

## Chapter 9

Riley's POV

The moment Kael opened his mouth, rage shot through me like wildfire.

I pushed myself off the ground, hands stinging from the marble floor. Pain flared in my knee, nearly knocking me off balance. I steadied myself with a breath and met his gaze.

"Wow, Kael. You really don't need facts to smear me anymore, do you?" My voice was sharp, venom-laced. "She ran into me, and yet somehow, I'm to blame again. Why? Because accusing me is free now? Doesn't even cost you a thought?"

"You—" His expression darkened.

"There are dozens of people here," I cut him off. "All of them saw what happened. So which one of us needs their eyes checked—you, or me?"

He glanced around, suddenly aware of the crowd's silence. Mooncrest City's elite stood frozen in place, watching. Some with frowns, others with expressions carefully neutral.

They didn't like me. I was the girl with a prison record, the stain on the Ebonclaw name.

But even they had limits.

Someone finally spoke. "Kael... it really was Scarlett who bumped into her. We all saw it."

Another voice joined. "Yes, it wasn't Riley's fault."

A ripple of agreement followed, low but growing.

Kael's face turned an ugly shade of red.

To him, this wasn't about truth.

This was about control.

I was ruining Scarlett's birthday brunch—the precious illusion of a perfect daughter, perfect family.

He knew me too well.

He thought I was vengeful. Dangerous. Capable of anything.

He wasn't wrong.

But not in the way he thought.

“Even if she did hit you,” Kael said, voice tight, “it was an accident. You could’ve moved. But no—you stood there on purpose.”

The air left my lungs in a rush. My ears rang.

Move?

I could barely walk without limping. I hadn’t taken a full step without pain since the day they dragged me out of court like a criminal.

Ah.

That’s right.

Kael didn’t believe I was injured.

He thought I was faking it.

Just like he thought I faked everything else.

He only saw Scarlett on the ground, weeping.

Never saw that I’d gone down with her.

If they liked painting me as a villain—fine.

Let them watch.

I yanked up my sleeve.

Gasps scattered like sparks across the room.

Blood streaked down my elbow. Raw, torn skin peeked through the shredded fabric. My palm was ripped open, bright red and still leaking. Droplets slid from my fingertips and splattered onto the floor.

I raised my arm, high, for all to see.

“Do I look like someone who threw herself into the floor for fun?” My voice trembled, not from fear—but fury. “You think I like bleeding in front of a hundred people just to earn one more insult from my brother?”

The tears welled, uninvited. My eyes burned, turning the world red and glassy.

Scarlett froze, mascara dripping down her cheeks.

She wasn’t used to losing.

Kael’s pupils constricted. He couldn’t look me in the eyes.

For once, shame had a grip on him.

Zara gasped and rushed forward, gently cradling my arm as if it weren’t her words that wounded me most.

“Oh, Riley—sweetheart, you’re hurt. Does it sting?” She blew softly on the injury like that would erase the years of silence. Like a mother comforting a paper cut. I wanted to laugh in her face.

Then Scarlett piped up, her voice fragile and trembling, eyes full of tears. “I’m sorry, Riley. I didn’t mean to. I was just so upset... my dress, the one Kael had custom made—it was damaged. I panicked and ran too fast. I didn’t mean to bump into you. Please, don’t be mad at Kael. He was just worried about me.”

She turned those wide eyes on me—so full of sorrow, so delicate in her misery. So convincing.

If I hadn’t known better, I might’ve pitied her too.

But I did know better.

She hadn’t changed.

Not in five years. Not in fifteen.

“You mean,” I said coldly, “that because Kael was worried about you, he had the right to accuse me without evidence?”

Scarlett blinked, startled by the venom in my voice.

She cowered into Zara’s arms, tears spilling again. “You’re misunderstanding me... I didn’t mean it like that...”

Zara tightened her arms around her, sighing heavily. “Riley, you’ve got it wrong. Scarlett is a sweet girl. She wouldn’t ever do something malicious. Today is her birthday. Please, just say sorry and let it go.”

Say sorry?

Let it go?

I raised an eyebrow, voice smooth and dangerous. “This isn’t the first time, is it? Are you sure I’m the one misunderstanding, Luna Zara? Or should I remind you what happened five years ago—”

“Enough.” Her voice wavered. She paled.

I smirked. “Thought so.”

There it was again.

That ugly, familiar choice.

Scarlett in her arms.

Me alone.

Like always.

I squared my shoulders and turned toward the door, every step jarring against the pain shooting through my legs.

I'd made it two paces when Kael grabbed my arm.

"Explain it."

I jerked around to face him, voice brittle with disgust. "Explain what?"

"The dress," he said tightly. "Scarlett's gown. What happened to it?"

I followed his gaze.

Feathered white fabric shimmered under the lights—except for one jagged edge where a layer had been torn out.

Fabric like that didn't fall apart by itself.

"Let me guess," I said. "You think I ruined it?"

"You were the only one in my car. The dress was hanging there. And now—"

"Now it's damaged, so it must be my fault?"

Scarlett began crying again, voice cracking. "Why would you do that, Riley?"

Zara sighed. "I know you're angry. But you can't lash out like this."

I let out a sharp laugh.

And then I said the one thing they hadn't expected.

"Kael's car has a dashcam."

Everything stilled.

"If you want to accuse me of tampering with the dress," I continued, "then pull out your phone. Show everyone the footage."

Scarlett stiffened beside her mother.

I turned to Kael. "You've got nothing to hide, right? I demand you play the video."

The crowd was already whispering.

Scarlett's voice came out shaky. "There's no need to check the camera—"

Zara jumped in, "Riley, that's enough. Don't make this any more embarrassing than it already is."

Alaric finally spoke for the first time, voice low. "This ends here. Go clean your wounds."

No.

Not this time.

I ripped my arm from Kael's grasp. My voice rang out like a whip.

"No one touches that video? Why? Because it would prove I didn't do it? Because it would mean someone else—someone you actually care about—would have to take the fall?"

They flinched.

And I didn't stop.

"I'm not afraid of the truth. I want it shown. Right now. In front of every person here."

I turned in a slow circle, meeting the eyes of the entire ballroom.

"Why are you all afraid?"