Trading My Ex for His Uncle

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A cold gust of wind blew through, and Brandon felt his heart sink.

From the moment he first laid eyes on Valarie, he had made up his mind-he had to be with her, to marry her.

He had pursued her for five years. They had finally gotten together, only to break up soon after.

He had tried everything to win her back, but no matter what he did, she only seemed to drift further away.

Was it really impossible for them to be together?

"Valarie, you told me to stay away from Michelle for a month, and I did.

"Tonight, Jayden called to say that Michelle tried to commit suicide and is in the hospital being resuscitated. I still didn't go see her.

"I know I made a lot of mistakes before, but I've been trying to change. Can you give me one more chance?" he pleaded.

Valarie remained silent for a long time. She knew she still had feelings for Brandon. When she met his pleading gaze, she felt herself softening.

Finally, she looked at him and nodded. "Alright, but this is the last chance I'm giving you. If you lie to me again, I won't look back."

The seriousness in her expression made Brandon's heart lurch. He quickly promised, "You can trust me. I won't lie to you again!"

"Mm," Valarie hummed in response.

Brandon pulled her into his arms, his voice trembling with emotion. "Valarie, thank you for giving me another chance."

Valarie pressed her lips together, about to respond, when suddenly, she felt his grip loosen.

The next second, she saw Jayden grab Brandon by the collar and land a hard punch to his face.

Brandon snapped back to his senses and immediately fought back.

Valarie instinctively stepped back, ready to call for hospital security, when Yale and Nolan arrived.

The two rushed forward to separate the fight.

Jayden struggled fiercely. "Nolan, let go of me! I'm not letting him off tonight!"

Michelle had been in the emergency room for hours. When he called

Brandon and told him to come to the hospital, Brandon had refused. Yet now, he was here, sweet-talking Valarie as if nothing had happened.

The more Jayden thought about it, the angrier he got. He wanted nothing more than to beat Brandon to a pulp.

Nolan held him back tightly and spoke in a low voice. "Jayden, calm down. Do you want to end up at the police station?"

Jayden sneered. "I don't care. I have to teach him a lesson today!"

On the other side, Yale let go of Brandon after restraining him and seeing that he wasn't trying to rush back into the fight.

"Brandon, Jayden's just emotional because of what happened to Michelle. Try to understand," Yale said.

Brandon wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and stared coldly at Jayden. "If you want to act like a rabid dog, do it somewhere else. I'm not interested in fighting you."

Jayden snapped, "Do you even know how long Michelle was in surgery? As a friend, you should've at least come to check on her. But no, you'd rather be here with her. What the hell did she ever do to you?"

Brandon's expression turned icy when Jayden pointed a finger at Valarie.

"Don't you dare talk about her like that. If you and Michelle hadn't treated her so horribly, things wouldn't have escalated like this.

"And don't try to guilt-trip me. Michelle's suicide attempt was her choice. No one forced her. I'm not responsible for her, and I don't owe her anything," Brandon snapped.

"Fine! I must've been blind to ever call you a friend!" Jayden growled.

Brandon's face remained expressionless. "I should be the one saying that. You knew exactly what Michelle was doing behind my back, but you covered for her. You helped her. You played a part in my breakup with Valarie. From now on, we're done."

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The moment Brandon spoke, silence blanketed the room.

Yale and Nolan both looked visibly uneasy.

Jayden froze for a second, then his face twisted with disappointment. "Fine! From now on, we're strangers!"

With that, he shoved Nolan aside and stormed toward the hospital entrance.

Nolan frowned and turned to Brandon. "Brandon, Jayden was just upset. Did you really have to make it so final? How are you going to fix things later?"

"I don't plan to fix anything. Because of him and Michelle, Valarie and I fought countless times. Do you really think I should sacrifice my girlfriend for two so- called friends?" Brandon retorted.

Seeing the indifference in his expression, Nolan suddenly regretted sending that message earlier. If he hadn't texted Brandon about Valarie being with another guy, none of this would have happened.

"I'm heading home," Brandon said before turning to Valarie, taking her hand, and leading her out of the hospital.

Watching them leave, Nolan felt a surge of frustration. Just as he was about to speak, he noticed Yale staring at him with suspicion.

He frowned. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Brandon only showed up because of you, didn't he? You told him Valarie was with another guy," Yale pointed out.

Nolan stayed quiet.

Yale scoffed. "I knew it! You-seriously, I don't even know what to say to you!"

"I didn't think they'd run into each other! And honestly, this isn't even on Brandon. Michelle's the one being dramatic.

"Attempting suicide over a guy? Ridiculous. If she weren't my friend, I wouldn't have even come," Nolan grumbled.

Yale grunted. "With the way you run your mouth, why don't you go talk some sense into Michelle and Jayden? Now that they've fallen out, are you happy?"

"How is this my fault? If it were you, who would you have chosen?" Nolan challenged.

Yale sighed and rubbed his temples. "Forget it. What's done is done. Let's go home."

Every day was already exhausting enough with work, and now he had to deal with this drama. He was so over it.

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Brandon followed Valarie's car all the way back to her home.

After parking, Valarie walked over to

his car

Window. "How's your f

O come inside? I can ce

nd for you before you go."

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Brandon shook his head. "It's just a small wound. But... how about a kiss instead?

That should do the trick."

Valarie stared at him.

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Seeing her speechless expression, Brandon chuckled. "I'm kidding. Get some

Best. Are you free for dinget

tomorrow?"

Valarie nodded. "Yeah, come pick me up."

"Alright," Brandon replied.

"Well... I'll head in now. Drive safe," Valarie said.

"Mm. Goodnight," Brandon wished.

"Goodnight." Valarie turned and disappeared behind the villa doors.

After her shower, Valarie shower sat at her vanity in her room,

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skincare while thinking wor

for the next day.

Just then, her phone rang.

Seeing that it was Stefan, she pressed her lips together. She needed to find a way

to make things clear with him.

Stefan was undeniably handsome, but she had never felt romantic love for him.

She picked up the call. "What's up?"

"Veevee, did you make it home safely?" Stefan asked.

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"Yeah, I just got home. How's your mother doing now?" Valarie asked.

"Her condition is stable. Veevee... I need to ask you something," Stefan said.

A flicker of surprise crossed Valarie's eyes. "What is it?"

There was a brief silence before Stefan spoke again. "Never mind, it's nothing important. Get some rest. Goodnight."

Before Valarie could respond, he had already hung up.

She set her phone down, deciding to invite Stefan out for dinner in the next few days and have an honest conversation with him.

...

After the surgery, Michelle remained unconscious for a full day before finally waking up.

The moment she opened her eyes, she saw Jayden sitting by her bedside.

"Michelle! You're awake!" Jayden exclaimed, relief flooding his voice as he quickly pressed the call button for the doctor.

Once the doctor confirmed she was out of danger, Jayden exhaled deeply.

"Michelle, do you have any idea what I went through while you were unconscious? Please, don't ever do something so reckless again. Brandon isn't worth it!" he said.

With his help, Michelle slowly sat up, her face pale as she looked at him. "Did... Brandon not come to see me at all?"

Jayden's expression darkened. "I called him several times while you were in surgery. Not only did he refuse to come, but he was busy sweet-talking Valarie instead."

Michelle's gaze dimmed at that. She lowered her eyes to the blanket and said nothing.

Seeing her disappointment, Jayden hesitated before speaking in a gentler tone. "Michelle, after everything that's happened, you should see it clearly now. Brandon will never love you. Maybe it's time to let go..."

It took a long moment before Michelle finally lifted her head to meet his eyes. "Jayden, I

understand. Thank you for beingnet

here for me. Honestly, after

everything I've done, I thought you wouldn't want anything to do with me anymore."

There was a flicker in Jayden's eyes.

At first, he had planned to cut ties with her. But the moment he heard about her suicide attempt and rushed to the hospital, all he could think about was her survival. He had spent the entire surgery praying she would make it.

That was when he realized he loved Michelle. Not just her beautiful side, but even the darkness within her.

He knew she wasn't a good person. In fact, she could be downright cruel. Despite that, he couldn't stop himself from loving her.

The only thing he could do now was keep her from going too far and reaching a point of no return.

After staying with Michelle for a while, Jayden finally got up to leave at her insistence.

"But if I leave, there won't be anyone to take care of you," he said.

Michelle smiled. "I'll call my dad later. He'll send someone over. You don't have to worry. Just go home and get some rest. If you look in the mirror, you'll see how exhausted you are."

Jayden had barely slept in the past 24 hours. Now that Michelle was awake, fatigue finally caught up to him.

"Alright, I'll go for now. Call me if you need anything, okay?" he said.

"Okay." Michelle smiled as she watched him walk out.

As soon as the hospital room door closed behind him, her expression turned ice- cold.

Picking up her phone, she noticed several missed calls from Stefan. She let out a scornful laugh and called him back.

The line barely rang before Stefan answered, his voice sharp with anger. "Michelle, you promised to cover my mom's medical expenses, but you went back on your word! Transfer the money now, or expose everything you made me do!"

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Michelle frowned. "What the hell are you talking about? I already told my assistant to handle it."

"Then why was my mom kicked out of her hospital room in the middle of the night?" Stefan shot back.

Michelle's voice grew cold. "Forget about that. I should be asking you. Besides taking a few staged photos with Valarie, have you made any real progress?"

"What more do you want?" Stefan asked.

She smirked. "I want something that will completely ruin her. You know what to do."

"Send me 250,000 dollars for medical expenses first, or I'm done doing your dirty work," Stefan demanded.

Michelle let out a mocking laugh. "Stefan, you know I can have your mother thrown out of the hospital for good with a single word, right?"

He had no right to threaten her.

Stefan retorted, "Oh, I believe you. But if you do that, I'll make sure the whole world knows everything you made me do. When that happens, Brandon will never want anything to do with you again."

"You!" Michelle clenched her jaw, her face contorting with anger.

After a long pause, she spoke coldly. "Fine. I'll call my assistant right now. You'll have the money in your account soon."

Without waiting for a response, she hung up and immediately dialed her assistant.

"How the hell are you handling things? I told you to pay for Lily Foley's medical expenses. Why the hell did Stefan say it wasn't paid?!" she demanded.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Snowden! I got caught up with other work and completely forgot... I'll take care of it right away!" her assistant apologized.

Michelle huffed. "Forget it. Just transfer the money to Stefan directly."
"Understood. I'll do it now," the assistant replied.

Stefan soon received a bank notification confirming the deposit of 250,000 dollars.

He glanced at the screen before texting Valarie, inviting her to dinner. He planned to give her the money then.

Valarie had been swamped with work all morning, only noticing the message around noon.

After a moment's thought, she replied.

Valarie: [Sorry, I already have plans tonight. Let's reschedule.]

A moment later, Stefan responded with an [Okay].

...

Brandon was waiting outside the Weir Group building around 5:00 p.m. when he got a call from Nolan.

"Brandon, do you have time tonight? Let's grab dinner with Yale and Jayden," Nolan suggested.

Leaning one arm lazily on the steering wheel, Brandon replied, "No need. You guys go ahead. I have plans."

"Brandon, both you and Jayden overreacted last night. Are you! going to throw away years of

friendship over something sel

trivial?" Nolan pressed.

Brandon chuckled. "You should be talking to Jayden, not me. Tell him to stop interfering in my business pushing me to see Michelle."

"I'll talk to him, but are you sure you won't join us?" Nolan probed.

"I already told you that I have plans tonight. Talk later." With that,

Brandon ended the call and pushed

the car door just as Valarie

walked out of the building.

"Valarie," he called out.

She approached him and asked, "Have you been waiting long?"

"No, I just got here," Brandon replied.

The two of them got into the car, and he drove them toward her favorite sushi restaurant.

When they arrived, Valarie got out first while Brandon went to park the car. As she waited, her phone rang. It was Nyla.

"Hey, Valarie! We're about to board our flight. Do you want me to bring you anything from abroad?" Nyla asked.

Valarie grinned. "How about a 6'3" handsome guy?"

Nyla burst out laughing. "That might be a little tricky. Anything else?"

"I was just kidding! I'm happy with whatever you bring me," Valarie answered.

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"Alright. I'm about to board. I'll talk to you later," Nyla said.

Valarie replied, "Okay, have a great trip."

After hanging up, Nyla turned to Damon and Mason, her eyes glowing with happiness.

She had dreamed for so long of taking a family trip together. Now, that dream had finally come true.

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Valarie and Brandon walked into the restaurant.

As they sat down, a server approached with two glasses of water.

"Good evening, sir, ma'am—" Before the server could finish, his smile faltered. Valarie hadn't expected to see Stefan here. A flicker of surprise crossed her face.

Just as she was about to speak, Stefan quickly regained his composure, adopting his usual polite smile. "Good evening. May I take your order? We just received fresh salmon and sea urchin today. I highly recommend trying them."

Brandon raised an eyebrow, a faint hint of mockery in his gaze. "We'll take your recommendations. And add an order of Arctic shrimp sashimi as well."

"Certainly, sir. Would you like anything else?" Stefan asked.

Brandon turned to Valarie. "Do you want to add anything?"

Valarie closed the menu and said calmly, "No, this should be enough."

"Understood," Stefan replied.

After confirming the order, he took the menu and walked away.

As he turned, his grip on the menu tightened, veins bulging on his hand. His

expression darkened with barely contained frustration.

Throughout dinner, Valarie struggled to enjoy the meal.

Noticing her distraction, Brandon asked in a low voice, "Valarie, does the food not taste good?"

Valarie snapped out of her thoughts and shook her head. "No, it's fine. I'm just feeling a little tired today."

Brandon nodded. "Then I'll take you home after dinner."

"Okay." Valarie put down her utensils and glanced toward Stefan,

t a distance. A come

look flickered in her eyes.

As if sensing her gaze, Stefan suddenly turned and met her eyes.

Their gazes locked for a brief moment.

Valarie pressed her lips together, about to took away, but Stefan

the first to lower his gaze.

sighed inwardly, guessing he must be hurt.

A flicker of guilt crossed her heart. She should have made things clear to him sooner.

Brandon had been observing her reaction. His expression darkened slightly.

Although Valarie had agreed to give him another chance, he could tell she no longer treated him the same way.

There was now a distance between

them. The warmth that had once defined their bond had faded, replaced by cold indifference. Their relationship felt like walking a tightrope-one misstep, and they would plunge into nothingness.

He couldn't let that happen.

After finishing their meal, Brandon handed his card to Stefan. "Check, please." Valarie frowned. "We could've paid ourselves."

Brandon glanced at her, his brows furrowing slightly. "Valarie, haven't we always had the staff handle the bill when we come here?"

Would she have questioned him like this if the server weren't Stefan?

Before Valarie could respond, Stefan had already taken the card and said quietly, "Please wait a moment, Mr. Sumner."

After processing the payment, Stefan returned the card. "Here you go, sir."

"Thank you," Brandon replied.

"It's my pleasure," Stefan answered.

Brandon took the card and turned to Valarie. "Let's go, Valarie."

Valarie looked at Stefan, hesitating as if she wanted to say something.

After a brief moment of thought, she realized this wasn't the right time. Without another word, she stood up and left with Brandon.

Once they were outside, Brandon glanced at her and asked quietly, "Valarie, you and Stefan—"

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"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" Valarie cut Brandon off, her gaze sharp with accusation.

Brandon hesitated, caught off guard for a moment.

After a brief pause, he nodded. "Yes, I did. Because I don't like how much attention you're giving Stefan. If it had been any other server handling the bill, would you still be questioning me like this?"

"There's no 'if.' I chose to be with you again, which means I'm not holding onto anything with Stefan. So, there's no reason for you to single him out," Valarie

replied.

Brandon's expression darkened slightly. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then held back. "Alright. I understand."

"Good. Let's go home," Valarie said, and the car fell into silence.

When they finally arrived at the Weir residence, Brandon broke the quiet. "Valarie, don't you think... things between us aren't the same anymore?"

They were supposed to be a couple, yet they tiptoed around each other-testing boundaries, afraid to say the wrong thing.

Valarie pressed her lips together, lowering her gaze. "We're back together, but what happened before doesn't disappear. It's going to take time to get things back to how they were."

Brandon let out a bitter laugh, the fear lingering in his chest.

No matter how much time passed, he couldn't shake the feeling that things would never be the same.

"Alright. Go inside. Good night," he said quietly.

Valarie nodded, stepped out of the car, and walked inside.

Once in her room, she sank onto the couch, feeling drained and lost.

She had hoped that giving Brandon another chance would mean they could return

to how things used to be. Now, she realized that was impossible. Being with him felt exhausting.

Her phone suddenly vibrated.

She unlocked the screen to see a message from Stefan.

Stefan: [Veevee, did you and Mr. Sumner get back together?]

Valarie hadn't expected him to notice so quickly. After a moment's hesitation, she typed back.

Valarie: [Yes.]

Almost immediately, Stefan transferred 250,000 dollars to her.

Stefan: [This is the hospital bill you covered last night. I planned to return it over dinner, but now that you're back with Mr. Sumner, it doesn't feel right anymore. Thank you for everything during this time.]

Valarie stared at his message, pursing her lips. After a long pause, she replied.

Valarie: [You don't have to. Your mother will still need money for her treatments. Keep it.]

Stefan: [But I'm not your family. I can't just take your money. I don't want to owe you too much. If you don't accept it, I'll go to the bank tomorrow and transfer it directly to your account.]

Valarie could almost picture his stubborn, slightly aggrieved expression.

The first time they met...

Stefan was walking alone in the pouring rain, drenched and looking as if the world had abandoned him.

She had just broken up with Brandon. Seeing Stefan in that state, she felt an overwhelming urge to help. She stopped and gave him a ride to his university.

She hadn't expected to see him again the very next day—this time, at a bar. He was working as a server, bringing drinks to her booth.

He recognized her immediately,

noticing the five or six empty

ottles

on the table. Without a word, he Cared them away and replaced her next drink with juice instead.

She took a sip and immediately sensed something was off. Looking up to question

him, she was surprised to realize it was the same rain-soaked boy from the night before.

That was how they got to know each other.

At first, Valarie had been drawn to Stefan's face. Over time, though, she realized

they were never meant to be.

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The two of them were eight years apart, with different interests and personalities.

Some of Stefan's behavior struck Valarie as incredibly immature. But more importantly, she had never seen him in a romantic light.

To her, he was more like a younger brother-someone she felt protective of, but not someone she could ever like that way.

He should be dating girls his own age, and she should get back to living her own

life.

With that thought, Valarie accepted the money.

Valarie: [Thank you for everything these past few weeks. And... I'm sorry about today.]

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Stefan stared at the message on his screen in a quiet park, his lips curling into a mocking smile.

Just as Brandon had said-Valarie had only been using him as a distraction. Now that she was back with Brandon, she'd discarded him without hesitation.

Taking a deep breath, he deleted the chat and didn't reply.

They had always been from different worlds. Now, things were simply returning to how they had been before.

Still, he couldn't deny the lingering sadness.

These past few weeks... they had just been a dream.

Standing up, Stefan made his way to the bus stop.

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Valarie waited for a response, but ten minutes passed, and Stefan still hadn't replied. She figured he wasn't going to.

Letting out a quiet sigh, she set her phone down and went to wash up.

Over the next few weeks, they didn't see each other again.

Valarie fell back into her usual routine work during the day, occasional dates with Brandon in the evening.

Meanwhile, Stefan kept up his daily grind—juggling school, working odd jobs, and trying to cover his mother's medical expenses.

Two weeks later, Stefan was in the middle of his shift at a restaurant when his phone rang.

It was the hospital. "Mr. Foley, a woman claiming to be your older sister came in and transferred your mother to Saintornia Sekond Hospital."

Stefan's grip on his phone tightened. A wave of unease washed over him.

He quickly hung up and dialed Michelle.

She picked up almost immediately, as if she'd been expecting his call.

"Stefan, I was wondering when you'd call. We're still on our way to the new hospital," she said with a laugh,

"Michelle, if you do anything to my mom, I swear I'll expose everything you've done. Take her back to Pinnacle Hospital. Right now," Stefan growled.

Michelle chuckled. "Haven't you learned by now? Do you really think you can threaten me? Your mother is in my hands. If you don't listen to me, you might never see her again."

Stefan's voice trembled with rage. "What do you want?"

"It's simple. Get Valarie to meet with me. If you do that, I'll leave your mother

alone. I won't bother you again," Michelle said.

"Never. I'm not doing anything for you again," Stefan refused immediately.

"Oh? Are you sure? We're about to cross a bridge on the way to the hospital. It'd be a shame if there were a car accident. If the vehicle went over the edge... Well, I don't think your mother would survive that," Michelle said nonchalantly.

Stefan's face went deathly pale. His hands trembled with anger, and for a moment, he almost lost control. "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" Michelle said sweetly. "It depends on whether you agree. You have three seconds to consider asking Valarie out for me. Three... Two-"

Before she could finish, Stefan gritted his teeth and cut her off, "Fine! I'll do it. But you have to take my mom back to the hospital-right now."

"Relax. The doctors at Saintornia Sekond Hospital are just as skilled. Besides, Dad knows the director there. She'll get the best care.

"I'll text you the time and place. I expect to see Valarie there

tomorrow night. If I don't, don't net

expect to see your mother again," Michelle said, sounding pleased.

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Michelle hung up after delivering her threat.

Stefan stood frozen, his body tense with despair.

No matter what he did, it seemed he could never truly escape the Snowdens.

If it weren't for them, he wouldn't be able to pay for his mother's treatment. Yet, they were the people he hated most. He despised them.

He also despised his mother, Lily. If she had never given birth to him, he wouldn't be trapped in this nightmare, stuck in the mud with no way out.

And yet... she was the only person who had ever shown him kindness.

That fragile thread of family-thin and fraying—still tugged at his heart, holding him back. Even though it hurt, he couldn't bring himself to sever it.

Valarie had just returned home when her mother called her over. She changed into her house slippers and sat beside her.

"Valarie, when are you and Brandon getting married?" Phoebe asked.

Valarie frowned. "Mom, we haven't even discussed that yet."

"You're not getting any younger." Phoebe huffed. "You rejected every guy we introduced you to, and now that you've found someone on your own, you still won't settle down? What exactly are you waiting for?"

Valarie looked down, silent.

Phoebe's frustration grew. "You always do this! Do you think ignoring the problem will make it go away?"

"No," Valarie said flatly. "But apparently, marrying someone just for the sake of it will. You just want me to marry anyone. Everything else doesn't matter."

"We just want what's best for you! Your father and I aren't getting any younger. We don't know how much longer we'll be around. Can't you at least let us see you settled before we go?" Phoebe lamented.

"So I should get married just to put your minds at ease?" Valarie shot back.

"You!" Phoebe's face flushed red with anger. "I don't care anymore. You either get married this year, or I'm done worrying about you!"

With that, she stormed off.

Valarie stood up to go to her room when her phone buzzed.

She was surprised to find a message from Stefan.

Stefan: [Veevee, do you have time tomorrow night? I thought about it, and I really should treat you to a meal If your boyfriend is free, he's welcome to join us.]

Valarie replied as she headed upstairs.

Valarie: [That's not necessary. It's the thought that counts.]

Stefan: [It's the last time, I promise After this, I won't bother you again. Your birthday's coming up, too wanted to give you your present early.]

Valarie hesitated before agreeing.

A moment later, Stefan sent her the time and location.

Stefan: [I booked this restaurant. Hope you don't mind.]

Valarie: [I don't. I'm going to get some rest now. Talk soon.]

She put her phone down and leaned back on the couch.

It had been over two weeks since they last spoke. Stefan's messages felt distant-more formal than before.

Valarie sat there for a while, lost in thought, before getting up to wash up.

The next evening, Valarie drove to the restaurant.

Just as she was about to step out of the car, her phone rang. It was Brandon.

He had been away on a business trip, so she hadn't mentioned this meeting to him.

"Valarie, what are you doing right now?" he asked.

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"I'm not doing anything special. What's up? Aren't you supposed to be in a business meeting? How do you have time to call me?" Valarie asked.

Brandon replied, "It's all taken care of. My flight is tonight. Want to meet up?" Valarie raised an eyebrow. "What time will you be back in Saintornia?"

"A little after 11:00 p.m.," Brandon answered.

Valarie shook her head. "That's too late. You've been on a business trip for almost a week. You should just go home and rest."

Brandon chuckled. "But I really want to see you. How about this? I'll have my driver stop by your place. We can see each other briefly, and then I'll head home. Sound good?"

Valarie considered it. His route home would pass by her neighborhood anyway. "Alright. Just call me when you're close. I'm about to have dinner, so I'll talk to you later. Bye."

"Okay," Brandon replied.

After hanging up, Valarie entered the restaurant.

Stefan had reserved a private dining room, and by the time she arrived, he was already inside.

They hadn't seen each other in half a month. He looked thinner and more tanned than before.

The moment Stefan saw Valarie, his previously dull eyes lit up, and a smile tugged at his lips. "You're here, Veevee."

"Yeah." Valarie sat down across from him. "How have you been?"

"I'm alright. Oh, where's your boyfriend? Why didn't he come with you?" Stefan asked.

"He's on a business trip," Valarie answered.

Something flickered in Stefan's eyes. "I see. Well, I ordered a couple of dishes before you got here. Take a look and add anything you want."

Valarie took the menu he handed her, skimmed through it, and added a soup. "It's just the two of us. Two dishes and a soup are plenty. By the way, why did you book a private room?"

"Because I wanted to spend time with you without any interruptions," Stefan said.

Valarie pressed her lips together but didn't respond. She didn't know what to say. "Stefan, I've been meaning to apologize to you. At first, I tried to develop feelings for you, but I realized I just don't feel that way. I'm sorry."

A heavy silence filled the room after her words.

Stefan forced a bitter smile. "I know. I never blamed you."

"You'll meet someone who's right for you someday," Valarie said.

"Yeah," Stefan muttered.

They exchanged small talk, and soon, the food arrived.

Throughout the meal, Brandon kept messaging Valarie.

Each time she picked up her phone to reply, Stefan felt a pang of disappointment. It was

clear-Valarie really liked Brandon. Otherwise, she wouldn't be texting him even during dinner.

Halfway through the meal, Valarie suddenly felt her vision blur.

At first, she thought she was imagining it. She blinked a few times, but the

dizziness only intensified.

As realization struck, everything went dark.

Her phone slipped from her hand and fell to the floor, still lit up with her chat with Brandon.

Stefan stood, picked up her phone, and quickly typed a reply.

Valarie: [I'm busy right now. Let's talk later tonight.]

Then, he exited the chat.

An hour later, Stefan arrived at an abandoned chemical plant on the outskirts of Saintornia, carrying the unconscious Valarie with him.

Michelle was already there, waiting.

Seeing Valarie unconscious, she smirked. "Wow, Stefan, I have to admit, didn't think you'd actually go through with it. I thought you might have fallen for her after spending all that time together."

Stefan's face remained cold. "I'm not in the mood for your nonsense. Where's my mom?"

"She's at Saintornia Sekond Hospital,

in the inpatient department, Building

1, ninth floor. But are you sure yout

want to transfer her back to Pinnacle Hospital? If she stays at the current hospital, the Snowdens will cover all the medical expenses."

Trading My Ex for His Uncle

Stefan let out a cold laugh. "Cover the expenses? Or use my mom as leverage to control me? You already know the answer."

Michelle chuckled. "If you don't appreciate my kindness, fine. Transfer her wherever you want. But don't expect a single cent from the Snowdens."

"Oh, you'll pay," Stefan said.

"What?" Michelle frowned, about to speak, when she suddenly felt a blade press against her neck.

Her expression shifted instantly. "Stefan, are you insane? One phone call, and your mom will be dead in minutes!"

Stefan nodded and smiled. "I believe you. But I just realized something... The Snowdens only have one successor-you. If you die, who do you think will inherit everything?"

"You're dreaming! If you dare lay a hand on me, my dad will make sure you suffer!" Michelle shouted.

"That's not your concern," Stefan said.

Upon seeing the cold intent in his eyes, a wave of fear finally surged through Michelle.

She forced herself to stay calm and locked eyes with him. "What do you want? Your mom's medical bills? Something else?"

Stefan shook his head. "No, none of that matters anymore. My mom's been in a vegetative state for years. Whether she lives or dies doesn't make a difference. You know what I kept thinking about on my way here?"

"W-What?" Michelle stammered.

"I was thinking about how, ever since I can remember, you've treated me like a servant-like a dog to be ordered around and bullied. No matter how much I tried to stay out of your way, you wouldn't let me go. Again and again, you used my mom to manipulate me. Why?" Stefan asked.

As he spoke, the knife pressed harder against Michelle's skin, leaving a thin, bleeding cut.

Michelle winced at the pain, her fear deepening.

"Stefan, put the knife down! I swear I won't mess with you again!" she screamed.

Stefan raised an eyebrow. His voice was eerily calm, devoid of emotion. "You look pretty good when you're scared."

"What... What do you want? I can give you money-more money than you could ever spend in a lifetime!" Michelle offered desperately.

"Money?" Stefan laughed bitterly.

"Yeah, I needed it before. If you had

offered me money when I was

just to

working seven to eight jobs working stay alive, maybe I would've Been grateful. But now? It's too late."

Michelle's face went pale, her body trembling, unable to say another word.

For the first time, she realized Stefan might really kill her.

Her bodyguards stood nearby,

unsure of what to do. None of them

had expected the situation to

escalate this far. If anything

happened to Michelle, Brad Would

never forgive them.

"S-Stefan, think about your mom... Think about the person you like..." Michelle tried.

Stefan sneered. "It's because of the person I like that I refuse to let you control me anymore!"

Michelle was on the brink of breaking down. "What do you want? Killing someone means going to prison!"

"Yeah, I know. But I'm willing to bet Brad Snowden won't let me go down when he finds out I'm the only heir left. I die, the Snowdens lose their only successor," Stefan said.

Michelle's breathing quickened. "He might take it out on your mother instead."

Stefan fell silent, as if considering her words seriously.

At that moment, Michelle's bodyguards began to inch closer, preparing to strike.