







# Betraying the Mob (Mob Lust 3)

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action, Suspense

**Description:** Shoot first, ask questions never.

Max

They say I'm an animal – a fierce, killing machine with no regard for authority.

Or life...mine or anyone else's.

I'm a liability to the family.

I don't follow the rules.

I don't abide by the code.

Attack first, ask questions never.

That's always been my MO, f\*ck the consequences.

I've taken big risks, crossed too many lines, and destroyed an empire.

Now my enemies are back and out for blood.

Revenge is what they want. Life is what they'll take.

And this time, everyone is a target, including the woman I love.

I've never worried about my choices.

I've never had anything to lose.

Until now...

Sloane

I have a life. It is simple. Calm.

I help people who are suffering and give them peace, hope, and joy.

I give them a purpose.

My work makes me happy...most of the time.

But the gaping hole in my heart still remains.

Only one person can fill it.

But he's lost, angry, and dangerous.

I can't trust him. He's a liar. A criminal. A vicious beast.

Falling in love with him, a man who can never be saved, was not part of my plan.

Then again, I never thought I was the one who needed saving.

**Total Pages (Source):** 61

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Thanksgiving, Six Weeks Ago

Max

A deep, ominous chill settles into my bones as I walk down Decatur Avenue in the armpit of Brooklyn on this frigid night. I flip up the collar of my coat to form a barrier against the heavy wind that nearly blew my car off the Verrazano Bridge a little while ago. Sidestepping puddles of half-melted ice from the last snowstorm, I peer around at the darkness consuming the dilapidated buildings, trying to make out any shapes that are lurking in alleyways, ready to pummel, but there are none.

I guess criminals celebrate Thanksgiving, too.

Nico would kick my ass if he knew I was here. Alone, no less.

It's been a rough few months for him, dealing with his dad's recovery from the hit that the Cappodamo family put on him and then taking over as boss. It hasn't been easy, and he's been damn stressed. But yet here I am, ready to pile on that stress and fuck shit up without his permission.

My phone vibrates against my leg. I glance left and right before pulling it out to read the text from Sloane.

Where are you? We just finished dinner, and I made your favorite for dessert. Is everything okay?

I tug down the rim of my worn Yankees baseball cap and shake off the useless guilt

that's been hovering over me ever since I made a sudden turn in the opposite direction...away from Sloane's house and toward the New Jersey Turnpike.

I should be with Sloane right now, sitting in the dining room at her dad's house, eating her tiramisu...the best damn tiramisu on the planet and the one she always makes any time I come over. I'm so fucking deep in the friend zone that the only thing I can get out of her is dessert. Or Raisinets when I show up at her apartment with the bullshit excuse that I want to play Fortnite. Video games. That's the only way in, so I've been reduced to fucking Player Two.

Things between us fell apart the last time because my priorities were fucked up. Funny how shit comes full circle. I've been dicking around for the past couple of months, trying to figure out how to tell her that I want to give this thing between us another shot, but something always stopped me from saying the words.

That was gonna change tonight. I was gonna lay it out there for her, to see if there's a future for us, to see if I can get the second chance I've been waiting for. And here I am in Brooklyn with my priorities all fucked up again. Maybe it's a sign that she's better off without me and my jacked priorities.

But that phone call...how the hell could I have ignored it? I know being here violates all sorts of rules, but I still came.

You always repay your debts.

Besides, I'd never let those bastards win their sick, sordid game either.

When they violated our territory and went after our business, they fucked themselves.

I'm just here to finish the job. It's what I do. It's what I'm good at.

Except this time, I don't have backup.

This is something I have to do by myself. I put Layla in this position, and now I need to get her the fuck out of it.

I mentally flip through attack strategies, squinting at the numbers on the buildings along the desolate road. There could be anywhere from one to five guys inside, based on what she whispered into the phone.

They're baiting me. I know they're not gonna do what they threatened to do. But Layla wasn't taking that risk, and now I'm here to save the fucking day.

I stop short, my ears straining to hear what sounds like very determined footsteps approaching me from behind. My throat tightens, and I stuff my hands deep into my pockets, gripping the handle of my trusty switchblade.

I pick up the pace, knowing I'll have milliseconds to pull out the blade, swivel around, and lance the fucker. The footsteps get louder and heavier, splashing through puddles.

The dipshit isn't even trying to be stealth anymore.

I glance left and right, and still, the street is empty.

Save for two people.

At least.

The bar is up ahead on my left. If this prick is one of theirs, I don't want to take him out here in the open, so I dodge left and dart between two buildings, crouched low so I can spring at the bastard when he comes for me.

My moves take him by surprise, and he sprints toward me, hood pulled over his face. I can only make out a profile, but I'll slash first and ask questions later.

As always.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

I grip the blade in my hand and release its gleaming metal tip. Ready to slice.

“Max!” A male voice whisper-shouts my name. “What the fuck?”

I furrow my brow. “Gabe?”

Gabe pulls off his hood. “Yeah, man. What the hell is wrong with you? I could have been a cop, for fuck’s sake!” He points at my blade. “You were just gonna fillet me without even finding out who it was?”

I retract the blade and stick it back into my pocket, letting out a deep sigh. “This is a shithole neighborhood, if you haven’t noticed. And if the cops came down here more often, it probably wouldn’t be as bad as it is. So, yeah, if someone is following me in this place, I’m slicing first, worrying about it never.” I lower my voice. “What the fuck are you doing here, anyway? Shouldn’t you be at your mother’s house right now, sleeping on the couch after stuffing your face with enough food to feed a third-world country?”

“Screw you.” Gabe grinned. “I already did all that. And now I’m all fueled up and ready to bust some fucking skulls. Where are they?”

I nod in the direction of the dilapidated building. Layla didn’t have an exact address, but she sent pictures. I did the rest with the help of one of my younger guys, Sammy, who also happens to be a tech genius. Fucking kid. He could do so much more with his life than be a hacker for the mafia, but then again, nobody ever asks if you’re gonna join the party.



It's just expected that you show up.

And never leave.

"I'm gonna kill Sammy," I grumble, adjusting the gun in the waistband of my pants.

"If he didn't call me, it'd be your funeral. I don't know why you needed to storm this shit show by yourself."

Gabe doesn't get it. But it's not like I can make him understand. I know what people say about me. I know what they think.

This time, I wanted to tell a different story, one where I'm the one who takes care of things, not just the one who carries out a fucking order.

I'm nobody's goddamned errand boy, but that's what they all see.

Because that's the picture Nico paints.

My best friend. And my boss.

He claims he wants to help me rise through the ranks, to get me involved in the business end so people don't just see me as a thug and start taking me seriously. But being his fucking peon isn't gonna erase that image.

I may not be Mr. CEO, but I do know how these jerkoffs operate. Nico can barely hold a fucking gun, much less fire one. If I told him about this, he'd have gathered all the guys together, had a fucking brutally long meeting about the pros and cons of how and when we should attack, blah, blah, fucking blah. This isn't the time to play around with our dicks. And now is the time for me to make my move and prove myself to those assholes who talk shit behind my back, betting on how long it'll take

before one of our enemies finally pops me.

Sorry, to disappoint you, dickheads. It ain't happening.

Not tonight, anyway.

But still, a nagging voice needles me.

Grandpa Vito wouldn't be happy about this.

I grit my teeth as Gabe cocks his gun. Vito was the head of the Salesi family and Nico's grandfather. The big guy. The one who oversaw everything. He'd always been my champion, even after the divorce. That's what we call the falling out between my dad and Nico's. A lot of shit went down back then, but Vito always supported me, even when nobody else did.

Now he's gone. It's been almost a year since he died of a heart attack, and sometimes I feel like nobody has my back anymore. I'm a liability. They don't want to take the risk on me since I'm such a loose cannon.

At least, that's what I hear.

The mental taunting continues.

Is that why Grandpa Vito got Nico to give you a job? Or was it because he didn't trust you either and needed to get you a babysitter?

Shut the fuck up, voice!

I clench and unclench my fists, the memory of Layla's whimpering making my chest tighten. "Are you ready yet, for Christ's sake?"

Gabe tucks the gun back into his jeans and nods. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

I put a hand on his chest before he takes another step closer to the door. “Wait. You didn’t need to come here tonight. But I want you to know I appreciate it. And I’ll make sure her father knows you showed up, too. Now keep your eyes open. I don’t need any more blood on my hands, got it?”

Gabe lets out a snort. “Fuck off, bitch. Worry about yourself.”

I roll my eyes and shove him aside, inching closer to the dingy metal door. With a throbbing pulse, I pull open the door; the stench of stale cigarette smoke tinged with scotch assaults my nostrils. I nod toward Gabe, and he covers the other side of the door. I creep inside. A few lights hang over beaten-up pool tables, marijuana smoke swirling through the air. A jukebox sits silent in a far corner.

The silence is deafening.

And fucking excruciating, if I’m being honest.

A piercing scream shatters the eerie stillness, and I dart in the direction of the desperate pleas.

It’s Layla.

I pull out my gun and point to Gabe, directing him to cover me as I run toward a back room. I have no fucking clue what waits for me beyond that door, but my friend is in trouble. Serious fucking trouble.

Her father, Antonio deVincenzo, was the only other person in the family who’d

believed that I had more to offer the family than smashed up skulls. He was the only one who gave me a real shot at my own business, until that asshole Rocco Lucchese fucked us both, leaving me with nothing but this dead-end job under Nico's watchful eye.

I never forgot what Antonio did for me.

And I owe him plenty, even in death. Lung cancer drained the life out of him last spring, but I'm still paying back the debt.

Feels like I've been paying it back for a long time.

But this is the last installment. I can't keep putting my ass on the line. I need to think about my future, meaning I'd like to have a future.

Gabe does a quick check and waves me toward the door a minute later. "All clear," he mouths.

I don't like this one bit.

This place looks like a fucking bloodbath waiting to happen. Something is wrong...very wrong. Why isn't this place crawling with thugs? Where the fuck is everyone?

Napping because they ate too much fucking turkey?

Doubtful...

I inch closer to the door, shooting out a hand and shoving it open to find Layla squirming under some beefy dipshit who didn't have the foresight to lock the front door. He has one hand under her skirt and one hand slapped over her mouth. He turns

around, his eyes red and bloodshot, face dripping with sweat. He drags himself to his feet, a shit-eating grin on his pock-marked face. His belt is undone, jeans hanging around his ass. Layla scrambles into a corner. Her face is streaked with black eye makeup, her teeth chattering so violently, she can't even speak. Her eyes are filled with terror, her body shaking uncontrollably.

I swallow hard, breathing deep to control my heartbeat. My hand is steady, trained on the bastard who'd just dry humped his last victim. He should be thanking his lucky stars that his dick is still inside of his pants.

Otherwise, I'd have shot off the head in his pants before blowing off the one on his shoulders.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Blood and bits of brain and bone splatter all over the wall before his body crashes to the floor with a loud thump. A shriek that can shatter glass follows, and I sideswipe Layla's attacker, holding out a hand to pull her up.

But she continues to cower in the corner.

"Layla, babe. It's okay. You're safe now. Let me help you up."

Still, she just shakes her head, stuttering something I can't make out, shivering and huddling closer to the wall.

"Layla," I say again, louder this time. "I need you to come with me. Is there anyone else—?"

Crack!

A single gunshot explodes from behind me.

“Gabe!” I shout, jumping to my feet and twisting around...

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Two seconds too late.

A thick hand grasps my neck, dragging me to my feet. Layla's weeping turns into full-fledge screeches as my back is slammed against the wall, the fucking bloody, brainy wall of horrors.

Mikey Bonnarro. Sonofabitch. He'd been one of Frank Cappodamo's soldiers, but his 'career' came to a screeching halt last New Year's Eve when Frank had kidnapped my sister Shaye. That was a fucking brutal night. It didn't end well for any of Cappodamo's men, including Frank himself. Before that bloodbath, Mikey had been positioned as a captain, and Frank was about to give him the drug distribution business for all of his territories. But shit went sideways for Cappodamo's whole crew once we stormed the deserted warehouse where they'd taken Shaye. Some of Frank's crew, including Mikey, were able to get away. But Mikey's brother Gianni wasn't so lucky. I slashed his tires and dropped about fifty grams of heroin into the passenger seat of his car before we busted out of the parking lot. He's been behind bars since that night, and it looks like Mikey is still pissed off that his promotion never went through.

"Shut up, bitch!" Mikey shouts at Layla before he turns back to me with an evil grimace. "Happy fucking Thanksgiving, Oriani. It's not very polite to crash someone's party. Didn't that cunt mother of yours teach you any manners?"

"Is this your plan, Mikey? You think kidnapping her is gonna win you points with those dipshits you work with?" I wheeze, trying to pry his fingers away from my throat. "You think it'll give you power over them? You think they'll follow you now because you got one of ours?"



“Loyalty doesn’t come cheap. They know what I can get them.” He shrugs. “It’s all about what you can deliver, right, Maximo? What have you delivered? Oh, right. Nothing. That’s why you’re Nico’s bitch now. He needs to keep tabs on the weak link, right?” He lets go, and my body crashes to the floor like a lead pipe.

Speaking of lead pipes, I’d love to have one in my hand right about now.

My hand flies to my neck, and I choke, trying to swallow as much air as my lungs can handle.

Mikey crouches down next to me and ruffles my hair. “Did you think I was gonna kill you, Max? Were you scared?”

My eyes dart behind him to where Gabe lies in a pool of blood right outside the back room.

More blood on my hands.

So much blood.

There doesn’t ever seem to be a shortage of it, that’s for shit sure. Gabe was a good guy. He showed up, and because of me, now he’s fucking dead.

On Thanks-fucking-giving.

Mikey follows my gaze and shrugs. “Collateral damage. You know how it is. I didn’t want to kill anyone. I only wanted to give you a message.” He waves over at Gabe, barely acknowledging his limp and lifeless body sprawled on the floor. “That’s your fault for being too big of a pussy to show up alone.” He taps my temple with the barrel of his gun. “You’re getting soft doing all this businessy shit, aren’t you? You’d have come in here shooting the place up back in the day. You would never have

dropped your gun before popping off a round or two.” He points his piece to where mine hit the floor minutes earlier and then points it to Layla. “But maybe this will make you remember...keep you focused. For next time. Because lucky for you, there will be one.”

Crack!

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Sloane

I shouldn't be here. I should get back into my car and drive home where I can drown my misery in rum-soaked tiramisu.

But I can't seem to convince my feet that they're going in the wrong direction.

The frigid cold slithers through me as I walk. It's been two hours since I left my dad's house and my family's Thanksgiving celebration. But I couldn't eat another bite. I couldn't make idle chit-chat for another second. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't completely devastated.

I finally got in touch with Shaye after driving around aimlessly, hoping for Max to respond to all of my texts and calls.

But the response never came.

I called the hospital to make sure he hadn't been admitted.

I called the police station to see if there had been any accidents in our area.

Not that he bothered to check in on me.

So when I finally found out that Max wasn't laying mangled in some wreck on the side of one of these icy roads and that he was actually at his house...his house, not mine...an unparalleled fury squelched the anxiety and panic that plagued me for the better part of the night. And I found myself sitting in front of his place not ten

minutes later, ready to unleash it all.

For the last goddamn time.

My heart thuds with each jump I make over the slush puddles covering most of the driveway. He didn't text me back. He didn't bother to call. And the fact that his car is sitting here is just another hint that he didn't care to make the effort.

The rubber sole of my Ugg boots skids on a patch of black ice and I stumble, grabbing onto the railing before I face-plant in the snow. Anger courses through me as I stomp up the steps. He's not hurt. He's not dead along some road somewhere. He's just a self-centered dickhead who doesn't give a shit about anything but himself.

He definitely doesn't care a bit about me.

So again, I ask myself why the hell I'm here?

I know the answer, of course. But it obviously isn't mutual since he's here and not at my dad's house right now.

I try to steady my breathing before I stab the doorbell. It doesn't work, and my teeth begin to chatter from the cold and the rage that grabbed hold of my body when I pulled up a minute ago and found Max's car taunting me from the driveway.

He doesn't care about me at all.

I press the doorbell, my fingertip borderline numb right now. I could actually poke his eyes out and not feel anything.

The door finally opens, and Max steps back, waving me inside. I clench my fists. Why does he have to be so goddamned sexy, standing around in low-slung jeans?

Shirtless? Good God, those abs look airbrushed—

Argh, focus, Sloane!

He looks at me with those deep dark eyes...the ones that remind me of melted chocolate, the ones I could blissfully float away in if I allowed myself to be that stupid girl yet again. “Happy Thanks—”

“Fuck you!” I scream. “I thought you were in some horrible accident! I texted you, oh, I don’t know, maybe twenty times in the past couple of hours? And you couldn’t take a second to just text me back once?” I swallow hard, blinking back tears. “I made everyone wait for you. I didn’t want to start dessert without you. But you didn’t care that you made me wait, did you? You never care about anything except you!”

“Is everything okay?”

My head darts away from Max, and I see her coming out of his bedroom...knockout brunette, huge boobs so perky they’re practically defying gravity by sitting on her throat, and long, lean legs I’d give my right arm for.

I am such an idiot.

“Layla, I told you to stay back there,” Max grumbles, tugging at his hair, his gorgeous messed up, sexed-up hair. I flex my fingers. Not so numb anymore. Whatever. They’re so ready to gouge out his eyeballs right now.

I force a high-pitched laugh. “Don’t be silly, Max. Why should she stay hidden? At least someone has the courtesy to let me know where I rate. Note to self, I’m way below the trashy whore.” I turn back to the girl whose lips are pursed. “Thank you for being so clear with me. I guess I had a difficult time figuring it out on my own. Shame on me for being incredibly dense.”

I blink back the tears. This is ridiculous. I'm about to lose it over something I never even had. This doesn't get more pathetic.

“Sloane, it's not what you think. Layla just needed my help tonight, and she didn't want to be alone afterward.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

“I’m sure you made her feel very comfortable here, Max. So comfortable that she figured she’d throw on your AC/DC t-shirt.” The t-shirt I gave you for your birthday, you asshole!

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it tonight, but it’s not because I didn’t want to be there with you,” he murmurs, reaching out to me. “I just had to take care of something. I didn’t have a choice.”

I recoil, my eyes flickering in Layla’s direction. She fires a glare at me and then at Max, arms folded over her chest, making her boobs inch closer to her chin. “Yeah, you did, Max. And you made it. Now I’m making a choice to never bother with you again.” I let out a shaky breath. “I thought we were friends. But you don’t know the first thing about being a friend. You only know how to hurt feelings and take advantage of people, namely me. I’m tired of it, tired of making myself available to you whenever you want to kill time until some better offer comes along.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mutters.

“Maybe that’s because you never tell me anything! You’ve never been honest with me. What kind of fucked-up friendship is that?” I clench my fists and slam them against my legs. “Is it because I’m not part of that top secret ‘life’ of yours? Is that why I don’t rate? Is it the reason why I’m only good enough to be a video game partner but not your girlfriend?”

Oh, shit. That wasn’t supposed to slip out...

I press my hands to my temples, a hot flush creeping up my neck. This can’t possibly

get any worse, right?

“I don’t deserve to have you in my life.” Max’s expression darkens. “You can’t count on me, Sloane. You never could.”

“At least we agree on that.” My stomach rolls, and if I stand here for another second, I think I might just spew tiramisu all over the front door. I spin on my heel, gripping the railing on the side of the stairs, desperate to get the hell away from here...from him...from them.

“I never meant to hurt you.” His voice. Dammit, as cold as it is outside, that low, gravelly rumbling sound never fails to quake my insides and melt them just as quickly.

I turn back around one last time. “You’re a fucking asshole, Max. And, just so we’re clear, I meant for that to hurt you.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Max

“Why the fuck do I even bother with you?” Nico barrels into my front hall and pokes a finger at my chest. My spine stiffens. “You should have called me, you asshole! How could you think that going in there by yourself was a good move?”

I swing a hand at his finger, knocking it away. “Layla was in trouble. I did what I had to do.”

“Really.” Nico narrows his eyes at me. “Because the way I see it, if you’d have done what you had to do, Gabe might still be alive right now instead of lying in your fucking trunk with half his head blown off!”

“I didn’t ask him to come,” I grumble, my chest tight. The guilt eats away at my insides. This was my play, my move to get back some of the respect I lost. Helping Nico plug Cappodamo last year helped, but I needed to do something on my own. So, great. I saved Layla, but at what cost? “I didn’t need anyone’s help!”

“You’re never going to get the respect from this family if you keep doing stupid reckless shit like this. Bonnaro can’t touch us. He has nothing now that Cappodamo is dead.”

“Don’t you get it? That’s what makes him such a crazy motherfucker! You know how Cappodamo worked. He wanted to put us out of business so he could take over our drug territories. The Salesi family was a threat to him, and he knew it! Mikey was about to move up in that family, and we stole that away from him. He’s not gonna stop until he gets his payback, Nico.”

“Then the head of the Salesi family should make the call about how to handle unrest. Not fucking you! My father will put you through a wall when he finds out!”

“You know what?” I grit my teeth, pushing my chest against Nico’s. “Layla is safe. That’s the important thing. If I’d have told you, you would have drawn the whole thing out to next week, and she’d probably be floating somewhere in the East fucking River by the time you actually made a move!”

Nico shoves me backward, and I leap at him, grabbing the sides of his jacket. “Don’t you lay another finger on me, Nico. I did what I thought was right. I owe her father.”

“You should think twice about who you should be loyal to, Max.”

“Antonio was the only one who gave me a job that didn’t require me to fire a fucking gun!”

“Yeah, until he needed you to collect his bets for him! Why do you think he wanted to take you on as a partner? He knew you’d get his fucking money so he wouldn’t have to!”

I take a sharp breath. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” Nico fixes his jacket and narrows his eyes. “Did you really think you were going to be one of the guys sitting at the head table? Sure, he may have roped you in with that promise, but don’t fucking think for a second that he wasn’t going to put you on the streets as his collector. He was a fucking slimy piece of shit who never wanted to get his hands dirty. He used you, Max. So stop fucking telling me that you owe him, especially now that he’s dead! It’s goddamn insulting, especially since I gave you a job at my club to help you get back on your feet after all that shit went down with Rocco. Then you fucking spit in my face with this shit!”

Adrenaline courses through my veins, my breathing labored because my pulse is throbbing so hard against my damn throat. One punch...just one...

Christ, I feel like a crack addict looking for my next fix. My fists clench tight, still stuck to my sides. Blood rushes between my temples, drowning out the protests my mind is screaming. Don't do it, Max. Keep fighting. You'll never go anywhere if you keep giving in to it. You'll never get what you want. Rage bubbles under my skin. I fight it...I'm always fighting...but the urge is so fucking strong. It's the only way I can grab back control, the only way I can mute the voices that torment me every day.

Nico's lips stretch into a straight line. "You wanna do it. It's written all over your face. Just take the fucking punch, Max. Get me right in the fucking jaw! That's what you're good at! Fucking do it!"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Sloane

“I know you’re still upset about that whole thing with Max. Believe me, I’m furious too.” My best friend Shaye twists her ponytail around her finger. “But you can’t let that stop you from coming. Please? It’s been weeks since everything happened. Besides, I didn’t get to party with you on your twenty-first birthday because you’re two years older! This will be the first time we can really celebrate together!”

“You know I’ve been working doubles all week, right? Besides, I took you out for your birthday, and we had wine. That counts as a celebration.” I poke around at the wires in one of the curtained-off areas in the Emergency Room at Holy Name Hospital where I work as a trauma nurse. What started out as a place to get experience turned into my home away from home, and now I can’t even think about leaving to go to another hospital because I love it so much. “This party is for Nico’s crowd, and I don’t really feel comfortable around them. The guys are dirtbags with nice cars and clothes, and the girls are super slutty and bitchy.” I snicker. “Except you, of course.”

Shaye huffs and folds her arms over her chest as I reattach some of the wires to the respirator in the makeshift room and pick up the stack of patient charts I’d set on the foot of the bed.

“I know they’re not the easiest group to mingle with, but you’ll have me! I am asking you to come because I miss you! You’ve been working crazy hours, and you need a break. And maybe a shower too,” she says, pointing at the messy and greasy bun sitting on top of my head.

I roll my eyes and hug the charts to my chest before leaving the room and heading to the nurses' station down the hall. It's unusually quiet for a Sunday morning. Last night must have been pretty uneventful. The waiting room is usually filled with local, college-aged kids who enjoyed their Saturday nights a little too much, but save for the couple of co-eds who needed their stomachs pumped because they downed a few too many Alabama Slammers, it's been an easy shift for me. I slide the charts into their respective slots and pick up a couple of new cases to be triaged with Shaye still hot on my heels. I glance at my watch. I also have a meeting with one of the hospital administrators to discuss some plans for the charity I run, The Buddy System. The program pairs up kids suffering from cancer with 'buddies' who come visit them and basically hold their hands through the treatment and recovery process. It gives the kids hope, peace, and something to look forward to during a really dark time for them. It's been a massive success since we implemented it, and I hope I'll get some money from the hospital to grow the program even more this year.

"You're not listening to me," she whines.

"You're right." I wink at her. "And thank you very much for noticing my hair. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"Sloane," she grabs my wrist. "Please come with us. I promise I'm not trying to set you up with anyone. I just want to spend time with you."

I cock an eyebrow. "Really."

Shaye lets out a deep sigh, averting her eyes. "I don't know what's wrong with my brother. Nico laid into him pretty hard that night, and—"

"What does Nico care?" I furrow my brow. "Max stood me up."

"Oh, well, yeah, but it was still wrong..." She nibbles one of her fingernails.

“I didn’t realize Nico was such a big fan of mine.”

Shaye shrugs, still staring at her nail polish. “I think everyone wants to see Max settle down.”

A tiny pang jolts my heart. A couple of months ago, I thought maybe there was a shot, maybe his feelings about me had changed...

My spine stiffens and I let out a deep breath. “We were just friends. It was never going to happen for us. Max is a great guy. He just doesn’t seem to have room in his life for anyone but himself.” There. That was diplomatic, right?

Although, if I really wanted to be honest, I’d have chosen one of the other comments flying through my mind at this moment. Because even though we were friends, I’d wanted more...so much more that he clearly was incapable of giving.

Max is a complete, self-centered prick, and I hope his dick shrivels up and falls off when he’s trying to ram some whorey girl who is too stupid to realize he doesn’t even know her name because he was too busy on his phone to listen when she said it the first fifty times he asked!

Hmm, bitter much, Sloane?

I decide against shouting my real feelings about Max to Shaye since it’s not her fault he’s such a douchebag. I’m a big girl, and I’m done with giving said douchebag any more opportunities to blow me off.

I flash a sweet smile at my best friend, lowering my voice. “I love you and Nico. But Max can go and fuck himself.”

Shaye snickers. “How about if I tell him not to come? I’d rather hang out with you

anyway. He's been so edgy these days. Definitely not his usual ultra-charming self."

If that isn't the laugh of the century. Max is the polar opposite of what you'd consider a charmer, and yet, here I am, still weak in the knees recalling our last encounter...that body, those eyes...

I grit my teeth. What he said doesn't matter. It's what he did...with that trampy whore.

That's why I refuse to get caught up in his sexy and smoldering trap ever again.

Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice...well, we know how that goes.

But what happens when it's the third time? Whose fault is it then?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Max

I push open the door of the Toyota Prius, say goodbye to my Uber driver, and step onto the sidewalk in front of Culaccino, Nico's private club. Tonight, the underground sex den is closed to the public in celebration of my sister Shaye's twenty-first birthday.

Drinks. I need many.

It's been two weeks since Thanksgiving night, and the memory is still as vivid as if I was staring at Gabe's body right now.

Senseless. Fucking senseless.

The guy was young, enthusiastic, always willing to help, and funny as hell. The loss plagues me every damn day. Knowing I let him die makes me even more determined to find out what the fuck Mikey is up to, because it sure as shit ain't knocking over trucks and stealing hot Chanel sunglasses and Louis Vuitton purses to sell for a quick buck.

He's a ruthless fuck who only cares about money. He'd do anything Cappodamo needed, and now that Cap is gone, he's trying to figure out how the hell to keep his control since that family pretty much imploded this past year. It's what happens when all the bosses are taken out...thanks to us.

He's trying to flex his dick now, and he won't stop until he gets what he wants. And what he wants is to destroy us.



“Max, how many times am I going to have to bail you out before someone puts a bullet in your goddamned skull?”

I let out a sigh. “Grandpa Vito, I was only trying to—”

“Stop.” Vito Salesi, the patriarch of the family, frowns at me. “If you want to move up in this organization, you need to find a way to beat that anger. I know it’s always there, but it’s going to get you killed if you don’t watch your step.” He walks around his desk and sits on the edge of it. Christ, I hate disappointing Nico’s grandfather, a man who’s been more of a father figure to me than my own deadbeat dad. “You have to control it, or you’ll end up in some dumpster somewhere. I won’t be around forever to save your ass, you hear me?”

Yeah, I heard him. I hear him repeat those words pretty damn often, actually.

But still, that fucking anger rages through me and makes me keep doing stupid shit.

I clench my fists. The list of my regrets has no fucking end in sight.

There’s a long line in front of the door, and my eyes scour the crowd for the one face I know I won’t find. That doesn’t prevent me from stopping to admire the goods on the half-naked chicks shaking their asses even though the wind chill tonight has to be below zero. A few girls catch my eye and puff out their chests, giving me the come-hither look. Nico must have hired a bunch of them for the party. A couple of the real whores slide fingers up their skirts as an invitation...I guess for me and anyone else who’s enjoying the show.

It’s not that they aren’t hot as fuck.

It’s that none of them are Sloane.

Sloane, who would choose death over standing around in a glorified bathing suit to attract some guy's attention.

Sloane, who turns red if a guy so much as winks at her.

Sloane, who'd never think twice about showing up at a place like this in jeans and a t-shirt and still manage to look like a supermodel in comparison to the sluts flashing their pussies to get inside this club.

She's always the most gorgeous girl in the room, even though she doesn't know it.

It's one of the many reasons why I fell in love with her.

But, like everything else in my life, I screwed it up. At least, I'd had her friendship, for a time, until I screwed that up just as much.

Now I have nothing.

I apologized and tried to explain myself without admitting the truth. That went nowhere fast.

She thinks I'm full of shit.

And dammit if she isn't right.

"Max!" I suck in a sharp breath and look toward the door. Nico's head pops out, and he waves me toward him. The two bouncers nod at me and unclip the velvet rope, letting me pass. I feel a few dirty hands graze parts of me that have been ignored for longer than I'd like to admit, but tonight isn't the time to dwell on that.

I've got other shit polluting my mind, things that would instantly kill even the most

raging hard-on.

Kill. Interesting choice of word.

## Page 10

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Inside the club, the pulsating beats of electronica drown out the toxic memories flashing through my mind. Accusations, tears, screams. Hell, I deserved all of it and more.

Forgiveness. I'd like to be worthy of it.

Someday.

But you saved someone that night, too.

Yes, Layla deVincenzo is still alive because of me. I protected her, brought her home to her family.

I brought Gabe home, too...just not in the same way.

I clench my fists. This shit will keep poisoning my mind until I drown it with some scotch.

Nico pulls me over to a table in a dark corner. My sister Shaye pops up from the couch, dressed head to toe in black leather. I smirk and kiss her forehead. "Aren't you sweating your ass off in all that leather? What happens if you have to pee? Is it a Ross situation waiting to happen?"

She chuckles loudly, letting out a little snort and then sips the rest of whatever is in her glass. I cock an eyebrow at Nico. My baby sis is pretty damn hammered. It's the only time she makes those unlady-like noises, and it's funny as shit.

“You’re an asshole,” she slurs, poking a finger at my chest. “S-Sloane is coming, and she’s s-still pissed off at you for that bullshit on Thanks-sgiving.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “I tried to apologize.”

“Yeah, and how did you think that was gonna go over when Layla showed up half-naked?”

“I told her to stay out of sight.” I flop onto the couch, my head in my hands.

“You fucked up big this time.” Nico punches me in the shoulder. “You’re just lucky my dad didn’t exterminate you.”

“Yeah, I feel really lucky.” How ironic is that? I fuck shit up and Nico’s dad gives me a pass. My own father? He’d sell me out in a hot second for a fucking nickel.

“It wasn’t your fault about Gabe. You have to stop blaming yourself.” Nico hands me a shot glass of some amber-colored liquid, and I gulp it down. “Another,” I rasp, slamming it onto the table. He refills it and I shoot it, the fiery liquid sizzling as it slides down my throat.

“Easier said than done.”

Nico nods. “I know it’s been rough. But he made the choice to go after you. Nobody gave him an order. That’s always a risk we take when we walk into a situation we shouldn’t.” He lifts an eyebrow. “Shit happens. Bad shit.”

“If this is a pep talk, it’s not fucking working.” I rub my temples. “I just wanna block it all out.”

“Gabe was a good guy, but he knew what he was signing up for when he became part

of the family.”

“He didn’t deserve it.”

“That doesn’t mean you go after Bonnaroo again.” Nico narrows his eyes. “So don’t get any fucking ideas.”

“I don’t think we’re gonna have to go anywhere. I think they’re gonna come to us.”

Thankfully, Shaye is completely obliterated. This isn’t the kind of conversation we should be having anywhere in public, but it’s also the first time in two weeks that my best friend has spoken to me and not bitten my head off in the process. Shaye leans over and puts a hand on my arm. “Did you s-sleep with Layla, Max?” Yeah, she is oblivious to what we just covered. Good. She doesn’t need to worry about anything else right now.

I shake my head. “Fuck, no. She was just really scared and didn’t want to be alone.”

“That means she wanted to fuck you and you didn’t take the bait.”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t lead her on. I told her she could stay in my bed, and I’d sleep on the couch. Was Sloane really pissed off because she thought I did?”

“Sloane showed up worried s-sick that you’d been lying in a ditch s-somewhere. Imagine how she felt when s-she saw Layla shaking her naked ass under one of your t-shirts, a t-shirt that Sloane bought for you, dumbass.”

“I know you’re not mentally with me right now, but I don’t get why she was so upset. We’re just friends. And that was her choice.”

Shaye shrugs and falls backward onto Nico. “Maybe s-she wants more.”

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“She might have.” I pour another shot for myself. “But she’d be smart to stay far away.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“There are lots of reasons why.”

Shaye grunts a response. “Is this about Daddy? He’s always all over your ass. You should just tell him once and for all to leave you alone and let you fuck up your life your way.”

I down the shot. “Thanks, sis. I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Anytime. And for what it’s worth, you made a dumbass move with Sloane the other night, but I don’t think it’s over for her. Not by a long shot.” She winks at me and uncaps a bottle of water before proceeding to dribble it all over her leather outfit.

“I don’t think water and leather mix well.” I snicker and nod at Nico. “Enjoy, brother.”

He shrugs and slaps her ass, his hand making a loud spanking sound on the fabric. And unfortunately, her face brightens up like a spotlight is shining on it. In no time, she’s plastered all over Nico. I throw up a little in my mouth and turn away once she throws a leg over his lap, straddling him right out in the open.

Why the hell did they want me here again? Just to torture me with PDA and give me a shred of false hope that I may not have completely screwed up with Sloane? Even if

it's not over for her, it should be. What the hell can I offer her? Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe unless I'm swinging a baseball bat at someone's head. It's like Nico said. It's what I'm good at. How the hell can I have a normal relationship when there's so much rage inside of me? I've proven time and time again that I can't control it, and the source of that rage taunts me every fucking chance he gets.

Thanks, Dad.

She needs normal and I'm anything but.

I walk over to a couple of the guys. Rocco, Vin, and Gio are sitting around the next table, and there are girls in bikinis sliding up and down poles on either side of the semi-circular couch. I sink next to Rocco, whom I still want to beat the fuck down nine times out of ten. He turns to me and pulls out a bottle of scotch. "You look like you can use one."

"A bottle? Yeah," I grumble. "That sounds about right."

He pours a couple of shots for us and hands me one. We shoot them back without a word, and when he raises his eyebrows, I nod. Two more shots get poured, then two more. It's only after the third one that I begin to feel somewhat numb.

That's a good start. Thank fuck I took an Uber.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just been a bad couple of weeks."

"I thought we were done with the Cappodamos. It's like they're fucking with us from beyond the grave."



“You know how things go. Mikey Bonnarro is scrambling for any power he can get.”

“I heard his brother Gianni is out of the clink.”

Fuck me.

“You know what that means, right?”

“Yeah.” I know exactly what it means...bad shit is about to go down. Fast.

“I told you not to mess with them that night. But you had to leave the drugs in his car and call the cops. You knew it’d come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t be the first time I made a goddamn bad choice.”

“They’re not gonna let that go, Max. Especially now that they’re trying to take over that family. They want revenge, and they want to make a name for themselves by taking over our territories.”

“I guess I’m lucky that guys like you have my back.” If that isn’t the joke of the fucking century. Rocco would be the first one to run if shit hit the fan. He only puts his neck on the line for Nico.

Rocco narrows his eyes at me. “I’m not taking a bullet for you because you get a bug up your ass for some bullshit reason. Don’t pull another Thanksgiving or you can kiss your ass goodbye.”

“Like you’d ever back me anyway,” I grumble.

“Look, just get the hell over it already. Yeah, I messed up your business thing with deVincenzo, okay? I stole your degenerate gambler clients and your money, and you

fucking ratted me out without caring whether or not I'd be whacked. I paid my debt to the family, Max. How much longer are you going to hold onto this for? I think that's why you're always so fucking wound up and ready to explode if someone looks at you cross-eyed. Maybe you need anger management classes or some shit like that to control it."

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I eye the half-empty bottle of scotch and imagine myself smashing it over Rocco's skull. It's a nice mental image. Not nearly as satisfying as doing it in real life, but hey, we can't always get what we want. Maybe this is a new tactic I can try when I want to beat the piss out of someone. Visualize instead of pulverize.

"How's everything going at the construction site? Nico said some of the teamsters are giving you headaches. You want me to bust some asses for you?"

"I can handle them by myself," I say through gritted teeth.

"If you need help..."

"I don't!"

Rocco puts his hands up. "Dude, relax. I'm just trying to help. We're a pretty good team even though you may not want to admit it. After what we did to Cappodamo and his dumbass goons—"

"Don't kid yourself," I grumble. "I only dragged you along that day because Shaye made me."

He reaches over and ruffles my hair. "Come on, stop being such a little prick."

"Leave my fucking hair alone." I smack at his hand, but he won't stop. "I'll shoot you if you don't get the fuck off of me."

Rocco collapses against the back of the couch in a fit of laughter. "Why the fuck are

you always about the guns and the bats? Can't you have a conversation? I'm trying to fix this shit between us, douchebag."

I rake a hand through my hair, trying to fix what he'd just fucked up. "I know what you're trying to do." I let out a sigh. "I'm sorry."

"That's better."

"I may need another shot if we do any more of this bonding shit, though."

Rocco grins and pours two more shots. I suck mine down, grateful it's too loud in here for me to talk to the other guys. I'd rather just sit by myself, stare at the pussy walking around, and soak my regrets in alcohol.

Too bad Rocco foiled that plan.

I hold the empty shot glass between two fingers, staring at the floor as Rocco goes on about his new car. I nod every once in a while, missing half of what he's saying, but he's too blasted to realize that he's talking to himself right now.

Click, click, click.

I can't hear the sound, but that's what I imagine I'd hear from two, high-heeled feet slowly approaching our table. I raise my eyes, squinting in the darkness, trying to make out who it is since my vision is now slightly blurry from all the booze.

Katarina Ivanov.

A smile tugs at my lips. Rocco is still yammering about his sound system, so I kick him to get his attention. He looks at me and then up at Kat when she stops in front of us.

She almost took him out in a pizzeria not too long ago because he got his panties in a bunch over Shaye disappearing from Nico's radar while our common enemy-slash-psychopathic family rival Luca Cappodamo was still on the loose. I'd have paid boatloads to be a fly on the wall watching that scene play out. Kat putting Rocco in a chokehold... that's entertainment money can't fucking buy.

And these days, I need all the laughs I can get.

"Hello, boys." Kat sticks a hand on her hip, and it's hard not to stare. I don't want to fuck her...I think she'd be pretty brutal in the sack considering the fact that she's a Russian mafia princess who is as lethal as an ice pick to the brain. But, damn.

No wonder why Rocco has had a hard-on for her ever since she showed up here in Jersey. That boner is oozing off of him whenever she's within sight. He denies it, but we all know better.

So does Kat. I think she likes the challenge. I bet she's into some really fucking kinky shit, too. One day, she's gonna ball-gag and anal plug him, and I might ask for some blackmail pictures.

Immediately, all talk of his new car screeches to a stop, and not a second too soon.

I really don't give a shit about his speakers.

Kat's lips curl upward when her blue eyes land on Rocco. "No date tonight, huh? You don't want to mess up the leather in your new ride?"

Rocco reclines on the couch and throws an arm behind him. He's trying not to look like he's trying too hard.

And failing miserably. If I can see how badly he wants to launch himself at Kat, and

I'm a guy, she must have sensed it from across the bar. But still, she came over.

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Maybe she's tired of the vodka-soaked Russians, and she wants to sample the Italian sausage.

Speaking of sausage, I'm fucking starving. I don't want to be here. I'd rather be at home in front of the television eating a pizza. I grab a beer from the ice bucket and rise from the couch since Rocco's ass is still plastered to the seat. I nudge Kat toward the empty spot. "If you're not drunk enough to sit there, help yourself to the scotch. It'll make him easier to swallow."

She cocks an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

I shrug. "You never know where things might lead. I don't judge."

"You shouldn't." Kat leans closer, whispering into my ear. "But I do judge, and you're a real asshat." I follow her gaze until I see where it lands. My throat tightens. Damn Shaye and Nico. They planned this whole fucking thing.

Sloane is now sitting on the couch next to my leather-clad sister and their heads are bent together, mouths going a mile a minute. My cock twitches as I catch an uncharacteristic glimpse of Sloane's upper thigh, and I will her to stand up so I can drink in every inch of her body, which, from what I can tell, is poured into an outfit that only makes me want to tear it off of her.

She must have borrowed it from Shaye, and if I had anything to say about it, it'd be balled up on my bedroom floor in a hot second.

"Let me guess." Kat takes a gulp of the clear liquid in her glass, her eyes as alert as

I'd ever seen them. Her tolerance is insane, courtesy of her daily vodka diet. "You're looking, drooling, wondering how the hell you messed up so badly. Am I right?"

"It's complicated," I grumble, unable to tear my eyes away.

"Isn't it always?" Kat smirks. "And do you think this badass, brooding older brother routine is going to get you another shot? Even though the only way Shaye could get her here tonight was to promise her that you'd be very far away?"

I turn toward Kat, jaw set. "I'm not looking for another shot."

"Aren't you?" Her dark red lips curl upward. "She's a catch, Max. Don't be a fucking idiot."

"We're just friends, that's all. Her choice, by the way. Besides, it wouldn't work. I'm not the right guy for her."

"Why? Are you still looking to dip your wick into these disease-infested whores?" Kat waves a hand around her. "Are you addicted to pussy, Max? Is that what's holding you back? Because your sorry ass is sitting here listening to another dude tell you all about what's under his engine, rather than finding out what's under hers."

Good Christ, she's a crass bitch. "Listen, Kat. I don't see how who I fuck is any of your goddamn business. I can't give Sloane what she needs, and that's the end of it. Friendship is all I can offer her. And judging by the way everyone is laying into me tonight, I'm not doing too great on that front."

Kat jingles the ice cubes in her empty glass. "Well, I guess it's a good thing your mind realizes you're not man enough to be what she needs." She leans closer. "But I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that your cock is singing a different tune right about now. Tsk-tsk. Nobody filled him in, huh?" She gives me a little finger



wave and twirls around, swinging her hips as she walks...right past Rocco.

His face falls faster than a dick that just shot a massive load. I roll my eyes. Jesus, is she ever tormenting him. I always knew she was some kind of masochist.

And a nosy fucking one at that.

Rocco slams his glass on the table and leaps off the couch. "I'm done here. Time to get laid."

I nod. "Good luck with that."

He storms past me and heads toward the dance floor on the hunt for his next conquest. Those two are so damn stubborn. Do they really think everyone is blind to the games they play with each other? Don't they know that they're made for each other?

And if that's the case, shouldn't they do everything to make shit happen?

Unlike me and Sloane who were doomed from the start.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:52 am*

Sloane

“I feel really uncomfortable in this dress.” I pull it down as much as possible, locking my knees so the fabric doesn’t rise any higher, otherwise the club owner may mistake me for one of the pole dancers and stick me into one of those cages.

“You look amazing,” Shaye gushes, slurring her words. “I’m so glad you came tonight. And I have to tell you...this-s fucking outfit is-s so hot! I’m sweating like a whore in church in all this leather, S-sloaney-Baloney!” Her voice rises and she lets out a shrill giggle.

God, I hate that nickname. “Okay, babe. I came for a little while, but I think it’s time for me to head out. I’m so tired, and I—”

“No!” She points a finger at me. Her hand wobbles, like she’s not exactly sure where she’s pointing, and I can probably bat it away and send her face-down into the couch cushion because her balance is nil right about now. “You can’t go. I need you here.”

I sigh. “You have Kat, who, by the way, is much more on your level and doesn’t need to be up in about five hours for work.”

“You spend too much time at the hos-spital.” She picks up her glass and tries to sip from the straw, but her mouth isn’t cooperating. I swallow a snicker. Shaye is clearly enjoying her twenty-first birthday party...now, anyway. In a few hours, she’ll probably have her head stuck in a toilet. I see this level of drunk in the ER all the time and it never, ever ends well.

“It’s my job. I kind of signed up for that when I decided to become a nurse.”

She leans toward me and lays her arms over my shoulders, her lips close enough to peck me. “Listen, Shaye. You know I love you, but you’re really not my type. Although I am tempted to smack your ass in those pants.” I snicker and take a long swig from my bottle of water.

“I’m not going to kiss you, S-sloane. Don’t worry. But you have to kiss someone tonight. I can’t let you leave until you do.” She puts up her hands, although I think they’ll do her more good pressed into the couch. At least that’ll keep her from pitching forward and face-planting on the floor. “Don’t even try to fight me on that.”

“You can’t have everything.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I didn’t fight you on the dress, remember? I was pretty agreeable about it, if memory serves.”

Shaye’s eyebrows knit together. “Oh, hmm. You’re right.” She narrows her eyes. “But that doesn’t count.”

“Why not? It’s not bad enough that I feel like a slutty mummy?” I snicker and take another sip of water.

“I happen to love that dress-s. And just so you know, I only want you to be happy.” Shaye pulls herself onto her knees, and by some miracle doesn’t end up rolling off the couch. She steadies herself by clapping her hands onto my shoulders. “Are you happy, S-sloane?”

Happy. There’s a word I haven’t really thought much about lately. Busy, yes. Stressed, definitely. Exhausted? No question about it.

But happy?

That remains to be seen.

“I’m good.” There’s a word.

“Good is bad.”

“Are you talking in code right now? Is this what too much vodka does to you?” I giggle. “Look, I appreciate your concern about my non-existent love life, but really, I’m fine. I have a lot going on right now, and I have to focus on my job.” And forgetting about Max for good.

“You work too hard.”

“Maybe I like not having too much downtime.” Downtime gives me time to think and wonder...like what exactly happened on Thanksgiving night between Max and that hoebag. And why he couldn’t even have the decency to text me that he’d opted for a booty call over my tiramisu.

I don’t have the energy to waste on that kind of crap.

“You’re getting in pretty close there, babe. It looks like you’re about to cop a feel.” Nico walks over and kneels down in front of Shaye. “And I can’t say I wouldn’t be turned on by watching this play out.”

Shaye snickers and slaps Nico’s shoulder. “You’re s-sick! I’m just catching up with my bestie. I miss her.”

“You just saw me a few hours ago!”

She shrugs. “Feels like longer.”

“That’s the booze talking.” I give her a quick hug and rise from the couch. “I hope you have a plastic bag in your precious Audi,” I murmur to Nico.

He winks. “I have a whole box.”

I start to back away as Shaye settles into Nico’s chest, her eyes drooping closed. They’ve been a lot more attached over the past month or so. Constantly together, almost like they can’t breathe on their own. It’s weird. And Shaye hasn’t been herself lately at all. Something is up with her. With them. I make a mental note to mention it to her. Maybe over some Swiss Miss hot chocolate to cushion the blow a bit. She can get pretty damn defensive. “Okay, this has been fun, guys.” Yes, fun like a scalpel to the chest without anesthetic. “Shaye, I’ll call you tom—”

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My leg slams into something hard and I stumble, losing my balance. Thank God I had the good sense to wear flats instead of the hooker heels Shaye dangled in front of me. Not only are my feet killing me from running around during my shift at the hospital, but I'm already five foot ten. Heels are the last thing I need, especially in a place where most of the guys are vertically challenged.

Seriously, Nico is the tallest one I've seen all night.

I spin around.

Nope. I stand corrected.

My heart hammers as I take in a sharp breath, filling my lungs with a deliciously sexy scent I've come to love. A throbbing pulse indicates that my blood pressure is about to soar into the heavens. Tiny beads of perspiration pop up along the back of my neck, and my lips stretch into a tight line. Dammit. I'm a trauma nurse, for Christ's sake. Being calm and collected is a requirement. I don't come undone...for anything.

Under normal circumstances.

But Max Oriani is anything but normal.

He's moody, self-absorbed, cocky, and insensitive, basically an all-around jerkoff. This is what I've been chanting to myself for the better part of the past two weeks.

A jerkoff with the power to make me tingle in places that haven't been tended to in longer than I'd care to admit. A jerkoff who has gotten two chances to figure out how

to be a guy I'd even consider spending my precious time with.

And that was two chances too many in my opinion.

I'm not stupid enough to go down that path a third time.

I clench my fists, my narrowed eyes darting toward Nico and Shaye who suddenly have become otherwise occupied and are currently cozied up in their little bubble of deceit.

I knew it. They got me here under false pretenses.

And I'm wearing this dress...a whorey bathing suit thing that leaves nothing to the imagination.

Nothing.

I want to run, but I'm afraid the dress will ride up into the wild blue yonder if I make any sudden moves.

"Hey," Max murmurs, keeping his distance, a damn good thing since past experience warrants that I launch a fist at his perfectly chiseled jaw.

I don't respond. I can't, since I'm too consumed with the lust clouding my mind and weaving a path through my body. All of the X-rated images prevent me from formulating coherent thoughts. My mouth is drier than a woman seeing Jim Belushi naked, and even if my lips decided to work, I have a feeling they'd betray me, too.

What the hell is wrong with me? How did I allow this to happen?

I am the most even-tempered person I know. Practical, logical, and composed.

Except when it comes to him.

Then, I suddenly transform into some sex-crazed, lust-induced woman who can think about nothing other than his body plastered on top of mine, under mine, behind mine...

Why, why, why?

Damn them all!

I straighten to my full height, still a good four inches shorter than Max. Another thing I hate. I don't feel like I'm in control when I'm staring up at him, and damn-near close to drooling, if I'm being honest.

Just think about what he did. Remember how it made you feel! Remember seeing that bitch in the vintage concert t-shirt you paid a small fortune for because he loves freaking AC/DC!

I grit my teeth and take a deep breath. "Max. How not nice to see you." I try to slide past him, but there are too many people blocking my path and his fingers wrap around my wrist, keeping me rooted to the spot. Well, that and my feet are no longer communicating with my mind.

My body wants to stay put, actually, my body wants to wrap itself around his wearing this whorey bathing suit thing, but my mind knows it's a horrible idea.

So what the hell will win?

"Please let go of me," I say with a smile so fake, it can rival most of the boobs in this place.



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“If I do that, you’ll leave.”

I narrow my eyes and lean in close so he doesn’t miss the disdain dripping from my voice. “You didn’t seem to care about that weeks ago when you blew me off for that whore.”

“I told you, babe, It’s not what you think.”

“Really? Half-naked girl walking around your house, you shirtless...and not lying in a ditch somewhere. I believe it’s exactly what I thought.”

“Sloane, I never wanted to hurt you. But something came up, and I just...I couldn’t—”

“Just stop! I thought you were a better person than you are. I thought my friendship actually meant something to you.” I put up a hand to stop any more shit from spewing out of his mouth. I can feel my pulse throbbing hard against my throat. My skin prickles from his nearness, and I hate my body for betraying me yet again within minutes. “You know what, Max? I don’t even care. I stopped caring a long time ago. We’re not meant to be anything, and that’s pretty damn clear to me now. I can’t believe I let this happen...let myself...again...” I shake my head and clutch my temples. “Argh! I’m not this girl!”

“It sounds like you might be,” Kat comes up behind me and whispers into my ear. “Just my two cents.”

I jump about a foot into the air, letting out a loud groan when I twist to see her

wicked smirk. “Oh my God, I’m so done with this night!” I smack my hands against my very bare legs and stalk past them without regard for anyone in my way.

Screw them all!

I push through them, ignoring Shaye’s slurry protests. I hear a lot of voices battling behind me, but I ignore them all and elbow my way toward the door.

A strong arm snakes around my waist, yanking me backward, and I catch a whiff of that delicious scent once again. I try to pry the arm off of me, but he’s too strong. And dammit, I’m too weak, both physically and emotionally.

Max guides me into a dark corner, backing me against a wall. “Stop fighting me.”

I shove him away from me. “You’ve never been honest with me. I’m tired of sitting around, waiting to see whether or not you show up. Because you never show up! Even when you’re there, even when you are standing right fucking beside me, you’re not! Am I just someone to pass the time with until some skanky bitch comes along and rubs her ass all over you?”

“I know I fucked up, and I’m sorry. I do want to be your friend, Sloane.”

“Well, you don’t act that way.” I flip my hair and straighten to my full height, hoping it sends the message that I’m no longer taking shit from him, or anyone else, for that matter. “And I deserve better from my...friends.”

“You do. You deserve so much more,” he murmurs, his face dipping lower and lower.

My gut clenches as his breath tickles my cheek. Suddenly, everything becomes very hazy. I’m having a really hard time right now trying to remember why I’m so mad,

and I don't seem to care at this moment.

“Nothing about my life is normal, Sloane. I fooled myself into believing I can have a regular friendship with you, that I could at least give you that.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You're dangerous, Sloane, because you turn me inside out and make me forget who I really am.”

“I know who you really are,” I hiss, recoiling as he leans in closer. I want him so badly, but this story doesn't have a happy ending. We've gone down this road before. There's no blissful destination, only a fiery crash.

“I know who you really are, too. You're so good, so fucking perfect. I don't want to taint you. And that's exactly what would happen, don't you get that?”

My breath hitches as his lips hover over mine. Dark eyes capture my soul, paralyzing every limb I know I should use to force him away from me. The heat in his gaze sings my insides, melting away the ice surrounding my thumping heart.

The scent of his cologne, mixed with liquor, intoxicates my senses, making me drunk with an insatiable desire I can't even begin to quell. His fingertips navigate a path up my arms, my skin prickling with anticipation...until a flicker of anger eclipses his lustful expression.

He pulls away, and I immediately feel the emptiness creeping back into my heart. “You shouldn't want me.”

Goddamn him! Is he kidding me right now? A shiver runs through me. “Don't flatter yourself. I don't want you or anything from you.”

“Good, because I don't have it to give.”

He backs away, peering at something behind me in the darkness. The he shoves his hands deep into his pockets as he darts around a column and disappears.

Gone. He's gone.

As if I've ever really had the power to keep him.

Max

“Please tell me you’re not fucking around with Layla.” Nico leads the way to the private elevator in his very exclusive, very private, and very kinky sex club in lower Manhattan a week after Shaye’s party.

“I already told you that nothing happened.” I rub the back of my neck, trying really hard to erase the images that have been plaguing me all week...Sloane lying naked on my bed, her long, lean legs falling open for me, giving me a half-hooded stare while she flicks her—

“How’d she end up at Shaye’s party, then?”

“I have no idea. I’ve tried to avoid her since Thanksgiving. I guess someone could have told her it was happening. She knows everyone at Culaccino, so she’d have been able to get in that night.” I stifle a groan, recalling how I’d wished it was the booze making me hallucinate, that it wasn’t really Layla scouting the crowd at the club, for me, no doubt. That was a shit show just waiting to happen. It’s why I forced myself away from Sloane. Layla can be a vindictive bitch when she wants to be. The last thing I wanted her to see was me kissing Sloane, even though it’s what I wanted more than anything. I’m pretty sure Sloane wanted it, too, but I managed to fuck things up again. I’ve sent her a bunch of texts this week, but I get one-word answers. Never a hey, wanna come over? Fuck it. I screwed myself pretty badly, and the irony that I haven’t actually gotten laid in what feels like forever doesn’t escape me.

Dammit, I miss her. I need her in my life. But she’s smart not to need me....smarter to stay away.

I follow Nico into the dimly lit elevator. The inside of the car is covered in dark-colored fabric, and leather benches line each wall, not that I'd never sit on any one of them. Christ only knows how many women he fucked in this elevator before he started dating my sister. I don't even want to think about what he's done to her in here. There's already way too much that I've seen that I can't ever unsee.

"Have you spoken to Sloane?"

"Nah. I think she's had enough of me. Besides, she deserves someone who she can count on, not someone who is barely holding his own shit together."

Nico narrows his eyes at me. "You will never move up in this family if you don't show everyone that your strength doesn't just come from baseball bats and bullets. You earned your title as a capo, and now you have a team of people who do the low-level shit and the skull smashing. Don't get mixed up in it again. I won't be able to pull you out of it next time."

Shit, if I go down that path again, who even knows if there will be a next time? But my mind wanders back to her, always back to her.

I don't have enough fingers and toes to count how many times a day I fantasize about fucking Sloane senseless. But she's a good girl, someone who has her whole life ahead of her. She actually does good things for people.

I do bad things to people.

And she has no idea about any of it. My past is a taboo topic. Never discussed. Never fucking ever.

I risked too much on Thanksgiving, and she may never let me back inside. I may not have had her exactly the way I wanted her, but it's better than nothing. Being with her

calms me. It settles the rage, makes me forget the anger.

Even that night in the club...being so close to Sloane is hypnotic. She tempers the fury inside of me. God, how I wanted to taste those lips, and dammit, if Layla hadn't been watching, I would have devoured them.

She makes me sane. I didn't think anything could accomplish that.

And I'm sure everyone else I know shares that opinion.

Ding!

The elevator doors open. Electronica blares through the speakers on the lower level, the area of Club Culaccino reserved for the kinkiest fuckers in the tri-state area. Red, pink, and purple lights flash over the naked bodies writhing and grinding on the floor, against walls, and on couches.

"It's been a long time since you've been back down here," Nico says, guiding me out of the elevator.

"Yeah, well, you did fire me. I had to save face with the other guys."

Nico pops me in the shoulder. "I apologized for that little misunderstanding, didn't I?"

"Uh, no, actually, you didn't." I cock an eyebrow and lean back against the elevator door. "I'm ready now, if you can say the words without choking on them. I mean, you've had enough time to practice them over the past month and a half."

Nico grins. "I'm sorry for attacking you like that. It was wrong."

“It was also fucking stupid. I could have pounded your ass into dog meat in seconds, Mr. CEO.”

“Well, in my defense, I was dealing with a fucking lunatic who was trying to kill me. It might have stressed me out a little bit.”

“You’re just lucky I showed you some mercy.”

“I’m just glad that whole thing is behind us. I’ll never forget everything you, Rocco, and Kat did for us that day. If things had gone differently, if you guys didn’t show up when we went after Luca...” He shakes his head. “Shit, I don’t even want to think about what could have happened to Shaye and Lily when that sicko showed up.”

“That’s what you do for family.”



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Nico claps a hand on my shoulder. “You sure you don’t want to take your old job? I’d like to have you back as my number two. I still have your private fuck room available, even though Rocco is trying to take it over.”

I let out a grunt. “Fuck him. He’s never getting it, even if I never use it again. And thanks for the offer, but I’m done being a number two. I wanna be a number one.”

I want to be someone’s number one is the thought that passes through my mind right then...and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the mob.

“I know. You’re doing good work at the site. And your dad hasn’t fucked things up there yet, so it must be pretty easy for you right now.”

“Can’t complain. The team is pretty good. They show up, get shit done, leave. They don’t give me headaches, and I haven’t had to kick anyone’s ass yet.”

Nico cocks an eyebrow.

“Relax, I’m not being literal. The anger management classes are really working.”

He rolls his eyes. “Hey, isn’t that Layla over there?” Nico nods over to a staircase by a far wall, past an orgy waiting to happen.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Layla deVincenzo standing alone, her dark hair falling over one eye. Her full red lips curl upward, and she nods at the guy groping her tits, still staring me down.

“Oh, Christ. What’s she doing here? She’s supposed to be upstairs in the dance club, working tables.”

Nico shakes the hand of a guy walking past. “Something tells me she’s looking for you. She’s been hanging around down here a lot more lately. Beware, brother.”

“I have enough shit to deal with right now, namely Mikey. I don’t need any more headaches.”

“Good, because Layla is fucking mental, and she doesn’t like to take no for an answer.”

My iPhone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket. “Yeah?”

Patty, one of the guys on my construction job, barks into the phone. “Max, I need you to come by my house.”

I look at my watch. “It’s fucking eleven o’clock, Patty. What the hell is the problem?”

“A pipe broke, and I gotta stick it somewhere. I need some help.”

Fuck. I look at Nico. “Something’s up at the construction site. Patty’s down there.”

“Did he say what?”

“Yes, he spelled everything out in complete detail so anyone tapping our phones will know exactly what’s about to go down.”

“You’re a sarcastic fuck, you know that?”

I nudge him with my elbow. “I keep shit interesting.”

Nico grabs my arm before I head toward the staircase opposite where Layla is getting finger fucked, still watching me.

Bat. Shit. Crazy.

“Max, why don’t you take Rocco with you? Let him handle it. You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

“Don’t worry, I’m gonna let Patty take the reins. But I need to be there to make sure he gets the job done.” My fingers are already starting to twitch. This construction foreman job is my way out...the closest to legitimate work I’ve ever had. I’ve done enough to screw with my livelihood over the past few years. Thanks to Nico and his dad, I have my own thing and the family finally takes me seriously again.

I’m building shit that’s gonna make us all a lot of fucking money.

I’m more than just an enforcer.

Lucky Luciano said the only way out is in a box.

And I need this job so I can stay out of said box.

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But that rage...it's always bubbling, always ready to spew like fucking lava from a volcano.

Unless I'm with Sloane. That's the only time I'm not battling against demons in my head or my heart. I can just be me, a person nobody else on this Earth knows.

Because you can't ever show hints of weakness.

Weakness gets you killed.

I dart around a corner, leaving Nico, and head toward a side staircase, avoiding the sweaty, grinding bodies sprawled in my path. A hand grazes my ass, and I grit my teeth, not even bothering to turn around because I know what comes next. It's been her MO ever since that Thanksgiving night.

"Max," Layla hisses, her hand winding around the front and rubbing the side of my leg. "I hoped I'd run into you."

"I came by to see Nico. I'm leaving now."

"I'd really like you to stay. Maybe come again," she purrs, the double entendre not lost on me.

I peel her hand off my leg. "I can't. Besides, it looks like you have company tonight."

"Jealous?" She presses her chest against my back, sliding herself around so she's facing me.

I let out a sigh. “Listen, Layla. I did what I had to do on Thanksgiving. It doesn’t mean I wanna fuck you, now or ever.”

She trails a finger down the front of my shirt. “You saved my life, Max. You came for me because you were in love with me. I know you were always afraid of what my father would do if he found out, but you don’t have to worry about that now that he’s gone. I see the way you look at me every time we’re together. I know you want me. Take me to your private room and fuck me. Let me taste that perfect cock of yours. Oh, God, I want to feel it everywhere. Please just—”

I place my hands on her shoulders because I need to stress this to her. “It’s never gonna happen, Layla. I don’t care what your father thinks, that’s not why I haven’t fucked you. I’m not interested, okay? Do you get that?”

She smirks and cups my dick in her hand. “Sure, you’re playing hard to get. I love the games. But my pussy is screaming for you, Max. Don’t make me wait too long.”

I roll my eyes and push her hand away. “I told you, I have to go.”

She grabs my hand and presses it to her tits. “You’re the only one who can protect me, Max. You’re the only one I want. And you know I never let anything stand in the way when I want something.”

Thank God I never fucked this woman. No orgasm would be worth this stalker-level master shit she’s parading in front of me.

Imagine what she’d do if I had screwed her...

I yank back my hand. “Go back to your freaky shit. I’m out.” I sidestep her and take the stairs two at a time, not able to get away fast enough.

Why the fuck did she have to call me that night?

It's a question I've asked myself more times than I can count. I sacrificed so much saving her, and for what? I lost Gabe, Sloane, and almost got my own ass terminated.

All for pussy I've never even touched.

I walk outside the club and peer around me. No sign of Layla. Thank fuck. I pull my keys out of my pocket and jog over to my car. At this hour, traffic heading back to northern Jersey will be light.

Forty minutes later, I pull up to the construction site. It's zoned for a strip mall, one that Nico's dad Joe is going to use as fronts for money laundering. His lawyers create shell companies for each storefront in the strip mall and then he works with his finance guys to run money through them. He runs a huge operation to clean any dirty money coming into the organization. Insurance companies, accountants, lawyers, plumbers, electricians, general contractors...you name it, and he knows someone with a business he can funnel money through. Nico has the same business sense as his father. It's why everything he touches turns into piles of cash.

My dad, on the other hand, needs ninety-nine cents to make a dollar and is always on the hunt for new ways to line his own pockets with cash. For as much as he makes, he can't keep a fucking red cent of it. It flies out just as quickly as it comes in.

And he tries to tell me I'm a fucking failure, go figure.

Makes me wonder what kind of plans he's got in the works. He makes big money moves, most of them bad for the family. It's what caused the rift between him and Nico's dad years ago. And it's also what caused the bloody fallout with the Cappodamo family.

Sometimes I wonder how the hell my dad has gotten away with not getting his ass shot up and dumped into the Hudson River.

Sometimes I think life might be easier if he did...

“Tell me who the fuck you’re working for!” Patty grabs a fistful of the scumbag’s hair. Guy doesn’t even blink, the stupid fuck.

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The rest of my crew is standing around, waiting, watching, wondering how far this is actually going to go. I try to calm my pulse, but shit like this charges me. It makes me feel alive. Adrenaline courses through me, and tiny hairs prick up along the back of my neck.

Some might say I'm a fucking head case, and they'd be right.

But they don't understand why I'm this way, why this sick need to assert power and control consumes me twenty-four-seven.

Nico doesn't get it, either. He just knows it can do a lot of fucking damage to the family, which is why he's trying to keep me away from it.

Except sometimes, I just can't help myself.

The thug tied to this chair isn't just some random drug dealer or sex trafficker. He isn't just squatting here to make a quick sale on the occasional nickel or dime bag. He didn't just happen to find this place and think it was a good meeting spot for him and his clients.

And those drugged out, half-naked girls lying sprawled all over the foundation, moaning and writhing around because they don't even know what fucking planet they're on right now? They didn't just stumble over here looking for a quick lay after getting hammered at a nearby bar.

This is a full-fledged business...operating in my goddamn backyard.



Everyone knows this is my site. And everyone knows this is the Salesi family's territory. We own northern Jersey. So who the fuck is stupid enough to spit in our faces by running a trafficking ring on our job site after hours?

The voices tell me to call Nico, not to try to handle this myself, to forget my way of doing things.

I grip the switchblade in my pocket and pull it out. I creep toward the dark-haired man. His body language may fool everyone into believing that he's calm, but I see the panic in his eyes. He knows what I'm about to ask, and what I'll do if he doesn't answer me the way I want.

Shut the fuck up, voices. I'm in charge now.

I flip the blade open and hold it to his throat. Only the slightest bob of his Adam's apple indicates the fear knotting his insides.

Those damn voices taunt me again.

You can kill him, but it won't free you. It won't be enough.

It's never enough.

"Do you know who I am?" I hiss in his ear, still holding the tip of the blade to his carotid artery. One slip of the hand, and he bleeds out on the concrete.

A brief pause followed by a quick nod.

"And do you know what I'm going to ask you next?"

Another nod.

“And you’re gonna tell me exactly what I want to hear, right?”

This time, there’s no nod.

“I don’t think you heard me,” I growl, sweat drizzling down my spine. The challenge. God, I thrive on this shit. “Should I ask again?”

He shakes his head.

“Good.” I rise to my full height and pull away the blade. “Tell me who set this up. Don’t bullshit me. I want a name, or I’ll slice your throat open like I’m gutting a fucking fish.”

Silence. I look up at my guys. They avoid my hard stare, exchanging looks with each other.

I know what they’re all thinking. I used to be the muscle of this family. If someone needed to have their kneecaps busted, Max Oriani was the guy who’d laugh as the assholes who were being brutalized would cry and beg for mercy.

But that guy sits behind a desk now. He wears a hard hat. He’s gone soft.

Rage bubbles in my veins. I can feel their eyes boring into me, waiting to see what I’ll do next...if I’m gonna own this or if I’m gonna delegate like every other fucking thing Nico has made me farm out in the past year. My guys sense weakness. They smell defeat. They think I’ve lost my edge. They think I need to call in backup to handle a problem when I used to be that backup.

Just do what you’re good at, Max. It’s what everyone expects, anyway. Show them you haven’t lost yourself. Show them you’re still strong and demand respect.

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I swallow hard as the guy narrows his eyes at me. His lips curl into a smirk as if he's calling me out on my bullshit threats. He knows what I'm capable of, and he knows I won't do shit to him until I get what I want.

My hand grips the blade tighter, my arm twitching.

He doesn't know dick.

With the flick of my wrist, the blade slashes his skin, digging into the flesh, and fuck, it electrifies me. With that one swift movement, I reclaim the control and respect hanging in the balance only seconds ago.

With a loud yelp, the shithead looks down at the deep red stain coloring his shirt. He clutches his chest, crying like a bitch. "It fucking burns, asshole!"

I dip my head, lowering it to his. "Are you wishing I'd have just slit your throat instead? So it'd be over and done with? How could you take this message back to your boss if I did that?" I hold the tip of the blade to his lips. "Besides," I snarl. "I want you to remember how I put the fear of God—fuck that, the fear of Max Oriani—in you tonight. Because you can bet the next time we come face to face, there won't be a second message for you to deliver to your boss. You'll be the fucking message."

If Bonnaró is behind this, I'm gonna show him the same courtesy. He popped a cap right into the wall behind me in that shithole restaurant. He had a message to send to the Salesis, and I delivered it.

Just like this asshole is gonna do for me.

Hey, Mikey, we're waiting for you and your fucknut brother. And make no mistake, we're ready.

I launch my fist at the guy's jaw, sending him and the chair flying backward into a cement mixer. The cheap wooden chair crashes to the floor and he lands face-first onto the concrete. A rush of blood flows from his mouth, his face already bruised from the beating he took from Patty before I showed up.

"Oh yeah, that's part of the message, too. I just want to be as thorough as possible. There may be a few final thoughts we put into it, but I'll let my guys handle the rest."

I pull Patty aside, away from the high-pitched screams that echo through the open space as the crew goes to work on him before sending him crawling back to his boss.

"Any ideas about who set this whole thing up?" Patty asks me in a hushed whisper.

I've got plenty of ideas that need to stay under wraps, at least for now. I don't trust anyone anymore. People value money more than loyalty these days, and these guys will align themselves with anyone who'll offer cash for information. "Nah, could be anyone. I'll make some calls, put some guys on it. We'll find the fuckers who did this."

This has Mikey written all over it. He's spiraling, waiting for a chance to sink his teeth into our business. He wants to crush us.

But he'll start with me because I'm the one who fucked him over hard.

That was his message on Thanksgiving.

And I got it loud and clear.

I hope he appreciates my response. I've been waiting for a long time to deliver it.

I nod over to the spot where the douchebag who shall remain nameless is being beaten to a pulp. "Make sure they don't kill him. I want him to be able to speak when he crawls back to his boss. Also, make sure they don't smash in his head too much. I don't want our message to be lost in translation, yeah?"

Patty nods and claps me on the back.

"Call me when you handle all of this. And call the Doc. He'll take care of the girls and sober them up. Find out where they live and get them back home." I pull out my keys and head toward my car.

I slide into the front seat and clutch my temples, but the pounding is too intense. A few deep breaths don't do much to calm my breathing or my heart rate, for that matter. I fought it. I didn't let the anger win. I saved face in front of my guys. My pulse throbs against my neck. I can do this. I can beat this thing.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second of relief, and an image of her smiling face flashes across my brain.

My sanity.

Sloane.

The one thing I just can't seem to win against.

I pull out my phone and stare at the keyboard for a second. My finger hovers over the screen, itching to type. I know it's wrong. I know it's bad.

But I know I won't regret it.

I let out a deep sigh and stab the letters.

Are you up?

Sloane

I tiptoe across the hardwood floor, silently cursing every squeak and creak of the boards under my feet. My dad isn't the heaviest sleeper, and the walls are practically made of paper. I think it's just one more way for him to keep tabs on me even while he's hibernating next door.

Having my own apartment off the main house makes living at home more tolerable, but I always feel a twinge of guilt that he's all alone in that big space. Mom has been gone for a long time, but he still hasn't moved on.

I guess I haven't either.

Letting go is something I haven't quite mastered yet.

And it hurts my heart to think that one day I'll be leaving my dad, too, but I don't have time or desire to unpack that right now.

Case in point...the one thing I can't seem to let slip through my damn fingers once and for all.

Thump, thump, thump.

My heart is off to the races, and slowing it down now is impossible. Tiny hairs on my arms stand at attention as I grasp the brass doorknob and twist it, pulling open the door.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Max, the only man I’ve ever loved and the one I swear time and time again to finally forget, leans against my railing. I don’t think he could look sexier if he tried, even at three o’clock in the morning. Stubble peppers the lower half of his face, his thick, dark hair is pointed in a million different directions like he’s been tossing and turning for hours, raking his fingers through it. I bite down hard on my lower lip, fighting off the images of his naked, muscular body sliding against the sheets, his long legs tangled around them. God, I’d have loved to have been a fly on the wall watching that beautiful sight...

“Why is that my problem?” I snap, a hand on my hip.

“Maybe because I really needed some Raisinets tonight and you wouldn’t take the bait to invite me over.”

“So you took it upon yourself to stop by.”

“I texted you first.”

“I didn’t respond. I could have been out. Or working. Or still pissed off.”

“But you’re here. And you answered the door.”

“I’m still pissed off.”

“I’m still trying to make it up to you.”

I fold my arms over my way-too-skimpy pajamas, shivering from the gust of cold air that assaults me.

“If you’re gonna debate for a while longer, you should probably put this on.” He shrugs off his leather jacket and hands it to me. I stare at his outstretched hand and



roll my eyes, holding open the door. “Come in,” I murmur, backing inside the small foyer as he moves toward me. I breathe deeply when he comes into my space, the spicy scent of his cologne filling the air and infusing my senses with everything that is him—the smoldering bad boy, leather-jacket-wearing older brother of my best friend who could always make my knees quiver with only a quick smile.

Even when he was throwing worms at me when we were kids.

I should have known back then I was doomed.

Why am I doing this to myself again? I’ve done it twice already, and I know how it ends!

I should tell him to go. Now. And to never ever come back.

But the expression on his face makes me swallow those words. There’s a heaviness surrounding him, stronger than anything I’ve felt before. It’s as powerful as the electricity crackling between us. Both of those forces seem to be battling against each other, though, and the flicker of emotion in Max’s heated gaze dies out seconds after he steps inside the apartment. In the end, the somberness he carries extinguishes the spark between us, leaving me raw and exposed.

I don’t like it one bit. And I don’t understand why that doom and gloom always seems to prevail.

Why can’t I win? Just once, dammit! What the hell keeps holding him back? And why won’t he talk to me about it?

But that’s Max. Quick with a sarcastic quip or a joke, but nothing of substance ever tumbles from those perfectly bitable lips. It’s something I’ve come to accept.

Kind of.

But at this point, I don't even know what I'm accepting. For a couple of months, he'd come over, beaten down, quiet, brooding, almost like he just needed to be with someone who wouldn't ask questions he didn't want to answer. Someone who would play Overwatch and Fortnite with him and always had Raisinets in the house. Someone who was all too willing to give him everything he wanted but wouldn't ask for anything in return.

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Surprise! That pathetic someone was...is...yours truly. So I talked and joked about anything I could think of, donating hours of my time to mindless video games, anything to keep him coming back since that's all he seemed to want, and I'd take whatever shreds of attention he was willing to give in the hopes that his feelings might change. He hadn't laid a finger on me, though his eyes always seemed to betray his intentions. It's almost as if his body wanted more, but his mind and heart knew he didn't have it to give.

I knew it, too.

So I guess that makes me a glutton for punishment.

Friendship was all I'd been offered. And it was all I was going to get.

He inches toward me, and a chill slithers down my spine. My skin prickles under the pads of his rough fingertips as they graze my bare arms. I forget to breathe for a second as his fingers slide up the sides of my face, caressing my lips and my cheeks. His face is so close to mine, his breath hot against my face.

What is happening here? Did I just wander into some kind of an alternate reality? Dammit, I have tried so hard to detest this guy, but he always manages to melt away any of my inhibitions.

How can I just forget everything that's happened between us? How can I forgive him when he's broken my heart one time too many?

But, mmm...good Lord, I just want to taste those lips one time to see if they are

everything I've imagined them to be. I can deal with that. One kiss, one beautiful mess of a second where I come apart in his arms and experience the bliss I've dreamed about for so long that I'm actually embarrassed to admit it.

My sensibilities tell me to stop this obsessing...now. Voices echo in my head, warning me that this is a dead end, that there is too much he hasn't told me, too much that will end up hurting me, too much that he can't escape. Too much that he'll never give in return.

Because I'm not as ignorant as they all think. Max, Shaye, Nico, Rocco, Kat...God, they must think I live under a rock, that their lifestyle doesn't raise any eyebrows, that it's perfectly natural to be flushed with cash and not do the work to justify it all.

At least, not the kind of work that warrants a legitimate paycheck.

That scares the hell out of me because there's a darkness that looms over them and their families. I may not have all of the answers, but I can connect most of the dots. I've seen The Godfather. I watched The Sopranos.

I've known for years that they're sons and daughters of the underworld, although they've kept me pretty well-shielded from exactly what that means...what they do, where they go, and how they operate.

And I suspect there is something more than just sex that kept him away on Thanksgiving, something he'll never admit to me. I can feel it when he looks at me now, when he came so close to kissing me at Shaye's party...the burden of what he carries is something he'll never be able to share.

So as much as I want Max...have always wanted Max...I know I can't have him. Not the way I need him. Our lives are too different. I like to drive in the right lane where it's safe and protected, and he's speeding past me in the far-left lane, throwing

caution to the wind and living for the moment because his choices don't guarantee anything more than that. Rule follower meet rule breaker.

Oh yes, I'm aware of the risks of getting too close.

But right now, I just want to feel Max's strong arms wrap around me, blanketing me in his deliciously soapy scent. My nipples tingle, hard enough to cut through glass right about now, and believe me when I say there isn't a place on my body that isn't awake, alert, and ready for action.

Until I open my stupid mouth and my mind finally has the good sense to take over.

This has to stop before I fall any deeper under his spell.

I have to break it, or it'll break me.

"Why did you come here, Max?"

His eyebrows furrow and he drops his hands, stepping away from me. I hug my arms around myself, bracing my body from the impending deep freeze, the same one that settles into my bones every time he leaves.

"I needed to see you," he murmurs, his eyes drawn and troubled.

"But why? We've been doing this dance for months, and I'm not sure I understand the point. You'd come over, sober, drunk, whatever. And you'd make me talk about myself. Work, school, my dad, my damn car." I throw my hands in the air. "What do you want from me? I'm not your friend. Friends give as much as they get. You give me nothing." I tug on the ends of my hair and let out a groan. "Look, I'm just not sure what you're after. How many more times am I supposed to turn the other cheek? And that girl...finding you with her like that when you were supposed to be with me? You

don't care about my feelings at all, so why should I waste my time on you?"

"That's not true. I care about you more than I do myself. And I'm telling you the truth when I say nothing happened between us, I didn't sleep with her. I wanted to be with you on Thanksgiving, but I needed to take care of something."

"There's more of your code language. I have no idea what that even means—you had to 'take care of something'. I'm not part of your world, and I don't understand any of it, so what do you want from me? It's clearly not sex since you haven't even tried to kiss me." Oh, crap. I didn't mean for that to slip out. Fuck my life, first the girlfriend slip-up and now this. It's not like I've been fantasizing about kissing him, having sex with him, really anything with him for twenty-four hours a day or anything crazy like that.

"Do you want me to kiss you?" Max's voice rumbles through me like a wave gathering force and speeding its way out in the ocean, preparing for the inevitable swirl and crash over the shore. And that half-smile, those deep-set eyes filled with something devious and delicious...Jesus, I could melt into a puddle right here and now.

How very sad for me.

"I didn't say that so you would...I just meant..." I let out an exasperated sigh and avert my eyes, trying again to put these irrational feelings into actual words. "I'm not looking for anything. I'm confused, Max. Especially because...well, why now? We already went down this path before, and it didn't work. Remember? You decided it was a bad idea to get involved because of Shaye. Then later you decided you just wanted to be friends. So I put myself out there and you stomped all over me again. So, why'd you come back? Third time's the charm?" I let out a dry laugh and push past him, mumbling to myself. "Or maybe the better question would be why did I open the damn door tonight?"

“Do you know I don’t have one single friend in this world whom I trust completely?”

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I stop in my tracks, my hand on the handle of the refrigerator. “Come on. What about Nico?”

He follows me into the kitchen and leans against the counter. “Nope.”

I slam the fridge shut. “Why don’t you trust anyone?”

“Because I’ve been disappointed enough times to know that there isn’t anyone I can really count on a hundred percent.” He shrugs and runs his fingers through his tousled hair. “I love Nico, don’t get me wrong. But he has priorities, and I’m not at the top of that list. When push comes to shove, everyone looks out for themselves. I’ve found that out the hard way.”

“That’s a really pessimistic view.”

“It’s how I feel.”

“Okay,” I say, slowly padding toward him. “So you don’t trust anyone. That still doesn’t answer my questions.”

“Do you know that most of the time I’m wound tighter than a fucking top? But somehow, whenever I’m around you, all of that tension, that suffocating feeling just disappears for a while. I ask you to talk about stuff because I only want to concentrate on listening to your voice. It drowns out all the fucking noise that crowds my brain. What goes on in here...” he snickers and pokes at his temple. “It’s fucking deafening. And the noise never dies out. It’s always there. There’s no off switch. But, I don’t know, being with you just mutes it all. I listen, I focus, and I get a break from the shit



consuming me on a daily basis.”

I jut out a hip and cock an eyebrow. “Great, so you’re using me as a form of mental therapy. This just keeps getting better and better.”

Max sighs and pushes his hair back. “I’m not using you, Sloane. I just want to be around you. There’s this thing you have...I can’t explain it, but it just...I don’t know, calms me. Makes me stop and take a breath. Forces me to enjoy what’s right in front of me instead of constantly looking over my shoulder.” He shrugs. “Sometimes I just need a break from my life. You’re like my own private vacation on our own tropical island somewhere with no distractions, no obligations, just the two of us.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out. I have so many questions. Maybe this is why he never talks. Evidently, he’s smarter than I am.

“I didn’t mean to lay all of that on you. I know I didn’t deserve another chance, but I just hoped...” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry if you think I’m using you. It won’t happen again.” He straightens up and smiles at me, a sad, forlorn smile that makes my heart clench. “Thanks for listening to me this time.” He turns, walking toward the front door.

“Wait,” I murmur, ignoring the voices begging me to shut the hell up and telling me to let him go. I want to know what he hoped. I have to find out. “I don’t want you to go.”

He slowly pivots, and I can see a flicker of desire in his eyes. A swarm of butterflies I didn’t even know had taken up residence swarm my belly, the fluttering gathering force and speed as Max closes the space between us. “I never meant to hurt you, Sloane.” The corners of his lips curl upward. “You’re the best friend I have.”

Lust swirls in the air between us. It’s so thick, I can barely draw in a breath. But still,

he doesn't make a move. He just stares at me, almost as if he's in a trance. Maybe that's what he needs.

But do I want to be that escape? Do I want to be the one he runs to because he can't deal with his choices?

Do I really want to ask any more questions at this second?

That would be a big, resounding no.

I reach behind his head, skimming my fingers over the back of his neck. The skin is smooth and soft beneath my fingers. He lets out a little moan that begs me not to stop, to draw him closer, to taste his lips.

And I know one taste isn't going to be nearly enough. One taste will be instant addiction with no plans for rehab.

He winds his arms around my waist, pulling me into him. He slides his fingers under the hem of my flimsy tank top, over my hips, up the curve of my spine. I have to chomp the inside of my mouth to keep my screams for joy deep inside of me.

Two years ago, I thought it might actually be our time. We took things slow because of Shaye, and then without warning, everything fizzled before we'd even shared our first kiss. After standing me up on Thanksgiving, I swore I'd never fall into his rabbit hole again. I promised myself I'd fight off the insatiable craving that clouds my head and my judgment whenever he's near.

Yet, here I am once more, my body begging for the mercy only he can provide.

I lost the fight.

But I'm still in the ring.

He dips his head, our foreheads touching. My eyes drift closed, and I tilt my head back, my lips beckoning him, testing him to see if this is really what he wants...if I'm what he wants.

An electric charge jolts my insides when his lips crash against mine, his fingertips pressed into the small of my back, pushing me against his chest as his tongue plunges into my greedy mouth. I fist his hair, breathless and more aroused than I've ever been as the coiling heat of our tongues tangle with a hunger that is foreign to me.

I rub my hands down his massive biceps, tracing the indentations of muscle. Oh, sweet Jesus, I need more. I want to feel more. I want to taste more.

I've never been so damn greedy for a man in my entire life.

Max pulls away slightly, gazing down at me with a concerned look. "I want you, Sloane. I want this. But if you're not okay with it, we can stop. I know I need to make you trust me again, and I'll wait." He sweeps a hand down the side of my face. "You're worth it. You're worth everything."

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My chest heaves, my pulse throbbing against my neck. “I don’t want to stop. I want this, too.” Because I fucking love you! Thank God I swallow that last bit before I end up sounding like some crazy clinger bitch.

But those damn voices pepper me with questions again.

What does this mean? What does he want from me? Is it just sex or something more?

Now I’m the one who needs the off switch.

His smile widens, and I don’t think I could be happier than I am in this moment. I grasp his hand and pull him toward my bedroom. He reaches for me, snaking his arms around my waist, lips scorching a path down the back of my neck. I’m so consumed with lust, I forget to move. I just stop, allowing the carnal haze to blissfully fog up my mind.

Max spins me around, lifting me into his arms and carrying me into the bedroom. I lock my ankles tight around his waist, tugging at his black t-shirt. I slide it over his head, and he pulls out one arm at a time, never once letting me go. I swallow a gasp when my eyes fall to his perfectly chiseled pecs and the ink that covers them.

I run my fingers over the ripples and grooves, my brows furrowing at the long, deep indentations beneath the swirling lines and images covering his chest.

Scars. So many scars. All different shapes and sizes.

I raise my eyes to his, questioning him without speaking a single syllable, but he has

no response. I know he can tell what I'm thinking, what I've always suspected but never wanted to acknowledge, but still no explanations come forth. His gaze begs me not to ask the questions...ones he doesn't want to answer, once I'm not sure I even want answered myself.

I'm not as naïve as they all think. I know that business is code for something a lot more dangerous. What I don't know is exactly how much more dangerous.

Max's words float back into my hazy consciousness...always looking over my shoulder, nobody to trust, the life I lead, choices I've made...

And the code of that life is written all over his body.

He's waiting for me to make my decision, my cue for whether or not I want to get in any deeper than I already am. But the reality is that I'm already drowning, and he's the only one who can save me.

I take his face in my hands and graze his lips with my own, giving him the answer he needs. He tightens his grip on me, his cock thickening against the barely there pajama shorts still clinging to my body. I raise my arms and he pulls off my tank top, taking each one of my breasts into his mouth, kneading them and suckling the nipples with his tongue and teeth. He gently lays me onto the center of the bed, and my body sinks into the fluffy down comforter. He loops his thumbs into the waistband of my shorts and slowly slides them down to my ankles along with my panties. He fumbles with his belt buckle, his smoldering gaze never vacating from my face even though I'm lying naked beneath him. He never peeks, just focuses on my eyes, like he's trying to see what's shielded behind them...the same thing I try to do with him.

Maybe tonight those shields will finally be lifted.

He forces his jeans and boxers to the floor and kicks them off before climbing over

me, the swollen head of his long, hard cock grazing my opening. My legs fall open for him, desire bubbling in my veins. I lie there, breathless, aching for him to touch me, to singe my skin with his carnal energy. He runs a hand down the length of my body, his soft lips following suit, traveling lower and lower. He caresses the insides of my thighs with his hungry mouth, gripping my legs, lifting my body to give himself leverage as his tongue plunges into my core, sweeping over my clit before each thrust into me. I fist the comforter and pull a throw pillow over my face to muffle the screams, or this would be grounds for Max's castration at the hands of my dad. I clench with every nip and nibble, my heart thudding with such force, it may just explode with glee. I arch my back, thrusting my hips against his mouth, screeching into the pillow like it's the first time I've ever felt this rush of emotion course through me like a raging flame.

Because it is. And I don't want it to be the last time.

I'm so screwed.

My body trembles and quivers, shuddering with delicious aftershocks as my breathing calms. The pillow is lifted from my face, and it's Max's seductive grin greeting my elated one.

"You're done already?" I whisper.

"Not even close," he murmurs, tracing the outline of my lips. "Give me a sec." He reaches down to the floor, and a minute later, he produces a foil packet.

"Wait." I lean forward and push him backward onto the mattress with what I hope is a sultry smile. I balance myself on either side of him, straddling him, dipping my head to take his perfect, pink cock into my mouth. My pussy still tingles from the memory of his delicious oral assault, and the greedy bitch wants more, but she's just going to have to wait a little while longer.

I slide my tongue down the sides, taking him as deep as my throat will allow, and that's not saying much since I have a pretty bad gag reflex and he's hung like a freaking elephant.

Oh, by the way...thank you, God!

He clasps my shoulders, digging his fingers into my skin as I nip and suckle, teasing his slit with my tongue. Loud moans spur me on, so I stroke him harder with my mouth, kneading his balls until he fists my hair...just hard enough to make desire pool between my legs.

This is happening. Holy shit, this is really happening!

His body quivers and quakes beneath me, and the energy flowing between us short-circuits my brain as I take him deeper and deeper.

"Stop," he rasps.

I lift my head, confused. "What's wrong? I thought—"

He raises himself up, eyeing me like a predator who hasn't eaten in days and is about to devour his prey. "Get up here," he growls, the low, gravelly tone making my skin prickle with anticipation.

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I bite my lower lip and crawl toward him. He pulls me on top of him, crushing his lips to mine. “That was fucking incredible,” he whispers, gently tugging at my hair and giving himself access to my neck. I let out a tiny gasp. My God, this man is driving me crazy with his lips, those hands, and his body.

He grabs the condom packet, tears off a corner with his teeth, and pulls it out. All one-handed. Pretty damn impressive. That, or he’s desperate to get it on—literally and figuratively.

So am I...

He rolls it on and backs me down to the mattress, rubbing his cock against my clit as he hovers over me. I run my fingernails down the sides of his torso, making him shudder against me, proving that he does actually feel things. His eyes drift closed for a split second, and when they open, those dark pools of desire are raging, showing me that he’s not impervious to what’s happening between us right now.

I don’t even want to think about what’s happening to me...or what will happen afterward.

I just want him. This moment. He’s all I’ve ever wanted.

He lowers his body over mine, the head of his cock pushing inside of me. I swallow a gasp. Damn, it burns when you haven’t had sex in a while.

Okay, it’s been a little longer than just a while. It’s inching closer and closer to forever.



But Max takes his time. He moves slowly inside of me, stretching me wide to take him all in. And oh God, there's so much to take. I tighten my arms around him, hugging him against me, my body urging him to kiss me, to take away the pain.

He lowers his lips to mine, his greedy tongue plunging into my mouth, swirling and curling with my own. With each thrust deeper, my body opens for him, molding around him like a glove. He slides in and out, rubbing himself against my clit each time. I fist his hair, releasing every shred of emotion coursing through me into that kiss.

I press my hands into the small of his back, urging him to stay buried inside of me, to never break this connection. I don't know how we got here, and I don't really care why. The only thing I know is that I don't want it to ever end. He's awoken things inside of me that I never even knew were asleep.

I draw in a sharp breath, my muscles clenching tight around him. I lift my hips, pressing into him, once, twice, and holy hell...the sparks inside of my core ignite into a raging inferno of unbridled lust and love that words alone could never describe.

Every cell sizzles as he rocks against me. Hands are everywhere, his, mine...they can't seem to grope fast enough or clutch hard enough as the euphoric rush captivates our flushed and frenzied bodies. Toe-curling, mind-numbing, body-tingling sensations command me, bright white lights flashing behind my eyes as the explosion shoots out to every extremity, igniting my insides. Max's perfect lips silence the screams that erupt from deep within my chest, and he thrusts a few more times before tremors assault his own body.

This thing...whatever it is...is more powerful and more intoxicating than any sick and twisted fantasy I'd ever concocted of the two of us in my mind, and believe me, there have been plenty over the years.

None of them could hold a candle to the reality of the two of us together.

I try to catch my breath, but my pulse refuses to cooperate. It continues to race, ready to explode out of my neck. Goosebumps pop up along my arms and shoot down my legs in response to his nearness.

Max collapses next to me, flinging one arm over his head and dragging his fingertips down my back with the other. “Fuck. That was crazy.”

“Yeah,” I pant, my chest heaving. I run a hand through my hair, sweeping it away from my face, and roll over to face him. A small smile plays at my lips. He looks so relaxed, so different than he did when he rolled in here a little while ago. Unburdened, uninhibited, and just...happy.

It’s rare to see. I catch glimpses here and there, but right now? It’s like he’s a different person. Or maybe this is the person he really is...the one who can never seem to make his way to the surface for too long before he’s ordered away, leaving the hardened version on display for the rest of the world to see.

Why is that?

Questions...I have so many...

What does he do when he leaves me after our late-night video game sessions? Where does he go? Who is he with? Is there a future for us? Does a guy with all of these scars even believe he can have a future?

Do I?

But I choke them all back, mainly because I don’t really know if I’m ready to hear all of the answers. I squash every doubt because I’m not sure I’m ready to battle any of

his demons either.

Max

“What was that?” Sloane breathes, her thick eyelashes fluttering over her green eyes as if she’s still trying to make sense of what just happened between us.

Kind of the way I am.

I graze the top of her breasts with my fingertips, and she gasps, biting her lower lip. “I don’t know, but I think we need to do it at least another five times to figure it out.”

She lets out a soft giggle, shivering against me. I wiggle an arm underneath her and pull her into my chest. Her hair is a beautiful mess of long, dark waves that tickle my skin. I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of coconuts.

Makes me think of suntan lotion...blue skies...a secluded beach...sex on said beach...

“Sloane, I didn’t expect this to happen tonight. It’s not why I came over.”

“I know,” she whispers, her fingernails tracing the outline of my pecs, and fuck, it feels amazing.

“I was serious when I said you make me feel different. Better, I guess.” I press a finger to my forehead. Is my mouth ever going to stay shut, for Christ’s sake?

“You’re doing a lot of talking tonight.” Sloane rolls over and leans forward on her elbows, a teasing smile on her lips. “I’m not used to all the exposition.”

“I guess I just needed to let some things out.” I tug at my hair, willing my mind to shut down before my mouth starts spewing things I can’t control.

“Do you feel any better?”

My eyes meet hers. “Yeah,” I say.

“Does this have to do with what happened to Mr. Salesi? And the guy who broke into Nico’s house?” She looks down to the thread on the comforter her fingers are occupied with, her hair shielding the expression on her face.

I don’t need to see her face to know that there are a hell of a lot of questions written all over it. Questions she’s never asked. Questions I’ve been lucky to avoid.

It’s been weeks since that night, and I know the story hasn’t quite come to an end. And when it does, I doubt it’ll be a pleasant one. “Sloane, I...” I what? I’m in love with you, but I can’t actually tell you anything about my life because it may get both of us killed? Or worse? So that’s why I try and keep my distance but fail miserably most of the time?

I mean, we’re talking the mafia here. A bunch of crazy motherfuckers who plot shit that make death seem like a welcome alternative.

“I’m just concerned, Max. My best friend was attacked and shot an intruder in cold blood, on the same day her boyfriend’s father was railroaded by a Mack truck no less. She hasn’t been herself at all lately, and she won’t talk to me. Do you know how helpless that makes me feel?”

“Shaye’s really lucky to have a friend like you.”

“There was a time she used to tell me everything. I feel like we’re drifting apart.

When she got together with Nico, she just shut down. I feel like she doesn't talk to me anymore. She's been sucked into Nico's world, whatever that is, and I'm left standing on the outside." She shrugs. "I guess it makes me a little sad. I figured when she moved back up here from Miami that things would be the way they were before she left." A sad smile lifts her lips. "But I guess she's on a new chapter now. It was bound to happen, right? That's life."

"Hey, you know she loves you. I just think she's been under a lot of stress lately and wants to be there for Nico."

"Yeah, I get it." Sloane collapses onto the bed and covers her face with her hands. "Everyone is moving on, and I'm still in the same place, living with my dad, working twelve hours a day." She peeks at me through her fingers. "I feel like we're playing one long game of therapist and patient tonight, just alternating roles."

"Do you feel better?"

"To be honest, yes, but only because you're here right now. I guess I needed to let some things out, too." She giggles and pulls the comforter over us.

"Cold?"

She nods, snuggling into me. I want to stay here forever, wrapped up in a blanket with this beautiful, naked woman plastered on top of me. I don't think that's asking for too much. It's safe, it's warm, and nobody is going to attack me with an ice pick while I'm lying here.

"Tell me something good," I murmur. "I need to hear you talk some more."

"Okay. Well, the hospital administrator asked me to give a speech at an upcoming benefit about my charity organization, The Buddy System. I'm really excited about

it.”

“More, please.”

“There are going to be a lot of donors present, and I have a chance to get people really excited about it.” She peers up at me and bites her fist. “I’m so nervous about it. I don’t want to mess up and risk losing donations. We really need the money.”

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“Do you need a friendly face in the audience cheering you on?”

She rises onto her elbows, a teasing smile on her face. “Are you inviting yourself to my event, Max?”

“Well, I think I can make myself available if you need the moral support.” I wink and ruffle her hair. “And if you want me there.”

“I’d love it if you came.” A bright smile stretches across her lips. “That would be awesome.”

“Then I’ll be there. Now, tell me more about the kids. What are they like?”

“They’re so great and positive. They go through so much with their diseases, but yet they try really hard to be optimistic. They’re such an inspiration, and I feel like this is the least I can do to help. So we find volunteers to come and hang out with them while they’re in the hospital. They’re the buddies. And we use donations to buy games and toys and electronics so the kids have things to keep them occupied when their buddies visit. The whole experience keeps their spirits high and their minds occupied so they aren’t thinking about being sick.” A shadow clouds her face for a second. “It’s so sad to know they might never get better, but making new friends helps them through the dark times, you know?” She sighs. “It’s not always easy. There’s this one kid, Eli, who was just admitted. I’ve heard that he’s really unresponsive and confrontational. I still have to meet him and introduce him to the program, but it doesn’t sound like he’d be up for it. I don’t know, I need to find just the right person to pair up with him, someone who can get through to him and help him come to terms with his diagnosis. Someone who can make him smile and look



forward instead of focusing on the present which is pretty crappy right now.”

“You really are an incredible woman, Sloane.” I flip over onto my stomach, leaning over her. “It takes a really special person to put an organization like this together.”

“Sometimes it’s nice to have someone to talk to and play video games with.” She nudges me.

“Yeah” I brush her hair off her forehead and lean down to gently graze it with my lips. This girl does so much...she gives so much...she deserves so much.

How can I possibly give her even half of what she gives to others, knowing my past is on the hunt for me?

I have a battle to fight, but I don’t know if I can win it.

I stroke the side of her face, pressing my lips to hers as a reminder that winning is everything.

It means I actually get to live.

I crack open my eyes, squinting at the blinding stream of light that managed to cut through the curtains. One of my arms is wrapped tight around Sloane. I drop a kiss onto her shoulder and she lets out a tiny moan, sliding that perfect ass against my cock.

Which, under normal circumstances, would make me want to fuck her until she forgets her own name and make her scream her hot little head off for hours on end.

But there are too many other things that keep my dick limp as a fucking noodle...things that can hurt her, things that can destroy whatever this is between us,

things that should have kept me tossing and turning in my own bed last night instead of invading hers.

Instead, I came over here in the middle of the fucking night with a shit storm tearing my mind apart.

I had no right to show up on her doorstep.

I had no right to put her in danger.

I had no right to make promises I can't keep.

Her deep, even breaths tell me she feels comfortable, secure, and safe.

That's fucking irony for you. I'm the last person anyone should feel safe around. Especially now.

Waiting is pure torture. I know what's coming, but I don't know when, where, or how.

I only know nobody is safe around me. Yet, here I am, literally wrapped up in the girl I've been in love with for as long as I can remember.

Now she's at risk...just like everyone else, because that's how it works when you're dealing with people who have nothing to lose.

They take everything because they have nothing.

They want you to feel the same pain.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

I have to get out of here. It's daylight, and my car is parked outside next to hers.

Anyone could be out there...

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Because today could be that day.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand and I reach for it without loosening my grip on her.

Hey, dickhead. I'm back. Did ya miss me?

I grit my teeth.

Yeah, it looks like that day is coming sooner than I thought.

I pull my truck into my parents' driveway a couple of hours later only to find my dad's car sitting there. I rake a hand through my hair, my mind still on Sloane and what the hell I'm doing with her. The conversation this morning didn't go much beyond our latest Victory Royale in Fortnite. I'm not sure there was much else to cover. Can I even offer her anything else right now? Will she be okay with my lifestyle?

I mean, the sex was insane, but she won't be happy with that for long. She's not that type of girl. But how much can she actually handle? That's the real question...one I don't know how to ask.

I get out of the car and jog to the front door, sticking my key into the lock. I walk inside to find Shaye sliding into a pair of boots. She looks up with a surprised smile. "Hey! What brings you here so early?"

"You ordered an Uber. Here I am."

She clasps her hands together. “Wow, front door service! What did I do to get so lucky?”

I shrug. “I know you hate driving in this slushy shit, so here I am.”

“Thanks. But seriously, how’d you know I was ready to leave?”

“Nico texted me and asked me to pop over. That boyfriend of yours wants to make sure you’re safe.”

“Then why’d he send you?” She snickers and gives me a little punch. “Just kidding. I appreciate it. The roads are so bad right now. Ice totally freaks me out.”

“Maybe you need an all-wheel drive instead of that stupid little sports car.”

“Or maybe I just need a permanent driver for the winter.” She winks then scrunches her nose. “You smell weird. Like, coconuttty. Did you change your shampoo?”

“Not exactly.” But I was very open to being rubbed up and down with Sloane’s coconut body wash this morning.

She narrows her eyes. “What’s up with you? Where were you last night?”

Damn, that sister of mine is perceptive. It must be because of all of those damn psychology classes she takes. I don’t like anyone to see through me. Ever. But somehow, she manages to do it all the time. “I was out.”

“With whom?” Her eyes widen and she claps a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God...no, don’t tell me...”

“Would that be so bad?”

“It would be if you’re just fucking around with her! Tell me you’re not just fucking around with her!”

“Look, you can relax. I’m a big boy, and she’s a big girl. We can figure shit out.”

Shaye wags a finger at me. “Max, I swear to God, if you hurt her...” She pauses, and I can tell her brain is working overtime to figure out an apt punishment. “I will paint every room in your house pink and shred your lucky leather jacket.”

I clutch my chest. “Wow. Then I’d better watch my ass. Can’t be living in a pink house without my lucky jacket.”

“Don’t be a jerk. I’m serious. I love her, and I love you, but you guys can’t seem to get your shit together. Can you blame me for being nervous?”

“There isn’t anything to be nervous about. It’s not like anything is happening. I mean, something did happen, but—”

“Stop!” She puts up a hand. “I don’t want to hear about it.”

I flash a mischievous smile. “Oh, but you will. Why should I be the only one who suffers? I’ve seen enough of you and Nico to make me want to consider a lobotomy.”

“That was different. Nobody asked you to barrel into his bedroom with a baseball bat!”

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“Yeah, my bad.” I shake my head. “Listen, I know you love her and want to look out for her. But you don’t have to worry. I don’t even know what this even is, if it’s anything.”

“I guarantee it’s something, at least to Sloane. So don’t fuck it up, or I’ll fuck you up.”

I put my hands in the air. “I’ve seen what you can do with a gun, sis. I don’t want to be on your shit list.”

“Good. Then behave yourself.”

“I will. Hey, you know, maybe you should make plans to get dinner or something. Seems like she misses you.” Holy Christ, is this what love does to you? Turns you into a total fruitcake who cares about feelings and shit like that?

“That’s a good idea. We haven’t really spent a lot of time together lately, at least not as much as we used to. We both have so much going on.”

“Well, you shouldn’t forget your friends.” And so it continues. What the hell is happening to me?

Shaye smiles. “You’re right. I’ll text her later and set something up.” She walks over to the coat closet. “Are you going to be able to get me to class on time? It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, I don’t drive ten miles an hour like you. So there isn’t a reason to leave two

hours in advance.”

She punches me in the shoulder. “Smartass.”

I snicker. “Hey, is Dad around? I need to talk to him real quick.”

“Yes, he’s in the office.” She turns toward the kitchen. “I’ll make us some coffee to go.”

“Sounds good.”

I wait until she’s out of earshot and knock at the office door. My dad grunts something about coming inside, so I push open the door. Dickhead barely looks up from his computer. I clench my fists. It’s not anything new, so I shouldn’t be shocked by his lack of acknowledgement. But it still pisses me the fuck off.

“Nice to see you, too, Dad.” I close the door behind me and fold my arms. “I missed you at the job site yesterday.”

“Yeah, I was there early and then I had to take off and meet with some people.”

“Really? What people?” I furrow my brow, pretending that he’s not completely full of shit.

He lets out a sigh and glares at me. “Architects, Max. The ones who are drafting plans for the storefronts. Do you want to see my notes from the meeting so you can report back to King Salesi that your project is running smoothly? Do you really think it’s going to make a difference?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”



Dad narrows his eyes and stands up from his chair. “Nobody is ever going to take you seriously, Maximo. You couldn’t manage this job without me or a shit ton of other help, for that matter. It’s not what you’re good at. It’s what Nico is good at, and that’s why he’s sitting on his gold goddamn throne and you’re sitting in some fucking ergonomic plastic chair in that concrete cell!” He pushes his hair back. “You’re good at maiming people. You flex your muscles, and everyone runs the other way. You’re a thug. It’s all you’ll ever be, no matter how hard you try to be someone different. And Christ, I wish you could be. It’d make life better for all of us,” he grunts.

A sharp pain shoots down my left arm. That motherfucker is not going to give me a panic attack right now. I won’t give him the pleasure of seeing me crumble. More weakness in his eyes. “Are you kidding me? You’re blaming our place in this family on me when you’re the one who tried to sell out the Salesis? You’re lucky you’re not dead right now!”

His eyes darken to a demonic black and if he had a gun, he might actually shoot me dead right here. I wouldn’t put it past him. He fucking hates me, detests everything I’ve done or will do. I honestly think it’s because the Salesis didn’t hold any of his bullshit against me, and I’m moving up while he’s stuck in the same shithole, year after year.

He’s never been loyal to anyone but himself. He’d sell anyone of us for a nickel, and he’d smile while doing it, too. Cocksucker.

“I haven’t heard that anyone’s disappointed with what I’ve been doing. But you...you disappear from that job site every day for hours with your fucking phone glued to your hand. Do you expect me to believe you’re acting in the family’s interest? Or are you just looking to screw someone else over so you can get a crack at their cash flow? Because let’s face it...the only thing you give a shit about is money. Ironical that you don’t ever have a pot to piss in, isn’t it?”

He slams his fists on the desk and throws his chair against the wall, making a dent in the sheet rock.

“Did it feel good to bust up your wall, Dad? Was that supposed to scare me? Why don’t you just fucking tell me why you hate me so much? Why you can barely look at me? Why I’m such a fucking disappointment to you?”

Dad’s breathing is sharp and labored, his chest heaving. His face flushes a deep purple color, and I can see that his fists are clenched tight. Is he gonna throw a punch? Fucking let him. It won’t hurt any more than the other shit he’s pulled on me in the past. “Last night was a fucking joke, Max. Nobody would have ever tried to pull that shit with me if I was running the show!”

“Yeah, but nobody wants to give you that chance. I may not have Nico’s skills, but at least they know they can trust me.” I fish my keys out of my pocket and push open the office door where Shaye is waiting for me with a concerned look on her face and a to-go cup of coffee.

I should have ordered us both an Uber and grabbed the bottle of Bailey’s on my way out of here.

Sloane

“Okay, so tell me how this happened. Were you swinging at a pitch from CC Sabathia?”

“Nah, I was just playing with some guys from work this morning. I guess I swung the bat a little too hard.” My patient flashes a smirk. “Besides, if it was a pitch from any of the Yankees, I’d have smashed it outta the park since they’re the enemy team.”

“Aha. So you’re a Mets fan.”

“Until my dying day.”

I smile at the handsome, dark-haired guy and cast a quick glance at the chart sitting on the foot of the bed. “Well, Gianni, it looks like you’re going to need a few X-rays to see if there is a tear in your rotator cuff. But the doctor will be in first to examine you.”

“Thanks. It’s Sloane, right?” Gianni’s face twists into a grimace as he shifts on the bed.

How the heck...? I furrow my brow and look down to find my name tag hanging next to my stethoscope. “Oh. Yes, it is.”

He nods, his dark eyes glimmering with a mischievous twinkle. “I gotta tell ya, I usually avoid Jersey like the plague. But you’re making me wanna come back again for a follow up. Maybe three or four. And then dinner if you’re up for it.”

I stop mid-scribble and look up to find a teasing grin on Gianni's face. "What do you say? You got plans later? Can I take you out?"

A hot flush rises from my neck, spilling into my cheeks. "I, um, I'm very flattered, but I'm uh, seeing someone." Huh. Am I even? It's not like we actually talked about anything us-related this morning. I make a few notes on the chart and smile. Whatever. Hope springs eternal, right? "Thank you, though. And control that swing. You don't want to have surgery on your rotator cuff. It's a miserable recovery."

He leans back against the wall, a lazy smile on his face. "You just broke my heart, Sloane."

"I'm pretty sure you don't say those words too often," I quip, flipping his chart closed and sliding it into the holder on the back of his door. "The doctor will be in shortly."

I pull open the door and walk into the hallway where doctors, nurses, and orderlies swarm the length, wheeling around gurneys, wheelchairs, and machines. It's complete and utter chaos, and I absolutely love every minute of it.

Good thing, since I practically live in this place.

One of the other nurses, and my best friend on staff, Jules, sidles up next to me and lowers her voice conspiratorially. "So, another patient hit on you, huh?"

"I think he was just doped up on morphine to control the pain. He did a real number on his shoulder. Said he was swinging a bat. I can't imagine what that ball looked like after he was done with it."

"Oohh, does he need an X-ray? Can I do it? He's hot, and if you aren't interested..." Jules waggles her eyebrows. "Other people might be."

“Go for it. He’s Italian. You’re gonna love his accent,” I say, mimicking Gianni’s voice.

Jules giggles and links her arm with mine. “So how excited are you about the benefit? I am really freaking proud of you, girl! You’ve raised so much money for The Buddy System and when you rock the hell out of your speech, you’ll get tons more! Especially those dirty old men who have cash to burn and love to watch your tight little ass wiggle around.”

I roll my eyes at her. Jules can be too much and just enough at the exact same time, and I love her for it.

“Speaking of tight little asses, did you pick out a dress yet?”

“I sure did! Low-cut, super tight, shows just enough leg. Don’t think I’m going to let the opportunity pass for me to catch my own sugar daddy.” She winks and waves to two of the residents as they pass us.

“Which one of them have you slept with?” I murmur.

“Both,” she whispers back.

When my mouth drops open, she shakes her head. “No, sicko. Not at the same time, thank you very much.”

Like I said, too much and just enough.

I snicker and stop at the nurse’s station. “Oh, so you do have limits. Good to know.”

I pick up the handset for the phone and start to dial when I hear my name. I look up with a smile. “Hey, Doc. I was just going to page you. There’s a patient in Room 2

with a torn rotator cuff. He's going to need some X-rays after you examine him."

Dr. Steven Kiley picks up a few charts and grins at me. "Thanks, Sloane. Hey, are you ready for the benefit?"

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Jules stands behind him, fanning herself and swaying, pretending to faint. I choke back a laugh. “Getting there. Still working on my speech. Will you be there?”

“Definitely.” His bright white smile is blinding, and those dimples...well, let’s just say the whole package gives Jules a reason to come to work in the mornings.

Her and the rest of the nursing staff. And probably every other hospital worker, too.

He’s that delicious. And smart. And sweet.

There must be a screw loose somewhere. It’s impossible for a guy to be that perfect and still be single.

“I hope we can grab a drink to celebrate. You deserve it. Congratulations.”

I ignore Jules who is now doing the rump shaker behind Dr. Kiley with zero regard for the bloody and bandaged patients being wheeled around her. He gives me a quick wink and continues down the hall to make his rounds.

“Holy shit, Sloane! Did you catch how he just undressed you with his eyes and fucked the shit out of you on this desk with all of us watching?”

Corrine, the head nurse, glares at Jules. “Can you please table your sick and twisted conversation? There are patients who are in dire need of medical attention here!”

Jules waves a hand at Corrine. “Don’t be so dramatic. Have you heard the code blue alarm go off? No, I didn’t think so.” She grabs my arm and pulls me away as Corrine

rolls her eyes at us and huffs about Jules's lack of professionalism. "Sloane," she calls out to me. "Can you check in on the patient in Room 5? They just brought him in. He's in bad shape."

I grab the chart and head over to the room while Jules keeps talking.

"You seriously have to tell me why you haven't jumped his bones yet. I've watched him drool over you for the past six months, but you never give him an inch. What are you waiting for?"

I sweep a stray strand of hair behind my ear, my lips curling upward. I can still feel the butterfly wings fluttering madly in my belly, well after our impromptu sex fest.

Jules gasps. "Oh my God, you had sex with someone! Who is it? Someone else here at the hospital?" She pushes me into an elevator, her eyes wide. "Tell me everything! Did you find a supply closet or something? Or was it in the residents' lounge?"

I giggle at the inquisition and shake my head. "Okay, first of all, how did you even know?"

"It's written all over your face! How could you not have told me?"

I shrug as the elevator creeps up to the fourth floor. "I don't know. It just happened...not here, not someone at the hospital, before you start tossing out names."

"Then who?" She gasps. "Not..."

I let out a breath and nod. "Max."

"Wow." Jules folds her arms. "Well, as your friend, I have to say I'm concerned. But I'm happier to hear that you finally got off." She narrows her eyes. "You did get off,



right?”

Sensations flood my body, fueling memories of those amazing, toe-curling hours. “Oh, yes. About four times.”

Jules claps her hands. “Four times? Jealous!”

“It was pretty outrageous.” We arrive at Room 5, and I push open the door to check on the new patient. He’s beaten pretty badly, bruises covering his face and neck. I can’t imagine what the rest of him looks like. “Hey,” I say in a soft voice. “How are you feeling?”

The guy looks at me with his one fully opened eye. “Seriously? How the fuck do you think I feel?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Jules chides him, walking around the bed to grab the water pitcher. “No need to get testy. She was just asking you a question.”

The guy grunts an apology and settles against the pillows as I do the exam. “So what does the other guy look like?”

“He fucking walked away after getting in a few good swings. His asshole crew finished the job.”

“Sounds like you need to get your own crew,” Jules quips. “What’s your name?”

“Pete,” he says in a low voice. His cell phone vibrates next to him and he grabs it, putting it to his ear with a grimace. “Yeah. I’m fucking horrible, what do you think? That asshole Oriani showed up, swung his dick around, took a couple of shots, and ran off.”

My ears perk up and I swallow a gasp. Oriani? Did I hear that right? Did Max...? No, he couldn't have, right? I didn't see him last night. We only exchanged a few texts. Could that mean...?

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“Yeah, none of our guys showed up. I was by my fucking self.” Pete keeps going, spewing expletives, but I can’t unhear all of that.

I write a few things on the chart, trying to calm my racing heart.

This shouldn’t shock me.

It’s something I’ve suspected for a long time. Jesus, how many signs do I need to tell me that this is bad? That I should run, not walk, in the opposite direction of Max Oriani?

But I know that for as many signs, I’d come up with even more excuses to fling myself back into his waiting arms.

Because even though I see what’s he’s capable of, the proof of what he does when he’s not with me, I can’t break free.

So forget Max for a second...how sick and twisted am I?

I finish up with Pete and flash him a small smile. “The doctor will be in shortly.”

He barely acknowledges me, still grumbling into his phone. But I’ve heard more than enough. I just don’t know what to do with any of it.

Confronting Max is something I’ve never done. Part of me doesn’t want to confirm any of my suspicions.

He's not that guy...

Is he?

And here's the big question, which really makes me doubt my sanity...would I care?

Jules and I walk out of the room and she's still fixated on Max while I'm trying to process what I just heard. I file the chart and we head toward the elevator.

The doors open, and we get in. "So," she says, a teasing smile on her lips. "Is he coming to the benefit with you?"

The elevator pings and we step into the hallway in the Pediatric Oncology Unit. I pat the top of my bun and shove a couple of loose strands of hair behind my ear. I try to mute the questions peppering my mind. "Yeah, but who knows what'll happen after that? I think he's just coming to show moral support anyway."

"Wow, so I finally get to meet this guy whom I'd chalked up to be an urban legend?"

"Yes. Moral support or not, he wants to be at the benefit." I bite down on my lower lip. He never made me any promises. "But I'm not getting my hopes up. Things he said to me that night...I don't know...he's never opened up like that. Ever, and I've known him practically for my whole life. I just don't want to pretend it's something that it's not, you know?"

"If I were you, I'd keep pretending. It's worth all the orgasms. Trust me, there are too many guys out there who think good sex is when they come."

I roll my eyes. "Noted."

Jules winks at me. "And now that you're occupied with Mad Max, what about poor

Dr. Kiley? He's going to be heartbroken."

"I'm sure he'll be just fine, especially since you tend to make a lot of this stuff up in that pretty little head of yours."

She runs a hand through her glossy dark ponytail and swivels in the direction of the elevator. "I'm heading back down. Let me know if you're in the mood to share any of the erotic details later. I'll save you a seat at the lunch table."

I swat at her ass. "What would I do without my supportive friend?"

"Well, now I know who you'd do." She winks and disappears back into the elevator.

I smooth down the front of my scrubs and take a deep breath. The agitation still pools in my belly, but I ignore it. I can't worry about Max's extracurricular activities right now. I need to focus on something much more important. The doors leading to the Pediatric Oncology Unit are painted a bright yellow, and the walls are alive with brightly colored flowers, trees, butterflies...all the makings of a beautiful and cheerful spring day. But beyond those doors, there is an ominous cloud that looms. No matter how much positivity we feed this wing, the deep-rooted fear is still ever-present.

I take a deep breath and hit the button to open the double doors. Little voices echo in the expansive space, and just being here makes me smile.

"Nurse Sloane! You're here! Are you going to play in our Fortnite Championship?" One of the little boys, Ian, asks me.

I bend down and give the bill of his baseball cap a little tug. "Sorry, pal. I can't today. We have a new patient named Eli, and I'm going to meet him."

“Did you find a really cool buddy for him yet?”

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I smile. “Not yet. I need to find out a little bit about him first, you know? I want to make sure I find him the perfect buddy.”

“I think Eli is really sad.” Cassie, one of the little girls, frowns. “I tried to say hi last night, but he told me to go away. I feel bad for him. I hope his buddy can help him.”

I give Cassie a quick hug. “Well, that’s the plan. I want to find just the right person for him, someone who can make him happy, because you know what all of the doctors and nurses say, right?”

“To stay happy and positive. That’s how we beat the cancer.” Cassie smiles. “We need to make Eli happy and positive, too.”

“Exactly.” I stand up and wave to the other kids playing in the large alcove. “So wish me luck. I’m going to meet him now.”

“Good luck!” Cassie and Ian say in unison, returning to their game.

I stop by the nurses’ station and grin at the head nurse, Clara. “Good morning!”

“My, my, don’t you look chipper this morning, sweetie!” Clara leans in. “Did you have a hot date last night?”

“No, actually, I’ve been here since last night.” I snicker. “The only big date I had was with a pile of patient charts.”

Clara laughs. “Well, that couldn’t have been too steamy, now could it?”

I tighten my ponytail and laugh. “Not if you count gangrene, a flare-up of irritable bowel syndrome, and a severed finger to be super sexy.”

“Not even close. I have no desire to live vicariously through you, sweetie. No offense.”

I wink at Clara. “None taken.”

“So you’re going to see Eli, hmm?” Clara shakes her head. “Poor thing. He’s having a really rough time. You know, his older brother is really the one taking care of him right now. Mother is a junkie who just got picked up for possession after the diagnosis came in. I guess she couldn’t handle it. The father took off years ago. I don’t think they have any contact with him anymore. It’s bad, sweetie. And I don’t know that a buddy is going to help with his problems. But I’m sure your smiling face will cheer him up a bit.”

My heart clenches. Un-freaking-believable. “Is Social Services involved?”

“Well, the brother is twenty-one years old, so he is the legal guardian. Social Services can’t do much about that.”

I furrow my brow, scanning his chart. Acute something or other leukemia. “Does the brother know what he’s in for? Does he go to school or work? How is he going to do this on his own?”

“The doctors have discussed everything with him, and he said he will do whatever Eli needs.” Clara covers my hand with her own. “Sweetie, you know you can’t solve everyone’s problems. I can see the wheels turning behind those pretty eyes of yours. You take on way too much, and it isn’t healthy for you. Your job is to give him something to look forward to, a shoulder to cry on, someone to make him laugh, someone to comfort him when he’s feeling sad or scared.”



I let out a deep sigh. “I know, it’s just that I hate these kinds of cases. How can such deadbeats become parents? How can you hear your son has just been diagnosed with a serious, potentially terminal illness, and you shove the responsibility at your other kid and go get blasted as an escape? I mean, how do you live with yourself? That poor kid doesn’t need a buddy. He needs his freaking parents!” I slap a hand on the top of the desk. “Okay! I have to get back to happy Sloane and leave pissed-off Sloane here with you.” I wink at Clara. “Sorry about that. I’ll be by later to pick her up.”

“I love your alter-ego, too, so take your time, sweetie.”

I turn down one of the hallways toward Room 16. My sneakers squeak on the freshly scrubbed tile floor, and I stop outside of the door, taking in a deep breath. The sharp smell of antiseptic cleaner fills my lungs and I let it out, along with all of the anxiety of meeting this new patient. I inch toward the door and knock twice before entering.

Eli is sitting up in his bed. He stares at an open book in his hands, never lifting his head.

“Eli,” I say in a soft voice. “My name is Nurse Sloane. I just wanted to stop by to say hello.” I creep closer to the bed, taking ginger steps, not wanting to upset him at all. “Can I get you anything? Are you hungry or thirsty?”

Still no response. I can’t blame him. Being diagnosed with this kind of a disease at his age, dealing with the loss of the only parent you know, feeling scared, alone, and helpless...it all makes my stomach roll.

He raises his dark eyes to mine, narrows them, and says in a biting tone, “Why don’t you just get out of here? I didn’t ask for anything, and I don’t want anything.”

I bite my lower lip. “Eli, I...I don’t understand what you’re feeling right now, so I

won't pretend by saying I do. What I do know is that there are people here who want to make you as comfortable as possible and to help you get well. That's what I do. So, while you might not want anyone around right now, when you decide you do, I'll be here."

His eyes fill with tears and he clenches the bed sheet, forgetting about the book in his lap. "Did anyone tell you I don't have a dad? Or that my mom is a drug addict who'd rather get high than be with me, her sick son?"

I nod. "I can't imagine how hard—"

"No, you can't." A deeper voice comes from the doorway, and I spin around with a gasp to find a taller version of Eli standing behind me with the same hardened look on his face.

"Oh, you must be Eli's brother. My name is Nurse Sloane. I just wanted to stop by to say hello and to see if he needed anything."

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Eli's brother nods. "I'm Tommy. And thanks for stopping by, but we have everything we need."

"O-okay," I stammer. Eli is still glaring at me, and Tommy crosses the room without so much as a passing glance. "I guess I'll just go."

"Thanks." Tommy's voice makes my heart ache, but I know there isn't any more I can do for them right now. They need time together to come to terms with Eli's illness and his prognosis, which, according to his chart, isn't good.

I turn to leave the room, and Tommy's voice softens for his little brother.

"I brought you my iPad." There is a rustling of a bag and then a few pings, dings, and bleeps of a video game. The music forces my lips into a sad smile.

He's a Fortnite fan, too.

I pull the door closed behind me and tears spring to my eyes. I love what I do. I love that this program can bring slivers of happiness to kids when they need it most.

But God, I hate that I need to do it.

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Max

I scrub a hand down the front of my face and pick through the stack of papers on my desk. My eye falls to the corner of my office where a lone Louisville Slugger baseball bat stands against a file cabinet.

Sometimes when I look at it, my fingers actually twitch a little, like they're going through withdrawal or some shit like that. I keep it there to remind me of the reasons why it's no longer in the trunk of my car.

A normal life. A steady, respectable for the most part, job. A somewhat solid future.

But most of all, Sloane.

These are the things that keep me focused.

Ninety-nine percent of the time.

But then memories bubble up without warning...like the one where Gabe's bloody body flashes before my eyes.

All because of me.

I didn't handle shit the right way on Thanksgiving. I let rage control my actions, and my buddy got fucking iced because of it.

Mikey knew what he was doing when he snatched Layla. He knew I'd show up

without an army of soldiers. He knew he'd get my ear, plant the seed, and then let us walk. He wanted his message to be heard, that he was on his way up again, as the head of his own family, and we'd better be ready for him. Back when Cappodamo was alive, Mikey was just the messenger. A nobody. All muscle, no brains.

He's still dumb as fuck, but now he's got a lot of clueless and dangerous degenerates looking for leadership since the heads of the Cappodamo crime family were wiped out.

By us.

More specifically by Nico and Shaye, the ones least likely to fire guns.

Who the fuck could have predicted that?

And now Mikey is picking up the pieces and putting them all together, making promises to his minions that he'll line their pockets with cash if they give him the loyalty he needs to take over and do business under his own family name.

King of the dipshits.

He has no desire to do anything legitimate. Flying under the radar has never been his MO. He's like a peacock, shaking his ass feathers so everyone knows he's there. And he's been shaking them since Luca Cappodamo was dropped six feet under, ending the legacy of the Cappodamo family.

I fist my hair. I shouldn't be thinking about any of this. It's not my place anymore.

It never really was, but that didn't stop me from going out to Brooklyn that Thanksgiving night. It didn't stop me from walking into a death trap with no regard for who or what I'd left behind.

“You’re a thug, Max. That’s all you’ll ever be. It’s the only thing you’re good at.”

With one sweep of my hand, all of the papers littering my desk are now scattered on the floor. I groan and collapse against the back of my chair. Because putting those fucking piles together again is gonna help me keep my shit together, right?

And now I have a real reason to do it.

“Doing a little early spring cleaning?” Nico appears in the doorway, holding out an espresso from Starbucks.

“Well, since you made me fire the cleaning crew, I figured...” I shrug, a smirk lifting my lips. I nod at the cup. “You don’t think I’m wound up enough these days? You figured I really need more caffeine, huh?”

Nico puts the cup in front of me and takes a long gulp of his own. “Listen, I know this has been a shitty few weeks for you. I’m here to see what you need. Let me help you out if I can.”

“I don’t need help.”

“So, the construction plans are moving along without any issues? You’ve got all of the supplies and labor you need, for the agreed-upon price...”

I let out a deep sigh and push back from the desk. “Billy Moretti.”

“What about him?” Nico leans forward. “That slimy bastard is always looking to plug both holes at the same time. What’s his problem?”

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“He wants a bigger slice of the pie. He says he’s putting in more than the other contractors and has a bigger crew. He threatened to walk if I don’t cut him a new deal.”

“So let him walk.”

“I can’t find anyone else who can start right away and has enough people to get this project done on time. If the work stops, the money flow stops. For fucking everyone...including you.”

Nico nods. “So, what do you want to do about it?”

I roll my eyes at him. “What the fuck do you think I wanna do? I want to smash in his skull!”

“But you haven’t so far. I’m proud of you.” Nico snickers.

“I’m damn close, though,” I mutter, taking a sip of the biting-hot liquid. My mouth twists. I really don’t like espresso, but it’s a lot like me...sharp, bitter, and hard to swallow. I know my ways didn’t always sit well with everyone in the organization, but they got shit done. Now I’m sitting here with my thumb up my ass because I can’t get people to do their damn jobs even if I wave hard cash in their faces.

These schmucks seem to respond better when you’re holding a tire iron against their faces instead.

I guess the threat of death is more of a driver than money.

“You’ll handle it. I have faith in you.” Nico taps his fingertips on the desk. “Seriously, I know you’re under a lot of stress right now. Your father is flaking out, leaving all of this on you, but I want you to know we all appreciate you rescuing this project. It’s gonna mean a lot of money for all of us once it’s all finished. Nobody is going to forget who got the job done, Max.”

I rake a hand through my hair, my throat tight. I do not want to talk about my father, and I know Nico well enough to see that the conversation is headed in a very bad direction. I need to divert. Now.

“Are you guys going down to Miami for her spring break this year?” There. That’s a good segue. I think I heard Shaye mention something about a trip while I was fantasizing about Sloane during our drive to school the other day. That’ll keep Nico’s focus off of my father, wherever the fuck he is right now.

Sometimes I think it’s better that I don’t know.

Especially when I already have some pretty damn serious suspicions, ones I don’t dare share with anyone.

Loyalty to the family comes before loyalty to anyone else...parents, siblings, children.

That’s the code. And it’s understood by everyone.

I’ve just been ignoring it lately, but the time will come when I will have to make a decision.

The clock has already started. And I’m angry as fuck enough to pull the plug on him and whatever game he’s playing.



“Nah. We talked about taking my parents and Lily, but Dad is still recovering, so I think it needs to wait a little longer.” He nods his head at me. “How about you? You thinking about taking a break at all?”

“With all of this shit hanging over my head? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“You need to get away, Max.” Nico’s voice drops. “Clear your head. Get game ready. This project is going to launch you to the top, but you need to reset. At least for a long weekend.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “I can’t. Not yet.” I wonder what Nico knows, and what he might do if I’m suddenly out of the picture for a few days.

My best friend always has an ear to the ground. He knows shit before anyone else. Part of it is because he’s been so ingrained in this organization, practically from birth. He sees things that most people miss, and he knows how to connect dots.

I hate that about him. It makes it harder to keep him in the dark. And I know there’s something going on with my father, something bad. Something dangerous for all of us.

“With Luca and Frank both gone, the Cappodamo family is effectively crushed. Moretti may have given you a few headaches, but even he’s not stupid enough to cause issues with this job. He’ll come around because we’re the big game in town now. If he wants to work, he knows it’s gonna have to be with us.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.”

“Who the hell else is gonna be lining his pockets? And besides, where does he get off making demands on you?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like something is off. He’s never been this much of a prick about our arrangement before.”

Nico shrugs and takes another sip of his espresso. “If it bothers you so much, look into it. Figure out if there really is something going on that we don’t know.”

I watch Nico gulp the rest of his coffee and toss the empty cup into the trash basket in the corner. He doesn’t look fazed at all about this Moretti bullshit. I must be making shit up in my head. And if there was something to worry about, Nico would already have it covered. Not that he’d necessarily tell me about it. Everything is on a need-to-know basis with this family. It drives me fucking bananas sometimes, but that’s the way we roll.

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Especially Nico. He keeps shit pretty close to the vest unless he absolutely needs to let people in on it. He's gotten fucked in the past for letting too many people in on things, and now he protects his information like it's his kid.

He doesn't take chances. Not anymore.

It's not worth the risks.

I know he probably thinks I'm overreacting. It wouldn't be the first time, either. But this isn't about me rescuing my reputation and showing those assholes in the family that I can do more than beat the shit out of people. This is about a nagging feeling I have in my gut that will not go away...the kind that tells me there is trouble ahead for us. Mikey pretty much confirmed that on Thanksgiving. He grabbed Layla to tell us he can get in close when he wants to. But since I have nothing but a prick contractor as evidence of a problem, nobody wants to hear about it.

The other nagging feeling, the one I continue failing to report to Nico, is the one about my father.

He's here and then he's not.

And he was the first person to blow off my suspicion about Moretti being on the take for someone else.

Clue number one that I'm on to something big. I may not have the business sense that Nico does, but I can see shady shit pretty damn clearly when it's happening in front of my face.

And when I figure it out...because I fucking will...I have no idea how the hell I'm gonna fix it.

And the voice inside of my head picks that moment to speak up.

You know exactly how to fix it.

You just don't want to be the one to pull the trigger.

Sloane

I walk out of the hospital, exhausted, blinking in the bright sunlight. My back is stiff, my hair probably needs a crazy intense wash, and my feet...holy crap. Walking hurts. Every time my foot hits the pavement, I wince. Pins and needles...how did they even have a chance to form since I've literally been on my feet for the past twelve hours, other than the few bathroom breaks I took?

I pull out my messy bun, letting my hair fall over my shoulders. It doesn't matter. I'll be in the shower soon enough. I tug my coat tighter around me since there's a biting chill in the air. The more steps I take, the more convinced I am that a hot bath is what I need. Screw standing. I'm tired of standing.

I shade my eyes with a hand and peer into the parking lot. Where the heck did I even park? I can't remember. I lose all track of time when I work a few days in a row, and truth be told, I'd have to really think about what day it is.

"You look a little lost for someone who practically lives here."

I swallow a gasp and jump. "Max! What the heck are you doing here?" I squint at him. "Do you even know what time it is?"

He grins. "I do. I've been waiting for a long time for you. I thought you got off at seven, but I didn't realize that meant seven in the morning."

I furrow my brow. "You've been here in the parking lot since last night?" Why won't the cobwebs clear?

“Not quite. Although, would that impress you?”

I narrow my eyes. “Since sleep is such a commodity for me, I’d say no, that if you waited for me for twelve hours when you could be home in bed, you’d need to have your head examined.”

“You wouldn’t be flattered at all?”

“Was that your plan? To impress me?”

“Not quite.”

“So why are you here?” I need coffee. Massive amounts of coffee. There is something happening here, and dammit, I just can’t figure it out.

“I want to take you to breakfast.”

I run a hand through my hair, and my eyes widen. Holy shit. My hair! My greasy, grimy, frizzy hair! “Shit,” I mutter, my brain finally deciding to wake up. “I’m, um, not exactly presentable enough to eat in public.”

“You look gorgeous. You look like a woman who’s spent the last twelve hours of her life helping people in need. I can’t imagine anything sexier.”

A hot flush creeps up the sides of my face. “Thanks, but I, um, I don’t really think—”

“I don’t want you to think.” He inches closer, his heated stare causing my knees to wobble against each other. “I just want you to join me for breakfast.” He pulls open the passenger side door of his truck, and I slide inside, sinking into the pebbled leather seat.

“You know, I’m not really sure how to take this version of Maximo Oriani.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

Max closes my door and jogs around to the other side, opening the door. “What are you talking about? I’m just being my normal, charming self.” He flops into the seat and guns the engine.

“Your ‘normal, charming self’ is actually kind of moody. And confrontational. And shut down.”

“I’m not allowed to have a bad day? Or month?” A teasing smile lifts his lips. I lock my knees together, fighting the urge to crush my own lips to his right now. In fact, the only thing that stops me is the fact that I need to brush my teeth. Badly.

“You’re entitled.” I shrug. “I know you’re human. Well, at least I think that’s the case. Most of the time.”

He clutches a hand to his heart and puts the car in Drive. “That hurts, Sloane. After I bore my soul to you the other night?”

“Look, don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you’re opening up, but like I said, we’ve gone down this path before. Sue me if I’m still a little gun shy.”

“You weren’t shy at all the other night.”

I swallow hard. No. I wasn’t. I should have played a little harder to get, darn it. Instead, I was a complete whore for him, and I’d do it again in a hot second if given the chance. “I just can’t figure you out, Max.” And quite honestly, I’m afraid to even try.

“Sometimes I can’t figure me out either,” he muses, maneuvering the car out of the

parking lot.

“Imagine how the rest of us feel.” I comb my fingers through my hair and cringe at the texture. I am so gross right now. How am I sitting here, even thinking about showing my face in public?



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“You’re pretty funny, you know that?”

I snicker. “Well, I’ve had to entertain you a lot recently. Luckily, you appreciate my brand of humor.”

“Trust me, it’s not the only thing I appreciate.”

My breath hitches. Dammit, why can’t I just keep it together? Why do I have to fall more in love with every cute thing he says? Who even knows if there’s anything behind it? And a tiny part of me is just waiting for him to bail out on the benefit. It’s too real for him. He always flaked out when things got too real...and that’s when I’d be left with the shattered heart.

Not him, me.

There always seemed to be a line of dipshit girls with porn-star bodies waiting around for their chance to take him for a test drive. It never went farther than that, but it still singed my insides every time I’d see one or two or three of them draped all over him.

I’m not over all of that. I want to be, but his grip on me is more like a chokehold.

Today, I’m his sanity.

Tomorrow, who knows what he’ll need?

Or whom he’ll beat to a pulp?

Pete's bruised face flashes in front of my eyes, and my stomach churns.

"Look, Sloane, I know I messed things up between us before, and I get why you're not ready to strip down for me right here and now. I don't deserve it."

I roll my eyes at him and let out a deep sigh. "So what's changed, Max? What makes this the right time? Because the way I see it, your priorities haven't changed. 'Business' is at the top. It always has been. It's why things fell apart between us years ago, the first time we tried to do something about..." I wave my hands around. "Whatever this thing between us is. You'd get a call or a text and just leave me in the lurch. I never got the courtesy of an explanation. And I don't even want to go back to what happened on Thanksgiving, the second time things blew up between us. You'd offer some lame, evasive excuse, and that's not what I'm looking for. I want more. I want someone who puts me first. Can you even do that?" Jesus, those words definitely woke my ass up. I didn't even realize they'd tumbled from my mouth until it was too late. I take a deep breath. They'd been buried for far too long. And whatever his reaction turns out to be, at least I'll know I was finally honest with him.

He should have heard all of that a long time ago, but better late than never.

I stare out the windshield. I don't know if I want to see his reaction to all of that. It may mean this is over...not that we ever really got started.

"Sloane, my business...it's really important to me. I have a lot of responsibilities, and my actions impact a lot of people."

"That's great," I snap. "My 'business' is really important to me, too, but I want more out of life than just pride in my work. I take care of tons of people, and I'm damn good at it, but it's not my whole life."

"That's the thing, Sloane." He pulls into the parking lot of a nearby diner and swings

the car into an empty spot. Actually, they're all empty at this hour. "This job is my life. I didn't ask for it to be, and I don't always love it, but I was grandfathered into it. I don't have the luxury of choosing a different career path. This is it for me." He cups my chin and turns my face toward him. "But I have this problem..."

I grit my teeth, trying so hard to be angry with him, to hate him so that I can preserve my fragile heart. But his dark eyes beckon me, drawing me into their depths where I know I can so easily and blissfully float away without a second thought. "What would that be?"

"You," he murmurs, his fingertips stroking the side of my face. "You're the problem. I know I should stay away, but I just can't."

I hate him. I have to hate him! But God, I really hate that I can't stop myself from falling more in love with him right now.

I'm so done. Sucked in. Completely captivated.

And let's not forget royally screwed.

My eyes float closed. I don't even know who he is...really and truly. He throws me a few crumbs, and I lick them up, wishing and praying for more until he shuts down, like he always does. I know what comes next, but it's always devastating.

Why do I put myself through this?

He continues to caress my face with his fingers, his breath like feathers fluttering against my cheek. "Max," I whisper.

"Yeah?"

“I...” My eyes float open. “I can’t be cast aside again. I’m not your toy, something you play with for a little while until you get bored of it and go out looking for something more exciting.”

“Okay, first, I could never get bored playing with you.” He smirks, tracing the outline of my jaw. “And second, I’m open to playing with toys and any other kinky shit you’re into. Just so we’re on the same page.”

I swat at his arm. “I’m not joking around.”

“Neither am I.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds and a loud rumbling noise comes from under my oversized coat. I clap a hand over my mouth to stifle the giggle.

“Good thing there’s a diner right here.” He winks at me and turns off the car.

My shoulder deflate as the sigh expels from my body. He jumps out of the car and runs around to my side, letting me out. I gaze up at him. “I want to believe that you’re really in this.”

“I am.” He leans toward me, pressing my back against the car, his hands on either side of me. “I’m trying to be the guy you need, Sloane. Really trying.”

“Should it be that much of an effort?”

“No,” he murmurs. “It shouldn’t. But it is. For me, it just is. And if you’re okay with that, then I’d like to get you something to eat before you gnaw off your own arm.”

I fold my arms. “Okay. But I’m only saying this because the hunger has effectively wiped out any rational thoughts I may have convincing me to run in the opposite direction.”

“Good.” He laces his fingers with mine, and we walk into the diner. It’s empty, save for the hostess and a waitress who is making coffee. Such a beautiful sight!

Although, once my mind is fully awake, I may realize what the hell I just agreed to.

I breathe in Max's spicy scent.

Screw it. I know what I'm doing.

Kind of.

The hostess leads us to a table in the back and hands us menus. I flip mine open and my mouth waters at the pictures of fluffy pancakes, crispy bacon, and decadent chocolate croissants.

"So what looks good?" he asks me.

"Um, everything?" I giggle. "I think the last thing I ate was a single Baked Lays chip five hours ago. The I had to run down to X-Ray to pick up a patient. One of the other nurses, my friend Jules, finished the bag for me. Wasn't that sweet of her?"

"Well, if you'd finished that bag, maybe you wouldn't have been as willing to come here with me and I'd be sitting here by myself, ready to devour the place alone."

"Oh, I don't know about that. The hostess hasn't been able to drag her eyes away from you since we walked in. I'm pretty sure she'd have loved to keep you company."

Max grins at me. "Would that have made you jealous?"

"Maybe."

"Good."

A loud ping comes from Max's pocket, and he pulls out his phone. He stares at the screen without saying a word, but the smile that had appeared so quickly is gone just

as fast. His eyes darken, lips stretch into a thin line.

“Is something wrong?”

He doesn’t answer right away. He grips the phone tight in his hands, his fingertips white. It looks like he’s trying to swallow something down, like there’s something deep inside of him looking to get out but he won’t let it. His entire body tenses, and I’m not even sure if he’s breathing. His eyes are still locked on the screen, shoulders squared.

“Max?” I reach out to graze his forearm and his eyes shoot up spewing fire. The last time I saw that glare was when he ran into Shaye at the mall talking to her psychology professor, and accused her of cheating on Nico. I thought he was going pummel the poor guy. It had been a long time since I’d seen that crazed look in his eye. It probably should have made me run in the opposite direction, but I stayed.

And even after what I heard that guy Pete grunt into his phone, I still got into Max’s car this morning. I still slid into a booth with him at this diner. I still never confronted him.

So here we are. Me and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong?” I ask when he doesn’t answer.

“No,” he mutters, raking a hand through his hair. “I can’t.”

A tiny part of me is relieved. If he doesn’t admit to anything, it can’t be real. Or at least, that’s what I want to believe. “Okay.” I close my menu and take a deep breath, silently berating myself for letting him avoid the question. No, screw that! “You know it helps when both people actually contribute to a conversation. Like, I ask you a question and you answer it, then—”

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“Sloane, do you realize how much shit I need to keep to myself every day? It is literally life or death if I don’t.”

My eyes widen. “Did someone...?”

“No.”

“Are we always going to play these games? And am I always going to have to be happy with whatever you decide is enough to tell me? Is that supposed to make me feel comfortable with your ‘business’ life?”

“It may not make you feel comfortable, but it’s what I can offer.” His eyes take on an unfamiliar sadness. “It’s all I can offer.”

“How am I supposed to feel good about that? Knowing that you can never be fully honest with me because someone might get hurt? Or killed?”

“Don’t you understand that if I am fully honest, it can put you in danger?” He sighs. “You have to believe that I want to make this work. But just like you aren’t allowed to talk about your patients, I can’t talk about my...clients. Every business has its own rules.”

“I don’t know if I can abide by those rules.”

I furrow my brow as a grimace twists Max’s face.

“Nurse Sloane.”



I nearly jump out of the booth when I hear my name. I twist around in the direction of the deep voice with the Brooklyn accent I'd become acquainted with a short time ago. "Oh, um, hi, uh...Gianni, right?"

Gianni smiles at me, but not the kind of smile that says Hey, it's so nice to see you again. It's more the kind of smile that says I'm the kind of dude that's gonna make your skin crawl. And it does.

He peels his gaze off of me and targets Max with his beady eyes. "If it isn't Maximo Oriani. It's been a long time. A very long time."

"Not long enough," Max grunts.

"You look surprised to see me. I figured someone must have told you I was on my way out here." Gianni walks closer to him. "I guess not."

"Must not have been important enough to mention," Max shoots back.

I swallow hard. What in the hell is going on here? They're both eyeing each other like they want to tear each other's heads off, and I may be the only thing stopping them. "Gianni," I blurt out. "How's your shoulder?"

He places a hand over his sling. "Well, it looks like I won't be playing much baseball in the next few months. Good thing I already had the game of my life."

I let out a nervous giggle. "I'm sure you'll be good as new for the next season."

"Yep. I'll be ready by then for sure. Until then, I think I'll keep those Louisville Slugger bats in my trunk." His eyes flicker back to Max. "You know, Oriani, life doesn't begin and end with baseball. I may be down, but I ain't out. Not by a long shot. You get the joke, right?" Gianni slowly reaches into his jacket, and before I can

even blink, Max grabs a fork off the table and shoots up from the pleather-cushioned booth, his arm around Gianni's neck. The fork is about half an inch away from Gianni's carotid artery, and a tingling sensation in my left arm indicates that I am damn-close to having a panic attack.

"Max!" I gasp, leaping out of the seat. "What the hell are you doing?"

Gianni lets out a dry laugh and drops a card onto the table. "Always ready to plug someone. Some things never change."

Max lets him go and straightens his jacket as the hostess rushes over. "Is everything okay? I just saw...is he...are you all...?"

"Everything is fine," I rasp, struggling to calm my breathing. "Just a little misunderstanding." I look at the guys. "Right?" Oh Jesus, please say I'm right!

They mumble a response, and the hostess rushes back to her spot behind the cash register where she is no doubt making sure her cell phone is ready to dial the cops at any second.

My eyes fall to the card right before Max sweeps it away and into his pocket. It only had a number on it. That's all. No name, no address, no graphic. Just a number.

Gianni adjusts his sling and reaches out to take my hand. "Thanks again, Nurse Sloane. I guess we won't be going on that dinner date after all. In that case, I'll have to find another reason to come out here to Jersey again." He flashes a nasty smile at Max. "I'm sure I can find at least one."

"Take care of yourself, Gianni," I reply, my voice shaking like I've almost witnessed a fatal forking in a dingy diner in a crappy part of town.

Oh wait.

I did.

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He nods to me and then to Max who is still gripping that fork in his hand.

“Max,” I hiss when the door chimes jangle, indicating that Gianni has escaped a rather bloody fate. “What the hell was that? You took a fork to his goddamn throat! In a diner!”

The fork clatters on the Formica tabletop. “We have a history. I thought he might have had a weapon on him.”

“Are you freaking kidding me? He had one working arm!”

“Not kidding. I’ve seen him do plenty of things with fewer working limbs that would make your head spin.”

“And what about you?”

“No, they didn’t make my head spin.”

I groan and clutch the sides of my head. “Who grabs a fork to stab someone like that? Why would you even feel the need to do that and put him in a chokehold? He’s already handicapped!”

“He’s a dangerous guy, Sloane. And he’s unpredictable. I was protecting myself. And you.”

“You don’t think you overreacted just a little bit?”

“If he’d have pulled a gun and fired off a couple of shots, would it have been an overreaction?”

“No, but he didn’t.”

“He could have.”

“So this is what you do every day, huh? Your actual job?”

“Professional fork assassin? No. that’s not my official title. Although,” he taps his fingertips on the table. “It has a nice ring. Good for the resume.”

“You’re making fun of me, and I’m just trying to find out why the hell I’m sitting across from a guy who is as evasive as they come and would think nothing of gouging someone with silverware.”

“Well, fuck me if I’m wrong, but I think it’s because it excites you.”

“You’re sick.”

“And yet you’re still sitting here. What does that tell you?”

I roll my eyes. “Is he a business associate?”

“I would never do business with an asshole like that.”

“So what’s the issue? Why is there so much bad blood?”

Max’s chiseled features soften, and he’s back to being Mr. Hyde. “Um, do you not know me at all? I don’t exactly leave most people with a warm and fuzzy.”

My head drops into my hands. “Oh my God. What the hell am I doing with you? I don’t know if I’m getting you or your alter-ego half the time.”

“But that’s good, right? I mean, that tells me you know half the time who you are getting. I think that’s more than what other people can say about me. Besides, my alter-ego is a sexy fuck.”

“Yeah, sexy like The Incredible Hulk.” I roll my eyes. “I mean, come on! What the hell were you going to do with that fork? Was what happened between you that bad that you had to resort to using cutlery as a scare tactic?”

“Well, my baseball bat is back at the office, so…” He snickers and sips his water.

“You have a response for everything, don’t you?”

“Isn’t that what makes a conversation? Didn’t you yell at me for being a crappy conversationalist before? That if it’s one-sided it’s not really a conversation? I’m just trying to do what you told me. How can that be bad? I think most women would appreciate a man listening to them and taking their advice.”

I shake my head as my tall stack of blueberry pancakes is set in front of me. “Let me consider my answer while I devour these babies. I’ll be in a better frame of mind once my stomach stops grumbling, and I can shower off the past twelve hours.”

Max’s fingers creep over to mine and stroke the top of my hand. “I have a lot of things to contribute to this part of the conversation if you’re interested.”

“And what part would that be?”

“The part where I explain, in great detail, what I’m going to do to you during that shower and exactly what I’m going to devour once I get you home.”

“The suspense is killing me.” I pop a heaping forkful of pancakes dripping with syrup onto my fork. “Ha. No pun intended.”

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Max

That motherfucker had some nerve showing up like that at the diner. If he pulls that shit again, I will tear his fucking arm off his scumbag body and then he won't have to worry about a sore shoulder anymore. A fierce pang assaults my gut, and the voices taunt me.

That fucker also knows you're with Sloane, which puts her in danger.

You need to deal with that.

With him.

Fast, before he takes anything else from you...

I grit my teeth, desperate to silence the voices, at least for a little while. I know they'll be back to haunt me later.

They always do.

My cock twitches as Sloane's scrubs fall to the floor. She doesn't know that she's putting on a show for me right now. I think that even after all of that coffee, she's still not fully awake.

I plan to change that. Like, right now.

I get up from a chair in the corner of her bedroom and come up behind her. Her hair



is still twisted and sitting on top of her head. I unclip the thing holding it all together and it falls gently to her bare shoulders.

She winces in the mirror. “It smells. Please don’t stick your face into it.”

I don’t listen. I don’t care what it smells like. I part the strands and taste the smooth skin of her neck, making her knees buckle when I take hold of her earlobe with my teeth. She falls back against me, her head thrown back, mouth letting out tiny mewls as I feast on her.

And for the record, the only thing I smell is coconuts.

“You’re gorgeous,” I murmur, my fingertips flicking open the back of her bra. She slides each arm out, and I let it flutter to the floor next to her scrubs. I knead her breasts, flicking the nipples one at a time as she backs up against me, her perfect ass in line with my hard cock. Good God, I want to drive into her right now.

Her eyes flutter open, half-way, that seductive look making my balls ache with need. I love watching her like this, seeing her reflection in the mirror, aroused at how her body responds to mine. It’s hot as fuck, and this teasing is gonna make me erupt before I even have a chance to feel that soft pussy clench around my dick.

Like I’m in fucking high school or some shit like that.

I slide a hand down, skimming the top of her panties. My fingers loop into the elastic, and I push them to her ankles. She kicks them off and turns around with a mischievous smile on her face. “Should we take this somewhere else? Wasn’t that part of your plan?”

“I have so many plans, it’s hard to keep them straight. I hope you don’t have much going on for the next four or five hours.”

She lets out a soft giggle, laying her arms around my shoulders and pressing herself against me. “You’re wearing too many clothes right now. It won’t be any fun if we try to pull off those jeans in the shower. You’d better leave them here. I think the rest of it should come off, too. It might get in the way.”

Oh, hell yeah, it will. Our frenzied fingers work fast to get me naked, and I fist her hair, crushing my lips against hers. Mmm, blueberries.

Good Christ, I’m so crazy about this girl.

She welcomes my tongue, coiling it with her own, the heat of her mouth warming my entire body. I grip the globes of her ass, squeezing and making her squeal as I lift her into my arms and back her into the bathroom. I sit her on the sink, the head of my cock grazing her opening. A jolt zips through me, making my gut clench and I plunge into her depths, drowning in her juices. She locks her legs around my waist and I know this is bad, I know I’m not wearing a condom, but damn, she feels so fucking good wrapped tight around my dick. I promise myself it’ll only be for a second, but the long, deep strokes make my cock throb and thicken inside of her.

She whimpers into my neck, pressing her fingertips into my hips, pushing me deeper inside. “Max,” she whisper-cries, clenching her muscles with each thrust of her hips. “Oh my God, that’s so incredible. Please, don’t stop. I need you deeper. Now!”

I tilt her backward, lifting her ass upward so I can drive into her, plundering her body with my desire. Her whimpers turn into tiny screams that I know she wants to really let loose but paper-thin walls make her resist.

Which is a good thing, considering the fact that her dad is only a few steps away and armed with some very sharp cutlery of his own. Since I’d like to be able to keep doing this with his daughter and not lose my balls in the process, I graze her lips with mine to occupy that devious mouth of hers. She fists my hair, tugging it as I thrust

harder and faster. I grasp one of her breasts, my dick filling with cum. No, no, no! I'm not ready. It's too fucking good, and I can't pull out now!

"Max," she rasps. "Come with me. Now. Please. I want us to come together."

"I can't," I whisper. "I don't have—"

"It's fine. Pill." She grips me harder, digging her nails into my hips then sliding her hands over my ass. "Oh, God, don't stop!" She squeezes her eyes shut, her face flushed a deep pink color, and she's never looked more fucking beautiful to me. A little wail escapes her lips and I pull her close, thrusting once, twice, three times before the explosion rumbles through me like an avalanche gathering speed and power down a mountain side. I hold her tight against me, drowning in some mixture of lust and love, hoping she feels the same way. I shudder, filling her with everything I have. We collapse against each other, our bodies slick with sweat, chests heaving with sharp and ragged breaths.

I've never had such amazing sex in a bathroom before.

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I've never had such amazing sex before, period.

I stroke the slope of Sloane's back, running a hand over her smooth, flushed skin and she shivers, a tiny giggle escaping her full lips. "That tickles."

I love you. I love you. I love you.

If I open my mouth, those three words may just slip out.

But I almost intentionally assaulted a guy with a fork right in front of her. I didn't miss the expression of utter horror on her face. And the questions...she's no idiot.

Then again, despite what I did, here we are, so...maybe she's the type to overlook certain things.

I can't tell her. Not yet. It's too soon.

Besides, I have the Bonnaros to deal with. They're dangerous and unpredictable. And Gianni has seen me with her. He knows who she is...where she works...

Fuck! Telling her I love her is dragging her in deeper when I should be responsible and just walk away. Every time I take a few steps forward, I slip and fall down the fucking stairs again, back into the dredges of my thug life.

Because it's just my nature. Like everyone says, it's what I'm good at.

Right now, I need to get good at something else or what I love will be put in

jeopardy. I know how these fuckers work. Revenge cuts fucking deep into the lives of everyone you love, and if I really love Sloane, I have to figure out how to stop these guys before she gets hurt.

Or worse.

I couldn't live with myself if my past mistakes come back to haunt her.

If anyone lays a fucking finger on her...

I grit my teeth, squeezing her tighter.

"I can feel you tensing up," she whispers, her breath hot against my neck. "Shouldn't you be relaxed right now? I have a really nice fluttery feeling in my belly right now, and I kind of feel like Jell-O. But you feel so stiff...what's up?"

"Stiff is usually a good thing," I murmur, rubbing my hand over her hair then down her arms.

"Yes. But it's usually a good thing when it's limited to certain appendages and we both benefit from its stiffness."

"Well, if that's what you're after, I'm sure it can be arranged."

"I do need a shower."

"I like you dirty."

She drops her head back, her green eyes glittering. "Do you now?"

"Yeah." I nuzzle her neck. "But I'm open to hopping in there with you to make sure

you don't get too clean." I lift her off the sink and watch as she saunters toward the shower and twists the nozzle on. Steam rises from the enclosure and she takes my hand, pulling me toward her.

"I like it really hot," she whispers. "I hope that's not a problem."

I grasp her ass and squeeze. "I never knew you were such a bad girl, Sloane."

"What can I say? You just bring it out of me."

I fist her hair, pulling her face close, our lips crashing against each other. Her eager mouth opens, her teeth nipping at my lower lip. My cock twitches, ready to get into the action. It doesn't take much for him to respond. At least, not when Sloane is the one grasping and stroking him hard with her soft hands.

She opens the shower door, not breaking our kiss, and pulls me inside. Water rushes over us as we clutch each other, our hands everywhere, limbs entwined. I drink her in like I've been wandering around in the desert for days without water and she's the only one who can quench my thirst. My heart hammers against my ribcage as she rubs the head of my dick against her pussy. It swells in her hand, ready to plunge into her heat again.

I just want to fuck her, all day, every day.

Is that bad?

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How can that be bad?

I break our kiss to taste the slope of her neck, not forgetting the sensitive spot behind her ear, and it doesn't disappoint. She falls to her knees, taking my cock deep into her mouth as she cups my balls in her free hand. I lean back against the tile, gritting my teeth, trying hard not to lose my shit just yet. I rake my hands through my hair, pulling it hard to make the pain combat the sparks igniting in my groin. After a few seconds of thinking of things that'll kill my erection, I realize that nothing can battle my desire for this woman. Not a busted skull or an ice pick to the eye. If my cock is in Sloane's mouth, nothing can stop me from blowing my load.

Nothing except pulling my cock out of her mouth...so I can put it somewhere else.

I lift Sloane up slowly so she doesn't slip. "You're fucking amazing," I whisper. "Now let me make you feel the same way, okay?"

She nods, her eyes dark with lust. I turn her around, making her face the tile. I bring a hand down the front of her torso, my fingers plunging into her wet pussy, flicking her clit. Her back arches, her ass pressing against my dick, and she lets out a little yelp. She thrusts against my hand, but I know she wants more when she reaches behind me and grasps my dick again, rubbing it between her ass cheeks.

My breath hitches, and I spread her legs with mine, pressing my cock deep inside of her while my finger keeps rubbing her clit. Her pussy clenches tight around me, sucking me in deep. I thrust into her, one hand on her belly, pressed tight against me. My cock pulsates inside of her as we're assaulted by the hot shower spray. Her legs tighten, her walls pulling me farther inside. She is squeezing me with everything she

has, and white spots flash behind my eyes, blinding me with a passion I've never known.

I let out a loud groan as her hips thrust backward, faster and harder. My free hand grasps one of her breasts, kneading the soft flesh as my mouth attacks the back of her neck. I can't get enough of this girl. She has me...all of me. I never thought I'd ever say that, never really thought I'd want to say it about anyone.

But being with Sloane...she just makes everything better. She makes me want to be better.

But more than that, she makes me look forward into a future where I can have everything I want but never knew I was missing.

I want that future...with her.

That realization doesn't even blow my erection. It only makes me drive into her harder, to connect with her on the deepest level possible.

I need to protect this, to keep her safe, to make sure I can give her everything she needs.

A fire rages deep within me, singeing everything in its path. Sparks shoot out to every limb, the flames raging through my insides, igniting each and every cell. I squeeze my eyes shut as she writhes against me. Our slick bodies slap against each other, the walls of her pussy blanketing my cock in her juices.

"Ahh!" I grit my teeth as the orgasm tears through me, holding her close to my chest. Tremors shoot through me, and my body quakes and quivers.

"That's some pretty impressive rebound time," she rasps, still breathless.



I nod since I still can't really speak. I drop my head onto her shoulder, closing my eyes against the spray of water rushing over me.

"Can you talk?" she teases, slowly twisting around. Her face is flushed a deep shade of pink, her eyes glimmering like jewels. I don't usually notice shit like that, but then again, I've never felt this way about a woman before. I've never pretended to, either. Never said 'I love you' to any woman in my life who wasn't family. I don't bullshit people.

I'm a straight shooter. I don't massage my words because they might hurt someone's feelings. But hey, at least I can say I'm being true to myself...even if it gets me killed, something I've never really been too worried about in the past. I was always too impulsive, always ready to beat the shit out of someone because, why not? What do I have to lose?

I lean my forehead against Sloane's, my lips curling upward. I have something big to lose now, and I need to protect her with all I have. "I think I'm gonna shower here from now on. That okay with you? I feel like the water pressure here is better than at my place."

"Really?" She cocks her head. "The water pressure is better? That's all you've got?"

"You want more?" My grin widens. "Yeah, I know you want more."

She presses her breasts against me, sliding against my overworked cock and dammit, if he doesn't twitch again. I know my rebound rate is impressive, but this is crazy. "I want you to tell me the real reason why you want to shower here from now on."

"How about if I tell you that fucking this perfect pussy is the reason I want to shower here? Is that what you want to hear? That I can't live without it? That I can't think straight unless I'm around you?"

Oh, shit. That last part shouldn't have made it out of my big ass mouth. She blinks fast, as if she questions whether or not I actually said it. Then she smiles and stands on her tiptoes to gently graze my lips with hers. "That's better."

After a few minutes of soaping each other up, we finally drag ourselves out of the shower, and collapse on her bed, wrapped in towels. Sloane leans her head on top of me and kicks a leg over mine, dragging a finger over the black swirls covering my chest and arms.

"Why so many tattoos?"

"There's a lot of my past that I'd like to forget."

She's quiet for a second, and I brace myself for the next question. She deserves honesty, but I know I can't give her that. Not entirely, anyway.

"So you covered it?"

"Yeah. It's easier to look at myself in the mirror when I don't have evidence of my mistakes staring me in the face."

“Were they all mistakes?”

“No.” Some of those fuckers deserved all the shit that came down on them. Like those bastards who kidnapped Shaye. No fucking mercy shown there. But there were some fights that erupted for stupid-ass reasons, mainly because I didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut. I’m just lucky to still be alive. I don’t know how I’ve escaped complete mutilation, if I’m being honest. “But that’s my past, Sloane.” I tilt her chin upward to meet my gaze. “It’s not my future. I’ve done things I’m not proud of, but I’m trying to put that behind me.” I caress the side of her face. “Because I want more for the future.”

“But what about...the fork thing? Are you sure you’re able to put it behind you?”

“It’s never going to be perfect. But I can promise I’ll always do everything to protect you, and that I’ll try to make the right moves, ones that don’t hurt anyone.” Who doesn’t deserve it. I swallow that last bit because I’m not really lying to her if I omit it.

“What if things change and you have to do those things again?” She shakes her head. “I don’t even know what ‘things’ I’m talking about, but they sound pretty dangerous. I just...I understand if you can’t tell me everything, but, Max, sometimes I don’t know who I’m getting with you. This job, it consumes you. And it impacts everything around you. I see it with Nico. I may not know details, but it’s shady as hell. How can you break away from all that? Is it even possible?”

“Not entirely, no. But you mean enough to me where I don’t want to get caught in those situations anymore. I avoid a lot of things I would have done before...because

of you.”

“But you can’t tell me more than that, can you?”

I shake my head. “No. I hope you understand.”

“I don’t.” She averts her eyes. “And it makes me think this is all wrong, that whatever we’re doing should stop. But somehow, I can’t stop thinking about you. I feel empty when you’re not next to me. Lost, almost.” Her gaze flickers back to me. “And even though I know there’s a lot of risk in being with you, I can’t imagine being with anyone else.”

My gut clenches. There’s so much I want to tell her, so much I can’t admit to. If she knew the real person inside of me...the one I’ve tried to bury for the better part of the past few months...I know I’d lose her. That’s why I keep fighting, why I can’t let my father’s words incite me.

It may be one thing I’m good at, but there have to be others.

I just need to dig deep and find them.

If I don’t, I’ll lose something way more valuable than my own life.

I’ll lose the life I can have with Sloane.

I swallow hard, hugging her tight against my chest. So many words are caught in my throat, forming a lump that rivals the size of a golf ball. “I love...that you feel that way.” I roll her on top of me. I need to see her face, to look deep into her eyes, to figure out if there’s a chance she’ll ever let herself feel the way I do.

But all I see are concern, apprehension, and doubt.

Not exactly what I'd been hoping for.

I have to convince her that I'm in this and I'll do whatever it takes to make her comfortable.

Even if I can't.

Sloane leans her head on her elbows, continuing to stare at me. "Why can't I break free from this, Max? Why do you have such a hold on me? I barely know anything about you, and yet I've known you for as long as I can remember."

"You know more about me than anyone else," I murmur, stroking the side of her face. "I can promise you that."

"So other than the fact that you know how to assault someone with cutlery, I know you're addicted to Raisinets, video games, and expensive sneakers." She furrows her brow. "And that you're a sex god, although I probably shouldn't have admitted to that. I don't want your head to swell."

"You sure about that? You scream for God a hell of a lot when that happens."

She gives my arm a playful slap. "You know what I mean."

I grin and smack her ass. "And you seem to know all of the important details already."

"You're always evading my questions."

"I don't recall you asking anything."

She's silent for a moment. "Why is there so much antagonism between you and your

dad? What's the deal with that?"

I let out a deep sigh. "The short answer is that he can be a real prick and wants to blame his failures on someone...and apparently I'm that someone."

Her expression turns serious. "I always felt really bad when he'd attack you in front of other people. I never understood it, and it made me so angry that he'd never say anything nice, no matter what you did."

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“I guess I just wasn’t Nico. I never had his business sense. I never had his brains. He wanted to turn me into something I’m not.”

“He should be really proud of you the way you are. You’re his son.” The flicker of sadness in her eyes makes my chest tight. It’s been a long time since I thought about any of this. Too much time has passed, too many bad feelings have festered, and too many scars have been caused by all of it. My dad wanted a son who could carry out his plans and give him the power and money he’d always craved but couldn’t actually grasp.

And instead of encouraging me to stick with things I’d been good at, he kept trying to push me toward a life I didn’t want. And after years of going along with what he’d wanted, I pushed back. He didn’t like that very much.

“He never accepted what I wanted. It was all about what he wanted and how I could help him get it.”

“You have a lot of really special gifts. It’s a shame he stood in the way of you pursuing them. Parents are supposed to support their kids’ dreams. It’s part of their job.”

“Not everyone has parents like that.” I shrug. “But I know when I have kids I sure as hell won’t shit all over their dreams, no matter what they are. I’ll make sure they take advantage of every opportunity they can to find their own happiness.”

A sad smile lifts Sloane’s lips. “I’ve been really lucky throughout my life. My dad, as overprotective as he is, has always been my biggest cheerleader. He always did

everything he could to show me how proud I made him. I think sometimes he overdid it because he knew it was only coming from him.”

“Your mom would have felt the exact same way he did if she were still alive.”

“That’s what he’d always tell me. I think that’s why your dad’s behavior always upset me. He had you, every day, and never appreciated you. I missed out on that with my mom. Even when she was really sick, she’d try to do as much as she could to be involved with my life. She didn’t have much time, so she made the most of it.” She shakes her head, her eyes shining with tears. “You never know when you’re going to run out of time, so you always have to make the best of situations. That way, you can look back and not have regrets. You’ll know that you tried to do the very best for your loved ones when you had the chance. I think my mom would be as bothered as I am about your dad’s behavior.”

I swipe away a tear that streams down her cheek. “You’re incredible. I say that to you a lot, but trust me, it’s not nearly enough. You’re the best person I know, and you make me want to be the best I can be. I need to make sure I’m on the right path to being the guy you deserve.”

“You’re pretty amazing, too.” She drops a kiss on the tip of my nose.

“Speaking of amazing, how’s your speech? Do you want to run through it with me?”

She shakes her head. “No, I want you to hear it for the first time when I give it tonight. I want you up there, right by the stage, looking directly at me so I can focus on you and not completely panic in front of that huge audience. Okay?”

I nod. “I’d do anything for you, Sloane. I mean it. I will always be there for you, whenever you need me.”



“Thank you. I feel more relaxed already.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else I can do to help you unwind? Do you need another shower, dirty girl?”

She snickers. “Actually, no. I’d rather save it all up for tonight. I have a lot of pent-up anxiety that I’m planning to release. I’d like your help with that.”

“I think I can figure out a way to take a little bit of time off so I can fulfill my part in your plans.”

Sloane’s smile widens, her pink lips curled upward. “I’m so nervous, but excited at the same time. This charity means so much to me. It’s like I have a piece of my mom with me all the time since it’s because of her that I even started it.”

“She’ll be there right next to me, cheering you on.” Just one more thing that makes this woman more than perfect. “So how did you get the idea for this charity anyway? Is it because you lost your mom to cancer?”

“I remember how hard it was on my mom, being sick and having a daughter to raise. She never had a support system, though, other than her nurses. They loved her and were so good to her when she’d come in for treatments, but it wasn’t the same as having a dedicated friend who was always there for you, who knew you as a person, understood your pain and your fears. My dad tried to fill that role because he thought he should as her husband, but it wasn’t enough for her. That’s why I came up with The Buddy System. And testing it out with the kids first was to see if they’d thrive with being involved with that kind of a relationship. So far, it’s been great. Except…”

Her voice trails off and she looks away. “Except what?”

“Well, not every kid responds the same way. For the most part, they do really well

with their buddies. But sometimes, there are instances where the kid isn't really open to the idea." She turns back to me, her eyes sad. "Like that boy Eli I told you about. It's so sad, but he's completely despondent. No parents to care for him, just an older brother. I tried talking to him recently, and he completely shut down. Can you imagine being so young, finding out you're sick, and not having parents to count on? How horrible must that feel?"

"I have no fucking idea." I shake my head. "Poor kid. It sucks to have deadbeat parents. Can he beat it?"

"I'm not sure. I think he's going to need surgery. But he's got a serious chip on his shoulder, and I really want to help, but he's not having it."

"Give him some time. I'm sure he'll come around once everything sinks in."

"I don't know. He doesn't seem to want anyone around. And his brother isn't exactly the warm and fuzzy type either."

"They're going through a lot. Can you blame them for keeping to themselves? They have two parents they can't count on for love, support, or anything else. They probably don't trust many people. And they've got to be scared. How old are they?"

"The boy, Eli, is twelve, and the brother, Tommy, is twenty-one."

Her voice cracks a bit, and every time she cries, it makes my heart hurt. I try to go for some humor to see if I can stop the tears before they can start. "I'd like to point out that you just broke your patient confidentiality contract, and frankly, I'm a little shocked."

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Her eyes widen and she slaps a hand over her mouth.

“I guess you really don’t get the importance of confidentiality agreements.” I roll my eyes. “Now what are you going to do to keep me quiet?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“When do I get to hear them?”

She pokes me in the chest. “I already told you. Later.”

“That’s a long time to wait. I’m going to see a lot of your esteemed colleagues tonight. How am I going to keep my mouth shut? I may be really tempted to say something...unless you can convince me not to...”

Her hand reaches down, fingers grazing my inner thighs. My cock springs to life. Again. Holy shit, this is a record.

I like the direction this is heading. Now let me see if I can try and keep my mouth closed and off of her pussy.

Max

It's barely been two minutes since I said goodbye to Sloane and it feels like forever.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Since when do I start acknowledging feelings and shit like that? When did I grow a vagina, for fuck's sake? I jog down her front steps and pull out my keys. I parked my car farther down the street, so that way her—

“Hello, Max.”

Dad won't see it. I paste a smile on my face and twist in the direction of his less-than-thrilled voice. “Hey, Mr. Camarena. It's nice to see you.”

He folds his arms over his massive chest. I'm about his height, but he's got me in girth. The man could easily smother me with his hulking body, and that's saying a lot since I'm not exactly a featherweight.

“I noticed your car here this morning when I went out for the paper.” He narrows his eyes at me.

“Oh, yeah, well, I followed Sloane back here after her shift at the hospital. Where I met her. Because I wasn't here over night.”

He nods and says nothing, so I just keep letting my mouth run. “So, the paper. Did you see anything good? Any news to report? I didn't get a chance to read it before I left my house this morning to meet Sloane at the hospital.” I hope he heard it the first time, but just in case he didn't, I thought it was good to repeat myself for good

measure.

His lips purse. That's never a good sign. "News, news, news...let's see. Other than finding out my daughter is still spending time with you, no. I can't say there was anything equally eyebrow-raising."

At least he didn't see my car the last time I showed up in the middle of the—

"Oh, other than finding your car here the first time you showed up in the middle of the night. And if memory serves, you didn't meet Sloane at the hospital after her shift that time because she wasn't actually working that day."

Fuck me. Does he have hidden security cameras out here or something? Some fancy system Sloane doesn't know about? I wish I knew how to hack a network.

Shit, I wish I had a computer...

"Yes, well I, um, I had a new video game I wanted to show her, and—"

"At three o'clock in the morning? Must have been some game." He creeps closer, a menacing look on his face and I actually shake a little bit. I hate myself for it, but I'm sure it makes him chuckle inwardly. Because on the outside, he looks ready to tear me apart with his bare hands, a death sentence I'd very much like to avoid.

"Sir, I know what you might be thinking, and I understand your concerns, but..." But what? Say something! It doesn't matter what! He won't believe you anyway, but it'll buy some time before you need to take off when he grabs that metal pole sitting on the side of the road and smashes your skull in with it! "...but I assure you there was nothing going on other than a little competition. Er, video game competition." I shrug and force a smile. "What can I say? She's my best teammate."

“Max.” He steps closer and drops a hand onto my shoulder. The weight of it pounds me into the ground like I’m a nail and he’s a very fucking powerful hammer. “Let me tell you something. You may think I live under a rock, but I assure you that I am very aware of the comings and goings of my daughter and her guests. And let me tell you something else...she doesn’t have overnight guests, for video games or anything else.”

“Well, uh, this was a very unique situation because, um, the team we were competing with is in, um, China, so it was afternoon for them. That’s why we had to play so late here in Jersey. See, it’s all because of that time difference.”

“Do you really expect me to swallow that bullshit?” He leans his face close to mine, his eyes narrowed to slits. Speaking of slits, I bet he’d like to slash the shit out of me right now.

Please don’t be packing a fucking knife, Mr. Camarena...

“Actually, I could just take a look at the security camera feeds from inside of her place if I wanted the truth. What do you say? Maybe we should take a look at those together.”

“That’s sick!” Oh, Christ. I didn’t mean for that to slip out.

His face twists into a grimace. “Really. I can’t imagine why if all you were doing was playing a video game!” He fists the sides of my coat. “I know what you’re all about, Max. I know what you do, and I know where you do it. I do not want my daughter anywhere around it or around you, for that matter.”

“Listen, Mr. Camarena, I know you hate me.” I eye both of his fists on me and it doesn’t look like they’re letting go anytime soon. “Believe me, I get how you feel. You’ve never really tried to hide it, just saying.” He pulls me closer by my coat,

gritting his teeth. “Sorry, I’m not trying to be a smartass or anything. I’m just telling you I could always sense your hatred of me. It’s pretty strong right now. Like, stronger than the Force.”

He pushes me away, letting go of my coat. I straighten myself out and rake a hand through my hair.

“You’re not good enough for my daughter. You never cared about her feelings, and I don’t want her involved with your lifestyle. You think I don’t know who you really are?” He points to his own chest. “I know better than anyone because I used to be just like you.” He inches toward me. “Yeah, me. How about that? But you know something? I realized it wasn’t worth losing everything that was important to me and I got out before I couldn’t. Are you smart enough to do that, Max? Because if you’re not, then stay the hell away from my daughter.”

“You have to trust me, Mr. C. Can I call you that?”

He actually snarls a response.

“Um, okay, Mr. Camarena. Please believe me when I say I’d never do anything to hurt Sloane. She’s an amazing girl, but you obviously already know that. I will never put her in danger.”

“You can’t make that promise. You know it as well as I do.”

“I will make that promise. Right now.” Even though he’s right. He knows what always comes first. I do, too, but these days, she’s winning out. And that puts my head on a chopping block.

Sloane

My legs still feel like Jell-O, and damn, it feels amazing to just lie here on my bed and replay every single salacious detail over and over in my mind. I glance at the clock and groan. I have to get up and work on my speech. I'm lucky that they're even giving me time to promote The Buddy System. And that's only because of all the positive feedback that the hospital administrators have been receiving from the children's families. It makes me so incredibly happy to know how much good we're doing, and I know we can do more if we only had more money. The hospital has been great about providing cash for toys and events we've held for the kids, and I've used some of my own money, too. Anything to make the kids smile.

But realistically, I can't exactly bankrupt myself trying to keep this program running, no matter how much I believe in it.

I wish Mom had gotten this kind of support when she was sick. Maybe that's why I keep pouring so much into it. If my work can help any of the people dealing with cancer...or any horrible disease...it's worth it. I'd rather do without than see these kids suffer alone. Their families aren't always able to dedicate twenty-four hours a day to them, and that's where we fill in the gaps, to make sure they never feel alone or without a shoulder to cry on.

I roll off of my bed, burying my face deep into my Max-scented pillow before my feet actually hit the carpet. I stretch my arms overhead and crack my back. Oh, that feels good. There's a tiny fluttering sensation in my belly that keeps the smile plastered on my face. I pass my mirror on the way to my closet and my cheeks are still flushed pink. My hair is all sexed-up and I have some stubble scratches on the



sides of my face and neck.

Oh God, I hope my dad doesn't decide to pop over here right now.

A loud knock sends me jumping into the air.

Argh! I hug my arms around my chest, my eyes darting around my room for sweats I can throw on. Nothing! Dammit! Do I have to be so organized all the time?

I yank open my closet and grab an oversized sweatshirt and pull it on. My pajama pants are hanging over a chair so I grab them and stuff my legs into them before running toward the front door.

"Coming!" I jog through the kitchen, stumbling over a corner of an area rug. I land right against the door with a loud thud. Jesus, I'm going to put myself into traction, and the worst part about that would be my inability to have sex with Max for weeks on end.

Lack of sex. That's what comes to mind. Not a broken bone or cracked skull.

I'm hopeless.

I adjust myself and pull open the door. Please don't be Dad, please don't be Dad...

"Good morning!" I let out the breath I've been holding when I see Shaye's bright smile in the doorway. She holds out a hot cup from Starbucks, and I gasp.

"You brought me coffee?"

"Not just any coffee. A grande mocha flat white with two sugars." She winks. "I love that you use real sugar. It's so you, you know?"

I furrow my brow and take the cup. “Why would I want to put that other poison into my body?”

“Because it’s fewer calories.” Shaye shakes her head and pushes past me. “While you ponder that, I’m just going to wait in here for you. It’s freezing out! And why do you look like you’ve just woken up?” She sniffs the air and spins around toward me. “Oh Lord. My brother has been here, hasn’t he?”

I can’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. “You’re like a bloodhound, you know that?”

She giggles. “I tell Nico he’s totally screwed if he ever tries to cheat on me. With my nose, he’d be dead and buried before he could even take a shower.”

“Think he knew what he was getting into when he snagged you?”

She cocks an eyebrow. “He certainly knows now, doesn’t he?”

I take a sip of the hot drink and let out a moan. “Oh, so good.” I pull her over to the couch and collapse onto it, not wanting to lose the fluttery feeling in my gut.

Shaye sinks down next to me. “Okay, so tell. What’s going on?”

I shrug, but the silly smile never wavers. “I don’t know. He met me after my shift and took me to breakfast.” For a second, my mind drifts from the fork incident to the little sex fest that took place once we got back here. I think I’d prefer to think about that—the bathroom sink, the shower, the bedroom...those places hold much better memories than that diner does.

“Seems like you got way more than food out of the deal,” Shaye says, then smacks a hand to her forehead. “Ah, yep. There’s the mental image I don’t want to see. I can’t

have this conversation with you right now. I just ate.”

I giggle and take another sip of my coffee. “Trust me, it’s not like I plan on sharing any details with you. I’ll just keep you guessing, especially about where it happened.” I turn my gaze to the place on the couch where she sits, flashing a mischievous smile, and she springs up from her spot.

“Where you...oh my God, Sloane! Are you serious?”

My giggle turns into full-fledged laughter. “Gotcha! Nothing happened out here. I was just messing with you.”

Her eyes narrow, and she flings a throw pillow at my head. “Please! I’m trying to block those images!”

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“You’ve been trying to set us up for years. Did you think we’d just be holding hands?”

Shaye stops, a knowing smile on her face. “So you are together.”

I tug on my hair. “Well, kind of. I guess.”

She sinks back down next to me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’re spending time together, you know, doing stuff. More than just that though,” I quickly shout once she claps her hands over her ears.

She lowers them, eyes narrowed as if she expects to hear more she doesn’t want to acknowledge. I don’t have a sibling so I can’t imagine how disgusting it is to envision them riding my best friend.

“I really care about him, Shaye. But I’m nervous. He’s so complicated—the things he does, things he says. Sometimes I wonder if he can be this guy, the one who can deal with being in a relationship.” I bite my lower lip. “And there’s other stuff, too.”

“Like?”

“Like his work. The things he does. Places he goes. People he deals with. He won’t talk about any of it, and it scares me sometimes.”

She drops her eyes and starts picking at her cuticles. “He’s always been shut down about his work.”

“Yes, but am I really supposed to just deal with his evasiveness? He keeps me in the dark about it all. Like this morning.”

Her eyes float back to mine. “What happened this morning?”

I explain his swift change from sweet Max into thug Max when Gianni showed up at our table. “He just became a completely different person within seconds. He was ready to maim with that fork. I’ve never seen him like that at all. It freaked me the hell out.” I shake my head and let it fall into my hands. “But, my God, he has this sick hold on me. And it’s only until I see that other side that I even think about breaking free.”

Shaye nods. “You know, I’ve never seen him try to be normal with a girl.”

I snort. “That’s an interesting way to put it.” I know this is Shaye’s way of deflecting my veiled comments about what Max actually does. She’s done it for as long as I can remember, and she’s damn good at it. She’s never given me any indication she knows what he’s all about. What any of them are all about, for that matter. And I know she’s not nearly as ignorant as she’d like me to think.

“I’m serious. He’s not exactly the type of put on airs. You get what you get with Max Oriani. But with you, I don’t know. Sometimes, it’s like he’s a different person. I see a side I didn’t actually know he had.” She smiles. “Maybe you bring that out of him.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like that, though.”

“Or maybe it’s a nice change for him.”

“I just wonder if things can really work out between us.” I cover my face with my hands. “Jeez, why am I even saying this stuff? It’s not like he’s proposed marriage or anything. I mean, it’s not even a thing. Are we friends? More than friends? I kind of

think it's more, but I wouldn't assume that I'm his girlfriend or anything."

"Have you asked him about it?"

I roll my eyes at Shaye. "Come on, are we in eighth grade? 'Um, Max, will you be my boyfriend?' How lame is that?"

"Well, if you really want to know where things stand, ask the damn question, girl!"

I snicker and hold up my hands to block the next pillow hurled in my direction. "Part of me is afraid to know the answer. I'm really into him, Shaye. I don't want to get hurt, and I don't want to ask the question and put him in a corner if he's not ready to go down that path, you know? Plus, there's just so much I don't know about him. He gives me a little here and there, but then shuts down for a lot of the big stuff."

"Like fork-slashing type big stuff?"

"Yes." I swallow hard. "You know, I'm not exactly living under a rock here. I can see things more clearly than you guys think."

Shaye shrugs and is back to examining her nails. "What are you talking about? See what clearly?"

"The work Max does, what Nico does, his family, your family, all of those short, thuggy, Italian guys who are always hanging around..." I cock an eyebrow.

"I have no idea where you're going with this." Her eyes crinkle at the corners. "But the short comment is a little bit judgey. I mean, you're like ten feet tall, so are they really that short?"

I throw my hands into the air. "You're totally deflecting! I'm not stupid! I've seen

The Sopranos! I know all about the..." My voice drops. "Mafia," I whisper.

Shaye lets out a loud giggle. "Who knew you had enough time on your hands to even think about this stuff? You might be seriously sleep deprived, though."

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“I am not sleep deprived! I just want to know what I’m up against. And don’t think I can’t see that you’ve been checked out lately. That whole thing with Mr. Salesi and then the break-in at Nico’s...I’m your best friend, and I feel like you don’t tell me anything! I know there’s some serious shit going on. Don’t you trust me enough to talk to me?”

She puts her hand over mine and slides next to me on the couch. “Sloane, listen. You’re my best friend in the world. I would never want to see you in danger. Do you really think I’d watch from the sidelines if I thought being with my brother would hurt you?”

“Is that what Nico promised you when you guys started dating? That you’d never be in danger? Did you believe him? Did you think that night would have ever happened?”

“Listen,” she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “What happened to Mr. Salesi was a horrible accident, a hit and run, just like the police said. And the break-in? It was a guy Nico used to work with who was hopped up on some crazy drugs. He claimed Nico owed him money because he was so strung out and needed cash to keep up his habit. Yes, it was dangerous and scary, but he’s not a threat anymore.”

“Because you killed him!” I clutch the sides of my head. “Do you know how hard it is to get my arms around that? How did you even know how to fire the gun?”

She shrugs. “I guess in the heat of the moment, you just do. You don’t think. It was self-defense. I did what I had to do.” A sigh deflates her shoulders. “I still have nightmares about that night.”



I pull her in for a quick hug. “I can only imagine. But that’s because you’ve never actually talked to me about it, even though I’ve always been here for you, hoping you’d open up about it.”

She gives me a tight squeeze. “There are things I just don’t like to talk about because they unleash memories I want to keep buried. That’s all. Don’t ever think it’s because I don’t want to open up to you.”

“I just get nervous, for all of you. Sometimes I feel like I could deal with it better if I actually knew what I was dealing with.”

“They work normal jobs. It’s just that they deal with some not-so-nice people in the process. People could go postal at any job, you know? There are never any guarantees. Hell, one day I may become a therapist to someone who decides he doesn’t like my analyses and comes into my office to blow off my head. Shit happens, babe. Anywhere and anytime, no matter what business you’re in. The question is, are you ready to deal with it when it does? And those guys? They’re always prepared.”

“Boy Scouts of the Underworld.” I nod. “That makes me feel so much better.”

“It’s just to give you some perspective. As for me, I’m dealing with things.” She rubs her head. “A lot of things, not just with Nico. My dad...he’s just been so off lately. He snaps at anything and everything, and if Max is around, forget it.”

My gut clenches at the thought of Tony attacking Max. Lord knows, I’ve witnessed it plenty of times in the past, but this time, it’s different. I feel more protective of him now. “Do you have any idea why?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve tried talking to him about it, but he just shuts down. He’s even been really abrupt with my mom, which never happens. I know things at work

haven't been fantastic, but at least he's got a job and makes good money. I'm not sure where all of the stress is coming from."

Anger bubbles in my veins when I think about Max going to his parents' house and getting pummeled by Tony's toxic tirades. It aggravates me even more now that I've spoken to Max about it. I see how it affects him. He'd always just blow it off, but you can only do that for so long. The scars on his chest are nothing compared to the ones Tony has inflicted on his heart over the years. "Everybody has stress. That's just life. It doesn't mean you have to take it all out on everyone."

Shaye furrows her brows at me. I guess I let a little bit of that anger out in my words. "I just know how much it bothers Max, that's all."

She nods and a smile lifts her glossy lips. "Because you looooooove him. Admit it, Sloaney-baloney! You're in love with my brother. Every single time his name comes up, this wide-eyed, puppy dog look of utter adoration flashes over your face. Don't get me wrong, it's cute as hell to see you like this. About time, too."

A deep red flush heats my cheeks, and my hands fly to my face. "Cut it out. I'm not in love."

"Oh, yeah? Then stop getting that dreamy look in your eye every time I mention his name. Max! See? That's the one I'm talking about." She grins, pushing her face into mine. "Max, Max, Max!"

I tumble backward on the couch in a fit of giggles, my eyes squeezed shut.

"You can't hide it from me! I'm an extremely perceptive person, lady!" She leans over me, shouting into my face.

I cover my face with my hands. "Why are you attacking me like this?" I rasp, still

breathless from the laughter. “What’s the difference whether or not I love him?”

She starts tickling my sides, digging her fingertips into my stomach, which she knows will get me to do anything she says. “Because I just want to know. Tell me!”

“Ahh!” My breaths are so sharp, sounding more like gasps with every second that passes. My belly heaves as the hysterics take hold. “S-stoooooop! I can’t b-breeeeeeathe!”

“Say it!”

“Okaaaaaaay!”

She straightens up and wiggles her fingers in the air. “Don’t get excited. It’s a quick pause. Speak!”

I take a deep breath, filling my lungs once again. Damn, oxygen is nice. I have a clear path to Shaye’s left which will get me into my bedroom, door locked, before she can leap at me again. No doubt she’ll try, too. “I...I...” I jump off the couch and crouch low, dashing past her and around the couch. A few more steps and I’m home free. Literally.

I shut the door behind me and lock it.

She lets out a loud huff and flips on the television. “I really don’t understand why you can’t just answer the question. Now get dressed. I made you a special appointment, and we’re going to be late.”

I rake a brush through my long hair and throw it into a ponytail. “Where are we going?” I call out.

Her voice gets louder as she approaches my bedroom door. “Tonight is a big night for you. I want to make sure you look absolutely perfect when you give that speech.”

I crack open the door. “Um, what exactly does that mean? Are you going to try to stick me in another one of your Saran Wrap dresses? Because it’s really not that kind of an event, you know.”

She snickers. “I’m talking about your hair.” She peers at it. “Although I can see you finally washed it. Good girl. That’s half the battle right there.”

Max

I pull open the big red door to the Pediatric Oncology ward, the smell of antiseptic making me damn near choke. At least the place is clean. The harsh scent that burns my nostrils is a sharp contrast to the warm and fuzzy feeling you get from walking through a hallway decorated with big, colorful flowers and bright rainbows surrounding a gaggle of smiling animals.

Anything to keep the kids happy.

I flex my fingers as I walk. I've never been the type to appreciate kids. Lily, Nico's little sister, doesn't count since I've known her from birth. She doesn't annoy me. But the rest of the kiddie universe? Let's just say I steer clear of the mall food court at lunchtime during the week. It's a fucking zoo with all of the babies and toddlers in northern Jersey screaming, laughing, and crying while their moms sit around and bullshit over Starbucks.

But today, I'm putting all of that aside. I'm here to do something good, to be the guy Sloane needs...the one she thinks I am.

I'm not so sure she's right, but I want to find out for myself.

I catch a glimpse of myself in a clear glass window as I head toward the nurses' station. Leather jacket, of course. Black Air Jordans, black jeans, black t-shirt...Jesus, I need to add some color to my goddamn wardrobe.

A group of kids gallop toward me on broomstick horses, neighing as they slow to a

stop. “Who are you?” A little blonde girl narrows her eyes at me.

“I’m, um, a friend of Eli’s,” I respond. With any luck, I can make that a reality.

She folds her arms over her chest. “Eli doesn’t have any friends. He’s mean.”

“Sandra, that’s not very nice.” A pretty, dark-haired girl in scrubs comes over and puts an arm around Sandra’s shoulders. “You know he’s having a hard time, sweetie.”

Sandra sighs and nods. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Nurse Jules.” She looks up at me. “Hey, you wanna play with us? You can be Black Beauty!”

I let out a chuckle. “Maybe later. I’ve got to see my pal. But thanks for the invite.”

She shrugs and flashes a bright smile at me before leading the rest of her crew in the direction of some makeshift stable in the open-air playroom.

The girl, Nurse Jules, straightens up and grins at me. “So, Black Beauty, huh?”

I shrug. “If I said I was color-blind, would that make it better?”

Her eyes rake over me, finally landing on mine with a pretty fucking blatant offer. “I don’t really think it could possibly be any bit better.”

Okay, all I want is to find this kid’s room...

I clear my throat. “I’m looking for a room.”

“I can find you a room.” She inches closer, and I swallow a groan. Yeah, she’s hot, but I’m on a mission. And this is hitting way too close to home since this is Sloane’s

hospital. And her program. Besides, there are kids swarming the place, for Christ's sake. What if one of them needs something? I lift an eyebrow. Doesn't seem like the first time she's made that kind of offer, I'm just saying.

"I'm actually looking for a friend of mine who's here. Maybe you can point me in the right direction. His name is Eli."

She places a hand on my arm. "Eli's room is this way. I'll walk you down there."

"Thanks, but I can find it myself if you just give me the number." The last thing I need is to roll in with Nurse Jules on my arm, claiming to be friends with a kid I've never laid eyes on. I can just picture it. Kid goes nuts, and hospital security will have my ass in a sling faster than Jules would strip off her scrubs if I gave her the word.

A look of disappointment shadows her face, but she flashes another blinding white smile. "It's Room 20. Third door on the right."

I nod and return the smile. "Thanks." I hurry past the nurses' station before any of them can stop me, and I take a right down the hallway. I quickly glance over my shoulder before rounding the corner and they're all still staring after me. Jules has joined them, and damn, am I sore from the eye raping I just got.

I read the numbers on the door and stop outside of Room 20. I have a bag hoisted over my shoulder, which I shift so I can knock. Once, twice, three times, and nothing.

Fuck, what if he's not even in here? I look up and down the hallway, and luckily the nurses aren't lurking. I knock one more time, a little harder. "Fuck," I grumble. I do shit like this all the time—acting before I think things through. What if he's sleeping? What if he's in there with a doctor? What if he's sick from a treatment? What if—?

"What?" A sullen, male voice calls out.

“Hey, Eli,” I say, trying to keep my voice as peppy as possible. “I, uh, just wanted to stop by to say hi.” Perfectly innocent. I could be anyone on the hospital staff.

“Fuck off. I don’t want company.”



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I recoil. Jesus Christ. “There are kids all over the place. Do you really think that kind of language is appropriate?” Look at me, being all adult-like.

A long pause. Then he answers. “Screw off. Is that better?”

I can’t help but smile. “Yeah. Thanks, man.” But I don’t leave. Something tells me to stay put. And then a minute later...

“I guess you can come in if you want.”

Yes! I’m fucking in! My smile fades. Great, once I open that door, what the hell comes next? What do I even say? I probably should have come up with something before showing up here.

But that’s never been the Max Oriani way.

Nope, I storm shit first, worry about it never.

I remember the last time I spoke those words.

Memories of Gabe come rushing back, and the guilt whirls around me like a funnel cloud. I can’t get sucked back into it again.

I am a good guy. I’m not a fucking monster. I can do the right thing.

Gabe’s blood is on my hands, but I won’t let it cripple me. I can help someone who really needs it. I can change things for myself. I don’t have to accept the hand I’ve

been dealt. I can rise above it.

And that starts here and now.

I twist the handle on the door and push it open to find a kid reclined against a bunch of pillows. He has longish dark hair that looks like it hasn't been combed in about a month, and he's wearing dark blue sweats. I look around the room. No flowers or balloons or stuffed animals. He doesn't even have the television on. It's just him and an iPad in his hands. He doesn't even look up when I walk into the room. He just keeps tapping the screen and grunting under his breath.

I place my bag on the floor and...nothing. I have no idea what the hell to do next. He doesn't even know he doesn't know me yet because he won't look up from the game.

He stabs the screen for a few more seconds before his gaze darts in my direction. "Cool sneakers. I wanted a pair, and saved up for months. Then my mother found my stash and stole it so she could get high." He finally looks up at me, his mouth twisted into a grimace. "I never asked anyone for anything. I earned that money doing crappy little jobs around the neighborhood, and she took it. I just wanted a good pair of sneakers so the kids at school wouldn't make fun of me anymore. But she didn't care about that...or me. She only cared about partying, and now she's in jail. And I'm here. Alone with my cancer." He narrows his dark eyes at me. "Do you know how badly life sucks for me right now?"

My jaw drops. I can't even stop it. Sloane told me that he's twelve. Twelve years old and on his own dealing with a disease that could potentially kill him before his next birthday. Anger courses through me. I'd like to find that mother of his and swing my baseball bat a few times in her direction. "Dude, I'm sorry..." My voice trails off because what the hell else can I say to make it better?

Absolutely nothing.

“Who are you, anyway?” He puts the iPad down and looks me up and down. “And seriously, what’s with the Grim Reaper look? I’m not dying, am I?” He lets out a dry laugh. “Well, maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.”

I crack a smile. “I’m a friend of one of your nurses. She said something about one of her patients being really into Fortnite, and since I’m a pretty incredible player myself, I figured maybe we could team up and kick some as...er, some butt together.”

He’s silent for a long minute, sizing me up with each passing second. I’m not used to this kind of examination by a kid. Usually punks are trying to size me up to see how much weight I can pack into a punch. They never guess right, either, the fucking morons.

“I only play solo.”

“You ever get a Victory Royale on your own?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, about sixty. Not bad.”

My eyes pop open wide and my jaw is on the floor yet again. It’s a record for me. “Sixty? Are you fu...are you serious? That’s like pro, my man.” I ball up my fist and hold it out to give him a bump.”

He rolls his eyes. “Relax. It’s only okay.”

I love this kid already.

“So, which nurse are you friends with?” He grabs a cup of water from the nightstand and takes a long sip.

“Um, her name is Sloane. She’s really sweet, has long brown hair, usually wears it in

a bun, smiles a lot. You know her?”

Eli nods. “Yeah, she came in the other day when my brother Tommy was here. She’s hot. You messing around with her?”

“Dude! Discretion. Do you kiss and tell?”

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“I don’t do anything to talk about. Look at me. I’m in a hospital bed with no hope of getting out anytime soon.”

“Oh, well, right.” I clear my throat. “So, anyway, yeah, she’s nice. I’ve known her for a long time. She thought you might like someone to hang out with. Someone who thought they’d wipe the floor with you at Fortnite but might actually learn something instead.” I chuckle and for the first time, Eli’s lips curl upward. Not a lot, just a little. But it’s enough to tell me I’ve broken through. Okay, maybe I made a hairline crack, if anything.

Still. That tells me there’s hope.

“I guess it’d be cool.” He shrugs. “You can stay. My brother’s gonna be here soon, though.”

“So you live with your brother?”

Eli nods. “Yeah. He does everything for me now that my mom is gone.”

“You’re lucky to have him.”

“I know. He’s my best friend. I hate to see him go through this. He works really long hours to make money for us to live. My mom used to steal from him, too.” He shakes his head. “We’re all we’ve got now.”

Christ, I want to just write a check to this kid, any amount that’ll take away the stress he’s under. He needs to stay positive to beat the cancer, but he looks so beaten down,

so sad and alone. That's what the damn disease feeds off of.

But that's why I'm here. I want to help him. I know how much it sucks to feel lost and alone. I feel that way a lot...or at least I did before Sloane finally wiggled her way back into my life. I pull open the bag I brought. "Hey, do you like chocolate?" I turn it over and shake the contents onto his bed not waiting for a response. Packages of Raisinets, M&Ms, Blow Pops, Twizzlers, Starburst jelly beans, and Reese's peanut butter cups spill onto his lap and I swear his face glows like a lightbulb for the next few seconds while he surveys all of his sugary options before a look of dismay shadows his face.

His eyes narrow at me.

"Oh, shit. I didn't even think about it...are you okay to eat this stuff? I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I got everything, but is it safe for you?" I push back my hair. Act first, think never. So fucking typical of me. What if he loves this stuff, but is forbidden to eat it? So I just dumped a whole boatload of the forbidden right in front of him? What an asshole I am!

He rolls his eyes. "Dude, I can't eat any of this. I have cancer." He peeks into the bag and lets out a groan. "Damn, Snickers? That's my favorite."

"Oh, shit," I grumble, pulling the bag away from him. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Eli shrugs. "It's okay. How could you know?"

"I've got other stuff...things you don't actually eat." I smirk and grab another bag, pulling out a Nintendo DS and some games. His eyes widen.

"Holy crap, are those for me?"

“Yep. All for you.”

He looks up at me after analyzing each and every game case. “I can’t give you any money for this stuff,” he says softly.

“Listen, man. It’s a gift. Actually, consider it payment for when you teach me how to get sixty of my own Victory Royales.”

He snickers. A for-real sort-of laugh. “It’s a deal.”

The door creaks open, and I turn toward the tall guy who appears in the doorway. He’s close to my height, wearing a very suspicious look on his face. “Eli, who’s this guy?”

Eli looks up. “Hey, Tommy. This is...” He looks at me. “Hey, you never told me your name.”

Tommy barrels toward me, grabbing me by the jacket and shoving me against a wall. “Who the hell are you and what do you want? If you’re here to collect from my mom, forget it. She’s in jail and we don’t have any money for you. Get the fuck out of here before I call security, you asshole.”

“Listen, Tommy, is it? I’m not here for money. I just came to spend some time with Eli, that’s all.”

“He’s friends with that nurse you think is hot.” Eli snickers.

Tommy reluctantly lets go of my jacket and pushes me away. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to bring him a few things. You know, make him feel more comfortable. I swear, I’m not looking for any trouble.”

He dissects me with his eyes for a minute, and then decides I'm not a threat because he pushes past me to ruffle his brother's hair. "How are ya feeling today?"

Eli collapses back on the pillows and lets out a loud groan. "Not too horrible."



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Tommy glares at me. “Are you an idiot? He shouldn’t be having all of this sugar.”

“Relax, Tommy. I didn’t eat any of it.” Eli picks up one of the games and slides it into the Nintendo DS.

“Listen, Tommy, I’m really sorry. I didn’t know it’d be bad for him. I just figured he might like a few treats. I know what hospital food is like,” I force a snicker to cut the tension, but Tommy doesn’t let up. His shoulders are squared, his mouth stretched into a tight line. My weak attempt to break the ice does absolutely nothing. I’ve made a fan with Eli, but Tommy? He wants to inflict pain. I know the look. If my head was in a vise right now, he might actually smile.

Eli waves the Nintendo DS in the air. “Check it out, T! I got game, man. This thing is awesome!”

Tommy’s narrowed eyes focus on me once again. Christ, if looks could kill, I’d be face down in a very shallow fucking grave. “Why’d you bring him that?”

I shrug. “I knew he liked video games. I figured he might enjoy something new.”

Tommy creeps toward me, his voice deep and menacing. “I don’t know who you are or why you’ve just shown up here to take pity on my brother, but we don’t need you. Or your gifts. I take very good care of Eli. We don’t need handouts, got it?”

My throat tightens. This is new territory for me. I’m not exactly what you’d call a philanthropist, so I just figured bringing him things he might like would win him over. I don’t know how to do this...how to make friends with a kid, how to be a

buddy. I just want to do something positive for someone else. For once in my life I want to make a difference in a good way.

“I’m not giving you a handout. I’m just trying to make him comfortable, that’s all. I figured he might like to have a friend to hang out with and play video games with. That’s all, man. I don’t want anything from you or from Eli. I, uh, I don’t know if you’ve heard about this program the hospital has for kids on this floor, but—”

“The Buddy System or some shit, right?” Tommy grunts, rolling his eyes. “Because that’s gonna help Eli, right? Having some stranger come in here and pretend to know what Eli is going through?”

I glower at him, my fists balling at my sides. Fucking prick has some nerve taking off after Sloane’s program. “This program has helped a ton of kids since it’s been put in place. Families appreciate it because there’s always downtime when they can’t be here for their kids. Having buddies really makes a difference here. They aren’t peppy assholes who come in and out and give lollipops in exchange for a smile. They’re people who’ve experienced similar circumstances, people who understand how to communicate with the kids and guess what? They actually help!” I puff out my chest, my voice getting louder and louder. “So before you spout shit, get your facts straight.” I wave at Eli. “Nice meeting you, kid. I really hope you beat this thing. Take care of yourself.” I swivel around, gritting my teeth. I pull open the door and walk into the hallway. My pulse throbs against my neck. That dickhead. I wanted so badly to take a swing at his smug ass mouth. Talking shit like that without—

I let out a deep sigh, stopping halfway down the hall and leaning against a bright orange-colored wall. Of course, he would be suspicious. Of course, he’d be apprehensive. He just found a stranger with his brother, a stranger who evidently looks like the Grim Reaper. If I’d have been Tommy, things would have gone down a lot differently. So he said some crap about the program. I get so damn defensive all the time. I really need to temper that shit.

“Hey.”

I turn my head in the direction of Tommy’s deep voice. “Yeah?”

He walks toward me, his hands stuffed into his pockets. “I didn’t mean to send you packing like that. I’m sorry for being an asshole. Our lives have been pretty fucked up lately. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.” He runs a hand over his shaved head, and his lips curl into a sad smile. “You know, I did this for him. I didn’t want him to lose his hair and feel like he looked different from everyone else, that people would stare and wonder. So I shaved mine so he’d have a partner in this.”

I nod. “I get it. He seems like a good kid. It sucks that he has to go through this. It sucks for both of you.”

“I guess he told you about our parents.”

“A little, but I didn’t ask any questions. He’s got you, and he thinks you’re pretty fucking awesome.”

“I do the best I can. But he seems to like you, which is pretty odd since he hasn’t really opened up to anyone since he got here. Everyone kind of avoids him now, so I try to be here as much as possible so he’s not alone. But, ah, I’ve got some things going this week, and I’m not gonna be here as much as I want.” He averts his eyes for a second and then looks back at me. “If you want to stop by and keep him company, I think he’d like that.”

“I can do that. And I won’t bring any more candy.” I smirk and hold out my hand. “I’m Max, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Max.” Tommy grins and shakes it. “And if you see your hot nurse friend Sloane, tell her to come by so we can thank her for sending you.”

“Will do,” I reply in a strained voice. I’m gonna have to let him know that my hot nurse friend Sloane isn’t up for grabs by anyone but me. I watch Tommy walk back to Eli’s room, but this time, he doesn’t close the door. He leaves it open. Interesting. Maybe they’re finally ready to open up a little.

Because of me.

Fucking A. Who’d have guessed that I’d ever be the voice of reason?

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Sloane

Ping!

I jump about ten feet into the air when I hear an incoming text. I glance at the clock on my nightstand and peer at my reflection in the mirror before grabbing my phone. My hair falls around my face in loose waves and my makeup is flawless thanks to Shaye's heavy hand. It's way more than I'd ever agree to wear...ever...but tonight is a really special night and I want to look perfect. I even let her put on fake eyelashes which feel hella weird on my eyes, but wow, do they pop.

I feel like a princess, and I can't wait to see my handsome prince.

I swipe my finger across the screen to see what Jules sent and my eyes widen as an image of my dark prince fills the screen. He stands out like a sore thumb in the hallway of flowers.

Her caption?

Sex on a stick showed up today, and damn I wanna lick him up and down.

I bite my lower lip. Sex on a stick indeed. But why was he even there? I type a quick reply.

Did he visit any of the kids?

A second passes. Eli. I think I'm gonna have to find an excuse to spend more time

with him even though he's a little prick.

I roll my eyes. Come on, he's not a prick. You have the worst bedside manner ever.

You'd better believe it's gonna change real quick if that guy keeps showing up!

I snicker and toss the phone on my bed. I'll just tell her later. I want to see the look on her face when I show up with him to the benefit.

I open my closet and pull out a form-fitting red dress. The color matches my lipstick perfectly and compliments my dark hair. Nude heels complete my look, and I douse myself with some perfume before leaving my room to wait for my chariot to arrive in the form of Max's Ford Raptor.

I can't walk very fast in these heels. The tips of my feet already feel pinched. How am I going to last for hours wearing them? How the heck does anyone? Shoes like these need to come with a surgeon general's warning, for Pete's sake.

I move gingerly, hoping that if I don't clip clop on the floor, my toes won't burn so much. I eye my black flats and hear Shaye's voice berating me in my head.

Don't even think about it. They are the antithesis of glamour, and I didn't work on your face for hours so you could kick off those heels and destroy your look with flats!

She's right. She did work hard on my face.

A little pain is good for the soul, right?

I practice walking up and down my hallway and forget about my burning toes when I hear a knock at the door. Clack, clack, clack go my heels against the hardwood floor, the smile spreading across my face in anticipation of seeing Max in a tux. Just the

thought makes me think about tearing him out of it later...

I yank open the door, ready to fling myself into his arms when I recoil. “Daddy! What are you doing here?”

My father shifts on the stoop, dressed in a navy blue suit. “You didn’t think I’d miss your big night, did you?”

“I’m so glad you decided to come.” Tears fill my eyes as I wrap my arms around him. “You’re the best dad in the world, do you know that?”

He squeezes me tight. “Your mom would have been so proud of you,” he says in a gruff voice. “All of the work you’ve done in her memory. She’d have loved it.”

“It makes me feel closer to her, you know?” I whisper, blinking fast to keep the tears in check. “Come on in. Max should be here any minute.”

He visibly bristles when I mention Max’s name and my brow furrows. “I’ll take my own car.”

I fold my arms. “Daddy, what’s the problem with Max? You’ve known him forever. Why are you so opposed to me spending time with him?”

My dad paces the floor, running a hand over his bald head. “Sloane, he’s not good for you. He can’t give you the kind of life you deserve. Why can’t you just find a nice, stable doctor at the hospital?”

The corners of my lips curl upward. “You don’t think Max is stable?”

Dad frowns at me. “He’s a loose cannon. He was always a troublemaker as a kid, and now he’s on to bigger things. Worse things. Things that you shouldn’t be around.”

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“Dad, he’s grown up. He’s not the same kid you remember.”

“Yeah, now he’s an adult. Still an asshole.”

I put my hands on his shoulders and look at him. “He’s a good guy, Daddy. You have to trust my judgment, okay? Besides, I...” I look down at my shoes. “I really care about him. He won’t hurt me.”

“Again, you mean?” My dad cocks an eyebrow.

My shoulders droop. “Things didn’t work out before. And I’m not a hundred percent sure they’ll work out this time, but I want to try. I’m not naïve, Daddy. There’s a lot of stuff I don’t know about him and what he does, but should I hold that against him? He makes me really happy, so should I just forget all of the good things and just focus on the bad stuff that I can’t even confirm, by the way? Isn’t it possible that he can change?”

My father’s face twists into a grimace. “Maybe. But his isn’t the kind of life you can just walk away from. There are rules, Sloane. And you can’t pick and choose which ones you want to follow.”

A shiver runs through me.

The code. It’s written all over his body.

But I can’t read it. I don’t know what it says. I have to trust him for that.



“I know,” I murmur, glancing at the clock on the end table. Max should be here any minute, and I really don’t want him to walk into this conversation. This is supposed to be a perfect night, and bad blood between him and my dad will turn it into a nightmare.

“You know, but yet you’re still moving forward with this whole thing.”

“Dad, I’m a big girl. I can’t hold his choices against him if he’s trying to put the past where it belongs. How would that be fair to him? Or to me?”

“That’s just the thing, Sloane. Guys like Max can never really escape their past. Things always come back to haunt them. And no matter what he tells you, he’ll always show up for the fight.”

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Max

I step out of the flower shop a few blocks from Sloane's place and stare at the bunch of star gazer lilies in my hand. I had to ask Shaye what kind of flowers Sloane likes, and now I'm clutching a bundle of them. They're different, classic, not the usual.

I'm not surprised they're her favorite. There's nothing typical about Sloane Camarena.

I look up and down the street. The sky is already dark, which I really hate. It sucks to be plunged in to darkness at four-thirty in the afternoon. Thanks, Daylight Savings Time.

There aren't any cars around either. This shop is nestled into a wooded corner, and it's surrounded by trees and bushes, so sometimes, I think people pass it right by without even knowing it's there. But I happen to know it's Sloane's favorite shop...another tidbit I picked up from Shaye...so I'm going to make sure I visit the place often.

As long as I can hold myself together and make her see that I'm in this for real.

A gust of wind rushes over me and I pull the edges of my tuxedo jacket together to brace me from the cold. I walk down around the side of the shop to where I parked my car, avoiding puddles of slush that are now iced over. I'd like to not land on my ass, but these damn shoes are slippery as hell.

My foot catches a patch of black ice and skids out in front of me, but I grab the side

of a tree trunk to balance myself. “Fuck,” I mutter, sidestepping the ice and continuing on my way. I finally make it to the clearing in the back and see another car parked next to mine. Weird. There wasn’t anyone else in the shop. And it doesn’t seem like the owner would drive a blacked-out Ford F-150.

Instinctively, my hand slides under my jacket and over the waistband where my gun normally sits, but tonight, there’s just fabric. No metal against my skin.

Because why in the fuck would I need a gun at a hospital benefit?

Tiny hairs prickle on the back of my neck. Snowflakes begin to fall, and I pick up the pace since I left my coat in the car. Chills slither through my insides with each step I take closer to my truck. My eyes shift left and right and every few seconds, I make a sharp twist backward to make sure nobody is lurking behind me. I jog the last few feet, pulling out my keys from my pants pocket and click to unlock the doors. I keep my head down and grip the driver’s side door handle, pulling it open.

“Ahh!” I jump backward, falling to my knees, my breath completely knocked out. “What the fuck!”

Jesus Christ. I rub my eyes and peer inside. It’s dim, but not completely black. I knew it wasn’t my imagination. Two fucking severed, bloody fingers sit in the driver’s seat of my truck.

Whose fucking fingers are they?

My pulse throbs in my throat, and I fumble around in my pocket for my phone. I have to call Nico. Or Rocco. Or fucking someone.

A loud creak behind me sends me flying against the door, and I spin around to see Mikey Bonnaro jump out of the F-150 next to me. His feet land on the concrete with

a thud and he doubles over in laughter. My blood boils, coursing through my veins like liquid flames. Just seeing that dipshit smirk of his makes me want to shoot it right off his ugly ass face.

“Maximo! I didn’t know a little blood would make you scream like such a bitch! Christ, I’m glad we went with the fingers instead of the whole head! You might’ve had a fucking heart attack and dropped dead on the spot! And that would’ve ruined all the fun.”

I straighten up, trying to catch my breath and shove him backward against his truck. “Whose fucking fingers are these, you asshole?”

He inches toward me, a sick, sinister smile toying with the corners of his lips. “I don’t want to ruin the surprise, Max. I’m sure it’ll make much more of an impact when you find out for yourself.” He folds his arms over his chest. “I have to say, I’m kinda surprised at your reaction, considering you’ve sawed off more than just a few fingers before. I’d have thought you had a stronger stomach. But then again, I guess sitting around behind a desk at some strip mall construction site will make those memories fade away.” He leans closer. “Yeah, that kind of work makes the killer instinct soft, just like a limp cock, you know what I’m sayin’?”

I swallow hard, my fists clenched at my sides. “Tell me who the fuck you did this to.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make any demands, Oriani.” Three other doors of the truck pop open, and a few more enormous and tattooed guys with nose rings, eye rings, and other metal parts poking out of their faces, ears, and necks jump onto the ground, surrounding me. I hear a lot of grunting, but no actual words are formed.

Mikey musta gotten these guys pretty cheap.

I eye them all, knowing that I could easily get my ass kicked to China and back in

seconds, but Christ, what a fucking bunch of circus freaks. “Fuck you, Mikey. Tell me now!”

Mikey’s eyes take on a rabid look, one that chills me way more than the frigid air since I’ve seen it before and know exactly what comes next. Like a crazed animal, he pounces on me. He launches a fist at my jaw, and I swing away from it, but he manages to follow it up with a shot to my midsection that has me doubled-over, clenching my teeth because I feel like he punched a hole through my lung and it fucking hurts.

“You don’t ask me questions, dickhead,” he hisses, grabbing my arm and twisting it behind my back. “And if by some miracle, you manage to knock me and the rest of my guys out, how will you find out whose fingers they are, huh? So typical of you, Oriani. Always ready to throw punches, never thinking about the consequences.”

I shrug out of his grip but only because he wants me to. He may plan to pound me into oblivion, but he’s not out to kill me.

Not tonight, anyway.

If he wanted me dead, I’d already be face-down on the cracked, wet concrete.

I raise my fists to my face, creeping toward him. I’m not fucking going down easy, that’s for shit sure. The group of goons eye me, circling around my truck like predators, daring me to throw down with Mikey so they can tear me apart, limb by limb.

But Mikey just chuckles. He doesn’t even pull a gun on me. He doesn’t need to. He knows I’m not armed, and he also knows I want information...information only he can deliver. He narrows his eyes. “I told you not too long ago that I was back to take my rightful place, Oriani. You and your father fucked shit up for me and my brother,

and now it's time to take what's ours." He chuckles. "I'm thinkin' that when all is said and done, you're gonna wish you had stabbed Gianni with that fork after all."

My eyes widen. Fuck!

“Whose fucking fingers are these, Mikey?” I yell. My head is spinning like a top and I can’t stop it. I’m scared shitless of what else I’m gonna find when he finally gives me the location I want, and I can’t for the life of me figure out his plan. If he’s not killing me, then...oh, Christ...

“I can see the light,” Mikey hisses. “It’s fucking dim, but at least it’s on. You’re getting there, aren’t you? You have an idea of who you’re gonna find, but you don’t know where to look. And you don’t know what’s coming next, either. That pisses you off more than anything.” Mikey leans back against his truck. “The thing is, if you were just a little smarter, you’d already be where you need to be. But let’s face it. Your fists were always more powerful than your brain. That’s why you’re still up Nico’s ass, trying to figure out how to do shit on your own. Nobody trusts you with anything big. In fact, I’ll bet your pal Nico knows a hell of a lot more than he’s telling you. Know why? He’s a smart guy. He can figure shit out pretty quick. Remember that night at the construction site? The scene you made, trying to prove to your piss ant crew that you’re not a fucking pussy? That was nothing, bitch. That was just a warning.” His smirk deepens. “You still haven’t connected those dots, have you? Well, guess what, dipshit? I bet your pal Nico has. And is it really so surprising he hasn’t told you what’s about to happen? It’s not like you can stop it anyway. Not like any of you assholes can stop it.”

I swing back my arm and crush my fist against Mikey’s eye. “Don’t you ever fucking talk to me like that again!”

He stumbles back against the car, holding a hand to his now-bloody eye. But the

bastard still doesn't stop smiling. "Did that make you feel better? Like more of a man, you know, the way you used to be before they slapped a fucking vagina in place of your dick!"

A deep roar emerges from my throat, and I leap on top of him, pounding my fists against him—his face, his chest, any target close enough for attack. Lucky for him, I'm only able to land a few good punches before his goons pull me off of him and throw me on the ground. I kick my legs around before they take me down to the pavement and manage to knock out a few teeth along the way. I cover my head, trying to protect my face and throat, but it doesn't matter. There's too much exposed, and I don't even wanna think about how busted up my insides will be when Mikey finally calls them off of me.

After a few seconds, he shocks the shit out of me and yells at them to stop...just like I did when my guys were beating the fuck out of his errand boy at the job site that night. Don't kill the messenger...yet. He serves a purpose. Once he does what we want, then we'll gut him.

I know the drill. Been there, done that, got the fucking t-shirt.

Mikey bends down to where I lay, clutching my side and assessing my injuries. One of my eyes is almost swollen shut, and I'm pretty sure I have at least one cracked rib. Since I can still breathe, it probably hasn't punctured a lung.

I'd say I fared pretty damn well considering the pack of thugs that was using me as a crash test dummy for their fists a few minutes ago.

He ruffles my slicked-back hair and snickers, the cocksucker that he is. "Sorry to mess up your outfit. And you looked so pretty, too."

I shove him away with one hand, but he only laughs. "This is fucking great, Max. I almost feel like we're getting close to being even. I just need to fuck your shit up a



few thousand more times. Wait for it because it's coming. Fast."

Blood pools in my mouth, and I spit it at his feet. "Give me what I asked for!"

"And then what? Are you gonna swoop in to save the day? You're such a fucking Boy Scout now, huh? Always trying to do the right thing, always trying to save someone from their fate. But you couldn't save Gabe, could you? Someone always ends up getting shanked on your watch." He fists my hair, his lips right against my ear. "Who's it gonna be this time? Wanna take a stab at it?" He lets out a sinister chuckle and shoves my head backward, my back slamming against the frozen concrete. "Whose blood will be on your hands tonight, Max?"