

Chapter 4

Brooklyn Barr POV:

The morning of the wedding dawned bright and impossibly sunny in Miami. A cruel joke. My phone rang precisely at ten o'clock, just as the planner had scheduled.

"Hey, babe. You ready?" Kaden's voice was tight with an anxiety he was trying to mask with cheerfulness.

"I'm ready," I said, my own voice a placid lake.

He let out a breath, a faint sound of relief. "Good. Great. I'll send a car for you at noon. See you at the altar."

"See you then," I lied, looking at my reflection in the mirror.

I was wearing a dress. A wedding dress. But it wasn't the one Kaden had begrudgingly paid for. It was the one I had found months ago, a secret purchase, a whisper of a hope for a different future. It was simple, elegant, and entirely my own.

At a quarter to twelve, I heard a car horn honk outside. At the exact same moment, my phone rang. It was Kaden.

His voice was a panicked rush. "Brooklyn, oh my god, something's happened."

I waited.

"It's Annmarie," he gasped. "She had a severe panic attack. Hyperventilating, the whole thing. I have to take her to the emergency room."

Of course. The damsel in distress, making her final, show-stopping play.

"I can't leave her, Brooklyn, you understand," he said, the words a command, not a question. "You have to go to the venue without me. I'll get there as soon as I can. It's our wedding day, a little delay won't matter."

A little delay. On our wedding day. Because his mistress had a conveniently timed anxiety spell.

"I understand," I said, my voice still impossibly calm.

He paused. Even through his panic, he sensed something was off. My compliance was too easy, too smooth.

"You're... you're not mad?" he asked, bewildered.

"No, Kaden," I said, and it was the truest thing I'd said to him in months. "I'm not mad at all. You go take care of Annmarie."

There was another beat of stunned silence before he stammered, "Okay. Good. I'll see you soon."

He hung up. I imagined him in his car, relief washing over him. He'd dodged a bullet. The ever-understanding Brooklyn had come through for him once again. He probably thought he was the luckiest man alive, successfully juggling his fiancée and his side piece on his very own wedding day.

He had no idea.

Kaden Blankenship POV:

I sped away from Annmarie's apartment, my heart still pounding. That was close. Too close. Annmarie, bless her dramatic heart, had put on a real show, but a couple of deep breaths and a promise to buy her a new Cartier bracelet had miraculously cured her "panic attack."

"You're sure Brooklyn was okay with it?" Annmarie had asked, batting her eyelashes.

"She's fine. She gets it," I'd said, giving her a quick kiss.

I felt a surge of pride. I was pulling it off. The perfect Miami wedding, a happy bride, and my best friend taken care of. I was the man.

My good mood lasted until I pulled up to the exquisitely decorated beachfront hotel in South Beach. The place looked incredible. But something was wrong. The parking lot was half-empty.

I walked into the grand ballroom. My parents and a handful of my relatives were there, milling about awkwardly. But the rows and rows of chairs set up for the ceremony were starkly, terrifyingly empty.

Brooklyn's side was a ghost town. Not a single guest. Not her parents, not her sister, not her friends from college. Nothing.

A cold dread, sharp and unfamiliar, slithered up my spine.

Did I forget to tell her the final address? No, I sent it a dozen times. The invitations went out. She handled all of that. She's the planner.

My hands started to shake. I pulled out my phone, my thumb jabbing at her contact picture. I called. Straight to voicemail.

I called again. Voicemail.

Again. Again. Again.

"Kaden, what's going on?" my mother asked, her face a mask of concern. "Where is everyone? Where's Brooklyn?"

"I don't know," I choked out, my eyes darting around the empty room, looking at the clock on the wall. It was ten minutes past the ceremony start time.¹

The phone in my hand rang. It was her. Brooklyn.

Relief crashed over me, so potent it made me dizzy.

"Brooklyn!" I yelled into the phone, a torrent of angry, panicked words spilling out. "Where the hell are you? Did you forget your own wedding? Everyone is waiting! I'm waiting!"

There was a pause. And then her voice, calm and clear as a winter morning, came through the line.

I could hear the faint sound of wind. And bells. Church bells. And the crunch of snow underfoot.

"I'm here, Kaden," she said.

My blood turned to ice. It wasn't the wind of a Miami beach. It was the sharp, cold wind of a mountain.

"I'm in Aspen."