

Chapter 11

Audriana POV:

The next evening, I stood at the kitchen sink, my shoulders aching with a weariness that went bone-deep. My reflection in the dark window was a pale ghost I didn't recognize.

I turned on the faucet, the warm water a small comfort as it sluiced over a stack of cheap ceramic plates. The suds felt slick against my skin. It was a mundane task, a simple chore, but it was the only thing keeping my mind from spiraling into the abyss that had opened up in my life.

Suddenly, the doorbell buzzed.

The sound was harsh and loud in the quiet apartment, making my heart leap into my throat. I never got unexpected visitors. My world had shrunk to my office, this apartment, and the silent commute between them.

My first thought was my father. Had he sent someone to drag me back? To force me into submission?

A cold dread washed over me. I turned off the water, my hands dripping onto the linoleum floor. I wiped them on the cheap cotton apron tied around my waist, the fabric already damp.

My bare feet made no sound as I crossed the living room, navigating around stacks of design schematics and industry reports I'd brought home. The familiar clutter of my work was the only thing that felt real.

I pressed my eye to the peephole, the warped glass distorting the hallway into a surreal tunnel.

And my breath caught.

It was Caden.

He stood under the flickering fluorescent light of the hallway, a towering figure in a perfectly tailored dark suit that probably cost more than my entire apartment's security deposit. He wasn't looking at the door but down at a document in his hand, a file marked with the familiar silver wolf logo of Sinclair Global.

My heart began to hammer against my ribs, a frantic, panicked rhythm. What was he doing here? Our arrangement was one of convenience, of distance. This felt... different. This felt personal.

I took a deep, steadying breath, the air shuddering in my lungs. I smoothed down my worn t-shirt and yoga pants, suddenly acutely aware of how I must look. Then I unlocked the door and pulled it open.

His head lifted. His eyes, dark and intense, swept over me in a single, comprehensive glance. He took in the faded shirt, the apron, the stray strands of hair escaping my messy bun. A flicker of something unreadable crossed his face, a softening around the edges of his hard features that was gone as quickly as it came.

"Audriana," he said. His voice was a low rumble that seemed to vibrate right through the floorboards.

"Caden," I replied, my own voice tight. "What are you doing here?"

He held up the file. "An addendum to the Apex project charter. It requires your signature. The highest level of clearance confirmation. I was on my way home and thought it would be faster to bring it by personally."

It was a plausible excuse. Not after the flowers, the breakfast, the black card. This was another move in a game I didn't understand.

Still, I couldn't just leave him standing in the hallway.

"Come in," I said, stepping back to open the door wider.

He entered, and the entire atmosphere of my small apartment shifted.

His presence was immense, a physical weight that seemed to suck all the air out of the room. The scent of him—that clean, cold smell of snow-covered pines—filled the space, overwhelming the faint scent of tomato sauce from my sad dinner.

He placed the file on the coffee table, his movements economical and precise.

"Can I get you something?" I asked, my voice sounding strained to my own ears. "Water?"

"Water would be fine," he said, his gaze sweeping the room again, lingering for a second on the cheap vase holding his perfect white roses.

I nodded and turned back toward the kitchen, my pulse thrumming in my ears. His presence so close, in my private sanctuary, was deeply unsettling. It felt like letting a wolf into a rabbit hutch. 

I opened a cupboard, reaching for a glass. The nice ones, the tall crystal tumblers I saved for special occasions, were on the top shelf. I stood on my toes, my fingers stretching, my mind a chaotic whirl of his scent, his proximity, the lie about the file.

My fingers brushed the smooth, cool surface of a glass. I had it.

But my mind was elsewhere. My grip wasn't firm. As I pulled it forward, the base of the tumbler caught on the lip of the shelf. It tilted, slipped from my grasp, and fell.

The world seemed to move in slow motion. The crystal arced through the air, struck the edge of the granite countertop with a sickening crack, and exploded.

Shards of glass sprayed across the floor and countertop like shrapnel. A larger, jagged piece flew up, and I reacted without thinking, my hand jerking up to shield my face.

A searing, white-hot pain shot through my palm.

I looked down. A deep, clean slice ran from the base of my thumb to the center of my hand. Blood, dark and shockingly red, welled up instantly, spilling over my skin and dripping onto the white tile floor.

A sharp cry of pain and shock was torn from my throat. I stumbled backward, my eyes wide with horror at the sight of my own blood.

My heel came down on a patch of water I'd dripped from my hands earlier.

My feet slid out from under me. My arms flailed, finding nothing but air. The world tilted violently, and I was falling, backward, toward the floor littered with glittering, razor-sharp shards of glass.

Time snapped back to its normal, brutal speed.

A blur of motion. A sound like the air itself being ripped apart.

Before my head could hit the floor, an arm like a steel band clamped around my waist. I was jerked upward with breathtaking force, my body slamming against a chest as hard as a rock wall.

I gasped for air, my senses reeling. I was crushed against him, my face buried in the fabric of his suit. My hands flew up, instinctively grabbing his lapels to steady myself. The scent of him, pine and ice and pure, undiluted male, filled my lungs.

Caden.

He had moved faster than any human possibly could. He had crossed the living room and the kitchen in the space of a single heartbeat.

He held me tight against him, his body a rigid wall of muscle. I could feel the furious pounding of his heart against my cheek.

He pushed me back just enough to look down. His gaze went from my wide, terrified eyes straight to my hand, still clutching his suit. To the blood that was now smearing the pristine dark fabric.

His face changed. The cool, controlled mask shattered, replaced by

something primal and terrifying. His eyes darkened to black pools, and a low, guttural growl rumbled deep in his chest. It was a sound of pure, unrestrained fury.

He didn't say a word. He didn't ask if I was okay.

He simply bent, sliding one arm under my knees and the other behind my back, and lifted me off the floor as if I weighed nothing.

"Caden, what are you doing?" I gasped, trying to struggle. "It's just a cut! I can put a bandage on it."

"Be still," he commanded, his voice a low, dangerous snarl that silenced me instantly.

He turned, his movements sharp and angry, and strode out of the kitchen. He kicked a dining chair out of his path, the wood scraping harshly against the floor. He didn't slow, didn't hesitate. He carried me straight to the front door.

"We are going to the medical center," he stated, his voice leaving no room for argument. "Now."

He shouldered the door open and carried me out into the hallway, leaving my apartment door gaping open, the single drop of my blood a stark red accusation on the clean white floor.



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