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Hayley's good mood instantly crashed as she thought, Anastasia's getting more shameless by the day! She's actually seducing Elliot in broad daylight during work hours! She bit down on her lip and decided that it was time she resorted to desperate measures.

Hayley gave up on her shopping, ran back to the car and started the engine. She glanced at the low wall next to the parking lot, and without another thought, she slammed on the accelerator and drove her car into the structure. The reaction from the impact caused Hayley to knock her head against the steering wheel.

The pain that followed was so intense that she had to take several sharp breaths to snap out of it. Now that she crashed the car and had sufficient reason to cry, Hayley inhaled deeply and took her phone before dialing Elliot's number.

At that exact moment, Elliot's phone, which was connected to the car's system, rang with an incoming call, thereby disrupting the silence in the vehicle.

Hayley's name appeared on the screen affixed to the dashboard. Anastasia was already feeling unsettled, and when she caught sight of the name, she felt even worse.

She turned away from the screen; it seemed as though looking at the name offended her greatly. Elliot hesitated upon seeing this, but he decided to answer the call

anyway. "Hey, Hayley. What's going on?"

"I crashed the car, Elliot!" Hayley let out a pained whimper. "I'm so scared. Could you come help me, please?" She started to sob and whine for help.

The car slowed momentarily as Elliot pressed out of concern, "Are you hurt?"

"My head hurts, and I feel like I'm spinning. Elliot, I need you here. It really hurts..." Hayley sobbed miserably.

Sure enough, that prompted him to want to rush over to her location at once. "Send me the address and I'll be right over."

Next to him, Anastasia snorted when she heard Hayley's voice. It's been five years since we last saw each other, but even I have to say her damsel-in-distress act is somewhat impressive.

Presently, Elliot hung up the call and glanced at the address Hayley had sent him. He turned around and said to Anastasia in a low voice, "Mind if we take a detour?"

Anastasia shrugged in some sort of a half-hearted agreement. She figured she could go and take a look at the damage Hayley had done.

Elliot steered the car toward the largest mall downtown and drove down to the third floor of the basement parking lot. Hayley's Porsche was still in the same state it had been in when it crashed into the wall, while the reckless driver herself was crouching next to the totaled car, looking as if she was trying

to keep her head from cracking. down the middle. At that moment, she looked up and saw Elliot getting down from his car. She didn't seem the least bit surprised that Anastasia had come along, though.

At once, she flew into Elliot's arms like a stunned baby bird. "You're finally here, Elliot..."

And here I was thinking that her head would be caved in and bleeding from the impact, but she's hopping around just fine. What a shame that the car is the only thing damaged here, Anastasia thought bitterly.

"What are you doing here, Anastasia?" Hayley asked, feigning surprise as she tightened her arms around Elliot's waist.

Anastasia narrowed her eyes and pointed out mockingly, "It's embarrassing to acknowledge you as a female road-user, Hayley. Did you only get your driver's license through bribery or something?"

Hayley chewed on her lip and stared at Anastasia with red-rimmed eyes as she demanded, "Why do you have to be so mean, Anastasia?"

"Oh, I'm being mean, am I? I thought you would have lost an arm or a leg or something from the crash. In fact, I was going to light up fireworks to celebrate the joyous occasion of your fatal accident!" Anastasia scoffed.

Upon hearing this, Elliot frowned and turned to shoot her a look, as though agreeing that her words were completely uncalled for.

"Anastasia, you.." Hayley's eyes turned red at that moment, and she looked like she could barely stand on her own feet. With a hand clapped over her forehead, she swayed and stumbled into Elliot's arms.

Possessed of lightning reflexes, he reached out and steadied her before asking frantically, "What's wrong, Hayley?"

"She's just putting on an act! She's perfectly fine," Anastasia interjected sardonically, immediately seeing through Hayley's act.

Elliot bit out darkly, "Could you just stop talking for a bit, perhaps?"

Anastasia chewed the inside of her cheek. Since she refused to stay and watch him coddle Hayley, she rolled her eyes and said, "I'll get going then."

"No, don't go," he called after her, stopping her in her tracks.

She turned and gave him a long look. What, do you actually have time to bring me home to see your grandmother? Elliot looked down at Hayley and muttered, "Hayley, Rey is on his way right now. I'll have him send you to the hospital so you can get a full check-up, okay? If the doctor says you're fine, just go back home and get some rest."

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"No, Elliot-I want you to go to the hospital with me," Hayley pouted as she clutched onto Elliot's sleeve tightly like a child terrified of losing affection.

"I can't go with you because I still have stuff to do. Be good and let R  y take you to the hospital," Elliot cajoled patiently.

"No. I want you to go with me, or I won't go at all," she whined stubbornly.

He frowned pensively. Given that she was still in shock after the accident, it made sense for him to take her to the hospital and stay with her throughout the check-up. However, just as he was considering this, Anastasia suddenly snorted. "So don't go to the hospital then, Hayley. President Presgrave and I still have things to do. Come on, President Presgrave, we have to get going!"

Hayley's chest rose and fell erratically when she heard this, and she started trembling as she groaned, "I feel dizzy, Elliot!" With that, her eyes rolled to the back of her head and her legs buckled under her. It was only because Elliot moved quickly enough to catch her that she did not collapse onto the ground.

He swept her into his arms and carried her into the backseat of the car, saying, "I'll get you to the hospital now, Hayley." He then addressed Anastasia, who stood firmly in place, "Could you get a ride back to the company?"

Anastasia watched as his car sped out of the parking lot, leaving her behind. She heaved a sigh and headed back to the company.

Over at the private hospital that was run by the Presgrave Corporation, Hayley had gone through several tests, and it was concluded that she was fine aside from the shock and the concussion that came with the accident. The doctor also mentioned that she would be fine after a few days' rest.

Elliot was presently seated by her hospital bed. Taking in the bump on her forehead and her pale face, he consoled her by saying, "Don't worry, you'll just have to stay here for a couple of days for observation purposes."

"Elliot, what were you doing with Anastasia? Were you both going out for work or something?" Hayley asked as she lay demurely in bed, feigning curiosity.

He shook his head. "I was going to bring her to the Presgrave Residence to meet my grandmother."

Hayley was in shock as she asked, "Why do you want her to meet your grandmother?"

"I was kidnapped once when I was only a child, and it was Anastasia's mother who sacrificed her life to save mine. My grandma's been waiting to repay the deed ever since," Elliot explained frankly.

"What? You were the kid Anastasia's mother saved back in the day? Anastasia and I were classmates throughout elementary and high school. I heard about how her mother had died while on duty, but I didn't think you were the person she saved. Her mother was a selfless woman," Hayley pointed out with admiration. "I've always looked up to her mother."

"Did something happen between you and Anastasia?" Elliot asked curiously. He could tell that Anastasia harbored enmity toward Hayley to the extent that her hatred for the latter was unmistakable.

Hayley had long since thought of an answer, and she lied with a sigh, "Anastasia came to save me once when I was being taken advantage of, but in the end, she ended up getting assaulted instead. She's been holding it against me ever since."

“Assaulted?” He blanched at this, wondering if Hayley was perhaps referring to some other kind of assault.

“Yes. Some gigolo ended up violating her. It was because of me that she had to suffer something as horrible as that,” Hayley went on to say as tears of guilt glistened in her eyes. She buried her face in her hands and muttered in anguish, “I could never make it up to her, not even if I were to spend the rest of my life trying to atone for my faults.”

Elliot felt his heart leap to his throat. Anastasia was assaulted by a man before this? “Are you sure she was.” The words died on his tongue as he fixed his gaze on Hayley, unwilling to accept what he had just heard.

Hayley’s tears streamed down her face as she nodded firmly and said, “Yes, her chastity had been cruelly taken away from her that night against her own will. That was her first time and I... She was assaulted because of me, and I can’t ever make it up to her. She’s hated me since that horrific ordeal, and I deserve it. I deserve to be loathed by her for the rest of this lifetime.”

Just as she was saying this, Hayley thought darkly, I just need to let Elliot know that Anastasia isn’t some virtuous and pure lady. Now, regardless of how pretty she is, she will forever be tainted goods to him!

Elliot, on the other hand, felt as if he was caught in the aftershock of an earthquake. He was so stunned that his handsome features seemed frozen in place, and his eyes were wide as he contemplated what he had just learned.

“It’s only right that she hates me. There is nothing I can do to atone for this sin of mine, Elliot. I know that I had the same experience as she did, but I was lucky

Anastasia, though; she met a scoundrel who slept with her and abandoned her as soon as the deed was over.” “Does that mean the kid belongs to that gigolo?” Elliot pressed in a low voice, his fist clenching where it rested atop his knee. I can’t believe she went through something like that.

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“I have no idea. She left for abroad after that day and we lost contact with each other,” Hayley said slowly while shaking her head. Then, she looked up nervously at Elliot and urged tearfully, “Elliot, you have to promise me not to ask Anastasia about this. I don’t want you to prod into the scars of her past, okay? Besides, if she finds out that I was the one who told you all about what happened to her, she’ll only hate me more.” ..

Elliot knew that going through something as horrific as this was traumatizing for any woman. As such, he nodded and said in a fit of compassion, “I promise I won’t mention a word about this to her.”

Burying her face in her hands, Hayley began to sob and snivel again, though she was actually smirking into her palms with the corners of her lips tipped up villainously. Now that Elliot knows of your dark past, would he still want someone as tainted as you, Anastasia?

Presently, Elliot reached out to pat Hayley’s shoulder. “There, now-stop crying and get some rest. I’ll be going back to the office.”

“Don’t go, Elliot.” Hayley grabbed the hem of his shirt and eyed him piteously. “Can’t you stay with me for a while longer?”

He had only just risen from his seat, but now that Hayley had asked him to stay, he did as told and sat down once more. This made him think of that fateful night from five years ago, when he had been so out of his own mind that he ravished Hayley like a monster. He could still hear her sobs from that night like haunted, disembodied tunes in the back of his mind, and he could still feel the way she struggled to break free from under him. And yet, he never stopped, merely pinning her down so that he could have his ruthless ways with her.

“That night... It was my first time as well, Elliot,” Hayley mumbled shyly as she looked up at him with her pretty eyes.

He nodded and said gently, “I know.” He had known, indeed, for he had noticed the drops of blood on the couch when he woke up after the brutal deed. The thought of this only made him want to compensate her more.

“Elliot, I... I want to keep being your woman,” she added boldly, abandoning all subtlety as she confessed her feelings for him.

His gaze was warm and steady as he said, “We’ll talk about this after you get better. I have a lot of things going on at the moment.”

She could hear the rejection behind his carefully-chosen and empty words, but that did not deter her at all. “Elliot, please don’t turn me down. I know I’m not beautiful, but I... I really like you.”

Just then, Elliot’s phone rang, and he rose to leave the room. “I have to take this call.”

Hayley watched as his tall and straight figure marched out of the hospital room. As she pursed her lips in disappointment, she still fervently believed that one day she would become his woman indeed.

The person on the other line was Harriet, who had been waiting for a really long time for Anastasia’s arrival. When the guest of honor never showed up, she began to grow frantic and decided to call her grandson for an explanation. “Elliot, why isn’t Miss Tillman here yet?”

—

“Something happened on the way, Grandma. I’ll bring her over to the house tomorrow.”

“What happened?”

“It’s mostly my part.”

“Fine, then! Bring her over tomorrow morning. Better yet, we should have lunch

Beste together!”

“Okay, I’ll arrange for it immediately,” Elliot answered respectfully.

He hung up the call and paused for a moment, then spun on his heels to return to the hospital room. After pushing the door open, he then said to Hayley, “They need me back at the office, so I’ll be going off now. Get plenty of rest.”

Hayley dared not force him to stay, so she merely nodded obediently as she said, "Okay."

With a small nod of relief, Elliot turned and left the hospital room.

Meanwhile, Anastasia had hailed a ride back to the company, which took up two hours of her time. As such, she immediately leafed through the documents and started tying up all the loose ends in the office, but she had barely drawn anything when her phone rang.

She picked it up and asked, "Hello, who is this?"

"It's me," Elliot replied.

"Oh, look who's back. Did Erica decide to let you go?" Anastasia asked with a raise of her brow.

"I've rescheduled your meeting with my grandmother to tomorrow morning."

"Well, then, as long as you've spoken to her. Anyway, I have to get back to work now."

"I'd like to buy you and Jared dinner tonight," Elliot suddenly offered.

"No, thanks," Anastasia replied. She didn't feel much like entertaining him after seeing how he and Hayley were all huddled up today at the parking lot.

If she had to be honest, she hated Hayley with a passion. They were both once as close as sisters, but clearly that friendship had been nothing more than a joke to Hayley, who did not hesitate to stab Anastasia in the back at first chance and push her off the cliff into a dark abyss.

If it weren't for Jared, Anastasia didn't think she could ever be saved from the agony that followed the incident which left her scarred. She would've spiraled into depression and hatred. She could still remember how the man—that scoundrel who thinking she was going to die.

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When the clock finally read 4.30PM, Anastasia grabbed her purse and left the company 10 minutes earlier than usual, hoping to flag a taxi downstairs by the pavement. However, for some reason, there were no taxis driving past the area.

She was just about to walk over to the bus station nearby when a gleaming black Rolls-Royce pulled up next to her soundlessly. The driver's side window rolled down to reveal the man behind the wheel, and he was eyeing her with his piercing gaze as he said, "Get in."

Anastasia waved her hand to dismiss his offer. "No, thanks." She would much rather take the bus.

Just then, the man stopped the car and opened the door. He got out of the vehicle and walked up to her, though she wasn't sure what he was planning to do.

Before she could react, the man opened the car door on the passenger side before reaching out to deftly grab her by the wrist. Then, without another word, he shoved her into the passenger seat.

"Hey! I will not be sitting in your car, Elliot!" she snapped at him, having never encountered a man as boorish as him.

He ignored her, and after seeing that she had reluctantly settled into her seat, he closed the door and pressed his key. He had locked the car door, and now that Anastasia could not escape, she watched with wide eyes filled with despair as the man rounded the car to slide into the driver's seat. Then, still paying no mind to her accusatory glare, he elegantly started the car and pulled away from the curb.

Given that she didn't have time to waste now that she was running late to pick Jared up from school, she decided to let this matter go. She buckled up her seat belt and pointed out exasperatedly, "Just because you're my boss and you helped me out big time doesn't mean that you can just disrespect me like this."

"I would have been more reasonable had you been more obedient," Elliot said coolly as he kept his eyes on the road ahead.

"And what have you done to warrant my obedience?" she countered incredulously.

"I've never been good at handling rejection," he said bluntly while throwing her a sideways glance.

She felt the urge to scoff. As it turned out, a man like him did not appeal to reason at all. Upon deciding to go with another topic, she took on a snide and wicked tone as she asked, "So, what's the verdict on your girlfriend's damages? Is she now a certified idiot?"

"Hayley is not my girlfriend; she's just someone I have to care for," Elliot answered unaffectedly.

Anastasia scoffed. "Go on, you can admit that you're seeing her romantically. I saw how you guys were hugging and all that."

"That is between me and her," he said while frowning. For some reason, he wasn't in the mood to dissect the details of his relationship with Hayley.

"Fine, then! You slept with her, didn't you?" Anastasia wasted no time in going straight to the point.

He stiffened at this, and he turned away from her slightly as though to physically evade the question.

"Do you not know if you've slept with her?" she pressed, not wanting to let the matter drop. Is he actually trying to show how good and innocent he is in front of me? Why won't he just admit that they've totally screwed each other?

"I don't want to talk about this," he replied firmly.

"Come on, own up to your dirty deeds," Anastasia chided with a snort. "You men are all trash."

However, he did not get riled up by this, for he knew that her hostility toward men was founded in good reason. "Hey, don't generalize us that way," he managed lamely for argument's sake.

Anastasia chewed on her lip and decided to keep quiet. She had thought about herself and her own predicament. At the very least, Elliot was willing to take care of Hayley after sleeping with her, which meant he was a man of principle. As for the scoundrel who ruined me five years ago, I hope he rots in hell!

They soon pulled up in front of the school gates. Anastasia got down from the car and went into the kindergarten to pick Jared up while Elliot waited by the entrance. It didn't take long for her to return

with her son in tow, and after she opened the door to the backseat for the kid, he greeted politely, "Hello, Mr. Presgrave."

Elliot turned to assess the little one who looked adorable and proper in his school

uniform. He couldn't help wondering how his life would be more perfect if he had a son around Jared's age, and he suddenly felt a surge of envy for Anastasia.

Having already made a reservation at the restaurant, Elliot began to drive toward the establishment

In the backseat, Jared was telling his mother about everything that had happened today, and his greatest accomplishment of the day was being crowned first place in eating. Anastasia was elated when she heard this and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Good job, my darling! Keep it up."

"Okay! Jared replied earnestly with a nod.

After they were led to their table at the restaurant, Elliot swiftly ordered the dishes. Throughout dinner, Anastasia kept an eye on Jared at all times, making sure that he ate without making a mess. She was

a mother, after all, and it was part of her maternal instincts to ignore her own dinner while making sure her son ate well; she would worry incessantly otherwise.

At a table not too far away from theirs sat a young lady of nobility whose gaze flickered over to them every once in a while, and she even took out her phone to snap a few pictures of Elliot and his company.

As it turned out, this young lady happened to be the one who had humiliated Anastasia during the jewelry exhibition the other day. The young lady had become fast friends with Hayley, who grew popular among the rest of the young ladies of the upper-crust society after she made a name for herself as Elliot's date and subsequently became a medium through which the elites intended to climb the social ladder. The young lady had noticed Anastasia right off the bat, for she had been jealous of Anastasia ever since the jewelry exhibition. He took particular care of her during the exhibition, and now he's having dinner with her in private too. Who is that child, though? Could he be Elliot's nephew? Judging by their strong resemblance, they have to be related somehow!

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The young lady took a few more pictures and sent them all to Hayley with a caption that read, 'Miss Seymour, you may want to keep a close eye on your man because this woman here is trying to seduce him!'

Hayley was lounging in her hospital room and scrolling through videos on her phone when she clicked into the new text. When she saw the pictures of Anastasia and Elliot, her eyes widened in disbelief while anger rose in her chest. Anastasia is on a date with Elliot with her son in tow!

She wondered furiously if it meant Anastasia intended to have Elliot become her son's new father. A single mother like Anastasia had little to no prospects on the marriage market, and she could very well be using Amelia's sacrifice from all those years ago to trap Elliot in a marriage in the guise of repaying a selfless deed. Not only that, she's trying to get Elliot to accept her son as well!

Hayley thought she had already seen through Anastasia's plot, and she swore she would not let the latter succeed.

It looked like it was time for her to approach Elliot's family and let them know that she had given up her chastity just to get Elliot out of a tight spot as well.

Meanwhile, under the lights of the restaurant, Elliot was practically glimmering with elegance as he sipped on his red wine, the shadows and lights interplaying over his delicately-chiseled features.

He looked up and gazed at Jared from across the table. At that moment, he had a sudden feeling that he and this boy met under the most particular of circumstances, which inevitably led to his affection for the little boy.

Likewise, Jared felt the same thing. He had only met Elliot on a few occasions, but he inexplicably warmed to him and found him very much like a safe harbor. As far as he was concerned, Elliot was a man he could trust.

Jared was only a child, and for a child to feel safe around someone they did not live with was a rare situation indeed.

After dinner that evening, Elliot dropped them off at the apartment. Anastasia held Jared by the hand and helped him down from the car before turning to address Elliot, "Thank you for this evening."

With that, she led Jared away from the car and toward the apartment.

Just then, Jared suddenly piped up, "Mommy, since Mr. Presgrave bought us dinner, shouldn't we at least have him up to the house for tea?"

Anastasia froze. She had no intention of asking the man to drop by her house for a cup of tea, but now that Jared had mentioned it, it would seem rude of her not to extend an invitation to Elliot. "Would you like to come up for a cup of tea?" she asked, having turned around to ask the man in the driver's seat.

She had assumed that he would say no, what with his busy schedule and all. It was only a matter of courtesy on her part to ask him to stay for a cup of tea, and it was the only way she could get her kid off her back about being a polite host.

However, she most certainly did not expect Elliot to turn off the car engine and emerge from the driver's seat. His straight and tall silhouette came down from the car and walked up to the entrance. "I suppose I could do with a cup of tea," he said as he approached them. All of a sudden, Anastasia felt pressured as she took in his towering figure. I shouldn't have asked, she thought darkly while regretting her decision.

"Mr. Presgrave, you can drop by my house for a glass of water!" Jared offered with a happy jump like he was in a pantomime.

And just like that, Anastasia brought the man home. She rummaged through the cabinet for a spare cup, but when she could find none, she resorted to filling Jared's cup with water. When she handed the mug with the cartoon printed on it to Elliot, she said, "I hope you don't mind using my son's cup."

The man wasn't bothered in the slightest as he took the cup and drank from it. Meanwhile, the little one was building bricks next to the couch. He glanced over at the boxes of toys stacked up on the couch, and at first glance, none of them looked cheap.

Elliot immediately guessed that the toys had been bought by Nigel. Without dwelling on it, he turned his attention on Jared, who seemed engrossed in building bricks, and the somber gleam in his eyes disappeared as a look of warm compassion replaced it.

Meanwhile, it looked like it was going to rain soon. Anastasia was bringing in the laundry from the balcony, but just as she was making her way across the living room, a pink piece of clothing fell out of the heap in her arms. She didn't notice this, but Elliot, with his eagle eyes, did.

The pink fabric that had fallen was ladies' underwear.

He rose from the couch and grabbed the flimsy garment off the ground. Then, he headed into the room after Anastasia and said, "Hey, you dropped this."

She turned around, and her pretty eyes widened by a fraction when she registered her underwear hanging on the tip of Elliot's finger. She hurried over and snatched the garment out of his grip, blushing as she muttered, "Thanks."

At that moment, a purple streak of lightning flashed across the dark sky, and this was followed by a deafening clap of thunder.

A childish scream sounded from the living room as Jared cried out, "Mommy!" He had abandoned his toy bricks and had both his hands clapped over his ears, looking terrified.

Elliot instantly walked back to the couch and scooped the little boy into his arms, drawing the child close. The little one was pressed into Elliot's well-toned chest, shrinking into the man's embrace as he hid from the thunder.

When Anastasia hastily walked out of the room, she was greeted by the sight of Elliot protectively holding Jared close.

Another loud crack of thunder echoed in the sky, and this time, a torrential downpour followed. The gray slates of rain showered across the balcony, and just as Anastasia was assessing the weather beyond the window, a white lightning tore through the sky ferociously. The thunder that came after was loud and violent, causing Anastasia to instinctively cover her ears. She seemed to shrink into herself, looking terrified as well. At that exact moment, Jared clutched tightly onto Elliot, equally terrified. It was then that Elliot realized with a tug of his heartstrings how the fear for thunderstorms was clearly a shared trait between mother and son.

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The downpour didn't look like it would stop anytime soon. Looking over at the man on the couch, Anastasia offered, "I'll get you an umbrella right away."

However, Elliot eyed her in mild amusement as he said matter-of-factly, "I'm staying here for the night."

Stunned, she blinked at him for a moment and asked, "Why?"

“Because Jared needs me.” As if to make a point, Elliot stroked Jared’s head with his large palm like he was some kind of guardian deity, and the little one looked up at him with an imploring expression and begged, “Mr. Presgrave, Mommy and I are terrified of lightning and thunder, so can you please stay with us and keep us safe for the night?”

Anastasia immediately interjected, “Absolutely not, Jared. I’m more than capable of keeping you safe during the storm.”

“But you’re terrified of thunder too, Mommy!” Jared argued, mercilessly calling her bluff.

“I am not. I’m just—” She was about to make her case when the universe, determined to prove her wrong, called upon yet another bout of lightning that slithered past the sky and tore through the night. As always, this was followed by another violent clap of thunder.

She shuddered, flinching as she clasped her hands to her ears quickly.

She waited out the thunder and looked at Elliot, and she did not miss the amusement glittering in his eyes. Flushing, she mumbled through gritted teeth, “Bottom line is that you can’t stay here. It isn’t the most convenient for any of us.”

“I’ll go as soon as the thunder stops,” he insisted.

At the sight of how tightly Jared was clinging onto Elliot, Anastasia nodded and said in resignation, “Fine, then. You can’t go back to your car anyway, what with the storm outside.”

She then left him in the living room with Jared and headed back into her bedroom. When she saw the undergarment that he had retrieved earlier, she was seized with the urge to kick herself. Of all the things to drop from the pile of laundry, it just had to be underwear!

The thunder was relentless, and the storm outside the window raged on. There was even a weather alert that urged everyone to stay safe because it was likely that the thunderstorm would go on for the rest of the night.

Anastasia thought grimly, Surely I can’t let the man stay here for the whole night? If everyone finds out that we spent the night together at my place, the rumor mill will have a field day churning out gossip!

More importantly, she wasn’t exactly staying at the most accommodating of abodes. With the apartment’s limited space, she didn’t have an extra room to put Elliot in, and the only beds here were hers and Jared’s.

As it got later and the thunder finally waned in its ferocity, Jared was dragged into the bathroom by his mother so that he could wash up for bed. A while later, Anastasia emerged from the room with a better part of her clothes splattered by bathwater. . Having settled Jared in the living room, she decided to hop into the bath herself.

Just then, Anastasia’s phone beeped with a new message. Jared immediately grabbed her phone and keyed in the pin before reading the text. “It’s a message from Mr. Nigel!” he declared in pleasant surprise.

Elliot narrowed his eyes as he bent to read Nigel’s message, which was clearly penned out of concern as it read, ‘Anastasia, are you and Jared alright? Do you need me to go over and keep you guys company?’

Jared had no idea how to reply to a text, so he set the phone down and busied himself with his Legos once more. Elliot reached for the pink phone, and with his long fingers clutching the device, he typed out the reply, 'No need!

However, that did not deter Nigel from his enthusiastic efforts. 'You know I'm just worried about you and Jared, Anastasia. I'll come over right now, how about that?'

'No, you can't. It isn't suitable for you to drop by right now, came Elliot's reply as his gaze darkened.

'Why won't it be suitable? I stayed over at your place plenty of times while we were abroad, remember?'

Elliot's face was as stormy as the sky outside as he thought, Which base did they get to? Have they hit a home run?

Before he could reply, yet another text came from Nigel. 'Anastasia, all you need to do is say yes and I'd be more than happy to take care of you and Jared for life. I'd stand guard over the both of you, and my embrace will be the safest harbor for you

both

Seeing his cousin's heartfelt confession made Elliot want to die inside. He cringed and tossed the phone to the empty space next to him on the couch, refusing to read any more.

He rose and appraised the apartment with mild interest. When he came to Jared's bedroom, he perused the photographs on the table, one of which was a picture of Anastasia and Nigel. Jared was propped up on Nigel's shoulders, and anyone who didn't know any better would think it was a family photo.

Elliot's gaze darkened. Just then, Jared shuffled tiredly into the room, rubbing his eyes as he muttered, "I want to go to bed, Mr. Presgrave."

"Come here." Elliot crouched down and scooped Jared into his arms. As though he was being pulled into a motherly embrace, Jared let out a small yawn and fell asleep while Elliot cradled him.

Anastasia had washed her hair and blow-dried it before she emerged from the bathroom, only to see her son sound asleep while resting on Elliot's shoulder.

She froze, for she had truly put Elliot through too much trouble this evening. He had become an impromptu babysitter in the span of a few hours.

Upon noticing her approaching figure, Elliot put a finger to his lips, making a shushing motion to warn Anastasia not to make a sound or she would wake the sleeping child. She knew what he was saying and pointed at Jared's room before whispering, "Here, I'll carry him over to his bed."

Elliot followed Anastasia into the room while cradling the little boy, whereupon she plucked Jared carefully out of his arms. The sudden close proximity between them allowed Elliot to take a whiff of her pleasant fresh-out-of-the-shower scent, and he couldn't help stiffening like an electric current had just gone through him. A sudden primal urge seized him as he registered her natural and deadly charisma, and he felt his heart skip a beat.

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Elliot felt like he was in a trance as he watched Anastasia hold Jared close to her before settling the little boy down into bed.

Jared was probably so exhausted that the moment his head hit the pillow, he immediately wriggled to find a comfortable position and slept....

Having tucked her son in, Anastasia turned and gestured for Elliot to leave the room quietly.

He did as he was told and took long strides to get out of the room with Anastasia in his wake. After closing the door behind her, she let out a small sigh and said, "Thanks for tonight."

"How will you thank me?" he asked, his voice low and magnetic as he eyed her curiously.

She frowned, and there was a bewildered look in her pretty eyes as she thought, How else can I thank him other than to literally say thank you'? "Uh... I could buy you a meal or something if you'd like?" she guessed, unsure if that was what he had been angling for.

"Oh, there's no need for that," he said dismissively.

She let out a breath of relief. Good, because I don't have the time anyway.

Her phone vibrated just then, and they both turned to glance at the phone lying on the coffee table. Even from this distance, Elliot could see the caller ID on the phone screen; it was a call from Nigel.

Anastasia went over to pick up the phone. The only private space she had in the small apartment was her own bedroom, which was where she went in to take the call, though she left the door ajar.

"Hello, Nigel. What's up?"

"Anastasia, let me go and stay with you for the night!" Nigel offered cheerily and relentlessly on the other line.

"Why would you do that? Don't you see how the weather is brutal out there? You'll be soaked before you even get into the car!"

"But I'm really worried about you and Jared. You're both terrified of thunderstorms."

Anastasia felt her heart squeeze as she remembered that Elliot was still lingering around the apartment. She hastily replied, "No, no, don't come over. Jared and I are about to call it a day anyway. Okay, that's all. Bye!"

With that, she hung up the phone and turned around, only to jump when she saw that Elliot's unhallowed presence had suddenly materialized in her bedroom. Not to mention, he was standing right behind her, gazing down at the woman like he was assessing her.

"President Presgrave, you-" She blinked her wide eyes at him. Heaven's sake, why did he have to scare me like that?

"Have you slept with Nigel?" Elliot demanded tactlessly.

She gaped at him, rendered speechless by his question. Doesn't he know it's rude to pry? She didn't think he had a right to inquire into her personal life, but she was frank nonetheless as she answered, "No, why?"

"How intimate have you been with him?" he pressed, as if he simply must get to the bottom of this pertinent matter.

Anastasia decided to be patient with him on account of all the help he had given her thus far. "We hugged as friends, if that's what you're asking."

"Have you kissed?" he asked, getting more specific with each question.

She blinked, as if unable to process what was going on at the moment. Why should I tell him everything just because he asked? Also, this guy is definitely getting more dangerous with each passing minute. I can't have him stay here any longer! With a small smile, she pointed out, "It's getting late, President Presgrave. Maybe you should be getting back."

He stared at her for a long while. She had only just showered, and she smelled clean, fragrant and particularly alluring. He narrowed his eyes all of a sudden, and he could feel his primal urges taking over his reasoning faculty as he eyed her like how a predator might eye its prey.

Anastasia had only just brushed past him when his arm darted out and grabbed her around the waist. She staggered backward out of surprise and ended up tripping over his foot. In a tangle of legs and arms, they fell onto the bed with him on top of her.

For one still moment, her breath intermingled with the testosterone in the air. Just as she was about to say something in protest, Elliot cupped her face and pressed his lips

against hers, sealing her voice completely. She let out a muffled whimper as her mind turned blank.

Against her own volition, she felt her veins thrum with a buzz akin to a mild electric current; her body was actually caving into his kiss.

Elliot's kiss was daring and aggressive. He offered her no room for negotiation nor air as he tasted her. At the same time, his broad and well-built frame pinned the breath out of her. Anastasia could do nothing but let him have his way with her, and it wasn't until she sensed the danger of this that she felt her senses rush back to her. Her eyes flew open, and as she glowered at him, she pushed him away hard.

He finally released her, and as the tips of their noses brushed and the lines of vision met, the air seemed to grow thick with tension. They were both panting with the heat of the moment washing over them. She began to bite out through gritted teeth, "Let me go, Elliot. I'm warning you—"

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Elliot cut her off by pushing the flat of his finger against Anastasia's parted lips and muttered hoarsely, "Don't be too loud or you'll wake the kid."

Anastasia immediately fell silent, but when she saw the wicked amusement in his eyes, she went on to push him.

When he got off her, she couldn't help noticing the sudden change in him from the waist down. This made her flush as she thought, Oh, for heaven's sake, must he be so obvious?

Elliot was frustrated as well, and there was a pained look on his handsome face as he drawled in a low and husky voice, "I'll get going, then."

Without another word, Anastasia clambered off the bed and went over to open the front door for him. She watched him leave and vowed never to let him past the threshold ever again. She knew now how dangerous Elliot could get; there was a beast in him that could attack at any given moment.

Presently, the rain had yet to stop, and it wasn't until after Elliot had gone out of sight that Anastasia realized she had not given him an umbrella. He had parked his car some distance away from the apartment, and at this rate, he would be soaked before he got to his car. She was about to sympathize with him when she figured that he needed to cool off under the rain, what with the abrupt and heated moment they had shared just minutes ago.

Meanwhile, over at the hospital, Hayley was tortured by the thought of Anastasia and Elliot hanging out together. That girl probably has some trick up her sleeve that she'll use to seduce Elliot. With that in mind, Hayley barreled out of the hospital that same night.

It was dawn when Hayley called the number of the driver Elliot had assigned to her. The driver was supposed to ensure that she was safely driven from one point to another.

"Mr. Connell, can I ask if you know where the Presgrave Residence is?" Hayley asked as soon as she boarded the vehicle.

"Do you wish to drop by the Presgrave Residence, Miss Seymour?" Bruce asked, surprised.

"Yes, please drop me off there. It's an emergency," she said imperiously.

Bruce had seen how kind and gracious Elliot treated Hayley, so he did not question her as he pulled away from the curb, thereafter driving over to the Presgrave Residence.

Half an hour later, Hayley found herself standing before an opulent manor fronted by elegant columns. She swallowed. When it came to the heart of the city, real estate was scarce and expensive, and to own such a stately home here took more than just wealth.

In fact, it took real power. Hayley suddenly realized how little she knew about the Presgrave Family; everything she knew about Elliot she had gleaned from magazines and newspapers as well as introductory pieces from the media. Now that she was standing here and taking in the grandeur of his family home, she felt her ambition grow.

She wanted more than anything to become the mistress of this fine home. She wanted to live here and be Elliot's wife.

Hayley still had two brothers who came after her, and her position in her own family had always been overshadowed by her male siblings. She had spent her whole life frantically trying to escape that life. She would always be overlooked, be it at home or in society, and she lusted after a life of indulgence and luxury. She wanted to make something on her own, or have power to wield.

As of now, she had a shortcut to achieving her dreams, and she would do all that she could to hold on to it.

She would not hesitate to cut down those who got in her way-more specifically, Anastasia and her son.

With renewed determination, Hayley squared her shoulders and rang the bell next to the side door. A maid came up to the door and spoke through it, asking politely, "Are you looking for someone, miss?"

"Hi, I'm here to see Old Madam Presgrave," Hayley replied. She had read from the papers that Old Madam Presgrave, Elliot's grandmother, was the matriarch of the family.

"Could you please fill in your details here? We'll let you in after we've verified your identity." The maid handed her a clipboard with a form on it.

Hayley did as she was told and even handed over her identity card. After waiting outside for ten minutes or so, she was finally allowed to pass through the door.

At that moment, Harriet was having breakfast in an elegant pavilion when she heard that a young woman wanted to see her. Stunned, she wondered briefly if the woman in question was Anastasia. "Is it Miss Tillman?"

"No, Old Madam Presgrave. It's a lady by the name of Hayley Seymour; she said that she's a friend of Young Master Elliot."

Elegantly dabbing the corners of her lips, Harriet said, "Send her in!" Not long after, she was greeted by the sight of a young woman who had followed the maid through to the pavilion. Harriet had initially planned on seeing Anastasia today, but this unexpected guest certainly had her guessing. Who in the world is this girl?

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Hayley looked at Harriet with her gray hair, which gave off an aura of a domineering matriarch of the house. Thus, she didn't dare to misbehave in front of the old madam. Soon, she walked up to Harriet and politely greeted her. "Greetings, Old Madam Presgrave. My name is Hayley Seymour. I'm your grandson's girlfriend."

Harriet frowned and asked in surprise, "You're Elliot's girlfriend?"

"Well, Elliot and I haven't dated long enough for me to drop by and say hi, so I'm sorry about that, Old Madam Presgrave." Hayley acted like she was beating herself up.

Harriet had always known that Elliot didn't like her arrangements, which made her wonder whether Hayley was behind the reason why her grandson didn't want to marry Anastasia. "Hayley, can you tell me how you came to know Elliot?" The old madam sized Hayley up, noticing her ordinary appearance as she was also able to tell that Hayley wasn't from a wealthy family.

However, the biggest question that bothered her was whether Elliot was dating Hayley.

When Hayley kept her head down and pursed her lips in silence, a curious Harriet then asked, "What's wrong? Why are you being so quiet?"

Hayley bit her lips and looked at the old madam. "It's embarrassing."

"Why? What could be embarrassing? Just tell me the story." Harriet's curiosity grew even stronger.

Hayley then pretended to muster her courage and shared about the incident that happened five years ago with Harriet. Since she was able to guess how Anastasia and Elliot's intimacy had happened, she managed to tell the story, as if she was the one who experienced it herself. Upon hearing Hayley's story, Harriet was left with her eyes wide open as she couldn't believe her grandson was responsible for taking away a lady's virginity

"The watch was the clue that helped Elliot look for me before he told me he'll make it up to me for the rest of his life."

Harriet's eyes were filled with sympathy after she heard Hayley's story. After all, she reckoned Hayley deserved her sympathy for having sacrificed her virginity in exchange for her grandson's life. "Hayley, I'd like to apologize to you on Elliot's

behalf. Besides, I'll see that he makes it up to you."

The old madam placed herself in Hayley's shoes and was able to empathize with the young lady as a woman herself. Well, Hayley was probably 19 when that happened to her. That was when a lady was in her golden years, yet something like this befell her. I bet she must have suffered from it a lot.

"Have you had breakfast, girl?" she asked in a concerned manner.

"No, I haven't..." Hayley shook her head.

"Somebody! Please prepare breakfast." Harriet ordered her maids while Hayley kept her head down with a complacent look that flashed across her face. Deep down, she believed the positive change in Harriet's attitude was a sign that her place was getting more important in the Presgrave Family.

Meanwhile, Anastasia was going through some files in her office at Bourgeois when her phone rang. She then picked it up and asked, "Hello, who is speaking?"

"I'm waiting for you at the door. Get down here now," Elliot spoke with a voice so deep and charismatic that no other man could speak like him.

She held her breath for a split second when memories of the man forcefully kissing her vividly haunted her and flooded her mind. At the thought of that, she felt reluctant to see Elliot. Thus, she turned the man's invitation down. "I'm busy today, so I'm not going to your grandmother's house."

"Are you going to come down, or do I have to go up there to get you myself? Take your pick," the man replied unhappily.

Anastasia bit her lips, realizing it wasn't right for her to renege on her words. Therefore, she packed her stuff and grabbed her purse before leaving the office. When she arrived downstairs, she was greeted by the sight of a black sedan. Then, she opened the car door and sat inside as the man wearing a black suit gave off an intimidating aura.

Not long after Anastasia entered the car, she looked the other way and set her eyes outside the window while feeling a rush of adrenaline all over her body as soon as she recalled Elliot's unexpected reaction the night before.

On the other hand, Elliot fixed his gaze on the lady's flank while starting the car engine and driving away from the company. For the next few moments, the car's interior was shrouded in silence until he suddenly accelerated on the highway. Frightened by that, she anxiously held onto her seatbelt and screamed in horror, "Elliot, the speed limit here is 50 miles per hour!"

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What is this man doing? Is he trying to show off how fast his car can go by speeding all the way from 30 miles to 70 miles?! Man, this is giving me a heart attack!

Elliot curled his lips into a smile before he said, "I thought you were mute."

Anastasia looked back at Elliot, feeling annoyed that the man sounded like he was cursing her. "You're the mute here," she retorted.

Nonetheless, Elliot wasn't angry but he was instead amused with Anastasia's response as he reacted with an even wider grin. As the car slowed down on the road, she decided not to entertain him anymore and kept quiet until they arrived at the Presgrave Residence.

Upon looking up, she was greeted by the sight of the magnificent-looking gate in front of the mansion. It was then that she finally realized how wealthy and powerful Elliot was when she linked it to what she heard from the media that no one could accurately estimate how much his fortune was worth. After all, what they had discovered about Elliot's fortune was merely just a tip of the iceberg.

Soon, Anastasia quickly fixed her attire, hoping to present her best self in front of Harriet.

In the meantime, Elliot walked through the door with Anastasia following right behind him, as if they were entering a garden in a royal palace with all kinds of expensive landscape and rare plant species around the area. Meanwhile, Harriet was talking with Hayley when she heard about Elliot's arrival from the maid. While Harriet told Hayley to excuse herself, Hayley seized the opportunity to ask the maid, "Did Elliot bring Miss Tillman along with him?"

"You know Anastasia, Hayley?" A stunned Harriet turned and brought up her puzzlement to Hayley.

"Yeah, I do. She was my good friend when we were in primary and high school." Hayley smiled and added, "We subsequently drifted apart from each other due to some misunderstanding, though."

"Does she know what happened between you and Elliot?" Harriet asked.

"Yes, she does." Hayley nodded.

Harriet let out a sigh, finding it hard to believe that Hayley, the lady who gave her

virginity to Elliot, was the former schoolmate of Anastasia whose mother had saved her grandson's life.

When Elliot and Anastasia showed up at the parlor's door, the man was stunned at the sight of Hayley sitting beside his grandmother because he had no idea she would be there. At the same time, Anastasia

couldn't find Hayley's presence any more annoying as her eyes filled with bigotry and hatred whenever she saw Hayley in front of her.

"Why are you here?" Elliot approached Hayley, looking like he was interrogating her.

"I'm sorry, Elliot. I just wanted to meet your family, so." Hayley bit her lips and looked down like she was afraid of being scolded.

On the other hand, he fixed his gaze on her face, thinking that she must have said something she shouldn't have to Harriet.

"Here you are, Miss Tillman. Please come in and have a seat." Harriet could barely hide her liking for Anastasia.

Anastasia politely greeted the old madam. "Good day, Old Madam Presgrave."

"Miss Tillman, I've been looking forward to meeting you. Now that we are standing here face to face, you look even prettier than I imagine!" Harriet complimented Anastasia, indirectly expressing her liking for the latter.

On the other hand, Hayley, who was watching their interaction, couldn't help but feel jealous of Anastasia due to the notion that the Presgrave Family was in Anastasia's debt because her mother had saved Elliot. For that, Hayley wished she could swap places with Anastasia and claim her place as the Young Mistress of the Presgrave Family.

"You're here, Anastasia," Hayley greeted Anastasia.

Anastasia only gazed at her coldly before turning her attention to Harriet. "Old Madam Presgrave, we'd like to speak to you in private."

Upon hearing that, Elliot squinted as he wondered whether Anastasia was going to turn down his grandmother's favor.

"Sure! I'd like to have a word with you, anyway." Harriet seized Anastasia's hand. "Come. Let's sit down and talk."

Soon, Anastasia and Harriet made their way to the garden outside the living room

where there was a comfortable couch with some beautiful scenery. Not long after that, the maid thoughtfully served the two ladies with some fruits and pastries. "Here: is your tea, Miss Tillman."

"Thank you, Old Madam Presgrave." Anastasia raised her teacup and took a sip of the tea that was radiating a pleasant aroma.

"Miss Tillman, I've been wanting to thank you for the time when your mother saved my grandson back then. While I'm sad about your mother's passing, I've actually been trying to look for a chance to make it up to you and your family," a sincere Harriet said.

Sensing Harriet's guilt, Anastasia shook her head and replied, "Please don't take it to heart, Old Madam Presgrave. My mom saved your grandson because it was the right thing for her to do."

“Girl, I want you to know that the Presgrave Family will always be your second home as long as you don’t mind it. Meanwhile, I would like to be your grandmother and do my best to take care of you and your son,” Harriet tearfully noted.