

Chapter 26

Haven Kramer POV:

I opened the silver box. Inside, nestled on a bed of velvet, was a single piece of candy. It was beautiful, coated in a translucent sugar glaze with a bright red center, like a tiny ruby.

Mrs. Villarreal stared at it, blinked, and then burst into a cackle of derisive laughter. "A piece of candy? Are you mad? You think you can bribe me with a sweet?"

Holly joined in with a shrill giggle. "She must have lost her mind, madam."

I ignored them. I picked up the candy between my thumb and forefinger and began to walk slowly toward Mrs. Villarreal.

"This is no ordinary candy," I said, my voice soft but carrying to every corner of the silent room. "It's a special 'after-dinner mint' I prepared just for you. A token of my appreciation for your... attentive care."

My smile was gentle, but my eyes were ice. Mrs. Villarreal's laughter died in her throat. She began to back away, a flicker of unease in her eyes. "You... what are you doing? Stay back!"

Her two maids, Holly and another girl, immediately moved to stand between us, forming a protective, if flimsy, barrier.

"Get away, you filthy wolfless thing!" Holly snarled, reaching out to shove my shoulder.

The instant her fingers were about to touch me, I moved.

My motion was a blur. I twisted my wrist, evading her push, while my other hand shot out. Two fingers jabbed precisely into a pressure point on the inside of her wrist.

A jolt of excruciating pain and numbness shot up Holly's arm. Her entire

limb went limp. She cried out and crumpled to her knees.

The other maid's eyes went wide, her mouth opening to scream.

"Phoebe!" I commanded, not even turning my head.

Phoebe, who had been standing behind me, surged forward. All her earlier fear was gone, replaced by fierce resolve. She clapped a hand over the maid's mouth from behind and dragged her aside.

It all happened in the space of a heartbeat. By the time Mrs. Villarreal processed what had happened, her two bodyguards were neutralized.

She stared at me in terror, stumbling backward until her back hit the wall. There was nowhere left to run. "You... what do you want? Guards! Guards!" she shrieked, her voice cracking with panic.

I stood before her and held the beautiful candy up to her lips. "Try it, madam. It's a special recipe."

"I won't! Get it away from me!" She shook her head wildly, flailing her hands to knock it away.

My patience snapped. My left hand shot out and clamped onto her jaw, my fingers digging into the soft flesh and forcing her mouth open. With my right, I flicked the candy. It flew past her teeth and into the back of her throat.

I ran a finger down her neck, triggering her swallow reflex. The candy was gone.

I released her and took two steps back, watching.

Mrs. Villarreal clawed at her throat, trying desperately to gag, to bring it back up. But it was too late.

"You... what did you give me?" she screamed, her voice shrill with terror.

"Nothing much," I said with a serene smile. "Just the primary metabolite of a chronic neurotoxin. It's harmless on its own, but once it reacts with your stomach acid... it breaks down into something quite interesting."

The biochemical jargon was pure fiction, designed to terrify.

I began to count down. "Five... four... three... two..."

"One."

As the word left my lips, Mrs. Villarreal's expression froze. Her eyes bulged as if she were seeing a demon.

The next second, a scream that was barely human tore from her throat. She clutched her stomach, her body doubling over like a cooked shrimp.

She slid down the wall and collapsed onto the thick rug, convulsing violently. White foam flecked her lips. The abdominal pain was so intense she couldn't form a single word, only animalistic shrieks.

Holly and the other maid, now free from Phoebe's grasp, were frozen in place, their faces ashen, shaking like leaves.

I looked down at the writhing form of Mrs. Villarreal, the placid smile never leaving my face. "Now," I said, my voice pleasant, "shall we have a proper discussion about my list of herbs, madam?"

