

Chapter 10

Riley's POV

I let my eyes sweep across their faces—one by one.

Alaric. Zara. Scarlett. Kael.

Each of them flinched beneath my stare, unable to meet my gaze. Even Kael, all fire and fury a second ago, broke eye contact first.

I knew what they were doing. What they were hoping for.

That I'd fall silent again.

That I'd back down. Again.

But I didn't.

“Fine,” I said coolly, my voice cutting through the silence like a blade. “Since none of you will say it, I will.”

I stepped forward.

“The gown Kael picked up was perfectly intact. The dashcam can prove I never touched it, never even looked at it during the ride. But somehow, by the time Scarlett slipped it on, it was torn.”

I turned toward the guests, toward the room filled with powerful families and polished reputations.

“So tell me,” I asked, louder now, “who really damaged the dress?”

My voice dropped to a quiet, dangerous hush.

“And more importantly—why is everyone so afraid of checking the damn footage?”

No one moved.

Because they knew. If the truth came out, they couldn't pin this on me.

Couldn't let me be the scapegoat.

Not again.

“I guess that's the problem, right?” I laughed bitterly. “If the dashcam proves I'm innocent, then who's left to carry the blame?”

I looked straight at Alaric and Zara.

“To carry the blame... to take the fall... to take the punishment meant for someone else.”

That last sentence hit like a grenade.

Zara's tears came quickly, but they didn't move me.

"Riley... it's not like that. You're my daughter too. I've always—"

I cut her off with a single look.

A sharp, dead-cold stare.

And this time, she had no defense.

"I don't care what you call me anymore," I said. "It means nothing."

I turned and walked away.

And when I reached the hallway corner, fate twisted the knife once more.

He was there.

Maddox.

Leaning against the wall like he'd been waiting for me.

I didn't slow down.

Didn't look at him.

But just as I passed, his voice drifted past my shoulder—low and familiar.

"I believe you, Riley."

It didn't soothe me.

It gutted me.

Because belief meant nothing now.

Not when it came too late.

Back in the storeroom, I stood in the doorway for a long time.

Then I stepped inside.

Sat on the fold-up cot, the same one I'd slept on for three years.

I felt hollow.

Not angry. Not even hurt anymore.

Just... emptied.

I stared at the wall, the faded uniforms, the ceiling with water stains.

This had been my world.

But not anymore.

I gathered my things—a plastic bag, worn shoes, a faded T-shirt.

I was leaving.

Then, just as I reached for the door—

It opened.

And standing there was the only person in this house who'd ever treated me like I mattered.

Mia.

She was older now, maybe sixty, her greying hair pulled back tight, her Omega scent faint but distinct—a soft blend of rosemary and iron.

“Miss Riley...” Her voice trembled. “You’re really back?”

I froze.

My lips parted. “Mia?”

No one else called me that anymore.

Not Miss Riley.

Just Riley.

Just that girl.

But Mia always remembered.

In a house that treated me like an unwanted stain, she was the only one who saw me as hers.

I remembered those summer nights—when the storeroom boiled like an oven and she snuck in an old fan she'd bought herself. I remembered her tucking an electric blanket under my thin mattress during winter, whispering, “Don’t tell anyone.”

I blinked away tears I didn’t have the strength to shed.

Mia looked at the plastic bag in my hand. “You’re leaving?”

I nodded.

She didn’t try to stop me.

She just stepped forward and took my arm. “Sit. Let me clean that wound first.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “Just a scratch.”

Her jaw tensed. “Riley... you’ve said that since you were sixteen. But it’s never been just a scratch.”

She led me back to the cot, her movements gentle but practiced.

Mia, like most Omegas in elite households, had learned to be invisible. Soft-spoken. Careful.

But with me, her hands were steady. Her voice carried steel.

She cleaned the cut with warm water and antiseptic from the old metal cabinet, wrapped it tightly, then looked me in the eye.

“You haven’t eaten since yesterday. Let me make you a bowl of noodles, then you can go wherever you want.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to eat anything from this house.”

She didn’t argue.

Just nodded.

She understood.

“You’ll need money.” She pulled a thick envelope from her apron pocket and pressed it into my hand. “Take it.”

“Mia—”

“Don’t fight me. I’ve been saving it for years. I was going to use it when I left this house... but now I know you need it more.”

I wanted to refuse.

But I couldn’t.

Because she was right.

And because her hand, calloused and shaking, was still wrapped around mine like I was her child.

She looked me in the eyes again, hers glassy with tears. “I’m an Omega. I can’t stop them from hurting you. But I can help you walk away.”

Her voice cracked.

“You were never meant to belong to this place, Riley. You’re meant to tear the whole damn thing down.”

I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood.

Then I whispered, “Thank you.”

And meant it more than anything I’d ever said.