

Chapter 14

Audriana POV:

I leaned back against the solid wood of my front door, the silence of the apartment rushed in to meet me, a stark contrast to the storm raging outside and the one churning inside my chest. Caden's jacket was still draped over my shoulders, a heavy, warm weight that smelled of him. I shrugged it off, folding it carefully and placing it on the arm of the sofa, a dark, expensive relic in my humble living room.

I set the bag of antibiotics on the coffee table next to the file he'd brought. The reason for his visit. It seemed like a lifetime ago. I was about to head to my bedroom to change out of my clothes, which felt damp and smelled of rain and antiseptic, when my phone, lying on the sofa cushion, began to vibrate.

The ringtone was a harsh, aggressive buzz I'd assigned years ago. It blared through the quiet room, an unwelcome intrusion.

I walked over and picked it up. The name on the screen made my stomach clench into a tight, cold knot.

GABE BLACK.

A part of me, the logical part, screamed not to answer. To throw the phone against the wall. But ten years of habit, of conditioning, were a powerful force. My thumb swiped across the screen before I could stop myself.

"Hello?"

"What the hell did you do to Hailee?"

His voice exploded from the speaker, a raw, furious roar. There was no greeting, no preamble. Just pure, undiluted rage.

I flinched, pulling the phone away from my ear. "What are you talking about, Gabe? I haven't seen Hailee since—"

"Don't lie to me, Audriana!" he bellowed. "She's been crying for the last hour! She went to Sinclair Global today, just to drop off her resume, to try and make something of herself, and you had security throw her out like a piece of trash!"

The accusation was so absurd, so completely disconnected from reality, that a harsh, incredulous laugh escaped my lips. "Are you insane? I was in meetings all day. I don't control building security. She probably didn't have an appointment."

"There you go again!" he snarled, his voice dripping with condescension. "Always making excuses. Always so cold. You can't stand to see her happy, can you? You're so twisted with jealousy over being rejected that you have to lash out and hurt an innocent person."

Innocent. He called her innocent. The word was a lit match dropped into the gasoline of my anger.

"Gabe, listen to yourself," I said, my voice dangerously calm. "This has nothing to do with me. This is between Hailee and a security guard who was probably just doing his job."

"It has everything to do with you!" he shot back. "You're always like this! So difficult, so argumentative. It's why I couldn't be with you! You have none of the softness, none of the empathy an Omega should have. You're unnatural."

Each word was a carefully aimed dart, poisoned with a decade of my deepest insecurities. He knew exactly where to strike.

"Even your own father agrees with me," he continued, his voice turning cruel. "He told me himself he thinks you're a cold-hearted monster who only cares about herself."

That one hit its mark. A wave of nausea washed over me, and the room seemed to tilt. My bandaged hand throbbed, a sharp, stabbing pain that echoed the one in my chest. I gripped the phone tighter, my knuckles turning white.

"You need to fix this," he commanded, his tone shifting to one of magnanimous authority, as if he were granting me a great favor. "You will call Hailee, and you will apologize. And you will ensure she gets an interview. Do that, and I'll consider asking my father to reinstate a small monthly allowance for you. Enough to live on. We wouldn't want you to be destitute."

The sheer, breathtaking arrogance of it stole my breath. He was offering me scraps from his table, after helping to burn my entire world down. He wanted to buy my compliance, to keep me as a pathetic dependent he could control from afar.

The image of Caden, his shoulder soaked with rain as he shielded me from the storm, flashed in my mind. The memory of his hand in mine, a steady anchor in a sea of pain. The weight of his jacket on my shoulders.

And then, the image of Gabe, offering me pocket money to soothe his own guilty conscience.

Something inside me snapped. The last thread of any lingering sentiment, any shared history, any pity for the boy I once loved, withered and turned to ash.

I was done.

"Gabe," I said, my voice cutting through his tirade. It was a sound I barely recognized. It was the sound of ice cracking. It was the sound of a blade being unsheathed.

"Are you and Hailee finished?" I asked, my tone deceptively sweet.

"What? No! We—"

"Good," I interrupted, my voice dropping into a low, lethal register. "Because you two are a perfect match. You're both garbage. And you deserve each other."

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line.

"And if you ever," I continued, each word a frozen dart, "call this number again, I will file a police report for harassment. Do you understand me, Alpha Black?" ①

"You bitch—" he started to roar, but I didn't wait to hear the rest.

I pressed the red icon on the screen, ending the call. My thumb moved with cold precision, navigating to his contact. I blocked the number. Then I deleted it entirely.

The phone slipped from my numb fingers and fell onto the sofa cushion. My chest was heaving, my breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps. The wound on my hand was on fire.

But for the first time in my life, I felt completely, utterly free. ②



