

Chapter 13

Audriana POV:

The moment Caden left, the examination room felt twice as large and ten times as cold, despite the heavy jacket still warming my shoulders. Jerrel leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. The professional mask was gone, replaced by an expression of friendly, unabashed curiosity.

"So," he began, a grin playing on his lips. "You're the one."

I shifted uncomfortably on the examination bed. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, I think you do," he said, pushing his glasses up. "I've known that man since we were pups. I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. It's like watching a glacier catch fire." He paused, his expression turning more serious. "He can be... a lot. Overbearing. Controlling. But his heart, once he gives it, is in the right place. Just be patient with him."

Before I could formulate a reply, Caden returned, a small paper bag in his hand. He stopped at the door, his gaze flicking between me and Jerrel, a silent warning in his eyes.

"I was just explaining the dosage instructions," Jerrel said smoothly, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender.

Caden grunted, unconvinced. He walked to my side and offered a hand to help me off the bed. I took it, and his fingers wrapped around mine, his touch sending a familiar jolt of electricity up my arm. He didn't let go.

We walked out of the medical center, my hand held firmly in his. The automatic doors slid open, and a gust of wind and noise hit us.

While we had been inside, the city had opened up and wept. A torrential

downpour was lashing the streets, turning the asphalt into a black, reflective river. Rain hammered against the awning above us, a relentless, deafening rhythm.

"Stay here," Caden commanded, his voice easily cutting through the roar of the storm.

He released my hand and strode out into the deluge, his expensive shoes splashing through puddles. He moved with a purpose that ignored the weather, a man who bent the elements to his will, not the other way around. He returned a moment later from the Maybach, holding a huge, black umbrella.

He clicked it open—a deep whoosh of fabric—and walked back to where I stood under the shelter of the doorway. He held the umbrella over me, then placed a large, warm hand on my back, guiding me down the steps and toward the car.

As we walked the few feet to the curb, I realized the umbrella was tilted entirely over my head. Not a single drop of rain touched me. I was in a perfect, dry cocoon, shielded from the storm. ○

But Caden... his left side was completely exposed. Rain plastered his dark hair to his forehead and streamed down his face. His crisp white shirt was soaked through, clinging to the hard muscles of his shoulder and arm. The color of his suit trousers had darkened with the wet.

"Your umbrella is crooked," I said, my voice small against the sound of the rain.

"It's fine," he replied, his voice a low rumble beside my ear. He didn't even glance at himself. His focus was entirely on getting me to the car, dry and safe.

A memory, sharp and painful, surfaced unbidden. A rainy afternoon with Gabe, years ago. He had held the umbrella just so, perfectly centered over his own head, complaining about his new leather shoes while I



shivered, the rain dripping from my hair and down the back of my neck. He hadn't even noticed. ①

The contrast was so stark, so brutal, it felt like a physical blow. Gabe's casual selfishness versus Caden's absolute, instinctual protection. It wasn't just a difference in character; it was a difference in species.

Caden opened the car door and held it, making sure I was settled inside before closing it. He rounded the car, slid into the driver's seat, and cranked the heat to its highest setting. A blast of warm air filled the silent car.

The drive back to my apartment was quiet. The only sounds were the rhythmic sweep of the windshield wipers and the soft rush of the heater. I watched the man beside me, his profile illuminated by the passing streetlights. He drove with an easy, confident focus, one hand on the wheel, seemingly unbothered by his drenched clothes.

He pulled up in front of my building and the entire ritual repeated itself. The umbrella, the hand on my back, the careful escort through the rain into the dry lobby.

We stood before my apartment door. I started to fumble in my purse with my good hand, trying to find my keys. The bandaged one throbbed with a dull ache. ②

"Allow me," Caden said.

He gently took the purse from me, reached inside, and retrieved the keys with an unnerving efficiency. He stepped closer, his body shielding mine from the drafty hallway. He was so close I could feel the heat radiating from him, could smell the rain on his skin mixed with his own pine-and-ice scent.

He leaned down, his head near mine, and slid the key into the lock. It turned with a soft click.

He pushed the door open but didn't step inside. He stood on the threshold, a formidable guardian in the shadows of the hallway. He handed me the purse and the small paper bag with the antibiotics.

"Take these as directed," he said, his voice low and serious. "And keep the wound dry."

"I will," I whispered, looking up at him. The hallway light caught the silver flecks in his dark eyes. "Thank you, Caden. For everything."

His gaze dropped to my lips, lingering there for a heartbeat too long. The air between us crackled, thick with unspoken things. I saw him take a small, sharp breath, a muscle feathering in his jaw. He was fighting some internal battle.

Then he took a half-step back, breaking the spell. "Goodnight, Audriana." He turned and walked toward the elevator without a backward glance, his posture straight and powerful. I stood in my doorway, clutching the bag of medicine, and watched until the elevator doors slid shut, swallowing his silhouette.

Only then did I retreat into my apartment, my heart pounding a strange, unsteady rhythm against my ribs. ☹



