

The Sterling Scandal: Married To The Uncle

The Sterling Scandal: Married To The Uncle

Chapter 1 No.1

The room was spinning before Elena even finished the tea.

It wasn't a gentle sway. It was a violent, lurching tilt that made the crystal chandeliers of the Sterling estate blur into streaks of aggressive light. She gripped the edge of the high table, her knuckles turning white, trying to anchor herself to the floor.

"You look pale, dear."

Victoria Sterling's voice was smooth, like velvet wrapped around a jagged rock. Elena's future mother-in-law stood too close, her hand resting on Elena's shoulder with a weight that felt less like comfort and more like a restraint.

"I... I can't find Ryan," she managed to say. Her tongue felt thick, heavy in her mouth. "He said he'd be right back."

"Ryan is busy with the investors, Elena. You know how important this merger is." Victoria smiled, but her eyes remained cold, calculating. She signaled a passing waiter with a sharp flick of her wrist. "Take Miss Miller to the guest suite. She needs to lie down. The tea was evidently too strong for her."

"No, I just need fresh air-" Elena tried to pull away, but her legs betrayed her. They felt like they were filled with lead.

The waiter, a man with a face as blank as a slate, took her arm. His grip was firm. "This way, Ma'am."

He didn't lead her toward the main staircase where the other guests were mingling. He steered her away from the warmth, down a corridor that grew quieter and colder with every step. The plush carpet swallowed the sound of their footsteps. The air changed, smelling less like expensive perfume and more like old cedar and rain.

They were in the West Wing. The part of the estate Ryan always told her to avoid.

"Wait," she slurred, dragging her feet. "This isn't..."

The waiter didn't answer. He stopped in front of a heavy oak door at the end of the hall. He opened it, the hinges groaning in protest, and practically shoved her inside.

Elena stumbled, her knees hitting the thick Persian rug with a thud.

"Ryan?" she called out into the darkness.

The click of the lock turning behind her was the loudest sound she had ever heard.

Panic flared in her chest, hot and sharp, cutting through the haze of the drug. She scrambled to her feet, swaying, and turned back to the door. She rattled the handle. Locked.

"Help!" she screamed, but her voice was weak, absorbed by the heavy tapestries on the walls.

A flash of lightning tore through the sky outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating the room in a stark, blue-white burst.

That's when she saw him.

He was sitting in the corner, a silhouette carved from the shadows. He wasn't Ryan. This man was broader, darker. He was seated in a wheelchair, his hands resting motionless on the armrests.

Julian Sterling.

The Fallen Titan. The cripple. The man the family whispered about with a mixture of pity and disdain.

He didn't move. He didn't speak. He just watched her with eyes that glinted in the dark.

The drug surged again, a wave of heat that started in her stomach and clawed its way up her throat. It wasn't just heat; it was a disorienting vertigo that made the world tilt on its axis. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. She just needed safety. She needed Ryan. Her confused brain superimposed Ryan's face onto the man in the shadows.

She stumbled toward him.

"Ryan," she whimpered, tears blurring her vision. "Please. It hurts."

She fell at his feet, her hands grasping his knees. The fabric of his trousers was cool against her burning palms. She could feel the rigid metal of his leg braces beneath the cloth, hard, cold, and unyielding against her touch.

Julian didn't flinch. He didn't kick her away, but he didn't help her either. He sat there like a statue, a king on a broken throne.

"You're in the wrong room, Elena," his voice was a low rumble, vibrating through the darkness. It wasn't the voice of a weak man. It was the growl of something dangerous that had been chained up for too long.

"Help me," she begged, the heat becoming unbearable. She tugged at the neckline of her dress, desperate for air. "So dizzy... please..."

She heard a sharp intake of breath from him.

"Silas," Julian said into the empty air, his voice dropping an octave.

A small earpiece she hadn't noticed blinked with a faint blue light. "Lock down the wing. No one enters until I say so. Victoria made her move."

Elena didn't understand what he was saying. Her head fell onto his lap. The scent of him-sandalwood, tobacco, and something uniquely masculine-filled her senses, drowning out the cedar smell of the room.

His hand hovered over her head for a second, hesitant. Then, with a sigh that sounded like resignation, his fingers brushed against her hair. His touch was electric, sending a jolt through her numb body.

"Sleep," he commanded softly.

The last thing she remembered was the terrifying realization that the legs beneath her cheek felt as cold and lifeless as stone, encased in their metal prison.