

President 61

Chapter 61

Taking a glance at his wristwatch, faint brow furrows appeared on Mark's chiseled face. "Good morning, give me five minutes," he said, lifting his head.

Immediately right after, he strode to the bathroom.

Mark stepped out right on cue in about five minutes, dressing in a flawlessly tailored suit that accentuated his build and poise. "Let's go."

Startled slightly, Summer asked, "Where to?"

"The results are ready today." Mark's voice deepened when he saw her looking at him in bewilderment.

Summer was surprised and thought, 'So soon?' but it was good news as she could finally get to know

who was behind the setup.

As the black Land Rover drove to their destination, she gazed outside, feeling bored.

Suddenly, someone familiar by the road caught her eye. She furrowed her brows and asked, "Isn't that... your aunt?"

Without uttering a word, he shot a glance and narrowed his eyes. Then, the car pulled over at the side

of the road.

Raine was forced to halt in her tracks, seeing as her path was blocked off. Lifting her head, she smiled

and

greeted them gently, "Hello there, Summer, Mark."

"Where are you heading to?"

"The municipal office, I need to get some documents."

"Then we're headed in the same direction. Let's go together, aunty," Summer insisted as she opened the car door.

Raine sat in the back seat, and the journey went on in silence as nobody spoke.

They passed by a cafe, and Summer asked to pull over since they did not have breakfast and she got hungry.

With a smile, Mark invited Raine, "Surely you haven't eaten as well, let's go together."

The cafe had a serene ambiance with relaxing music playing in the background. It felt cozy and peaceful.

Summer had placed quite a few orders: orange juice, baguettes, salad, and a bowl of mashed potatoes.

Meanwhile, Raine had gotten a cup of juice and a freshly baked bun.

Summer glanced over to Mark and saw him having his mushroom soup slowly with grace.

'Having such a big frame but only eating so little,' she thought to herself.

Furrowing her brows, she pushed her plate of baguettes to him. Before he could say anything, Raine spoke up, "Mark usually has his baguettes with brie."

"Oh, then take this instead." Summer gave him her bowl of mashed potatoes.

"He only eats the ones mashed with red potatoes," Raine spoke up again.

"What about salad then? It's just mixed vegetables."

"He doesn't fancy baby carrots..."

Upon hearing so, Summer eyed Mark and raised her brows, saying, "How did you end up having such

a tall frame when you're so picky?"

Chuckling, Raine explained, "It's nothing unusual.

Everyone just has their own preferences."

Seemingly as if he was not the topic of the discussion, he took a quick glimpse at the food Summer ordered and knocked on the table with his index finger curled. "Eat quickly," he prompted.

"Are we in a rush?"

"What makes you ask?" asked Mark with his eyebrow raised to Summer. Never once did he spare a glance to Raine.

"Don't you know that it's rude to rush someone when they're eating?"

The corner of his lips twitched upwards, and with a hint of curiosity in his tone, he asked, "Oh? I didn't

know. Mind telling me who said so?"

Summer actually gave it a thought for a moment, but she couldn't come up with an answer.

Embarrassed, her cheeks reddened, and she cleared her throat with a light cough. Then, she quietly finished up her breakfast without saying anything further.

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"You're an educator, yet you don't have the answer for the question you've asked," pausing, he shifted

a bit in his seat and fixed his posture as he continued, "you still have much to learn and improve on, don't you think so, my wife?"

Summer was rendered speechless.

'He called me his wife so publicly..., ' feeling surprised, she thought.

Despite feeling a pang of pain, Raine still plastered a soft smile on her face. No one except for herself

could tell how much her heart hurts at that moment.

'He didn't even spare me a single glance ever since I've returned,' she thought bitterly. 1

'And yet they look so happy and blissful interacting with each other.'

After breakfast, Raine had insisted on taking a cab to the municipal office as she had claimed that it was not that far away.

Since she seemed persistent in going by herself, Summer did not press her to stay any further, and after they bid their farewells, Raine left.

She had worn a black cardigan paired with a long frilly skirt, and it swayed as she walked. As though

she came out of a painting, she looked beautiful and divine.

Summer admired Raine while watching her walk off, and she thought to herself, 'Never have I seen someone so gorgeous even while they're just walking.'

As they drove to their destination, Summer looked around, and the roads seem familiar to her. Feeling

something was amiss, she asked Mark, "Why are we heading to my parents' house?"

"You will find out later," he simply replied without saying much. Having parked their car, they went ahead to the apartment.

Keeping silent, she followed closely behind him as her heart filled with worry and doubt.

Passing by the third floor, Mark continued to climb up the stairs to the fourth floor, which left Summer

feeling puzzled as her parents' house was on the third floor.

'We're going to the fourth floor?' she thought quizzically.

Recollecting that Mark has brought her here to confront the person behind her setup, she then realized

there was someone she knew who lived on the fourth floor-her best friend, Nancy.

Her heart started to pound as she thought about it. Her footsteps quickened as she caught up to him

and grabbed the corners of his shirt. Feeling distressed, she asked, "Are you sure? Do you have proof?"

"What do you think?" he questioned her.

She looked into his eyes and clenched her fists. Then, she walked past him straight to Nancy's front door.

Summer easily pushed the door open as it wasn't locked. As she stepped into Nancy's home, she saw

her packing her bags and suitcases.

With Nancy's back facing her, she asked, "Where are you going?"

Nancy jolted upon hearing her voice. She tried to ease her nerves before turning to face her friend with

a look of feigned worry plastered on her face.

"Why are you here? Are you feeling alright? I was so worried about you that day!"

Summer watched Nancy coldly as she spoke and asked, "Were you?"

"Of course!"

Nancy sounded sincere, but her eyes did not meet Summer's. Her head hung low as she gave

Summer a onceover.

When she spotted a familiar, tall, and toned silhouette by the door, her face drained of color, and as if

she got struck by lightning, her body became numb and froze in place.

Mark had remained outside waiting by the door nonchalantly.

Summer pushed away Nancy's hold on her hands when she saw the change in her expressions. She

demanded, "So what made you do it? Tell me, right now."

Nancy smirked, and in a sarcastic tone, she scorned Summer, "Why don't you think what you have done? That will solve your mystery."

"Is it because I lied about you that one time?" Summer asked as that was the only time she wronged

Nancy.

Since everything is exposed, there was no need for Nancy to hide the truth any longer.

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Nancy nodded her head as she said, "That was just one of the many reasons."

Taking a deep breath, Summer thought, 'There is still more?! Just how displeased is she with me?'

"Do you know what I hate most about you? Even though our appearances and capabilities are on par,

all the acknowledgments and compliments would surely go to you. No matter how much I do or how

hard I try to be better, I would receive none of those, but that was still fine to me until you lied and hid

the truth from me. That was the last straw."

Sitting on the sofa, she sneered as she continued her rant, "I saw you as my closest friend. In the times

when you were in a pinch, when have I not been there for you?"

Whenever Summer had asked for her help, Nancy would be there, and she had helped Summer plenty.

When Summer could not go for classes, she had filled i n for her classes.

When Summer did not have a place to stay, she gave summer her contacts and even took days off from work to help her clean her new place.

"I was having a major crisis, and I had even begged

you for help, but all you did was lie in my face even though you were capable of helping me! Am I just a

joke to you, Summer Hart?!"

Other than that, what made Nancy feel the most upset and embarrassed was how Mark did not even spare her a single glance when she threw herself at him.

She had swallowed all the remaining pride she had left and tried to seduce him, yet what she got in return were shame and humiliation.

'Perhaps in his eyes, women like me are seen as trash but just what is it that Summer has that I don't?'

Nancy thought bitterly.

It seems Summer did not truly understand her best friend after all. All this while, she did not know

Nancy had harbored all those grudges against her.

She tried to explain, "I told you, I didn't mean to hide it from you. It was complicated, and there were

some complications back then!"

As if she heard something hilarious, Nancy cackled loudly. She said, "You were getting married to the

director of the most powerful company in Santabaca, yet you say there were complications? Or are you

trying to flaunt, or is it simply just to trigger me?"

Hearing so, Summer replied sullenly.

"We have been friends for three years, and I thought we understood each other well. I guess

everything I thought we had was one-sided, and it was all just a joke. If you can't understand where I'm

coming from and think that it's just to mock you, then I won't explain any more to you..."

She continued, "From this moment on, we are no longer friends, but I have to let you know one thing. I

am certain that I haven't done or sacrificed any less for you back in the days."

Summer felt that it was meaningless to pinpoint and list every single time or thing she had done for

Nancy, such as helping Nancy pay for her tuition fees for 2 years and her brother's.

If Summer were to bring up these favors, she knew Nancy could not take it based on her understanding

of Nancy's prideful personality. Nancy's pride would not be able to take it, and she would overthink and

complicate things even further, which was why Summer did not want to mention anything else.

"Since you've always thought of me as a hindrance who snatched your spotlight, today onwards, I will

stay as far as I can from you, so you can have the chance to shine and get all the acknowledgments and attention you have always wanted. However..."

Summer paused as she stepped forward and raised her hand.

Smack.

She gave Nancy a hard slap on her cheek and continued her words sternly.

"This slap is for what you have done to hurt me. You know what you did."

Immediately after, she turned on her heel and strode out the house without sparing a glance to Nancy.

She paused as she passed by the third floor. She turned to face Mark as she told him, "I'm going to visit my parents for a bit."

He glanced at her. She looked calm, but her pale cheeks remained flushed as her eyes glinted with emotion, making her appear alluring, and he was almost tempted to caress her cheek.

"Okay," he replied as he gazed into her eyes, and after checking the time, he said, "I'll head to the office for some work."

Speaking up, she answered, "Drive safe and take care."

She watched as he left, and only when his lean figure was out of sight did she turn on her heel and headed towards her parents' house.

Amara had answered the door, and immediately, Summer's face darkened as she asked, "Why are you

here?"

"Why can't I be here? This is my home too. Where else should I be if not here?" Amara refuted as she

did her manicure, the smell of her nail polish horrid.

Walking past her, Summer went directly to her dad's room and asked him, "Dad, why is she here?

Have you forgotten what you and mom had promised me before?"

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Solomon sipped on some tea before sighing as he heard Summer's complaint and explained, "She

came to us and said she had no place to stay. Plus, she has promised never to repeat that mistake.

We can't possibly chase her out; she's family after all."

"How can you believe anything she spews? Do you not recall what she had done caused us?" she felt

furiously talking about her as she continued, "You guys are just too soft-hearted, and she is clearly taking

advantage of that!"

"I guess the older we age, the more compassion we have for other people. You will understand when

you're our age," Solomon said as he adjusted his glasses before massaging his legs.

She took a deep breath before saying, "Well, what I do understand and know now is that she's just like

an annoying piece of gum. No matter how hard we try to pluck her out of our hair, she remains tangled

in it."

Summer knew that her hatred alone would not help at all. As long as her parents condoned Amara's behaviors, even if Summer were to chase her out, her parents would pick her up afterward.

She felt exhausted for having to deal with Amara's drama to no end. 'We're back to square one, again,'

she

thought despairingly.

Solomon swiftly changed the topic and asked, "What's the progress of the case you're dealing with now?"

"It's resolved," she replied simply without going into details as she did not want to talk or think about it

ever again.

"That's a relief! Well then, let's watch some TV together to cheer up. There's a basketball competition

going on today."

He patted her shoulder while smiling at her dotingly as he pulled her to the living room. They sat close

together on the sofa.

As soon as the TV was switched on, Mark appeared on the screen. He looked stunning, and his charm

radiated as he sat on a maroon couch in the set.

He was interviewed by some reporters. Summer reached out and snatched the remote from her dad's

hand. She turned up the volume.

"We're all so very curious as to when you actually got married, Mr. Valentine. And how was it that no

one caught wind of the news?" the host of the show smiled as he asked.

Mark was leaning slightly into the couch as he crossed his legs gracefully. His chiseled features

showed no shifts in his expression as he merely curled up his lips into a half-smile. His deep voice

resonated.

"It's new to me that such interest and attention was given to my marriage. Since I've mentioned having

a press conference to publicize the details, why not we make it a banquet and have it tomorrow night

then? It'll be held at Paragon hotel. My wife and I will be there to attend to your questions. Hope

everyone enjoys themselves tomorrow."

"This surely is news worth looking forward to! Plus, this will be the first time you're attending a public

event with your wife ever since getting married. Next, on behalf of the crew, I would like to take this

chance here to thank you, Mr. Valentine, for joining our interview session today and also congratulate

you on your marriage. We wish you a long and blissful marriage, and may we hear good news from you

soon."

He nodded slightly and smiled as he thanked the host.

Summer had snapped back into reality when the interview ended. She threw the remote aside and went to the balcony, dialing his number.

After a while, the call was connected, and the sounds of footsteps could be heard. It sounded like Mark

was stepping out of the set, and she could hear him greeting and bidding farewell to the people around.

"Would you care to explain what you meant in that interview just now?"

"I meant what I said. You and I will be attending the banquet at the Paragon Hotel tomorrow night, literally."

After taking a deep breath, she mocked playfully, "We were together two hours ago, and you could've

easily told me. It's just a single sentence with a few words. Do you have a word limit for a day's speech

or something?"

"I only thought of it during the interview. Since you already found out, I don't have to fill you in again.

I've got to attend a meeting now, bye."

Summer could tell that he was busy with work. As he was talking to her on the phone, voices of him

and his secretary could be heard in the background occasionally as he ordered the secretary to retrieve

documents. She could also hear him discussing work-related matters such as business negotiations

with his secretary.

Summer was speechless as the call hung up.

When she went back into the living room, Daisy returned from the market and prepped some

vegetables she bought. Pretending to be a goody-two-shoes, Amara sat near her mom and helped in

prepping. Summer could hear them muttering as they chatted on and off with each other.

Daisy halted her movements as she noticed her daughter walking by and asked, "I heard that you and

Mark are hosting a banquet tomorrow night at Paragon Hotel?"

"Apparently. I have just found out as well. What about it, mom?"

Instantaneously, Amaia placed the stalk of vegetable she had in her hands down on the table and

swiftly began massaging Daisy as she kneaded her back while she said, "I'm counting on you, mom!"

She headed to the washroom while humming delightedly right after. Summer eyed her for a moment

before facing Daisy as she asked, "Mom, what did she ask you to do?"

"She asked me to request some invitation cards from you-she wants to go to the banquet."

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Summer spoke immediately, "I don't have any."

Hearing so, Daisy pressed on, "Then do you know how to get them? Maybe you can get some for her."

"Mom, why are you even putting up with her?"

"I'm not. It's just that you know how she is. If you don't get it for her, she might take it upon herself and

possibly cause a big fuss at the banquet. And, all the guests attending are either notable figures or of

the ruling class in Santabaca; I can't bear to see her put my precious daughter in a humiliating

situation."

Daisy reasoned as she lowered down her voice, forcing Amara out of earshot.

Solomon also agreed, "Yeah. Knowing her, she would surely cause a scene tomorrow at the hotel. Just

get some for her."

Summer felt an intense headache forming; it was as if her head was about to explode, and her chest burned with rage whenever she had to deal with anything Amara-related.

Amara peeked her head out from the washroom. Calling out to Summer, she obnoxiously asked,

"Could you also send someone to get me a dress for the banquet? I don't think I have anything suitable

for the

occasion."

Without sparing her a reply, Summer's gaze was icy-cold as she stared at Amara.

Feeling slightly apprehensive and perhaps embarrassed from Summer's intense gaze, she hmped

and mumbled, "What's the big deal? Fine if you don't want to then!"

Summer stayed at her parents' for quite a while and only headed back to the Valentine mansion around

8:00 pm. However, no one was home other than the housekeepers.

She trudged to her room and fell onto the bed. She sighed, thinking, 'Nothing has been going my way

for the past few days.' Then, after lying in frustration for about half an hour, she slowly dozed off.

Mark had been returning home late recently, and it was getting later day by day.

And it had become habitual for Summer to leave a lamp on for him in the room.

Unbuttoning his dress shirt, Mark sat on the sofa. He was still dealing with the pile of documents stacked i n front of him.

Sounds of footsteps were heard as Raine stepped into the living room. She quickly caught sight of the

gorgeous figure seated on the sofa.

We are finally alone with one another, but I didn't expect it to feel this awkward,' she thought. 1

She debated in her head, 'I can't pretend that I did not see him. That's just wrong and impolite. But

what should I even say to him? Hi?'

She stood still for a moment before smiling and speaking up. She asked politely, "Have you had dinner,

Mark?"

"Mhmm," he answered simply without putting down his pen nor lifting his head.

"I was going to make some coffee. Do you want some?"

His lips moved as he replied plainly and directly, "No."

She felt a pang of pain in her chest, and she turned away, heading towards the kitchen.
Unbeknownst

to her, her wallet fell out from the pocket of her coat.

She hadn't realized it, and it was left on the ground.

Leaning against the cold tiled wall of the kitchen, she felt her heart cold and numb from the way he
had

treated her. She reminded herself, 'This is how he should act. This is what I have wanted.'

Like a gentleman, he was polite, respectful, and friendly but only up to a certain extent that
distanced

himself from others he wasn't close to.

But when he had treated her with such attitudes, she couldn't help but feel dejected and heartbroken.

'This isn't fair...' she thought bitterly.

She tried to push those feelings away as she started brewing her coffee. Remembering that she had a
few missed calls, she felt around her pockets for her phone.

Feeling around the pockets on her coat, she couldn't find her wallet. She furrowed her brows as she
began searching around the kitchen.

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"Looking for this?" Mark appeared in the kitchen and asked. He held the wallet in his right while
holding

a lit cigarette in between his fingers on his left.

Raine froze and then nodded her head slowly. She smiled as she said, "You found it. I was looking for it

around this small area but to no avail. I thought I had lost it."

Acting nonchalant, he leaned over the door and flicked off the ashes of the cigarette, but his eyes were

deep with emotion as he asked, "Don't you have something to explain to me?"

"What? I don't get what you're saying," she answered, feigning calm even though she had panicked slightly.

He moved his hands as his slender fingers pulled out a picture hidden within the wallet as he blew out

a puff of smoke.

The photo was small, but it was clear enough to pick up a man and a woman hugging intimately in it.

The man was none other than Mark himself, while the woman was Raine.

He strode towards her and held her against the door. With their bodies almost pressing closely

together, he said with his voice sounding deep, "Didn't you say we

should cut up all ties with each other completely? Why are you still keeping this picture here, hmm?"

As she did not dare to look into his deep orbs, Raine turned her head and looked away while huffing

slightly.

He opened his arms, and she was pinned between the door and his huge toned frame. He smirked as he teasingly asked, "Is it because you can't forget about me, or did you miss me, hmm, auntie?"

"Neither!" she exclaimed as she shook her head and clenched her fist.

"Neither, huh?" he repeated as he lifted a finger under her chin. His eyes were half-lidded as he asked,

"Why don't we find out then?"

Without waiting for a reply, he closed the gap between them and kissed her right after.

Raine struggled with her might as she tried pushing against his large frame. When she finally pushed

him off her, she heaved, taking quick breaths before exclaiming in an unusually calm manner.

"What we had is over! We are done! So stop trying to tease me or gauge my feelings and what not purposefully!"

Hearing her declaration, he chuckled sarcastically. His voice sounded cold without any hint of warmth

as he replied, "You think I'm the one who's teasing, huh?" "Hah!" he scoffed. Holding onto her chin tightly, he looked at her with rage. It was as though he were about to strangle and kill her.

"Back then, you had the guts to flee to America. And for the past three years, you hid from me. Since

you've already decided to run and hide, why didn't you stick to it forever? Why are you showing up

again after three years and reminding my wife about my likes and dislikes or my taste in food is like?

You're the one who keeps appearing before me, so tell me, Baine Valentine, who's the one teasing now?"

She hung her head as she heard him speak. Without looking at him, she muttered softly, "I know how

to act from now on. I'm sorry..."

Narrowing his eyes, he felt rage pierced him to the core. He asked, "How should you act?"

At that exact moment, Jazz's voice resonated from the living room as he said, "Hey Mark, you there?

Someone's calling you."

After scoffing coldly once more, Mark released his grip on her and left.

Meanwhile, Jazz held onto Mark's phone while he was calling out to him, facing the direction of the washroom. Noticing Mark, he said, "Oh, you were in the kitchen just now? I thought you were in the

washroom. Here, your phone's been ringing for a while."

Mark glanced over Jazz's uniform as he grabbed his phone and asked, "How much longer are you working for this part-time job?" "I'm not too sure yet, but probably until next year when classes are starting. Why?"

"Do you have any local universities you have in mind for now? Or perhaps universities abroad? If you

do, give me a list, and I'll look them up to see which is best for you."

For the first time, Jazz's eyes looked solemn as he replied, "It's alright, Mark. I'll take charge of my own

life. No matter university choices or future professions, I'll decide for myself. That was the advice you

gave, remember?"

Staying silent, Mark did not continue the conversation further as he merely patted his younger brother's

shoulder, which was a sign to Jazz that he supports him.

In truth, Jazz already had plans for himself. He smiled as he said, "Thanks, Mark."

The living room was then filled with nothing but silence. Meanwhile, Raine watched from afar with wobbly legs as she leaned against the door, and her eyes glistened with some tears.

She bitterly thought, 'I too, don't want things to be like this. It's just better this way for both of us. Why

can't he understand my intentions?' 1

'I have my worries, and forgetting about them is easier said than done- it's just too difficult for me.'

The next day.

Perhaps Summer had gone to bed quite early in the night before, so she awoke before sunrise.

Lying beside her was Mark, who was still asleep. He seemed relaxed as his usual cold features had been replaced with a tinge of gentleness.

Lightly, she reached over and pinched his nose. Letting go, she muttered, "Good morning, Mr.

Valentine."

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Since she was fully awake and had felt bored lying on the bed, she got dressed and decided to go for a

walk beside the garden of the Valentine mansion.

The snow had stopped after snowing for the whole night before. The air was cold, but it felt refreshing.

Taking a deep breath, she felt nice as the fresh air entered her lungs.

Feeling as if all her frustrations are floating away, she thought, 'Let all those bad memories of what happened float away and be forgotten.'

However, before she could even take a few more steps, her phone rang, and she answered, "Hello?

Why are you calling so early, mom?"

Daisy sounded exhausted as she said, "Amara kept bugging me to call and remind you about the invitations to the banquet. She's worried you might forget."

"Mom, can you stop her from annoying me?" Summer replied as she took a seat on a bench. Her jolly

mood was instantly ruined.

"Just get her some, and I'm sure she'll quit bugging you. Plus, the banquet ends quite early, so she wouldn't be able to cause any troubles."

"Fine, I got it. I'll give you a call later."

After strolling along the garden for quite some time, she glumly headed back. She noticed a familiar vehicle-a black Land Rover-starting up.

Mark watched her as she walked towards him. He passed her a down jacket as he threw it to her, "Get

in."

"Where are we going?"

"To try on some evening dresses for the banquet."

After driving for some time, the car finally pulled over outside a boutique, and in they went.

The dresses looked extravagant. Never had she thought she would have the chance to put them on.

The store assistant gave a warm smile when she noticed Mark. Walking towards them, she asked in a

friendly tone, "Hello, Mr. Valentine. Are you here for a n evening dress?"

"Mhmm," he answered simply. His lean arms came into view as he browsed and flipped through the dresses. He then picked out a few that caught his eye.

Summer remained silent as she stood aside quietly and watched him browse through the store.

She felt her heart race, and her cheeks reddened as she watched him pick out dresses for her. 'He looks really attractive with that serious look in his eyes,' she admitted to herself.

After staring for a while, she purposefully called out,

Mark." "Yes?" he responded as he eyed her.

"It's just you look so accustomed to browsing through dresses, so it made me wonder if you're a regular

to shops like these and choosing dresses for your female plus-ones?"

Ignoring her, he lifted his head and passed the dresses to the shop assistant. With his eyes squinting slightly, he requested, "Let her try these on, please."

"Of course, Mr. Valentine."

He sank into the couch as he half-heartedly flipped through the magazine, scanning through it. As he

remembered what had transpired in the kitchen the night before, he pursed his lips.

Fishing out his phone, he dialed a number. When the call went through, he asked, "Has she left?"

"Yes, Ms. Valentine has left to Grudin North at six o'clock in the morning."

"Grudin North?"

"Yes, sir. She had voluntarily requested to transfer there, and she would be working as the assistant

secretary of the governor, which means she would be your father, Mr. Valentine's assistant secretary."

His veins were popping out as he gripped his phone tightly. The corners of his lips curled into a cold and bitter smirk.

'It's been three years, but she's still the same.'

His thoughts continued ranting on, 'As soon as I tell her to disappear and never appear in my sight, she

would just immediately pack her bags and leave our home at daybreak.'

'Just how compliant is she?'

Mark decided to let her be as he thought, 'Since she sees me as a scary beast she needs to hide from,

I won't stop her. Why should I? If she wants to run and hide, hide all she wants.'

As if on cue, footsteps echoed through the hallway, and Mark had plastered his usual expression back

on. Acting as if nothing happened, he lifted his head.

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The dark shade of royal blue had contrasted with her pale skin tone beautifully. As it accentuated her

complexion, she looked extremely dazzling.

The thigh-high slit on the left side of the dress brought out her long slim legs. It was alluring and almost

tempting as her legs would only be partly visible occasionally as the skirt flowed.

He had not expected for her to look so ravishing in the dress.

He had frozen for a moment and felt his blood rush. His eyes darkened, and he swallowed down a gulp

before exclaiming, "Change to the next!"

He furrowed his brows as he thought, "That slit was almost up to her waist. Why are the designs of the

dresses here getting so poor?"

Summer examined herself in the mirror and thought, 'Does it look that bad on me? Sure, it's kind of exposing, but it's still a pretty dress.'

After going back and forth for quite some time, she had nearly tried on every dress the shop assistant

had brought to her, but the picky man outside was not satisfied with any of them.

It took quite a while for her to change into a dress, but

all he did was taking a short glance at her before spitting out a "Next!". And she had to repeat the cycle

all over again.

Fatigue had slowly caught up to her, and she was growing frustrated. She huffed in annoyance as she

sat and rested for a bit in the dressing room.

"Do I look that bad in those dresses? Can't he just simply pick one? I'm getting tired of him acting like a

master ordering around his pet. Does he know how tiring this is?"

Feeling amused at her complaint, the store assistant who was holding onto her next dress chuckled

and said, "I think it's the opposite, Mrs. Valentine. You have a great figure, and all the dresses looked

gorgeous on you, but personally, I think the dress that looked the best on you was the royal blue one."

Summer didn't know how to describe what she felt when she heard someone addressing her as Mrs.

Valentine. It was a strange yet pleasant feeling.

"And, I think it's because he thinks the dresses looked a bit too revealing on you. That's why he kept

asking you to change. Men can be very possessive after all."

"Are you sure?" Summer asked with her brows raised as she lifted her head and smiled at the store assistant.

Summer could clearly tell that something in her was going off track and that something was her heart.

At the beginning of this whole incident, she had only agreed to marry him to protect her unborn child.

But now, she knew her heart had wavered- she had uncontrollably and undeniably gotten attracted to

him, and she was falling deeper for him day by day.

"Of course! Why don't you try this red one next, Mrs. Valentine? It's gorgeous, and I think it would look

great on you as well."

The expensive lights shined through the night, and the ambiance was luxurious at the Paragon Hotel.

The parking lot was filled with the world's most renowned cars. A long red carpet was extended from

the fountain to the hotel entrance, which was a big classy glass revolving door.

Reporters and journalists flocked in like bees to honey as they entered while the guards were using their might to keep everyone at bay.

The hotel's interior was decorated in a golden theme with warm tones, giving the whole room a sun-soaked feeling similar to the Mediterranean-style designs. Under the night sky, it looked grand and striking.

Dressed in a long purple dress, Amara was accompanied by her two friends. The trio gaped around the

hotel together.

There was an Italian musical fountain right in the middle of the huge banquet hall. The water dances-

rising and falling as it follows the dynamics of the music. Famous French paintings were carved on the

bronze pillars, and a big shiny clear crystal lamp was hanging high as it reflects and disperses the light

into colorful rays. The whole place looked extravagant and luxurious.

Amara could not help but stare in an openmouthed wonder as it was the first time in her entire life that

she was able to step foot into a place so exclusive. Her friends, whom she brought along, kept

showering her with thanks and praises.

Nobles who were lavishly dressed up had gathered in the banquet hall, filling up the space as they held

their wine glasses while smiling and chatting with one another.

All of a sudden, sounds of applause echoed through the hall. As she followed the sound and everyone's gaze, her eyes widened in reflex, and her mouth was agape to the size that could fit in an egg.

'Isn't that the b*tch, Summer?' she thought as she filled with envy.

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Summer was dressed in a long red strapless dooby mesh tube dress, exposing her neck and defined clavicles. It accentuated her complexion, making her stunning.

A matching red veil was draped over her right shoulder and around her waist, and it floated along, drawing beautiful arcs in the air as she walked.

Her makeup was light, and her silky black hair was styled with a similar but shorter veil attached in her

hair into a low ponytail that rested on top of her shoulders.

She had looked enchanting, pristine and flawless. Her dress was not revealing, but it had a subtle alluring feel to it as it fitted on her. It was an indescribable feeling, but her beauty could easily take everyone's breath away.

She hooked her arm around through Mark's, and he was smartly dressed in a nice suit. His features were defined with his deep dark eyes, and he was easily made the center of attention as he radiated undeniable elegance and grace.

Spamming their cameras with pictures, the reporters took and recorded as much as they could.

Flashes of light kept flickering off the cameras ever since the

couple entered the hall.

Billy let out a whistle as he stared at Summer. Tsking, he said, "How did I never realize Summer could

look s o alluring?"

Hearing his words, Sherman twisted his ear as she questioned, "What are you staring at?"

"You, of course, my love!" he immediately replied as he tried to atone himself.

Charlie chuckled lightly as he raised his brows while agreeing, "Ms. Hart is a stunner indeed."

"What about me?"

Before Charlie could respond, Billy had spoken up, " You're whor*sh!"

Grace's almond-shaped eyes widened as she shot daggers towards Billy.

As he stood on the stage, Mark glanced at the many guests in the hall. His lips curled up slightly as he

spoke up with his deep husky voice.

"Hello, everyone. My wife and I are extremely thankful for your presence here tonight. We hope that

everyone would enjoy themselves fully tonight."

Even though it was a simple greeting, it had garnered thunderous roars of applause from the audience

and filled up the hall.

Holding Summer by her arm, Mark then stepped down the stage steadily as they gracefully walked towards

their guests.

Summer believed her legs might have given up and collapsed if she weren't holding onto him. Never

had she dealt with such an occasion, especially one that had her as the host.

"It's okay. Don't be nervous, just relax. I'm here with you."

His warm and rough hands snaked around her waist as he leaned in close to whisper in her ear. As she felt his warm breath on her ear, her eyes glistened with surprise.

His words worked like sedatives as they calmed her pounding heart. She began to relax and smiled naturally as she held on to the corner of his suit, sticking closely to him.

They went around and greeted their guests, shaking hands with all of them. No matter who they had met, Mark faced them with a look of sincerity.

Summer copied whatever addresses Mark had greeted the guests with.

Whenever their guests would pass Summer a glass of wine, Mark would politely decline and have her

drink the juice he requested instead.

She felt her cheeks heating up either because she had too much juice or the hall became stuffier.

Mark had also noticed the gradually flushing tint appearing on her fair cheeks, which looked like sun-

kissed clouds as they seemed to be soft and mesmerizing.

And it was starting to catch more attention from the others, especially their male guests. No one dared

to stare boldly, but brief glances and peeps were noticed.

Feeling a hint of displeasure, he narrowed his sharp eyes. He then brought Summer to Sherman and

said, " Keep her company."

"Sure," Sherman replied, smiling as she held onto Summer, who had felt slightly unwell.

"Why didn't you ask for my company instead?" Grace asked, feeling offended.

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Mark eyed her swiftly and said, "You don't feel safe." "You're saying as if I'm a man. Well, I'm not, and

it's not like I would do anything inappropriate to her," she replied as she wondered if she had given off

an untrustworthy impression.

Snatching the opportunity to butt in, Billy said, "Hey, you guys can brush off the wedding party and return gifts for guests but let me remind y'all that we're definitely playing that game tonight!"

Charlie agreed as well, he said, directing to Mark," Yeah, bro. You better prepare yourself. You can't run

away this time."

Mark furrowed his brows after taking a short glance at their excited faces. Without giving them a reply,

he turned and left.

"We can take his silence as his consent, right?" Billy said, bumping his shoulder into Charlie's.

"I think so."

"Let's plan something extra exciting. Shoot me with the most wicked ideas you have!"

Upon hearing the thrill in their voices as they discussed, Sherman shook her head in helplessness as

Summer gently rubbed on her temples to ease the slight throb in her head.

As much as Yvette did not want to show up to the banquet, she knew she was obliged to.

'Since Ronald, that father of his, couldn't show up, I have to. I'm the only parent present, after all. Plus,

if I don't, the reporters would surely make a fuss out of it,' she grumbled to herself.

Hence, that was the sole reason why Yvette had attended, and she left right after greeting most of the

guests.

Meanwhile, Jazz had easily spotted Summer in the crowd. He, too, had not expected Summer to look

so breath-taking in her red dress. He felt intoxicated by her beauty.

He thought as he admired her, 'Even if she's not wearing that dress, she'll look lovely in anything-she i

s gorgeous after all."

But as he caught sight of her circling her hands around his brother, his smile turned bitter. He drowned

his sorrows with glass after glass of alcohol.

In a far corner of the hall sat a woman. A vase full of greenery was placed as a decoration on the table

near that corner. So, if one did not pay enough attention, they would barely notice someone sitting there.

A glass of cocktail was placed in front of Baine. She looked at Mark through the gaps of the plants in

the vase; her gaze lingered.

As though her eyes were stuck on him, she could not shift her gaze away.

She had already bought the tickets to Grudin North and even boarded onto the train, but as soon as she did, she had missed him badly.

After it had passed to the next station, she got off the train and headed back to Santabaca.

Knowing that her heart would suffer, she herself wondered why she had done so.

'I just can't help it,' she thought.

Amara absolutely loved these grand banquets and events. However, when she saw Summer dressing so enchantingly and different from "her ugly-duckling self", as Amara called it, she felt furious and filled with envy.

She gritted her teeth as she turned away without paying attention to her steps, and alas, she fell backward and knocked into someone. Instantly, a shrill cry radiated through the hall.

"What the h*ck?!" yelled Lily irritably as her glass of wine had spilled onto her white gown.

Already in a sour mood, Amara felt even more infuriated by the fuss and profanity that Lily had spitted.

Amara said as she bit back, "Who do you think you're cussing to?"

Lily, who was pampered all her life, could not take her rude tone as she responded, "You, of course!

And what can you do about it? Do you not have eyes or something?" "Are your eyes grown on your

back?" Amara scolded back fiercely.

"Ugh! You b*tch!" Being less experienced than Amara, Lily could only cuss as she was cut short off

insults. Her glance swept over Amara's dress, and she looked disgusted as she asked, "Where did you

get that dress? From the garbage pile?"

Lily's insult hit a nerve in Amara. Like a cat getting stepped on its tail, she made more vicious remarks.

"Look at you wearing something so lavish for your age. Don't tell me you're a secret mistress of some

wealthy old man here?"

Lily saw red hearing her words, and she raged, "Do you who I am?! Do you know I can easily ask my

brother to kick you out?"