

## Chapter 6

The lock on my bedroom door clicked. It wasn't broken, just... opened. Devon stepped inside, his presence filling the room, casting a long shadow over me where I sat huddled in the window seat. My eyes, red-rimmed from crying, glared at him.

"Get out!" I snapped, my voice raw and hoarse.

He ignored me, closing the door softly behind him. "Locks are for people with something to hide, Amira," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle, completely at odds with his actions. "I picked up a few tricks on the streets. Comes in handy."

He stood there for a long moment, simply watching me. The silence stretched, thick with unspoken accusations and a history of twisted affection. Then, he sighed, a sound that seemed to carry the weight of the world. He walked over to the armchair by the fireplace, settling into it, his gaze fixed on the dying embers.

"Delilah and I," he began, his voice low, almost a murmur, "we grew up together. On the streets. We were just kids, trying to survive. She was my shadow, my only constant. When your father found me, gave me a chance... I told him I couldn't leave her behind. She was all I had."

He paused, a flicker of something raw in his eyes. "Your father, he was a good man. He took us both in. But he made sure I knew my place. My debt. To him. To you." He looked at me then, his gaze piercing. "Delilah... she's the only anchor I have to who I was before all this. Before the music, before the fame, before... everything. She's the only one who truly understands the darkness I carry."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "I need you to understand that, Amira. I need you to accept her. She's part of me. Always will be."

My mind, still reeling from the past week's betrayals, struggled to process his words. For a fleeting second, a tiny crack appeared in my resolve. His vulnerability, rare as it was, almost disarmed me. Almost.

"So," I said, the word dripping with sarcasm, "when we're married, will your 'anchor' still be your priority? Will she still be 'the only one who matters'?"

He didn't flinch. His jaw hardened. "Yes," he said, his voice firm, unwavering. "She will always be my priority. Always." He met my gaze, daring me to challenge him. "I will be a good husband to you, Amira. I will protect this family. I will give you everything you could ever want. But my loyalty, my heart... that belongs to Delilah. You will have my name, my children, my public devotion. But never my love. Never my soul."

A bitter, broken laugh escaped my lips. I threw my head back, the sound hollow and devoid of humor. All this pain, all this suffering, all these years... it had all been for nothing. It had all been for him, and he didn't care. He was a stone, impervious to my love, my pleas, my very existence.

I stopped laughing. Silence fell, heavy and suffocating. There was nothing more to say. No point in arguing, in pleading, in fighting. He had laid it all bare.

Just then, his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, and his face softened instantly. A gentle smile, tender and warm, touched his lips. It was Delilah. "I'll be right there, sweetheart," he murmured into the phone, his voice a soft caress I had never heard directed at me. He hung up, then stood.

He placed a small, velvet box on my nightstand. "A peace offering," he said, his voice flat, emotionless once more. "For your birthday. I'm leaving now." He turned and walked out, closing the door behind him. The click of the lock, this time from the outside, echoed hollowly in the room.

I stared at the box, then at the closed door. A peace offering. I opened it. Inside lay a delicate silver necklace, a small, glittering pendant. It was pretty, in a generic sort of way. But it wasn't the ruby. It wasn't the necklace I had fought for, the one he had publicly given to Delilah. It was a cheap knock-off, a gesture devoid of thought or genuine sentiment.

With a choked sob, I snatched the necklace from the box and hurled it across the room. It clattered against the wall, then fell into the wastebasket by my desk. I buried my face in my hands, a wave of profound sorrow washing over me. I deserved better. I deserved real love, real respect. Not this half-hearted, contemptuous offering.

My 21st birthday was approaching. A grand ball, a lavish affair, where my engagement would be officially announced. I was supposed to be radiant, thrilled. Instead, I felt like a ghost, haunting my own life. I tried on the dress, a breathtaking gown of emerald silk. I looked in the mirror, my reflection a stranger. I was beautiful, yes, but empty. And the ruby necklace, the one I had coveted, the one Devon had stolen from me and given to Delilah, still nagged at me. It wasn't just a necklace anymore. It was a symbol of his power, his control, his utter disregard for me.

Then, a package arrived. From Bentley Swanson. A discreet, elegantly wrapped box. My father had already informed him of my decision, much to his delight. Inside, another velvet box. A letter lay on top, his handwriting strong and confident.

Amira, my dearest. I heard about the auction. My deepest apologies that I couldn't secure that particular piece for you. I tried, but it seems some things are simply out of our control. The words were a veiled jab at Devon, a clear understanding of the public humiliation. However, I took the liberty of commissioning something truly unique, something that truly reflects the fire and passion I see in you. May it bring you joy on your special day.

I opened the box. My breath hitched. Inside lay a set of rubies, not just a necklace, but earrings, a bracelet, a ring. They were exquisitely cut, deeply colored, burning with an internal fire. They were even more stunning than the auction piece, designed with a modern elegance that whispered of quiet strength. And they were mine.

A genuine smile, hesitant but real, touched my lips. The first in a long, dark week. I carefully fastened the necklace around my throat, the cool metal a pleasant contrast to the warmth of my skin. The earrings sparkled. I felt a surge of unexpected confidence course through me. I looked in the mirror. I didn't just look beautiful. I looked powerful. I looked like a queen.

Later, as I descended the grand staircase to greet the first guests, Delilah was waiting at the bottom. She stopped, her gaze immediately drawn to the crimson fire around my neck. Her innocent smile faltered for a fraction of a second.

"Oh, Amira," she cooed, her voice sickly sweet. "What a stunning necklace! Is it... did Devon give it to you? It's almost as lovely as the one he gave me." Her eyes, though, were fixed on the rubies, a simmering resentment evident in their depths.

I didn't even look at her. I swept past, my head held high. But her next words stopped me cold.

"You know," she whispered, her voice barely audible, but laced with venom, "he never really loved you, Amira. He only ever suffered you. He told me. He tells me everything." She paused, then a sickeningly familiar sound reached my ears. The muffled sound of a video playing. She held out her phone, the screen showing a blurry, intimate moment. Devon, his face contorted in passion, her own body writhing against his. A soft moan, unmistakably hers, filled the air. "He was never like this with you, was he? He was never yours." She pulled her phone back, a triumphant smirk on

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her face. "But hey, there are six other Fellows, aren't there? All of them eager for a piece of the Estrada pie. And I've already had my fill of them all, so feel free to pick through my leftovers."