

## Chapter 8

Brooklyn Barr POV:

Two weeks later, Joel and I walked up the marble steps of the city courthouse. Our Aspen wedding had been for our hearts; this was for the law. As we pushed through the heavy wooden doors, a figure lunged out of the shadows.

It was Kaden.

"Brooklyn, wait!"

He grabbed my arm, his grip desperate. Joel instantly moved, placing a firm hand on Kaden's chest.

"Do not touch my wife," Joel said, his voice low and dangerous.

Kaden ignored him, his wild eyes fixed on me. "Please, just two minutes. That's all I ask."

I pulled my arm free. The contact felt wrong, like a ghost touching my skin. He stumbled back, his face a mask of agony. And then, in the middle of the busy courthouse corridor, he dropped to his knees. ☰

People stopped and stared.

"I was wrong," he choked out, his voice thick with tears. "I was a blind, arrogant fool. I know that now." He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. Inside was the diamond ring he had given me, the one I had left on our empty bed. "I promise, Brooklyn. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. Just like I said I would."

The memory of that long-ago promise, whispered in a hospital room, no longer held any power. It was just a painful echo of a lie.

"You made a lot of promises, Kaden," I said, my voice hollow. "Do you even remember the first one you broke?"

He looked up, confused. "What?"

"The promise to cherish me," I said. "To protect me. The one you're supposed to make at the altar. You broke it before we ever got there."

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"The promise to cherish me," I said. "To protect me. The one you're supposed to make at the altar. You broke it before we ever got there."

"I'll be better!" he sobbed, clutching the ring box. "I'll do anything! Just tell me what you want!"

"I wanted a partner," I said, the words spilling out, a final exorcism of my pain. "I wanted someone who remembered my appointments. Someone who held my hand when I was scared. Someone who didn't think my pain was a performance. I wanted the man who held me in that hospital and swore my sacrifice meant the world to him. But that man was never real."

I saw the truth of my words hit him. He flinched as if I'd physically struck him.

"Some mistakes can't be unmade, Kaden," I said softly.

I turned to leave, but a sharp voice called my name. Kaden's mother stood there, her face a mixture of fury and desperation.

"Brooklyn, how can you be so cruel?" she demanded, grabbing my other arm. "He loves you! Look at him! He is broken without you."

I looked at the weeping man on the floor, then back at his mother.

"Let me ask you a question," I said, my voice calm. "If I had been the one to have a panic attack on our wedding day, would he have rushed me to the hospital? Or would he have told me to stop being dramatic and get in the car?"

Her mouth opened, then closed. She glanced at her son, and in his wretched, guilty face, she found her answer. Her hand dropped from my arm.

"Love isn't a feeling, Mrs. Blankenship," I said quietly. "It's a choice. It's a thousand small choices, every single day. And Kaden always, always chose someone else."

With that, I turned and walked away. I didn't look back. Joel's hand found mine, his fingers lacing through my own, a warm, solid anchor in my new reality.

We signed the papers. We became husband and wife in the eyes of the law. As we walked out into the sunshine, I could still hear Kaden's

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+120 Points at most  
desperate sobs echoing from the cold, marble hallway behind us.

It was the sound of a door closing for the very last time.