

Chapter 4

Audriana POV:

We stood on the top step of the grand entrance, the city lights of Manhattan beginning to glitter in the deepening twilight. Caden maintained a careful distance, a foot of cool air between us that felt both respectful and calculated. It gave me space to breathe, to gather the frayed edges of my composure.

His assistant, Ian, moved with silent efficiency, appearing at my side.

"Ms. Sullivan," he said, his voice neutral as he offered me a stark black business card. "Mr. Sinclair's private number."

I took the card. The stock was thick, heavy, and felt like velvet. Only a name, Caden Sinclair, and a number were embossed in silver. Simple. Elegant. Powerful. I sent my own digital contact card to the number with a tap of my phone. An exchange of data. A transaction.

A black Maybach, so dark it seemed to drink the surrounding light, pulled up to the curb with a whisper-quiet engine. It wasn't flashy, but I recognized the subtle signs of extreme modification—the thickened windows, the reinforced frame. This was not just a luxury car; it was a mobile fortress.

Caden opened the rear door himself, a gesture that momentarily surprised me.

"Join me for dinner," he said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement of intent. "We should discuss the parameters of our new partnership."

I hesitated for only a second. He was right. We had just bound our lives together, however temporarily. We needed to set terms. And frankly, the thought of going back to my empty apartment and facing the silence was unbearable.

"Alright," I said, bending to slide onto the plush leather seat.

He got in the other side, and the heavy door closed with a solid, satisfying thud, sealing us inside. The city noise vanished, replaced by a profound silence broken only by the soft hum of the engine. The air inside was cool and carried that same intoxicating scent of pine and ice, his scent. It was everywhere.

The car pulled smoothly into the river of traffic flowing through downtown Manhattan. We sat in silence, two strangers in the back of a gilded cage, watching the city lights blur past.

Thirty minutes later, we stopped. The Onyx Room.

My breath caught. This wasn't just a restaurant; it was an institution. A private, members-only club so exclusive that even my grandfather, Desmond Sullivan, with all his influence, had to book six months in advance for a table.

The doorman saw the car and immediately rushed to open the door. The restaurant's general manager, a man I recognized from society pages as David Price, was already on the sidewalk, his posture radiating a deference that bordered on worship.

"Mr. Sinclair," David said, bowing his head slightly. "Your table is ready."

He didn't even glance at me. He personally escorted us past the velvet ropes, through the hushed, opulent dining room, and into a private elevator. We were taken to the top floor, to a secluded corner booth with a panoramic view of the entire city skyline.

I settled into the leather seat, my mind reeling. The casual way Caden commanded this level of access gave me a new, and frankly terrifying, appreciation for the scale of his power.

A waiter appeared, pouring a deep red wine into crystal glasses without a word. Caden picked up his glass, the liquid catching the light like a liquid ruby. He was about to speak, to begin laying out the terms of our strange new life.

But my purse began to vibrate with a harsh, insistent buzz.

I froze. It was a specific ringtone. A tone I had assigned to only one person.

My grandfather.

My blood ran cold. I glanced at the screen. DESMOND SULLIVAN.

"I'm sorry," I murmured to Caden, my voice tight. "I have to take this."

He gave a slight nod, his face unreadable as he swirled the wine in his glass.

I pressed the phone to my ear. "Grandfather."

"Audriana." His voice was frail but laced with the iron authority he never let go of. There was no greeting, no "are you okay," no mention of the fact that my mate of ten years had just publicly humiliated me and our family. "You will go to the charity gala at the Plaza immediately."

I blinked, stunned by the audacity. "What? Why?"

"Benard Conley is there," he snapped, his voice growing stronger with irritation. "Hailee had a... misunderstanding with him earlier. He's an important ally, and he's offended. You will go and smooth things over."

The words hit me like a physical slap. He wanted me to go and clean up Hailee's mess. To apologize to Benard Conley, a lecherous old Alpha known for his wandering hands and his collection of young, desperate Omegas.

"Why should I have to apologize for her?" I asked, my voice dangerously low. "Let Gabe handle it. He's her Alpha now, isn't he?"

"Do not be insolent!" he thundered, and I could picture him in his study, his hand gripping the head of his wolf-headed cane. "This is your duty as a Sullivan! It is about protecting the family's interests!"

"My duty?" I whispered, the words tasting like ash. "What about my interests? What about my honor?"

"You have no honor!" he spat, and the cruelty of it stole my breath. "You lost that when you lost Gabe. You are now a liability. The least you can do is make yourself useful. Go to the Plaza. Fix this. That is an order."

A chilling cold seeped into my bones, a cold that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. In his eyes, I wasn't his granddaughter. I was a tool. A pawn. And now that I was broken, he was looking for one last way to use me before discarding me completely.

Across the table, Caden sat perfectly still, his eyes closed as if savoring the aroma of the wine. But I knew better. With his werewolf hearing, in this silent room, he could hear every single word. I saw the muscle in his jaw feather, a tiny, almost imperceptible twitch. A flicker of something dark and violent crossed his face before it was smoothed away.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, pulling myself together. The Audriana who would have wept and pleaded was gone, torn away with the mate bond.

"No," I said, my voice clear and cold.

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

"What did you say?" Desmond hissed.

"I said no. I am no longer a pawn you can move around your board, Grandfather. Find someone else to clean up your messes."

"You ungrateful child!" he roared, his voice cracking with fury. "If you do not obey me, I will see you ruined! I will freeze your trust. I will cancel every card. You will be left with nothing!"

A bitter, ironic smile touched my lips. "You're too late, Grandfather."

I ended the call.

I placed the phone face down on the table with a sharp click. My chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. My eyes burned, but I refused to let the tears fall. Not here. Not in front of him. I was a Sullivan, and whatever else we were, we were not weak.

Not anymore.

