

Chapter 4

When I got home, a team of stylists and makeup artists was waiting for me. Emilio had arranged everything. They fussed over me, transforming my grief-stricken face into a mask of polished elegance, dressing me in a gown of midnight blue silk.

At dusk, Emilio arrived, his own tuxedo perfectly tailored. His eyes lit up when he saw me, a look of genuine awe on his face.

"You look breathtaking, Elana."

I just gave him a cool, detached glance and let him lead me to the car.

The gala was at the museum, in the very wing I had spent two years of my life designing. We walked in to a ripple of applause, our entrance met with smiles and envious glances.

"You're so lucky," a woman I knew whispered as we passed. "To have a man who adores you so much."

I used to revel in that envy. I used to feel a thrill of pride, knowing I had what every woman wanted. Tonight, I knew the beautiful surface was just a cover for the dark, rotting abyss beneath.

Emilio played his part perfectly, his hand possessively on the small of my back, his eyes full of a love that was a lie. He presented his gift, a heavy box from a famous jeweler. Inside was a diamond watch from a brand I had once told him I disliked.

He had forgotten. Or perhaps, he was remembering someone else's favorite.

"I don't..." I started to say, but I was cut off as a small body collided with my legs.

I stumbled back, catching myself on a table.

"Daddy!" a child's voice cried out.

My heart seized. It was Leo. He was clinging to Emilio's leg, his face buried in the expensive fabric of his trousers, sobbing.

"You're too close to my daddy!" he wailed, pointing an accusing finger at me. "Are you going to make him leave me and Mommy?"

The entire hall fell silent. Every eye was on us.

I wanted the ground to swallow me whole. The child looked so much like Emilio, the resemblance was undeniable.

Whispers erupted around the room. "Is that... his son?" "Who is she, then?"

My carefully constructed world, the one I had fought so hard to maintain, was shattering in public, under the bright lights of my own celebration.

Emilio's face was a mask of controlled panic. He knelt, his voice patient. "Whose little boy are you? Where are your parents?"

This only made the child cry harder.

Then, Hayden Cleveland pushed through the crowd, her face a picture of maternal distress. "Oh, I am so, so sorry! Leo, honey, come to Mommy."

She tried to pull the boy away, but he clung to Emilio, his little face a mess of tears and accusations.

I recognized her from the church, from the photos online. She was even more beautiful in person, her performance of the flustered, apologetic mother flawless. But I could see the calculation in her eyes.

"Daddy, don't let her take me away!" Leo screamed, his voice echoing in the silent room. He glared at me, his eyes filled with a pure, childish hatred. "It's her! She's the one trying to steal you from us!"

I was frozen, stunned into silence.

My eyes fell to the child's wrist. He was wearing a small string of sandalwood beads, a miniature version of the one I had spent a week on a pilgrimage to a remote temple to get for Emilio, for his protection, for his peace of mind.

He had given my gift to his son.

A surge of rage, hot and powerful, broke through my shock. I took a step forward, my hand outstretched, needing to see, to confirm. "That bracelet..."

"Elana, don't!"

A powerful force slammed into my chest. It was Emilio. He had shoved me, hard. His face was twisted in a panic I had never seen before, his eyes wild as he shielded his son.

My high heels caught on the plush carpet. I fell backwards, my body clumsy and out of control.

My head hit the sharp corner of a glass table with a sickening crack.

The world exploded in a shower of splintering glass and searing pain. Shards from a broken wine glass sliced into my arm. I gasped, the air knocked from my lungs.

I looked up, my vision blurring. Emilio wasn't looking at me. He was fussing over Leo, who had a tiny scratch on his knee.

"Are you okay, son? Did the bad woman hurt you?" he murmured, his voice thick with concern. He scooped the boy into his arms and pushed through the crowd toward the exit, Hayden following closely behind.

She glanced back at me, a flicker of pure, triumphant malice in her eyes. It was a look that confirmed everything. This was all her plan.

Emilio left without a single look back. He left me bleeding on the floor of the room built to honor me.

The pain in my head and my arm was sharp, but a new, deeper, more terrifying cramp was seizing my abdomen.

The whispers around me grew louder, turning into a tide of judgment.

"Did you see that? She tried to grab the little boy."

"She must be the other woman. How shameless, to cause a scene like this."

"Emilio Thomas is such a good man, protecting his son like that."

The words were a physical assault, each one a new wound.

The pain in my stomach intensified, a brutal, tearing sensation. I looked down. The midnight blue of my dress was stained with a spreading patch of dark, wet crimson.

My baby.

The last thread of my strength snapped. The room tilted, the lights blurring into streaks as the world faded to black.