

Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 101:

She poured a cup, blew on the first spoonful to cool it, and held it to Amelia's lips.

"Here," she said softly. "Drink this. It will make you feel better. I made it for you myself."

Amelia stared at the spoon. A memory surfaced: a feverish childhood illness, her own mother refusing to enter her room for fear of catching a cold, and only Faye bringing her lukewarm broth.

She opened her mouth and accepted the soup. It was a wave of warmth, sliding down her throat, settling in her stomach, and spreading through her entire body. It felt like liquid comfort.

She drank the soup as Eleanor fed it to her, spoonful by spoonful, the tears still streaming silently down her face. It was a flood of grief, not just for the day's horrors, but for a lifetime of missed affection, for the mother she never had.

Eleanor didn't tell her to stop crying. She just sat with her, patiently feeding her, using a soft napkin to gently dab the tears from her cheeks.

When the cup was empty, Amelia's sobs had subsided into quiet, shuddering breaths.

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Eleanor set the cup aside and took both of Amelia's hands in her own. She looked at her with a serious, profound intensity.

"Amelia," she said, her voice firm but kind. "I don't care how this marriage started. I don't care about any contract. From this moment on, you are my daughter. Do you understand?"

The words were a vow. A promise of unconditional acceptance.

"That woman," Eleanor continued, a flash of steel in her gentle eyes, "does not deserve to be called your mother. The daughter-in-law of the Thornton family is not someone to be bullied."

In her words, Amelia felt it: a powerful, unshakable sense of belonging. A shield. A home. It was everything she had ever craved from the Carlisle name and never received.

She could only nod, her throat thick with emotion. Her voice was choked and nasal when she finally managed to speak.

“Thank you... Mom.”

The word came out naturally, a heartfelt acknowledgment of the role Eleanor had just claimed.

Eleanor’s own eyes welled up with tears, but her smile was radiant. She pulled Amelia into another hug, this one fierce and protective.

Amelia rested her head on Eleanor’s shoulder, inhaling the comforting scent of her perfume, and let herself be held. She had married a man to escape a nightmare, and in doing so, had stumbled into the one thing she had always believed was impossible: a mother’s love.

Eventually, exhausted and emotionally drained, she drifted off to sleep right there on the sofa, safe in Eleanor’s embrace.

Eleanor gently laid her down, covering her securely with the blanket. She sat beside her for a long time, watching her sleep, a fierce, protective love for this wounded girl blooming in her heart.

Finally, she took out her phone and sent a text to her son.

“She’s sleeping now. She’s been through a terrible ordeal, but she’s calm. Don’t worry. When you come home tonight, Garrett, be gentle with her.”

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Chapter 102:

She knew her son. She knew the rage that would be consuming him. And she knew that what Amelia needed now wasn’t a vengeful lion. She needed a gentle hand.

Garrett’s flight landed in New York at eleven o’clock, and he arrived back at the penthouse just before midnight. He moved through the darkened penthouse quietly, his body tired from the long journey but his mind steady. The successful acquisition, the multi-billion-dollar deal, it was all secondary to getting back to her.

He noticed the master bedroom door was left slightly ajar, unlocked to make it easy for her pet, Mochi, to come and go. Not wanting to wake her, Garrett went to the guest bathroom first to wash up.

When he finally slipped into the master bedroom, he moved with quiet, deliberate steps and gently got into bed.

But his eyes fell on her face.

In the darkness, he could clearly see the multiple injuries: a dark bruise at the corner of her eye, a swollen scrape on her forehead, and a torn lip with dried blood.

He reached out, his fingers gentle, wanting to touch the bruised skin, to somehow absorb the pain himself. He lightly brushed his fingertips against her cheek.

The slight touch disturbed Amelia's sleep. She stirred, a soft murmur escaping her lips, and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at him groggily, her mind still clouded with sleep, murmuring something about whether this was a dream.

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Garrett let out a soft chuckle. "Haven't seen me for just a few days, and you don't even recognize your own husband?" he reminded her gently.

He reached over and flicked on the overhead light. Instantly, he raised his hand to shield her eyes from the sudden, glaring brightness, waiting patiently until she adjusted before slowly moving his hand away.

His gaze fell back on her battered face. “Was it Kristen Carlisle?” he asked directly. There was no trace of politeness in his voice when he mentioned the name, only a cold, protective edge.

Amelia lowered her head, avoiding his intense gaze. “I’m... I’m fine,” she stammered. “Just a minor scratch. It’s not worth mentioning.”

“Not worth mentioning?” Garrett pressed, his brow furrowing as he asked for the details. “Did Kayson just stand there and watch you get bullied?” He mistakenly assumed that Kayson, who had actually been unconscious, was awake and simply stood by.

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Amelia quickly explained, wanting to comfort him. “I fought back. They didn’t get the upper hand either.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized her mistake. She had just inadvertently revealed that there were other people present at the scene.

Garrett let out a cold laugh. “So there was someone else there after all.”

Realizing she had been tricked into giving away too much, she immediately pulled the blanket up, completely covering her head.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I... I think I should go sleep in the guest room with Mochi. I don’t want my face to scare you.”

“Oh?” Garrett’s voice was calm, tinged with a hint of amusement. “And you aren’t afraid of scaring the kitten?”

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Chapter 103:

She felt trapped, hiding in the dark under the covers. A wave of guilt washed over her. She had become a burden. A problem he was now forced to deal with.

It seemed like ever since they got married, all the troubles were caused by her, and it was always Garrett stepping up to protect her.

In this contract marriage, she felt like she was constantly taking and never giving. She lay there in the quiet room, feeling utterly and completely unfair to him.

Amelia heard Garrett fall silent. She steeled herself, poked her head out from under the quilt, and brought out her only bargaining chip. Her nose glistened with faint mist from breathing under the covers, and she blinked softly.

“Mr. Thornton... do you want to do it?”

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Garrett froze for a moment, his tone sharp with anger laced with a cold scoff. “What kind of man do you take me for? Someone who only cares about carnal pleasures?”

His eyes darkened, and he turned off the light.

Early the next morning, Garrett rose before dawn. Without a word, he carried a still-sleeping Amelia directly into the passenger seat of his car.

Amelia stirred as the engine purred to life. Reaching up to rub her sleep-heavy eyes, her fingers brushed against the deep bruise on the corner of her eye. She gasped sharply, the sudden jolt of pain instantly waking her.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Garrett kept his eyes fixed on the road, offering no response. The air between them was a frozen wasteland.

Outside the window, lingering snow clung stubbornly to the branches lining the road. As they drove further, Amelia gradually recognized the familiar route. When the imposing roof of the Carlisle family villa came into view, a wave of profound shock washed over her. She never thought he would bring her here.

The car rolled to a halt in front of the familiar, carved iron gates. Garrett’s face was a mask of icy resolve. He stepped out, walked around the car, and opened her door. Without uttering a single word, his cold demeanor silently demanded she get out. Filled with a sickening dread, Amelia stepped out, keeping her head bowed as she followed him with small, timid steps into the house she had once called home.

Inside, the atmosphere was a picture of peaceful domesticity. Faye Miller, the longtime housekeeper, was busy preparing breakfast. Richard Carlisle sat at the dining table, leisurely reviewing his itinerary reports. Kristen sat nearby with a deep frown, while Kamila sipped her drink, her expression perfectly calm. Their sudden intrusion shattered the morning tranquility.

Faye recognized them immediately and called out a surprised greeting. Seeing his son-in-law, Richard instantly plastered a flattering smile across his face. He stood up, enthusiastically inviting them to sit and join them for breakfast, his mind already calculating how to use this visit to ease the strained relations with the Thornton family.

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Chapter 104:

Garrett coldly refused the offer to sit. Instead, he pulled Amelia protectively in front of him, exposing her battered face to the room. His gaze locked onto Kristen. "I would like to know," he demanded, his voice a quiet but deadly hammer, "what exact mistake Amelia made to deserve being beaten so ruthlessly by you?"

Kristen's face tightened. She turned to Richard, hoping he would back her up, but she was met only with a harsh, warning glare from her husband, silently ordering her to apologize. A chill ran down her spine. Forced into a corner, she put on the haughty air of an elder and began to make excuses. "It was just a minor dispute between mother and daughter," she stammered defensively. "I simply lost my temper... it was an accident."

A cold, mirthless sneer touched Garrett's lips. "An accident?" he retorted, his voice dropping another ten degrees. "If an 'accident' leaves a person injured this severely, then an intentional strike would have surely cost her her life." He then turned his piercing gaze to Richard, his tone deadly serious. "Mr. Carlisle, it is quite obvious that Kristen has severe manic tendencies. Keeping someone so unhinged in the Carlisle house will sooner or later cause a catastrophic disaster."

Richard's flattering smile vanished, replaced by pale horror. He realized this was far more serious than he had been led to believe.

He turned on his wife, his voice dangerously low. "Kristen. What exactly happened?"

She started to stammer out another lie, another pathetic excuse, but Garrett had no time for it.

He took out his phone.

He pressed play.

The room was filled with the sounds from the hospital. The ugly, vicious curses from Susan and Kristen. The sound of tearing fabric. The muffled, pained sobs from Amelia. It was undeniable. It was horrifying.

As the recording played, Kristen's face went from pale to ashen. She swayed on her feet, clutching the back of a chair for support. Richard listened, his face turning to stone, his expression hardening into one of pure, cold fury directed at his wife.

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Garrett stopped the recording.

"Mr. Carlisle," he said, his voice final. "I didn't come here for an apology. I came here to inform you. As of today, my wife is severing all ties with this woman. You will be receiving a second, more detailed lawsuit from my attorneys by noon."

He didn't wait for a response. He turned, pulling Amelia with him, and walked out of the room.

As they reached the foyer, they heard Richard's voice, roaring with a rage Amelia had never heard from him before.

"Kristen! On your knees! Now!"

Kristen had never endured such humiliation and could not hold back her anger. “Why should I apologize? I wasn’t the only one who hit Amelia. Besides... would I have laid a hand on her if she’d been obedient?”

“No one gets to beat my wife and get away with it.” Garrett Thornton knew reasoning with these people was futile, and he did not want Amelia to witness any more of her birth parents’ snobbery and cruelty. “Either you and Susan Edwards publicly apologize to Amelia in front of everyone, or you both go to jail. The choice is yours.”

“...What?” Kristen’s face drained of all color.

“Let’s go.”

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Chapter 105:

After they left without a single backward glance, Richard Carlisle marched over to Kamila Carlisle and demanded, “You said you had a plan. Where is it?”

“Father, don’t be impatient. Just wait and see.”

The silence in the car was a physical thing, heavy and suffocating.

Amelia was curled into the passenger seat, the fine wool of Garrett’s jacket still wrapped around her shoulders. It smelled of him, a clean, sharp scent of cedarwood and power, but it offered no warmth. Her fingertips were ice.

Barely a minute after they got into the car, her phone buzzed in her pocket. An unknown number.

Her hand trembled as she unlocked the screen. The first message was a photo. It was Garrett. In a hotel restroom, shot from a low, compromising angle. Kamila was in front of him, her body twisted, her expression one of struggle, water splashing around them. It was expertly framed to corroborate a terrifying narrative: that Garrett had violently attacked her, nearly drowning her.

Amelia's breath hitched. Now Amelia understood. While Richard was likely panicking over Garrett's wrath, Kamila had been entirely confident. Kamila was betting everything on Amelia's soft heart, certain she would compromise to protect Garrett.

A second message arrived immediately. "Drop the lawsuit against Kristen, or tomorrow, every gossip column in New York will be running the evidence of your husband's violent outburst. We'll see how his reputation survives."

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Amelia knew the Carlises weren't bluffing. They had concrete proof of his extreme actions in that bathroom. She couldn't gamble with his future.

He drove with a focused, brutal efficiency, the city lights blurring past them in streaks of neon.

"My legal team will file the second suit by noon tomorrow," Garrett said, his voice cutting through the quiet. It was flat, devoid of any emotion, like a judge reading a verdict. "Assault. Intentional infliction of emotional distress. We'll bury her. They will apologize publicly, or they will rot in a cell."

The words didn't bring the satisfaction she expected. Instead, a cold knot of dread tightened in her stomach. She saw the photo on her screen again. She couldn't be his ruin.

Fighting back the bitter sting of tears, her hand shot out, grabbing his arm.

“Garrett, please... you have to drop the lawsuit against Kristen.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

The car screeched to a halt. He slammed on the brakes, throwing them both forward against their seatbelts. He whipped his head around to face her, his eyes blazing in the dim light of the dashboard.

“What did you say?”

The look on his face was one of sheer, wounded disbelief. He had gone to war for her. He had brought the full weight of the Thornton name down on her abusers. He expected gratitude. Relief. Liberation.

Not this.

The intensity of his gaze was terrifying, but she forced herself to speak. “She is still my mother...” She swallowed hard, forcing the cruelest words she could find past her lips to make him stop. “And we are only in a contract marriage, Garrett. You don’t have the right to pursue this on my behalf.”

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Chapter 106:

A muscle jumped in his jaw. A flicker of something that looked like pain crossed his eyes before it was extinguished, replaced by a glacial coldness. He let out a short, sharp laugh that held no humor.

“Right,” he said, the word clipped.

He turned back to the road, accelerated smoothly, and didn't say another word all the way back to the penthouse.

The moment they were inside, he didn't head to his study immediately. Instead, he stopped in the vast, silent living room and turned to her. The cold anger from the car had been replaced by a vast, empty coldness. He looked at her as if she were a complete stranger.

“A contract marriage,” he said, his voice a low, dangerous murmur. “I see. I misunderstood my role in this arrangement.”

“You’re right, Miss Frye,” he said, the formality cutting deeper than any shout. “I overstepped.”

Miss Frye. The name hit her like a slap. He had rebuilt the wall she’d just constructed, but he’d made it of solid steel.

He pulled out his phone, his movements sharp and precise. He dialed, never taking his eyes off her.

“Casey,” he said, his voice terrifyingly calm. “Withdraw all legal action against the Carlisle family. All of it.”

He ended the call. He didn’t give her another glance. He simply turned, walked back into his study, and locked the door.

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The next morning, the penthouse was silent.

Amelia emerged from the master bedroom with dark circles under her eyes that no amount of concealer could hide. Garrett was already gone.

Mrs. Ingram saw the fading bruise on her cheek and her hollowed expression. The housekeeper's eyes filled with concern, but she asked no questions, simply placing a plate of Amelia's favorite blueberry pancakes on the kitchen island.

The smell turned Amelia's stomach. She couldn't eat. She needed to escape the oppressive quiet of the apartment, an atmosphere thick with unspoken words and Garrett's lingering anger.

"I'm going to my studio for a bit," she told Mrs. Ingram, the lie tasting like ash in her mouth.

She changed into a high-necked, navy-blue dress. It was severe and professional, effectively hiding the marks on her neck and creating a shield of cool detachment.

But she didn't go to the studio. She had the driver take her to Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue. If she was going to feel empty, she might as well do it in a place designed to fill voids with beautiful, expensive things.

She walked into a boutique where a single handbag cost more than her first car. The air smelled of leather and money.

She was drifting through a rack of silk blouses when a sharp, familiar voice cut through the quiet hum of the store.

“Well, well. Look what we have here. Isn’t it Miss Frye, fresh off the turnip truck?”

Amelia turned. Kian Sinclair stood there, a smirk plastered on his face. Beside him stood a woman with raven-black hair and sharp, intelligent eyes that missed nothing. She exuded a quiet, confident stillness. Leighton Beaumont.

Kian’s eyes raked over Amelia, filled with undisguised contempt. “What’s the matter? Garrett’s allowance not enough to buy out the whole store?”

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Chapter 107:

The words were a direct hit, a perfect echo of the lie she had told Garrett last night. That this was all just a transaction.

A wave of reckless, self-destructive energy surged through her. If that's what they thought she was, then that's what she would be.

Amelia let a slow, cold smile spread across her lips. She reached out and stroked the sleeve of a ridiculously expensive fur coat. "What can I say? He just loves the way I spend his money."

Kian looked genuinely shocked by her brazenness. The woman beside him, Leighton, merely arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow, a flicker of amusement in her dark eyes.

"Is that all he is to you?" Kian pressed, his voice dripping with disdain. "An ATM?"

Amelia stepped closer to him, invading his personal space. She leaned in, her voice a conspiratorial whisper, just loud enough for Leighton to hear.

"What else would he be? You don't actually believe in love, do you? He was more than willing to be a homewrecker for me, after all."

The word homewrecker landed like a punch. Kian's face turned a blotchy red. He saw it as a mortal insult to his best friend.

Seeing his outrage gave Amelia no satisfaction. Only a deeper, more profound emptiness.

Leighton, who had been silent until now, finally spoke. Her voice was smooth and melodic. "Miss Frye. No, it's Mrs. Thornton now, isn't it? I'm Leighton Beaumont. A childhood friend of Garrett's."

She extended a hand, her movements graceful and poised.

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Amelia shook it. Leighton's fingers were long and cool.

Leighton's eyes scanned Amelia's face, not with judgment, but with the detached curiosity of someone solving a complex puzzle. "You're very interesting, Mrs. Thornton."

The statement sent a shiver down Amelia's spine. This woman was far more dangerous than Kian.

She had no desire to continue this game. She turned to the hovering sales associate. “This one,” she said, gesturing to the fur coat, “and that one. Wrap them up. Send them to The Elysian Towers.”

She didn’t ask the price. She simply pulled out the black Amex card Garrett had given her. It had no limit.

The soft chime of the credit card machine approving the transaction sounded like a verdict, sealing her lie in place.

Kian’s expression curdled further. But Leighton’s lips curved into a small, inscrutable smile.

Amelia took the receipt and walked away without a backward glance.

Outside, the cold December wind hit her face, but her eyes burned.

Back in the store, Leighton watched Amelia’s retreating figure. She turned to her assistant, who had materialized silently at her side.

“Find out everything Amelia Frye has done for the past forty-eight hours,” she murmured.

Kian was still fuming. “Did you see that? The woman is a shameless, gold-digging viper! Garrett has lost his mind!”

Leighton placed a calming hand on his arm, her eyes sparkling with a strange excitement. “Patience, Kian,” she said softly. “The game is just beginning.”

“He’s completely bewitched,” Kian grumbled, slumping into the passenger seat of Leighton’s sleek black sedan. “That woman must be a sorceress.”

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Chapter 108:

Leighton navigated the midday Manhattan traffic with an effortless grace, her expression serene. “Kian,” she said, cutting through his rant. “Have you ever considered that if she were just a simple gold-digger, Kayson Edwards wouldn’t have ended up in the hospital over her?”

Kian froze. “What? Kayson’s in the hospital?” The news hadn’t reached his corner of the gossip mill yet.

“I assumed the epicenter of all social intelligence would have known,” Leighton said lightly, a hint of teasing in her voice. “He was admitted for ‘acute stress-induced cardiomyopathy.’ Right after his father publicly stripped him of all his duties.”

The bait was set. Kian’s insatiable curiosity flared to life. He demanded details, but Leighton just smiled mysteriously, saying only that her source was impeccable.

That was all the motivation he needed. He had to know more. He had to get the full story. He thought of the perfect person to pry it out of: Wyatt Stone, Kayson’s loyal friend and a man who occasionally ran in their circles.

After dropping Leighton at her Upper East Side brownstone, Kian drove directly to the Edwards Corporation headquarters. He knew Wyatt would be there, trying to hold the crumbling empire together.

The lobby of the glass and steel tower felt like a tomb. Employees scurried past, their faces grim, speaking in hushed tones. The air was thick with anxiety.

Kian settled into a plush armchair in the lobby's coffee bar, ostensibly waiting for a meeting, and simply listened.

The whispers painted a clear, dramatic picture: news of Amelia's marriage to Garrett had broken, Marcus Edwards had publicly humiliated his son in a board meeting, and Kayson had promptly collapsed from a heart attack.

The narrative only confirmed Kian's bias. Amelia was the femme fatale at the center of it all, the cause of every disaster.

Just then, he saw him. Wyatt Stone emerged from the elevators, looking like he hadn't slept in a week. His face was sallow, his eyes shadowed with dark circles. He was speaking urgently to another executive.

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Kian intercepted him, arranging his face into an expression of deep concern. "Wyatt, man. Long time. I heard about Kayson..."

Wyatt flinched at the sight of him, clearly in no mood to talk. "He needs rest," he mumbled, trying to brush past.

Kian wouldn't be deterred. He leaned in, his voice a low probe. "Was it because of Amelia? I heard she married Garrett Thornton. The whole thing is insane."

At the mention of her name, a visible tremor went through Wyatt's body. A flash of raw pain and resentment crossed his features. It was a micro-expression, lasting less than a second, but Kian saw it.

Wyatt made a flimsy excuse and practically fled, leaving Kian standing alone in the lobby.

A cold, triumphant smile touched Kian's lips. Got it.

He had his proof. Amelia's betrayal had put Kayson in the hospital, and her new husband, Garrett, was not only oblivious but was also footing the bill for her shopping sprees.

Garrett was being played for a fool, and Kian, as his loyal friend, had a duty to expose the truth.

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Chapter 109:

He pulled out his phone, ready to call Garrett and lay out his findings. But he stopped. Garrett, in his current state, wouldn't listen to reason. He needed more than just a theory based on office gossip and a pained look from Wyatt Stone. He needed something concrete.

He decided to wait. To watch.

Back in his car, a plan began to form in his mind.

Meanwhile, in a sterile room at City General Hospital, Kayson drifted in and out of consciousness. A single name escaped his lips in a feverish, broken whisper.

"Amelia..."

His mother, Susan, heard it. Her face contorted with a renewed sense of desperation. She snatched her phone and dialed Amelia's number again. This time, it went straight to voicemail.

Amelia had blocked all unknown numbers.

"Useless!" Susan shrieked, nearly throwing her phone against the wall. She rounded on Wyatt, who was standing helplessly by the door. "You! Call her! Use your phone! Beg her to come!"

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Wyatt looked from the ghost-like figure of his friend in the bed to the frantic, unraveling woman beside it. He felt a profound sense of hopelessness.

He knew Amelia wouldn't come. But he had to try. It was the last thing he could do for the friend he had failed to protect. He pulled out his phone and found her number.

Amelia finally made it to her studio. It was the one place in the city that felt entirely hers, a sanctuary of her own making.

She wasn't there to work. She sank into the armchair by the floor-to-ceiling window, watching the endless river of traffic below, and let the city's noise wash over her.

The studio door burst open without warning. Tatum Shaw marched in, her arms laden with two grocery bags filled with potato chips, chocolate, and a six-pack of beer.

Tatum's cheerful expression vanished the moment she saw the bruise on Amelia's face. She let out a low whistle. She didn't ask what happened. She just cracked open two beers and handed one to Amelia.

"Alright," she said, settling on the floor. "Spill it. Which asshole do I need to key a car for this time?"

Amelia took a long swallow of the cold beer but said nothing. Tatum didn't push. She just started ranting about a nightmare client, her easy chatter a comforting presence that slowly began to untangle the tight knot of tension in Amelia's chest.

Just as she was starting to feel human again, her phone rang. The screen displayed a name she hadn't seen in a long time: Wyatt Stone.

She frowned. Tatum gestured for her to answer, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Amelia swiped to accept the call and put it on speaker.

Wyatt's voice came through, hoarse and exhausted. "Amelia... it's Wyatt."

“I know,” she said, her tone flat.

He hesitated, as if gathering his courage. When he spoke again, his voice was laced with a pleading desperation she’d never heard from him before. “Kayson... he’s not doing well. The doctors, they said there’s a chance he might not... He keeps saying your name. Can you... can you just come see him? Just for a minute.”

Tatum rolled her eyes so hard Amelia thought they might get stuck. She mouthed the words: Don’t you dare.

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Chapter 110:

Amelia's expression didn't change. There was no hesitation, no flicker of doubt. Her voice was calm and resolute.

"Wyatt, listen to me very carefully. I am not coming."

A stunned silence came from the other end of the line.

She continued, her voice devoid of warmth. "First, Kayson's mother, Susan Edwards, assaulted me in the hospital yesterday. I will not be putting myself in that kind of danger again."

She paused, letting that sink in before delivering the final, killing blow. "Second, and more importantly, I have plans tonight. My husband is taking me to dinner with his best friends."

The statement was a bombshell. It stunned Wyatt into silence and made Tatum's jaw drop.

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Faced with a choice between Kayson's dying wish and a contractually obligated dinner, Amelia had chosen the dinner without a second thought. It was a declaration.

She was telling Wyatt, and more importantly, herself, that the past was over.

“Because of a dinner...?” Wyatt finally managed to choke out, his voice filled with disbelief.

“Not because of the dinner,” Amelia corrected him sharply. “Because it’s my husband’s dinner. And Kayson Edwards is no longer my concern.”

She ended the call.

Tatum let out a whoop of triumph and threw her arms around Amelia. “That’s my girl! It’s about damn time!”

Amelia didn’t smile. She leaned her head on her friend’s shoulder. “Tatum,” she whispered, “am I a cold-hearted bitch?”

Tatum stroked her hair. “No, honey,” she said softly. “You’re just finally learning to love yourself.”

Amelia glanced at the clock. It was getting late.

She stood up and walked into the small dressing room attached to her studio. She was going to this dinner. She was going to face Garrett's world, whether it was a lion's den or a viper's nest.

She selected a sleek, black dress, elegant, powerful, and utterly uncompromising. She sat at her vanity and began to apply her makeup with a steady hand, creating a mask of flawless perfection.

Tonight, she wouldn't be Amelia Frye, the jilted fiancée. She would be Mrs. Thornton.

Garrett was already there when Amelia arrived.

He hadn't waited for her. He was seated in the plush, private dining room of the exclusive club, flanked by Kian and Leighton. A half-empty glass of whiskey sat in front of him, and he was staring into it as if it held the answers to the universe.

The air around him was frigid.

Kian and Leighton exchanged a worried glance. They had never seen him like this, so withdrawn, so coiled with a silent, simmering rage.

“Garrett, what the hell is wrong with you?” Kian finally burst out. “Is she really worth all this?”

Garrett’s head snapped up. He slammed the glass down on the table, ice cubes rattling violently. “Shut up, Kian.”

The door opened at that exact moment, and Amelia walked in.

She was a vision in black, her makeup impeccable, her posture poised. She looked less like a woman walking into a tense dinner and more like a queen arriving at her court.

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