

Chapter 17

Riley's POV

I shouldn't have been surprised to see Kael Vale at the station.

But I was.

He stood there like a shadow from my past, his eyes lit with fury, his presence coiling around me like a cold serpent.

I froze.

"So late at night... where exactly were you planning to go, Riley?" His voice was low, deadly calm.

I didn't answer. I just wanted to run. "Let go of me."

But Kael didn't let go.

He grabbed me hard, dragging me away from the ticket gate with terrifying strength. My bag fell, scattering my things across the floor. The crowd stared but no one moved to stop him.

"Help! I don't know him! He's a kidnapper!" I cried out.

My voice echoed through the station, raw with panic.

Some people hesitated. One or two stepped forward—until Kael turned and said coolly, "She's my sister. She ran away from home. It's a family matter."

And just like that, the spell was broken.

They backed off.

"I'm not his sister!" I screamed. Tears blurred my vision. "I'm not!"

But no one came.

Desperation clawed at me. I scanned the crowd until my gaze locked with a middle-aged woman's. She looked uncertain but not hostile.

"Mom!" I sobbed. "Mom, help me!"

Her expression changed instantly. Her instincts kicked in.

She stormed toward us, wedging herself between me and Kael. "Let go of her right now!"

Kael flinched, caught off guard.

"This is a family matter," he growled.

"She's calling for help," the woman snapped. "I heard her. I don't care if you're her blood—she doesn't want to go with you."

He tried to grab me again, but a small army of women closed in. One called him a monster. Another kicked him in the shin. They formed a shield around me, protective and furious.

I couldn't hold back the sobs anymore.

The woman who'd stood up for me gently wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Don't cry, sweet girl. If you don't want to go, then you don't have to."

"You knew he wasn't a trafficker?" I asked, stunned.

"Of course. That suit alone costs more than my car. But sweetheart, it doesn't matter. Even if he's your brother—if he's hurting you, he has no right to take you. Blood means nothing without love."

Her words shattered something inside me.

I could only whisper, "Thank you. Thank you."

She gave me a little push forward. "Go. Get as far away as you can. Never let anyone like that touch you again."

I ran.

I didn't feel the pain in my injured leg. I didn't feel the cold.

I only felt the desperate need to flee. Kael had found me at the station—he'd find me in Garkh too. I couldn't go there. I couldn't use my ID. I couldn't let them catch me again.

Behind me, I heard Kael shouting my name. I didn't look back.

I saw the station exit ahead and pushed myself harder.

Almost there. I was almost free.

Then a hand came out of nowhere, covering my mouth with a cloth soaked in something sharp and chemical.

The world tilted.

As darkness closed in, I heard a mocking voice.

"She really doesn't make things easy for you, does she, Kael?"

Then: "Let's go. We're going home."

When I came to, I was in the back of a car.

Kael was beside me, pale and furious.

"So you're awake."

I turned my face away and grabbed for the car door.

Locked.

"Trying to jump out? Don't bother."

I faced him again. "You think this makes you powerful? Dragging me back like a prize?"

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. His expression said it all.

That he'd won.

That he always would.

I clenched my fists. "You can keep me in chains if you want. But if you think I won't run again, then you don't know me at all."

His face darkened.

"Try me."

Oh, I would.