

The Tide 311

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Trevon looked coolly at him, retorting, "No choice Natalie called the shots"

In essence, it conveyed that I followed Natalie's orders. If Natalie didn't give the command, I wouldn't have come, implying that I wasn't exactly eager to be the one welcoming you all.

Rose pushed open the door of the Porsche, and the driver's side window rolled down. The man wore jet-black sunglasses and a white tee with a round neckline.

As for the jacket, after receiving a playful pat from a schoolgirl, Frank had tossed it right into the trash.

“Trevon, what a catch, awe-inspiring.” Rose exclaimed with genuine admiration.

“You’re looking sharp today. Trevon replied with a complimentary tone.

Sherri hooked her arm through Rose’s and sized her up momentarily. “Well, you’ve been hiding your charm. When you dress up, you’re stunning. Maybe I should introduce you to Edward. He’d be smitten.”

“No doubt, Sherri. I might be a bombshell, but I usually keep it low-key. I can’t risk overwhelming all the suitors if I go all out. And if Edward isn’t my type, you can ease up on the matchmaking

Rose considered that Edward favored Natalie. She wasn’t interested in that kind of makeshift love. Who knows, there could be a spot for her someday.

“Ah well, guess we lost a stunning sister-in-law in a snap,” Sherri sighed, a tinge of regret in her voice.

Hackett shot Rose a condescending look, feigning a measuring gesture. “Your face is bigger than a dinner plate, and that makeup.... quite the layer”

He even gestured to the thickness with his hands. Rose was in a good mood, unfazed. She playfully brushed her locks along her collarbone and quipped, “A lady doesn’t engage with nonsense. You’re just jealous of my beauty. I get it. Catch you later, and keep that mouth shut.”

Trevon urged Hackett and Sherri, “Getting in or not? If not, feel free to walk. Just a friendly heads-up, it’s about 18.6 miles. If you’re up for a workout, here’s your shot.”

Upon hearing that, the two couples hopped into the car, settling into the back seats. With wheels at hand, who’d choose to hoof it? No-brainer.

Once they were settled in. Trevon gestured toward the driver’s seat of the Porsche with a nod of his head. “Should we turn around or keep going ahead?”

“Follow your car,” he stated before ruthlessly shutting the car window, making it clear he had no intention of continuing the conversation with Trevor

Rose grasped the situation instantly, swiftly reopening the passenger seat and slipping back in. She moistened her lips, inhaling and exhaling deeply. “When I got out of the car, couldn’t you have let me know you were planning to enter the manor? Was it essential for me to get out?”

Frank steered with one hand, his elbow propped on the window, his tone casual. I can’t help you with the IQ department. Maybe you should ask Natalie if she will undergo a lobotomy.”

Rose clenched her teeth, holding back from biting him before stepping out of the car. If she held back her bite, she’d have to believe in the Roberts family curse.

The car arrived at the yard in no time. Frank parked the car, and as soon as it came to a halt, Rose grabbed his arm, biting down hard before finally releasing it, a sense of relief washing over her.

With a confident sway in her step and a contented air, Frank’s arm was left with lipstick marks. She then retrieved her lipstick from her bag and touched up her lips.

How would you explain this later? Imph. I would have given you a piece of my mind, teaching you not to sass me.

She exited the car and headed toward the makeshift awning where Ava and Joseph stood. "Hey there, Ava."

Ava turned her head and was awed by Rose's impressive appearance. "Rose, you've transformed into a whole different level of gorgeous. You're drop-dead stunning."

Rose shrugged with a slight smile "Well, Mr. Turner is quite the charmer."

Joseph responded with courtesy, "Welcome,"

After exchanging polite greetings, Joseph excused himself and went about his business without intending to join the girls'

conversation

Frank remained in the car, using a tissue to wipe his arm. While the lipstick marks were removed, the teeth marks remained. He hadn't brought long sleeves with him either.

He wondered if his abrupt appearance might have startled the young girl.

Having stepped out of the car, Hackett scanned the surroundings for Frank but couldn't spot him. He headed over to Rose and asked, "Where's Frank? Did he take off?"

Ava tensed at Hackett's question, squeezing Rose's hand tightly, holding her breath as her heart raced.

Rose caught the subtle shift in Ava's demeanor. Her arm wasn't numb, so that she could feel the tight grip. She gave Ava's hands a comforting pat and reassured her. "No need to be nervous. Show your confidence. He's the wrong one. Why should you be anxious?*

Unfortunately. Ava's inner strength didn't match Rose's assumptions. Even before Frank emerged, Ava tugged her along, heading into the villa with Sherri to find Natalie.

Trevon strode over to Frank's driver seat, opening the car door with a friendly gesture. He rested a hand on the roof and casually leaned against the car's roof "Paralyzed, huh? Or just not brave enough to step out? Ava heard you were here and hurried into the room"

Frank's action of wiping his arm momentarily paused, then he tossed the used tissue onto Trevon before it landed on the ground "I can't pull off your wall-climbing stunts. Not exactly my forte."

Caught red-handed with his little scheme, Trevon seemed fine. He was a married man now, even planning for a second kid. Frank had yet to catch up to that league entirely. "I've got a marriage license. Catch up to Ava before you start dishing out advice"

Frank chuckled, shooting a glance at his smug friend. "If you hadn't held me back, I could've moved faster. Don't expect me to address you as 'brother-in-law' if you keep playing these little games."

Frank had an astute understanding of Trevon. He was always brimming with schemes. Lending a hand was one thing, but hindering him wasn't necessary. There was no point hoping for more.

Trevon felt a pang of guilt. He had indeed put a little hindrance in his path and convinced Ava to hold back. He gave his nose a little rub and patted Frank's shoulder. "Hang in there. Calling me 'brother-in-law' is a fresh twist, a good idea. How about giving it a test run?"

“Get lost.” The banter had crossed a line. Thankfully, he didn’t have a daughter or would be in for a show. At least, that was what Frank thought.

Once Joseph had the canopy set up, he spotted Frank standing tall. He didn’t show any rudeness to the unexpected guest. After all, he had gained an appreciation for their conversation the other night, recognizing Frank as a man of sharp precision and practicality.

“Mr. Roberts, you’ve taken the time to drop by my modest dwelling as well,” Joseph exchanged pleasantries

Frank gave a wry smile, tugging lightly at his collar. His gaze swept over the manor’s surroundings—a secluded paradise nestled against the mountains and water, crisp and clean air filled with birdsong and floral scents. It was somewhat akin to his home, though this villa leaned more toward a princess-style ambiance,

“Mr. Turner, you jest. If you consider this place a modest dwelling, then I suppose my place would be a shantytown,” Frank

retorted.

Hackett couldn’t help but cast a glance around. If this was a modest dwelling, what on earth would his place be classified as? A hut in the hills or a primordial tribe?

After several polite exchanges with Joseph, Frank grabbed Hackett and headed toward the parking spot, popping open the trunk.

The moment the trunk opened, Hackett was dumbfounded. He shoved the cunning Frank aside, cursing. “Damn it, did you need to buy so much stuff? Couldn’t you have given me a heads-up? I’ve come empty-handed, and you’ve got the whole damn trunk full. We’re sharing a hotel room, and you’re here to seal the deal.”

Frank kicked him, “Get a move on, unless you want to come away empty-handed, keep your mouth shut.”

Hackett begrudgingly unloaded the items from the trunk, individually setting them down on the ground. He muttered, “What in the world did you buy? Each of these boxes seems to be custom-made. I’m afraid to handle them too roughly.”

Frank replied, “Jewelry, watches, coffee, wine...”

Hackett thought, “You buy what you can afford. Money talks, and he’s showing off with all those bags while I’m here with two empty hands,”

Frank led the way with arms full of bags, and Hackett trailed behind, still complaining. They almost collided with Emma as she emerged. She was dressed in a modern gown adorned with champagne-colored leaf patterns.

The woven fabric showcased detailed leaves on the dress, stitched with champagne-hued threads. Her hair was elegantly pinned with a stylish hairpin, radiating elegance and refined femininity.

She looked like a timeless beauty sprung from a classic painting. Hackett couldn't help but catch his breath. It wasn't a surprise that Ava possessed such striking beauty.

Emma cradled Jasper in her arms. Jasper nodded toward Hackett and Frank, a gesture of greeting that left them wondering where he'd picked it up from.

It was genuinely amusing.

Frank paused in stride and politely said, "Good day, Emma. I'm Frank, and this is my first visit to the manor. I wasn't quite certain of your tastes, so I brought a little something as a gesture."

His tone carried manners, politeness, and an innate understanding of social niceties, leaving no room for critique.

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Emma stood upright with a commanding presence, her posture emanating grace and dignity

Emma didn't break into a smile at that moment, but a subtle warmth was evident on her face, creating an aura of approachable courtesy

Observing Frank carrying the items, Emma feigned ignorance about him being someone Ava favored. She exchanged polite pleasantries, "You all are Ava's friends. It brings Ava so much joy to have you here. I'll graciously accept these gifts this time, but I hope you'll consider coming empty-handed next time

Emma quickly caught on Frank didn't want to be impolite. Refusing in front of so many people would affront his dignity. So, she gracefully accepted for now. She had no choice but to get them for now. If they ended up being with Ava in the future, taking these gifts would be natural. What they had prepared for Ava went beyond what was before them.

If circumstances led to them not being together in the future, it would be appropriate for Joseph to return these gifts. But from her current perspective, the likelihood of the former was more substantial

Frank had a favorable impression of Emma. Her smile was soothing, perfectly complementing her stylish outfit. Like a gentle breeze from the south, she exuded warmth and gentleness, a stark contrast to Grace, whose presence carried an assertive and dominating energy.

"Alright, Emma, Frank courteously responded and took the items inside

Emma gestured to a servant to help with the items. Behind them, Hackett's fingers practically turned white from gripping so tightly. Upon seeing the servant approaching, he hurriedly handed over the things

As Frank walked inside, Emma gave him a quick appraisal. At first glance, he exuded a handsome air. His face was undoubtedly crafted to match Ava's preferences, flawless from every angle. He radiated a mix of coolness and politeness.

Seeing Frank stow away the items and depart, he nodded courteously in her direction. This only elevated Emma's opinion of him. He conducted himself with poise, without a trace of undue familiarity. He desired to see Ava, yet he refrained from advancing toward the staircase.

He certainly knew how to strike the right balance.

Ava seemed to have a discerning eye.

Observing the scene unfolding in the courtyard, Jasper couldn't remain in Emma's embrace. He squirmed and wriggled, clearly eager to explore the surroundings.

Emma sighed softly and lowered Jasper to the ground. She hadn't grasped his hand when he wriggled free and hurried toward the shaded area.

Once Jasper reached Trevon's side, Emma turned and returned to her study.

Under the shade, Joseph had thoughtfully arranged a comfortable setup with a sofa, a coffee table, chairs, and a cooler stocked with various beverages popular among young people like Ava.

Having shared countless adventures with Hackett and Frank over the years, Hackett was taken aback by Frank's unusually polite and amiable demeanor. It almost felt like he had been possessed or caught under a spell. Hackett couldn't resist a teasing jab, "You're quite the actor, aren't you? Your acting skills could likely squeeze into a water bottle."

Hackett grabbed a drink from the cooler with a playful grin, popped it open, and took a refreshing sip. The cooling sensation cascaded down his throat, revitalizing him from the inside out.

Frank lounged casually in his chair. His gaze locked onto the second-floor windows. He casually told Hackett, "Grab me a bottle, will you?"

After lugging around all those items, Hackett was slightly sweaty, but he was about to decline when another voice chimed in,

"Get me one too."

"Hey, am I your waiter now? Trevon, you're practically part of the Turner family. Shouldn't you be the one serving us?" Trevon and Frank settled into their seats, both chiming in almost immediately. "Yeah"

Hackett rolled his eyes mentally. Okay, he thought, he'd fetch then a drink. The Turners were practically Trevon's family now, and Frank might end up as the head of the household. Weighing the pros and cons, he fetched several bottles from the cooler.

Although, honestly, the taste didn't hold a candle to what he was used to.

Everyone had their preferences, he supposed. He just didn't quite fancy the beverage in Frank's hand.

Jasper sat on Trevon's lap, reaching out his little hands toward the drinks on the table. He asked sweetly, "Daddy."

Trevon couldn't help but notice the yearning expression on Jasper's face, but he firmly declined, "No, sweetheart. Mommy wouldn't like that."

Despite his attempts to grab the drinks, Trevon held them just out of Jasper's reach. After a while, Jasper gave up, shifting his

pleading gaze to Hackett.

Hackett sighed inwardly, unable to resist those pleading eyes, immediately reminded of Ruby. He relented, advising. "Just let Jasper sip to satisfy his craving. It won't hurt as long as it's not a regular thing. A little taste won't hinder his growth."

"Guess he's not your son, huh?"

Hackett contemplated for a moment. Well, even Ruby indulged in a sneaky sip occasionally...

Frank chuckled "Good genes, huh? Come on over here. Jasper. I'll grab you a drink."

Jasper didn't dare move. Trevon maintained his stern expression, an icy demeanor.

Seeing Jasper's surrender, he pouted and glanced at Frank, his expression conveying. "Dad's not going to budge." He looked pretty bleak.

Frank found Jasper's expression adorable and laughed. "Watch out when he grows up. He might pull the oxygen tube on

you

Trevon retorted. "Having someone yank your tube is better than having no one to do it."

Hackett said, "Thank goodness I ended up with a soft-hearted daughter"

Their matter-of-fact remarks were met with frosty glares the next instant. A chill seemed to run down spines.

Five heads huddled behind the curtains on the second floor, within Ava's room, peering through the gaps to watch the scene unfolding beneath the canopy

Alex. his arm casually draped around Ava's shoulder, leaned over in his usual calm manner. He sported a navy short-sleeved shirt and ash-gray jeans that fit his waist just right. No belt was needed.

Leaning against the side of the curtain, he observed the boy Ava was fond of "How long are you all planning to keep spying?"

When those words were uttered, the rest of the group rose. Rose was the first one up. speaking candidly. "Well. Frank might have some charm, but I still hope you stand your ground. Ava, and wipe that smug grin off his face."

Rose had momentarily forgotten about the recent favors she had received from Frank. Her pocket money might be in jeopardy.

Natalie wasn't one to meddle, so she settled onto the bed, while Sherri took a seat in the nearby chair. Rose, Alex, and Ava remained on their feet.

Ava's expression showed a mix of uncertainty and contemplation. She furrowed her brows slightly and admitted. "I guess my self-control isn't that great. What should I do? For a moment, I was genuinely touched seeing him carrying all those bags. There was this split second when I wanted to thank him for all his hard work."

Rose remained speechless.

Sherri was at a loss for words.

Natalie rested on the bed, leaning back with a faint smile. With Frank employing such relentless tactics, how long could Ava possibly resist?

It was easy to predict that it wouldn't take three months.

It commenced with the delivery of flowers, a prelude to an unanticipated appearance at the mask party. They then coincidentally became classmates, sharing the same lecture halls. The friend request came next, yet messages remained unsent, leaving Ava to weave her tapestry of fantasies. And then, without a single salutation, he would materialize at the manor, each orchestrated meeting causing Ava to descend even deeper into the realms of infatuation.

The truth was, it was hard to believe he had never been in a relationship before. Yet, his emotions remained untarnished, as pure as a blank canvas.

Alex had given up any attempts to intervene, leaning against the curtain with a defeated air. "Ava, why don't you freshen up and find your vibe? Get a little more awake,"

The next half hour was dominated by the sisters' efforts to assist Ava in choosing her outfit, picking the right shade of lipstick, selecting earrings, and more.

"I think this one looks lovely, feminine. After all, hasn't Frank always mentioned that Ava has a bit of a tomboyish side? Let's show him she can be elegant too."

Rose disagreed, "Don't put too much weight on his opinions. Why should we adapt to his preferences? He's the one pursuing you now, not the other way around. Just go with what makes you feel confident.*

Sherri posed a question, "But what if this style doesn't align with your brother's taste? What if it's not his kind of thing?"

Rose shot back, "I doubt that would be the case. If he's managed to make his way to the manor, he must have some appreciation for aesthetics. Why isn't he soaring with wings then?"

Alex appreciated Rose's personality but couldn't hide his confusion, "Uh, pardon my curiosity. Rose, are you all closely related, or do you share a slightly different kinship?"

Laughter erupted from the group, especially Sherri, who had to hold her stomach due to her hearty laughter. It was evident that Rose was quite forthright in her disapproval of Frank. She seemed to be either firmly against him or actively encouraging Ava to playfully tease Frank.

In most situations, sisters would praise their brother, but this particular sister not only refrained from such praise but also seemed determined to keep Ava from getting too close to him.

Ah, the complexities of sisterhood.

Rose approached Alex and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Hey, I understand you've got some questions swirling around. But the reality is we share the same blood. I know that might not match your expectations."

Alex admired their close sibling bond but seemed uncertain about something.

The courtyard was meticulously arranged, overseen by Joseph himself. Emma took a quick look at the setup and then stepped into her study wearing indoor shoes.

The scene was picturesque – the elegant Princess Villa, the tranquil stream, the lush green lawn, and the trees casting pleasant shadows in the abundant sunlight.

Ava donned black bell-bottom pants paired with a slightly irregular white blouse. The short sleeves struck a balance between trendy and age-appropriate. Her hair was elegantly tied high up, revealing a pair of milk-white pearl earrings and a delicate clover necklace. A deep blue diamond-studded wristwatch adorned her wrist,

She unbuttoned the top collar button of her blouse, exposing a slender neck and smooth skin. The curve of her collarbones peeked through, alluring and captivating

Subtle makeup enhanced her features, and her soft, full lips exuded an enticing charm. Her flawlessly proportioned features carried a gentle grace, while her black pants highlighted her well-toned legs, provoking imaginative thoughts in the minds

of men.

It was a move designed to leave an impression.

Natalie, captivated by the sight, discreetly gave Ava a thumbs-up of approval. “Stunning.”

Rose took a step back, her hand gently covering her mouth in an amused gesture. “This is exactly the effect we’re aiming for teasing Frank by giving him a glimpse of your legs while leaving him curious, all the while highlighting your stunning collarbone. It’s all about sparking his imagination.”

“Don’t worry, he truly is my blood brother. No need for those suspicious looks,” she chuckled.

“I’m just helping Frank to break a few bad habits and securing Ava’s future life,” Rose explained.

Alex and Sherri exchanged a knowing glance, conveying their admiration for Rose’s approach.

Girls had a way of connecting swiftly, turning mere minutes into lasting friendships. And for those who didn’t click, no amount of effort could bridge the gap.

Natalie stood up, smoothing out her floral maxi dress. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and scrutinized Ava thoughtfully. Satisfied with her assessment, she asked, “Are you ready?”

“Let’s head downstairs and dazzle Frank’s eyes,” Rose said, excitement evident in her voice as she anticipated Frank’s reaction to seeing Ava

Ava gave herself a quick pep talk and then nodded after a brief pause. “I’m ready.”

The five of them shared simultaneous smiles. Alex playfully draped an arm around Ava’s waist, and the others exchanged meaningful glances before breaking into amused chuckles.

Their synchronized efforts were truly impressive.

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From what place did these exquisite beings emerge, if not from the untamed wilderness itself

As the quartet of otherworldly women graced the rugged terrain, a newfound guardian spirit materialized alongside.

Each woman displayed her unique elegance, attired in distinct fashions, radiating diverse charms. Yet, their shared gender was the only commonality among them.

Under the pergola's shelter, four men engaged in conversation. Three adorned themselves in white short-sleeved shirts, while Hackett stood out with his vibrant attire, an anomaly that set him apart.

Their discourse spanned topics of commerce and the launch of the research facility. Yet, the entrancing tableau at the villa's entrance effortlessly diverted their attention, capturing their care and resonating within their hearts.

Around the table, four pairs of eyes stole glances at the four women. Joseph briefly diverted his gaze toward Ava and Natalie before courteously lowering his head to take a sip. Hackett's eyes were fixed on Sherri, a glint of enraptured fascination in his eyes. Trevon's gaze was unyielding, affixed on Natalie, unable to divert his attention.

In comparison, the women maintained a composed demeanor. Their collective focus centered on Frank. All eyes were trained on his countenance, brimming with curiosity over his reaction as Ava graced the scene, each wondering if he would be captivated.

Two words were etched upon each individual's expression: curiosity and eagerness.

Frank was adept at reading expressions, and he naturally picked up on these subtle reactions.

Women were inherently curious creatures, and Natalie was certainly no exception. Stepping out of the villa, her attention was immediately drawn to Frank. Even with Trevon right there, she couldn't resist stealing glances at another man. Trevor, being astute, could sense the subtle undercurrent of dissatisfaction brewing within himself.

As soon as Ava made her entrance, Frank fell silent. Leaning back in his chair, he exuded an air of casual nonchalance. One hand rested on the chair's back while the other lazily lay on the table. His expression was inscrutable, his piercing eyes squinting slightly as he swept his gaze over Ava from afar. He took a sip of his drink, seemingly untazed.

A warm radiance seemed to envelop Ava, enhancing her presence as the center of attention for the day. Frank's keen eyes caught every fleeting emotion playing across her face.

The sleek black pants not only flattered her figure but also elongated her legs. The classic black and white ensemble was effortlessly stylish, imparting Ava a fresh, distinct allure. With a button of her blouse unfastened at the collar, the creamy expanse of her collarbone was subtly exposed, igniting curiosity.

Ava locked eyes with Frank, a rush of nervous energy coursing through her, causing her heart to race and her chest to flutter. Alex, ever the supportive friend, gently squeezed her waist, infusing her with courage.

Perhaps it was Ava's imagination, but she thought she detected a crack in Frank's typically imperturbable demeanor. A subtle curve played at the corners of his lips, a detail that went unnoticed.

by most. Their eyes held for mere seconds before Ava lowered her gaze, conceding victory in this silent duel.

Hackett failed to discern these subtleties. Believing Frank to be composed, he playfully nudged Frank's shoulder and asked. "Aren't you making a move?"

Ah. Joseph's presence acted as a reminder, tempering any bold inclinations

Amidst this analysis, Jasper unexpectedly blurted out. "Go for it."

Innocent words, spoken innocently. Certainly not in the same context

With a proud expression, Jasper sought approval from Trevon, as if he had just accomplished a great feat. Trevon, regardless of whether Jasper truly understood, muttered toward Frank. "Frank doesn't have the nerve."

Jasper chimed in. "He's scared."

Hackett had to give the kid a thumbs-up. "Impressive."

Jasper looked satisfied, nodding like an inspector evaluating an employee's performance, pleased with himself

Frank didn't spare a glance at Hackett, finishing his water and swallowing audibly. Trevon, with Joseph present, commented, "Quenched your thirst?"

Still casting a sideways glance at Ava, Frank lifted his chin slightly at Trevon "Not enough? Need you to fetch some for me!" "Let him stay thirsty." He wasn't about to waste his time. It was a rare sight to see this guy back down. He deserved to feel parched, and suffocating would be even more fitting

Joseph picked up an orange, meticulously peeling it. His tone calm and deliberate, he remarked. "Having an orange to quench your thirst at my place wouldn't bode well. Mr. Roberts, it's wiser to cherish your life"

Frank reached out, taking the orange into his hand. "Absolutely, and for the long haul"

Joseph caught the subtlety but opted for a knowing smile over exposing it

Amid their conversation, the group of five had arrived at the edge of the sunshade. Ava displayed a slight flush on her cheeks, her heartbeat racing. Alex shot a sly glance at the composed Frank, her arm confidently wrapped around Ava's waist.

It was a striking sight.

Frank's gaze lingered on Alex's hand. Despite her being a girl, the gesture was strikingly audacious. Yes, audacious. He pressed his lips together, picked up the orange, and took a bite with a nonchalant one-handed maneuver

In a split second. Alex was taken aback by his intense stare. It was as if this man was devouring her, yet she knew the rules of friendship. One had to stand their ground. If provoking this man was the outcome, then she was willing to play her role.

The group settled into their seats.

Natalie instinctively took her place beside Trevon. Once seated, Trevon's hand grew restless. His broad palm encircled Natalie's waist. Even through the thin fabric, the warmth of his touch radiated, his subtle yet deliberate caresses sending shivers down her spine, electric current coursing through her entire body.

After indulging in these playful gestures for a while, Natalie lifted her gaze and shot him a warning look, silently urging him

to behave.

After receiving the warning glare, Trevon toned down his actions, yet his hand remained steadfast, gripping her waist firmly. He refused to let her slip away. She tilted slightly, compelled to tug her chair closer to him.

With the distance shortened, Trevon found satisfaction in the adjustment, a subtle smirk playing on his lips.

Alex settled into a nearby seat, followed by Ava, Joseph, Frank, Hackett, and Sherri

Rose stood by the table, sensing the informality of the arrangement. She leaned in to murmur a few words to Hackett. In the next instant, Hackett guided a puzzled Sherri to rise, situating her across from Frank and beside Trevon

Once Hackett settled, Rose leisurely positioned herself beside Frank, her hand lightly resting on his shoulder. Her weight leaned into him, her pleased gaze sweeping the scene. "Ah, just right. This is how it's meant to be."

An assertive force abruptly brushed away the hand resting on Frank's shoulder. He gently guided Rose back into her seat and inquired. "Planning to head back in the evening or early tomorrow?"

They had arrived on a Friday, and now it was already Monday. Their leave was up, and work beckoned the next day. If they were returning, it made sense to do so in the evening. Joseph had mentioned escorting her home, but the thought left an undertone of solitude.

At the question, Ava faltered for a moment. Her initial determination seemed to waver. Her shoulders sagged, and Joseph reached out to encircle her with his arm, quickly adjusting her ponytail. "Let's savor the cake and keep our spirits high. You never know. There might be a surprise waiting for us tonight"

Ava's mind had already begun to wander. Would he be going back with her?

Weren't his intentions here to declare his feelings, to pursue her?

Was he leaving before even getting the chance to do so?

Separated by Joseph, Frank couldn't catch a glimpse of Ava's expression. Noting Rose's lack of response, he said, "If you're not up for heading back, you can take a day off. I'm a bit tied up to escort you."

No time to escort her back? Was he planning on staying?

The cake in Ava's hands suddenly seemed much sweeter, her mood lifting. On the sidelines, Joseph released a relieved sigh and shook his head with frustration and amusement.

Suddenly rising from his seat, he addressed the group. "I've got some company matters to attend to. Have a good time, and if you need anything, just let Trevon know, and he'll take care of it

Trevon? Natalie and Trevon shared a chuckle at the term. Indeed, Joseph had a sense of humor.

With a cheerful nod, Trevon said, "You can count on me, Joseph. I'll play the role of the gracious host"

After Joseph left, a vacant spot was now between Frank and Ava. Rose quickly noticed and made a sly attempt to seize the opportunity, but her hand was swiftly caught in a firm grip. Meeting Frank's warning gaze, she lifted an eyebrow. "What's the deal?"

"Stay where you are," Frank's tone was a mix of firmness.

Held firmly by him, Rose had no choice but to remain in her original spot.

In no time, the servants presented a mouthwatering array of pastries, savory barbecued dishes, grilled meats, expert pizza crafters, and baristas, Joseph had rounded up a team of culinary experts for the manor, all to enhance Ava's pleasure and contribute to her joyous journey.

As the table filled with dishes, Trevon watched the playful exchanges with a grin. One arm secured his beloved wife's waist while the other raised a beer in a toast toward Ava with a faint smirk. "Here's to you, Ava. I offer a toast in honor of your

Ava raised her glass gracefully and leaned forward to clink it against Trevon's, saying, "Thanks, Trevon. Cheers."

Following her lead, everyone else quickly raised their glasses, toasting Ava's victory.

Frank casually popped open a beer can, taking a relaxed sip before setting it down. His thoughts remained unreadable to those around him.

Trevon glanced in Frank's direction, placed his beer aside, and leaned back in his chair, his tone casual yet meaningful. "Remember the wisdom your expert shared with you. He's generously shared a lifetime of knowledge."

With a subtle curve of his lips, Trevon's words held a playful hint. laden with meaning, as if he were observing an intriguing spectacle.

The implications behind Damon were lost on Sherri, Hackett, and Alex. They couldn't discern the subtleties within.

Only those in the know could genuinely grasp the hidden significance of that sentence. Of course, Trevon was also needling Frank, trying to unsettle his calm demeanor.

He couldn't tolerate Frank's calm facade, the act he put on.

Sherri knew an expert had been aiding Ava but remained oblivious to the identity. The expert who's been assisting Ava is truly impressive. Ava, I think it might benefit you two to meet, considering your shared interests."

Ava took a deep breath in the next instant, turning slightly to face Frank, her glass raised in a courteous gesture of gratitude. "Mr. Roberts, I am grateful for your ongoing guidance. As a substitute for wine, I offer this drink. Thank you for your assistance during this period."

Sherri was left momentarily speechless. Was there some juicy information she was missing?

Looking at Hackett beside her, she noticed he was equally puzzled. Glancing at Natalie and Trevon, who appeared composed, only deepened her bewilderment.

Sherri signaled with her eyes. "What's the gossip?"

Natalie covered one side of her face with her hand, silently mouthing the words, saying Frank was the expert. Sherri was at a loss for words.

[Chapter 314](#)

The warm and bright rays of sunlight fought a desperate battle to pierce through the canopy, yet its efforts were in vain. Surrendering, the sun allowed its rays to refract across the ground and the lawn.

The shade canopy remained resolute, casting unyielding shadows on the yard beneath it.

The card game had commenced.

Trevon cradled his young son, Jasper, in his arms as he managed the deck of cards with a single hand. Beside them, Natalie intermittently fed pieces of fruit to Trevon and their son, Jasper.

The latter action was not a conscious decision on Natalie's part. Jealousy knows no bounds. Even the affection a son receives can ignite us flames. Thus, she had to tend to both her beloved "sons."

After numerous rounds of games, Hackett and his companions found themselves consistently outplayed. Their initial confidence had been shattered, leaving them struggling in the game. Hackett sighed and said, "This isn't enjoyable at all. Can't you allow us to win for once? We're merely playing cards, not waging war."

Witnessing Hackett's waning spirits, Jasper hastily played a pair of clown cards and exclaimed excitedly. "A pair!"

"My dear Jasper, your father is already thoroughly defeating me in this game, yet you present a pair of clowns. At this rate, I will suffer utter defeat," Hackett said with a smile, his gaze tenderly fixed upon the endearing Jasper.

Natalie emitted a soft chuckle. Jasper had actively participated in the game for over half an hour without a hint of boredom. He continuously attempted to contribute to the game at every opportunity.

Hearing Hackett's words, Trevon proudly declared, "He is my biological son, and we are in complete agreement with each other." With a fond gesture, he playfully tousled his son's hair, believing him to be a well-behaved young boy who knew how to protect his father.

Upon hearing that, Hackett found himself at a loss for words.

Seated beside them, Frank played his hand and advised Hackett, "If you maintain silence and keep your nonsense to yourself, your mind will gain agility and focus. Give it a try."

Following this, he shared a knowing glance with Trevon, both men understanding their forthcoming strategy for the next round.

Henceforth, Hackett maintained absolute silence and did not utter a single word. Trevon leisurely played his cards, and remarkably, Hackett emerged victorious in the next round.

Following his victory, Hackett pondered, "Perhaps I'm not cut out for multitasking. Concentration may lead to triumph and good results!"

But, little did Hackett know Trevon had intentionally allowed him to win this round.

Frank diligently supported Ava throughout the game on the opposing side, suppressing her opponents and anticipating her cards and moves. He synchronized his plays with hers, trying to help Ava exhaust the cards in her hand.

With Frank playing as her shield, it became a two-on-one situation.

Each time Ava emptied her hand, her countenance bloomed into a radiant smile, and it was a delightful spectacle.

In a deep, husky voice, Frank asked Ava, "How many cards are in your hand?"

Unperturbed by her defeat, Rose interjected and said, "You're blatantly cheating now. This is hardly fair."

Ava grappled with whether to inquire about her teammates' card count. During her past games with Alex and others, she had never probed her partners about their cards. Now cornered, she hesitated, unsure whether to answer Frank's question.

Frank glanced at his sister and responded, "We're no different from you. We're merely mindlessly discarding our cards."

Noticing Ava's silence, Frank paused his play and turned his attention to the blushing girl beside him. In a gentle and somewhat seductive tone, he inquired. "Hmmm? How many cards remain in your possession?"

Frank's fleeting gaze caused Ava's cheeks to flush uncontrollably. In a soft whisper, she replied hesitantly. "Four."

Frank swiftly comprehended her situation and played a 3 card. Rose harbored no reservations about their overt manipulation, and she consoled herself with the fact that the loser had some perks.

Turning to Alex, she asked, "Alex, do you have any straights?"

Hearing Rose's question, Alex contemplated, "Why not reveal all my cards?"

Confidence radiated from Frank as he reclined in his chair, his legs spread apart, his muscular arms poised in defiance. In a casual tone, he remarked, "You have the option to unveil all your cards."

Rose scoffed and replied, "Cheater, that's not allowed"

As he played, Frank's arms occasionally brushed against the sleeves of Ava's white shirt, whether by design or coincidence.

Ava's heart experienced tumultuous fluctuations throughout the game, akin to a roller coaster ride.

Ava felt an overwhelming nervousness, prompting her to snack on the different cakes and pastries in an attempt to calm her tumultuous heart.

Emma and Joseph occupied the second-floor balcony, gazing upon the yard's unfolding scene below.

Joseph and Emma lingered on the balcony for over half an hour after politely excusing themselves from the yard to grant the guests some space. Despite the distance, their presence cast an undercurrent of unease.

At a glance, Ava's face radiated smiles mingled with a touch of shyness. Joseph and Emma's observant eyes even caught her occasional glimpses of Frank.

Holding a book, Emma delicately removed the bookmark and placed it on the page. Seated gracefully on a white wicker chair, she spoke gently. Your sister's affection for that young man holds more weight than one might think. It borders on love. Even if you examine the situation, it's unlikely that her feelings for him will change *

Joseph fiddled with Jasper's Rubik's cube as he sat beside his mother. After a swift look towards Frank, he replied, "Mom, I understand that "

Emma's perceptiveness was matched by her trust in Ava's judgment. When that young man returns to Athana, return the secret defense map to him." Emma instructed her son.

The secret defense map could function as leverage against Frank but feelings coerced by manipulation would not be pure. Genuine, unforced emotional expressions held the greatest beauty, and Ava did not require such reinforcements in her budding relationship.

Frank's offer to stake his family's fate was his earnestness and a way of conveying his feelings for Ava. Emma and Daniel were content with his actions, further elevating their opinion of Frank

However, no one would intervene and interfere in the unfolding dynamic between Frank and Ava

The family consistently respected their children, allowing them to mature organically Each phase of growth should not be prematurely disrupted Undergoing each stage naturally held more value than a multitude of counsel

Of course, it's not about exposing children to danger without proper awareness. Like what they did with Frank Emma, and Daniel evaluated their personalities, delved into emotional dynamics between the couple, and facilitated Ava's organic experiences within a secure framework

Joseph nodded in agreement. He had no intention of exploiting the secret defense map against Frank. I will return it to him, he replied

Emma then instructed. "I am going back to my room. You tend to affairs here. Your father has a late meeting and will not return home until later tonight. Also, escort that young man's sister home"

Detecting a trace of unusual anticipation in his mother's eyes. Joseph smiled his lips curving upwards. He added with a grin "Mom, you're overthinking again. There is no need to anticipate anything between me and Frank's sister. It would have done so years ago if our connection were meant to flourish. You need not worry about me. I've already arranged a private jet for

her return

Emma felt extremely helpless. Persuasion would prove futile if her son were not inclined to pursue a relationship. Love was bound by destiny. For instance, Ava had numerous admirers at university, yet none piqued her interest.

However, upon arriving in Athana, she fell for this young man. Despite the distance. fate united them.

Emma resolved to allow her son's path to unfold naturally. Despite excelling in his career and character, he held no desire to pursue any romantic relationships.

With Emma's departure. Joseph remained alone on the balcony, gazing at the stars and moon. He inadvertently slipped into deep contemplation Solitude held its own merit. Witnessing his two sisters happiness was sufficient for him.

He had no excess affection and love to extend to others. Besides that, Joseph was engrossed in his pursuits and had no time

to spare

As evening descended, the estate hosted a bonfire party.

Joseph had prepared a high-quality speaker. The speaker was currently playing music that infused the gathering with a lively atmosphere.

The elongated, melodious tunes wafted through every corner of the estate. The wind also joined the party, sweeping into the vibrant scene and offering a gentle breeze to all the guests who were present. Tree branches and blossoms swayed in response to the music's rhythm.

The melody encapsulated young men and women's joy, confidence, and smiles, blooming in the picturesque estate. Laughter reverberated, each note resonating in their hearts.

Jasper discarded his previously aloof demeanor, struggling to move to the music. His dancing improved, shedding its initial awkwardness

Having attended such gatherings in various countries. Rose recognized the fun diminishes without games. A circle formed

as everyone sat down

She proposed enthusiastically. Thave a game suggestion, and no objections will be entertained. You must accomodate me as I leave in an hour and a half Let me share the rules with everyone First, we will start with me. For each round, we will count from one to 99 in chronological order. Anyone saying a number containing eight must skip the number and gently pat the next person's head. The count then resumes. The person who gets it wrong must either dance or sing as a penalty What does everyone think of this game?

Hackett held Sherri's hand as they sat cross-legged on the ground. He squinted slightly and inquired. "Rose, am I mistaken or was your game originally based on the number seven"

Without hesitation. Rose responded confidently. "Because the number eight is my favorite number"

Subsequently, Hackett fell into silence. Next to them, Natalie chuckled lightly. "Sherri's new spouse suggests you continue concealing your identity"

Hackett thought the term "new spouse" had a pleasant ring to it. It sounded fresh. In response, he playfully gestured, zipping his lips in Natalie's direction

[Chapter 315](#)

The commencement of the game marked a moment of excitement. Joseph settled beside Rose, followed by Alex, Natalie,

Trevon, Hackett, Sherri, Ava, and Frank.

Whether it's Ava, Sherri, Rose, or even Natalie, all of them cherished the current ambiance. This was a hard-earned moment for everyone.

As melodious music filled the air, Rose elevated her left hand and declared loudly, "1," Joseph's warm voice chimed in, "2," and the numbers 3, 4, followed, and so on.

Ava landed as the eighth in the first round. Nearly letting slip an "8," she caught herself just in time. A smile tugged at her lips as she playfully scratched her head, her gaze sliding toward Frank, who was seated next to her.

Her pale hand suspended mid-air as a blush formed on her cheeks. She hesitated in patting him.

All eyes fixated on the outcome of the first round, curious about whether Ava would dare to hit Frank and how he would

react.

On the other hand, Joseph remained calm and composed, almost as if he was privy to the outcome, a slight smile adorning his lips.

That was not what Trevon Wilson and Natalie Foster were thinking. While the couple held distinct perspectives, they acted harmoniously as they calculated the upcoming head-pats.

After a moment, they spoke in unison and shared a knowing smile, "This is the start to the end...

They were prepared to be the 'victims' of the game later on

“Go ahead, vent your frustrations. There is no need to restrain yourself,” Frank remarked with a smile.

With an audience watching, Ava found herself torn between hitting Frank or holding back. Abstaining would stall the leaving the others hanging.

game,

Ava concluded that a pat on the head during the game was not about revenge. She clenched her fist, then relaxed it before patting the back of Frank’s head. While it was not a brutal hit, the power from the pat caused Frank’s head to tilt forward. Witnessing this, Hackett could not help but silently chuckle. It was rare for them to witness Frank in such a pitiful plight. If only he had reacted much quicker, Hackett could have captured this as a memory so they could play the video on a grand screen during Frank’s wedding.

Trevon threw Frank a meaningful glance as he suggested, “One more time, perhaps?”

Joseph automatically brushed the statement aside. While Trevon had calculated, Joseph had done the same. After patting Frank, Ava’s frustration seemed to have waned, and warmth radiated from her heart.

After patting Frank on the head, Ava’s frustration seemed to have waned, and warmth radiated from her heart.

In the second round, Frank was eighteenth, and Rose’s turn was right after his. Frank drew his hand back a tad before delivering a solid pat to Rose’s head.

Displeased, Rose protested, “That’s a bit much. Can’t you ease up a little when hitting a lady?”

Frank retorted with a serious tone. “The rules did not say that we should go easy on others.”

Pouting. Rose playfully nudged her elder brother’s arm before continuing the count, “19…”

Rose was the twenty-eighth person in the third round and had to pat Joseph’s head. A hint of awkwardness surfaced, and she cleared her throat, addressing Joseph as she explained, “Joseph, this game, well, it’s just a game. I will go easy on you.”

Joseph sensed her discomfort from her expression and reassured her, saying, “There’s no need for you to worry. We will follow the rules.

Then, Rose shut her eyes and delicately tapped Joseph on his head before swiftly retracting her hand. She felt embarrassed, wondering how she had missed herself. Regardless of the number, she could not avoid being part of the numbers ranging from one to ninety-nine.

In the fourth round, Joseph’s pat landed on Alex. Their camaraderie eliminated any awkwardness. Clad in masculine attire, their familiarity with each other was evident. Before the pat, Alex even quipped, “Just treat me like one of the guys.”

Joseph chuckled at Alex’s comment, and he realized why Ava got along so well with this tomboyish girl and brought her to

the estate.

Alex's pat fell on Natalie in the fifth round; in the sixth, Natalie's target was Trevon. Anticipating the hit, Trevon obediently lowered his head, inviting the pat from his wife.

Yet, Natalie's pat was gentle and hesitant. Trevon reveled in the experience, showcasing affection for their son by playfully touching his face and earlobe.

Jasper protested, swatting away his father's larger hand away with his chubby one. He cried, "Don't touch me!"

In response, Trevon remarked, "This visit to Sapphire City has bolstered your courage and temper

The seventh round unfolds as a showdown between the men. Trevon's hit on Hackett was so strong that it could have caused

a concussion. Hackett, after that, rubbed his head, muttering. If I wake up tomorrow with a fuzzy brain, it's on you."

In the end, Hackett Blackwell kept rubbing the back of his head and cursing. "If I wake up tomorrow and become muddle-headed, you'll be responsible."

In response, Trevon inquired, "Are you extorting me?"

In the eighth round, it was Hackett's turn to target Sherri. Hackett slightly tweaked the rule, opting for a kiss instead. He gently kissed Sherri's head, prompting a collective 'aww' from the crowd. Natalie facepalmed, feeling a pang of embarrassment.

Frank stole a glance at Ava, who was shielding her face from the loving scene. Back when she was pursuing him, her boldness was palpable. Now, that boldness seemed to have waned. The transformation from daring to reserved puzzled him. He contemplated that if he were to kiss her now, she might blush uncontrollably.

Frank's intense gaze was impossible to disregard. Ava sensed Frank's eyes on her, yet her embarrassment prevented her from facing him. The mere thought of their eyes meeting sent tingles down her spine.

In the ninth round, Sherri's gentle touch hit Ava, and it was more of an encouraging pat. And in the final round, the tenth, Ava's number was "98," and she swallowed the number before it slipped from her lips.

Rose cheered, "Ava, this marks the tenth round, a perfect ending! Give it your all to wrap things up!"

It was the perfect ending.

Frank's tempting voice once again caressed her ears. In the dim night, the campfire cast his silhouette in sharp relief. It was distinct, captivating, and charismatic. His lips parted slightly as he said, "Feel free to hit me however you want to release your frustrations."

Ava was not truly angry or being theatrical. She wanted Frank to woo her. It was a simple request, yet she was cautious of her pride and needed a pretext.

"Oh," she uttered. Ava lifted her hands with her words and softened her grip before hitting Frank on the head.

Frank's head tilted forwards once more. Observing. Ava slightly regretted her restraint. Her hand remained suspended mid-air. Standing tall, Frank slowly guided her hand back to its original position as he said, "It was not a hard blow. It was alright."

"It was not a hard blow? Was it alright?" Ava pondered.

Warmth coursed through Ava's body when Frank's hand touched her arm, a cellular stir that raced through her body. Her heart fluttered, and her eyelids dropped as her fingers fidgeted with her shirt.

On the other hand, Frank captured each subtle motion in his gaze.

As the clock neared 10 o'clock, Rose reluctantly spoke, "I'm leaving. You guys keep playing."

Ava and the rest of the group rose to their feet as they intended to bid Rose farewell. However, Rose declined as she disliked sentimental goodbyes.

"Oh, come on. It's not like I'm embarking on a long journey. I'm simply returning to Athana. Spare me that mournful look. Smile, everyone. Life is beautiful, so do not frown. Smiling makes you look ten years younger," Rose advised.

Turning to Joseph, she added, "Mr. Turner, there's no need to see me off. You've already arranged a private plane for me to stay till late. I'm incredibly grateful for your assistance. I owe you one. When you get married, I give you a generous present!"

Standing alongside Natalie, Joseph chuckled softly. "Alright," he mused, aware he might not have been able to accept the gift.

Rose embraced her friends in succession before departing. Hackett stepped forward for a hug, but Frank sidestepped, lifting a foot to stop him. "Stingy, it is just one hug. Is this necessary?" Hackett argued.

His wife did not even object to the hug, so Frank's response as an older brother seemed somewhat excessive.

With Rose gone, the others began to depart one after another. After all, they had enjoyed a day filled with laughter and fun.

Ava's gaze clung to Frank's receding figure, her heart feeling oddly unsettled, as though reluctant to let him go.

In the moonlit night, his shadow stretched, his tall form gradually fading from view as he headed toward the parking lot. The estate's expanse obscured him, and she couldn't perceive him.

A hollow sensation flooded her heart as if something was absent, and for a brief moment, she wished he would stay.

That night, after she had hit Frank twice, he did not appear angry, but instead, he seemed peculiarly content.

Natalie approached, draping an arm around Ava's shoulder, offering a comforting pat as she said, "Let's go. This isn't the

final farewell Frank mentioned he wouldn't leave permanently You'll cross paths again. Get some rest, you've had a full day of enjoyment

Though Ava might have felt dispirited, she nodded in agreement.

Guided by Natalie, she entered the room, their arms interlocked.

As Ava stepped into the room Emma emerged. She extended her arms for Jasper, relieving Natalie of the tired little one.

intome You're a young couple, and you should spend some time alone. Let Jasper sleep with me tonight. Since

le will not be home late Jasper can keep me compan

na sand.

your

In Emma's arms. Jasper schubby cheeks were flushed, las eyes half-shot, giving off a faint shimmer of sleepiness.

Inside the room, Natalie sighed, her gaze landing on the man ding her I doubted it would take three months for Ava to Test Frank He had already relented before leaving"

Trevon brushed away a few stray strands of hair from her forehead as he replied, "Chances of that are high. Have you ever

little rabbit escape from the gaping jaws of the big bad wolf?

had come prepared. It would be strange if he did not successfully woo Ava. If Ava were not in school, he would have brought her home with him

Natalie nodded, aligning with his sentiment. When it ime to pursuing candle to Frank's The comparison did not hold

comantic interest. Ava's methods could not hold a

Lost in thought Trevon leaned in, his grip around her waist tightening as he suggested. "Honey, go freshen up We can't let

Natalie playfully pushed his chest as the replied. "Mr. Wilson, to have a second child, quality was key You are taking this to

"My quality is top-notch Mrs Wilson, allow me to prove it once again I promise just one time will suffice," Trevon replied.

He was remarkably insistent in this aspect Eventually, Natalie acquiesced to his request for another round of reinforcement.

[Chapter 316](#)

On the way to the airport. Frank halted the car at an open space not far from Turner Manor.

Rose observed her brother deftly maneuver the car into a parking spot using one hand and inquired, "What are you up to?"

Ignoring Rose's question, Frank retrieved his phone from the central console and typed a few words on the open chat interface. Then, he exited the app after typing and dialing a number. Once the call connected, he instructed. "You can proceed now"

Rose was utterly perplexed by this sequence of actions and speculated. "What on earth is he doing? He isn't setting off explosives, is he Curiosity piqued, she questioned once more. "What's your plan? You..."

Before she could complete her sentence, a sudden explosive sound erupted, overpowering her voice. A spectacular burst of fireworks shot swiftly into the sky, instantly illuminating the darkness

The interior of the car, previously dim, now glowed brightly with the radiance of the fireworks Rose's gaze fixed on the night sky, where the colorful explosions left a brief yet dazzling imprint against the dark canvas

Overlapping memories flashed through her mind. It was the scene of Trevon confessing his feelings to Natalie on the island not long ago. At that time, Trevon had ignited fireworks for Natalie. Ava was envious of that proposal. As Rose admired that moment, she had made it sound like she had arranged it for Ava

A sudden realization dawned on Rose. Her mind raced. Surprised and playfully, she swatted Frank, who reclined lazily in his seat and gazed at the fireworks above. "Geez, you're quite strategic. So, you overheard everything that night. You arranged this for Ava tonight because she envied the fireworks on the island, right?"

Frank tapped the steering wheel with one hand and leaned against the car window with the other, responding, Pursuing someone is a man's affair What's a girl doing meddling with it?"

For reasons she couldn't quite fathom. Rose found Frank incredibly impressive-domineering yet charismatic.

Rose contemplated. "No wonder Cranky Franky said he'd take the first 99 steps towards her in the future. So, this is what he meant- a touch of male chauvinism. But it's alright, after all, he is my brother"

Meanwhile, a passionate encounter was unfolding in a room at Turner Manor. Prioritizing quality and gentleness, two people were engrossed in their realm of ecstasy.

However, their euphoria was abruptly interrupted by the loud sound of fireworks a few minutes later. Trevon frowned and glanced at the gap in the curtains. The bursts of light occasionally pierced through the cracks, disrupting their climax.

With her vision blurred, Natalie suggested. "Aren't you going to close the curtains?"

Annoyed by Frank's antics. Trevon clenched his teeth in irritation and muttered. "This Frank guy sticks to a script, following a set routine. He is copying what I've done before. He lacks originality. Let Ava hang on a bit longer. It'll toughen him up."

At this instant, Natalie's delicate appearance reflected the softness of spring rain, her cheeks tinged with a sheer flush, her hues perfectly harmonized, chimed in with a hoarse and soft voice. "You're exacting your revenge here. Go and close the curtains."

Without hesitation. Trevon surged forward again, saying. "Once you're in, you won't want to leave. Let's keep going."

On the balcony's diamond swing, the fireworks in the night sky harmonized with the sparkling gems adorning the chair.

In a state of mutual resonance, Ava's phone received a message from Frank. The message contained simple words. [Look at the sky 1

Clad in a smooth and silky silk nightgown, the fabric felt icy to the touch, imparting a refreshing sensation upon contact. A warmth spread through Ava's heart as her fingers grazed the cool cloth. Each firework blossoming in the sky left a fleeting beauty etched within her heart, creating a sense of warmth that radiated through her being.

Ava's gaze settled on the bunny imprints on her nightgown, and a rush of happiness surged within her. Without conscious thought, she reached out to touch the celestial beauty above.

Nestled within the swing, her body sank deep into its embrace as if she had become one with this surprise. Her chest swelled with joy, her toes tapping rhythmically along the swing's edge, her hand cradling her head as she tilted it to take in the night sky.

After observing for a while, she lapsed into contemplation. Her mind raced, "Frank said he'd take 99 steps toward me. So, is the final step marriage or having a child? Never mind the last step for now. Let's tally up how many steps Frank has taken.

"The first step was coming to Sapphire City to find me. It is worth one point. The second step was secretly helping me, which is worth one point. The third step is giving me 11 flowers. That's one point. Showing up at the masquerade, that is another point. Accompanying me to class, one point. Walking me home, one point. Attending the gathering at the manor, one point. The fireworks are another point.

"Adding them up, he's taken eight steps. 1, 2, 3, 4... 8 points. He's still 91 points short.

"With just one point for each step, it feels like too little. When will we reach 99 99 points seem a little far away. How about we make each step worth five points? That would be 40 points.

"No, I wouldn't say I like that number. Let's go with six points per step. That will be 48. That number feels a bit awkward, though. Scratch that. Seven points per step, which makes it a total of 56 points. Yes, that's good. It's just a bit shy of reaching the goal"

Ava reviewed the multiplication tables up to 100 from her elementary school days as she delved deep into her thoughts. Finally, she made her decision. She unlocked her phone, glanced at the screen, and spotted a few words. A smile tugged at her lips.

Brimming with joy, she typed a message on the screen, her fingers dancing merrily across the keyboard, [For the person walking 99 steps, thanks to your fireworks, I'll bump you up to 56 points.]

A response arrived instantly, and Frank wrote, [How did you come up with that calculation?]

He inquired about the method behind the points.

Without hesitation, Ava replied, I worked out the calculations based on my criteria. If there are any opportunities or points, I will add them to your score.]

Frank countered. [What are the criteria?]

Ava replied proudly. [Ava's criteria.]

Frank responded with a simple, [Hmm, alright.]

Following the exchange, Frank's responses seemed more extensive!

It felt strangely familiar as if they were already in love.

Ava rose from her seat and jumped with joy while holding her phone. Then, she leaned against the balcony railing to continue watching the endless cascade of fireworks in the sky. The extent of the fireworks Frank had arranged was hard to discern

There was hardly a girl who did not have a soft spot for romance. If a girl told a man she disliked romance or surprises, she might not honestly dislike romance; she might dislike the man.

Ava, however, welcomed surprises, particularly the romantic gestures of Frank. She wasn't opposed to romance, so why not embrace it?

Frank accompanied his sister to the airport. Upon arrival, Joseph's private jet was already awaiting them.

During the car journey, Rose observed Frank's occasional smirks and laughter as he undoubtedly engaged in a chat with Ava. She could sense that her brother held a genuine fondness for Ava.

After the luggage was moved onto the plane, Rose followed suit and boarded the aircraft.

With things in order, Frank stood before Rose with his hands in his pockets, and he said thoughtfully, "Behave when you're back home. Don't stir up trouble. If there's a problem, find Grace and sort it out. Understood?"

Rose chuckled absentmindedly, then shrugged casually as she replied, "Got it. You're playing the parental role even before you officially start dating."

Taking a step forward, Frank reached out and patted his sister's short hair. There was a trace of unspoken concern in his gaze. He reiterated, "Don't go searching for Edward. And seriously, thank you for waiting until I returned."

Rose did not inquire about his return, and Frank did not reveal when he would return.

With matters settled, Frank prepared to disembark from the plane. He turned to his standing sister and added, "Give us a call once you're home. I'll make sure you have enough money to make the call."

Rose smiled at her brother's retreating figure and said, "Frank."

Frank paused briefly, momentarily thinking she was reluctant to leave. A gentle warmth touched his heart. "If you don't want to return, I can help you request leave. No need to act as if you're wronged."

Rose, with an uncommonly serious demeanor, offered a gentle smile. She sincerely said, "Frank, Ava is wonderful. You two are a perfect match. Bring her to Athana soon. Keep going"

Frank was momentarily taken aback, then a rare smile graced his lips. He walked back to Rose, affectionately patting her head. He affectionately said, "There will be a time when you will start calling her sister-in-law'. Go now."

Rose nodded, saying, "Alright."

After disembarking, Frank did not immediately drive away. He lingered in a corner, watching the plane ascend into the clouds, vanishing into the night sky. Only then did he shift his gaze away and dial a call to his father, William. The call was swiftly answered. Frank reported saying, "Rose's plane has taken off. Time it yourself"

On the other end, William acknowledged. After Frank finished speaking, he hung up the call.

Reopening the chat interface on his phone. Frank visualizing the expression she might have

She seemed to feel no pride

messages. Frank had used. He read each

attentively.

He found it twofold endearing. The calls of his friend warned him of a journey ahead. It surprised the young man was peacefully reminding him of his

will day of excellence, and there was

[Chapter 317](#)

The following morning, a man was dressed in a black T-shirt adorned with an intricate constellation design on the chest, paired with deep gray jeans and limited edition white cushion shoes. He added a black baseball cap casually to his ensemble.

Strolling toward the entrance of Sapphire City University, the man's hands comfortably rested in his pockets. Upon arrival, he greeted the security guard with a nod of respect. The guard's lips curved into a smile encountering a harbinger of wealth.

upon his

presence as if

The man strolled, exuding a demeanor of casual nonchalance. His swiftness carried a relaxed, unhurried rhythm, suggesting a lack of urgency. Halting midway, he leaned against a roadside tree. With his back against the trunk, one foot rested against the tree, adopting an aura of unconventionality and roguish charm.

Amidst the university's academic atmosphere, he was an anomaly as he could not blend in with his surroundings.

The charisma of an attractive and unique man had its way of drawing women's attention. Two young ladies dressed in elegant attire could not resist gravitating toward the tree. One of them initiated a conversation, her voice laced with curiosity as she asked, "Excuse me, are you a student of Sapphire City University?"

The man did not lift his gaze as he maintained his posture. It was evident he harbored no inclination for dialogue.

He retrieved his phone from his pocket and typed a message while the other hand remained in his pocket.

His demeanor reflected disinterest and detachment, practically broadcasting the message, "Keep your distance,"

The girl next to her companion discerned his lack of interest in interaction. She gently tugged her friend's sleeve and whispered. "Let's move on. Shall we go to the library"

Nevertheless, captivated by the man's enigmatic aura, the girl who initiated the conversation was not ready to give up. She gently urged her friend to pause. Mustering her most charming smile, she asked, "Can we get to know each other? I am in the Broadcasting Department. I'm often chosen to host the graduation ceremonies at Sapphire City University. L

The man found her persistent chatter rather bothersome. Ava Turner's verbosity was bearable, but this girl's words became a grating nuisance. Without lifting his gaze, he responded curtly, "What does it matter to me?"

The girl exhibited equal pride. Being enrolled at Sapphire City University was no small feat, and if she did not meet specific standards, approaching an apathetic individual like him would feel like lowering her standards.

Were it not for his striking appearance, she might not have taken an interest. Her pursuit of conquest surged, prompting a coquettish flick of her hair. She asked, "If you're not attending Sapphire City University, which university do you attend?"

The girl's companion found herself in an awkward position Why would her friend try to hit on such an aloof guy? Feeling uncomfortable, the companion nervously shuffled her feet on the ground.

The man stayed silent for a while. After a moment, a few words slipped from his lips as he said emotionlessly.

Homeschooled University."

The two girls were locals from Sapphire City. They pondered for a while, racking their brains and almost resorting to searching online. The girl who had started the conversation tried to echo his words, and she muttered, "Homeschooled University. Is that a foreign university?"

The man's focus remained on his phone, his silence unwavering. The messages he dispatched had yet to garner replies.

Little did she know that Ava and Alex had been watching at the door for a few minutes. It was not strange for Ava to witness this scene. Frank was an attractive man. Otherwise, she would not have taken a fancy to him at first glance.

It was normal for attractive people to be coveted.

At the same time, this also meant that she had good taste in men.

On the other hand, Alex held a contrasting viewpoint. She detected a trace of envy within Ava. It appeared that Ava might be slightly envious of the attention the man was receiving. Clearing her throat, Alex interjected as she said, "Ahem, Ava, is your envy radar malfunctioning? Isn't it about time we..."

That subtle throat clearing served as a genuine signal. The man's attention was seized, causing him to raise his head. Turning to the two girls, he projected a frosty expression and uttered, "I'm already taken, ladies."

Nearby, Ava overheard his words and could not help but chuckle softly. Mentally, she awarded him a point, and he passed the minimal criterion of 63 points.

Then, she feigned indifference and resumed her walk to the library. As she passed by, she covertly directed her gaze toward

the tree.

The man's lips curved into a smile as he stood up to tidy his outfit. Then, he trailed behind her silently, his eyes focused on her retreating figure.

The two girls trailed closely behind, not in a desperate chase but converging toward the same destination-the library. Ava cast a sidelong glance and noticed the man had caught up with them. Her joy heightened, and Alex turned her head,

musings. "Ava. Frank seems to be quite the heartthrob. Should I hang back so you two can have some time together?"

Alex sensed Ava's fondness for the handsome stranger and decided she needed an excuse to leave the couple alone. The situation had shifted; this guy was irresistibly attractive. If things went awry, it could unsettle Ava.

Ava was composed and discerning. She did not share Alex's view. Walking alongside her friend, she confidently replied, "Not need. If others easily sway him, then I have misjudged him. But I trust my instincts."

With those words, she held her head high, radiating self-assurance, as she continued walking beside Alex.

Frank followed in silence, observing her with a smile, his gaze steady on the contour of her head.

Inside the library, tranquility reigned. Many individuals were already seated, engrossed in their studies.

The second, third, and fourth floors were occupied. Ascending to the second floor, Ava and Alex sought out their desired books from the rows of shelves.

The shelves towered above them. Ava circled around and identified her sought-after book. While initially thinking of asking Alex to retrieve it, she shifted her stance. Instead, she confidently addressed Frank, who was leaning casually against the bookcase, and she said. "Fetch that book for me"

There was no subject, only a self-assured command.

Frank straightened up without missing a beat. He did not exhibit surprise. He stood before Ava and inquired, "That database?"

The proximity between them was intimate, and his breath gently brushed her face as he spoke. Her cheeks tingled, and the library's stillness echoed with the rhythm of her racing heartbeat.

Alex observed the scene unfold from the corner of her eye, and she thought, "Oh dear, he is far too captivating. Ava would not be able to resist him"

Ava's gaze lowered, her toes curling slightly inside her shoes. She nodded.

With one hand resting against the bookcase, Frank extended the other to the book Ava sought. Even though he had the book within his grasp, he lowered his head and asked. "This pertains to your curriculum for the upcoming semester. I would not recommend delving into it."

The inclination to escape flickered in Alex's mind as she thought. "Why would I escape? It's because this guy is far too calculative. He even seems aware of Ava's subjects for the next semester, as though he's been plotting. Even I, who spend nearly daily with her, do not know about this."

Ava's gaze held firm as she confirmed, uttering. I want that book"

She needed to get ahead in her studies to graduate early. She had consulted her professor about early graduation and how she could compress three years of coursework into just one and a half years.

In this timespan, she had to excel in character, participate in public service and group activities, adhere to regulations, score above 85 in her courses, accumulate sufficient credits, pass her thesis defense, and apply for early graduation. Her professor had outlined the steps, and she was ready to work diligently, for she needed to get a jump on the subsequent courses.

As he observed Ava's resolve, Frank lifted his hand and handed her the desired book, a hint of skepticism flickering in his thoughts and a subtle smile at the corner of his lips.

Clutching the book close to her chest, Ava's heart raced. She found a secluded spot and settled in.

Alex took a seat beside Ava, facing Frank. She felt like a third wheel.

For Alex, who was unaccustomed to such scenarios, every fiber of her was buzzing with embarrassment. She tentatively addressed Ava, who sported a faint blush, and asked, "Should I use the restroom?"

Through that utterance, Alex left the decision of a restroom visit entirely in Ava's hands.

Ava had deliberately brought Alex to the library for some dedicated study time. In a gentle tone, she asked, "Aren't you reading anymore?"

"Of course I am. But I can't focus. I can't concentrate due to my pressing need for the restroom," Alex replied as she fabricated a lie.

Despite Ava's intention for Alex to study diligently, she did not want her friend to endure discomfort while reading. Ava nodded in understanding, silently urging her to leave promptly and return.

Just as Alex got to her feet, a magnetic voice reached her ears, "Thanks for that, mate."

"Uh... you're welcome. Goodbye," Alex stuttered in response.

Frank nodded in acknowledgment.

Ava silently mused. "He thanked her for using the restroom. Well, she did not assist him in that regard."

She kept her comments to herself, and brushed off that rough thought.

As anticipated Alex took an extended time to return, and Ava suspected that their productivity for the day might be compromised. A hunch told her that her friend had sneaked away.

Just as she was about to grab her phone to message Alex, a familiar low voice echoed. She won't be rejoining you."

"Just as I thought, she slipped away. Ava thought to herself

"Oh," Ava murmured, feigning engrossment in her reading. In reality, not a single word registered in her mind. The man proved quite the distraction.

Just as Alex had notes the man impeded her reading progress-much like he interfered with her artistry. The opening page held her captive for an extended period, as if she were mentally arranging each word.

This could not persist. She lifted her head, meeting eyes with Frank's carefree gaze. He held a book akin to hers, engrossed in its contents. It also belonged to the domain of computer science. While she was stalled on the first page, he had already traversed to the fifth.

She pondered whether he detected her attention. Frank met her mildly vexed expression and quirked a smile. "You cannot seem to focus," he remarked.

It was an affirmative sentence and not a question.

Sincerity compelled Ava to confess, and she said, "I'm awarding you 7 points. You've passed the test."

Her ears reddened after her admission. She hastened to press her palm against her heated cheeks and the cool surface of the table. With pursed lips and puffed cheeks, she transformed her countenance to conceal the urge to burst into laughter.

Frank perceived her intent but did not expose it. He allowed a smile to grace the corner of his lips and said, "Hmm, let me

teach you that'

The book encompassed topics set for the next semester, which was challenging for the young girl. Frank's elucidation would undeniably simplify comprehension. Observing Ava's incredulous gaze, he clarified again, saying, "I know this topic. I can

teach you

Concise and direct, Ava grasped the notion and responded, “Oh”

Eager to learn. Ava naturally welcomed the prospect of free topic elucidation. After all, it conserved her mental faculties, and allowed her to learn the subjects more efficiently.

Mr. Roberts extended a concise explanation, and she absorbed it with unwavering attention, assuming the role of a diligent student. Yet, she could not resist glancing at the captivating instructor during his impromptu lecture.

“Listen to me first. You can stare at me later. Frank advised with earnestness

Caught in the act, Ava experienced a twinge of embarrassment and answered with a sheepish smile, “Oh”

[Chapter 318](#)

Engrossed in their discussion, Ava and Frank unconsciously drew many complex gazes from the students nearby.

Countless looks of envy, jealousy, and disdain were all cast their way..

Not far from the pair, two girls engaged in a relentless whisper, their conversation a tapestry of speculation. Their gazes were anything but discreet as they remained fixated on the man seated across from Ava.

One of the girls held a book in one hand, a pen in the other, and a notebook was placed on her side. This pair was none other than the identical girls who had approached Frank earlier.

There was another girl who was sharing the table with them. Together, the three women instantly formed a gossip group.

The girl majoring in broadcasting scoffed angrily as she said, “What is the big deal? He is just taken. There was no need for him to act all high and mighty just now.”

Her female companion, who was more pragmatic, advised her as she said, “Concentrate on your studies. He might just be reserved. If he responded to your greeting, would that not be disingenuous?”

In any case, this girl felt that the man’s actions were proper. Having a girlfriend while entertaining advances from others was certainly disingenuous behavior. Pursuing one individual at a time was the only fair approach.

The girl, who was sharing the table, briefly glanced toward the couple. In a hushed tone, she asked, “Are you discussing the couple over there?”

The broadcasting major girl remained dissatisfied. It was her first time encountering a man who treated her with such indifference. Annoyed, she pursed her lips and replied, “Yeah, do you know that guy?”

She had heard of Ava’s name before, as Ava was renowned for her beauty and amiability. Besides, Ava also had many admirers. It was said that the pursuits of others did not easily sway Ava. However, she had never met or seen this specific guy before. He had even indicated he was not from their institution,

implying his association with another. His handsomeness would have garnered him fame if he were from Sapphire City University.

The girl at their table retrieved her phone and shared an online forum post with the pair. The post featured a picture of Ava and the other person, Frank. The image portrayed Ava clutching a mask while the individual gently wiped her tears. The man's gaze seemed tender, and it was laced with a trace of indulgence and anguish.

"They are a couple. There's no doubt after seeing them together," the broadcasting major girl asserted, preempting the need to see the photo for confirmation.

The girl at their table divulged information in a low voice, saying, "No, they are not. A student of the computer science department told me that Ava initially pursued the man but was subsequently rejected. She feigned distress, and then the man had initiated pursuit here."

This was the nature of gossip. With each recount, the information morphed from one iteration to the next to a point where the truth became murky.

Different versions circulated among social groups, and the emotional consequences of these tales were often disregarded.

"So, she pursued them first. That explains it" the broadcasting major girl responded with a blend of scorn and disdain.

Suddenly, a "man" wearing a mask settled beside them. A look of curiosity was plastered on the girls' faces. "What's the chatter about? Fill me in," the "man" said.

The girls at the table glanced at the "male" classmate who joined them. One of them inquired curiously, "Are you guys as drawn to gossip as we are?"

"Hey, gossip is not constrained by gender. It's a human tendency. It's more entertaining when we share information with one another," Alex responded. Her expression indicated she was present to revel in the drama.

If invited to participate in the gossip, all girls would undoubtedly oblige. The girls at the table began to recount the gossip tale in great detail.

Alex kept her mask on throughout the conversation. Her voice was naturally low, creating an impression of gender ambiguity. After hearing the gossip tale, Alex corrected the group, saying, "You have all the facts wrong. Where did you pick up this misinformation? It's entirely off the mark. Let me correct this for you. The man did not reject Ava. This person noticed her when she visited her sister's city. You know what?"

Alex addressed the trio of girls with a hint of amusement. She continued, half-serious and half-joking, saying, "Then, you know, our Ava from the university is quite something. She turned this person down despite their relentless pursuit. Yet, upon her return, the man employed all means to get closer to Ava. On the day of the competition, the man even arranged for a delivery rider to present Ava with 11 roses. Eleven roses, you grasp the significance, don't you? It means utter devotion." Alex reshaped the narrative's protagonist. After all, speculation would thrive where truth remained elusive, Who could not

concoct stories? She emphasized again. "There is no room for doubt. This is the real truth. Just look at that picture. Their gaze is rife with tenderness and affection. Scrutinize it. Ponder it deeply."

The three girls regarded Alex's words with confusion and reluctant belief. After all, Alex had delivered her account with such

precision and conviction. Alex's version of events appeared reasonable when they examined the photo through the phone's

screen.

The broadcasting major girl was consumed by envy. What was Ava's secret? It boiled down to slightly enhanced looks, tinged with innocence and sweetness. She, too, possessed such allure

Alex's brief dialogue had successfully twisted the narrative. It was not entirely fabricated. Frank's pursuit of Ava was genuine. The episode involving the II roses was also accurate. Alex had not fabricated these details. She had only changed the protagonist of the story.

The girl majoring in broadcasting clung to two pivotal details: the first is that the young man who pursued Ava had faced rejection yet persevered. The second is that he hailed from a city beyond Sapphire City's borders. Curiosity spurred her to address Alex and ask. "He's not affiliated with Sapphire City, am I right? He stated he was from Homeschooled University, but where is that situated?"

Beneath her mask. Alex's countenance registered surprise. She asked, "Which university?"

"Homeschooled University," the broadcasting major girl repeated.

"Are you certain about the name?" Alex questioned. She found herself increasingly puzzled. The moniker sounded almost like a made-up word.

The broadcasting major girl nodded affirmatively, and Alex stifled a grin. Standing up. Alex said, "Well, that could be a well-known institution over there. Anyway, focus on your studies. I'm heading out. Oh, and keep this information to yourself. These are insider information. Ironically, some people believed that Ava was the one pursuing him."

After Alex's departure, the trio of girls released sighs of contemplation. They pondered why such a handsome individual was not pursuing them. Their envy was evident.

Afterward, Alex made a discreet exit from the library. Curiosity piqued, she messaged Ava, asking [Hey, could you ask Frank what Homeschooled University is?]

While Ava was engrossed in the lecture, the buzzing of her phone on the desk disrupted her focus. She sneakily stole a glance at the device, reading the notification.

"Go ahead and check it," Frank gently said as he halted mid-lecture,

Every minuscule motion and expression of Ava was perceptible to Frank. Nothing eluded his attention, and he was merely playing along.

"Oh," Ava responded as she openly picked up her phone, a playful smile gracing her lips.

Reading the message, Ava's brows knitted in confusion as she thought, "What is this university? Should I approach Frank to clarify this?" Yet something about the message felt peculiar. After rereading it several times, she surrendered the thought.

She scratched her neck and propped her chin on her hand. Her lengthy eyelashes fluttered gently, and her gaze flowed tenderly as she asked, "Mr. Roberts, what is Homeschooled University?"

This query prompted Frank to momentarily pause his lecture, a fleeting grin curving his lips. He sent the correct name to Ava via text. [Home-Schooled University I

A faint buzz urged Ava to inspect her phone. Confronted with the words on the screen, she could no longer suppress her reaction. She placed her hand on the desk and buried her face within her arm, her shaking shoulders belying her genuine emotions.

Chuckling unreservedly, Frank rested his phone on the desk. He folded his arms across his chest and reclined against the chair. Resuming the lecture could wait; the girl's joy took precedence for now.

Observing Ava, who was immersed in unrestrained laughter, he succumbed to the contagion of joy.

Arching an eyebrow, he inquired, "Is it amusing?"

Following her laughter, Ava yearned to applaud him, and she pondered, "How did he think of this? So inventive." Despite the lingering smile, her breathing remained uneven as she supported herself on her elbows, trained her gaze on the impassive Frank, and asked, "Where did you come up with this phrase? Is there a source?"

Frank sustained his gaze, uttering a single word. With an air of tranquility, he replied, "Yes."

Meeting Ava's direct, inquisitive stare, Frank preempted her question, replying, "I'm at home every day. Isn't that akin to attending Home-schooled University?"

The girl had not inquired about his profession, solely about the university. Since he was presently unaffiliated with an institution, why not dub it Home-schooled University? The name seemed fitting enough.

Ava's hand covered her forehead, following her attentive listening, her laughter reverberating. With one hand still veiling her face, she extended her other hand and gave Frank an appreciative thumbs-up.

Frank observed the pale and slender outstretched hand before him. An internal impetus propelled him, prompting the uncrossing of his arms. His hand ascended, capturing her delicate fingers and delicately lowering them onto the table. The motion flowed seamlessly, exuding a naturalness that bordered on the ethereal. His lips parted, and his voice emerged, saying, "Let's continue the lecture"

The warmth from his palm infused her being, causing her laughter to taper off abruptly. Ava's cheeks ignited with a rosy hue, her hand still cradling her flushed face. She lowered her eyelids, a veil

concealing her bashfulness. Her hand neither recoiled nor retreated as the sensation was far too pleasant. Breaking the contact seemed inconceivable.

“Oh she meekly and obediently responded.

Frank’s hand enveloped Ava’s while the other extended toward the book, poised to resume the lecture. Her thoughts had already wandered astray, rendering her deaf to the words that spilled from Frank’s lips.

This instant was imbued with a certain beauty, an impression that time had suspended its march. The library’s patrons seemed to evaporate, leaving solely the two figures behind.

A transient notion whispered at the edges of her mind, an idea of leaning in for a kiss, but rationality swiftly reasserted itself. His narrative hadn’t concluded, and her curiosity about the forthcoming surprise overruled her fleeting impulse. Thus, she quieted the whimsy.

“Concentrate on the lecture. Frank’s reminder echoed again in her ears.

Ava’s musings were corralled back to the present. The situation resembled that of a daydreaming student being caught, her affirmation issued. Understood”

Frank did not retract his hand

Frank’s palm cradled hers with the utmost restraint, devoid of extraneous movements.

To outsiders, it was a mere portrait of a devoted couple engrossed in academic pursuit, a sight of envy. Amid leisure hours. they melded scholarship and affection, a dual devotion.

Leaning against the library’s descending escalator. Alex awaited Ava’s response, her demeanor unhurried. A muted ping resonated, eliciting a swift retrieval of her phone

After reading the message. Alex was at a loss for words.

Alex was confident that Ava would be thrilled to be with this man in the future. Although this man did not say much, his words were highly humorous.

Alex sincerely hoped that Ava could be happy. While she was not happy herself, the smile on Ava’s face was very infectious. Alex cherished her friend very much.

As for her return to the library, the reasoning was simple. The duo inadvertently drew too much attention. Easily discerned. they provided fertile ground for idle speculation.

Shifting the blame onto Frank was a decision Alex had thoroughly considered. The guy Ava liked was not a local, so blaming him posed no issue. Besides, Ava was still in university, and gossip would not be appropriate. Furthermore, it’s normal for guys to pursue girls, but if others found out that Ava had pursued a guy and been rejected, who knows how they might twist the story.

[Chapter 319](#)

The wind at the end of spring was not as cool, and the warmth of summer made people slightly sweaty.

In Sapphire City, the temperature outdoors was indeed several degrees higher than that in Athana.

The family of three sat on a tricycle and circled the old town of Sapphire City. The driver was sweating profusely, making Natalie feel a little guilty.

She had originally wanted to rent two tricycles. After all, Trevon was quite heavy, and this kind of physical work was footwork. However, Trevon had offered a lot of money. The driver took it and said that it was a piece of cake. Then, he threw a towel on his shoulder and wiped his sweat as he rode.

The tricycle stopped at an antique street. The driver introduced, "Sir, this is the most crowded place in the tourist area. You can take a look around. It's quite memorable. Every place is antique and preserves traces of history."

Trevon was wearing a white Polo short-sleeved shirt and sweatpants. He held an umbrella in one hand and Jasper in the other. The father and son were both wearing cool sunglasses. Jasper was also wearing a macaroni-colored baseball cap.

It was like the arrival of a big shot and his mini version.

Natalie thanked the driver after paying. She hid under the umbrella and hugged Trevon's arm. "Let's go over there. There are quite a lot of people over there. Let's go and see what they're selling."

Actually, Trevon did not like crowded places. It was not only crowded but also chaotic. However, his wife liked it, and his son liked it, so he followed them. In addition, it was a rare opportunity to travel together.

On one side of the ancient town was a bridge. The entire ancient town was surrounded by flowing water. The clear sound of flowing water was very pleasant to the ears. Perhaps this was what people said about the beautiful and pleasant scene in a good-looking small town.

Every house retained its oldest charm. Whether it was the bridge or the ground, or the houses, they were all antique, making people want to step forward and explore.

Jasper was very curious. His small eyes rolled around as he handsomely pushed up his sunglasses and muttered, "Beautiful."

Trevon glanced at the little boy in his arms. "You actually know that it's beautiful. It's because they are colorful, right?"

Jasper wanted to tell Trevon that he really thought it was beautiful. He said in his childish voice again. "Daddy, beautiful."

Natalie looked at her son who had a firm gaze and retorted, "That might not be the case. Perhaps Jasper likes this kind of antique."

The two of them came out alone behind Ava's back. Their original intention was not to disturb the only time she had with Frank. Natalie knew that although Ava did not promise Frank verbally, she had already given up resisting in her heart. It was no different from agreeing now. Frank would go to school with her, and Ava was especially happy every day when she came back. She was either holding her computer or her phone at home. She looked like she was purely in love, so there was no need for her to agree.

Originally, Natalie wanted to call Sherri today, but Trevon didn't want others to disturb the atmosphere, so they secretly came out and abandoned Hackett and his family.

At the thought of this, Natalie held Trevon's arm affectionately and walked forward. The umbrella covered the warm light that wanted to penetrate. "By the way, Trevon, Sherri said that she wants to hold a wedding together with us. What do you think?"

Trevon's eyes darkened. He didn't want to hold a wedding together. What was the difference between it and organizing a shopping spree? He rejected it without hesitation. "No."

He lowered his eyes and met her gentle gaze. He lowered his voice. His hands were really occupied. Otherwise, he really wanted to hold her waist. Why was the sun shining in such weather? Wouldn't it be better if it was cloudy? "I don't plan to do it twice. I want to give you a unique halo for a once-in-a-lifetime matter. You should be the only protagonist. You can let her be your bridesmaid, but there can't be two protagonists."

Trevon's words were very calm, but they could not be refuted or changed. This was something he could not compromise with. He could form a team to play, but he could not form a team to get married.

Natalie could already feel the determination in his eyes and tone. When it was her first time attending a wedding, she was a bride, so she did not know that weddings could not be held together. Alright, since that was the case, she could only say sorry to Sherri.

There shouldn't be a woman who didn't want a unique wedding, right?

"Alright. I'll follow your words. Mr. Wilson, remember your words. I want to see what kind of wedding you'll give me."

"I guarantee that you'll be satisfied, Mrs. Wilson."

They looked at each other and smiled. It was all in the words. Some gentleness and love could be understood with a word, a look, or even a gesture. They didn't even need to say a sentence. Perhaps this was love.

While they were strolling around, Trevon also shared with her about Frank giving Joseph the secret defense map. Ava's matter was almost certain. It was better to confess as soon as possible. If one day, she found it out, Frank would be criticized again.

Natalie was shocked again after hearing this. Frank was really taking every step carefully. He was getting closer to Ava step by step and had come up with a foolproof plan. He had even gotten Joseph's approval. Could Ava still escape from his grasp?

As Natalie was thinking, she saw a man sneakily approaching a girl from the corner of her eye. The more Natalie looked at him, the more she felt that something was amiss. She narrowed her eyes and stopped in her tracks.

Trevon observed the direction of the woman beside him and followed her gaze. He frowned slightly and was about to remind her. "You..."

Natalie had already dashed into the crowd and chased after the man. "Catch the thief! Catch the thief! My phone was stolen..."

It was only now that the girl realized that her bag had been stolen.

Everyone looked in the direction and saw a woman wearing a T-shirt and jeans smashing her baby bag on the man who was running.

The distance was too far. The bag only touched a little of his body before falling to the ground. Natalie looked around and found a shortcut that could block the thief. She jumped nimbly to the side of the river. Trevon's eyes darkened when he saw

this.

However, his hands were already occupied Jasper kept praising Natalie in his arms. "Mom, great."

Hearing this, his temples throbbed. He knew that the thief was no match for Natalie. It would only take a few minutes for him to be caught, but it was really dangerous to jump around. It was very easy for her to get injured.

It turned out that the wildness that had been suppressed in her bones had never dissipated. This reminded him of a night two years ago. On the way home, she had beaten a few people. At that time, he had turned off the lights and watched the show, making Jim anxious.

After being with him, she seemed to have become very gentle, and her personality had become soft. It made him forget the woman who was even admired by Jim in the past.

He remembered how Jim described her. She was cool and valiant. Wasn't this the case? The woman he liked stepped on the thief with one foot and slapped the back of his head a few times before rudely snatching back her bag.

Natalie, the brave woman, kept dusting the baby bag in her hand. She even tidied her hair. The girl whose bag was stolen thanked her profusely. "Thank you, Miss. You're so awesome. Were you an athlete before

Natalie's lips curved. "Maybe it's because my legs are long. In the future, don't put your phone in your bag when there are many people."

Such backpacks could easily be stolen and not discovered when carried behind one's back.

"Thank you, Miss. You're not only good-looking but also kind."

"Do I still have to praise you?" Trevon was very helpless.

Natalie shrugged. "That's not necessary. If you really want to praise me, I'll accept it. Let's see how you praise me."

Trevon was speechless.

When Natalie saw that his expression had turned colder, her joking tone changed. "Don't be angry. You know that I could catch up. I'd already considered the safety range before I started to run. With you and Jasper, I'll definitely think twice before doing anything. Look, I am fine, aren't I?"

Trevon knew that she was coaxing him. He clearly knew that she had never considered it before she took a step forward, but he still fell for her trick. His brows relaxed.

Jasper lay on Trevon's shoulder and secretly gave Natalie a thumbs-up.

The mother and son were communicating in a language that Trevon did not know. They were secretly laughing.

At Sapphire City University, Ava stayed in the library for a few hours. In the beginning, she was embarrassed to be held by Frank's hand and lectured. It was difficult for her to focus. From time to time, she would look at their crossed hands, and the temperature on her cheeks would rise again.

Her cheeks kept cooling down and then blushing again.

Gradually, she was attracted by the topic he was talking about and forgot that her hand was being held.

The people in the library left one after another. Frank turned to look at his watch and realized that it was already 11:30 am. He reminded her, "What do you want to eat?"

"Huh? What?" Ava, who was still immersed in the book, asked.

"Lunch. It's past 11 now"

the phone and looked at the time on the screen. She realized that it was a little late. She looked around and realized that the number of people had unknowingly decreased. She never knew that there would be a day when she could quietly

in the library with the man she liked for so long

It turned out that even if two people who liked each other didn't do anything, sitting together could make time slowly disappear. It was still happy

She quietly retracted her hand and placed her hands on both sides of her cheeks. She tapped on both sides of her cheeks with her fingertips as if she was thinking about what to eat with Frank "Yes, Mr. Roberts, my teacher, you've been teaching

the questions for the entire morning Let me treat you to a meal. What do you want to eat?"

Frank was silent for a while. He did not expect her to say that. From Frank to Mr. Roberts, now she called him a teacher again. The way she addressed him was really different every day. "Cafeteria"

"What? Cafeteria" Shouldn't he take the opportunity to eat something nice? Why was he going to the cafeteria?

So be it. She had to satisfy Mr. Roberts's request

"Let's go Ava said readily

After saying that. Ava was about to get up and tidy up her books and bag However, Frank had already helped her get her bag from the chair. He even took the books away and placed them back in their original positions.

warm sun shone on this scene. It was filled with love.

The bag was still in Frank's hand. He held the bag in one hand and adjusted the long chain in his palm.

When they walked out of the library, the warm sun turned into a bright sun. It was a little hot. Before Ava could take a step, a baseball cap appeared on her head blocking the sunlight and darkening her vision.

"I'll bring you an umbrella tomorrow" Frank glanced at the sun hanging high in the sky. It was very dazzling. The baseball cap could not hide the sun. It was so hot

"Okay" Ava's heart suddenly warmed up. Her heart was beating wildly

Had Frank never been in a relationship before? However, no matter which side it was, he was very alluring. She was about to break through her defense and agree to him immediately.

Ava pressed down on the baseball cap on her head and told herself to calm down. She should hold on for a while longer. She smiled warmly at Frank "I've scored your baseball cap. Now you have gotten 70 points"

Frank was amused by her cute look. He didn't seem to be chasing after his girlfriend, but rather fighting for his credits to graduate. He shook his head helplessly. "Okay"

The two of them walked side by side in the direction of the canteen. Along the way, she sent Alex a message [Let's eat in the canteen together]

Alex replied instantly. [Not interested, busy.]

Ava was speechless. She knew what being busy was. It was sleep.

[Chapter 320](#)

The cafeteria was on the second floor, and the first floor was the film hall. Most of the students would rest in the film hall after eating.

The students came to the cafeteria one after another and walked to the bar counter in whispers.

There were already many people lined up at the bar counter Ava felt that it was not good to let Frank wait. It was better to order on her phone. After ordering, she would go and get the dishes.

The cafeteria of Sapphire City University was different from many universities. They could order their food online through the app. After ordering, they could just go to the bar to get their food. The chefs would pack up the food they ordered or pack it up and push it out. As for whether it was packed or served in the hall, they could choose when ordering.

Ava subconsciously pulled Frank's arm toward a certain spot. He was still holding her bag.

For some reason, the way he held her bag was very handsome and not out of place at all.

"Let's sit here. It's quieter here," Ava suggested. This was a corner where she and Alex usually sat.

"Okay." Frank sat down opposite her and gently placed the bag in his hand on the table.

As for the table, he had already observed it when he came in. It was very clean and the environment was indeed not bad.

Ava also sat down at the same time. She lowered her head and turned on her phone. She opened it and scanned the QR code at the corner of the table. Her slender fingers slid across the screen. She was in a dilemma. After looking at the menu for a while, she puffed up her cheeks and looked up. "Frank, what do you like to eat?"

Whether it was Mr. Roberts or Frank, the title could be freely changed in her mouth.

"Suit yourself." He was never a picky eater. He ate whatever he had.

In Ava's opinion, these two simple words were based on her preferences. She could choose on her own. She was the one who treated Frank to a meal. Putting aside the fact that she liked Frank, it was also his first time coming to her school. She felt a little embarrassed to order what she liked.

However, she felt like she was being pampered.

She held the phone in one hand and rested her chin on the other. Then, she placed the phone on the table and pushed it to him. Her long eyelashes fluttered, which touched Frank's heart. "Mr. Roberts, why don't you take a look? If you really don't know what to choose, you can order one dish."

This way, she wouldn't feel guilty.

Frank placed his hands on the table and glanced at the menu that was pushed to him. Then, he looked were filled with thoughts and anticipation. Frank casually said. "Sausage."

up

at her eyes

which

Seeing that he had ordered a dish. Ava was in a much better mood. She took her phone back and began to order in unison. She ordered a few dishes at once, but her eyes froze on the barbecue ribs for a few seconds before she swiped the screen. After she ordered and was about to pay, Frank spoke again. "Order the barbecue ribs."

"Ah? Do you like it?" Ava also wanted to order it just now, but she gave up because she found it troublesome to eat it.

Frank replied concisely. "Yes."

Ava clicked on the return button in the upper left corner and swiped the menu to order the barbecue ribs before paying. Frank did not stop her when she paid.

After she paid, the front desk announcer was already calling out numbers to get food. It was very efficient.

Before Ava got up, Frank took her phone and walked to the bar counter. At this moment, his hat was on Ava's head, and his face was not covered by a mask.

His tall figure walked toward the crowd Handsome men had always been eye-catching. From time to time, people would approach him to start a conversation. There were not many handsome and roguish people like Frank in the university.

"Hey, handsome, are you eating alone? Let's eat together," a student at the side asked tentatively.

Frank didn't answer. He ignored the girl and operated Ava's phone. Then, he handed it to the cashier and took the meal

away.

When the girl saw the handsome man walking in a certain direction, she realized that he had a girlfriend. She sighed. 'Alas, indeed, handsome men don't fall behind. Someone always picks them up.'

Frank placed the plates on the table and took them out one by one. Then, he placed the plates aside and slowly sat down. He handed macaroni and fork to Ava. "Eat."

"Oh, was there a girl who wanted to share a table with you just now?" Ava saw the scene just now.

"Yes." He continued to be concise.

Frank was easily attracted to women wherever he went. What should she do? Should he wear a mask in the future and hide his handsome face?

What should she do? He was too charming.

While Ava was still daydreaming, a shrimp fell into her bowl. "What are you thinking about? I'm not fickle"

Was that a promise? Sort of

When she came back to her senses, she realized that Frank was not eating. Instead, he was slowly peeling the shrimp with disposable gloves. He had already quickly peeled half of the shrimp, and there was still half of them on the plate.

The man who was peeling the prawns seriously was very charming. He lowered his eyes and handled every prawn seriously. His facial features were well-defined and his face which was not smiling had a cold and mysterious look. He had a high nose bridge, good-looking lips, and a well-defined jawline

Ava stared blankly. No matter how she looked at him, she found that he was handsome and she liked him.

Sitting in the cafeteria, she felt as if the entire world was not as pleasing to the eye as him. He exuded an aura that made people make mistakes all the time.

Ava propped her head up and looked at Frank who was still peeling prawns. In a daze, she said, "Frank"

Frank was already used to her changing the way she addressed him at any time. "Huh?"

"Why are you so handsome? Did you inherit your father's genes, or did you inherit your mother's genes?" Ava was very curious. How good-looking were the parents of such a handsome man?

Upon hearing her words. Frank stopped peeling the prawns and looked up. He saw that Ava's eyes were as clear as water, innocent and sincere as if she was really just asking out of curiosity. He did not feel that her words were teasing or praising him at all. When she met his deep eyes. Ava did not avoid them. She really wanted to know.

Frank looked into her eyes for a second but couldn't take it anymore. He avoided her gaze and continued to peel the prawns. "Both"

Ava continued. Then your parents must be very good-looking. Otherwise, how can you be so handsome"

The plate of prawns was pushed in front of her. Frank took off his gloves, picked up his fork and knocked on her plate. "Eat."

"Oh Although she said that, she still stole a few glances at Frank. He was especially eye-catching.

After that. Ava ate very seriously. Frank ate very quickly. While Ava was still eating, Frank had already bought a bottle of beverage back. "Grapefruit juice.

After finishing the last mouthful of food, Ava seemed to have discovered a new world. She looked at the attentive man in front of her without blinking. "Did you buy it at the milkshake store?"

There was a very famous milkshake store in Sapphire City University. This was to prevent everyone from ordering takeout. There were always different deliverymen waiting at the entrance. It was relatively unsafe. The principal opened a very famous milkshake store.

"Yes, I just saw it," Frank said simply.

After eating. Ava picked up the drink and took a sip. It was clearly a little sour, but she felt very sweet, the kind that made her

heart melt

Frank picked up the bag and was about to leave when Ava's phone rang. Alex's voice couldn't be louder. The two of them stopped walking out. "Baby, your meal has caused a stir on our school's Internet forum."

Ava did not understand what was going on. What did she do? "What's wrong? What's wrong with me?"

Alex was extremely excited. When she heard from Ava that they were going to the cafeteria to eat, she had already thought that the two of them would attract a lot of attention. Both of them were extremely good-looking, so it was difficult for them to keep a low profile.

The photos of you guys eating have been posted on the forum. I'm telling you. He's so handsome. Many people are envious, but there are also many people who are jealous. Just read the nice comments. Don't pay attention to those who are jealous."

Alex reminded her.

Regardless of whether one was living a good life or not, there would always be people discussing it. A person's mouth was always talking, but the words they said could be pleasant to the ears and unpleasant. Some people were kind, while some were jealous and mean.

After listening to Alex's description, Ava wasn't curious about what everyone said about her. She didn't care about what others thought. Otherwise, she wouldn't have pursued Frank back then. She wanted to see the photos on the forum. Alex said that they were very good-looking and matched.

She opened the school forum and saw the headlines, "Ava had brought her boyfriend to the cafeteria for a meal" One photo was of Frank holding her hand in the library. The two of them were talking seriously about the questions. There was also a

photo of Frank putting the baseball cap on her. The last photo was of Frank peeling shrug. There were a total of three photos

It was indeed beautiful. The photographer's skills were really good. He had taken all their good posts. It was very wonderful. She wondered if it was taken by a student from the photography department.

Frank was taller than Ava. As long as he lowered his eyes slightly, he would be able to see the entire contents of her phone The corners of his mouth curled up when Ava couldn't see

"Let's go. What time is class in the afternoon" Frank asked naturally as if he did not care about such gossip

"2 o'clock" Once again. Ava felt that this person's technique was especially good. She secretly saved all the photos on the

forum

A low and magnetic voice came from beside her "Send it to me."

"Ah? What?" Ava was still immersed in the three photos and did not delve into Frank's words

Frank said bluntly. "Photos."

Ava was stunned What should she do? Her face seemed to be redder. Fortunately, the sun was a little strong, so Frank couldn't tell if it was because of the sun or because she was shy

"Do you want all of them? Do you want to commemorate it? A day trip to the cafeteria" After a few seconds of rebebe Am said playfully with a smile

Frank continued concisely. It's up to you."

As she choked on the water she had just drunk Was it okay to be so direct? She couldn't hold it in okay

Frank could not help but laugh. He took out a tissue to wipe her face. "It's so easy to amuse you Why didn't you have the courage to chase after me back

"You put it out" Ava stood there motionlessly Frank helped to wipe her chin.

He admitted it so quickly that Ava swallowed the words she wanted to say Forget Anyway, she liked him.

"Alright, I'll forgive you on account of your good attitude, but it doesn't mean that I'll agree to it now"

Ava thought. "If you say a few more words. I would like to give you more points"