

# Trading My Ex for His Uncle

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## Trading My Ex for His Uncle

Nyla was momentarily stunned but reached out to accept the gift.

"Can I open it now?" she asked.

Alexander nodded. "Of course."

She lifted the lid and found a stunning ruby necklace inside, surrounded by diamonds that shimmered like a star-studded sky. It was breathtaking-impossible to look away from.

"It's beautiful. Thank you," she gasped.

"As long as you like it, that's all that matters. By the way, where's Buddy?" Alexander asked.

"He's probably in the main hall," Nyla answered.

Alexander chuckled. "Alright. I'll go look for him."

As soon as he left, Valarie let out a gasp of amazement. "Nyla, who was that guy?

I just saw this necklace on the news a while ago. It was auctioned off for 20,000,000 dollars to a mysterious buyer! And now, I see it in real life-right here!"

Nyla was taken aback. She hadn't expected the necklace to be that valuable.

She examined it again. Aside from its beauty, it didn't seem all that special. "Are you sure it's worth so much?" she asked.

Valarie nodded fervently. "Absolutely! This was an engagement gift from a queen's husband. He personally designed it as a symbol of a once-in-a-lifetime love.

"If this man gave it to you, he's probably wishing you and Damon a lifetime of happiness. But seriously, what's your relationship with him? He must care about you a lot to give you something this expensive."

Meeting Valarie's curious gaze, Nyla pursed her lips. "He's my cousin. But before you told me, I had no idea how valuable this necklace was."

If she had known earlier, she probably wouldn't have accepted it.

Valarie, having been her best friend for years, immediately understood what she was thinking. "Nyla, don't overthink it. Since your cousin could afford to give you something this extravagant, it means he genuinely wants you to have it. He just wants to see you happy. But seriously, when did you suddenly gain a cousin?"

As they entered the dressing room, Nyla briefly explained how she and Alexander met.

After listening, Valarie sighed. "Your cousin seems like a really good guy."

Even though they had just met and barely spent any time together, Alexander had still given her such a meaningful wedding gift. That said a lot.

"Yeah... it's just that the gift is too expensive. When he gets married I'll have to get him something equally

valust thinking aboutit gives

a headache," Nyla muttered.

Valarie laughed. "Come on, it's not a business transaction! You don't have to match it exactly. Just pick

Over

something meaningful within your means when the time comes."

Nyla considered it and nodded. "You're right. I'll figure it out when the time comes."

After changing into her reception dress, they returned to the hall.

Nyla and Damon made their rounds, toasting guests at each table.

...

By the time the wedding ended, it was past 6:00 p.m.

Exhausted, Nyla didn't even want to move. She leaned back in her chair while her makeup was being removed and unknowingly drifted off to sleep.

When she woke, she was back at the villa, already changed into her sleepwear.

Blinking in surprise, she lifted the blanket and got out of bed.

After washing up, she went downstairs, where Lydia immediately approached her. "Ms. Kin-Oh, I mean, Mrs. Sumner, are

you hungry? The kitchen kept some food warm for you."

Nyla smiled. "I'm not hungry. Lydia, just call me whatever you used to. Changing it now feels strange."

Lydia chuckled. "You'll get used to it soon enough."

"By the way, where's Damon?" Nyla asked.

"Mr. Sumner drank quite a bit tonight. He didn't want the smell of alcohol to bother you, so he's resting in the study," Lydia said.

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Nyla continued. "And Buddy?"

"Mr. Mason has already gone to bed," Lydia reported.

Nyla nodded, then turned and made her way to the study.

She gently pushed the door open and saw Damon fast asleep on the couch. Quietly, she stepped inside.

The couch wasn't very big-perfect for her to nap on while reading. But for someone as tall as Damon, it looked rather cramped.

As she moved closer, she noticed he hadn't even loosened his tie before falling asleep. A flicker of distress crossed her eyes. He must have been exhausted from all the wedding preparations.

Carefully, she reached out, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt. Then she grabbed a blanket and draped it over him.

After making sure he was comfortable, she left the room as quietly as she had entered.

Since she wasn't sleepy yet, she decided to sit in the living room for a while.

Just as she settled on the couch, Lydia approached with a shawl. "Mrs. Sumner, the temperature drops at night. Keep warm."

"Thank you, Lydia. You should rest now. I just need a little time to wind down," Nyla said.

"I can keep you company," Lydia offered.

Glancing at the time, Nyla saw it was already past 11:00 p.m. Not wanting Lydia to stay up, she stood. "It's getting cold down here. I'll head upstairs and try to sleep. You should rest too."

"Alright, Mrs. Sumner," Lydia replied.

Back in her bedroom, Nyla picked up her phone and found a string of messages from Valarie, filled with pictures from the wedding.

She scrolled through them, saving every single one before sending a message. Nyla: [Valarie, thank you so much for today! You worked so hard!]

Then she transferred 10,000 dollars as a gift.

...

Valarie was at a bar, drinking with Stefan, completely unaware of Nyla's message.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes hazy, and under the dim lights, she looked dangerously alluring.

Stefan's gaze darkened. "Veevee, you're drunk. Let me take you home."

Valarie shook her head stud

"No, I can

I'm

enoto

y today, so drinks drink

me! Keep them coming!"

Stefaned and reached for the

bottle

let her hand, but she refused to

the struggle, she lost her

and fell right into his chest.

Her face collided with the firm muscles beneath his shirt.

"Ow! So hard!" she whined.

Rubbing her aching nose, she tried to push him away, but after all the alcohol, her movements were slow and weak.

Rather than pushing him, it felt more like she was caressing him.

Stefan stiffened.

Feeling her soft hands trailing over his chest, his voice deepened.

"Veevee, stop. If you keep doing that, I can't guarantee what'll happen next." .

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She blinked up at him, dazed. "Huh? What did you say?"

The alcohol muddled her thoughts, making it hard to process his words.

Stefan sighed and reached out, covering her eyes.

If she kept looking at him like that, he might really lose control.

He was a grown man, after all.

She was drunk, right in front of him. Was she that confident he wouldn't do anything? Or did she not see him as a man at all?

Suddenly, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Upon seeing the caller ID, irritation flashed across his face. He didn't want to answer.

But thinking of his mother's medical bills... he had no choice.

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After placing Valarie on the couch, Stefan stepped out of the private room to answer the call.

Michelle sneered. "Stefan, tomorrow is the deadline for your mother's medical bill, and you haven't made any progress.

"Looks like you really don't care about the money. Or... have you gotten close to Valarie and don't need it anymore?

"What a pity. Valarie still doesn't know you have ulterior motives. Do you want me to help tell her?"

Stefan lowered his head, his eyes dark with emotion. "I'll send the photos in a bit." He hung up without hesitation.

Slipping his phone back into his pocket, he didn't return to the private room immediately. Instead, he leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette.

The swirling smoke obscured his features, making it impossible to read his expression.

It felt like his entire life had been shrouded in darkness since birth. No matter how hard he fought, he could never break free.

His phone buzzed with a new message from Michelle.

Michelle: [Stefan, your mother is in a VIP ward, and her daily medical and hospital expenses cost thousands. Even if you sold your blood or kidney, you wouldn't be able to afford it. I'm just asking you to take a few bed photos with Valarie. You're not even losing out. Stop dragging your feet. Don't tell me you've actually fallen for her? Let me remind you know your place. A woman like Valarie would never fall for a worthless nobody like you.]

Stefan read the message, then expressionlessly deleted it. He stubbed out his cigarette and turned back toward the private room.

By the time he returned, Valarie had already finished another bottle of alcohol.

Hearing the door open, she lifted her head slowly. When she saw him, she smiled. "You're back!"

Stefan paused for a moment, then quickly walked over to her. "Veevee, it's really late now. Let me take you home."

Valarie blinked, processing his words. After a long moment, she nodded and reached out a hand to him. "Okay, help me up."

Staring at her delicate hand, Stefan swallowed hard before reaching out to take it. Once he helped her up, he realized she could barely stand and was practically hanging on him.

Without hesitation, he picked her up and carried her out.

As they passed through the lively crowd and stepped outside, the chilly night air hit them.

Valarie instinctively curled into his embrace. "It's cold..."

"It won't be for long," Stefan murmured.

Standing at the entrance of the bar for a

à decision and turned to net

the nearby hotel.

...

An hour later, Michelle smirked coldly as she looked at the photos Stefan had sent.

She dialed a number. "Go ahead and pay for Stefan's mother's hospital bill for next month."

After hanging up, she thought for a moment before deciding to send the pictures anonymously to Brandon.

Once he saw them, he'd definitely give up on Valarie for good.

Inside the hotel room, Stefan's gaze  
landed

Vala was conflicted net

the faint red marks

's neck and chest. His.

expression was belongs to

When he had laid her on the bed earlier, there had been a brief moment where he almost gave in to temptation.

At the last second, however, he managed to restrain himself.

After hurriedly taking a few pictures and sending them to Michelle, he immediately redressed Valarie.

His original intent for approaching

her had been impure enough. If he had actually taken advantage of her while she was drunk, she would never forgive him once she found out the truth.

It was better to stop now, while there was still a chance for redemption.

...

Valarie woke up with a splitting headache at 9:00 a.m. the next morning.

She sat up, pressing her fingers to her aching temples as fragments of last night's events slowly returned to her.

"Veevee, you're awake?" she heard Stefan ask.

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Valarie turned to the couch and saw Stefan sitting there, watching her with concern.



"You stayed here all night?" she asked, surprised.

"Yeah." He nodded. "You drank too much last night. I was worried about you, so I stayed to look after you."

"That must've been exhausting," Valarie remarked.

Stefan shook his head. "It wasn't. How do you feel now? I bought you breakfast and made you honey water this morning. If your head hurts, the honey water should help."

"I'll wash my face first." Valarie got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

While freshening up, she noticed several faint red marks on her neck and chest-suspiciously like hickeys. She frowned slightly.

When she stepped out, Stefan was still on the couch, looking especially well-behaved.

Valarie sat across from him, pointed at her neck, and asked bluntly, "Did you do this?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Stefan's face turned bright red. He lowered his head, avoiding her gaze. "I... I couldn't help myself. But I swear, I didn't do anything else."

Seeing his nervous, guilty expression, Valarie chuckled. "I was just asking. No need to be so tense. But I don't really like it. Don't do it again."

"Got it..." Stefan mumbled.

Valarie grabbed her purse and stood. "Thanks for taking care of me last night. I have work later, so I'm heading out. Do you need a ride?"

Stefan quickly shook his head. "N-No, that's okay. Here, have some honey water before you go."

As Valarie reached for the cup, her fingers brushed against Stefan's. His whole body stiffened.

Taking a sip, she smiled. "It's good. You have class today, right? Sure you don't need a ride back?"

"I don't want to inconvenience you. And... I'm really sorry about last night," Stefan said quietly.

Noticing his ears turning red, Valarie felt her heart soften. After all, what could resist a handsome

woma

young university student apologizing so sincerely?

"Alright, I get it. Come on, I'll drop you off at school," she offered.

Stefan visibly relaxed when he realized she wasn't angry, quickly following her out.

Half an hour later, Valarie's car pulled up outside Saintosh University.

Before getting out, Stefan hesitated, then turned to her. "Veevee, please don't drink like that in front of other men again. You're really cute when you're drunk. If the guy can't control himself... you might get taken advantage of." sŵnovel

Valarie blinked, then smiled. "Alright, I'll be careful. Now go."

"Okay. Bye." Stefan waved before heading into the campus.

Valarie drove to the office, only to find Brandon waiting downstairs.

Noting his tense expression, she pursed her lips. "Mr. Sumner, what do you want?"

Brandon's gaze hardened. "What's going on with you and Stefan? Don't tell me you've actually fallen for him."

He studied her intently, watching for any change in her expression.

Valarie frowned. "That's none of your business. I don't owe you an explanation."

"Valarie, did you really spend the night with him?" Brandon pressed.

She stopped in her tracks, her eyes turning cold. "Are you still having me followed?"

Brandon let

Out a bitter laugh. "If I

were still keeping tabs on you, youet

wouldn't have been able to

Wight with him."

the whole night with him."

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"Whether or not you're having me followed, who I choose to spend time with is my business. I hope you'll stop prying into my private life," Valarie said.

Brandon grabbed her wrist, his voice low and firm. "Valarie, the month is almost up. Don't forget the promise you made."

She pulled away. "There's still a week left. We'll talk when the time comes."

With that, she turned and left.

Brandon watched her go, frustration darkening his face.

The anonymous photos he'd received that morning were still fresh in his mind, making his expression even stormier.

Forcing himself to stay calm, he pulled out his phone and called his assistant. "Find out who sent those photos to my email this morning."

After hanging up, his mood remained grim. It was time to give Stefan a warning.

Just as he was about to leave, his phone rang again.

His eyes flickered with annoyance at the unfamiliar number. Without hesitation, he rejected the call and blocked it.

Ever since he'd cut off Michelle, she'd been calling him from different numbers every day. At first, he'd answered, but now, he simply blocked each one as soon as it came in.

She never got tired of trying.

Tossing his phone back into his pocket, Brandon got into his car and drove away.

Michelle angrily threw her phone onto the bed.

The month-long agreement between Brandon and Valarie was nearly over, yet Brandon had been avoiding her entirely. She hadn't even gotten the chance to see him.

No. She had to find a way to make sure Valarie and Brandon had no future together.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up her phone again and called Jayden. "Jayden, are you free tonight? Let's have dinner together."

There was silence on the other end.

Just as Michelle was about to ask again, he finally replied, "Sure. What do you want to eat?"

"I remember a pretty good restaurant near your office. Let's go there tonight," she suggested.

"Okay."

After hanging up, Jayden set his phone down with a blank expression and returned to the documents in front of him.

To his right, a report lay open-a background check on Michelle. It detailed her frequent contact with Stefan over the past month.

...

That evening, Michelle arrived at the restaurant and waited in a private dining room for more the net half an hour before Jayden finally showed up.

"Sorry, something came up at work," he said.

The moment he spoke, Michelle sensed something was off. His attitude toward her was much colder than before.

"Jayden, are you still doubting me because of Stefan?" she asked.

Jayden looked up. "Michelle, were you involved in what happened with Stefan and Valarie?"

Her face darkened. "What do you mean by that? You still don't trust me, do you?"

"Just answer the question-yes or no," Jayden said flatly.

"No! Are you satisfied now?" she shot back.

His expression shifted from doubt to disappointment.

Michelle's heart sank. A bad feeling crept over her.

"Jayden-" she began.

into it.

contaou've been in frequent He cut her off, "I had someon k

with Stefan. You even paid

for his mother's medical expenses.

"I remember you used to hate them-you always blamed his mother for ruining your family and causing your own mother's death. Are you going to tell me you've suddenly forgiven them?"

Michelle's expression turned icy. "Since you already know everything, why bother asking?"

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"I just wanted to see if you'd tell me the truth. Now I know-you don't trust me," Jayden said.

Michelle cried, "Fine! I admit it. I sent Stefan after Valarie. I wanted him to ruin her relationship with Brandon! Go ahead and tell Brandon if you want! I don't care!"

She stood, ready to leave.

Before she reached the door, Jayden's voice echoed behind her.

"I won't tell Brandon," he said. "But I won't help you anymore, either. There's still time to stop this. You can walk away now."

Michelle's footsteps faltered momentarily, but she didn't turn back. She had never regretted her choices-why would she stop now?

As long as she could have Brandon in the end, she wouldn't give up.

If Jayden refused to help, she'd just have to figure it out on her own.

That evening, as Valarie got off work, she received a call from Nyla.

"Valarie, come over for dinner tonight! Oh, and by the way, I sent you a thank-you gift last night. Make sure you accept it," Nyla said.

Valarie had seen Nyla's money transfer that morning but hadn't planned to accept it. She had meant to tell her but had been too busy to remember.

"Sure, I'll come over. But there's no need for the money. We're friends-why be so formal?" Valarie said.

...

When she arrived at the villa and stepped out of her car, she ran into Brandon. After what he'd said to her that morning, she had no interest in talking to him. Without a word, they walked inside together.

The moment Valarie saw Nyla, she headed straight to her and sat beside her.

Brandon greeted Nyla briefly before heading to the study to find Damon.

Nyla glanced at Valarie's neck and noticed faint marks. Her eyes widened, and she instinctively looked at Brandon before leaning in close to Valarie, "what's with those marks on your neck? Don't tell me... you and Brandon-"

Before she could finish, Valarie quickly covered her mouth.

"No! It's just mosquito bites," she said awkwardly.

Nyla was skeptical.

It was winter. Where would mosquitoes even come from?

Seeing Valarie's embarrassed expression, she decided to drop it. Instead, she switched topics. "Oh, by the way, Damon and I are planning a trip in a few days. Want to come? You could use a break."

Valarie shook her head. "I've got too much work. There are several big projects I'm handling. I'll be busy for a while."

As the only daughter of the Weirs, she was expected to take over the Weir Group in the future. Her father had already started training her for the role.

Nyla looked a little disappointed. "Alright... Then we'll plan another trip when you're free."

"Sounds good. Are you bringing Buddy along?" Valarie asked.

"Yeah. We don't feel comfortable leaving him at home," Nyla said.

Ever since the bullying incident, Mason had been in low spirits. This trip would be a good chance for him to unwind.

"That sounds like a great idea. You guys should enjoy yourselves as a family," Valarie said.

As they chatted, Lydia came in to announce that dinner was ready.

Nyla and Valarie moved to the dining table, and soon, Damon and Brandon joined them.

Noticing Brandon's dark expression, Nyla shot Damon a questioning look.

Damon raised his brows innocently, signaling that he had no idea either.

Valarie caught the exchange and couldn't help but tease, "Seriously? You two can't even have dinner without exchanging secret looks? Have some consideration for the rest of us!"

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Nyla looked at Valarie. "What do you mean, giving each other looks? Just eat. I made your favorite-spicy chicken."

Valarie nodded. "Okay."

As they ate, Damon glanced at Brandon. "When are you going back to the company?"

It had been nearly a month since Brandon left the Sumner Group. If he stayed away much longer, the people he had trained might start siding with someone else.

Brandon paused mid-bite, instinctively glancing at Valarie across the table. She didn't even look his way.

After a brief silence, he lowered his gaze. "In a few days."

"Alright." Damon didn't press the issue.

Brandon was the CEO of the Sumner Group. Damon couldn't keep treating him like a subordinate.

Halfway through the meal, Brandon's phone rang.

Seeing Jayden's name on the screen, he frowned and ignored it. But the phone rang again. And again.

After declining multiple calls, he realized the others at the table were all looking at him.

He picked up the phone. "It might be urgent."

Stepping aside, he answered in a low voice. "Jayden, I'm busy. Don't call again—"

"Brandon, Michelle attempted suicide. She's in the ER. The doctors said she lost a lot of blood... She might not make it," Jayden said.

Brandon let out a cold laugh. "She tried coercion, and when that didn't work, she resorted to this? Whatever happens to her has nothing to do with me."

Without another word, he hung up.

As he turned back, a text from Jayden came through.

Jayden: [I'm at Pinnacle Hospital. Come if you still have a conscience.]

Brandon's grip tightened around his phone, his knuckles turning white.

After several seconds, he deleted the message, his face blank.

Even though he had no intention of going, he found himself losing his appetite.

Regardless of his feelings for

Michelle, they had been friends for

years. He didn't love her, but am



friend, he had never wanted anything bad to happen to her.

After dinner, Valarie said goodbye to Nyla and Damon before heading out.

Just as she reached the door, her phone rang.

Seeing Stefan's name on the screen, she was surprised.

Since the day they'd met, he had only ever contacted her through texts. This was the first time he had actually called.

She answered, and his anxious voice came through immediately. "Veevee, where are you right now?"

"I just had dinner at a friend's house. What's wrong?" Valarie asked.

"I need your help," Stefan said.

As Brandon stepped out of the villa

he caught

a glimpse of Valarie's

taillights flickering before her disappeared into the night belongs to

He let out a bitter laugh. She really didn't want to be around him.

Just as he was about to leave, his phone rang again. This time, it was Yale.

"Brandon, I heard Michelle attempted suicide. She's in the ER. Nolan and I are heading over. Are you coming?"

They all knew Michelle had done this because of him.

Brandon lowered his gaze. After a moment, he said, "I'm not going. Let me know if she makes it."

"Alright. We'll keep you updated," Yale said.

Hanging up, Brandon got in his car and drove off.

As soon as Yale and Nolan arrived at Pinnacle Hospital, they saw Valarie rushing toward the inpatient department with a young man who looked several years younger than her. s̄nôvel

Nolan turned to Yale. "Did I just see Valarie? Who was that guy with her? I don't recognize him."

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Yale shook his head. "No idea. Let's check on Michelle first."

He had no intention of getting involved in whatever had happened between Brandon and Valarie.

"Alright," Nolan replied.

When they reached the ER, Michelle was still being treated.

Jayden sat in a chair in the hallway, head down, lost in thought. Hearing footsteps, he slowly looked up.

When he saw that Brandon wasn't with them, he let out a bitter laugh. "Of course, he didn't come. Heartless bastard."

Yale sighed. "Jayden, you can't blame Brandon for this. He promised Valarie he wouldn't see Michelle for a month."

Given Brandon's personality, he wouldn't break his promise, no matter the trouble Michelle stirred up.

"So a stupid promise means more than someone's life?" Jayden shot back.

Yale frowned. Seeing that Jayden wasn't in the mood to listen to reason, he didn't argue.

In his opinion, Michelle had brought this on herself. If she thought attempting suicide would make Brandon cave, she was dead wrong.

If he were in Brandon's shoes, he wouldn't have come either. Otherwise, once Michelle realized she could manipulate him like this, wouldn't she start threatening suicide every other day?

The hallway fell silent again.

Nolan wasn't too concerned about Michelle. His mind lingered on the man he'd seen with Valarie earlier.

After a moment's hesitation, he pulled out his phone and sent Brandon a message about it.

...

Brandon had just gotten home and was about to take a shower when he saw Nolan's message.

After reading it, his expression darkened immediately.

Without a second thought, he grabbed his phone, rushed out the door, and drove straight to the hospital, not even bothering to put on a coat.

...

As Stefan stepped out of the elevator onto the eighth floor of Pinnacle Hospital,

he saw his mother's bed had been moved into the hallway.

His face twisted with anger, and he stormed over to the nurses' station. "Who gave you the right to move my mother out of her room without permission?! Her condition is critical! If anything happens to her, will you take responsibility?!"

The nurse remained calm. "Mr.

Foley, we notified you about

transferring your mother to another

hospital, but you refused. The

deadline has passed, so we're

following hospital policy."

"But we already paid for the next month's bills! Why are you kicking her out?!" Stefan demanded.

The nurse frowned. "Mr. Foley, we have not received any payment. In fact, your account has been overdue for more than half a month."

"What?! That's impossible!" Stefan's eyes widened in shock, anger rising within him.

Michelle hadn't paid his mother's medical bills?!

Seeing his disbelief, the nurse pulled up the payment records and turned the screen toward him. "Mr. Foley, your mother's last payment covered only half a month-72,131 dollars. That payment was made last month, and her account went into arrears on the 3rd, more than two weeks ago."

"No way! That has to be a mistake!" Stefan yelled.

Seeing him lose control, Valarie gently pulled him aside. "Stefan, calm down. Right now, the priority is paying the bill so your mother can be moved back into a proper room."

Her voice was soft but firm, helping Stefan regain his composure.

"You're right... but I don't have that kind of money..." he muttered.

That was why he had reached out to Valarie when he couldn't reach Michelle.

"I'll cover it for now. Go check on your mother," Valarie said.

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Stefan looked at Valarie, his eyes red. "Veevee, thank you! I'm sorry for causing you trouble."

"It's fine, it's not a big deal. Go check on your mom," Valarie said.

After Stefan left, Valarie turned to the nurse. "Can I pay the hospital fees now?" The nurse nodded. "Yes, you can."

Once Valarie finished paying and the nurse confirmed the transaction, she said, "Ms. Weir, I'll have my colleagues move Mr. Foley's mother back to her room now."

"Okay," Valarie replied.

She didn't argue with the nurse. After all, the hospital was just following protocol. Stefan's mother had been behind on payments for over two weeks, and the fact that they hadn't moved her out sooner was already lenient.

Before long, Stefan's mother was back in the ICU.

Seeing the medical equipment reconnected, Stefan let out a breath of relief.

After confirming his mother's condition was stable, he turned to Valarie. "Veevee, I really don't know what I would've done without you tonight. Thank you. I promise I'll find a way to pay you back."

Valarie looked at him, her gaze curious. "Don't worry about the money right now. But I do have a question. How long has your mom been in the ICU?"

"More than three years," Stefan said. "She was in a car accident three years ago and fell into a coma. The doctors said she might never wake up."

"So she's been in intensive care this whole time?" Valarie asked.

"Yeah," Stefan answered.

"I checked earlier. The daily cost of an ICU stay is over 3,000 dollars. You're still a university student. How have you been paying for all of this?" Valarie asked.

She knew Stefan well enough to be certain he couldn't afford such a massive expense. Even if the driver responsible for the accident had paid compensation, it wouldn't have been nearly enough.

Stefan smiled bitterly. "I'm an illegitimate child. The money came from my father."

If his father, Brad Snowden, hadn't suddenly cut him off, Stefan would never have been forced to work with Michelle to get close to Valarie.

At first, he only wanted money for his mother's medical expenses. But after spending time with Valarie, he had developed real feelings for her.

Valarie was momentarily stunned. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

She felt a wave of guilt, realizing she had doubted him earlier.

"You don't have to feel bad," Stefan said. "I've been used to this my whole life."

To him, his so-called father was just

a stranger with whom he happened to share blood. If his mother hadn't been in the accident, he probably never would have met that family.

"So your mom suddenly falling behind on payments-does that mean something happened with your dad's side?" Valarie asked.

Stefan looked down. "Maybe. I'll go find out tomorrow."

"Alright," Valarie replied.

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"Veevee, I've already troubled you enough tonight. It's getting late. K walk you downstairs. Oh, and about the medical expenses-let me write you a promissory note," Stefan said.

Valarie waved him off. "That's not necessary-"

Stefan interrupted her. "No, I need to. I don't want to owe you more than I already do."

Seeing the determination in his eyes,

Valarie sighed and nodded. "Alright.

But there's no rush-pay me back when you start working and have the 3ey."

As they walked toward the elevator, they talked.

Just as they reached it, the doors slid open.

Valarie was surprised to see Brandon standing inside. "Brandon? What are you doing here?"

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Brandon didn't respond. He stepped out of the elevator, seized Valarie's wrist, and yanked her behind him.

Valarie nearly lost her balance. As she steadied herself, she heard his cold

warning. "Stefan, stay away from Valarie. If you don't, you won't be able to handle the consequences."

Stefan met his gaze, his expression unreadable. "Mr. Sumner, you just made her almost fall. Let go of her."

Brandon let out a sarcastic laugh. "She's my girlfriend. It's none of your business." Valarie immediately yanked her wrist free. "Brandon, what the hell is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this in the middle of the night?"

Brandon turned to her. "And what about you? What are you doing here so late? Don't tell me you've actually fallen for this kid who's younger than me."

At first, he hadn't taken Stefan seriously. He had assumed Valarie was just using him to get back at him.

But as she grew kinder to Stefan, panic began to creep in.

Brandon was terrified that she really liked Stefan and that she didn't want him anymore.

Valarie rubbed her sore wrist, her patience wearing thin. "How is that any of your business?"

"Valarie, I gave you time because I thought you'd come to your senses. But don't you think you're going too far now?" Brandon demanded.

Valarie exhaled sharply and turned to Stefan. "Go back to your mom's room. She needs someone with her."

"I'm not leaving. If he tries anything, I can protect you," Stefan insisted.

Brandon scoffed. "You? Protect her? You're nothing more than a distraction. What makes you think you have the right to talk like that?"

"Brandon!" Valarie's voice cut through the air. Her eyes burned with fury. "If you say one more word like that, I won't forgive you."

Brandon stared at her in disbelief. "Valarie... you'd say something like that to me because of him?"

"This is a hospital. I don't want to argue with you here," Valarie said coldly. "If you want to stand around all night, be my guest."

With that, she turned and walked toward the stairwell.

Brandon moved to follow, but Stefan stepped in front of him. "Mr. Sumner, it seems she doesn't want to see you."

Brandon sneered. "Stefan, you're just a broke university student. Do you really think Valarie would actually like you? She's playing with you. If you were smart, you'd walk away. Otherwise, I can make your life hell."

Stefan clenched his fists. "Oh? I'd love to see what you can do."

"You don't want to find out," Brandon said darkly. "Besides, you had your own reasons for getting close to Valarie, didn't you? I already looked into it. You and Michelle are

ver

half-siblings. If Valarie finds out, do you really think she'll forgive you?"

Stefan tensed, his grip on Brandon's arm tightening without thinking.

Brandon's gaze turned icy as he shoved Stefan aside and strode toward the stairwell.

He caught up with Valarie at the hospital entrance and blocked her path. "Valarie... let's talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Valarie replied flatly. "Brandon, you weren't like this before."

The man she once knew would never have said such things.

Brandon looked at her, desperation in his eyes. "Valarie, I know I crossed a line tonight, but I was terrified of losing you. Be mad at me all you want, but please... don't fall for someone else."

Valarie's heart ached as she looked at him.

After a long pause, she turned her gaze away. "Brandon... I don't even know if I still want to be with you. I don't even know if I still love you."