

Chapter 14

Maya

I couldn't sleep.

Between my body betraying me every time I replayed how close I'd been to Caden yesterday and my brain lecturing me for letting him rattle me in the first place, sleep treated me like a stranger.

The sun was barely rising when I decided to get out of the room and out of the house.

As far as I knew, Caden didn't return from wherever he went yesterday. And when I tried to ask Tylon, he told me it was none of my business, and I should focus on things that concerned me.

Dick.

I didn't know if I was angry at Caden or not. Whatever his father said yesterday evidently upset him, but he had no right to take it out on me, especially if he meant what he said by thinking of me as a friend.

I scoffed at the word.

Friend.

Yeah right.

Throwing on the leathers from yesterday, I decided that I needed to get my mind cleared. I could go to the gym and train, but that wouldn't so much clear my mind as occupy it with memories.

So, I decided to go for a run.

It was stupid, considering I was kidnapped days ago, but I told myself I wouldn't go far.

The morning air was cool against my face when I pushed through the backdoor, and I felt myself feeling better already.

"Going somewhere?" a voice asked.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Leo stood in the back porch light in sweats and a T-shirt, hair a little mussed like he'd slept and woken clean.

"For a run," I said, hand over my heart.

"It's not safe alone," he said, and I opened my mouth to argue because I needed this. He lifted a palm. "Luckily for you, I'm doing the same. Mind if I join?"

I paused for a while, completely taken aback. I thought he was going to tell me to stay home.

"I don't," I admitted.

"Good."

We took off on a narrow path between the trees, until it eventually got wider.

For a while, the only sound was our footfalls and the easy rhythm of his breathing. He ran like he did everything else—controlled, steady and built to last.

"How're you feeling?" he asked finally.

"Weirdly better," I said. "The bruises are basically gone." I touched the cheek that should've been a problem and felt almost nothing. "I don't get it."

"I noticed," he said, and let it sit. His gaze slid to my outfit, but not like how Caden or even Tylon looked at me. "Nice leathers."

"Thanks," I said. "Kind of makes me feel like I know what I'm doing."

He chuckled slightly. "You will," he said.

We rounded a bend and the path dipped into damp ground. Big prints studded the mud, deeper at the toes, looking like dog paws but.... bigger. I slowed without meaning to.

"Are these... wolf?" I asked. "Is that why you said it isn't safe? I heard them the other night."

"Something like that."

"Why does the school have wolves this close? Doesn't that pose a risk? They should call someone to get them moved or something."

"They aren't dangerous unless you test them," he said. "Every student knows not to wander."

"I didn't," I mumbled. "And if we're seeing their prints, aren't we trespassing. Is it safe?"

"If it wasn't, I wouldn't have taken you here, Maya." Leo was the only

one who said my name with such... grace, and focus, like it meant something.

He gave me a look that landed somewhere between apology and 'please don't push this yet,' so I let the subject fall behind us with the prints.

"Do you know if Caden is okay?" I asked after a minute. "It seems like he has a bad relationship with his father."

Leo's jaw worked before he answered. "It's complicated. But I can't tell you anything. It's not my place to tell."

"I get it," I said, and I did. "Are you all close? You and Caden and Tylon, I mean?"

"Well, Caden and Ty grew up together, so they're closer. I met them three years ago." He hopped over a root, waited half a beat for me to clear it, then fell back into step. "They've been... good to me."

"The other day, the woman called you the Blackridge heirs," I said. "What did she mean?"

He huffed a laugh. "We're all heirs. And we're the only ones who've lived at the Blackridge house since Tylon's grandparents."

"Oh," I said, processing. "So you're not related."

"No."

"Heirs to what?" I pressed, and I was really lucky Leo was the patient one.

He slid me a look that said I'd gotten as much of that answer as I was going to today. I didn't push anymore. "The trail splits up here," he said, nodding ahead. "The left loops back toward campus, which we'll take. The right turn goes deeper into the woods."

"Okay so always take left," I said, more to myself.

"Yes we'll always take left. You never run alone, okay?"

It was a question, but I knew it was an instruction.

"Got it."

We took the left and the trees opened just enough to spill light. The morning smelled like wet leaves and something wild hiding under it. Leo's head tilted almost unnoticeably, like he was listening to a

frequency I couldn't hear.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, though it sounded like a decision. "Keep your pace."

We ran another minute and the path got narrow. Fresh prints cut across the trail again, larger this time, claws raking deep.

My wrist tingled under the jacket cuff where my tattoo sat, a soft prickle that made no sense.

"Leo," I said quietly, "those are bigger."

"I see them."

"Not dangerous unless tested" still apply?"

"Yes," he said. "Stay with me."

I did, because I like living.

"Why do you do that?" I asked, trying to keep my voice normal. "Answer and not answer at the same time."

"Occupational hazard," he said, and the way he said it made it sound older than we were.

We ran up a small rise and I slowed to a walk once I got tired. Leo didn't look like he had been jogging for the past thirty minutes.

Birds flurried out of a tree ahead, sudden and loud with shrieking.

I yelped and fell back into Leo. He held me firm, but nothing more.

"What was that?" I whispered.

He didn't answer. His eyes were on the trail ten yards ahead, like he was seeing something I couldn't.

"Don't run," he said softly. "Whatever happens, don't run until I say so."

"Wow, that is super comforting."

"You wanted honesty."

The bush parted and something stepped onto the path like it owned the ground.

I screamed and yelped and Leo covered my mouth with his hand, but it was too late.

The wolf had already seen us.

No, not wolf.

That wasn't go damn wolf. It was a freaking monster!

It was massive and even from this distance, its eyes were deadly.

It had gray thick fur, huge ears already pricked, and teeth that seemed sharper than daggers.

But without a doubt, that wolf was easily five foot tall. That should have been impossible.

I was shaking in Leo's arms, but he didn't even look phased.

It lowered its head and sniffed, then lifted golden eyes to us—no, to me.

Every survival instinct I had wobbled. The prickle at my wrist crawled to a hum. I couldn't tell if my heart had sped up or stopped.

Leo shifted, not back but forward, putting himself between us. The air around him changed, like heat gathering before a storm. He didn't look at me when he spoke.

"Maya," he said, voice low and very calm. "If I say go, you turn and run straight to the house. Don't look back. Got it?"

"What about you? Are you planning to take on that thing alone?"

"I'll manage," he said, and I winced as my arm brushed his, and it basically burned.

The wolf took a step closer. It wasn't afraid of us. It looked like it was deciding something.

"Leo," I whispered.

"Run, Maya," he said, as the beast charged at us. "But!"

"Run!"

I bolted.