

## Chapter 3 Why Hurt Ashley

Gerard Todd, Kristian's ever-dutiful assistant, hesitated for a moment before asking, "Sir, should I go ahead and book a restaurant?"

Kristian massaged his temples, irritation flashing across his face. "No need."

He knew Freya was venting her frustration. If splurging eased her temper, so be it—he'd let her spend freely.

The moment the words left his mouth, his phone vibrated. Another alert flashed—over thirty million had just vanished from his account.

Gerard averted his eyes, while the four bodyguards stood stiffly, arms laden with shopping bags like silent, overburdened mules.

Freya strode out of the jewelry boutique and casually handed her latest purchase to Gerard, whose hands were conspicuously empty. Just as she turned to continue her spree, Kristian's phone rang.

His posture shifted instantly. The tension in his shoulders eased, his frown softening as he glanced at the caller ID. Long fingers cradled the phone, his voice uncharacteristically tender as he answered. "Hello, Ashley."

Gerard and the bodyguards exchanged startled glances. Had their boss forgotten Freya was standing right there?

"Ashley was in a car accident on her way to a hospital follow-up. She's unconscious—still in surgery," the voice on the line blurted, frantic. "Please come. She kept calling your name before they took her in."

"Send the address. I'm on my way." Kristian's chest constricted, the words sharp with urgency.

He ended the call, his gaze flickering to Freya.

An explanation hovered on his lips, but he swallowed it. Instead, he turned to Gerard and the bodyguards. "Stay with her. Buy whatever she wants. If it doesn't fit in the car, have it delivered by this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," the five men chorused.

Without another word, Kristian strode off, leaving Freya and the others in his wake.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the group.

Gerard adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, forcing a polished smile. "Mrs. Shaw, don't worry. Mr. Shaw will return once he handles matters."

"What a loyal employee," Freya murmured, her tone laced with something unreadable.

Gerard blinked, thrown by her response.

Freya studied the mall's glittering chandeliers, her voice deliberate. "Being his assistant is one thing. But cleaning up his messes? Tell me, Gerard—have you ever seen a man ditch his wife mid-date to run to his mistress?"

The bodyguards stiffened; Gerard's smile froze.

For a heartbeat, all five men stared at her with something dangerously close to pity.

This might be the price of marrying into wealth—knowing her husband had left her for another woman while she was expected to swallow the insult.

"Save the sympathy," Freya scoffed, amused by their expressions. She gestured to the bags weighing them down. "A single one of those could cover your salary for a year. Maybe ten."

The blow landed perfectly.

She pressed, "Well, anything you'd like?"

Five pairs of eyes widened in unison.

Freya's mind worked in ways they couldn't follow.

"Since he's off playing hero for his darling, let's put his money to better use." She twirled the black card between her fingers, her voice quieter now.

The sting surprised her. She hadn't realized Kristian's departure would still claw at her.

Right now, all she wanted was to drain his account dry.

Gerard and the bodyguards gaped.

Delighted by their shock, Freya resumed shopping, the card clutched like a weapon.

She assumed Kristian would linger at the hospital all day. But as she sat down to eat, he appeared like a storm, his presence slicing through the restaurant's warmth.

Before anyone could react, he seized Freya's wrist and hauled her toward the parking area, his grip ironclad.

Her back slammed against the car door, pain radiating through her. She winced. What the hell was his problem?

His accusation came like a whip crack, "Why hurt Ashley?"

Kristian trembled with suppressed rage. "You hired that hit-and-run driver, didn't you? I gave you everything you wanted, the house, the car, the money. What more do you want? Why did you still hurt her?"

He looked like vengeance personified, his eyes glacial.

"When did I—" Freya's confusion was genuine.

"Still lying?" His voice could've frosted glass. "You planned this. Picked today so I'd be distracted while your hired man ran her down. You know I'd die before letting her suffer."

His voice was Arctic frost, the kind that seeped into bones and made spines stiffen.

Freya's initial fury dissolved into something colder, sharper. His absurd accusation had an ironic effect—it drained her rage, leaving only icy clarity.

She met his gaze, lips curling in derision. "How poetic. Turning betrayal into some grand romance."

"Freya Briggs!" Kristian's control frayed, his shout raw with warning.

"You're delusional." She didn't flinch, status be damned. "Think. Why would I trash my fresh start—my freedom—over someone like her?"

"You know exactly why." His voice dropped lower, a blade pressed to her throat.

A realization flickered. "Ah. You think I'm still obsessed with you?"

Kristian said nothing, but his clenched jaw and the fire in his eyes were

"Why should I still want you?" Freya laughed, the sound brittle. "After being treated as a stand-in? After your infidelity? After watching you fawn over another woman?"

The words landed like slaps.

Kristian stiffened. "I didn't cheat," he ground out.

"You handed her your heart while wearing my ring." Her smile was lethal. "That's cheating."

"Enough deflection," he snapped.

"You're the one hallucinating conspiracies!"

Silence. Kristian studied her, as if peeling back layers for the first time. The weight of his scrutiny was suffocating.

Freya refused to wilt. "So she claimed I hired a man to kill her, and you just... believed her?"

"Yes." His anger faltered under her unwavering stare, but the frost remained. "Ashley didn't lie. And she has proof."

Freya's brows arched.

Her fingers dug into her bag strap, knuckles whitening. "Perfect. Let's go to the hospital. Right now."

Kristian blinked. Her immediate agreement threw him.

Guilty people didn't invite confrontation.

Doubt slithered in. Was the evidence fabricated?

"Move." Her command shattered his thoughts.

He released her wrist, disconcerted by her detachment. Something ugly twisted in his chest—annoyance? Guilt? Before he could name it, he yanked out his keys and wrenched the car door open.