

Chapter 3

My father's words were meant to teach Damien a lesson about his place, about his duty to me. He was telling him that I was to be his world, the woman he must honor above all others.

I remember the feeling of my small boot on his broad shoulder. My heart had hammered in my chest. It was the first time I realized I was in love with him.

I was too young, too infatuated, to see the shame burning in his eyes.

After that day, I never asked him to do it again. I respected his pride too much.

Now, I watched as he knelt willingly, gladly, for another woman. For Eve. He looked up at her with a tenderness that made my own eyes sting.

The sight was a physical pain, sharp and unbearable. I forced myself to look away.

I kicked my horse, a powerful black gelding named Midnight, into a gallop. I urged him faster and faster, the wind whipping past my face, temporarily chasing away the storm in my heart. I needed to feel free, to outrun the suffocating reality of my life.

The stable had a challenging obstacle course, with high jumps and tight turns. I guided Midnight towards it, pushing him to his limits.

We approached a tall oxer. Midnight gathered himself, launching into the air.

In that split second, I heard a sharp crack.

The saddle cinch had snapped.

I was thrown from the horse, landing hard on the unforgiving ground. A searing pain shot through my leg. Midnight, spooked

and riderless, thrashed wildly, his powerful hooves dangerously close to my head.

Through a haze of pain, I looked for Damien. He was still with Eve, his back to me, completely oblivious to my plight. He was supposed to be my designated guardian during these lessons, his one official duty.

He had failed. He was too busy doting on her.

"Damien!" I screamed, my voice raw with desperation and agony.

He finally turned, his eyes widening in shock. With a speed that was almost inhuman, he was at my side. He grabbed Midnight's reins, his voice a low command that instantly calmed the frantic animal. He was a master of beasts, a skill he'd learned on the streets.

His job was to keep me safe. He had been so focused on Eve he had almost gotten me killed.

The next thing I knew, I was in a hospital bed with a broken leg.

Damien, seemingly wracked with guilt, volunteered to be my caretaker. He was a perfect nurse, attentive and gentle. He brought me my meals, read to me, and made sure I was never in any pain.

For a few days, a foolish part of me allowed a sliver of hope to grow. Maybe he did care. Maybe this accident had made him realize something.

But then I would see the way his eyes lit up whenever Eve visited, the secret smiles they shared when they thought I wasn't looking. The hope would wither and die.

My leg was healing. One night, I woke up needing to use the restroom. The cast made it awkward, and I hobbled slowly down the quiet, sterile hallway of the private hospital wing.

That's when I heard voices from a small alcove near the nurses' station. It was Javier and Damien.

"You went too far this time, Damien," Javier's voice was a low hiss.

"Cutting her saddle strap? She could have broken her neck."

My blood ran cold. I pressed myself against the wall, my heart pounding in my ears.

Damien's reply was chillingly calm. "I didn't expect the horse to spook like that. My calculations showed she'd just have a minor fall, maybe a sprain. Enough to scare her, to make her more dependent. This broken leg... it was an anomaly."

He had calculated my fall. It wasn't an accident. It was a plan.

"So this is your penance?" Javier asked. "Playing the devoted caretaker?"

"I'll see it through," Damien said. "Then this will all be over. She'll be fine, and we can move on."

A wave of nausea washed over me. I felt a coldness spread from my chest through my entire body, a chill that had nothing to do with the hospital air conditioning.

He had done this to me. On purpose. To "scare" me. To "manage" me.

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood, but I didn't feel the pain. The agony in my heart was so much greater, it eclipsed everything else. This wasn't just betrayal. This was monstrous.

