

Chapter 10

Haven Kramer POV:

My heart stopped. The sound of the crashing basin, the spreading pool of water at my feet-it all faded into a dull roar in my ears.

Demetri was awake. His eyes, the color of a frozen lake, held my gaze. There was no confusion in them, no grogginess of a man waking from a long slumber. There was only a still, unnerving intelligence.

How long had he been watching me? Did he see me cut into his flesh? Did he feel it? Did he know what I had done?

I forced my own body to remain still, my breath caught in my throat. My mind, the surgeon's mind, raced, cataloging possibilities, assessing threats.

Slowly, I put down the wet cloth I was holding. I raised a hand and waved it tentatively in front of his face. His eyes tracked the movement.

It was real. He was conscious.

My entire plan had been built on the foundation of him being a helpless, unconscious patient. A tool.

But a man with thoughts, with a will of his own... an Alpha... he was a variable I had not accounted for. A dangerous one.

I found my voice. It came out as a dry whisper. "Can you... hear me?"

He didn't answer. His gaze remained locked on my face for a long moment, then slowly, deliberately, it drifted downward. It settled on the neckline of my dress, which was damp from the spilled water, clinging to my skin.

I instinctively pulled the fabric away from my chest, a hot flush of discomfort rising to my cheeks.

The silence stretched, thick and heavy with unspoken questions. It was shattered by a commotion from the hallway. Loud footsteps, a commanding voice barking orders.

Phoebe burst into the room, her eyes wide with panic. "Miss, it's Mrs. Villarreal! She's coming!"

Before I could even process the warning, the door was thrown open. A portly, imposing woman in an expensive silk dress swept in, flanked by a retinue of servants. Her face was a mask of arrogant disapproval.

This had to be Cliffie Villarreal, Demetri's childhood nurse and the current housekeeper.

She didn't spare me a single glance. She marched directly to the bed, her expression one of exaggerated, theatrical grief.

"Oh, my poor boy! My poor Alpha! Look what they have done to you!"

Her servants bustled around, one moving to shut the window, another fussing with the bedclothes, all of them pointedly ignoring my existence.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it. The man on the bed, the man with the intelligent, watchful eyes, had closed them. He was once again the picture of a lifeless, comatose patient. He was faking.

A jolt went through me. A sudden, stunning moment of clarity.

This was a game. And I had just been shown one of the rules.

One of Villarreal's maids, a pert-faced girl named Holly, turned on me, her hands on her hips. "You must be the new Kramer girl. Who gave you permission to open the window? Don't you know the Alpha cannot be exposed to a draft? Do you have any idea how to care for the sick?"

Phoebe puffed up with indignation, ready to defend me, but she quailed under the housekeeper's glare.

I put a hand on Phoebe's arm, stopping her. I leaned in and whispered a few quick, sharp instructions in her ear.

Phoebe blinked, then a spark of courage lit her eyes. She understood.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Holly! Are you questioning the Alpha's mate?" Phoebe's voice, though trembling, was surprisingly loud and clear. She was reciting my words perfectly. "Lady Haven opened the window to bring the Alpha's fever down! He was burning up. Did none of you know that?"

Cliffie and Holly both froze. Their expressions faltered. They clearly had not known.

"And another thing" Phoebe pressed on, her confidence growing. "For two days, my lady has not slept! She has cleaned his wounds, tended to his needs... she has dealt with filth you wouldn't touch! May I ask, Mrs. Villarreal, how were you caring for him before we arrived? Was letting his wounds fester and rot your method of treatment?"

The words were a slap in the face. Villarreal's jowly cheeks flushed a deep, mottled red. She was utterly unprepared for a counterattack, especially from a timid little maid.

I stood to the side, my eyes downcast, projecting an image of a weak, innocent mistress who needed her servant to fight her battles.

But inside, I was smiling. The first shot in the war for control of this household had been fired. By them. And I was more than ready to return fire.

I could feel it, a subtle shift in the air around the bed. The man who was "unconscious" was listening. His breathing, which I had been monitoring for days, had changed. The rhythm was just a fraction faster. He was interested.

I knew, in that moment, that I had more than just a new enemy in Cliffie. I had an audience. A silent, calculating, and very dangerous one.