

## Chapter 17

Maya

The kiss took me by surprise, but I couldn't deny the way my body melted into him.

Caden's lips moved like he'd been holding himself back for days and finally decided not to. My hand found his shoulder for balance, though I wasn't sure if I wanted to steady myself or pull him closer.

Probably both.

He deepened the kiss before I even caught my breath, one hand slipping behind my neck while the other found my waist, anchoring me to him. His touch wasn't rough, it was firm and just sure. Like he knew exactly how much pressure to use, exactly how far to go before my mind stopped keeping up.

When his hand slid lower and gripped my hip, I gasped against his mouth, and that was all it took for him to move.

In one smooth, deliberate motion, he lifted me, my legs instinctively wrapping around him, and I barely realized what was happening until my back met the wall.

The shock of it made me break the kiss, but he didn't let me go far. His forehead pressed against mine, both of us breathing hard, like we were trying to find words that didn't exist yet.

"Caden," I whispered, a half warning and half plea.

He smiled against my cheek, a slow, crooked smile that made everything worse.

"You can still tell me to stop."

I didn't. I couldn't. And he took that as an answer to continue.

He claimed my mouth again, slower this time, and deeper... so, so deeper.

His fingers curled into the fabric at my waist. The smell of him that was something like coffee and just... him, hit me so strong that it almost seemed unnatural.

The warmth of him was majestic, as if he was heating up by this very

interaction. And the weight of the moment and what this meant... it all hit at once.

I didn't even care that I could feel the faint vibration of laughter from the students passing somewhere behind the courtyard wall. I didn't care that my thighs were half exposed by the way he was holding me, and someone might see.

Hell, I didn't even care what anyone would think if they did see.

The world had narrowed to him... to Caden.

To the way his thumb brushed just under my jaw and made me forget what breathing even felt like. To the way he used a perfect combination of lips and tongue, and his hands balanced against my thigh while the other was behind my neck, his thumb rubbing my ear in a maddening way that made me melt.

When he pulled back, his eyes were darker than I'd ever seen them. Blue, but not really. More like lightning waiting for somewhere to land.

"You shouldn't look at me like that," I said softly, not trusting my voice to do anything else.

"Like what?"

"Like you mean it."

He huffed a small laugh, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "Maybe I do."

The space between us felt charged again, like the smallest shift would spark something dangerous. I wanted to move, to speak, to do something, but my body had other plans. My hands rested against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm beneath my palms, and that was the moment I realized how fast my own heart was beating in return.

He lowered me slowly until my feet touched the ground again, but he didn't step back. His thumb dragged lightly along my lower lip, tracing where his mouth had just been.

It tingled in a way that made me want to ask for more, but I was too timid to do so.

It was then that the realization dawned on me. Caden was my first kiss.

My first ever intimate anything, really.

He was still thumbing my ear.

The gesture was simple, but it carried the kind of weight that made my knees weak.

I might've stayed like that, lost in whatever this was, if movement over his shoulder hadn't caught my eye.

Jamille.

She stood at the edge of the courtyard, arms crossed, expression unreadable except for the faint curve of disapproval on her lips. And she was staring right at us.

Her gaze flicked from me to Caden, lingering just long enough to make my stomach twist.

What was her deal? Wasn't she with Tylon? Or did she just hate me that much? And for what?

I stepped back. "I have to go," I blurted, glancing at the time on my phone. "I've got thirty minutes before my internship."

Caden looked over his shoulder, then back at me, something sharp flashing in his eyes. "Ignore her."

"That's easy for you to say," I muttered, still flushed.

His smile returned, softer this time. "You're cute when you're trying to act unbothered."

"I'm not trying," I said, crossing my arms, though my pulse betrayed me.

"Sure you're not." His boyish smirk was back. "Maya, I can practically smell how turned on you are right now." And his eyes grew darker.

He leaned in again, not for another kiss this time, but close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath against my ear. I knew he was doing it on purpose, just to get me even more worked up.

"I thought we were getting lunch?" he said in a suggestive tone, that I would have interpreted 'get lunch' in a different way.

"Bye Caden," I rushed out, turning around. His laugh followed behind me.

"See you after work, Maya."

I hated that my stomach flipped at that. Because I would be seeing him after work. We lived together. The thought both excited and scared me at the same time.

Chapter 17

5 Voucher

When I glanced back, he had already turned to leave, hands in his pockets, like he hadn't just scrambled my brain in broad daylight.

I watched him walk away, the sun catching in his curls, until he disappeared around the corner.

I exhaled hard, pressing a hand to my face. My skin was still warm where he'd touched me.

When I finally looked toward the courtyard again, Jamille was gone. But her absence felt heavier than her glare.

Something told me she wasn't done with me.

And as for Caden... I wasn't sure I wanted him to be.



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