

# **The Heiress He Threw Away**

## **Chapter 1 - The Day Before Forever**

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The wedding gown loomed in my closet, a phantom—white silk and lace, as fine as a vow, as costly as a fantasy. I would wear it tomorrow. I would be Mrs. Ethan Cole tomorrow.

Tomorrow, my six-year-long effort would pay off at last.

I leaned against our small apartment's tiny kitchen, stirring sauce with one hand and holding my phone against my shoulder. The walls were so thin, I could hear Mrs. Chen's TV, but I had not registered it in years. This had been home since I'd opted for love over luxury.

"Sophia, are you even listening?" My friend Maya's voice came through the speaker.

"I'm listening," I lied, distracted by the jingle of keys in the lock. Ethan was home early. My heart did that stupid flutter it always did when he came in the door. Even after six years, even after everything.

"I'm just saying, it's strange that he hasn't met you yet. You're marrying him tomorrow, and—"

"Maya, I have to leave. He's back." I cut the call off before she could complain, smoothing out my thrift store dress and smiling falsely. "Hey, you're early! I'm making your favorite—"

The words caught in my throat.

Ethan leaned against the doorway, still wearing his crisp business attire—the same one I'd spent three months saving for to buy him. His face, though. His face had aged ten years since I'd last seen him this morning, after eight hours. His jawline was clenched, his dark eyes not looking at me.

"We need to talk."

Four words. Four innocent words that made my blood freeze.

"Okay." I killed the burner with trembling hands, the sauce for the pasta forgotten. "What's wrong? Something happen at work? Is it your mom? Is she—"

"I can't marry you."

The world went still.

I surely must have misheard him. The TV in the apartment next door was blaring, or perhaps I was experiencing a stroke, or perhaps this was some sort of sick joke because there was no way—absolutely no way—he just uttered what I believe he did.

"What?" The word escaped my lips as barely above a whisper.

Ethan finally glanced my way, and what I saw in his eyes made me sick to my stomach. Pity. He pitied me.

"I can't marry you, Sophia. Sorry."

"You're sorry?" I echoed, my voice getting louder despite my best attempts at calm. "We're having the wedding tomorrow. The hall is reserved. The guests are arriving. Your mother is flying in from—"

"I'm marrying Victoria instead."

The name struck me like a blow. Victoria. My stepsister. The girl my parents had taken in fifteen years ago, the golden child who did not make mistakes, the one who'd quietly taken all of my parents' attention and affection away from me until I was all but invisible in my own household.

"That's not funny, Ethan."

"I am not kidding." He stroked a hand through his immaculately styled hair, mussing it in a manner that would have been cute yesterday. Today it just made me want to scream. "She's dying, Sophia. Cancer. Stage four. She has six months, maybe, and her dying wish is to. she wants to know what it's like to be married before she dies."

I glared at him, expecting the punchline, expecting him to at least crack a smile and tell me this was some sick test. But he simply stood there, miserable and self-righteous at the same time.

"So you're abandoning me on the eve of our wedding to wed my dying stepsister." I said it slowly, testing every word, trying to make it sound plausible. It didn't. "Do you hear how crazy that sounds?"

"I know how it sounds, but—"

"But what?" Anger was taking the place of shock now, hot and bitter. "But you pity her? But you want to play the hero? What about me, Ethan? What about the last six years of my life?"

"It's not forever!" He took a step towards me, and I retreated as if he were a stranger. "Once she's. once she passes away, we can get married. We can resume where we left off. This is just temporary, Sophia. Please try to see."

"Temporary," I said blankly. "You want me to wait for my stepsister to die so you can return and marry me as if nothing occurred."

"I know it's a lot to ask—"

"A lot to ask?" I cackled, and it was so unbalanced that even to my own ears it sounded crazy. "I sacrificed everything for you! My family disowned me because I chose you instead of their dowry plans. I've worked two jobs to fund your business ambitions while we lived in an apartment like this—this—" I waved at our small apartment, "—while you made your career! And now you're discarding me for her?"

"I'm not throwing you away." But he refused to look at me again. "I love you, Sophia. That hasn't changed."

"Don't you dare." My voice cracked. "Don't you dare tell me you love me while you're doing this."

"Victoria is dying!" His voice cracked for the first time. "She's twenty-six years old, and she's dying, and she's never been married, never been loved. How can I refuse her last desire? How can anyone be that merciless?"

"And what do you have to say for yourself, being cruel to me?" Tears were flowing down my face now, burning and unstoppable. "What do you have to say for yourself, breaking your promises? The life we were planning? The—" My hand instinctively went to my stomach, where a secret I hadn't shared with him yet was taking root. A secret I'd found out this morning, intending to surprise him tonight at the rehearsal dinner.

I was pregnant.

And my child's father was standing in our living room, informing me that he was getting married to someone else.

"I need to leave." Ethan stepped towards the bedroom, likely to grab a bag. "The wedding is still proceeding tomorrow, just. with a different bride. I'm sorry, Sophia. I really am. But this is the right thing to do."

The right thing. He really thought this was the right thing.

I saw him walk away into our bedroom—our bedroom, where we'd had sex last night, where he'd whispered promises all over my body—and something within me broke. Not only my heart. Something more. Something essential about who I believed I was and what I believed my life would be.

My phone vibrated. A text from my mother: "Heard about tomorrow. Victoria is such a saint for giving Ethan this gift. We're so proud of her. Don't make a scene at the wedding."

Don't make a scene. My fiancé was marrying my stepsister, and my own mother was advising me not to make a scene.

Another letter, this one from my father: "This is for the best. Victoria deserves happiness in her final days. You'll understand when you're older."

I was twenty-six years old. The same age as Victoria. But somehow, I was still the child who didn't get it, and she was the princess who was dying and deserved it all.

Ethan came out with a suitcase, not meeting my eyes. "I'll have the rest of my stuff sent next week. The lease runs out at the end of the month. I've already paid it, so you can work things out."

"How selfless," I returned bluntly.

He stopped in the doorway, his fingers wrapped around the knob. For an instant, I expected him to turn, to see sense, to stay with me.

"I love you, Sophia," he whispered. "I hope you'll forgive me one day."

And then he was no longer there.

I remained in the center of our small apartment, hearing his footsteps recede down the hall, and the past six years of my life shattering into dust. The pasta sauce was simmering on the stove. The wedding dress still draped the closet. And within me, a small life gestated—a life that would never possess the father I'd hoped to provide it.

My phone vibrated again. Another text from my mother: "Don't embarrass the family tomorrow. Victoria is dying. Be graceful about this."

Be graceful. Be understanding. Be invisible.

I'd been all those things my whole life.

I gazed around the apartment—at the discount furniture I'd purchased used, at the walls I'd painted myself since we couldn't pay for a decorator, at the life I'd constructed out of nothing while pretending I wasn't the daughter of one of the wealthiest families in the nation.

For six years, I'd been playing poor. I'd kept my trust fund, my inheritance, my real identity as Sophia Hart—heiress to the Hart Empire fortune—hidden. I'd done it to see if Ethan could love me, not because of money.

And now I had my answer.

The boiling pasta sauce triggered the smoke alarm, its ear-piercing scream filling the apartment like a scream I couldn't let out.

I stroked my belly, where my secret grew.

"It's just us now," I whispered to the child who never would know that their father loved someone else more.

And in the shattered fragments of my heart, something new took root.

Something piercing.

Something volatile.

Something that tasted like revenge.