

## Chapter 3

My father's words from my thirteenth birthday echoed, chillingly clear: "A man only kneels to his wife, Devon. Remember this. Amira is your future. She is your destiny." He had meant it as a lesson, a way to impress upon Devon his responsibility, his role in our family. And I, in my naive, childish love, had believed it. I had believed that one day, that forced act would transform into genuine devotion. I had been so blind, so utterly incapable of seeing the profound shame in Devon's eyes, the humiliation he endured for me. That knowledge, now, was a fresh wound.

After that day, I never asked him to kneel again. I respected his pride, his fierce independence. I thought I understood him, that I honored his boundaries. And now, he knelt for her. Not because he was commanded, but because he chose to. The gentle way he lifted her, the soft words he spoke—it was a tenderness he had never once offered me. The sight was a searing brand on my soul.

I couldn't watch anymore. I turned my head sharply, a desperate need to escape this suffocating pain. I swung myself onto Shadow, digging my heels into his flanks. "Faster!" I urged, my voice hoarse. Shadow, sensing my urgency, thundered across the open fields, his powerful legs eating up the ground. The wind whipped through my hair, tearing at the tears that threatened to fall. I needed to outrun the ache in my chest, the fresh betrayal that had just ripped through me.

I guided Shadow toward the obstacle course, a series of jumps and fences designed for advanced riders. It was reckless, I knew, but I craved the danger, the physical challenge to drown out the emotional torment. We cleared the first few jumps flawlessly, the rhythm of horse and rider a brief, exhilarating escape. Then, as we approached a particularly high hedge, Shadow hesitated.

I urged him on, perhaps too harshly. There was a sudden, sickening snap. The saddle girth, old and worn, broke. I felt myself lurch forward, losing my balance entirely. Time seemed to slow. I hung suspended for a terrifying second, then plunged to the ground with a sickening thud. A sharp, white-hot pain shot through my left leg.

I lay there, gasping, my leg twisted at an unnatural angle. Shadow, startled and disoriented, whinnied loudly, his hooves dangerously close to my head. Pain, raw and excruciating, consumed me. I desperately looked for Devon, for anyone. He was still by the fence, fussing over

Delilah, oblivious. He hadn't seen me fall. He hadn't heard me. He hadn't guarded me.

The realization hit me harder than the fall. He wasn't just indifferent. He was negligent. He had failed the one duty my father had assigned him. The protector was nowhere to be found.

"Devon!" I screamed, my voice raw with pain and burgeoning terror.

My cry finally broke through his reverie. He spun around, his eyes widening in shock when he saw me. In an instant, he was across the field, a blur of motion. He seized Shadow's reins, calming the agitated horse with practiced ease. Then he was kneeling beside me, his face grim.

The next few hours were a blur of pain and hospital white. A broken tibia. Surgery. A long recovery. Devon stayed by my side, a picture of solicitous concern. He brought me flowers, read to me, even fed me when my arm was too weak. He was the perfect, attentive caretaker, a role he played with chilling perfection.

A foolish, tiny spark of hope, against all logic, flickered in my heart. Maybe, just maybe, this accident... maybe it had cleared something for him. Maybe he saw me now. I watched him interact with the nurses, his charm effortless, his concern for me seemingly genuine.

Then, I saw him talking animatedly with Delilah in the hallway, her hand resting lightly on his arm. The spark died, leaving only ashes.

One evening, unable to sleep, I pushed myself up and hobbled to the hospital lounge. I was craving a distraction, anything to escape the dull throb in my leg and the sharper ache in my chest. As I neared the lounge, I heard voices, low and urgent. Devon's, and another one-Bryant.

I paused, hidden by a corner, a prickle of unease crawling under my skin.

"Did you really have to cut the saddle strap, man?" Bryant's voice, rough with concern, echoed in the quiet hallway. "She could have been seriously hurt."

My blood ran cold. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic bird trapped in a cage.

Devon's voice, calm and detached, followed. "It was the only way to get her attention, to make her realize she needs me. I had to create a situation where she'd feel vulnerable, grateful for my protection. The bone breaking... that was an accident. Not part of the plan."

I pressed myself against the wall, my breath catching in my throat. My

leg throbbed, but it was nothing compared to the shock that coursed through me. He had done this. He had planned it.

"So you're just playing the doting fiancé now?" Bryant asked, a hint of disdain in his tone.

"I'll play the part until she's recovered," Devon replied, his voice devoid of emotion. "Then, this charade ends. She'll be so dependent, so grateful, she won't even know what hit her." He chuckled, a low, chilling sound.

A wave of nausea washed over me. Not just betrayal. This was calculated cruelty. I bit down on my lip so hard I tasted blood, but the physical pain was a distant echo compared to the absolute devastation inside me. They weren't just manipulating me. They were actively endangering me. And the man I loved, the man I had given my heart to, was the architect of my pain.