

Chapter 31

The days were pure bliss.

Work was thriving. Angie and Nat were returning tomorrow.

Logan hadn't reappeared since that night, and Sophia hadn't contacted me again.

Serra disappeared the same night.

For a while, I forgot all the dangers lurking in the shadows.

Almost.

I cursed and bolted down the stairs.

Peaceful sleep was a rare luxury—and now it had me scrambling like a lunatic.

Today was important. A meeting with a new client—and I'd overslept.

Now I was rushing like a madwoman.

A loud gasp escaped me when I collided with Cain out of nowhere.

I froze, wide-eyed, heart racing.

"Can you not do this?" I said, checking my watch. "God, I'm dead—"

Cain grabbed the strap of my bag as I brushed past him.

The tug was nothing to him—but it threw me off balance, sending me straight into his chest.

Heat spread in my cheeks.

"This isn't the time for your brutalities," I squirmed in his arms.

"You're not leaving without eating," Cain said, dragging me to the dining hall and forcing me into a chair.

I blinked in shock when he served me himself.

He loomed over me like death—jaw locked, arms crossed, eyes hard.

"Aren't you running late?" his tone was clipped.

"I'm—"

"Eat." His voice was a sharp command.

I pressed my lips into a thin line, eyeing the overloaded plate.

Too much food.

"Eat or I will—"

I shoved an apple slice into my mouth before he could finish.

He didn't move. Didn't even blink. Just stood there. Watching.

"Stop staring," I muttered mid-chew.

"Why are you so careless?" he scolded. "You're human. Your body needs proper nutrition."

He thundered at me *gently*, all for my well-being.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

"I'm not going to die from skipping a meal," I said dismissively.

"This argument is beneath us," he bit back. "Fix your habits, or I'll intervene. And we both know—"

He gripped the back of my chair and leaned down.

"You won't like it."

His gaze locked with mine—hot and silent.

"Shae will report to me," he said, fixing his cuffs. "Don't skip your meals or else—"

"Or else *what*?" I dared.

His chuckle was low and dark, his eyes glinting with pure wickedness.

"Or else..." Cain growled, turning my chair to face him.

He caged me in, dipping so close I felt the heat of his breath.

"I'll drain your stamina in ways that'll force you to eat—just so I can drain you again."

I'd never eaten this fast in my life.

I bolted from the dining hall the moment I was done. His deep laugh followed me.

I relived the embarrassment until I reached my studio.

Cain had changed.

He was less hostile and more... attentive.

Whatever I wanted or needed, he provided.

No force. No command.

He let me be.

I was free, freer than I'd ever been.

I should be annoyed. But I wasn't.

And *that* annoyed me.

His concern for my health was no joke.

He didn't eat—but sat with me at meals.

If he was busy, he had Sibyl or Shae ensure I ate.

I wasn't... confused.

Every fiber of my being screamed his actions were part of a bigger scheme.

But still—I let him be.

I shoved his thoughts aside as the car parked outside my studio.

Work.

The more I stayed occupied, the less I'd think about him.

The client meeting went smoothly.

I threw myself into the next order without pause.

"Why did I have to go mute?" I muttered. "I should have had a snarky comeback."

"You are born insane—on top of being a traitor?" Serra said.

Shae appeared beside me, alert.

"This is your workplace?" she sneered. "Tacky."

"You need something?" I asked evenly.

"You can't give me a thing," she spat. "But yes, one thing."

She stepped closer.

"Don't get any idea," Serra hissed. "It's for *his* wing. I don't think I need to spell it out."

"Wasted trip, darling," I smiled sweetly. "See yourself out."

"You bloody—!"

"Say one more word," I snapped. "And I'll decorate your face with bruises."

"You think it's that easy?"

"Get out." I pointed to the door. "One scratch on me and you'll be dumped cold. We both know who stands where."

"Omisha!" Serra shrieked, raising her hand.

Only to be stopped midair by a glowing whip.

"That would be a very dumb thing to do," Clarissa said coolly, stepping behind her.

"You stopped me?" Serra screeched.

Clarissa flicked her wrist. The whip vanished.

"Stop screaming," Clarissa said, bored. "Leave."

Her eyes glowed with a warning Serra clearly understood.

"Don't try to be cute, Serra," Clarissa warned. "We aren't unaware of your father's brewing."

Serra paled.

"If even one hair on her head is harmed, Cain will *end* you."

"He's making a mistake," Serra hissed, glaring at me. "I'll prove just how wrong he is."

She disappeared in red flames.

"Brat," Clarissa scooped, then looked around. "Nice place. The dresses—not to my taste."

I sat across from her on the opposite couch.

"Thank you."

"I'm just following orders," she replied. "Serra's thickheaded."

"Does she love Cain?" I asked. "They're betrothed?"

"A brat like her stands no chance beside my brother," Clarissa snorted. "She's being delusional, that's all."

She rose to her feet.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm okay with you," she said coldly. "You're the reason everything fell apart."

Her words hit like ice.

"Return his wing and leave. I won't see him suffer again."

"I'm a victim too, Clarissa. I didn't choose this," I said bitterly. "I'm not that woman."

I held my ground against her.

"Your enmity is not my problem. Ask your brother to find a solution, so we can part ways."

"Slick to your words," she said before vanishing.

So *much* for *having a good day*.

I glanced at the terrace. The sky loomed dark and still.

Everything was too quiet.

I stepped out of my room for a short walk, hoping to clear my mind.

Serra stood outside Cain's room, adjusting the knot of her silky robe.

An afterthought—hair artfully messy, lips smudged just enough to suggest recklessness.

Cain came out a second later, shirtless and calm. His gaze flickered over Serra before resting on me.

"Did we disturb you?" Serra asked.

"I barely knew you were here," I said, forcing a smile.

Serra wrapped herself around Cain. He eyed her in disdain, but didn't push her away.

My chest tightened. "You are jealous?" she purred.

"Of what?" I scooped. "This?" I raised my hands. "Not even in my *wildest* dreams will I fall for someone like him."

My heart thundered when his eyes narrowed dangerously.

I scooped. "I'm not interested in developing any infatuation for a man older than my great, great, great, great, and *great* grandfather." *Score one for me.*

I smiled sweetly. "Enjoy your... whatever." I walked away.

I was proud of myself. I came out in the back garden and plopped down on the bench near a tree.

My mood was spoiled. Rotten. All because of them. Him.

"I should've known better than believing his stupid ass." I threw my head back and scowled at the stars.

But all I could see was them. Together. I covered my eyes with my arms.

He wasn't just in my head. He was buried deeper. I didn't even realize it.

I rubbed my face tiredly. Tried deep breaths.

I came out for peace. But it was worse here than in there.

"I should—"

The hair on my neck rose. Something was wrong.

Cain said nothing could cross the barrier. But this one—it wasn't Cain's.

I turned to run—only to slam into something hard. A coarse, claw-like hand muted my scream.

The lampposts flickered and died. I was far from the mansion, plunged in darkness.

"Ca—"

He grabbed my neck, raised me in the air before throwing me across the garden, toward a more secluded and darker part.

I collided with the wall and fell to the ground with an aching back.

I got on all fours, breathing heavily while watching that thing stomp toward me.

"What in the hell—I crawled back in fear. "Don't come near me."

I screamed when it grabbed my neck again and thrust me into the wall.

I couldn't even blink as I stared into its glowing red eyes.

Its legs were those of a bull, its upper torso was human, and its face was that of a hound.

Its body was covered with hideous, pointy green scales. I was the size of a peanut before it—

"Cain!" I screamed, reaching for the ring.

It grabbed my hand when I tried to touch it.

I stared at the creature in horror as it ripped the ring from my finger and threw it away.

I was doomed. "Cain!" I kept screaming his name.

I covered my face when it extended its claw-like hand.

It rammmed a punch into the wall next to my head. It was toying with me.

"Leave—"

I gasped when it grabbed my throat and squeezed hard.

I cried out in pain as it threw me across the garden for the second time.

My spine was going to split in half if it happened one more time.

"Cain!" Tears sprang to my eyes. "CAIN!"

I pushed at its claw-like hand as it pulled me up by my hair and choked me harder.

Its breath scorched my skin. I felt as if someone had forced my face close to a furnace.

I gasped, falling to my knees, when the creature holding me fell back with a bone-cracking noise.

It howled, rolling on the ground like a slaughtered animal.

A shadow dropped over me.

Cain didn't even lift a finger. He only watched.

That creature turned to a heap of ashes.

I couldn't even blink when Cain faced me once the lights came back.

My eyes were fixed on the remains of the monster who was about to tear me to pieces.

"Ana!" Cain helped me up. "Look at me," he said, holding my chin and forcing my eyes on him.

His expression was stone cold.

He cupped my face with both hands. "Snap out of it. Ana!"

I fell forward into his arms. "I thought I was dead."

"It's not your time yet," he replied.

I had no energy left to retort.

Cain carried me back inside the mansion and to his room.

He laid me down on the bed and sat next to me.

"The ring—"

It appeared on my finger. "Then how did you know? You heard my scream?"

"You're hurt," he said, ignoring my question.

I pushed back as he reached for me.

The sudden action sent pain shooting up my back, and I whimpered.

Cain glared at me angrily, grabbing hold of my arm.

"I'll see a doctor." I tried pulling my arm out of his grip. "I don't want you—"

Cain pulled me into his lap. "Now is not the time for your tantrums."

I pressed my palm to his mouth when he tried to kiss my neck.

"I—" I stuttered under his intense gaze.

Cain lowered my hand from his mouth.

"I'm going to Acreoterra."

He took advantage of my distraction, his mouth latching onto my neck.

Cain gripped my waist, holding me still as he kissed the wound on my right shoulder.

"He was Serra's pet."

I was appalled.

He grabbed my hand and kissed the injury on my index finger.

"She suffered the consequences," he whispered, kissing my arms one by one. "You won't see her or her dogs anymore. I sent her back to hell."

My lips pressed in a thin line as I watched him heal me with his sinful mouth.

"Take a few days off from work," he said, making me sit on the bed facing away from him.

His fingers glided over the hem of my shirt. "Call your friends here. Don't go out while I'm gone."

"This is going too far," I whispered heavily.

"Take it or," Cain ordered.

I shook my head.

"Ana!" His fingers ghosted over my injuries under my shirt, making me whimper in pain.

The lights blew out.

"I'm older than your great, great, great, great, and great grandfather," Cain purred in my ear. "You shouldn't feel a thing then."

"Way to get back at me," I panted.

I raised my arms when Cain pulled the shirt off my head.

"Don't try anything funny," I warned.

I obliged silently when he pushed me down gently.

I rested the pillow when Cain unhooked my bra.

My eyes closed at the feel of his lips moving over my back.

He started from my waist and moved up in random patterns.

"Why kisses?" I moaned when he kissed the length of my shoulders from one end to the other. "Why couldn't it be any other way?"

Cain pulled me back up and turned me slightly.

I covered my breasts as he touched my sides.

"Don't look," I whispered hoarsely.

He chuckled deeply as he kissed below my left collarbone and lowered to the right side of my ribcage.

His mouth was a volcano. His touch was lava. It burned me even though it held no intimate meaning.

The pain was gone, but the embarrassment lingered heavily in the air and on my skin.

"Do your legs hurt?" Cain asked.

I shook my head meekly.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, facing the other way.

My hands shook while reaching for my bra. I couldn't hook it.

I looked at him over my shoulder when I felt his hands on top of mine. His turquoise eyes shot me the warning through the darkness.

I wore my shirt as soon as he hooked my bra.

"I thought you were a rational person," I gasped in surprise when Cain pulled me into his lap again. "But you let Serra affect you so easily."

"When did I let her affect me?" I frowned.

"What's so funny?" I asked, annoyed when he chuckled.

Cain pinched my chin softly.

"What are you doing?" My frown deepened when he turned my face side to side.

"Your cheek has a cut." He kissed it before I could protest. "And this too."

Cain claimed my lips and kissed me until I felt dizzy.

"There." He stroked my lower lip with his thumb. "All good."

"You sly being." I jumped out of his lap. "How could you mess with me like this?"

"Should I show you again?" Cain murmured, stepping toward me. "Your naivety is adorable."

His smugness and the arrogance in his eyes set me ablaze.

"I hate you, Cain."

"I hate you too, Anastasia," he replied coldly.

I looked away from him.

"Don't stray in my absence." He caressed my cheek. "If anything feels wrong, just call Aeron or Xic."

I looked around the empty room.

"He was leaving right now?" I muttered, touching my lips.

They were tingly and swollen. My whole body was buzzing and burning.

I slumped on the bed and rubbed my temples.

This was bad...super bad.