

Claimed By My Fiancé's Ruthless Uncle

novel Chapter 5 No.5 - -

The morning light was cruel. It sliced through the gap in the heavy velvet curtains, a laser beam of reality cutting across the bedsheets.

Elisa woke with a gasp. Her head pounded, a dull, rhythmic thud behind her eyes. For a second, she didn't know where she was. The sheets were grey silk, not her white cotton. The room smelled of cedar and sex.

Memory crashed into her. The club. The rain. The stranger.

She sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. She was naked. Her body ached in places she wasn't used to aching.

The bathroom door was ajar. She heard the shower running.

Panic, cold and sharp, flooded her veins. What had she done? She had slept with a stranger. She, Elisa Hamilton, the woman who planned her outfits a week in advance, had picked up a man in a hotel lobby.

She had to leave. Now.

She scrambled out of bed. Her clothes were scattered on the floor, still damp. She pulled them on, her fingers fumbling with buttons. She found her trench coat draped over a chair.

As she grabbed her purse, her eyes landed on the nightstand.

There was a glass of water and two aspirin. And next to them, an ashtray with a single, unlit cigar. And a watch. A Patek Philippe.

She looked at her left hand. The diamond ring glittered, heavy and mocking. The bet.

A surge of vindictive anger rose in her throat, choking her. She pulled the ring off her finger. It slid off easily, as if it had never really belonged there.

She picked up the cigar. She slid the ring onto it, the diamond facing up. A phallic, ridiculous display. It wasn't enough. She moved it next to the watch.

Payment, she thought bitterly. For services rendered.

She turned and ran. She didn't wait for the elevator. She took the stairs down one flight to the main bank, terrified the doors would open and he would be there.

Back in the penthouse, the shower turned off.

Gallagher stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped low around his hips. Steam curled off his broad shoulders. He ran a hand through his wet hair, walking into the bedroom.

"Are you hungry? I can order-"

He stopped. The bed was empty. The sheets were tangled, a chaotic map of the night before.

He walked to the nightstand. He saw the ring.

He picked it up, turning it over in his fingers. The platinum band was cold. He recognized the setting.

A dry chuckle escaped his lips. "Well played, Elisa."

His personal phone buzzed on the dresser. He glanced at the screen. Nephew Chris.

Gallagher picked it up, sliding his thumb across the screen. "Christopher."

"Uncle Gal!" Chris's voice was too loud, too cheerful. "I heard you were back in the city. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was a last-minute trip." Gallagher sat on the edge of the bed, the ring still in his hand.

"We need to get dinner," Chris said. "I want you to meet Elisa properly. We're setting a date. Finally."

Gallagher looked at the ring. He looked at the small smear of blood on the grey sheets, stark and undeniable.

"Hamilton," Gallagher said, his voice flat, uninterested. "I'm familiar with the name."

"Oh? Well, you have to meet her. She's great. Perfect, even."

"I'm sure," Gallagher said.

"Well, anyway, are you around this week? The board is asking about the acquisition."

"I'm around," Gallagher said. "We have a lot to discuss, Chris. About your investments."

"Great. Awesome. I'll text you."

The line went dead.

Gallagher tossed the phone onto the bed. He looked at the blood again. He hadn't expected that.

He closed his hand around the ring, the diamond digging into his palm.

He picked up the hotel phone and dialed zero.

"Security," a voice answered.

"This is Mr. Osborne in the Penthouse. I want the surveillance footage from the lobby between midnight and one a.m. deleted. And the elevator logs."

"Sir, policy states-"

"Buy the hotel if you have to," Gallagher said calmly. "Just delete it."

He hung up.

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