

## Chapter Forty-Four

### Recap

She isn't going anywhere.

Slowly, I bring a hand up to pinch the bridge of my nose.

With my eyes closed, I hiss with an exasperated sigh, "Travis!"

"Are you going to tell me the truth this time?" Layla is still standing in her position as I release my hold a er a few moments.

I nod at her, but look towards the door for Travis to come back inside.

I know I have to tell her everything now. For once, I understand how Travis must have felt when I refused to let this go. The fear of losing Layla with the information that I have and will be giving to her...it just makes perfect sense now.

Moments a er I called him, he reappears with a weary expression on his face. I meet his dark, eden gaze and give him a brisk nod to begin his story.

Telling Layla his role in this is not my story to tell. Though he is a big part of it, I'm praying he will save her from some trouble and leave certain things out that he didn't leave out for me.

A sense of déjà vu enters my memories as he steps towards Layla and shoots her a regretful, warning look. His features furrow in disappointment, and his jaw clicks in utter seriousness, as he opens his mouth to repeat the same words he had said to me the day that we played 20 questions on the roo op.

"Just so you know," He recites gru ly, taking a quick glance at me, "Once I tell you, there's no going back."

### Chapter Forty Four

The entire evening, Travis explained the entire situation to Layla while I pitched in with additional details. Even as we slandered her with the brutal information, she continued to remain stoic. I was beginning to worry, for I wondered if she had taken in so much information that she couldn't attain any more.

It seems Travis noticed too, so less than twenty minutes later, we both decided to call it a night—to let her dream of minor problems rather than think of the life-threatening reality standing before us.

Travis managed to lullaby her to sleep while reciting the rules of survival—the very ones he had tried to provoke me with the first day we met. I remember watching her eyes flutter shut in relief, probably appreciating the still blackness that enveloped her as she did so.

I was next to fall, for I still remember, in the hazy fog of my mind, how Travis was rocking gently in his seat on the couch in the early hours of the morning. I would have reached out, comforted him, but I thought better of it. Instead, I shi ed in my position and shut my eyes whenever he took a quick glance in my direction.

I couldn't trust myself around him anymore. Now more than ever, I felt an intoxicating attraction towards him—not to his appearance, though it benefits the cause, but to his emotions. When they brimmed, mine brimmed. When I saw panic written across his features, an unsettling anxiety nestled in my gut.

I tossed and turned due to my inner dilemma until I could no longer withstand it.

When at last I shove the covers o my body, I notice the first rays of sun starting to seep through the sealed blinds. I squint at the sight and push forward, gently placing my warm toes on the chilled marble surface. I glance at Layla, who is still sleeping soundly on the other side of the same couch, careful not to wake her with any sudden movements.

My face feels hot and ashen as I rub a hand over it, and I detour from my original destination, being the kitchen, and make my way to the bathroom. Behind the locked and closed door, I lean against the counter and stare at my reflection in the mirror.

Contrary to the amount of sleep I got, my eyes were dim and my lips were set in an unbelievably straight line. With a huge sigh, I twist the faucet and splash some cold water on my face.

I almost double in guilt when I imagine how di erent things are going to be for Layla. One minute, she's completely secure in her own home, and in the next, the words secure and home don't even exist. a

I take one final glance at myself in the mirror, observing how my train of thought begins to transform my expression from despair to confusion—confusion to frustration—frustration to anger. a

Confusion because despite these constantly arising problems, I haven't found a singlesolution. Is my mom still in jail? Who attacked our home? Where is James? Who is Carrie? Frustration because trouble seems to follow me like a magnet, and no matter how hard I try to escape it, I'm chained. And lastly, Anger. It courses my veins because I have let this go on for too long, because I've now incorporated Layla—my family—in this mess. a

I have to come up with something.

To end this once and for all. a

With that thought, I open the door with much more force than necessary and make my way over to the kitchen.

While I open the fridge, glossing over the contents, my mind spins under the influence of any possible ideas.

I can fight, I'm not the best—but I'm not terrible. Even Travis had said that my hooks are strong. So clearly, it's not the defensive that is the problem. It is the fact that I don't know who I'm supposed to defend myself against that's the issue. a

Because James is too much of a coward to show up himself, I have a faceless opponent.

My eyes narrow in on a carton of eggs and some raw, uncut vegetables. I reach forward and grab them, nudging the fridge close a er grabbing the ingredients I need to make a breakfast.

As I settle down to crack a large bowl of eggs, I purse my lips while I think.

Clearly, I begin, everything leads back to James Grenage. All I know about him is that he's the gang leader.

"Power." I mumble, tilting my head to the side.

So he's got the power, and he's more than willing to abuse it. He is Travis's ex-leader, his archrival—they both want each other dead. The men we fought at the gym—they stated that they were James's men.

"Numbers." I mumble again, exhaling sharply. I slam the last egg against the corner of the glass bowl and separate the yolk from the whites. When I'm finished, I chuck the shells in the trash below and pull out a sharp edge knife as well as a fork.

Power in numbers, that's what he has—that's what we know. The number is unknown, but considering that he can send men who are ready to die in his name, he must have many. And there are only so many that Travis can recognize.

"Faye?"

I jolt at the sound of a drowsy voice. Looking up, I clear my throat and bring my free hand up to my chest in surprise.

"Layla," I breathe, shaking my head, "You scared me."

She walks over to me sti ly and o ers me a small smile, "Sorry."

When my heartbeat recovers, I shrug and place the knife on the counter so that I can whip up the egg whites in the bowl.

"No it's fine," I reassure her over the mixing, "How are you feeling?"

Layla approaches the island table across from me and drags the long stool out so she can sit down.

She bites her lip and looks distant before answering, "I'm not really sure."

I nod in understanding, "Well, tell me what you remember."

"The last thing I remember before knocking out is Travis stating his so called 'survival code?'" Confusion is evident in her voice as she continues to scratch at her memory. a

"Right," I agree, "I think that's where we called it a night."

Layla exhales shakily and leans back in her seat with a hand bracing her forehead. "You know," She begins, "I don't want to believe any of this...but the fact that I'm sitting here, at this very moment—it just reminds me that this is all real, whether or not I want to believe it."

"Tell me about it," I mutter, glancing down at the overly mixed eggs.

"But," She says so ly, making me look up at her in curiosity, "I'm glad I know."

I raise an eyebrow skeptically, "Of all emotions, I didn't think you'd be happy to know that this is the messed up reality we're in."

She shrugs, "I think it just—it makes sense—all this drama." She brings her hands up in front of her and moves them around in an attempt to emphasize what she was struggling to say. "It answers a lot of my questions."

I open my mouth, about to disagree with her, to tell her that though it may have answered her questions, the situation brought along a lot more problems and very few solutions, but a light rap at the front door had us both in silence.

We both whip our heads in the direction of the entrance and then back at each other in possible panic.

My hands instantly clench around the knife on the counter, and I slowly begin to tip toe towards the door. Layla frantically waves her arms and mouths a drastic and clear no, but I ignore her and motion for her to stay silent and still.

With my heart beating and my palms sweating in less than a second, I start to feel the same raged adrenaline fuel my actions.

The doorknob jingles and rattles more just as I make it to the corner behind the door. My eyes flicker over to Layla, and I clench my jaw as she stares at the door with her hand covering her mouth. a

The door knob stops moving and the lock clicks. Internally, I curse, deciding that I'd resort to the knife as my last defense. I brace my right hand, ready to go for the uppercut as the front door peels open ever so slowly.

As soon as I see a black combat boot cross the doorway, my hand goes flying through the air. It meets hard flesh an instant later, just the same time that pain ripples through the entire length of my right arm. a

The man groans in agony, and I run out from behind the door to make the score 2-0. Only, when I notice Travis, gasping for the air I knocked out of him, leaning his head against the wall, I freeze and drop my stance. a

Layla's audible gasp mirrors my visible reaction, and I step closer to him in worry.

"Shit!" I place an arm on his shoulder as he moans and ducks his head down while gritting his teeth, "Travis, I'm so sorry!" a

Layla comes forward lightly and closes the door behind us with a resound lock.

"Dammit Faye!" Travis growls when he finally catches his breath. a

I grimace as he releases his grip on his temple, a discoloration already starting to take form.

"I thought you were one of James's guys," I insist while grabbing his chin and moving his face so that I can observe the damage more clearly.

"I would say it's alright," He begins lowly, "If it didn't hurt like a bitch" a

At his comment, despite his clear irritation, I find a twisted compliment. My lips twitch as I attempt to fight back a small smile of self-victory. a

"This isn't funny, Williams." Travis warns me while I bite my lip. a

"I know, I know," I reprimand myself inwardly as I watch him sti ly start to walk past me and towards the kitchen.

I run past him, a smile still making its way onto my face, "Do you have any ice?"

"No," He calls out, "Just get something from the freezer—it'll have to do."

I do as he says and open the freezer lid. The chill hits my bare arms, and I shudder before rummaging through the frozen bags section. I pull out a bag of frozen brussel sprouts and hurry my way over to him. a

Seated in the very chair Layla was in earlier, he extends a hand as I get closer to him.

When I'm in reach, he snatches the bag and applies it with care to his swelling patch of skin. I stand on the other side of the island counter and observe the way the bad boy is gripping a bag of frozen brussel sprouts to his injury.

"Stop." He orders, glaring at me.

I shake my head, convincing myself more than him, that I'm not smiling.

"Okay, maybe this is somewhat funny." Travis admits soon.

I glance up at him in surprise, a grin spreading across my features in the same way a smirk is appearing on his.

And in this moment, I let myself relish the happy moment. a

For I know that when I'm all alone again, the rage will consume me. a

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Hey!

I hope y'all enjoyed the last chapter. This chapter is supposed to deviate for drama for just a brief moment—but dont worry. I promise you the stress will pick up at a more intense rate starting with the next chapter! a

Thanks for reading and COMMENTING as always.

Can I get 65 comments, please? a

QOC: If you could be ANY character in this novel, who would it be and why? a

VOMMENT

xxSummerxx

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