



*Victor Gu,
Once Mine*

STORY BY PRISCILLA LI

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Also by this Author:

London Loves Series

To Love Edmund Ashcombe

Shanghai Nights Series:

Victor Gu, Once Mine

Norah

I sprang uninvited into his rooms, propelled by a foolish certainty born of memory. I had known him since childhood; though seven long years had passed since we last stood face to face, I told myself—naïvely—that he must still be the same boy of twenty I once knew. Time, I believed, could not have altered him so completely.

He stood with his back to me, facing the tall window, a cigarette poised between his fingers. He drew upon it slowly, deliberately. When he turned, the breath caught in my throat.

He was not the boy I remembered.

He was older—undeniably so—handsome in a sharper, more formidable way. Polished. Severe. The softness of youth had vanished entirely. His gaze narrowed as it found me, travelling without apology over my qipao—over the line of my chest, the curve of my waist, the fall of fabric over my hips—before he turned away again, as though I were nothing more than an inconvenience.

“Victor?” I asked, the name leaving my lips with an innocence I did not feel. “Do you remember me? It has been... a long time. I missed
—”

“Leave.” His voice was flat, unmoved. “I do not have time for uninvited... strangers.”

He gestured stiffly to a footman without so much as a glance in my direction. “Escort her out.”

My heels pattered helplessly across the floorboards as I was ushered from the room. The door closed behind me with a quiet finality that felt far louder than it should have. I leaned against the wall in the corridor, my breath unsteady, my heart pounding with disbelief.

He was gone.

Not merely absent—but changed. Hardened. Cold. The boy I had carried with me all these years had been replaced by a man I did not recognise, his regard sharp enough to wound and distant enough to dismiss me entirely.

Through the glass, I caught one last glimpse of his reflection at the window—still, composed, expressionless.

Victor

I watched her reflection disappear from the window, my face held deliberately still.

She had burst into my chambers without invitation, propelled by a familiarity that no longer existed. We had known one another since childhood—yet seven years is a lifetime when one is forced to become someone else. I knew she must have expected to find the boy she once left behind. The foolish, soft-hearted youth of twenty. That boy no longer existed.

I stood facing the window when she entered, drawing deeply on my cigarette, letting the smoke steady my breathing. When I turned, I saw the shock bloom unmistakably across her face.

I was not what she remembered.

Age had sharpened me—polished me into something deliberate and controlled. The careless warmth of youth had long since been burned away. My gaze found her before I could stop it, travelling with unwanted familiarity over the red qipao that clung to her figure—over the curve of her chest, the narrowness of her waist, the softness of her hips. I turned away at once, irritated with myself for the lapse.

“Victor?” she said, gently. Innocently. “Do you remember me? It has been... a long time. I missed—”

“Leave,” I said, my voice even, stripped of feeling. “I do not have time for uninvited... strangers.”

The word tasted like ash.

I gestured to the footman without looking at her. “Escort her out.”

Her heels pattered across the floorboards—light, hurried, familiar.

I remained where I was, watching her reflection vanish from the glass.

God help me—I missed her.

Through the window I saw her cross the foyer toward the ornate doors of the building, her shoulders drawn inward as though bracing herself. She was smaller than I remembered. Or perhaps I had grown larger in absence. That red qipao—too vivid, too familiar. Her hair was styled just as it had been when we were teenagers, and without warning memory struck me like a physical blow.

I saw her sneaking into my room with contraband books and sugared snacks, laughing too loudly, whispering about school, about boys she pretended not to care about. I heard her giggle again—soft and unguarded.

I had changed so very much.

And for the first time, I wondered if she had at all.

I remembered her smile—unrestrained, reckless. Her laughter. Her ridiculous antics. My chest tightened painfully as memories rose unbidden: her perched in my lap without thought or permission, calling me by that damned nickname she alone was allowed to use, hugging me whenever emotion overtook her—joy or sorrow, it had never mattered.

I remembered everything.

I watched as she summoned a town car, her movements mechanical, defeated. I knew what she had wanted—street food from the carts along the side streets, slow walks along The Bund as we used to take when the world felt too heavy and we needed silence to think.

Those things belonged to another life.

As the car pulled away, I remained at the window, the cigarette forgotten between my fingers. The city lights reflected against the glass, cold and distant, matching the expression I wore so convincingly.

“Fuck,” I muttered quietly, crushing the cigarette into the ashtray with more force than necessary.

My father rang late in the evening, the telephone’s sharp insistence cutting cleanly through the quiet of my rooms. I groaned inwardly before I even lifted the receiver. Politics. Military developments. Power. That was all my family ever spoke of—expansion, borders, influence. I had followed in its stead not out of conviction, but out of obligation, wanting none of it and yet trapped within it all the same.

I answered mechanically, my voice steady, my thoughts anything but.

“Yes, Father. The northern border remains secure... yes, the alliance talks are progressing as anticipated.”

His voice droned on, precise and tireless, cataloguing troop movements and diplomatic tensions with clinical enthusiasm. I listened just long enough to respond appropriately, my mind wandering—inevitably—back to you. To the way you had looked at me, searching for something that no longer existed.

I ran a hand through my hair, staring at the city beyond the window.

And then it struck me—quietly, cruelly.

I had become exactly what I once despised.

Cold. Calculated. Detached. Polished into a man my family could wield like a weapon, my own desires sanded down until nothing remained but obedience. And seeing you again—God—it had torn something open I had long believed sealed shut.

My father continued, utterly unaware of the storm gathering behind my silence.

“And remember, Victor,” he said, brisk and satisfied, “your engagement to Miss Lin is next month. Ensure you are presentable. On your best behaviour.”

My grip tightened around the receiver.

“Yes, Father,” I replied.

I ended the call without ceremony.

Victor

I poured myself a glass of whisky and drained it in a single, burning swallow. It did nothing to dull the thoughts crowding my mind—of her, of the life I had been pressed into like a mould I never consented to wear. Engagement announcements delivered like strategic briefings. Political marriages spoken of as victories. Power traded quietly across dining tables.

“I’m going out,” I said curtly to my butler after ending my call with my Father, already reaching for my coat - knowing exactly where I wanted to go.

Norah

My mother continued chatting as though the subject were of no great consequence, her tone light, almost cheerful.

“I heard your school friend Rebecca Lin is becoming engaged,” she said, ladling soup with delicate precision. “An aristocratic suitor, I’m told—very wealthy, very powerful. An excellent family.” She glanced at me with practiced casualness. “You know, Norah, we really ought to see you engaged as well. How did you like Edward Xu? Or Arthur Wang?”

I made a noncommittal sound, my gaze fixed on the bowl before me. The words slid past me without settling. Engagements, alliances, advantageous names—it all felt unbearably distant, as though she were speaking of strangers rather than of my life.

Later, I sat alone in the front courtyard, swinging my legs idly from the makeshift swing my father had once tied for me as a girl. Rebecca Lin was getting married. Of course she was. She had always been the most eligible among us—the prettiest, the most polished, the most assured. We had attended the same private girls' boarding school in downtown Shanghai, where futures were discussed in hushed tones and marriages treated like inevitabilities rather than choices.

I had often wondered whom I might marry. I had hoped—quietly, foolishly—that it would be someone I liked. My parents would have wanted that too, I think. But it seemed politics reigned over both love and life now, pressing everything into neat, strategic arrangements.

I pushed off the ground, the swing creaking softly beneath me, lost in thought—until the low hum of an approaching engine drew my attention. A town car slowed as it reached our front gate, its dark exterior out of place against the familiar courtyard stones.

Curiosity stirred. I rose to my feet just as our guard stepped forward, already asking the necessary questions, his posture alert and assessing.

The town car drew up smoothly before our gate. The driver stepped out first, followed by a tall figure I recognised before my mind allowed me to name him.

Victor.

He was dressed sharply in a tailored suit that followed the lines of his broad frame with unmistakable precision, his hair perfectly arranged, every detail controlled. He spoke briefly with the guard, answering questions with effortless authority, his manner confident and assured. When he turned toward the courtyard, his gaze found me at once—my legs stilling upon the swing, my hair falling loose down my back.

He paused.

“Norah,” he called, his voice low, steady—soft, yet impossible to ignore.

For a heartbeat, I wanted to run to him as I once had—without thought, without hesitation, as a child, and later as a girl foolish enough to believe the world might allow such recklessness. But we were older now. Time had pressed itself between us.

I rose instead, straightened my back, and walked toward him at a measured pace. When I reached him, I inclined my head politely.

“Victor.”

His gaze lingered as I approached, tracing every step as though committing it to memory. I was suddenly aware of my own smallness beside him, of how slight I must appear compared to the women he now moved among. I sensed something flicker behind his eyes—recognition, perhaps remembrance—but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

“May I have a word with you inside?” he asked, courteous yet firm, his tone leaving no room for refusal. He glanced briefly toward the guard and his butler, a silent command passing between them.

I turned and nodded to our own staff, who understood at once and made themselves discreetly scarce.

“It is late,” I said quietly. “Let us speak in the reading room.”

I stepped aside to allow him entry.

As he crossed the threshold, I became acutely aware of the way his eyes took in everything—the furnishings, the walls, the space itself—with an assessing air that had been entirely absent when we were young. His expression was composed, unreadable, almost severe.

Had I been twenty, I thought with a strange clarity, I might have been afraid of him.

Victor

I followed her into the reading room, my eyes moving instinctively over the familiar space. The shelves still held the books she had loved as a girl, their worn spines lining the walls like quiet sentinels. The deep armchairs remained by the hearth, the fireplace casting a gentle warmth that stirred memories I had no wish to confront—secret refuges, whispered conversations spoken far past propriety, kisses stolen when we believed the world could be held at bay.

I cleared my throat, forcing those recollections aside.

“You look well,” I said simply, closing the door behind me.

My hands remained clenched at my sides, fingers tight with restraint. It required effort not to reach for her, not to confirm she was real and standing before me once more. “Your parents are doing well?” The words were civil. Distant. Safer that way.

“Yes, quite,” she replied.

Her composure unsettled me. “Did you come for pleasantries?” she asked softly. “How may I help you?”

Something in her tone—gentle, precise—caused my expression to harden. I ran a hand through my carefully styled hair, suddenly aware of how ill-suited the expense and cut of my suit felt in this room, where I had once been nothing more than myself.

“Straight to the point,” I murmured, more to myself than to her. “As always.”

I drew in a steady breath and met her gaze directly.

“I am to be engaged next month.”

I paused, watching her face with an intensity I did not attempt to disguise.

“To Rebecca Lin,” I continued, my voice lowering despite myself. Saying her name felt like a betrayal spoken aloud. “My family arranged it.”

She inhaled quietly, and I knew she understood at once. I could almost see the conclusions forming in her mind—that this explained my distance, my abrupt dismissal earlier, my need to sever the past cleanly so I might begin again as the man my family required me to be.

“Alright,” she said at last. “I see.”

Then, with measured calm: “She is a very elegant lady.”

Elegant. Suitable. Acceptable.

Norah

His jaw tightened at my measured reply. I saw it plainly—he had expected tears, anger, perhaps reproach. My composure, it seemed, wounded him far more deeply.

“Elegant. Yes,” he repeated.

He stepped closer. The polished toe of his shoe stopped mere inches from mine. “Is that all you have to say?” His voice lowered, the practiced detachment slipping from it. “After everything... just elegant?”

He watched my face intently, searching for something I was determined not to reveal. The space between us felt suddenly very small, the air heavy with everything left unsaid.

He advanced again.

Instinctively, I retreated. One step back for every step he took forward until the solid edge of the bookshelf met my back. I had nowhere further to go.

Victor placed his hands against the shelf on either side of my head, effectively enclosing me without quite touching. His face was close—far too close for propriety—and I could feel the warmth of his breath, see the tension drawn sharply across his features.

“Answer my question,” he insisted quietly, urgency threading through his voice. “Just elegant? That is all you feel about her?”

My heart hammered wildly—part fear, part something far less defensible. I turned my face slightly away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze.

“Why are you asking me?” I asked softly. “Why do you care what I think?”

“Because...” His voice dropped to a near whisper, rougher than I had ever heard it. He leaned closer, his words brushing near my ear. “I need to know if any part of you still cares about me. About us.”

His arms remained braced beside me, allowing no easy escape, though he did not touch me.

“Before I commit myself to someone else. Before I marry Rebecca.”

He swallowed hard, and when he spoke again, each word was deliberate, almost fragile.

“Do you still care... Norah?”

I looked back at him then, curiosity softening my expression despite myself.

“Is something wrong?” I asked quietly. “Is Rebecca... troubled by our past friendship?”

“Yes,” he said at last, the word dragged from him through clenched teeth. His face was so close I could feel the warmth of his breath. His thumb lifted, tilting my chin upward, compelling me to meet his gaze. “She is upset. Jealous of a ghost. Of a memory.” His voice faltered, just slightly. “Of you.”

Something in his expression shifted—as though the truth surprised him even as he spoke it.

“She wants me to forget you,” he continued quietly, his eyes searching mine with an almost desperate intensity. “But I cannot.” His voice broke, the sound restrained yet unmistakable. “I simply cannot.”

My heart thudded violently in my chest. My legs felt unsteady, my heels suddenly too high, too tight, as though they might betray me at any moment. I drew in a breath I had forgotten to take.

“You—what?” I pressed my hands against his chest, attempting to push him away, though the effort felt strangely futile. “You did not want me before. You did not recognise me. You would not even acknowledge me.” My voice trembled despite my resolve. “And now you do?”

He did not move. He let my palms rest against him, and beneath them I felt the rapid, undeniable beat of his heart.

“I was protecting you,” he said hoarsely. “From me. From this life. From everything I have become.”

His eyes closed briefly, pain flickering across a face usually carved from restraint. “Do you truly believe being with me now would be the life you desire? Cold. Calculated. Political.” He swallowed. “Suffocating.”

His grip tightened against the shelves.

“Then why,” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, “are you telling me that you care?” My chest ached with the effort of holding myself together. “You are engaged. Rebecca should not need this—and I...”

His eyes snapped open, locking onto mine with such force that my breath caught.

“Because for once,” he said fiercely, “I wanted to be honest.”

The words rang in the small room, stripped of all polish.

“I wanted to stop pretending that you do not exist. That we never meant anything to one another.” His voice rose despite himself, echoing against the walls lined with our shared past. “Because seeing you again—after all these years—was like a blow to the chest. Because I realised that I still care.”

He leaned closer, his restraint finally splintering.

“I still care, Norah,” he said, the admission raw and unguarded. “And it is driving me quite mad.”

I was acutely aware of my breathing—of my chest rising and falling, rising and falling—as though it were the only thing tethering me to the room.

His chest rose sharply beneath my hands, his breath uneven, unguarded. The polished composure he wore so effortlessly had fractured, revealing the man beneath—raw, aching, undone. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against mine, our noses nearly touching.

“Say something,” he whispered hoarsely. “Yell at me. Hate me. Tell me to go to hell.” His voice faltered. “Just... say something.”

His eyes fell shut. The room seemed to shrink around us, filled only with the sound of our ragged breathing and the quiet crackle of the dying fire.

“You denied me,” I said at last, the words trembling as they left me. “That hurt me more than you know.”

My fingers tightened instinctively around the long pearl necklace resting against my chest, the cool weight of it grounding me.

His eyes flew open. Pain crossed his face so swiftly it was almost unbearable to witness. He lifted a hand and gently caught the strand of pearls between his fingers, his thumb brushing my collarbone with unconscious intimacy.

“I know,” he murmured, his voice breaking. “And I am sorry. More sorry than you will ever know.”

His fingers tightened around the necklace, drawing me imperceptibly closer. “I thought it was for the best,” he continued quietly. “I believed it would be easier if we simply... forgot one another.”

Before I could reply, a soft rap sounded at the door.

Victor stepped back at once, retreating from me as though a curtain had been drawn between us. When he opened the door, he was once again the man of control and composure, every trace of vulnerability sealed away.

“Yes?”

A whisper followed—low, discreet. I heard just enough.

“Rebecca... looking for you... dinner.”

Victor paused. When he glanced back at me, his expression had cooled entirely, his face once more unreadable.

“Tell her I will be there shortly,” he said evenly.

The steward nodded and withdrew.

“This was a mistake.”

Victor turned back to me, his voice flat, distant. “I must go.” He began buttoning his jacket, smoothing the fabric as though order might be restored with such small gestures. “Forget what I said,” he added. “Forget everything.”

He crossed the room toward the door, his hand settling upon the knob.

The words were spoken without inflection, as though he were donning a mask once more.

My back slid down the wall until I sank to the floor, the cold tiles seeping through the thin fabric of my skirts. I sat there quite still, my breath shallow, my thoughts in disarray, every emotion I possessed drained cleanly from me.

What was that?

My heart thudded painfully in my chest, as though it had been struck and left to echo in the hollow space afterward. Confusion pressed in from all sides—his words, his nearness, the abruptness of his retreat—none of it settling into anything I could name or endure.

I pressed a hand to my sternum, willing the ache to subside.

I could not take this again.

Not the uncertainty. Not the hope that dared to rise only to be extinguished just as swiftly. Whatever that moment had been—confession, weakness, cruelty, or longing—it had left me shaken to my core.

And sitting there on the cold floor, utterly undone, I knew with quiet certainty that my heart could not withstand another such blow.

Victor

I paused with my hand upon the door, the cool metal pressing into my palm. My back was to her, yet every muscle in my shoulders tightened as though she were standing directly before me. For a fleeting, dangerous moment, I considered turning around. Saying something—anything—that might lessen the damage I had already done. One word more and I might have stayed. One look more and I knew I would not have left at all.

I straightened instead.

The habit of discipline reasserted itself, hard and familiar. Without looking back, I opened the door and stepped through.

It closed behind me with a quiet, final click.

Outside, Rebecca's voice reached me—warm, bright, pleased.

“Victor,” she said, greeting me as though the evening were unblemished, as though I belonged wholly to her and to the life waiting beyond these walls.

I answered her as expected, falling easily back into step at her side.

Norah

The following day, I took luncheon with Selene.

She was leaving for England in a month's time and spoke of the journey with an excitement that was almost luminous—of steamships and long crossings, of beginning a life that was not quite new, yet mercifully unburdened by everything that had come to strangle her here. Given all she had endured, I wanted nothing more than for her to live freely, to be happy.

She watched me for some time in silence.

“Are you quite alright, Norah?” she asked at last.

Her gaze lingered upon my face with careful scrutiny. My eyes, once bright, felt dull and heavy; I knew there were faint shadows beneath them. My hair, usually smoothed into a tidy bun, had begun to loosen, and my favourite pearl necklace lay absent at my throat. Selene sighed softly, already aware that something was amiss.

“Norah,” she said gently, reaching across the table to take my hand. “You have hardly touched your food. And, my dear—you look positively dreadful.” Her voice softened. “What has happened?”

“He came back,” I whispered.

Her expression shifted—excitement tempered by caution. “Weren’t you glad of that?” she asked carefully. “Is... something the matter?”

I tried to explain—how he was warm one moment and distant the next, how he spoke of caring for me only to abandon me at the first beck and call of Rebecca Lin.

“Rebecca Lin?” Selene echoed, the pieces falling swiftly into place. “Of course.” She gave a short, humourless cough. “The most obvious choice—for the wealthy and powerful.”

She considered my words, then squeezed my hand gently. “So let me understand this clearly,” she said. “Victor returned, confessed feelings, stirred hope—and then immediately ran back to Rebecca?”

Her sympathy sharpened into anger. “That man is insufferable.” She leaned back, arms crossed, then forward again with intent. “Norah, you must listen to me. You deserve better than being someone’s secret indulgence or emotional battleground.”

“I know,” I murmured. “I waited for him for so long. I think I... loved him.”

“Loved,” Selene corrected softly but firmly. “Past tense.” She met my eyes with gentle resolve. “The man you loved—the boy you waited for—no longer exists. What returned wears his face, but he is something else entirely. And even if he harbours feelings—which, may I add, is thoroughly improper given his engagement—he continues to choose her. Again and again.”

She paused, watching as the truth settled quietly within me.

I understood what she meant. I knew what was expected of me. In time, I would acquiesce to a suitable match arranged by my parents, as was proper, as was inevitable.

Selene seemed to read the resignation in my expression. Her voice softened. “I am sorry, Norah,” she said. “I know this is not what you wished to hear. But sometimes—sometimes love alone is not enough.”

She reached up and brushed away a stray tear before I could stop it.

“You deserve someone who will choose you openly,” she continued. “Without hesitation. Without shadows. Someone who will put you first.”

I held her hand tightly then, knowing she spoke the truth—even as my heart quietly mourned what I had once believed might be mine.

Victor

“Yes... I know,” she said weakly to her friend, Selene.

I was not there to hear it myself—but two seats away, placed with deliberate care, my men were. She did not realise that every quiet word, every pause, every location she occupied was being observed and faithfully relayed to me in due course.

They were thorough. Discreet. Invisible.

By the end of each day, the information found its way back to me.

I sat in my war room, maps spread wide, officers moving about their duties with practiced efficiency. Borders were discussed, troop movements marked, strategies refined. Yet none of it held my attention. My eyes remained fixed upon the reports laid before me—each one bearing her name.

“She is resigning herself,” one man reported softly. “There is no mention of love. Nothing of waiting for... you.”

My jaw tightened.

“Good,” I said.

That was what I wanted. Was it not?

Soon after, the tone of the reports shifted. Her parents had begun ushering her into the marriage market, as propriety demanded. Luncheons at yum cha diners. Meetings arranged in hotel lobbies. Quiet afternoons spent in tea houses. Suitors arrived in careful succession—respectable, eligible, entirely unremarkable.

Each evening brought fresh documentation.

A photograph of her sipping tea opposite a stocky heir of the Ye family. A note observing her polite laughter at a nervous jest made by a doctor's son. Another report—brief, efficient—detailing her return home in the company of a military officer's nephew.

I crumpled each page in my fist and cast it into the fire.

The flames consumed them quickly.

I had engaged those men to protect her—not to force me to witness, in careful detail, her being paraded through Shanghai like a prize to be claimed by any man with sufficient credentials.

Then came a different name.

Edward Lin.

Old money. The Lin family—an ancestral merchant house with traces reaching back to the Song dynasty. The sort of lineage spoken of with quiet respect. The sort my own family would approve of instantly.

This report was longer than the rest.

Edward Lin. Age twenty-seven. Unmarried. Heir to the Lin shipping enterprise. Educated at Cambridge. Fluent in four languages. Described repeatedly as gentlemanly, affable, warm, and gentle. Three hours spent with Miss Sun at the botanical gardens.

She smiled—genuine smiles, the report noted. Not the polite ones. They fed the koi together.

I stood alone in my opulent study, the paper clenched tightly in my hand, my knuckles white with strain. This one, I did not throw into the fire at once. I read it again—slowly, deliberately—until each word etched itself painfully into memory.

Warm. Gentle. Suitable.

Everything I was not.

She was choosing well. Sensibly. Just as she should.

Norah

I met Edward again that afternoon, and found myself looking forward to it more than I had expected. Our companionship had grown easy and companionable, marked by gentle humour and thoughtful conversation. Lately, I had even begun to consider—quite seriously—the possibility of being wed to him. It was not a notion born of passion, but of steadiness, and there was comfort in that.

We met at a small tea house just off the main street. I had risen early to make egg tarts and brought them with me, wrapped carefully, wishing to share something of my own making with him.

Edward entered with his usual warmth, his expression brightening the moment he saw me. He took the seat opposite, his fingers brushing mine as he reached for one of the tarts.

“You made these yourself?” he asked, genuine admiration softening his voice. He took a bite, smiled, and looked at me as though the world beyond the table did not exist. “They are excellent.”

After a moment, his expression shifted—still kind, but more earnest. “Norah,” he said, pausing briefly, “I was wondering... would you care to accompany me to the Lin family’s annual charity ball next weekend?”

My eyes brightened, though my smile did not quite follow them. I liked Edward very much. I could be content as his wife, I thought. Love, perhaps, was not always necessary. Practicality had its own quiet virtue.

I nodded. “I would be delighted, Edward,” I said—though the word carried a lie I hoped he would never notice.

His happiness was immediate and unguarded. He reached across the table to take my hand, his thumb tracing slow, reassuring circles against my knuckles.

“I am so glad,” he murmured. “My grandmother has been asking about you. She wishes to have you to dinner soon.”

When Edward and I parted ways, I felt the weight of what lay ahead settle heavily upon me. Things were moving quickly—precisely as they should. And yet, as I walked alone, a sharp ache formed behind my eyes. I stopped beneath a nearby lamp post, pressing my palm against the cool iron, the beginnings of a splitting headache blooming as doubt crept in.

Victor

Across the street, I watched through the tea house window.

I saw Edward's hand close over hers—saw the warmth of his smile, the gentle ease with which he leaned toward her. I saw the polite inclination of her head as she listened, attentive and composed. It should not have mattered. I told myself it did not.

The mug in my hand shattered without warning. Scalding liquid spilled over my fingers, pain blooming sharp and immediate, yet I scarcely noticed. I did not look away from the window until they parted.

By the time I stepped outside, I had wrapped my hand in a handkerchief, the blood hidden, the damage contained. I moved through the gathering dusk and into the shadows, my steps measured, my expression schooled into neutrality.

I found her not far from the tea house, leaning against a lamp post. Her forehead rested against the cool iron, her eyes closed, her posture betraying a weariness she had not yet learned to conceal. Even at a distance, I recognised the signs—the way she held herself when pain pressed too closely.

“Norah,” I called softly, scarcely louder than the hum of passing traffic. “Are you quite alright?”

Norah

I heard his voice and instinctively shifted away.

“I will be alright,” I murmured weakly. “I will manage.”

He was already too close. “You do not look well,” he said, and I felt it then—his presence beside me, tall and unyielding, the familiar scent of his cologne stirring something unsteady in my chest. The world tilted. My legs betrayed me entirely, and I clutched at my head as the pain surged.

I did not fall far.

Victor caught me at once, his arms firm around my waist as my strength gave way. My body went slack against him, my fingers still pressed desperately to my temple, my legs trembling beyond my control. I was dimly aware of curious eyes upon us, passersby slowing in their steps—but he seemed not to notice them at all.

“Shh,” he whispered close to my ear. “I have you.”

He lifted me without hesitation and began walking, the motion smooth and decisive, toward his car.

Inside, he settled me carefully upon the seat and removed his coat, wrapping it around my shoulders with quiet efficiency. My head came to rest against him, and though I was acutely aware of his closeness, I found myself unable to resist it. The world spun too fiercely for pride or propriety. I heard him give instructions to the driver, his voice calm, controlled, and then the car moved.

The night streets blurred past the windows, lamplight streaking into indistinct lines. Victor kept his arm around me, steady and protective, and I realised—dimly, helplessly—that I was leaning into him, my head resting against his shoulder as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Had I been well, I would have pulled away at once.

I was not.

The car came to a halt. The door opened. Cool night air brushed my cheek.

“Careful,” Victor murmured as he lifted me once more into his arms.

I woke to the sound of a clock I did not recognise—its measured ticking unfamiliar, intrusive. Instinctively, I tried to sit up at once, alarm flaring sharp and immediate.

A hand stopped me.

It pressed lightly, firmly, against my chest, guiding me back down with unmistakable restraint—but no force. I froze.

Victor sat on the edge of the bed. His tie had been loosened, his sleeves rolled back, the severity of his usual presentation softened by fatigue. The room was dim, the light casting shadows that sharpened his features and made him look older somehow—more real.

“Stay still,” he said quietly. “You fainted earlier. You require rest.”

His hand remained where it was—deliberate, careful, wholly devoid of impropriety. There was no possession in the gesture. Only concern, written plainly across his face.

I sank back against the pillows, my breath unsteady. A strange shyness crept over me then, an acute awareness of my surroundings—the unfamiliar room, the unfamiliar bed, the unsettling intimacy of being in his home.

He seemed to sense it at once. His hand moved away from my chest and instead closed gently around my wrist, keeping me seated but no longer pinning me in place.

“You are safe here,” he said softly. “I would not harm you.”

His thumb brushed—unintentionally, I was sure—over the delicate place at my wrist, where my pulse fluttered far too quickly. The clock continued its quiet ticking, the sound suddenly very loud. He released me and stood abruptly, placing distance between us as though mindful of it.

“Do you require anything?” he asked. “Water?”

“No,” I replied, my voice thin. “I am—sorry. What... what happened to me?”

He paused, considering. I sensed he was choosing his words with care.

“You collapsed,” he said at last. “I saw you leaning against the lamp post. I brought you here so that you might rest.”

His gaze remained fixed upon my face, watchful, searching for any sign of distress. His own expression was carefully neutral—almost guarded.

“Do you remember anything?” he asked quietly. “The date with Edward...?”

The name cut through the haze.

“Edward?” My thoughts scrambled, then rushed back all at once. “Edward—how do you know I was with Edward?” I asked, the questions tumbling over one another. “Do you know him? Does he know where I am?”

“Yes, I know Edward Lin,” he said evenly. “We are... business acquaintances.” He paused, weighing his words with care. “He does not know you are here. Only my driver and I brought you to the penthouse.”

His hand rested upon the bedspread, fingers unconsciously rumpling the fabric as though grounding himself in the motion. “You were unwell,” he added simply. “I could not leave you in the street.”

There was no jealousy in his tone, no claim or possessiveness—only calm explanation.

“Oh, I see.” I folded my hands neatly in my lap, the gesture instinctive, proper. Then the question rose unbidden. “But... how did you know I was with Edward?”

For the first time, he hesitated. His jaw tightened, just perceptibly, before he answered.

“I saw you,” he said at last. “The two of you—together—at the tea house. I was... nearby.”

His eyes flicked away from mine for a brief moment, as though the admission cost him more than he wished to show. When he looked back, his face had settled once more into careful neutrality.

“You seemed happy,” he added quietly, almost tentatively. “He smiled at you.”

Something dark passed through his gaze then—so fleeting I might have imagined it—before it vanished entirely.

“I see.” My voice was steady, though my chest felt strangely tight. “Thank you for helping me. I ought to return home—my parents will be worried.”

He inclined his head curtly.

“I have already sent word to your family,” he confirmed. “They know you are safe—with me.” His gaze lingered upon me a moment longer than was strictly necessary before he turned away, busying himself with adjusting a tie that had never truly been out of place. “My driver will see you home when you are ready.”

His voice had returned to its formal register—polite, distant. Then, as though recalling something essential, he paused.

“You should eat something before you leave.”

At that precise moment, his stomach betrayed him with a low, unmistakable sound.

“You have not eaten?” I asked softly. “Perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?” He turned back toward me, his tone deceptively even. Something flickered in his eyes—caution, perhaps, or the faintest glimmer of hope—but his expression remained carefully controlled. He gestured vaguely toward the kitchen. “The cook is still awake. I could have something prepared for us both.”

The offer hung in the air—simple, restrained, and yet heavy with years of unspoken history. He did not press the matter. He merely waited.

“I would like that,” I said quietly. “Please.”

He nodded once, the faintest curve touching his lips—more reflex than smile—and called for the cook, his voice courteous yet authoritative. Within minutes, two bowls were brought in: clear chicken soup, rice, and vegetables, steam rising gently as they were set before us.

As I began to eat, I felt his attention upon me. His own appetite seemed to return as he lifted his chopsticks, his movements precise, almost ritualistic.

“You have barely eaten today,” he observed softly.

“Do I look alright?” I asked after a moment, glancing up as I continued eating. “You are... staring.”

He blinked, “You look... healthier,” he said after a pause, selecting each word with care. “The colour has returned to your cheeks.”

He focused resolutely on his food. “And I was not staring,” he added, dismissively. “Merely... observing.”

I placed my chopsticks down and dabbed my mouth with my napkin. I felt his eyes upon me again, though I pretended not to notice. It should have unsettled me—any proper lady would have found such scrutiny alarming. And yet, inexplicably, I felt at ease.

“Well,” I said softly, “thank you again—for taking care of me.”

“It is nothing,” he said lightly. “Anyone would have done the same.”

Even as the words were spoken, I sensed their untruth.

“You should rest a little longer before returning home,” he added, more gently.

“I should not impose,” I began—

Before I could finish, the footman appeared and bent to whisper something into Victor’s ear.

“Is she here?” Victor asked quietly.

“Tell her I will meet with her tomorrow,” he replied without hesitation. “It is late.”

The footman hesitated. “She is in the front foyer, sir.”

Victor’s expression hardened at once—steely, controlled. He had barely begun to rise when Rebecca swept into the room.

She paused in the doorway, perfectly composed, her hair immaculate, her gown immaculate still—every inch of her suggesting command and certainty. Her gaze fixed upon me with sharp, assessing precision.

“Norah,” she said, her voice smooth and sweet, like honey laced with something bitter. “What a surprise to find you here. In... Victor’s private quarters.”

“Rebecca,” Victor acknowledged evenly.

Her smile widened, though her eyes never left mine. She crossed the room with unhurried confidence, the click of her heels echoing against the marble. When she reached Victor, she slipped her arm around his waist, deliberately placing herself between us.

“Darling,” she murmured, tilting her face up toward him. “Who would have imagined you entertaining such a... charming guest?” The word carried no warmth. “Surely she ought to be on her way home by now. It is terribly late.”

I had never cared for drama, nor for scenes of quiet cruelty disguised as civility. I pushed my chair back at once and stood.

“Thank you again, Victor,” I said calmly, meeting his gaze. “For caring for me when I was unwell.” I made my meaning clear, openly and without embellishment. “I can make my own way home.”

I felt his eyes upon me—the tension in my shoulders, the effort it took not to shrink beneath Rebecca’s scrutiny. Her grip on him tightened, possessive and unmistakable. He should have spoken then. Said something—anything—to explain, to soften the moment.

He did not.

Rebecca laughed softly, the sound brittle as glass. “How very brave of you, Norah. Walking home alone at such an hour.” She glanced at Victor pointedly. “Though I am certain Victor would insist on escorting you himself.”

I refused to feel small. I refused to feel bullied.

If this was what I must endure, then so be it. I understood the rules of the world we lived in far too well.

What I did not understand—what hollowed something out inside me—was Victor's silence.

And standing there, between the weight of unspoken truths and the sharp edge of propriety, I realised that silence, when chosen, could wound far more deeply than any cruel word ever spoken.

Victor

I said nothing.

My expression remained carefully unreadable as I watched her hesitate, her composure held together by sheer will. I recognised the game being played—Rebecca testing her, pressing where she knew it would sting, waiting for some crack to appear. I also knew that any explanation, any attempt at clarity, would only deepen the entanglement. Words, at this moment, would serve no one.

So I remained silent, my jaw clenched until it ached.

Rebecca sensed it at once. Her smile sharpened—triumphant, knowing.

“Victor, darling?” she coaxed, her voice sweetened into something cloying as she turned up her face to mine. “You will drive Norah home, won’t you? It is the gentlemanly thing to do.”

“I can call a cab,” Norah said firmly. “Thank you.”

Rebecca’s smile changed. She stepped closer to Norah, lowering her voice until it carried a threat thinly veiled as concern.

“A cab? In this neighbourhood? At this hour?” She gave a soft, humourless laugh. “You would be fortunate not to be abducted—or worse.” Her eyes flicked briefly toward me, then returned to Norah, sharp and commanding. “Victor will drive you. Will you not, Victor?”

Her grip tightened at my waist, possessive, insistent.

Something in me hardened then—not anger exactly, but resolve.

“I will drive her,” I said at last.

My voice was calm, detached, final.

Rebecca looked satisfied. Norah did not look at me.

Norah

I changed hastily into my dress and composed myself as best I could before meeting them in the foyer.

The moment I entered, I felt Victor’s gaze flicker toward me—brief, assessing—taking in the change of attire, the effort at composure. He looked away almost at once. Rebecca did not. Her eyes travelled over me with deliberate slowness, lingering upon my hastily arranged hair and the colour still high in my cheeks.

“Charming,” she murmured under her breath.

Victor did not acknowledge her remark. He moved instead to the car and held the door open, his posture rigid, expectant.

“In,” he said quietly, the word brooking no discussion.

I obeyed.

The leather of the backseat was cold against my skin as I slid inside. Victor closed the door with a soft, decisive click and took his place at the front. Rebecca settled beside him, her gaze finding me immediately in the mirror, never once wavering.

The drive passed in suffocating silence. The engine's low hum and the distant rush of passing vehicles were the only sounds. Each moment stretched unbearably long until at last the car slowed and stopped before my house.

Victor did not turn. He did not open my door.

I stepped out without a word. I was too weary to perform gratitude, too humiliated to summon civility. All I wanted was to be alone. Tears threatened, blurring my vision, and as I reached for my keys they slipped from my trembling fingers and scattered upon the ground.

I bent to retrieve them, my shoulders shaking despite my effort to remain composed.

Behind me, a door opened.

I did not look up at once, but I knew it was Victor. He crossed the distance quickly and knelt beside me, his presence heavy even in silence. His hand closed over the fallen keys.

“Here,” he said quietly.

I snatched them from his grasp without meeting his eyes. My fingers fumbled at the lock as I turned toward the door, breath coming fast and uneven. I managed it at last and slipped inside, closing the door behind me with a force I did not intend.

Victor

I stood there for a moment longer than I ought to have—my hand still outstretched, the weight of her keys lingering uselessly in my palm. Slowly, I lowered it to my side.

Rebecca leaned out of the car window, her expression sharpened with thin amusement.

“Well,” she said coolly, “that was... entertaining.” She tilted her head, voice dripping with disdain. “Shall we go home, darling?” Her hand patted the driver’s seat in invitation.

I did not move.

Images rose unbidden—Norah’s flushed face, the way her shoulders had trembled as she bent for her keys, the humiliation she had tried so valiantly to swallow. Rebecca’s voice faded into irrelevance as something struck me with sudden, brutal clarity.

I was hurting her.

At last, mechanically, I returned to the car.

Rebecca’s chatter filled the space at once.

“Really, Victor. What were you thinking?” she laughed lightly. “That girl is hardly worth your time.”

I heard nothing.

The drive back passed in a blur of streetlights and shadows. I sat stiffly behind the wheel, my thoughts circling relentlessly. Norah’s face appeared again and again before me—her trembling lips, her wet eyes, the way she had snatched the keys from my hand as though even my concern had become unbearable.

Rebecca's voice drifted on, meaningless, unheard.

When we arrived at my building, she turned toward me with a smug little smile.

"So," she said, "back to our engagement party plans tomorrow?"

I stepped out of the car without answering.

Behind me, she called lightly, to my back,
"I shall take that as a solid yes."

I entered the penthouse in silence, my movements stiff, unsettled. The quiet of the place—usually welcome—felt oppressive tonight. Her face would not leave me: flushed with humiliation, eyes bright with hurt, anger trembling just beneath her composure.

Rebecca followed, the sharp rhythm of her heels echoing against the marble floor.

"Victor?" she called, trailing after me into the bedroom. "Are you even listening?"

She began speaking of arrangements—flowers, guest lists, seating plans—but the words passed over me without meaning. I removed my jacket, my cufflinks, each motion automatic, my thoughts wholly elsewhere.

With her.

Rebecca undressed quietly behind me and slipped into my bed, moving closer with an ease born of expectation rather than intimacy. She rolled toward me, hopeful, confident perhaps that the formality of our impending engagement would eventually secure what genuine closeness we never had.

I turned onto my side, my back to her.

She pressed against me, her body fitting neatly along mine. Ordinarily I might have responded out of habit, politeness, obligation. Tonight I remained rigid. My mind was far removed—replaying Norah’s eyes, the trust that had once lived there, the way it had faltered when she took the keys from my hand.

Rebecca’s arm slid across my abdomen, possessive, drawing me subtly back toward her.

“Come here, darling,” she murmured, her breath warm against my neck.

I exhaled quietly. It was going to be a very long night.

I lay still, tension locked through every muscle. Her touch felt wrong tonight—not offensive, not unwelcome exactly, but profoundly misplaced. I found myself imagining smaller hands instead, softer ones, the memory of them so vivid it unsettled me. Each time Rebecca leaned closer, each brush of contact summoned Norah’s face unbidden behind my closed eyelids.

I said nothing, hoping silence might suffice.

Rebecca only pressed closer, misreading restraint for acquiescence.

“Victor...” she whispered, her voice low, coaxing.

I groaned softly and pushed the sheets away.

“I require a bath,” I said coolly, already rising from the bed. I did not wait for a response. I needed—quite desperately—to escape, if only for half an hour. Escape from the room, from expectation, from the path laid so firmly before me.

Behind me, I felt rather than saw Rebecca’s frown. The rejection stung her; I knew it must. She remained in the bed alone, confusion and irritation no doubt settling upon her carefully composed features. She was not accustomed to being refused. Certainly not by me.

The bathroom door clicked shut.

Steam soon fogged the glass as I ran the bath, then lowered myself into the water, the heat seeping into my bones. I closed my eyes tightly, as though by doing so I might shut out the world entirely.

For once, I was not thinking of business. Nor politics. Nor engagements, alliances, or duty.

I was thinking of her.

It was then—lying there, submerged in heat and silence—that I made a decision.

I would let her go.

I would stop loving her.

I leaned back against the porcelain, though the water did nothing to ease the tightness in my chest. The decision was cold. Calculated. Born of necessity rather than desire. I would marry Rebecca. I would build the alliance my family required. I would do what was expected of me, what I had always done.

I would erase her from my heart.

I told myself this firmly, silently, as though repetition might make it true.

Yet even as I resolved it—there in the quiet steam of the bath—a single tear escaped the corner of my eye. It slid unnoticed down my cheek and disappeared into the water.

I did not move to wipe it away.

Norah

I ran upstairs and collapsed upon my bed, the strength finally leaving me. Heavy tears streamed down my face unchecked, soaking into the pillows as sobs I had restrained all evening broke free at last.

It was not merely the humiliation Rebecca had inflicted—sharp though that wound was. It was Victor. Always Victor. The way he offered fleeting glimpses of care only to retreat into coldness, the way he drew me close with tenderness before pushing me away again without explanation.

Each kindness raised hope. Each withdrawal crushed it anew.

I sat in the bath that night and wished, not for the first time, that I might simply sink beneath the water and let it close over me. The heat did nothing to soothe the ache inside my chest. All Victor had done—again and again—was hurt me. In glances, in silences, in half-given kindnesses that cut deeper than cruelty ever could.

That was all he did.

And so, lying there with the water lapping softly against porcelain, I made my decision.

I would be with Edward.

The night gave way to morning, and when I woke, there was a new resolve in me. I would accept Edward's affection fully. I would allow myself to be cared for without fear. I would build a life that did not orbit Victor's unpredictability or ache beneath his contradictions.

I aimed, at last, to choose.

The Lin family charity gala loomed ahead, inevitable as fate. I knew Victor would be there. I knew Rebecca would be as well. But I would not face them alone this time.

I had Edward.

I chose a gold silk qipao for the evening—one embroidered with elaborate Chinese mythical creatures, their delicate threads catching the light with quiet splendour. It had been made by the dressmakers long patroned by the Lin family, and wearing it carried a significance beyond mere appearance. It spoke, gently but unmistakably, of association... perhaps even of commitment.

The silk followed the lines of my waist and hips closely, the slit at the side revealing just enough of my legs to remain fashionable without impropriety. When Edward saw me, a faint blush coloured his cheeks. There was admiration in his gaze—yes, and something softer too, a quiet warmth that reassured rather than unsettled me.

It made me unexpectedly happy. If affection could grow into love—and if he already cared for me as I suspected—then perhaps a family, children, a steady future together would not be such an impossible dream.

The Lin family gala was already in full swing when we arrived. Champagne glasses glimmered beneath the crystal chandeliers, their reflections scattering across polished floors. Shanghai's elite moved gracefully through the hall, conversations low and cultured, laughter restrained yet sincere.

Edward offered his arm, and I accepted it, letting him escort me inside.

I became aware almost immediately of the subtle stir our entrance caused. Heads turned; whispers followed. My qipao caught the light beautifully, its gold sheen luminous beneath the chandeliers. Edward's gaze remained fixed upon me, unabashed in its admiration, and for the first time in many weeks, I allowed myself to feel quietly proud rather than uncertain.

Victor

I stood before the full-length mirror in my bedchamber, adjusting the knot of my bow tie with deliberate precision. The black evening coat sat upon me as it had been tailored to do—immaculate, severe, unmistakably correct. I looked, to any observer, precisely what I was meant to be: composed, powerful, unassailable. A man shaped perfectly for the world he inhabited.

Rebecca stood beside me, radiant in a deep red gown that drew the eye without apology. The diamond upon her finger caught the light and flashed—a signal, unmistakable and intentional. An engagement ring. Proof of alliance. Of inevitability.

Tonight was the Lin family charity gala.

Tonight, we would announce what had already been decided.

“Ready, darling?” she asked, slipping her arm through mine with proprietary ease.

I met my reflection once more before answering. The man staring back at me revealed nothing—no doubt, no reluctance, no fracture beneath the surface.

I inclined my head in affirmation.

“Yes.”

Victor

I saw her the moment she entered.

It was impossible not to. The gold silk of her qipao caught the chandelier light so vividly it seemed almost luminous, the embroidered mythical creatures shifting subtly as she moved. My jaw tightened despite myself as my gaze travelled over her—the elegant line of her waist, the gentle curve of her hips, the slit revealing a graceful flash of leg when she walked.

I knew I should not look so closely. Should not appreciate her beauty. Should not feel the pull that rose, unwelcome and persistent.

The temptation was... considerable.

I reached for a glass of wine from a passing server and drained it more quickly than was proper.

Rebecca remained at my side, her hand looped comfortably through my arm as she laughed at something one of the guests had said. I offered the appropriate nods, the appropriate smiles—but my attention had long since wandered.

It remained fixed on Norah. And Edward Lin.

I watched him lean close to her, murmuring something that coaxed a soft laugh from her lips. The sound—though I could not hear it clearly—sent an unexpected pang through my chest. I finished the wine in a single swallow and signalled for another almost immediately.

For a fleeting moment, her eyes met mine across the room. Recognition flickered there—along with something far more complicated. And though she might have wished to hate me, I could see plainly that she did not.

She turned instead toward Edward, moving closer to him, her posture suddenly more demonstrative. She held his arm, leaned toward him, presented a picture of intimacy so deliberate it could hardly be accidental. As though she wished to prove—to me, to herself, perhaps to the entire ballroom—that she was content.

My eyes narrowed before I could stop myself.

The sight struck deeper than I cared to admit. Some irrational, possessive impulse stirred—one I had no right to entertain, not after the decisions I myself had made. I forced it down with another swallow of wine, attempting to numb the unwelcome surge of feeling.

Rebecca shifted beside me, clearly noticing my distraction.

“Darling?” she prompted lightly.

I turned my gaze upon my fiancée with something perilously close to cold disdain.

Rebecca noticed at once. Her smile faltered, the practiced charm slipping as she realised she no longer held my attention. She followed the line of my sight—and there Norah was, laughing softly with Edward Lin. I saw the moment jealousy struck her, sharp and unwelcome.

“Victor,” she hissed under her breath, clutching my arm to reclaim me. “You are being rude. What is that girl to you?”

With visible effort, I tore my eyes away from her.

“No one,” I replied darkly.

She bristled at the dismissal. Rebecca had never been accustomed to indifference, least of all from me. Though she wished to avoid a public scene, irritation tightened her voice.

“Dance with me,” she demanded.

I set my glass aside with a faint clink, every movement measured, controlled. Offering her my arm, I led her onto the floor with the ease expected of a man in my position. The orchestra swelled, and we fell into the familiar steps of a waltz.

Yet even as we turned, my eyes betrayed me.

They sought her out instinctively.

I saw Edward's hand settle at her waist, saw the natural ease with which they moved together. Something fierce and unfamiliar surged through me—jealousy, sharp and undeniable, unlike anything I had ever permitted myself to feel.

“Rebecca,” I said through clenched teeth, attempting to refocus, “you are squeezing my hand rather tightly.”

She smiled up at me, unrepentant. “Darling,” she murmured, “we are lovers. Let it be.”

Edward led her onto the dance floor with an ease that struck me immediately—his touch gentle, deferential, nothing of the quiet claim I had once taken for granted. They moved together gracefully, the orchestra swelling around them, his head inclined toward her as he murmured something that brought a soft blush to her cheeks.

“You are the most beautiful woman here tonight,” I imagined him saying, for the evidence was plain enough in her expression. He spun her elegantly, her gold silk catching the chandelier light like molten sunlight.

I saw everything.

The whisper near her ear.

The blush.

The ease of her laughter.

Everything that, once upon a time, had belonged to me.

Before I realised what I was doing, the wine glass that I had not realised I had sought in my hand, shattered. The stem bit into my palm, the sharp crack of crystal lost beneath the music.

“Darling!” Rebecca’s startled squeak cut through the haze.

I blinked, returning abruptly to the present. Shards glittered in my hand; crimson welled between my fingers. Rebecca stared at me, eyes wide with alarm.

Without drawing attention, I dropped the broken glass behind me, masking the injury as best I could. Rebecca leaned closer, her voice lowered to an urgent whisper.

“Victor, what is wrong with you? You are behaving most strangely.”

I forced a smile—smooth, practiced, entirely hollow.

“Nothing is wrong,” I replied easily.

It was a lie, of course.

Norah

Edward was kindness itself. As we parted from our dance, I felt certain—quietly, reassuringly—that he could make me happy. He asked me to wait in the front courtyard while he fetched the driver and the car to see me home. I agreed, grateful for the cool night air.

I sat upon the stone edge of the balcony, the silk of my gown gathered neatly beneath me, and watched the moon hang pale and distant above the courtyard. For a moment, there was peace.

Then I heard footsteps.

I turned—and my heart tightened. Victor was crossing the courtyard toward me, his figure half-lit by lantern light. Instinctively, I rose, meaning to walk away at once.

He moved faster.

“Do not walk away,” he said—soft, firm, and far too charged. There was more emotion in his voice than he likely intended. “Stay where you are.”

I stiffened.

“Do not speak to me,” I hissed, keeping my voice low. “People can see us. They can hear.”

I chose my words deliberately. I knew what would reach him—what always did.

He froze.

The shift was immediate. Whatever desperation had flickered in his expression cooled into something sharper, more controlled. Of course he cared. Optics. Reputation. Standing. Especially tonight—of all nights.

He took one more step closer, lowering his voice to a dangerous whisper.

“Then perhaps,” he said quietly, each word edged with restraint, “you should be more careful about where you choose to sit alone in the moonlight, Norah.”

His gaze held mine, unblinking.

“People might talk.”

The words struck colder than he likely intended—or perhaps exactly as he intended. And in that moment, standing beneath the same moon that had once witnessed our childish confidences, I understood with painful clarity that whatever tenderness still lingered between us had become a weapon he was no longer afraid to wield.

My feelings threatened to boil over, pressing hard against the fragile restraint I had clung to all evening. Through gritted teeth, the words escaped me before I could stop them.

“I hate you.”

They struck him as though I had laid a hand upon him. For a fleeting instant, his colour drained, shock flickering bare and unguarded—then the familiar mask slid into place, cold and furious. He stepped closer, closing the space between us in a way that stole the air from my lungs. His hand caught my arm—firm, unyielding, though not cruel.

“Say that again,” he whispered, intensity vibrating through every syllable. In that moment, he forgot entirely about optics, reputation, consequence. His fingers tightened just enough to make his demand unmistakable. “I dare you to say it again.”

“Let go of me,” I said, my voice low but shaking.

His grip tightened a fraction more—not to hurt, but to assert. His eyes searched mine with a ferocity that unsettled me, as though he were hunting for something he could neither name nor bear to find. The moonlight carved harsh shadows across his face, rendering him almost unrecognisable.

“Say you hate me again,” he murmured, his voice perilously soft. “Tell me to my face how deeply you despise me. Tell me while you are wearing a dress that declares you belong to another man.”

His thumb brushed my pulse—roughly, deliberately—and I felt my heart betray me, racing beneath his touch.

I drew in a shuddering breath.

“I... hate you,” I said.

I had to say it. If it meant he would leave me alone, I would say it again and again. If it meant he could no longer wound me with his nearness, then I would bear the cost of the words.

They fell between us like something broken.

Victor released my arm at once, as though the contact burned him. For a moment, he did not move. His chest rose and fell sharply, his eyes alight with a terrible mixture of pain and anger. Then, without a word, he turned on his heel.

He walked away.

He did not look back.

Edward returned not long after, apologising at once for his delay. He explained that he had been detained by the chance encounter of old friends, his tone earnest and regretful. The moment his eyes fell upon me, concern overtook him.

“Norah,” he said softly, “you look quite pale. Are you alright?”

He lifted his hand and cupped my face with gentle care, his thumb brushing my cheek in a way that was unassuming and sincere. His concern was unmistakable—warm, steady, real. With him, I felt safe. Comfortable. He did not unsettle me or leave me breathless with confusion. He did not make me feel as though I were perpetually on the brink of drowning in longing and hurt.

He was not Victor.

As Edward leaned forward to press a tender kiss to my forehead, my gaze drifted—unbidden—past his shoulder.

Victor stood at the edge of the balcony, half-consumed by shadow. He did not move. He did not speak. His eyes were fixed upon us, stripped of anger, stripped of heat—empty, as though something vital had been extinguished within them.

The sight struck deeper than any harsh word.

“I am quite well,” I whispered to Edward, though my voice felt distant even to my own ears. I did not look away from Victor as I spoke.
“Only... tired.”

Edward drew me gently closer, accepting my answer without question.

Victor and Rebecca’s engagement was announced as though it were a mere social notice—an item tucked politely among others—but it was nothing of the sort. It spread with astonishing speed through Shanghai society, whispered from drawing room to drawing room, then splashed boldly across the society pages of the morning papers.

Each article spoke of them as the perfect couple. Their power. Their wealth. Their beauty. Photographs accompanied the prose—Rebecca radiant and flawless, her smile unfaltering; Victor immaculate, composed, always impeccable... and always, I could not help but notice, faintly removed.

I saw those papers each morning at breakfast.

My parents discussed the engagement with animated interest, speculating about the guest list, the splendour of the wedding, whether our family might be invited. I sat quietly through these conversations, my tea cooling untouched, my expression carefully neutral.

The truth was simple and unspoken: I did not wish to attend anything of theirs. It was the very last thing I wanted. But my parents believed—kindly, innocently—that Victor and I were still friends. Old attachments, in their minds, did not simply dissolve.

When the invitation arrived, their delight was immediate.

“Norah, my dear!” my mother exclaimed, holding up the thick, elegant card as though it were a prize. “Victor and Rebecca have invited us to their engagement party! Is that not wonderful?”

She looked at me with warm expectation. “You and Victor were always so close. I am certain he will be pleased to see you.”

My father nodded, thoroughly in agreement.

“So happy,” I said, forcing myself to join in.

The smile I offered felt stiff upon my face, like something carefully affixed rather than truly felt. And as I lowered my gaze to the table once more, I wondered how many such smiles I would yet be required to wear—and how much longer my heart could endure the pretence.

The day of the engagement party arrived in all its splendour—an extravagant affair held at one of Shanghai’s most distinguished hotels. My parents were radiant with anticipation, speaking animatedly of the evening as though it were a celebration in which we all shared equally. I listened, nodded, smiled when required.

I wore a ball gown chosen with care, its cut elegant, its lines fitted to my form. My hair had been arranged with precision, every pin in place, every curl obedient. To any observer, I must have appeared composed—perhaps even enviable.

The moment we entered the ballroom, I saw them.

Victor and Rebecca stood together beneath the chandeliers, bathed in warm light. She laughed easily, perfectly; he smiled with practiced charm. Together, they presented a flawless portrait of happiness—so complete it felt almost rehearsed.

My parents hurried forward at once to offer congratulations, voices bright, hands extended, leaving me standing behind them—suddenly, conspicuously alone.

Victor's gaze found mine immediately.

I turned away at once. I could not return it—could not meet his attention, his scrutiny, anything. I scanned the room instead, searching for a familiar face, an acquaintance, anyone who might anchor me, but there was no one close enough to claim. My fingers worried at my gloves, twisting the fabric anxiously.

My parents remained absorbed in conversation, their laughter mingling with polite exclamations. I drifted nearer to the champagne fountain, alone now, the hum of society pressing in on all sides. I realised then—with a faint, unwelcome pang—that the gloves upon my hands were the very pair Victor had given me one Christmas many moons ago.

I felt eyes upon me.

Heavy. Unyielding.

Victor moved slowly toward me, not hurried, not careless—deliberate. When at last he came into my line of vision, I kept my gaze stubbornly forward, though I was painfully aware of him studying my profile—the curve of my nose, the line of my lips, the angle of my jaw he had once traced absentmindedly as though it belonged to him alone.

He stopped close enough that I could feel the warmth of him behind me, his chest nearly brushing my back.

“Norah,” he said again, softly—but now there was strain in it, anger perhaps, or something deeper we had never resolved.

“What do you want from me?” I asked at last, my voice quieter than I intended. I had believed—firmly, desperately—that he was finished with me. That whatever lay between us had been sealed away. What could he possibly still want?

His jaw tightened. For a moment he said nothing, as though the answer itself was too complicated to form. When he spoke, his voice was low, dangerously controlled.

“I want you to stop pretending I do not exist,” he said. “I want you to look at me when I speak.”

“Why?” I asked, turning my head just enough to signal defiance without truly facing him. “What could I possibly gain from that?”

Something darkened in his expression—hurt layered over anger. He leaned slightly closer, his voice dropping to an intense whisper meant for me alone.

“Because I am standing here, Norah. I am not some ghost from your past. I am real. And whether you wish to admit it or not... there are things between us that remain unfinished.”

He paused, and when he spoke again, the edge in his voice softened just enough to betray something fragile beneath it.

“I want one thing from you,” he said quietly. “Just one.”

His voice caught—only slightly.

“Look at me.”

I lifted my eyes at last.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He held my gaze with an intensity that unsettled me, as though he were searching my face for something—anything—that might yet grant him hope. I knew what he saw there: the hurt, the anger, the careful walls I had built because of him. Yet there was something else in his expression too, something that made my pulse quicken despite myself.

“I want you to come home,” he said.

The words were simple, yet they carried a weight that pressed heavily upon my chest. Home—to him, to the life we once shared, to a time before everything had fractured beyond recognition. His voice faltered on the word, just enough to betray him.

“Please.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

For a brief, unguarded instant, his face crumpled. I glimpsed the raw emotion beneath the stoic mask he wore so well—then it was gone, replaced by fierce resolve.

“I am speaking of us,” he said through clenched teeth. “Of you coming back to the apartment—back to your room—back into my life.” His hand lifted instinctively, hovering near my face, before he forced it back to his side. “I am speaking of us behaving as though the last year never occurred.”

“What do you mean?” I hissed, my composure beginning to fray. “We were never—never truly together. We were close once, yes. Friends, more than friends perhaps. But that ended the moment you returned and became... this.”

My breath grew heavy as the words poured out, long restrained. “You say you want me, and then you discard me the instant obligation calls you elsewhere. I do not know how else to name it.”

I pointed at his chest, my hand trembling. “I deserve more than that, Victor. If you truly loved me, you would not hurt me as you have.”

His chest rose and fell rapidly, each breath shallow, as though my words had struck him physically. I saw something shift in his eyes—recognition, self-loathing. He saw himself, then, as I saw him. And for the first time, he seemed to hate what he beheld.

“Norah,” he whispered, his voice breaking despite himself. “I am begging you. Give me the chance to become the man you deserve.”

“Have you forgotten,” I said, the words sharp despite my effort to keep my voice low, “that this entire party is dedicated to your—” I emphasised it deliberately, painfully—“*engagement?*”

His face twisted as though I had struck him. He glanced about the ballroom—the garlands, the flowers, the laughter rising and falling with the music—every detail a celebration of the very future he stood there denying. Colour drained from him, and for a moment he looked unwell.

“I have not forgotten,” he said under his breath. “But neither have I forgotten what I am giving up to do this—what I am sacrificing.”

His eyes burned, bright with unshed tears that only made the admission more unbearable.

“Rebecca is nothing to me, Norah.”

“Do not,” I breathed. “Do not.”

But he had already moved closer, far too close. His face hovered inches from mine, and I saw the pain there plainly—the desperation, the unraveling restraint. I could feel his breath mingle with mine, smell the familiar perfume he himself had once chosen with me, the scent now heavy with memory.

“Do not what?” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “Do not tell you the truth? Do not tell you that I love you more than anything—more than this engagement, more than my family’s legacy, more than my own damned sanity?”

The words struck like blows, each one landing where I was most vulnerable.

I stepped back.

Then another step.

The noise of the party closed in around us again—the music, the laughter, the applause—suddenly unbearable. I turned away from him, from the chandeliers, from the celebration built upon denial and cruelty, and fled.

I did not look back.

Victor

I watched her step back. I saw the tears finally spill over, tracing bright paths down your cheeks. Every instinct in me urged me forward—to reach for her, to pull her into my arms, to shield her from everything, including myself.

But I had gone too far.

I always did.

I stood there, rooted to the spot, as Norah turned and fled the ballroom, the sound of her sobs cutting through the music like something torn open. The celebration continued around me—laughing, clinking glasses, applause—oblivious to the ruin unfolding in its midst.

“Victor?”

Rebecca was suddenly at my side, immaculate as ever, her timing flawless. She looked around, confused, already sensing the fracture.

I saw her moving—saw the way her figure slipped through the crowd—and something in me broke entirely.

I hesitated for the briefest fraction of a second.

Then I ran.

I did not care for the scene I made. I did not care for Rebecca calling my name, her voice sharpening with disbelief. I did not care for the whispers that rose like startled birds as I pushed past guests and burst through the ballroom doors.

I ran.

My heart thundered in my chest as I tore into the night, the city lights blurring at the edges of my vision. I caught sight of her just as she disappeared around a corner, the hem of her elegant gown trailing behind her like a golden promise already being withdrawn.

I ran faster.

Faster than I ever had in a tailored suit.

Faster than I had run toward any ambition, any victory, any duty in my life.

By the time I reached the Bund, the river lay dark and vast beside the promenade, its surface broken by scattered reflections of light. And there she was.

She leaned against a lamppost, her golden silhouette stark against the black waters of the Huangpu. Her chest heaved as she struggled for breath. Her exquisite heels lay discarded nearby, abandoned without ceremony. Her hair was coming undone, pins scattered at your feet like the remnants of something once carefully constructed.

For a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

She was beautiful.

Not the composed, admired beauty of the ballroom—but something raw and devastating. Dishevelled. Heartbroken. Alone. The kind of beauty that does not ask to be seen, yet destroys the one who sees it.

Then she slid down, folding in on herself, and sat upon the stone steps. She hid her face in her hands, and her sobs broke free at last, echoing across the river and the silent facades beyond.

I approached slowly, my steps muted on the cobblestones. I watched her crumple there like something fragile and precious, and the sound of her weeping split me open.

I stopped a short distance away.

Norah

I felt his presence before I heard him, the air shifting as he drew near.

“Do not come any closer,” I said hoarsely. “Do not. I cannot bear it any longer.”

I heard him falter. I did not need to look to know his hand had reached for me and stopped mid-air, suspended between my sobs and whatever fragments of his heart yet remained. When he spoke, his voice was scarcely more than breath.

“Norah... please.”

There was desperation in it now, unguarded and raw. “Look at me.”

I felt him sink down before me, his pride—once so formidable—cast aside entirely. He knelt on the cold stone as though it mattered nothing, as though dignity had ceased to exist.

“Please.”

I laughed then, a broken, ugly sound torn from my chest.

“Every time I look at you,” I said, my voice shaking violently, “you stab me with a thousand knives.”

He recoiled as though struck. I felt it in the sudden stillness, in the sharp intake of his breath. My words had found their mark. They always did.

“I know,” he said at last, and there was no defence left in him now. “I know. I have been destroying you—piece by piece.”

He remained kneeling before me, the fine fabric of his suit darkened with damp and grit, ruined without a thought. His voice broke.

“But seeing you like this—crying because of me—God—”

“Then apologise,” I cried suddenly, the restraint finally snapping.

My voice rose, echoing off the stone and water and empty night around us.

“Apologise,” I screamed. “Apologise for everything.”

The words tore out of me like something long trapped at last released—years of confusion, hope, humiliation, and hurt spilling into the open air. And as my cry faded into the dark, I realised I was shaking—not only with grief, but with the terrible knowledge that an apology, no matter how sincere, could never return what had already been broken.

Hot tears streamed freely down my face, unheeded and unstoppable.

He moved closer—too close—and before I could summon the strength to retreat, his hands came up to my face, trembling as they cupped my cheeks. His thumbs brushed at my tears, as though he might erase them, as though sorrow could be undone by touch alone.

“I am sorry,” he said again, and this time there was no restraint left in him. “For hurting you. For pushing you away. For making you believe you meant nothing.” His voice faltered, the words breaking apart as they left him. “I am sorry for becoming a man you could no longer recognise.”

I clutched at my gown, the fine fabric crushed beneath my fingers. The gloves he had once given me—so carefully chosen, so tenderly presented—were now soaked through with my tears, ruined beyond repair. Somehow, the sight of them undid me all the more.

My body shook with silent sobs, each one wracking and breathless. I felt small then—utterly spent—sitting upon those cold steps with my dress creased and dirtied, dignity abandoned along with my composure.

He saw it all.

I knew he did.

“Norah...” His voice was scarcely more than a breath now, thick with emotion I had never before heard him allow. “Please—do not cry so. Please...”

He drew me into his arms, carefully, as though I might shatter if held too tightly. His coat was warm, his chest solid beneath my cheek, but even that comfort came laced with pain.

“I cannot bear to see you thus,” he murmured. “I cannot endure knowing I have done this to you.”

I tried to answer him, to push him away, to say something—but my body betrayed me. A sharp hiccup tore from my chest, then another, each one a painful reminder of how thoroughly I had come undone.

He held me fast against his chest, his arms closing around me with a protectiveness that brooked no escape. I felt the steady rise and fall of him as he rocked me gently, felt the warmth of his coat, the familiar scent of him. His face pressed into my hair, and to my surprise, I felt the dampness of his tears there.

“Shh... shh...” he murmured, over and over, his voice broken. “I have you. I am so sorry... so desperately sorry...”

My sobs did not cease at once. They came in painful waves, my body hiccupping helplessly against his. But gradually—slowly—they subsided. The storm within me ebbed, leaving only exhaustion in its wake. When at last I could breathe without shaking, I became dimly aware of movement around us. Curious onlookers had begun to gather at a distance, their attention drawn by the spectacle of us upon the Bund’s steps.

Victor did not loosen his hold.

If anything, he drew me closer, one hand firm and steady at the back of my head. My breathing evened against his chest, my strength spent. The night air was cold upon my skin, but he did not shift or rise. Let them look, I thought hazily. Let them see.

“We are leaving,” he said quietly, his lips brushing my hair.

I nodded.

It was a small motion, but it carried more weight than any word I might have spoken. I leaned into him then—truly leaned into him—and in that moment, for the first time, I allowed myself to depend upon him.

He felt it at once. I sensed it in the way his arms tightened, careful and reverent. He lifted me gently from the steps, as though I were something precious and fragile. My body fitted against him as it always had, my head resting against his shoulder, the familiar solidity of him both comforting and terrifying.

The small crowd parted without a word as he carried me past them. Their whispers followed, indistinct and unimportant. He paid them no heed.

He carried me to the car waiting nearby. The driver sprang forward at once to open the door.

“Home,” Victor said shortly. “Now.”

The car began to move the moment he settled inside with me still cradled against him.

After a beat, he spoke again, softly this time.

“Norah?”

“Mmm?” I murmured, my voice scarcely more than breath.

I did not open my eyes.

He looked down at me then—I could feel the weight of his gaze even without seeing it. I knew how I must appear: small, spent, my gown ruined, my gloves stained with tears, my shoes abandoned on the Bund’s stones. I was the evidence of his doing, whether he wished to admit it or not.

“I am cancelling the engagement,” he said quietly.

There was no hesitation in his voice, no flourish—only a calm, resolute finality. “Tonight. And tomorrow morning, I will make it known.”

His arms tightened slightly around me, as though the vow were meant to shield us both.

I did not have the strength to respond with outrage or hope or fear. All of those emotions lay somewhere far beyond my reach.

Whatever you wish, I thought dimly, and then spoke it aloud without energy, without protest.

“Whatever you want.”

The words were not surrender. They were exhaustion.

Victor

My heart tightened painfully at her words. That quiet, defeated tone—no protest, no resistance, no fire left in it. Anger I could have faced. Hatred, even, would have meant she still felt something strongly enough to fight me.

But this... this weary indifference unsettled me far more.

“Norah,” I murmured, pressing a careful kiss to her forehead. “We are not doing whatever I want. We are doing what you need.”

My thumb brushed lightly over her cheekbone, mindful of how fragile she seemed in that moment.

“And what you need,” I added softly, “is sleep.”

By then, the car had drawn up before my penthouse. I stepped out without waiting for assistance, lifting her easily into my arms. She did not resist, merely settling against me with the quiet trust that both comforted and unnerved me.

Inside, I moved slowly, deliberately—every action measured so as not to startle her. I helped her out of the ruined gown with as much discretion as possible, my focus fixed firmly on practicality rather than anything else. She was exhausted, shaken; dignity mattered.

I ran a bath, testing the water carefully before guiding her into it. She stirred faintly once, attempting to rise, but I hushed her gently.

“Easy,” I said. “Just rest. I have you.”

I washed her hair and hands carefully, as one might tend something precious but fragile. When she was clean and calmer, I wrapped her in soft towels, dried her hair as best I could, and carried her to my bed.

I settled her beneath the covers, ensuring she was warm, comfortable, undisturbed. Only then did I allow myself to sit beside her for a moment, watching the steady rhythm of her breathing.

For the first time that night, the chaos quieted.

Norah

He wrapped me carefully in his blankets and left the room, closing the door with a quiet finality. I drifted somewhere between waking and sleep, my body heavy, my thoughts dulled by exhaustion.

It was later—how much later I could not tell—that I became aware of raised voices.

Through the thin crack of the bedroom door, sound carried more clearly than I wished. Rebecca’s voice cut through the stillness, sharp and shrill, each word edged with accusation.

“You are cancelling our engagement? Have you lost your mind? My family will destroy you!”

There was a pause, and when she spoke again, her voice had lowered into something far more dangerous.

“Who is she?” she demanded. “That little—”

The word never quite reached me, but I flinched all the same.

Then came the sound of a slap—clean, unmistakable—echoing through the apartment.

For a moment, there was silence. Then Victor’s voice followed, calm and cold in a way that made my chest tighten.

“Watch your language.”

I heard objects knocked over, glass breaking, the sharp scrape of furniture dragged aside in fury. Rebecca's footsteps retreated, fast and furious, until at last the front door slammed—once, twice, again—each impact reverberating through the walls as though the apartment itself were protesting her departure.

Then nothing.

The silence that followed was almost unbearable in its suddenness.

I lay very still beneath his blankets, heart racing despite my weariness, staring into the darkness. I did not move when the bedroom door opened softly. I only felt the shift in the air as Victor entered, closing it behind him with care.

He did not speak.

I sensed rather than saw him sit upon the edge of the bed. For a long moment, there was only the sound of my own breathing and the faint, uneven cadence of his. I imagined him there—head bowed, hands covering his face—alone with the consequences of what had just transpired.

It was over.

Whatever fragile structure had held his former life together had collapsed entirely beyond that door.

Victor

Morning came far too quickly.

Chaos followed in its wake.

My telephone rang without pause—again and again—its shrill insistence cutting through the fragile calm of dawn. My parents demanded explanations, voices tight with shock and disapproval. Rebecca's parents were less restrained, their words sharp, threatening—legal consequences, reputational ruin, alliances soured. The press, ever ravenous, circled eagerly, clamouring for statements, for scandal, for spectacle.

I answered them all with the same measured composure I had honed over years of negotiation and command. If this was to be endured, it would be endured properly.

“No comment,” I repeated to the journalists, over and over. “Personal matters.”

To my parents, I offered no elaboration. Only the truth, stripped bare of ornament.

“It was not right.”

To Rebecca's parents, I was careful—precise. I chose my words as one selects glassware in a fragile room.

“Incompatibility,” I said.

The term was suitably vague, suitably civil. True enough to stand scrutiny, polite enough to avoid open war. They were displeased—furious, even—but there was little they could do without inviting the very scandal they wished to avoid.

By midday, the worst of it had passed.

The newspapers ran their pieces. The engagement was dissolved due to incompatibility. Society murmured. Speculation flared, then settled. The machine moved on, as it always did.

At last, my telephone fell silent.

I remained standing for a moment longer, hand still curled loosely around the receiver, as though expecting it to ring again. When it did not, I released a long breath I had not realised I was holding.

Then I turned and walked into my bedroom.

The room was quiet. Still.

And for the first time since the night before, I allowed myself to feel the full weight of what had been done—what had been lost, what had been irrevocably changed.

Norah

I had been hiding there all morning, wrapped in his blankets as though they might shield me from the world beyond the door. My parents had been searching for me. I learned later—through his careful words—that they had even called the police.

He opened the bedroom door slowly, as though uncertain of what he might find. I heard the quiet click as he closed it again behind him.

“Your parents have called the police,” he said gently. “They were looking for you.” He came to sit on the edge of the bed, his movements uncharacteristically cautious. “I told them you were safe—with me.” After a pause, he added, “They have rung twenty times.”

My chest tightened.

“Mama was worried,” I said softly. “She heard about your... news.” I swallowed. “I think everyone has heard about it by now

He nodded, a grim acknowledgment. By now, his broken engagement must have spread through Shanghai with the speed of scandal—whispered in parlours, printed in bold type. I could only imagine what my mother had feared when she heard the rumours and could not reach me.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Everyone knows.”

He set my phone down with care, as though it were something fragile, and looked at me properly then—curled in his bed, eyes heavy with exhaustion.

“Are you...” He hesitated, as though the question itself were ill-formed. “Are you all right?” Then, more plainly, “About the engagement ending?”

I lifted one shoulder in a small shrug.

“If it was not what you wanted,” I said, my voice even though my heart was anything but, “then you should not have pursued it.”

My eyes lifted to his then, drawn there despite myself.

“You,” he said softly.

The single word carried more truth than any speech could have done.

“I wanted you,” he went on, his voice scarcely more than a breath in the stillness of the room. “I still do.”

“I know,” I said quietly. “I can feel it.”

Without quite meaning to, I reached for his hand. My fingers brushed his—warm, familiar—and for a fleeting moment it felt as though the world steadied itself around that small point of contact.

Then reality returned.

Edward's name rose unbidden in my mind. The promise of lunch. The weight of intention I had placed upon that future only hours before. My hand withdrew at once, as though burned.

I saw him notice it. The way his hand stilled where mine had been. The flicker of understanding as my eyes drifted to the clock, the colour rising faintly in my cheeks.

“You are meeting Edward,” he said quietly.

It was not a question.

I nodded.

He rose smoothly from the bed, his composure reasserting itself with practiced ease, though I sensed something taut beneath it—something wounded.

“Then you should go,” he said. His tone was calm, but there was an undercurrent there I could not mistake.

Victor

I watched in silence as she dressed—one of the gowns kept in reserve, chosen with the same discretion that governed everything in my life. The fabric settled against her with effortless grace, following lines I knew far too well. It was an intimate sight, made cruel by circumstance.

I wanted—God help me—to reach out. To take her arm, to stop her, to remind her that I had dismantled an entire future only hours before. That I had done so without hesitation. That it was her I had chosen.

But I did nothing.

I had learned, at last, that love demanded more than force or insistence. If I were to keep her, it would not be by trapping her between choices made in haste.

So I let her go.

“Have a pleasant lunch,” I said evenly, my voice betraying nothing of the storm beneath.

She inclined her head and left. The door closed softly behind her—far too softly for what it severed.

The moment the latch fell into place, restraint deserted me. I turned away and struck the nearest pillow with a violence that startled even myself, driving my fist into it again and again until the fury bled out of me, leaving only emptiness behind.

I stood there, breathing hard, staring at the closed door.

I had chosen her.

Now I could only wait to see whether she would ever choose me in return.

Norah

I met Edward for luncheon that afternoon, and as we spoke at length, a quiet certainty settled over me. He was a lovely man—truly so. Gentle in manner, considerate in thought, possessed of all the qualities one might reasonably desire in a husband. And yet, with a heaviness I could no longer ignore, I understood that he was not a man I loved.

He insisted upon paying, as was his habit, and when we rose to leave he reached for my hand, speaking lightly of seeing me home. I shook my head instead, offering him a small, apologetic smile.

As I sat across from him, listening to his careful plans for the future—plans sensibly arranged, thoughtful, and wholly absent of Victor—I felt nothing stir within me. No quickening of the pulse. No flutter of hope. Only a calm, aching clarity.

I did not love Edward. I never had.

My heart, imprudent and stubborn, belonged elsewhere—to a man who unsettled me, who wounded me more than once, and yet whose love burned fierce and undeniable all the same.

When Edward reached for my hand again, I withdrew gently.

“I like you very much, Edward,” I said softly. “I have many fond memories of our time together. But I do not know that we would make a good match.”

The colour drained from his face, though he bore it with admirable composure.

“I need time,” I continued, my voice faltering despite my resolve. “Time to look after myself. And I do not believe I am ready to marry... anyone.”

Edward received my gentle refusal in silence, his fork resting untouched upon his plate. The colour had drained from his face, yet there was no anger there—only disappointment, tempered by a quiet, admirable understanding.

“I see,” he said at last. “You are not ready because...” He hesitated, choosing his words with care. “...because of Victor?”

He did not accuse. He did not press. He merely stated what he already knew.

“You still love him, do you not?” he added softly. “Even after everything?”

“How do you know?” I asked, genuinely startled.

Edward smiled then—gently, without bitterness. He leaned back in his chair, his expression calm, his eyes kind.

“Norah,” he said, “a man does not cancel an engagement—especially one so publicly announced—on a whim.” He paused. “He does so because he is already in love with someone else. Someone whose heart he has spent years trying, unsuccessfully, to break.”

He reached across the table—not for my hand this time, but for the bill.

“You deserve honesty.”

“Edward...” I began, my voice catching.

He lifted a hand, smiling faintly, and signalled to the waiter.

“Listen to me,” he said quietly. “I would have been honoured to marry you—truly. But I see now that my heart would never have been fully in it either.” His gaze held mine steadily. “You deserve someone who looks at you the way Victor does. As though you are the only soul in the room.”

He passed his card to the waiter with composed finality.

“So allow me this,” he said gently. “Let me wish you every happiness in finding that person.”

That was when his kindness undid me.

Edward’s eyes widened a fraction when my tears came so suddenly. At once, he produced his handkerchief and placed it gently into my hand.

“Norah,” he said softly, “I am not here to make you cry.”

He leaned forward—not to claim my hand, not to bind me to him in any way—but to brush a tear from my cheek with an unexpected tenderness that undid me further.

“Go home,” he continued gently. “Go to Victor. Stop punishing yourself—and everyone around you—for loving him.” A sad little smile touched his lips. “Just promise me one thing.”

I nodded, sniffling quietly.

“Be happy,” he said. “Will you?”

“I promise,” I whispered.

He nodded solemnly then, retrieving his card from the waiter as though concluding a matter of great importance. Rising slowly, deliberately, he gave me space to gather myself.

“Goodbye, Norah,” he said. “Take care of yourself—and Victor.”

With one last gentle smile, he turned and walked away, leaving me alone at the table, his words echoing long after he was gone. I sat there for some time, tears falling silently onto the white linen, grieving not a love lost—but the kindness of a man who had given me freedom without bitterness.

It took me far longer than it should have to make my way back to Victor's apartment. I felt utterly undone, my composure in tatters, my heart laid bare. I had scarcely reached the front steps when the door opened.

Victor

I was standing in the doorway when she returned—my hair unkempt, the weight of sleeplessness etched plainly beneath my eyes. I had been waiting. I had not moved.

The instant I saw her—her eyes red and swollen, her cheeks streaked with tears, her body trembling as though held together by will alone—everything else fell away. Edward, propriety, restraint, consequence—it all ceased to matter.

“You are crying,” I said, the words roughened by something dangerously close to panic.

In two strides I crossed the threshold and gathered her into my arms.

“What did he do to you?”

She shook her head against my chest.

“He... let me go,” she said, after a pause. “So I could be with you.”

My arms tightened instinctively, my heart thundering painfully. Edward had released you—for *me*. For a man who had hurt you again and again. The realisation filled me with a sickening sense of unworthiness.

“Norah,” I whispered hoarsely. “Look at me.”

My hands rose to your face, gentle despite their urgency, my thumbs brushing away the tears that refused to stop.

“Hm?” she murmured.

I looked into her eyes—raw with exhaustion and pain—and saw something there I had no right to expect. Affection. Love. And perhaps, impossibly, forgiveness.

“You are giving me another chance,” I said quietly. “After everything... you are still choosing me.” My voice faltered. “Why?”

“I hated you,” she said softly. “But I realised I loved you so much I could hate you.”

The words struck deeper than any rebuke. My vision blurred as tears threatened, long restrained and now finally earned.

“I do not deserve you,” I confessed. “I truly do not.”

I leaned my forehead against hers, my eyes closing as though the nearness might steady me.

“Then make certain you deserve me,” she said.

I pulled back just enough to look at her properly. There was no gentleness in the challenge—only truth. A demand. And I felt something settle within me then, fierce and unshakable.

“I will,” I vowed softly. “I will spend every day proving myself worthy of you.” I pressed a reverent kiss to her forehead. “Beginning now.”

I drew her inside and closed the door behind us.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, I did not feel as though I were running from my life.

I was choosing it.