

Chapter 9

Audriana POV:

Caden stepped into my living room, and the space, which had always felt cozy and sufficient, suddenly seemed small, almost fragile. He moved with a quiet, contained grace, his eyes taking in everything. He scanned the worn but comfortable sofa with its pile of soft blankets, the overflowing bookshelf, the small balcony overlooking a brick wall.

His gaze lingered on the coffee table, where a few of my design sketches were scattered. They were rough drafts for a jewelry line I was developing under my anonymous "Aura" persona. Before he could get a clear look, I quickly moved past him, gathering the papers with a nervous flutter of my hands and tucking them into a drawer.

"Sorry about the mess," I mumbled, my face flushing.

He didn't reply, but his eyes held a flicker of curiosity.

I took the white roses into the small, open-plan kitchen and began arranging them in a tall glass vase—the only thing I owned that was large enough. Their clean, fresh scent began to fill the apartment, warring with the lingering smell of last night's coffee.

I pulled the pasta and a can of crushed tomatoes from my sad little grocery bag. It was peasant food, a meal born of exhaustion and a depleted bank account. The thought of serving this to a man who probably had a personal chef on call was mortifying.

As I filled a pot with water, I felt his presence behind me. He had taken off his expensive cashmere sweater, draping it over the back of a barstool. He rolled up the sleeves of his crisp white shirt, revealing strong, corded forearms dusted with dark hair.

He walked to the small counter space next to me, picked up a knife, and held up a tomato.

"May I?" he asked.

I stared at him, dumbfounded. "You... cook?"

A corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "I attended a boarding school in Switzerland for a few years. It was considered a valuable survival skill, along with speaking three languages and knowing how to start a fire with

two sticks."

He began dicing the tomatoes with an efficient, practiced rhythm that was mesmerizing to watch. We worked in silence for a few minutes, a comfortable, domestic quiet that was more intimate than any conversation. The small kitchen forced us into close proximity. His arm brushed mine as he reached for the olive oil. A current of heat shot through me at the contact, and I quickly turned away, focusing on stirring the pasta to hide the blush I knew was creeping up my neck.

The pot began to boil, sending clouds of steam into the air, creating a warm, hazy curtain between us. And something about the simple, shared task, the warmth, the anonymity of the steam, loosened my tongue.

"He threatened to cut me off," I said, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. "My grandfather. He said I'd be left with nothing." I laughed, a short, bitter sound. "As if I hadn't been 'nothing' to him for years. Hailee was always the favorite. The sweet one. The one who knew how to cry on cue."

The rhythmic chopping stopped.

I risked a glance at him. He had put the knife down and turned to face me, leaning against the counter. His dark eyes were fixed on me, intense and focused. He wasn't just hearing my words; he was listening.

"True power is never given, Audriana," he said, his voice a low, serious rumble. "It is taken. What he gives, he can take away. That is not power; it is leverage. What you build for yourself... that is yours forever."

His words struck a chord deep inside me. It was the core philosophy I had lived by for years, building my career at Sinclair Global, hoarding my secret "Aura" earnings. To hear it spoken aloud, by him, felt like a validation, a moment of profound and unexpected connection.

We ate dinner sitting at the small breakfast bar, our knees occasionally bumping under the counter. The pasta was simple, but it tasted better than anything I'd eaten at The Onyx Room. Caden ate with a quiet appreciation, making no comment on the humble fare.

His gaze drifted past me, landing on my laptop, which I'd left open on the end of the counter. The screen displayed the familiar interface of the Sinclair Global internal network, the Apex Ventures project folder clearly visible.

I saw his eyes narrow slightly, a flicker of recognition. Of course. He was a Sinclair. The name wasn't a coincidence. But how high up was he? A vice president? A board member?

"Sinclair Global," he said, his tone casual. "I have some dealings with them. A difficult company to navigate. Are you facing any... resistance... on your project?"

He was fishing but I was too tired to be properly guarded.

"You have no idea," I sighed pushing a stray piece of pasta around my plate. "There are some old-guard directors who think my approach is too aggressive. The head of R&D, Robert Miller, is the worst. He's an arrogant, obstructionist dinosaur who blocks every request I make, just because he can."

Caden made a soft, noncommittal sound in his throat, but I saw him file the name away. A cold, predatory light gleamed in his eyes for a split second, and a tiny part of me felt a pang of pity for the unsuspecting Robert Miller.

When we finished, he stood up and began gathering the plates.

"I'll wash," he said, before I could protest. "You look exhausted."

I was too stunned to argue. I leaned against the doorframe of the kitchen, watching as this powerful, enigmatic man stood at my sink his sleeves rolled up, washing our dinner plates. The scene was so surreal, so domestic, it made my head spin.

I thought this marriage was a business contract. A shield. But watching him now, in my home, sharing my food, listening to my problems... it felt like something else entirely.

After he was done, he dried his hands and walked to the door, retrieving his sweater. The apartment suddenly felt cold and empty without his presence filling it.

He turned at the door, his hand on the knob. He reached out, his fingers gently brushing a stray strand of hair from my cheek, tucking it behind my ear. His touch was light, but it left a trail of fire on my skin.

"Get some rest, Audriana," he said, his voice a low, soft murmur. "Tomorrow will be a new day."

He gave me one last, long look, his eyes promising things I didn't dare to imagine, and then he was gone.