

My Husband Chose Her Over Me Novel

Chapter 4

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My voice was steady, but the raw emotion behind it trembled just beneath the surface. “Caden, I need you to choose. Her or me. You can’t have both.”

The grand hall’s noise faded to a distant murmur around us. Candlelight caught the gold threads in Caden’s formal attire, casting his sharp jawline in shadows that made him look like the stone statues of his ancestors lining the palace corridors. His shoulders tensed beneath the heavy ceremonial cape, a barely perceptible reaction that only someone who had shared his bed for three years would notice.

“Are you mad?” The words burst from Caden, louder than he intended. “This isn’t about personal preference—it’s statecraft!”

My fingernails dug into my palms, the pain keeping me from crumbling right there on the polished marble floor. The ruby and pearl ring he’d placed on my finger three years ago caught the light, mocking me with memories of promises whispered in darkness.

Heads turned throughout the hall. His father’s conversation with the ambassador halted abruptly. In one careless moment, Caden had given the court exactly the spectacle they craved.

“Is it?” I asked, keeping my voice steady despite the tears threatening to spill from my eyes. “Then tell me this wasn’t your choice. Tell me you were ordered to take a second wife—that you fought against it. Tell me any part of the past three years meant something to you.”

“You’ve always known what this marriage is, Elara,” he finally said, his voice dropping to ensure only I could hear. “It’s not about you and me. It’s about securing the future of this kingdom.”

The truth caught in his throat. I could see it in his eyes—the arrangement had been his suggestion, not his father’s. The calculations had been simple: Vassari’s military strength for their northern border, their grain supplies for rocky harvest seasons, their gold for the depleted treasury.

Lady Isolde was the key to it all—beautiful, accomplished, and most importantly, the emperor’s favorite daughter.

When Caden remained silent, I nodded slowly, as if confirming something I’d long suspected.

“I see,” I said quietly. “At least have the decency to be honest about it.”

A muscle jumped in Caden’s jaw. His hand twitched at his side, as if fighting the impulse to reach for me.

“And now you expect me to smile while you parade your new bride before the court?” I continued, my voice dropping to a whisper that carried more weight than a shout. “I won’t be ignored anymore. I need to know if you’ll choose me, or if I’m just another piece for your family’s power.”

“The wine is getting warm,” he said instead, gesturing to the glass in his hand. “Shall we return to our guests?”

Something changed inside me. In the early days of our marriage, he’d taken pride in teaching me to navigate court politics, to conceal my thoughts, to play the long game. Now I realized he’d created a formidable opponent.

“Of course, my prince,” I said, my voice carrying just far enough. “I wouldn’t dream of keeping you from your duties. After all—” my eyes met his with startling directness “—one of us should honor their vows.”

Without waiting for his response, I turned to go when his voice stopped me. “It’s never been about you, Elara. It’s about duty, not feelings. You should understand that by now.”

The words landed with devastating precision. I felt something vital break inside my chest—not my heart, but something deeper. The last fragile thread of hope I had clung to.

“I understand perfectly,” I said, my voice suddenly calm, the storm of emotion clearing into terrible clarity. “You’ve answered my question.”

Caden’s expression shifted, uncertainty flickering across his features. “Elara—”

“Your Highness,” I corrected him, taking a deliberate step backward. The small distance between us felt suddenly vast. “I believe Lady Isolde is waiting for her wine.”

I turned away, refusing to let him see the tears that threatened. The crystal chandeliers above blurred into stars as I blinked rapidly, fighting for control. The whispers followed me as I moved through the crowd. Courtiers pretended not to stare, but I felt their eyes—pitying, curious, calculating.

Near the eastern entrance, Thorne appeared at my side.

“Princess,” he murmured, offering his arm with quiet dignity. “Allow me to escort you.”

I accepted gratefully, letting him guide me toward the private royal corridor. As we reached the threshold, I couldn’t help glancing back.

Across the glittering expanse of the hall, Caden stood exactly where I had left him, his expression unreadable from this distance. Lady Isolde approached him, taking the wine glass from his hand with a triumphant smile.