

Chapter three

Ava's POV

I woke up with a start, my body aching, my head pounding. It took me a while to recognize where I was.

Oh no! I didn't do what I was sent to do. My mother will kill me.

I looked at the desk where the gift was supposed to be, but it was empty.

That's when it hit me: something wasn't right. I sat up quickly, but the room spun around me. I wasn't in the clothes I'd worn to the party. My heart raced as I looked down in horror. I was completely naked.

"What... what happened?" I whispered to myself, trying to piece it together. But everything after I came into the room was a blur.

My phone buzzed with a new message. My stomach dropped when I saw it was from Natalia.

My ngers trembled as I opened the message, my only thought:

Oh my God, what have I done?

The message on the screen contained an attachment. Tapping "open attachment," my heart somersaulted, nearly falling to my feet as I saw the worst picture I had ever been in.

It was me.

And a man. Wait.....I zoomed in closer. Oh my God! It's the man I met on the stairs yesterday.

We were naked. The lower parts of our bodies tucked under the sheets. My face looked wild, as if I'd just been in an intense lovemaking session.

We weren't awake. No. Instead, we were sleeping comfortably, as if we hadn't slept for a week before then.

My mind was racing with thoughts. Just how did this happen? I couldn't remember anything after opening the door to this room. My mind was hazy, not bringing any memories to life no matter how hard I tried.

A beep sounded from my phone as it vibrated in my hands, signifying the arrival of another message. Opening it, I found this one to be a text. It read: "Meet me in the East garden immediately—Natalia."

I felt the fury coursing up my veins, my legs quickly moving towards the shower in the room. I had to get rid of the alcohol or drugs in my system.

The minute I walked out of the bathroom, I picked up a pair of men's clothes from the closet, tying them to t around my small frame. This had to be the man's room in the mansion. Did he work here? Was he paid to do this?

Praying desperately that he should be with Natalia so that I could express my rage on them, I hurried outside.

Arriving outside, the frigid breeze hit me in the face, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around myself, seeking warmth.

The garden looked gloomy, just like me. The owers hadn't bloomed this morning, and the entire place was dead silent.

Natalia was already waiting, standing by the fountain, her arms crossed, her face furious. But she had the slightest hint of a smirk on, almost unnoticeable.

Before I could even speak, her hand ew across my face with a sharp c***k.

The slap echoed through the silent garden. I blinked, stunned to silence. Why did she slap me? Before I could even say a word, she broke into a loud shout.

"You lthy, disgusting w***e!" Natalia's voice was sharp and furious. "How could you do this to me? To our family? You slept with my boyfriend!"

What? He's her boyfriend? Oh my God! No! My mouth opened, but no words came out. I thought she orchestrated it. I wanted to defend myself, to explain that I didn't know how it had happened.

But all I could manage was a pathetic, whispered, "I... I didn't... I don't remember—"

"Don't remember?" she spat, her voice as cold as ice.

"Don't give me that pathetic excuse, Ava! I trusted you. We trusted you!" Her voice broke, and she looked away, her chest rising and falling as she fought for control. "You're a disgrace. To me. To this family."

"I'm sorry," I croaked, my voice barely above a whisper. I was completely lost. So that was Liam. Did he do it on purpose? Then how did Natalia have pictures? Nothing made sense.

If it wasn't Natalia, then it had to be Liam. "I swear, I don't know what happened. Please, Natalia... I would never—"

Before I could nish, another voice interrupted, colder than Natalia's, and lled with disdain.

"You should be ashamed, Ava."

I turned, my heart clenching in fear as I saw my mother walking toward us, her expression one of pure hatred. For a second, I wondered, could it be her?

She looked at me like I was the dirt underneath her feet, her eyes icking between me and Natalia, and the corners of her mouth curling up into a smirk. It was her.

"You've always been a disappointment, a sorry excuse for a daughter. But this? Sleeping with your sister's boyfriend? You've really outdone yourself this time. Bravo, w***e!"

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but my words seemed to be stuck in my throat.

I wanted to tell them to stop whatever dirty game they were playing, but I couldn't. How could I defend something I didn't understand? How could I ght back when I didn't even know what had happened?

"I—" I began, but my mother cut me off with a wave of her hand.

"Enough!" she snapped, her eyes narrowing. "Don't embarrass yourself any further. We already have a solution."

I froze, confusion washing over me. "A solution?"

Natalia stepped forward then, her lips spreading into a sly smirk. "It's simple," she said. "You're going to marry Liam."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. "What?" I gasped. "No! I— How could I—"

"Oh, you will," my mother said, her voice composed, as if she were telling me I must go to school.

"Unless, of course, you want these pictures leaked to the world. I'm sure the media would love to know how Ava Patel, the cruel daughter, slept with her sister's ancé. An addition to her heinous acts."

I felt the world closing in on me. "No," I whispered, shaking my head. "You can't do this. I can't marry him. He's engaged to Natalia!"

Natalia let out a sharp laugh. "Oh, sweet, naive Ava," she said, shaking her head. "Liam isn't my ancé anymore. Never was."

What? Just what is she saying?

"Didn't you know? I've been engaged to Jim Dallas—the owner of Ditech—for weeks now. Liam is nothing but a lthy librarian. Did you really think I'd marry someone like him?"

My heart shattered. Everything made sense now: the engagement party, the mention of Jim the other day. Wow! Liam and I had been played, hard.

As if on cue, I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned, and there he was—Liam, standing at the edge of the garden, his face contorted into a deep frown.

He must have heard everything.

"So that's what this is about," Liam said softly, his voice laced with bitterness. "I was only a plaything for you."

Natalia crossed her arms, completely unbothered. "You served your purpose, Liam. Don't act so surprised. You knew what this was."

Liam's eyes shifted to me, and for a brief moment, I saw something icker there—regret, maybe. Or pity. "Miss Ava.. I didn't know. I swear, I didn't know any of this would happen. I was drugged as well."

Natalia let out a loud laugh. "Don't worry, you guys didn't do the nasty. Although the pictures say otherwise..."

My brain nally comprehended all that had happened. Liam and I had been drugged, but we never went to the same room. Some rooms in the mansion looked really similar. They must have manipulated it to look like we were in one.

Natalia smirked, stepping closer. "So, Ava, what will it be? Marry Liam and save what little dignity you have left, or let the world see just how low you've fallen?"

I sted my hands as I turned to look at Liam. He stood there, his jaw set in a hard glare, his eyes cold and intense. He didn't say a word at rst, but then he stepped forward, closing the space between him and Natalia.

"Natalia," he said, his voice a low, dangerous growl. "One day, you're going to regret every single thing you've done. Trust me, it'll be sooner than you think."

His words sent a shiver down my spine. I glanced at Natalia, noticing a icker of surprise on her face before she quickly masked it with a smirk. But I could see something else—a hint of worry, as if Liam's words had struck a nerve.

Then, she tossed her hair back, linking her arm with Mom's. "Mom, I think we've made ourselves clear. Let's go inside. I'm sure Ava will do the right thing, won't she? And Liam too. He wouldn't dare let poor, innocent Ava's reputation fall to ruin."

She turned on her heel, guiding my mother with her, leaving me and Liam standing there alone, their laughter fading as they disappeared back into the house.

Liam exhaled, running a hand through his hair. He turned to me and I could see his face still had some coldness to it. "Are you okay, Ava?"

I managed a nod, though my heart was pounding. "How can I be ne, Liam? What are we supposed to do? Can't you just stop her? Can't we get rid of those pictures somehow?"

He shook his head, his expression softening for a moment before hardening again. "No. Not right now. I'm just a poor librarian, Ava. I can't match their resources..."

His gaze turned darker, a icker of something I hadn't seen before—something deeper.

"But I do have an idea. A plan." He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I know you don't want to do this. But right now, we have to play along. Let them believe they've got the upper hand. When they least expect it, we'll strike."

I stared up at him, gulping hard. He looked deadly, iike he was talking about avenging more than this event. But I knew I was just overthinking.

"What are you suggesting then, Liam?" I murmured, my voice barely audible.

He locked gazes with mine, his eyes holding a sinister glint. "Marry me Ava!"