

Too Far 351

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Elliot would have to pay a huge sum of money if Anastasia insisted on covering up the story, and she simply didn't think it was necessary to go to such lengths.

As such, she took it in stride and said, "Forget it. I'll just let it be." She was only thankful that the paparazzi had taken a nice shot of her, and she would be lying if she said she wasn't impressed with their skills.

"You're really going to let this go?" Elliot murmured as his arms snaked around her waist from behind. A delighted smile curled on his lips as he went on to ask, "Does this mean you've officially acknowledged our relationship?"

Anastasia blushed in embarrassment. If she were to deny their relationship now, the public was probably going to call her a succubus who toyed with men's feelings. With her back to him, she muttered softly, "Fine, I guess we can try dating for a while and see where it'll lead us."

"I won't let you down," he promised in a magnetic voice as he bent down slightly to kiss the top of her head. "I'll be sure to satisfy you in every imaginable way."

She was at a loss for words when she heard this. I think it's a little early for the kind of satisfaction you're talking about, Elliot, she wanted to say. She didn't think she would be ready to take things to the next level so soon.

Suddenly, she found herself thinking about Hayley and wondered whether the girl would go ballistic with rage after seeing the news.

However, Anastasia couldn't care less about how Hayley might feel, much like how Hayley had not cared about whether she lived or died all those years ago.

"Have you been in contact with Hayley recently?" Anastasia asked, looking up at Elliot curiously.

He answered gravely, "The last time we spoke, she told me that she was going abroad on holiday for three months, but we didn't speak after that. From now on, my assistant will be the one dealing with her instead and I won't see her anymore."

Anastasia could feel that he was getting uncomfortable talking about Hayley, so she nodded and let the matter drop. "Let's go for breakfast before we head back," she suggested brightly.

"Okay," he replied happily and held her in his arms for a while, and it wasn't until she felt the dangerous tension that was growing between them that she shoved him aside abashedly.

After breakfast, they were coming out of the basement parking lot when a cold breeze suddenly picked up. Anastasia shivered, but the next second, she was pulled into Elliot's warm embrace. He carefully bundled her up in his suit jacket and led her to the car.

Even though they were a mere dozen or so steps away from the vehicle, she still found his gesture heartwarming. As it turned out, a man who was truly in love with a woman would pay attention to all the little details, and she could definitely feel how much he loved her and wanted to take care of her.

It was hard to tell just how much of the population had their hearts broken by the news of Anastasia and Elliot's relationship.

Over in the Tillman Constructions' finance department, Alex heard the news after his subordinates burst into an uproar over it. When he fished out his phone and searched for the news, he was immediately greeted by the picture of Anastasia and Elliot locked in a passionate kiss at the cafe, and he felt his heart twist with bitter jealousy.

His chest tightened at the sight of the woman he loved wrapped in another man's arms. He knew that he no longer stood a chance with Anastasia, and now, all the feelings he had for her died, becoming a secret she would never know.

However, his feelings for her weren't the only things that were extinguished right then. The ambition that had driven him all this while was gone too. He wanted to use Anastasia as his stepping stone to take over Tillman Constructions, but it seemed impossible right now.

That said, it didn't mean he was willing to accept fate's arrangements. All the hard work he had done for Francis in the last few years was in vain, and the shortcut he could have taken to achieve further success was cut off.

No, this isn't how it's supposed to be, he thought grimly. He couldn't just let his dreams go down the drain without putting up a fight. He had not toiled in Tillman Constructions all these years just so he could give up now, not when he deserved more than what he was getting now.

As frustration and agony seized him, he clutched his head and felt a fiery rage course through him. With a violent swipe of his arm, he knocked the piles of documents off his desk and onto the floor.

No one knew how much he had lost. He was losing out on an entire future that he had planned for himself. The fact that he couldn't be together with Anastasia did not torture him as much as losing the chance to own Tillman Constructions.

Yet, a man like Elliot who was far above him had gotten everything he ever wanted. He couldn't even begin to compete with Elliot, much less be considered on par with him.

Just as Alex thought he might combust with rage, an irritating silhouette drifted into his peripheral vision.

It was Erica, Francis' other daughter. She wasn't as beautiful as Anastasia, and she was spoiled beyond reason. However, she had the same birthright to the company as Anastasia did, which meant she had an equal chance of succeeding Tillman Constructions.

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A malicious and devious look flashed in Alex's eyes at the thought of this. That's right, I still have a chance of owning Tillman Constructions, and that chance lies in Erica! He recalled how Erica had tried to get close to him the last time; he was clever in his own right, and he figured that Naomi had pinned her interests in the company on him. Is that why she got her daughter to seduce me?

In that case, he decided that there was no harm in collaborating with Naomi, seeing as they both had interests in Tillman Constructions that they could not afford to part with.

He glanced at the picture once more, and when he saw how happily in love Anastasia looked while she was kissing Elliot, he felt as if someone had stabbed his heart with a dagger. He wanted to hold Anastasia in his arms as well and claim her as his own, even if it was only for a fleeting night.

If he had the chance to fulfill his desires like that, he would be sure to seize it.

At that moment, his mind was filled with all the lewd things he wanted to do to Anastasia. She was the woman of his dreams, and she was the only one he ever wanted.

Meanwhile, over at Bourgeois, jealousy, and resentment lingered in the air in the office following the news of Anastasia and Elliot's relationship. Needless to say, a lot of hearts were broken that day.

Aliona, in particular, did not show up for work, and Alice spent the better part of the morning taking her anger out on her assistants and employees. She was furious. She had plotted to her wit's end to have Anastasia kicked out of Bourgeois, but as things were, it wouldn't make a difference whether she left or not, for she would eventually marry the president of the company. In fact, she would be marrying the president of the business empire that was Presgrave Corporation.

Anastasia's status had elevated beyond anything Alice could ever hope to achieve in this lifetime. While she had been toiling away to get promoted in Bourgeois, Anastasia had already taken one huge step forward by seducing and snagging Elliot, thus emerging the victor in this ongoing rivalry.

While this was happening, Aliona was huddled up in her apartment. She had been shell-shocked ever since she read the news this morning, and she had a feeling that Anastasia had seduced Elliot on purpose at the cafe so that she could set this whole love affair in motion, thereby gaining publicity.

To some extent, Aliona believed this was Anastasia's way of telling others of her capabilities. She's trying to rile me up, she concluded with gritted teeth. The task that Riley had entrusted her with was now rendered hopeless.

However, she couldn't give up so easily. Her entire life revolved around her plans of marrying Elliot so that she could take over Presgrave Corporation and present it to her father. This was the best, if not the only way she could ever repay all that Riley had done for her. If she couldn't manage this, then she would have failed him as a daughter.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by the sound of her phone ringing. She glanced at the caller ID before she picked up the call and greeted in a defeated voice, "Father."

"I just saw the news about Elliot and Anastasia. Who would've thought that they would go public with their relationship?" Riley scoffed icily on the other line as a snide edge crept into his tone.

"I'm sorry for not accomplishing the task you entrusted me with, Father. My incompetence has let you down, and I have been a waste of your time and energy," Aliona said, wrapping an arm around herself as if she would fall apart if she didn't.

"Aliona, don't say that. We still have a long journey ahead of us, so pull yourself together! Who's to say that Anastasia would live long enough to walk down the aisle and marry Elliot, right?"

Upon hearing this, Aliona brightened up instantly as she asked, "Father, what are your plans?"

"If she's going to be just as much of a nuisance as her late mother, I'll just have to dispose of her the same way. I can make her disappear."

"You plan on eradicating her, Father?" Aliona was excited. With Riley getting involved in this, she might still stand a chance to accomplish the task. More importantly, she was excited that she could get close to Elliot. She secretly found him magnetic and electrifying; she lusted over him and wanted him for herself.

"That's right," Riley affirmed. Then, he added encouragingly, "I'm planning something right now, and I'll let you know when the time comes. However, you must pull yourself together and don't ever falter, got it? You still have to take down Elliot."

"Yes, Father. Once you get rid of Anastasia, I'll be able to take down Elliot for sure," Aliona said with renewed confidence.

"That's what I want to hear. Now, just wait for my word!"

As soon as Riley hung up the call, Aliona's eyes lit up with an almost maniacal gleam. Anastasia was basically announcing her death wish the moment she went public with Elliot, and Riley would never let her live long enough to see her wedding day.

Presently, a hysterical fury descended upon Erica early that morning at Tillman Residence. She never expected that she would wake up and scroll through her phone in bed to find pictures of Anastasia and Elliot kissing spread all over the internet.

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Erica ran down the stairs in the clothes she had slept in and told her mother about the news. Naomi was stunned as well, but her astonishment was quickly replaced by worry as she muttered, "Anastasia

has her way with men. Who would've thought she'd have some tricks up her sleeves? I can't believe she managed to bag Elliot in such a short time."

"Mom, now that she has Elliot on her side, will we still be able to get our hands on Dad's company? You know how greedy she is, and with a bigshot like Elliot backing her up, she would be trampling all over us if she were to take Dad's company as well!" Erica pointed out belligerently.

Naomi snorted. "Anastasia has always hated me, and now, she finally has all her cards lined up. It's only a matter of time before she shows her hand and gets revenge on us. We can't afford to sit here and wait for our deaths."

"I totally agree, Mom. We can't just let her take everything away from us. We have to think of a way."

"Erica, Alex is our safest bet right now if we want to take the company for ourselves. This is your chance. I'm sure he wouldn't turn you down if you were to ask him to join us for dinner tonight," Naomi suggested. The time for her to strike was now, and Alex was going to be one of her most vital pawns in this game of chess.

Erica, on the other hand, was angry and upset that she was saddled with her father's subordinates while Anastasia got to date a fine specimen like Elliot. She didn't think this was fair, but she had no choice other than to go through with Naomi's plans.

At that moment, she remembered Hayley and wondered if she had heard the news. She's been getting mooching off the Presgrave Family all this while, and she really likes Elliot too. I bet she's furious right now!

Erica had no idea that Hayley had gone abroad to undergo plastic surgery. This was a secret that Hayley intended to be tight-lipped about, and she couldn't afford to let anyone know what she was doing.

When Erica returned to her room after her conversation with Naomi, she dialed Hayley's number, growing exasperated when she saw that the line couldn't get through.

Meanwhile, Hayley was recuperating from the major procedure that she had just undergone in Hogland. The anesthetics had yet to wear off, and she was still asleep at the moment. She had no idea of the crushing news that would greet her when she woke up later.

She had done plenty of changes and tweakings to her features that put her through unbearable pain, but the man she was so hopelessly in love with had announced his relationship with a woman who was her arch-nemesis.

Over at Bourgeois, Elliot's car pulled into the basement parking lot, and Anastasia opened the door to get down from the vehicle the moment it rolled to a stop. However, she had only just stepped out when the man next to her pointed out sourly, "I'm good enough to be in paparazzi shots with you, but not enough to show up at work alongside you, eh?"

Anastasia stopped in her tracks, and sudden realization dawned upon her as she said, "Sorry, I forgot about that."

Elliot sighed, for he wasn't sure what to do with her. He couldn't believe that someone who took her work and life so seriously would treat their relationship with considerable laxity.

He marched up to her and grabbed her hand. Then, he led her to the elevator without another word.

For some reason, she felt like her heart was suspended on a tightrope, ready to take the plunge and fall freely into her stomach at any given moment. She had yet to get used to such public displays of affection with this man.

Sure enough, the moment she arrived at the department of design, the employees lingering outside the elevator lobby instantly caught sight of her and Elliot holding hands. She flushed and turned to him. "I'll be going to my office," she said quietly.

With that, she turned to walk into the office under the envious gazes of her co-workers.

"Hey, Anastasia."

"Good morning, Anastasia!"

"You look so pretty today, Anastasia!"

"I love your purse, Anastasia."

The way to her desk was paved with endless compliments as the girls in the office greeted her with unprecedented enthusiasm, but she regarded them with the same smile that she would any other day.

She never cared about how others looked at her, and she still maintained her indifference even though they were throwing compliments in her direction to get in her good books.

Not long after, Felicia turned up at her office and braced her arms against the desk as she eyed Anastasia's outfit meaningfully. "Oh, someone didn't change out of their clothes! I'm guessing you had a pretty good night."

Anastasia blushed as she pleaded, "Please don't make fun of me, Felicia."

Knowing how shy Anastasia was when it came to the subject of men, Felicia stopped teasing her. "Okay. I'll stop, but I will still congratulate you for bagging President Presgrave! Also, those pictures are more than enough to make a woman jealous!"

Anastasia was amused and embarrassed at the same time. The pictures were going to be the bane of her existence for a while.

Upon noticing the flustered look on the younger woman's face, Felicia pointed out comfortingly, "We're all adults here, and whatever you did in those pictures is completely normal. There are plenty of young couples in the park who go twice as hot and heavy as the both of you, and the only difference is that you were caught by the paparazzi. I don't know any young couples out there who haven't done all this lovey-dovey stuff."

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Anastasia was practically dying of embarrassment as she buried her face in her hands, but now that everything was out in the open, she had no choice other than to accede to reality.

Just then, her phone rang. She picked it up and glanced at the caller ID, wincing when she saw Nigel's name. She was far too flustered to put his call through.

"Answer it," Felicia encouraged before walking away to give her some privacy.

Anastasia took a deep breath and picked up the call. "Hey."

"My fair Lady Tillman, so you have indeed left me for my cousin!"

"Please stop teasing me about this," she begged exasperatedly.

Nigel chuckled. "Who would've thought that my walking iceberg of a cousin could be so passionate when he's with you?"

"Nigel," she warned.

"Okay, okay, I'll stop. I only called to congratulate both of you, and I'm really happy for you guys as well. I wouldn't have allowed any man other than Elliot to be with you," he pointed out playfully.

"Thanks," she said. This was quickly followed by a panicked, "Hey, you didn't show Jared the pictures, did you?"

"The pictures are a little PG-13, so of course I didn't show them to him," he replied matter-of-factly.

Anastasia's face grew hot. "You can't ever let him see those pictures!"

"I know, and I won't. He told me he wants to stay over at my place, so I'll pick him up this afternoon and bring him home. That way, you and Elliot can get some much-deserved quality time."

She felt bad for saddling Nigel with babysitting duty and said, "I don't want to impose on you, Nigel."

"It's not imposing at all. You know how much I adore the little guy; he brightens up my day like no one else!" Nigel was already treating Jared like his own nephew.

"Okay, then. Thanks for offering, Nigel," Anastasia said. She felt like she was asking too much of him, but nothing else mattered as much as Jared's happiness.

"There's no need to thank me. Just go and capture my cousin's heart before some other damsel comes and snags him! He's a popular catch, you know," Nigel said jokingly and hung up the phone.

Presently, Anastasia propped her chin up with one hand. She couldn't focus on work, so she held her phone and scrolled through the pictures before blushing. She knew that these were candid shots, but she still couldn't believe that Elliot looked good from every angle, and she was flustered to see how her face lit up while they were kissing. I look like I'm enjoying his kiss a little too much, she thought.

She scrolled down to the comments section where the netizens had erupted into a frenzy. Without a doubt, she had become the object of everyone's envy as heartbroken women announced that they wanted to die after seeing the news. Some even went so far as to call Elliot their husband, though that was more comical than anything else. I didn't know he had tens of thousands of admirers, Anastasia mused.

A laugh escaped her at the thought of that. Life would be meaningless if she couldn't appreciate the humor of this situation.

When noon rolled around, Elliot called her and suggested that they go out for lunch. She did not turn him down, and the both of them headed over to the restaurant next to Presgrave Corporation.

After lunch, Elliot offered to give her a tour of Presgrave Corporation and his office. Given that she wasn't in the mood for work, she decidedly went along with him.

She found herself standing in the company building, which was a landmark in the central business hub of Avena. It was also known as the building of all buildings in the area.

This was the first time Anastasia had dropped by Elliot's office in Presgrave Corporation. As expected, it boasted a stunning view of the skyline and masculine decorations. It gave the illusion that it was built above the clouds when it really was just the pinnacle of a skyscraper. She had a feeling that it would still be bright and sunny here even if there was a storm brewing over the city.

"Do you like the view?" Elliot murmured as he wrapped his arms around her waist from behind.

She nodded and said gently, "Yes."

"You can drop by anytime to have coffee and take in the scenery," he offered in a husky voice.

She sensed something dry and cool press against the back of her ear. He had kissed her there, and she quickly shrunk away from him as she grumbled, "Do you make a habit out of kissing people at the most random of times?"

He straightened up and eyed her solemnly as he corrected, "No, I only make a habit out of kissing you, randomly or not."

This made her heart flutter, but at that moment, she heard his phone ring and prompted, "Go and answer the call."

He returned to the desk and picked up his phone. "It's my grandmother. She probably saw the pictures," she said.

Anastasia gasped and quickly put her finger to her lips as though to shush him. In low, hushed tones, she urged, "Don't tell her I'm here."

Elliot raised a brow in amusement, and at the sight of the anxious look on her face, he answered the call and put it on speaker. "Hey, Grandma."

"Elliot!" Harriet sounded elated on the other line as her bright voice filled the spacious office. "Is it true? I'm not dreaming, am I? Are you and Anastasia officially dating now?"

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"Of course you aren't dreaming, Grandma. Anastasia and I are officially dating," Elliot replied with a smile, though his gaze lingered on the flustered woman whose face was buried in her hands as she stood to the side.

Anastasia immediately and desperately signaled for him to look her way. She even mimed to tell him to keep her presence here a secret from the old lady.

One could practically hear Harriet buzzing with excitement on the other line as she quipped, "Alright, then. I'll be waiting for you to marry her and make her my granddaughter-in-law!"

"Okay, Grandma. I'll talk to her about this," Elliot promised.

"Also, bring her and her child back home in the next few days. They shall be my honored guests."

"I'll make the arrangements," he said patiently and indulgently.

"My dream has finally come true. Oh, and don't let the press snap pictures like those ever again. I don't want Anastasia's reputation to be tarnished." Harriet was already going into protective grandmother-in-law mode.

Anastasia was moved to hear this. Elliot, on the other hand, said decisively, "I'll have those pictures on the internet taken care of immediately."

He ended the call with Harriet and turned to appraise Anastasia with interest. "Hear that? Grandma wants us to get married as soon as possible."

She felt her heart somersault. We're moving a little too fast, aren't we? We only just went public with our relationship yesterday, and now we're talking about throwing a wedding?

Meanwhile, over in Hogland, Hayley finally woke up after the surgery. She felt like her bones had been detached and put together again, and she was in so much pain that she couldn't help trembling. This was her first procedure, and she had already arranged for subsequent surgeries that included liposuction and breast augmentation.

Presently, there was only one person in her mind who became her driving force to go through such torturous ordeals, and that was Elliot.

She grew excited just from thinking about how she would 'accidentally' walk by him and amaze him with her stunning appearance. She could already imagine the way he would look at her with the same devotion and love as he did with Anastasia, and the thought of that alone was enough to satisfy her. She was sure that when the time came, he would be entranced by her beauty.

Now that she had regained consciousness, Hayley was transferred to the normal ward; she would remain there for the rest of her recuperation period while being tended to by a professional caretaker. The female manager who had recommended her to the facility, in particular, was attentive to her every need.

While Hayley's looks were average at best, she was generous with her money, and the manager knew that those who had gotten plastic surgery would return for future procedures as well, even if sporadically. At some point, Hayley would become one of her long-term clients as well.

Right now, Hayley's face was entirely wrapped in bandages, revealing only a pair of bloodshot eyes. The sutures on her eyelids had yet to be taken off, and the parts of her face which were still visible were so bruised up that she looked borderline horrific. She took one glance at herself in the mirror and grew so despondent that she didn't want to take another look.

She couldn't wait for the swelling to go down and for her new face to be revealed. She turned to her assistant and said, "Give me my phone."

The assistant did so immediately, and Hayley wasted no time in connecting to the WiFi here. As soon as she did, her phone chimed incessantly as new texts came pouring in. She saw that most of these texts were from Erica, and she clicked on the first one at the very top.

'Hayley, where are you? Did you turn your phone off or something? Have you seen the news of Elliot's newfound love life?'

Her mind imploded when she read this. What love life?

She quickly backed out of the text message and clicked into her browser, promptly searching Elliot's name. At once, she was greeted by countless articles written about him, but what caught her eye right off the bat was the title that read, 'Elliot Presgrave Pictured Kissing Girlfriend in Cafe'.

Hayley's chest rose and fell rapidly as she clicked into the article to see who Elliot's supposed 'girlfriend' was. That was when she saw the picture, and though only half the girl's face was captured by the camera, Hayley could still tell from the delicate side profile that the girl was none other than Anastasia.

A piercing shriek escaped Hayley as she threw her phone aside in a fit of rage, and she put her hands over her face. Having gone through such painful plastic surgery, she was supposed to rest, and stress did

not do any good for her at all. However, she was belligerent after reading the news, and she felt as if she might combust.

"Miss Seymour, is everything okay?"

"My face hurts," Hayley groaned, though her heart was the one filled with searing pain. She never expected Anastasia to be so shameless as to be pictured being all loved-up in Elliot's arms.

Hayley could barely breathe through the pain that came from the incisions and wounds on her face. She needed to calm down, but the image of Elliot and Anastasia kissing seemed burned into the back of her mind.

The fiery pain lasted for a while, and even the doctor dropped by to check on her. She was told to keep calm and maintain a straight face most of the time if she wanted to keep her sutures and wounds from tearing, which would lead to scarring and disfigurement.

Devastated, Hayley lay in bed and felt resentment wash over her. She had gotten work done on her entire face, only to have some other woman swoop in and act all lovey-dovey with Elliot. Worst of all, that woman was her arch-nemesis, the one person she hated the most.

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For the sake of her face, which had just gone through a major procedure, Hayley had no choice but to keep her rage and anguish in check. It was as if a thousand needles were piercing her heart right now as she clutched tightly onto the sheets under her, and she had to swallow to keep herself from shouting out in maniacal fury.

Meanwhile, in Aversa, Anastasia was having dinner with Elliot at a lavish French restaurant, the ambiance of which only accentuated the man's suave demeanor and romantic nature.

When it came time for her to go home after dinner, Elliot drove her back to the neighborhood entrance and parked the car. She grabbed her purse, but just as she opened the door to step down from the car, she heard a low and somewhat disgruntled man's voice asking, "Aren't you going to ask me to stay for a cup of tea?"

Anastasia said firmly, "No, it's getting late. Maybe next time."

"The weather's so cold tonight, though. How about we have a sleepover? You have a bed, and I'll warm it up for you," he offered proudly.

She held onto the door as she sputtered and doubled over with laughter.

Elliot did not wait for her to speak before he got out of the car, and without her registering what he was doing, he walked over to her, grabbed her hand, and led her toward her apartment.

"H-Hey, Elliot! No, don't do this," Anastasia cried frantically.

However, he had already guided her through the neighborhood entrance. Panic filled her as they drew near to the apartment building. Jared wasn't home tonight, which meant there was no buffer between her and Elliot; she was at a loss as to how she should act around him.

More importantly, she wasn't a little girl anymore, but she was still terrified of what would happen now that they were two grown-ups left to their own devices. She had only just agreed to be his girlfriend, but it looked like he already had plans to make himself at home in her apartment.

"Open the door," Elliot prompted now, his gaze darkening as he stared at her meaningfully.

"Can't you just go home?" Anastasia looked up at him pleadingly. "It's really, really late."

"It's only 8.30PM, which I think is considerably early."

"I have work tomorrow, though," she countered insistently as her mind scrambled for more excuses.

"Not if I say you don't," he pointed out with a roguish smile. He was the president, after all, and he thought granting his employees days off fell well within his purview.

"No, it's really late." She bit down hard on her lower lip. If one didn't know better, one would think the man was a restless beast that had been caged for far too long, and he would devour her the moment she opened the door.

Amusement flashed in his eyes as he asked, "Are you that afraid of me?"

"Yes, I am," she admitted. "Can you please leave now?"

"I promise I won't make a move on you if you let me in—unless, of course, you make the first move," he said solemnly.

With unwavering confidence, she argued, "I'd never make the first move."

"I'll stay for just a cup of tea," Elliot needled in his signature husky tone, sounding like he was cajoling her. "Please let me go in and stay for a while."

Anastasia couldn't bring herself to say no to him, not when he was looking at her with puppy eyes even though he was known to be dangerous and domineering. She softened and took her keys out from her purse, opening the door as she warned him one last time, "No funny business. Otherwise, I'll kick you out."

"Okay," he promised with good cheer.

Having opened the front door, Anastasia turned on the lights, which cast a warm glow over the living room. She set her purse down and changed into slippers before taking out a men's pair from the cabinet for Elliot as she said, "Put these on."

"How considerate of you," he observed with a coy smile.

"It's supposed to be for my dad," she said, not wanting him to get too pleased with himself.

"Say whatever you want," he replied a little glumly.

He sat down on the couch while she picked up around the house for a bit. Then, she went into the kitchen and brought him a glass of water. "Here, finish the water and skedaddle home."

Elliot looked at the water, and suddenly, there was a dark gleam in his eyes as he called out, "Hey, could you come over here and see if I've got something in my eye?"

Anastasia was standing on the other side of the coffee table and drinking from her own glass when she heard this. She walked over to him worriedly. "Let me take a look."

However, she had only just drawn near to him when triumph glimmered in his half-lidded eyes. The next second, he put out his foot and tripped her, making her lose balance. She gasped in shock as she toppled forward into his embrace.

She felt a strong arm snake around her waist in one swift movement, and when she tried to prop herself up, she found that she was pinned firmly against him.

"You—" She looked up at him in bewilderment, and when she saw the devilish smirk playing on his lips, she knew she had been tricked.

Nevermore did she feel like a damsel in distress who had just been cornered by a handsome and roguish knight. Before she could protest, he chuckled and murmured huskily, "You've made the first move, so don't mind me playing along." The next second, the room spun as he flipped her over.

Just like that, Anastasia was trapped between Elliot and the couch with her face mere inches away from his, and she was acutely aware of how their bodies were closely pressed together.

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Anastasia wanted to cry out in exasperation, for she should have known better than to trust this man.

"Elliot, I swear, if you think you can—"

However, before she could say the words 'get away with it', Elliot inched forward and kissed her.

He intended to get away with this, and it looked like he was succeeding. After all, he couldn't help himself when it came to Anastasia; it was as if she was his fatal attraction, her presence probing and enticing him like a siren's call.

Anastasia struggled against him for a few seconds, but it was all for show since she knew there was no escaping the man on top of her. In the end, she succumbed to his kisses, the hunger in her awakening with the way he nibbled and tugged on her lips.

However, there was a voice in the back of her head, albeit a muffled one, that nagged at her and made her keep her guard up. She wasn't so much worried about someone walking in on them as she was about losing herself to Elliot and his deadly charisma.

She still wasn't ready to bring their intimacy to the next level, and while the kiss was sweet and lingering, she couldn't help sensing the danger in it as well. The air that crackled around them as their tension built reminded her of a brewing storm, and any time now, a hurricane would hit them and wreak havoc.

However, with the direction this very intimate kiss was taking, she wasn't sure how she could keep the floodgates closed any longer, not when the water was already bursting to come through.

Everything about Elliot—his breath, his warmth, and his testosterone-driven urgency—was shrouding her like a veil. The voice of reason in her mind was being constantly drowned out by her own desire, and for a moment, it was like reality had melted away into the background.

She was on the verge of surrendering to nature and primal instincts at this point.

Just then, Elliot whispered huskily, “I want you, Anastasia...”

This sent an electric current through her veins, and she shuddered as she willed herself to push him away. “Elliot, no...”

The next second, however, he picked her up from the couch without warning and carried her over to the master bedroom.

She was so stunned that her mind drew a blank. The dimness of the bedroom became something like a dark space for Elliot to act on his heightened senses. He wanted nothing more than to lay her down and please her in ways she could never imagine.

Anastasia’s thoughts were hazy, and her insides were coiled up with mixed feelings she couldn’t quite decipher. When she tried to push Elliot away, he clasped her wrists and pinned her hands above her head, which prompted indescribable fear to course through her all of a sudden.

“No... Don’t touch me... Go away!”

Panic seized her. It was as if her mind did not perceive the man kissing her to be Elliot, but that sc*mbag from five years ago. His strong arms, his towering build, and his domineering, unforgiving air struck a heavy resemblance to the gigolo from Abyss Club.

“Anastasia, what’s wrong?” Upon sensing that something was off with her, Elliot stopped and reached out to hold her.

Unexpectedly, she struggled violently to get away from him as she cried, “Go away! Don’t touch me!”

It was like he had become the source of her fear. Bewildered, he quickly got off the bed, strode over to the door, and turned on the lights in the room.

When he saw the girl curled into a ball on the bed with her eyes tightly closed while her body trembled with insurmountable fear and hurt, he felt his heart drop to his stomach. He hated himself for having pushed her too far.

He suddenly remembered the horrific ordeal she had been through. Whatever they had been doing just now—or rather, whatever he had been doing to her—had clearly brought her deep-seated trauma to the surface.

“Anastasia, it’s me,” Elliot murmured as he perched on the edge of the bed, keeping a safe distance as he reached out to stroke her hair gently. It made it seem like he was coaxing a wounded animal.

It was only then that she opened her misty eyes, and she suddenly became aware of how she had overreacted. She flipped onto her side, looking flustered as she mumbled, “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

There was no hiding the guilt in his voice as he said, “No, I should be the one to say sorry.”

She sat up slowly and buried her face in her hands. "I... I think you should go home."

He couldn't possibly leave her alone in this state. He implored softly, "Let me stay here and take care of you for the night. I promise that's all I'll do."

"I don't need you to take care of me," she muttered weakly as she shook her head, though her face was devoid of color.

At the sight of how frightened she looked, he was seized with the urge to find out who was the b*stard that dared hurt her five years ago. If he managed to track him down, he would make him pay in blood.

"Can you tell me more about what happened that night?" Elliot asked. He wanted to help her get through this, and he didn't want her to have to shoulder this alone while suppressing the trauma and letting it fester in her.

Anastasia gazed up at the man in front of the bed. The trauma and the bad memories had hollowed her out, and she felt like a shell of herself. When he let go of her, she nudged him like a scared kitten seeking comfort.

Elliot refrained from holding her too tightly, and he kept his movements slow as he leaned forward to kiss her on the top of her head. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it."

She closed her eyes tiredly. At the end of the day, she couldn't bring herself to word out the horrific things she had been through.

Finally, she released his arm, and her gaze was calm once more as she said, "You can go home now. I'll be fine on my own."

Chapter 358

"Do you think I could leave you alone like this?" Elliot held onto Anastasia firmly, refusing to let her go.

The steel edge to her demeanor had returned, and when she spoke, it was in clear, unwavering tones. "I've survived for five years; I'm pretty sure I'll be fine on my own for a night."

Elliot pursed his lips and asked tentatively, "Is Jared really the child of that hooligan?"

Anastasia hated confronting the truth of Jared's birth every time it came up, but reality was cruel, and there was nothing she could do to deny Jared's father's identity. "Yes," she finally bit out through gritted teeth.

Elliot's chest tightened. He understood that this was a painful topic for her, so he let it drop.

In the end, he got up and left after she insisted that he did. When the door closed behind him, an icy gleam flashed in his eyes as he vowed to uncover the wretched man's identity even if Anastasia refused to speak of him. He needed to know what kind of a monster could bear to hurt her so badly.

Presently, Elliot waited at the door, but when he realized that Anastasia was not going to open it and invite him back into the house, he left.

The only way he could achieve a breakthrough in this case was to find out which clubhouse the incident had taken place in. Just because Anastasia was set on remaining tight-lipped about it, he was sure that others might have some idea as to what had happened on the night she was assaulted.

As he sat in the backseat of the car, he began to consider his options. Hayley knew about the details of that night, but he didn't want to ask her about it. He sifted through the names in his mind, trying to pick the person most likely to give him some useful insight on the matter.

He settled on one person at last, and that was Erica, Anastasia's half-sister. Given how she had brought up Jared's birth the last time she threw a tantrum, there was a high chance that she knew

about the incident. He was confident that she could provide him with some leads on this.

As he leaned into his seat, Elliot pulled out his phone and gave Rey a call. "I need you to arrange a meeting for me with someone."

"Who would that be, President Presgrave?" Rey asked courteously.

"Erica."

In the silence of the bedroom, Anastasia was holding a glass of water as she sat on the lounge listlessly. She felt guilty for having imagined Elliot as the man who had assaulted her five years ago while they were intimate. In truth, she was stunned as well that the trauma she thought she had buried deep inside her heart could be so easily brought to the surface with a single touch, triggering her fear of intimacy.

She suddenly felt that this was unfair to Elliot. If they really did work out as a couple and got married, she couldn't possibly reject him for the rest of their lives and chain him to involuntary celibacy.

The next morning, Erica was still tucked under the covers when she suddenly received a phone call that made her bolt upright in bed. "What? Does young Master Elliot want to see me at noon?"

"Yes, President Presgrave has something he needs your help with. Would you be free to meet with him?"

Erica was so stunned that she couldn't string words together, and she stammered, "O-Of course. I'd be free to meet with him."

"In that case, will 11.30AM today do for you?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be there," she replied as she nodded vehemently.

When the call ended and she received the address for the restaurant where the meeting would be, she was so elated she could pass out. Never in her wildest dreams did she think Elliot would invite her for lunch.

"My goodness, what should I wear?" She leaped down from the bed and threw open her closet doors, rummaging through her clothes with fervor. She had but one goal in her mind, which was to seduce Elliot and make him her man.

She didn't care that he was Anastasia's supposed boyfriend, nor was she bothered by his history with Hayley. She was still dead set on bagging him because he was worth it.

She didn't tell Naomi about the meeting. After picking out a figure-hugging dress, she put on a blazer over it, thinking that if Anastasia could win Elliot over while dressed in pantsuits, surely that meant he had a thing for professional career women.

Then, she sat down in front of the vanity and began to apply her make-up delicately, not allowing even the slightest flaw. She was determined to show her best self to Elliot.

Meanwhile, all the departments in Bourgeois were getting ready to move into their new company building. Since the offices in Presgrave Corporation were fully furnished with the most lavish of decorations, the only thing that the departments had to do was to pack up their files and equipment for the big move.

Anastasia was nestled in the quiet of her office when Aliona suddenly walked through the door.

"Is there something you need, Miss Dora?" Anastasia asked curtly.

"Your efficiency in snagging President Presgrave is indeed commendable, Miss Tillman," Aliona drawled sarcastically.

"I will only entertain conversations about work, Miss Dora," Anastasia pointed out coolly. "The company is no place for us to talk about her personal affairs."

Chapter 359

"I just want to let you know that I will never give up on my feelings for Elliot," Aliona said. She was here for no other reason than to try and get on Anastasia's nerves after her own bitter resentment overwhelmed her. "For the rest of your life, you'll have me as competition," she added confidently. "I'm sure it'll only be a matter of time before President Presgrave notices me and falls for me."

Anastasia, however, was neither impressed nor intimidated. "Your non-achievements do not interest me, so take your gloating elsewhere," she pointed out sarcastically.

Contempt flashed in Aliona's eyes as she snorted and said haughtily, "We'll see who the real winner will be!" Now that Father's already plotting her demise, Elliot will be mine sooner or later once we get rid of her!

Anastasia, on the other hand, was admittedly affected by what Aliona said even though the latter had already left. It seemed as if Elliot constantly had a barrage of women who would not hesitate to seize even the slightest of chances to get close to him.

When noon rolled around, Anastasia made up her mind to invite Elliot out for a meal as an apology for what happened last night. If it hadn't been for her overreaction, things might not have ended on such a tense note, and the night would have been perfectly wrapped up.

She picked up the phone on her desk and dialed Elliot's extension. When he did not pick up, the call was automatically transferred to his assistant's line.

"Hello, this is the president's office," the assistant greeted courteously.

"Hi, Lily. Is President Presgrave in at the moment?"

“Oh, Miss Tillman! It seems President Presgrave has already left for a lunch appointment.”

“I see. Alright, thanks.”

Anastasia hung up and sighed in frustration. Then, she asked Felicia to join her for lunch instead.

Meanwhile, Erica was on cloud nine as she made her way over to the restaurant. She checked herself in the mirror constantly just to make sure that she looked as flawless as she did when she left the house. In fact, the tiniest smudge of her make-up would set her off at this point.

She had to present her flawless side to Elliot today. She reckoned that something about her must have caught his eye, which explained why he would ask her out for lunch out of the blue. The thought of this gave her a rush. If things went well, she might even surpass Hayley and Anastasia to become Elliot’s new object of affection.

In every woman, there was buried confidence that would not dim under any circumstance.

Presently, Rey was waiting outside the restaurant for Erica, and when he registered her arrival, he led her up the stairs to the main dining atrium.

She was brought to a private dining room in which Elliot was already seated and waiting for her. Erica swallowed and felt her palms grow sweaty. At the same time, she nervously flipped her hair over her shoulder as she appraised the man shyly. After taking her seat, she asked, “Young Master Elliot, may I know why you’ve asked to see me today?”

Rey left to give them some privacy, and as soon as the door fell shut, Elliot slid a bank card across the table and said to her, “Miss Erica, there’s a million in this card. All you need to do is answer my questions, and the money’s yours.”

Erica was stunned as she gaped at the card in front of her. A million was a tempting offer, and she blinked to snap out of her reverie. “What do you want to know, Young Master Elliot?”

“You have to promise to answer all my questions honestly,” he said as he eyed her somberly.

Disappointment surged through her at that moment. Have I read too much into the lunch invitation? Did he not ask me to join him for a meal because he likes me? However, when she glanced at the bank card, the thought of having a million in her pocket comforted her. After all, it was enough to last her for a while. She nodded and said, “Fire away, Young Master Elliot.”

He gazed at her darkly and asked, “First question—do you know the name of the man who assaulted Anastasia five years ago?”

Erica’s heart leaped to her throat. As it turned out, Elliot was only here because he wanted to know about Anastasia’s past. In a snide tone, she countered, “Why don’t you ask my sister? I’m sure she knows more than anyone else the details of that particular night.”

“If you have no plans of giving me the answers I want, then I won’t waste your time anymore,” Elliot said, not wanting to stay here and listen to someone speak ill of Anastasia.

He reached out to take back the card, but that was when Erica panicked and cried out, “Okay, okay, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, Young Master Elliot.”

He paused and took his hand off the card. Money was the key to getting someone as greedy as Erica to open up. "I want you to tell me everything you know about what happened that night," he ordered. He knew that she would not give up on the bank card.

While Erica knew that the incident at Abyss Club had been planned and set up by Hayley, it didn't change the fact that she was an accomplice. There was no way that she could deny her involvement in the whole thing, so after a moment of thought, she said, "On the night of the incident, Hayley and I were hanging out at the club, but that was when one of our male co-workers decided to make a move on her. She called my sister out of panic to have her pick us up, but we waited for long enough to think she wasn't coming at all. Just as we were leaving, however, Anastasia suddenly ran out of the club with her clothes disheveled, and that was how we found out she had been assaulted."

Chapter 360

Elliot's fists clenched where they rested atop his knees as he pressed, "What did that b*stard look like? Do you know what he did for a living?"

"I don't know. Last I heard, he was a male escort. Besides, you know how clubs can get rowdy and chaotic, so it's not as if I would have paid attention to anyone's background," Erica said, but the way she blinked her eyes told Elliot that she was lying.

Seeing that she was being untruthful, he went on to demand, "Tell me the time and place of the incident."

"I don't really remember the time, but I know it took place at Abyss Club."

Upon hearing this, Elliot's heart dropped to his stomach. Abyss Club? That was where Hayley and I... He snapped out of his thoughts and urged, "You're sure it was Abyss Club?"

"I'm sure," she replied firmly. "As for what happened that night, I don't quite remember." She wasn't lying this time.

He went on to probe for more information, asking, "Do you recall what seasonal clothes you were wearing? You would remember that."

Erica thought hard and said, "I believe we were wearing our summer wardrobe. Do you have any more questions, President Presgrave?"

"Why didn't you call the police and file a complaint on Anastasia's behalf after she was assaulted that night? You're supposedly her family, aren't you?" He sounded like he was accusing her.

She quirked her lips and muttered, "It wasn't as if we were the ones who caused something like that to happen to her. Besides, she happened to run into us when she left the club, and she wasted no time in pinning the blame on us even though we were innocent!"

Her narrative aligned with Hayley's. They would never confess to having admitted to Anastasia, upon her confrontation with them five years ago, that they had been the ones to set her up.

Elliot, on the other hand, had a grim look on his face. Erica had given him a new lead that he had never come across before, which was Abyss Club. This was the same club where he and Hayley had had their

encounter five years ago as well. He wondered if this was all a coincidence, and if that were the case, he wanted to know the timeline.

“Are those all the questions you have for me, Young Master Elliot?” Erica asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Are you sure you know nothing about the male escort from that night five years ago?”

“I swear I haven’t the slightest clue about him,” she insisted. “Also, I’m willing to bet that my sister walked into the wrong room and got herself screwed over by him. Apparently, he was a maniac who nearly tortured my sister to death.” She was deliberately saying this. Much like Hayley, she wanted to carve a vile impression of Anastasia into Elliot’s mind.

Anger rose in Elliot when he heard this. If he found out who that sc*mbag was, he would be sure to wipe him off the face of the earth. “That’s enough from you,” he bit out through gritted teeth. He didn’t want to sit here a moment longer and hear Erica’s scathing remarks about Anastasia. “You may leave now.”

Erica took the bank card, but her gaze flickered wistfully over the elegant man sitting across from her as she said shamelessly, “Young Master Elliot, I just want you to know that I like you a lot, and I would do anything you ask me to if that’s what you want.”

At that moment, he looked up at her with his razor-sharp gaze that threatened to slice through her. She was so intimidated by this that she flushed and quickly elaborated, “What I meant was that you could ask me any other question you might have, President Presgrave. I’d be more than happy to help.”

With that, she turned to leave the room like how one might flee from danger. Holy crap! If looks could kill, I would’ve been dead a hundred times over, she thought as a chill ran down her spine. More importantly, she had seen how lowly she looked in Elliot’s clear, obsidian eyes. He was high and mighty like he was born to be on a pedestal, and what she had told him just now basically rendered her worthless.

After Erica left, Elliot summoned Rey into the room and said, “Retrieve all the security footage from five years ago at Abyss Club.”

He was determined to find out who that sc*mbag was, and when he did, he would make him pay without ever letting Anastasia find out about it.

Over at Bourgeois, Aliona got a call from Riley, who said on the other line, “I’m going to need you to lure Anastasia out. My men are ready to execute the plan.”

Aliona’s eyes flashed with anticipation as a sudden bright idea came into her head. Nodding, she replied, “I know what to do.”

She hung up the phone, rose from her seat, and headed into Felicia’s office. “Director Evans, I’m supposed to meet a client, but I’m afraid I have too much work to do at the moment. Could you get Anastasia to take the order instead?”

“She’s probably busy. Why don’t you look for somebody else?” Felicia suggested.

“There’s a higher chance of us bagging the deal if she were to take up the job, though. My client is a young lady from a really affluent family, and she only came to Bourgeois because she heard so many things about Anastasia.”

Felicia pondered on this for a beat or two. She then answered, “I’ll talk to Anastasia and see what she says.”