

## Whispered Goodbye Chapter 09

When I returned to the table from the restroom, Tori Justice was holding my phone, frowning at me. Looking closely, it wasn't a familiar number, but the call had already been answered.

Tori Justice didn't give me any hints, just smiled eerily.

"Hello?" I took the phone and walked to a quieter spot.

An annoyed "Senior" came from the other end of the line.

Then a familiar yet impatient voice came through the speaker.

"You're Senior Leo's girlfriend, right? He's drunk and making a scene. Come pick him up near your place."

Jade Kingsley was calling me to pick up Leo Sterling?

"Leo Sterling and I have broken up. You should know the address, right? Why don't you send him home with your fellow student?"

Leo Sterling never touched alcohol because of his alcoholic father. What was this all about?

"But my boyfriend's coming to pick me up. I don't want to keep him waiting. You wouldn't want Senior to sleep on the street, would you?"

Jade Kingsley said righteously.

I asked her with a strange tone if Leo Sterling knew she had a boyfriend.

Jade Kingsley seemed confused, saying she didn't think she had any obligation to tell Leo Sterling, as he was just a senior colleague.

I let out a self-deprecating laugh.

For Leo Sterling's sincerity, and for my own.

I returned to the table and sat down. Tori Justice was making faces at me, but I told her to stop, saying it was just a prank call.

But who could have guessed that the other protagonist of that “prank call” would appear early the next morning?

Leo Sterling, with bloodshot eyes, walked straight towards me carrying a clay pot of fresh-cooked congee, under the gaze of many colleagues.

I started to regret my choice of which foot I stepped into the office with just moments ago, superstitiously thinking it might have brought me bad luck.

“I didn’t know where you lived, so I had to bring it to your office,” Leo Sterling said, with a hint of apology.

I led him to the reception room, where he took out the bowl he’d brought and began ladling out the congee.

He mentioned going to the farmers’ market at six this morning, thinking it was quite early.

To his surprise, the market was already bustling with people, and fresh meat was practically a free-for-all.

It had been years since he’d cooked fresh-cooked congee himself, and he’d almost forgotten how.

In his fumbling haste, he’d even scalded his hand, leaving two blisters.

Leo pushed the congee towards me, his tone gentle and eager to please.

“So you didn’t come to see me about a legal matter?” interrupted his rambling.

Leo froze, his grip tightening on the spoon.

Seeing him shake his head in silence, my tone grew cold.

“This is my workplace, not a venue for you to try and win me back. I expect you to respect my work.”

Leo’s face paled as he pressed his lips together, making a move to take out his phone to transfer money to me.

I stopped him and asked him to leave with the congee.

“At least have a bowl of congee, hmm? It’s your favorite, isn’t it? I woke up extra early to make it.”

Leo’s eyes were pleading.

I’d had many such mornings, and six o’clock wasn’t particularly early.

The congee was his choice to make, not my request. I had no obligation to eat it. He shouldn’t try to guilt-trip me.

After hearing my words, his gaze dimmed, and his “I’m sorry” came out dry and coarse.

I stood up and opened the glass door, gesturing for Leo to leave.

As he gathered his things from the table, his hand suddenly shook, spilling the bowl of congee.

Leo looked at me helplessly, and I sighed, going to the pantry for a cloth.

He asked me with downcast eyes if there really was no chance.

It was just that he’d gotten a bit closer to Jade Kingsley, but it was all for our future, he said. Our future?

“So you’ve cut ties with Jade now?” I asked pointedly.

He shook his head, bewildered.

“When I broke up with you, didn’t that mean there’s no more ‘us, just ‘you’? I thought you’d stop cozying up to Jade.” I shrugged, watching Leo’s face flush red and white.

I let out a derisive laugh. “You think it’s about Jade now, but what about the Lisa Golds and Zoe Golds that might come along later?”

Leo insisted it wouldn’t be like that.

But the problems between us weren’t just about third parties in our relationship.

Between studies and me, Leo chose studies; between career and me, Leo chose career.

I was Leo's lover, his family. I didn't expect him to prioritize me above everything else.

I just hoped he could consider me equally.

But what belonged to me were only the long nights I endured alone, sick with fever, and the mornings I still got up early after exhausting work days.

Birthday candles blown out alone, meals eaten in solitude, evenings running frantically in downpours without an umbrella to catch the bus.

If I'd weathered so many fragile moments on my own,

Did Leo's presence or absence even matter to me anymore?

Leo stood still as a statue.

Then I heard him say we'd been together for ten years, we were inseparable family, he thought I'd always be there.

"Leo, my mom raised me for fifteen years, and she still tossed me aside without a second thought.

"Ten years is nothing. I guess I'm tired of always being the second choice as family. I don't want to be abandoned again."

The pain from our families spanned our lives up to now; neither of us could easily let it go.

"I heard you got drunk and made a scene last night, Leo. Don't make me lose what little respect I have left for you."

Let's not repeat the same mistakes, Leo.