

Claimed By My Fiancé's Ruthless Uncle

novel Chapter 1 No.1 - -

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Elisa picked up her phone from the polished mahogany table. The screen was black. No missed calls. No texts. Just her own reflection staring back—a woman composed of hairspray, silk, and desperate patience. She opened the "Find My Friends" app. The little blue dot representing Chris was moving fast. It wasn't heading toward his office. It was heading south. Toward Chelsea.

She took a breath that rattled slightly in her lungs, then set the phone down, face up. For the tenth time, she adjusted the white rose in the center of the table. Her finger brushed against a petal, catching a drop of water that hadn't yet evaporated. It was perfect. Everything was perfect.

She glanced at the bottle of 1982 Lafite Rothschild breathing on the sidebar. It had been open for exactly forty-five minutes. The timing was precise. The crystal glasses gleamed under the dim chandelier light, reflecting the cold, empty perfection of the penthouse dining room. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, the lights of the Upper East Side shimmered, a sprawling grid of wealth and indifference that mirrored the stillness in her own chest.

The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed. Nine o'clock.

Chris was two hours late.

Elisa smoothed the skirt of her dress, her palms damp against the fabric.

Smile, she told herself. Just smile. It's the anniversary.

The sound of the front door lock turning was like a gunshot in the silence.

Elisa stood up immediately. Her chair scraped softly against the rug. She walked toward the foyer, her heels clicking on the marble, rhythmically masking the erratic thumping of her heart.

Chris Osborne walked in, bringing with him a gust of cold November air and the faint, sweet scent of bourbon. He didn't look at her. He was busy wrestling with his scarf, his movements jerky and irritated.

"You're home," Elisa said, her voice soft, practiced. She reached out to help him with his coat.

Chris turned his shoulder, dodging her hands. "I've got it." He hung the cashmere coat on the rack himself, the fabric rustling aggressively. "Traffic was a nightmare. Absolute gridlock on Fifth."

He still hadn't looked at her eyes. His gaze bounced from the coat rack to the floor, then to the hallway mirror. anywhere but at her.

"I was worried," Elisa said, stepping back to give him space. "I thought maybe a meeting ran late."

"Something like that." Chris walked past her, loosening his tie. He headed straight for the dining room without waiting for her.

Elisa followed him. She watched his back, the tension in his shoulders. He sat down at the head of the table, not noticing the flowers, the candles, or the wine. He just looked tired. Or bored.

"Hungry?" she asked, moving to the sidebar to pour the wine. The dark red liquid swirled into the glass, rich and heavy.

"Starving," he muttered, picking up his napkin and dropping it onto his lap.

Elisa placed the glass in front of him. She sat to his right, close enough to touch him, but she kept her hands in her lap. "Happy anniversary, Chris."

Chris froze. His hand, halfway to the wine glass, stopped in mid-air. He blinked, a slow, painful movement, as if his brain was grinding gears to catch up. He looked at the wine, then at the elaborate dinner setting.

"Right," he said, his voice flat. He picked up the glass and took a large swallow, treating the vintage vintage like cheap water. "Happy anniversary, babe."

He had forgotten.

Elisa felt a cold stone settle in her stomach. It wasn't surprise. It was just a heavy, familiar weight. She forced the smile to stay on her lips, though it felt like the skin might crack.

"Three years," she said quietly. "It feels like a lifetime."

"Yeah. Sure does." Chris cut into the steak she had prepared, the knife screeching slightly against the china.

Elisa watched him chew. She reached into the pocket of her dress and her fingers closed around the velvet box. The edges were sharp against her skin. This was it. The test. The moment that would decide the fate of the merger, her inheritance, everything.

She slid the box onto the tablecloth and pushed it gently toward him. It was a small, navy blue box from Tiffany's.

Chris stopped chewing. He stared at the box as if it were a live grenade. His throat worked as he swallowed the meat, the sound loud in the quiet room.

"What is this?" His voice was tight.

"I was thinking," Elisa said, keeping her tone light, breezy. "With the merger coming up between our families... maybe it's time we set a date. Officially."

Chris dropped his fork. It clattered onto the plate, sending a spray of red sauce onto the pristine white tablecloth. It looked like blood spatter.

He stood up so abruptly his chair tipped backward, teetering on two legs before slamming back down. "Jesus, Elisa!"

Elisa didn't flinch physically, but her insides coiled. "Chris?"

"Why do you always have to do this?" His face was flushed now, the alcohol and anger mixing under his skin. "Pressure, pressure, pressure. That's all I get from you. From your dad. From everyone."

"I'm not pressuring you," Elisa said, her voice trembling slightly. "It's just a conversation. We've been engaged for a year."

"I'm not ready!" Chris shouted. He ran a hand through his perfectly styled hair, messing it up. "I can't deal with a wedding right now. The market is volatile, the board is breathing down my neck... I need space, Elisa. I need room to breathe."

He looked at her then, really looked at her, and Elisa saw it. The disgust. It wasn't just stress. He looked at her like she was a shackle around his ankle.

"Space?" Elisa repeated, the word tasting like ash.

"Yes. Space." Chris grabbed his phone from the table. He didn't even look at the wine he'd spilled. "I'm going out."

"Out? We haven't even eaten."

"I lost my appetite." He turned and marched toward the door.

Elisa stood up, her legs feeling weak. She followed him to the foyer. "Chris, please. Where are you going?"

He grabbed his coat, not bothering to put it on, just bunching it in his fist. He opened the door, the hallway draft hitting her face.

"Don't wait up," he said. He didn't look back.

The door slammed shut. The sound echoed through the penthouse, vibrating in the floorboards under Elisa's feet.

She stood there for a long time, staring at the wood grain of the door. The silence of the apartment rushed back in, suffocating her. She walked back to the dining room. The red stain on the tablecloth was spreading, soaking into the fibers.

She looked at the velvet box. It was still closed. He hadn't even opened it.

Elisa sat down in her chair. She didn't cry. Tears were a luxury she couldn't afford right now. She felt a cold, clinical clarity wash over her. It wasn't just fear of commitment. Chris was running. He was running toward something, or someone.

