

Claimed By My Fiancé's Ruthless Uncle

novel Chapter 3 No.3 - -

The music dipped for a transition, and the voices from the VIP booth drifted over the balcony railing, clearer than before.

"Man, you finally ditched the nun?"

The voice belonged to Dash, Chris's best friend since prep school. A man who wore loafers without socks and thought poverty was a choice.

Elisa held her breath. She pressed the phone against her chest, the microphone pointed toward the booth.

"Had to," Chris's voice floated out, lazy and slurred. "She was trying to lock down a date. Literally put a ring box on the dinner table. I thought I was going to suffocate."

"Brutal," Dash laughed, the sound like breaking glass. "But smart. You hold out a little longer, you win the pot."

"The pot?" The blonde model giggled. Her hand was on Chris's knee, sliding upward.

"Twenty million," Chris said. The pride in his voice was nauseating. "The bet was I couldn't get the Ice Queen to set a date before the merger closed. Dash didn't think I had the stamina to deal with her."

Elisa felt the floor tilt beneath her feet. A bet.

"God, she's so boring," Chris continued, his voice dropping but still audible. "It's like trying to seduce a marble statue. All duty, no warmth. 'Is this okay, Chris? Are you happy, Chris?'" He mimicked her voice, making it sound high and pathetic.

The table erupted in laughter.

"So what happens when you get the money?" Dash asked.

"I take the Hamilton shares, I finalize the merger, and then I cut her loose," Chris said. "My uncle will handle the legal fallout. He hates the Hamiltons anyway."

"Does her dad know?"

"Arvel?" Chris scoffed. "Arvel Hamilton cares about his stock price more than his daughter. As long as the merger goes through, he'll look the other way. He practically told me to keep her in line."

The air left Elisa's lungs.

Her father.

She pressed a hand over her mouth to stop the sob that was clawing its way up her throat. It wasn't just Chris. It was everyone. Her entire life was a transaction. She was currency. A boring, tradeable asset to be used and discarded.

A marble statue.

The words burned into her skin.

She looked down at the recording on her phone. 02:14. Enough. It was enough to destroy him. Enough to destroy the merger.

But not yet.

If she walked in there now, she would be the hysterical ex-fiancée. The crazy woman. They would laugh at her. She would lose.

Elisa stopped the recording. Her fingers were numb. She shoved the phone back into her pocket.

She turned around, her movements stiff, robotic. She had to get out.

She stumbled down the stairs, her vision blurred by tears she refused to shed. At the bottom of the steps, a waiter turned the corner with a tray of champagne flutes. Elisa didn't see him in time.

She collided with him. The tray flipped. Glass shattered on the floor, a cacophony of breaking crystal. Champagne splashed over her legs.

"Hey!" the waiter shouted.

Up on the balcony, Dash turned his head. He looked down.

Elisa ducked her head, her hair falling forward to curtain her face. She pushed past the waiter, stepping on shards of glass. She didn't feel the cuts. She ran toward the exit.

She burst out of the heavy doors and into the night. The rain was torrential now. It soaked her instantly, plastering the thin silk camisole to her skin, weighing down her trench coat.

The valet saw her and started running toward the key box.

"No!" Elisa shouted. She couldn't wait. She couldn't sit in that car, in the silence.

She kicked off her heels. One, then the other. They clattered into the gutter.

She ran.

She ran down the wet pavement, the cold water splashing her bare feet. The rough asphalt scraped her skin, but the physical pain was a relief. It was grounding. It was real.

She ran until her lungs burned and her legs gave out. She stopped at a corner, gasping for air, hugging herself against the freezing wind.

She looked up. Across the street, the golden awning of the Four Seasons Hotel glowed like a beacon in the storm. Warm. Anonymous.

She didn't think. She just walked toward the light.