

Chapter 15

Audiana POV:

The adrenaline from the phone call drained away as quickly as it had come, leaving a hollow, shaking void in its place. My legs gave out, and I collapsed onto the sofa, the soft cushions doing little to soften the impact. The phone slid to the floor, landing silently on the thick rug.

I looked down at my hand. A small, dark red stain was blooming on the pristine white bandage over my palm. The force of gripping the phone had reopened the wound.

I pressed my face into my good hand, the smell of antiseptic sharp in my nostrils. A tremor started in my shoulders, a violent, uncontrollable shudder. It wasn't a conscious decision to cry. It was a dam breaking. The rejection, the betrayal, my family's cruelty, Gabe's vicious words-it all came crashing down on me at once.

No loud, theatrical sobs escaped. Just a series of quiet, choked gasps, the kind of sound a small animal makes when it's caught in a trap. It was the sound of a decade of hope dying. It was the sound of being utterly and completely alone.

The rain outside intensified, hammering against the windowpane as if trying to break in, the noise a welcome cloak for my private agony.

A brilliant, jagged fork of lightning split the night sky, illuminating my dark living room in a stark, blue-white flash.

In that split second of unnatural light, my peripheral vision caught something.

A shape. A tall, dark silhouette standing in the entryway of my apartment.

My head snapped up, the choked sobs dying in my throat. My body went rigid with a primal, instinctive fear. My heart, which had been aching with grief, now hammered with terror.

Caden.

He was just standing there, in the shadows just inside my door. He hadn't left. Or he had come back.

His suit was still damp from the rain. Water dripped from the hem of his trousers onto my floor. His face was unreadable in the gloom, but I could feel the weight of his gaze on me, a physical pressure.

He had heard it all. The entire, humiliating, brutal phone call. He had seen me at my absolute weakest, a crumpled, weeping mess on the sofa.

A wave of hot, fierce shame washed over me, so powerful it was nauseating. I scrambled to sit up, swiping angrily at the wet tracks on my cheeks with the back of my hand. I tried to pull together the shattered pieces of my pride, to wrap myself in the cold, indifferent mask I usually wore.

"Get out," I rasped, my voice raw and broken.

He didn't move.

"I said get out!" I tried again, pushing myself to my feet, but my legs were still trembling, and I swayed, sinking back onto the cushions.

He finally moved, emerging from the shadows. He didn't walk with his usual confident stride. His steps were slow, deliberate, almost silent, the way a wolf approaches a wounded animal it doesn't want to startle.

He didn't stop until he was standing right in front of me. And then he did something that shattered my reality for the second time that night.

He went down on one knee.

He knelt before me on the floor of my cheap apartment, bringing his eyes level with mine. For a man of his stature, of his power, the gesture was one of profound, shocking deference. It was an act of submission. An act of comfort.

He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a folded square of white linen. His handkerchief. He didn't offer it to me.

He lifted his hand, his movements slow and gentle, and carefully, tenderly, wiped the last tear from the corner of my eye. The fabric was soft, but I could feel the slight roughness of his fingertips through it, a calloused strength that sent a shiver down my spine.

I froze, my breath caught in my throat. I just stared at him, at the intense, unwavering focus in his dark eyes.

"You do not need to hide from me, Audriana," he said, his voice a low, deep rumble in the quiet room. It wasn't a platitude. It was a statement of fact. A command.

His gaze dropped to my bandaged hand, to the fresh bloodstain. I saw his jaw clench, and a flicker of something truly lethal, something ancient and predatory, flashed in the depths of his eyes before being suppressed.

He looked back at my face. "That phone call," he said, his voice hard as stone. "That weakness you showed them. It is a mistake." ①

I flinched, expecting a lecture.

"Not because it is wrong to feel pain," he continued, his voice softening almost imperceptibly. "But because it is a tactical error. You showed a predator your soft throat. It will only make them more eager to rip it out."

His words were brutal. Unsentimental. And they were the truest thing anyone had ever said to me.

It was like a bolt of lightning, not in the sky, but inside my own mind, illuminating everything with a harsh, clarifying light. My tears, my grief, my pleading—they were useless. In the world of wolves, the only currency was strength. Pity was a prelude to a killing blow. ①

I took a deep breath. I felt a shift inside me, a tectonic plate grinding into a new position. The grief didn't vanish, but it cooled, hardening from a molten agony into a core of pure, cold rage. The trembling in my limbs stopped.

I met his gaze, and I knew he saw the change in me. The fire being banked. The ice forming.

"You're right," I said, my voice hoarse but steady. "It was a mistake."

I pulled back slightly, out of the range of his touch. The vulnerable, heartbroken girl from a moment ago was gone. In her place was something new. Something sharper. Something that had been sleeping deep inside me, a part of my bloodline I had long ignored.

"It's a mistake I will not make again," I said, the words a vow. "I am done being their victim. I am done being anyone's stepping stone."

A slow, dangerous smile spread across Caden's face. It was not a kind smile. It was the smile of a predator that has just seen its mate show her teeth for the very first time.

"Good," he whispered.



