

## Chapter 8

Maya

The cold from the ground did the waking for me.

My cheek was pressed into damp leaves, with dirt stuck between my teeth as I swallowed.

Rope burned at my wrists when I tried to move, and my ankles jerked and I slid forward, when I realized I was being dragged like luggage through mud.

There were voices around me. Three male voices.

When I adjusted my eyes to the dark, I noticed that I was right.

One was hauling me half-conscious through the forest by the rope slung over his shoulder, one walked ahead parting the bush, and the other one paced off to the side like he'd been assigned to watch the edges.

I lifted my head and blinked past the blur.

For one awful second my brain said names it shouldn't. Tylon, Caden and Leo... because who else would be here at this hour. I didn't know them, after all. I just spent one night with them.

But then my eyes adjusted, and even though I didn't know them long, I instantly knew that these men weren't them. They were less bulk and more scrawny, their walk was different and even from behind, I knew it wasn't them.

No. These men weren't the ones I knew.

It was then that I realized that I was definitely and undoubtedly being kidnapped.

Rule number one was not looking too possible right now.

I pulled against the rope once my self-preservation instinct kicked, catching their attention.

They stopped, and the way they looked at me like I was a package instead of a person.

"Up," the one dragging me said, annoyed for some reason like he was the one being hauled in mud.

I got my knees under me and pushed up on shaky legs.

It was trees for miles. No campus lights bled this far. The ground sloped in a way that told me we weren't on any paved path I'd seen. I had no idea where they were taking me, how they were, and what they were going to do with me.

"What do you want with me?" I asked, and my voice came out thin and frail. I coughed once and I tried again. "Why me?"

The one with the beard glanced back but didn't answer.

"Orders," the one pulling me said, as if that was an answer.

Anger clawed at me. I tested the rope at my wrists, and felt as it bit into my skin.

"Let me go!" I demanded, as I dug my heel into the ground, refusing to go further. "This is illegal!"

"Careful, sweetheart," the scouter mocked. "I'd hate to scuff the product."

I still stood firm. "I'm not anyone's product, you asshole. If you don't let me go, you will be sorry. My boyfriend doesn't play."

I was bluffing. Of course I was, and apparently, they knew it too.

"Shut up," he said, in a bored tone before hauling me forward again. I tripped over my feet and fell face down into the mud.

I winced as I felt a branch slice my cheek, and I spat out a mouthful of mud.

I couldn't let this happen. I needed to get out of this alive. Fumbling to get back onto my feet, I decided to devise a plan. A terrible one, but a plan just the same.

I didn't endure years of abuse to finally get into my dream school and die this way. I refused to.

I increased my pace so that I was close enough to the guy dragging me. He glanced back and smirked.

"Good, the faster you move, the better—" I didn't wait for him to finish. Instead, I lined myself close to him, then drove the point of my knee into his shin where there's less meat.

He swore and stumbled, and the rope at my ankles went slack. I turned

into Beard Guy, threw my shoulder and balance into his ribs, and bought myself two free steps.

The scouter grabbed my arm, and I swung my bound wrists into his jaw, felt the hit all the way to my elbow, and went for his groin.

That one hurt.

I made a run for it, but even I knew it was futile. Those hits weren't even hard enough to keep them down for a minute.

But not only did I hurt them, I pissed them off.

A kick to my side sent me face down in the mud again with a wince. The air left me quick and hard.

When I forced breath back into my lungs, the punch to my cheek came clean and hard, and I knew it would leave a bruise by morning.

I spat blood into the leaves and saw scouter smile like he'd been waiting to like so something all night.

He cocked his fist again, and I braced for impact.

Except, he never landed it.

When I opened my eyes, all I saw was a flash of a shadow, and he was being flung into a tree.

The other two followed in similar ways.

Bodies went down in a way that seem unnatural. It was way too fast... too clean.

The shadow resolved into a person I knew. Dark curls always a little unruly, shoulders broad shoulders and those eyes. Except, Caden's eyes, usually a bright, warm blue, looked near black in the thin light, all pupil, no ease.

He came to me in two strides, turned me gently, and loosed the knot at my wrists effortlessly, like he'd tie his own knots in his days.

"Hey," he said, voice steady in a way that made me breathe. "You with me?"

"I think so," I managed to say.

"Good. Don't look."

Before I could ask what he meant, manly screams echoed through the trees, sent sleeping bird fleeing.

And I realized that Caden wasn't alone. Leo and Tylon were there too.

They all came for me.

I didn't know why or how. But gosh, did I fall in love with them at the very thought.



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