Chapter Five

Ayla

I was thankful Nate helped me into his house. I'm not sure what happened. My abdomen hurt, but then it was unbearable. And the only thing I can remember doing is twisting in my seat. Nate's mom, Elizabeth, met us at the front door and helped me inside with her son.

Bluey wandered into the house behind us. She jumped up on the couch and made herself comfortable beside Nate's father, whose name I hadn't caught when I was here earlier.

“Bluey, manners.” I scolded her.

“She's fine, dear. We are used to fur on the furniture.” Elizabeth giggled. But I don't remember seeing an animal.

“Nate, can you grab my pack from my vehicle and my phone, please?” I asked him.

“I have her, honey. Go.” Elizabeth told her son before he left.

Elizabeth helped me to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, the sweatshirt I was wearing was now soaked in blood. Even the top of the sweatpants were red with blood. I unzipped the sweatshirt to find that the bandages were soaked red, and it scared me to take them off to see the damage underneath them.

“It's okay, Ayla. I'm a doctor. I'll be as careful as I can.” She told me and I nodded. Leaning against the sink, Elizabeth cut off the bandages.

I tried not to cry out every time the bandage would pull against my skin. Soon after Elizabeth started cutting away, Nate came in with a first aid kit. Looking at the horror on his face when he looked at my abdomen, I knew it was bad.

“Bad?” I cried out. He looked at me and shook his head.

“You don't have to lie. I can feel it.” I hissed, as Elizabeth pulled back the bandage that was now cut.

“Nate, please get some clean towels and put them in the room Ayla was in earlier?” His mother asked him.

“Will do.” He answered her before he left. When he was gone, I found I missed him. Just him being around me made this more bearable.

“It looks like everything has scabbed over and most of the stitches I put in earlier are still intact.” Elizabeth told me, examining my abdomen.

“You stitched me up?” I asked her.

“I had too. The claw marks were deep. Did something happen earlier that would have torn out some of these stitches?” She asked me.

“I don't know. Everything is a daze.” I answered her.

“It's okay, dear. Let's get you in the shower to get you and the wounds clean.” She told me and I nodded.

Elizabeth turned on the shower before helping me strip off my clothes. Helping me into the shower, I hissed and cried out when the water ran over the wounds.

“Breathe, Ayla. I know it hurts, but it needs to be cleaned.” I heard Elizabeth say. As the water ran over my body, I felt like I had blacked out.

I lost all track of time when Elizabeth shut the water off. Leaning against the wall, I was trying to breathe through the pain. Why does this hurt so much now?

“It looks like it’s infected.” I heard Elizabeth say. f**k.

“Let’s get you dried off and then I can apply an ointment that will help with the pain and help you heal.” She said, wrapping a towel around me.

“Thank you.” I whispered, as she helped me out of the shower.

“I really appreciate your kindness. You and your family.” I told her as she helped me out of the bathroom and into the other room.

“You are welcome, my dear. I think my son likes you.” She giggled as she patted and dried my abdomen.

“I like him, too.” I hissed.

When she was done, I went over to my pack Nate had placed in the room. My phone was also lying on the bed. Elizabeth helped me find a pair of underwear and some sweatpants. She also helped me pull on a sports bra, which, thankfully, I packed. When I was dressed, she helped me wrap up my wet hair in a towel and then turned her attention to my abdomen.

She applied a cool and soothing ointment before she wrapped everything up in a clean bandage. When everything was done, I felt exhausted and I couldn’t keep my eyes open as I stood there.

“Get some rest.” She told me. I nodded as she helped me to lie down.

I don’t remember falling asleep as I woke up with Bluey cuddled into me. My body felt better as I sat up and looked around the room. The lamp beside the bed was still on and there was a bottle of water and my phone on the nightstand beside the bed. First, I drank the water and then I checked to see that it was four in the morning. Looking at my abdomen, the bandages were still clean.

Thankfully, then I checked my messages. I ignored all the ones from Jordan. Xander had sent me a few asking how I was doing and telling me he still could not enter my house to search for my necklace.

Me: I’m doing okay, Xander. Stressed out about my house. I’m pretty sure I left the necklace by the bathroom sink. I really appreciate your help in finding it.

Too awake to go back asleep now, I got up and slipped into the bathroom. This must be Ruby’s, as makeup and hair products lined the sink. Looking at myself in the mirror, I looked like a hot mess. My hair was a knotted mess, and I had bags under my eyes from crying. With a sigh, I washed my face before going back to my room to fix my hair.

My hair was dry and full of knots, but I brushed it out and put it in a messy bun. I then found some warm socks and a hoodie before I left the room with my phone and headed into the kitchen. Bluey was still sleeping on the bed, so I left the door ajar so she could come find me when she was ready.

Making my way to the kitchen, the house was quiet, and I knew everyone was still asleep. I felt weird walking around in a strange house, but I told myself I would just make a cup of tea and then go watch the sunrise. I also needed to figure out what I was going to do with my life now that I don’t have a place to live.

In the kitchen, I found the kettle on the counter by the stove. Turning in on, I found the tea bags and cups. While the water was coming to a boil, I leaned against the counter, trying to get my thoughts in order. I was homeless once again. Now I had more money, but it wouldn't last and I had Bluey to worry about. The reason I bought a home was so I could have a dog. Places that allowed animals were more expensive and harder to find in the city, especially closer to where I work.

When the kettle was done, I poured the streaming hot water into the cup and placed the tea bag in it before making my way out to the front door. The chilly air of the morning cleared my senses as I took a seat in one of the chairs. Crossing my legs, I sat my cup on my lap, watching the world around me. The air was still damp from yesterday's rain. The sky was now clear and I could see all the stars.

I wish I had called Bluey to come out to sit with me. I could really use someone to talk to about what I should do. When the sun was up, I was going to have to call my boss and let him know what was going on. And then I was going to have to go home and go through the rubble that was once my home. I should probably take this time to find a new place to live, since I'll have to put all my freelancing work on hold until I can get Bluey and I settle down again.

My laptop was at home so now I need to go buy all new clothes for work and a new laptop to finish my last article that's due in two days. And I'm still waiting to hear from Xander. I felt hopeless as I looked out from the porch, watching the night sky. And this all started with a random attack in the woods.

When did my life become so complicated? I finally thought things were going right in my life. And then bam, it's f****d up again. After I worked so hard to get to where I was and now I'm lost again. And being close to my father, whom I never thought I would see again.

The only reason I'm even here is because his wife wants to see me, not him. From a young age, I knew my father never liked me. My mother and I would only see him one day a week and he never spent that time with me, only my mother. After I grew older, and more aware of what was going on, I always wondered why my mother would put up with someone who didn't like her child. She was never with another. Always waiting for that one night with my father. One night a week, I would have to go to bed early and he would be gone by the time I woke up.

I also wondered why I wasn't good enough to be around him? And now, seeing him again and knowing he didn't even acknowledge me as his, it hurts. When you are a child, you just want your parents to love you. And he never loved me. He loved my mother, I think? Or maybe she loved him and couldn't say no to his booty calls?

This is all too much to handle. My life was fine and then I had to get attacked and see my father again. I could handle the house fire, but seeing him again just brings up the past. My past that I've been running from. And I will never understand how you could leave your child. His family was here. I could have moved in with family, but instead, I was moved into foster care. I could have had a normal life after the death of my mother, not the hell that I experienced.

Sighing, I pulled out my phone to start looking for a new place to live. I don't think I'll ever know why I wasn't good enough for my father to call me his daughter, and there was no point in overthinking the what ifs. I had to focus on things that I could control, like where me and Bluey were going to live until our house could be rebuilt.

Sipping my tea, I found a few good options and sent off emails. I may have to stay in a hotel and Bluey a kennel for a few weeks, but I'll figure that out when someone gets back to me. Maybe even Xander can house Bluey until I can move into a place of my own. There was so much for me to do, but nothing I could do right now with everyone still asleep on an early Sunday morning.

After going through all the for-rent ads, I started making a list of everything I needed to do and everything I needed to buy. Officially, I was worried about money. I was going to have to replace everything on my own until the insurance company investigates the claim. But first, the fire department needs to file a report and the cause of the fire. I'm not even sure when I would be reimbursed, but at least I had an excellent lawyer on my side. I know my boss will help or find a friend of his that could.

I was so lost in my thoughts and on my phone that I didn’t hear the front door opening and someone standing beside me.

“You’re up early.” Nate said, and I jumped, almost dropping my phone.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” He said, sitting in the chair beside me. Looking over at him, holding my chest, he really was a very sexy man.

His dark hair looked like he had just run his fingers through it. His grey t-shirt hugged his muscles, and I swear his biceps were going to rip his sleeves. As I took him in, he looked at me with dark blue eyes.

“It’s okay.” I panted out, giving him a smile.

“How are you feeling?” He asked me. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees.

“Much better.” I breathed out, and he smiled. His smile made me want to melt. How can someone be so goddamn sexy?

“How long have you been up?” He asked me.

“Since four. I couldn’t go back to sleep so I made tea and came out here. I hope that was okay?” I asked him.

“You’ve been out here for three hours? Aren’t you cold?” He asked me and I shrugged.

“I hadn’t noticed the cold.” I told him, looking out past the house. The sun was just about to rise, changing the colours of the sky. We sat in silence for a few minutes while I tried to come up with something to say. He looked like a Greek god, while I looked like a hot mess.

“How did you sleep?” I asked him, then internally scolded myself for being so lame.

“It was good.” He chuckled.

“Good morning you two.” Jim said, walking up to the porch with Claire.

“Jim, Claire.” I smiled.

“How are you feeling this morning, my dear?” Claire asked me, as they were walking up the stairs of the porch.

“Better. Thank you.” I told her.

“Good morning, Claire, Jim.” Nate greeted them.

“Come, my dear, you must be cold.” Claire said, motioning me to go with her. Standing up, I took my cup, and we all walked into the house.

I actually wasn’t cold. I usually ran warm, but I did what Claire had wanted. Walking into the house, Bluey was curled up on the couch with Nate’s father again.

“Bluey, you are such a man stealer.” I scolded her. She lifted her head just enough to rest it in his lap, and I rolled my eyes at her.

“Is she like that with everyone?” Nate asked me, pointing at my dog.

“Man stealer? All the time,” I answered, and he chuckled.

“Ayla, I’m Will. We haven’t officially met.” Nate’s father said.

"It's nice to meet you. Thank you for letting me stay in your home and for giving Bluey cuddles. At this rate, she will never want to leave." I told them.

"Ayla, are you hungry?" Elizabeth called from the kitchen. Nate led me into the kitchen, while Claire and Jim stayed in the living room with Will.

"How are you feeling, sweetie?" She asked me when I entered the kitchen.

"So much better. Thank you." I told her with a smile.

"That's wonderful." She exclaimed, busying herself in the kitchen.

"Thea will be here soon. She would like to speak with you." She said with her back turned, and I looked at Nate, confused.

"Thea is your father's wife." He said, and I instantly became nervous. I knew she wanted to speak to me, but I didn't think it would happen so soon.

"Oh," I said.

"Ayla, it will be okay." Nate told me.

"Will you stay?" I blurted out.

"I mean, never mind. I'm sure you're busy." I stumbled out, internally face palming myself. Looking at him, he had raised an eyebrow at me. I looked over at Elizabeth, who had stopped what she was doing and was watching us intently.

"Coffee?" Nate asked me, changing the subject. He took the cup I was still holding and placed it in the sink.

"Sure." I breathed out. Elizabeth was still watching me intently as her son poured me a coffee.

"Don't be nervous, Ayla." She told me.

"It's hard not to be. My father wants nothing to do with me, but his wife wants to see me." I blurted out.

Before they said anything else, I heard the front door open and Bluey let out a growl. I knew my father had just walked in. Taking a deep breath, I willed myself to get this over with.

"Nate, honey, can you move some chairs into the living room?" Elizabeth asked her son as he handed me a cup of coffee.

Nate picked up two chairs, and I picked up one and we moved into the living room, with Elizabeth following behind us. Nerves turned my stomach painfully as my father came into view. Bluey was no longer sitting on the couch, and she wandered over to me as I placed the chair down. Nate placed a chair down beside mine and sat down.

Sitting down, I looked around the room. Will, Claire, and Jim were sitting on the couch. My father and his wife were sitting on the love seat. Elizabeth walked over to the chair beside her husband. I could feel Thea was watching me intently. She was very beautiful, with long golden blonde hair and bright brown eyes.

"Ayla, it's nice to meet you. I'm Thea, your father's mate." She said and there was that word mate again.

"It's nice to meet you as well, Thea. What did you want to speak to me about?" I asked her, placing my cup on the coffee table. Bluey came over and rested her head on my lap.

"How old are you?" She asked me. I thought it was weird. She could have just asked my father.

“Nineteen,” I answered.

“What happened after your mother died?” She asked, and I shifted uncomfortably. My father grumbled, but Thea shot him a look.

“I went into foster care.” I answered her. My life felt under a microscope, as everyone in the room was watching me intently.

“Why were you sent to foster care?” She asked me and she genuinely sounded concerned.

“Because my father never signed my birth certificate,” I sighed. Claire and Thea both gasped.

“Atlas, is that true?” Jim growled out.

“I was seventeen.” My father argued.

“Old enough to stick your d**k in her, but not to sign your name?” I exclaimed. Instantly rejecting my word vomit.

“Really, Ayla?” My father growled out.

“Atlas, she’s right. Why didn’t you sign the birth certificate?” Thea asked him.

“Because she wasn’t my mate.” He sighed.

“Mate? What does that have to do with me being your daughter?” I asked him.

“Ayla, what happened in foster care?” Claire asked me when my father wouldn’t answer my question.

“I learned nothing was free,” I answered. And I heard Nate growl. I looked over at him and he was shaking with his hands balled into fists, his knuckles white.

“Ayla, can you please explain?” Thea asked me and I sighed.

“It means I didn’t eat unless I got on my knees.” Nate got up and left, slamming the front door behind him.

“Did that fucker rape you?” My father yelled, standing up from his seat.

“I ran away before he could.” I sighed, and he stormed out of the house. Thea came over to sit on the seat beside me.

“Ayla, why didn’t you tell the courts about your father?” She asked me, taking my hand in hers.

“I did. They couldn’t find him.” I told her.

“I’m going to go check on them.” Will said. He kissed Elizabeth before leaving the house with Jim.

“What happened after you ran away?” Claire asked me with tears in her eyes.

“I was homeless. I finished school, but I was also working eighty hours a week, plus school. It was hard, but then Mr. Ferguson gave me a chance and hired me as his receptionist and assistant at his law firm.” I told them.

“And things have been better?” Elizabeth asked me, and I nodded.

“Besides, my house burning down and losing my mom’s necklace.” I said.

“What’s your plan now?” Claire asked me.

“I've been looking for a place to rent and I’ll need to leave for the city soon to get some clothes for work tomorrow. I really appreciate your kindness, Elizabeth,” I said.

“You can always stay here.” Elizabeth offered, but I shook my head.

“My father doesn’t want me here. I think it’s time for Bluey and I to leave.”