

## Chapter 2 Exhaustion

Perhaps it had started the moment Jessica came back.

The memory of that night was still sharp—Caiden had stumbled home long past midnight, reeking of alcohol.

From then on, his appearances at their shared home grew rarer.

At work, their paths crossed only in passing, their exchanges reduced to the briefest of nods. Even a single word between them felt like an extravagance, as if the bond that once held them together had quietly disintegrated.

A wave of exhaustion washed over Noreen.

What meaning remained in a marriage like this? Staying together only hurt all three of them.

She pushed herself upright, fingers tightening around her phone as she made a call to Caiden.

The line rang for an agonizing stretch before someone finally picked up. But the voice that drifted through wasn't Caiden's. It was Jessica's.

She still spoke in a soft, gentle way, though an icy undertone threaded through her words.

"Is this Noreen?" she inquired in a low, measured tone.

A sharp tremor ran through Noreen's fingers as she clenched the phone more tightly. It took her a breath before she could force out a steady, "Yeah."

"Caiden's taking a shower right now. I'll tell him to return your call when he's out."

Somehow, Noreen kept her voice from splintering. When she finally spoke, it came out level, almost detached. "Don't bother."

The line went dead with a soft click.

She'd originally picked up the phone to talk about divorce, but deep down, she knew he wouldn't call her back. Not anymore.

After a beat of silence, Noreen exhaled slowly and dialed her lawyer's number, instructing him to draft the divorce papers.

Two years of this cold ache had hollowed her out.

Jessica's return only made the truth sharper. It was time to end this marriage and finally set herself free.

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Noreen had taken her insomnia medication and drifted into a heavy, dream-drenched slumber.

Halfway between consciousness and sleep, she vaguely sensed the mattress dip, as though someone had slipped beneath the covers.

A moment later, a cool yet achingly familiar embrace wrapped around her.

Soft lips brushed across her forehead, then trailed to her cheeks and finally claimed her mouth in a slow, tender kiss.

The sensation carried a warmth she hadn't felt in so long—so distinctly like the Caiden she used to know.

Her mind clawed toward wakefulness. She was desperate to see if this was real or just another cruel dream, but her body refused to obey. Darkness pulled her under again, leaving her trapped in that hazy cocoon.

By the time she stirred the next morning, her hand instinctively reached for the space beside her.

The sheet was icy.

A wry smile curved her lips, thin and bitter, as silence filled the room.

Clearly, whatever she'd felt last night had been nothing more than a dream.

Sunday meant no office, so she stayed cocooned in the blankets for a while, letting the quiet stretch.

When she finally made her way downstairs, the clock was edging toward nine.

Near the window, Caiden sat at the dining table, bathed in a soft wash of sunlight. The morning light carved out the clean lines of his figure, outlining him in quiet serenity. His collar was slightly open, exposing the

elegant slope of his neck and a pale glimpse of his collarbones.

His head was slightly bowed, lashes casting faint shadows beneath his eyes. One hand rested lazily on the edge of the snow-white tablecloth, fingers long and strong, while the other held a delicate porcelain cup. Thin curls of steam rose from it, swirling into the sunlit air.

Noreen hadn't expected him to show up out of nowhere.

The suddenness of it left her tongue-tied, unsure how to bridge the distance that had grown between them.

As she struggled to piece together something to say, Greta's cheerful voice cut through the quiet. "Good morning, Mrs. Evans! Please come down and have breakfast."

At the sound, Caiden lifted his head toward Noreen.

Their gazes collided for a brief, brittle moment—his eyes cool and unreadable—before he looked away as if nothing about her presence mattered.

Sunlight poured through the window, gilding the edge of his profile in soft gold. The morning light caught on his lowered lashes, making him seem distant, almost ethereal, as though he belonged to another world entirely.

He sat with effortless elegance, a figure carved into stillness, wrapped in a serenity she could no longer reach.

Noreen descended the stairs at an unhurried pace.

Sliding into her seat, she absently stirred the porridge, saying nothing to Caiden.

The rising steam curled into the pale light, softening the edges of everything before her eyes.

The dining room sat in near silence, broken only by the faint clink of silverware and the steady tick of the wall clock.

"Something bothering you?" Caiden's voice cut through the quiet, cool and detached.

Noreen's hand stilled around the spoon.


When she lifted her gaze, she caught sight of his long fingers flipping through a glossy financial magazine. The cover featured a photo of him at the Pearl Tower the night before, raising a glass at Jessica's birthday

< Chapter 2 Exhaustion  
celebration.

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But yesterday had also marked their third wedding anniversary.



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