

Chapter 6

Maya

The sunroom was prettier at six a.m and tempting to stay and watch. But I needed my morning fuel, especially since I barely slept last night and today was my first day at my internship.

However, Caden was already at the espresso machine when I went down for coffee. His hoodie sleeves were rolled to his elbows, and his hair was damp from what seemed like an early-morning shower.

He glanced back like I was right on time, but I didn't miss how fast his hand went to the purple bruise forming on my hand.

"Good morning stranger," he said. "Coffee?"

"Sure," I said, as I approached him with a yawn and a stretch.

His eyes trailed down my body, and I felt the heat rising in my cheeks as he did. I completely forgot that I only packed shorts and tank tops as my night clothes. They were the only things I had. Last night I'd been so wrapped up in everything that I hadn't even realized how minimally clothed I was.

I shifted slightly behind the counter to hide the shadow of skin that was being revealed under the tiny blouse. I needed to get dressed soon, before the next two men came.

He bumped my shoulder with his. I could feel his heat and humor, the exact dose I needed to feel like I could breathe again.

"Sorry," I mumbled, leaning over the counter as I sipped my coffee. "I don't have anything better. Unless I'll start wearing my work clothes to bed," I joked.

"You should." That voice came from behind me, causing me to jump as I swerved around. Of course, Tylon stood in the doorway, eyes hooded and jaw tight as usual.

He wore a black T-shirt, clean jeans and eyes that seemed like they were evidently awake longer than mine.

It was then that I realised that Caden saw only a glimpse, but Tylon saw everything behind when I was leaning over the counter.

His jaw ticked once, and his fists were clenched as if he was holding

himself back from doing something. His eyes were anywhere but on me, and I knew that he saw everything. I mean, I wasn't butt naked, but the shorts were very very... small.

I burnt red.

Looks like I need to put that \$42 to good use and buy myself some pyjamas.

He didn't so much as glance back my way, his attention went straight to Caden.

By the look on his face, I thought he was about to dish out some deathly threat at Caden.

"You haven't bought the groceries yet," he said, taking me by surprise. "It your turn."

Caden's mouth tipped but not into a smile. He had already seen the mark on my wrist, and he seemed to have known it was by Tylon's hand.

I could tell by the way his eyes had gone flat and careful and the muscle in his cheek had started doing its own thing.

"Fine," he said, voice even. "But I'm buying strawberry milk."

"I drink regular," Tylon replied.

"Exactly."

A pause stretched. Ty's jaw ticked once. "I'll do the shopping," he said at last. "Pay the bills on time."

He left without another word, the air organizing itself in his wake.

"You totally did that on purpose," I said, half a laugh, half a question.

Caden didn't shrug it off this time. He looked at my wrist again, then at the doorway Ty had walked through.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there last night," he said quietly. "Leo told me what happened. And I'm not surprised. Over the years I've known Ty, he's..." He sighed and shook his head, as if deeming it useless. "I'm a heavy sleeper. But if you ever need anything, knock. Don't worry about the hour."

The apology surprised me more than it should have. "Thank you," I said, soft because it mattered. I scuffed my thumb over the edge of the mug and tried to make my voice normal. "So... you've known him

forever?"

"We've known each other since we were kids. This is his house, and the school is located in his pa—" His eyes widened as if he saw something scary, then he coughed on the words. It was one of those fake coughs that suggested he was trying to hide something.

"His what?" I pressed.

He shifted uncomfortably, and his eyes were evidently trying to find a way to tell me. "His... Parents house," he said as if he had a lightbulb moment. "Well, basically, the entire area is kind of owned by his parents. And the neighbouring... land is mine." I didn't understand the pause in his sentence, but I let it slide.

"So you guys are basically some rich aristocratic families?"

He had that thoughtful look again. "Yes, I guess you can say that. Why do you think it's called the Blackridge house? It's not names after the university, you know. More like the university is named after his family, centuries old."

"His name is Blackridge?" I asked as my eyes widened, and Caden nodded. "Oh damn. So, he can throw me out."

Caden threw back his head with a laugh. "No, princess. No, he can't. It's basically his house, but the directive came directly from the... heads."

"Like the council?"

Yet again, I managed to put that shocked look on his face. I really should start making notes. But then he collected himself, as if remembering that they mentioned it yesterday.

"Yes. Exactly like that."

"So, you do guys work for your families? Or do you just get everything handed to you?"

His face went unnaturally still, and I seemed to have struck a nerve. I felt awful. Maybe I said it too harsh? Maybe I misjudged them? Maybe they don't get handouts—

"Yeah," he said, breaking me from my thoughts. He looked down, evidently troubled by something. "Yeah, I work for my father."

Oh. So, he wasn't offended about the handouts comment. Yet, it seemed he had a complicated relationship with his father.

"I work for him alright," he added with a humourless laugh. "Though I wished I didn't."

I wanted to ask what kind of work he did, but I didn't want to pry or push him farther into a hole he was evidently uncomfortable with.

"So, what's Blackridge like? Not the family. The university," I asked, and I could see that he was grateful for the topic change."

"Oh, you'll love it. You're transferred, right? So you're going into third year?"

"Yeah," I said, heaving out a breath. "But I'm not so much worried about school as I am about the internship. I need this to work out. My future and education depend on me being able to stay in this internship."

Caden drained his mug and threw it in the dishwasher before turning to face me again.

"Well, from what I know, that program is full of preppy, geeky students. So, you should fit right—" I sailed a kitchen towel at him before he could finish, but I couldn't stop myself from laughing.

"You are of no help!" I managed through my laugh.

He shrugged innocently as he backed out of the kitchen with his hands up. "It got you smiling though, didn't it?"

I opened my mouth to throw another rebut at him, but he was gone before I could.

I rolled my eyes and finished my own coffee.



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