

Chapter 12

Audriana POV:

The black Maybach sliced through the Manhattan night, a silent, armored shadow. Inside, the air was thick with a suffocating tension. I sat pressed against the plush leather of the back seat, my body rigid. Caden sat beside me, a formidable wall of muscle and fury, his presence consuming all the available space.

He had taken a clean, folded handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it tightly around my bleeding palm. Now, he stared at it, his jaw clenched so hard I could see the muscles flexing under his skin. His gaze was fixed on the white linen as my blood slowly, inexorably, soaked through, turning a patch of it a dark, vivid crimson.

The car took a sharp turn, its tires barely making a sound, and pulled to a stop before a discreet, modern building that blended seamlessly with the upscale brownstones around it. There was no sign, no name, just a sleek glass door that slid open as we approached. This was no public hospital.

Caden was out of the car before it had fully stopped. He rounded the hood, pulled my door open, and before I could protest or attempt to stand on my own, he was lifting me into his arms again. The gesture was no longer just practical; it felt possessive, absolute.

He strode through the automatic doors into a lobby that looked more like a luxury hotel than a medical facility. It was all cool marble, soft lighting, and the faint, clean scent of antiseptic. A young nurse behind a minimalist reception desk shot to her feet, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and terror at the sight of him.

"Alpha- I mean, Mr. Sinclair," she stammered, her hands fluttering

nervously.

"Get Jerrel Holman down here," Caden growled, his voice echoing in the quiet space. "Now."

He didn't wait for a reply. He carried me down a short corridor and into an empty examination room, the powerful swing of his legs confident and sure. He placed me gently on the edge of the padded examination bed, his movements surprisingly careful for a man who seemed to be vibrating with suppressed rage.

Minutes later, a man with sandy-blond hair and gold-rimmed glasses strode into the room, a white coat flapping behind him. He looked annoyed.

"Caden, for the love of the Goddess, it's evening," he complained, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Some of us have lives that don't revolve around your every whim. What could possibly be so-"

He stopped dead.

His head tilted slightly. He sniffed the air, once, twice. His easy-going demeanor vanished, replaced by an expression of pure, unadulterated shock. His gaze darted from Caden's thunderous face to me, sitting on the bed, and back again. His eyes widened behind his glasses.

He could smell it. The undeniable, electric scent of a newly formed mate bond, clinging to both of us like a second skin.

Caden shot him a look that could freeze fire. "Her hand," was all he said, his voice tight.

Jerrel's professionalism snapped back into place like a shield. He cleared his throat, his eyes still holding a hint of disbelief, and approached the bed. "Right. Let's have a look."

He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and gently took my hand, unwrapping Caden's blood-soaked handkerchief. The wound was still weeping, a

deep, ugly gash against my pale skin. ②

"Nasty cut," Jerrel murmured, his voice now calm and clinical. "Looks like there are still some fragments in there. This is going to sting."

He picked up a pair of fine-tipped tweezers. As he carefully probed the wound, a sliver of glass grated against a nerve. ③

An involuntary gasp of pain escaped my lips, sharp and ragged.

The room temperature plummeted.

A wave of raw, untamed power rolled off Caden in a suffocating tide. It was a physical force, pressing down on my chest, making it hard to breathe. The glass vials in a tray across the room began to vibrate, emitting a high, thin humming sound. Jerrel's hand, holding the tweezers steady over my wound, trembled for a fraction of a second.

"Caden," Jerrel said, his voice strained. "Control yourself. I need a steady hand if you don't want me to scar her for life."

Caden took a deep, shuddering breath, the sound harsh in the silent room. The oppressive pressure lessened, but it didn't disappear. It coiled around him, a predator held back by the thinnest of leashes.

He moved to my side, his large body eclipsing the sterile lights above. He didn't speak. He simply held out his free hand.

It was an offering. An anchor.

My fingers, trembling from the pain, wrapped around his. His hand was large and warm, his grip firm and steadying. As Jerrel went back to work with the tweezers, I squeezed, my nails digging into his skin. I felt a tremor go through him, but he didn't flinch, didn't pull away. He just stood there, a solid, immovable mountain, absorbing my pain.

After the last glass shard was removed and the wound was stitched with neat, precise sutures, Jerrel began wrapping my hand in clean white bandages. He worked in silence, but I could feel his curious gaze on us.

He finished the wrapping and started making notes on a chart, his pen scratching against the paper. "So," he said, his tone carefully casual. "Anything you want to tell me, Caden? Or should I just start preparing the nursery?"

Caden moved, his body physically blocking Jerrel's line of sight to me. "It's a private matter," he said, his voice a cold wall of dismissal.

The air conditioning in the room kicked on, and a blast of cold air washed over my bare arms. I was still in my thin t-shirt and yoga pants, and a shiver wracked my body.

Instantly, Caden was shrugging out of his suit jacket. The fine wool was probably worth more than my monthly rent. He didn't hesitate. He draped the jacket over my shoulders, the movements gentle but firm.

It was still warm from his body heat. The heavy fabric settled around me like a comforting weight, and his scent-pine and ice and something uniquely him-enveloped me in a protective cloud. I instinctively pulled the lapels closer, my good hand clutching the expensive material.

Jerrel stopped writing. He looked at Caden, then at me wrapped in the ridiculously oversized jacket, and a slow, knowing smile spread across his face. He had his answer. The cold, ruthless Lycan King was utterly, completely gone on this woman.

My heart gave a strange, painful flutter in my chest. This feeling, this overwhelming sense of being protected and cherished, was entirely new. And it was terrifying.

Caden turned to go to the in-house pharmacy to retrieve the prescribed antibiotics, his voice a low command to Jerrel to "explain the aftercare."

He walked out, leaving me alone with the man who was clearly his closest friend, and who now knew my deepest, most dangerous secret.

