

Chapter 2 No.2

The sound of a key grinding in the lock was violent enough to wake the dead.

Elena gasped, shooting up from the pillows. Her head throbbed with a dull, rhythmic ache, like a hammer striking inside her skull. She was in a bed. A strange bed. The sheets were gray silk, cool and slippery against her skin.

She looked down. Her dress was rumpled, the strap hanging off one shoulder.

"Stay down," a voice commanded from the window.

She snapped her head around. Julian was there, his wheelchair facing the door. He had his back to her, his posture rigid. He wasn't wearing his jacket anymore.

Before she could ask why, he whipped around, holding his black suit jacket. He threw it at her with surprising accuracy.

"Cover yourself."

She barely had time to clutch the jacket to her chest before the door burst open.

It wasn't just Victoria. It was a circus.

Flashes of light erupted like gunfire. Pop. Pop. Pop. The blinding white strobes left spots in her vision. Elena screamed, pulling the jacket over her head, curling into a ball of shame.

"Oh my God!" Victoria's voice was a theatrical shriek. "Elena! How could you?"

She stood in the doorway, hand over her mouth, flanked by three men with cameras and a handful of "concerned" guests who looked more like vultures circling a carcass.

"Get out!" Julian roared.

The sound was so powerful it physically shook the room. The photographers hesitated, lowering their cameras for a split second. Julian wheeled himself forward, placing his body between the mob and the bed.

"This is my private sanctuary," he snarled, his face twisted in a mask of fury. "Get your cameras out of my face before I break them."

"Julian," Victoria stepped forward, her eyes gleaming with triumph. "We were just looking for Elena. Ryan was worried sick. And we find her... here? In your bed?"

"I... I don't remember," Elena sobbed, her voice cracking. "I felt sick. Someone brought me here."

"Likely story," one of the reporters muttered, snapping another picture over Julian's shoulder.

"She was drunk," Victoria declared, turning to the crowd. "Look at her. Disgraceful. Ryan is downstairs heartbroken, and she's up here throwing herself at his crippled uncle."

The word 'crippled' hung in the air, heavy and cruel.

Julian's hands gripped the wheels of his chair so hard she thought the metal might bend. He looked at Victoria, then back at Elena. His eyes were dark, unreadable pools. For a second, she saw something flicker there—calculation? Pity?

He turned back to Victoria. "She didn't throw herself at me."

The room went silent.

Julian looked down at his lap, his shoulders slumping in a performance of resignation that was terrifyingly convincing. "We have been seeing each other, Victoria. For months."

Elena's jaw dropped. "What? No, that's not—"

"Quiet, Elena," Julian snapped, though his eyes warned her to shut up. "She came to me because she couldn't stand the sight of your son anymore. She chose me. We thought we could keep it secret until after the merger, but... clearly, we were careless."

Victoria blinked. This wasn't part of her script. She wanted Elena to be the villain, the seductress preying on a helpless invalid. But Julian painting himself as the secret lover? It made Ryan look like a fool who couldn't keep his woman, and it made the scandal a consensual, albeit messy, affair.

"You... you beast," Victoria spat, recovering quickly. "You're disgusting. Stealing your nephew's fiancée?"

"I am what this family made me," Julian said quietly. "Now get out."

Security finally arrived, pushing the reporters back into the hallway. The

door slammed shut, leaving them in a ringing silence.

Elena stared at Julian's back. He was breathing heavily.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why did you say that?"

He turned his chair slowly. The vulnerability was gone. His face was a mask of stone again.

"Because if you were the seductress who drugged herself, Ryan would sue you for breach of contract and destroy your family," he said coldly.

"If we are lovers, it's just a scandal. A mess they have to clean up to protect the stock price. I just bought you a lifeline."

"A lifeline?" she laughed hysterically, tears streaming down her face. "My life is over. Ryan will never believe me."

"Ryan is the one who let this happen," Julian said. "Get dressed. Arthur is waiting in the study. The execution begins now."