

Chapter 2

I spent the entire night staring at my ceiling, the memory of Damien's words replaying in my head. Marrying her is just repaying a debt. He saw me as a transaction, a bill to be paid.

I would not be his charity case.

With my lineage and fortune, I could have any man I wanted. I didn't need to beg for scraps of affection from someone who despised me.

I stood before my father again, my resolve hardened. "I'm serious, Dad. I'm marrying Hunter. I trust him. He's the only one who has ever been honest with me."

"But the Fellows..."

"The Fellows are loyal to you because you hold their futures in your hands," I said, my voice sharp. "Their deference to me is just an act." I hid the flicker of pain in my eyes. The years I'd wasted, the love I'd poured out—it all felt like a joke.

I straightened my shoulders. "I have some requests."

"Anything, sweetheart."

"Freeze their accounts. All of them. And cut off Eve McClain's allowance completely. She's not a Barron. She has no right to our money."

My father looked shocked but nodded slowly. "If that's what you want, it's done. I'll have them all removed from the estate after your wedding."

A weight lifted from my chest. I walked out of the study, my head held high.

I met Eve on the grand staircase. She was dressed in a delicate white dress, looking like the picture of innocence. She rushed over, linking her arm with mine.

"Elena! I was just coming to find you! There's a charity polo match today. Will you take me? Please?"

I looked at her, at the sweet smile she wore, and felt sick to my stomach. This was the face of the girl who had stolen my love and laughed at my pain.

I yanked my arm away from her grasp.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Then, in a move of pure theatrical genius, she let out a small cry and tumbled dramatically down the last few steps of the staircase.

"Eve!" A frantic shout came from the bottom of the stairs. It was Damien.

I looked down and saw them all. The seven Fellows, standing there, looking up at me.

Kennith Boyle pointed a finger at me, his face red with rage. "Elena, you vicious bitch! How could you push her?"

Eve, meanwhile, was already on her feet, rushing to my defense with tears in her eyes. "No, no, it wasn't Elena! I just slipped. She would never hurt me." Her words only made me look guiltier.

Her eyes were red-rimmed, her lip trembling. She was the perfect victim.

The Fellows all glared at me with pure disgust.

Damien didn't say a word. He just gave me one cold, dismissive look before scooping Eve into his arms and carrying her away as if she were made of glass.

I was left standing there, alone. I didn't get a chance to explain. I didn't even want to.

Later that day, I went to my scheduled riding lesson at the stables, hoping the fresh air would clear my head. Of course, she was there.

Eve was standing by the paddock, looking pale and fragile. Damien was with her.

"Elena," Eve said, her voice soft and sweet. "I'm sorry about this morning. And please, don't worry about me and Damien. I know my place. I would never get in the way of your happiness."

Damien hovered by her side, his eyes never leaving her, as if she were the most precious thing in the world. He personally saddled a gentle mare for her, lifting her onto its back with extreme care.

He then spent the next hour leading the horse around the paddock, his hands patiently guiding hers on the reins, his voice a low, soothing murmur that only she could hear.

When she said she was tired, he led the horse to the mounting block. But instead of letting her use it, he dropped to one knee, offering his shoulder for her to step on.

I froze.

My mind flashed back to my thirteenth birthday. I had wanted to ride the most spirited stallion in our stables, a wild horse no one could tame. Damien, already a master horseman, was the only one who could handle him.

My father had taught him that a man should only kneel for his wife.

But that day, my father had looked at a reluctant sixteen-year-old Damien and said, "Kneel. Let her step on your shoulder. She is your future, Damien. She is everything."

Damien had knelt, his face a mask of silent humiliation.



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