

BYWAFADA 661

Chapter 661 Old Mrs Fuller Collapsed

Sonia took the folded blanket and spread it open, then draped it over Toby's resting form, but that wasn't the end of it; she asked Tom to turn up the thermostat, and it wasn't until after he had done so that she visibly relaxed.

Tom, on the other hand, was relieved and somewhat grateful to see her taking such tender care of Toby. This display was enough to prove that whatever Toby had done and sacrificed for Sonia was worth it, for she had repaid in kind.

Presently, Sonia was clueless as to Tom's passing thoughts as she sat down next to Toby. Her body was turned to the side as she gazed down at his sleeping profile.

The effects of Toby's overt wine drinking were evident in his flushed face, but there were gray shadows beneath his eyes that told her he had not slept a wink last night and had passed out from the alcohol alone.

She supposed she was grateful that he only downed red wine last night. If he had been on much harder stuff, then he would have ended up in the hospital at best and dead at worst.

The possibility of the latter made Sonia shudder.

Just then, her phone rang. She regained her composure and fished the phone out of her purse, only to see that it was a call from Rose. She's probably desperate to know if Toby is okay, she thought, then answered the call without missing a beat. "Grandma."

"Sonia," Rose's voice was full of worry as she asked, "did you manage to see Toby?"

Nodding, Sonia said grimly, "I did."

"Oh, that's wonderful news. How is he doing right now? Did he do anything impulsive?" Rose pressed anxiously, tightening her clutch on her cane.

Sonia looked down at Toby momentarily before explaining, "He got really drunk, but other than that, it doesn't look like he'll do anything impulsive just yet."

"But he didn't do anything at all aside from drinking?" Rose questioned, sounding incredulous. Toby had gone through quite the rough alcoholic phase back in the day, and if the liquor wasn't enough to knock him out, he would start cutting himself. To hear that he had not resorted to self-harming this time and only stopped at getting drunk was surprising, and Rose couldn't hide her disbelief.

"That's right," Sonia said with a nod. "Mr. Brown said that Toby likely passed out cold before he could hurt himself."

"No, that's impossible!" Rose stood up abruptly.

Sonia was a little taken aback by the ferocity of the old woman's denial. "Grandma, what is it?"

All the color drained from Rose's face as she demanded, "Sonia, tell me what he drank."

"Red wine," Sonia answered matter-of-factly, without hesitation.

To the side, Tom faltered as he clenched his fists nervously. Oh, crap, Old Mrs. Fuller isn't like Miss Reed; there's no way she wouldn't know that it would take more than red wine to knock President Fuller out. But now that he has passed out cold from drinking red wine, Old Mrs. Fuller will definitely grow suspicious of this.

Sure enough, Rose clutched her phone even tighter when she heard Sonia's reply. "No, that can't be. Toby is a heavyweight, and it's impossible that red wine could knock him out. Sonia, is Tom with you right now?"

Sonia gave Tom a cursory glance. "Yes."

Rose's expression grew stormy as she bit out, "Hand him the phone. I need to speak with him right now."

"Alright, just a moment." Sonia pulled the phone away from her ear and passed it to Tom, saying, "Mr. Brown, Grandma would like to speak with you."

Knowing there was no escape from what was destined to come, Tom took a deep breath to calm his nerves. With a forced smile, he took the phone and greeted, "Old Mrs. Fuller." He walked out of the study to continue the rest of the phone conversation.

Meanwhile, Sonia was a little baffled by his leaving, not understanding why he had to take the call outside. However, she did not dwell on this and instead raked her fingers through Toby's hair to comb it into submission. Then, she got onto her feet and went into the bathroom to fetch a basin of water so that she could give Toby's face a good wiping.

Out on the balcony, Tom surreptitiously closed the balcony doors behind him. Having gone out of Sonia's earshot, he loosened up enough to answer Rose's question forthrightly, saying, "Old Mrs. Fuller, President Fuller has, indeed, passed out from drinking red wine alone."

"Stop spewing lies, Tom," Rose warned darkly on the other line, her face twisting even more. "Toby can't possibly get drunk on red wine alone, so why don't you tell me the truth? Does he have a secret stash of hard liquor?"

"No," Tom said solemnly, shaking his head. "Old Mrs. Fuller, I promise you he does not have a secret stash anywhere."

"Then why don't you explain to me how he managed to get drunk?" Rose demanded sharply.

"Well..." Looking down at the top of his shoes, Tom wasn't quite sure how he was supposed to answer. He didn't know if he should be the one to break the news on Toby's current condition, and if he did break such news, he didn't know how Rose was going to take it.

Suddenly caught between a rock and a hard place, Tom had no idea what he should do.

"Well, what? Out with it!" Rose demanded impatiently, not at all aware of his dilemma.

A sigh of resignation escaped Tom, and at last, he decided to tell the truth about Toby's condition. If I don't tell her now, she'll still find out about it eventually. "Old Mrs. Fuller, I'm going to be frank with you, but you have to be mentally prepared for the truth," he said calmly and slowly.

Rose frowned, a grave look passing over her wizened face. "Mentally prepared?"

"Yes."

"What in the world has happened? Why would I need to be mentally prepared?" she urged. She was confused, but she was sharp-witted enough to sense that something was off. In a trembling voice, she asked, "Tom, come right out with the truth and tell me if something has happened to Toby."

"Yes," Tom said again with a firm nod. "President Fuller's heart is... failing. I think it's precisely because of this that red wine was sufficient to knock him out."

There was no response on the other line, only the sound of shattering glass. Upon hearing this alarming noise, Tom blanched and quickly shouted, "Old Mrs. Fuller? Old Mrs. Fuller!"

He started to panic. What if Old Mrs. Fuller fainted because she couldn't take the news? If that's the case, then I'd be in a world of trouble. She's old enough as it is, and if she collapses this time only to never wake again, I...

Not daring to continue his chain of thought, he gripped his phone tightly and shouted into it, "Old Mrs. Fuller!"

Just then, he heard speaking voices, but it wasn't from Rose. Rather, it was Mary.

On the other side, Mary had propped Rose in an upright position on the couch, and while holding her limp frame in her arms, she cried frantically, "Old Mrs. Fuller, wake up! Please wake up!" Tears of panic sprang to her eyes, but there was nary a response from Rose.

Having heard Mary's disembodied cries over the phone, Tom could guess just how badly Rose was doing right now. She really has collapsed. Now things are getting worse!

Stiffly, he pulled the phone away from his ear and sullenly called for an ambulance to be dispatched to where Rose was. Then, he returned to the study and handed the phone back to Sonia, anxiously saying, "Miss Reed, I'll leave President Fuller in your care for now. I'm afraid I must be getting back to the old manor."

Sonia saw the look on his face, and upon hearing that he would be leaving for the old manor, she felt a lump form in her throat. "Did something happen to Grandma?"

"I believe she has fainted."

"What?" Sonia's voice rose in pitch as she demanded, "She fainted? H-How did that happen? She was fine just moments ago!"

"It's all my fault. I told her something I shouldn't have," he confessed, patting his cheek like he was berating himself. "I would never have said anything if I'd known this would happen." He shouldn't have thought that he could break the news of Toby's deteriorating condition to Rose, even if it were on the

assumption that she would find out about it eventually. He had given himself such presumptuous and false reassurance, and now he was truly and deeply regretting it.

Rose's condition aside, Tom would have a hard time explaining to Toby once he sobered up.

He was pulled out of his thoughts when Sonia asked with a frown, "What did you tell her?"

Tom shook his head tiredly. "Please don't ask me that, Miss Reed. I can't say any more about the matter. I've already caused Old Mrs. Fuller to faint out of shock, and I can't imagine what would happen if you... Forget it. Look, I can't dawdle here any longer; I have to go back and check on Old Mrs. Fuller. I'll leave everything here to you."

As worried as Sonia was about Rose, she knew that she couldn't leave Toby here unattended. With a grave nod, she said, "Very well. I'll take care of Toby, don't worry. Please go and check on Grandma, and call me if anything else happens."

"Alright." With that, Tom turned to brisk-walk out of the study and left the apartment.

Left alone with Toby, Sonia stared at him and clasped his hand tightly, murmuring, "Did anything happen to you that I should know about? Why did Grandma faint when she heard about it?"

Alas, her question went unanswered, for Toby never did stir from his wine-induced slumber. Little did she know that he was presently trapped in a seemingly endless nightmare, only it would be more accurate to call it a recollection of his traumatic past.

Chapter 662 A Mysterious Apology

Right now, Toby was dreaming of his past.

He was going upstairs like he usually would in the mornings so that he could call his mother for breakfast. Normally, all he would have to do was knock on her bedroom door, and she would open it with a gentle smile on her face, one that was reserved for him.

This time, however, the door remained shut no matter how incessantly he was knocking on it. When the door didn't seem like it would open any time soon, he started to sense something wrong.

Without wasting another moment, he called for one of the household staff to unlock his mother's bedroom door with a spare key. But instead of a warm smile, what greeted him as soon as the door swung open was the strong scent of blood. As he walked in, he realized that the coppery smell was coming from the adjoining bathroom.

The color drained from his face as he slowed in his tracks, but when fear seized him, he barreled toward the bathroom like a madman.

The bathroom door had been left ajar, and when he skidded to a stop at the doorway, the horrific sight within instantly came into view.

His mother hung by the side of the bathtub, her face and body splattered with blood. Slumped on the ground, she was holding a razor in one hand while the other was submerged in the water-filled tub.

The water in the bathtub had been colored red by her blood, while she had already gone cold and lifeless.

The bloody scene was burned into the back of Toby's mind ever since, only to resurface every year on his mother's death anniversary so that it could torture his soul and remind him of his devastating loss.

There were even times when the scene would evolve into an entirely non-existent one, like right now, where he dreamed of his dead mother suddenly rising to her feet and slowly walking over to him. She was covered in her own blood as she questioned him hauntingly, "Why was I made to carry you in the first place?"

She went on to accuse him of being the reason why she was trapped within the Fuller Family, kept from pursuing her own true love. Then, as he stood there frozen, she reached out her blood-stained claws and strangled him.

Toby woke up in shock, his bloodshot eyes snapping wide open, and his breathing came out ragged.

Jumping at his sudden awakening, Sonia didn't recover from the shock for a while, and when she did, she lowered her head as she gently patted his face. "Toby, what's wrong?"

It was as if Toby couldn't hear her at all. His pupils were dilated as he stared up at the ceiling in terror, and his lips moved like he was saying something.

Bending down, Sonia put her ear close to his lips and finally heard him mutter, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

Sorry? She frowned, confusion filling her eyes. Why is he apologizing? And to whom?

She glanced at him worriedly and realized that he was having something like night terrors, and his thoughts were not of his own conscious mind. She quickly reached for his shoulders and shook him, yelling, "Toby, wake up! Wake up, please!"

She couldn't let him stay in this trance for too long, or it would start taking a toll on his mind. He has to snap out of it and regain his thoughts.

Perhaps her shaking did the work, for Toby's pupils started to constrict back to their normal size, and his gaze was slowly focusing on Sonia instead of the ceiling. He stared at her in a daze, and after a couple of seconds, he muttered weakly, "S-Sonia?"

He sounded hoarse, his voice so unpleasant that it reminded Sonia distinctly of the quack of an old duck. All the alcohol he had taken had obviously fried his vocal cords, and she couldn't help but grow angry at him as she let go of his shoulders, snapping sarcastically, "Seeing as you recognized me, I gather that you've sobered up a bit."

"What are you doing here?" he asked groggily, pressing his hand to his forehead as he made to sit up on the couch. But weakness overcame him, and he couldn't even lift his neck, let alone find the strength to sit up.

At the sight of this, Sonia put her hands on his shoulders to keep him lying down on the couch. "Okay, that's enough of moving. Just lie down and stay still." Having said this, she rolled her eyes at him exasperatedly and demanded, "It was only yesterday when you guessed that I'd come, and didn't I also tell you not to turn your phone off two days ago? You promised me, but you went ahead and turned it off anyway! If it weren't for the reason that you were knocked out today, I would have broken up with you right here and now for having kept your phone off!"

Usually, Toby would have leaped to admit his fault and tried to cheer her up as soon as he heard any mention of a break-up, but as things were, he simply wasn't in the mood.

He closed his eyes and raised his arm, then let it fall over his eyes as he kept quiet.

Sonia's heart twisted when she saw him looking so forlorn, and she couldn't help empathizing with him. After all, she had lost her parents as well, but his loss was a far more bitter tale than hers, so much so that anyone would afford him sympathy.

His father had been murdered at a hotel, while his mother took her own life. However, Toby had been the one to discover the horrific aftermath of the second incident when he was only a child.

As for Sonia, she had been too young to remember anything when her mother passed away from illness. While the death upset her, she didn't feel devastated. Her father's death had come about during her adult years, and she had mourned him, but by then, she was already strong enough emotionally to grow out of the grief.

Toby, however, was different. His mother's suicide had been so sudden that no one could have possibly seen it coming; more importantly, he was the first to discover her body, and that would have scarred any child at such a tender age.

With that in mind, Sonia abruptly leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Toby, burying her face into the curve of his neck as she murmured anxiously, "Did you know you almost gave me a panic attack, Toby?"

He hadn't expected her to embrace him so suddenly and merely lowered his gaze to look at her.

She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "Did you know that Grandma told me about how you'd get really sentimental and unhinged on this day every year? She even warned me that you would resort to self-harm if you were left to your own devices. Can you imagine how frantic and terrified I was when I couldn't get through your phone? I was so scared that I was too late, that I'd come into this apartment and find your lifeless body!"

Upon hearing the crack in her quivering voice, Toby realized that he had truly scared her to her wits' end. He raised his arm and gently patted her back, muttering hoarsely, "I'm sorry..."

"Oh, are you feeling contrite now?" She reached out her hands and cupped his face, pointing out in mock anger, "Don't just apologize to me; you still have to say sorry to Grandma and Mr. Brown. They were worried sick about you, terrified that you'd do something impulsive. Thank goodness..." Her expression softened as compassion flooded her eyes. "Thank goodness I got here in time, and thank the heavens that you got too drunk to hurt yourself. Otherwise, you would have ended up lying in a hospital bed instead of on this couch."

Toby looked down as something flashed in his eyes, and he said nothing.

It wasn't so much that he hadn't had the time to hurt himself before the drinks knocked him out, as it was the fact that his body had given in without warning. He had only been a couple bottles of wine in when his heart started feeling like it was burning, and he passed out from the pain.

Indeed, he had collapsed not because he was drunk but because of his failing heart.

Even now, he could still feel a stabbing ache in his heart, but he couldn't let Sonia know about it.

When Sonia saw the pensive and sullen look on his face, she sighed in resignation, then stared into his eyes as she suggested gently, "Toby, how about if we go and see a therapist?"

"A therapist?" He parted his lips as he said the words several more times, like he was trying them out.

She nodded. "That's right, a therapist. You turn into a different person on the same day every year, and I think it's because you have a disorder. You witnessed the traumatic aftermath of your own mother's suicide, and with you being so emotionally scarred at a young age, you become unhinged as a coping mechanism this time each year. If we see a therapist about this, then maybe you could get professional guidance that will help you work through all these, or it could help you leave the past behind. It might even help you come to terms with whatever you witnessed as a child. Eventually, you'll get better."

Chapter 663 Deep-Seated Trauma

"No, I won't," Toby said weakly with a shake of his head. He knew that he had issues, too, but he didn't think these were issues that could go away with therapy.

Sonia frowned unhappily when she heard this and countered by saying, "Why not? And how would you know you won't get better until you've tried it?"

He closed his eyes tiredly. "My mom, she... She regretted giving birth to me..."

"What?" Sonia froze at first, then eyed him in bewilderment. "Did you just say your mom regretted giving birth to you?"

He said nothing, but his silence was an affirmation.

She shook her head incredulously. "That can't be right. No, that's impossible! How would you know your mom regretted giving birth to you? Grandma told me that you were really close with your mom and that she was gentle."

A woman who could earn such praise from Rose couldn't possibly have regretted giving birth to Toby, but as Sonia assessed the expression on his face, she didn't think he was lying at all. So what in the world is going on here?

Toby still had his eyes closed, and he did not utter a single word.

Seeing him like this only made her worry more. She leaned closer to him and pleaded, "Tell me, Toby. You can talk to me about anything; I'll be your most faithful listener. Don't keep it all inside, or it'll only make you spiral deeper. Grandma and I really care about you, and we all want to see you walk away from your past and embrace your usual self. If you don't talk to us or try to overcome the trauma, it'll only make us worry about you more, and we won't ever get a peace of mind. Do you really want to see Grandma and I running around like headless chickens every year because of you? Don't forget that Grandma isn't getting any younger."

She didn't tell him that Rose had collapsed. Given his current state, Rose's predicament would only add to his burdens. I'll wait until he feels better, Sonia thought.

Having heard Sonia's words, Toby parted his lips, and he had to admit that his current state would indeed make everyone around him worry incessantly. More importantly, Rose really wasn't getting any younger, and with each passing day, her body grew more feeble. The doctor even mentioned that she might only have a few good years left in her.

"The night my mom took her own life..." he whispered, finally willing to speak as he opened his eyes.

Sonia stared at him intently. "Yes?"

"That night, she drank a lot. I had no idea why she drank that much, but I kept her company anyway. It wasn't until she got really wasted when she held me in her arms and told me a bunch of stuff..." He trailed off as he fixed his hollow gaze on the ceiling. "My mom cried about Connor's upcoming marriage, and she told me that she would have run away with Connor had she not been pregnant with me at the time. She told me that she only stayed because she was pregnant with me."

"She..." Sonia faltered a little, then pressed, "So you think that she regretted having you because she told you this?"

His eyelashes fluttered for a bit as he dwelled on his own thoughts. "Back then, I had no idea who Connor was, but I knew my mom didn't love my dad. She didn't want to marry my dad, but she chose to stay in the Fuller Family because of me, and she stayed married to my father for the same reason. I was secretly happy when she told me this, until the next morning when I found her body. From there on, my nightmare began to torture me, and it's been this way for over a decade. In my dreams, I would relive the moment I discovered her body, or I'd dream that she was strangling me with blood-soaked hands. She would ask me why I was born in the first place, and why I got in the way of her happiness."

Sonia bit down hard on her lower lip, bristling as she urged, "Those are only dreams; they can't hurt you because they aren't real."

"I know that, but what my mom had conveyed to me on the night she took her own life had been her true feelings." The light in his eyes looked as if it was extinguished as he gazed at Sonia. "Because of these dreams, I realized that my birth was the reason why my mom couldn't pursue her own happiness. My existence tethered her to the Fuller Family and kept her from escaping; I practically pushed my mom into taking her own life."

Taken aback by this, Sonia immediately understood that Toby's deep-seated trauma had not been a result of his witnessing his mother's suicide but of his belief that he was the reason for her death.

“No, that’s not true!” She shook her head vehemently. “Toby, don’t even for a second believe that you caused your mom’s death, and your mom never once thought of you as a burden. Listen to me carefully: you only think that you had anything to do with your mom’s suicide because those dreams told you so, and you were convinced at a young age that that was the truth. However, your mom could never mean what she said that night. You were her son, and there was no way she regretted having you, let alone think of you as a burden.”

If I were in her shoes, and even if I were in love with another man, I would never regret having a child with another man. As far as Sonia was concerned, any sensible woman ought to know that children were innocent, that she shouldn’t take her resentment out on these children.

When Toby heard this, something glimmered in his eyes, but it disappeared just as quickly as she shook his head. “You’re not her; you can’t possibly know what her thoughts were.”

“No, I know,” she said solemnly, grabbing his hand tightly in hers as she gave him a firm nod. “Toby, I truly believe in what I said. I have heard many stories of you and your mother from Grandma. She said your mom was a gentle person who loved you as a mother should, even though she never loved your father. But she chose to take up her responsibility as a mother for your sake, and I don’t think she ever regretted having you. She only said what she did out of sentiment, musings on what could have been if she had taken another road in life. That was not regret, because if it was, she wouldn’t have said ‘what if’ but told you right there and then that she regretted giving birth to you.”

Toby’s eyes widened slightly, but he didn’t get to interject as Sonia went on to say, “Also, if she truly did regret having you and thought of you as something that kept her from pursuing her own happiness, then she wouldn’t have loved you the way she did. She never would have been a good mother to you. On that note, Toby, I conclude that you are only so affected by her words because of those nightmares. What you should be aware of is that those nightmares are not reality but a manifestation of your childhood trauma. So please, Toby, forget about those words and leave the past behind, okay?”

A bitter smile curved on his lips. “It’s been over ten years since the nightmares started. I can’t just stop having them, you know.”

“I know, but you’ll have to try and move forward, won’t you?” she pressed. A sudden thought crossed her mind, and she rose from the couch to walk to the side of the room, whereupon she retrieved a paper bag and walked back to him.

Under his curious gaze, she reached into the bag and pulled out something.

It was a scarf, a black one.

Just then, Toby’s eyes widened when he remembered asking her to knit him a scarf the day before. “Is that—”

“This is the scarf you asked me to make. I stayed up all night just to finish knitting it,” she said as she opened up the scarf and draped it over his nape. “Not bad. It actually looks really good on you.”

She had planned on giving him the scarf on his birthday, but after learning of his shift in personality today, she decided to bring it over, hoping that it might help in soothing him or something like that.

Presently, Toby raised a hand and sunk his fingers into the soft fabric of the scarf hanging from his neck. He could pick up a faint, pleasant scent and realized that it was Sonia's fragrance.

He couldn't help but tighten his grip on the scarf, then buried his head into the soft yarn.

At the sight of this, Sonia added, "It was meant to be your birthday gift, but now that I've given it to you in advance, I'll just have to get you something else on the actual day itself."

"This is good enough," he replied, still holding the scarf as he stared at her appreciatively, clearly moved by the gift.

She poured him another glass of warm water. "Would you like some water?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks."

"Okay, I wasn't actually giving you a choice. You have to drink this. I mean, do you even hear how terrible your voice sounds right now?" she asked with a frown.

If it weren't for the fact that he had alcohol in his stomach, she would have made him a honey drink for his irritated throat.

Chapter 664 Man-Child

It was when Toby saw the serious and steely look in Sonia's eyes that he realized he had no choice but to take the water.

He brought his hand up to rub his temple tiredly, and after exerting quite a bit of strength, he managed to prop himself up on the couch. He took the glass, and under Sonia's watchful gaze, he gulped the water down without complaint.

Satisfied, she retracted her gaze, and no longer stared at him like he was a criminal.

When he finished the water, he set the glass aside and shook his head slowly, feeling as if it had been stuffed full of cotton.

At the sight of this, Sonia pressed, "Headache?"

He hummed wearily in response.

She pursed her lips into a thin line of displeasure. "Well, serve you right for downing all that alcohol with such little concern for your own life."

Knowing that he was in the wrong this time, Toby lowered his head guiltily and stayed mute.

Sonia couldn't bring herself to stay mad at him when she saw how worn-out and upset he looked. Her expression softened as she muttered, "Forget it. What matters is that you don't try to reenact this incident. You nearly scared me to death, and I don't think my heart can take another shock like this; I certainly don't want to have all my senses on alert this time each year."

Toby stared at her with despair in his eyes. "I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize; no one could blame you for what happened," she said gently. "I understand why you would resort to such coping mechanisms in light of the situation, but I do hope you'd sort through these feelings before you spiral even further. Don't forget what I said earlier about you not being the cause of your mom's suicide. There's no need for you to invalidate yourself, because if you do, then who else could give you the affirmation you need?"

Toby's eyes glistened like he was pondering her words.

She brought her hand up to his forehead and explained when she saw the confusion in his eyes, "Don't worry, I'm just checking to see if you're running a fever. You barely slept a wink last night, and coupled with the inordinate amount of wine you drank in this unheated space, I'm worried that you might have caught a cold or something. But judging by the look of things, you don't seem to be having a cold at all."

She put her hand down, then asked, "Maybe you'd like to get a bit of shut-eye?"

He was exhausted and completely drained of energy, not to mention his head felt like lead. He didn't think he could even put his feet on the ground. He wanted to sleep, but he was worried that if he did, she would leave. The thought of that made him shake his head and tell a harmless lie. "No, I'm not tired."

"As if," Sonia pointed out sardonically, rolling her eyes at his obvious fatigue.

Toby parted his lips to argue, but before he could say anything, his stomach beat him to it by giving a loud grumble.

He looked down at his own stomach and blinked, seemingly bewildered, as he asked, "It just made a noise."

She nearly laughed at this. "Yeah, and that noise indicates that you're hungry." It was nearly noon, and aside from his hardcore drinking last night, he didn't have much else to eat. Even Sonia was beginning to feel hungry, so she could only imagine the hollowness he felt in his stomach.

"Hungry?" he repeated slowly, like he had never heard of the word, and his confusion showed in his eyes.

Sonia felt her eye twitch as she assessed him and his rather stupid state. Maybe all that drink he had last night is finally getting to his head and meddling with his mind, which explains why he's in such a daze, as opposed to his usual sharp-witted self. Then again, she had to admit that there was something endearing about him when he behaved like this, which was a rare sight indeed.

She never once thought that Toby, on the edge of being completely hungover but still riding out the effects of his alcohol consumption, would be quite so interesting before sobriety caught up with him.

With an exasperated shake of her head, she put out her hands and pressed his shoulders so that she could ease him into a reclining position on the couch. "Okay, just be good and lie down here while I go into the kitchen to rustle up some food for you, that is if you even have ingredients in the fridge."

He had only had alcohol to drink last night with no other sustenance; it was a wonder that his stomach could still grumble at all.

Toby obediently lay back down on the couch, blinking at Sonia wearily and mutely, still in some kind of a stupor.

She took her hands off his shoulders and rearranged the scarf around his neck, then tucked him under the blanket before getting up to go into the kitchen.

However, she had only just taken a step when the man on the couch grabbed her by the wrist. She stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Toby curiously. "What is it?"

"Are you going to leave?" he asked, staring up at her instead of answering her question.

She tipped her head to one side, a little baffled. "Where would I be going?"

"Away," was all he replied.

Amusement colored her features. "I never said I was going away."

"You didn't, but you're leaving now, aren't you?" he asked hoarsely. He pressed his lips into a fine line, and she could hear the disappointment clear in his tone; he wasn't even trying to hide his dejection, and he sounded like he was about to be abandoned.

Seeing this, Sonia patted the back of his hand and explained patiently, "No, I'm not going away. I'm just going to make you something to eat."

"I don't believe you." Now his lips looked thin and grim as he added accusingly, "You're lying to me. You're going to leave as soon as you step out that door, just like my mom; one day, she promised to bring me out for a meal, and the next, she was gone."

Stunned by this, Sonia took a second to recover. With a sigh, she elaborated solemnly, "I'm not lying to you, and I promise I won't leave. I'm just going into the kitchen to make you some food, and I'll be back before you know it. Don't worry; I've always kept my promises. Would you like me to swear or take an oath before you?" She put up a hand and made to swear with utmost seriousness. "I'm going into the kitchen, and I will be back here as soon as I'm done. If I don't keep my word, then I shall stay and take care of you every day for the next foreseeable period. How about that?"

Toby's eyes widened, then he blinked as he asked, "Really?"

"Really!" She gave him a firm, reassuring nod.

He stared at her as if to figure out if she could be trusted. After what felt like a long moment of debate with himself, he slowly released her wrist and kept his gaze on her as he said, "Fine, then you may go. But you have to come back soon because I'll be here waiting for you."

"Yes, I'll be back in a flash," Sonia promised with a grave nod.

She was beginning to understand that under the influence of alcohol, his mind had regressed to the state it had been in when he was around ten years old, which was about the same time when his mother had taken her own life.

So his coping mechanism is to literally transform into his ten-year-old self after getting wasted, but what's most surprising is that a ten-year-old Toby is actually pretty adorable.

With superhuman self-control, she kept herself from reaching out to pinch the man's cheeks. Dismissing the impulse, she turned away from the couch and left the study under his wary gaze.

Presently, she headed into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She had expected to be greeted by empty shelves and compartments, given that Toby had never stepped foot into any kitchen, much less cooked, but she was astonished to see that the fridge was fully stocked. In fact, most of the ingredients looked fresh.

A little stunned by the revelation, she couldn't help casting a brief glance in the direction of the study. No way, she thought, blinking. Does he actually know how to cook?

She took out a packet of vegetables and looked it over in wonder, unable to imagine Toby cooking. After all, he was completely hapless in the kitchen when he had dropped by Bayside Residence the other day, and he had no idea how to operate a kitchen.

Besides, he was the head of the Fuller Family and the president of Fuller Group. With all those responsibilities weighing down on him and filling up his schedule, it wasn't as if he had the luxury of picking up culinary skills on the side.

Without dwelling further on this, Sonia put the packet of vegetables into the sink and rummaged through the other ingredients until she came upon chicken breast slices. Inspiration dawned upon her, and she decided to cook a chicken chowder with a green salad on the side.

Toby had had too much to drink, and everything else in the fridge didn't seem to make for hearty hangover-cure recipes. She figured that a well-seasoned bowl of chowder was just what he needed, not to mention it would be easy on his stomach.

She spent about half an hour in the kitchen just rustling up the meal. When she was done, she ladled the chowder into two separate bowls and placed them onto a tray, thereafter proceeding toward the study.

I wonder if he's asleep now. The door to the study was left ajar, for she hadn't closed it all the way just now. Without having to reach for the doorknob, she made her way through with ease.

She quietly walked over to the couch. She assumed that Toby had drifted off into sleep, but much to her surprise, he was wide awake, and his eyes were fixed on the ceiling as if he was in a trance.

She bent over and set the tray down.

Upon hearing the sound of her movements, Toby blinked out of his reverie and finally returned to his senses. He turned his gaze away from the ceiling and focused on the woman next to him, then looked delighted as he exclaimed, "You came back!"

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Sonia couldn't help but smile when she saw how happy Toby was at her return. "Yes, I'm back. See, I made good on my word and didn't leave at all, and I came back on time."

He hummed contentedly in response.

She pulled up a chair next to the couch and sat down. "Can you get up?"

"No," he said, looking at her piteously as he shook his head.

She sighed, then reached out a hand. "Come on. I'll help you up."

He put his hand in hers, and as soon as she had a firm grasp on him, she pulled him into an upright position on the couch. "Okay, hold still, and don't fall back again."

"Okay," he said, nodding like an obedient little boy.

He was behaving so well that Sonia couldn't resist ruffling his hair affectionately. "You know, Tobykins, I didn't think you'd be so much more fun during a hangover."

"Tobykins?" he repeated with a raise of his brow as he eyed her inquisitively. The next moment, he grimaced and demanded unhappily, "Who is Tobykins? Are you seeing someone else?"

His voice was loud, and he looked at her like she was the biggest heartbreaker in the city. She tried to keep from sputtering as she asked, "What are you talking about? Who's seeing someone else?"

"You!" he replied furiously, glowering at her.

She blinked, then pointed at herself. "And who am I seeing?"

Incensed, he pursed his lips, and his eyes were red as he grumbled, "Tobykins!"

"Well..." Sonia felt the corner of her lips twitch at the accusation. I'm seeing someone else by the name of Tobykins? Okay, well, as things are, I can't say he's wrong. She put a palm to her forehead as she looked at him incredulously and said, "I swear it's like you've lost half a mind, Toby. You do realize that you're Tobykins, don't you?"

This seemed like news to him as he stiffened. "I'm Tobykins?"

"Mm-hmm," Sonia replied with a slow nod.

Once again, his face darkened as he argued, "You're lying to me. My name is Toby, not Tobykins."

"Tobykins is a nickname I gave you," she answered through gritted teeth, rolling her eyes at him.

It was only then that he understood that he really was Tobykins. As his anger subsided, he gazed at Sonia blearily and asked, "But why am I Tobykins? I'm not a kid anymore."

"Why?" Sonia was highly entertained by this exchange. "Because you're behaving like a kid right now, of course. Toby, I really want to see how you'd react after you sober up and recall every single childish thing you said and did today. I bet you'd wish a hole could open up in the ground and swallow you up."

"Huh?" Toby was clearly too drunk to comprehend her words, and his confusion was evident on his face.

She waved her hand dismissively. "You know what? It's fine. I don't even know why I bothered telling you all this in the first place; it's not like you can understand what I'm saying. We should eat."

Having said that, she took up a bowl of chowder from the tray and placed it carefully in Toby's hands. "Take care not to spill it." My goodness, it's like I'm actually fussing over a little kid right now. Here's to hoping he won't spill the chowder.

Toby was truly on his best behavior as he carefully held the bowl in his palms. Sonia could tell that he had a firm grasp on the bowl, and when she was sure that he wouldn't tip the bowl on one side and spill the chowder, she loosened up and took her own bowl of chowder.

She was already starving as it was, having gone without food for the whole morning while she was fussing over him. Hours had passed since then, and now she felt so hollow she might just shrink into herself.

Stirring her chowder with her spoon, she began to take small mouthfuls of it, but that was when she sensed Toby staring at her without once eating his own chowder.

She put the spoon down and glanced at him with a raised brow. "Are you going to keep staring at me like that, or are you going to eat?"

He looked like he was about to say something, but he did not utter a single word.

She sighed. "What is it? Don't you know how to feed yourself?"

Toby stared at her and stayed stubbornly mute. This only made her feel more exasperated. Kids are cute, and that's an understatement, but heaven help me. I have no idea what they're thinking! Sometimes, one would find oneself rendered helpless by children and their strange demeanor.

Like right now.

In resignation, she put down her own bowl and reached for his instead, taking it out of his hands as she scooped up some chowder and brought it to his lips. "Say, 'ah'."

He did as he was told and opened his mouth, and she spooned the chowder into it.

He chewed twice, then swallowed. Amused by this, Sonia prompted, "Could it be that you're just trying to get me to wait on you hand and foot instead of doing these things on your own, Toby? Do you actually see yourself as a kid?"

"No," he replied with a small shake of his head.

"You know what, don't even bother arguing with me," she said with a roll of her eyes, then brought yet another spoonful of chowder to his lips.

He opened his mouth just as obediently as he had the first time, making it clear that he wanted her to spoon-feed him. Resigned, she sighed and fed him each mouthful. It wasn't as if she had a choice; if she refused to feed him, he would stare at her with wide puppy eyes, which was her weakness. More importantly, he was her man, and she couldn't bear to let him starve.

When the chowder had been polished off, Sonia set the bowl aside and handed him a glass of water. "It's for you to rinse your mouth."

He took the glass of water and proceeded to rinse his mouth without needing any assistance. When he looked like he was about to be done, she raised a small basin for him to spit out the water, which he did without objection.

After that, she handed him a tissue so he could wipe his mouth, but this time, he somehow became inept again and waited for her to do it for him instead, staring at her once more with childish helplessness.

Frustration seized her. "Okay, you know what, Toby? I think I've figured you out. You may look like a hapless kid right now, but your thoughts are clear enough for you to decide which chore you'd like to do on your own and which you'd prefer to have others do for you."

Like feeding you chowder, which happens to be a chore that he'd prefer someone else do for him, and I'm the only other person available at his service.

However, when it came to rinsing his mouth, he knew that there was no way she could have helped him and resorted to doing it on his own.

Right now, wiping his mouth was, once again, a chore that he could elect to have someone else do for him.

He was a manipulative child stuck in a grown man's body.

Alas, he feigned innocence now, as if he couldn't understand why Sonia was upset at him, and there was a groggy look in his eyes as he gazed at her. "Hmm?"

She felt the corner of her mouth twitch once more in anger. Screw this, she thought belligerently. Why do I bother talking sense to a hungover person? I'll wait until he sobers up before I get even with him!

Rubbing her temples tiredly, she heaved a sigh and wiped the corners of his mouth for him. It was only after she was done cleaning him up that he lay back down on the couch.

Now that he had settled down, Sonia finally had the time and the liberty to enjoy her lukewarm chowder, and while she ate, Toby kept his eyes on her.

She swallowed her mouthful of chowder and asked, "Maybe you should take a nap now that your stomach is full. Sleep off the alcohol, and you'd feel much better when you wake up."

However, he shook his head stubbornly, implying that he had no intention to sleep whatsoever, even though he was already dozing off and was only keeping his eyes open by sheer determination.

Sonia made no effort to persuade him and decided to let him be. She would much prefer to keep him like this instead of having him run amok like Rose had described; she didn't think she could handle it if his self-harming tendencies were triggered.

Besides, the harder he tried to stay awake, the more he would wear himself out and eventually drift off into sleep.

At the thought of this, Sonia paid no attention to him and quietly finished her own chowder, thereafter setting the bowl down. She was just about to bring the tray out to the kitchen when the man on the couch, who had been silent all this while, suddenly said, "Stinks."

“Excuse me?” She turned around to glower at him incredulously. Did he just say I stink?

He said softly, “I stink. I need a bath.”

She rolled her eyes. Okay, he was talking about himself. I got mad for no reason. Crossing her arms, she eyed him bemusedly as she countered, “Oh, so you do realize that you stink.”

Naturally, having consumed all that alcohol, he would now, over the course of the last few hours, carry with him the overpowering and rather assaulting stench of stale alcohol.

She had thought about letting him sober up before making him shower, but she certainly didn’t expect him to think of his own scent as unbearable and thereafter demand a bath. Fine, I guess it’d be better for him to bathe before he sleeps.

She reached to pull him up from the couch. “Come on, I’ll help you over to your room.”

He hummed in response and stood up from the couch, but there was no strength in his legs whatsoever. He could barely stand on his own two feet, which was why he was only upright for seconds before he toppled forward, dragging Sonia down with him.

In the end, he lay face-down on the floor while Sonia landed on his back with a startled cry.