

## Chapter 7 No.7

The sound of Betty's voice was like a bucket of ice water thrown over my head. I froze, the reality of my situation crashing down on me. I was in the men's bathroom, sandwiched between Aldric and Caius, my body still limp from their touch.

I shoved against Aldric's chest, my voice a desperate, hushed plea. "Please, you and Caius need to go out there. Distract her. Get her to leave."

Aldric didn't move. A slow, predatory smile touched his lips. "That sounds like a favor," he murmured, his eyes dark and intent. "And favors require payment."

Frantically, I fumbled in my pocket, pulling out a crumpled fifty-dollar bill -the equivalent of nearly three days' expenses for me. "Here. Just take it."

He glanced at the money and then back at my face, his gaze dropping to my lips. "I don't want your money," he said, his voice a low thrum that vibrated deep within me. "I want a different kind of payment. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"Sylvia! Are you in there?" Betty's voice came again, more urgent, followed by another sharp rap on the door.

Time was running out. Heart hammering against my ribs, I stood on my toes and pressed a quick, chaste kiss to his cheek, intending to pull away immediately. But as I moved back, his hand shot up, tangling in my hair and holding me firmly in place.

"That's not it," Aldric whispered, and before I could protest, his lips captured mine in a firm, possessive kiss that stole my breath. It was brief but filled with longing. Then he pulled away, his eyes smoldering. "That's what I wanted."

Then, as swiftly as they had trapped me, they were gone. Aldric and Caius slipped out of the men's room, their laughter echoing faintly down the hall.

I stayed pressed against the door, listening until their footsteps faded, then counted to ten before cautiously stepping out. The hallway was, thankfully, empty.

I retreated to the back kitchen, my hands still trembling as I tried to straighten my uniform.

Suddenly, Nico, one of the other servers, sidled up beside me. He slung a heavy, familiar arm around my shoulders, his touch making my skin crawl.

"Hey there, new girl. You look a little flustered," he said, his voice leering.

Before I could shrug him off, Betty marched into the kitchen. She deliberately bumped into Nico, knocking his arm away, and immediately placed a protective arm around me.

"Back off, Nico," she warned, her tone sharp. "She's not interested. And she's shy, so keep your hands to yourself."

Later, after the twins and Fiona had left, I went to clear their table. The amount was so vast, so effortlessly given, it felt surreal. I was used to the jingle of loose change and crumpled fives. This single note could cradle me for a week. Folded underneath it was a napkin with a note scrawled in elegant handwriting: "Have a nice day, little kitten."

The memory of the men's room, of Aldric's kiss and Caius's touch, came rushing back. My cheeks flamed, a heat that spread through my entire body. I felt a telltale dampness between my legs, my underwear clinging uncomfortably.

After we finished working, Betty and I clocked out. Once she knew where I lived, her mouth widened in shock.

"You know," she began, breaking the quiet, "your place is really out of the way. This walk is crazy, especially after a long shift." She glanced at me, her face softened by the glow of the occasional streetlight. "From now on, I'll pick you up and drop you off for our shifts. It's no trouble at all."

A wave of pure gratitude washed over me, so strong it almost brought tears to my eyes. In a world that had offered me so little kindness, Betty's unwavering friendship felt like a lifeline. "Betty, you don't have to do that. It's too much."

"It's nothing," she insisted, waving a dismissive hand. "Really, I drive right past your street anyway." Her smile was genuine, a clear indicator of her big, generous heart.

But years of fending for myself had taught me a hard lesson: nothing is truly free, and accepting help without offering something in return made me feel vulnerable and indebted. I couldn't just take.

"At least let me help with gas, then," I said, my voice firm despite my tiredness. I fumbled in my pocket, pulling out a few of the precious dollars I'd earned. "I can't just accept such a big favor without giving anything back. Please."

Betty looked at the cash, then back at my determined face. She saw I wasn't just being polite; I needed this small semblance of balance. After a moment, she smiled softly and took a single bill from my hand, leaving the rest.

"Okay, deal. But this is more than enough," she said, tucking it into her own pocket. "You're stubborn, you know that?"

"I have to be," I replied, a weight lifting from my shoulders.

During the drive home, Betty asked, "Where did you disappear to earlier? I was looking for you. Were the twins bothering you again?"

"I... I just needed some air," I lied, my eyes fixed on my hands. "I stepped outside for a minute. And it was the same as always. They just... teased me a bit. Nothing serious." I couldn't possibly tell her the truth.

"They're not bad guys, you know," Betty sighed. "They just like to flirt. A lot."

I nodded, not wanting to continue this topic.

When I got home, my social worker, Rachel, called. "Just checking in, Sylvia. How are things?"

"They're... okay," I said, the words feeling hollow. These check-in calls were a formality ever since the court had forced Alice to take me in.

"And you're receiving the child support checks from your father?" she asked.

A bitter laugh escaped me. "I've never seen a single one. Alice takes them all."

There was a heavy silence on the other end. Rachel knew the situation; she knew Alice's love was a non-existent resource.

"I'll... see what I can do, Sylvia," she promised, but her voice lacked conviction. I knew she was powerless.

I headed for the shower, needing to wash the diner smells.

Under the spray of hot water, my own hands traveled over my body,



remembering the twins' touch. But my own fingers felt clumsy and inadequate, only stirring a restless, unsatisfied ache that they had ignited.

I slept fitfully, my dreams haunted by intense, dark eyes and the scent of expensive cologne.

The next morning, I woke early, my body still thrumming with a strange energy. Thirsty, I padded down to the kitchen for a glass of water, hoping to cool my dry throat and settle my nerves.

Just as I was drinking, a low, guttural roar echoed from outside. It was a deep, primal sound that didn't belong in our sleepy backyard. Curious and uneasy, I crept to the back door and peered into the pre-dawn grayness.

There, beyond the rickety garden fence, at the tree line of the dense forest, stood two massive, shadowy forms. Their eyes glowed with an unearthly amber light. Wolves? My breath caught in my throat.

It was impossible. One of them lifted its head and let out another, softer roar that was more like a rumble, before both creatures turned and melted soundlessly into the dark woods.

Shaken, I went back inside and up to my room to change. My mind was reeling from the bizarre sight, and in my distraction, I forgot to lock my door. I had just pulled a clean shirt over my head when the door creaked open.

Robert stood there, leering. He was rarely up this early. "Well, look at you," he slurred, his breath smelling of last night's beer. "Up with the sun. Couldn't sleep? Need a man to tire you out?"

Disgust and anger churned in my stomach. "You're disgusting. Get out."

"Or what?" he sneered, stepping into the room. "You'll fight? Maybe I like it rough. Makes it more fun."

He lunged at me. I sidestepped, my heart in my throat, and made a desperate dash for the door. His hand shot out, grabbing my wrist with a bruising grip.

"Let me go!" I screamed, struggling wildly.

He laughed, his other hand digging painfully into my waist. "Hold still, you bitch!"


I went limp, feigning surrender. A triumphant grin spread across his face. As he loosened his grip, thinking I would comply, I brought my knee up

with all my strength, hitting him squarely between the legs.

He howled in agony, crumpling to the floor with a string of curses. I didn't wait. I tore my wrist from his slackened grasp and flew down the stairs, bursting out the front door into the cool morning air.

I didn't stop running, leaving that house of nightmares behind me, if only for a little while.



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