

Chapter 5

Audriana POV:

The silence in the booth was absolute, broken only by the distant hum of the city far below. It stretched for a long moment, thick and heavy with the things left unsaid from my phone call. I stared at the tablecloth, tracing the intricate damask pattern with my eyes, anything to avoid looking at him. I felt exposed, stripped bare. He had just witnessed the final, brutal severing of my family ties.

I braced myself for the inevitable. Pity. A condescending platitude. An offer to "handle it" for me, reducing me to a damsel in distress.

Instead, I heard the soft clink of a fork against porcelain.

I looked up. Caden had cut a piece of the perfectly cooked Wellington steak that a waiter had silently placed between us. He pushed the plate gently across the table towards me.

"Eat," he said, his voice a calm, low command. "Starving yourself for people who do not matter is a poor investment."

The words were so unexpected, so devoid of sentimentality, that they shocked me out of my misery. He wasn't offering sympathy. He was offering... respect. He saw my situation not as a tragedy, but as a business problem. A liability to be cut loose.

And in that moment, that was exactly what I needed to hear.

A shaky breath escaped me, and it felt like I was releasing a pressure valve in my chest. I picked up my knife and fork. The silver was heavy and cool in my hands. I cut into the steak. I ate.

The food was exquisite, but I barely tasted it. I was fueling my body, just as he said. An investment in myself.

"Now that you have... divested from your previous obligations," Caden said, watching me with those dark, unreadable eyes, "our partnership becomes your primary asset. And mine."

He raised his wine glass. The deep red liquid swirled, catching the light.

"To a new venture," he proposed, his voice a low, resonant hum. "Unburdened by family."

I looked at the glass he held out, at the man behind it. A man who, in the space of two hours, had become my husband, my ally, my sole partner in a world that had suddenly turned hostile. He wasn't offering a fairytale. He was offering a fortress.

I picked up my own glass. The crystal was cool against my fingertips.

"To new ventures," I echoed, my voice stronger now.

Our glasses touched with a soft, clear chime that sounded like a promise.

Miles away, in a stuffy, wood-paneled study that smelled of old books and decay, Desmond Sullivan coughed, a wracking, painful sound that shook his frail frame. He slammed his redwood cane onto the thick Persian rug.

"Insolent child!" he wheezed.

Dagny Crosby, Hailee's mother and my aunt, glided into the room, a glass of water in her hand. She placed a gentle hand on his back.

"Don't upset yourself, Uncle," she said, her voice dripping with false concern. "Audriana has always been headstrong. Selfish. She doesn't appreciate what this family has given her."

She let her words hang in the air before continuing, her tone turning practical. "But perhaps it is for the best. Since she is so determined to throw her life away, it clears the path. Hailee and Gabe... they have a true connection. A bond blessed by the Goddess. It would be a shame to stand in the way of that."

Desmond's brow furrowed. He was a creature of tradition and alliances. The match with Gabe had been about uniting the Sullivan and Black families, securing their future.

Just then, the study door opened. Hailee stood there, her eyes red-rimmed, her expression a perfect portrait of heartbroken innocence. She drifted into the room and knelt by Desmond's chair, laying her head on his knee like a devoted puppy.

"Oh, Grandfather," she sobbed, her voice muffled by the fabric of his trousers. "I feel so terrible. I've ruined everything for Audri. I never wanted to hurt her. But I love him so much. I'll do anything for this family. I'll bear the shame. I'll accept the scorn. Just don't be angry with her."

It was a masterful performance. Every word was designed to paint her as a selfless martyr and me as a spiteful shrew.

Desmond looked down at the weeping girl at his feet, then thought of my cold defiance on the phone. His face hardened. The choice was easy. An obedient, loving granddaughter versus a rebellious, useless one.

He patted Hailee's head. "There, there, child. It is not your fault."

He looked at Dagny, his decision made. "You are right. Announce the engagement. Tomorrow. A grand celebration. We will show the world that the Sullivan family is stronger than ever."

He paused, his eyes turning cold. "As for Audriana... call the bank. Freeze her accounts. All of them. Let's see how long her defiance lasts when she can't even afford a cup of coffee."

In the shadows of the study, where Desmond couldn't see, Dagny and Hailee exchanged a look of pure, venomous triumph.

Back in the silent, air-conditioned bubble of The Onyx Room, my phone lit up with a new notification. It wasn't a call. It was a series of text messages, one after another, from my banks.

'Your Blackwater Centurion Card has been suspended by the primary account holder.'

'Your Sullivan Trust Platinum Visa has been frozen.'

'Your emergency fund line of credit has been closed.'

They were thorough. I'll give them that.

A cold, mirthless smile touched my lips. I wasn't surprised. I was... disappointed. That after all these years, this was all I was worth to them. A line of credit to be cut.

I didn't flinch. I didn't let the panic show. I calmly reached into my clutch, past the now-useless credit cards, and pulled out a simple, unadorned debit card from a small, independent credit union. It was my own account, opened years ago under my own name, funded by the freelance design work I did on the side. My escape fund. It wasn't much compared to the Sullivan fortune, but it was mine.

Caden, who had been watching me intently, saw the gesture. He saw the bank notifications light up my screen. He saw me switch cards. He didn't say a word.

He just took a slow, deliberate sip of his wine, his eyes dark and calculating over the rim of the glass, hiding the silent, deadly plans that were already forming behind them.

The rest of the dinner passed in a strange, quiet harmony. We were two predators, circling each other, testing the waters of our new, dangerous alliance.