

Rising From Wreckage: Starfall's Epic Comeback

Chapter 1 1

Rain didn't just fall in Manhattan tonight. It hammered against the asphalt like it was trying to break the city open.

Analia Graves felt the impact before she heard it.

The world spun violently to the left. Metal shrieked against metal, a sound that vibrated through her teeth and settled deep in her bone marrow. Then came the slam. Her sedan kissed the guardrail with a force that snapped her head back against the headrest.

Silence followed, heavy and suffocating, broken only by the rhythmic, mocking slap of the windshield wipers.

Pain bloomed behind her eyes, hot and white. She blinked, trying to clear the haze, but a warm, sticky liquid was already trickling down her temple, stinging her eye. She reached up, her fingers coming away wet and dark in the flashing dashboard lights.

Blood.

Panic, cold and sharp, pierced through the shock. She needed help. She needed safety.

Her hand, trembling so violently she could barely control it, fumbled for her phone in the passenger seat. The screen was cracked, a spiderweb of glass over the wallpaper she had set three years ago—a photo of her and Clive on their honeymoon in Bora Bora. He wasn't smiling in the picture, but she was.

She pressed the speed dial for "Husband."

It rang. Once. Twice. Three times.

The sound of the ringback tone was a lifeline, a thin thread connecting her to the only person who was supposed to protect her.

The call disconnected.

Analia stared at the screen, her heart skipping a beat. He must have pressed the wrong button. Or maybe the signal was bad in the storm. Her chest tightened, restricting the air in her lungs. She dialed again.

This time, it was answered on the second ring.

"Mrs. Wilson," a voice said. It wasn't Clive. It was smooth, professional, and utterly detached. Liam, Clive's executive assistant.

"Liam," Analia croaked. Her voice was a broken rasp. She coughed, tasting copper. "Liam, put Clive on. Please."

"Mr. Wilson is currently in a debriefing regarding the PR crisis," Liam said. He sounded like he was reading from a script. "He gave explicit instructions not to be disturbed."

"I... I had an accident," Analia whispered. The pain in her head was throbbing now, a drumbeat in time with her racing pulse. "I'm on the highway. My car... there's blood."

There was a pause on the other end. A muffled sound, like a hand over the receiver. Then, Liam's voice returned, but the tone had shifted. It wasn't concern. It was embarrassment.

"Mrs. Wilson, Mr. Wilson says..." Liam hesitated.

"Says what?" she pleaded. Tears mixed with the blood on her cheek.

"He says to stop the theatrics," Liam said, his voice dropping an octave. "He said, and I quote, 'Hang up. Tell her I don't have time for her emotional blackmail tonight.'"

The line went dead.

Analia didn't lower the phone immediately. She held it to her ear, listening to the hollow drone of the disconnect tone. It was louder than the rain. Louder than the sirens wailing in the distance.

He thought she was lying.

He thought her bleeding out on the side of the I-95 was a ploy for attention.

The phone slipped from her numb fingers and clattered onto the floor mat. She leaned her head back, closing her eyes. The darkness was inviting.

By the time the paramedics pried the door open, Analia was floating in a space between consciousness and a nightmare. She felt hands on her, efficient and impersonal. They strapped her to a gurney. The rain hit her face, cold and shocking, but she didn't shiver. She felt nothing.

Inside the Emergency Room, the fluorescent lights were an assault. A doctor with tired eyes stitched the cut on her forehead. She had refused the local anesthetic. She needed the sting. She needed to know she was still in her body, because her soul felt

like it was hovering somewhere near the ceiling, looking down at the wreckage of her life.

"You're lucky, Mrs. Wilson," the doctor muttered, tying off a knot. "Another inch and you'd have lost the eye. Where is your husband? We need someone to sign the discharge papers if you want to leave tonight."

"He's... out of town," Analia lied. The lie tasted like ash.

She turned her head to the side. A television mounted on the wall was broadcasting entertainment news. The volume was low, but the banner at the bottom was bright red.

BREAKING: CLIVE WILSON SPOTTED AT THE PLAZA WITH ANGELENA STUART.

Analia's breath hitched.

The footage was grainy, shot through the rain, but unmistakable. Clive, her husband, was ushering a petite woman into a waiting limousine. He had his suit jacket off, draped over the woman's shoulders to shield her from the storm.

His face was turned toward the woman. His expression was etched with a frantic, raw concern that Analia hadn't seen directed at her in four years of marriage.

Angelena Stuart. The childhood sweetheart. The one that got away. The one who was currently "fragile" due to an alleged pregnancy scandal.

Analia looked at the time on the screen. The footage was live.

At the exact moment Analia was bleeding into her steering wheel, begging for help, Clive was wrapping his jacket around another woman.

Something inside Analia's chest made a sound like snapping glass. It wasn't a loud break. It was quiet, final, and irreparable.

She sat up. The room spun, but she forced it to stop.

"I'll sign the papers myself," she told the nurse who walked in with a clipboard.

"Mrs. Wilson, you really shouldn't drive," the nurse said, eyeing the bandage.

"I'm not driving."

Analia pulled her phone from her purse. The screen was shattered, but it still worked. She scrolled past "Husband." She scrolled past "Father."

She stopped at "Zoe."

She pressed call.

"Analia?" Zoe's voice was bright, surrounded by the ambient noise of a TV sitcom. "Hey, babe. Everything okay?"

"Zoe," Analia said. Her voice was steady. Terrifyingly steady. "I need you to pick me up at Lenox Hill Hospital. I crashed the car."

"What the fuck?" Zoe shrieked. The sitcom noise cut out instantly. "I'm coming. I'm in the car. Is Clive there? Put him on, I'm going to scream at him."

"No," Analia said. She watched the TV screen, where the limousine was driving away. "He's not here. And I'm not going back to the Penthouse."

"Okay," Zoe said, her voice softening instantly. "Okay, honey. I'm coming. Ten minutes."

Analia walked out of the hospital twenty minutes later. The rain hadn't stopped. It soaked through her thin blouse, chilling her skin, but the cold felt like armor now.

A few paparazzi were lurking near the entrance, hoping for a celebrity overdose or a scandal. They didn't even raise their cameras for her. To them, she was nobody. Just Analia Graves, the quiet, boring wife of the Wilson heir. The furniture.

Zoe's beat-up Ford Fiesta screeched to a halt at the curb. It was a stark contrast to the sleek black town cars Analia was used to. It was rusted, noisy, and beautiful.

Analia climbed in. The car smelled like stale french fries and vanilla air freshener. It smelled like home.

Zoe didn't ask questions. She just reached over, grabbed Analia's freezing hand, and squeezed it hard. "We're going to my place. I have wine and frozen pizza."

Analia looked out the window as the city blurred past. The pain in her head was a dull throb now, easily ignored.

Her phone buzzed in her lap.

A text from Clive.

Stop the drama. Go home. I'll deal with you tomorrow.

Analia looked at the words. Yesterday, she would have typed a paragraph of apology. She would have explained. She would have begged.

Today, she simply pressed the power button and turned the screen black.

