

Chapter 2

Once I land?

I let out a wry laugh, uncertain whether I would even make it home alive. Before I could say another word, he hung up.

My relationship with Keith had always been one-sided.

I was the only one who made any effort in the relationship. He had always remained stationary, almost indifferent.

We had been neighbors since childhood, and I had harbored a crush on him for a full decade.

In the tenth year, tragedy struck when he was involved in a car accident that nearly left him confined to a wheelchair for life.

His ex-girlfriend, Michelle, used studying abroad as an excuse to abandon him, running off to another country.

It was I who stayed by his bedside, nursing him back to health, and accompanying him on countless trips to seek medical help and undergo rehabilitation.

I kept vigil by his side day and night.

Perhaps out of gratitude, Keith accepted my affection. Those days, although challenging, brought me a deep sense of happiness.

It was obvious I loved him more than he loved me.

Then came our anniversary.

I had bought a cake and prepared a feast, eagerly waiting for him to come home from work. I waited from dusk until the early hours of the morning, but he never showed up.

I had called him multiple times.

“One of my colleagues called in sick, and I’m covering for him,” he had said when he finally answered.

“Is anyone even riding hot air balloons at this hour?” I asked.

“Don’t be suspicious. I’m just putting in some extra hours. The hot air balloons need maintenance too.”

“What time will you be back?” I asked him again.

“A little later.”

“Okay. I’ve made your favorite dishes, so please come home soon.”

As time went on, whenever I asked, his responses became more dismissive.

“I’ll be back later.”

All those ‘laters’ often stretched into the early hours of the morning.

Then there was the night I had heated his meal several times already when my phone suddenly pinged with a notification.

It was a post from Michelle.

[After such a long separation, we still have so much to talk about. How fortunate I am to have met you in this lifetime.]

The accompanying photo showed an aromatic candle.

In the comments, someone asked who had given it to her.

Michelle replied: [An old friend of mine. We went to a DIY studio today, and he made it for me to help with my insomnia.]

The comment section was with praise and envy.

With a sinking heart, I quickly spotted Keith’s account among the likes.

My intuition screamed that he was with Michelle. After all this time together, he had never given me a single gift, yet as soon as she returned, he seemed to drop everything for her.

I sat on the sofa, tossing and turning, unable to sleep through the night.

At three in the morning, Keith returned, reeking of alcohol.

“Why aren’t you asleep yet?” he asked, the scent of liquor mingled with lavender wafting off him.

“You were working late again?” I asked quietly.

He glanced at the spread of dishes on the dining table, all of which were his favorites.

“A colleague thanked me for covering his shift and insisted on treating me to dinner,” he said.

The emotions I had bottled up all night pressed down on me, suffocating me.

“Did you forget to mention that today is our anniversary?”

Keith rubbed his forehead, visibly irritated.

“Is it really necessary to make such a big deal about anniversaries? Valentine’s Day, Birthdays... There are so many. Must we celebrate every single one?”

A sense of grievance welled up within me, and I held back tears, afraid to cry.

“Is Michelle back in the country?”

That seemed to set him off. He looked at me coldly.

“Look, Astrid, we’re already in a relationship. What else do you want?”

Yes, what else could I want? I had his body, but I could never possess his heart.

He retreated to his room while I sat alone on the sofa, silently crying myself to sleep.

An hour later, he received a message from Michelle, saying she felt some discomfort in her heart.

Despite his exhaustion, Keith didn’t show any signs of annoyance. He threw on some clothes and headed to the hospital.

I recalled the early days of our relationship when I had prepared breakfast and gently knocked on the door of his room to let him know.

Keith had angrily opened his eyes and hurled an ashtray in my direction.