

Chapter 5

I looked at myself in the mirror one last time. The black dress was perfect—but it didn't feel like mine.

I was burned out. I didn't have the energy to keep pretending everything was fine.

It wasn't the first time—and it wouldn't be the last.

But each encounter left a deeper scar than before.

*Nothing changed, after all.*

"Buckle up, Anastasia," I muttered, patting my dress. "Sulking won't pay your bills."

I forced a smile and left for the hotel.

Everything went surprisingly smoothly, even with the last-minute changes. I was sure we'd be celebrating with a private afterparty at the apartment tonight.

"That dress is straight from hell," Nia said, slinging her arm around my shoulder. "Keeping up with that man isn't easy."

She nodded toward Cain, sitting among the exclusives.

"His cold aura is something else," she muttered, shuddering involuntarily. "He's a charmer, in a dark way."

"Too many fantasies, Nia," I muttered, ticking another box on the checklist.

"But don't you think it's a little weird?" Nia said seriously. "All of this. The Blacks—not to mention the models they brought."

I looked at them on instinct.

"I don't mean they're not beautiful. But this beauty doesn't seem normal." Nia whistled. "How can someone be this flawless? How come these dresses look so natural on them?"

"You're thinking too much." I ticked another box and looked up when one of the models walked past us.

It was finally over. I could breathe now.

"Anastasia Grace!" Angie pounced on me once she found me alone. "You looked like you'd walked out of hell itself. Those dresses? Murder weapons."

I scratched my forehead sheepishly.

"You nailed it, Ana. Congratulations," Angie said, hugging me. "Your very own collection."

"You were amazing, Angie," I grinned. "The entire coverage was amazing."

"Keep going," Angie chuckled. "But, thanks. I was a wreck."

We walked out of the event hall.

"Aeron practically had an invisible knife to my throat. I was sure I'd mess up somewhere."

"Same, girl, same." I looked at Angie as she linked her arm with mine. "Where's Nat?"

"Probably handling the closing formalities," she said.

"Ana!" Hannah called me from behind. "A minute."

"I'll meet you downstairs, Angie." She nodded, and I walked back with Hannah.

"Is everything okay?"

Hannah just grabbed my hand and took me to the top floor.

There was only one room.

I frowned in confusion as she signaled for silence and lightly rapped on the door.

Everything clicked the moment I saw who was inside. Hannah let go of my hand as we entered.

"Ms. Anastasia Grace!" One of them stood. "Killian Abram, Mr. Cain's lawyer."

I shook his hand against my will.

"Your work was laudable," he added, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Besides Cain and his brothers, Sharon, our main model, was there, too.

"Why am I here, Hannah?" I asked calmly.

"There's no need for theatrics," Sharon said, her voice sweet with poison. "We're just here to correct a little misunderstanding."

She turned to Cain.

"Why don't you break it to her?"

"Anastasia!" Hannah cut in before anyone else could speak. "Hand over your designs to Ms. Constance. This is her collection now."

I blinked, stunned.

"Are you hearing yourself, Hannah?" I asked, shooting a look at Cain. He just sat there, unmoved—as if this were routine.

"Certain matters required this decision, Ms. Grace," his lawyer said smoothly.

I clenched my hands.

"Mr. Black is prepared to meet whatever price you name. In return, you'll sign the non-disclosure agreement and pass the rights—"

"Save it," I cut him sharply.

I signed the papers and turned toward the door.

"And Hannah," I said coolly, meeting her eyes. "You'll have my resignation tomorrow."

I slammed the door after me and rushed to the elevator. Anger surged in my chest. I leaned back, blinking fast.

One traitorous tear slid down my cheek.

"Damn it."

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I looked up from my laptop when the door opened. Angie's head poked inside a moment later.

Last night, I had just come back quietly without telling them a thing and locked myself in the room.

Everyone would have found out everything in under a minute.

But I didn't care about that.

I didn't care about sneers and mockery. It was the betrayal that shook me.

"What?" I asked when she hopped inside my room with Nat on her tail. Angie took my laptop and set it on the bed before jumping on top of me. "Get off me, you oaf."

"You little menace!" She crushed me harder. "Why didn't you tell us right away about what happened?"

"You would have found out eventually." I breathed in relief when she rolled off me. "What does it matter? What's done is done."

Inside, a storm was raging. It was my hard work, my blood and sweat they took from me. My dignity.

"No, it's not done." Nat held my hand. "You should have fought for your rights."

"There is no point." I blew out a breath. "I am fine."

"You resigned," Nat pressed.

"I'll find another job, Nat," I assured her with a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. "It's designing dresses I feel passionate about, not the place. Maybe I will open my own studio."

"Excellent decision," Angie hyped me up. "I will help you promote it."

"Maybe I'll open a restaurant instead," Nat mused, tapping her chin. "Working for assholes clearly isn't it."

Just then, my phone decided to join our conversation.

"Hannah!" I raised the phone toward them. "She is persistent."

"Come to the office." Hannah ended the call before I could say anything.

"Cain Black has rubbed off on her." I stared at my phone in disbelief. She was not the woman who inspired me.

"I'm going to put a lid on this shit for good," I said, getting off the bed.

*If they wanted round two, I was ready.*

I went to the office with my head held high. Everything was the same, yet there was something eerie and cold about the atmosphere.

There were mixed looks for me when I passed my colleagues. I was in no mood to take their opinions into account.

I knocked on the door and waited for Hannah to command me in. As expected, she was sitting in her chair with her laptop open in front of her.

"To the point, Hannah."

"Sit down, Ana." Hannah closed her laptop. "Please."

I saw a crack of tiredness behind her mask of indifference.

"Accept my resignation."

"Sit down, will you?"

I sat down across from her.

"I'm sorry about what happened. I was not expecting him to make that call."

"It's not the first time, Hannah," I replied calmly. "A lot of designers suffer the same thing every other day. I'm not holding you accountable."

"I won't mind if you do." She passed me a file. "I want you to think about this with a cool head."

I bit my cheek at her words.

"Don't mess with the wrong people, Ana. Some debts cost more than you think."

I didn't need her warning—I'd already been burned once. And I wasn't done bleeding yet.

"I don't know what I did wrong. I don't care to know either, and I don't care if I can't work anymore. I won't be a marionette to someone's commands."

"Don't be reckless, Ana," Hannah said, her voice sharp. "You don't know the kind of power that man holds."

I said nothing, just signed the file and handed it back to her.

Hannah took the file from me with a sigh and signed it. "You need to serve one month. Company policy."

I took the file back and stood up.

"Tear it if you change your mind by the end. Now get back to work."

I gripped my left wrist when it began to sting. I had enough encounters by now to know *he* was near when my wrist hurt.

I looked back when the door to her office opened. My mouth turned down the moment our eyes met.

If destroying every tailored suit on Earth could bring Cain Black to his knees, I'd start with the one he's wearing now.

I bore zero expression when I passed Cain Black. He didn't seem pleased to see me, either.

A heated argument broke out between them right when I closed the doors.

"You are back." Nia jumped on my table the moment I entered our cabin.

I hated the thought of bursting her bubble. Nia looked at me in confusion. "What?" she asked when I sighed deeply and opened my laptop.

*Maybe later.*

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I stuffed everything in my bag and looked outside the glass door. Everyone was gone.

It was hellish today for many reasons, but the top pick on my list of today's misfortunes was named Cain Black. We had four consecutive meetings with him. I wanted to sit them out, but Hannah forced me otherwise.

*It was a terrible experience.*

I couldn't concentrate on anything because of the pain in my wrist and his glares that landed on me more than anyone else.

I didn't know why or how Mr. Black found everything about me despicable. I didn't even talk back at him once after our first encounter.

I didn't want to dig my grave any deeper.

My bag fell to the floor when I found Cain standing in the doorway of my cabin. His eyes didn't break their hold on me as he forced me to stagger my steps.

I rested my left hand behind my back when the pain in my wrist worsened.

"Fancy meeting you here," Cain murmured darkly as my back hit the wall, his towering figure boxing me in.

His predatory aura alerted me to every possible danger. "I've been meaning to have a word."

"Working hours are over." I tried to slip away, but he put his hand on the wall near my face to block my path.

"Is that how you talk to your boss?" His cold mockery scraped at my nerves. "Seems like you've never been properly disciplined."

"With all due respect, *sir*," I met his eyes. "You forced me to give up the rights to my work."

"I won't call that force, Anastasia." The sound of my name in his deep voice sent a shiver down my spine. Cain moved even closer. "You don't know what forcing actually means and looks like."

"Mr. Black." I raised one hand between us. "Is that all?"

"I am not done with you," he hissed.

I held my breath when he loomed in, his hand suddenly pinching my chin, forcing my eyes back on his.

"What makes you so defiant? You haven't even learned to swim—and you want to bite the sharks?"

He grabbed my left wrist and pinned it to the wall. I was completely in his control now. It invoked a new kind of fear in me.

"Let go," I snapped, struggling in his hold. "I'm not dying to bite you back. I know how sick men like you are."

*It felt wrong. The feeling of being near him.*

I pulled violently against his grip.

"Know your place," Cain spat, each word laced with venom.

His breath grazed my cheek.

I couldn't decide what was worse—his closeness or the pain it was bringing me.

"Watch your tongue, little butterfly," he whispered darkly. "No one would notice if you disappeared."

My head turned involuntarily—my nose collided with his.

"It would be a relief for many." His eyes blazed with pure, chilling hatred.

I pulled my hand free and shoved him back.

"Don't ever touch me again." I jabbed a finger at him. "I'm not afraid of you."

I grabbed my bag off the floor and stormed out. Inside the elevator, I pressed the button to the ground floor.

I didn't breathe until the elevator started moving.