



CAPTURED HEARTS

CHAPTER ONE

“**C**OLLIN!” Victoria screamed through gritted teeth.
“I’m driving as fast as I can...”
“Drive *faster!*”

I grimaced. “My sweet goddess, please retract your claws.”

“Sorry.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“We’ll be at the hospital soon. Caleb should be on his way.”

She sobbed. “Caleb.”

You better be there, brother.

I was deeply regretting each decision I had made that morning. The first, stopping by the manor. While Caleb was meeting with one of our larger clients from overseas, he asked me to check on Victoria. Though he had passed on the responsibility of head of the Council to me, he was still overseeing the

family business—Carrington Properties, Inc.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” She hugged me when I came in and handed me a cup of coffee. “Do you want anything else?”

“My sweet goddess, all I need is your company.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She chuckled as she turned and waddled into the kitchen.

Made you smile. “I try.”

“Why aren’t you at the meeting with Caleb? I’m surprised you’re not sitting front and center while they sign this new contract. It’s a pretty big win from what Caleb’s told me.”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to spend this quality time with you, princess.” She rolled her eyes at me over her cup of tea. “You know I hate that stuff. I’m more about drawing them in, wining and dining them. Caleb’s the master when it comes to the fine print.” I took a sip of my coffee. “How are the little nippers doing? I have to say, you’re glowing right up through the tips of your pointed ears.”

“They’re quiet for the moment. After the acrobatics they were doing throughout the night, I’m surprised my stomach didn’t burst.” She rubbed absently at her swollen belly.

“You’re still the most beautiful creature to grace these halls.”

“Shameless flirt.”

“Devilish imp.” She stuck her tongue out at me as I rose from the table to place my empty cup in the sink. When I turned back, her face had gone pale. “Victoria, what’s wrong?” I rushed back to her.

“Collin?”

“What is it, princess?” I took her hand in mine.

“My water broke...”

“No...no, it couldn’t have.” My mouth went dry. “You’re not due for another two weeks.”

“I’m telling you it broke,” she repeated.

No. No. No. “Caleb’s not here!”

“I know that...”

“It couldn’t have broken. It wouldn’t break without him here.” The blank stare she gave me did nothing to calm the panic rising in my chest. “Put it back...” She punched me in the arm. “Ouch! What do you want me to do about it?” I could barely contain the volume of my voice.

“Collin Carrington, I swear...” She placed her hands on either side of my face and forced me to look her in the eyes. “You need to pull it together. I need you right now.”

I shook my head, my cheeks squishing between her palms. *No, you need my stupid brother. Why did he leave you? Why did I come here?*

“I need you to call Caleb and take me to the hospital. When they start, we’ll need to time my...” A scream, one I never thought could come out of one so tiny, cut off her last words. Her fingers gripping my face turned from tender to vise-like before I could blink. *Aaagghh...* I’d never felt such excruciating pain. Before I could make a sound, Galia came running into the kitchen.

“Mistress, you need to let go of Master Collin before you pop his eyes out.” She gently removed Victoria’s hands and placed them on the armrests of her chair. She didn’t make a sound, but her face was scrunched up and red. “Grip this instead.”

Galia, you’re an angel.

“Master Collin, let me see your face.” Galia examined the fingernail impressions in my cheeks. “You’ll survive, they’re already healing. I’ll call Master Caleb. You need to focus on getting her into your car and to the hospital.”

“She wanted me to time something?” I whispered.

“Her contractions.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Count the time between pain episodes and how long they last.”

“Ah...and...how do I do that?”

“Oh for the love of the heavens, sweet boy.” Galia rolled her eyes. “Give her something to squeeze when she’s having one. Time how long she holds it and how long in-between squeezes. Understand, dear?”

I shook my head, but when she fixed me with a serious glare, I nodded. “Yep.”

Without another word, I scooped Victoria up in my arms and carried her to my car.

The second thing I regretted that morning was sacrificing my arm for Victoria to squeeze during her contractions, the divots from her fingernails clear evidence of my mistake. *Very bad idea.*

She was a whirlwind of emotions in the passenger seat. Raging one minute, weeping the next, and screaming shortly after the tears dried. *I'm not cut out for this.* I wanted to laugh, scream, and cry right along with her.

Driving through the crowded streets was also grating on my nerves. Victoria howled again.

"Why don't we try the breathing exercises you learned?" I suggested.

Closing her eyes, she began taking slow, measured breaths. Her hand never left my arm but her grip loosened...briefly.

"Eeee..." Victoria bit down on her lip.

Here come the claws. Sure enough, the sharp pain shot through my skin moments later. I groaned, my fangs elongating, unbidden.

"Sorry." She sobbed, trying to take quick breaths.

"The contractions are coming faster."

She nodded, leaning back into the headrest.

"We're almost there, princess. Once Caleb arrives, he will be able to soothe your pain."

She furrowed her brow at me.

I chuckled. "Have you forgotten? Vampires have the power to soothe their mates when they're in pain."

"Ah, yes, that's...a useful...power." Victoria huffed.

I took her tiny hand in mine, pressed it to my lips, and winked. She smiled.

When we veered into the hospital's valet, an orderly rushed out with a wheelchair. *Galia must've called ahead.* He opened Victoria's door and helped her out.

I ran around the car, tossing my keys to the attendant. "All yours." Looking at the orderly, I asked, "Mind if I drive?" Taking control of the chair, I wheeled her into the lobby. The nurse behind the counter looked up. One glance at

Victoria's face had her running around the desk.

"Mrs. Carrington?" Victoria nodded.

"According to your records your due date isn't for another two weeks."

"Surprise." Victoria hissed through clenched teeth.

"Are you having contractions?"

"She is," I answered for her. "Her water broke too." The nurse turned to me for the first time.

"Are you the father?" she asked.

"Oh no! No kids for me. That honor is my brother's. I thought he would be here already." I looked around the waiting area. *Where is he?*

"And you are?"

I frowned slightly. *Ouch!* "Collin Carrington."

"Oh! My apologies, sir. I didn't recognize you." She returned her attention to Victoria. "Dr. Hansing is away on vacation this week. Dr. Downing is covering in delivery. We paged her as soon as we received the call you were coming. Let's get you checked in."

"I can help you with that. I'm not sure she'll be able to answer between the screams." The nurse nodded and beckoned me over to the desk.

Victoria grabbed my hand before I could walk away. Fear shone in her eyes. I patted her hand. "I'll be right here, princess."

As I gave the nurse Victoria's information, I pulled out my phone and called my brother. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm almost there," Caleb answered on the other end. He sounded almost as panicked as Victoria. "There was an accident on the main road. I should've ran there. How is she?"

"Terrified and in pain. She needs you, Caleb. Do what you need to do but get here...now!" I hung up, following after the nurse who wheeled Victoria behind the delivery room doors. I knelt down so we were eye to eye. "Caleb's almost here. You're all checked in, and the doctor should be here any minute."

Victoria nodded, tears filling her eyes. "Collin, I don't know if I can do this."

“It’s a little late for doubts, darling. Besides, when have you ever shied away from a challenge?”

“It...*hurts*,” she cried.

Before I could respond, we were interrupted.

“Mrs. Carrington, I’m Dr. Downing.” A tall chestnut-haired woman approached. My heart thumped and pounded in my chest.

Wow.

“Hello...doctor.” Victoria answered weakly.

“Please call me Gianna. Is this your husband...?” Her voice hitched when her winter-gray eyes locked with mine.

“No. He’s my brother-in-law.” She looked between us.

“Uh...yes...that...I’m her...” I couldn’t think. “Collin!” I shoved my hand out to her.

“What is wrong with you?” Victoria hissed. “And what is that smell?”

Gianna breathed in deeply. “Clove and amber.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Victoria covered her mouth, heaving in the back of her throat. Neither of us turned to her until she smacked my arm. “Get me a...”

“What?” I looked to her.

“Bucket,” was all she managed before vomiting on the floor.

Gianna’s attention returned to Victoria. “Oh! Mrs. Carrington, let’s get you into a room and changed.”

“No need for formalities. Please call me Victoria.”

“How far apart are your contractions?”

“Five minutes!” I barked.

Gianna jumped at my voice. “And how long are they?”

I held up one finger.

“One minute?”

I nodded.

She smiled. “Are you always this articulate?”

“No...yes...um...what?” I scratched at the back of my head. *What is wrong with me?*

She laughed. “Is the father on the way?”

“He better be, or I’m going to drive a stake through his heart,” Victoria growled.

She’s really scary right now.

The doors opened, and Caleb came charging in. “Victoria!” He ran to her side, taking her hand in his and kissing it. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t home with you. You aren’t due for a couple of more weeks. I thought you’d be...”

“What the hell took you so long? This is your fault! You were seconds away from being staked. How dare you leave me...*Aaahh!*” A contraction hit her. Her face scrunched up as she squeezed Caleb’s hand.

Caleb’s eyes, full of pain and confusion and *tears*, met mine. His ears, cheeks, and neck flushed from the tension. His fangs poked out from between his lips.

“Welcome to my world, brother. This bundle of crazy is all yours.”

I watched as the doctor wheeled Victoria further into the delivery area, Caleb being dragged along like a lost puppy. My eyes instinctively lingered over the curve of Gianna’s hips. My world seemed to sway, matching their rhythmic swish—left, right, left...I shook my head to clear my thoughts and took out my phone.

Maybe I should follow them...No. I like my heart stake-free.

“Hey Collin, what’s up?” Blake answered on the first ring.

“Victoria’s in labor.”

“*What?*”

“They just took her back. Can you call everyone and let them know?”

“Sure thing, boss. What are you going to do?”

“See if I need stitches.”

“She beat you up?”

“That’s putting it mildly. I think I’ve permanently lost feeling in my right arm.” I shook out the numbness, then carefully inspected the fingernail indents, some of which had drawn blood.

“Ha, she’s tougher than she looks. I’ll call everyone and see you there.”

“Make it quick. I expect the youngsters will be here shortly.”

“You got it.”

I hung up. Sitting in a chair, I leaned back and closed my eyes, the image of Dr. Downing immediately filling my mind. *Why am I so flustered?* She was a beautiful woman, but I'd been around beautiful women before. What was it about her that made me so tongue tied? Her warm chocolate hair? Or her eyes, the color of the sky before a thunderstorm? Perhaps her scent...citrus and gardenia. It was intoxicating.

Gianna.

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