

Chapter 3

Brooklyn Barr POV:

The flight to what was supposed to be our pre-wedding weekend in Miami was a study in arctic silence. I sat by the window, noise-canceling headphones on, staring out at the endless expanse of clouds. It was a tangible barrier, a shield against the man sitting next to me.

Kaden was restless. He shifted in his seat, tapped his fingers on the armrest, and kept glancing at me, his brow furrowed with an anxiety that was almost comical. He was used to my forgiveness, my eventual surrender. My silence was a language he didn't understand, and it unnerved him.

"Nice weather up here," he tried, his voice a little too loud.

I didn't move.

He cleared his throat. "The flight attendant said we should land on time. No delays."

I kept my gaze fixed on the horizon, pretending I couldn't hear him over the music that wasn't playing.

"Brooklyn," he said, his voice sharp with frustration. He reached over and tugged one of the headphones off my ear. "Are you even listening to me?"

I turned to him slowly, my expression a blank wall. "I heard you."

He flinched, taken aback by the cold, dead tone of my voice. He sank back into his seat, a flush creeping up his neck. "Fine. Be that way."

We didn't speak again until we were in a cab, heading towards a ridiculously trendy part of South Beach. The whole weekend was his production, a performance I was simply expected to attend.

"So," I said, the word cutting through the strained quiet. "Are all the plans finalized for the wedding?"

It was a test. A final, flickering hope that he might, at the last possible second, confess. That he might show one shred of respect for the life we were supposed to be building.

He avoided my eyes, forcing a cheerful smile. "Everything's taken care of. You know I trust your judgment on these things, babe. You're the architect. The master planner."

The lie was so blatant, so insulting, it stole my breath. He was crediting me with plans he had secretly dismantled, a wedding he had stolen from me. The trust I had so freely given him had been used as a weapon, a tool to ensure my compliance while he arranged my public humiliation.

My hands clenched into fists in my lap. A cold, hard resolve settled deep in my bones, solidifying the cracks in my heart. This had to end.

He must have sensed my internal shift, because a flicker of unease crossed his face. He probably thought I'd found out about the venue change. He was likely already rehearsing his excuses, planning how he'd smooth it over with a grand, empty gesture later. He had no idea how far beyond that I'd gone.

Our first stop was a high-end cake tasting boutique. The air was thick with the scent of sugar and buttercream. On a pedestal in the center of the room was a sample cake, a masterpiece of white fondant and delicate, handcrafted sugar flowers. Aspen blossoms. My stomach twisted.

As I was about to raise a sample of champagne-infused cake to my lips, a familiar, cloying voice cut through the air.

"Kaden! Brooklyn! What a crazy coincidence!"

I didn't need to turn around. The sound of Annmarie's voice was a permanent fixture in my nightmares now. She sashayed over, feigning surprise with the skill of a seasoned actress.

"I was just in the neighborhood! Kaden, remember that time we came here after that gallery opening? You said their red velvet was to die for."

My hand froze mid-air. Another secret trip. Another piece of their hidden life together, casually dropped like a grenade into the middle of mine.

"Brooklyn, honey, you have to try the passionfruit guava," Annmarie chirped, completely ignoring my rigid posture. "It would be divine for a beach wedding."

I pulled my hand back, setting the fork down. "No, thank you."

"Oh, don't be shy," she insisted, stepping closer.

I took a deliberate step back. "I've already made my choice."


Annmarie's smile faltered. She put a hand to her chest, her eyes welling with crocodile tears. "Oh. I... I'm sorry. I was just trying to help. I'll just... I'll go."

Before she could take a single step, Kaden's arm shot out, his hand closing around her wrist. "Don't be ridiculous, Annmarie. You're not going anywhere."

He turned to me, his eyes hard. "What is your problem, Brooklyn? She was just making a suggestion."


Then, as if delivering the final, killing blow, he added, "Besides, you should get used to having her around. I forgot to tell you. I asked her to be a bridesmaid."

The room tilted. A bridesmaid. At my wedding. The woman who had systematically dismantled my happiness, my future, was going to stand beside me as I pledged my life to the man she had stolen. He hadn't asked me. He had just decided. As always.

"A bridesmaid," I repeated, the words tasting like ash. 

"That's a great idea," I said, my voice eerily calm.

Kaden and Annmarie both stared at me, stunned by my easy agreement.

Annmarie, ever the actress, played her part. "Oh, Kaden, maybe it's too much. I don't want to intrude..." She leaned into him, her hand fluttering on his chest. 

Kaden's arm tightened around her possessively. He kissed her forehead, a gesture so intimate and public it made me physically sick.

"Don't be silly," he murmured to her, then glared at me. "See, Brooklyn? Was that so hard? You've been so moody and difficult lately. It's exhausting."

Annmarie stroked his arm. "Shh, darling. Don't be upset. She's just got wedding jitters."

"It's more than jitters," Kaden snapped, his patience finally breaking. "I'm sick of it. I'm sick of walking on eggshells around your delicate feelings." He gestured wildly, his face contorted in a sneer. "Are you ever going to let that go? I get it, you saved me. You don't have to keep playing the martyr about it!"

Silence. A thick, suffocating silence fell over the ridiculously cheerful little shop.

The world went white at the edges. My sacrifice. My pain. The permanent alteration of my senses. To him, it was just a card I was playing. A role. The martyr.

I remembered the countless times he'd dismissed my pain. The day he'd prioritized getting Annmarie's dog from the groomer over taking me to an urgent neuro-ophthalmology appointment when I'd woken up with a terrifying blind spot. I'd had to take a cab, alone and terrified. He'd forgotten our five-year anniversary, the real one, the anniversary of the accident, but had thrown Annmarie a lavish surprise party for her half-birthday.

I was so, so tired. A weariness so profound it settled in my bones, weighing me down. I had been fighting for a love that was already dead, trying to resuscitate a corpse.

It was time to let go.

I turned without a word and walked out of the shop, leaving them standing there, entwined in their toxic little world.

Kaden stood there, dumbfounded, watching me go. Then, he turned to the shop owner, forcing a laugh. "Women, right? Pre-wedding nerves."

He kept his arm around Annmarie, pulling her closer, his lips brushing her hair. I saw it all reflected in the shop window as I walked away.

My phone buzzed in my hand. A long, rambling text from Kaden appeared.

Brooklyn, come back. You're being ridiculous. I'm sorry if I was harsh, but you have to understand the pressure I'm under. I'm trying to manage two very important women in my life. You need to be the calm, supportive one. You're going to be my wife, for Christ's sake. Start acting like it.

I stopped walking. I read the message again, the words a perfect crystallization of his selfish, narcissistic worldview.

I'm trying to manage two very important women.

A slow, cold smile spread across my face.

I will lighten your burden, Kaden, I thought. I'll remove one of the women from the equation.

I deleted the message and kept walking, a strange sense of lightness

filling my chest. For the first time in five years, I was walking away from him. And I knew, with absolute certainty, that I was never going back.