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Skylar stood awkwardly at the door of the living room.

Did Willie get it wrong? Am I even invited? Skylar reflected. Gritting her teeth, she felt a surge of exasperation rise within her. Is it too much of me to expect to be treated as a guest? Incensed, Skylar dumped her fruit basket unceremoniously onto the dining table. Raising her voice, she announced brightly, "Mrs. Ford, my apologies for coming over so late."

Skylar's smile was entirely stiff and insincere. She already deeply regretted allowing Willie to drive her over.

Tobias' head suddenly snapped in Skylar's direction, alerted only at the sound of Skylar's voice. He turned to Claudia and explained, "Mom, Skylar's here. I won't be staying here tonight, then. Have a good rest."

Claudia turned lazily to face Skylar, scanning her from head to toe.

The smile on Skylar's face faded, and she met Claudia's eyes stonily. Respect was mutual, and if Claudia did not even show Skylar the courtesy of inviting her to take a seat or offering her a drink, Skylar would take no pains to be polite, either.

"It's late. Why don't you stay here with her? Aren't the two of you already in a relationship?" Claudia finally said with a disdainful sniff.

Skylar was momentarily bewildered by the change in Claudia's attitude.

If that had occurred before, Skylar would have stayed without hesitation. Nevertheless, she resented being commanded by Claudia's whims. Even though Skylar loved Tobias, she was not willing to sacrifice her dignity.

Skylar thus simply answered, "It's late, Mrs. Ford. I'll be heading back home. It wouldn't be good for me to stay here when I'm not married to Tobias. I came for a quick visit, but I'm going home now."

Tobias finally spoke. His tone was solemn as he said, "Stay with me tonight. My mother's feeling unwell and I have to remain here."

Realization dawned upon Skylar. Tobias had summoned her here because he could not tear himself away. If not for Claudia's condescension, Skylar would have stayed in her own accord. However, she could not endure the fact that she had just stood there and being neglected, in front of Tobias and Claudia for a whole half an hour.

Skylar was determined not to bow her head to the Fords. She thus lowered her eyes, avoiding Tobias' probing gaze.

Claudia then asked witheringly, "Are you sure? I guess you're more conservative than I expected, Ms. Jones. If you're not staying, you may take your leave."

Without another word, Skylar turned to go.

"Stay. Don't leave," Tobias called, a new note of urgency in his voice. Skylar, however, refused to take the insult of being ordered around.

Tobias watched her departing figure, glowering. Suddenly, a dry laugh escaped him.

It looks like she's Little Miss Independent now. She's intent on making her own decisions, Tobias thought, smirking to himself.

Claudia sighed. "All that popularity must have gone to her head. She has totally disregarded you."

Tobias chuckled. "We were rude to her. I didn't want her to overhear what we were saying about Sheldon, so I treated her coldly on purpose. Skylar must have gotten offended. It'll be alright. I'll give her a call later to coax her a little."

An unhappy expression hung over Claudia's face. "When are you planning to put a stop to Sheldon's foolish act? What can he actually do? Will he only stop only after creating havoc?"

Thoughtfully, Tobias replied, "Everyone must be given a chance to figure things out on their own. We need to give him some space to grow."

Claudia never expected that her two sons would come to be at odds with each other. As children, Sheldon had clung to his elder brother. The two had been inseparable when they were young.

In order to pay off her debts, Claudia had worked from dusk to dawn. She barely had any time for her sons. Therefore, Claudia felt that she had not fulfilled her responsibility as a mother to both of them even until now.

When Claudia was absent, Tobias had taken on the mantle of raising Sheldon during the family's darkest days of battling poverty. Claudia hated being reminded of that period. The suffering she had undertaken was still raw in Claudia's mind. She blamed Xander and hated him squarely for it.

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As the years passed, the wealth and success of the Ford family business increased slowly but steadily. Meanwhile, the Ford brothers had also grown into intelligent, capable young men. It was only when Tobias took up the reins of the Ford family business, that it began skyrocketing.

Claudia had single-handedly shouldered every burden in the Ford family throughout Sheldon and Tobias' childhood. It was the reason why she fretted so over Tobias' marriage. Claudia had worked her whole life to bring her children happiness. She would now have to hand over that task to another woman.

Claudia was the only person who could empathize with Tobias' struggles. The seemingly endless stretch of work that lay before Tobias was an image that no ordinary person was capable of grasping.

Skylar had arrived at Tobias' home eager to discuss several matters. She now collapsed onto the sofa, feeling deflated. The silence and emptiness of her home seemed to be taunting her.

Looking out the window, Skylar saw the soft glow of lights dotting the landscape. A feeling of desolation overcame her.

As Skylar was indulging in her self-pity, a faint noise came from upstairs. Skylar sat up, immediately wary of another potential spy.

Did he follow me home? Skylar worried.

She heaved a sigh of relief when she saw Miranda descending the stairs.

"Why are you here? Why didn't you wait for Dad to fetch you from the hospital? Has he sold off his house?" Skylar asked sarcastically.

Miranda rested a hand on the railing. After a few months of not having seen her daughter, Miranda thought that Skylar had grown prettier.

She kept this to herself, however, and said sharply, "Look at your pathetic state! Who bullied you this time?"

Skylar did not reply. She could not possibly admit that she had gone all the way to Tobias' house so late at night only to have Tobias and Claudia spurn her. It was a rather humiliating experience.

Miranda sat down on the sofa next to Skylar. Neither of them said a word, both ruminating on their own troubles.

"I couldn't wait for Thomas to come. He only visited me once, saying that Tobias took ninety-five percent of Quest Group's profits. When Tobias took over, he left us with nothing. I thought he would help us out of the kindness! It turned out that he was merely riding on our vulnerable situation," Miranda complained, her tone laced with bitterness.

Skylar had guessed as much. Thomas' visible change in attitude was due to a discrepancy in the allocation of profits. Frantic at his loss, Thomas had resorted to the only method he knew how.

Derisively, Skylar retorted, "What are you planning to do, then? To head up to the rooftop and threaten to jump if Tobias doesn't come? You've seen for yourself that it doesn't work. I'm only a pawn in this game."

Miranda covered her face with her hands and bent over in grief. She suddenly looked like a defenseless young girl, unable to deal with the harshness in her life.

Skylar felt discomfited. After all, Tobias had only intervened in Quest Group because of her. She'd initially been grateful for his help, but time had proven that she had been too naive and idealistic.

She clumsily patted Miranda on the shoulder and said soberly, "You can find a man anywhere you look. Why stick so irrevocably with one? Dad never consults you about anything. Isn't his family supposed to be his top priority? Why don't you look for someone else? It's never too late to start dating again."

"Shut up! I'll only love your father. You'd better not say anything like that ever again," Miranda said hotly. The inconsolable expression on her face was instantly replaced by wrath.

Frustrated by Miranda's fickle changes in attitude, Skylar massaged her temple, saying, "Fine, I won't say anything then. Where will you be spending the night? Here, next door, or Uncle Wesley's?"

Miranda stared at Skylar, then said, "We've already moved out. There isn't enough money for us to continue renting the place next door."