Chapter 16

Maya

It had been two days since I decided Caden didn't exist.

He'd tried. I'll give him that. He tried with coffee, with jokes, with his stupid grin that usually worked on everyone but now did nothing for me.

But I'd mastered the art of brushing him off, which included a polite nod here, a quick pivot there, an intentional "Oh, sorry, Leo was just telling me something," when he wasn't.

If it bothered him, he didn't show it. If it hurt him, I didn't notice.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Now, after two days of pretending not to care, I kind of hated how much I cared.

Class ended early. Yet, Elise and I were the last ones out because she held me back to discuss the unfairness of diversity systems worldwide, and I was mid-sentence in telling her how much things have changed when I froze.

Caden was leaning against the wall across the hall, looking like he had all the time in the world to be doing this.

He had one arm draped lazily across his torso, while the other was holding a milkshake.

Elise raised a brow, then looked at me. "Is Caden waiting on you?"

I bit the inside of my cheek. "It seems so."

Caden pushed off the wall and walked over, that stupid half-smile tugging at his mouth. He held out the milkshake.

"Peace offering?"

Elise's brows lifted higher, like she could smell the tension.

"I'll... catch you later, okay?" she said, already taking a strategic step back. "You're coming back to the office today, right?"

"Yeah," I said, still staring at Caden. "One o'clock."

She gave me a knowing grin. "Perfect. Don't kill each other before then."

When she disappeared around the corner, I looked at the milkshake like it was a bomb. "You think this fixes things?"

"Maybe," he said. "Depends on how good it is."

I hesitated for a second before taking it, mostly because it looked so good and I was tired of being stubborn.

It was good. Of course it was. Damn him.

"Can I take you to lunch before work?" he asked, almost tentative.

I should've said no. I wanted to say no.

But instead, I said, "Fine."

We walked in silence through the hall. The silence wasn't awkward, just... heavy. His steps matched mine easily, but I could feel him trying to figure out my mood.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" he finally said.

I kept my eyes ahead. "You shouldn't expect it to be."

"I don't."

We turned down one of the side corridors. It was quieter that the main one we just left. The glass windows lining the side of the wall allowed sunbeams to stream inside, giving it more of an aesthetic look than a university.

"Maya," he mumbled, much softer now. "I was an ass. I know that. And.. You didn't deserve it."

I stayed quiet. He deserved to sweat a little.

"I realized what I was doing wrong. I was trying tp pretend it didn't happen by just being myself, when what I should have done was stop, acknowledge that i hurt you, and apologize for it."

This took me a bit by surprise, I must admit. My strides slowed as I actually looked up at him, giving him my attention.

"I didn't mean to shout at you that day in training," he continued. "I just —" He exhaled through his nose, shaking his head like the words were hard to find. "I was angry. But not at you."

"That much I figured," I said. "But I didn't think you'd be the type to take it out on someone else."

That landed. His jaw flexed once, his throat working as if a ball sat

there.

We reached the doors that led outside. I pushed through them first, welcoming the air, and stopped near the corner of the courtyard. He caught up beside me.

"So it's because of your father," I said quietly. "Whatever he said that day."

Caden's expression changed just slightly, like a door closing. I held his hand before it could.

"I don't want to talk about him."

"I get that," I said softly. "But he clearly gets to you. Maybe you should."

He looked at me then, really looked, and whatever I'd meant as concern suddenly felt like a live wire between us.

The distance shrank without either of us deciding it should.

"I have a job to do, he forces me to do it, holding something that shouldn't be negotiable over my head," he said finally. "That's all."

Something about the way he said it... the weight behind 'job' made me shiver.

"It's... complicated," he added. "It all is. But I was wrong for treating you like that, Maya." The sincerity in his eyes made all the remaining hurt float away. "I'm really sorry."

"I'm sorry too," I said, and meant it. "For pushing."

He shook his head. "You don't have to apologize."

When he reached for my hand, and I almost pulled back out of reflex, but his fingers brushed mine, and the world narrowed to that small point of contact.

There it was again... that spark. The literal kind.

A prickle under my skin that spread like heat, coiling through my stomach until breathing felt optional.

Caden noticed too. His thumb traced the inside of my wrist, right where the tattoo hid beneath my sleeve. "You feel that?" he murmured, eyes searching mine.

I nodded. "Yeah."

His hand slid higher, over my arm, until it rested at my waist. I could barely think straight. The air between us wasn't air anymore. It was pull.

It was magnetic, alive and reckless.

"Caden…" I started, but it came out as a whisper.

He didn't answer. His fingers flexed at my waist, drawing me in until my chest brushed his. The milkshake was long forgotten, and the rest of the world gone.

"I was wrong," he said against my temple. "About a lot of things. But not this."

My pulse was hammering, and I wasn't sure if it was mine or his I felt.

"Promise me you wont run the next time I screw up, because…" he chuckled softly before continuing. "I know I will. But I mean well, Maya. I mean you well."

I swallowed hard, my voice catching somewhere between frustration and something dangerously softer. "And if you don't?"

His lips tilted, just barely, before closing the space between us.

"Then you'll have to remind me like this."

And his mouth met mine.

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