

Surprise 276

Chapter 276 Too Aggressive for My Taste

Oliver took a breath, seemingly uneasy with the turn of events. After a long pause, he said firmly, "I'll make another trip to Elmsbury and get to the bottom of this."

"Take it slowly," Courtney answered as she gazed at him. "We can't afford to miss out on any details this time, so we have to deal with it step by step."

"I know." He was embarrassed and looked sheepish as he muttered. "I don't think I can live with myself if I don't get to the bottom of this."

She raised her brow and teased, "Why? Is it because you're the Sherlock Holmes on campus?"

Upon hearing that, his eyes widened and he gaped at her as blood rushed to his face. "H-how did you find out about this?" he asked in awkwardness.

His peers had called him Sherlock Holmes for the fun of it, but he thought it was embarrassing. He then ordered all of the juniors in his faculty to stop addressing him by that nickname. However, it only made it worse—oppression was often met with resistance and the more he fought against it, the more his juniors took pleasure in torturing him.

Even the teachers in school jumped on the bandwagon toward the end.

How did Courtney find out about it, though?

Courtney grinned. "It's not a big secret. Didn't you hear someone calling you that when we were on our way here? I'm pretty sure there were people who pointed at you when we cycled past them."

Oliver buried his face in his hands, wishing that a hole would appear on the ground and swallow him up. He was sure that he would die of embarrassment.

She had always treated him like he was a kid and she probably thought he was all the more childish after learning about his ridiculous nickname.

"Here you go. Two hot caramel macchiatos."

The awkward silence was interrupted by the sound of the tray hitting the table. The girl who bantered with him was serving their orders and as she straightened her posture, she irritably snapped at him, "Why are you acting shy? It's disgusting."

With that, she retrieved the tray and moved to step away from their table.

"Hey! Who are you calling shy?" Oliver barked, causing her to stop in her tracks. He then added disgruntledly. "Are you blind? I wasn't acting shy at all!"

"Me? Blind? I think the only person who's blind around here is her!" The girl retorted and turned to address Courtney angrily. "Miss, you probably don't know this, but Oliver is a complete Lothario on campus. Heaven knows how many women he's brought here—both young and old—and he always gets two caramel macchiatos on every date!"

Oliver's face grew thunderous. "What kind of nonsense are you spewing about?"

Courtney, on the other hand, was nonchalant. She shifted in her seat and looked up at the girl while smiling and asking, "Is that so? You mean to say that he's pursued older women too? He must be a lunatic then!"

"He's a pervert and a lunatic!" The girl nodded with conviction. "So, don't trust anything that comes out of his mouth. He's nothing but a womanizer."

"That's not—" Oliver's lips twitched as he stared at the girl in utter disbelief. "You know what, Tessa? If you were to promote your menu in the same way that you make up all those ridiculous stories about me, your milk tea would be selling like hotcakes!"

"I'm not making anything up," the girl countered primly.

Courtney blinked and although she was thoroughly amused, she felt the need to introduce herself anyway. "I appreciate the warning, but I'm just an older sister to him."

Upon hearing that, the girl stiffened with shock. "An older sister? As in, you're related to him by blood?"

Oliver rolled his eyes at her. "No, we're not related by blood, but she means a lot more to me than I imagine an older sister would."

"Really??" The girl grew flustered at the unexpected revelation. She felt like she was just thrown a curveball.

"Of course. I have a five-year-old kid at home," Courtney answered pleasantly with a playful glint in her eyes. "So, is it true that Oliver is really as notorious as you say when he's on campus? He's going around breaking girls' hearts? You should keep an eye on him on my behalf then."

The girl blushed furiously. "W-Why should I keep an eye on him? I won't do it. I—" She broke off nervously and ducked her head. "I'll bring the pizza over for you right now, Miss. Just give me a moment!"

As she dashed off, he yelled, "Hey! We didn't order a pizza!"

"It's for your sister! My treat!" Tessa answered hastily and disappeared into the kitchen.

"What a freak," he scoffed, but when he turned his gaze to Courtney, he saw that she was eyeing him with a meaningful look. He frowned. "Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something on my face?"

Courtney shook her head. "No, there's nothing on your face, but I think that girl just now may have a thing for you."

"Huh?"

Seeing the confusion that was written all over his face, she pursed her lips. After a thoughtful pause, she leaned forward like she was about to divulge a dirty secret or two and asked curiously, "Oliver, can't you tell that she likes you?"

“What?” Oliver exclaimed with widened eyes and lowered his voice as he hissed. “Courtney, you can’t go around making jokes like this. It’s not funny at all!”

She did not understand why he was making a big deal out of it. “What’s wrong with what I said? She’s a really cute girl—is she not good enough for you?”

“No, it’s not a matter of how cute she looks; it’s the fact that she’s a total psychopath!” Upon having said that, he groaned in protest and looked incredulous as he asked. “Do you know what course she’s in?”

“What is it? Nursing? Information Science?” Courtney knew that the courses that Oliver’s school provided were limited when it came to a female-friendly curriculum, but there were still a couple of courses that were more suited for girls.

However, he drew in a shaky breath, as though the answer had intimidated him. “Courtney, have you ever heard of the school’s Blue Eagles Program?”

“Blue Eagles?” She frowned in thought before she said hesitantly. “I’ve heard of it. Isn’t that the military training program for gifted folks?”

Oliver nodded solemnly. “Yes. Once these gifted students complete the program, they are immediately recruited and recognized as part of the army’s special forces. These are the same people who will be dispatched to secure our borders and fight in our wars. The school keeps a close eye on all of them and they have strict rules to follow—dating is absolutely forbidden. She knew this when she signed up for and passed the entrance exam for the Blue Eagles Program. How could she be interested in dating anybody when she knows that she will be punished?”

“Wait—are you telling me that the girl is a member of the Blue Eagles?”

Courtney found it hard to believe what she heard despite his nod of confirmation.

Tessa was not that tall; she barely surpassed five feet three. She was fair-skinned and slender. On top of that, there was something adorable about her that did not go hand-in-hand with being a trainee for the military’s special forces.

“No one else has broken her record in the shooting range—a record that she set in her first year in the program. She can take up to ten grown men in close combat and these are men who have all been trained! It’s like she turns into a complete maniac when she’s on the training field; she has injured hundreds of her opponents, if not thousands. I’ve never met anyone who takes training as seriously as she does. Trust me, Courtney, she’s not as delicate as she looks. She’s too aggressive for my taste.”

Courtney watched Oliver’s face twist into a grimace, which piqued her curiosity even more. “Tell me about the so-called taste of yours. What kind of girl would pique your interest? I could set you up on a date. You were rather popular with the ladies back at the hotel; there are plenty of women with wonderful personalities out there—only if you have nothing against dating older women.”

“Age doesn’t matter to me,” Oliver replied. He leaned back in his chair and stared thoughtfully into space, avoiding Courtney’s imploring gaze. His voice grew smaller as he said. “I’m looking for a girl who is gentle with her loved ones and courteous with others, but she won’t hesitate to take a stand against

her enemies. She's kind and she won't back down just because life gets in her way. She's someone who is strong-willed and soft-hearted—that's the kind of girl I'm looking for."

he raised her brows. "Does a girl like that even exist?"

"Yes and she takes good care of me. She slices apples for me and she buys me snacks. Every now and then, she checks in on me to make sure I'm doing okay."

Courtney assessed him and after a while, she drawled, "Does this woman happen to be your mom?"

Chapter 277 Alexander's Fall From Grace

Upon hearing Courtney's words, Oliver swallowed what he was about to say and looked into her imploring eyes. He could do nothing else but nod in resignation. "Yes, I'm talking about my mom."

"Better sort it out before it turns into an Oedipus complex or something; girls take it personally when you start comparing them to your mother," Courtney reminded gently and took her purse as she stood up to leave. "I have to go now. There are some things I need to take care of at the office."

"I'll see you off," he offered and promptly rose from his seat.

"No need." She brushed him off with a dismissive wave of her hand before jerking her head toward the kitchen. "Didn't Tessa say she'll bring out a pizza? Stay here and make sure you thank her for her kind gesture. I can see myself out." With that, she slung her purse over her shoulder and headed toward the door of the milk tea shop.

"Where did your sister go?"

Tessa came out of the kitchen with the piping-hot pizza. The sound of the pizza tray clattering against the table made Oliver jump and he glared at her. "What did you do that for? Can't you act in a feminine manner like you're supposed to and be gentle in everything you do? You scared the living daylight out of me!"

The smile that was on her face was quickly melted by his snide remark. She shot him a murderous look and snapped, "Good graces are lost on you. Don't eat the pizza if you don't want to—I can always feed it to the dogs around campus."

"Be careful; this attitude will be the reason why you're never going to find a husband."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't dream of marrying you even if you're the last man on the planet."

Oliver blinked. He thought about what Courtney had said earlier and retracted his head as he smiled to himself.

"What are you smiling at?" Tessa demanded in an incredulous manner.

He did not reply and kept smiling instead. He bent his head to bite into a slice of pizza, oblivious of how delicate he looked as he did so. She blushed at the sight before her. She boldly appraised him, wondering how anyone could look that good. He's better-looking than most of the buffed-up hooligans in the Blue Eagles.

The moment Courtney returned to the office, she immediately looked for Bill. “How’s the order coming along?”

“We’ve asked the manufacturer to hurry up on the process, but the deadline given to us by Sakura Group is rather tight—everything must be ready to go within a month. However, I’m concerned about the quality of the finished work. We have to send someone to keep an eye on the manufacturing process—day in and day out.”

“It has to be someone who works in fashion, isn’t it?” she asked.

He nodded. “Designers will be arranged for the task.”

She grew worried. “Would you be able to make the necessary arrangements? There is still work to be done within these couple of days for the design competition.”

In order for Citron’s designing team to make a strong comeback under Bill’s leadership, Citron Apparel had decided to take part in the upcoming nationwide fashion design competition. As a result, Bill and the team spent the last two days busy brainstorming for designs for the competition.

He currently appeared to be nonchalant as he answered, “It won’t be a problem. The work that we’re doing for the competition isn’t as difficult as it seems. Not to mention, we don’t have to keep an eye on the manufacturer 24/7. All we need is to send a couple of designers over to check things out once or twice a day.”

Seeing that he was confident about the whole process, Courtney did not protest further and simply nodded in agreement. “In that case, you have free rein on the matter—make any decision you deem suitable.”

Upon hearing that, Bill nodded firmly and he began to make a roster for the designers to visit the manufacturer’s factory to check the work in progress. There was no one in Citron Apparel—not even Courtney—who could top Bill when it came to being a workaholic.

After she left the design department, Natasha caught up with her and reminded her about the AW Business and Trade Cocktail Party that would be held the next evening.

“Miss Hunter, will you be attending the party alone or…” Natasha trailed off with implication.

Courtney eyed her assistant with amusement. “Do you think I’m incapable of finding a date?”

Natasha pursed her lips before she slowly responded, “Miss Hunter, perhaps you are planning to bring President Duncan as your date for tomorrow evening?”

“Yes.”

“This may be inappropriate of me to say and please don’t be angry with me, but I don’t think you should bring President Duncan along.”

Upon hearing that, Courtney stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Natasha in surprise.

A flustered Natasha quickly explained, “Don’t be angry, Miss Hunter. I’m just saying that the commercial world is filled with those who won’t hesitate to bring you down and there aren’t many good folks out

who would stand by your side. Given President Duncan's past business maneuvers and his questionable temper, I'm afraid he may have more foes than friends."

"Go on," Courtney responded as she wanted to hear more of Natasha's thoughts on the matter.

Natasha paused as she carefully chose her words. "President Duncan is no longer the director of Sunhill Enterprise, but the head of finance for Hunter Group instead. If he attends an upper-class social event like the cocktail party tomorrow, he might run into somebody he knows, like the Radson brothers who are in charge of AW Group. I heard that they used to be rivals with President Duncan. On one hand, he might have a hard time facing these people and on the other, I'm worried that if you show up with President Duncan, you might become the victim of vicious gossip. I'm just saying that all of this can be easily avoided if you go alone, or if you choose to go with somebody else instead."

It was apparent that Natasha had given some thought to it and was polite in the way she said it as well. If Courtney were in her shoes, she would have been brutally honest—Alexander's attendance at the event would be his downfall. His fall from grace would make him the butt of everyone's joke.

It was not hard for Courtney to imagine the sneers and jests of those who ran in the business and trade circle. For a proud man like Alexander, who never experienced a downfall in his entire life, it would be difficult for him to brace against the taunting crowd at the cocktail event. With all those in mind, she looked at Natasha with admiration. "I'll think about it."

"As long as you aren't angry about it," Natasha replied as she let out a breath of relief.

They were heading toward the office when Courtney asked, "How long have you been working in Hunter Group?"

"Five years."

"That long?" Courtney appeared shocked. "But, why are you..." She trailed off in hesitation. She could not finish her question without sounding rude, but seeing that she could not think of another way to ask it, the unspoken words hung in the air.

Natasha, on the other hand, did not seem to mind at all as she let out a small laugh before she asked, "Do you mean to ask why I am still a secretary despite having worked here for so long?"

Courtney nodded.

"I don't have excellent academics," Natasha explained with a sheepish look on her face. "I only graduated from middle school and I got a job here because my uncle pulled some strings with Mr. Hunter. While my grandmother is part of the Hunter Family, she is only a distant relative of Mr. Hunter's. It was good enough for them to arrange a secretarial job for me."

Upon hearing that, Courtney softened. "You know what they say—you reap what you sow. Good things come to those who work hard enough for them."

When she first started working in Hunter Group, she was given a list of candidates from which she would select her personal assistant. An assistant's job was never easy and the pay was disproportionate to the workload. Furthermore, she needed someone who was well-rounded, paid attention to detail and had unwavering loyalty. It was a challenge to find somebody who could fit that description.

The group's board of directors were worried that Courtney would have immense power over the company. In an attempt to rein her in, they decided to add a couple of candidates who were related to the board members to the list and Natasha Golding happened to be one of them.

"Thank you, Miss Hunter." Natasha bowed her head. Regardless of what Courtney said to her, she was always calm and collected, giving off the impression that she was far older than she looked. For that reason, and many others, Courtney had picked her out of all the other candidates.

That afternoon, Courtney and Bill made a trip to the manufacturer's factory. As predicted by Bill, the manufacturing process was less than ideal. The workers were not meticulous and their skills were subpar at best. As a result, there was a need to rework on the first batch of fabric and he lost his temper on the spot. It wasn't long before the director of the manufacturing company rushed back to handle the situation at hand.

"What in the world is going on here?"

"What's going on?" Bill glared at the director before he threw the scraps of fabric onto the floor. As they landed before the director's feet, he pointed at them in disdain and gave the older man an incredulous look. "See for yourself! Is this the kind of quality that you promised us?"

Chapter 278 Can I Be Your Apprentice?

The atmosphere grew heavy almost instantly.

The director of the manufacturing company was a middle-aged man who wore a pair of little round spectacles. He looked bright and capable, but his expression was now stony as he pointed out, "Mr. Dawson, there's nothing wrong with these."

"Nothing wrong?" Bill repeated incredulously as his hand swept down to pick up one of the discarded shirts and waved it in front of the director's face. "The shirt placket is all messed up and look at the stitching! As soon as this batch goes out the door, it carries with it the pride and dignity of the entire Hunter Group! With a quality like this, you're going to cost us our reputation!"

"Well..."

The director looked uneasy at the confrontation. Upon seeing that, Courtney stepped up and assumed the role of a mediator; she tugged at Bill's sleeve as she said, "Stop talking for a bit and let me have a word with the director."

"And you are..." The director adjusted his spectacles and appraised Courtney curiously.

Most of the work that required trips to the manufacturing company were all previously done by the designers. As such, she had never officially met the director.

Standing at one side, Natasha promptly made the necessary introductions. "This is Courtney Hunter—President Hunter, the director of Hunter Group.

"President Hunter?" The older man blinked. "I beg your pardon, Miss. I didn't think you'd be so young!"

“That’s all right,” Courtney answered pleasantly. She looked at Bill and silently indicated for him to step aside. She then went over to the director to have a private word with him.

“Mr. Finch, please excuse Mr. Dawson. He’s actually great at everything except keeping his temper in check,” Courtney began. “Here’s the thing—we need this batch to be ready within a month. With a deadline like this, you’ll understand why we can’t afford even the slightest of mistakes. We’re terribly sorry if we offended you in any way.”

Mr. Finch replied sheepishly, “Please don’t apologize. After all, it was our fault in the first place. I just returned from Elmsbury and I was just about to supervise the production for your batch. I didn’t think we’d run into problems so soon.”

“You seem like a reasonable man, Mr. Finch. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you how important this is to us. If you could work a little overtime just to keep an eye on the process, reworking the products won’t be necessary, don’t you think?” Upon having said that, she lifted a slender finger like she was drawing an idea out of thin air. “How about this? If you can finish the production earlier, then we’ll incentivize you on a contractual basis. If quality is ensured and you finish the work a day earlier than the deadline, you will receive a five percent incentive on top of the agreed sum—ten percent if you finish the work two days earlier.”

“If we finish the work ten days before, then that would be...” Mr. Finch continued as his mind worked out the calculations as he grinned at Courtney. He did not have to say anything to let her know that he was more than agreeable with the proposition.

Courtney was well-acquainted with the way businessmen worked—she drove a hard bargain, but she needed to make it worth his while too.

On their way there, she and Bill had settled on the good cop, bad cop strategy in order to make sure that things turned out the way they wanted. After all, they did not want to come off as gullible to Mr. Finch.

It was nightfall by the time she made her way home after tying up all the loose ends at the manufacturing company. She offered to drop Bill and Natasha off along the way. The villa on Lotus Road had been vacant for a while, so she let him move in and make it his home for the time being.

They were pulling up outside the villa when Natasha asked suddenly, “Bill, I was wondering—can I be your apprentice and learn fashion designing from you?”

Courtney glanced into the rearview mirror and saw that Bill’s eyebrows were drawn together. He asked in reply, “Why do you want to learn fashion designing?”

“Because I like it.”

“Just because you like it doesn’t mean you’ll be good at it. That’s just how the world works. Have you dabbled in fashion designing before this?”

“I... I have not.”

From the rearview mirror, Courtney could see Natasha shrinking into herself, as though she wanted to curve around the inferiority that she experienced. In all the time that she knew Natasha, it was the first

time that she saw a sheepish look pass across the girl's face—a stark contrast from her usually composed disposition.

Judging from the way that Bill closed the door after getting down from the car, it was clear that he had no idea about the effect his words had on Natasha. Like most men, he was oblivious to the many aspects of chivalry and he had a mind that was straighter than steel. It was no wonder that he was single even though he was nearly forty years old; he practically doomed himself to perpetual bachelorhood.

As the car roared to life, Courtney teased lightly, “You know, it's pretty clever of you to come up with the strategy of learning fashion designing from Bill. I mean, designing is all he ever thinks about. There's nothing much else going on in his brain.”

Natasha looked confused for a moment, but when she finally made sense of what Courtney said, she quickly explained, “Miss Hunter, I'm afraid you've taken this the wrong way. I really want to learn fashion designing from Bill.”

“Well, this is going to be harder than the other thing I meant,” Courtney mused, her hands on the steering wheel as she kept her eyes on the road beyond the windscreen. “You know how proud these artistic types are and they show little mercy to those who are weaker than them in the industry. If you really become his apprentice—and that's on the basis that he's even willing to take you in—he's going to destroy your self-esteem. Would you be able to live with that?”

Natasha sighed. “As long as Bill is willing to take me in, I'll be grateful anyhow.”

“You seem dedicated.” Courtney was beginning to believe that Natasha was really interested in fashion designing. She raised a brow as she asked. “Are you really that interested in fashion design? Let me have a word with Bill to see whether he's willing to take you in as an apprentice.”

“No, you don't have to,” Natasha answered hastily. “I'll figure a way out on my own. He wouldn't turn you down if you asked, but I really want him to teach me because he wants to do it—and not because he's doing you a favor.”

She seemed so determined that Courtney had no choice but to relent. She did not pursue the matter any further. After all, even she could not be certain that she could persuade the ever-eccentric Bill to do her such a favor.

When Courtney arrived home that night, she was carrying a bag of potatoes. A nearby grocery store was offering discounts for potatoes and they were being sold in two giant heaps right at the entrance. She had bought a large bag of them after seeing how fresh the produce was.

She was greeted with darkness the moment she arrived home. Her fingers felt blindly along the wall as she looked for the light switch, which usually was not hard to locate—given its proximity to the door. However, instead of stumbling across the switch, her fingers came across something cold and soft before the door suddenly slammed shut behind her.

A startled Courtney screamed as she withdrew her hand, letting the bag of potatoes to drop to the floor.

The sound of her screams coupled with the thudding sound of the potatoes hitting the ground, seemed to reverberate throughout the house like a prelude to a horror film.

She trembled as she reached for her phone while calling out, "Alexander! Alexander!" Alexander ought to be here at this hour, but it seems like there is no one at home at all.

The floor was cast in the weak silver moonlight that filtered through the curtains and her ears pricked up at the sound of footsteps coming from the children's room.

Courtney could hear the blood pounding in her ears as she yelled, "Alexander, is that you?"

However, as she said that, she saw the long shadow of a figure hiding behind the doorway. He appeared to be holding a chainsaw and from where she stood, she could see that there was red liquid dripping from the jagged edges of the weapon. What she saw made it all the more horrific under the ethereal moonlight.

All the scenes from the horror films that she watched flashed through her mind and she suddenly remembered the notice that was pinned up on the community bulletin board two days ago.

The notice warned that there was a serial killer on the loose and since he was recently spotted in Melrose City, the authorities wanted everyone to take precautions.

Courtney's eyes widened as she mumbled, "Tina, Jordan..."

Meanwhile, the figure was slowly coming out from behind the door.

She reached for a potato and with her free hand, she felt along behind her until her fingers touched the cold steel of the doorknob. She was trembling while her heart raced, but she tried her best to stay calm. Perhaps Alexander and the kids are not home at all. Perhaps nothing happened and this man is just a burglar.

As soon as the figure emerged, Courtney threw the potato toward him and she quickly opened the door behind her so that she could escape.

She thought she heard a male grunt coming from within the room before it was drowned by the loud crash of his murder weapon landing on the floor. It was as though the crash was a deadly, demonic claw that aimed for her, threatening to pull her down into the depths of hell.

Chapter 279 You Let Them Get Away With It

A bright light greeted Courtney's escape and before she could react, she heard someone yell, "Surprise!"

It was followed by a loud burst of colorful confetti. Her breath hitched when she saw the elevator lobby was filled with people wearing odd masks and costumes. Among them were two small figures dressed up like jack-o'-lanterns as their heads bobbed under the weight of the pumpkin prop.

Courtney let out a scream at the sight of the motley crew before her, but she slightly calmed down as she figured out why the voices sounded familiar. She hesitantly called out, "Jordan? Tina?"

The smaller of the two jack-o'-lantern figures lifted the pumpkin costume to reveal a mischievous grin.

"Mommy, it's me!" Tina announced happily.

“What are you...” Courtney trailed off as her eyes widened with bewilderment.

Happy Halloween, Miss Hunter!”

Someone cried from among the crowd as everyone began to remove their masks and headpieces to reveal their identities—they were all residents within the building.

Halloween? Courtney buried her head in her hands. “For goodness’s sake, all of you...”

Lisa, the woman who stayed at the apartment across the hall from theirs, was dressed as the Corpse Bride. She picked up a fraction of her dress while she sauntered to where Courtney stood, laughing as she said, “Did we scare you? The whole building is celebrating Halloween. You aren’t the first one to be frightened by the rest of us—those who came home after dark pretty much ended up with the same treatment too.”

Upon hearing that, Courtney froze and it took a while before she regained composure. “I thought the serial killer infiltrated my home! You guys scared the living daylight out of me!”

As she surveyed the somewhat familiar faces who grinned at her in the elevator lobby, she could feel a surge of warmth spread through her. The apartment building was always lively with community events, but due to her busy work schedule, she was often far too busy to participate. Nevertheless, the residents made sure she received the goody bags from all the events she missed out on.

Alicia was the one who bought the apartment for her. Now that Courtney thought about it, her aunt probably had her best intentions at heart.

Lisa asked, “By the way, where’s your husband?”

Courtney blinked. “My husband?”

“The children’s father,” Lisa pointed out before pressing on. “Did you not see him? He was supposed to be in your apartment!”

When Courtney regained her composure, she gaped at Lisa and gestured toward the front door of her apartment. “You mean, that person inside was—”

She broke off and she turned to open the door under the curious gaze of the crowd. She felt around in the dark and found the light switch before realizing that it was covered with a layer of clay-like substance. She then peeled it off and turned on the lights.

As the room brightened, she saw Alexander sitting at the entrance to the children’s room. The beige pants he wore were stained with the unidentified red liquid on the floor. There was a quail egg-sized bump on his forehead and he looked dazed as he stared at the doorway.

The silence was broken when someone sputtered behind her and soon, everyone burst into laughter as they were unable to contain themselves any longer.

Courtney was willing to bet that it was his most embarrassing moment in his thirty something years of existence.

Meanwhile, he grimaced. He had wanted to save himself from the embarrassment of dressing up for Halloween, but instead, he ended up humiliating himself in front of all the residents in the building.

“Pfft!” She sputtered as she gently pressed a hardboiled egg against the bump on his head. “Sorry, but you looked so ridiculous back there that I couldn’t help but laugh.”

Alexander was indignant, but he did not want to snap at her while Courtney was being gentle with him, so he forced his words down instead.

“I don’t get it—you said you didn’t want to join them for Halloween, so why were you holding a chainsaw like a murderous maniac? I was almost scared to death! Just be thankful that I was holding a potato instead of a knife; otherwise, who knows how badly I might have injured you?”

Upon the mention of the godforsaken chainsaw, he grew grim and glowered. “That was ketchup on the chainsaw and don’t ask me how I got into this mess. You should ask the kids!”

Tina and Jordan were still hanging out with the rest of the residents and joined their forces as they went around to scare other unsuspecting occupants of the building. The kids would not be returning home soon. However, judging from the way she sneakily took the ketchup-stained chainsaw with her, Courtney strongly suspected that the little girl played a part in Alexander’s predicament.

Both kids had probably planned to assume terrifying roles tonight. However, seeing as they could not locate the perfect prop, they decided to make one of their own instead. In an attempt to give the prop a test run, they had somehow convinced Alexander to retrieve the chainsaw for them around the same time that Courtney came home from work. Tina could not have thought of such an elaborate scheme, so it was more than likely that it was Jordan’s handiwork.

Courtney scoffed in disbelief at the audacity of those children. “You allowed them to get away with it,” she pointed out accusingly, rolling her eyes at him as she flicked his forehead.

Alexander made an irritated noise; he frowned like he was about to retort, but when he saw the mock exasperation on her face, he slightly drew back and stared. He was quiet for a moment as he recalled something.

When he was younger, he liked to visit the Lewis Family. Mikayla’s parents argued all the time and that was even far warmer than the ambience at his own home. He remembered how good it felt to be around them and now, he began to realize that there was a familiarity in the way Courtney treated him.

He felt as though someone had poured a bucket of cold water over him, causing him to snap him out of his reverie. How did I not realize that the warmth I had been pining for all these years is right next to me? The occasional humorous banter that kept me on my toes, the way I allowed Courtney to blame me for the small, insignificant things that I would have otherwise mercilessly refuted—these are the little changes that are leading me toward a life I always longed for.

Alexander remembered what his father told him when he was a child—the world was a wonderful place, but he just needed to find someone who could illustrate all the awesome things about it to him.

It was late at night by the time the kids returned home with a triumphant haul of sweets, having gone on a robust round of trick-and-treating in the entire apartment building.

Courtney brought the two children into the bath and gave them a good scrub-down. She then watched as they fell asleep before they could even get past the beginning of the bedtime story.

When she returned to her bedroom, she saw that Alexander was reading in bed. He looked up at her as she came in and he said, "Drink the milk while it's still warm."

She glanced at the glass of milk on the nightstand, smiling as she took notice of the mug. The mug came in a his-and-hers set—hers happened to be pastel pink with a minimalist design and a tiny heart engraved on it.

Courtney lifted a corner of the duvet and slithered into bed before finishing the milk.

Alexander, on the other hand, watched her. When he saw that she was done with the milk, he closed his book and reached out to switch off the reading light attached to the headboard. "Get some sleep," he said gently.

She did as she was told, but as she lay on the bed, she found herself unable to sleep. She muttered softly, "Would you be able to stand living like this for the rest of your life?"

His chin was propped on the top of her head, so when he spoke, it was as though his voice vibrated against her scalp. "I don't think there's anything wrong with living like this."

"However, what if you bump into your old friends and acquaintances? Won't you feel awkward then?"

"I think they would be the ones feeling awkward," Alexander mumbled thoughtfully. "Let them be smug all they want—I don't see the need to be bothered by them."

He sounded rather cavalier about it, as if he couldn't care less about those old acquaintances of his.

Courtney pressed on further, "How about if I ask you to be my date for the AW Business and Trade Cocktail Party? Casey sent me an invite and I have plans on attending, but you might run into more than a few familiar faces if we go together. Would you..."

Even as she trailed off, Alexander did not say anything.

In the dead silence of the night, she was beginning to regret bringing up the topic in the first place. She knew that men had their pride—there could have been a glitch in her brain for her to even mention anything about it.

After what seemed like ages, the arms around her tightened before Alexander's deep voice resounded next to her ear, "If I'm not going, who do you have in mind as a date?"

Courtney stiffened and answered slowly, "Seeing as Bill is our designer, it would be ideal for him to come with me and receive some publicity out of this, but he's been busy recently. Shay's definitely going with Casey, which leaves me with no one other than Oliver."

She was so preoccupied with her words that she was oblivious as to how his face was growing darker by the second.

“If that doesn’t work, Addie from the company would be fine too.”

Are you actually considering Addie from the company?” Alexander’s expression darkened. “What is on your mind when you bring up other men in front of me to attend the cocktail party?”

Courtney’s heart sank when she heard his husky and gloomy voice.

She felt a sudden movement and the next thing she knew, Alexander, who was lying on the pillow beside her, shifted above her.

“That is not what I meant.” She pushed against his chest. “I was afraid that you would be in an embarrassing situation. Besides, am I not asking for your opinion right now?”

“Are you asking me to pick a date for you?” His voice sounded even more menacing now.

Courtney felt as though the situation was worsening, but she braced herself when she retorted, “Well, since you’re not coming with me, I have to attend the event with somebody, isn’t it?”

“Did I say that I’m not going?” Alexander stared at her from above. The blanket covered his shoulders like a massive mountain while Courtney was rendered motionless underneath the pressure.

It is clearly for his sake, but he is blaming me now. She felt wronged. “I was just taking you into consideration. How would I know if you’d...” She was speaking halfway when she noticed Alexander’s intense gaze. She felt her chest tightening and she did not feel like speaking anymore. “Forget it. It’s useless to speak with you. Do as you please!” She turned her head away.

Alexander was astounded, so he slowly turned sideways to lie beside her. Just when he was about to hold her in his arms, she wriggled away to sleep at the edge of the bed. In fact, she completely ignored him.

After reflecting on his behavior earlier, he regretted not speaking nicely. “I know that you are concerned for me, but I care more about our lives together than others adding insult to my injury. If we aren’t together, it doesn’t matter who you attend the event with because I wouldn’t have the right to speak up. However, now that we are together, there shouldn’t be anybody else attending the cocktail party as your date apart from myself.” Courtney was still motionless at that point. Hence, he scooted closer to her while speaking in a rumbling voice. “I’m just afraid that your heart isn’t with me. However, the cocktail party of the business and trade industry isn’t as simple as you might imagine. I will be worried if I’m not by your side.”

She remained silent and just when Alexander was running out of ideas, she suddenly answered with a hoarse voice, “In any case, I can’t possibly take Jordan and Tina along, can I?”

His knitted eyebrows significantly relaxed. “Didn’t you mention that Oliver has a lot of time on his hands?”

Courtney turned to face him when she heard that. “Are you truly treating Oliver as your personal nanny?” she asked in shock.

“Well, isn’t he?” Alexander raised his eyebrows, as if taking the situation for granted. Oliver has been following Courtney around everywhere. He claims that he’s keeping her safe while investigating certain matters. In reality, as a man, I can tell that he has selfish motives. Everybody sees through him. Since

Oliver has accepted the money, he should be responsible for the safety of the two children too. I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

At 7.30 PM the next evening, the Business and Trade Cocktail Party, organized by the AW Group, was at the top floor of the most luxurious hotel in Melrose City—the Emerald Gem Hotel. The red carpet extended from the entrance of the hotel, welcoming the attendees who consisted of social elites and celebrities. Since the AW Group was mainly involved in the media industry, it was only natural for many celebrities to show up. Reporters were proud to receive an invitation for the event whereas those who did not loitered outside the entrance for some pictures.

Courtney and Alexander walked the red carpet while holding hands. Despite their plastered smiles, they were both chatting with each other in hushed tones.

“Casey deliberately turned a cocktail party into a film festival. He didn't need to make it so obvious even if he's trying to win Shay over, did he?”

He observed the surroundings thoughtfully for a while. “Well, it's not just for Shay. By doing this, the AW Group has more exposure too. The film and television entertainment industry has been gaining popularity for the past few years, so he is right to grab this opportunity to gain traction from the public.”

“If he's trying to gain attention, why isn't he coming out to the public with Shay?” She pouted unhappily. I have nothing to say about the secret love affair between Casey and Shay. After all, the locals aren't very receptive to relationships such as theirs. Besides, if Shay were to come out to the public, he would lose his career and he might be forced to retire from the industry. Nevertheless, I do not appreciate the rumors circulating about Casey recently. He has had scandals with countless female celebrities one after another and the news has been all over the media.

Despite understanding where Courtney was coming from, Alexander did not explain on Casey's behalf even though he was aware of certain facts. I have competed with Casey since our childhood. It's only fair for me to throw him under the bus right now.

Shay approached them the moment they entered the hall. “Courtney, I've waited a long time for you to arrive. Why are you so late?”

“The traffic was terrible. Besides, with the parade of extravagance out there, we had to line up since we had to walk the red carpet.” Courtney shot a pointed look behind Shay. Casey was like a shadow as he followed Shay closely from behind.

“Who knows what's going on in his mind? It's quite a lot of messing around for no good reason.” Shay was even harsher than her with his comments. He rolled his eyes impatiently at Casey, who was standing behind him. “Courtney, stay with me later and please don't go about as you wish, so as to avoid running into some unpleasant people.”

“What happened?” Courtney was bewildered.

Shay glanced at Casey when he heard that. “Courtney is speaking with you.”

Well, judging by his tone, he sounds like he's lecturing me. Courtney felt rather helpless. I wasn't asking about Casey when it's Shay whom I'm clearly addressing!

Casey did not seem angry; he kept his hands behind his back when he casually answered, “There are many people within the business and trading industry. It’s better to make a friend than an enemy. I am sure that Miss Hunter understands that point.”

“Stop trying to praise Courtney. Why don’t you come clean and say that you’ve invited the wretched couple, Isaac and Vanessa?”

Both Courtney and Alexander scowled at those two names being mentioned. They both wore the same expression—annoyance.

“Are they here too?” she asked while frowning deeply.

Casey nodded. He checked the surroundings to make sure that those two were not within earshot before explaining, “It is true that they are both here, but Shay isn’t right. It seems like the two of them didn’t come together.”

“They didn’t come together? What do you mean by that?” Courtney was confused. Isaac has been invited as a courtesy of Graham Enterprise. AW Group is on par with Sunhill Enterprise as a large corporation in Melrose City. Hence, it is Graham Enterprise’s honor to be invited to this event since they are a small business. Vanessa’s family isn’t doing well, so I just can’t figure out how she can attend the event apart from showing up as Isaac’s date.

The three of them stared at Casey, who adjusted his spectacles, when he answered pointedly, “Well, it is true that Mr. Graham did not show up with his wife. Unless I have been mistaken, he attended the event with a female anchor from our company. His wife’s situation is even more intriguing because she showed up together with Mr. Isaac’s brother.”

Courtney was stunned into silence and her frown deepened. After Isaac and Vanessa’s engagement party, we never met each other again. Later, I heard that they weren’t on good terms, but I didn’t expect them not to bother to even put up a front.