

Chapter 2

The words replayed in my mind like a broken record, Devon's voice a cruel whisper: "It's a debt repayment, Delilah. Nothing more. You are the only one who matters." I hadn't slept a wink. Every fiber of my being screamed in protest. I was a transaction, a pawn in their twisted game. But I refused to be a charity case, a consolation prize.

I am Amira Estrada. My family's name, my fortune, my position—they meant something. I had fought for love, but I would not beg for it. There were countless men who would kill to be in Bentley's position, men who would genuinely cherish me, men who weren't playing mind games with my future. I was worth more than this. Much, much more.

I took a deep breath, the icy resolve from last night solidifying in my veins. My father was still looking at me, confusion warring with concern.

"Amira, are you sure about this?" he asked, his voice softer now. "Bentley Swanson is a good man, I'll grant you, but his label is small. And the Fellows... they have grown up here. They are family."

"They are not family," I retorted, my voice sharp. "They are employees, Papa. And their loyalty is to their paychecks, nothing more. Or perhaps to someone else entirely." A bitter flash of Devon and Delilah in the conservatory, then in the library, the mocking echoes of their voices. All those wasted years, all that foolish adoration. The thought twisted my gut.

But I refused to show weakness. I straightened my posture, my head held high. "I have made my decision, Papa. And I have some conditions."

My father blinked. "Conditions?"

"Yes," I said, my voice as cold as the morning air. "First, I want all the Fellows' discretionary accounts frozen. Effective immediately. Every single one."

His eyes widened in shock. "Amira! That's drastic. What has gotten into you?"

"Drastic?" I scoffed, a humorless laugh escaping my lips. "They've been living off our family's generosity for years, while secretly mocking and manipulating me. This isn't drastic, Papa. It's justice. And second," I

continued, my gaze hardening, "Delilah's stipend? Cut it. All of it. She will receive nothing further from Estrada Records or the Estrada family. She can go back to wherever Devon found her."

My father's jaw dropped. He stared at me, his face pale. "Amira... this is completely unlike you."

"Perhaps," I conceded, my voice flat. "But then, I was completely unlike myself before. I'm through being naive, Papa. Are you with me, or against me?"

He looked at me for a long, agonizing moment, then a slow nod. "Very well," he said, his voice grim. "It will be done. And after your wedding, Amira," he added, his eyes hardening, "the Fellows will be asked to vacate the estate. All of them."

A wave of relief, potent and sweet, washed over me. I felt lighter, as if a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I turned and walked out of the study, a new purpose burning in my chest.

As I descended the grand staircase, a familiar figure emerged from the shadows. Delilah. She smiled, her eyes as innocent and wide as always.

"Amira, darling!" she chirped, reaching out to hug me. "I heard you talking to Mr. Estrada. Is everything alright? You sound... different. Oh, and I was just about to find you! The Fellows are planning a picnic by the lake today. You should join us!"

Her touch, light and feathery, felt like an infestation. Nausea churned in my stomach. I recoiled, yanking my arm away with such force that she stumbled back, her eyes flashing with surprise before quickly being replaced by feigned hurt.

"Amira, what's wrong?" she whimpered, her voice cracking.

Before I could answer, her foot caught on the edge of the top step. She gasped dramatically, her eyes wide, and tumbled down a few steps, landing with a soft thud. A theatrical tear gathered in her eye.

"Oh, Amira, why did you push me?" she cried, rubbing her elbow.

Just then, from the hallway below, a chorus of indignant voices erupted. Devon, Jordan, Bryant, and the other four Fellows appeared, their faces contorted in anger. They had heard. Or, more likely, they had been waiting.

Bryant rushed forward, his face flushed. "What the hell, Amira? Did you just push Delilah down the stairs?"

Delilah, ever the damsel, held up a hand. "No, no, Bryant. It was an accident. Amira was just... startled. I'm sure she didn't mean it." Her words, meant to "defend" me, only painted me more clearly as the villain. She dabbed at a tear that wasn't quite there, her lower lip trembling.

The Fellows glared at me, their eyes filled with disgust and accusation. Devon, his face a mask of cold fury, simply leveled a look at me that promised retribution. Then, without a word, he strode past me, scooped Delilah into his arms, and carried her away as if she weighed nothing. Her head rested against his shoulder, her tearful gaze meeting mine over his shoulder, a small, triumphant smirk twisting her lips.

They left me standing there, alone on the staircase, the silence thick with their unspoken condemnation. I almost laughed. They were so predictable.

Later that afternoon, needing to clear my head, I headed to the stables for my riding lesson. I was still fuming, the scene on the staircase replaying in my mind. But as I approached, I heard voices. Devon and Delilah were already there.

Delilah, perched on a hay bale, looked up with an innocent smile. "Amira, I hope you're not still upset about this morning," she said, her voice sugary sweet. "I told Devon it was an accident. I wouldn't want anything to stand in the way of your happiness."

I ignored her, walking straight to where my horse, a magnificent black stallion named Shadow, was being groomed. But my eyes kept darting to Devon. He was fussing over a small, docile mare, carefully adjusting its saddle.

"Are you sure you're up to riding, Delilah?" he asked softly, his voice laced with concern. "Your elbow looked quite bruised."

"Oh, I'll be fine," she simpered, batting her eyelashes. "As long as you're here to help me."

Devon smiled, a rare, gentle smile I had never seen directed at me. He led the mare to Delilah, then knelt, cupping his hands. "Here, sweetheart. Let me help you up." He carefully lifted her onto the saddle, his movements tender, his gaze full of adoration. He then spent the next few minutes patiently explaining how to hold the reins, how to sit. His voice was a low, soothing rumble, completely different from the clipped, indifferent tones he used with me.

Then Delilah, with another dramatic sigh, declared, "Oh, Devon, I'm so tired! My leg feels weak after the fall."

Without a moment's hesitation, Devon knelt again. He didn't just offer his hand. He knelt, positioning himself, so she could place her small, delicate foot on his broad shoulder, using him as a step to dismount.

A gasp caught in my throat. The image was a punch to the gut. I remembered my thirteenth birthday. My father, in his booming voice, had commanded Devon, then a lanky fifteen-year-old, to kneel before me.

"A man only kneels to his wife, Devon," my father had declared, patting my shoulder. "Remember this. Amira is your future. She is your destiny."

Devon had knelt, his face a mask of barely concealed humiliation. His eyes, when they met mine, had held a flicker of resentment that I, in my youthful infatuation, had completely missed. But he had complied. And after that day, seeing the shame in his eyes, I had never asked him to kneel again. I thought I was respecting his pride, his dignity.

Now, he knelt willingly, eagerly, for her. My heart twisted, a cold, hard knot of pain and rage. He had always resented me. And he had always loved her. It was as simple, and as devastating, as that.