

## Chapter 20

Riley's POV

I woke up in Kael's room. Again.

The first thing I saw was Mia, perched at the edge of the bed, gently dabbing a cool salve over the swelling on my cheek with a cotton swab. Her eyes were full of worry.

When she noticed I was awake, she leaned in and mouthed something.

"Miss Riley, does anything else hurt?"

Her voice was muffled and distant. The slap from Alaric had worsened the hearing in my already damaged right ear—everything now sounded like I was underwater.

But I could read her lips.

I hadn't known how to do that before I went to prison. Back then, I hadn't needed to. But after losing most of the hearing in my left ear, I'd had to teach myself—painfully, desperately—so I could understand the orders barked at me. Misunderstandings led to beatings. Lip reading kept me alive.

I blinked back the sudden sting of tears and forced a small smile. "I'm fine, Mia. Just... really hungry."

The look that crossed her face—pure guilt and concern—nearly broke me.

"What would you like to eat?"

"Clear broth noodles."

"I'll make it right away."

She rushed off.

I pulled myself upright, leaning against the headboard, my gaze drifting to the window. I don't know how long I sat there before the door opened again.

I thought it was Mia.

It wasn't.

Zara stepped into the room.

She met my indifferent gaze and flinched slightly but didn't retreat. Instead, she sat down beside me.

"Riley, I made you some clear broth noodles myself. Please, try it."

She reached to feed me.

I moved away. "I'll do it."

I took the bowl and chopsticks.

The broth was light, the noodles perfectly tender. Finely chopped green onions floated on top alongside a single soft-boiled egg. No extra spices, no garnishes. But the scent hit me like a punch to the chest.

I took a bite.

Familiar.

So familiar.

The warmth of the broth slid down my throat and curled in my belly like a memory.

"How is it?" she asked gently.

I paused mid-bite. "You made this?"

"Yes. Even Scarlett has never had noodles I made myself. You're the first."

She smiled as if expecting praise, pride shining in her eyes.

But I couldn't feel touched. I couldn't even pretend.

Instead, I gave a small, cold laugh and kept eating.

She didn't know, of course, what clear broth noodles meant to me.

Back in high school, during my first winter at the Vale estate, I returned home one night soaked in snow. No lights were left on for me. Everyone was asleep. The food had gone cold.

That night, I threw up everything I ate and curled up alone in agony.

Until Mia woke up.

She found me. Took care of me. Made me my first bowl of hot, clear broth noodles.

After that, she started leaving the porch light on. And every night, she'd warm something simple—porridge, dumplings, noodles—just for me.

Everyone in the Vale family knew Kael had a sensitive stomach. No one ever cared that I developed one too. No one noticed that being back here, starving half the time, had eroded my health.

At the rouges' pack, I never had stomach problems.

Only when I returned to my "home" did I start getting sick.

I finished the entire bowl—every drop of broth.

Zara beamed. “Did you like it?”

I looked straight at her lips. Then I cut to the point.

“If you have something to say, say it. No need to sugarcoat anything.”

The temperature in the room dropped.

Her smile faltered. “Riley, I’m trying. Why can’t you just let go of the past?”

I said nothing. Just stared. Watched the twitch in her lip, the guilt she tried to hide.

“Tell me what I need to do,” she pleaded. “What will it take for you to forgive me?”

Still silence.

Because I knew it didn’t matter. Even if I answered, she wouldn’t do it.

She kept talking. Kept playing the part. But I remained cold.

Finally, she sighed heavily. “Riley, I know you’re upset. But you can’t let your emotions cloud your judgment. The Vale family is in trouble. If we don’t fix things with Blackmaw, we could lose everything. You’re one of us. You should help us.”

There it was.

The real reason for the visit.

She didn’t care about the noodles. She didn’t care about me.

She wanted to use me to clean up their mess.

And the most insulting part? She brought Mia’s noodles and pretended they were hers.

I felt nauseous.

“Get out.”

Zara blinked. “What?”

“You or me. Someone leaves. Now.”

She stood, shocked. “How did you become so unreasonable?”

I snorted. “Five years of beatings and isolation will do that.”

“You had a roof over your head—”

I snapped. “I had prison walls! You let me take Scarlett’s fall. You deleted the footage. You ruined my life. Don’t talk to me about love.”

“Unbelievable,” she muttered. “You’re completely irrational.”

“Good. Then stay out of my life.”

She fled, unable to meet my eyes any longer.

I stayed in Kael’s room the rest of the day.

That night, Alaric came storming in.

He raged about losses. Ten billion gone in one day. All because I refused to grovel at Ronan’s feet.

I smiled through his tirade.

That smile nearly gave him a stroke.

As he left, Kael lingered.

He gave me one long, unreadable look before following the others out.

At the time, I didn’t understand what it meant.

Not until morning.

When I woke, the hearing in my right ear had started to return—faint, but there.

I came downstairs and overheard two maids whispering.

“Mia didn’t come today?”

“Heard something happened to her daughter. School’s threatening to expel her.”

My heart stopped.

I looked toward the sofa.

Kael sat there casually, reading the paper.

He turned. Met my gaze.

And smiled.