

Chapter Nine:

The Aftermath

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The door to the pit leads out to a hallway and a small staircase. My legs are halfway numb, and I stumble noisily up the stairs. Everything is silent. My throat hurts too much to call out for someone.

When I reach the top of the stairs I'm left with more hallways. I shiver as I stagger in the direction of the library. It's the only place I can think of to go.

The tiled floor swirls from under my feet. The pounding in my head has only gotten worse since shouting for help and then making my escape.

I'm almost to the library door when Ziggy rounds the corner. His eyes widen and he immediately runs toward me.

"Oh my God, Park! We've been looking everywhere for you." He turns his head and calls down the hall. "CLAY! CLAY, I FOUND THEM!" I'm shaking on my feet as he looks back at me. He immediately frowns. "Are you okay?"

"Parker!" Clay exclaims, appearing around the same corner. As soon as they see me they start running and pull me into a bone-crushing hug. "Park."

"I'm here," I whisper hoarsely.

"I was so worried," they sob against my hair. I don't know when they started crying. "It's been four hours. I couldn't find you. I thought--"

I know what they thought.

My body trembles, and I cling tightly to them. I feel my knees buckle and then my legs give out. Clay lowers us softly onto the tiled floors.

"Ziggy, can you run and get them some water?" Clay asks, gently brushing my damp hair out of my face.

"Sure thing." Ziggy pauses reluctantly before leaving. The horror of seeing my current state lingers in his expression. I know I must look awful.

"I was so worried," Clay repeats. The tears have stopped but their voice is strained. I shake against their body as they press a kiss to my forehead. "Parker, what happened? Are you okay?"

“I--I found where the killer has been stashing their things.” My voice wobbles. “They’re a--a hitman, Clay.”

They lift up my hand, examining the rope burn on my wrists. Their tone goes cold. “What did they do to you?”

“I’m okay. I promise.” I shake my head. “The killer knocked me out--chloroform, I think. They were keeping me in the pit.”

“What did they want?”

“They wanted to know more about the investigation.” I yawn into Clay’s shirt. The exhaustion is starting to drag at my bones, pulling me closer and closer to sleep. “Clay...Clay, you’re on the list. They’re going to try to kill you.”

“Well, they aren’t going to succeed.” They kiss my forehead and then my cheek. “You’re so brave. I’m so proud of you.” Clay carefully pulls me into their arms and lifts me off the floor. “Come on, we need to get you to a hospital.”

“There’s no time.” I struggle against them. “Aren’t you listening to me? *You’re on a hit list, Clay.*”

“And you were just *abducted*, Parker,” they retort. “Chloroform is toxic. You are going to a hospital whether you like it or not.”

“The list--”

“I’ll take care of it later.”

I fall silent. The hallway is spinning and rolling in my vision. Ziggy returns from the vending machine with two bottles of water. Everything is blurry, but I can vaguely make out the concern on his face.

“I got the water,” Ziggy says quietly, glancing at me. “Is Park okay?”

“They’re going into shock. I’m taking them to a hospital.”

“God. Here, I’ll get the doors for you.”

Shock?

My brain refuses to form proper thoughts. Clay’s body is warm, but I continue to shiver against them.

The exhaustion pulls at me as I wheeze quietly for breath. My throat still hurts. I let my head loll against Clay’s chest. *I’m so tired.*

“Stay awake, my love.” I hear Clay’s voice. My eyes have fluttered shut. “Try to stay awake for me.”

There's a bang of a car door. My body is like a bag of sand. I keep my eyes closed, but I can feel the moment I leave Clay's arms and am set in the passenger's seat.

"Park. Open your eyes. Look at me," Clay demands. I feel one of their hands gripping my shoulder. I'm warmer now. The scent of their cologne floats around me. "Parker, look at me."

I blink hazily at them. The sunset is spread out behind them. Their suit coat is wrapped tightly around me. Clay's brows are furrowed and there's a sharp crease in the middle. They brush a finger across my cheek.

"There you are," Clay breathes with relief. "Keep your eyes open. We're going to get you help."

"Clay," I murmur. "Clay, I want to go home."

They kiss my forehead. "I know. Just hang on for me, Parker. Everything's going to be okay."

The car door slams shut. My eyelids feel as heavy as stones. I struggle to hold them open, focusing on the sun lit parking lot through the front glass.

The driver's door is thrown open, and the next thing I know we are speeding down the road. Clay turns the radio on for me. It plays weakly in the background. I can hear their voice begging me to stay awake; to stay with them.

I try to listen to them, but eventually the exhaustion grows to be too much. I can't remember the last thing I hear them say before I'm pulled down into darkness.
