

## Chapter 3

Maya

"This is you," Caden said, showing me into the sunroom.

There was glass on three sides of the room, a low bed, and yellow curtains that made the room even brighter.

"It's... a greenhouse with delusions of a bedroom," I said before I could stop myself.

But he laughed, the kind of laugh was warm and makes a place feel less like a stranger.

"Technically it's a room," he said, dropping my bag at the foot of the bed. "But your description has better PR."

He didn't leave. Of course he didn't. He leaned a palm on the doorframe and looked around like he was measuring whether the light would bother me at dawn, whether the latch would stick, whether I cared. That last one, I wasn't sure about.

"You keep a planner," he said, tipping his chin at the one tucked under my arm. "Color-coded."

"It's how I know what to panic about," I half-joked. "Red is due now, orange is due an hour ago, yellow is me pretending it can wait."

"And blue?"

"Blue is coffee."

"Then we'll get along," he mused, evoking another real laugh from me.

I had a feeling coffee wasn't the thing that would make us get along.

He stepped in, close enough that I caught the clean, warm smell of his soap and something sharper that wasn't cologne.

He reached for the curtain chord just as I did, and his hand grazed mine. He didn't move away quickly, but he didn't make it a moment either, and both choices said he knew exactly what he was doing.

"We'll get you a blackout shade if the sunrise is too much," he said in a cool, chill voice that made me see another part of him. "Or you can juts come to my room."

I snorted and gave him a pointed look. "How many girls have you given

that speech to?"

"Two," he said lightly, then held my gaze. "Counting you."

I shouldn't have smiled. But I absolutely did.

A soft knock hit the doorframe behind him.

Leo entered with towels, some sheets and blankets and one of my two suitcases.

"These just arrived," he said, rolling in the second behind the first. "And I got you these just in case none was in here."

"Thanks," I said, taking them. His fingers brushed mine, brief and warm, much like when it happened with Caden. But with Leo, I couldn't quite tell where he stood.

He hadn't been downright cold like Tylon, nor openly welcoming like Caden. He just seemed... polite. Like he was doing the bare minimum because he was stuck in this situation too, and not because he actually wanted me here.

Still, I appreciated the gesture, and I smiled just the same as I pulled away my hand.

Caden's gaze cut to the motion.

"That a tattoo?" he asked, eyeing my wrist.

"It was a drunk mistake on my sixteenth birthday," I said, just as lightly, because that was the story, I'd told myself for four years. "My best friend and I got matching ones, except hers didn't... stick. Long story."

"Short version?" Caden asked.

"I woke up with it. She didn't."

They shared a look I couldn't translate. It wasn't mocking, but it wasn't nothing.

"It's a wolf," Caden said, the playfulness thinning but not gone. "That's an interesting choice."

I shrugged. "I guess it's because I've always liked dogs."

Leo's mouth did a small twitch. Caden looked amused. "But I really am a cat person, so I don't completely understand."

Caden looked actually wounded for one second, throwing his hand to his chest with a dramatic gasp, then he grinned.

"Blasphemy."

"Tragic," Leo said in a deadpan tone, and it made me laugh because maybe he did have a sense of humor too.

Ty's appeared in the doorway, his attention fixed on his phone, and, thankfully, fully clothed now.

"Training is at dawn," he said. "And we tighten rotations this week."

"Because of the Council?" Leo asked, almost conversational, which told me it wasn't.

Ty's thumb paused over his screen. "Because of the Council."

Caden's eyebrows flicked up. "We're not supposed to say the quiet parts out loud in front of the new civilian."

"I'm not fragile," I said, even though the word Council slid under my skin like ice. Blackridge's glossy brochures didn't mention councils, plural or singular. Orientation had whispered about an old advisory body that "oversaw" and "guided" and probably hosted charity galas with bad appetizers.

But it more sounded like a club with dues and a dress code, not a reason to tighten rotations like we were on a ship heading into a storm.

Ty didn't correct me. He didn't confirm me either. He just lifted his gaze to mine long enough to check something I couldn't name, then walked on.

Caden shifted like he was about to follow, then noticed something on my clothes. I followed where his eyes landed, seeing a loose thread where the hem of my shirt had snagged on the bed frame.

He crouched, met my eyes, and kept a respectful half-step of space.

"May I?" he asked with his palm up, as if waiting for my permission.

I was taken aback by the sudden gentleness, but soon realized he was trying to help.

"Tell me if this is too close," he added, voice lower at the edges. The ridiculous part was my pulse answering before I did. I nodded.

He angled sideways so I wasn't boxed in. His eyes stayed on the fabric as he freed the snag with careful fingers. Even so, with him that near I could count his breaths. The space between us felt warm and very specific.

From somewhere I didn't see, he produced a safety pin and tucked the loose stitch inside the seam.

"You carry those around?" I asked.

"I have a complicated relationship with buttons," he said, hands steady while he pinned the split. "Better?"

"Better," I said, and it mattered more than it should have.

He looked up and held my gaze a minute longer than necessary, then was the one to look away first. Air I didn't realize I'd been holding actually moved.

Leo had been quiet in the doorway. His gaze tracked the whole exchange. It looked like a warning. Caden's answer was a microscopic shrug that said 'relax, it's nothing.'

He rocked back on his heels and gave me space again.

Leo's eyes were still tracking the movements, but he said nothing before leaving.

Odd. He was an odd one.

"Thanks again for everything. You've been kind and welcoming," I said as I plopped in the surprisingly comfy couch across from the bed.

Caden smiled as he leaned against the doorframe again.

"Anytime," he grinned. "And my bedroom door is open if you want to take me up on the offer of—" He didn't get a chance to finish, as I hurled a cushion at him, sending him scurrying away.

I chuckled.

Idiot.