

Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 13:

Amelia nodded, but a cold knot of anxiety was tightening in her stomach. Her palms began to sweat. She started picking at the skin beside her thumbnail, shredding a piece of cuticle.

Garrett's eyes flickered down to her hands. Before she could react, his larger, warmer hand covered hers, stilling her nervous fingers.

His touch was firm, stopping her self-destructive habit. His palm was dry and calloused, the hand of a man who did more than sign papers. Amelia's body went rigid, but she didn't pull away.

The car turned off the main road, passing through a set of imposing iron gates. A long, winding driveway, lined with ancient oak trees, led to a magnificent stone mansion that looked like it had been pulled from the pages of a history book.

A butler opened the car door. Standing in the grand entrance was a woman with silver-streaked hair and a smile that radiated genuine warmth. She was impeccably dressed, but her eyes were kind, lacking the cold, appraising stare Amelia was used to from women of her class.

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Garrett stepped out and enveloped the woman in a hug. "Eleanor, this is Amelia."

Eleanor Thornton's gaze fell on Amelia. It was filled with open, friendly curiosity, not the critical assessment of a potential threat.

She bypassed her son completely, taking both of Amelia's hands in her own. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "You're even more beautiful than in the pictures, my dear. Please, call me Eleanor."

Amelia felt a blush creep up her neck. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Eleanor."

"Nonsense, the pleasure is all mine!" Eleanor declared, tucking Amelia's arm through her own and leading her inside, leaving Garrett to follow like an afterthought. "Are you cold? You must be starving. Garrett never thinks about these things."

Amelia had never experienced this kind of maternal fussing. Her own mother's touch was always conditional, her concern performative. She was so taken aback she could only allow herself to be led, murmuring polite responses.

Garrett trailed behind them, watching his mother effectively steal his wife, a look of wry amusement on his face.

Dinner was a revelation. Eleanor was a charming and witty hostess, keeping the conversation light and steering it away from anything that might make Amelia uncomfortable. She shared embarrassing stories about Garrett's childhood, making him groan while Amelia found herself laughing, a real, unforced laugh.

After the meal, Eleanor waved a dismissive hand at Garrett. "Go talk business with your brother in the study. Amelia and I are going to have a real conversation."

She led Amelia not to the drawing room, but to a smaller, more intimate space that turned out to be her personal jewelry vault.

From a velvet-lined safe, Eleanor retrieved a small, antique box. She opened it to reveal a breathtaking emerald ring, the stone a deep, vibrant green, surrounded by a halo of diamonds.

"This was Garrett's grandmother's," Eleanor said, her voice soft. "She gave it to me on my wedding day. It's the ring for the lady of this house."

She held it out to Amelia.

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