

Lost Me, Gained Regret (Jane and Bryant Ferguson)

Chapter 271

"Seriously, how many times do I have to say it? He's out of your league! Why won't you believe me?"

She covered her mouth and laughed mockingly before grabbing my cheeks harshly and coming closer, her voice filled with spite. "Why bring this upon yourself? You think I'm like that stupid Margaret, dreaming of entering the Ferguson estate but can't even handle a pebble like you in my path? Look, Jane, I've always gotten what I wanted, never missed once. If I can't have it, you think my mom will just sit back and watch me be unhappy? What makes you think you can compete with me, all alone and powerless?"

As she spoke, she glanced at a tattooed thug nearby. "Call Bryant."

"Right." The tattooed man immediately made the call.

I frowned at Dorothy, saying icily, "You're in cahoots with Jarrod. What are you planning?!"

"What do you think?"

She smirked, clapping her hands as she stood up, looking down at me. "Worried I'll harm Bryant? Please, he's the husband I've carefully chosen. Instead of worrying about him, you should be worrying about yourself."

I looked up. "What do you want from me?"

"Well, let's see," Dorothy said, hands clasped behind her back as she leaned in, "if both of us were kidnapped, and he could only save one, who do you think he'd choose?"

I paused.

He had told me this morning to trust him. He told me to always trust him, no matter what.

I clenched my fists as I replied, "I don't know."

After all, the last time it came down to choosing, Bryant didn't even glance my way.

Besides, I was afraid of angering Dorothy further. Who knows what madness she could unleash?

With the Myers family backing her, she could probably get away with murder here today. "Don't know, huh?"

Dorothy chuckled cruelly. "Well, today we'll find out. Jane, it's time you faced reality. People like you, bottom-feeders, have no place trying to climb into our world."

At that moment, the tattooed man returned. "Ms. Myers, done. I told Bryant both you and Jane have been kidnapped, and he needs to come himself."

Slap!

Dorothy's hand landed sharply on his face. "Bryant? You address him as Mr. Ferguson!"

The tattooed man looked annoyed but seeing Jarrod lounging carelessly, quickly corrected himself. "I've informed Mr. Ferguson as you instructed." "What did he say?"

"Mr. Ferguson sounded very anxious. He's on his way now."

"Good."

Dorothy nodded, satisfied, and signaled to the others. "Tie up this bitch."

Jarrold's men, accustomed to dirty work, were both quick and ruthless.

In no time, I was tied to a column, utterly helpless.

And just as I was secured, Dorothy eyed the stool beneath my feet and raised an eyebrow, "Kick the stool away. It's more fun to have her dangling."

With a swift kick from the tattooed man, I lost all support, slowly sliding downward, suspended in mid-air.

The rope dug painfully into my skin, burning wherever it touched.

As I slid further down, the rope tightened, soon making it hard to breathe.

The pain was intense, the pressure unbearable...

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Struggling for air, my consciousness began to blur.

The discomfort was so unbearable that I wished for death.

I had vowed to never entangle with Bryant again, yet in this dire situation, he was the only person my mind could grasp.

"Bryant... Please, come quickly... Save me..." I silently pleaded in my heart.

Just as I was about to lose consciousness completely, a bucket of cold water was suddenly splashed over me.

The basement, already chilled by the draught, became even colder, snapping me back to some semblance of awareness while making me shiver uncontrollably. The icy water trailed down my cheeks, neck, and under my collar, biting into my bones.

As I lifted my eyes, I saw Dorothy tied up to a pillar nearby.

Her face bore the imprint of two slaps, and her clothes were filthy and tattered, presenting a picture of utter disarray.

Yet, she stood on a chair, calm and composed.

I let out a weak, cold laugh, "Looks like you're quite the actress."

"Does it matter?" Dorothy retorted with confidence. "All that matters is who he'll choose!"

At that moment, the sound of a car engine approached.

Dorothy kicked away the chair beneath her, casting me a superior look, "Jane, don't blame me. Blame your lowly status that makes you so easy to manipulate."

Soon, a familiar figure descended into the basement, his posture dignified, still dressed in the bespoke suit from the morning.

His gaze instantly found mine, his pupils narrowing, before someone stopped him a few feet away.

Jarrold, lighting a cigar with a smile, greeted, "Mr. Ferguson, it's not easy getting a moment with you."

Bryant's expression darkened, his gaze sharp and foreboding, "Let them go."

"I was hoping to do some business with Mrs. Ferguson today," Jarrod settled into a chair. "But then, my men tell me Ms. Myers here has some unclear ties with you. Couldn't decide who to take, so I brought both."

"What do you want?" Bryant asked impatiently.

Jarrood burst into laughter, "I don't want anything now. Just curious to see, Mr. Ferguson... who you'd choose to save."

Bryant's eyes narrowed, his gaze sharp. "What are you implying?"

A handgun was placed in front of him. With a twisted smile, Jarrod explained, "This gun has just one bullet left. Mr. Ferguson, pick someone to use it on, the rest is up to you."

The implication was clear: the gun was meant for either me or Dorothy.

Bryant's jaw clenched, too far for me to clearly discern his expression.

My breathing slowed involuntarily.

With a chilling tone, Bryant asked, "Are you sure?"

"Mr. Ferguson, can you really care for two women at once? What's wrong with getting rid of someone insignificant?" Jarrod clearly had no regard for human life. Bryant held the gun, hesitating to act.

Suddenly, Jarrod grabbed another gun from his man, pointed it first at me, then at Dorothy, swinging it back and forth.

My heart raced to my throat!

No one is immune to the fear of death.

I'm no different.

Dorothy looked at Bryant in desperation, "Bryant... save me!"

"Still undecided?"

Jarrood cocked the gun, "I'll count down from three. If you haven't decided by then, I'll decide for you!"

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"Three..."

The atmosphere around Bryant plummeted as he steadied his grip on the gun, aiming it directly at Dorothy.

Dorothy shook her head frantically, "No... please, Bryant, don't..."

But Bryant's expression was stone-cold, unyielding. Yet, when our eyes met for a fleeting second, I caught a glimpse of the profound restraint hidden deep within his gaze. Jarrod was still counting down, "Two..."

Bryant clenched his jaw, his wrist giving a slight twitch as he cocked the gun single-handedly.

"One..."

The gunshot echoed - but in that critical moment, Bryant swiveled the gun away from Dorothy and aimed it squarely at me!

I was paralyzed, my blood running cold.

So, it was me he was willing to forsake all along.

Even if it meant my death.

Despair seeped into my very bones in an instant, as I stared blankly in Bryant's direction, my vision blurring.

Though the anticipated pain never arrived, a piercing agony throbbed somewhere deep inside me.

"I'm doing this willingly..."

"Trying to win you back..."

"I'll take the next ninety-nine steps, just stay here and don't back out on the last one."

"Jane, I'm serious, and I will make amends. I can't lose you."

"I'm the one with impure thoughts."

"No matter what happens, you have to trust me."

All the promises of winning back his wife, all the declarations of profound love, turned into a cruel joke in that moment.

All lies.

His love for me was never worth anything.

It was me who was foolish, naively hoping he would choose to save me...

He would never choose me. Never.

How could I be so naive?

Jarrold laughed again, "Haha, Mr. Ferguson, don't be mad, it was just a joke. One is Ms. Myers, the other your wife, for now, at least. I wouldn't dare touch them."

"But I must say, Mr. Ferguson, even you can't escape the age-old tale of chasing something new and discarding the old!"

A thin layer of frost seemed to cover Bryant's dark expression, "Can we go now?"

"Since you've chosen Ms. Myers, of course, you can take her with you, by all means!" Jarrod said.

Bryant walked over, his face a mask of barely discernible struggle. To anyone who didn't know him, it would be invisible.

The man who had assured me of his trust that morning didn't even spare me a glance now.

He went straight to Dorothy, untied the ropes binding her, and lifted her into his arms right before my eyes.

"Woohoo... Bryant, I was so scared... You're so good to me, I don't know what I'd do without you!"

Dorothy acted as if she had been through a tremendous ordeal.

Jarrold tentatively spoke up, "Mr. Ferguson, what about Mrs. Ferguson? If you insist on taking both, we can make it work. We could negotiate the West End project terms, just cede another twenty percent of the profits to us."

"Jarrod," Bryant scoffed, as if he'd heard the world's funniest joke, disdainfully retorting, "what makes you think I would give up such a significant profit for an ex-wife? Hasn't she held me back enough?"

His last words were crystal clear, yet deeply cutting, stabbing right into my heart with sharp precision, causing me a jolt of pain.

I looked up to see a faint smile on his face, as if he was merely engaging in light banter.

In that moment, a wave of bitterness surged up to my throat.

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As it turned out, Bryant was indeed thinking that.

I was just a burden to him. He must have been harboring resentment for a while.

Otherwise, such cutting words wouldn't have come out so easily.

A bitter smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. I should've never hoped he would come to my rescue.

Jarrold clapped his hands, saying, "Mr. Ferguson, you really live up to expectation, able to let go so easily!"

"Bryant..."

Dorothy winced in Bryant's arms, "My leg hurts so much, I think I injured it just now."

"Hmm."

Bryant responded, ready to stride away!

Jarrold called out to him, "Mr. Ferguson, about Ms. Webster..."

"Whatever!" Without stopping, Bryant spat, indifferent.

It seemed, how I ended up didn't concern him at all. His attention was solely on Dorothy's injury.

His tall, straight figure quickly disappeared from my sight.

Outside, the sound of tires screeching against the ground echoed for a few seconds before everything returned to silence.

I squinted at the flickering bulb above, suddenly laughing, "You want to kill me, don't you? Go ahead."

Bryant's earlier shot had already given me a brush with death. I was no longer afraid.

Jarrold stubbed out the remainder of his cigar on the ground, looking at me with flushed cheeks, "Mrs. Ferguson, the Myerses might be fools, but I'm not. For now, I wouldn't dare touch you. Today, I'll let you go but if there ever comes a time when I need a favor, I hope you'll speak well of me."

"What good could I do for you?"

I laughed at myself. Me, powerless and as insignificant as an ant, easily crushed by the Myerses, how could I possibly be of help to him?

Jarrold waved his hand, "You can't talk like that. Fortune turns like a wheel; who says you'll always be down on your luck?"

I didn't believe he was being kind, "You're really willing to let me go?"

"Of course."

Jarrold signaled his men to untie me, then slowly said, "But, you can't let the Myerses know that I let you go this easily." Suddenly freed, I collapsed on the ground, gasping for fresh air as life surged back into me.

After a moment, I managed to speak, "Is that so, and how do you want me to cooperate?" "Jarrod, Mr. Ford has arrived."

One of the thugs suddenly came down, his face flushed with panic.

Was it Gregory?

Jarrold asked, "Which Mr. Ford?"

"Vista Town's Mr. Ford."

Smack!

Jarrold's face turned livid, and he slapped his subordinate, cursing, "Are you an idiot, leaving him waiting outside?!"

He couldn't bother with me anymore, straightening his long coat as he hurried upstairs.

It seemed he ran straight into Gregory at the entrance to the basement.

Jarrold, who dared to negotiate terms in front of Bryant, was completely cowed in front of Gregory, "Greg, I mean, Mr. Ford, you wanted to see me? A call and I would've been right there, why go through the trouble of coming yourself?"

I wasn't sure it was Gregory until I heard "Greg."

At Dorothy's birthday party, that's how Gregory's close friends had called him too.

"See you?"

Gregory was as arrogantly casual as ever, "Do you have any idea, you've messed up my plans?"

"What, what plans?"

"Jane was supposed to pick someone up for me, and you got her tied up here?"

Gregory's voice was filled with cold fury, "Jarrod, you've gotten bold, have you no respect left for me?"

"I..." Jarrod seemed unwilling to provoke him, quickly using Dorothy as his excuse, "I... I had no choice. Mrs. Myers and her daughter came to me with this request. You know... I can't afford to offend the Myerses either, but I didn't know about Ms. Webster and you. Had I known about your ties, I wouldn't dare lay a finger on her!"

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The arrogance had left the room along with Jarrod's confidence.

Gregory cracked a slight smile, his voice light, "I don't care about your Myers family connections. If you touch her again, I won't hesitate to send you to join your brother six feet under."

Jarrold dropped to his knees with a thud, "I was wrong. You have my word, I owe everything I have to you. From now on, if you say jump, I'll ask how high, and I'll respect Ms. Webster as I do you." I was puzzled at first, wondering why Jarrod would dare to negotiate with Bryant yet seemed terrified of Gregory. It then became clear to me.

The Ferguson Group was all about legitimate business, steering clear of the murky waters.

But the Ford family, they had a foot in both worlds, feared and respected in equal measure.

"You better keep your word," Gregory spat, his patience wearing thin. "Now take your crew and get lost."

"Right away!"

Jarrold scrambled to his feet, motioning for his men to leave. Before exiting, he turned to me, hands clasped in a plea, "Ms. Webster, I truly intended to let you go. Please, if you could just..." "Take a look." I lifted my hands for him to see the raw wounds, "Jarrod, I might let this slide, but I expect Dorothy to share the same fate."

I was done turning the other cheek. If no one was willing to spare me, why should I seek peace?

"Ms. Webster..." Jarrod was on the verge of tears.

Caught between the Ford and the Myers families, he couldn't afford to offend either.

I smiled gently, "No matter the Myers family's influence, this is RiverCity, your turf. Making her suffer without drawing attention shouldn't be hard, right?"

"Ms. Webster, please don't make this difficult..."

Before he could finish, Gregory descended the stairs, flicking his lighter, "You sure have a lot to say to someone who kidnapped you."

I pursed my lips, pretending to leverage my situation, "I was asking Jarrod for a favor, but he refused..."

"I'll do it!" Jarrod couldn't afford to hesitate any longer, his voice loud with desperation, "Ms. Webster, I agree!"

Better to agree now and figure out a solution later than to openly defy Gregory.

"Thank you," I smiled in relief.

He quickly led his men out, leaving the basement eerily quiet except for the whistling wind.

Gregory looked down at my disheveled state, his brow furrowing slightly, "You're the first wealthy man's wife I've seen in such a mess."

"Thanks to your beloved 'sister'."

Knowing his ties with the Myers family, I couldn't help my sarcasm.

He didn't deny it, merely raising an eyebrow, "Can you stand?"

I had tried to get up a few times, but the injury on my ankle was as bad as my hands, if not worse. Any attempt would only lead to more pain, "I need your help." "Alright."

With a lazy nod, he pocketed his lighter and bent down. As I reached out my hand, he effortlessly scooped me up, his grip secure under my back and knees. "Mrs. Ferguson, sometimes, showing a little vulnerability might work in your favor."

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Hearing that, I fell silent.

It wasn't until the car sped off into the night that I turned to look at Gregory again.

"How did you find this place?" I asked.

He unlocked his phone and tossed it my way, "Your husband sent me the address."

I glanced at the screen, a message from an unknown number.

It might not even be Bryant. Or rather, I couldn't bring myself to believe it was Bryant.

Gregory seemed to catch onto my hesitation. With a casual grip on the steering wheel, he began to theorize, "With everything that's gone down today, the Myerses must've offered Jarrod something sweet to get on board. Dorothy kidnapping you was definitely a move against Bryant; thus, nobody else would know this address."

"Jarrod's guys, who've got no beef nor bond with me and certainly don't know I'm connected to you, wouldn't be the ones to get me to rescue you."

"So, the text could only have come from Bryant."

This was the first time he had taken such a patient and elaborate approach with me.

I clenched my fist, "Got it, thanks."

It was the usual pretense.

Sending messages to Gregory on one hand and turning guns on me with the other.

At a stoplight, Gregory glanced over, "Go to hospital?"

I shook my head, "Just home."

I was exhausted and didn't want another hospital trip. These wounds looked worse than they actually were. A hospital visit would probably just mean some disinfection and ointment, all of which I had at home. Remembering he had asked me to pick someone up, I ventured, "I didn't pick up your girlfriend, hope I didn't cause any trouble?"

"Girlfriend?"

His frown was severe as he shot me a sideways glance, "Your imagination's wasted not writing."

I was confused. He then said in a calm tone, "She's fine, very easy-going."

That put my mind at ease, but it didn't stop my questions.

After what had happened, I felt like I had walked through the gates of hell and back, leaving me somewhat out of sorts in the ensuing calm.

Arriving at River Villa, Gregory carried me out of the car and into the elevator lobby, tilting his chin, "What are you waiting for? Hit the button."

I snapped back to reality, "Right."

Stepping out of the elevator, we were greeted by a familiar figure.

"What happened to you?"

Mark's face darkened at the sight of my injuries, reaching out to take me from Gregory.

Gregory held firm, skillfully deferring, "We're practically at the door. I'll bring her in."

"Alright."

Mark, mindful of my injuries, didn't press further and reached to open the door, surprised to find his fingerprint still worked.

He looked at me in surprise, and I smiled, "Landlords usually keep a key, right? As a tenant, it wouldn't make sense for me to delete your access."

Once inside, Gregory placed me on the couch.

I looked up at him, "Thanks for today."

Though it was Dorothy who stirred up trouble, it ultimately had nothing to do with him.

He really didn't have to involve himself.

He said casually, "You owe me two meals now."

"I'll treat you once I'm better," I was resigned.

He didn't stick around; instead, he turned to Mark and playfully raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't take advantage of people in vulnerable positions, would you?"

Mark's smile was light, "If you didn't, why would I?"

"I'll leave her in your care then. I'm not cut out for the delicate work of treating wounds."

With a yawn, Gregory lazily made his exit.

Mark brought over a first aid kit, his gaze softening with concern as he looked at my injuries, "What exactly happened?"

"It's nothing."

I hesitated, not daring to tell him everything, just smiling, "See, I made it back fine, really. You don't need to do anything more for me. I know things are complicated with your family; you need to look after yourself first."

I still vividly remembered the last time he took a beating on my behalf.

I couldn't bear to see him in trouble again because of me.

Seeing the shadow in his eyes, I changed the subject, "Did you come over for something specific today?"

"I heard you were looking for an office space, and we have some available property. I thought you might want to check it out," Mark explained gently. "But when I couldn't reach you by phone, I got worried and came over."

I thanked him before letting him know, "No worries, Christine and I already found a place."

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Chapter 277

We were on the cusp of securing that office space, just waiting for the investment from RF to come through.

Mark seemed taken aback when he heard I'd managed to rent an office despite the Myers family's decree banning me from doing so in RiverCity. "You found one?" "Yeah," I nodded. "Seems like the landlord's based overseas. Probably doesn't care much about the Myers family. After all, out of sight, out of mind."

"That's a relief."

Mark carefully dabbed antiseptic on my wounds, his voice full of worry, "This must hurt, right?"

"It's bearable."

I gritted through the pain, reminding myself over and over: No more being soft-hearted from now on.

This world has always been about the survival of the fittest, no good deed goes unpunished.

...

The next morning, Christine showed up at my place bright and early.

She burst through the door, surprised to find me already up. "Weren't you injured? Why not rest a bit more?"

I set aside the fashion magazine I was flipping through. "Did Mark tell you?"

"Yeah, he texted me last night."

Christine dumped a bunch of groceries on the dining table, annoyed with herself, "Sorry, I went out drinking last night and only saw the message this morning."

"It's fine, I'm not in bad shape."

"Let me be the judge of that."

She marched over, lifting my shirt to inspect the damage from head to toe, her eyes reddening with anger, "And you call this 'not in bad shape'? What would you consider serious, then? Who the hell did this?" "Dorothy." I gingerly touched my wrist, still sore, and ruffled her hair, "Chris, she's not leaving RiverCity anytime soon. Our journey in setting up our company is going to be tough."

"I'm going to face her!" Christine didn't even hear the rest of my words, ready to storm off.

I stopped her, "What good will that do? Beat her up and then what? Either of us end up in a worse situation?"

"What should I do then?! Just let you suffer in vain?"

Christine was always ready to throw down, "I'll go down with her, how about that?"

"It won't be in vain."

I shared with her the promise I'd wrung out of Jarrod.

Only then did she calm down a bit, looking at me skeptically, "Really?"

"Really," I assured her, then asked, "Did you hear what I said earlier?"

I was afraid of dragging her into this.

But she brushed off the concern, "Would you give up on Janedream because of Dorothy, a piece of trash? If not, then I'm with you all the way."

I pondered for a moment, "Okay."

Should anything else come our way, we'd just have to play it by ear.

Christine had marketing experience, I had my design skills. We were almost ready to get the company off the ground, just waiting on RF's funding to move forward. So, Christine let go of her plan for retaliation.

...

When I woke up from my nap, Christine looked even more troubled than when she had seen my injuries in the morning.

Seeing me, she clumsily tried to hide her tablet, "Oh, you're awake?"

"Let me see." I approached, reaching out for the tablet.

Christine knew she couldn't keep it from me in the age of the internet. Reluctantly, she unlocked it and handed it over.

The headline hit me like a truck.

"Ferguson and Myers Families Announce Nuptial Plan!"

Both families were local dynasties, well-known in the community. The news had just broken and was already trending.

I felt like I had a sponge lodged in my throat but tried to play it off, "Is this what you're upset about?"

I had suspected something like this would happen when Bryant chose Dorothy last night.

I just didn't expect it to come so fast.

"Is this it?"

Christine paused, seeing through my facade. After a moment's hesitation, she looked at me earnestly, a rarity for her, "Jane, when I broke up with Steven, I learned something... something I've been afraid to tell you."

"What is it?"

"About your feelings for Bryant, all these years."

Christine looked down, "I was always worried you couldn't handle it. But knowing what we know now, maybe it's better to have told you sooner."

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Christine was rarely this serious, and a vague sense of unease began to rise in my heart.

It felt as if something was about to shatter.

I stared at Christine, biting my lower lip, "I'm all ears. Lay it on me."

"Actually..."

Christine struggled with her words, clenched her teeth, and finally blurted out, "The person who took you to the infirmary in college, and the one who brought you food, it wasn't Bryant!"

Not Bryant?

My mind was buzzing, everything went blank for a second, and I was totally shocked.

It took a while before I could gather my thoughts, feeling as if a heavy stone was pressing on my chest, making my voice tremble, "Really?"

I knew it was true.

Christine knew too well how much this meant to me. She wouldn't have told me unless she was absolutely sure.

But then...

What did all my years of affection amount to?

Christine nodded, "Yeah."

"So... the person who helped me..."

I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm, "Was it actually Mark?"

Christine was taken aback, "How did you know?!"

"It all makes sense now..."

I responded, but my mind was swirling with a bitter realization.

No wonder.

No wonder Bryant always thought I had a thing for Mark, constantly questioning the nature of my relationship with him.

No wonder he panicked when I told him my feelings for him were based on those actions.

He even asked me if I would still like him if it wasn't him who helped me.

I should have realized sooner!

I was too blinded by my own assumptions....

All this time, the light I'd been chasing had never shone on me. Not even for a moment did he share his warmth with me.

He didn't like me, yet he watched coldly as I suffered, mistaking him for someone else, falling and struggling in vain.

No wonder that gun was pointed at me without hesitation.

It was all one-sided!

Always had been!!

Christine looked out the window, suddenly saying, "Jane, it's snowing! The forecast predicted it yesterday, but it didn't, I thought maybe it wouldn't at all!"

I turned to look outside at the snowflakes swirling down. Without a doubt, by evening, the ground would be covered in a layer of pristine white.

"The weather forecast predicts snow this Sunday. Want to build a snowman together?"

That message suddenly invaded my thoughts.

I couldn't help but laugh, a laughter that soon tasted salty with tears.

It was all lies.

All of it.

The day he told me he'd come build a snowman with me, he was pointing a gun at me.

On the day it actually snowed, he announced his engagement to another woman!

Bryant, how hypocritical you are.

Staying silent through my years of misplaced affection...

Vilely basking in my affection with no intent of reciprocation!

I murmured, "I was wrong..."

So terribly wrong.

"Jane?" Christine handed me a few tissues, cleaning my tears, "Hey, this isn't your fault. No one could have seen this coming. If anything... it's just fate playing tricks." Fate playing tricks, huh.

I didn't know how long I cried before I finally calmed down, curled up on the couch, staring blankly out the window.

The snow kept falling.

I couldn't quite pinpoint what I was feeling at that moment.

Before, I had felt wronged, saddened, disappointed...

But now, a mix of emotions were tangled together, and above all, there was this sense of indignation.

Indignant on my own behalf.

Ding dong!

The doorbell rang.

"That must be the delivery I ordered! With this heavy snowfall, let's have a cozy night in with some stew!"

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Barefoot, Christine dashed to the door, freezing momentarily upon opening it. "Mark, you... came to see Jane?"

"Yeah." With a gentle smile, Mark stepped inside, glancing my way as he slipped off his shoes. "How are you feeling today? Still in pain?"

Seeing him again, even just after a night, made me feel strangely unworthy.

It was Mark who helped me out!

Noticing my daze, Mark chuckled, "Daydreaming?"

"No, not really." I hastily shook my head, pulling myself back to the present to answer his earlier question. "Much better, not as painful as yesterday."

"That's good to hear."

He placed a bag on the coffee table, "I swung by the pharmacy to pick up some scar treatment for you. Those injuries of yours are no joke, and even though they're not on your face, we can't be careless about them. We don't want any scars."

Feeling a mix of guilt and gratitude, I was more compliant than usual. "Yeah, I'll use it when I change my dressings tonight."

"Hold off for now."

The house was warm, heated throughout, as Mark took off his white down jacket, explaining with a light laugh, "You should wait until the wounds start to heal before using the scar treatment." "Okay." I nodded, making a mental note.

Just as Christine was about to close the door, our takeout arrived. She carried it into the kitchen. "Dinner's on me tonight. You guys just sit back and relax."

Stew was the best choice in this weather.

Neither Mark nor I objected.

From the kitchen came the soft clinking of utensils. Mark, with a side glance, observed me closely, his gaze tightening slightly. "Have you been crying?"

"...Yeah."

There was no denial.

For eight whole years, mistaking someone else's kindness for another's had led me to fall for the wrong person. It was worth shedding a few tears over.

Had I not been mistaken, I might not have fallen for Bryant so deeply.

He was like the calm after a storm, a bright distant moon, but I had never dared to see him as my beacon, to carelessly fall for him.

At most, like others, I'd cherished a fleeting crush, moving on after graduation.

Mark appeared somewhat helpless. Misunderstanding the cause for my sadness, he tried to comfort me, "Matters of the heart require some blessing from fate. You were already on the path to divorce, and now with his announcement of an engagement, you can start to let go..."

"Mark," I suddenly cut him off, staring at his kind and gentle face, holding back yet unable to stop myself from asking, "You've always known I got it wrong, haven't you?"

He furrowed his brows lightly, "What do you mean?"

"I just found out, back in college, it was you who helped me."

I looked at him earnestly, speaking softly, "Why... why didn't you ever tell me?"

He paused, then gently wiped away the tears on my face, "I didn't want to see you upset, like now."

I ventured cautiously, "Does it bother you? That I've always attributed your kindness to Bryant?"

Even though he'd always had someone else in his heart, wanting a thank you for a good deed is only natural.

"It doesn't bother me." He smiled, watching me intently, his gaze warm and inviting, "I can wait. Wait for the day you're willing to see me, wait for you to move past him." Now, it was my turn to be stunned.

His words left no room for doubt. But I remembered he's had a crush on someone for years...

Mark and I, at most, had known each other for just over eight years.

I struggled to find my voice, finally managing to whisper, "What did you say?"

Chapter 280

The air seemed to freeze around us.

Mark reached out, gently ruffling my hair as he spoke in a calm, measured tone.

"The girl I wanted to ask to that concert... was you. The one I've been waiting to divorce... also you. And the one I've loved for twenty years... yes, you." His voice carried a quiet confidence, his amber eyes shining with unwavering certainty, "Jane, it's always been you, nobody else."

It felt like my heart was being pulled out of my chest. Suddenly, I was flustered, at a loss for words.

Turned out, when faced with someone who genuinely cared for and loved me, my first instinct was to feel unworthy.

Mixed emotions swirled within me, and I instinctively wanted to deny it, "How could it be me? You've known her for so many years, and we've only..."

"Do you remember me telling you about moving back with the Larsons when I was eight?" Mark patiently explained, lifting his wrist to show me a bracelet, "Before I was taken back by the Larsons, I was in Southaven. This bracelet, does it ring a bell?"

"No..." I shook my head in confusion.

My memories before moving in with my aunt were fragmented, consisting only of bits and pieces about my parents and being chased for debts.

My aunt, having to put up with Allen's mood swings just to feed me, would never have taken me to a hospital.

Later, when I sought medical advice, the doctor said it was amnesia caused by severe trauma.

And it'd been too long; the chances of recovering those memories were slim.

"This was a birthday gift you gave me."

Mark, clueless about the storm inside me, didn't seem down at all. He spoke gently, "It's okay. We have a long future ahead of us. It's enough that I remember the past." "You..." I hesitated before asking, "When did you recognize me?"

"It was that time you fainted from low blood sugar."

Mark looked at me with a tender gaze, "I heard someone call your name."

He chuckled softly, "At first, I wondered if it was just a coincidence. But then, I noticed so many of your habits were the same as when you were little. They haven't changed." I blinked, "Like what?"

"Your love for spicy and sweet foods, the way you fidget with your hands when you're nervous, your fear of anything squishy..."

Mark observed me, "So, it adds up, right?"

With each habit he listed, my certainty grew, and I had to admit, "Yes! It adds up."

It really was me. Absolutely me.

But still...

I fidgeted with my hands, saying, "Mark, I might..."

Not be ready to return your feelings.

Liking someone isn't easy, and before I can clear my own heart, accepting another feels irresponsible.

Both to myself and to the other person.

"I don't need an immediate response from you."

Mark understood me too well, his voice soothing, "Jane, you don't have to feel guilty or pressured because of this. I like you, and I helped you that time, because, as a kid, you protected me so many times." "As a 'bastard' with no father and a deceased mother, whenever I was mocked or bullied, you were there, fists ready, like a little warrior, shielding me."

"Was it really like that?"

I asked, somewhat wistfully.

Had I been really like that as a child? Bold, brave, fearless, standing tall like a sunflower.

How did I become what I was today...

"Of course, it's true."