

Chapter 10

Maya

Caden filled the doorway with two mugs and a quiet, "Coffee?"

I pushed up on my elbows. I'd been awake for about an hour, just watching the sun spill across the glass and the floor.

Oddly, everything hurt less than it should. The scrape on my cheek had looked mean last night. This morning it was smaller, edges already pink and knitting. I noted it, filed it as weird, and didn't think about it too much.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as he handed me the coffee.

"Surprisingly fine," I mumbled.

He smiled a soft smile, different from his cocky ones he usually wore. This was genuine... almost concern.

"That's good to hear." Then his face grew solemnly serious. "I'm sorry about what happened to you. We all are."

"It's not your fault," I said and mean it.

He heaved out a sigh as he sat beside me, and I noted the considerable dip of the bed when he did.

"I know," he mumbled. "But you're new and I could have ensured you were safe on your first day. I don't know about the others, but I see you as a... friend."

My heart skidded at thought, and I was suddenly aware of how close he was.

"I appreciate that," I said, my voice soft. "But the good thing is that you found me before it got too bad."

His jaw ticked. "We should have found you sooner."

I smiled... Really smiled and rested my hand over his. It was still warm from the coffee, and his eyes dropped to where our fingers met.

"I'm fine," I assured him, and I stared him dead in the eyes so he knew it.

"Good."

A moment passed between us a beat too long, until his gaze caught on

the gray T-shirt I'd thrown on. It was Leo's from last night. The easy line of his mouth went flat. Not dramatic, just colder.

"Why are you wearing that?" he asked.

Heat climbed my neck. I tugged the hem down and folded my arms like that might hide it.

"Leo gave it to me last night. The fabric's softer and looser, so doesn't rub the bruise."

He sat there a beat longer than necessary, weighing something I couldn't see.

"Right," he said finally.

"Why does it matter?" I asked, trying to keep it light and failing.

"It doesn't," he said too quickly. "Forget it."

We let the coffee buy us a minute. The sunroom did its soft glow thing. Birds made little comments from the oak by the window. It really was a beautiful room.

"Have you ever done any self-defense training?" he asked, shifting back to business.

"No," I said. "Unless you count one semester of terrible PE and a YouTube workout session."

"We're starting as soon as you're better," he said. "That's not a question."

I took a minute to process what he was offering... or better yet demanding.

Self-defense meant he cared that I could help myself, instead of always having someone to save me.

I flexed my muscles and reflexes, like the coffee made me even better.

"Oddly, I feel better," I said. "Like, actually better. The bruises don't ache as much."

A knowing look passed over his face, but it was gone before it came. He tipped his cup to hide it. "Good," he said. "Glad it's easing."

"Easing," I echoed, watching him. "You say that like you expected it."

He didn't take the bait. Instead shifted closer to me. Up close he smelled like coffee and something clean and warm that wasn't cologne.

"Who are your parents, Maya?" he asked, gentle like he was nudging a door.

"I don't know," I said, because there wasn't a pretty way to say it. "I've been in foster homes my whole life. Different places. Different rules. No one kept much paper on me that didn't get lost or 'misplaced.'"

He went still in a careful way, the kind people do when they don't want to spook a story. "Anyone good, at least?" he asked.

"A few," I said. "Enough to get me here. Enough to teach me to make a budget and not leave a pan on the stove. Enough to recognize when a house is safe."

His mouth softened. "This one is," he said. "Even when we're bad at showing it."

I looked down at the mug because eye contact seemed like a lot. "Last night was... a lot," I said. "Thanks for coming."

"You don't thank us for that," he said. "But you're welcome." He cleared his throat like he was done with the heavy. "Ice cream?"

I blinked. "For breakfast? You trying to make me sick on top of everything else?"

"That's slander," he said, fighting a smile. "There's a place that opens early. We can sit outside. Sun helps bruises. And the owner pretends coffee ice cream counts as a balanced meal."

"Does it come with vitamins?"

"Sprinkles," he said. "Which I'm told are practically the same."

It pulled a laugh out of me I didn't know I had this morning. "Fine," I said. "But if I hurl, I'm blaming you."

"Noted," he said, standing. He offered a hand and I let him take the mug, then my fingers. He didn't haul me although his hand was firm. He just helped me up slow so my side didn't complain. "Get dressed and meet me in five minutes."

I did just that, switched Leo's shirt for a lighter sweater, then thought better and put the T-shirt back under it.

Caden waited in the doorway, patience radiating from him as he leaned easily along the doorway.

The morning had that clear, cool bite that promises a good day if you

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5 Voucher

let it.

We stepped onto the porch, and a black SUV rolled into view at the curb like it had been idling just out of sight. It had tinted windows, and it moved slow and unhurried, like it had purpose. Just... wrong.

Caden went still in a way that made the air change. The easy curve of his shoulders vanished, and every line of him sharpened.

"Maya," he said, voice low and even. "Inside. Now."



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