

Wedded Bride 501

Chapter 501 Shirley

Anthony despaired of changing Autumn's mind, so he turned to Andy and let him know about her decision. Andy wanted to tell Abby, but Autumn refused.

"I hope you can keep this to yourself forever," Autumn said in a hard voice, her face grim.

"But why?" Andy asked frowning, looking at Autumn in confusion. "Since you disappeared, Abby has suffered so much. She couldn't eat or sleep well and constantly worry about you. Now that you've recovered, why don't you come back and put them out of their misery?" Andy reproached Autumn.

"I'm sorry for being selfish," Autumn replied sadly, looking guilty. "I want to forget everything, that's why

I've decided to take those pills. I can't come back and live with you because of all the painful memories.

I want to forget that part of my life. I can't continue to live like this," Autumn said in a final tone. She had already made her decision.

Andy shook his head and asked, "How about Arthur and Amy? How can you bear to see them weep for you every day?"

"I..." Autumn faltered, not knowing what to say. She felt like a rebellious teenager who had no thought

for anybody but herself. It might sound selfish but she had only one thought in her mind right now and that was to forget everything, move to a new place and start her life anew.

"They will soon forget about me. Perhaps... our roads will cross one day," Autumn continued sadly, her face bleak with sorrow. "I caused them nothing but trouble since I came into their lives. They were constantly worried about me. I hope you will spend more time with them and take good care of them," Autumn pleaded.

"Are you really sure about this?" Andy asked, searching her face intently, hoping that she would change her mind and forget about her ridiculous plan.

"Yes, I'm sure," Autumn answered with finality. In her mind, that was the only choice she had. "Andy, there is one thing... I want to ask you a favor."

She drew near to Andy and whispered in his ear. After a slight hesitation, he nodded in agreement.

"Now that you've made up your mind, I will respect your decision. I'll keep your secret for now, but when you get settled, I'll bring them to see you," he promised.

"It's a deal," Autumn agreed without argument. The only person she intended to avoid was Charles.

She hoped never to see him as long as she lived.

Autumn asked Andy to give her a new identity. She wanted to go with a new name, Sheryl Xia.

Autumn was optimistic that she could turn over a new leaf and begin a new life again after this summer.

Once Autumn got her new ID and passport, she prepared to take the pills. Before taking the medicine

that would erase her memories, she wrote a letter to herself. In the letter, she reminded herself that

Shirley was her daughter. She reminded herself that the first thing she needed to do after she woke up

was to go abroad.

Anthony initially planned to leave Y City after Autumn gave birth. But now everything had changed.

Once he learned that Autumn planned to go abroad, he turned in his resignation and booked the same

flight as hers.

After taking the medicine, Autumn fell into a dreamless sleep. She woke up feeling light, her past totally

forgotten. She found a letter on her bedside table. After reading the letter, she knew her name and

accepted her new identity.

Even though she didn't remember that she had a daughter, she changed Shirley's diaper and fed her

milk instinctively.

Anthony arrived home after giving his resignation. Autumn didn't recognize him and she almost jumped in fear at the sight of him entering the door. "Who are you? Why do you have a key to my apartment?"

she asked suspiciously, eyeing Anthony as if he was a burglar.

Anthony froze. Searching Autumn's face, he suddenly realized that Autumn had taken the medicine and the drug had taken its effect on her.

He hesitated for a while before saying nervously, "I'm... I'm your boyfriend."

'Autumn, now that you've forgotten Charles, please forgive my selfishness. This is the only method that I can keep your company and protect you, ' he said to himself.

"Boyfriend?" Autumn asked him disbelievingly. 'There was no mention of a boyfriend in my letter or the name of my daughter's father. I have no recollection of my past now. And I know nothing about this man. How can I accept a stranger as my boyfriend?' she frowned.

"Yeah, I'm your boyfriend. I don't mind that you don't remember me. Take your time," Anthony assured her with a warm smile. "Are your luggage ready? If you're all set, we can go to the airport now,"

Anthony proposed.

Three years later

Autumn was leading a new life as Sheryl.

She was a single mother and a very famous model on the stage.

The past three years passed in a haze for Sheryl. She had led a tranquil life with her daughter Shirley and Anthony. Although Anthony had claimed to be her boyfriend, she refused to accept his words and proposed to start afresh.

Anthony had been a constant source of support to her and Shirley for the past three years. Sheryl was touched by his devotion and finally agreed to date him. They lived like a normal couple. Although there was a good harmony in their life, there was not much excitement in their relationship.

She always felt like there was something missing in their relationship, but she didn't know exactly what it was.

They were accustomed to each other's company, and she was used to seeing him every day, but she still unconsciously kept her distance from him.

She had been having a recurring nightmare these years. A man called her gently in her dream, "Come back to me, Autumn. I missed you so much."

His face was not clear but she couldn't forget the sound of his low, attractive voice which kept resounding in her ear.

'Who is Autumn?

Why do I keep having these weird dreams?' she asked herself, trying to calm her breathing.

All of a sudden, she heard a sound beside her and the bedside lamp turned on, dispelling the darkness in the room.

She rolled over, fluttered her eyes and saw Shirley hovering above her. She was clutching her teddy bear in her slender arms. The face of her lovely daughter reassured her. "Sher, I had a terrible dream," she said sweetly.

"Oh my goodness, did you?" Sheryl asked her daughter lovingly. She uncovered her quilt, scooped up Shirley and lay her down beside her. "You little sly girl, you just don't want to sleep alone, do you?" she said in a motherly tone, rubbing her daughter's small, upturned nose.

A guilty smile crept up in Shirley's face. Recently, Sheryl has been training Shirley to sleep alone in a separate bed. However, things didn't go smoothly. Every night, exactly at midnight, her baby girl would appear in her room clutching her teddy bear.

Looking at her cute face, Sheryl didn't have the heart to push her away. "Shirley, dearest, you have to

learn to sleep alone one day," she cooed wrapping her arms gently around her small body.

"I'll do that when I'm a little older. I'm too small," Shirley said seriously, looking up at her mom with a

pathetic look in her face. "Sher, when will you marry Tony?" she asked her mom curiously, wrapping

her arms around Sheryl's neck.

Shirley meant everything to Sheryl. She promised herself that she would give her daughter the best

future she could give, and that was why she worked very hard to earn and save money.

Her daughter was a very good girl and she never gave her trouble, even as a baby. She didn't throw

tantrums like other kids and she was very affectionate. Her only little shortcoming was being too clingy.

Sheryl thought that her daughter was perfect. She had a delicate face and a pair of black, starry eyes.

Staring at her eyes, Sheryl thought of the man who always appeared in her dream. That man also?

had?the same impressive eyes. However, she couldn't remember his name.

"I'm talking to you, Sher. What are you thinking about?" Shirley asked. Unlike other kids, Shirley never

called Sheryl, mom. She always called her by her pet nickname for her, Sher. When she was little, she

gave Anthony a nickname, too," Tony". And she still called him that.

Chapter 502 Interview

"It's all right," Sheryl said as she hugged Shirley closer to her. She gently passed her fingers through

Shirley's hair and asked her with a smile, "Why do you ask me this suddenly, Shirley?" She maintained

a smile on her face and looked at her daughter's face, trying to read her mind.

"They all have a daddy, but I don't," said Shirley softly as she lifted her face to look at Sheryl. Sheryl

could see it coming. And no matter how much you prepare for such questions, you can't save yourself

from the awkwardness of the situation. Sheryl kept looking at Shirley patiently as Shirley

continued, "They say daddy and mommy should be married. So if you marry Tony, I will have a daddy,

too." For a little girl of her age, Shirley couldn't definitely understand what the word marry meant. She

just thought it to be a kind of a bridge that will make her equal to her peers.

Even at this tender age she could make out that she was different from the other kids. And she even

knew the fact that it was just a daddy that was needed to complete her family. And for getting daddy

home, her mommy had to get married to one.

"So do you really like Tony or not?" Sheryl asked Shirley as she held her tight on her lap. Anthony had

proposed her several times in the last few years, but every time she hesitated. She didn't have the

courage to say yes. Every time, she ended up refusing him.

But Anthony didn't give up. He had been kind to them all the time. He had been like a support for them all these years. He was ready to wait for her to say yes.

"Tony is nice to me. I want him to be my daddy." Shirley sounded very clear and confident as she spoke. Sheryl couldn't help being amazed at the clarity of mind her little girl exhibited.

It is so surprising how observant the kids are. Shirley was very well aware of the fact that Anthony was not her real father. However, she realized that it would be good for her and Sheryl if they got married.

She could even see how Sheryl worked hard to make the ends meet and remained tired most of the time.

In her small little heart, Shirley seemed to be planning for her mommy's future. Sheryl could not stop admiring her little one for the sensitivity and concern she showed towards her.

However, what Shirley demanded was a difficult target to be achieved. Because no matter how much the situation seemed to be getting better if she agreed to marry Anthony, it would not be possible.

Simply because, Sheryl had no feelings towards him.

Hence, she listened to Shirley patiently and ended the discussion saying, "It's late, sweetie. Time for you to go to bed." Sheryl pulled the quilt for her and patted her good night.

Mornings are usually super busy for mothers and more so if you are a single mother. The next day started with Sheryl diligently readying Shirley for her kindergarten. After she dropped Shirley to the kindergarten, she headed towards an interview of BM Corporation.

It was grand spring-summer fashion show that was being organized by BM Corporation. Sheryl and her friend Sue had made an appointment for that interview.

Sue had been a constant support for Sheryl ever since. Sheryl landed in this foreign land with a baby in her arm. The two women from eastern origin felt like finding a home in each other in an unknown country. By the time Sheryl reached BM Corporation's office, Sue was already waiting for her.

"You're late, Sher. Is everything alright?" Sue said with a sigh of relief when she saw Sheryl entering the office. "Thank God, you have come! You're the next. Come on, make it fast!"

Sheryl hastened to check her papers. "Sorry to be late. I sent Shirley to the kindergarten, but then I got stuck in the traffic jam." Sheryl awkwardly explained to Sue with an apologetic look on her face. She really looked worked up for being late.

"Next one, Sheryl Xia, please." She hadn't yet finished giving her explanation to Sue and she heard her name being called. She looked startled at the lady in the front office and then looked at Sue once again. She had her mouth half open as if she wanted to say something to Sue. But since her name had been called, she had no choice than to leave the conversation in the middle and go ahead for the interview. She just took a deep breath and said to Sue, "Wish me luck! Talk to you later."

Sue raised her thumb and said, "Good Luck." Sue spoke with a wide smile on her face and tried to cheer her up. Sheryl smiled and took long strides ahead.

As Sheryl walked towards the office, multiple thoughts crossed her mind. A lot depended on this interview. Hence, she was also a bit nervous. She made a lot of money from her career as a model, but she spent most of it on Shirley. She was her only child and like every mother she wanted to give her all the happiness in the world and also protect her with all her might. More so, she had played the role of a father as well as a mother.

She could not say no to Shirley for anything. Hence, no matter how much money she made through modelling, she could hardly save a penny.

She had been swimming against the tide ever since she landed in this country. She was determined to crack the interview no matter what. Clearing this interview would mean getting the job that would free her of any financial worries for a period of time.

Hence, she straightened up her spine, took a deep breath and strode ahead with all her determination.

The modeling world has very tough rules. It is a place where the new faces get more preferences.

Sheryl did not have the best figure. Nor did was she the youngest. Rather she had all these factors that could work against her whenever she went for a modelling assignment. But just because some of these pull back factors, she could not afford to quit. If not for her own self, she had to keep trying for Shirley.

She could never forget her first stage performance when she had to sport a bikini. She still remembered the awkwardness of standing on the stage only with a bikini and how she was rebuked and fired when she tried to cover herself a bit. It felt like a whip on her bare skin. She could never forget the humiliation and embarrassment.

She was so discouraged and she thought that she would never stand on a stage. That was when she met Sue. Sue came across as a strong and independent girl who gave her a lot of courage to face all the predicaments on her way. With her help and encouragement Sheryl got over all the roadblocks one

by one.

As Autumn walked into the room, she found three interviewers. As she greeted them one by one, she spotted the one sitting in the middle to be an Asian.

He stared at Sheryl with a piercing look. from top to bottom which made her a little uncomfortable.

Sheryl answered all the questions they asked in English. Then the interviewer in the middle suddenly spoke to her in Chinese. He asked her in an intriguing tone, "So, your name's Sheryl Xia. Right?"

"Yes, it is." Sheryl paused for a while and replied with conviction.

The man had his gaze fixed on her face as he nodded and continued, "The show is going to be held at Y City. So I wonder if it's okay for you. I hope you don't have a problem travelling for a business trip?"

Sheryl was not in a position to choose. She had the responsibility of her daughter. She always tried to avoid any job that required her to leave Shirley alone but this time, the situation was different. This job offered a pay package that she could not ignore.

The question about travelling to Y city put her in a momentary dilemma. In one moment, the innocent face of Shirley flashed in front of her eyes making her heart mellow. But the next moment she

straightened herself up and looked at the practical side of it. She thought to herself, 'I can't miss this chance. Shirley and I really need this money. I can ask Anthony to look after Shirley for a few days till I am back.'

So she nodded and said yes.

"Well, that's all right, then." He turned to the other two interviewers and the three of them whispered something among themselves. Sheryl looked at them with butterflies fluttering inside her stomach.

Every passing moment felt like a long time. Then they finally stared at Sheryl and declared that she had been selected.

The moment she heard them saying that she was in, Sheryl could hardly conceal her excitement. But she had to pretend to be cool and composed in front of them. But the moment she came out, she showed a victory sign towards Sue and cheered.

Sue was next in line after Sheryl. Fortunately, even she got selected for the show. The two friends planned to celebrate their achievement. Nobody could ever understand what this opportunity meant for them.

They headed towards a Chinese restaurant. As they placed the order and waited for the food to appear

on the table, Sue asked Sheryl, "So, how is it with Anthony these days?" Sheryl smiled and said, "Don't know. He seems to be very busy of late."

Sheryl didn't like to ask too much about Anthony's private life. Moreover, she didn't even have asked him either, because he would always tell her everything. Sue had been telling her that it was very silly of her not accepting Anthony's marriage proposals. "If I were in your place, I would have definitely married him by now. But look at you, Sheryl, you don't have any interest in him."

In Sue's words, it was the typical case of a full man knew no hunger.

Sheryl just chose to smile and avoided the topic every time Sue brought it up. Even this time, she just smiled and waited for the topic to change.

Sheryl could never express her thoughts to anyone. Hence she just kept them at the bottom of her heart in a way that no one would ever be able to even touch them.

Sue could see love for Sheryl in Anthony's eyes. But she never understood what made Sheryl so cold towards him. She often tried to convince Sheryl to get married to Anthony. But whenever she brought this topic up, Sheryl avoided the discussion in a very diplomatic manner. Sue felt concerned about

Sheryl and her daughter. She felt that Anthony was the answer for all their troubles. She feared that if

Sheryl kept procrastinating her decision to marry Anthony, she might lose him to some other woman

and end up regretting all her life.

Sheryl looked at Sue with knitted eyebrows and said, "Mimi, if you like him so much, I'd like to give him

to you."

"What?" Sue exclaimed. "Come on, a friend's wife is not to be bullied, nor a friend's husband, either. I

have strong sense of justice. So how can I keep thinking about your boyfriend?" Mimi was the

nickname that Sheryl lovingly called Sue. Sue was a model with an excellent figure, but her face was a

little bit round. The dresser was always teasing saying her that she needed more cosmetics.

So Sheryl was called Mimi which literally meant a little fat kitty.

Sue frowned at Sheryl and said, "I'm just worried about you. It's not easy to look after Shirley all by

yourself. If you get married to Anthony, he can help you with your burden. Then you won't have to work

so hard. I just don't understand why you wouldn't accept that. Why?"

Chapter 503 You Can't Go There

"You won't understand it." Sheryl felt awkward every time she had to give explanation to anyone

regarding her relationship with Anthony. Why was it that except for her everyone thought that Anthony

would make the perfect husband for her? Last night it was Shirley and now Sue. This was one question that she was being faced with everywhere. She always avoided discussing this with Sue, but today she felt like putting an end to this topic once and for all. It was the first time she talked about this issue with Sue. She gave a bitter smile and said, "Although we are together with each other these years, actually there is no attraction between us. The passion between couples has never existed in our relationship and I have no special feeling for him even when he holds my hand." Sheryl spoke in a point blank manner.

Sue looked at Sheryl's face with utter disbelief. "So, how about sex?" Sue probed Sheryl out of curiosity.

"What are you talking about?" Sheryl blurted out. She was completely taken aback to be asked such a private question. She was almost on the verge of losing her cool. But then she remembered how supportive Sue had been for her. "We have never even kissed. Leave aside sex."

Sue was shocked. Her eyes almost popped out as she asked, "What? Are you kidding me? Do you mean that you and Anthony even haven't kissed in a three-year-relationship?" Sue had started to

realize that it was just a one sided love from Anthony. What she still could not believe was that how a girl could be so indifferent to her boyfriend like Anthony.

'Are they really dating each other? That's incredible!' Sue thought to herself.

"Yes," Sheryl said with a firm voice hiding her embarrassment. From the way Anthony stayed with her like a shadow and took care of her and Shirley, it was obvious for others to assume them to be a couple. However, it was crystal clear in her mind that she had no sexual interest in Anthony. He was just a good family friend to her. Nothing more, nothing less.

"That's really unbelievable. I have never met a couple who can maintain their relationship in this way!"

Her eyes wide open as she spoke to Sheryl. "Okay," Sue said, trying to bring herself back from state of shock and look calm. Then she shook her head gently and said in a convincing manner, "Sher, no matter what, I think Anthony is a good man to be your husband. And if you still don't love him, then, please let go of him."

Sheryl agreed with what Sue was saying. She had been with Anthony for three years now and it was indeed high time to consider whether they should move on or not. And not that Sheryl did not think about it before, but she could not even deny the fact that she did not want to lose Anthony as a friend

either.

"Yes, I know. I will make a decision after I come back from Y City." Sheryl gave a smile and said, "I really should have a talk with Anthony on this issue."

No matter what decision they would make, Sheryl would always take Anthony as her best friend. Why couldn't a man and a woman be just good friends? Why was it necessary for them to get married? She found a lot of solace and support in Anthony. She could not think of a single day without him. But when it came to romance, she could never give that place to Anthony.

All of a sudden, Sheryl's phone rang, cutting through their conversation and Anthony's name flashed on the screen.

"Where are you?" Anthony asked. Sheryl told him about the Chinese Restaurant where they were dining in. Anthony arrived at the restaurant in a while.

He greeted Sue politely and said to Sheryl, "It's time to pick up Shirley. Do you want to come with me?"

"Oh! Okay, sorry I almost forgot about Shirley," Sheryl said as she hastened to arrange her handbag.

Sheryl felt embarrassed as she checked the time. She didn't even realized how soon the time had

passed. She excused herself from Sue and said, "I have to pick up Shirley now. See you."

"Okay, see you!" Sue smiled and wave at both of them. Sue then waved at the waiter to get the bill.

Anthony stopped her politely and said that he had already paid the bill.

Sue expressed her gratitude with a polite smile. Then as soon as he turned his back to head towards

the door, Sue turned to Sheryl and said, "Look! What a perfect man he is! Why don't you love him?"

"Shut up!" Sheryl frowned as she yelled at Sue.

Then Sheryl and Anthony said good bye to Sue and drove to the kindergarten. Sue watched them from

behind and thought to herself, 'They look like they are made for each other. What a silly girl Sheryl is

that she can't see her love in Anthony!'

When they arrived home with Shirley, Sheryl headed straight to give Shirley a bath while Anthony took

over the kitchen for preparing dinner. He gave Sheryl a big smile as she came out of the bathroom with

Shirley wrapped cozily in the towel in her hand. Then he said, "Wait a minute. We can have dinner

when the soup is ready."

He then said to Shirley, "Shirley, I made your favorite fried tomatoes with eggs. You can eat as much as

you want."

Shirley's eyes brightened up instantly. "OK, thank you." Shirley was overjoyed to hear fried tomatoes with eggs. It's incredible how kids find joy in such trivial things.

Anthony finished cooking and set the table for the dinner. He put the soup on the table and summoned Sheryl and Shirley to join in. "Sorry, Sher. I was so busy recently and I had no time to take care of you and Shirley," Anthony said as Sheryl pulled the highchair to make Shirley sit down. "I hope I can compensate you with this dinner," he added.

"I really appreciate you for what you have done for us." Sheryl replied with a smile as she placed the bowl in front of Shirley and helped a spoon full into her mouth. "It's not your fault to be busy working.

Shirley and I are not little babies and we don't need you to spend all your energy and time on us."

Sheryl smiled and added, "You have given Shirley and me a happy life all these years. Even I feel like a little girl like Shirley by not doing anything myself and depending on you for everything. I have no clue how I would survive if I have to live alone one day."

"That day will never come," Anthony said in a stern voice. Then he softened his voice and added, "We have such a happy life together. Why will you ever live alone?"

"That is what I'm going to talk to you about." Sheryl put her bowl down and broke the news to Anthony in a calm voice. "I went to BM Corporation for an interview today and I cleared it."

"Wow that sounds great," applauded Anthony. Then he looked at Shirley and said, "Yeah! Mom's got a new job. That calls for a party." Anthony knew Sheryl's nature very well. She never liked taking favor from Anthony for anything. Even though she had forgotten everything about her past life, she tried to live independently. However, Sheryl felt quiet indebted to Anthony for supporting her and staying by her

side through thick and thin.

Sheryl tried her best to solve all the problems and bring up Shirley up all by herself. She could never thank Anthony enough for what he had done for her all these years.

Anthony had no other choice than to just be by her side as a true friend. Whenever he offered any kind of help to her, she refused it politely.

Anthony had rejected the idea when she told him that she wanted to be a model. But finally he had to give in to her determination and strong will to become independent.

"Sher, will you have enough money to buy me beautiful clothes?" Shirley raised her face and looked at

Sheryl with an innocent look.

Sheryl lovingly touched Shirley's round face and answered, "Yes, Mom will buy many beautiful clothes and toys for you. Are you happy?"

"Yes, I'm happy!" The little girl said with a lot of excitement and joy in her voice.

Anthony's heart melted as he watched the joyous vibes being shared between the mother and daughter. He observed both of them lovingly. One was the woman he had loved since as long as he could remember and the other was the little girl he cherished like his own daughter. He remembered holding Shirley the first time when she was born. He would give up anything as long as he could be with them.

"Anthony," Sheryl said abruptly bringing him back from his trance. "I want to ask you a favor." Sheryl added, "The spring and summer clothes fashion show would be held in another city. So I will have to leave for a few days. I want you to take care of Shirley during that time."

"No problem." Anthony nodded his head. Shirley was very comfortable with him even when Sheryl was not around. It would rather be good fun for both of them. Hence he agreed to her request immediately.

"How long will you be away?" Anthony asked her.

"I am not sure yet." Sheryl shook her head and added, "The sponsor didn't tell me and I haven't asked him either."

"Then... where will you go?" Anthony just asked causally munching his food, but the answer came as shock to him from head to toe. "Where will you go?" he asked once again to make sure what he heard was right.

"Y City," Sheryl answered with a smile on her face. "Actually I really want to go there because it's my birthplace." Sheryl spoke with a lot of fondness in her voice. The mention of Y City brought a strange homely feeling to her heart. She could feel an innate bonding with that city though she did not remember much about it.

Albeit her mind was completely blank about everything that took place before Shirley's birth, she knew that she came from Y City. All she remembered was that she came from that city with Shirley when she was just an infant. And now that she got a chance to pay visit to her hometown, she was thoroughly excited.

"No, you can't go there!" Anthony uttered abruptly bringing Sheryl back from her trance. Sheryl stared

at his face with disbelief. She had never seen him speaking in this way in the last three years.

Suddenly, the jovial family environment changed in to a tensed and somber one. Even little Shirley could feel the heaviness in the room and started crying. Sheryl quickly shifted her attention towards her and tried to pacify her while watching Anthony from the corner of her eyes. Anthony's face had become firm and his eyebrows stitched into a tight frown. He looked angry for the first time. And for some unknown reason it sent a chill down Sheryl's spine.

Chapter 504 Shirley Is My Daughter

There was pin drop silence in the room for a while. Anthony's eyes fell on Shirley's face and he could see fear in her innocent eyes. She had never seen Anthony behave this way. She stared straight at him with her eyes wide open. Anthony became conscious upon noticing Shirley's startled expression. He softened his eyes and smiled at her. "Have you finished up with your dinner, my sweetie?" he asked tenderly.

"Yeah," Shirley nodded at him meekly. She was relieved to see a smile on his face.

"Now please return to your room and stay there for a while. I need to talk to your mom," he coaxed her with a warm smile. Shirley climbed down her chair awkwardly, and ran to her bedroom. After making sure Shirley walked into her room, Anthony put on a stern look, turned to Sheryl and commanded, "Now

call you company and tell them that you will quit."

"Why?" Sheryl looked at Anthony in confusion. She had no clue how did the good news of her job and the 'happy-family-vibes' between the three of them suddenly changed into something so serious. She was surprised with Anthony's unreasonable behavior. "You know how much I struggled to get this opportunity. Besides, I can get a generous reward. All I need to do is to go on a business trip and take part in a show. I have made such great efforts, but now you're stopping me? Shouldn't you give me a sound reason for that?" she reasoned.

"There is no reason. You can't go there," Anthony said adamantly. Sheryl stared at his face trying to understand what went wrong with him all of a sudden. What could be the reason that he was not even ready to explain to her? He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Sheryl, and continued in the same domineering manner, "I won't let you go there even if you're mad at me or even hate me."

'Autumn broke her heart there.

How can I let her go back?

Of all places, why did Sheryl have to get a work there? I can't let her return to that place. I have to stop

this. I can't let her go, ' he was resolute in his decision. The more he thought about it, the more stern his face grew. Sheryl could not identify the man sitting right across her.

"You... Why are you behaving in such an unreasonable manner?" Sheryl stammered angrily. She did not even feel obliged to obey him. It was her life and her career for which she had worked so hard. She looked at Anthony indignantly and went on decisively, "Whether you agree or not, I will go there. It's final. If you're unwilling to take care of Shirley in my absence, I... I'll take her with me."

"Don't get me wrong, Sher." Anthony's voice got mellowed down as she mentioned Shirley. "She has nothing to do with my not wanting you to go there. Shirley is my daughter. How would I be unwilling to look after her?" Anthony explained.

There was a turmoil going on inside his heart all these years. And now, it was on the verge of taking shape of a twister that would turn his world completely upside down. The very thought of it scared him.

It was only he who was aware of the truth. The truth that he never ever wanted Sheryl and Shirley to know. In the past three years, he thought he had stolen Sheryl away from Charles. Now if she went back to Y City and met Charles once again, he feared that she would leave him forever.

Anthony could feel a fist full of sand slipping out of his hand. His world began and ended with Sheryl

and Shirley. How could he let them go?

"No, Shirley is my daughter, not yours," Sheryl corrected him in a firm voice. She had learnt that

Anthony was not Shirley's father long time ago.

They both knew it. Initially, it was extremely tormenting Sheryl. One fine day, she just woke up to find

that her past became a blank page. She had a baby in her arms but she did not even remember who

the father of her child was.

Sheryl had asked Anthony about her daughter's biological father a number of times. And every time

she got the same answer from him: I didn't know. Later, she gave up on that thought and decided to

look forward for herself and her daughter.

"What do you mean by that?" Anthony blurted out as he squinted at her.

"You heard me," Sheryl replied in a point blank manner. She just blurted out these harsh words at

Anthony. This time she was really annoyed with him. How could he take such an authoritative position

in her life? Who gave him the right? And on the top of that he was not even ready to give an

explanation to her either. So many questions crowded into her mind and she did not have an answer

for any one of them. This made her really angry on Anthony.

Sheryl's words came as a whip on Anthony's skin. The hurt showed on his face as he spoke in a mellowed voice, "Yes. You're right. I'm not Shirley's biological father. But you've witnessed how I treated her all these years, haven't you? I have treated her like my own daughter. Does your work mean so much to you that you want to defy me by all means and completely deny my place in your and Shirley's life?"

Sheryl mellowed down a bit as Anthony spoke these words. In fact, she was repentant to have uttered such cruel words to him. But now it was too late to take them back. With a composed expression, Sheryl said with a softer but still firm voice, "You know how much I need the money. In order to raise Shirley, I have to work very hard and earn money. No matter what you say, I'll have to take up this job." Sheryl cast a glance at Anthony and said in a low yet cold voice, "I'm really tired and want to get some sleep. Close the door when you leave."

Sheryl headed towards her bedroom with turning back at Anthony even for once. In her heart, she really felt sorry for saying such unpleasant words to him. Particularly after he had done so much for her and her daughter. And this time she was just too angry to even pretend to be polite with him.

From her bedroom, she could hear the sound of taps. She assumed that Anthony must be washing the utensils.

After the cleaning was over, Anthony walked towards Sheryl's room, and knocked. "I have cleaned the kitchen and stuffed snacks and fruits into the fridge. I hope you reconsider my words. I really hope you drop your idea of going to Y City."

Anthony felt utterly helpless. He could never tell Sheryl why he didn't want her to go to Y City. Only he knew how important it was for him to stop her from going there. If she insisted... Anthony's mind got clouded with so many thoughts as he drove back home.

Since Autumn had disappeared, Charles changed a lot. His life fell apart. Most of the time he stayed away from home. Every corner of the house reminded him of Autumn.

While taking a stroll in the balcony, he could hear Autumn's voice whispering into his ears. "Do you want a boy or a girl?" Even the air inside their house seemed to bear her fragrance.

While he was in the bathroom, memories of his beloved wife helping him with his shower would come to his mind. What a doting wife she was! Even though their marriage was an accident, Autumn gave

her heart and soul to nurture their relationship.

In his bedroom, he could feel having Autumn around. Now she was sitting on the couch reading a book, the next moment she was standing by the window lost in her thoughts, and then she was sleeping peacefully in his arms.

As he entered the kitchen, he would find her standing in the doorway, smiling at him. Wearing an apron, her hair bundled, she would raise her eyes at him and say smiling, "Here you are. Wash your hands. The dinner is ready."

Even after Autumn disappeared for the past three years now, Charles could feel her presence everywhere around him.

Autumn was nowhere. But for Charles she was still there, all the time, just like a shadow.

Three years, yes, it had been three years that she had left. Charles looked at their wedding photograph. It just seemed like yesterday. The newly hired servant could not understand why Charles kept asking her to make braised pork chops. After eating the dish, he kept gazing at the plate.

Later she learnt that it was a dish that Mrs. Lu specially prepared for Charles.

'What an affectionate man!' she thought to herself.

It had been three years since Autumn had disappeared. Almost everyone believed that she was dead, including the Zhao family. They had left the city. Despite this, Charles didn't lose hope. He firmly believed that Autumn was still alive and that she would come back to him.

She would have to come back sooner or later.

Every passing moment had been terrible for Charles without Autumn. He never liked staying at home.

In the past three years, he went to the bar every night and indulged himself in drinking just to make sure that he stopped missing Autumn. He came back home completely drunk, so that he fell asleep the moment he touched the pillow. And when he woke up the following day, he focused on his work. Today, it was no exception.

Three years passed. And a lot had changed in Lu family as well. Chris and Sam were on a family way.

Recently since Sam had been on a business trip, she came to stay over at the Lu family house. Chris came out of her room to have some water when she spotted Charles who was about to leave.

"Where you are going?" she frowned and demanded a reply from Charles.

"It's getting late. Are you going to drink again?" She asked with a concerned look, touching her bulging

belly. It really ached her heart to see Charles in this condition.

Sometimes Chris hoped that Charles did not love Autumn as much as he did. Three years passed, but he hadn't forgotten her for even one single second.

Charles nodded. "I can't get a sleep, so I'm leaving to get some drink. You're pregnant now, so you need to take good care of yourself. Hurry up. Go upstairs and go to sleep."

Charles said the words before walking out of the room so that he could avoid looking at Chris's baby bump, which might again remind him of Autumn. 'Before she disappeared, she was carrying my children. I don't know how they have been doing recently, ' he thought to himself. How happy they were! They were just getting ready to welcome their babies and all of a sudden, his world fell apart. But he knew, deep inside his heart, Autumn would come back to him very soon.

Chapter 505 Three-year Separation

"Think rationally Charles." Chris gazed at his brother's distraught, sullen face and sighed. She was desperate; she wanted to make Charles see straight with her words. "You know this three-year absence might endanger Autumn."

She hoped her words would bring her brother to his senses, not being like this. She pursed her lips and glared at him. "You had better cheer up than remain in seclusion with only despair and liquor as your

friend."

"It's my life, so you better stay the hell out of it!" His eyes shone with fury as he met his sister's startled ones, his voice was raised and his words were intentionally hurting her. She was frozen still, and her face showed disbelief at her brother's behavior towards her. Gone was his loving brother, who was replaced with this hostile man.

She gulped and lowered her gaze; her voice was almost like a whisper against the eerie stillness of the room. "You are wasting yourself, dear brother..." Continuing her advice, she said, "Please act like a real adult and spare us from worries about your irrational actions."

Her words hit Charles. He stared at her face before stepping out from the room, the door hitting the frame with a bang as it was shut behind him.

With his eyes closed, he breathed out his frustrations and welcomed the fresh, cold air entering his lungs, as he stood in front of the lush greenery of a garden. His eyes opened and focused on the cold cement flooring and at once, his thoughts drifted back to Autumn's face, filling his heart with sadness and immense pain.

Later that night, he found himself in front of the counter of the bar, sitting on a comfortable stool. Taking

observations and comparison of the peaceful club he used to go to, he found this new crowded club was featured by loud music around.

Just when he was about to take his drink from the bartender, a woman dressed in daring red outfit came and approached him with every intention of flirting with him.

The woman's hand was about to touch him lewdly when she noticed his glare. His dark, cold look shaken her to senses and left him in peace. It also served as a warning to the other watching sluts waiting for their chance on the side.

Two glasses of liquor were gone in one gulp. Charles was drowning fast into drunkenness. His only wish was to relieve these emotions and feel a sense of elation.

A loud crash and broken glasses earned the attention of everyone. The once wild crowd of dancers stopped and focused on the scene. Charles turned his head and looked as well. There was a man, possibly the chief barman, scolding a waitress, while the latter pleaded for mercy.

After half an hour of severe reprimand, the waitress returned to the bar counter, almost close to tears.

Her back turned to him, her shoulders shaking slowly. By now, he thought, she must be crying.

Charles looked at her and ordered for another glass of liquor to mix. She turned to him, her eyes were red and there were trails of tears on her face. He later knew she was a new waitress.

"Please give me a glass of whisky with ice cubes." His tone was direct.

Blinking her tears away, the waitress hastily moved to make his order. She was still sensitive over the earlier scenario, her hands still shaking from fear. Her determination to make things right didn't go with her body as the glass slipped from her hands and smashed into the floor, shattering loudly.

The chief barman saw this mishap and turned to the poor waitress. "Miss, your low performance on the job demands an immediate termination, though your being a single mother gained my sympathy."

The man from earlier gave the waitress a severe scolding.

"Leila, you better seek employment somewhere else considering your poor performance for your first week of work here." The man shouted his words at the poor waitress, his index finger pointing at her.

Blazing bright neon lights of the bar made Leila's face recognizable to the shocked Charles.

He knew she recognized him when she stole a second glance at his direction, but she kept her calm demeanour.

"I beg you. I need this job for my son's treatments. Please do not fire me, Sir. I will not repeat the same mistake again." She grasped the man's hand, pleading for his mercy.

However, the man remained indifferent to her words and continued with a lowered voice, "Your poor job

performance justifies your termination. I cannot think of any reason to retain you.

You must take good care for your son's health by doing any other job instead."

The decision was finalized and there was nothing she could do. She went to the empty staff room

quietly and took off her uniform. She made one last look of it before putting it in the hanger, her mind on

her only son and his needs.

When Leila exited the staff room, Charles's presence surprised her.

He was casually waiting for her by the door. "Why are you here?" Though she was afraid of meeting

him back then and now, he stood in front of her.

"Please calm down. Meeting you here is just a pure coincidence." Autumn's long absence had Charles

seek for someone close to talk with. He was desperate to ease the loneliness of his lost wife.

He just wanted to talk about his lost wife and reminisce the memories.

"What for? I don't think we have something to talk." Leila glared at him, putting a brave front before walking away. He tried to stop her.

He stared at her retreating back, his hopes high on having a conversation with someone close to Autumn none other than Leila.

"Relax, Leila. All I want right now is to have a decent conversation..." She stopped and turned to him as her eyes were wide in shock. Charles was ridden with guilt upon remembering Leila's reason for termination.

She whispered a reply. "I can only give you half-an-hour."

"Sounds good." Grateful for her time and understanding, Charles went to buy some canned beers in a nearby supermarket. They agreed to have a drink on the side of the road, sitting by the metal railings lining the road.

He gave her a can, which she gladly accepted. Sharp pop sounded upon opening his can, and he drank quickly from it. "I recalled you told me one time that you had grown to hate both the alcohol and the bars," Leila said while she remained watching him drink.

"It all depends on the circumstances," came his quick reply. His face turned to her, a smile plastered on it. However, she could see how forced they were. He softly added, "This world is too unpredictable and violent! I am in desperation and depression of losing contact with my beloved wife."

She understood the reason of Charles despair was Autumn's absence. "I am aware of Autumn's disappearance."

"Really?" Charles looked at her, pausing shortly before taking another gulp of beer.

"Mr. Lu, to tell you honestly..." She looked up to him and continued with her words softly, "It is possible Autumn was in danger during her three-year absence. But, you need to be optimistic and keep your faith in her as she expected you to be."

Chapter 506 Not Yet Time

Leila's initial plan was to bring the boy to see the Lu family a year after Autumn's disappearance. But she had two fears. One was that Charles might suspect the child's identity. And the other was that Autumn might suddenly appear. So she kept putting off her plan.

Then recently, she learned Charles was a frequent guest at one bar. She decided to work there. After more than a month of waiting, she finally came face-to-face with him.

She was glad that all her efforts were not in vain.

Charles scowled at Leila on hearing her words, as he said, "Autumn must be living somewhere else already. Maybe she has a problem with me, and that's why she hasn't come back to me."

Leila raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Come on, Mr. Lu. Stop deceiving yourself," she said. "It's been too many years since she left. Shouldn't you set her free? Look at me."

She checked to see if he was paying attention. "Many years ago, you meant everything to me. And I thought you would accept me if I took care of you and stayed loyal to you. I was even dreaming that you would divorce Autumn for me. And if that had been the case, I was determined to go see Autumn to apologize."

She gave a self-mocking smile and confessed, "But when you fired me, I realized I was coveting someone who never belonged to me. Autumn was the only one you loved. It took me three years to let you go and move on. So I know you can do it, too."

Charles gave her a bitter smile. "I'm sorry," he said earnestly. He sighed while thinking, 'To keep Autumn from becoming paranoid, I was cruel to Leila. Now she's so thin that I can barely recognize her.'

This time, Leila gave him a real smile. "I'm telling you these things not because I want an apology. But I do hope you can forget Autumn, and go on with your life. She's gone now, and you can't bring her back. It's best to let her go and move on," she advised.

Charles gave her a wry smile. "I know I should let go of Autumn and move on with my life. I've tried but I just can't," he sighed.

Suddenly, he stood up and said, "Let's go!"

"Go where?" Leila asked. His command stunned her.

"I had drinks, so I can't drive. Besides, your manager said that you had a son and he was sick. Is he in the hospital?" Charles spoke without looking at Leila.

"No, he isn't in the hospital," she quickly replied. "He just has a cold and is resting at home."

Her expression became tender and affectionate when Leila spoke of the boy. Her initial plan was to use the child to get Charles to marry her. But over time, she developed a real fondness for the boy and began to treat him like her own as he grew up. She found herself vowing to do anything to provide him with the best life.

Maybe he looked like Charles, and this made Leila accept and regard him as her own. But the boy was aloof and indifferent to her.

Despite his lack of interest in Leila, she continued to love him and hoped his attitude towards her would eventually change.

"I'll come with you and visit him," Charles suddenly offered. "I didn't expect you to get married after your

disappearance. And who is the boy's father?" he asked.

Charles didn't hear everything Leila's manager said since the bar was too noisy.

She looked at him before replying, "I'm... I'm not married."

"You mean you're single and unmarried?" Charles was incredulous. It was the last thing he expected to hear. Charles could not help but marvel at Leila for being a strong woman.

He insisted, "I'll take you home." Leila smiled gratefully but politely refused his offer. She said it would not be appropriate given his condition. She was thinking, 'It's not yet time for him to meet the child.'

Charles did not insist, noting the firmness in Leila's tone. They hailed a cab and arrived at the Lu family house. Leila assisted Charles out of the vehicle. He was drunk. She hurriedly left to escape but

stopped when Charles called out.

"Leila!" he called her name aloud. "Can you give me your phone number?" He paused. "Maybe we can have a drink another time," he offered.

She turned to see if he was serious. "Okay." Her lips formed into a sly smile.

After exchanging numbers, Leila called a taxi while Charles walked into the house slowly. As he entered the living room, he found Chris asleep on the couch. His brows were knitted. Even drunk, he looked at her with concern. Before he could lay a blanket to cover her, Chris' eyelids fluttered open.

"You're back," she said, her voice still sounding sleepy. She rubbed her eyes, and then stared at her brother.

"Yeah, I'm back," he said while nodding. Frowning, he said, "It's late. Why aren't you resting in your room?"

"I was waiting for you," Chris answered, smiling. She looked up at her brother and asked, "Do you have time tomorrow, Charles?" Charles raised his brows in question. "I was hoping you could accompany me to mother-and-baby stores," his sister continued.

Her words transported Charles to another time. 'Autumn always asked me to accompany her when she

wanted to shop in those stores, ' he thought.

Chris tugged her brother's arm. "Did you listen to what I said?"

Her voice snapped Charles back to the present. He replied, "Uhm, okay."

In the years since Autumn disappeared, he had been avoiding mother-and-baby stores. But since Sam wasn't around, he had to keep Chris company. Recalling Leila's words earlier, he now wondered if he should finally learn to accept Autumn's death.

The following morning, Chris was excited as she woke her brother, and urged him to get ready for their outing. They entered a shop, and Chris ended up buying so many items. Charles soon ran out of patience and was itching to leave.

He eventually realized what Chris was doing. 'Her intention was to take me somewhere for a relaxing time, ' he thought.

But he was quickly running out of patience and finally told his sister. "Are you done here? I still have things to do at the office, so I need to leave," Charles said with a hint of annoyance.

Chris panicked as she saw her brother attempting to leave. She quickly grabbed his hand and

appealed, "Wait, Charles. Look, there's a toy shop, and I want to have a look there." She was gesturing to the opposite shop. "Please stay a while longer. Are you going to let me go around carrying all this stuff with my bulging belly?" she implored.

Her brother grumbled, "Don't you think it's too early to buy toys for your unborn baby?"

"It's never too early," she replied with a grin. "I need to get everything ready for my baby." She shifted to negotiating mode. "We can go home after taking a look there, okay?"

With great reluctance, Charles finally gave in.

Chris cheerfully went through the racks of baby accessories. "How about this, Charles?" she asked. "I have a feeling this is going to be a baby girl. When I give birth, I'll dress her up so she'll look like a pretty princess," she told her brother, her eyes full of expectation and joy.

Charles held out a princess dress with a pink collar bow and commented, "I think this is lovely." Deep inside he was thinking bitterly, 'I was looking forward to the arrival of our twins and wondered about their gender. Now, I will never have the chance to meet my children.'

Chris stared at Charles with wide eyes. She never expected her brother to choose the color pink for an infant.

Chapter 507 Single Unwedded Mother

Several hours later, Chris settled on a ton of baby stuff. When she turned around, she caught sight of a pretty, slender woman. She stood in front of shelves but looked a bit awkward, as if she didn't know what to do.

With her was a fair-skinned boy, about three or four years old. Chris was struck by gorgeous eyes that appeared to twinkle. He was adorable. The child was staring obsessively at a harmonica.

"Do you like this, Charlie?" the woman asked, stooping to the boy's level. The cute boy nodded, and the woman bit her lower lip before saying, "Okay then, we'll take it."

Getting the harmonica from the shelf, the woman took the boy's hand and headed towards the counter.

As they approached, she met Chris' confused gaze.

While in deep thought, Chris stared at the woman, a finger tapping her chin. She kept thinking she had met her somewhere. She thought harder until it finally came to her. 'Is that Leila?'

She stood up straighter. 'What is she doing here?' Chris wondered.

'And who is that little boy with her?' A hundred questions were running in her head.

"Miss Lu..." a surprised Leila mouthed as she saw Chris. Deliberately, she hid the boy behind her back

to prevent Chris from looking at him.

But the child stuck his head out from behind Leila and stared curiously at Chris' bulging belly.

The boy's eyes were twinkling as Chris stared at him. She was wondering where she had seen something similar. Instinct had her turning around to look at Charles, who was paying for her purchases.

After he finished paying, Charles asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Over there, Charles," Chris pointed towards where Leila stood. She intended to show Charles how much the boy with Leila looked like him.

Charles looked at where Chris gestured but saw nothing. He was puzzled and stared at his sister.

"What am I supposed to see?" he asked Chris in confusion.

Chris turned and saw Leila running, dragging the child behind her. Heart pounding quickly, she wanted to follow to confirm the boy's identity. But she resisted the impulse.

She paused to think, 'I hope that is not Charles' child with Leila. I figure he's about three years old.

Three years ago, Charles and Autumn were still together. If that boy is his son, then it only means my

brother cheated on his wife.'

Some part of her wished the boy was Charles' son. 'If he did cheat on Autumn, maybe she wasn't that important to him. Besides, maybe Leila can help Charles finally forget Autumn, ' she thought.

Being a woman of action, Chris decided it was time to have a talk with Leila to confirm her suspicions and set things straight.

That evening, she hired a detective to find out where Leila lived. 'Fortunately, Sam is away on a business trip. Otherwise, he would never allow this, ' she thought. It was not long before she learned where Leila was staying.

Chris got up earlier than usual. After getting dressed, she headed to Leila's house. When she arrived at the apartment building, she waited at the corner. At 7:30, Leila and the boy came out and walked to a nearby kindergarten. Chris followed at a distance to avoid being seen, never taking her eyes off the little boy.

The longer she saw the child with Leila, the more suspicious she became. 'What a coincidence, ' she thought. The boy not only looked like Charles but they also shared similar characteristics based on her observations.

Leila watched Charlie go inside the school. When she turned around, she caught sight of Chris,

standing not far from where she was. Chris flew into a panic and tried walking away quickly.

Then she mumbled to comfort herself, "I came here to find out about the boy's identity, so there's no need to hide."

Chris composed herself and made her way to Leila.

She stared as Chris approached, with no sign of shock registering on her face. It appeared that she was ready to talk to Chris in case she came. Looking at Charles' sister, she offered, "There's a coffee shop around the corner. We can go there and talk."

"Good idea," Chris agreed. She didn't hesitate, as she was more curious than anxious.

Since Chris was pregnant, Leila ordered a glass of warm milk for her instead of coffee.

Chris gripped the glass, but did not drink from it. She kept staring at Leila, who lowered her head

looking calm. Chris inquired, "Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"I am, yes," Leila replied, face still impassive. "I guessed you would be looking for me. Since that day

when we met at the toy store, I have been waiting for you to come. Admittedly, I didn't expect it to be

this soon," she explained.

"Then you must already know why I wanted to meet you," Chris said slowly. Leila nodded, while staring at her cup of coffee.

Chris decided to get straight to the point. "Is Charles your son's father?" she asked frankly. Chris had never been good at hiding. And she wasted no time to get to the point.

"No, he isn't. You're mistaken," Leila answered nervously, looking up at Chris.

But the other woman noted Leila's flustered expression and confirmed her suspicion.

"Then why do you look so nervous?" Chris asked. The two women stared at one another.

"I'm not nervous," Leila defended. But she looked down to avoid Chris' eyes. Quickly, she changed the subject, settling on Chris' pregnancy. "You're about seven months pregnant, am I right?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll soon be giving birth," Chris smiled as she looked at her belly and stroked it gently. As she raised her head, Chris met Leila's eyes full of envy.

"I need to talk to you, Leila," she said with a hint of scorn. After three years, she still found Leila annoying. But, if the boy was Charles' child, then Chris thought she would prefer it that her brother and this woman ended up together.

'At least, the boy could distract Charles. And hopefully, he would stop looking for Autumn, ' Chris thought.

"What do you want to talk about?" Leila asked sternly. Inside, though, she was giggling. In the last three years, Leila had been closely observing Charles.

She knew Charles would never forget Autumn, and this knowledge was what stopped her from carrying out the plan. And by then, three years had passed. But a month ago, she finally made up her mind to seek Charles again. Now, she had no intention of giving up.

Their meeting was on purpose so she carefully planned everything. Leila believed Chris would make the connection between Charlie and Charles.

Somehow, Leila found out that Chris had been hoping Charles would move on from Autumn's disappearance. So, she intended to use Chris to help her get Charles.

Despite being reluctant, Chris realized that it was an opportunity to help her brother. "I want to talk about you and Charles," she finally admitted. However, Leila showed no reaction.

"You grew up under the loving care of your family. Then you married a good man who treats you well.

You will never understand how life as a single, unmarried mother is, Miss Lu," she said bitterly as she slowly sipped her coffee and looked Chris in the eye.

Her smile was equally bitter. "You never need to worry about making a living," Leila went on. "But unlike you, I have to work to support my son and our needs. That's why you will never understand me."

Chapter 508 Finding A Common Ground

Leila stared at Chris and said in a solemn voice, "Yeah, if you talk about love, I really had deep feelings for Mr. Lu. I cannot deny it. He is handsome, successful at such a young age and more than anything else, he is a thorough gentleman. How could anyone ever resist his charm?

Had it been a few years back, I would have been overjoyed to accept your proposal. I would have promised anything to be with Charles. But now my priorities have changed. Now, all my focus is on my son. As a mother, I have to be responsible for both of us. I need to pay attention to my behaviors. It's important for me to set a good example. Besides, I don't have much money. The first thing I think about when I wake up is how to make more money to support myself and my son. Love is merely a luxury for me. But then one's energy is limited. I can't waste my energy on gaudy enjoyment." Leila spoke in one breath. For the first time she sounded reasonable to Chris. Leila was infamous for her deceitful and

opportunistic attitude that had even affected Charles and Autumn's marriage in the past.

Leila stood up and continued maintaining the earnestness in her voice, "Miss Lu, I am sorry. I can't keep your request. It is no use persuading me. I won't say yes." Speaking these words she turned her back towards Chris, trying to map her silence as she listened to her. Leila played her cards very well till now.

She knew exactly how to win Chris's confidence and use her to get Charles back in her life. All her good intentions as she revealed to Chris were fake. Her ultimate goal was to get married to Charles.

And she was sure Chris would create opportunities for her to get close to Charles. 'After Autumn went missing, Charles' loneliness has been a matter of concern for everyone in the Lu family. And who could be better than me to be with Charles?' Leila thought.

"Wait!" Chris stopped Leila by holding her arm as she was about to leave.

No matter how much genuine Leila tried to sound in front of Chris, her past activities stopped her from believing in her. 'How is it possible for a girl like Leila to give up on Charles? My gut tells me she is lying, ' Chris thought to herself.

'However, I have no other choice. She is the only hope to save Charles from depression. Besides, she

has a son from Charles. Anyhow, I have to help her win Charles's affection.'

Chris just could not let Leila go. She had to stop her for Charles's sake. She held Leila's arm and

pleaded earnestly,"Leila, please take a seat and listen to me for a moment. I promise it won't take a

long time." Leila didn't speak. Nor did she move from her place. Chris pulled Leila's hand and got her

seated on the chair.

Then she sat down face to face with her and said,"Although you don't admit that Charles is the father of

your son, I am not blind. Nor am I a fool. He has such striking resemblance with Charles that you

simply can't deny that he is Charles's son." Leila lowered her eyes as she pretended to listen to Chris.

However, heart of heart, she was elated and proud to be Charlie's mother. Charlie was the gate pass

for her to enter into Charles's life and become his wife. But she showed no excitement in front of Chris.

Rather, she presented herself to be a tender and considerate mother. Inside, her heart was taking

leaps of fantasy by the thought of becoming Charles's wife and reigning over Dream Garden. But her

face reflected humbleness as she sat with her head lowered in front of Chris.

Inch by inch Leila was getting closer to her target. She could not afford to make any mistake. She could

not let Chris get the slightest hint of what was going on in her mind. Hence, she kept her eyes lowered

lest Chris read her mind. In her mind, she said happily, 'Autumn did one good thing for me. She gave birth to a son and left him for me to bring him up. Now her son will help me to achieve my rightful place in Charles's life.'

Keeping her ambitions concealed in a humble smile, Leila replied to Chris, "Does it really matter?" Leila forced a smile and said in a firm voice, "The moment I decided to give birth to the baby, I had told myself he is my child. Only mine. He has nothing to do with anyone else. I decided to stay away from Charles and raise him myself."

Leila's statement proved Chris's assumption to be true. Chris had a very strong intuition the moment she met Charlie that he could be Charles's son. Little did she imagine how it was Leila and her contriving ways that had brought her to this conclusion. It never even occurred to her in her wildest thought that Charlie could be Charles's son from Autumn. When she heard Leila indicating towards Charlie being Charles's son, she asked with a broad smile, "So you admit that Charles is the father of your son?" Chris stared at Leila, waiting for her reply.

Leila sneered, "What if he is? And what if he is not? Why are you persistently asking about my son's

father? How does that change anything for me or my son?"

Chris smiled and said politely, "Relax Leila. I mean no harm. I have asked an unofficial consulting detective to investigate about your livelihood. I learnt that you didn't live a good life. You had to take care of your son all by yourself and make enough money to earn a living. It has become more difficult for you when your savings are used up." Once Chris got confirmed about Charlie's identity, she knew how to persuade Leila for coming into Charles's life. Even Autumn would not have been happy to see the way Charles was wasting his life in loneliness and depression. She felt, if Charles accepted Leila, they would live a happy family.

"Does it have anything to do with you?" Leila pretended to be unconcerned and said in an indifferent tone. 'Stupid Chris, you will never come to know how I used you to achieve my goal.'

Chris thought the simplest way to persuade Leila was to depict a new life for her son. A mother could never deny a comfortable life and a bright future for her son. Hence she showed concern towards Charlie as she said in a persuasive manner, "Think about it Leila. Your son is nearly four years old. Very soon you have to put him in a good school. And as you know it will be a huge expense. Will you be able to afford it all by yourself? Don't you want your son to enter the best school?"

"Of course I do," Leila replied promptly without hesitation. Her eyes mellowed down when she thought about her financial situation. Slowly, the sparkle in her eyes disappeared. It was true that she couldn't afford the expenses of sending Charlie to the best school. In fact, she didn't have enough money for him to learn something like piano. "But, it would be totally impossible," Leila said in a very soft voice. She looked humiliated and embarrassed as she admitted about her poor status. She felt herself going red in the face.

"Nothing is impossible, Leila," Chris comforted Leila with a gentle smile. She went on to speak in the same persuasive manner and said, "You can take your son back to Dream Garden and tell all the truth. Since you are family, Charles will take good care of him and be responsible for his education."

"No way," Leila retorted firmly. She stared at Chris and announced, "I have told you once that my child is only mine. He has nothing to do with Charles."

Chris laughed with disdain and contempt, "If you insist on that, you should leave Y City with your son."

As the conversation proceeded, Chris gained a strong position. She knew Leila's intention and would be happy to help her if she stopped playing tricks and be honest.

Chris was aware of Leila's little game and could see into her soul. Leila stayed in Y City and dreamt of becoming Charles's wife and be able to live a rich life.

Leila couldn't refute Chris's words. What she said was absolutely true. Leila had never giving up the idea of marrying Charles.

"You came here to make fun of me?" Leila asked feeling humiliated. She didn't like the feeling of being mocked at. Chris attacked her in a very point-blank manner. True enough! If she did not want any help from Charles in her child's upbringing, why didn't she leave Y City once and for all? For the first time since they started conversing, Chris revealed that she was completely aware of Leila's intentions. And this made Leila feel a bit uncomfortable.

"To be very honest with you Leila, I really don't like you," Chris twisted her mouth and said in an indifferent tone. "I used to dislike you. And even now, my feeling is the same." Chris knew she shouldn't have said such words, but she couldn't help letting out her disdain. Chris thought, 'What a fake woman! Charles deserves a woman like Autumn, not a hypocritical woman like Leila. But after Autumn's death, Charles needs a companion. And since Leila is the mother of Charles's son, it will be a good option for them to form a family. This way Charles can get rid of his loneliness and even his son will find a home.'

"Really?" Leila asked casually, curving her lips into a sarcastic smile. She couldn't care less about

Chris's hatred towards her. After all, they wouldn't live together.

Chris had always thought Leila was manipulative and scheming. But given the situation, she could not rely on anyone other than Leila to save Charles from getting into depression.

"I am asking you for the last time, is the child Charles's or not?" Chris urged. Leila didn't speak. Chris

became impatient and said, "If you don't want, you don't have to reply to my question quickly. If he is not

Charles's son, just pretend this meeting never happened. But if he is, I will help you marry Charles. You can consider my proposal carefully and give me your answer."

Chris was in a strange dilemma. She knew Leila was not the right person for Charles. But on the other

hand, she could not see Charles being lost in Autumn's memory and end his life in desperation. He

needed to start a new life. And the only hope in front of Chris at the moment was Leila. No matter how

deceitful and cunning she was, she could at least help Charles to start a new life.

Leila maintained silence for a long time pretending to think over Chris's proposal. Then she spoke

narrowing her eyes, "Are you serious? You will help me?"

Before Chris said anything, Leila took a deep sigh and continued, "Yes, it is true. Charlie is Charles's own blood. About four years ago, I went on a business trip to Europe with Mr. Lu. One night, he was drunk and we had sexual relations. He had no idea what had happened that night. Before he woke up, I had left. I didn't know how to face him and Autumn. I just kept it a secret. It was out of my expectation that I was pregnant. After serious consideration and struggling with myself for a long time, I decided to give birth to the baby. He is Charlie." Leila finally played her card. She had Chris hear what she wanted to hear. Also she made the story clear once and for all so that it could stop questioning Charlie's identity over and over again.

Leila forced a smile and continued, "I have been worried about Charlie these days. He is growing to be more and more like Mr. Lu. He has asked me a thousand times why he doesn't have his father. The other children all have their fathers. I have really been anxious about his mental health.

If you can help me to be with Mr. Lu, Charlie will have his father and I will appreciate your help." Leila stared at Chris with gratefulness written all over her face. Leila could not believe her luck. Heart of heart, she was bouncing with joy. But she had to show integrity and self-respect in front of Chris. At

least till the time she got married to Charles.

Chris was not to be easily cheated either. She knew Leila too well to believe every word uttered by her just on the face of it. Though Chris was looking at Leila's face, her mind kept hovering over the idea to see Leila, Charles and Charlie as one happy family. And in the view of this, Leila's words could be partly trusted. She hesitated for a while and promised, "Since the child is Charles's, we won't let him live outside. I will consider it carefully and call you." Chris knew that Leila was not telling the complete truth. And she was very well aware of Leila's intention. Chris was sure Leila wanted to be Mrs. Lu.

"Why are you helping me?" Leila asked with the desperation venting out through her voice. The last statement made by Chris put her into a dilemma once again. She thought, 'Chris doesn't like me. Why did she offer to help me? And now she is saying that they won't let Charlie live outside. What does she mean by that? What if she just takes away Charlie and ditch me?' Thousands of questions came crowding her mind. It was important for her to know Chris's real intentions.

Chris smiled ruefully and explained, "In these years, Charles felt Autumn was still alive. He had meals on time, went to work in the day, sleep late at night. Whenever he was free, he would drink too much. I feel sorry for him and hope your coming into his life will help him to come out of this life of quiet

desperation. That's why I will help you."

Leila nodded in a reassuring manner and promised, "I will."

Chapter 509 The Man Who Resembles Me

Leila couldn't wait to be with Charles after Chris left. She had to pick up Charlie from the kindergarten at 3 o'clock that afternoon.

Charlie's big bright eyes looked very similar to Charles' and Leila had grown very fond of the little boy.

After picking up Charlie, she went to the market to buy premium cut pork ribs and chicken which were Charlie's favorite food.

"Eat more," Leila urged Charlie as she saw him put down his chopsticks. Little Charlie resembled

Charles not only in appearance but also in personality. Like Charles, Charlie spoke little but he was

very smart for his age. He had a look of sophistication and had an air of royalty about him. His mind

was sharp and mature for a three-year-old, Leila mused tenderly.

"If you like them, mom will make more pork ribs and chicken for you tomorrow," Leila told Charlie with a tender smile. Watching him sitting at the table looking all serious tugged at her heart.

"I'm full," Charlie said, taking a small sip of water. He dabbed his mouth regally with the table napkin

and made as if to leave the table.

"Charlie, wait!"

Leila looked at Charlie timidly and said, "I want to talk to you,"

Unbelievable as it may seem, but she always felt shy and humble in front of Charlie, a three-year-old boy. He never called her mom and she always felt like his nanny even though she raised him as her son from infancy.

Leila sat up straight, trying to act strictly and remind Charlie that she was his mother. But Charlie's cold disdain as he regarded her made her change her mind immediately. She was intimidated by Charlie and knew in her heart that she would be just his nanny forever.

Preparing some fruits and arranging them on a platter, she set them in front of Charlie. He ate the fruits delicately with his fork like nobility. 'Charlie looks so cute, ' Leila thought staring at Charlie wonderingly.

He looked so cute that she wanted to hug him and kiss him but his distant air made her give up the idea. She knew that Charlie hated being close to anybody. If she tried to hug or kiss him, she was afraid that he would throw the fruits at her face, so she never gave in to this urge.

In order to keep the peace, she continued to sit motionlessly in her chair.

When Charlie was about to finish eating the fruits, Leila cleared her throat and said, "Charlie, do you want to have a father?"

"No, I don't!"

Charlie answered coldly without any hesitation.

Hearing his cold reply, Leila felt embarrassed for asking.

She explained to Charlie carefully, "If you have a father, he will buy you new clothes and toys. He can take you to all the places you want to go. He could also get someone to teach you how to play the piano. I know you wanted to learn the piano but our house is too small. If you have a father, he can buy a big house that can accommodate even ten pianos."

"Did that man come back for you?"

Charlie asked, looking at her shrewdly.

"That man? Which man are you referring to?"

Leila frowned, regarding Charlie with amazement and confusion in her eyes.

"The man in your phone."

Charlie's face was inscrutable. "The man which resembles me,"

"Hmm...yes,"

Leila admitted reluctantly, trying to gauge Charlie's reaction. She was surprised to learn that Charlie

had seen the pictures of Charles she kept in her phone. She kept Charles' photos in her phone and

looked at them every night like a besotted teenager. She was embarrassed to know that Charlie knew

about the pictures but never once raised the subject. "Charlie, that man is your natural father," Leila

said seriously.

"I know,"

Charlie replied in a bored tone, "I recognized him right away because he looks a lot like me."

"Oh... okay." Leila felt relieved at how Charlie received the information. Feeling a little anxious, she

asked Charlie, "If he wants you to come live with him, will you agree?"

"Why doesn't he come and ask me himself?"

Charlie retorted imperiously.

"Come again? What did you say?"

She wasn't sure she heard Charlie correctly.

"I said, let him come and ask me himself!" Charlie said. "I want to ask him where did he go and how a father can leave his son,"

Charlie stood up, his little body erect and proud. "It's time to go to bed. I'm going to take a bath now."

His words shocked Leila. She couldn't believe that such words were coming from the mouth of a three-year-old. For a while, she just stood looking at Charlie's retreating figure, and then hurried to follow him to his door. "Charlie, do you want mom to run the bath for you?"

"Leave me alone!"

The door closed behind him with a slight bang.

Leila felt despondent. She just wanted a cute, normal son but what she got was a cold, little boss baby.

Charlie couldn't understand why he had no tender feelings for Leila. In fact, he hated Leila's intimacy and he found her touch repulsive.

He had never called her mom and rejected her care out of instinct.

He took a bath and put on clean pajamas. He put the dirty clothes in the washing machine. After a while, he climbed on his bed and read a short fairy tale until he felt sleepy.

His last thought as he drifted off to sleep was that he would leave this house and see the outside world when he grew up.

That night, Charles called Leila and asked her for a drink. She had just finished her chores and was waiting for Charles to call her. She tiptoed to Charlie's room to check up on him before she left home.

Every time Charles asked her to go out with him, he would drink and talk about Autumn and what happened in the past. She knew that tonight wouldn't be any different. She tried to humor Charles and pretended to listen eagerly to his every word. 'When the day comes that he will get tired of talking about the past, that day I will make my move, ' Leila promised herself.

These days Charles was just a shadow of the Charles she knew in the past. He still looked handsome and aristocratic but he was leaner and more gaunt. After a few drinks, he was reduced to crying and calling out Autumn's name repeatedly. The sight was heartbreaking for Leila to see.

Reaching out, Leila hugged him tightly, murmuring over his head softly, "Hush darling, don't be sad. I'm here."

Charles was too drunk and was unaware of his surroundings, but Leila's words seemed to pacify him.

After a while, Leila drove Charles to his home.

She came across Chris at the house. A servant came to take Charles up to his room at Chris'

instructions. Turning to Leila, she said, "You've gotten close to my brother in a short time. You've been scheming long enough."

Leila reacted to the scorn in Chris' voice, "I think you have misunderstood. Charles invited me out for a drink. I didn't refuse him because he looked so sad and depressed. I hope you can help him to quit drinking as it's becoming quite serious. If he doesn't stop soon, it will damage his health."

"I think you'd better take care of him yourself. I think there's no more chance that Autumn will come back to him,"

Chris said in a resigned tone. "If you're really serious about him, why don't you grab the chance tonight? You know what to do so he wouldn't find any excuse to refuse you anymore."

Chapter 510 Still Devoted To Autumn

"What..."

Leila didn't believe she could pass herself off as Autumn enough to win Charles' affection.

At most, she's had the privilege to listen to Charles talk his heart out. But she was far from becoming his lover.

And even drunk, he would not sleep with her.

So, this was Leila's greatest challenge.

Meanwhile, Chris was relentless in pushing her to complete the mission. "You think this is beyond your reach?" Chris asked. She hoped sneering at Leila would encourage the woman to hurry up.

"I'm afraid so. Definitely," Leila replied. Every day she was not making progress, which filled Leila with more doubt. "As far as we're concerned, Mr. Lu tends to sleep alone when drunk. And this is making it impossible to play my game," she told Chris.

"So, it's time to act more wisely," Charles' sister suggested. Bluntly, she told Leila her idea. "You can make it appear that Charles slept with you. And then you can use Charlie, his son who is in your charge, as leverage."

Leila looked doubtfully at Chris. She didn't believe she could rely on the boy, who she knew was too willful and capricious.

But she said confidently, "Don't worry. I know what to do."

She had waited three years, and was determined to win Charles.

With Autumn supposedly dead, Leila was in a position to be made part of Lu family, passing herself off

as Charlie's mother. She intended to use the child to her advantage.

Leila stood up and said, "I need to go back home now and take care of Charlie."

Chris watched her leave, wondering what Leila had planned.

The following day, Chris invited Charles to have breakfast with her at the table. "Have a taste of this shrimp-filled wonton," she offered her brother.

"No, thank you. Just enjoy it yourself," he replied. Charles felt disheartened and couldn't hide it.

Worried about her brother, Chris appealed, "Please eat, even just a little. Besides, I have something to talk to you."

He sighed and gave in to his sister's wishes. Charles sat down beside Chris and had a bowl of wonton, prepared by Nancy Zhang specifically to help get rid of his hangover.

Surprisingly, he enjoyed the meal much to Chris' delight. She saw it as an opportune time to talk to her brother.

His bowl clean and his stomach full, Charles turned to his sister and urged, "Now, feel free to talk."

"It's nothing serious, really."

She smiled before going on, "Leila brought you back last night. It's nice to know that you two are becoming close, or even closer than before."

"It was only a coincidence that she happened to be there," he replied.

Then skillfully, he steered the conversation away from Leila. "Since there doesn't seem to be anything important happening here, I need to go to the office to deal with piles of paperwork."

"All right. Then, drive carefully," his sister said. She nodded at him and then smiled secretly. 'Oh, Charles. If you only knew. There will be more encounters between you and Leila.' She chuckled.

Charles focused most of his energy running the business, as his way to get over the trauma caused by Autumn's disappearance. And with Edward spending more time with his new girlfriend, he assigned Charles to manage Sun Company, which meant an increased workload for him.

His two assistants, David and Alice, were already overworked as they helped Charles manage the affairs of the growing company.

"We need to work overtime again," David complained to Alice.

He just walked out of the boss's office and approached Alice to complain and apologize. "I'm sorry that I can't go see a movie with you tonight as I promised."

"It's okay," Alice replied, patting David's arm. Then smiling, she teased, "Well, we can make working together romantic."

"You're so sweet," he whispered. David wrapped Alice in his arms affectionately.

"Okay, enough with the banter!" Alice broke free from the embrace. She warned, "We're at work and should behave appropriately. It doesn't include hugging."

"But we're just acting naturally," David complained. "Everybody knows about our romantic relationship, even Mr. Lu," he pointed out.

"Still, we need to behave properly here," she retorted. Alice felt a little embarrassed over their public display of affection.

Since Charles decided to concentrate on the business to keep him from thinking about Autumn's disappearance, David and Alice had been his assistants. But since they were closely working together, they eventually ended up as a romantic couple.

David cast a helpless glance at Charles' office, with its shut door, and continued complaining, "If Mr. Lu still doesn't move on from Autumn's disappearance and focuses all his time on the business, we will

never be able to go out on a date."

Alice saw how frustrated David felt and agreed quietly. But she shrugged it off and ordered her

boyfriend, "Enough of the complaining."

Putting herself in Charles' position, she argued, "Mr. Lu needs more time to recover from PTSD. You

know, post-traumatic stress disorder."

Her eyes appealed to David. "He needs our sympathy and understanding."

His reply was a deep sigh. After Autumn went missing, Charles desperately searched for his wife for

days and ended up becoming ill. After recovering, he decided to dedicate himself to the company,

working day and night, and requesting David and Alice to put in as much time as he did.

David was growing frustrated with the situation at work because he was eager to solemnize his

relationship with Alice and wanted to present her to his family during their Spring Festival reunion.

Alice stared at Charles' door, falling into a dreamy state. "Mr. Lu's feelings for Mrs. Lu has never

waned," she sighed. Looking at David, she added, "Separated for three years, but Mr. Lu continues to

cherish his wife. If I were Autumn, I would find it very heartwarming to know my husband still adores

me."

"But I'm just as devoted to you," David rushed to tell Alice. Her eyes twinkled at his words, but she put an end to the sweet talk. "Get back to work!" she snapped.

Alice truly sympathized with Autumn's fate.

She may not have known Charles' wife very long, but she found out that Autumn's life had been full of hardships and ordeals. Now, not only did she go missing, she was pregnant with no contact with her family. 'And who knows what happened to her? She may be in even bigger trouble, ' Alice thought to herself.

Back in America

Sheryl was feeling uneasy over Anthony's absence. Their constant quarreling and fights pushed him to leave.

With no one to argue with, Sheryl realized how unbearable it was to live without Anthony.

It seemed laughable that she was sitting on the couch watching a comedy show but looking petrified.

What was most frustrating for her now was Anthony not appreciating all her efforts to make sure she and Shirley live a more comfortable life. Making matters worse was his reaction to her getting a job

interview.

She found it strange and somewhat terrifying when Anthony flew into a rage at the knowledge that she

had left the house to go in for the interview. "Sher, are you okay?" asked a small voice.

There was no reply. Shirley then crawled up the coach and cuddled up to Sheryl.