

Chapter 9

Maya

Maybe love was a bit much, but gratitude wasn't. Gratitude and relief and that stupid shaky laugh that comes out when your body decides it's done pretending to be brave.

I kept my face turned while the sounds behind us sharpened. Bones breaking, breath ragged, and the thud of weight falling. I didn't want to see it. I didn't need to.

It made me wonder who these men were... and I meant the ones I was living with. They seemed skilled and dangerous. Yet, I didn't feel any real fear.

A gentle hand came and rested on my shoulder, and I glanced up to see familiar hazel eyes. Leo smiled softly at me, and helped me up. I could see the anger and sadness in his eyes, but as usual, it was always so controlled.

"Let's get you home," he said, and eased my arm over his shoulders like we'd practiced it.

"What about Tylon and Caden?" I asked. My voice came out ragged. "You're just... leaving them?"

"They'll handle it," he said. No drama. No doubt. He adjusted his hold so I could spare my ribs.

"And them?" I tipped my chin toward the dark where the men had gone down. "What happens to them?"

"They'll be handled," he said, like he was discussing the weather.

"By who? Shouldn't we call campus security or... someone?" I heard myself and almost laughed. We were in the middle of nowhere with a face full of dirt and a cut that wouldn't stop stinging, and I was thinking about campus security.

Leo didn't smile. "It's covered," he said. "I promise."

"Covered how?" I pressed.

He didn't answer that. "Take short breaths," he said. "Try to keep them shallow. I know it hurts."

We started moving. He kept a pace that my bruised side could keep up with. The forest was still around us.

I focused on my feet... specifically on not tripping.

"How did you find me?" I asked when the quiet got too loud. "I didn't even know where I was."

"Elise called the house," he said. "She was worried when you didn't text back. We checked with Ms. Vale and—" He hesitated. "And your team lead."

"Jamille," I said, and my stomach pulled tight.

"She didn't know where you were either," he said carefully. "Caden went out first. Then Tylon got a message that there were intruders on the land with a girl. So we went together."

I blinked. "A message? To Tylon? Why him and not, I don't know, the authorities?"

Leo's mouth tightened like he'd almost smiled and stopped himself. "Don't worry about that part," he said. "His family's systems are faster than the school's. That's all it means."

It didn't feel like all it meant, but I had nothing left for follow-up questions.

My legs shook. My teeth hurt. Everything freaking hurt.

Leo wrapped his jacket around me, and it smelled like cedar and soap, and the night air kept trying to crawl under it.

Eventually, Leo resorted to carrying me. I think I dosed off a bit, until I felt myself being lowered onto something. I grabbed onto his shirt, and his light chuckle woke me completely.

"Hey, hey. It's okay. You're safe."

My eyes adjusted, and I realized that we were home.

I sat up, and Leo disappeared down the hall, and returned with a bowl, a stack of clean cloths, and a first-aid kit.

It took me a minute to realize what he was doing, until I realized he was ... treating me.

"This will sting," he warned, lifting a cloth toward my cheek.

"Everything already does," I muttered with a soft laugh.

"It'll feel clean after," he said, and I let him.

He worked without fuss, and he was so... gentle.

He dabbed the warm cloth with light pressure to my cheek, first to clear the mud and blood, another to check the cut.

He tipped my chin with two fingers and angled me toward the light. I tried to hold still. His focus never drifted. He wasn't looking at my mouth or my collarbone or any of the places a girl learns to guard. Just the cut. The corner of my eye. The rope burns at my wrists. He rinsed the cloth, wrung it out, and pressed again.

From this close, I could see the light flecks of green in his eyes. He also had a tiny mark on his nose, and the scent of cedar was even stronger on him than the jacket.

Leo was undoubtedly a beautiful specimen of a man—perfect in his own way.

"Sorry," he said when I flinched.

"You're not the one who should be sorry," I said through my teeth, blinking away my fuzzy thoughts.

"I hurt you," he said softly.

"You're helping me," I countered.

He swapped the cloth for gauze and a brown bottle. The liquid stung, but it didn't last. He wrapped my wrist, then the other, firm enough to help, not enough to pinch.

When he moved to my side, he hovered a palm over the fabric and watched my face instead of diving in.

"May I?" he asked.

"Go ahead." I lifted my shirt hem a couple inches and stared at the ceiling so I didn't have to see his reaction when he saw the bruising already coming up.

His touch stayed on the cloth.

He mapped the edge of the bruise with the tip of his fingers, light as you can and still check anything.

"No obvious break," he said. "You'll hate laughing for a few days though. And sleep on your back if you can."

"Great," I said. "I love being boring."

He almost smiled. Almost. "You make it look better than most."

He handed me a bottle of water I didn't see him carry in. I didn't realize how thirsty I was until the first sip made my whole body ache with relief.

"Thank you," I said.

"Anytime." He straightened, then paused. "You're not going into the office tomorrow."

"I have to," I said out of habit. "My internship—"

"Already handled," he said. "We called Ms. Vale. She wants you to rest. She said she'll sort anything that needs sorting."

I stared. "You guys called her? When, how?"

"We can be efficient," Leo said as if it was old news. "Ms. Vale was distressed to hear what happened, and she wants you to recover."

I opened my mouth to say something, but he beat me to it.

"And your stipend is safe."

I let my head tip back against the wall and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Good," I said.

"Do you need anything else? Food? Tea?"

"Just help to bed," I said. "And sleep. Mostly sleep."

"Sleep we can do." He took the bowl and kit to the sink, and came back with a folded T-shirt. "It's mine," he said, the way a person talks about something basic. "If your tight night clothes on your ribs gets annoying."

I burnt red. He wasn't even in the kitchen this morning, and he knew about that.

"Thank you," I said again, because he kept finding ways to make the night less terrible.

He walked me up to the sunroom with care and ease. He set the T-shirt on the chair, ran and bath, and came back.

Leo was different from the two, but he was very... thorough in everything he did.

"If you need anything, just knock," he said. "I'm a light sleeper. Caden

not so much. But he'll help, too."

I pretended not to realize that he didn't mention Tylon.

"Leo?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for coming." My voice cracked on the last word. I swallowed it back down. "All of you."

"You don't have to thank us for that." He hesitated, and his eyes went warmer. "But you're welcome."

He turned for the door, then looked back. "You're safe here," he said, not like a line as how he said literally everything else, like a promise.

I nodded and he left.

Unlike last night, sleep came easily.

But I could have sworn that before I dozed off, I heard wolves in the distance howling.



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