

Chapter 7

Maya

"Maya! Wait up!"

Elise's voice echoed across the field. I turned as she jogged over, ponytail neat even while running, two folders clenched to her chest and a granola bar clenched between her teeth.

"Late on your first day?" she said, as she fell in line with me.

I checked my watch. "It's not even eight yet."

"I know," she mumbled as she finished her snack. "But Ms. Vale likes punctual. Preferably thirty minutes early. Preferably yesterday."

I snorted. "Noted."

"You slept well?" she asked with a curious glint in her eyes.

"Define well," I said, because three hours of lying very still doesn't count in my view. "I'm functional."

"As are most of us. You get used to it."

I snorted again, but this time it was swallowed by a yawn.

"You had coffee though, right?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be functional if I didn't."

She threw back her head with a laugh. "Good. That's ninety percent of the job," she said brightly.

We cut through the lobby of Comms & Policy, where the air smelled like paper and ink and ambition.

I saw pictures on their website when I was signing up for the internship and scholarship, but it was nothing alike in person. And in the good way.

Ms. Vale met us at the door with a handshake and a surprisingly welcoming smile. By the way Elise mentioned her, I thought I'd see an elderly woman with a bun too tight and a permanent scowl. But Miss Vale was kind eyed and young.

"I heard about the housing mishap," she said as she pulled me away from Elise, who waved and went to her desk. "I personally take offence,

given that I advocated for your arrival and comfort."

I had no idea how to respond to that. "It's okay, really. The Blackridge house isn't all that... bad."

"Well, if you need anything, report it to your team lead, then it will come directly to me, okay?"

Relief flooded me. "Yes, thank you so much. When will I meet the team leader?"

Before she could respond, a familiar face—which I didn't want to be familiar one bit, step in front of me with a fake smile and three inch extension eye lashes.

"Maya. So happy to you on the team," she chirp with the most obnoxious attempt of friendlies.

"Oh lovely. You're here," Miss Vale said. "Maya, meet Jamillia Phills, your team lead."

If my eyes could have popped out of my head, it would have already.

"Jamille, you have already been prepped for Maya, but now you're meeting her. It seems you two already know each other."

"We've ran into each other already," Jamille said with calculating eyes. "Last night, actually."

I didn't want to remember it. The way Tylon had her over his desk. The way he drove into her. The way she moaned his name.

"Maya," Jamille said, breaking me from my thoughts. "You look a little flushed. Are you okay to start today?"

Ms. Vale glanced at me in concern.

"Yes. I'm fine," I said quickly. "I... It's nice to formally meet your Jamille." I extended my hand, but she barely brushed her nails across it, before wiping it in her jacket discreetly.

What a bitch.

"Well, I'll leave you guys to it. Jamille runs a wonderful team, and based on your letter, resume and interview, Maya, I know you'll fit right in. Have a productive day!" And with that, Miss Vale was gone.

Great. I head a feeling that Jamille was going to make my time here a living hell.

I thought Caden said only nerdy people worked here! She looked so out of place, and the length of her skirt should have been illegal.

"Morning everyone!" she said, getting the room's attention. "Get to work!"

Everyone looked at her as I would've too. Because everyone was already working. Expect me.

So she ran through assignments with unqualified authority.

She "couldn't find" my network login, so I sat at a guest terminal half of the day. She "realized" my badge hadn't been encoded and set it aside to "sort later." She asked for a dry, two-paragraph brief, then rewrote it in front of three team members and called the spectacle a "teachable moment."

Elise drifted in and out like a guardian when she could, but she could only do so much and no more.

I left for my first classes, which were great, and then returned as we were allowed and expected to.

But apparently, Jamille didn't get that rule, apparently. She accused me of skipping work, and threatened that she'd convince Ms. Vale to fire me if I didn't make up the hours.

So here I was, at seven-thirty, alone in the office doing unnecessary shit.

This was the worst first day ever, and if I didn't need it—if I wouldn't have been homeless and broke without this, I would have left.

"You'll want a thicker skin," she said as I got ready to leave. "This isn't community college."

My eyes narrowed, and the words that erupted in my mind to tell her would have most definitely gotten me fired.

Still, I bit my tongue, pushed passed her and left the building.

The cool air was welcoming.

Campus at night was different from campus at day.

I was offered transportation too, and it did come. But Jamille's tactics made the shuttle leave me.

I needed to talk to Miss Vale. But I couldn't get to Miss Vale without Jamille. I had to find another way.

Footsteps joined mine somewhere between the fountain and the oaks, but not closely behind.

I got rid of my heels and walked barefoot. At this point, I had no dignity left part from the need to ease the ache in my feet.

Another sound answered ruffled behind me. Now, I was completely alone on the dark path that led to Blackridge house, so it could be anything.

I shifted the bag higher on my shoulder and kept a good pace.

The steps behind me drew closer. The bush rustled, and that's when I broke out into a run.

But I wasn't fast enough, and within seconds, I was tackled to the ground, and a hand was pushing something over my nose.

I fought against the darkness. I really did. But it didn't last. The last thing I saw was another body emerging before the world got dark.



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