

Chapter 25

Screams. Blood. The crunching sounds.

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That same scene repeated over and over again until Ava jolted awake.

There was nothing but the pitch black around her and the shadows receding from her dreams. The sudden movement made her groan and close her eyes as she lay back and curled into a fetal position. Breathing hurt, but she had to take deep breaths to calm herself. As usual these days, her nightmares were accompanied by a panic attack. With her body in so much pain, she felt frozen in place, all her muscles seizing up.

She couldn't move, she couldn't breathe...

This was really where she died. In this school, alone, with people who played with her like she was a piece of meat.

She tried all her usual techniques—counting, focusing on drawing deep breaths, thinking of something else. It wasn't working. Her lungs started to burn as all the chaotic thoughts in her head told her she was dying.

Her heart's loud, erratic beating was the only sound in the dark room. She wanted to pull on her pajamas—they felt constricting even though she had worn her shorts and strappy vest top—but her muscles were too still to move.

Then there was a gentle touch on her back and the whispered word, “Breathe”

The voice washed over her and calmed her as if all she needed to draw deeper breaths was his command.

In and out. In and out. She concentrated on the deep breaths until her lungs stopped burning and her mind calmed down.

Then she felt the mattress dip and the heat of his body behind her. His spicy cologne filled her nose as she relaxed against him and closed her eyes. His warm breath blew against her necks he nestled closer and wrapped his large arm gently around her.

She didn't know when she had fallen asleep, but the sky was lightning outside her window when her eyes opened, and she was very much alone.

Had she dreamt that? Had she missed him so much that she had taken to imagining he would come into her room in the middle of the night? If so, then she was more messed up than she thought.

Groaning, she kicked the covers off and then forced her stiff body to move. It was Saturday, but she was still required to report for duties in the kitchen.

It took her a while but she eventually got off the bed and limped to the bathroom. The good thing about having the room all to herself was she didn't have to share, and no one would hurry her if she soaked her body for a while. She ran the bath and then stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror before slowly feeling her pajamas off.

Her body was black and blue all over. Black eyes. Cut lips. Cut cheeks. There wasn't any part of her that wasn't cut, bruised, sprained or swollen in some way. She'd thought she would be out of the matches after her first loss, but the coach said she needed all the help she could get to bring her skills up to par. So in every training session, she had been thrown around and beaten, almost as if it was a sport for them. The coach hadn't stopped any of those matches until she had been unconscious

And this was just the warm-up week. Emily had told her that things got intense from the second week after the new students were expected to have settled into their new routines.

How much more of this shit could she take? Did they mean to kill her? Would she really leave this place in a body bag?

Maybe she was being punished for going to see the dean every single morning to request the same thing

Maybe she was being punished for sometimes letting her mouth run away from her and ending up with weeks-worth of detentions.

Either way, she was just one giant sore, and still, nobody wanted to listen to her to get her out.

After a soak that she had to cut off because of the time, she dried herself and took some painkillers from the first aid kit that Zeke had given her. She didn't know what had possessed him to do that, but if he wasn't an asshole like the dean, she could have kissed him in gratitude.

By the time she had limped to the kitchen, she was half an hour late and had another detention in the bag. But she was past caring now.

“Move quicker, human. The place is a mess, have some pride!”

“I can't move any quicker than this,” she protested.

“Do it, or I will report you!”

She rolled her eyes, and the kitchen supervisor pulled her tablet out. It was like they kept the page open on her name so they could mark it.

By the time she finished everything, she could only manage to pick up a piece of fruit before sitting at the first table she came to in the dining hall. She needed to rest before calling her dad, and then she could walk back to her dorm to sleep the day away.

There was already a queue when she followed the directions on her tablet to the phone room. A long one that she didn't think she could stand in for long.

She couldn't stop the tears from falling down her cheek as she turned back. Though she was hurt that her dad sent her to this hellhole, knowing what would happen, she still wanted to hear his voice. Still wanted him to tell her everything would be okay; she would get through this as she had done everything else. Still wanted to hear her brothers tease her and Caleb to ask if she was keeping her head down and following the rules.

She wiped her face as she started the long walk back. She would try again tomorrow.

A car drove up from behind her and stopped, and she couldn't stop the tears when she turned to look at the driver.

Jared wasn't grinning this time as he looked at her face. He switched off the car without a word and then got out. Then he led her around to the passenger side, where he helped her into the car and gently strapped her in.

"This is so fucked up," he said as he started the car. "You should be here, Red."

She wanted to shut and say, "Tell me something I don't know," but all that came out of her mouth were sobs.

Her heart had never hurt this much. She wanted to go home.