

Hitched 1561

Chapter 1561

Keaton steered with easy confidence, his long, sculpted fingers resting loosely on the wheel as he gazed into the distance.

"I used to be in love with this girl. Really in love. I believed every single thing she said. When she told me she'd never marry anyone but me, I bought it completely!"

"And because I trusted her so much, I ended up dragging two innocent people into my mess..."

Keaton's brow furrowed, as if recalling those unhappy memories.

He fell silent for a moment before continuing, "Then she dumped me. And when she left, she really twisted the knife, you know?"

"Basically, she hurt me pretty bad. Just like Zane hurt you."

"After I finally crawled out of that relationship, I realized getting emotionally invested was pointless. It's much easier to just keep things physical. You get your needs met without getting hurt. It's a win-win."

"I don't want to get torn to shreds by a woman ever again, and I really like the life I have now. So, I'm definitely not getting married."

Winona looked at him, completely surprised. "!"

She had no idea Keaton had a history like that.

The Keaton she knew had always been a charming, carefree player.

He spoke about it so casually, but Winona still frowned in concern.

A wound as deep as the one Zane gave her? That was a soul-crushing kind of heartbreak.

Keaton added, "You know why you and I click? It's because we're in the same boat. We're both shipwrecked souls."

"And you know why I liked Shifra? Because she reminded me of that girl. Not in looks, but in the vibe she gave off."

"Do you know why Shifra had the guts to break up with me first?"

"Because she knew she was like her. Shifra thought I couldn't live without the feeling she gave me, that I'd definitely come running back to her."

"She overestimated her place in my heart, and she overestimated how much I needed that feeling."

"How should I put it? It was exciting, suddenly finding that first-love feeling again. But honestly, I could take it or leave it. I mean, I've gotten by all these years without it."

Winona: "..."

She had planned to go straight home, but after hearing all this, her heart softened. She couldn't bring herself to just leave him alone.

He knew how to look after his parents; he was a good son. And he'd been hurt by love before; his past was heartbreaking.

Winona swallowed the frustration that had been caught in her throat and suggested, "Drinking on an empty stomach is never a good

idea. Should we grab somethin

eat on the way?"

"...Sure. What do you feel like? My treat."

Winona pulled out her phone and

There's a street with a

bunch of food stalls up ahead can just grap something t

"Okay."

About ten minutes later, the car pulled over at the entrance to an alley, and they both got out.

Keaton looked at the bustling, smoky atmosphere of the alley and asked, "You're a big star. Can you eat this kind of stuff?"

Winona retorted, "You're a silver-spoon type. Can *you* eat this kind of stuff?"

Keaton said, "I'm a grown man, not some primadonna. Of course I can eat it."

Winona pulled on her face mask. "I'm even less of a primadonna."

She strolled into the alley, heading for the food stalls.

Keaton put on his mask and followed her.

Winona bought a lot of food-everything from crispy skewers to steaming dumplings and savory pancakes.

She stopped at various stalls, and Keaton followed behind, paying for everything.

Finally, Winona stopped in front of a stand selling candied fruit skewers and asked Keaton, "You want one?"

Keaton shook his head. "Not a fan."

The old man running the stall said

with a smile, "My candied fruit is the best! You should buy a couple to try. One for you and one for your girlfriend"

Winona politely corrected him, "You misunderstand, sir. I'm not his girlfriend."

The man was surprised. "Oh? You're not? I saw you two, a handsome couple, you look just like lovebirds!"

Winona just smiled. "You must be mistaken."

The man was a bit embarrassed. "Well, if you're not his girlfriend, then you're his..."

Before Winona could answer, Keaton spoke up with a grin, "She's my venerated ancestor."

Chapter 1562

The old vendor had never heard a joke like that before and just stared in shock. "?!"

Winona was speechless. She gave Keaton a light kick. "Don't mind him; he's just being an idiot."

Keaton just stood there, laughing foolishly, not at all angry.

Winona picked out two skewers for herself, one classic apple and one strawberry.

They cost \$15 in total, and Keaton paid with his phone.

Winona pulled her mask down, unwrapped the apple skewer, and started eating as she walked.

Keaton followed beside her, carrying several bags of food.

Noticing people on the street kept looking their way, Keaton reminded her, "Aren't you afraid of being recognized? This could be a headline tomorrow: 'Famous actress Winona spotted late-night snacking with a handsome mystery man.'"

Winona shot him a sidelong glance. Calling himself a handsome man... tooting his own horn much?

"It's not illegal for me to walk down a street and eat. Let them talk. If you're scared of being recognized, you should pull your mask up properly."

Keaton chuckled. "I'm not worried about trending on social media with a beautiful woman on my arm."

Winona took a bite of her candied apple. "I'm even less afraid. If anyone asks who you are, I'll just say you're my lowly stable boy!"

Keaton: "Oh, turning the tables on me?"

Winona: "You started it. You said I was your venerated ancestor."

Keaton grinned. "So you admit it?! Alright, then. Tomorrow I'll take you to my family's estate and introduce you to the portraits of my ancestors, so they don't get confused."

"Get lost!" Winona snapped, then went back to gnawing on her candied fruit.

There were eight pieces of apple on the skewer. By the time they got back to the car, she had eaten all but three.

Keaton asked, "Is it that good?"

Winona shot back, "Have you never had one?"

Keaton nodded. "Never tried this stuff."

Seeing him staring at the skewer in her hand, Winona hesitated, then offered the skewer. "Want a bite?"

Keaton didn't need to be asked twice. "Sure."

Winona: "..."

She reluctantly broke off a piece from the other end of the skewer and held it out to him.

Keaton was fastening his seatbelt, and he simply turned his head and ate it right out of her hand.

Winona: "!"

He, however, acted as if nothing had

happened, chewing thoughtfully.

"Sweet and sour! Aren't you actresses supposed to be so careful about what you eat? You dare to eat something this sweet."

Winona glared at him for a few seconds, then frowned as she pulled out a wet wipe and cleaned her

fingers. She

She was getting really

frustrated

annoyed with him. Did he have no

sense of personal space?

Winona muttered under her breath, "An actress is still a person. I'm not going to torture my stomach."

As she spoke, she ate another piece of candied apple.

Keaton started the car and suddenly said, "Let me have another one. That was actually pretty good."

Winona was exasperated. There was only one piece left on the stick. She reluctantly handed the entire skewer over to Keaton.

He took it without a second thought and ate the last piece, mumbling as he chewed, "Honestly, it's really fun hanging out with you. It's so easy and relaxed."

"I don't have to scheme about how to get you into bed, and I don't have to hide from my parents' nagging! You're easy on the eyes, you're not high-maintenance, and you can drink with me and help me unwind. You're a great hangout buddy."

Winona rolled her eyes and started on the strawberry skewer.

She had just eaten one piece when Keaton said, "Let me try that one too."

Winona had had enough. "No!"

Keaton said, "Why are you being so stingy?"

Winona ignored him and focused on her food.

Keaton watched her with his alluring eyes, a half-smile on his face. "You've got a problem with me tonight, don't you? You're not your usual lively self."

Winona: "..."

Lively my ass! She didn't know what was wrong with her. Ever since he had hugged her, she'd been feeling annoyed. So annoyed! And then he ate out of her hand, which only made it worse!

Keaton said suddenly, "If you're in a bad mood because I hugged you, you can hug me back. Any way you want. Go for it."

Chapter 1563

Winona shot him a cold glare. Keaton just gave her a charming smile.

"I was just trying to cheer you up. When I hugged you, I swear I had no other intentions. I genuinely see you as a good friend! If I'm lying, may I never find a girlfriend for the rest of my life!"

Winona didn't want to admit that the hug was what bothered her; it would make it seem like she actually had a guilty conscience.

She frowned and lied, "I am a bit annoyed, but that's not the reason."

Keaton asked, "Then what is it?"

Winona retorted, "Do I need a reason to be annoyed?"

Keaton put on a placating smile. "Of course not. It's just that, seeing you upset, I wanted to show some concern. How about I tell you some of my most embarrassing stories to cheer you up?"

Winona was speechless. "Get lost!"

As he drove, Keaton began to recount his hall of shame.

From the time he went swimming at the beach as a kid and a wave knocked his swim trunks right off, forcing him to run ashore, butt-naked. He was crying as he ran, yelling that a sea monster had stolen his trunks.

To his time in kindergarten, when to show off how fast he was, he went around telling everyone he could beat the rabbit from the fable. He became the laughingstock of the entire school! Janelle was on pins and needles for ages because of it, seriously wondering if he was a little slow.

Later, in elementary school, fed up with being constantly bossed around by his older sister, he decided to fight back and show her who was boss! With a grand gesture, he ripped up her homework. The result was several hard slaps from his sister that left his jaw feeling crooked for days.

"I'm telling you, the only reason I started working out and hitting the gym was because of my sister. I had to get stronger, just to keep her from killing me!"

"Pfft-"

Winona couldn't help it; she burst out laughing.

She'd thought he started building his strength to finally beat his sister, but it turned out to be purely for self-preservation.

Keaton kept the stories coming until Winona was doubled over, her sides aching from a laughter so deep it left her breathless in a moment of Impulsive warmth she broke off a strawberry from her skewer and held it to his lips.

By the time they reached their destination, Winona's mood had completely lifted.

But as she stared at the oceanfront villa before them, she froze. "This is your house?"

"Yeah, I bought it years ago, but only finished decorating last year. What's wrong?"

Winona: "... " Talk about a twist of fate!

This villa had the best view in the

entire area. Back then, she had loved it and desperately wanted to buy it

But she was away filming and

couldn't sign the contract in person After finalizing the details with the sales agent over the phone, she asked Zane to go sign for her.

But when Zane arrived at the sales office, he was told the house had already been sold!

She had loved it so much and was so unwilling to let it go that she tried to offer a higher price, but she failed.

She had regretted it for a long time.

Zane had been furious about it too. He had called her, ranting, "That guy has absolutely no class. Not only would he not show his face to

negotiate, but he was incredibal net

rude. When I offered to pay more, he told me to get lost! I said Lcould add ten million, and he told me to take a good long look in the mirror and asked if I thought someone like me was worthy of such a fine house? For a house over a hundred million, he could pay in full, which means he's rich. But the way he talks, he has no class at all. He must be some uncultured, nouveau riche slob!"

At the time, Winona had also imagined some pot-bellied, greasy slob dripping in gold chains. She had even secretly cursed him: 'I hope that pig goes bankrupt soon!'

She never would have imagined that the 'pig' who had snatched the house from under her was Keaton.

Chapter 1564

Keaton had already opened the door with facial recognition.

"I only stay here occasionally, but I keep a lot of good wine. Come on in."

Winona snapped out of her thoughts and followed him into the villa.

In the dressing room by the entrance, an entire wall was filled with clear display cases. But instead of handbags, the cases were filled with pairs of men's shoes.

They were all limited-edition designer brands-running shoes, sneakers, casual shoes, and dress shoes...

Winona asked curiously, "You like collecting shoes?"

Keaton grunted in agreement. Seeing her staring, he immediately said, "These are all men's shoes, nothing you'd like, right? Let me be clear, even if you did like a pair, I wouldn't give them to you. These are my collection!"

Winona replied, "I like collecting shoes too, but I only collect women's shoes. And I have way more than you do!"

Keaton was surprised. "A fellow enthusiast! This is just the tip of the iceberg. I'll take you to my place sometime, my whole basement is full of them."

Keaton owned multiple properties, so Winona didn't know which one he was talking about, nor did she particularly care. She asked him, "Do you have any women's slippers here?"

"Nope."

Winona was curious. "No girls have ever been here?"

Keaton said, "This is my secret hideout. I don't just bring anyone here. You're the first lady to visit. Happy now?"

Winona: "...So what am I supposed to wear?"

Keaton handed her a pair of his own slippers. "Make do with these. I've only worn them once."

Winona wasn't fussy. She took off her coat and shoes, slipped on his slippers, and walked into the house.

The villa was situated right on the coast, decorated mainly in a modern style of black, white, and gray-clean, simple, and stylish.

The entire wall facing the sea was made of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Standing before them, you could see the vast expanse of the ocean and a lighthouse in the distance. The light on the tower was on, shining like a bright star, guiding sailors on their way.

Part of the reason she had fallen in love with this place back then was because she could see that lighthouse.

She couldn't explain why she liked it; she just saw it in the brochure and wanted to buy it.

Thinking about it now, Keaton was right. Zane definitely didn't deserve a house this beautiful! It would have been a waste on someone like him.

Keaton saw her staring into space and asked with a twinkle in his eye, "You like my place?"

Winona didn't hide it. "A place this nice? Who wouldn't like it?"

Keaton said, "I have a lot of properties and don't stay here often. If you like it, you can stay here."

Winona was taken aback. "Give it to me?!"

Keaton immediately clarified, "I can't *give it to you, but you're welcome to stay here! I'm quite fond of that lighthouse so can't give the house away. But as friends, you can come here to relax whenever you want."

He really was generous with his friends, Winona thought.

Although she loved the place, she still refused. It was someone else's home, after

all. What would it look like if she just moved in? Even between friends, there had to be boundaries.

"I appreciate the thought."

Keaton said, "You don't have to be so formal with me. After all, you're not my friend anymore, you're my venerated ancestor!"

Winona was speechless. "..."

Keaton grinned and held up the takeout bags. "I'm going to plate this stuff. You can look around the house."

He had already taken off his jacket, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing strong, powerful forearms. Like Tarquin Bradford, Keaton had the kind of athletic build that appeared lean under a tailored shirt, but hinted at the raw, powerful muscle beneath the fabric.

Winona glanced around but decided against exploring. She saw him place the takeout on the marble island and bend down to get some clean plates, so she walked over to help.

"It's already in boxes. Why bother plating it?"

Chapter 1565

Keaton said, "Life needs its little rituals, Winona!"

"...Putting fifteen dollars' worth of mini-sliders on plates that probably cost five hundred dollars each. Yeah, that's some ceremony."

As a celebrity, Winona was no stranger to luxury brands. The set of plates in Keaton's home was from an Italian artisan workshop, where a single side plate cost well into the hundreds. It was niche, understated luxury, popular among young people with good taste.

Keaton arranged the mini-sliders neatly. "If you like something, fifteen-dollar sliders can go on five-hundred-dollar plates, or even better ones. After all, what you like is priceless. The things we love are the most valuable."

Winona didn't respond. That philosophy certainly matched his criteria for dating.

He never cared about a girlfriend's net worth, only that she was clean, healthy, and that he liked her. He'd date a princess or a Cinderella. In his eyes, a princess and Cinderella were the same; no matter their background, if he liked them, they were good enough.

Keaton was an expert at reading women. Noticing she had seemed down ever since she arrived, he added, "This place has magic. It can heal the heart. If you're ever in a bad mood, come stay the night. I guarantee you'll feel better the next day."

It was nonsense, but for some reason, Winona believed him.

"Is it because of the lighthouse?"

"Yeah. It's very healing."

With a silent understanding, they both turned to look at the lighthouse.

A single point of light on the dark surface of the sea was like a sudden glimpse of hope in a desperate situation. It truly was healing.

But as Winona looked, she felt an inexplicable sadness.

From the moment she had stepped into this house, memories of her time with Zane started flashing through her mind.

When she had wanted to buy this house, they were still deeply in love. Or more accurately, she was deeply in love with him, and he was putting on a very convincing act.

How should she put it? Zane was a true scumbag, but back then, she had truly loved him.

She could say they were even, that it was all over, but when she inadvertently recalled the past she still felt a pang of sadness. Not because she still loved him, but out of pity for her past self.

Zane was her first love. He had taken up the best years of her life! After investing so

much emotion and so much time, he wasn't easy to forget.

"What do you want to drink?" Keaton's voice broke her train of thought.

Winona collected herself and asked, "What do you have?"

Keaton replied, "Wine, beer, or the hard stuff... it's all in the cabinet behind the bar. Go pick something."

Winona nodded and went to choose the drinks.

Keaton carried the plated takeout to the low coffee table in front of the window.

Winona returned with a few bottles of hard liquor—not the top-shelf stuff, but definitely high-proof.

Keaton's eyes narrowed slightly. "With your tolerance, one bottle of this and you'll definitely be drunk!"

"You said we wouldn't go home until we were drunk! And besides, I'm safe here with you."

Keaton could tell her thoughts were miles away, but he chose not to

shatter her silence just yet. "You'rez definitely safe here. I'll risk my life for my venerated ancestor and get drunk with you! But street food goes with beer, so let's start with a few of those."

Keaton turned to get some beer.

The original plan was for her to keep him company while he drank, but now it felt

like he was the one keeping her company.

Winona didn't correct him. She sat quietly by the window, gazing at the distant lighthouse. She had even started drinking, but her eyes were already getting hazy.

For some reason, at that moment, the sorrow she kept buried deep in her heart, the pain she normally refused to touch, suddenly broke free and rushed to the surface.

She felt a heavy sense of oppression and her spirits sank. She was sad, and she felt like crying.

Keaton came back with the beer and saw her state. His eyes narrowed...

Chapter 1566

After staring at Winona for a moment, Keaton sat down across from her on the ground.

He didn't ask what was wrong. Instead, he popped open a can of beer, handed it to her, and opened one for himself.

"Here, let's have a drink first."

The two of them clinked their cans and each took a few gulps.

Keaton looked at the spread of snacks between them. "Which one's good?"

"They're all good," Winona said.

Keaton chuckled. "The Newsom family might not be old money, but you guys are pretty well off. And you're the only daughter. Did your folks really let you eat this kind of street food?"

"That's the thing. Since we're not some high-society family, we don't have a ton of rules," Winona said. "My parents spoiled me. They'd let me have a little junk food now and then to satisfy my cravings. Once I got older, they couldn't stop me anyway."

Keaton pointed at a carton of chili cheese fries. "What's all this stuff on top?"

"Never had it?" Winona asked.

"Nope."

She pushed the carton towards him. "Try it."

Keaton looked skeptical. "It looks like a heart attack in a box."

"It won't kill you. Live a little," Winona urged.

After a moment's hesitation, Keaton took a bite, then immediately washed it down with a big swig of beer. "Yeah, no. Hard pass. Not a fan."

Winona pursed her lips. "You're living in an ivory tower. Try this, then." She handed him a stick of spicy fried calamari.

"This I've had," Keaton said. "It's a staple at Italian places."

After he'd eaten a piece, Winona asked, "How is it?"

"It's alright," Keaton nodded. "Just way too spicy."

Then, Winona handed him a piece of a giant pretzel with spicy mustard...

Winona had bought over a dozen different snacks, and Keaton was like an obedient child, trying whatever she told him to.

By the time he had sampled everything, he had finished three cans of beer.

Winona looked at him, puzzled. "You can't handle spicy food?"

Keaton nodded. "Never have, not since I was a kid."

"Seriously?" Winona was surprised. "I asked you if you wanted spicy when I was ordering, and you didn't say anything."

Keaton opened another beer. "As long as you like it, that's all that matters."

"...Why don't you eat spicy food?" Winona asked.

Keaton's lips were turning red from the heat. "I don't know, it's just a preference. I grew up in a place where it was always dry. Eating a lot of spicy food just gives me terrible bear burn and makes me sweat there's no upside."

eth

Winona was speechless. "You're one to talk about health, pulling all-nighters all the time. What about all those girlfriends you had from the South What did you do when you ate with them?"

"Well, obviously, I went with whatever my girlfriend wanted," Keaton said. "If she wanted spicy, we'd get spicy. I could just not eat or eat very little."

"But they were all considerate. When they ate with me, they'd avoid spicy food on their own. Even when I offered to go to a spicy place, they'd say no."

Winona's lips thinned. "How thoughtful of them. Makes me sound like a real jerk of a friend." She had ordered everything extra spicy.

Keaton laughed. "You're different from them. They were girlfriends. You're the queen. Whatever you do is right. The queen is never wrong."

His teasing made her laugh. She raised her can to his. "Here's to that. Cheers."

Keaton played along, drinking with her.

Seeing that her mood had lifted a bit, Keaton finally turned to look at the lighthouse in the middle of the dark

sea Chat do you feel when you

look at that lighthouse?"

Winona followed his gaze, her beautiful eyes narrowing slightly. "...Comfort. Like a rescue."

"It is healing," Keaton said. "A good place to mend."

"I come here every so often, spend the night. I don't bring anyone, just me. I sit right

here, have a drink by myself, and just watch it quietly."

"And I can't help it, I just go over all the sad things buried deep in my heart."

"The next day, I feel so much lighter, like I've been reborn. Even happier than before."

"It's like all the sadness I was holding onto is just gone. My body feels light and refreshed."

"You know, people just can't keep too much bottled up inside. If you're unhappy, you have to let it out. Keeping it in only hurts yourself."

Chapter 1567

Winona knew his heartfelt speech was meant for her. She turned to look at him.

"How about something stronger?"

"...Alright."

Keaton opened a bottle of whiskey and poured a glass for each of them.

They both downed their first glass before Keaton finally asked, "You look so weighed down. There's definitely something on your mind. Want to talk about it?" Winona took a sip of whiskey. "Who told you I was down?"

"I can just tell."

"... You're so perceptive. Alright, then, tell me why I'm so down."

Keaton's eyes narrowed. "It's because of Zane, isn't it?"

Winona fell silent.

"The hurt Zane caused you," Keaton said, "it's just like what Clementine did to me. So I get it. I understand how you feel."

"Clementine?" Winona asked. "The girl you mentioned on the drive over, the one who hurt you?"

"Yeah."

"I've never heard that name. Is she from Jindale City?"

Keaton shook his head. "No, she's not from Jindale City. She wasn't some debutante either. Just a regular girl."

Winona's curiosity was piqued. "So how did you two meet?" Birds of a feather flock together. For a guy from a wealthy family like Keaton, most of his friends were from similar backgrounds.

Keaton let out a long breath, finished the whiskey in his glass, and lit a cigarette.

He turned to look at the lighthouse. "I spent ninth grade in a different town. The Huber family had business there, so my parents had to stay for a year and they took me with them. That's when I met her."

"Her family was poor. She'd dropped out of school in eighth grade and was helping her grandparents sell fruit from a stall outside my school."

"She wasn't stunningly beautiful, but she was tall and thin, with long hair. She had these beautiful, delicate hands and slender wrists. She just had this fragile quality that made you want to protect her."

"And she smiled all the time. Her smile was so gentle, and her eyes were incredibly bright."

"I had a really good impression of her back then. A lot of guys in my class liked her. They'd always use buying fruit as an excuse to go see her after school."

"But it wasn't just us. Some of the local thugs had their eyes on her too."

"One time, when her grandparents weren't there, those thugs started harassing her. I happened to walk by."

"I was young and hot-headed, and I already had a thing for her, so I got into a fight with them."

"It was me against a bunch of them, and they were older. Unsurprisingly, I got my ass kicked."

"I can still remember it. The way she was trembling with fear, and how she threw herself over me when I was on the ground, crying and screaming my name."

"She was crying so hard, so helplessly, shaking my arm and asking, 'Where are you hurt? Does it hurt? I'm so sorry...'"

"That was the day I fell in love with her."

"Before that, it was just a crush. That day, it was for real."

"It was the first time in my life I'd ever truly fallen for a girl."

"To keep her from worrying, and for my own pride, I gritted my teeth through the

pain, got up, and ran a hundred yards away."

"Then I ran back to her and said, 'See? I'm not hurt. I don't feel a thing. You can stop crying.'"

"Those street punks knew how to fight. They never hit you in the face, so the teachers and parents wouldn't find out."

"She actually believed I was fine and stopped crying. She gave me a huge bag of fruit. I didn't want to take it, but she insisted, so had to carry home."

FindNovel.net

"I never used to eat much fruit, but I ate every single piece she gave me."

"I ate it all myself. I didn't even share it with my parents. It was the best fruit I'd ever

tasted back then, sweet as honey."

"After that, every time I went to see her, she'd secretly slip me a clementine."

"So I gave her a nickname, Clementine. Only I called her that."

Chapter 1568

Keaton took a drag from his cigarette and continued, "The first love letter I ever wrote was to her. The first time I ever really held a girl's hand, hugged a girl, it was with her."

"I even kissed her. I didn't dare go for anything deep, just a peck on the lips. Back then, we'd call it 'sealing the deal' or something goofy like that."

"Just from that, I was so excited I couldn't sleep the whole night."

"The next day, I found her and told her, 'I kissed you, so now you're my girl. I promise, I'm going to marry you someday!'"

"I was young, I hadn't been beaten down by love yet. My love was pure, and it was serious."

"I was so protective of her. I wanted to take care of her, to be good to her."

"I tried every trick I could think of at the time to make a girl happy, all on her."

"I turned down every girl who had a crush on me. All I could see was her."

"I even decided I wasn't going back to Jindale City. I was going to stay there with her, take care of her, and build a life there after I grew up."

"For our future, I secretly took all my savings—my allowance, birthday money, everything I'd saved since I was a kid—and used it to anonymously sponsor her education."

"I also anonymously promised her that she wouldn't have to worry about tuition or living expenses ever again, that she'd be sponsored all the way through college, even if she wanted to study abroad."

"I did it anonymously so she wouldn't feel burdened. I was afraid if she knew how well-off my family was, she'd feel insecure and pressured."

"I wanted her to go to school so we could be together forever. She was only a teenager; she belonged in school."

"I figured getting an education was a better path for her than selling fruit with her relatives. And only if she went back to school could I see her every day—middle school, high school, college..."

"Sigh... I really loved her back then. I would have died for her. I'd even picked out names for our future kids..."

Keaton took a long drag of his cigarette, his eyes tracking the sweep of the lighthouse beam as a shadow of old, familiar pain settled over his features. "But then... she fell for someone else."

"She fell in love with one of the thugs who used to harass her, the same one who beat me up the worst."

"She dropped out of school again, for him."

"I was heartbroken and furious. I found my eyes bloodshot from crying, and told her how much

oyed her how import

was."

school

"But she just told me coldly that we were over and warned me not to bother her again."

"She said I couldn't give her the life she wanted. I asked her what kind of life that was."

"She said freedom, fun, happiness. She didn't want to be tied down by school. She wanted to go work in another city with that thug."

"I was so angry, but I couldn't let her go. I didn't want to see her jump into a fire pit. I went looking for her, again and again."

"And the result was getting beaten up by that thug and his buddies, again and again."

"I watched as she learned to smoke,

خمداد

drink, play cards, and cuss... She started wearing heavy makeup got tattoos, dyed her hair all sorts of colors content

"There was nothing I could do. I was so angry I cried."

Keaton glanced at Winona and gave a self-deprecating smile. "Yeah, I actually cried."

Winona's brow furrowed, a look of pain in her eyes...

Keaton continued, "I couldn't tell my parents. At night, I'd just curl up under my covers, silently fuming, silently crying."

"I even had this crazy idea. Maybe my parents had found out about us and confronted her privately?"

"Maybe she felt insecure, like she

wasn't good enough for a rich kid like me, and got together with that scumbag just to make me give up on her

"But I tested my parents multiple times. They had no idea who Clementine was.

They didn't even know I was dating anyone."

Chapter 1569

"Back then, the Huber family's new company was just starting up. My dad was swamped with work, and my mom's attention was all on him. They had no clue what was happening to me."

"Still not giving up, I went to find her again and asked if she'd been forced to break up with me."

"She was holding a cigarette, and she just laughed out loud."

"And she didn't just laugh herself. She told the thug what I said, and he and his buddies all started laughing with her, mocking me."

"I don't know if it was anger or just pure grief, but I spiraled into a feverish depression after that."

"Two weeks later, I was better, but I still couldn't stop myself from going to find her."

"Sigh, in today's terms, I was a total simp. I just couldn't control myself. I had to see her."

"I happened to see that thug hitting her. Without a second thought, I rushed over to protect her. But she just told me to mind my own business and get lost."

"She said she didn't want to see me, and that if I harassed her again, she'd call the cops."

"But the very next day, she showed up at my school. She stood on the other side of the fence and told me she was pregnant-and the baby was his."

"He didn't want the baby and told her to get an abortion, but he wouldn't give her any money for it."

"She had no money for the procedure and she was terrified. She said her grandparents would kill her if they found out. She didn't know what to do."

"I was completely stunned when I heard that. She was just a teenager, and she was pregnant."

"I was also furious. I loved her so much I wouldn't even dare to really touch her, and she had given herself to that scumbag. She wasn't even an adult."

"But after the anger, all I felt was heartbreak for her."

"I couldn't bring myself to ignore her. She wanted an abortion, so I gave her all my allowance money and even skipped school to secretly take her to a small clinic."

"The procedure was successful, and she went home the same day."

"I was so worried about her health. For a long time after that, I went to see her every day, bringing her good food from my house."

"I encouraged her to pull herself together, to go back to school, to stay away from those bad people."

"I even told her... that I didn't care about what happened. That I'd still marry her..."

Keaton paused, took another drag of his cigarette, and looked at Winona. "I was serious back then. I really didn't care."

"But then, she hurt me again."

let

"She brought the thug to find me. They had pictures of me taking her to the clinic, and they claimed Khad raped her gotten her pregnant, and forced her to have an abortion."

"The thug grabbed my collar and tried to blackmail me. He demanded two thousand dollars, saying if didn't pay up, they'd either beat me death or cat the cops and hav me arrested."

"I was so... so angry..."

Keaton took a harsh drag from his cigarette. "I can't even describe the rage. Two thousand dollars. For two thousand dollars, she could frame me like that."

"They had taken a lot of pictures. Of her coming to me for help, of me taking her to the clinic, of me secretly bringing her food."

"In other words, it was a setup from the very beginning. She was taking advantage of my feelings for her, using me, extorting me..."

"I was furious, I went crazy. It wasn't about the money. It was about how she could

so easily trample all over my feelings without a second thought..."

"I was young and reckless, impulsive, not thinking about the consequences. I told them I had to go home to get the money but. instead I grabbed a kitchen knife and went back to fight them to the death."

"But God, I was still so pathetic. Even then, I couldn't bring myself to hurt her."

"I told her to stand aside while I fought the thug and his buddies."

"The ironic thing is, to protect him, she stabbed me. Four times. If a passerby hadn't

seen what happened, I would have died at her hands..."

Chapter 1570

Keaton stopped again. Even after so many years, even though he had long since moved on, his heart still ached when he got to this part of the story.

After a long moment, he looked at Winona and managed a smile. "Surprised I had a moment of being such a pathetic loser?"

Winona's brow was furrowed, her expression shifting from shock to sympathy. "....."

Anyone else hearing this story would think the girl was trashy and stupid. To throw away a guy like Keaton for some low-life thug-she'd folded on a royal flush. They would think Keaton was lucky to be rid of such a thankless woman. But Winona saw something more: Keaton's pain.

How angry, how suffocated, how pained, how hopeless must he have been as a teenager? Other people's first loves were bittersweet; his was just bitter.

Seeing her silence, Keaton asked with a laugh, "No thoughts?"

Winona sniffled, then clinked her glass against his. She finished her drink before speaking. "Who wasn't an idiot when they were a teenager? Being a simp for your first crush is pretty standard. But damn, you had it rough. Serves you right for getting into a serious relationship so young, though. Puppy love never ends well. So what happened next?"

Her deliberately casual tone made Keaton smile. "Things got messy after that. My parents were furious. They called the police, who investigated the whole thing. The thug and his buddies, including her, were all arrested."

"After I recovered, I was sent abroad. And just like that, she was out of my world..."

"One heartbreak nearly cost me my life."

"Later on, I don't know if it was the more open-minded environment abroad or just time healing the wound, but I suddenly figured it out."

"Life is a journey. On this journey, you're bound to meet all sorts of people and go through all kinds of things."

"No matter who you meet or what you experience, there's no need to make a big deal out of it."

"If you deeply loved someone and then you broke up, it just means they weren't the right one for you. They were just a passenger on your life's journey."

"And how can you let a mere passenger derail your entire life?"

Winona nodded in agreement. "You're right about that." Just a passenger, not worthy of messing up your whole life.

They had a few more drinks. Keaton said, "My parents don't know the whole story about Clementine. Back then they just thought was bem... Bullied They never knew how deeply I loved her."

"Tarquin knows about it, but not the details. You're the first person to hear the entire story."

Winona raised her glass to his. "Your secret's safe with me. Drink up!"

One glass after another, they finished the first bottle and immediately opened a second.

By the time the second bottle of whiskey was empty, they were both drunk.

When they stood up to go to the bathroom, their steps were wobbly.

Sitting back down, Keaton slurred, told you about Clementine

because because I needed get it

off my chest and also to give you some advice."

"A scumbag like Zane isn't just unworthy of ruining your whole life, he's not even worthy of ruining your mood."

"Of course, you can't always help it. Sadness just hits you when it hits you, it's out of our control."

"Being sad isn't the scary part. The scary part is keeping it bottled up inside and letting it destroy you."

"I've been there, I have experience.

You really can't keep painful things locked away. You have to talk about

them. Only when you talk about

them can you truly be free.

"You can tell me what's buried in your heart. I'll listen. I'll be your audience."

Keaton's words were starting to float. Winona's eyes were hazy, her cheeks flushed. She was even more drunk than he was.

"You're right. Everything you said is right. That scumbag Zane doesn't deserve to ruin my mood! He's not human! He's a bastard! He has no heart!"

"If he had even a shred of a conscience, he wouldn't have done this to me!"

"He was the one who came after me! He chased me until I broke, and for what? Just to throw me away!"

"When he was pursuing me, he did everything he could to be good to me. I really thought I had found true love, but I never expected..."