

## Chapter 11 No.

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The ride to the hotel was a blur of neon lights and pain. Skye sat in the back of the armored SUV, shivering uncontrollably despite the heavy blanket Felix had wrapped around her.

She stared out the window, watching the city pass by. It looked normal. People were walking, eating, laughing. They didn't know that minutes ago, she had been buried alive. They didn't know her husband had left her to burn.

Beside her, Alistair was wiping the blood from his forehead with a cloth. He watched her constantly, his gaze intense, assessing.

"He left," Skye whispered. It was the first thing she had said since they climbed out of the rubble.

Alistair didn't pretend not to understand. He reached out and took her hand. His grip was warm, solid—the only real thing in a world that was dissolving.

"He panicked," Alistair said, though his voice held no forgiveness. "Cowards always run, Skye. Survivors stay."

"I don't feel like a survivor," she murmured, closing her eyes. "I feel... cold."

"Sleep," Alistair commanded softly. "I'll wake you when we're safe."

When she finally drifted into a chemically induced sleep, it wasn't peaceful. It was black.

The sedatives pulled her under, drowning her in a dreamless void. When she finally opened her eyes again, the pale light of dawn was filtering through the heavy curtains. It had been ten hours since the explosion.

The first thing Skye registered was the scent of antiseptic, a sharp, clean smell that cut through the fog in her mind. It was a terrifyingly familiar

scent, one that dragged her back to the precipice of death in another life. Her eyes flew open, wide and panicked, but the blinding white of an operating theater was replaced by the soft, cream-colored walls of a luxury hotel suite.

Alistair's man, Felix, was sitting in an armchair by the window, looking at his phone. He looked up as she stirred.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Felix said, his tone more relieved than his casual posture suggested. "The boss is fine, by the way. A mild concussion and a few stitches. He's already in a meeting across town, planning someone's demise, I'm sure."

Skye sat up, wincing as a constellation of bruises made themselves known across her ribs and back. She was wearing a plush hotel robe. Her own clothes, smelling of smoke and sewer, were gone.

"How long was I out?" she asked, her voice a raw whisper.

"A few hours," Felix said, standing up. "The hotel doctor gave you a sedative. Said you were in shock."

Skye swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her body ached, a deep, bone-weary exhaustion settling in. She had survived. Again. But the victory felt hollow, overshadowed by the fresh memory of Liam running away. The image of his taillights fading into the rain was branded onto her memory.

Her personal phone, which had been recovered from her clutch, lay on the bedside table. As if on cue, it began to vibrate, the harsh buzz shattering the quiet of the room. The caller ID was a name she dreaded: Kensington Manor.

She let it ring, her jaw tightening.

"You should probably answer that," Felix advised. "They've been calling every ten minutes for the last hour. The Matriarch is not known for her patience."

Skye took a deep breath and swiped to answer, putting the phone on speaker.

"This is Skye."

"Where are you?" The voice on the other end was not Beatrice's. It was the cold, formal tone of the Kensington family butler. "The Matriarch expects you at the Manor. Immediately."

"I've been in an accident," Skye said, her voice flat.

"We are aware," the butler replied, his tone implying her survival was an inconvenience Mrs. Kensington insists. She says it is a matter of urgent family importance regarding the morning's... unfortunate press."

Skye looked at Felix, who raised an eyebrow. The press. Of course. The kidnapping and explosion would be a PR nightmare for the Kensingtons. Beatrice wasn't summoning her out of concern; she was summoning her for damage control.

"I'm not well enough to travel," Skye said, testing the boundary.

"A car has been dispatched to your location," the butler stated, his voice leaving no room for argument. "It will arrive in fifteen minutes. Do not keep Mrs. Kensington waiting."

The line went dead.

Skye stared at the phone. She was a pawn again, being moved across the board at her grandmother-in-law's whim. But this time, she thought, looking at her own reflection in the dark screen, the pawn had a new player on her side.

"I need to go," she told Felix. "But I'm not going in looking like a victim."

She stood up, ignoring the protest of her bruised body, and walked toward the bathroom. The hot water of the shower was a small mercy, but as she scrubbed the grime away, she meticulously planned her defense. She would play the part of the traumatized but dutiful wife. She would let them think she was broken. Because a broken thing is no threat.

An hour later, Skye Sterling stood just inside the heavy oak doors of the Kensington Manor library. The room was designed to intimidate. It was a cavernous space of dark mahogany and leather, smelling of old paper and judgment. Rain lashed against the tall, leaded windows, the sound muffled by heavy velvet drapes, creating a hermetically sealed chamber where silence felt like a physical weight pressing against the e-drums.

Beatrice Kensington sat in her high-backed chair near the unlit fireplace. She was a woman carved from granite and old money, her silver hair coiffed into an immovable helmet, her eyes sharp enough to cut glass. Her cane, topped with a silver hawk's head, tapped rhythmically against the Persian rug. Tap. Tap. Tap. It was the sound of a countdown.

Skye kept her head lowered, a performance of submission. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved black blouse specifically to cover the angry red welts left by the kidnapper's ropes. Every shallow breath was a reminder of the shockwave that had nearly pulped her internal organs. To the untrained eye, she looked like a chastised child, a broken woman terrified of the matriarch's wrath.

But beneath the curtain of her lashes, Skye's eyes were dry and calculating. She needed Beatrice to see a victim, not a threat.

"Come closer," Beatrice commanded. Her voice was like dry leaves scraping over concrete.

Skye took three tentative steps forward, letting her shoulders slump slightly. "Grandmother," she whispered, her voice trembling just enough to be convincing.

Beatrice didn't answer immediately. She picked up a tabloid newspaper from the side table—The Sea City Gazette—and threw it on the floor at Skye's feet. The pages fluttered open, revealing a grainy photo of Skye in her red dress at the auction, hand raised, bidding on the wasteland. The headlines screamed: **STERLING MADNESS: HEIRESS BUYS TRASH FOR MILLIONS.**

"Explain this," Beatrice said, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "My auditors flagged the withdrawal this morning. The press caught wind of it an hour ago. Have you finally lost the little sense you had? Five hundred million dollars on a toxic dump? Are you trying to bankrupt this family, or just humiliate us?"

Skye stared at the newspaper. She remembered the rush of adrenaline when she raised that paddle. But now, she clasped her hands tighter, digging her nails into her palms until the sharp pinch of pain grounded her against the memory of the ticking bomb.

"I... I thought it was a good investment," Skye stammered, keeping her gaze on the rug. "I wanted to contribute. I wanted to show Liam that I

could help build the family legacy."

"Build?" Beatrice scoffed. She leaned forward, the hawk-headed cane pointing accusingly at Skye. "You don't build, Skye. You exist. You are a Sterling, yes, but you lack the killer instinct. You lack the spine. You bought mud because you are desperate for attention."

The insult hung in the air. Skye felt a flash of genuine anger in her chest—a hot, tightening sensation behind her sternum that aggravated her injuries—but she swallowed it down. Beatrice was right about the old Skye. But she knew nothing of the new one.

"I'm sorry," Skye whispered. "I just... I don't have the street smarts that some people do."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. "What are you babbling about?"

Skye took a breath. This was the pivot. The moment to deflect the missile.

"Miss Miller," Skye said softly, lifting her eyes just enough to meet Beatrice's chin. "Seraphina. She seems so... experienced. She knows how to handle people. How to get what she wants. I suppose growing up without... structure... teaches a woman how to survive in ways I never learned."

The room went silent. The tap, tap, tap of the cane stopped.

Beatrice's face tightened. If there was one thing the matriarch hated more than incompetence it was "low breeding." Seraphina Miller was the antithesis of everything Beatrice valued—pedigree, bloodlines, tradition. Skye had just politely reminded her that Liam was parading a "street-smart" nobody around town while scolding his blue-blooded wife.

"That woman," Beatrice hissed, the venom shifting targets instantly. "She is a parasite. A common climber."

Skye nodded, feigning agreement. "She certainly has Liam's ear. Perhaps I should ask her for business advice. She seems to know how to manage his assets better than I do."

Beatrice slammed her hand down on the armrest. Dust motes danced in the dim light. "You will do no such thing. A Kensington does not take advice from a mistress."

The matriarch stood up, leaning heavily on her cane. She walked toward Skye, stopping inches away. Skye could smell the scent of lavender water and decay that clung to the old woman.

"You want to help this family?" Beatrice demanded. "Stop playing business. Stop buying wastelands. Start playing wife."

Skye forced herself not to flinch. "I try, Grandmother."

"Try harder," Beatrice snapped. "There is a charity gala next week for the Children's Hospital. You will attend. You will wear something appropriate. You will stand by Liam's side, and you will smile. And more importantly..."

Beatrice poked the tip of her cane against Skye's stomach. The pressure was invasive, rude.

"You will produce an heir," Beatrice commanded. "Within the year. If that Miller girl gets pregnant before you do, the scandal will be uncontainable. Do you understand me?"

A wave of nausea rolled through Skye's gut. The thought of Liam touching her, of carrying his child after everything he had done—after he had left her to die in that warehouse—made her skin crawl. Her throat constricted, a physical rejection of the idea.

But she didn't pull away. She nodded, her eyes wide and watery.

"Yes, Grandmother," Skye lied. "I understand. I will focus on my duties."

Beatrice waved her hand dismissively. "Get out of my sight. And burn that red dress."

Skye backed out of the room, her movements jerky and submissive. She reached for the heavy brass handle, pulled the door open, and slipped into the hallway.

The moment the latch clicked shut, the transformation was instantaneous.

Skye's spine straightened as if a steel rod had been inserted into her back. The tremor in her hands vanished. The fear in her eyes was replaced by a cold, arctic clarity. She let out a long, slow breath, expelling the toxic air of the library.

She turned the corner toward the main staircase. As she reached the landing the massive front double doors downstairs burst open. A gust of wind and rain swept into the foyer, followed by a frantic Liam.

He looked like a man who had seen hell. His suit was rumpled, covered in fine gray dust. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat and rain. He stumbled into the foyer, his chest heaving as if he had run a marathon, his eyes wild and darting around the grand hall.

Behind him, shivering and soaked to the bone, was Seraphina. She clung to the back of his jacket like a frightened child, her makeup running in dark streaks down her face. They had clearly just arrived from the warehouse.

"Is anyone... did the police call?" Liam choked out, his voice cracking. He braced himself against the wall, his legs shaking.

He looked terrified. Not worried—terrified. The terror of a man waiting for a death notification. The terror of a murderer wondering if the body had been found.

Skye stood motionless on the landing, looking down at him like an avenging angel. She watched the color drain from his face as his eyes traveled up the stairs and locked onto hers.

Liam froze. His mouth fell open. He blinked rapidly, once, twice, as if trying to clear a hallucination.

"Skye?" he whispered, the name strangling him. His knees actually buckled, and he gripped the banister for support. "You... you're here."

"I'm here, Liam," Skye said, her voice cool and devoid of emotion. "Where else would I be?"

Liam stared at her, his eyes scanning her body, looking for burns, for blood, for the evidence of the explosion he had left her to die in. But he saw only the pristine black blouse and the composed face of his wife.

"But... the warehouse..." Liam stammered, his composure shattering. "I saw... the explosion... the timer... I thought..."

"You thought I was dead?" Skye finished for him, descending one step. The movement sent a sharp spike of pain through her side, but she kept her face impassive. "You left in such a hurry, Liam. I suppose you didn't

look back."

Liam swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. He looked like he was about to vomit. He couldn't admit he knew about the bomb without admitting he had left her there. He was trapped in his own cowardice.

"How?" he rasped. "How did you get out?"

"I got lucky," Skye lied smoothly, her eyes boring into his. "A maintenance hatch in the floor. I managed to cut the ropes on a sharp piece of metal just in time. A passing truck driver saw me crawling out of the drainage pipe on the road. He gave me a ride."

It was a flimsy lie. A maintenance hatch? Cutting ropes alone in seconds? But Liam was too overwhelmed by guilt and the shock of seeing her alive to question the logistics. He needed to believe it, because the alternative was facing the reality of what he had done.

"Oh God," Liam breathed, wiping a trembling hand across his face. "Skye, I... I panicked. The gunman... he said..."

"Save your breath, Liam," Skye cut him off. She looked at Seraphina, who was peering out from behind Liam's shoulder, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"Liam! Oh, Liam, it was awful!" Seraphina suddenly wailed, realizing the danger was over and switching instantly to victim mode. She threw herself into his arms right there in the foyer. "That man... he had a gun! I was so scared!"

Liam wrapped his arms around her automatically, but his eyes never left Skye. He looked at her with a mixture of horror and confusion, as if he were holding his mistress while staring at a ghost.

In the past, Skye would have run down there. She would have explained. She would have begged him to listen. Her heart would have been breaking in her chest, a physical ache of rejection.

Now? She felt nothing. It was like watching a bad soap opera on a muted television.

She didn't say a word. She simply turned her back on them and walked to her room.

Once inside, she locked the door. She moved to her desk and opened her

laptop. The screen glowed blue in the dim room. The Sea City University application portal was open.

There was a notification: Special Late Entry Examination Period—Closing in 1 Hour.

She didn't hesitate. Her finger hovered over the trackpad for a fraction of a second—a heartbeat of farewell to the obedient housewife she used to be.

Click.

Submitted.

She looked at her reflection in the dark monitor. The woman staring back wasn't a victim. She was a strategist.

"Let them play house," she whispered to the empty room. "I'm going to buy the neighborhood"