

Chapter 4 No.4

The silence in the SUV was suffocating.

Silas had been waiting by the side entrance, alerted by Julian's signal. He was driving like a man possessed, weaving through the Hamptons traffic. In the backseat, he had already cut away Julian's shirt and was applying antiseptic to the angry purple welt on his shoulder.

Elena sat frozen, staring at the blood on the leather seat.

"Here," Julian gritted out, his teeth clenched against the sting of the alcohol. He nodded at Silas.

Silas handed her a tablet without a word.

"What is this?" she asked, her voice hollow.

"Read it," Julian said. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, exposing the lean, scarred muscles of his back.

She looked at the screen. It was a dossier. Bank transfers. Emails. Photos.

There was a photo of Ryan kissing a woman—Miss Chen. The timestamp was three months ago. There were receipts from a pharmacy for a neuro-disorienting agent, paid for by a shell company linked to Victoria.

And there was a chat log between Ryan and his mother.

Ryan: She's boring Mom. I can't do it anymore.

Victoria: Patience. She knows too much about the offshore accounts from her time interning in archives. We need to discredit her completely before we cast her out. I have a plan for the engagement party.

Elena felt like she was going to throw up. The tablet slipped from her fingers and landed on the floor mat.

"They set me up," she whispered. "From the beginning."

"They needed a villain," Julian said, his voice void of emotion. "You were the sacrifice."

She turned to him, anger finally burning through the shock. "And you? You knew? You let it happen?"

"I suspected," Julian corrected. "I didn't know the timing. If I had intervened sooner, they would have just found another way to destroy you. This way... we have leverage."

"Leverage?" she laughed bitterly. "I have nothing. My reputation is gone. My family will disown me when the check doesn't clear."

"Marry me," Julian said again. "Legally. Today."

"Why?" she demanded. "What do you get out of this? You just got beaten for me. Why?"

Julian turned his head. His eyes trapped hers. "Because my trust fund has a clause. I can't access the principal until I marry. I need that money to rebuild. And you... you need protection."

"So it's a business deal," she said, feeling a strange sense of relief. She could understand business. She couldn't understand kindness. Not anymore.

"Strictly business," Julian lied. She didn't know it was a lie then. "I get my money. You get safety. And we both get revenge."

Revenge. The word tasted sweet.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go to City Hall."

The ceremony was bleak. No flowers. No guests. Just Silas standing witness outside the glass doors, watching them like a hawk.

When the clerk asked for the rings, Elena realized they didn't have any.

Julian reached into his pocket. He pulled out a simple, tarnished gold band.

"Give me your hand," he ordered.

She extended her trembling fingers. He slid the ring onto her finger. It was heavy, warm from his pocket.

"This was my mother's," he said quietly. "It's the only thing in that house they couldn't take from me."

She looked down at the ring. It felt like a shackle, but it also felt like armor.

"I, Julian, take you, Elena..." his voice was low, rough.

"I, Elena, take you, Julian..."

The clerk stamped the paper. Thud.

"Congratulations," the clerk droned, bored. "You're married."

Julian didn't kiss her. He just held her hand for a second longer than necessary, his thumb brushing over her knuckles.

"Let's go," he said. "We have a war to start."



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