

# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 61:

“Apologize to her, right now,” Kayson commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument. Leo tried to step in again to defend Amelia, but Kayson shot him a ferocious glare that instantly silenced him. No one else in the crowd dared to make a sound.

A wave of self-mockery washed over Amelia. She regretted every ounce of her wasted devotion over the past nine years, disgusted with herself for even harboring a fleeting moment of reluctance just seconds ago.

Her eyes were completely dead as she looked at him. “If I apologize, can I leave?” she asked calmly.

The question caught Kayson off guard, leaving him momentarily speechless.

Just as Amelia took a breath, preparing to utter the apology, a low, magnetic male voice drifted in from the entrance.

“My wife doesn’t need to apologize to anyone.”

The world seemed to stop. Kayson and Amelia both froze, turning their heads in unison.

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Garrett Thornton walked into the lobby, stepping out of the snowy night with a black umbrella in hand. Dressed in a dark, impeccably tailored suit, he exuded an aura of profound, unapproachable nobility.

He parted the crowd of stunned onlookers and walked straight to Amelia's side. Ignoring the chaotic scene, he gently took her freezing hands into his warm grasp. With meticulous care, he adjusted her collar to shield her neck from the draft, his voice incredibly soft and tinged with reproach. "Why didn't you wear more layers? You'll catch a cold like this."

The moment Amelia saw him, the rigid control she was clinging to shattered. Her shoulders slumped in relief. A sharp, stinging sensation burned behind her eyes.

She shook her head, her fingers instinctively reaching out and clutching a fistful of his suit jacket.

That small, dependent gesture was the final twist of the knife for Kayson. A jolt of raw, primitive jealousy shot through him. His eyes turned red.

Standing nearby, Kamila saw Garrett, and the color drained from her face. She knew, with sickening certainty, that her plan had just exploded.

The lobby was buzzing. The plot twist was too shocking, too delicious. Edwards's ex was Thornton's wife?

Garrett gently wrapped his fingers around Amelia's freezing hand, his touch warm and undeniably intimate to anyone watching. In an instant, the helplessness and grievance that had suffocated her just moments ago vanished into thin air.

Kayson stared at the hand Garrett was holding, at the possessive way his fingers were intertwined with Amelia's. His vision swam. The blood pounded in his ears, a frantic, desperate drumbeat.

Garrett's expression turned instantly frosty. His sharp gaze cut toward Kayson. "Care to explain why you are publicly making things difficult for my wife?" he demanded, his voice echoing with a chilling authority.

Kamila was the first to recover. She squirmed out of Kayson's slackened hold, shock evident in her eyes before her actress instincts took over. She turned toward Garrett and Amelia, her face a mask of tear-streaked innocence.

"Mr. Thornton, you're misunderstanding," she pleaded softly. "Amelia is just... upset. Please don't let her fool you. She's just throwing a tantrum and casually entangling herself with other men out of spite..."

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She was trying to reframe the assault, painting Amelia as a promiscuous, vindictive woman while making herself and Kayson the victims.

Amelia could tolerate being slandered herself, but hearing Kamila smear Garrett's name ignited a fire within her. She opened her mouth to fiercely defend him, but Garrett raised a hand, gently stopping her.

Garrett let out a short, sharp sound that wasn't quite a laugh. It was a sound of pure, icy dismissal. "Is that so?" he asked. His eyes, sharp and merciless, settled directly on Kamila. A flicker of cruel amusement danced in their depths. "Or were you the one who actively leaned in to get slapped?"

The icy smile on his face left Kamila completely speechless. The blood drained from her face, her carefully constructed performance shattering.

Seeing Kamila falter, Kayson immediately stepped forward to shield her. “Amelia hit her, and she needs to apologize!” he insisted stubbornly. Then, trying to ruin Garrett’s reputation in front of the crowd, he brought up a past grievance. “And you, Thornton—you’re just using the project bidding to exact personal revenge! You forced Kristen to apologize, and now you’re backing Amelia just to mess with my family!”

Amelia stepped forward excitedly to refute his ridiculous claims, but Garrett smoothly pulled her back into the safe, comforting harbor of his arms.

“Carlisle’s building materials failed the quality inspection,” Garrett explained calmly, his tone casual but carrying the weight of absolute authority. “That is why you lost the bid. As for today, I am simply seeking justice for my wronged wife.”

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Every word was perfectly reasoned, hitting Kayson so hard that he was left utterly speechless.

Yet Kayson gritted his teeth, refusing to back down. “Amelia still raised her hand. She owes Kamila an apology.”

Before Amelia could even react, the whispers in the lobby shifted. Several employees who had witnessed the entire ordeal finally stepped forward to restore the truth. “That’s not what happened!” one of them called out. “Kamila grabbed Amelia’s hand and slapped her own face with it!”

The looks of judgment aimed at Amelia now turned into a barrage of accusations against Kamila. “How manipulative,” someone muttered. “She set her up.”

Panic-stricken, Kamila hastily hid behind Kayson, frantically trying to whisper her innocence, but the crowd’s scorn was palpable.

Garrett looked at Kayson, his voice dangerously soft. “I suggest you get your facts straight before jumping to conclusions. And if there is ever any further harassment directed at my wife, I assure you, I will not show any mercy.”

With that, Garrett squeezed Amelia’s hand, preparing to lead her away.

But Kayson couldn’t let it end like this. He felt the dozens of pairs of eyes on him, the humiliation a physical weight crushing him. The last vestiges of his reason burned away. He made the worst possible decision.

He ignored Kamila. He ignored the crowd. He stepped forward and blocked their path. He locked his eyes on Amelia, his voice a raw, desperate plea laced with a threat.

“Amelia. Come here.”

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She looked back at him, and he saw nothing in her eyes. No anger, no love, no pain. Just a vast, weary emptiness.

Her stillness drove him over the edge. He raised his voice, a gambler betting his last chip. “I’m giving you one last chance. Him, or me. You walk out of here with him, and the nine years we had... they’re over. For good.”

He thought the weight of their history, the “nine years,” was a chain he could still use to pull her back.

He was wrong.

Hearing those words, Amelia smiled. It wasn't a happy smile. It was a smile of pure, unburdened relief. The smile of a prisoner whose chains had just been broken.

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She didn't answer him.

She didn't have to.

She simply turned her head, looked up at the man standing beside her, and said softly, “Let's go.”

The choice, made with two quiet words, was more final than any scream, more definitive than any argument.

A genuine, triumphant smile finally broke across Garrett's lips.

He squeezed her hand, his grip firm and reassuring. Without another glance at the wreckage he was leaving behind, he turned and led her toward the revolving glass doors. The crowd parted for them as if by magic.

Their silhouettes, one tall and powerful, the other slender but resolute, were framed for a moment against the city lights—a portrait of victory.

Kayson stood frozen, watching them go. He felt as if all the bones had been removed from his body. He was hollow.

He had lost. He had lost in a way he hadn't even known was possible.

Kamila watched him, her face a mask of venomous hatred. She looked from Kayson's shattered expression to Amelia's departing back, and her hands clenched into fists.

The glass doors swished shut behind Amelia and Garrett, sealing off the past.

Outside, the cool Chicago night air hit Amelia's face. It was cold, but it felt like the first clean breath she had taken in a decade.

It felt like freedom.

Garrett's suit jacket was still draped over her shoulders, carrying his warmth.

The elevator doors slid shut, severing them from the chaos of the lobby.

Yet Amelia's mind was still trapped in that final moment downstairs. When Kayson had cornered her, demanding she choose between them, she had simply stood there, gazing at him.

Under the soft hotel lights, his face had merged with the boy from her youth.

The memories had surged unbidden—the agonizing day her secret crush diary was publicly posted and humiliated, the biting mockery from Kristen, and Kayson, gentle and composed, handing back the torn pages while advising her to focus on her studies.

That single act of kindness had tethered her to him for nine long years.

But tonight, she realized that long-suffering love had finally, irrevocably died. She had given him no answer, turning her back and walking away with Garrett. She knew her retreating silhouette had thoroughly shattered whatever delusions Kayson still harbored.

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Now, encased in the small, silent box of polished bronze, Amelia could smell the faint, clean scent of his aftershave mixed with something else, something uniquely him—a hint of expensive wool and cold night air. Her heart, which had been pounding with adrenaline, now beat a different, more unsteady rhythm.

She stared at the tips of her shoes, acutely aware of the man beside her. The fierce warrior who had faced down Kayson and Kamila had vanished, leaving her feeling suddenly small.

She bit her lip, deciding it was best to say nothing until they reached her floor.

Ding. The elevator arrived.

She practically bolted out, eager for the safety of her room. She swiped her key card, the green light flashing, and pushed the door open.

Instead of saying goodnight at the threshold, she found Garrett following her naturally inside, closing the door behind him. The sudden intimacy of the enclosed hotel room made her breath hitch.

“Why did you suddenly show up here?” she asked, her curiosity finally winning out over her nerves.

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“I’m here to attend the summit,” Garrett replied smoothly, taking in the layout of the room.

“Well... thank you,” she said, her voice softening. “For stepping in and bailing me out down there.” The memory of his large, warm hand enveloping hers suddenly flared in her mind, making her feel unexpectedly self-conscious. A flush crept up her neck. Desperate to change the subject, she blurted out, “I’m—I’m just going to get some water. The bathroom is over there if you need it.”

The atmosphere in the room settled into a heavy, charged silence. Amelia retreated to the kitchenette, chugging down a glass of cold water to soothe her parched throat and awkwardness.

Meanwhile, Garrett walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window, his phone buzzing in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered the call.

As he spoke in low tones, Amelia couldn't help but steal covert glances at him over the rim of her glass. His broad shoulders, narrow waist, and the commanding posture of his tall, muscular frame were undeniably captivating. It was a shame, she thought with a silent, pitying sigh.

Such a perfect physical specimen, yet plagued with psychological intimacy issues. He was a feast for the eyes, but strictly untouchable.

On the other end of the line, Casey's crisp, professional voice reported, "Sir, your exclusive presidential suite has been fully prepared and is ready for your arrival."

Garrett was about to acknowledge it when his eyes caught a reflection in the dark glass of the window. Behind him, Amelia was staring at his back, her gaze fixed and entirely unguarded. A cunning glint flashed in his eyes.

"What do you mean there are no rooms available?" Garrett suddenly barked, his voice dripping with manufactured annoyance.

Casey paused, utterly bewildered. “Sir? I just said your suite is—”

“I don’t want to hear excuses about the summit booking everything up!” Garrett interrupted harshly, putting on a flawless performance of a weary, frustrated executive. “Figure it out, Casey.” He hung up the phone abruptly, not letting his subordinate utter another word.

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Chapter 65:

He turned around, sighing heavily, the perfect picture of a man at the end of a very trying day. “It seems my impromptu arrival caused a logistical nightmare. The hotel is completely booked. I don’t have a room.”

Amelia stood by the counter, holding her empty glass. A sliver of suspicion pricked at her. It was all a little too convenient.

But Garrett's performance was flawless. The frustration in his eyes, the tired slump of his shoulders—it was utterly convincing.

And he had just rescued her. He had stood up for her, defended her, and publicly claimed her in a way that had finally, blessedly, severed her from Kayson. To turn him away now, after all that, felt ungrateful. Churlish.

Her own flawed diagnosis of him sealed the deal. He has intimacy issues, she reminded herself. He wasn't trying to get into her bed. He was just a man without a reservation who needed a place to crash. He was safe.

That single, erroneous thought made her lower her guard.

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She wrestled with herself for a moment longer, then let out a small, resigned sigh. "My suite has a living room," she offered proactively, her voice steady. "The sofa should be big enough."

A triumphant glint flashed in Garrett's eyes, so fast she might have imagined it. He quickly replaced it with a look of reluctant acceptance.

“That’s very gracious of you, Mrs. Thornton,” he said, the formal address sounding strange in this context.

He moved toward the living area as if he owned it, his long-legged gait eating up the space.

Amelia watched him for a second, a sinking feeling in her stomach that she had just willingly invited the wolf over the threshold. She shook her head to clear the thought.

She retrieved a spare pillow and a duvet from the bedroom closet and tossed them onto the living room sofa with a bit more force than was necessary.

Garrett glanced at the sofa, which was clearly too short for his six-foot-three frame, and then back at her.

He raised an eyebrow and said in a soft, feigned aggrieved tone, “This sofa is a bit cramped, but it’s fine. I can make do for one night. I’m just afraid I might tumble off in the middle of the night and disturb your rest.”

“Well then...” Amelia looked at his pitiful display, a twinge of compassion stirring inside her. She glanced toward the bed beside her and hesitated before speaking. “Do you want to sleep with me?” The words had barely left her lips when a faint blush crept across her cheeks. She chided herself inwardly, realizing it sounded just like an ambiguous invitation.

A slow, profound smile tugged at Garrett’s lips. He murmured, “Very well. You truly have the softest heart.”

Outside, a heavy snowstorm howled, the fierce wind battering the glass. Kayson sat in the dark, the only light coming from the city glow beyond his window. He poured another glass of whiskey, the amber liquid sloshing over the rim. Empty bottles littered the floor around his chair like fallen soldiers.

His mind was a torment of his own making, conjuring images of Amelia actively offering to let Garrett stay the night.

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A soft knock came at the door. It was his subordinate, Leo, looking pale and nervous.

“Mr. Edwards,” the young man began, his voice hesitant but carrying a heavy implication. “Our people at the hotel... they just reported that... Mr. Thornton went into Ms. Frye’s suite. And he hasn’t come out. The lights in their room have already been turned off.”

The implicit, ambiguous speculation in Leo’s words pierced Kayson sharply. He gripped his whiskey glass so tightly that his knuckles turned a stark, bone-white.

He imagined Amelia waking up startled in the night, afraid she might unconsciously cling to Garrett in her deep sleep, while Garrett slept soundly beside her, his refined profile illuminated by the dim light.

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Taking a deep breath, Leo risked stepping forward to clarify the truth. “Sir, about what happened in the lobby... it was Kamila who actively leaned in to take the hit. Ms. Frye’s strike was purely an accidental slip of the hand. I’m saying this because I remember how much Ms. Frye helped me in the past, and I can’t bear to see her wronged.”

But Kayson, stubbornly clinging to his anger, insisted that raising a hand was a fault in itself. “That’s enough. Get out.” He harshly interrupted Leo’s defense.

Before turning to the door, Leo looked at him with blunt disappointment. “I misjudged you, Mr. Edwards. I thought you were just stubborn with your words, but you’ve never truly considered or understood Amelia.”

Leo braced himself for an explosion. Instead, Kayson laughed.

The bathroom door swung open. Kamila stepped out after her shower.

Leo glanced down uncomfortably at her bare legs beneath the oversized white shirt. He had earlier suggested giving up his own room and bunking with someone else so Kamila could have a private space, but Kayson had refused the idea and instead let Kamila stay in his personal suite.

Leo lowered his head and left the room.

“What’s wrong? Why did he leave as soon as he saw me?” Kamila padded barefoot across the floor, her smooth, rounded toes pressing against the top of her feet, looking flustered and uneasy.

Kayson tossed back a mouthful of wine, his Adam’s apple bobbing heavily. His voice carried a crushing weight. “Nothing. Go get some rest.”

“Kayson.” Kamila walked over to him without shoes. She stood a full head shorter, forced to crane her neck to meet his gaze. “Was that Garrett Thornton earlier? Do you know why my sister married him?”

He knew. How could he not?

If only he hadn't gone to find Kamila that day. If only he hadn't spoken so harshly over the phone. If only... But there were no second chances.

Amelia was now undeniably married to Garrett Thornton, his greatest rival. He'd begged her to come back, softened his attitude toward her countless times, yet she'd made up her mind to leave him for good.

He was powerless to change anything. The mere thought of it packed damp sand tight in his chest, making every breath an ache.

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## Chapter 67:

“They got married the exact day I failed to show up at the civil affairs bureau.” Kayson suppressed his turbulent emotions and replied in a quiet, gentle tone.

“What?!” Shock flooded Kamila’s face.

So Amelia had been telling the truth about her marriage and their breakup. She hadn’t ended up with Kayson—she’d wed Garrett instead. Her legs buckled, her body swaying unsteadily, and she nearly collapsed to the floor.

Kayson quickly reached out, catching Kamila just as she swayed and almost fell.

“I’m so sorry, Kay,” she whispered, feigning deep guilt as she leaned against him. “If I hadn’t dragged you down and made you miss getting the marriage certificate, Amelia wouldn’t have impulsively married someone else. I just want to make it up to you...”

But internally, a toxic resentment churned. She simply couldn’t accept that Amelia’s new husband was Garrett Thornton.

Kamila knew all too well that Garrett possessed a superior family background, striking looks, and a career that had consistently overshadowed Kayson's for years. A fierce, burning jealousy consumed her.

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She'd gone to endless trouble and schemed relentlessly to stop Kayson and Amelia from marrying—not so Amelia could marry someone far more outstanding and flaunt her happiness in front of her.

She pressed her forehead against the cold, floor-to-ceiling window. The glass did nothing to cool the fire raging inside her.

Her life flashed before her eyes, a series of humiliating vignettes all starring Amelia.

She remembered their childhood. For more than a decade, Amelia had been little more than a maid raised by the housekeeper.

When Kamila took piano and riding lessons, Amelia could only stand outside the classrooms holding her bags. Yet Amelia possessed an extraordinary natural talent.

Just by sneaking glances at a few lessons, she could play an entire piece flawlessly in one go. Even the teacher praised her, saying she had hands made for the piano. But Amelia never boasted, smiling softly and saying, "You play far better."

Kamila knew Amelia was mocking her.

To punish her, she made Amelia run all the way home behind the car. The road stretched on for miles; Amelia gasped for breath, utterly disheveled, and only when blisters broke open on her feet did Kamila feel satisfied.

Kamila feared horses and had cried many times out of terror, dreading every riding lesson. One day, she left class sniffing, only to spot Amelia stroking a small brown pony. The stable hand spoke warmly to her, “This horse seems to take a real liking to you. Would you like to ride him?”

All the things Kamila strove so hard to attain, Amelia got effortlessly. Why did everything have to be this way?

During their time studying abroad, Amelia easily graduated with stellar academic records, while Kamila, restricted by her congenital physical limitations, could never secure the center position in her dance performances.

For years, she had swallowed the bitter pill of being second best, consoling herself with one single, solitary belief: that in Kayson’s heart, she was the one. The special one. The white moonlight he cherished while he merely tolerated Amelia out of a sense of duty.

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A deep, shuddering breath racked her body. She wiped the tears from her eyes, her expression hardening. The soft, fragile mask dissolved, revealing the cold, hard ambition beneath.

She would not lose.

She turned and walked back to Kayson. He had collapsed onto the sofa, the empty whiskey glass still clutched in his hand, his eyes closed.

She didn't try to comfort him this time. She knelt on the plush carpet beside him, her voice a low, thoughtful murmur.

“Kay,” she began softly. “I was just thinking. Don’t you find it all a bit... strange?”

He didn’t respond, but she knew he was listening.

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“How did Amelia even meet Garrett Thornton?” she mused, as if talking to herself. “She breaks up with you, and the very next day, she’s married to your biggest rival. It’s too fast. Too convenient.”

She was planting the seeds, carefully, methodically. “Would a normal woman really jump into another relationship that quickly? Especially with her ex-fiancé’s enemy?”

She watched his profile, looking for any reaction. “Unless... unless the marriage isn’t real. I am absolutely certain she has an ulterior motive, and there are no true feelings between them.”

His eyelashes flickered. He had always believed the same thing before, but after witnessing their interaction today, his conviction had begun to waver.

A thrill of victory shot through her. Her tone shifted, laced with thinly veiled contempt for her sister. “But Kay, who would truly accept a woman who spent nine years following another man? Did you... were you two ever intimate?”

Kayson’s expression dimmed, his eyes evasive. “Nine years of companionship... it’s impossible not to have entanglements,” he confessed softly. “We slept together for nine years. But Amelia and I are completely over now. You don’t need to blame yourself.”

His words echoed in her mind like a death knell.

We slept together for nine years.

The shrill, insistent ringtone of a phone shattered the quiet morning, dragging Amelia from a deep sleep. It wasn’t her alarm; it was Casey Henderson calling Garrett to wake him for the upcoming three-day Vanguard Summit.

Drowsy and disoriented, Amelia blindly reached out to fumble for her phone to silence the noise. Instead of smooth glass, her hand met warm skin. Her fingers brushed against a firm jawline and, in her clumsy state, she accidentally pinched the tip of Garrett’s nose.

Her eyes snapped open. The realization that they were sharing the same bed hit her like a bucket of ice water. She shot upright, yanking her hand back as if burned. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” she blurted out, her heart hammering in a panicked rhythm.

Garrett stirred, his eyes fluttering open. He silenced his phone and turned to her, his voice rough with sleep. “What’s your schedule looking like today?” he asked casually, ignoring her panic.

Still flustered, Amelia pulled the duvet up to her chest. “I... I have to finalize a proposal with a client this morning,” she stammered.

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To her surprise, Garrett let out a long, exaggerated sigh. “This three-day summit is going to be excruciatingly boring,” he complained, his tone dropping into an unexpected, almost childlike whine. He looked at her, his expression softening. “Once you’re done with your client, come keep me company. Please?”

Amelia blinked, taken aback. She thought about the past few days, remembering how many times Garrett had stepped up to protect her. A sense of reciprocity tugged at her. "Alright," she conceded softly. "I'll come over after I'm done."

A satisfied smirk replaced his pout. He threw off the covers and stood up. Right there, in the middle of the bedroom, he began to untie his bathrobe.

The morning light caught the sharp definition of his chest, the lean, powerful lines of his abdomen, the breadth of his shoulders.

Amelia's face exploded in heat. She hurriedly slapped both hands over her eyes. "What are you doing? Go outside and change!" she squeaked, her voice pitching higher.

A slow, amused chuckle rumbled in Garrett's chest. "What's the matter, Mrs. Thornton? Afraid of what you might see?" he teased, clearly enjoying her turmoil.

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Her ears were burning furiously. From behind her hands, she shot back, "I'm not the one who's cold and unfeeling! I can't just stare at a half-naked man without... without feeling something!"

Garrett paused, his bathrobe hanging off one shoulder. His eyes darkened with a sudden, intense gleam. She wasn't cold? She felt something looking at him? He completely misinterpreted her flustered honesty as a bold, proactive flirtation.

A triumphant smile played on his lips.

He sauntered into the bathroom, leaving her to her chaotic thoughts.

By the time he came out, he was once again the impeccable, untouchable Mr. Thornton, dressed in a sharp, tailored suit.

With their plans for the day settled, she went into the walk-in closet to choose an outfit. He followed, leaning against the doorframe, watching her with an unnerving, predatory stillness.

His gaze made her skin prickle. She moved faster, her hands fumbling slightly. She pulled out a conservative, high-necked black dress. Safe. Professional.

He shook his head slowly. He reached past her, his arm brushing against hers, and pulled a different dress from the rack. It was a deep, wine-red sheath, its cut simple but devastatingly form-fitting.

"Wear this one when you join me later," he said.

“It’s too... much,” she protested immediately.

He stepped closer, holding the dress out to her. His voice dropped, becoming a low, intimate murmur. “Mrs. Thornton, you need to get used to being the center of attention.”

He leaned in, his lips brushing against her ear, his breath warm on her skin. “Besides,” he whispered, his voice laced with a dark, teasing humor, “you saw for yourself last night. I have no ‘interest’ in you, do I? So what are you afraid of?”

His words hit their mark perfectly, playing directly into her flawed diagnosis of him.

She thought he was reassuring her, reminding her that he was “safe.”

Garrett, on the other hand, was deeply intrigued. Stepping back, he caught his reflection in the closet mirror and impulsively snapped a quick selfie. He stared at the photo on his screen, a frown creasing his forehead.

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Chapter 70:

Did he really look like a man with a low libido? Did his face scream “frigid”?

The morning of the Vanguard Summit began with a highly publicized red carpet and opening ceremony. Kayson Edwards made his appearance just ahead of Garrett Thornton.

Beside Kayson was Kamila Carlisle, her arm linked intimately through his. To any outsider, they looked exactly like a couple in love.

Waiting in the backstage VIP lounge, Casey Henderson watched the monitor and sighed at their close relationship.

Garrett, however, merely chuckled with a playful, teasing glint in his eye. “Let them be,” he remarked. “After all, Kayson is practically my ‘brother-in-law’ now.”

Casey was left utterly speechless by his boss's dark humor.

The main hall of the Vanguard Summit was buzzing with the low hum of power.

Instead of walking the red carpet, Garrett walked in through a discreet side entrance, and a hush fell over the room. All eyes turned to him.

In the official seating arrangement, Garrett and Kayson, the two industry titans currently targeted by every media lens, were seated directly adjacent to each other in the front row.

Taking his seat next to Garrett, Kayson looked terrible. He had clearly made an effort—his suit was immaculate, his hair perfectly styled—but the dark circles under his eyes and the unnatural pallor of his skin told a different story.

During a brief pause before the opening remarks, Kayson leaned closer to Garrett, his posture radiating aggression.

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“You really went out of your way to hide your wife today, didn’t you, Thornton?” he mocked, his voice low and venomous. “Skipping the red carpet, keeping her in the shadows... Still unwilling to make your marriage public?”

Garrett didn't even look up. He was calmly adjusting his collar, his movements slow and deliberate. As he did, the collar shifted, revealing a faint, ambiguous red mark on his neck. Kayson's eyes locked onto it, his jaw tightening.

"I prefer to keep what's mine away from prying eyes," Garrett replied, his tone bored. "Unlike you, Edwards. You always have Kamila trailing after you like an idle appendage."

"Kamila is a professional dance theater actress," Kayson shot back defensively, his hands clenching at his sides.

Garrett chuckled softly, effortlessly deflecting the anger. "So quick to defend her. It's quite telling."

Kayson stared at Garrett, who looked impossibly composed and radiant under the summit lights. The contrast made Kayson's own haggard, desolate expression all the more obvious. "You think you've won?" Kayson snarled, his hands clenching at his sides. "I know why you married her. You're just using Amelia to get to me."

At that, Garrett finally looked up. He smiled. It was a slow, pitying smile that made Kayson's blood run cold.

"You flatter yourself," Garrett said softly. "I have been captivated by Amelia long before she stopped being your fiancée. Marrying her was purely out of my own desire. It has absolutely nothing to do with dealing with you."

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To prove his point, Garrett leaned in. “You possessed her for nine years, but you never actually saw her. I know she’s allergic to mangoes. I know that when she sleeps, she likes to clutch the bottom left corner of her pillow. I know she picks at her cuticles when she’s nervous.”

With every detail Garrett listed, his tone utterly casual, the color drained further from Kayson’s face.

He knew some of those things. Others, he had long forgotten.

Desperate, Kayson hissed, “So you’re proud of being the third party? Gloating about coveting another man’s fiancée?”

Garrett’s eyes darkened, his retort razor-sharp. “You’re the one who’s been cheating all along. Isn’t Kamila beside you just the other woman?”

“Watch your mouth, Thornton,” Kayson warned, his voice shaking with rage.

Garrett saw his stunned expression, and his smile widened. He turned back to Kayson for the final, killing blow.

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a low, demonic whisper that struck right at the heart of the matter. “If you had been willing to firmly protect Amelia back then, she would never have turned around and married me so decisively.”

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Kayson sat rigid, a statue carved from ice. The summit’s opening speech began, but Kayson didn’t hear a word.

Amelia was held up mid-meeting with a client. By the time she saw the client off and rushed to the venue, the evening gala was already in full swing. Garrett, who was tied up

exchanging pleasantries with the guests, had sent Casey Henderson to receive her at the entrance.

“Mr. Thornton is expecting you inside, ma’am,” Casey greeted her respectfully, gesturing toward the grand doors.

Dressed in a blush-pink cinched-waist tulle gown, Amelia hurried inside. She hadn’t even had time to properly style her hair, and her heart fluttered with deep unease and self-consciousness.

Inside the grand ballroom, a melodious piano tune floated through the air. Garrett was surrounded by a circle of business elites. The moment he spotted Amelia arriving, he immediately excused himself from the crowd to welcome her.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” his voice rang out clearly across the room. “My wife has arrived.” By publicly addressing her as his wife, he instantly drew the gaze of the entire hall.

Under the sudden weight of a hundred stares, Amelia almost stumbled. “Careful, Mrs. Thornton,” Casey whispered. With Casey’s quick support, she steadied herself and forced a composed facade, making her way toward Garrett.

However, halfway there, she was intercepted by Mr. Sterling, the elderly and affable head of Sterling Corp. Completely unaware of the reality of the situation, he mistakenly assumed Amelia was still Kayson’s fiancée.

He enthusiastically stepped forward to shake her hand. “Amelia, my dear! It’s been too long,” he greeted warmly. “Tell me, when are you and Kayson finally tying the knot? I’m still waiting for my wedding invitation!”

Before Amelia could form a coherent protest, Garrett had already reached her side. He naturally wrapped an arm around her shoulders, a clear and undeniable claim of possession.

Mr. Sterling looked at them in disbelief. “Everyone knows Amelia is Kayson’s fiancée,” he stated bluntly, suspecting the two were playing some kind of elaborate joke on him. “Is this some sort of prank, Mr. Thornton?”

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex’s Rival

Flustered and embarrassed, Amelia desperately tried to step forward to correct the misunderstanding. “Mr. Sterling, please, let me explain—” she started. But Garrett gently yet firmly pressed her back into the protective circle of his embrace.

His expression turned cold and sharp, dripping with possessive authority. “There is no prank, Mr. Sterling,” he sternly informed the older man. “Amelia is my wife. I demand that you, and everyone else in this room, stop tying her name to Kayson’s.”

Unconvinced and feeling his pride slighted, Mr. Sterling scanned the room. Spotting Kayson standing in a corner, he shouted at the top of his lungs, calling him over.

“Kayson!” Mr. Sterling’s voice carried across the entire room. “Come here and clear this nonsense up!”

The music seemed to falter. Conversations died down. The guests stopped their chatter, gathering around to witness this emotional confrontation between two business titans over the same woman. “Did he just say ‘wife’?” someone whispered in the sudden quiet. “What about Kayson?” another muttered.

Kayson, hearing his name, turned. His body went rigid.

Every eye in the room—including Garrett’s cold, calculating gaze—swung to Kayson.

He was trapped. Cornered.

He had two choices. He could publicly admit that his fiancée of nine years had left him and married his arch-nemesis.

Or he could declare war on Garrett Thornton, right here, right now.

He looked at Amelia, so completely enveloped by Garrett, her expression a confusing mix of shock and something else he couldn't decipher. The last, desperate flicker of hope in his heart died.

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He had no ground left to stand on. No claim left to make.

He was on trial, and the verdict was already in.

Time seemed to stretch, thin and taut. With Mr. Sterling's public call echoing in the air, Kayson knew there was nowhere to hide. He could feel the weight of every stare in the room, a physical pressure that made it hard to breathe. The polite curiosity had curdled into a hungry, predatory anticipation. They were waiting for the kill.

He carefully set his fragile whiskey glass down on a nearby table, smoothing his expression as he adjusted his cuffs. He began a slow, deliberate walk toward the center of the room. The guests naturally parted to make way for him, the ambient piano music seemingly shifting into a more rapid, tense melody.

He stopped and looked at Amelia, held fast in Garrett's embrace. Up close, her clear, breathtaking beauty struck him, and for a fleeting moment, he lost himself in the sight of her.

He then looked at Garrett, whose eyes were cold and challenging, the look of a wolf enjoying the final, desperate struggles of its prey.

Seeing Kayson's daze, Garrett spoke up. "Careful, Kayson," he warned, his tone laced with a subtle edge. "Staring like that might just make Kamila rather displeased. We wouldn't want your fiancée getting the wrong idea." It was a calculated move, giving Kayson a dignified step down.

Kayson seized the lifeline, smoothly covering his tracks. "Of course," he chuckled. "I was merely admiring the design. I was actually thinking of purchasing the exact same dress for Kamila."

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 73:

His mind raced, scrambling for an escape route, a way to salvage a single shred of his dignity. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her. Kamila. Standing at the edge of the crowd, her face a pale, anxious mask. She was his only way out. A humiliating, pathetic exit, but an exit nonetheless.

He took a deep breath. He forced his lips into a smile. It felt stiff and unnatural, a rictus of civility.

He raised an empty hand in a placating gesture to the still-confused Mr. Sterling. "You've made quite a mistake, old friend," he said, his voice surprisingly steady.

He paused, letting the drama build, then delivered the line that would sever his past. "My history with Amelia is just that—history. We parted ways a long time ago."

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A collective gasp rippled through the ballroom.

He had admitted it.

Amelia felt a profound, shuddering sense of release. It was over. Truly over.

Garrett's eyes narrowed, a flicker of satisfaction in their depths. But he wasn't finished yet.

Kayson didn't give the crowd time to process. He turned on his heel and moved. He walked through the stunned onlookers, his path straight and deliberate, directly toward Kamila.

Her heart leaped into her throat.

He stopped in front of her. In the shocked silence, he held out his hand.

He turned back to the room, his voice devoid of any warmth, a flat, corporate announcement. "Allow me to introduce you all. This is Kamila Carlisle. My fiancée. When the wedding bells ring, Mr. Sterling, I promise you'll be the first to know."

Kamila froze. A wave of dizzying, disbelieving joy washed over her. The title she had coveted, schemed for, and dreamed of was finally hers. Delivered in the most humiliating circumstances imaginable, but hers all the same.

She placed her trembling hand in his. A triumphant, radiant smile spread across her face.

Kayson led her back to the center of the room, holding her hand aloft like a trophy, a piece of evidence to prove that he had not been discarded.

He had simply traded up. As he did, he secretly observed Amelia's expression. He expected to see some lingering emotion, but her eyes were calm, her heart clearly undisturbed.

The devastating realization hit him: she had completely, irrevocably let him go.

Mr. Sterling began to applaud awkwardly, and a few others joined in, trying to smooth over the excruciating social rupture.

The crisis seemed to be averted.

As the scattered applause for Kayson and his new fiancée filled the room, Garrett noticed Kayson's uncontrolled gaze still tracking Amelia.

He plucked a glass of light red wine from a passing tray and handed it to Amelia. As she took a small sip, her features looking gentle and captivating, Garrett suddenly took the glass from her hand.

Deliberately, he turned the crystal and drank directly from the faint lipstick mark she had left behind. Amelia looked up at him, flustered and confused.

“I have plenty of fine wine at home,” he explained softly, “but I find I prefer the taste from your glass.”

Garrett leaned down to Amelia, his lips brushing against her ear. “Kayson is still stealing glances at you,” he whispered. “If you don’t want the truth of our contract marriage to be exposed right here, you’d better play along.”

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 74:

He pulled back just a fraction, feigning a dark jealousy. “And don’t you dare look back at him.”

He looked into her eyes, his own gaze so deep and intense it felt like it could drown her. “Now,” he murmured, his voice a low, possessive growl meant only for her, “now everyone knows. You belong only to me.”

As the banquet continued, a young, nervous waiter seemed to stumble in that moment.

The waiter’s tray tilted violently. A full glass of red wine arced through the air, splashing directly onto Garrett’s impeccably tailored trousers.

The glass shattered against the marble floor with a sharp crash. The waiter went bone-white with terror, stammering apologies as the dark stain spread across the expensive fabric.

To everyone's surprise, Garrett's expression remained perfectly mild. He didn't explode in rage or berate the trembling young man. Instead, he simply brushed off the worst of the liquid with a calm demeanor.

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He turned to Amelia, his voice gentle. "Wait for me right here. I'll just go to the washroom and clean this up."

"Okay," she nodded, watching him walk away.

As Garrett disappeared down the hallway, a senior staff member rushed over, harshly scolding the waiter for his clumsiness and the broken glass. The surrounding guests whispered, dismissing it as a mere accident.

But Amelia's eyes were sharp. She had caught the subtle, deliberate flick of the waiter's wrist just before the tray tipped. The warmth in her gaze vanished, replaced by a chilling frost.

"Pay for it," she said, her voice dropping to a cold, unyielding register that cut through the staff member's scolding.

The waiter froze, looking up at her in stunned disbelief. "What? But... but that gentleman just now..."

“My husband is easy to talk to,” Amelia interrupted, her tone laced with ice, “but I am not. I will have someone send the compensation bill to you later. Not a penny less.”

Meanwhile, in the men’s washroom, Garrett attempted to wipe the wine from his trousers with a damp paper towel. Realizing the stain was set and simple water wouldn’t suffice, he tossed the towel into the bin and strode briskly out into the corridor.

His path was immediately blocked. Kamila stood there, a smug smile touching her lips.

Garrett’s eyes narrowed. In an instant, the pieces fell into place. The waiter’s unnatural stumble, the targeted spill—it was all her doing.

Unfazed by the sharp glint in his eyes, Kamila stepped closer, her voice dripping with venomous confidence. “You think you’ve won? You think she actually cares about you? Amelia’s marriage to you is nothing but a pathetic scheme to provoke Kayson. She’s just playing a game with you, and you’re the fool falling for it.”

Garrett let out a dry, mocking chuckle. He looked at her as if she were a particularly repulsive insect. “Are you quite finished?” he retorted, his voice laced with heavy sarcasm. He made a move to step around her, utterly uninterested in her desperate attempts at instigation.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 75:

Seeing him dismiss her so easily, Kamila's fury boiled over. She lost whatever shred of composure she had left. "Don't act so high and mighty!" she spat, her face twisting into an ugly sneer. "She spent nine years trailing after Kayson like a dog! She's nothing but used goods, someone else's leftovers, and you're treating her like a prize!"

The words hung in the air, a vile, unforgivable insult.

The mocking amusement vanished from Garrett's face. It was as if a light had been switched off, plunging the corridor into an arctic cold. The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees.

He took a step toward her, his gaze no longer civilized, but feral. “I warned you yesterday,” his voice was a low, terrifying rumble, devoid of any warmth. “I told you I do not show mercy to mean, vicious women. You are utterly devoid of humanity to use such filthy words to slander Amelia.”

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She backed away, her bravado evaporating. “What are you doing?” she stammered, her voice trembling.

Garrett didn’t bother replying. He abandoned all restraint. His hand shot out, grabbing her forcefully by the arm, and he dragged her roughly back into the men’s washroom.

A cry of pain and terror was ripped from her throat as he shoved her toward the sinks.

Before she could draw another breath, he forced her head down, plunging her face directly into a basin still filled with cold water.

The world exploded in a spray of water and a roaring in her ears. She thrashed wildly, her hands clawing at his, but his grip was like iron. Bubbles erupted from her mouth, her lungs burning for air. Muffled, gurgling sounds were the only screams she could manage, completely drowned out by the elegant piano music drifting down the hallway from the banquet hall.

Just as black spots began to dance in her vision, the door to the washroom burst open.

Garrett's assistant, Casey Henderson, stood there, holding a replacement pair of trousers he had brought at Amelia's urgent request. His face contorted into a mask of horror as he took in the violent scene.

"Mr. Thornton, stop! Let her go!" Casey yelled, rushing forward to intervene before it was too late.

Amelia had come with Casey Henderson.

She couldn't enter the men's restroom, so she waited outside. She caught faint noises from inside and leaned forward to peek, only to hear Casey shout out.

Fearing something terrible had happened, she rushed in following the sound. But the moment she stepped one foot inside, her legs froze to the floor as if rooted, unable to move an inch.

For a full second, Amelia's brain refused to process what she was seeing.

The scene was a blur of primal violence. Garrett, his back rigid, his knuckles white as he held a sputtering, thrashing Kamila underwater. The sound of gurgling panic. The sheer, brutal force of it.

Her mind went completely blank.

Casey was the first to react. He lunged forward, grabbing Garrett's arm. "Mr. Thornton, stop!" he yelled, his voice tight with urgency.

The intervention seemed to break the spell. Garrett released his grip, shoving Casey away with a furious snarl.

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## **Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival**

Chapter 76:

Kamila's head broke the surface. She collapsed against the sink, gasping, choking, and vomiting water onto the marble. Her hair was plastered to her face, her expensive makeup running in black rivers down her cheeks. She looked like a drowned thing.

Garrett's chest was heaving. His wild, crimson-tinged eyes found Amelia standing in the doorway. The madness in them didn't recede. If anything, it intensified, mingled with a raw, violent frustration at being seen by her in this state.

"You're a psycho!" Kamila shrieked between ragged coughs, pointing a trembling finger at him. "A complete psycho!"

Her words were like gasoline on a fire.

Garrett's gaze darted around the room, searching for something, anything, to vent the rest of his fury on. His eyes landed on a heavy, thick-bottomed glass tumbler sitting by the sink.

He snatched it.

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Before anyone could move, before Casey could shout another warning, he hurled it at the marble floor.

The sound was like a gunshot. The glass exploded, sending shards skittering across the tiles in every direction.

Amelia flinched back with a small cry.

Garrett didn't hesitate. He bent down, his movements sharp and jerky, and picked up the largest, most jagged piece of glass from the floor. Its edge glinted menacingly under the harsh bathroom lights.

He closed his fist around it.

The sharp edges sliced into his palm. Bright red blood welled up instantly, dripping between his fingers and onto the pristine white floor.

He didn't seem to feel it.

He straightened up, the bloody shard clutched in his hand, and started walking toward Kamila.

She was still slumped on the floor, but at the sight of him advancing, a new wave of terror seized her. She scrambled backward, crab-walking away from him, her words a terrified, incoherent babble. "No... please, don't... I'm sorry..."

Casey's face was pale. He took a step forward, intending to intervene again, but a single, murderous look from Garrett froze him in place.

Garrett's shadow fell over Kamila. He raised his hand, the bloody glass poised to slash down across her face.

In that split second, as Kamila squeezed her eyes shut and let out a piercing scream, something soft and warm wrapped around his raised arm.

Amelia.

She had moved. She hadn't screamed, she hadn't run. She had closed the distance between them and was now clinging to his arm with all her strength.

Her face was pressed against the cold, expensive fabric of his suit jacket. Her voice, when she spoke, was trembling, but it was shockingly clear.

"Garrett. Stop."

He froze, his entire body going rigid. He could feel the warmth of her body, smell the faint, clean scent of her shampoo.

“Look at me.”

Slowly, as if moving through water, he lowered his head. He saw her face, tilted up toward his. Her eyes weren’t filled with the fear or disgust he had expected. They were filled with a deep, complicated, and overwhelming worry.

Her voice softened, becoming almost a whisper, the kind of tone one uses to soothe a wounded, cornered animal.

“It’s enough,” she said. “Let’s go home. Your hand is bleeding.”

She didn’t judge him. She didn’t condemn him. She pointed out his injury.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 77:

The word “bleeding” seemed to pierce through the red haze of his rage. His focus shifted. He looked down at his own hand, at the blood dripping from his clenched fist. Then he looked back at Amelia’s worried eyes.

The wildness in his gaze began to recede, the frantic, dangerous energy slowly draining away. The taut muscles in his shoulders and back started to relax.

Clang.

The bloody piece of glass slipped from his fingers and clattered onto the floor.

Amelia let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She didn’t let go of him. If anything, her grip tightened.

She ignored the whimpering mess that was Kamila. She ignored the stunned relief on Casey’s face. Her entire world had narrowed to the man in front of her.

She took his uninjured hand. “Come on,” she said softly. “I’ll take you to get that cleaned up.”

And for the first time, like a beast that had finally been gentled, he was utterly compliant. He let her lead him, step by step, out of the wreckage of the washroom.

Casey was left behind. He watched them go, then looked at the pathetic, shivering heap of Kamila on the floor. He pulled out his phone, his expression grim, and began making the calls to clean this up.

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Kamila stared after them, her eyes wide with a mixture of disbelief, hatred, and a burning, uncomprehending jealousy.

Why wasn’t she afraid of him?

The silence in the hotel suite was thick and heavy.

Amelia quickly urged Garrett to change into clean clothes first. His injured hand was severe and absolutely could not touch water. Amelia made Garrett sit on the edge of the

plush living room sofa while she retrieved the first-aid kit from her luggage. Her hands were still shaking, a fine, almost invisible tremor.

Garrett sat motionless, watching her. He claimed that he had been wanting to teach Kamila a lesson for a long time, but the last vestiges of the feral rage hadn't completely vanished from his eyes, leaving a dark, brooding, and unreadable expression. He followed her every movement as she knelt on the carpet in front of him and opened the kit.

She pulled out a bottle of iodine, cotton swabs, and a roll of sterile gauze.

"This might sting," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

She gently took his injured hand in hers. The sight of the gash in his palm, deep and angry, made her stomach clench. It was a miracle he hadn't severed a tendon.

She soaked a cotton swab with the iodine. As she dabbed the antiseptic onto the wound, the sharp sting made Garrett's entire body go rigid. He locked his jaw and tightly furrowed his brows, enduring the intense pain, but he made no other sound. He just stared, his gaze hot and intense, not at his hand, but at her face, her downcast eyes, the focused line of her mouth.

She worked carefully, her touch feather-light as she cleaned the wound, her brow furrowed in concentration. The only sounds in the room were the soft rustle of the gauze wrapper and the quiet, uneven rhythm of their breathing.

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 78:

Amelia knew all too well how skilled Kamila was at sowing discord and hurting people with her words. She could easily guess that Kamila must have said something incredibly humiliating about her to spark such a violent conflict.

A profound look of loneliness washed over Amelia's face.

"Why?" she asked, her voice soft but laced with a heavy sigh. "Garrett, I know she must have been slandering my reputation, but we are just a contract couple. You really don't have to stand up for me like that, let alone get hurt because of me. I... I have no way to repay this kind of favor."

Hearing her words, a wave of intense heartache surged through Garrett. He looked at her, his voice tight with frustration and empathy. “Why do you always do this? Why have you silently endured her verbal bullying for all these years without fighting back?”

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Amelia didn’t answer his question. Her attention remained entirely focused on the angry gash in his palm, her heart heavy with the fact that he was injured because of her.

The atmosphere in the room grew quiet and deeply ambiguous. Amelia kept her head down, completely afraid to make eye contact with him. The intimate quiet, however, eventually gave her the nervous courage she needed to voice the theory that had been forming in her mind.

“Garrett...” she started, nervously biting her lip. “I have to ask. Are you... are you frigid? Or do you have some kind of hidden physical illness? Such as impotence?”

Garrett froze.

She continued, the words coming out in a rush. “It’s okay if you do. We could look into medical treatment, see a doctor.”

“Impotent? Frigid?”

Garrett had heard the rumor that he was frigid earlier that morning, but the word “impotent” was entirely new to him.

“Who told you that? What the hell is going on in that head of yours?” Garrett ground his teeth, looking furious. “Who on earth is spreading these ridiculous rumors about me?”

He leaned in close, his voice a low, dangerous growl. “You’re determined to believe I have a problem, aren’t you? Fine. Maybe I do. But it’s not the one you think.”

Miles away, Kamila had been rushed to a private hospital in Chicago. Casey had handled the immediate aftermath with brutal efficiency, but the sheer humiliation of the ordeal had left Kamila completely devastated.

She was physically fine, but her mind was a hornet’s nest of fury. As she lay in the hospital bed, the door opened, and Kayson rushed in.

The second she saw him, Kamila broke into a torrent of genuine, hysterical tears. She threw herself into Kayson’s arms, weeping pitifully.

“Kay... help me...” she wailed, her voice cracking. “It was awful...”

Facing Kayson's urgent questions about what had happened, she immediately began to twist the truth.

"I was just trying to be kind," she sobbed, painting a vivid, terrifying picture. "I only tried to gently advise Garrett to divorce Amelia, for everyone's sake. But he went insane! He pushed my head into the sink and even tried to hurt me with broken glass!"

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 79:

She was the innocent victim, attacked simply for offering good intentions. Kayson's expression darkened into a white-hot rage, and he immediately promised her that he would get justice and demand an explanation from Garrett.

Hearing this, Kamila wiped her tears and pretended to be magnanimous. “No, Kay... I don’t need an apology. I’m just... I’m just so worried about Amelia. Being with a man like that...”

Kayson’s jaw tightened. The endless succession of dramatic incidents had completely exhausted his mind and spirit. Hearing Kamila’s twisted account, his heart turned completely cold toward Amelia. In his mind, she was siding with a violent madman, abandoning all reason. He was thoroughly disappointed, finally letting go of any lingering illusions he had about getting back together with her.

“Don’t worry about her anymore,” Kayson said, his voice flat and drained of all emotion. “She made her choice.”

A twisted sense of finality settled over him. He gently pulled away from Kamila’s embrace. “Stay here in the hospital for observation tonight. I’ll handle the rest.”

Without another word, Kayson turned and walked out of the hospital room, deciding to head back to his hotel alone.

Kayson bypassed the front desk, striding through the opulent lobby like a man on a mission. He didn’t wait for the elevator, taking the stairs two at a time to Amelia’s floor, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs.

He reached her suite. He didn’t knock immediately. Instead, he paced back and forth outside the door, hesitating for a long moment before finally raising his hand to press the doorbell.

His knuckles were an inch from the wood when the door clicked open.

Garrett Thornton leaned against the doorframe.

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His right hand was wrapped in fresh white gauze. He had changed out of his suit, and he had deliberately left the top two buttons of his dark shirt undone. The slightly disheveled look was carefully calculated to create the unmistakable illusion that he and Amelia had just shared an intimate moment.

He looked completely, infuriatingly relaxed, as if he had been waiting for him.

He swirled the wine in his glass, a slow, deliberate motion. A mocking smile played on his lips. “Mr. Edwards. A rather late hour to be visiting my wife’s room, don’t you think?”

The sight of him, so calm and in control, sent a fresh wave of rage through Kayson. “What did you do to Kamila?” Kayson demanded the second he found his voice, his eyes darting past Garrett, trying to catch a glimpse of Amelia inside the room. “The Carlisle family won’t let this go! Don’t you dare drag Amelia down to bear the blame for your violence!”

Garrett didn't move. He took a slow sip of his wine. "So eager to play the hero for Kamila," Garrett mocked, his gaze sharp and piercing. He easily saw through Kayson's righteous facade. "Yet your eyes keep drifting inside. You're still thinking about Amelia, aren't you?"

"I have no such intentions!" Kayson argued forcefully, his face flushing a dark, mottled red as his hypocrisy was laid bare.

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 80:

Garrett's mocking smile deepened. "Whatever your intentions, my wife and I are preparing to rest. I'd appreciate it if you didn't disturb our private time." Without waiting for a response, Garrett stepped back and firmly shut the door in Kayson's face.

Kayson's control finally snapped. With a guttural roar, he began hammering on the closed door, yelling threats.

The commotion had finally attracted attention. Two burly hotel security guards came jogging down the hallway.

Garrett opened the door just enough to address the guards, his voice once again calm and reasonable. "This gentleman appears to have had a bit too much to drink. Perhaps you could escort him out."

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"I'm not leaving!" Kayson raged, struggling as the guards took him by the arms. He was no match for them. They began to drag him toward the elevators, his expensive shoes scuffing on the carpet.

He locked eyes with Garrett, his own gaze filled with a potent mixture of hatred and utter humiliation.

"Garrett Thornton! This isn't over!" he yelled, his voice echoing down the hall as the elevator doors dinged open.

Garrett watched, his expression blank, as Kayson was hauled away. He waited until the elevator doors slid shut, then turned.

He didn't go back into his own suite.

He walked to Amelia's door, swiped a keycard he apparently possessed, and let himself in.

Outside the window, a cold snow was falling, making the winter night exceptionally freezing, but inside the room, the temperature seemed to be steadily rising, the atmosphere thick with unspoken tension.

Amelia was sitting on the soft carpet in the living room. She looked up, startled, as the door opened.

She saw Garrett step inside, bringing with him the chill of the hallway and the lingering, dangerous energy of the confrontation.

"What was that noise outside?" she asked. "I heard shouting..."

Garrett walked toward her, his expression unreadable. "Nothing. Just the hotel staff taking out the trash."

Amelia knew it was a lie, but she didn't press the issue. "You should rest early," she murmured, a frown creasing her forehead. "Today's conflict is bound to breed rumors. We need to be careful."

"Let them talk," Garrett replied, utterly indifferent to the gossip he was so used to weathering.

Amelia lowered her gaze back to the carpet. "I'm heading back to New York tomorrow. I won't be able to accompany you to the conference."

She sat there quietly, waiting for his response. When silence stretched between them, she lifted her head, only to crash straight into Garrett's dark eyes—eyes that were suddenly swirling with a heavy, undisguised desire she couldn't begin to decipher.

"Then before you leave," Garrett said, his voice dropping to a low, husky register, "I suppose I should prove to you that I'm not the frigid, impotent man the rumors claim I am."

The air between them instantly heated, emotions surging wildly in the quiet space. Garrett slowly knelt on one knee in front of her. He raised his gauze-wrapped hand, his long fingers gently cupping her chin, tilting her face up to meet his.

He lowered his head, his breath hot against her cheek, and kissed her.

This kiss was slow, deeply restrained, yet overflowing with a desperate, long-suppressed desire.

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 81:

The kiss was a brutal assault on her senses.

It was hard, demanding, and utterly consuming. Amelia's hands came up to push against his chest, but it was like trying to move a marble statue. He didn't budge. But just as Garrett was about to deepen the kiss, Amelia turned her head to the side, dodging his lips.

Garrett immediately restrained his surging emotions. He pulled back slightly, his broad chest heaving, but his expression masked the storm inside him. "We are contract spouses," he said, his voice laced with a forced, respectful calm. "I will respect your wishes, Amelia. I can endure this."

Panic flared in her eyes, and Amelia quickly grabbed his sleeve. "No, it's not that I'm resisting you," she explained hastily, her voice trembling. "I just... I misunderstood. I thought you were repulsed by intimacy."

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She bit her lip, her face flushing a deep, embarrassed crimson. "Last time, in front of outsiders, you were so stiff the entire time. And then I heard Mrs. Ingram say that you've never had a female companion... so I secretly suspected that you might have some physical problems." She couldn't even bring herself to look up, her chin tucked against her chest.

Garrett was both annoyed and amused by her wild conclusion. A sound that was half a laugh, half a groan, escaped his lips. He reached out, his large hand gently cupping her small, delicate face, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"Amelia," he said bluntly, his dark eyes intense and unwavering. "I am completely normal. I like women. The reason I was so rigid last time was simply because... that was the first time in my life I had ever kissed a woman."

Amelia stared at him, her mind struggling to catch up. A faint, shimmering light gathered in her eyes, and her cheeks turned a captivating, radiant pink.

Garrett watched her, his gaze dropping to her lips. “Can we continue?” he asked eagerly, his voice raw with anticipation.

Guided by a dizzying, heart-stopping warmth, she gave a shy nod.

He didn’t hesitate. He leaned in and captured her lips in a deep, consuming kiss. Amelia was pressed against the edge of the sofa, the intensity of his hunger leaving her almost out of breath. The dam between them had broken, and a torrent of feeling was finally unleashed. They spent the entire night tangled together, lost in a passionate haze.

Early the next morning, the soft light of dawn filtered into the hotel room. Amelia woke up feeling utterly exhausted, having fallen into a deep slumber in the early hours of the morning.

She turned her head and saw Garrett still fast asleep, his breathing even and calm. She realized she had been cleaned up and dressed in fresh clothes. A blush crept up her neck as she caught sight of the used items in the trash can. Hastily, she grabbed some tissues and covered them up.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

## Chapter 82:

As she gathered her things, she remembered how she had accidentally torn his expensive shirt in the heat of the moment last night. Feeling a pang of guilt, she emptied her wallet, taking out all her cash, and left it on the nightstand along with a quick apology note.

She quietly checked out of her room and headed downstairs to meet her colleagues for the trip to the airport. On her way through the lobby, she happened to spot Leo also checking out, but she was in too much of a rush to go over and exchange greetings.

Because Amelia's company was operating on a tight budget, the entire team was flying economy. Coincidentally, Kayson was booked on the exact same flight back to New York.

He was sitting alone in the first-class VIP lounge, looking down through the large glass windows at the bustling terminal below.

As he took a sip of his coffee, his gaze landed on a familiar figure. It was Amelia. She hadn't had time to eat breakfast, so she had bought a stack of sandwiches and cartons of

milk, distributing them among her tired-looking colleagues. The group surrounded her, everyone offering her warm, grateful smiles.

Watching her, a flood of memories rushed into Kayson's mind. In the past, Amelia was always the one urging him to eat breakfast on time and to drink less coffee. Whenever he had a hangover from business dinners, she would patiently cook a soothing millet porridge to care for his stomach. Over their nine years together, she had nurtured his health meticulously.

Now, even if his private chef carefully prepared the exact same meal, it never had that same comforting taste.

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Kayson's jaw tightened. He was too stubborn to swallow his pride and try to win her back, convincing himself that he didn't lack women who would be more than willing to take care of him.

But as the bitter coffee slid down his throat, a profound sense of loss and confusion bloomed in his chest. Deep down, he realized a terrifying truth—from childhood until now, the only person he had ever truly wanted to spend his life with was, and always had been, Amelia.

The flight had just landed in New York. Standing by the baggage carousel, Amelia and her colleague were waiting for their luggage when a familiar figure caught her eye. It was Kayson. He was supposed to be continuing his attendance at the summit, yet here he was, having returned early.

The sight of her, so changed, so luminous, broke something inside Kayson.

Amelia's expression remained entirely indifferent. She walked straight past him, a quiet sigh echoing in her heart. The two of them, who had once shared such deep ties, were now nothing more than strangers crossing paths.

"Amelia!" His voice was raw, desperate, stopping her in her tracks.

Her colleague, fully aware of Kayson's past actions, immediately tensed up, looking at him with deep wariness. Amelia gently patted her colleague's arm. "Wait for me over there," she said softly, before stepping forward to face him alone.

Around her neck, she wore a delicate silk scarf, specifically tied to conceal the marks underneath. However, as she moved, the fabric shifted slightly, failing to completely cover the angry, purple-red mark on her collarbone.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 83:

Kayson's eyes locked onto it. His breath hitched in his throat. The world seemed to tilt on its axis. A sharp, agonizing pain pierced through his body and mind simultaneously. In that split second, the final shred of his delusion shattered. He finally realized that her marriage to Garrett wasn't a fake act to punish him. They had truly been intimate. Amelia genuinely wanted to leave him completely; this was no angry test or bluff.

Forcing a facade of calmness, Kayson opened his mouth. "Amelia... I apologize for my impulsive behavior before," he said, his voice strained. "Come back to the Edwards Group. Work with me again." He clung to the desperate hope that by spending every day together, he could somehow salvage their nine years of history.

She looked at him, at his wild, bloodshot eyes and his desperate expression. She felt nothing. Not anger, not pity. Just a vast, weary emptiness.

"I'm not going back," she said, her voice flat. "For the past nine years, I was willing to chase after you. I endured all the unequal treatment without a single complaint. But now, I am completely awake. I am no longer holding onto you. Whoever you choose to marry in the future has absolutely nothing to do with me."

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Her words tore at his heart, inflicting an unbearable agony. Panic seizing him, he instinctively grabbed her wrist.

“Amelia, please,” he begged, his voice cracking. All his pride, his arrogance, was gone, stripped away by the raw terror of his loss. “I’m sorry! I just... I don’t know how to express tenderness. When I went to study abroad and kept you by my side, that was my hidden affection! I was just terrified of losing you...”

But it was too late. Listening to his desperate confessions now only made her want to escape. She forcefully wrenched her wrist free from his iron grip.

Looking at his devastated face, she let out a soft, mocking smile. “Kayson,” she asked quietly, her words slicing through the airport noise, “can unspoken love even be called love?”

She gave him a small, polite nod, the kind one gives a stranger you’ve just bumped into. “Goodbye, Kayson.”

And with that, she turned her back on him, squared her shoulders, and walked away without a single backward glance.

He stood frozen, watching her disappear from view. The bustling sounds of the airport faded away into a dull roar. All he could hear was the deafening, shattering sound of his own heart breaking.

Amelia stepped out of the arrival terminal at JFK Airport, the cool New York breeze a stark contrast to the previous night's heat in Chicago. Her colleagues were already waiting by the curb. Seeing her approach, they immediately hurried over, their faces etched with genuine concern.

"Ms. Thornton, are you alright? How was the flight?" one of them asked, quickly taking her luggage.

When Amelia had first parachuted into her leadership role, the team had secretly dismissed her as a mere nepotism hire—someone riding on Shanna Price's coattails with mediocre abilities. But this Chicago trip had changed everything. Her unwavering professionalism, sharp crisis management, and genuine care for her subordinates had completely dismantled their prejudices, earning her the team's absolute trust and respect.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 84:

Settling into the plush leather seat of the waiting town car, Amelia let out a long sigh. She was just about to close her eyes for a much-needed nap when her phone buzzed in her purse.

She pulled it out to find a message from Garrett, who was still back in Chicago attending the remainder of the summit. It was a photo: a neat, crisp stack of hundred-dollar bills sitting on his hotel nightstand, right next to the hasty apology note she had left behind.

A second later, another message popped up. What is this?

Before she could type a reply, a follow-up text arrived, his cold fury practically radiating through the screen. Are you trying to insult me with this 'compensation'? What in God's name do you take me for, Amelia? Some gigolo you can pay for a night's work?

Amelia's cheeks flushed hotly. Her fingers flew across the keyboard. Don't be ridiculous. That was just to compensate you for the dress shirt that got torn.

Three dots appeared on the screen, indicating he was typing. Then his reply came through, dripping with wicked, ambiguous amusement. Is that so? If we're strictly settling accounts, then I suppose I should be compensating you for the dress and intimate apparel of yours that I ruined last night. Send me the bill.

The explicit, teasing nature of his words made her heart race and her face burn even hotter. Unable to bear looking at the screen for another second, Amelia abruptly locked her phone, tossed it onto the empty seat beside her, and squeezed her eyes shut, trying desperately to block out the memories.

At the Edwards family estate, the atmosphere was funereal.

Kayson had locked himself in his childhood bedroom since returning from Chicago. He refused to eat, refused to speak to anyone.

His father, Marcus Edwards, a man whose face seemed carved from granite, had finally run out of patience.

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He kicked open Kayson's door without knocking. The room was a disaster zone—clothes strewn everywhere, empty bottles on the floor. Kayson was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, looking like a ghost.

Marcus strode over and threw a thick file onto Kayson's chest. The impact made a dull thud.

"Look at what you've done," Marcus said, his voice devoid of any warmth.

The file contained a full report. The collapse of the Sterling deal. The nosedive of Carlisle Group's stock. And a detailed account of Amelia Frye's marriage to Garrett Thornton.

"I told you to marry that girl," Marcus seethed, his voice a low, dangerous rumble. "It was a strategic alliance. It was about securing her mother's trust fund for our portfolio. And you? You didn't just lose her. You handed her, and all that potential capital, directly to the Thorntons."

Kayson remained motionless, unresponsive. This seemed to infuriate his father even more.

"For your incompetence," Marcus announced, his voice as cold and final as a judge's sentence, "for allowing your personal feelings to jeopardize this family's strategic interests, I am freezing everything. Your corporate cards. Your access to the family trust. All non-essential company assets under your control. Everything. Frozen."

It was the corporate equivalent of being disowned.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 85:

That finally got a reaction. Kayson slowly turned his head, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Marcus ignored his son's shocked expression. He gestured to his assistant, who had been waiting silently in the doorway. The assistant entered the room and, with methodical precision, removed the platinum and black cards from Kayson's wallet.

It was a ritual of humiliation.

Kayson watched it happen, his mind replaying the image of Amelia's back as she walked away from him at the airport. A crushing wave of helplessness and shame washed over him. He had lost everything.

Marcus turned to leave. He paused at the door and looked back at his wife, Susan Edwards, who was hovering in the hallway, her eyes filled with tears.

“This,” Marcus said to her, his voice like ice, “is just the beginning.”

He walked away, leaving Susan to stare in horror.

From inside the room came a low, guttural sound of pure, animalistic agony.

Kayson was dragged from his room by the family butler. He was showered, shaved, and dressed in a suit like a life-sized doll, his movements stiff and robotic. He was driven to the Edwards Corporation headquarters in complete silence.

When he walked into the top-floor boardroom, they were all there. The entire board of directors, their faces grim and judgmental. His father, Marcus, sat at the head of the long, polished table, his expression unreadable.

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Kayson realized with a sickening lurch in his stomach that this wasn't a meeting.

It was a public execution.

Marcus gestured to his assistant, who began distributing a new file to everyone at the table. It was a meticulously compiled report detailing Kayson's recent professional failings, all linked to his "personal emotional distractions." It included his unauthorized flight from New York back to Chicago, logged as a dereliction of duty.

Marcus began to speak, his voice flat and emotionless, as if reading a quarterly earnings report. He publicly listed Kayson's "transgressions," painting a picture of an unstable, emotional leader who had put his own feelings above the interests of the company.

He was, Marcus concluded, an unfit heir.

The board members murmured amongst themselves, their glances toward Kayson a mixture of pity and contempt.

Then Marcus delivered the final blow. "Therefore, I propose a motion to suspend Kayson Edwards from all executive duties, effective immediately. I will be assuming the role of interim CEO."

It was a public dethroning.

Kayson, who had been sitting in silence, finally looked up. A tiny, defiant flame flickered to life in his dead eyes.

A bitter laugh escaped his lips. “All this... because I didn’t marry the woman you wanted me to?”

He pushed his chair back and stood up, his gaze locked on his father. “I have poured half my life into this company. You can’t negate all of that because one business alliance failed!”

It was the first time he had ever openly defied his father in front of the board.

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## **Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex’s Rival**

## Chapter 86:

A dark flush crept up Marcus's neck. Instead of just slamming his hand on the table, he lunged out of his chair, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat. "You still don't get it!" he roared, his fist connecting with Kayson's jaw with a sickening crack. "You didn't lose a woman! You lost a strategic asset!"

The argument escalated into physical violence. Before Kayson could process the shock, Marcus grabbed him by the lapels of his suit, shaking him violently. He struck his son again, the heavy gold ring on his finger cutting deep into Kayson's cheek, laying their family's brutal dysfunction bare for every top executive to see.

The savage beating, combined with the sleepless nights, the alcohol, and the constant, grinding humiliation—it had all taken its toll. Marcus landed a final, vicious blow to Kayson's stomach, forcing the breath from his lungs.

The room began to spin. A sharp, crushing pain radiated from his battered face and ribs, stealing his breath.

He tried to say something else, to raise his hands and fight back, but the world went black at the edges. He clutched at his chest, a strangled gasp escaping his bloody lips.

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He swayed for a moment under his father's furious glare.

Then, as Marcus shoved him away in disgust, in front of the entire board, Kayson Edwards collapsed, falling backward like a felled tree. He hit the floor with a sickening thud and lay still.

The boardroom erupted into chaos. People screamed, horrified by the CEO's violent outburst. Someone rushed forward to check his pulse.

For a single, frozen moment, Marcus just stared at his son's battered, motionless form on the floor, his own chest heaving, a flicker of something that might have been panic in his cold eyes.

Susan Edwards, who had been waiting anxiously outside, heard the commotion and burst into the room.

The sight of her son bruised and bleeding on the floor broke her. A piercing, grief-stricken shriek tore from her throat. She ran to him, falling to her knees beside his still body.

She cradled his head in her lap, turning to glare at her husband, her face a mess of tears and fury.

"Are you happy now?" she screamed at Marcus. "You beat him half to death! You've killed him! You've killed our son!"

The distant, rising wail of an ambulance siren grew closer, a soundtrack to the complete implosion of the Edwards dynasty.

The diagnosis was severe: acute stress-induced cardiomyopathy. Takotsubo syndrome. Broken heart syndrome.

Kayson was in the ICU, his condition critical.

Susan Edwards kept a tearful vigil outside the glass doors, while Marcus stood a few feet away, smoking a cigar, his face an impenetrable mask.

At Garrett's penthouse, the atmosphere was quiet and peaceful. With Garrett still in Chicago attending the summit, Amelia had the sprawling apartment to herself. She was reading on the sofa, enjoying the rare moment of tranquility.

The doorbell chimed, a startlingly cheerful sound in the quiet atmosphere.

Amelia opened the door to find her mother-in-law, Eleanor Thornton, standing on the threshold. She was beaming, holding a large, elegant gift basket.

"I was in the neighborhood," Eleanor announced brightly. "Thought I'd pop in and see how my favorite daughter-in-law is settling in while my workaholic son is away."

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 87:

Amelia, flustered, invited her in. Without Garrett there to buffer the interaction, she felt a sudden spike of nervousness, but Eleanor's warm smile quickly put her at ease.

Eleanor set the basket on the counter and took Amelia's hand, leading her to sit down on the sofa, launching into a warm, easy chatter about Amelia's new job and life in the city.

Amelia found herself relaxing under the gentle tide of Eleanor's kindness. It was a maternal warmth she had never experienced from her own mother.

Then Eleanor turned her bright gaze on Amelia. “You’d better be taking good care of yourself while Garrett is in Chicago. I’m not getting any younger, and I’m expecting grandchildren from a wonderful daughter-in-law like you.”

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The word “grandchildren” made Amelia’s breath hitch. She tensed, the weight of the secret arrangement pressing heavily on her chest.

Amelia felt a sudden, desperate need for honesty. She couldn’t lie to this woman, not when she was being so genuinely kind.

She took a deep breath. “Eleanor... there’s something you should know. Garrett and I... our marriage, it’s... it’s based on a contract.”

The words tumbled out in a rush of nervous energy.

The warm smile on Eleanor’s face slowly faded. She looked at Amelia’s nervous expression with a thoughtful, unreadable gaze.

The silence stretched. Amelia braced herself for the anger, the disappointment, the inevitable rejection.

But it never came.

After a long moment, a soft, gentle smile returned to Eleanor's lips. She patted Amelia's hand.

"Oh, you silly girl," she said, her voice full of a surprising tenderness. "It doesn't matter how a marriage starts. All that matters is where it's going. And I know the way my son looks at you. Even from miles away, he talks about you with a reverence I've never heard from him before. Trust me, that's not in any contract."

Her words were a balm, instantly dissolving the tension in Amelia's heart. Amelia stared at her, stunned into silence.

Eleanor, having planted her seed of wisdom, didn't linger. She made her excuses and left, giving Amelia the space to process.

After she was gone, the apartment felt different—lighter, filled with a newfound sense of hope. Amelia stood in the quiet living room, her thoughts drifting to Garrett in Chicago.

Just then, Amelia's phone rang, shrill and insistent. It was an unknown number.

She answered cautiously. A frantic, weeping female voice came down the line. It was Susan Edwards.

She was nearly incoherent, babbling about Kayson's collapse, about the ICU, about how he was calling Amelia's name in his unconscious state.

Her tone shifted from frantic to pleading. "Amelia, please. I'm begging you. As a mother. Can you just come to the hospital? Just for a minute? The doctors said... they said hearing your voice might help him wake up."

Amelia stood frozen, the phone pressed to her ear. She pictured Garrett's unwavering support, the stark contrast to the man currently lying in a hospital bed.

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## Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 88:

She took a deep breath. She thought of the nine times Kayson had left her waiting. She thought of the public humiliation. She thought of the long, painful road she had traveled to get here.

Her voice, when she spoke, was perfectly calm and utterly resolute.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Edwards. I’m not a doctor. I don’t think I can help him.”

And before Susan could launch into another round of desperate pleas, Amelia ended the call.

It was the first time she had ever cleanly, completely, and without guilt, refused the emotional blackmail of the Edwards family.

Amelia lowered the phone, her hand steady. She felt a complicated mix of emotions, but the strongest one, by far, was relief. A profound, liberating sense of release.

She stood alone in the quiet room, the lingering shadows of her past finally dissolving into the stillness of the night. The heavy burden she had carried for so long was gone. The cold war was over.

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Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away in Chicago, Garrett was just wrapping up the second day of the business summit. The schedule had been relentlessly packed, and it wasn't until late into the night that he finally had a moment to sit down and check his phone.

He opened their chat, his eyes narrowing slightly. The screen remained stubbornly frozen on his last message—a teasing, ambiguous remark he had sent hours ago. Amelia had not replied. A wave of profound displeasure washed over his face, his jaw tightening as he stared at the screen.

Standing nearby, Casey Henderson silently observed his boss's dark expression. He couldn't help but sigh inwardly. Ever since getting married, the once cold, rational, and unshakeable CEO had become surprisingly sensitive and paranoid. Casey was half-tempted to look into booking a discreet psychiatrist for him.

“Did Kayson head back to New York early?” Garrett suddenly asked, his voice cold and commanding. “Have our people keep a close eye on him. I don't want him getting anywhere near Amelia to harass her.”

Casey hesitated for a moment before offering a careful piece of advice. “Sir, if I may... being too possessive or excessively clingy might actually backfire and annoy a woman. It's best to give her some space.”

Garrett shot him a sharp, icy glare, his tone defensive and stubborn. “I am simply ensuring my wife's safety. Just do it.”

“Understood,” Casey replied, immediately stepping out to make the arrangements.

He returned shortly after, holding his tablet, his expression serious. “Sir, we just received word from our contacts in New York. Kayson Edwards was severely beaten by his own father the moment he arrived home. He’s currently in the ICU with serious injuries and will need at least half a month to recover. The whole incident seems to have nothing to do with Amelia directly.”

Garrett’s expression shifted, a flicker of surprise crossing his face, but not an ounce of pity. “Marcus Edwards is a ruthless bastard,” he commented, his voice flat. “To do that to his own son.”

“Indeed,” Casey nodded.

“Find out exactly what triggered the beating,” Garrett ordered, his eyes darkening. “I want to know the internal situation.”

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 89:

“Right away. I’ll have the team dig deeper,” Casey replied.

In the sterile, quiet hallway of the hospital back in New York, Susan Edwards stared at her phone, the dead line buzzing in her ear.

Amelia’s cold, final refusal was the last straw. The grief and fear she had been drowning in for hours had nowhere to go. It curdled, twisting into a white-hot, vengeful rage.

She shot to her feet. “It’s their fault!” she shrieked at Marcus, who was still standing impassively by the window. “It’s the Carlises! That woman and her two wretched daughters, they destroyed my son!”

Marcus didn’t respond, which she took as tacit permission.

Fueled by a mother’s fury, Susan stormed out of the hospital. She threw herself into her waiting car, barking an address at the driver. “Carlisle Group headquarters. And hurry.”

Kristen Carlisle was in her office, staring at spreadsheets that spelled out her company's impending doom, when her secretary burst in, her face pale with panic.

"Mrs. Edwards is here! She's making a scene at reception, demanding to see you!"

Before Kristen could even process the words, her office doors were thrown open. Susan Edwards stood there, her face tear-streaked and contorted with rage.

She marched across the room and, without a word, slapped Kristen across the face. The sound cracked through the air like a whip.

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"Are you insane?" Kristen shrieked, clutching her stinging cheek.

Susan grabbed the front of Kristen's expensive silk blouse. "My son is in the ICU!" she screamed, her voice hysterical. "He could die! And it's all because of your cursed, good-for-nothing daughter Amelia, and that scheming little viper you call a stepdaughter!"

She was placing the blame for Kayson's collapse squarely at their feet.

Kristen was terrified. She hadn't known it was this serious. She tried to deflect, to throw Amelia under the bus completely. "It was Amelia... she's the one who..."

Susan wasn't listening. She got right in Kristen's face, her eyes wild. "I don't care how you do it! You get Amelia. You drag her to that hospital. You make her apologize to my son and beg him to wake up. You fix this! Or I swear to God, I will personally see to it that the Carlisle name is wiped from the face of this city!"

She shoved Kristen away from her. Kristen stumbled backward and collapsed into a chair.

Susan turned and stormed out, leaving a trail of destruction in her wake.

Kristen sat there, her body trembling, a cold, terrifying dread seeping into her bones. She knew it wasn't an empty threat. The Edwards family could crush her like an insect.

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# Nine Rejected Marriages, I Wed My Ex's Rival

Chapter 90:

The next morning, the fragile peace was shattered. A frantic, aggressive pounding on the front door jolted Amelia awake from a deep sleep.

As she hurried into the hallway, she noticed her pet cat, Mochi, had already sensed the danger. The small feline's back was arched, its fur standing on end as it hissed warily at the front door.

A prickle of unease ran down Amelia's spine. She crept forward and peered through the peephole.

Her heart didn't just sink. It plummeted.

Staring back at her from the hallway was the face of her mother, Kristen Carlisle. She was draped in a luxurious fur coat, her expression a mask of cold, impatient fury. She looked like a woman who had come for a war.

Amelia's instincts screamed at her to be on guard. She refused to open the door, keeping the deadbolt firmly locked. "Whatever you have to say, you can say it through the door," she called out, her voice tight.

"Open this door right now, Amelia," Kristen's voice pierced through the heavy wood, sharp and venomous. "If you don't, I will go straight to the press. I'll spread the rumor that Garrett Thornton stole another man's fiancée. Let's see how the world reacts when they find out he's a homewrecker. You'll both lose all your dignity and become the laughingstock of the city."

The blood drained from Amelia's face. A wave of nausea washed over her. She couldn't let Garrett be implicated in her mess. This was her family's toxicity, and she had to contain the damage herself.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Amelia unlocked the deadbolt and pulled the door open.

Kristen stormed into the entryway. The moment her eyes landed on Amelia, they filled with a profound, concentrated hatred.

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Amelia tried to maintain her composure. She walked to the kitchen, poured a glass of hot water, and offered it to her mother. "Here."

Kristen completely ignored the gesture, swatting the air dismissively. Her sharp gaze, cruel as a shard of glass, swept over the sprawling, multi-million-dollar penthouse, taking in the extravagant decor.

“Look at you,” Kristen sneered, her voice dripping with acid. “Living in this luxurious mansion. You’ve completely forgotten your identity, haven’t you? You’re so greedy for wealth and status that you’d sell yourself out.”

Amelia’s face remained cold, her expression hardening. She set the water down. “Just tell me why you’re here.”

Kristen pushed past her, marching into the living room and unceremoniously dropping onto the plush sofa. “Why am I here? You have the nerve to ask? You broke off your engagement without a word and married Garrett Thornton! You completely disregarded the dignity of both our families!”

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