Chapter 2 No.

No.2

The entrance to the Grand Hotel was a chaotic sea of flashing lights. The annual Charity Gala was the biggest event in Sea City's social calendar, a place where fortunes were flaunted and reputations were either made or destroyed.

A sleek black Rolls-Royce pulled up to the curb. The crowd of paparazzi surged forward, shouting names.

Liam! Liam, over here!

Mr. Kensington, is the merger happening?

The door opened, and Liam Kensington stepped out. He was undeniably handsome, with the kind of sharp jawline and brooding eyes that made women forgive him for almost anything. He adjusted his cufflinks, looking annoyed by the attention, yet feeding off it.

He didn't wait for the valet. He reached back into the car and offered his hand.

A delicate, pale hand took it. Seraphina Miller emerged.

She was wearing white. Of course, she was. It was a chiffon gown, floaty and innocent, almost identical in style to the one Skye had just ripped apart at home. Seraphina looked up at Liam with wide, doe-like eyes, playing the role of the timid protégé perfectly.

You look like an angel, Miss Miller! a photographer shouted.

Seraphina blushed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She clung to Liam's arm, her knuckles white. "I'm so nervous, Liam," she whispered, loud enough for the microphones to catch.

You're fine, Liam said, patting her hand. "You belong here."

He scanned the entrance, frowning. Skye wasn't there yet. Good. Maybe she had decided to stay home. He preferred her invisible.

Another car pulled up behind them. It wasn't a modern luxury car. It was a vintage 1950s Bentley, dark green and imposing. It belonged to the

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Sterling family estate, a car that hadn't been seen in public since Skye's father passed away.

The heavy doors swung open.

A red stiletto hit the red carpet.

The crowd went silent. The shutter clicks stopped for a split second, as if the camera lenses themselves were holding their breath.

Skye Sterling stepped out.

The red dress flowed around her like liquid fire. It was scandalous. It was magnificent. The back was entirely open, displaying the sharp, elegant line of her spine. Her hair was swept up in a severe, chic chignon exposing the long column of her neck. Her lips were a slash of crimson.

She didn't look down. She didn't smile nervously. She looked straight ahead, her chin tilted up, radiating a cold, imperious power that sucked the air out of the vicinity.

Who... who is that? a reporter whispered.

That's... Mrs. Kensington? another answered, soundingunsure.

The cameras erupted. The flashes were blinding a strobe light storm centered entirely on her. They had expected the mousey wife; they got a lioness.

Liam turned around at the sudden shift in noise. His eyes widened. His jaw actually went slack. He stared at her, unable to reconcile this vision with the woman who usually wore beige cardigans and made him tea.

Seraphina's smile faltered. She looked at her own white dress, then at Skye's crimson masterpiece. She looked like a flower girl standing next to a queen. Her grip on Liam's arm tightened painfully.

Skye began to walk. She moved with a predator's grace, each step deliberate. She ignored the reporters shouting questions about her "new look." She walked straight up to Liam and Seraphina, stopping only when she was close enough to smell Seraphina's cloyingly sweet perfume.

You're late, Liam snapped, his voice tight. He recovered from his shock quickly, replacing it with anger. "And what the hell are you wearing? You look... vulgar."

Skye looked him up and down. Her gaze was dismissive, like she was inspecting a stain on a tablecloth.

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Hello, husband, she drawled. She turned her eyes to Seraphina. "And... guest."

Seraphina's eyes welled up with instant tears. "Mrs. Kensington, I... I just wanted to support the charity. I didn't mean to intrude."

I see you're wearing white, Skye observed, her voice flat. "Trying to salvage a reputation that doesn't exist?"

The reporters nearby gasped. They leaned in, hungry for the drama.

Skye! Liam hissed, stepping between them. "Apologize. Now. You are making a scene."

I haven't even started making a scene, Liam, Skye said softly. She leaned in closer to him, her red lips curling into a smirk. "I didn't want to match with your charity case. It confuses the donors."

She's a scholarship student of the Kensington Foundation! Liam argued, his face flushing.

Then maybe she should study more and socialize less, Skye countered. She sidestepped him smoothly. "Move. I'm here to spend money, not waste time on cheap melodrama."

She brushed past them, the silk of her dress whispering against Liam's suit. She left him standing there, fuming, impotent in his rage.

Upon the second floor, in the shadowed VIP booth overlooking the grand hall, a man sat in a leather armchair. He held a glass of amber whiskey, the ice clinking softly.

Damn, a young man next to him whistled. Felix Carter leaned over the railing. "Is that the Sterling girl? The one everyone says is a doormat?"

The man in the chair didn't answer immediately. Alistair Thorne leaned forward, the shadows retreating from his sharp features. He had eyes the color of a stormy sea—grey, turbulent, and intelligent. He was the outcast of the Thorne family, the dangerous "black sheep" who controlled the city's underground while his cousins played in boardrooms.

He watched the woman in red cut through the crowd like a knife. He saw the way she held her shoulders—tense, but strong. He saw the rage vibrating off her.

She's not a doormat, Alistair murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated in his chest. "She's a bomb waiting to detonate."

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Skye paused at the entrance to the ballroom. She felt a gaze on her. A physical weight on the back of her neck. She looked up, scanning the balcony.

Her eyes locked with Alistair's.

Distance separated them, but the connection was instant and electric. He raised his glass to her in a mock salute.

Skye didn't smile. She held his gaze for a heartbeat longer than was polite, acknowledginghim. I see you watching, her eyes said.

She turned away and walked into the gala. Her heart was racing, slamming against her ribs. Alistair Thorne. In her past life, he was a myth, a shadow who eventually took over the city after the Kensingtons fell. She had never spoken to him.

But in this life... in this life, she would need a monster to kill a monster.

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