

## Chapter Ten

### Ava

It's still dark when I wake up and roll over to find a better position. Garrett's bed is far more comfortable than my lumpy old mattress, but being pregnant, I have all kinds of aches and pains that keep me up at night.

I expect to feel Garrett as I shift closer to the center, but the sheets are cold against my skin.

I sit up. His side of the bed is empty. Garrett is gone.

Sliding out from under the covers, I pad into the huge en-suite bathroom, but he isn't there, either.

Thinking he must have gone downstairs, I fumble around in his closet for a pair of his sweats and quickly pull them on. They smell like Garrett, and I breathe in his scent — clean citrus mixed with sandalwood.

A light is on in the living room when I reach the first-floor landing. I tiptoe into the room to surprise Garrett but stop dead in my tracks.

A woman is reclined in one of the ultra-modern chairs, reading a magazine in a pair of silk pajamas. Shiny blond curls cascade over her shoulders, her manicured feet are bare, and she's sitting with one leg propped up on the back of the chair.

A glass of red wine rests on the floor in front of her. Whoever she is, she lives here.

I edge my way slowly out of the room, hurt and panic panging in my chest.

What if Garrett is already married and I'm the other woman? It's a crazy thought, but it's the only thing that makes sense. Why else would she be here?

My feet are silent on the plush white carpet, but the blond notices me anyway. She looks up from her magazine and stares at me with a serene, almost bored expression. "Oh, it's you."

I swallow. She speaks as though she knows who I am.

Her perfect lips stretch into a bland smile that doesn't quite meet her eyes. "I'm Hyacinthe, Garrett's sister."

"His sister?" I rasp, my whole body sagging in relief. She's his sister — not his other girlfriend or his wife.

“And you are . . .”

“Oh. I’m Ava,” I say, feeling suddenly self-conscious. Even in pajamas, Garrett’s sister looks ridiculously chic, whereas I’m drowning in one of his sweatsuits. “Sorry, I . . . didn’t expect anyone else to be down here.”

“If you’re looking for my brother, he’s not here,” says Hyacinthe in a bored, annoyed tone, returning to her magazine and flipping the pages impatiently.

She glances up at me once again, and I notice her eyes are the exact same shade of blue as Garrett’s, though they lack any of Garrett’s mischief or warmth. “He left about an hour ago.”

I blink. “He left?”

“Mmhm.” She flips another page in her magazine before flicking her gaze back to me. “It’s just my brother’s way . . . He’s never exactly been Mr. Dependable. Try not to take it personally.”

I swallow to wet my parched throat, and Garrett’s words come floating back to me.

They’re not welcoming to outsiders.

They’d say you were just some trashy one-night stand.

They’d try to pay you to get an abortion — to use their money and influence to make this whole thing go away.

When that didn’t work, they’d resort to threats.

Suddenly, I’m seeing Hyacinthe’s artificial smile in a whole new light. She wants me to leave.

“Would you like for me to have Robert bring the car around?” she asks. “He can take you anywhere you need to go.”

Her question only confirms my suspicions, and my hands curl into fists as I draw myself up to my full height.

The change in position pulls the material of Garrett’s sweatshirt snug around my middle, and Hyacinthe’s gaze zeroes in on my belly. Her blue eyes seem to frost over, and I sense a shift in her demeanor.

“No. Thank you,” I say, as politely as I can manage. “I’ll wait until Garrett gets back. He can drive me home.”

Garrett said his siblings would try to manipulate me if they found out about the baby, and this Hyacinthe strikes me as a proverbial snake in the grass.

“Oh, sweetie.” Her blue eyes crinkle in something like sympathy, and her tone turns soft and simpering. “He isn’t coming back.” She sighs. “Not today. He’s probably gone on one of his benders.”

She waves a dismissive hand as if this is a regular occurrence, but I see right through her act.

“Garrett wouldn’t leave without telling me unless he was going to be right back,” I say. “I’m sure he’ll be home soon.”

A crease appears between Hyacinthe’s perfectly plucked eyebrows, and her gaze turns pitying. “I hate when this happens,” she sighs, setting both her feet on the ground and resting her elbows on her knees. “Do you have any idea who we are? Who he is?”

Her patronizing tone grates on my nerves, but I manage to keep my expression neutral. It seems a bit crude to say, “I know your family is rich as fuck,” so I settle for, “I’m aware of his . . . family responsibilities.”

“Mmm.” Hyacinthe flashes another tight-lipped smile. “I wish Garrett shared your awareness.”

Reaching toward the coffee table, she picks up an iPad and taps a few times. She holds it out to me, and I take a cautious step forward.

“My brother is the heir to the Von Horton oil fortune,” says Hyacinthe. “He’s meant to take over as CEO when my father retires, but he spends all his time drinking and fucking.”

My body goes numb as I take the iPad, where she’s pulled up a trashy tabloid article with the headline, “Von Horton Can’t Keep It In His Pants — Possible Love Child?”

Beneath it is a picture of a red-faced Garrett, who’s clearly drunk out of his mind. He has his arm draped around a petite brunette, who — I can’t help but notice — sort of looks like me.

“Something like this has happened before,” Hyacinthe murmurs. “Things got bad when he went to LA.”

She leans forward to swipe the screen, and another tabloid photo of Garrett appears — this time with another girl. She swipes three more times, revealing more gossip column articles about Garrett’s extracurricular activities — each headline more salacious than the next.

“My father summoned him back to Colorado after he got wind of this,” says Hyacinthe. “It’s . . . been a problem.”

“I looked into your family after we first got together,” I tell her. “I never came across any of this.”

“Well, you wouldn’t,” says Hyacinthe, still looking at me like I’m some poor naïve girl whom her brother took advantage of. “My family pays a private reputation management firm a lot of money to scrub the web clean of anything . . . problematic. But, with my brother, covering up his many indiscretions is a bit like playing Whac-A-Mole.”

Face burning, I try not to look too closely at the shot of Garrett with his hand resting on the thigh of a leggy supermodel at what appears to be some kind of red-carpet event. My heart is pounding. My throat itches with tears, but I don’t want Hyacinthe to see how much the images bother me.

It’s not the thought of him being with other women that I find so upsetting. I always assumed that Garrett had other lovers — probably lots of them. It’s the idea that I might just be another one of many that causes a little seed of doubt to lodge itself in the pit of my stomach.

“He’s an embarrassment, but he is going to inherit my family’s company,” Hyacinthe sighs. She swipes the iPad out of my hands and sets it down on the coffee table.

Hyacinthe spreads her hands in a helpless gesture and brings them together in front of her, staring up at me with a serious expression. “I’m telling you this because you seem like a sweet person, and I think you deserve to know. As a member of this family, my brother has certain . . . responsibilities. He will marry someone rich but not too rich — someone with impeccable breeding and good taste.” She cocks an eyebrow. “Certainly not some snow bunny he knocked up in Aspen.”

I flinch at Hyacinthe’s choice of words.

Deep down, I know she’s just trying to get rid of me, but I can’t shake the feeling that there might be some truth to her assessment — however cruel it may be.

Garrett could have any woman he wanted. Why would he choose to be with me? Why would he derail his whole life — possibly jeopardizing his inheritance — to raise our unborn child?

I don’t doubt that Garrett is committed, but will he feel the same way five years from now?

Will he look back and regret his decision to walk away from the life he had? Will he grow to resent me and our child because of what he had to give up?

Even though I know my mother loved me, I also know that having me altered the trajectory of her life forever. She never got to go to college — never had more than a couple hundred dollars in the bank.

I’d come home from after-school care and make myself cereal for dinner. My mom would be working the second of her three jobs, and she’d drag herself home after a long day of cleaning

houses and waiting tables. She'd microwave a frozen dinner, collapse on the couch, and fall asleep within five minutes of us watching a movie together.

She couldn't afford to put me through college; it was only with scholarships and financial aid that I was able to enroll online and earn my degree.

My mom's life certainly would have gone another way if she hadn't had me, but maybe if my dad had stayed, things would have been different.

I shove this thought aside as quickly as it pops into my head. There's no point imagining what might have been.

"Why don't I have Robert drive you home?" asks Hyacinthe, interrupting my train of thought.

While I don't want to walk away and raise this baby without Garrett, I know I don't belong here. And even though I know that Hyacinthe isn't looking out for me, I find myself nodding.