

The Ruined Bride of Velvet Nights by Brick Moving Ant

Chapter 52

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- I accepted admission to Stanford, moving with my family to Palo Alto.
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- When I heard Zephyr had managed to get into UC Davis after all, I simply nodded, unsurprised.
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- Despite everything ugly between us, we'd known each other most of our lives.
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- I was genuinely glad he'd found his way back to a better path.
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- For his sake and his parents'. But Stanford and Davis- One in Silicon Valley, one in the Central Valley. Different worlds, different futures, different lives.
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- I spent the entire summer traveling, exploring national parks and cities I'd never seen.
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- It wasn't until welcome week that I heard from old classmates: Zephyr had been frantically searching for me all summer.
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- I hadn't shared my location with anyone from high school. I
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- 'd made sure my parents understood the full situation to prevent any accidental information leaks.
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- But somehow, he still managed to find me on campus during the first week of classes.
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- Zephyr looked rough--his usually perfect hair unwashed, dark circles under bloodshot eyes, clothes wrinkled like he'd slept in them.
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- A year ago, I would have found his disheveled appearance heart-wrenching.
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- Now I just noticed how ordinary he looked without his carefully maintained image.
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- Girls still glanced his way, but with confusion rather than admiration.
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- "Zephyr? What are you doing here?" I asked, genuinely shocked.
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- He looked down at me, desperation in his eyes.
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- "You disappeared without a word. You can't just vanish like that, Phoebe."
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- "We had a plan to go to Davis together. I busted my ass to get in. Why aren't you there?"
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- 1 shifted uncomfortably, "Zephyr, I thought I made myself perfectly clear months ago."
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- His voice rose with emotion: "Phoebe, you can't do this to me!"
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- "You're throwing away thirteen years over one bad patch."
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- "I broke up with Katherine, cut off Derek and Mason and all those guys, quit drinking, haven't touched a cigarette in months--I did everything right!"
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- I sighed, feeling nothing but mild annoyance at the interruption to my day.
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- "Zephyr, those are all things you should have done for yourself, not for me."
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- "I never asked you to dump Katherine. I genuinely don't care about your relationship status
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- anymore."
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- That visibly stung him.
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- "Look, I know you were always trying to help me be better. I was the asshole."
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- "If you want me on my knees begging, I'll do it right here in front of everyone. Just tell me what it'll
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- take..."
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- "Phoebe, after everything we've been through, don't I deserve one more chance?"
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- "Nothing makes sense without you. I can't sleep, can't focus--I need you back in my life."
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- He pulled out our childhood stuffed animals--the rabbit and dog--holding them out like peace offerings.
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- "I was completely wrong before. But I've changed everything. I'll spend forever making it up to you." "Please don't leave me behind, Phoebe."
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- I didn't reach for them, just replied quietly: "Some things can't be fixed with apologies, Zephyr."
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- "Even if you're sorry, I can't forget what happened."
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- "I remember you thinking about Katherine while using me, treating my body like a convenience, laughing about me with your friends, forcing yourself on me in that bathroom..."
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- The Quinad Pride of Velvet Nights

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Chapter 19

"Stop!"

Zephyr's eyes glistened, his voice breaking.

"I know it was all my fault. I was the worst person possible to you."

"I just want a chance to make things right, to earn your trust back. Is that really impossible?"

I glanced at my watch, growing impatient.

"Zephyr, not all broken things can be repaired. This is one of them."

As he started to respond, another voice called out.

"Hey! Sorry I'm late. Professor Charles kept us overtime."

Sid jogged up and took my hand naturally, his smile warm as he greeted me with a quick kiss.

He nodded politely to Zephyr: "Sorry to interrupt. Phoebe and I have lunch reservations off-campus."

The way Sid's fingers interlaced with mine--respectful, supportive but never possessive--said everything about why I'd finally opened my heart again.

His kindness had never been a strategy; it had simply been who he was all along.

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