

## Chapter 5

Ava's POV

We arrived home later in the day, after a small celebratory meal. It wasn't planned, but somehow it just felt necessary. I wished, more than anything, that my dad could have been there on my wedding day. Lost in thought, I barely noticed that Liam was speaking to me until he raised his voice, breaking my train of thought.

"Ava!" I jumped, glancing at him. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Ava, I was asking if you're okay... you've been zoned out for a while."

I noticed Liam and Uncle Bertram watching me with concern. I managed a smile, "I'm ne," I said softly. "I just... I wish Dad would have been here. Even if the wedding was fake, even if this whole thing probably won't last... It would've meant a lot."

They stared at me, their gazes soft and lled with pity. I didn't like that, so I hastily added, "But, well, he had to be at Natalia's wedding. It's understandable. Mum probably made sure of that."

Liam's gaze softened. "Why do your mother and sister treat you like this, Ava?"

I looked down, not ready to explain. "I... I don't know," I murmured, unwilling to share the reason for my guilt. Maybe I deserve it, I thought but didn't dare say aloud. Uncle Bertram, however, must have sensed it.

"Ava," he said rmly, "I've told you, you do not deserve to be treated this way. Nobody does."

I wanted to believe him, but my doubts held me back. There was so much I couldn't tell Liam—not now, not yet.

Uncle Bertram's voice softened, breaking the silence. "So... what now? Living arrangements and all that?"

Liam let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair. "Honestly, all of this happened so fast. I don't even have a place set up yet." He glanced at me, embarrassed. "I was staying with a friend temporarily. There's my uncle's house, but it's not completely set up for us."

I quickly interjected. "Oh, that's no problem. You could stay at my family home for now. Just until we sort out something permanent. I have some money saved up, and once we get that gured out, we can look for a place."

Liam shook his head. "No, Ava. I can't live off you like that. I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

I rolled my eyes with a small laugh, catching his frown in response. "Come on, Liam. This isn't ideal for either of us. Besides, I'm pretty sure neither of us would have chosen to meet and get married like this."

He didn't look amused, but Uncle Bertram chuckled, breaking the tension.

"Look at it this way," I added, trying to lighten the mood. "We will stay here for a few days. I'll be starting my new job soon, and once I get paid, we can move out. Hopefully, we can nd our own place and be free."

Uncle Bertram nodded, encouraging us. "That's a sound plan. Let's leave it at that for now."

We agreed, and the rest of the journey home was spent in silence. Liam remained quiet, lost in his own thoughts.

When we arrived, the house was unusually quiet; most of the staff had been given the day off for Natalia's wedding. I hadn't invited anyone for mine—why bother? They never really liked me. I'd rather avoid a wedding with people who treated me like I didn't belong. Even Mrs. Rose, Uncle Bertram's wife, had gone to Natalia's wedding instead. At least she was welcomed there.

Uncle Bertram turned to us as we entered. "I'll be in my room if you need anything. I could use a rest."

"Of course, Uncle. Thank you," I said, grateful for his support. He gave me a reassuring smile before disappearing down the hallway.

I turned and caught Liam's gaze on me. It was so intense that I felt heat rising to my cheeks. "Let's go inside," I said quickly, breaking the silence. He took my luggage without a word, following me as I led the way into the house.

As we walked down the hallway, Liam started up the stairs towards the family rooms. I stopped him. "No, I'm not staying up there."

He raised an eyebrow, clearly puzzled, but he followed me as I turned and headed toward a different part of the house. His confusion grew as we approached the servants' quarters. I opened a door, stepping inside, and he followed slowly, looking around with a growing frown.

"Are we here to see one of your servants before we move on?" he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I laughed softly. "Not exactly." His surprise was understandable, but still, I couldn't help but nd it funny. "Liam. This is my room. This is where we'll be staying," I said with a small, apologetic smile. "I know it's not the best, but... well, we'll manage. The bed is pretty tiny, though, so I'm not sure how we'll sleep—"

Liam's jaw dropped, and he set one of his bags down, staring at me as if I'd just spoken another language. "Ava..." His voice trailed off, and I raised an eyebrow, wondering why he was reacting this way.

"Ava, what's going on? Why are you living here like this?"

I shrugged, trying to sound casual. "Well... this is my life."

He shook his head, clearly frustrated. "Your life? Ava, you're a Patel, and you're living in the servants' quarters?"

"Please, let's not talk about it," I replied, not wanting to go down that road. "I'm tired, Liam. I just want to freshen up and get some sleep."

I saw the concern in his eyes, but I was too exhausted to explain. This was how things had always been for me, and I didn't want to dig up the past—at least not tonight.

Liam sat at the foot of the bed, glancing around the cramped room, his brow furrowed. I heard him whisper something that sounded like: "Very soon, all of this will be over. Just wait until my plans are done."

I frowned, unsure if I'd heard him correctly. "What did you say?" I asked, turning to him.

"Oh, nothing," he replied quickly, shaking his head. "I didn't say a thing."

"Okay," I murmured, although I didn't believe him.

"Let's rest. It's been a tiring day," he suggested, and I nodded in agreement, my eyelids growing heavy. As I drifted off to sleep, I felt a strange comfort in knowing he was there.

A few hours later, I jolted awake to the sound of music blasting from downstairs. Ugh, Natalia's reception has started. Groaning, I rolled over, trying to block out the noise when suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Liam stood up and opened it, revealing a maid in the doorway.

"Ava," she said with a tone that dripped with disdain, "your mother says you should join the maids in the kitchen. We are understaffed, and we need all the extra hands we can get."

I nodded, resigning myself to the familiar humiliation. Just then, I saw Liam's hand grip the doorframe tightly, his expression darkening.

"You are going nowhere," he said, his voice low and erce.

"Liam, please," I pleaded, desperation creeping into my tone.

"No Ava! I am not letting this happen. You won't serve in your own home."

He turned his gaze back toward the maid, then bolted out the door, thumping his way downstairs with his sts clenched. My heart raced, panic surging through me. Oh God, what is Liam going to do?