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Mom let out a deep sigh and continued her blabbering.

Meanwhile, I stayed on the line, unaffected by her rambling. Whenever she went on and on over the phone, I wished that I could just hang up.

"Anna, I quite like this boyfriend of yours. He knew that Dad's undergoing medical treatment, and it's a delightful surprise that he gave us a hundred thousand."

My eyes almost popped out of my sockets. Did Mom just say that Yuval gave them a hundred thousand?

I'd never mentioned anything about my family to him, let alone Dad's health condition. Thus, I couldn't wrap my head around this.

"Mom, what's going on? There's no way he's giving us money."

Although I had a feeling that Yuval fancied me, to pay for my Dad's medical fees was simply beyond the bounds of possibility.

"Well, he just did. He paid for your Dad's operation before, didn't he? Aren't you a lucky girl to have such a wealthy boyfriend like him?"

Her words shocked me to the core. Wait... wasn't it Michael who paid for the operation? Since when did it become Yuval? What the heck is happening?

Right at that moment, I was spiraling down the rabbit hole. Someone had given my parents a hundred thousand for nothing? Could it possibly be Michael? Nah, it can't be him. Why would he do that? Moreover, he wouldn't have let my family know about our unspeakable relationship.

However, among the people I knew, no one would do such a thing except Michael. My brain stopped functioning. Right then, I wasn't sure if it was Michael or Yuval.

"Mom, do you know his name?"

Now I was the one on tenterhooks.

"Anna, what kind of question is this? Your boyfriend gave us the money, and are you telling me that you don't know his name?"

"Just answer my question, Mom!"

I was getting frustrated.

"It was his assistant who brought us the money. He said that he's working for Mr. Shaw."

She sensed my agitation and made it short and sweet.

Now I could confirm that it was Michael who sent them the money. He was the only Mr. Shaw I knew.

My hands quivered as I tried to figure out what I was feeling inside. Why would Michael do that? It was pretty clear that I drove him up the wall that day, and I assumed that he was going to end our relationship. What was his agenda? Why did he pay for Dad's medical treatment?

I couldn't read him or had the faintest idea of what he was up to.

"Anna? Are you okay? You there?"

Mom urged for a response after a prolonged silence.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Anyway, I still have some work to finish up. Talk to you later. Bye."

I quickly hung up, just in case she bombarded me with a train of questions about my relationship with Michael. If we were talking about Yuval, I'd willingly let her know a thing or two. However, the person she was praising was Michael, and I honestly didn't know much about him.

After the call, it took me quite a while to pull myself together. I glanced towards the CEO's office, trying to decipher Michael's intentions.

My mind was all over the place as I wondered what made Michael do that.

At the same time, Millie could see that I was in a jumble. She traced my glance towards the CEO's office, turned back, and looked at me.

"Hey, Anna. You've been looking at that office for the longest time. What's up? Have you fallen for Mr. Shaw?"

Millie probed, and her words gave me goosebumps.

"N-N-Nonsense! Why would I fall for him?" I responded with a curt turn of the head and denied firmly.

I wasn't sure for what reason my heart didn't seem to agree with my words. What's the matter with me? The way I thought about Michael had somewhat changed.

"Look at those darting eyes of yours. What's there to deny? He's handsome and rich. Plus, he's single. It's only normal that you fancy him. I bet almost all the ladies here want to get a piece of him."

Guess my actions weren't convincing enough for Millie to believe me.

"How about you? Do you like him too?"

"That's for sure. He took my heart away the first time I saw him, but I knew that a Plain Jane like me would never be his type."

Millie was frank about her feelings for Michael. Heck, I could even see her eyes gleaming with hearts and sparkles when she spoke about him. Is she for real?

On the outside, Michael was cold, charming, wealthy, and didn't lust after women. If Millie knew what he was really like on the inside, I doubt her feelings for him would be the same.

"I don't think he's a nice guy, and I kind of despise him."

I looked at his office again.

Lots of women wished to be associated with him in one way or another, but not me. I wanted to run away from his ever-growing possessiveness and hoped that we'd never crossed paths ever again.

"Really, Anna? Not only do you dislike him, but despise him?"

Millie gave me a quizzical look. Apparently, she found it unbelievable.

"He's not a saint, so why should everybody like him? I don't like him. I detest him!"

The more she thought that I was in love with Michael, the more I denied it. Besides, I was telling the truth, anyway.

Hearing that, Millie stopped talking and looked at the CEO's office. Together with my knitted brows and pursed lips, I did the same. Blood drained from my face when I saw the person standing in front of it.

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Speak of the devil – the man himself was staring at me with his steely eyes.

I dropped my head as fast as I could and locked my neck. Why, oh why, is God playing tricks on me again?

Every time I badmouthed Michael, he would unfailingly appear somewhere close enough to hear it. Just when I thought things were finally getting better between us.

Millie, too, detected his overpowering hostility and went back to work. From what I could see, the ladies in the company seemed to fear Michael more than they liked him.

That was no surprise, though. His scrupulosity when it came to working would scare anyone off. A trivial mistake would cost someone her job.

"If I hear another word of gossip during work, you'd better send yourselves packing!"

He gave us his signature stare before uttering those threatening words.

Even with my head down, I could feel his piercing glare.

Only after I heard the closing of his door did I dare to lift my head again. His despotic aura followed him into his office.

"Oh my god! The way he looked at us was so scary! Anna, did you see those eyes?" Millie asked with her lips trembling.

"Yeah. Let's not gossip during working hours again, or we'll be fired."

Come to think of it, Michael was being lenient with us. I highly doubted that we'd be given a second chance if the CEO was someone else. Thus, Millie and I were considered lucky. However, I wondered if his leniency was because of me.

Millie nodded her head and kept quiet from there on.

After work, I went to the supermarket as usual. Doing things on my own most of the time did make me feel lonely.

Back when I was living with Natalie, we'd always hang out at night. But now it was just me, and nothing seemed to interest me anymore.

When I got back to the house in Birchwood, Michael was already on the couch with his legs crossed in the living room. The top two buttons of his shirt were let loose and as always, his gaze was gnawing at my soul. I quietly turned away.

"Hurry up and make me dinner."

He got up and strode towards me.

"What are you doing here? I thought I've made things clear that night?"

I ignored his request and wanted him to clarify.

Which part of my unwillingness and exhaustion didn't he understand? What was he trying to do, standing in front of me tonight?

"Yes, you did, but did I say I'm going to let you go? Anna, you started it. Do you think it'll be that easy to ditch me?" he murmured those shameful words into my ear.

How I wish I could give him two tight slaps to vent out my anger! How did men like that even exist? I'd told him everything at that point, so why couldn't he just let me go?

Right then, he could see that anger was bubbling in my eyes, yet he brushed it aside.

"You know, the more you resist, the chances of me letting you go dwindles. Treat me well, and who knows, maybe one day when I'm in a good mood, I'll set you free?" He paired his threat with a sneer.

What a bastard! Never had I imagined that I'd be entangled in this scruffy affair. This man was like gum that you could never shake off no matter how hard you tried.

Since there was no point arguing with him, I walked to the kitchen in a huff.

After countless quarrels, it was obvious that he only did what pleased him. None of my reasonings or pleads would affect him. Any attempt to talk sense into him would only be futile.

Michael sat on the couch and watched TV while I cooked. He never once looked over to the kitchen, not even a glimpse.

I felt like I was a working wife who was busy with house chores after a day of work. It was weird that he felt like kin to me sometimes.

The extended hours of being in the same space made this feel almost real, as if we were really family.

I must've been bewitched to feel this way.

Shaking my head unconsciously with the intention of shaking all my thoughts out, I didn't notice until I accidentally cut my finger with the knife.

"Ouch..."

My face crumpled, the knife fell onto the floor, and blood came oozing out from between the flesh.

In came Michael. When he saw the cut, his usual stoic dark eyes turned soft. "Why are you so clumsy? Are you okay?"

He sounded worried. Despite that, I wasn't sure if the kindness I saw in his eyes was just a delusion. Would a guy like him sincerely care for a casual sex partner?

"I wasn't paying attention," I explained softly.

"You idiot. Can't you be more careful?" A reprimand followed.

I started looking around for a Band-Aid, but he already had it in his hand.

"Thank you." When I tried to take it, he pulled his hand away, and before I had the chance to ridicule him, he offered to help. "Let me do it." He then took my hand, wiped off the blood, and sealed the wound carefully with the Band-Aid.

He did it so gently that I didn't even feel a pinch. I gaped at him as my mind became befuddled by his gentleness, though I must admit that his simplest act of kindness sent my heart fluttering.

Right then, I knew I had fallen for him, but I chose to live in denial, knowing that there'd be no future for us. I'd always tried to suppress my feelings, and that was why I wanted to break off from him.

If this relationship continued, I wasn't sure if I could stop the probable endearment towards him.

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"Be more careful for the next two days. Always keep the wound dry and clean."

My jaw was still hanging in astonishment, reliving his tenderness in my head.

"Anna, have you turned mute?" he blurted with a frown from my non-responsiveness.

When I finally got back to my senses, his face was already only an inch away from mine. I nervously drew my focus back onto the chopping board.

After that, Michael went back to the living room, and about half an hour later, dinner was ready.

It was simple cooking and not the best, I must say. It did make me wonder why Michael always came here for dinner.

To be frank, I believed that his housekeeper would've made something way better than what I could offer.

We sat across from each other and started eating away. Should I ask him about what Mom told me?

"Did you give my parents the money?"

I let it out as this question had been bothering me the entire day.

I didn't mind getting on his nerves again anyway, as I'd done that way too many times.

"News travels fast, doesn't it?"

He wasn't surprised and continued chewing his food graciously as if he had nothing to do with the money.

"So it really is you. Why did you send my family a hundred thousand out of the blue?"

I put down my fork and looked at him, confused.

"I remember that you said that it was exhausting to support the whole family. Since now you're my woman, things will change. I can send your family a hundred thousand every month," he haughtily suggested.

Everything became crystal clear to me right then. He sent them money because he deduced that whatever I said that night was a hint for him to give me more?

How dare he think that of me! I was only ranting!

"Michael, you must've misunderstood me. When I said that I wanted someone to lean on, I wasn't asking that person to share my responsibilities. I was just hoping that someone could give me a shoulder to cry on whenever I'm tired and feeling helpless."

I tried to oppress the rage in me as I patiently explained to him.

"What's the use of a shoulder? With free money, you don't have to work your a*s off to support your family. My goodness, Anna. I can't believe that a woman at your age could still be so naive!" he jeered.

That got me fuming. What he said was true. Women my age had been through enough, and most of them had bowed down to reality. Still, he shouldn't stereotype all women as such. Not everyone was money-minded.

It'd be unfair for the man if my purpose of being with him was merely to let him share my burden and responsibilities.

Yes, I was selfish, but not to the extent of getting someone to fund my family's expenses.

As a matter of fact, Dad's medical treatment wasn't the major spending. It was Steven's debt that had been sucking my bank account hollow. He was a good-for-nothing who always hung out with chavs. Not only that, but he was also a compulsive gambler.

Things wouldn't have been this tough if it was just Dad's monthly medical fee. However, Steven's debts kept rolling and rolling. No matter how many times I'd cleared his debt and his countless assurance of turning over a new leaf, he'd always go back to his old ways.

Thus, if I wanted someone to lean on and give me an endless supply of cash to fill this black hole, I would've been the most self-serving woman on earth.

"Michael, you can mock me, but that's what I really want. It's as simple as that. I was sharing with you my point of view, not asking you for money, so please, for the love of god, stop meddling with my life already."

I enunciated every single word.

"So within your capability, how much more can you do for your family? Anna, serve me for another six months. I've promised to give you a handsome amount of money after this ends. By then, you'll have one less problem in your life forever."

What he said really bemused me. What was so special about me that made him want to own me?

I wasn't ugly, but neither do I look fetching. For a guy like Michael to find someone pretty would be a piece of cake. He just had to whistle, and women would flock in droves to him. I mean, seriously, though, could someone answer my question? Why me?

"If that's the case, how am I different from a whore? Am I a whore to you?"

Undeniably, I'd got my hands on a great sum of money since I submitted to him. It was a sure-win trade, but what about my dignity? Was it below money?

I'd trampled my dignity once for two hundred thousand. It'd crushed me, and that was why I wouldn't allow it to happen again.

"You've positioned yourself as one, not me. Anna, what's so bad about being with me? Do you know how many people out there yearn for this? And here you are, saying no to me again and again. You even wanted to run away from me!"

A big cheese like him should've been used to women attending to all his whims and fancies. Perhaps I should be thankful for his patience after all this while.

"Yes, you can grant me money, but that's it. I want a boyfriend whom I could introduce to my family and friends. I want to get married and have children. Can you give me these? Since you can't, why can't you just let me go? Michael, we're poles apart in every single way."

That man thought all I wanted was money, but only I knew what my heart desired.

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If I really wanted money, I would have asked for it from him the first time we slept together. But I didn't.

All I wanted was to have a proper discussion with him, not another argument. He was a domineering man, but he wasn't coldhearted.

Michael scanned me from head to toe curiously. He didn't have to say a single word for me to guess what he was thinking and what he was about to do.

"I'd advise you to give up on the idea of becoming my girlfriend. I can give you anything except that. I would never marry a nobody like you; know your place, Anna!"

If I'm just a nobody, then why are you, a huge CEO, so insistent on clinging to me?

You're surrounded by so many great, intelligent women. You could easily get any one of them to fall for you. So, why me?

"I never wanted to become your girlfriend. Relax. I know where I stand."

A man like him was most likely going to marry someone hailing from a powerful family background and beloved by all those around her.

There was no way that a woman like me would ever become his wife, and the mere idea sent chills up my spine.

"I won't force you. You have time to figure things out."

I let out an internal sigh of relief. I knew Michael would be reasonable.

But I didn't need time to figure things out. I'd made the decision a long time ago to end things with him. I was just afraid that if I let our relationship go on this way, I would not be able to keep my feelings in check any longer.

Michael was way too out of my league, surrounded by flocks of admiring women. On the other hand, I was just an ordinary girl. Even though I, too, liked handsome, charming guys like him, this particular man was destined to never be mine.

I'm not going to let myself fall any further. I'm not going to let myself get hurt again.

I decided to not reveal my decision until after a few days passed so that I wouldn't aggravate him in his brief moment of kindness.

After dinner, I was under the impression that Michael would stay the night. Yet to my surprise, he left the table and picked up his coat as soon as he had finished his dinner, walking out the door without so much as a "goodbye."

He left me all alone in an empty house, and I hated it.

Later, I took a shower and lay down on my bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. My mind was consumed by thoughts of Michael.

I'd thought that I would never be able to love another man after Justin, but I hadn't expected to fall in love with Michael so quickly after.

All along, I'd been lying to myself that I hated Michael, but I understood all too well what I truly felt for him. When I couldn't help but think of him every time I tried to go to sleep, I chalked it up to having interacted with him too much during the day. It took me a while to realize that that was not the case.

I knew that this little crush would go nowhere, and I was scared to let myself get heartbroken once more. So, I curled in on myself like a porcupine and protected myself in the only way I knew how to – by keeping him at arm's length.

The sound of my phone ringing snapped me awake from my daze. I glanced at the screen, cheering up when I saw that it was Natalie.

I hadn't dared call Natalie for the past few days for fear that she might think that I was trying to get in between her and John again. There were actually several times where my finger nearly pressed the "dial" button, but I could never muster up the courage to do so.

I hurriedly answered the call. "Nat! You finally called!"

I must have sounded excited even through the phone. I mean, what could I say; Natalie calling was the best thing that had happened to me recently.

To my surprise, I heard Natalie sobbing on the other end. "Anna..."

"Why are you crying, Natalie? What's wrong?"

My heart lurched to the bottom of my stomach. Natalie was a bright, happy-go-lucky girl who rarely cried.

Was it that asshole, John? Did he hurt her?

Instantly, Natalie's answer confirmed my suspicions. "He lied to me, Anna. He's having an affair with another woman," she wailed.

I'd expected the answer, but my breath hitched in my throat nonetheless when hearing Natalie say it out loud.

Natalie was bawling her eyes out right then. However, I knew that whatever I said right now would fall on deaf ears. At that point, my best friend was devastated, and my heart went out to her as I knew exactly how she felt.

"Are you at home, Nat?"

I knew that she used to live together with John, but I didn't know whether or not she still did.

Natalie hiccupped. "Mm-mm..."

With that, I hung up the phone and immediately left the house.

The ride to Natalie's house was about ten minutes. I rushed up to the door and repeatedly rang the doorbell, worried sick that she might do something she would regret if she was left alone for even a minute longer.

Natalie had given me a spare key when I first left her house. Now, I regretted giving the key back to her when I moved away.

After a long, agonizing wait, Natalie finally opened the door. Letting out a relieved sigh, I dragged her into the living room and sat us both down on the couch. Her eyes were horribly red and swollen, and her clothes were all rumpled.

"Nat... What happened to you?"

I tucked a stray lock of messy hair behind her ear, giving her a pained look. I'd been friends with her for years, and I'd never seen her in such a state before.

John, you d*ck!

"I'm sorry, Anna. I should have listened to you in the beginning. John is nothing but a scumbag. He even brought that girl along with him when he met up with me for the breakup today," Natalie spat out through a stuffy nose, throwing herself into my arms.

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I knew all too well how much Natalie liked John. Yet, he had the audacity to not only cheat on her but also bring the girl he'd cheated on her with when asking to split with Natalie? What a f*cking a*shole!

"What the hell? How could he do such a thing?"

My hands clenched into fists, rage flaring up within me.

"I'm really sorry, Anna, I truly am. I know that you were only looking out for me back then. I'm sorry for not believing you..."

Natalie started crying even harder, constantly wiping her tears away with a tissue.

"It's okay, Nat. You don't have to apologize. You were head over heels for John; that wasn't your fault."

I probably would have done the same thing as Natalie if I were in her shoes.

"You really don't blame me? I even said that I was going to cut off all contact with you because of John..." She glanced up at me uneasily.

"Come on, we've been friends for so long; you know me! If I really was still angry at you, I wouldn't have come here at all."

It was true that I had been angry back then, and that was why I'd left her house. But I had grown to accept reality as time passed. Besides, Natalie was my best friend, and there was no way I could be angry at her forever.

"Thank you so much, Anna. Thank you for coming over to comfort me," she choked out, her arms tightening around me.

"Don't mention it. I know you must be feeling horrible right now. Cry all you want; you'll feel better afterward," I reassured her, patting her back in a comforting motion.

I knew all too well the heart-wrenching type of pain that was betrayal, causing one to lose all hope and motivation to continue living, and I knew that Natalie had to be feeling the exact same way.

"I really loved him, Anna," Natalie whimpered, her tears wetting my shirt. "Why did he have to do this to me? I even gave him my virginity... Why did he have to hurt me like this?"

Hearing that, I had no idea how to answer her.

Natalie was right; she had given up everything for this relationship. Unfortunately, people like her who did just that were usually always the ones to get hurt the easiest.

"Just forget about him, Nat. He's not worth your love. Just think of it as getting accidentally bitten by a dog."

Comparing John to a dog is an insult to all dogs around the world. At least dogs are loyal to their owners.

"But I really like him, and I really want to stay with him. What should I do?" Natalie insisted.

Of course she would feel indignant over getting dumped by John. After all, this was her first relationship, and she had poured all of her time, love, and effort into it. Anyone else would feel indignant if they were in her position.

"Calm down, Nat! You could do so much better than that guy!"

Natalie cried even harder after hearing me say that.

Oh, what I would give to hunt John down right now.

But all I could do was hug her and stay by her side for the time being. Regardless of however much I tried to give her advice or comfort her, she had to come to face the truth by herself.

Natalie stayed in my arms and sobbed throughout the rest of the night. She only finally drifted off into sleep when it was dawn, completely drained of energy.

Then, I carefully set her down on the couch, grabbing a blanket from her bedroom and tucking her in.

I heaved a heavy sigh as I looked at her. There was no telling when Natalie would be able to heal from this hardship. If only I'd been more determined to show her what John was really like...

After that, I took out my phone and glanced at the time. It was nearly time for me to go to work, but I felt anxious about leaving Natalie alone like this. So, I decided to call my supervisor and ask for a day off.

I sat by Natalie's side for a while, cleaning up her dried tears and snot before leaving to buy us breakfast.

Dragging my feet as I walked, I stared down at the pavement as I stewed in my own frustration and thought up various ways to get revenge on John.

Just then, my phone rang. My eyebrows furrowed together when I saw that Michael was calling, completely curious as to why he would call me at this time.

"Hello, Mr. Shaw," I politely greeted.

There was silence on the other end of the line for a second before I heard Michael demanded, "Why didn't you come to work today? Are you avoiding me?" He sounded upset and accusatory.

"No, Mr. Shaw. Even if I didn't want to see you, I wouldn't give up my salary to do so. I had something urgent to tend to, and I've already asked to take a day off from my supervisor. I don't need to inform you too, do I, Mr. Shaw?" I sighed in exasperation.

At the state I was in, I wished I could work overtime every day just so I could earn a little extra money. Why would I not go to work because I wanted to avoid him? His imagination and narcissism were truly something else.

It's not like my world revolved around you, y'know!

"What is your reason for not coming to the office?" he pressed on.

"Why do I need to tell you my reason? I was already granted leave."

I was already in a bad mood before this, but Michael's incessant questioning only worsened it. Who does he think he is?

"I'm your boss, Anna. Do you think you can get away with taking a day off without giving me a valid reason why?"