

Chapter 2

Audriana POV:

Each step down the corridor was a battle. The plush carpet that had silenced my approach now felt like quicksand, trying to drag me down. The soul-tearing pain of the rejection was a physical weight, settling in my bones, making my legs tremble. I stumbled, my shoulder hitting the cool, unforgiving wall. I pressed my palm against the patterned wallpaper, steadying myself, forcing air into lungs that felt like they were lined with broken glass.

My phone vibrated in my hand, a vicious little buzz against my palm. I didn't need to look. I knew who it was. I flipped it over. Hailee. A picture of her and Gabe, his arm wrapped around her, her head nestled on his shoulder. They were smiling. The photo was taken in the lounge, just moments after I'd left.

A cold, sharp laugh, devoid of any humor, escaped my throat. I didn't delete it. I blocked the number. The action was swift, clinical. A tiny, insignificant act of control in a world that had just spun violently out of it.

I pushed off the wall and continued my march, my focus narrowed to the exit sign glowing at the far end of the hall. Just get out. Disappear.

That's when I felt it. A gaze. Heavy. Intense.

In the shadows of a recessed archway, leaning against a massive Roman column, a man stood watching me. He was tall, impossibly so, dressed in a dark, impeccably tailored suit that seemed to absorb the dim light around him. I couldn't see his face clearly, but the sheer force of his presence was a physical thing, a change in the atmospheric pressure of the hallway. His knuckles rapped a silent, impatient rhythm against the cold marble. The name 'Caden Sinclair' echoed in my mind—a name whispered with a mixture of fear and reverence in the upper echelons of the business world. I had seen his picture in financial journals before, always in passing, but never in person. The Sinclair family owned half the continent; whatever position he held, his power was undeniable.

Before I could process his scrutiny, a new disturbance shattered the quiet.

"Caden! Don't you dare walk away from me!"

A woman with fiery red hair and a dress the color of spilled wine came storming down the intersecting corridor. Her heels clicked angrily on the marble floor. She was beautiful, furious, and heading straight for the man in the shadows.

"Juliana," he said. His voice was low, a deep baritone that rumbled with arctic cold. It was not a greeting. It was a dismissal.

"Don't 'Juliana' me!" she shrieked, her voice echoing. "Our families have an agreement! You can't just ignore me. You can't just decide you're not interested!"

The man, Caden, finally moved out of the shadows. He stepped into a pool of light from an overhead sconce, and my breath caught. He wasn't just handsome; he was terrifyingly beautiful. Sharp, aristocratic features, dark hair swept back from a high forehead, and eyes so dark they seemed to swallow the light. They were eyes that held the cold stillness of a frozen lake.

He barely glanced at her. His brow furrowed in a minute expression of extreme displeasure.

"The agreement," he stated, his voice devoid of any emotion, "is cancelled. All business between Sinclair and Beaumont is terminated. Effective immediately."

Juliana gasped, her face paling. "You can't do that." She reached for his arm, her manicured nails flashing.

He moved with liquid grace, a subtle shift that put him just out of her reach. A man who had been standing silently behind him, an assistant of some kind, stepped forward, placing himself between Caden and the hysterical woman.

"Ms. Beaumont," the assistant said calmly. "Perhaps we can discuss this at a later time."

Juliana dissolved into ragged sobs, her fury collapsing into a messy, public spectacle. Staff members down the hall were starting to stare.

Caden didn't even look back. He turned, and his gaze, deep and penetrating, landed directly on me. He had been aware of me the entire time. The observer had become the observed.

I just wanted to get past. To escape this hallway of public humiliations. I kept my eyes fixed on the exit, trying to make myself small, to slide by the edges of his powerful orbit.

But as I drew level with him, it happened.

A scent hit me like a physical blow. Not perfume or cologne. It was something elemental. Snow-covered pines and the clean, sharp scent of ice just before a storm. It was cold, powerful, and utterly intoxicating.

His eyes, which had been cold and distant, flared. His pupils dilated, turning his dark irises into black pools. I saw his jaw clench, a muscle twitching violently. A low growl rumbled in his chest, a sound so deep I felt it in my own bones.

Mine.

The word wasn't spoken. It was a primal roar that crashed through my mind, a violation of my innermost thoughts.

My own body betrayed me. A jolt, like a live wire, shot up my spine. My legs went weak, a strange warmth pooling low in my belly, a stark contrast to the icy ache of Gabe's rejection. It was the recognition. The fated mate bond, a thing of myth and legend for most, a cruel joke for me, happening now, in the worst possible moment of my life.

He moved before I could react. One long stride and he was in front of me, a wall of muscle and power, blocking my escape. The air crackled between us, thick with a tension that was both terrifying and thrilling.

I took a half-step back, my guard slamming up. I tilted my head to look up at him, my neck aching from the angle. "Excuse me," I said, my voice tight.

His gaze swept over me, taking in my pale face, my trembling hands, the faint scent of my own tears that I was trying so hard to hold back. He saw everything. He saw my weakness.

He didn't waste time with pleasantries. He didn't ask my name.

"You need a shield. I need a wife," he stated, his voice a low, magnetic rumble that vibrated through me. "Marry me."

I stared at him, dumbfounded. The world tilted on its axis for the second time in less than an hour. The pain from Gabe's rejection was still a raw, open wound, and this stranger, this impossibly powerful Alpha, was proposing? I must have been hallucinating. The pain was making me crazy.

"You're insane," I breathed.

He took a step closer, invading my personal space, his sheer size overwhelming. His scent was a dizzying cloud around me.

"Am I?" he murmured, his voice dropping even lower, meant only for me. "You were just publicly rejected. Your pack will see you as damaged goods. Your family will either hide you in shame or sell you off to the highest bidder to salvage some value."

Each word was a cold, hard slap of truth.

He gestured with his chin towards the sobbing Juliana, still being placated by his assistant. "I am being pressured into a union I have no interest in." His eyes flicked back to the direction of the VIP lounge I had just fled. "We both have a problem. A marriage of convenience provides a solution for us both."

My mind, usually sharp and analytical, was a chaotic mess. But through the fog of pain and shock, his words cut through. A shield. A. He was right. My grandfather would be furious. My family would see me as a failed investment. They would try to marry me off to some old, decrepit Alpha to forge a new alliance, to squeeze some last drop of use out of me.

This man... he was dangerous. The raw power rolling off him in waves was unlike anything I had ever felt. It was an inferno to Gabe's flickering candle. That power could be a cage, or it could be a fortress.

But it was a choice. My choice.

And right now, it was the only weapon I had.

I took a deep breath, the scent of him filling my lungs, steadying me. I met his dark, intense gaze.

"Okay," I said, my voice clear and firm. "I will."

A flicker of something-surprise? satisfaction?-crossed his features, so fast I almost missed it. Then his face was a mask of cool indifference again.

He simply nodded. "Follow me."

And he turned, expecting me to obey. I watched him for a second, then fell into step behind him, walking towards the registration desk, towards a future that was even more terrifying and unknown than the one I had just lost.