

No Second Baby, No You, Only Divorce c 7

It was 1:30 p.m., and Vincent was in the middle of a high-stakes meeting with his company's executives. When his personal phone rang, he almost hit "decline" on instinct—he assumed it was Scarlett, calling to pester him again. But when he glanced at the screen, he saw it was labeled "Sunshine Kindergarten".

Panic flickered through him. What if something had happened to Vanessa? He cut the meeting short, muttering an apology to his team, and stepped into the hallway to answer.

"Is this Vanessa Stewart's parent?" The voice on the other end asked, crisp and professional.

"Yes, this is her father," Vincent replied, his voice tighter than he intended.

"We're hosting a parent-child event today, and Vanessa's parent hasn't arrived yet," the teacher explained. There was a hint of frustration in her tone—like she'd had to make this call one too many times. "I know these events might seem small to adults, but they mean the world to the kids. When we start the group activities, every other child will have a parent there... except Vanessa. Can you imagine how that'll make her feel?"

Vincent was caught off guard. He'd sent Scarlett a text—he was sure of it. He'd assumed she'd seen it, that she'd show up like she always did, quiet and compliant. But clearly, she hadn't.

There was no time to track Scarlett down now. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I'll be there in 20 minutes. I'm on my way."

He hung up, told his secretary to reschedule the meeting, and rushed out of the office, his mind racing. Why hadn't Scarlett gone? She never missed anything involving Vanessa—even when he'd ignored her for weeks, she'd still shown up to parent-teacher conferences, school plays, doctor's appointments.

By 4:30 p.m., the event was over. Vanessa walked out of the kindergarten with her head down, her lower lip stuck out in a pout.

He opened the back door for her, and she climbed in, still silent. They sat there for a minute before he spoke, his voice softening. "Rough day?"

Vanessa's

eyes welled up with tears. "Where was Mom?" she snapped, her voice wobbly. "She said she'd come! Everyone else had their mom, but I only had you. Sabrina was busy with her concert, so I couldn't even ask her. It was embarrassing!"

Vincent took her hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm sorry, baby. That's my fault, not yours. I should've double-checked with Mom. It won't happen again."

But his apology didn't cheer her up. She crossed her arms, staring out the window. "The relay race was supposed to be for moms and kids. I had to run with you, and you're way taller than

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the other parents. We won, but it didn't feel fair. Everyone was staring."

Vincent opened his mouth to comfort her, but his phone rang again. It was Amanda. He hesitated, then answered-he knew she'd blow up his phone if he didn't.

"Tomorrow's your father's birthday," Amanda said, no preamble. "A few relatives are coming over for dinner tonight to celebrate early. Grab Vanessa and meet me at Lexi Mall-I need help picking out a gift."

Vincent blinked. He'd completely forgotten about Richard's birthday. "Got it. We'll be there in 15 minutes."

He hung up and turned to Vanessa, who was still pouting. He brushed a strand of hair off her forehead, his voice warm. "Hey, tomorrow's Grandpa's birthday. You remember how Mom always cooks a big feast at Stewart Manor? She probably skipped today's event to get everything ready-she's probably been in the kitchen since this morning."

Vanessa thought for a second, then nodded. That made sense. Mom was always cooking for Grandpa's birthday-she'd make his favorite sweet potato pie, his go-to braised ribs,

even those tiny meatballs he loved. Her mood lifted a little. “Oh. Okay. I didn’t think about that. The other kids would’ve laughed at me if I said my mom forgot, anyway.”

Vincent chuckled, relieved. “Next time there’s an event, I’ll ask Sabrina to go with that sound?”

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Vanessa’s face lit up instantly. The pout vanished, replaced by a grin. “Really? Yay! You’re the best dad ever!”

He ruffled her hair. “Shall we go meet Grandma at the mall, then head to Grandpa’s house?”

Vanessa’s smile faded. “Is Mom gonna be at Grandpa’s?”

She still remembered the last time she’d seen Scarlett-how Mom had slapped Sabrina, how Mom had made her cry. She didn’t want to hug her or kiss her. Mom smelled like burnt oil and hospitals; Sabrina smelled like vanilla and flowers. Mom’s hands were rough from washing dishes; Sabrina’s hands were soft when she braided Vanessa’s hair.

Vincent saw the conflict in her eyes. He didn’t want to lie to her. “Yeah, she will be. It’s Grandpa’s birthday-she wouldn’t miss it.”

Vanessa's lower lip trembled. She looked up at him with big, teary eyes. "Can I ignore her? I'm still mad. I won't talk to her until she says sorry to Sabrina."

Vincent buckled her seatbelt, his heart softening. "Sure, baby. Whatever you want."

He drove to Lexi Mall, picked up Amanda, and by 6 p.m., they were pulling into the driveway of Stewart Manor. Amanda chattered on the phone the whole way, gushing to relatives about

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Scarlett's "amazing cooking" and how the dinner would be "the best one yet".

But when they walked in, the house was dark. The living room was empty—no streamers, no table set for guests, no sound of laughter. The kitchen was even worse—the counters were clean, the stove cold, not a single pot or pan out of place. No sweet smell of pie, no savory aroma of ribs—nothing.

Amanda froze. She rubbed her eyes, like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. For five years, Scarlett had handled every birthday, every holiday, every family gathering. She'd

wake up at dawn to shop, spend hours in the kitchen, and have everything ready by 5 p.m. sharp. Amanda had bragged about her to every friend, every cousin—Scarlett's such a great daughter-in-law. She knew how to keep a family happy.

Now, it was all gone.

"What the hell is wrong with Scarlett?" Amanda snapped, her voice echoing through the empty house. "Does she need a calendar reminder? Does she think this is a joke?"

She pulled out her phone, dialing Scarlett's number so hard her knuckles turned white.

No answer. She called again. Still nothing.

Furious, she threw her phone against the wall. It shattered into pieces, plastic and glass scattering across the floor.

Vincent stepped in front of Vanessa, shielding her from the outburst. He knelt down, whispering, "It's okay, baby. Grandma's just upset. We'll go out to eat instead—your favorite, okay? The pizza place with the unicorn sprinkles."

Amanda rounded on him, her face red. "We always have dinner here! I told everyone we'd be hosting! Now what am I supposed to say? That my son's wife can't even be bothered to cook for her father-in-law's birthday? That she doesn't care about this family?"

She'd never liked Scarlett-not really. If it hadn't been for Vincent's grandmother, who'd insisted on the marriage after Scarlett got pregnant, Amanda would've picked someone "better"-someone from a wealthy family, someone who knew how to "act like a Stewart".

Vanessa clung to Vincent's neck, scared. He ignored Amanda's rant, his mind wandering. Scarlett hadn't answered his calls yesterday. She'd missed Vanessa's event. She'd forgotten the birthday dinner. This wasn't like her. Not at all.

Had something happened to her? Was she sick? But she was a doctor-she'd know how to take care of herself. Had she gotten into an accident? He should've checked the hospital records.

"Daddy," Vanessa mumbled into his shoulder, "Mom did this on purpose. She didn't want to come to my event. She didn't want to cook for Grandpa. She wanted me to be embarrassed. She's a bad mom. Sabrina would never let me feel this way. I don't want Mom anymore."

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Vincent's heart tightened. He held her closer, not knowing what to say.

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