

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

In the afternoon, we left Ashford Manor, and the car slowly made its way through the city streets. A faint tension filled the air. I took a deep breath and spoke, "You must have seen Pop-Pop's attitude. He clearly doesn't support our divorce. What are you planning to do next?"

Alexander looked out the window, seemingly in no rush to respond. He sighed. "We can go ahead and get the Divorce Decree, without telling Pop-Pop for now, and then we'll break the news to him later."

As expected, he chose this path without hesitation, showing no intention of changing his mind. Even though his grandfather had scolded him to his face, even though we had to deceive him and go against some of his wishes.

A heavy stone seemed to press against my chest, making it harder to breathe. Every inhale felt like a knife slicing through me, the pain almost unbearable.

I lowered my head, silently nodding, and hoarsely asked, "Alright, when do we go to get the Divorce Decree?"

Alexander flipped through his phone's schedule. "I'm pretty busy these days. Let's do it next Monday."

"Okay," I responded briefly, but deep inside, there was a faint, almost imperceptible tremor.

Seeing my decisive answer, Alexander couldn't help but purse his lips, sneaking a few glances at me.

To be honest, I knew I wasn't unattractive. My almond-shaped eyes, slightly upturned at the corners, were bright and expressive. At times, they were gentle, and at other times sharp—when gentle, there seemed to be a magic in them that drew people in without them realizing; when sharp, they could cut through steel, piercing straight to the heart and impossible to ignore.

I had a standard oval face with delicate features—a small, straight nose, full lips, and when I smiled, the dimples at the corners of my mouth gave me a playful, almost adorable look.

My figure was slender and graceful, and my skin was smooth and flawless. I was disciplined about my health, practicing yoga every week to maintain good posture, and even after work, I'd sweat it out at the gym.

Of course, Alexander knew all of this.

These three years of marriage had often made me realize that, it seemed, he could never resist me. When I closed my eyes, I could still feel his every delicate touch, his affectionate gaze. He remembered clearly—even that overwhelming, intoxicating sensation.

Aside from my appearance, my abilities were also impressive. In university, I had excellent grades, received Research and Program-based scholarships, and even participated in the International Design Awards, winning a Visiting Scholar Program opportunity. At work, I was highly organized, and V&R's growth had far exceeded his expectations.

With someone as exceptional as me, how could no man be interested?

After the divorce, I didn't know who would end up with me.

Suddenly, Alexander's low voice broke through my thoughts. "Do you have someone you like?"

My heart skipped a beat, and I turned to glance at him, answering softly, "Yes."

The person I liked was the one sitting right in front of me. Ten years of time, from the moment I stepped into The Hawthorne Dynasty, had already destined me to give everything for him.

Back then, I had just lost my father and arrived at The Hawthorne Dynasty. I was fragile, full of self-doubt, sensitivity, and cowardice. Alone in a strange land, living under someone else's roof, I even felt a sense of hopelessness toward life.

Yet it was then that Alexander appeared in my life. In that moment, my world suddenly brightened. His warmth was like a ray of sunlight, shining into my cold heart. From then on, I became deeply dependent on him, my emotions rooted deeply within me.

I tried hard to catch up to his pace, to get closer to him. But his heart already belonged to someone else, and I could only silently watch from a distance. Even though I had briefly owned it, in the end, I still had to lose it.

Perhaps this was fate's plan—meant to be alone, never to be with him for long.

When Alexander heard my words, his brow furrowed slightly, an inexplicable frustration rising within him. Was he in such a hurry to divorce because he wanted to be with someone he liked?

"He must like you too, right?" Alexander suddenly asked, his gaze filled with longing.

I shook my head gently. "No, he doesn't like me. He's liked someone else for many years."

Those words weighed heavily on Alexander's mood. He pressed his lips together, his voice low. "If he doesn't like you, why do you still like him?"

I forced a bitter smile. "There's no reason, really."

Alexander paused, a flash of complex emotion crossing his eyes before he regained his composure.

I knew deep down that nothing could change now. No matter what he asked, all I could do was try my best not to let myself be bound by this relationship.

The endorsement shoot was about to begin, and I arrived early at the studio to make sure the staff had everything ready.

Before long, both the photographer and makeup artist showed up. These two had been my long-time collaborators, and after working together for years, they could understand exactly what I wanted with just a single word.

As the set neared completion, I glanced at my watch. It was almost 9:00 AM, and half an hour had passed since the agreed time. Yet neither Isabella nor her team had shown up.

The assistant had already followed up once.

Photographer Ariana Wells fiddled with the camera and sighed. "Isabella sure has an attitude."

Makeup artist Sophie Lancaster sneered. "What can we do? She's back from overseas. If she wants to throw her weight around, we can't stop her. Not even Vivienne has that kind of power over her."

Everyone knew that this brand ambassador had been personally selected by CEO Hawthorne.

Normally, as the brand director for V&R, I had the authority to make changes. But not when it came to Isabella.

Even if she acted like a diva, I had no choice but to tolerate it.

I pulled out my phone, scrolled to Eliza's number, and dialed.

The call connected, but after a brief ring, it was dropped.

Sophie raised an eyebrow, clearly irritated. "They're absolutely ridiculous. Just because they have CEO Hawthorne backing them, they think they can treat you like this?"

I dialed again, but the line went dead once more.

After several attempts, with no reply and no message on WhatsApp, I put my phone away. "I'm guessing they won't be here until at least noon. You two can head out for now. I'll call you when I need you."

After working in this industry for so long, I knew how Eliza played her games. When we first discussed the collaboration, I could tell she had a way of getting what she wanted.

Sophie scoffed. "In all my years, I've never met anyone so full of themselves. She's been abroad for a few years, picked up a little fame, but no big awards or major hits. Yet she thinks she can pull this kind of stunt?"

"Don't let it get to you. We'll go out for a meal sometime to make up for it," I said.

"Then let's head out now," Sophie and Ariana said, as they bid me goodbye and left the studio.

I stayed behind and had the assistant bring me my laptop to work in the break room.

A commotion sounded outside, pulling me out of my thoughts. I checked my watch—it was already 11:30 AM.

I'd been right about my guess.

A few moments later, the assistant knocked on the door. "Director Vivienne, Miss Blackwood and her team have arrived."

"Got it, thanks."

I shut my laptop, stretched lazily, and calmly packed it into my bag as I walked out of the break room.

When Eliza saw me, a smile tugged at her lips as she walked over. "Director Vivienne, I'm terribly sorry. We had an early meeting at the company, and it ran longer than expected. My phone was with my assistant, and he must've hung up on you by mistake. I don't know why he didn't notify me or send a text, but I'll definitely have a word with him. I hope you don't mind."

Though her words sounded apologetic, there was no sincerity in her expression.

"Vivienne, I'm really sorry. Something else came up, and it took longer than expected," Isabella added.

I smiled and replied, "It's fine. I was just about to head out."

Eliza returned the smile. "Don't worry, Director Vivienne. You can leave now. We'll take care of everything."

I smiled back, though my expression was more reserved. "What I mean is, we won't be filming today."

Eliza's smile faltered, and her expression shifted to cold annoyance. "Director Vivienne, what does this mean?"

"Exactly what it says," I answered calmly.

"You're messing with us, aren't you? Why didn't you notify us earlier? Now we've wasted a trip."

"It was an urgent situation. The makeup artist and photographer weren't available. I tried calling you earlier to inform you, but I couldn't get through. And since Director Eliza hung up on me, I figured your assistant didn't pass the message along, so I waited here for you to arrive. I didn't want you to show up and find no one here."

Both Eliza and Isabella stiffened at my words.

"Now that you've been notified, I have other matters to attend to. I'll be leaving now. Please make sure to be on time for tomorrow's shoot."

I smiled as I finished speaking, grabbed my laptop, and walked out with purpose.

Eliza and Isabella stood frozen, watching me leave, their faces dark with anger.

"She's something else! Who knew she'd be so clever?"

Isabella smirked. "I told you—she's not someone you can outsmart. Think about it—after I left, the woman who managed to win over Alexander? She must be no ordinary character."

"So, what do we do now?"

Eliza knew they'd already used the excuse of being late today. If they did it again tomorrow, they'd have no excuses left.

Isabella shook her phone. "I'll call Alexander."

I, too, was someone with strength. Ordinary people couldn't touch me. The only one who could hurt me was the one I cared about—Mr. Alexander Hawthorne.

