

Chapter 7

The filth pouring from her mouth was more than I could bear.

My hand moved on its own. The sharp crack of my palm connecting with her cheek echoed in the hallway.

"You're disgusting," I spat, my voice trembling with rage.

A cold presence behind me made me freeze. I turned slowly and met the icy, furious gaze of Damien.

He didn't say a word. He just stood there, looking at me, and I knew. I knew he would make me pay for this.

The entire birthday gala passed in a blur of anxiety. I smiled, I mingled, I accepted birthday wishes, but my mind was in a knot of fear. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Damien's quiet, calculated revenge.

But nothing happened. The party was a spectacular success.

Finally, the moment arrived. My father stood on the stage, ready to announce my future husband. The ballroom fell silent, a thousand guests holding their breath.

"It has to be Damien Paul," someone whispered nearby. "He's the only one worthy of her."

"What about Hunter Beach?" another voice countered. "He's been chasing her for years. Poor guy never stood a chance."

I couldn't help the small, triumphant smile that touched my lips. I glanced across the room at Hunter. He caught my eye and gave me a look of such deep, unwavering love it took my breath away. He raised his hand and signed to me, a little joke between us: Don't you dare change your mind.

I laughed, a real, happy laugh.

And then the world exploded.

The giant screen behind the stage, which had been displaying a beautiful montage of my life, flickered and changed. An image of my bedroom appeared. It was me.

I was holding one of Damien's shirts, pressing it to my face, my eyes closed in a state of pathetic, lovesick bliss. The video continued, showing me in my most private moments, touching myself, whispering his name.

"I love you, Damien," my voice echoed through the silent ballroom. "I love you so much."

A wave of absolute horror washed over me. I turned, my eyes desperately seeking Damien in the crowd. He stood there, his face a cold, blank mask.

Tears streamed down my face. "How could you?" I mouthed, my heart shattering into a million pieces. "How could you be so cruel?"

"Turn it off!" my father roared, his face purple with rage. "Somebody turn that damn thing off!"

But the video kept playing. The system was locked.

Hunter, seeing my devastation, didn't hesitate. He charged the stage, picked up a heavy champagne stand, and smashed the projector to pieces.

"Find out who did this!" my father bellowed, his voice shaking. "I want them found!"

One of his business partners tried to calm him down. "Charles, it's just a young girl's crush. It's clear who she's in love with. Announce the engagement to Damien. It will smooth everything over."

My father's face was pale. He knew. He knew I had chosen Hunter. He looked at Hunter, a desperate hope in his eyes.

Hunter walked to my side, wrapping his strong arms around me, shielding me from the prying eyes of the crowd. He held me tight, a solid, unshakeable anchor in my swirling nightmare.

Then he turned to face the stunned guests, his voice ringing with authority and fury.

"Elena Barron is my fiancée," he announced, his voice booming through the hall. "And I swear to God, whoever is responsible for this, I will find you. And I will destroy you."

The crowd gasped.

Across the room, the faces of Damien Paul and the other Barron Fellows were ashen. They stared at me, at Hunter, their expressions a mixture of shock and disbelief. This was not how their plan was supposed to end.

