

Chapter 2

Brooklyn Barr POV:

The drive home was a blur of smeared traffic lights and the hollow ache in my chest. Five years. I'd given him five years of my life, my loyalty, my body. I'd built my world around him, a meticulous design based on the faulty premise that he understood the meaning of sacrifice.

I used to believe he did. In the hazy, pain-filled weeks after the accident, when the world was a kaleidoscope of fractured images, his voice had been my only anchor.

"I'll never forget this, Brooklyn," he'd whispered, his hand clasped around mine in the sterile hospital room. "You saved me. Marry me. Let me spend the rest of my life making it up to you. We'll get married in Aspen, right on that mountain. To remind us. Always."

I had wept with relief, clinging to his words like a prayer. I believed him. I believed he remembered the terror, the cold, the split-second decision that had changed my life forever. How could he not? It was the bedrock of our engagement, the very ground on which our future was supposed to be built.

Now, I realized it was all just a performance. Kaden didn't cherish the memory; he wielded it. It was his get-out-of-jail-free card, his proof of my unending devotion.

My neurologist, Dr. Sanchez, had warned me. "Your condition is stable, Brooklyn, but it's exacerbated by stress. Extreme emotional distress can trigger episodes. You need a calm, supportive environment."

A bitter laugh threatened to escape my lips. A calm, supportive environment. Right now, my world felt like a building in the middle of an earthquake, the foundations cracking beneath my feet. I pressed my palm against my sternum, trying to physically hold myself together, to push down the wave of grief that was threatening to drown me. My heart felt like it was being squeezed by an invisible hand, each beat a throb of agonizing clarity.

The phone rang, jolting me. Kaden's name flashed on the screen. I let it ring four times before answering, my voice carefully neutral.

"Hey."

"Babe," he said, his voice loud over a din of laughter and clinking glasses. "Listen, things are running late at the office. We're taking a client out. I probably won't be home until after midnight."

A client. Of course. Her name was Annmarie.

There was a pause. A chasm of everything I couldn't say.

"Okay," I said, the single word costing me more effort than designing a skyscraper.

"That's it? Okay?"

"Yes, Kaden. Okay. Have fun."

He was quiet for a second, probably surprised by my lack of protest. Then, "Alright. Don't wait up."

He hung up. I stared at the dark screen, the silence in the car suddenly deafening. Don't wait up. I had been waiting up for him for five years. Waiting for him to see me, to value me, to love me as much as I loved him. The waiting was over.

That night, sleep was a distant country I couldn't reach. I lay in our cold, empty bed, the pristine white duvet a stark reminder of the wedding that was now a lie. Around 2 a.m., my phone buzzed with an Instagram notification. It was a post from Chace.

My thumb hovered over the icon, a sense of dread coiling in my stomach. I opened it anyway. I had to see.

The photo was a gut punch. It was a group shot from a crowded, upscale bar. And in the center, Kaden. He was laughing, head thrown back, one arm wrapped securely around Annmarie's waist. She was plastered against his side, her head resting on his shoulder, her eyes half-closed in a drunken, adoring gaze. He was holding her up, his body a shield against the jostling crowd, a supportive presence he hadn't been for me since the day he walked out of the hospital on his own two feet.

But it was the comments that truly broke me.

"They look so perfect together!"

"The King and his Queen! Power couple."

"I remember when everyone thought they'd get married back in college."

Some things are just meant to be."

Then, a comment from a mutual acquaintance, a girl named Lauren. "@KadenBlankenship Dude, bold move. Hope Brooklyn doesn't see this."

I held my breath, waiting. Kaden's reply appeared almost instantly.

"@LaurenP She'll live. Or she won't. Her choice."

His choice. It was always his choice. My pain, my humiliation, my very existence was just a minor inconvenience he could choose to deal with or discard.

I liked the comment. A silent, digital acknowledgment of his cruelty. Then I put my phone down, turning it face down on the nightstand. I would not let him see me crumble. Not anymore. I was done being the passive recipient of his contempt. I was done being a ghost in my own life.

The next morning, I drove myself to my follow-up appointment with Dr. Sanchez. The rain was coming down in sheets, mirroring the storm inside me.

"All by yourself today, Ms. Barr?" the nurse asked kindly as she took my blood pressure.

"I'm a big girl," I said with a smile that didn't reach my eyes. "I can handle it."

Leaving the clinic, the rain had intensified. I pulled up the hood of my jacket, but the cold seeped into my bones. As I waited for the light to change, my eyes drifted to the cafe across the street. And then I saw them.

Kaden and Annmarie, huddled together under a single large umbrella, laughing as he unlocked his car. He was holding the passenger door open for her, a gesture of chivalry he'd long abandoned with me. And draped over her arm, protected from the rain by a clear plastic garment bag, was a flash of white fabric and intricate beading.

The Valentino.

A hysterical little laugh bubbled up in my throat. Of course. He couldn't even be bothered to take his mistress's five-figure dress home himself. He had to parade it in front of her, a trophy of his affection.

I walked home in the downpour, not even trying to avoid the puddles. By the time I stumbled through our front door, I was soaked to the skin, shivering.

Kaden came into the foyer a few minutes later, shaking a few drops of water from his hair. He stopped short when he saw me.

"Jesus, Brooklyn, what happened to you? You look like a drowned rat."

"I walked home," I said, my voice flat.

He frowned. "Walked? From where?" Then his eyes widened in a brief, fleeting moment of recollection. "Oh, right. Your appointment. I forgot."

I just stared at him. I had reminded him yesterday morning. And the day before. I'd left a note on the fridge.

"Well," he said, his momentary guilt quickly souring into annoyance. "How did it go? Did you finally get a clean bill of health? Can we put all this... drama... to rest?"

My eyes, my sacrifice, my ongoing struggle—all just drama to him.

I held his gaze, my own eyes clear and steady for the first time in what felt like an eternity. "No, Kaden. I didn't. The optic nerve damage is permanent. There will always be a risk of flare-ups. Of the shimmering. Of the blind spots."

He was silent for a moment. Then he let out an exasperated sigh. "So what you're saying is, this is never going to end. You're always going to have this... thing... to hold over my head."

I said nothing. There was nothing left to say. The man I thought I knew, the man I had saved, was gone. Or maybe he had never been there at all.

"God, you're so exhausting," he spat, his voice rising. "It's always something with you, isn't it? A headache, a blurry spot, some new fucking symptom. Do you enjoy being a victim?"

I saw it then. A small, faint smudge of pink on the collar of his crisp white shirt. The exact shade of lipstick Annmarie had been wearing in the cafe.

"You have lipstick on your collar," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

He froze, his hand flying to his neck in a panicked, guilty reflex.

"And tell Annmarie," I added, the words tasting like poison, "that she should be more careful with her fifty-thousand-dollar dress. It's supposed to rain all week."

His face went from pale to crimson in a heartbeat. "You were following me? What is wrong with you?"

"She was distraught, Brooklyn!" he yelled, advancing on me. "Her cat died! I was comforting her!"

"Her cat died last month, Kaden."

"Well, she was having a delayed grief reaction!" he sputtered, his eyes wild with the desperation of a man caught in a lie. "You don't understand, you're not as sensitive as she is. She needs me! I have a responsibility to her!"

"A responsibility?" I asked, a broken, mirthless laugh finally escaping me. "And what about your responsibility to me? Your fiancée? The one who walked home alone in the pouring rain from a doctor's appointment for an injury she got saving your life?"

"That's different!" he shouted. "That was an accident! This is... this is Annmarie!"

As if on cue, his phone rang. He snatched it up. Annmarie's name glowed on the screen. He answered, his voice instantly dropping into that soft, concerned tone.

"Annmarie? What's wrong? Are you okay?"

A muffled, theatrical sob came through the speaker. "Kaden... I'm so sorry... I think I'm having another panic attack..."

He didn't hesitate. He didn't even look at me.

"I'm on my way," he said, already turning toward the door. He paused, his hand on the knob, and threw a final, contemptuous look over his shoulder.

"Stay here. Dry off. And for God's sake, try not to be so dramatic when I get back."

He walked out, slamming the door behind him. The sound echoed in the silent, cavernous space of the life we had built.

Dramatic. He thought I was being dramatic.

And in that moment, I realized the truth. For five years, I hadn't been blind because of a damaged nerve. I had been blind because I chose not to see.