

Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 31:

He drove to the familiar building, using a spare key he'd had made after the lock was "repaired," and let himself in.

The apartment was silent. And empty.

All of her things, her books, her clothes, the small, personal touches that had made the sterile space hers, were gone.

A vast, ominous feeling, cold and heavy, settled in his chest. For the first time, the possibility that she had truly left him felt real. It was a terrifying, alien sensation.

He jabbed at his phone, calling her number. It went straight to voicemail. Cursing, he slammed the door and headed for the Carlisle estate alone.

A sleek black Bentley purred to a stop in front of the manor's imposing gates. Amelia stepped out. Garrett had insisted she wear the dress he'd had delivered that afternoon, a simple black sheath, its expert tailoring clinging to her curves. Her makeup was flawless, a polished, untouchable mask.

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Garrett didn't get out. He simply lowered the tinted window. In his hand was a tiny, flesh-colored earpiece.

"If anything feels wrong, press this," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Casey will be inside with a team in three minutes."

A flicker of warmth touched her heart, but she pushed it away. "No, thank you," she said, handing it back. "This is my battlefield."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then gave a curt nod. "I'll be waiting out here."

Amelia took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and walked toward the house. She felt like a queen walking to her own execution.

In the living room, Kristen and Kamila turned as she entered. They both froze for a second. This was not the Amelia they knew. The quiet, apologetic girl was gone, replaced by a woman radiating a cold, unapproachable elegance.

Kristen recovered first. "You finally decided to show your face! Who are you trying to impress, dressed like that?"

Amelia ignored her. She walked past them and sat down on the sofa, crossing her legs with a grace that made her seem like the mistress of the house.

Just then, the doorbell chimed. Kayson strode in.

Kamila was on him in an instant, her hand clutching his arm, her eyes welling with tears. “Kay, you’re finally here,” she whispered, a damsel in distress.

But Kayson’s eyes were locked on the woman seated on the sofa.

He walked toward her, his face a thundercloud of frustration and anger. He stood over her, his shadow falling across her. “Your things. Where did you hide them?”

Amelia slowly lifted her gaze to meet his. Her eyes were devoid of any emotion, as if she were looking at a complete stranger.

“I threw them away,” she said, her voice flat.

“Threw them away?” He couldn’t believe it. He thought she was joking, playing some cruel game.

She added, her voice dropping to a near whisper, but each word landing like a hammer blow, “Everything that had anything to do with you.”

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Kayson’s face turned ashen. Kamila saw her opening and tightened her grip on his arm, her voice trembling with manufactured hurt. “Kay, please don’t fight with her. It’s all my fault...”

He looked down at Kamila’s “understanding” face, then back at Amelia’s “heartless” one. The scales in his mind tipped once again.

He patted Kamila's hand reassuringly, his voice turning to ice as he addressed Amelia. "Amelia, have you had enough of this drama?"

Amelia watched the pathetic performance, a small, mocking smile playing on her lips. She didn't bother to answer him. Instead, she turned her head toward her mother.

"Are we having dinner?" she asked calmly. "I'm starving."

Her complete and utter disregard, her perfect calm, was more infuriating to Kayson than any screaming match could ever be. He felt a vein throb in his temple. He was losing control, and he didn't know why.

Kristen was speechless, sputtering with rage. Faye Miller, the old housekeeper, scurried out from the dining room. "Dinner is served," she announced, her voice trembling, desperate to break the tension.

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The long mahogany dining table was a battlefield. Kristen sat at the head, a furious queen on her throne. Kayson and Kamila were seated on one side, a united front. Amelia sat alone on the other, an island of defiant calm.

The clinking of silverware was the only sound, sharp and grating in the tense silence.

Kristen broke it first, tapping her wine glass with her knife. “Amelia, Kayson is right here,” she said, her voice sharp with command. “Aren’t you going to apologize for your childish behavior?”

Amelia continued to cut her steak with meticulous precision, not even looking up. “Do I need to apologize, Kayson?” she asked, deflecting the attack with a soft, pointed question.

Kayson stiffened, caught off guard. Kamila immediately jumped in, her voice a gentle caress. “Sister, don’t be like this. Kayson was just worried about you.”

He seized the lifeline she offered. “Amelia, stop this nonsense,” he said, his voice a low growl. “Come back with me. We can forget any of this ever happened.” It was the voice of a king offering a pardon, not a man asking for forgiveness.

Amelia finally put down her knife and fork. She dabbed her lips with her napkin, then raised her eyes to meet his.

“I can’t go back, Kayson,” she said, her voice clear and steady. “I’m married.”

The words dropped into the silence like a bomb.

The entire room froze.

Kristen's fork slipped from her fingers, clattering onto her plate with a sharp crack. Kamila's perfectly crafted smile froze on her face.

Kayson was the first to recover, letting out a harsh, disbelieving laugh. "Married? To who? You'd really make up a lie like that just to make me angry?"

Kristen found her voice, a shrill, furious screech. "Have you lost your mind? You'd curse yourself like that just for a little attention?"

Kamila looked at Amelia with wide, "concerned" eyes. "Sister, are you under too much stress? Maybe we should get you to a doctor." She expertly planted the seed that Amelia was mentally unstable.

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Chapter 33:

Amelia looked at the three of them, their identical expressions of scorn, their absolute refusal to believe her. The last flicker of warmth in her heart for this family died, leaving behind nothing but cold, hard ash.

She stood up, her chair scraping softly against the floor. "If you don't believe me, then there's nothing more to say."

She turned to leave. Kayson shot out of his chair and grabbed her wrist, his grip like iron. "You're not going anywhere until you explain what game you're playing!"

"Let go of me!" Amelia cried, struggling against his hold. "It's none of your business!"

Kamila let out a perfectly timed gasp, stumbling as if Amelia's flailing arm had struck her. She swayed, collapsing gracefully into Kayson's arms.

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He instantly released Amelia, his attention shifting entirely to Kamila. “Are you alright? Did she hurt you?”

The scene, so familiar, so painfully replayed over the years, was a knife to Amelia’s heart.

Kristen saw it all, and her rage found its target. She lunged forward, her face contorted with fury, her finger jabbing at Amelia’s face. “You wretched girl! If you can’t be happy, you have to ruin it for your sister?”

Amelia let out a cold laugh. “Her?”

That single word was the spark that lit the fuse.

Kristen’s hand flew up. She swung with all her might.

The sound of the slap was sharp and loud, a crack of thunder in the silent room.

Amelia’s head snapped to the side. Five angry red finger marks instantly bloomed on her pale cheek. A thin trickle of blood welled at the corner of her mouth.

She didn't cry. She didn't scream.

She slowly, deliberately, turned her head back to face her mother. Her eyes were cold, shattered, and utterly devoid of emotion. It was a look that made Kristen, for the first time in her life, feel a flicker of fear. She took an involuntary step back.

Amelia said nothing. She simply turned and walked out of the dining room, out of the house, leaving a tableau of shock and confusion behind her.

Kayson stood frozen, watching her go. The sight of the blood on her lip sent a strange, sharp pang through his chest.

Amelia ran, her heels clicking on the stone driveway, not stopping until she reached the sanctuary of Garrett's car. She wrenched the door open and collapsed inside, her body finally starting to tremble uncontrollably.

Garrett turned to look at her. He saw the swollen, red cheek. He saw the blood at the corner of her mouth.

His face became terrifying. The air in the car seemed to drop twenty degrees, turning sharp and brittle.

He didn't ask what happened. He simply shrugged off his suit jacket and wrapped it tightly around her shivering form, pulling her close.

Tucked into the warmth of his embrace, feeling the violent, protective rage radiating from him, Amelia finally broke. The tears came, silent and hot, streaming down her bruised face.

The car moved through the city in absolute silence, broken only by Amelia's choked, soundless sobs. Garrett didn't speak. He just kept one large hand on her back, rubbing slow, steady circles, a clumsy, unpracticed gesture of comfort.

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Chapter 34:

His phone vibrated. A message from Casey. It contained a single, grainy image from a dining room security camera, a screenshot of Kristen Carlisle's hand raised, frozen in the instant before it struck.

Garrett's knuckles turned white as he gripped the phone. The pressure in the car became so intense it felt hard to breathe.

He switched the screen off, not wanting Amelia to see it, not wanting to force her to relive the humiliation.

"Home," he said to the driver, his voice rough.

Back at the penthouse, he didn't wait for her to move. He scooped her into his arms, ignoring her weak protest, and carried her through the apartment, his strides long and purposeful. He didn't stop until he was in the master bathroom.

He set her down gently on the cool marble vanity. "I can do it myself," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

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He ignored her. He turned on the tap, soaking a soft washcloth in warm water. With an incredible gentleness that seemed utterly at odds with the man he was, he began to wipe the tear tracks from her face, carefully cleaning the small cut on her lip.

His touch was feather-light, as if he were handling a priceless, shattered piece of porcelain.

Amelia watched his reflection in the mirror, his focused, intense profile, the hard line of his jaw. She saw her own reflection next to his, the swollen cheek, the haunted eyes. A fresh wave of tears threatened to fall.

He finished cleaning her face, then retrieved an ice pack from a small medical kit. He wrapped it carefully in a silk handkerchief and pressed it gently against her cheek.

The cold made her flinch.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked instantly, his voice low and concerned.

She shook her head, feeling more vulnerable and exposed than she ever had in her life.

Finally, she found her voice, a raw, scratchy sound. “I... I tripped on the stairs. I fell.”

It was a pathetic lie. She couldn’t bear for him to know the ugly truth. She didn’t want to drag him into the disgusting mess of her family.

The hand holding the ice pack stilled for a fraction of a second. He looked down at her, his eyes deep and unreadable. He didn't call her out.

"I see," he said, his voice a low murmur. "You'll have to be more careful, then, my Mrs. Thornton."

His understanding, his refusal to challenge her flimsy lie, made her feel a sharp pang of guilt.

He held the ice pack in place for ten minutes, his presence a silent, solid comfort. Then he lifted her again, carried her to the massive bed, and tucked the covers around her.

He sat on the edge of the bed, just watching her. "Sleep," he said. "I'm right here."

Under his steady gaze, enveloped in a sense of security she had never known, exhaustion finally claimed her. She fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Meanwhile, chaos had erupted at the Carlisle estate.

After Amelia left, Kayson, for the first time, turned his anger on Kristen and Kamila. "That was too far!" he yelled, his voice cracking.

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Chapter 35:

Kristen was unrepentant. "I was disciplining my own daughter! What business is it of yours? She wouldn't have been hit if she hadn't been spouting such nonsense!"

Kamila started crying, her usual tactic. "Kay, are you blaming me? I just wanted my sister to come home..."

Her tears grated on Kayson's nerves. His mind was replaying the image of Amelia's shattered eyes over and over.

He suddenly realized that her expression when she'd said "I'm married" hadn't been manic or deceitful. It had been... calm. Factual.

A terrible, sickening thought began to form in his mind. He had to find her. Now.

Kamila and Kristen tried to soothe him, insisting Amelia was just having a tantrum, but the seed of doubt had been planted. He believed she had nowhere to go, that she would retreat to one of their old, familiar places.

He stormed out of the Carlisle estate, beginning a desperate, all-night search that was doomed to fail.

Back in the master bedroom, once Garrett was sure Amelia was sound asleep, he rose silently and walked out onto the balcony. The cold night air hit his face, but it did nothing to cool the furnace of rage inside him.

He dialed Casey's number. His voice was no longer gentle. It was the sound of ice breaking.

"I want every project the Carlisle family is currently bidding on to be in a competitor's hands by sunrise. And start digging into Kayson Edwards. I want a full report on every move he's made in the last six months."

He paused, looking back through the glass at the sleeping woman in his bed.

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“I want them,” he said, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper, “to pay for tonight.”

The headlights of Kayson’s car cut through the New York night as he drove, aimless and frantic.

He went to the restaurant where they’d had their first date. It was closed. He went to her favorite bookstore. Dark. He stood by the bench in Central Park where he’d first told her he loved her. It was empty.

His phone battery was dying. He called her number again and again, each time met with the same cold, automated voice. She was gone. Vanished.

His mind raced. There was one person left. One person who would know. Tatum Shaw.

He slammed on the brakes, pulling his car over to the side of the desolate street. His hands trembled as he scrolled through his contacts, finding Tatum’s name. He hit dial, the phone pressed hard against his ear. It rang and rang, a relentless, desperate sound in the dead of night. He called three times before someone finally answered.

Tatum's furious, sleep-creased voice crackled through the speaker. "Kayson Edwards, are you out of your damn mind? Do you know what time it is?"

"Where is she, Tatum?" he pleaded, his face pale and drawn in the harsh glow of the dashboard lights. "Is she with you?"

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On the other end of the line, Tatum pictured his pathetic, broken state, and a vicious sense of satisfaction washed over her. She gave a slow, cruel laugh that echoed through the receiver. "Where is she? She's with her husband, of course."

Kayson stared blankly at the windshield, uncomprehending. “Husband?”

“Are you deaf?” Tatum snapped, enjoying every second of his confusion. “I said, she. Got. Married.”

He shook his head, a desperate denial. “No. It’s not possible. She’s lying to me. You’re all lying to me!”

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His arrogance, even now, was astounding. It pushed Tatum over the edge. “You self-absorbed bastard!” she screamed into the phone. “Why would she lie? Do you think the universe revolves around you? She lives in the penthouse at The Elysian Towers. Now lose my number before I call the cops!”

She hung up, plunging the call into silence.

Kayson sat frozen in the driver’s seat. The Elysian Towers.

The words were daggers, twisting in his gut.

He stumbled out of the car, his body hitting the side of the door with a dull thud. He clutched at his chest, gasping for breath in the freezing night air.

She wasn't lying.

She had really left him.

A tidal wave of rage, jealousy, and a regret so sharp it felt like a physical wound, crashed over him. He let out a raw, animalistic roar and slammed his fist into the car window.

The glass shattered, spiderwebbing outward. Shards rained down on the pavement. Blood, dark and hot, streamed from his knuckles.

He didn't feel the pain. The agony in his soul was infinitely worse.

Miles away, in the silent penthouse of The Elysian Towers, all was peaceful.

Amelia slept deeply, exhausted from the emotional turmoil, but safe. The medicated cream on her cheek gleamed faintly in the soft light from the hallway. Her breathing was even, her long lashes casting soft shadows on her skin.

Garrett, having finished his calls, returned to the bedroom. He saw her there, so still and peaceful, and his footsteps softened.

He walked to the side of the bed and knelt, just watching her sleep.

In the dim light, the swelling on her cheek was still visible, a stark reminder of her vulnerability. A reminder of the violence she had endured.

He reached out, his fingertips hovering just above her skin, afraid to touch her, afraid to wake her.

He had never felt such a fierce, primal urge to protect someone. It was as if she were a long-lost treasure he had just rediscovered, and he would burn the world to the ground before he let anyone harm her again.

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her forehead in a kiss so light, so full of a tenderness he rarely allowed himself to feel, that it was barely there at all.

The next morning, in the main conference room of the Carlisle Group, Amelia's father, Richard Carlisle, nervously awaited the results of a multi-billion-dollar resort project bid.

It was the cornerstone of their five-year plan. Kristen was there, dressed to the nines, radiating an unshakeable confidence.

Their presentation went flawlessly. Victory seemed certain.

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Chapter 37:

But at the last moment, as the project lead was about to announce the winner, his phone rang. He took the call, and the color drained from his face.

He returned to the podium, his expression grim. He announced that a small, unknown firm had won the contract.

Worse, he declared that due to “unforeseen circumstances,” his parent company was terminating all existing partnerships with the Carlisle Group, effective immediately. All outstanding debts were being called in.

Kristen shot to her feet, her voice shrill. “Why? Our proposal was superior!”

The representative gave her a look of cold pity. “Because Thornton Industries just completed a full acquisition of our parent company. This was Mr. Thornton’s first directive.”

The name hit Kristen like a physical blow. She collapsed back into her chair. Thornton... She couldn’t fathom how she had made an enemy of such a titan.

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It was just the beginning. Throughout the morning, a cascade of calls came in. Banks terminating lines of credit. Suppliers demanding immediate payment.

The dominoes fell, one after another. In a matter of hours, the Carlisle Group’s stock had plummeted in pre-market trading. They were teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

In his penthouse, Garrett sipped his morning coffee, listening to Casey’s report over the phone.

“Sir, everything is proceeding as planned. The Carlisle Group’s cash flow will be completely severed within forty-eight hours.”

Garrett simply nodded, his face impassive. It was as if he were discussing the weather.

He glanced toward the closed bedroom door. “Let her sleep in,” he said softly.

Instead of sleeping late, however, Amelia was jolted awake at eight o’clock sharp by the shrill ringing of her phone on the nightstand.

She groggily picked it up. It was Tatum, her voice bubbling with barely contained excitement.

“Amelia! You won’t believe this,” Tatum launched in immediately. “Kayson actually called me yesterday trying to fish for your whereabouts!”

Amelia rubbed her eyes, sitting up. “He did?”

“Oh, yes. I told him off, obviously,” Tatum scoffed. “I told him it was hilarious how he couldn’t care less about you before, but now that you’re married, he’s suddenly desperate. I even rubbed it in, told him you were spending a passionate night with your new husband right there at The Elysian Towers.”

Amelia gasped softly. “Tatum, you didn’t.”

“I absolutely did! He was so mad he just hung up without another word,” Tatum laughed triumphantly. “Don’t worry, though, I kept my mouth shut about who your husband actually is. Let him sweat. Anyway, we need to catch up properly. Meet me this afternoon?”

“Alright, I’ll see you then,” Amelia agreed, a faint smile touching her lips as she ended the call.

She threw off the covers and headed to the en-suite bathroom to wash up. Standing before the mirror, splashing cold water on her face, the reality of the morning finally settled in.

She paused, looking at her reflection, and realized with a sense of wonder just how deeply and peacefully she had slept last night in Garrett’s master bedroom. The lingering anxiety that usually plagued her was entirely gone.

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Chapter 38:

The swelling on her cheek had gone down, but a faint bruise was beginning to form.

She walked out into the living room and found Garrett watching the financial news. The headline scrolling across the bottom of the screen was about the sudden, shocking collapse of the Carlisle Group's stock.

She stopped dead, her heart pounding. She didn't understand the intricacies of finance, but she understood disaster when she saw it.

She walked over to him, her hands trembling slightly. "Did... did you do this?"

Garrett muted the television. He looked up at her, his eyes calm and deep. He didn't admit it, but he didn't deny it either. "Do you want me to have done it?"

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The question caught her off guard. She searched her heart and found, to her surprise, a dark, secret flicker of satisfaction.

He took her hand, his thumb stroking her palm, and gently pulled her down to sit beside him.

“No one,” he said, his voice quiet but absolute, “gets to hurt my wife. No one.”

The words were simple, but they carried the weight of an unbreakable vow. Amelia’s heart skipped a beat.

She looked at the man who had unleashed a financial hurricane for her sake, and for the first time, she allowed herself to think that maybe, just maybe, this marriage wasn’t only a transaction.

The next morning, for the first time, they sat across from each other at the breakfast table like a normal couple. Sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air.

The silence was thick with unspoken things. Amelia kept her eyes fixed on her glass of milk, afraid to look at him. His words from yesterday, my wife, were still echoing in her head.

Garrett folded his newspaper and set it aside. His gaze fell on the faint bruise on her cheek, and his eyes darkened for a moment.

“What are your plans for today?” he asked, his voice casual.

Amelia was startled by the question. “I... I’m meeting Tatum,” she answered. Since leaving her job, her days were a blank slate.

“I’ll drive you,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

She opened her mouth to refuse, to insist on her independence, but the look in his eyes stopped her. It was calm, but unyielding. She swallowed her protest.

In the car, as the city slid past the windows, Garrett spoke again. “Kayson Edwards is not a man who gives up easily.”

Amelia’s stomach tightened. She knew he was right.

“His next target will be you,” Garrett continued, his voice even. “He will try to prove to you that your choice was a mistake.”

She remained silent. It was her biggest fear.

He reached across the console and covered her hand with his. His palm was warm and strong, a solid, reassuring weight. “Don’t be afraid,” he said softly. “I’m here.”

Those three simple words settled something deep inside her. A strange sense of peace.

He dropped her off at the cafe, watching until she was safely inside before the car pulled away.

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Chapter 39:

Tatum enveloped her in a huge hug the moment she walked in. “So,” she said, her eyes sparkling with excitement, “that ruthless tycoon is totally into you, right? He bankrupted your family for you!”

Amelia’s cheeks flushed. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a contract.”

Tatum gave her a look that said I don’t believe you for a second. She launched into a detailed analysis of Garrett’s every action, concluding with absolute certainty that the man was smitten.

Amelia tried to dismiss it, but Tatum’s words planted a seed of doubt. She found herself replaying every moment with him, every look, every word.

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They talked for hours. When they finally parted, Amelia decided to walk toward the subway. She needed time alone to think.

She didn’t notice the black Bentley that followed at a discreet distance, a silent, watchful guardian.

She was just a block from The Elysian Towers, turning a corner onto a quieter side street, when a sharp honk from a nearby car pierced the air.

Amelia turned her head and saw Kayson sitting behind the wheel.

She was dressed in a sleek, professional outfit, her posture upright and her aura radiating a newfound confidence. She no longer resembled the cautious, submissive woman who used to tiptoe around his feelings.

There was no joy, no surprise on her face, only a cold indifference. After a moment of silence, she simply turned on her heel and walked away.

Kayson immediately scrambled out of the car and chased after her.

He grabbed her arm, his composure entirely gone. “Are you deaf? Or are you just playing deaf because you’re still throwing a tantrum over our argument the other day?” he demanded.

Amelia stared at him coldly. “What is the point of you pestering me like this, Kayson?” she asked, her voice devoid of any emotion.

Her coldness only fueled his anger. “Pestering you? You caused a massive scene at the Carlisle house and made Kamila cry! Just because I missed our appointment to get our marriage certificate, you had to turn everything upside down and humiliate me completely!”

Despite the faint panic rising in his chest at the sight of her icy expression, he forced a tough facade. “You are going to come home with me right now and apologize to Kristen and Kamila. Once you’ve apologized, we’ll go straight to the registry office and get married.”

“Let go.” Amelia stumbled a couple of steps as he yanked her, a sharp pain shooting through her wrist from his bruising grip. “Kayson, let go of me!”

But Kayson didn’t stop. He forcefully dragged her along. “Fine, you can apologize later. We’ll go get the certificate now. I’ve already made a compromise, Amelia, so don’t push your luck!”

She felt a surge of pure, cold terror. She was trapped.

And then, a voice cut through the air, low, cold, and laced with deadly menace.

“Let. Her. Go.”

Garrett emerged from the shadows, his movements fluid and silent like a panther. He didn’t run; he walked, each deliberate step radiating a lethal calm that was far more terrifying than any shout.

He didn’t even glance at Kayson.

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Chapter 40:

His entire focus was on Amelia. He reached her, shrugged off his expensive suit jacket, and draped it over her shoulders, covering her where Kayson's hands had been. He gently pulled her behind him, a shield between her and her past.

He lowered his head, his voice a soft murmur meant only for her. "Are you scared?"

The moment he appeared, the tension had drained out of Amelia's body, replaced by an overwhelming sense of relief. She shook her head, pressing closer to the solid wall of his back.

That small, instinctive gesture of trust was a dagger in Kayson's heart.

Only then did Garrett turn his attention to Kayson. His eyes were chips of ice. It was the look one gives to something utterly insignificant, something to be crushed underfoot.

The sight of their easy intimacy, her reliance on him, drove Kayson mad with jealousy. He pointed a trembling finger at Garrett, his voice a raw shout directed at Amelia. "You choose him? You choose this... this playboy over me?"

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A low, humorless chuckle rumbled in Garrett's chest. He pulled Amelia tighter against him, his arm a possessive band around her waist. His voice, when he spoke, was a clear, ringing declaration that echoed in the quiet street.

"She didn't choose me, Kayson. I chose her."

He paused, letting the words sink in, before delivering the killing blow, each word precise and cruel. "From the moment she said yes, Amelia Frye became my wife. The legal, indisputable Mrs. Thornton."

"My wife." He repeated the words slowly, savoring them, branding them into the air.

Kayson staggered as if he'd been physically struck. Hearing the claim from Garrett's own lips, spoken with such absolute ownership, was devastating.

His last shred of pride refused to accept it. "No... it's not possible!" he stammered, his mind scrambling for an explanation. "It's an act! You're working together to trick me!"

He latched onto the idea like a drowning man clutching at a piece of driftwood. He pointed at Amelia again. "She's doing this to get back at me! Because I didn't show up to the registry office, she found my biggest rival to put on a show and make me jealous!"

The more he spoke, the more he believed his own delusion. "You think I can't see through it? This is the most pathetic play I've ever seen!"

"Kayson, you're delusional," Amelia whispered, horrified.

Garrett just watched him, a flicker of amusement in his cold eyes. He was enjoying this.

He raised an eyebrow. "An act?"

A slow, dangerous smile spread across his face. "Alright. If you think it's an act, then perhaps we should make it more convincing."

Kayson stared, uncomprehending.

Garrett leaned down, his lips brushing against Amelia's ear. His breath was warm, sending a shiver down her spine. "Play along, sweetheart," he whispered, his voice a seductive rumble. "Let's give him a final performance."

Her earlobe burned where his lips had touched.

Kayson saw the intimate whisper, and the flames of jealousy roared, consuming what little reason he had left. "If you're real, then prove it!" he roared, goaded beyond endurance.

Garrett straightened up, his smile widening. It was exactly what he had been waiting for.

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“As you wish,” he said to Kayson.

Amelia's heart leaped into her throat. She had no idea what he was about to do.

Garrett's hand came up, his fingers gently cupping her cheek.

Kayson stopped breathing.

Garrett didn't hesitate. His eyes, deep and hypnotic, locked onto Amelia's. He was pulling her in, drowning her.

His head lowered slowly, closing the distance between them.

She could see the individual strands of his eyelashes, the dark whirlpools in his eyes. Her heart was a frantic drum against her ribs. She forgot to breathe. She forgot to resist.

Garrett's mouth claimed hers.

It wasn't a gentle kiss. It was a brand. A statement. It was pure possession, a ruthless declaration of ownership meant to annihilate his rival. His lips were firm, demanding, moving against hers with a practiced confidence that stole her breath and scattered her thoughts.

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One of his hands tangled in her hair, tilting her head back, while the other cinched tight around her waist, pulling her flush against the hard lines of his body. She was completely, utterly trapped.

Amelia's mind went blank. All she could register was the scent of him, clean mint and a faint, masculine trace of tobacco. It was an intoxicating, aggressive scent that was purely Garrett.

A weak, instinctual impulse to push him away flickered and died. Her hands came up to rest on his chest, but there was no strength in them. Against the solid wall of his muscle, her resistance felt more like an embrace.

A few feet away, Kayson watched.

He saw the kiss, and his entire world shattered. It crumbled into dust, the pieces scattering in the wind. He saw the way Amelia's body molded against Garrett's. He saw that she wasn't fighting him. She looked like she belonged there.

The poison of jealousy was a fire in his veins. He wanted to charge forward, to rip them apart, but his feet were rooted to the spot, encased in lead.

It felt like an eternity before Garrett finally, slowly, lifted his head.

Amelia's lips were swollen, her eyes dazed and unfocused. She was gasping for air, her legs so weak she had to cling to him to stay upright.

Garrett's thumb brushed over her kiss-bruised mouth. Then he looked up, his gaze locking on Kayson's ashen face. It was the look of a predator, a victor, filled with cold, dismissive contempt.

His voice was a low, triumphant whisper, meant only for the three of them. "Now, do you believe me?"

It was the final, fatal blow.

A strangled, inhuman sound tore from Kayson's throat. His eyes were wild, blood-red with a pain and fury too great to contain. He turned and stumbled away, shoving blindly through the crowd of onlookers, a man utterly and publicly broken.

His fleeing figure marked the definitive end of a nine-year chapter in Amelia's life.

The moment Kayson was gone, the predatory look vanished from Garrett's face.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 42:

In moments, they were inside the lobby of The Elysian Towers, the noise and chaos of the street sealed behind the heavy glass doors.

The elevator ride to the penthouse was suffocatingly silent. Amelia's cheeks were on fire. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. The ghost of his kiss, the feeling of his lips, was still a burning imprint on hers.

She was mortified. And angry. How could he, in front of all those people?

She finally worked up the courage to look at him, to say something, anything. "You—"

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But he spoke first. He was looking at their reflection in the polished bronze of the elevator walls. His voice was quiet, dangerously soft.

"Why didn't you push me away?"

The question hit her like a punch to the gut. Why hadn't she?

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She had no answer.

The elevator chimed, signaling their arrival. The doors slid open.

Amelia fled. She practically bolted out of the elevator, down the hall, and into the master suite, slamming the door and locking it behind her.

She leaned against the cool wood, her heart pounding like a trapped bird. She lifted a trembling hand to her lips. They were still tingling, still warm.

She was in trouble. Deep trouble.

Because she hadn't hated it. Not at all.

Out in the hallway, Garrett stood by the elevator, watching the door she had disappeared behind. He didn't follow.

He raised his own hand, his fingertips lightly touching his lips, as if to recapture the taste of her. The kiss had been a strategic move, a weapon. But it had also been more than that. Far more than he had anticipated.

A slow, deeply intrigued smile spread across his face. This was getting interesting.

Amelia paced her new bedroom like a caged animal, the plush carpet doing nothing to soothe the frantic energy coursing through her. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw it: Garrett's intense gaze, the humiliating collapse of Kayson's pride.

She fell onto the bed and buried her face in a pillow, trying to smother the chaotic thoughts.

Her phone rang, a shrill intrusion. It was Tatum.

“Oh my god, Amelia! I saw the pictures online! That kiss! That was not a ‘business arrangement’ kiss!” Tatum’s voice was a high-pitched squeal of excitement.

“It was an accident,” Amelia mumbled into the pillow.

“An accident? Honey, that was a declaration of war! I saw Kayson’s face in one of the shots. I’ve watched it on a loop for ten minutes. It’s glorious!” Tatum paused, her tone turning conspiratorial. “So? How was it? Is he a good kisser?”

Amelia’s face burned. “We have a contract, Tatum.”

“A contract doesn’t bankrupt your family for you! A contract doesn’t kiss you like that in the middle of Fifth Avenue!” Tatum’s voice grew serious. “Listen to me, Amelia. That man, Garrett Thornton, is not just playing a part. You need to figure out if he’s playing for keeps, or just playing you.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Amelia asked, her voice small and lost.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 43:

“You test him,” Tatum said, her voice full of a sudden, strategic wisdom. “Give him a little something, then pull back. See how he reacts. A man can’t hide his intentions when his pride is on the line.”

Tatum’s words were a stone dropped into the still, murky waters of Amelia’s heart, sending ripples of possibility outward.

Across town, in a penthouse office that looked like it had been ransacked by a hurricane, Kayson sat on the floor amidst the debris. In his hand, he clutched a faded photograph of

himself and Amelia, taken years ago. In it, she was smiling, her head resting on his shoulder, her eyes full of adoration.

His assistant, Leo Foster, moved cautiously around the room, picking up pieces of a shattered lamp.

Kayson suddenly looked up, a strange, feverish light in his eyes. “She’s doing it to punish me.”

Leo froze. “Sir?”

“She loved me for nine years,” Kayson said, more to himself than to Leo, a desperate mantra. “She can’t just stop. This is all a game. A test. She’s trying to make me jealous, to make me regret everything, to make me fight for her.”

He struggled to his feet, a twisted, determined smile forming on his lips. “She wants to play? Fine. We’ll play. She thinks marrying Garrett Thornton means she’s won? I’ll show her. I’ll show her that in the end, she’ll come crawling back to me.”

He stared down at the smiling girl in the photograph. “I’ll make her beg me to take her back.”

Leo watched his boss, a cold knot of fear in his stomach. This wasn’t a man fighting for love. This was a man descending into madness.

For the rest of the day, Kayson locked himself inside his office. He refused to eat lunch, shelved all the pending documents that required his signature, and showed absolutely no intention of leaving even after working hours had ended.

When Wyatt Stone finally returned to the company, assistant Leo practically ambushed him, desperate for help. "Mr. Stone," Leo pleaded, his voice hushed. "He's been locked in there with the door shut since this morning. He specifically asked me to bring him an old photo of Amelia, and he's just been sitting there, staring at it all day."

Frowning, Wyatt approached the heavy doors, knocked briefly, and pushed his way into the dim office. The room was shrouded in shadows, the only illumination coming from the city's night sky filtering through the windows. Kayson was still fixated on the photograph on his desk, his eyes vacant yet intense. Hearing the intrusion, he waved a hand impatiently, trying to shoo the visitor away without looking up.

Wyatt didn't leave. Instead, he walked straight over and snatched the photograph from Kayson's grip. "I already knew she married someone else," Wyatt stated bluntly, his voice cutting through the heavy silence. "I figured it out the day she transferred her shares." He looked down at Kayson, a touch of mockery lacing his tone as he demanded, "The real question is, what exactly did you do to make a woman who followed you devotedly for nine years completely give up on you?"

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 44:

Kayson let out a cold, self-deprecating sneer. “Give up? No. She’s doing this purely to humiliate me.”

He began to pace, his mind frantically piecing together a twisted logic. He was absolutely certain that her choice was out of pure spite. “Think about it,” Kayson muttered. “What hurts a rival more than taking his fiancée? There are no real feelings between them. All that public intimacy, the kiss... it’s all just a pathetic act.”

His eyes darkened with a chilling resolve as he convinced himself of his own delusion. “Let her play this childish game. Once her little revenge plot falls apart and she truly crosses the line to anger me, I won’t soften. Even when she comes crying and begging for my forgiveness, I won’t take her back.”

Wyatt frowned, catching the implication. “A rival? Who exactly did she marry?”

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“Garrett Thornton,” Kayson replied confidently, scoffing at the name. “It’s a ridiculously childish move on her part.”

At the mention of that name, Wyatt froze completely. The sarcastic retort died on his lips, his expression shifting into pure shock as he stood there, unable to calm the sudden storm of dread crashing over him for a long time.

Wyatt’s mind flashed back to a charity gala two or three years ago.

Kayson had been restless all evening. Kamila had complained of a “migraine,” and he’d been desperate to leave. He’d abandoned Amelia mid-conversation, leaving her standing alone and mortified, a half-full glass of red wine still in her hand.

Wyatt had been watching from a few tables away. He’d seen the hurt and embarrassment cross Amelia’s face as she set the glass down on a passing waiter’s tray.

He’d also seen who else was watching.

Garrett Thornton.

He had been sitting alone, observing the entire exchange with an expression of detached amusement. As the waiter passed his table, Garrett had casually reached out, plucked Amelia's abandoned glass from the tray, and drained the remaining wine in one smooth, deliberate swallow.

The gesture was audacious—a blatant act of appropriation. A declaration.

The memory sent a chill down Wyatt's spine. This wasn't a recent development. Garrett Thornton's interest in Amelia had been a long, patient game. Wyatt decided to bury this unsettling revelation deep in his heart and keep it a secret.

Wyatt tried to soothe him. "Kayson, you don't need to dwell on this. Getting rid of Amelia has been your greatest wish for a long time, hasn't it? Think about it—this is the best of both worlds. You're finally free."

Hearing this, Kayson's ragged breathing slowed. He barely managed to suppress his chaotic emotions, forcing himself into a fragile state of calm.

Just then, Kayson's personal phone buzzed on his desk. A multimedia message from Garrett Thornton.

He snatched it up, his movements jerky and violent, ready to smash it. He assumed it was more spam, more gossip.

He tapped the screen.

And his world stopped.

His breath hitched. His pupils contracted to pinpricks. The blood drained from his face, leaving it a waxy, skeletal mask.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 45:

On the screen was a high-resolution photograph—a marriage certificate. But what struck Kayson like a physical blow was the date printed clearly on the document. The date of registration was the exact same day he had stood Amelia up for their wedding.

Amelia's elegant, familiar signature was intertwined with the bold, aggressive scrawl of Garrett Thornton's. It was undeniable. It was final.

A sound tore from Kayson's throat—a guttural, inhuman noise of pure agony.

With a final, explosive roar, he hurled the phone with all his might against the far wall. It shattered on impact, the screen exploding, components scattering across the floor like shrapnel.

The violence seemed to drain him of all strength. He slid down the wall, his legs giving out beneath him, and collapsed onto the expensive carpet in a heap.

Wyatt stared, frozen in horror. He had seen Kayson angry, arrogant, and cruel. He had never, ever seen him broken.

Meanwhile, after finishing lunch and a shopping trip with Tatum, Amelia returned alone to The Elysian Towers.

Garrett was still out, supposedly working overtime.

As she entered the penthouse, she noticed Mrs. Ingram, the housekeeper, preparing to leave for the day. Curious, Amelia asked why she didn't live on the premises.

"Oh, I only come in during the day to clean and manage things," Mrs. Ingram said with a polite smile. "Mr. Thornton doesn't like having outsiders living with him. To be completely honest, ma'am, you are the very first woman he has ever brought home."

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Amelia blinked, surprised by the revelation. She couldn't help but probe further. "Mrs. Ingram, has Garrett... never had any physical contact with other women?"

Mrs. Ingram was only the housekeeper and knew little about Garrett's private romantic life. But she guessed Amelia was asking about his dating history, so she quickly thought of a way to help Garrett out.

"Absolutely! He has never touched another woman besides you—I can swear to that!"

Amelia's mouth fell open in shock.

Could he really have some sort of psychological issue that made him uncomfortable around women? If that was the case, she ought to keep her distance from him going forward.

The sharp crack of billiard balls echoed through the hushed, wood-paneled game room of the exclusive St. James Club.

Garrett leaned over the green felt, lining up a shot. He missed. The cue ball grazed the seven, sending it spinning uselessly away from the pocket.

He straightened up, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face.

He couldn't focus.

His fingertips still tingled with the phantom sensation of Amelia's lips. The memory of the kiss—the taste of her, the way her body had yielded against his—was a persistent, distracting heat under his skin. It left him with a strange, unfamiliar restlessness. A low-grade irritation he couldn't shake.

His friend, Kian Sinclair, clapped him on the shoulder, a wide grin on his face. "Hey, man, your head's not in the game today. Still thinking about your mystery bride?"

Garrett didn't answer. He just took a long swallow of his whiskey, the amber liquid doing nothing to cool the fire in his blood. His gaze was distant, lost in a memory less than twenty-four hours old.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 46:

Just then, the door to the game room swung open. Wyatt Stone stumbled in, his tie askew, his face pale and drawn. He looked like he'd been on a multi-day bender, and he made a beeline for the bar.

Kian recognized him immediately. He sauntered over, clapping Wyatt on the back with a little too much force. "Wyatt! What brings you here? Your boss is the talk of the town today. Front-page news."

Wyatt managed a weak, bitter smile and downed a shot of tequila in one gulp. "Don't even start. He's driving me insane."

Kian's curiosity was piqued. He leaned in, his voice conspiratorial. "So, what's the deal with this Amelia Frye? What's she got that can make Kayson Edwards lose his mind like that?"

Wyatt's eyes darted nervously toward the far end of the room, where Garrett was idly chalking his cue. He lowered his voice to a near-whisper.

"She doesn't go by Frye anymore," he said, his voice heavy with defeat. "She goes by Thornton."

The cheerful grin on Kian's face froze, then shattered.

His head whipped around to look at Wyatt, eyes wide with disbelief. Then he spun back to stare at Garrett.

Garrett was leaning against the pool table, seemingly oblivious to their conversation. But Kian knew him. He knew that relaxed posture was a lie. He had heard every word.

A roaring sound filled Kian's ears. It was the sound of his brain short-circuiting.

He stormed across the room, his movements jerky with shock. “You married Kayson Edwards’s woman?” he yelled, his voice cracking. “Are you insane?”

Garrett slowly lifted his head, his eyes lazy and unconcerned. He corrected him, his voice dangerously soft.

“No,” he said. “I married my woman.”

The simple, possessive statement shut Kian up cold. He stared at Garrett, speechless. Then he fumbled for his phone and rushed to a corner, frantically dialing.

The call connected almost immediately. “Chaim? You are not going to believe this...” Kian’s voice was a frantic, jumbled mess as he relayed the impossible news.

On the other end of the line, Chaim Petersen was silent for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was unnervingly calm. “I know,” he said, and hung up.

Chaim’s placid reaction sent a fresh wave of unease through Kian. This was bigger, more complicated than he had imagined.

Garrett ignored Kian’s meltdown. He set his cue stick back on the rack and reached for his jacket.

Kian intercepted him, blocking his path. “Where are you going?”

“Home,” Garrett said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Home? For what?” Kian pressed, bewildered. “You’ve never come home this early. Ever. At this hour, you’d either be working overtime, away on business, or at some social engagement.”

Garrett’s steps faltered.

An image flashed in his mind, unbidden. Amelia at the breakfast table that morning, her head bowed, her small hand wrapped around a glass of milk. The way the morning light had caught in her hair.

He froze.

He’d never felt this before. This... pull. This urgent, pressing need to return to a place simply because someone was there. Waiting for him.

The feeling was so foreign, so powerful, it momentarily stunned him.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 47:

He didn't answer Kian. He just brushed past him, his pace quickening, leaving his friend staring after him in stunned silence.

The click of the key in the lock made Amelia's entire body go rigid.

She was sitting on the living room floor, surrounded by sketches and fabric swatches from her design portfolio. She had been trying to lose herself in work, to build a plan for her new, independent life. Anything to stop thinking about Garrett.

The door swung open. He was home. Hours earlier than usual.

He stepped inside, shrugging off his jacket and tossing it onto a chair. His tie was already loosened, the top button of his shirt undone. He looked... domestic. It was deeply unsettling.

He stopped when he saw her, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. Then his expression smoothed over. "What are you working on?" he asked, his voice neutral.

Amelia clutched her laptop to her chest like a shield. Her heart beat a fast, nervous rhythm against her ribs. "Just... preparing some materials. For job interviews."

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Garrett's gaze dropped from her face to the open laptop, to the portfolio spread across the floor.

A small, almost imperceptible frown creased the space between his brows.

Garrett walked toward her, his steps silent on the thick rug. He stopped just in front of her, casting a long shadow over her work.

“Does the wife of a Thornton need to work?” he asked. His tone was flat, devoid of emotion, but the question hung in the air like a judgment.

A spark of defiance ignited in Amelia’s chest. She felt the sting of being dismissed, of being categorized. She lifted her chin, her eyes meeting his directly.

“Amelia Frye does,” she said, her voice quiet but firm.

Her stubbornness seemed to surprise him. He studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. The silence stretched, and Amelia braced herself for an argument, for another display of his controlling nature.

Instead, he gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. “What would you like for dinner?”

The sudden retreat caught her off guard. A wave of relief washed over her, but it was quickly followed by a fresh surge of suspicion. This wasn’t a surrender. It was a tactic. He was trying a different approach, a softer form of control. It made her even more wary.

In his sleek downtown office, Kian Sinclair paced like a caged tiger. “I don’t get it, Chaim! Why are you so calm? Garrett married the enemy! She has to be a corporate spy. A Trojan horse sent by Kayson!”

Chaim Petersen leaned back in his leather chair, calmly polishing his glasses. “And you think Garrett, who vets his baristas, wouldn’t know? Don’t forget who he is.”

Kian deflated, but his anxiety surged back. “Fine! Not a spy. Then she’s a gold digger! After his money, his name! A woman who spent nine years with Kayson Edwards is not some innocent. We have to go see for ourselves. We have to check her out.”

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex’s Rival

Chapter 48:

Chaim sighed, placing his glasses back on. He studied his friend’s frantic state. “Alright,” he finally conceded. “A visit might be in order. If only to set your mind at ease.”

Back at the penthouse, Amelia stepped out of the en-suite bathroom, a plush white towel wrapped tightly around her body. Steam billowed out behind her, smelling of lavender and soap.

She stopped dead. She'd forgotten to grab a change of clothes. Her underwear was in the walk-in closet, inside the master bedroom. The bedroom door was slightly ajar.

She listened. The apartment was silent. Garrett must be in his study.

She tiptoed into the bedroom, her bare feet silent on the cool hardwood floor. She slipped into the walk-in closet, and the automatic lights flickered on.

She quickly found what she was looking for: a simple set of black lace underwear. As she picked it up, a sudden draft swept through the apartment. The bedroom door, which hadn't been latched properly, swung wide open with a soft thud.

At that exact moment, Garrett was walking down the hallway, a glass of water in his hand.

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His stride faltered. He stopped.

His eyes met hers.

Amelia froze, one hand clutching the towel at her chest, the other holding the delicate wisp of black lace. The scene was frozen in time, a tableau of shock and accidental intimacy.

Garrett's gaze, hot and immediate, dropped from her wide, startled eyes down the bare, damp skin of her shoulder to the towel that barely concealed her body. Then his eyes fixed on the black lace in her hand.

His throat worked in a single, convulsive swallow. The air in the hallway seemed to thicken, to crackle with a sudden, raw electricity. His eyes, which had been cool and controlled moments before, were now dark, molten, and blazing with a stark, predatory hunger.

The raw possessiveness in his gaze terrified her.

A small scream escaped her lips. She scrambled backward, slamming the closet door shut.

She leaned against the wood, her heart hammering against her ribs so hard she thought she might pass out. She could hear his breathing from the other side of the door, harsh and ragged. Then came the sound of retreating footsteps, quick and heavy.

A moment later, she heard the rush of water from the main bathroom. A cold shower.

Her face was burning, a blush so hot it felt like a fever. But then a thought, cold and sharp, cut through her embarrassment.

His reaction... it was so extreme. So violent. He hadn't tried to come closer; he had fled. He had needed cold water to calm himself down.

It all clicked into place. His intense, possessive stares. And now this—this panicked retreat from a moment of potential intimacy.

Her conclusion landed with the force of a physical blow.

He wasn't just turned on. He was terrified.

He had a severe intimacy disorder. He craved closeness—the way he looked at her proved that—but he was pathologically afraid of it. The physical reality of it sent him into a panic.

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 49:

The “discovery” filled her with a strange, dizzying mix of pity and fear. She felt a pang of sympathy for this powerful, broken man. But the fear was stronger.

She had to be so, so careful. She couldn't provoke him. She couldn't trigger his condition. For her own safety, she had to maintain an absolute physical distance.

As she stood there, trembling with her new, terrifying understanding, the doorbell chimed through the apartment.

Garrett's voice, tight and hoarse, called out from the living room. “Who is it?”

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“It's us! Open up!” Kian Sinclair's loud, impatient voice boomed through the door.

Amelia's stomach plummeted. She quickly dressed, her hands shaking. She heard the front door open, heard the sound of male voices in the living room.

With a sense of impending doom, she opened her bedroom door.

Kian and Chaim were standing in the living room. And Kian's eyes, like searchlights, were fixed directly on her, filled with open hostility and suspicion.

Kian completely ignored Garrett. He strode directly toward Amelia, his eyes raking over her from head to toe. It wasn't an appreciative glance; it was an assessment, a cold, invasive evaluation of a piece of property.

He stopped in front of her, a contemptuous sneer twisting his lips.

"It's really you," he said, his voice dripping with disdain. "Tell me, what's your motive for seducing Garrett? Are you doing this for Kayson?"

The insult landed like a slap. Amelia's face hardened, but she held his gaze, refusing to show weakness.

A voice, cold as a winter lake, cut in from behind her. "Kian. Watch your mouth."

Kian spun around to face Garrett, his face flushed with righteous anger. He jabbed a finger in Amelia's direction. "She's playing you! What did she do to trick you? Did Kayson put you up to this? Did he send you to ruin Garrett?"

His accusations were loud, deliberately humiliating. Chaim moved to put a restraining hand on his arm, but Kian shook him off.

Amelia's heart sank. She had expected his friends to be wary, but not this. Not this raw shaming. She clenched her fists, her short nails digging into her palms, preparing to defend herself.

But before she could speak, Garrett moved.

In one fluid motion, he stepped in front of her, placing his body between her and his friend. His tall frame was an impenetrable wall.

He didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. The quiet menace in his tone was more terrifying than any shout.

"Say that again."

The threat was unmistakable. Kian was momentarily stunned by his friend's ferocity, but he was too worked up to back down. "She's trouble, man! Are you going to throw away our friendship for her?"

The last trace of warmth vanished from Garrett's eyes.

He lunged forward, grabbed the collar of Kian's expensive shirt, and slammed him back against the wall.

Thud.

The sound of impact echoed through the silent room. Chaim gasped. Amelia stared, her heart frozen in her chest.

Garrett's face was inches from Kian's, his expression murderous. He spoke through clenched teeth, each word a shard of ice.

"Listen to me very carefully, Kian Sinclair."

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Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 50:

“First. Her name is not Amelia Frye. It is Amelia Thornton. My wife.”

“Second. She is my choice. It is not your place, or anyone else's, to pass judgment on her.”

“Third, and last,” he said, his grip tightening, causing Kian's face to flush a dark, mottled red, “if I ever hear another disrespectful word about her come out of your mouth, our friendship is over. Do you understand?”

The only sound in the dead-silent apartment was Kian's ragged, choked breathing.

Chaim finally broke out of his stupor and rushed forward to pull at Garrett's arm.
“Garrett, stop! He's just worried about you!”

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Garrett released his grip abruptly. Kian slumped to the floor, clutching his throat, coughing and gasping for air.

Garrett calmly straightened his cuffs, his composure returning as if a switch had been flipped. But his eyes remained glacial.

He looked down at the pathetic figure on the floor. “Now take your foolishness and get out of my house.”

Kian’s face was a mask of shock, hurt, and disbelief. He looked from Garrett to Amelia, who still stood behind him, perfectly shielded.

He scrambled to his feet without another word and fled the apartment.

Chaim let out a long, weary sigh. “You were too harsh, Garrett.” He then turned to Amelia, addressing her for the first time.

He gave a polite, formal nod. “Mrs. Thornton. My apologies for the scene.” His tone was detached, clinical.

With that, he too turned and left, presumably to chase after Kian.

The heavy door clicked shut, leaving Amelia and Garrett alone in the tense, echoing silence.

Amelia stared at his back, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. The raw, uncompromising way he had defended her, the absolute finality of his protection, was something she had never experienced. It was breathtaking.

But the violence... the speed with which he had resorted to it, the cold fury in his eyes as he choked his best friend...

It was terrifying.

And it confirmed everything she had just concluded. He wasn't just protective. He was dangerously unstable. His reaction wasn't about love; it was about defending a possession.

The click of the lock echoed through the dead-silent living room.

Amelia stood there, her heart still racing from the evening's events, but not from fear. She didn't know what to say, what to do.

Garrett turned his back to her. He walked to the wet bar, poured a measure of whiskey into a crystal tumbler, and took a slow sip, sighing quietly to release the tension.

He set the glass down with a soft clink and turned to face her. His eyes, dark but surprisingly gentle when they found hers, held her gaze.

The silence stretched, warm and intimate. Amelia couldn't bear it. She spoke first, her voice barely a whisper. "You... you shouldn't have done that. He's your friend."

He started walking toward her.

Slowly. Reassuringly.

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