

CHAPTER 2

As soon as my shift ended that night, I walked a block away from the diner until I reached the gym. I pushed open the glass door and was immediately hit with the familiar scent of sweat and rubber. Inside, the head warrior was already deep into his workout. Standing at 6 feet 5 inches, his athletic frame was highlighted by a pair of fitted shorts that showcased his powerful thighs.

A sprawling tattoo covered his back, a vivid collection of intricate symbols and designs that told a story of strength and resilience. I couldn't help but admire how the bright colors contrasted against his tanned skin, drawing attention to the details in the artwork. His muscles rippled with each movement, and though I tried to maintain composure, a flutter of admiration—and a hint of breathlessness—washed over me. I'd never let him know just how much he affected me, though.

I made my way to the locker room, changing into a black and white sports bra paired with matching tights, socks, and sneakers. Once I was dressed, I returned to the main area where Angel was getting the room ready for training. I immediately jumped in to help him.

"I wasn't sure you'd make it today," Angel said with surprise, as we unrolled the mats on the polished hardwood floor, the familiar scent of rubber filling the air.

"I rushed over right after the diner closed," I replied, brushing a stray lock of hair from my forehead.

"When do you find time for homework?" he asked, genuine concern creasing his brow. Angel always had a way of checking in on me, making sure I wasn't overwhelmed. He was one of the few who genuinely cared.

"I fit it in between shifts," I said with a shrug, trying to downplay it.

"I can tell. You never look excited to go home," he observed, his gaze understanding as we adjusted the mats.

"Would you be?" I shot back, a hint of sarcasm lacing my words as I thought about the chaos waiting for me at home.

"Fair enough. Is she still treating you like you don't exist?" he asked, empathy shining in his eyes.

"Absolutely. And so is he. But honestly, who cares?" I replied, trying to sound indifferent as I gestured toward some scattered gym equipment, eager to change the subject. I wasn't ready to dwell on that conversation, so I focused on the task at hand.

The trainers began to trickle in, signaling the start of the final training session of the day. As usual, I only managed to make it to the night sessions after school.

We jumped straight into training, and Angel was particularly fired up about hand-to-hand combat, pushing everyone to give it their all. At first, the guys were hesitant to spar with me at full strength, but it didn't take long for them to realize that I could hold my own. After taking down a few of them, they treated me like part of the team—just the way I wanted.

The session unfolded as expected, and I found myself paired with Ian, my usual training partner. He seemed a little reluctant, maybe hoping to get the upper hand, but I could tell his feelings were more complicated than that. He often tried to make small talk, but I wasn't interested, so I kept my responses

short, making it clear that I wasn't looking to connect.

Once practice wrapped up, I helped Angel pack up while Ian lingered nearby as we rolled up the mats.

"So, Madison, what's your plan for tomorrow night?" Ian asked, casually leaning against a set of gym equipment, his eyes locked on mine.

"I've got work," I replied flatly, scanning the floor and letting my thoughts wander.

"You work every night," he noted, frustration seeping into his tone.

"Yeah, well, not everyone's got rich parents to lean on," I shot back, finally meeting his gaze. The weight of my responsibilities pressed down harder today, and I couldn't help but notice how many of the other kids around here had everything handed to them.

It was kind of depressing, really.

"I really think you could take just one night off," he insisted, his tone lighter now, but still full of conviction.

"Right, like it's that easy," I replied, sarcasm slipping through. I turned away, unable to hold his gaze, and fiddled with a water bottle on a nearby bench.

"Ian, Madison and I have plans, and it's clear she's not free tomorrow," Angel said, stepping forward from where he'd been putting away equipment. His tone was firm, but there was a hint of genuine concern in his eyes.

"Okay, I'll catch you at training tomorrow," Ian said with a resigned sigh, clearly aware that the conversation was over. He slung his gym bag over his shoulder and left, the heavy doors swinging shut behind him.

Angel walked over to lock the front door of the gym, and as soon as he turned around, I rushed up to him, jumping into his arms and kissing him on impulse.

"Sorry, I couldn't help it," I grinned, pulling away slightly.

"I'm not complaining," he said with a chuckle, then pulled me back for another kiss before guiding me toward the mat that was still set up in the gym. He gently laid me down, positioning himself over me.

"Are you sure we have time for this?" Angel asked, his eyes glinting with mischief.

"We'll make it quick," I said, tossing aside my sports bra as he stripped off his clothes with practiced ease.

Being with Angel was the highlight of my day. I looked forward to our training sessions and the sweet moments that followed. It was the only time I felt truly valued, like someone actually cared about me. Though we kept our relationship under wraps, Angel made me feel more special than anyone else ever had.

"Well, that was fun," I said, catching my breath as we lay on the mat. Angel chuckled softly, still recovering from the intensity.

"Yeah, just a bit," he replied, still panting.

After a few moments, I slipped on my clothes and prepared to leave. Angel followed suit, and we headed to the locker room to grab our things. Once we were outside, I was about to start my walk home when Angel grabbed my hand.

"Get in. I'll give you a lift," he urged, his voice steady but tinged with concern.

"No way! If she sees me getting into your car, she'll just call me a w***e," I shot back, crossing my arms defiantly.

"I'll drop you off down the road. Seriously, it's safer than walking home in the dark. It's not safe out here," he insisted, his eyes scanning the quiet street with concern.

"It's just a wolf pack wandering around. Honestly, it's safer than you think," I replied, refusing to budge.

"I'm the head warrior of this pack. Trust me, I know what lurks in the dark better than anyone. It's not as safe as you think," he said, his voice becoming more serious as he stood firm.

"Fine," I muttered, huffing slightly as I opened the door and slid into the passenger seat. My heart raced from a mix of irritation and the thrill of the unknown.

We drove through the pack's territory until we reached a quiet residential area. I got out and started walking down the street, noting that all the houses were dark, their lights turned off. When I reached my dad's house, I tripped over the same broken step he'd neglected for far too long.

Once inside, I flipped the light switch, but before I could even breathe, something slammed into the side of my face, sending me crashing against the wall just inside the entrance.



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