

Chapter 2

Maya

An overpriced hotel was really looking good right now.

"I come in peace," I called, because I wanted to live, "and also with paperwork."

The first to move was the one who looked like he'd been carved out of shadow and expectations. He was tall, had broad shoulders and dark hair, pushed back with ruthless efficiency.

His gray eyes watched me like they'd already assessed all my flaws and filed them alphabetically. The scar through his eyebrow should've made him prettier; it made him colder. And he was shirtless... Very, very shirtless.

My eyes did a terrified hop from abs to ceiling, then to the floor like I'd stared straight at the sun. I could feel the heat crawling up my ears and cheek. I shifted from my right leg to the left, hoping with everything in me that he didn't just see that.

"Lost?" he said.

"Placed," I said, holding up the keycard. "By Housing."

His gaze flicked to the card, then to me, to the duffle bag on my shoulder, then to my face again. He didn't smile.

The way he looked at me was cruel and clinical... like he was cutting me raw with the sharpness of his gaze. Something in my shoulders pulled tight like I'd been called to stand still while someone measured me.

I watched the calculations happening in his head—subtle shifts in his jaw as if he were sorting me into a criterion.

"We're not a dorm," he said flatly.

"So I hear." I gulped, shifting the weight of the bag to my next thigh. "And apparently also not a sorority." That part wasn't supposed to be heard, but they all seemed to hear it just the same, all three rewarding me with different looks, ranging from disapproval to downright humor. I didn't even know I said that so loud.

The joke caught on a dry throat, and I cleared it once before my mouth

remembered how to behave.

The other man who just ditched his apron, leaned on the doorway, dark curls messy and blue eyes bright with the sort of trouble that didn't apologize afterward. He grinned when I looked up, and it lit the room.

"Welcome to the fortress, sweetheart," he said. "I'm Caden. He's Ty," he said, motioning to the shirtless super model still glaring at me. "Don't mind the glower," he added softer, but evidently wanted him to hear. "It's chronic."

Ty didn't look away from me. "Tylon," he corrected mildly. "And no."

His words came out clipped and controlled, like he was barely restraining himself from growling or something. A small tick in his jaw said the correction wasn't negotiable.

"No... what?" I asked.

"No, you can't stay."

"Fun story," I said, smile bright and completely fake. "I actually don't want to stay here. But if I don't, I stay nowhere. And I have to be at the Comms & Policy internship building at eight a.m. bright-eyed and not smelling like a bus station tomorrow morning. So unless Housing intends to bunk me in a filing cabinet—"

"Let me see the authorization," Ty said, cutting me off with his palm out.

I handed it over. He read the memo about temporary placement, capacity issues, and needing their compliance.

He went very still with the paper steady in one hand, his shoulders squared, and his eyes tracking down the text like he was checking for a loophole. Whatever it said, his jaw ticked once, and he passed the card back.

"Temporary," he said.

"Thrilling," I replied.

Caden moved towards me and took my duffel bag, and the relief was instant.

"I've got it," he murmured as the strap slid off my shoulder under his hand, and his fingers brushed mine in a quick, reassuring caress.

He wore an easy grin, easy posture, and even gave me a little shoulder bump that said it would be fine even if nothing else seemed so. For a

reckless second, I almost believed it. He had that type of effect, it seemed.

"We can put her in the sunroom," he said as he tossed it over his shoulder.

"We are not putting a stranger in the sunroom," Tylon said.

"Guest suite, then," Caden said, without turning.

"Not the guest suite."

There was a light chuckle, and it was then that I remembered the third man who was still kneeling in front of the broken vacuum. He brushed off his jeans as he stood, and I realized right there and then that I was placed in a house with three Greek god-looking men to live with for a whole semester, or more.

God, help me.

He looked younger than Caden and Tylon, but he wasn't any less magnificent. They were all handsome in their own way, and I had no idea if there were anymore.

His hazel eyes glittered with a mixture of indifference, but feeding into Caden's humor.

"Library couch?" he offered.

"Stop helping," Tylon growled.

"Hi," I said to the third one, seizing the gap. "I'm Maya, by the way. I'm very organized, I clean up after myself, I label things in a way that is helpful and not creepy, and I make coffee that will make up for the awful one they make here, apparently."

Something like humor touched his eyes. "Leonardo. Leo for short," he said. "Coffee is a strong argument."

Ty's gaze cut to me, then to the ceiling, then back like he was considering letting me stay and throwing me out.

"I will take this up with the heads, but for now, house rules," he said finally. "No parties without agreement. No guests without notice. No entering rooms that aren't yours. No going downstairs after midnight."

Caden glanced back. "That last one isn't real."

"It is now."

Leo leaned against the doorframe where Caden previously was, with his hands in his pocket. "She's clearly capable of handling herself. No one's scared of your scowl, Ty."

"She should be. She's human," Ty said.

"She's standing right here!" I huffed, hating that the conversation seemed to be flying over me. "And are you insinuating that you're not? What are you? Some super-human just because you seem to wear a permanent scowl and bossy pants?"

I heard Caden draw a sharp breath, and Leo's eyes widened. And suddenly, I felt like I just crossed a line.

But I wasn't about to let him treat me like some incompetent child, just because we were forced into something that none of us were ready for or wanted. But what the hell can I do about it?

Absolutely nothing. So we just had to live with it.

Silence reigned for a few seconds, and I didn't miss the way Caden edged towards me, as if he was preparing to jump in front of me should Tylon leap.

He didn't crowd me... just angled himself a breath closer, like a steady heat at my side and a buffer if I needed it. Weirdly, that tiny, ordinary detail calmed me more than anything.

But instead, Tylon simply mumbled, "Just remember the rules," and left.

"Right," Caden said after a beat. "That settles it. Sunroom it is."

Rule number one: Don't die.

Got it.



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