

## Chapter 8

Caden POV:

The Mayfair pulled up outside the Sinclair Global building twenty minutes later. I sat in the back, watching the glass revolving doors, waiting. I hadn't told Audriana I was coming. I wanted to see her in her element, to gauge how she was handling the new office, the new pressure.

My phone buzzed. A message from Ian: 'She's been in the office all night. Still there.'

I smiled. Of course she had. She was a fighter.

I got out of the car and walked into the lobby. The security guards straightened, their eyes wide. I ignored them and took the private elevator to the thirty-fifth floor.

The strategy department was mostly empty at this hour. A few early birds glanced up as I passed, then did a double-take when they recognized me. I didn't slow down.

I stopped outside her glass-walled office. She was inside, bent over her desk, a pen behind her ear, her hair falling across her face. The Apex Ventures file was spread before her. She looked exhausted, but her eyes were sharp, focused.

I knocked once and pushed open the door.

Audriana's head snapped up. For a second, surprise flickered across her features, then suspicion, then something softer that she quickly masked.

"Caden," she said, her voice guarded. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on my investment," I said, stepping inside. "And my partner."

Her lips twitched. "I'm fine."

"You've been here all night"

"So have you, I presume."

I didn't deny it. I walked around her desk and looked at the file. "How is the Apex deal progressing?"

"Slowly," she admitted. "Robert Miller is blocking every request I make. He's..."

"A problem," I finished. "I know. It's being handled."

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'handled'?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She flinched, then held still. "You need rest, Audriana. The deal will still be there in the morning."

"I can't. Not yet."

I studied her for a long moment. Then I nodded. "Very well. But you will eat. I'll have something sent up."

I left her staring after me, her mouth slightly open.

Audriana POV:

The door closed behind him, and I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. What had just happened? He had walked into my office-my new office-as if he owned the building. Which, I realized with a jolt, he probably did. The name Sinclair was on the tower, after all.

I had been so focused on the acquisition that I hadn't stopped to think about who he really was. Caden Sinclair. A man whose name was on the building itself. Whatever his exact role in the Sinclair empire, his power clearly ran deeper than I'd ever imagined. And I had married him in a hallway while bleeding from a rejection.

The absurdity of it hit me like a wave. I leaned back in my chair and laughed-a short, hysterical sound.

Maya appeared in the doorway, a look of concern on her face. "Audriana? Are you okay?"

"Fine," I said, wiping my eyes. "Just... fine. Did you see who just left?"

Her eyes went wide. "Was that Caden Sinclair? The Caden Sinclair?"

"The same."

"Oh my god." She clutched her chest. "How do you know him?"

"It's... complicated," I said. "Very complicated. Now, can you get me another coffee? I have a feeling it's going to be a long day."

She nodded and scurried away.

I turned back to my computer screen. The encrypted partition for 'Aura' was still open. I minimized it quickly, my heart pounding. No one could know about that. Not yet.

The sun was setting by the time I finally left the office, casting long shadows across the streets of lower Manhattan. I had spent the day pushing through the Miller blockade, making calls, reviewing contracts. Maya had brought me lunch—a sandwich I barely touched.

My apartment building was old, a pre-war relic with decent security but none of the glitz of the high-rises uptown. It was my sanctuary, a small space in the world that was entirely my own.

I dragged my exhausted body out of the elevator, juggling my laptop bag and a plastic bag from the corner bodega containing a sad-looking head of lettuce and a box of pasta. The ultimate dinner of the defeated.

I was fumbling for my keys, my phone pinned between my ear and shoulder, when the hallway light flickered on.

"I'm telling you, Alana, it was insane," I muttered into the phone. "He just showed up. In my office. Like it was nothing."

"Who? The billionaire?" Alana's voice squealed. "Oh my god, tell me everything."

"I can't. It's... complicated. I have to go."

I ended the call and finally found my keys. I slid the key into the lock, ready to push open the door and collapse into blessed solitude.

That's when I saw him.

He was standing at the far end of the hallway, bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun filtering through a grimy window. Caden. Here. In my building

He started walking towards me, his long, confident strides eating up the distance. In his hand, he held a bouquet of the most perfect white roses I had ever seen, their pristine petals a stark contrast to the peeling paint and scuffed linoleum of my hallway.

My brain short-circuited. I dropped my keys. The plastic grocery bag slipped from my grasp, the lettuce rolling sadly across the floor.

He stopped in front of me, his sheer size seeming to shrink the already narrow corridor. His gaze dropped from my face to the scattered groceries at my feet, then to the cheap plastic bag still clutched in my hand. A small frown creased his brow.

He didn't comment. Instead, he held out the flowers.

"A celebration," he said, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through the floor. "For your official independence"

I reached out and took the bouquet. The stems were cool, the petals soft as silk. A drop of dew, or perhaps water from the florist's mister, fell onto my hand, cold and startling.

The absurdity of the situation was overwhelming. This man, who commanded Michelin-starred restaurants and terrified Alphas with a single glance, was standing in the dingy hallway of my walk-up apartment, holding a bunch of flowers. It felt like a scene from a movie I didn't know I was in.

Somehow, I found my voice. My mother had raised me to be polite, even in the face of the apocalypse.

I bent down to retrieve my runaway lettuce, my cheeks burning "Thank you. They're beautiful."

I unlocked my door, pushing it open into the small, tidy space of my apartment. I hesitated at the threshold.

The invitation was on my lips before I could think it through. It was part politeness, part a strange, burgeoning curiosity. Part of me, a part I didn't

want to acknowledge, didn't want him to leave.

I turned back to him, my hand on the doorknob. "Have you eaten?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper. "It's just pasta, but... you're welcome to join me."


A slow smile spread across his face. It was the first real smile I had seen from him, and it transformed his harsh, beautiful features into something breathtaking. It was a smile of victory.

"I would like that very much," he said.

He bent down, effortlessly retrieving my dropped keys, and followed me across the threshold, his large frame filling the doorway.

I closed the door behind him, the solid click of the lock shutting out the rest of the world, leaving me alone in my tiny apartment with the Lycan King.



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