



MISSING

Wil was missing.

The hotel room was silent. I sat on one of the beds, glaring down at my father, Jack, who was passed out on the opposite one.

The prostitute he had brought home had left after awkward apologies and a good luck wish at finding my brother.

"Kayli," Corey said to me through the cell phone I held to my ear. I could imagine him at the computer in the apartment, typing away. Hovering over the keyboard, his sun-kissed hair messed up in the same way I'd seen it earlier that day. "Are you sure he's not with a friend?"

I hesitated. A few days ago, I got mixed up in a group of Academy boys who needed my help. In return, I was promised a lot of things, including assistance in helping get Wil into a college in a hurry and out of the godforsaken dump of a hotel we currently lived in. When I got back, Wil's clothes, school books—most of his things--were gone. I'd been so worried about getting back to him and letting him know where I was, but the whole time he hadn't been home. I wanted to believe Corey and think maybe he was at a friend's house.

But I knew that wasn't true. I could feel it. Like a piece of me was missing that couldn't be replaced until I found him. He was gone. Someone may as well have chopped off my hand. "I know," I said as coolly as I could, remembering this wasn't Corey's fault. "I'm telling you, he's been missing for," I counted off on my fingers, "what is it? Three days? Four? Ever since Marc first picked me up."

"The school record shows he went to class all last week."

I sucked in a heavy breath and held it, sitting up on the bed. I stared hard at the silent television, as if that held answers that my brain wasn't able to put together in my panicked state. "He has?"

"Yeah," he said. "He's been going every day. He's probably spending the night at a friend's house."

I stood up, and stumbled forward a step as I wasn't sure what direction to start pacing first, and Marc's clunky boots on my feet were hard to walk in. I glanced at the two notes sitting unfolded on top of the kitchenette counter next to an uneaten doughnut. All had been left for Wil, and none had been picked up, so I knew he hadn't been by. He'd never spent the night at someone else's house before. "I should...I don't know. What am I doing standing here?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. I was waiting because I didn't know what to do next. I didn't have a car so I couldn't run off to find Wil, even if I wanted to. I didn't know where to start now. I needed another pair of eyes. I needed Academy boys.

There was a hard pounding knock at the door; I felt the vibrations resonating through the floor. "Kayli!" Raven shouted.

I ran for the door. "Raven's here," I told Corey.

"Let me hang up on you and check in with Axel. He was heading out to the school district so he could check out any classmates who might have seen Wil. Don't worry. We'll find him." He said goodbye and hung up.

I unlocked the door and got shoved back as it was pushed open from the other side. Raven towered in the doorway. He wore the same black T-shirt and sweatpants I'd seen him in a few hours earlier. He hadn't bothered to change. Somehow that made me feel better. He took this as seriously as I felt.

His shoulders rolled back. His arms seemed to swell, making the tribal and rose tattoos on his forearms shift. His eyes darkened when he saw me and realized what a mess I was. "Tell me," he said, the Russian accent thickening. "What happened?"

I stepped back from the door to let him in. "Where's Marc?" I asked.

"He's downstairs asking questions." He lumbered forward, his eyes going all over the place, from the

tiny hotel kitchenette, to where my father was with his bare ass hanging out, still passed out from whatever drunken stupor he'd been in from the night before. He nodded in Jack's direction. "Did you ask him?"

"I can't get a coherent sentence out of him," I said, avoiding looking at Jack. The more I did, the angrier I got. I wanted to feel sorry for him, but it was getting harder and harder to drum up any sympathy. He lost his wife, my mother, years ago. Since then he'd fallen apart and drank his way through life. After all the crap he gave me during the times I tried to drag Wil with me to get away from him and his abuse, he chose now to not give a damn.

Raven went to the bed and leaned over, checking my father's pulse at his neck. He split Jack's eyelids open and checked his pupils. He released him, and wiped his fingers across his shirt as if to clean them. "We need to wake him. Make some coffee."

"He won't drink coffee."

"Make some water," he said. He bent over, grabbing Jack's arm. He shoved it over his own shoulders and started to haul him up. "Open the bathroom door."

I ran to the bathroom, opening it up and then dove in to push aside the shower curtain. Raven dragged him into the stall and dropped him on his butt onto the tile. I averted my eyes; I could see with my peripheral vision enough of what was going on, but avoided looking at Jack naked.

Raven leaned in and turned the cold water faucet on full blast.

It took a moment, but Jack started sputtering and opening his eyes, crying out. He rolled back and forth against the wall, trying to use it to haul himself back out of the unrelenting spray. His grimy face streaked as the water washed some of him clean. "Turn it off!" he howled.

"Get up," Raven said. He positioned himself in front of Jack, for which I was grateful. I'd seen enough. Raven crossed his arms over his chest, standing out of striking distance if Jack decided to attack him, but still looming. "Where's Wil?"

Jack coughed, long and hard and thickly enough that I thought he was trying to vomit. He reached up, turning off the water. He managed to twist the faucet until it was only dribbling and then scooted himself out of range. He rotated and peered up at Raven. "Who are you?"

"Kayli's looking for Wil," Raven said. "When's the last time you saw him?"

"Hell if I know." He cringed and then looked around Raven and spotted me behind him. "Who is this, Kayli?"

I clenched my hands into fists. He wasn't listening at all. "Jack, Wil's missing. I can't find him."

"Well, shit, tell me about it," he said. He wiped water away from his face. "Get me a pair of pants, will you?"

I picked up a dirty pair of cotton pants he'd left in a corner of the bathroom and tossed them at him. I turned, looking at the wall. "You haven't seen him at all?"

"I haven't seen you, either. Not in a few days." There were sounds behind me like he was stumbling into his pants and then a thud like he fell against the wall. "I thought he was with you."

"I called you and told you to tell him I was at a job."

"How am I supposed to keep up with either of you?" he bellowed.

"So you haven't seen him at all?" Raven asked.

"Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I'm her boyfriend," he said.

"What? How come I've never heard of you?"

I turned around. Jack stood, his short hair wet and stuck against his head, his face dripping. His bare belly hung over the waistband of the pants. Raven and Jack had squared off and were glowering at each other. I stared hard at Raven for a moment, trying to figure out if he was saying 'boyfriend' to keep things simple, and for some reason I took it like that. Seemed like the easiest thing to rattle off rather than just saying friend or, the real truth: that I'd just met him a few days ago and still barely knew him.

"He's not helping," I told Raven. "He doesn't know."

"Kayli?" Marc called. Footsteps sounded by the still-open door of the room. Marc nudged it further open as I stepped out to meet him. He spotted me and limped toward me, favoring one of his legs. His

soft brown hair hung over in front of his mismatched eyes: one blue, one green. He gripped me by the elbows. “You okay? I..”

“Who is *this*?” Jack bellowed. He padded out into the main hotel room. “Why do you have all these boyfriends coming out of the woodwork? What kind of job were you at?”

Marc’s jaw hardened, making his high cheekbones stand out a little more. The black and brown plastic bands on his left wrist seemed to tighten against his arm as he made fists. He positioned himself in front of me, warding off Jack from getting any closer. “We’re here for her. We’re taking her with us.”

“What is this shit?” Jack said. He tried to look over at me from over Marc’s shoulder. “Kayli—”

Raven bumped into him on his way out of the bathroom almost knocking him over. He scanned the kitchenette again, and then the beds and the dresser. He spotted my two book bags on the floor by the beds. He picked them both up, slinging them over his shoulder, then turned to me. “Do you have anything else here? We’ll take it with us.”

“Hang on a second,” Jack said. He marched over to Raven, his finger pointed at him. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Someone should stay here,” I said, ignoring Jack. “I mean, maybe I should. If Wil comes back—”

“He’s not here and he hasn’t been back,” Marc said. “I checked the computer logs downstairs in the business center and I’ve asked the manager. He said he hasn’t seen him, only Jack.” He looked over where I’d opened up the drawers, finding them empty. “If he’s taken his things, he’s not planning on coming back. Not for a while.”

“But...”

“You don’t take all your things and plan on coming back,” he said. He grabbed my hand, tugging me to the door. “Come on.”

“Wait a second, you’re not dragging her out of here.” Jack stomped over. “Let go of her.”

Marc moved over again, blocking access. “She’s coming with us.”

Jack looked at me, his eyes wide and wild. “You can’t just leave here.”

“You mean you can’t find beer money without me?” I asked.

“Don’t give me that shit.”

“No,” I said. I yanked my arm out of Marc’s grasp and stepped toward Jack, getting in his face. I didn’t want to do it this way but I had no choice. He was my father, but I’d had enough and I was wound up too tight to stop now. “I was gone for four days and you didn’t give a damn. Wil’s gone and you’re not out looking for him. You don’t even care. You just want me here to pay for this hotel room and to give you money. I’m nothing to you but an income source. The only reason I was doing it at all was for Wil. He’s gone. So I’m gone, too.”

Jack clenched his hands and shoved one toward me. “You selfish little...after everything I’ve done...”

Raven clamped down on Jack’s wrist and twisted. Jack bent over backward to relieve the pressure. He howled and clawed at Raven’s grasp. Raven pushed back until Jack was on his knees and then shoved.

“Don’t touch her,” Raven said in a cold, deep voice.

Jack held his arms up in defense, easing himself up. “Fine. Take her.” He focused on me, pointing a finger. “You think I need you? You don’t know anything about nothing.”

I ground my teeth together to stop myself from arguing. Over the years, I’d dreamed of the day I would walk out on him and let him rot in his own mess. Now that it was here and I was doing it, all the words I’d wanted to spit at him didn’t want to appear. Did it even matter? Nothing I could say would make any of this right.

But why was there that persistent nag at my heart? Maybe it was because I still had a picture of him in my mind of what he used to be. Before my mother died, he’d kept a job, even if it wasn’t a good one and didn’t pay very well. He wasn’t always the friendliest, but he’d worked hard and kept us kids in line. It was what you’d want in a dad, at the least.

How could he dare ask me to stay, and beg me with those eyes that looked struck and horrified? After all the fights? After becoming a bum and forcing us to cart him around while we barely survived? He’d given up on us.

“You have about a month,” I said as coolly as I could muster. I could leave him that at least. It

relieved some of the guilt over abandoning him like a helpless animal. “The hotel room has been paid until then. If you don’t cause too much trouble, and they don’t have a reason to kick you out.”

Jack’s lips twisted and his head jerked back. “You shrewd girl. You’ve been holding back money? Paid a month? For this place?”

“Come on, Kayli,” Marc urged. He reached out for my wrist and tugged. “We should go.”

“You’re an idiot,” Jack called after me. “The rent is outrageous here. I was going to move us somewhere else. After the next check came in, I was going to...”

I turned from Marc, looking back at Jack. What was he babbling about? “What check?”

Jack shook his head. “You think you’re going to get a dime from me? You’ve got to be kidding. After all I’ve done to teach you to fend for yourself.”

“Teach me?” I asked. My shoulders drew back and I pointed a finger at him. “You mean drinking all our money and getting into fights at night until we were nearly out in the street? You couldn’t afford a cardboard box.”

“Stop, Kayli,” Marc said, tugging again, gentler this time. “He’s just egging you on.”

“What check?” I asked Jack again.

“You think I need you?” Jack shoved a finger back at my face. “It doesn’t matter if Wil is here as long as he’s going to school and the cops don’t catch him living somewhere. And if you’re both off on your own, then the state may reduce it, but I can still live on...”

It was like ice water striking at my very heart. “You...” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You get checks from the state?”

“You think I do nothing around here?” he bellowed. “You think I can’t support myself? You think your little contribution makes you tough shit?”

I smashed my fists against my thighs to stop myself from hurling them at his face. My mouth clamped shut and I was biting my tongue so hard, I tasted the blood boiling inside me. “How long?” I managed to utter.

“None of your business what I do with my money,” he said. “You dropped out of school and have been running around. When I stopped providing for you and your brother, you straightened up and worked and finally started contributing.”

Raven held up a hand between us. “This isn’t the time for this. Wil is still gone.”

But the revelation struck me hard. My father had lied to me. Lied about having money. He lost his job, and didn’t even try to look for another one. It’s why I’d dropped out of school. I’d started working part time jobs where I could get them. And when it wasn’t enough, I started stealing what I needed by picking pockets at the mall. Even then, we got kicked out of our old apartment and Jack convinced us we should stay at the hotel until we found another. But this whole time, I had been the only one paying the bills and contributing. Jack left nearly every afternoon when the bars opened to drink and pay for hookers out of the money I’d brought home for rent.

And now he tells me he’s been getting government assistance all along. Possibly using me and Wil the entire time as the state helped pay for what we needed. Only the money went to Jack. He must have drank it all. Gave it away to those hookers.

My rage bubbled over. I lunged at him. I wailed. I screamed. Marc tried to pull me back, but I wrenched myself free. Raven dropped my bags and wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me back, but not before I clawed at Jack’s face with a good swipe. Even then, it wasn’t enough.

“How could you?” I screamed at him as Raven started carrying me to the door. “We needed you and you kept it all to yourself? We were starving!”

“Get out!” Jack bellowed after me. “Ungrateful little shithead!”

A slew of curses fell from my lips as Raven towed me out. I fought him, but not as hard as I could have because he wasn’t the one I wanted to kill.

I was a mess, upside down, seeing red and choking on sobs as Raven brought me to the parking lot. Marc followed, carrying the book bags that Raven had dropped. His head was down and he stared at his feet as we left. He opened the truck and threw my bags into the back seat. Raven put me down in the passenger side and then shoved me over until I was in the middle.

Raven got inside, slamming the door. “*Skatert'yu doroga.*”

“Good riddance is right,” Marc said. He jammed the key into the slot and started the truck.

I sat back against the seat. My eyes were open and I was staring at the windshield, but I wasn't really looking at anything. I was trying to contain the anger that now threatened to consume everything inside of me.

I'd been gripping Raven's thigh after he got in. As he settled, he snatched up my hand and squeezed. Then he opened up his arm and pulled me into him until I was leaning against his chest. He gripped at my shoulder, clutching me.

I let him. And in a way, his strength allowed some of my anger to flow away. Marc drove and then glanced at us. His hand drifted out, and he gripped my knee.

None of us said anything. We didn't need to. We all knew.

I'd never see Jack again.

But what about Wil?



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