

Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 21:

She took a small step closer, her eyes locking onto his. “And third: I won’t pursue your breaking the lock this time. But if there is a next time, I will call the police directly.”

Kayson stared at the velvet box, then back at her face. He let out a humorless, incredulous laugh. He firmly believed that nine years of deep affection wouldn’t simply sever over one missed appointment. He just thought she was throwing a massive tantrum.

“Breaking up? Withdrawing shares?” he scoffed, shaking his head. “Amelia, don’t be so dramatic. I am not going to indulge your unreasonableness anymore.”

Amelia looked at him, her face showing not anger, nor hurt, but pure, unadulterated disgust.

Seeing her icy glare, Kayson felt a brief flash of annoyance. He completely failed to realize that she was already married to Garrett. Convinced she was merely acting out of spite, he coldly grabbed his coat from the back of a chair.

“I’ll give you a three-day cooling-off period,” he declared, his voice taking on its usual condescending tone, showing absolutely no intention of comforting or apologizing to her. “When you’re done playing this game, we’ll talk.”

Hearing his pathetic, self-centered ultimatum, Amelia felt the last vestiges of her old affection for him turn to ash. A real smile touched her lips. It was a smile of pure, unburdened liberation.

Amelia spoke up. “Wait a minute.”

Kayson had paused, a smug, mocking certainty in his eyes, clearly expecting her to soften and beg for a reconciliation.

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He had even stared at the white cat hair clinging to her coat, a ridiculous glimmer in his gaze, as if calculating that his improving allergies might allow him to humor her by keeping a cat to ease their tension.

Words meant to reconcile lingered on Kayson’s lips, but then he watched Amelia lower her lashes and say flatly, “You left your suitcase behind.”

Having sprinted down all twelve flights of stairs in a fit of restless frustration, Kayson burst out of the building’s front entrance.

He dragged his forgotten suitcase behind him, his face flushed and his chest heaving. As he stepped into the cool night air, his steps abruptly faltered.

Standing there, leaning casually against an eye-catching luxury car parked by the curb, was Garrett Thornton. A faint scent of tobacco clung to the air as Garrett took a slow drag from the cigarette between his fingers.

As long-standing bitter rivals in the business world, the animosity between them flared instantly the moment their eyes met.

“Thornton,” Kayson mocked, his voice laced with venom as he strode forward. “What is someone like you doing in a shabby place like this?”

Garrett took a slow drag from his cigarette, his tone light but laced with a chilling authority. “Waiting to pick up my wife.”

Kayson let out a harsh bark of laughter, glancing at the run-down apartment building. “Your wife? Living here? I have to say, Thornton, your wife has terrible taste.”

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Chapter 22:

Garrett didn't flinch. He exhaled a thin plume of smoke, his eyes softening with a profound, almost mocking tenderness, though his words were directed at his rival. "Once you see her, Edwards, I guarantee you won't make such an assessment."

Kayson sneered, utterly oblivious to the truth hidden in Garrett's words. Eager to leave the frustrating night behind him and having no patience to exchange further barbs with his nemesis, Kayson turned on his heel. He hauled his suitcase toward his own waiting driver, speeding off into the night long before the elevator reached the ground floor.

By the time the elevator chimed and the doors opened, the lobby was empty. Amelia stepped out and walked toward the entrance, freezing in the doorway when she saw the familiar figure outside.

Garrett was just stubbing out his cigarette.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her voice laced with surprise.

He pushed himself off the car and walked toward her, his expression unreadable. He took her handbag from her shoulder without asking, his movements smooth and natural. “I don’t make a habit of letting my wife walk into a den with a wounded animal alone.”

A warmth bloomed in her chest, unexpected and unsettling. She didn’t know how closely he had just crossed paths with her past, nor did she know about the quiet declaration he had made in the dark.

She simply let him lead her to the passenger side, his hand warm and steady around hers, leaving the remnants of her past life behind.

Across town, in a VIP ward at the orthopedic hospital, Kamila Carlisle was sulking. Her nutritional meal sat on the table, having long gone cold. When her well-meaning caregiver tried to coax her into eating, Kamila viciously mocked the woman, driving her out of the room.

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Once alone, Kamila suppressed her bubbling anger and dialed her mother, Kristen Carlisle. She deliberately bypassed Amelia, wanting to craft a pitiful, submissive image in front of Kristen.

“Mom,” Kamila whimpered into the phone, forcing a fragile, tearful tone. “I... I just want to apologize to Amelia. It’s all my fault.”

On the other end of the line, Kristen’s fiercely protective instincts flared. “Did that wretched girl make things difficult for you again?” she demanded.

Kamila let out a fake, choked sob. “No, Mom, it’s just a misunderstanding. Kayson rushed back to Amelia’s place because she’s upset about me. I’m so worried.”

Kamila’s phone screen lit up with a text message notification during the call. It was from a junior secretary at the Edwards Corporation, a girl Kamila paid handsomely for information.

The text was short: Mr. Edwards just had a hostile verbal clash with Garrett Thornton outside Ms. Frye’s old building. The tension was explosive.

Kamila’s eyes, red from fake tears, flashed with a cold, venomous light. Even without a physical fight, the mere fact that Kayson and Garrett Thornton were clashing outside Amelia’s building was enough ammunition. She quickly wiped her face, her expression shifting to one of deep, sisterly concern as she spoke back into the phone.

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Chapter 23:

“Mom, I just got a message,” Kamila pressed, her voice full of feigned panic. “I’m so worried about Amelia. She’s all alone out there, and now she’s somehow causing scenes and getting tangled up with dangerous men like Garrett Thornton! We have to do something.”

Kristen frowned on the other end of the line. “She made her bed. Let her lie in it.”

“But what will people say?” Kamila pressed, her tone turning manipulative. “They’ll say the Carlisle family is heartless, that we let our own daughter wander the streets. And... if she’s home with us, and Kayson wants to see her... he’ll have to come here, won’t he?”

The last sentence hung in the air, a piece of irresistible bait.

Kristen's eyes lit up with understanding. A slow, approving smile spread across her face. "You are so clever, my love," Kristen's voice cooed through the speaker. "So much smarter than your sister."

"I'll hang up and call Amelia right now to demand she come home," Kristen declared.

The ride back to The Celestial was silent, but it was a different kind of silence than before. Amelia kept glancing at Garrett's hands on the steering wheel. Strong, capable hands that had so easily neutralized a threat.

She felt a profound sense of warmth. The image of him waiting for her downstairs, a steadfast shield against her past, filled her with an unexpected, deep gratitude.

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Yet, beneath the warmth, a quiet confusion lingered. Why was he doing all this? Why was he treating her with such fierce, unwavering care when their marriage was merely a transaction?

As if sensing her prolonged gaze, he spoke, his eyes on the road. "Did I scare you?"

Amelia shook her head, a soft, genuine smile touching her lips. "No," she said, her voice quiet but steady. "Thank you. For waiting for me. For everything."

A short, humorless laugh escaped his lips. "It's my job to protect my assets, Mrs. Thornton." He was back to business, rebuilding the wall between them, leaving her unanswered questions hanging in the air.

His phone rang, and he answered it via the car's hands-free system. It was Casey Henderson.

Garrett's voice became clipped and efficient, the voice of a CEO. "Report."

He listened for a moment, then issued a series of commands. "Good. Upgrade the security system at her old address. Top of the line. 24/7 monitoring on all entrances. Any unauthorized access attempts, and you call the NYPD directly. Use my name."

He ended the call and glanced at Amelia. "Problem solved. He won't be able to get near the place again."

She nodded, a knot of tension she didn't know she was holding finally releasing. He was always three steps ahead.

Back at the penthouse, she was overwhelmed by a wave of exhaustion so profound it felt physical. The events of the past few days crashed down on her. She wanted nothing more than to sleep for a week.

In his office, Kayson was a caged tiger. He paced back and forth, the shards of a priceless Ming vase crunching under his expensive Italian shoes.

Leo Foster stood by the door, silent and terrified.

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Chapter 24:

Kayson's private line rang, a shrill sound that made him jump. He snatched the receiver, barking into it. "What?"

An imperious, elderly voice cut through his anger. "Is that any way to speak to your grandmother?"

Evelyn Edwards. The matriarch of the family. The one person Kayson truly feared.

His tone changed instantly. “Grandma. I’m in the middle of something.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said, her voice dripping with ice. “I heard you were supposed to get married three days ago. I also heard you failed to show up. And now I’m hearing rumors that Amelia is being seen with a Thornton. Explain yourself, Kayson.”

A headache began to pound behind Kayson’s eyes. His grandmother adored Amelia. She saw her as the perfect, steadying influence he needed.

“It’s a misunderstanding,” he mumbled.

“I don’t care what it is,” Evelyn snapped. “You will fix it. I want to see a marriage certificate on my desk by the end of the week. If I don’t, you can forget about the board’s support for your new expansion project.”

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The line went dead.

Kayson slammed the phone down. Garrett's mockery. Amelia's rejection. His grandmother's ultimatum. The walls were closing in.

A single, obsessive thought burned through the panic. He had to get her back. No matter what it took.

The next morning, Amelia woke up feeling lighter than she had in years. The final confrontation with Kayson had been ugly, but it had been a necessary amputation.

She was free.

She decided to make it official. Today, she would resign from her job at the Edwards Corporation's subsidiary design firm. It was the last thread connecting her to him.

She scribbled a quick note for Garrett, telling him where she was going, and left it on the kitchen counter.

When she arrived at the towering glass skyscraper of the Edwards Corporation, she felt a strange sense of detachment. The lobby buzzed with the familiar energy of a corporate giant, but it no longer felt like her world.

Employees she knew nodded at her, their eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity and pity. The rumors were clearly flying.

She ignored them, her head held high, and walked straight to the Human Resources department.

The HR director, a woman named Martha, looked deeply uncomfortable when Amelia handed her the resignation letter.

“Ms. Frye,” Martha stammered, avoiding her eyes. “According to company policy, a resignation at your level... it requires a direct sign-off from Mr. Edwards himself.”

Amelia had expected as much. He wouldn’t make it easy for her.

“Fine,” she said, her voice even. “I’ll go to him.”

She took the elevator to the top floor. The executive suite was quiet, the plush carpet muffling her footsteps.

Leo Foster was standing outside Kayson’s office like a sentry. He looked haggard, his face pale.

“Ms. Frye,” he said, blocking her path. “Mr. Edwards is... not seeing anyone right now.”

Amelia glanced at the closed double doors. She could almost feel the waves of fury radiating from within.

She gave Leo a small, calm smile. “That’s all right. I’ll wait.”

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Chapter 25:

She walked over to the leather sofa in the reception area, sat down, and pulled a book from her handbag. She crossed her legs, opened the book to her marked page, and began to read, a picture of perfect, unbothered tranquility.

An hour passed.

Amelia read, turning the pages of her novel with a steady hand. High-level executives walked past, their footsteps slowing as they took in the surreal scene. The CEO's ex-fiancée, sitting calmly outside his door as if she were waiting for a dentist appointment. The whispers grew louder.

Leo went in and out of the office three times, each time emerging with a deeper pallor and a more frantic energy.

Finally, the office door was yanked open with such force that it slammed against the wall.

Kayson stood there. His tie was loosened, his hair was a mess, and his eyes were shot with blood. He looked like a man who had been through a war.

He stared at her, a bitter, mocking sneer twisting his lips. "Come to beg?"

"I'm here to resign, Kayson," she said, her voice cool and clear. "I just need your signature."

He stared at the letter as if it were a snake. He didn't take it. Instead, his hand shot out and grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into her flesh. He dragged her into the office.

He shoved her toward the massive window that overlooked the city. “Look down there, Amelia,” he hissed, his voice raw with a desperate fury. “You see all that? Without me, without this company, you are nothing out there. You won’t survive a week.”

Amelia gazed at the sprawling metropolis below. The view that had once intimidated her now looked like a world of possibilities. “I was never relying on you, Kayson,” she said softly.

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Her calm defiance was the final straw. It broke him.

He lunged for the intercom on his desk, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. He stabbed the button for a company-wide page to the executive floors.

“All VPs and department heads, to the main conference room. Immediately.” His voice, amplified by the speaker system, was strained and harsh.

Amelia watched him, a flicker of confusion in her eyes.

A cruel, broken smile spread across Kayson’s face. “You want to leave?” he said, his voice dropping to a venomous whisper. “Fine. You can leave. But first, everyone in this

company is going to know that you, Amelia Frye, are nothing more than the woman I threw away.”

He grabbed her arm again and pulled her out of the office, down the hall to the main conference room.

The executives were already assembled, their faces a mixture of confusion and apprehension. They fell silent as Kayson dragged Amelia into the room, their eyes widening in shock.

He shoved her into a chair at the long, polished table, then took his place at its head. He was the king in his court, and she was the prisoner in the dock.

He cleared his throat, commanding the attention of the room. “I’ve called you all here to make an announcement.”

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Chapter 26:

He let the silence stretch, savoring the drama. His gaze landed on Amelia, dripping with malice. “Amelia Frye, due to her recent... personal conduct, has brought significant damage to the reputation of this corporation.”

Amelia sat perfectly still, her hands folded in her lap. She looked like a spectator at someone else's trial.

“She has used her position as my fiancée to seek personal favors and has repeatedly attempted to interfere with executive decisions,” Kayson continued, his voice rising, weaving a tapestry of lies.

A low murmur went through the room. People exchanged glances. Some looked at Amelia with contempt, others with a flicker of pity.

She didn't say a word. She didn't defend herself. She simply waited.

Kayson leaned forward, placing his hands on the table, delivering his final, crushing blow. “Therefore, effective immediately, on the grounds of gross misconduct, Amelia Frye’s employment with this company is terminated. She is fired.”

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He leaned back in his chair, a look of grim satisfaction on his face. He waited for the tears. For the pleading. For her to break.

He was disappointed.

Amelia didn’t cry. She didn’t even flinch.

Instead, a slow, genuine smile spread across her face. She let out a soft sigh, a sound of profound and utter relief.

She leaned toward him, her voice a whisper that only he could hear, a silver dagger in the heart of his victory.

“Thank you.”

Then, in the stunned silence of the room, she stood up. She straightened her jacket, lifted her chin, and with a poise and grace that radiated absolute power, she turned and walked out of the conference room, her heels clicking a steady, triumphant rhythm on the marble floor.

Kayson sat frozen at the head of the table, the eyes of his entire executive team on him. He felt like a child who had thrown his most violent tantrum, only to have the object of his rage pat him on the head and walk away. The sense of utter, humiliating defeat was absolute.

The moment Amelia stepped through the revolving doors of the Edwards Corporation building, the bright afternoon sun hit her face. She closed her eyes, tilting her head back, and took a deep, cleansing breath. It was the first breath of her new life.

She felt weightless. Free.

She pulled out her phone and, with a few decisive taps, deleted every work-related contact from the past five years. A digital exorcism.

She hailed a cab, the iconic yellow a beacon of her escape. “The Celestial, please,” she told the driver, her voice light.

At a private, members-only club downtown, Garrett Thornton lined up his shot. The sharp crack of the cue ball hitting its target echoed in the wood-paneled room. The eight ball disappeared smoothly into the corner pocket.

His childhood friend, Kian Sinclair, leaned on his own cue stick. “Seriously, Garrett. You get married out of the blue and you won’t even tell us who she is? You’re holding out on us.”

Garrett chalked his cue, a smug grin playing on his lips. “The best things are worth waiting for, Kian.”

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Chapter 27:

“Yeah, yeah,” Kian scoffed. “So when do we get to meet the mysterious Mrs. Thornton? The suspense is killing us.”

Garrett glanced at the Patek Philippe on his wrist. “Soon,” he said, his grin widening. “I have to head out early tonight, actually. She’s officially moving in.”

A chorus of whistles and suggestive catcalls erupted from his friends.

Just then, Garrett’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw a message from his housekeeper, Mrs. Ingram.

“Mr. Thornton, there is a Miss Frye here claiming to be your wife and asking to come in.”

“She is my wife,” Garrett typed back quickly. “Let her in and put her belongings in the master bedroom.”

He pocketed the phone, his smug grin returning. But after a short while, his phone buzzed again. It was Mrs. Ingram replying, “Sir, Miss Frye says she wants to sleep in the guest bedroom. But aren’t you husband and wife? Is this appropriate?”

The smile on Garrett’s face vanished instantly. He bid his friends a quick goodbye, ignoring their good-natured jeers, and left the club with a dark, heavy stride.

Earlier that afternoon, when Amelia arrived back at The Celestial, she found Casey Henderson waiting for her in the lobby.

“Madam,” he said with a respectful bow. “Your belongings are ready. Mr. Thornton asked me to convey that this apartment was for your safety and transition. He would be honored if you would now join him at his home.”

Amelia felt a flicker of apprehension, but she nodded. It was the next logical step in their arrangement.

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She followed Casey to a different building, a slender, impossibly tall skyscraper overlooking Central Park. The penthouse was a duplex, even larger and more opulent than The Celestial suite, but it felt different. It felt lived in. There were books on the shelves, art on the walls, a sense of personality.

A kind-faced, older woman with her hair in a neat bun greeted them at the door. She initially looked hesitant, making Amelia wait a moment while she sent a quick text to Garrett. Once she received his reply, her demeanor shifted to warm professionalism. “Welcome home, Madam. I am Mrs. Ingram, the head housekeeper.”

Mrs. Ingram gave her a tour, her voice warm and professional. Finally, she stopped before a pair of large double doors. “And this, Madam, is the master suite.”

The room was vast, with a panoramic view of the park. A king-sized bed dominated the space. One entire wall was a walk-in closet, and Amelia could see that half of the racks had been cleared, waiting for her.

Her heart gave a sudden, nervous thud against her ribs. Sharing a room. Sharing a bed. It wasn't in the contract.

She hesitated, turning to the housekeeper. "Mrs. Ingram," she began, her voice softer than she intended. "Could you... could you possibly prepare a guest room for me? Just for tonight. I... I need a little time to adjust."

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Chapter 28:

Mrs. Ingram's professional smile didn't falter, but her eyes flickered with surprise for a fraction of a second. "Of course, Madam. Right this way." Amelia didn't notice the housekeeper discreetly pulling out her phone to send that second message to her boss.

She was shown to a guest suite down the hall. It was beautiful, luxurious, but it was undeniably separate.

Once alone, Amelia sat on the edge of the bed, the silence of the huge apartment pressing in on her. Her phone buzzed. It was a message from an old university friend, Shanna Price, inviting her to an industry summit and networking party next week.

Amelia looked at the invitation. She was unemployed. She needed a new start, new connections. A new purpose. She typed back a quick, decisive “I’d love to!”

By the time Garrett arrived home an hour later, there was no soft whistling, and his excellent mood had been completely extinguished.

Mrs. Ingram met him in the foyer, her expression carefully neutral.

“Good evening, sir,” she said. “Mrs. Thornton has settled into the east guest suite, as you know.”

Garrett didn’t reply. His features were cold and hard as he bypassed the housekeeper.

He stared down the long, silent hallway at the closed door of the guest room. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

He slowly began to unbutton his cuffs, his movements precise and deliberate. Each step was silent on the thick Persian rug, but it carried the weight of a calculated, strategic advance.

Garrett stood before it, his hand raised.

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But the knock never came.

He let his hand fall to his side, clenching into a fist.

He was not Kayson Edwards.

He turned, his expensive leather shoes making no sound on the plush runner. But his presence was a physical weight, pressing down on the air as he descended the sweeping staircase to the living room.

Mrs. Ingram was overseeing a final wipe-down of the marble fireplace, her movements efficient and practiced. She looked up as he approached, and the professional calm on her face faltered. She saw the look in his eyes and a shiver of apprehension went through her.

Garrett loosened the top two buttons of his shirt, the fabric straining slightly across his chest. He sank into the depths of a cream-colored sofa, an image of languid power. The pressure in the room, however, became immense.

He spoke, his voice deceptively mild. “Mrs. Ingram, is the heating system for the east guest suite getting a bit old?”

She froze, her mind racing to understand. Then comprehension dawned. “Yes, sir,” she replied, her voice perfectly level. “It can be unreliable. It might be due for an inspection.”

Garrett nodded slowly, as if considering a complex business proposal. His tone became thoughtful, almost considerate, as he looked up, his gaze pinning her in place. “We can’t have Mrs. Thornton catching a chill. Please make sure she’s kept comfortable. Move all of her things to the master bedroom. Immediately.”

He let the order hang in the air for a beat before adding the final, masterful touch. “And please inform her that I have a late-night international conference call. I’ll be sleeping in the study.”

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Chapter 29:

“Yes, sir,” Mrs. Ingram said, bowing her head slightly. She turned and walked away, her back ramrod straight, a fine sheen of sweat breaking out on her temples.

Upstairs, Amelia had just stepped out of the en-suite shower. Wrapped in a fluffy towel, she felt a sliver of peace for the first time in days. The guest room was her sanctuary, a space that was hers alone. A boundary.

She had just slipped into a silk nightgown when a soft knock sounded at the door.

She opened it to find Mrs. Ingram, her face a mask of polite regret. Behind her stood two maids with a luggage cart.

“Madam, my sincerest apologies for the disturbance,” Mrs. Ingram said, her voice smooth as cream. “There appears to be an issue with the heating in this wing. It needs urgent maintenance. For your comfort and health, Mr. Thornton has instructed us to move your belongings to the master suite.”

Her gaze shifted past the housekeeper to the cart, where she saw her suitcase already open. One of the maids was carefully folding a silk blouse she had just worn, placing it inside. It was happening, whether she consented or not.

The blood drained from Amelia's face.

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"That's... not necessary," she tried, her voice weak. "I'm fine here."

Mrs. Ingram's expression was a perfect blend of sympathy and unyielding resolve. "Mr. Thornton was most insistent, Madam. He was very concerned for your well-being."

A wave of helplessness washed over Amelia. She was a butterfly caught in a web woven from silk and steel. Every struggle only entangled her further. This was Garrett's command, delivered through a polite, smiling proxy. There was no refusing.

"Very well," she said, the words tasting like ash. "Thank you for your trouble."

She was forced to follow them down the hall, a prisoner being escorted to a more luxurious cell. The double doors to the master suite were opened, and the sheer scale of the room hit her. The enormous bed, the scent of him, a clean, masculine fragrance of sandalwood and something uniquely Garrett, made her heart hammer against her ribs.

The maids moved with quiet efficiency, placing her things in the empty half of the vast walk-in closet. Her dresses hung next to his suits, her shoes sat beneath his. It was as if she had always belonged there.

Amelia sat on the edge of the massive bed, the mattress sinking slightly under her weight. She felt like a piece of property, her territory marked and claimed. The humiliation was a cold knot in her stomach.

She remembered Mrs. Ingram's message. He'll be sleeping in the study.

The thought brought a small measure of relief, but it was quickly overshadowed by a chilling realization. He didn't need to use force. He could bend her to his will with a single, polite command. It was terrifying.

She reached for her phone, needing to talk to Tatum, to ground herself. But as the screen lit up, an incoming call made her entire body go rigid.

The caller ID read: Mother.

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Chapter 30:

Amelia's breath hitched. She stood and walked to the floor-to-ceiling window, the glittering lights of Manhattan a cold, indifferent audience. She pressed the phone to her ear, forcing her voice to be steady.

"Hello?"

Kristen's voice was a shard of glass in her ear. "Amelia, have you grown wings? You dare to ignore my calls now?"

"I've been busy," Amelia said, her tone clipped.

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A derisive laugh crackled through the line. "Busy? Busy making a fool of yourself all over town? I am ordering you to come back to the Carlisle estate tomorrow evening. Immediately."

"Why?" Amelia asked, though she already knew the answer would be something vile.

Kristen's tone was imperious, final. "To celebrate Kamila's discharge from the hospital. And to apologize to Kayson in person! You must win him back."

The mention of Kayson's name sent a wave of nausea through her. "I'm not going."

The rage on the other end was palpable. "You dare defy me! If you don't come back, I'll consider myself without a daughter! I will make sure you can't survive in New York!"

Listening to the familiar threats, the empty promises of ruin, something inside Amelia snapped. The years of quiet submission, of swallowing her pain, it all curdled into a hard, cold resolve. The fear was gone, replaced by a sudden, exhilarating surge of defiance.

She held the phone tightly, her knuckles white.

"Fine," she said, her voice low and steady, each word a carefully placed stone. "I'll be there."

She paused, letting the silence stretch, before delivering the final blow.

“But I’m not coming to apologize.”

She hung up before Kristen could utter another word.

The next evening, the Carlisle estate was ablaze with light, a beacon of old money and cold hearts.

Kamila, dressed in an ethereal white dress that made her look like a wounded angel, was personally arranging a bouquet of lilies on a console table. Her movements were delicate, practiced, designed to showcase her fragility.

Kristen watched from a nearby armchair, her face a mask of maternal pride. “When Kayson arrives, you must be gracious, understanding,” she instructed. “Let him see how much better you are for him.”

“Of course, Mother,” Kamila murmured, her eyes downcast, but the slight curl at the corner of her mouth was cold.

She discreetly pulled out her phone, her fingers flying across the screen.

Kay, I know my sister is coming home tonight, and I'm a little scared... Can you come be with me? I'm so afraid we'll argue again.

She sent the message, then immediately deleted the record from her outbox. No traces.

In his office, Kayson was drowning. The pressure from his grandmother was a physical weight on his shoulders. When Kamila's text appeared, it was a lifeline. A wave of protectiveness, of being needed, washed over him. It was a feeling he hadn't realized he missed.

Don't be afraid. I'm on my way, he typed back instantly. I'll make Amelia apologize to you.

He still believed he was in control.

Assuming Amelia was holed up in her old apartment, nursing her wounded pride, he decided to "pick her up." He would use the car ride to lay down the law.

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