

Chapter 6

The lock on my bedroom door clicked open with ease. Damien stepped inside, not even bothering to pretend he hadn't just picked it.

"Get out!" I yelled, my eyes red and swollen from days of crying.

"I learned how to do that when I was living on the streets," he said with a small, unamused smile, as if that explained everything. He sat down on the edge of my bed, the gift box in his hands.

He sat in silence for a long time before he spoke. "When I was a kid, I had nothing. No one. Then I found Eve. She was just a baby, abandoned like me. She became my reason to live. My only family."

He paused, his dark eyes fixed on me. "And then your father found us. He gave me a home. A future. I owe him everything. I would do anything for him, for you."

He opened the gift box. "But you have to understand. Eve is my sister. She's all I have from my old life. I can't let anyone hurt her. I need you to tolerate her, Elena. That's the only thing I ask."

For a moment, his words, his vulnerability, almost reached me. A flicker of the old, foolish Elena stirred in my heart.

Then he said the word "sister," and the illusion shattered.

Brothers don't kiss their sisters the way he kissed Eve in the garden. Brothers don't look at their sisters with that kind of raw hunger.

He was a liar.

"So, after we're married," I asked, my voice dripping with sarcasm, "will she still come first? Will your 'sister' always be your priority?"

"Yes," he answered without a shred of hesitation. "She will always be my first priority. But I will be good to you, Elena. I will cherish you." He paused. "As much as I can."

I let out a bitter laugh that sounded more like a sob. "As much as you can." All my unhappiness, all my pain, stemmed from him. From my one-sided love for him.

I didn't say anything else. There was no point.

Just then, his phone rang. It was Eve. He answered immediately, his voice softening. "I'll be right there." He hung up and stood to leave.

"This is for you," he said, placing the gift box on my nightstand. He left without another word.

Inside the box was a necklace. A simple, elegant diamond pendant. It was beautiful, but it wasn't the "Tears of the Ocean." It wasn't what I had wanted.

It was a consolation prize. A symbol of how much he was willing to give me: something, but not everything. Not the best.

I picked up the box, walked over to the trash can, and dropped it in without a second thought.

I deserve a man who would give me the world, not one who would ask me to settle for second place.

My 21st birthday arrived a month later. It was to be the biggest social event of the year, a gala where my father would officially announce my engagement.

I stood in front of the mirror, wearing a custom-made haute couture gown. I looked like a princess, but I felt a pang of regret that I wasn't wearing the "Tears of the Ocean."

Just then, a butler entered my dressing room holding a large, beautifully wrapped box.

"This just arrived for you, Miss Barron. From Mr. Beach."

My heart skipped a beat. Hunter.

"Mr. Beach sends his apologies for not being able to find the 'Tears of the Ocean'," the butler explained. "The current owner refused to sell. So he commissioned this for you instead. He hopes it will

suffice."

I opened the box. Nestled on a bed of black velvet was a breathtaking set of jewelry. A necklace, earrings, and a bracelet, all featuring enormous pigeon's blood rubies, the rarest and most valuable in the world. They glowed with an inner fire, a deep, passionate red.

"The ruby symbolizes a love that is more precious than anything," the butler said softly.

A genuine smile, the first in a long time, blossomed on my face. I put on the jewels. They felt warm against my skin.

I finally felt like a queen. And I knew, with absolute certainty, that I had made the right choice.

As I was about to leave my room, I ran into Eve. She was also dressed for the party, but her eyes were fixed on the rubies around my neck. Her smile faltered.

"Those are... magnificent," she said, her voice tight. "Did Damien give them to you?"

I brushed past her without a word.

Her eyes flashed with a look of pure hatred. "He doesn't love you, you know," she hissed at my back. "He's only marrying you to repay your father."

She stepped in front of me, blocking my path, and held up her phone. "He'll never touch you the way he touches me."

She pressed play. On the screen, a video began. It was her and Damien, tangled together in bed, their bodies moving in a rhythm of pure lust.

"He's never looked at you like that, has he?" she taunted, her voice cruel. "You should pick one of the other Fellows. Javier, maybe? Or Kenneth? I've had them all. Kenneth is particularly... athletic." She laughed, a low, vulgar sound. "I can give you a full report on their performance if you like."

