

Chapter 11 No.11

She scrambled, not in fear, but in stagecraft. She minimized the evidence folder. She opened a browser window and typed in a search term: Symptoms of severe depression. She left the tab open, glowing in the darkness.

She messed up her hair, pulling strands loose from her bun until she looked unraveled. She rubbed her eyes until they were red. She curled her knees to her chest again, wrapping her arms around her shins, making herself small.

She controlled her breathing. In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.

The door to the study creaked open.

"Elisa?"

Chris stood in the doorway. He was still wearing his coat. He looked impatient. He looked like a man who had just come from a warm bed to deal with a nuisance.

She didn't look up. She stared at the wall, her eyes wide and unblinking.

"Elisa, what are you doing on the floor?" He stepped into the room, his annoyance palpable. "The maid said you haven't eaten all day."

He didn't care about her hunger. He cared about the optics.

She turned her head slowly, like a rusted mechanism. She let a single tear slide down her cheek. It was cold.

"Chris," she whispered, her voice cracking perfectly. "I think... I think my mind is breaking."

He paused. His hand was still on the doorknob, ready to leave. He looked at the mess in the gallery from his brief stop there, a detail he now connected to her trembling hands here.

"What are you talking about?"

"The noise," she said, pointing to her head. "It won't stop."

He took a step back. She saw it in his eyes. Not concern. Revulsion. He was looking at a defective product.

"You're just tired," he said dismissively. "Go to bed, Elisa."

"I can't," she whimpered. "I'm scared."

He sighed a loud, heavy exhalation. "Fine. I'll sleep in the guest room. I have an early meeting."

He turned and walked away. He didn't ask if she needed a doctor. He didn't ask if she needed him. He just closed the door.

Elisa waited until his footsteps faded down the hall.

She wiped the tear from her cheek. She sat up straight.

Phase one, complete. He believed she was breaking.

Her phone buzzed against the hardwood floor. A short, violent vibration.

She didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was. The number was blocked, but Ivy Maxwell didn't understand boundaries. She understood conquest.

Elisa picked up the phone. The screen illuminated her face in the dim room. A series of photos loaded, pixel by pixel, high-definition insults sent from a burner account.

The first photo was innocent enough. A paint swatch. Soft Sage. Baby Blue.

The second photo was a knife to the gut. It was Chris. He was standing in a store she recognized—a high-end children's boutique on the Upper West Side. His arm was draped around Ivy's waist. He was smiling. Not the tight, camera-ready smile he gave her at galas, but a real, unguarded grin. He looked like a man who had everything he wanted. He looked like a father.

Elisa stared at the image. Her heart didn't race. Her hands didn't shake.

She felt a cold, clinical detachment, like a surgeon examining a tumor. He was building a nursery. With her money. With the time he stole from her.

She swiped to the next photo. It was a chaotic shot, likely taken by accident or in haste. It showed a bedside table in what she assumed was the loft he bought Ivy. There were wine glasses, a tangled gold necklace, and the corner of a document peeking out from under a lamp.

She sat up straighter. She pinched the screen, zooming in until the pixels blurred. Using the basic photo editor on her phone, she adjusted the contrast and sharpened the image, her eyes scanning the blurry text. Her mind, honed by years of analyzing architectural blueprints and financial fine print, could piece together fragmented information with terrifying accuracy. The letters swam into focus.

It was an invoice. St. Mary's Rehabilitation Center.

The total was staggering. Thirty thousand dollars a month. Paid by Christopher Osborne.

Her eyes scanned down to the patient line. She expected to see Ivy's name. Maybe a brother. A sick mother.

Patient: Hayley Hamilton.

The phone slipped from her fingers and clattered onto the floor.

The air left the room. Her lungs seized. Hayley. Her little sister. The golden child. The one who mocked her for being boring while she lived a life of "freedom."

St. Mary's wasn't for broken legs. It was for high-end addicts.

Hayley was in rehab. And Chris was paying for it.

The pieces slammed together in her mind, forming a picture so ugly she wanted to look away. Chris wasn't just sleeping with Ivy. He was laundering the Hamilton family's dirty laundry. He was covering for Hayley, keeping her addiction secret from the board, secret from the press, and most importantly, secret from her.

He was buying her sister's silence. Or maybe he was buying her loyalty. That explained Hayley's sudden hostility, her constant jabs at her relationship, her alliance with Chris. He held the leash.

Elisa picked up the phone again. Her grip was tight enough to crack the screen.

It wasn't just Chris. It was the whole damn tree. The roots were rotten. Her father probably knew. He would prefer a drug-addicted daughter kept quiet by a son-in-law than a scandal that could tank the stock price.

She was alone. Truly, completely alone.

She closed her eyes. A face flashed in the darkness behind her eyelids. Sharp angles. Dark eyes. A voice that rumbled like thunder.

Gallagher Osborne.

He was the predator at the top of the food chain. The only one Chris feared. The only one with enough power to burn this entire forest to the ground.

He was dangerous. He was a weapon she didn't know how to wield, but he was the only weapon she had.

Her plan had just changed. This wasn't about escaping a marriage anymore.

This was about razing an empire.



 SPIN 999 BONUS! 100% chance of winning!

Check