

Chapter 18

Maya

I couldn't focus.

Every time I blinked, it was there again, the feel of his mouth against mine, the way his hands had fit so perfectly around my waist, the warmth that hadn't faded even after I left him standing there.

I told myself I was just flustered, that it was because no one had kissed me like that before. But deep down I knew it wasn't that simple.

It was the spark. The pulse that had flared to life between us like it had been waiting for that moment. And the strangest part wasn't that it happened, it was that Caden hadn't looked surprised. Just... relieved. Happy even? Like he'd been expecting it. Or hoping for it.

I sat behind my laptop in the internship office, pretending to read a document that hadn't changed for the last ten minutes. My finger drifted to my bottom lip, tracing where his had been. The ghost of it still lingered, stubborn and sweet.

I shook my head and forced my eyes back on the screen. This was ridiculous.

I had work to do, and the last thing I needed was to start daydreaming about a guy who could knock me flat in training and still smirk about it.

But as much as I tried to focus, my thoughts kept circling back to that kiss and the strange comfort I'd felt in his arms. Like something about us fit in a way that shouldn't make sense, but did.

I opened a new tab to distract myself and typed, largest wolf breeds. I had been wanting to research it for a few days. Now seemed like a good time to do it.

Google filled the screen with images of gray wolves, Arctic wolves and dire wolf fossils. I scrolled through, heart skipping as I read.

"The largest recorded wolf stood approximately 3.2 feet at the shoulder..."

Three feet? That's all? Just three?

I frowned.

That couldn't be right.

That thing I saw with Leo wasn't three feet tall. It was five easily or more! I knew it was. There was no doubt.

Unless.... Unless I was hallucinating.

Maybe I'd exaggerated the height of the wolf in my head. Fear did that sometimes, right? It made things bigger, closer, or more dangerous than they really were.

But I remembered the sound it made... the heavy growl and the way the ground had shaken when it charged. I remembered the golden, death filled eyes.

No wolf should have eyes like that.

"Maya."

I snapped out of my daze. Jamille stood over my desk, one manicured hand resting on the desk divider, the other on her hip. She looked amused, which was never a good sign.

"You plan on working today or just daydreaming about your little rescue mission?"

Heat climbed up my neck. "I'm working," I lied.

"Really?" she drawled, leaning over my screen. "Because this looks less like policy review and more like a pet adoption search."

"I was just—"

"Don't explain," she said with mock sweetness. "Explaining just makes it sad."

Her voice carried, drawing glances from the others. I wanted to melt into the chair, or better yet, disappear altogether.

"Maybe you should focus less on fairy tales and more on the internship you're lucky to still have."

"Jamille," a voice cut through from the doorway, calm but firm.

It was Miss Vale. I didn't know if I should have been worried or relieved.

Her heels clicked against the tile as she approached, that composed kindness she always wore mixed with quiet authority.

"Be fair," she said, folding her arms. "Remember that Maya's still recovering. What happened to her could've happened to any of us."

Jamille turned and rolled her eyes, as if insinuating that it wouldn't have happened to her.

Her smile flattened. "Of course, Miss Vale. I'm just encouraging focus."

"Encourage gently," Miss Vale said. "She's been through enough."

Jamille rolled her eyes just enough that she thought it went unnoticed. "Understood," she said tightly, before gliding back to her desk.

Miss Vale gave me a small, encouraging smile.

"Ignore her," she said softly. "You're doing fine."

"Thank you," I said, though the words felt small in my throat.

When she left, I stared at my reflection in the dark laptop screen. I tried to believe it. I was totally fine.

Except my pulse hadn't stopped since that kiss, and the thought of going home made my stomach twist.

Because Caden would be there.

The ride back to the house felt longer than usual. The whole way, I tried to rehearse what I'd say to him. Something casual, maybe? 'Hey Caden, heard of any fruits lately?'

I groaned. I wanted to be casual, not awkward.

Maybe I should say something that didn't sound like I'd spent half the day reliving the way his breath felt on my neck.

By the time the mansion came into view, my heart was already pounding.

The lights were on, faint and warm behind the tall windows. For a moment, it looked peaceful and normal. I wanted to believe it was.

I stepped inside quietly. The air felt... different. Heavier somehow.

"Hello?" I called softly, half-hoping no one would answer.

No response. Usually, at least one of the heirs would be home. I've never been home alone.

I took a few steps deeper into the hall, my bag still slung over my shoulder. There were faint scuffs on the floor. It seemed like mud, and the scent of something metallic hung in the air.

"Caden?" I called, but there was no response.

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5 Voucher

I was about to call again, but then I heard it.

A sharp, low sound. Not a growl exactly, but close enough to make every hair on my body stand up. It came from somewhere down the east corridor... the one that led to the basement gym and the locked doors beyond.

"Leo?" I tried.

No answer.

The sound came again, louder this time. Like claws against the floor.

My breath caught. The last time I'd heard claws, Leo was standing between me and something that shouldn't exist.

I turned to back away slowly, reaching for my phone. But before I could even unlock it, the light flickered overhead, and a shadow moved at the end of the hall.

It wasn't Leo, and it wasn't Caden.

And definitely not human.



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