



# Slaying the Mob (Mob Lust 4)

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

**Description:** This life no longer owns me. Only she does.

Max

This life. It's a game, a very dangerous game where the losers always pay with their lives.

To win big, you have to take risks.

I always played to win because I had nothing to lose.

Until the game changed, and the stakes became too high.

I finally had something...someone...to keep safe.

But winning big meant I could have it all.

So I took a final risk to secure my future with Sloane.

I wanted it all, and it was finally within reach.

I broke the code.

I violated trust.

I lost focus...

And the one I vowed to always love and protect.

Sloane

I let myself fall in love with a monster.

And even though his soul is black as death, his heart is pure.

But only I can see it.

I was warned to stay away from Max Oriani, that I'd become a target, that I'd be...

Taken.

Or worse.

But the nightmare of living without him would be torture of the worst kind.

So I didn't listen.

I gave him everything I have.

And now I have to pay the price...

If I have any hopes of seeing him again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 78

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

Max

“I don’t take orders from anyone, least of all some prick who fucked with my future. You never counted on me showing up again, did you? You figured once Cappodamo was outta the picture, you were in the clear. Am I right?” Mikey Bonnarro tugs my hair harder, and I grit my teeth, powerless to do a goddamn thing that’ll get me out of this cluster fuck.

Fucking A, I wish I had my blade. I’d cut the bastard so fast and so hard, he’d bleed out before I could jump to my feet.

“You know what?” He pulls out a cigarette, lights it, and blows a stream of smoke right into my face. “I’m glad shit worked out this way. I’m running my own show now, and I don’t have to listen to anyone. I’ve got my crew and some very fucking generous offers from people who want what only I can get.” He narrows his eyes. “And I can get plenty, Max. Trust me on that. The Salesi family ain’t the only game in town anymore. The Bonnaros are back, and we’re taking over.”

“You don’t cross into this fucking state, you asshole. You know the rules.”

“Fuck the rules!” He drops my head and a sharp pain shoots down my spine. “You weren’t thinking of rules when your dickhead father decided to break them to cover his own ass.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I rub the back of my head. “He was trying to make a deal with Cappodamo to bring both families together—”

“Max, Max, Max. Is that what your old man told you? That he was doing it for the family?” Mikey’s eyes narrow to slits. “And you believed him, you dumb fuck?” He lets out a dry laugh. “How gullible are you? Lemme tell ya, Tony Oriani doesn’t do anything for anyone but himself. He doesn’t give a damn if the big boss Joe Salesi lives or dies, something that was pretty fucking clear when he helped Luca Cappodamo take him out in that car wreck. Did you think it was really a hit and run? Oh, wow, sounds like there are a lot of things Daddy needs to catch you up on. That is, if you can make it to him in time.”

Helped Luca Cappodamo take him out... No, fuck, no! I press a hand to the back of my head where the lump grows by the second. I try to make sense of what he’s telling me, but my vision is hazy and my head is throbbing. I knew it...I fucking knew something was off. I bought all of my dad’s bullshit, was it because I just didn’t want to admit the truth to myself? Was it because I knew I’d have to come clean with Nico? Didn’t I always know it would come to this?

If you violate the code, you die.

Everyone knows this.

You know what needs to be done. You just don’t want to be the one to pull the trigger.

Or, did someone else already pull it?

“Make it where? Where, for fuck’s sake?” I croak.

“Lemme give you a little clue. I’m crushing your business while I’m building my own. Right under your fucking noses, Max. Let’s see if you can figure out that riddle. I don’t have much faith, but who knows? Maybe you’ll just shock the shit out of me tonight. Christ only knows, I’ve done that to you, yeah?”

He snaps his finger and his crew jumps back into his truck, following his lead like the mindless 'roided-up minions that they are, the tires skidding on the icy pavement as it squeals out of the parking lot.

I lie still on the ground, trying to focus on numbing the pain with my mind, but I'm no Jedi master. I'm fucking hurting. Bad. And I have to get up and figure out how I'm gonna make it to the job site in one piece. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out. I feel like I've been knocked into next month, and I have no fucking idea what time it is.

Other than it's too late.

Where are you? My dad and I are waiting for you.

Goddammit! I squint my eyes at the time in the top corner of the screen. I should've been at Sloane's twenty minutes ago. My finger hovers over the keyboard. What the hell am I supposed to tell her?

Sorry, babe, can't make it for your big night. I have to find my dad who may or may not have been gutted like a fish by a mortal enemy. I hope you understand.

Yeah, that probably won't fly.

I struggle to my feet. "Ahh!" Are any of my fucking ribs still in one piece, for Christ's sake? But as bad as the pain is, it still isn't enough to mute the rage rushing through me. My heart thumps, and I wince with every pound and pulse against my bruised chest. I pull myself to a kneeling position, my breaths sharp and raspy. That fucking prick! I'll never forget the day Joe Salesi's car was plowed into. My dad showed up to the hospital hours after the accident spewing excuses about issues with building inspections. He looked us all in the eye and lied like the sack of shit he is. Watching his childhood friend struggle for life while he lay mangled on a hospital

gurney, bloody and bruised. Comforting Mrs. Salesi and Lily, their young daughter, offering to help, to do anything they need.

Yeah, because you hadn't done enough already, right, Dad?

I look down at the trail of blood splattered across the front of my starched white shirt, my torn tuxedo jacket, and my scuffed-up shoes. What a fucking sight. How could I have thought I'd be ever be able to do right by Sloane?

I love her, but this whole thing...fuck. It's where we have to end. I can't drag her in any deeper. These people...they're out for blood, and mine spread all over the fucking pavement sure as hell isn't enough. They won't stop until they've drained it from everyone I love.

Even the ones I don't love...

I take a deep breath and stab a few words into the keyboard of my phone.

I can't make it tonight. I'm so sorry. I know you'll do great.

I stare at the words before clicking the Send button. I don't know what hurts more — the ache in my heart or the one in my chest.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

I know once I do it, I will have lost my chance with her. Forever.

I grab onto the door handle of my truck and pull myself up, wincing as my spine straightens. My body instinctively hunches over, falling into the side of the door. I pull it open and crumble into the seat, squeezing the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. “Motherfucker!”

I turn the key in the ignition, dropping my head onto my hands before I finally make my choice and send the text.

The fucking code.

It always trumps everything.

That’s how I’d always lived.

Until now.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

Sloane

“So, where’s the spicy Italian sausage?” Jules sidles up behind me, poking me in the side while I’m standing at one of the buffet tables at The Essex House, the venue for this year’s hospital benefit.

I shake my head, unable to open my mouth for fear of what might come out. I don’t want to think about Max. I don’t want to hear his name. Hell, I don’t even want to see his name, which is why I clicked off my phone right after he blew me off for the third and final time. I don’t need to be reminded that I’ve allowed myself to be kicked to the curb yet again by that jerkoff. And I certainly don’t want to see any of his lame-ass excuses flash on my screen.

I may even change my phone number tomorrow. Screw him.

Jules puts her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes. “Are you telling me The Godfather pulled another disappearing act? Oh, he’s definitely gonna sleep with the fishes tonight once I get my hands on him.”

Tears pool in my eyes, despite the smile lifting the corners of my mouth. I blink fast to keep them in check. Shaye wouldn’t be happy if I turned her makeup masterpiece into a mess of colored streaks and puddles.

Not happening! I look fantastic. He’s not worthy of my tears. Or my heart, for that matter.

I’ve cried plenty over him in the past. I refuse to waste any more.

Jules positions herself in front of me and puts her hands on my shoulders. “Tell me what happened. Give me an excuse to pull a Lorena Bobbitt and I’ll take a machete to his junk.”

I snicker. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ll be fine. He’s over.”

Jules narrows her eyes. “I know my way around an operating room. I know how to set up an IV. I know how to puncture a vein. I have a very unique set of skills...skills that make me very dangerous to people like him.”

“Thanks, Liam Neeson. I’ll take all of that into consideration.” I sniffle and smooth the front of my dress. My toes are almost numb at this point because of the shoes Shaye insisted I wear.

I wish I could say the same thing about my heart.

Dad walks over with two Coca-Colas and smiles at Jules. “Here you go, girls.”

Jules throws her arms around my dad’s neck and gives him a big kiss on the cheek. “Papa C, so great to see you out and looking so sharp!”

Dad clears his throat and adjusts his tie, a pink flush creeping into his cheeks. “Thank you, Jules. You look lovely.”

She does a little curtsy and holds up her glass. I’m sure she would have preferred something much more alcoholic but my dad is a gentleman and never would have left her empty-handed. And she’s respectful...at least enough to take whatever he offered.

Besides, knowing her she’s already been pre-gaming for the past couple of hours.

While watching Taken for the fiftieth time.



“I’m so excited to see our girl up at that podium tonight!”

“At least someone’s here to support her,” Dad mumbles under his breath.

“Daddy!” I hiss. “Please. I told you, it’s done. Okay?”

“You said that last time, too. Remember?”

Jules looks between me and Dad and claps her hands. “Oh, I love this song! Papa C, come and dance with me, okay? Tell me all about your, um, accounting clients. It’s almost tax season! That’s exciting, right?”

Dad rolls his eyes at me as she tugs him toward the dance floor, and I bite my lower lip to keep from laughing despite the heaviness in my gut and the ache in my soul.

I thought the void had finally been filled. I’d wished and prayed for so long that I’d finally feel whole again, and just when I really thought maybe I could have it all, my hopes for the future were yanked away.

Yet again.

Third time’s the charm?

Nope.

More like, three strikes and you’re out.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

I walk over to our table, gripping the place card in my hand. I find an empty seat and sink into it, breathing a sigh of relief when my toes regain feeling.

“Well, well, well. Nurse Sloane. I didn’t expect to run into you here tonight, but I’m sure glad I found another excuse to come back to Jersey.”

I look up at the intruding voice and manage a tight smile. “Hello, Gianni.” My chest tightens as he pulls out the chair next to me and sits down.

My eyes fall to the silverware in front of me, I toy with the fork. It doesn’t go unnoticed. Gianni lets out a chuckle. “You don’t seem like the kind of girl who likes a good forking in such a public place.”

I giggle and cover my face, dropping the fork onto the table. “Yeah, I prefer a little more discretion.”

He nods with a leer that makes my knees lock together. “I’ll bet you do.”

A hot flush creeps up my neck, and I try to deflect. “Are you here with someone?”

“No, I came alone.” He scoots his chair closer, and a sharp, spicy scent hits my nostrils. “Always want to keep my options open.”

“Oh,” I murmur. “Well, um, how are you affiliated with the hospital? I thought only donors, board members, and employees were invited?”

He nods. “That’s right.”

“So which one are you?”

He smiles, exposing a row of bright white teeth. He creeps me the hell out, but he’s definitely easy on the eyes. Longish dark hair, chocolate brown gaze, olive skin. And tonight he looks like he just stepped out of GQ magazine.

The thought causes a sharp pang to slice through my heart.

Max would have looked amazing in a tux.

Max’s tux would have looked amazing balled up on my bedroom floor.

I clench my fists under the table and force a wide smile, still waiting for his reply.

“I’m a donor.” He looks down at his lap before raising his saddened gaze. “See, one of the reasons why I hate coming out to Jersey so much is because my mom died of cancer here. Right in this hospital, thirteen years ago.” He shrugs. “But I come back every year for this benefit to give back to the hospital that cared for her way back when.”

“Gianni, I’m so sorry to hear that. My mom passed away from cancer, too. It’s why I decided to become a nurse. I wanted to pay all of it forward, I guess. You know, give back to the people who gave of themselves for her.”

“That’s really nice. I bet your patients love seeing your smiling face every day.”

“Well, every day is a struggle for them, so I just want to know that I’m helping as much as possible.” I shift in my chair as his expression changes from one of empathy to one decidedly more...curious. Much more curious than I’d like him to be.

“You’re a really special woman, Sloane. I knew that the first time I met you.” His

hand inches toward mine, and I lift it to smooth back a flyaway. I don't like the way he's studying me right now. His eyes probe me so long and hard, I feel violated.

And sore.

I clear my throat and sit back against my chair, back straight. My gaze falls to the distinctive tattoo inked across the top of his hand and the sight of it sends a shiver through me for some odd reason. "Well, I think it's great that you give back. There is no shortage of people who will benefit from your generosity."

"I just want to be around you," he continues, staring at me as if he hadn't heard a word I just said. "There's so much I want to find out about you, Sloane. Don't waste your time on guys like Max Oriani. They can never appreciate someone like you. You deserve a man who can appreciate you. All of you."

Holy crap, did he just—?

My skin crawls at each syllable that tumbles from his lips. I've heard the expression, but never actually experienced it before. Until now. It literally feels like slime is oozing all over me, and I can't shake hard enough to rid myself of it. It sticks and slides over me, making my gut clench.

Oh, yes. He did. I didn't imagine any of that.

The urge to bolt from this table is overwhelming, and my toes actually twitch in my shoes. Full feeling has returned, and they're alert and ready to run.

Nice to know if I choose to move my feet that they'll respond. The nerves aren't completely deadened.

How is it possible that this guy can make me feel such deep empathy one second and

complete nausea the next?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

Hm. Maybe because he's some kind of sociopath?

Jesus, I really need to get the heck away from here. My fingers tap my beaded clutch bag, a clear indication that they want to dial Max's number and tell him there are plenty of forks here waiting should he feel the urge to dig into Gianni's chest with one. Or ten.

But Max had something more important to do tonight. And I shouldn't want to call. I don't want to feel. I want to hate him...the way I swore I did before.

Until he managed to wiggle his way back into my heart.

I thought that's where he wanted to stay.

I was so very wrong.

Gianni leans closer, his dark eyes studying me, his voice deep and gravelly. But it's not at all sexy. It's downright scary. His tone is threatening, daring me to challenge his offer, to turn him down. His body turns slight left, like he's blocking my escape. But that smile is still in place, showcasing a very different image than the one deep inside. I can sense it. I've worked with enough psychotics to know a damn-convincing façade when I see one.

"Sloane! There you are! I think it's about time. Are you ready?" Dr. Steven Kiley stops next to my table with a wide smile. He nods toward Gianni who returns it with a death glare. But Dr. Kiley doesn't even flinch. Maybe he caught my silent S.O.S. Maybe he just happened to spot me on his way to the bar. Either way, I'm rescued.

For the moment.

“Yes! I am, thanks for coming to find me.” I grab my clutch tight and manage to swing my legs around in the chair. Dr. Kiley sticks out a hand to help me through the tangle of legs blocking my rapid exit. I rise from the seat and paste on a fake smile. “It was nice talking to you, Gianni. Enjoy the rest of the night.”

“Sorry for interrupting. Was that your, um...date?” Steven’s voice definitely begs me to say no, and I am very happy to comply.

“No, just someone I was talking to. I don’t really know him at all.” I bite my tongue when the next words threaten to spew forth...that my real date, my real boyfriend, who was supposed to be here with me, got a better offer and ditched me on one of the most important nights of my life.

No! We are not going there, Sloane! My inner cheerleader speaks up giving me a reality slap across the face. Tonight is your night, and nothing will ruin it. You’ve worked too hard for this, and if Max doesn’t want to acknowledge it, if you aren’t important enough for him to support, then fuck him!

I swallow hard and force a smile at Dr. Kiley. “Shall we?” I link my arm with his and allow him to lead me toward the podium, anxious to put as much distance between myself and Gianni as possible.

“I can’t wait to hear your speech,” he murmurs. “There are a lot of people here who are really interested in what you have to say.”

With a throbbing pulse, I give a quick nod. I wish I could say it was from nerves. I peer through the crowd and let out a deep sigh of relief when I spot Jules and my dad standing on the side of the dance floor. Jules is talking a blue streak as usual, her hands flying through the air as she explains something to him. He nods politely, as he

always would, even if he couldn't care less about what he's hearing. That's just my dad.

I let out a deep sigh, feeling somewhat settled. My eyes slide through the crowd once more, but Gianni is nowhere to be found. Thank God. Let him find someone else to prey on.

I follow Dr. Kiley to the microphone and smile at Eric Bane, the chairman of the hospital board. "Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak, Mr. Bane. It really means a lot to me."

Mr. Bane nods and shakes my hand. "I'm very excited to share the news of your program with our attendees this evening. If you're ready, I'll introduce you."

Butterflies swarm in my belly as Mr. Bane's booming voice quiets the room. I catch the eyes of Jules and my dad. Jules gives me the thumbs-up and Dad is grinning so hard, it looks like his face might just explode from a happiness I haven't seen in a very long time. I swallow hard. Public speaking really isn't my thing, and I grip my index cards tight in my hand even though I don't even need them.

What I really need isn't here.

And he won't be ever again.

Dr. Kiley is the first to applaud when Mr. Bane introduces me to speak, and I feel a bit better knowing I have the support of people who actually care about me. I step forward and adjust the microphone, flashing a wide smile at the audience. "Good evening, everyone. Thank you to Mr. Bane and the board for giving me an opportunity to speak to you about a program called The Buddy System. I formed this program a year ago when I became a full-time nurse in the trauma center. Working here has opened my eyes to the wonderful work that everyone does to help people in



need, to make patients as comfortable as possible, and to provide them with world-class care.” My eyes flit around the room at the sea of strange faces. I see a lot of smiles of encouragement, and that strengthens my voice. “I lost my mother years ago to cancer. It was the hardest time of our lives, one thing that got us through those difficult months of surgery and treatments was knowing what wonderful people surrounded her at the hospital. They became her rock, her support, her shoulder to cry on when my dad and I couldn’t be there with her.” Tears pool in the corners of my eyes. “That’s what The Buddy System strives to do. We’ve rolled out the program in the Pediatric Cancer Care Unit and it has been a tremendous success. Volunteers take on ‘buddies’, and they visit the kids, bring them gifts, play with them, and basically, be their friends at a time that’s really confusing and frightening for them. They don’t take the place of our staff, but they bring happiness and hope to the kids and their families. They brighten days and bring smiles. We plan to roll out the program to other units in the hospital in the next several months, but we need funding to do even more. Please consider making a donation to The Buddy System and help us bring that hope and happiness to others. Thank you for your time.”

A loud smattering of applause rings in my ears, and I want to jump for joy. Well, I take that back. I’ll jump later when I’m barefoot. It’ll hurt a heck of a lot less when I’m not wearing these stilts.

Jules and my dad rush over to me, smothering me with hugs and kisses. Their excitement is contagious, and a few of the administrators walk over to shake my hand and tell me how impressed they are with the work I’ve done in such a short amount of time.

They think I’m just diligent and driven. They’re right...somewhat. But they don’t know that the reason I jump-started it all was mainly because there are never any guarantees with this kind of diagnosis. Waiting around to cut through red tape just means that we’re letting time get the better of us and some of the kids just didn’t have the time to spare.

My mother didn't.

And the positivity has helped so many of them. Kids whose treatments have stopped working, kids who've needed transplants to stay alive, kids who've been given only months to live...this program has done wonders for them, giving them something to look forward to each day. And some of their conditions have actually improved because of the added attention.

And I'm glad that more people want to become part of our tribe. My heart swells at the well-wishes and congratulations, and I know Mom is smiling down on me. I can feel her with me, just like I do each day I visit with the kids.

I swallow hard, past the growing lump in my throat. This is where I was always meant to be, and what I was meant to do. I reach out and hug my dad hard around the neck, breathing in his fatherly scent of Royal Copenhagen. It's the only cologne he's ever worn, even though I've tried to mix it up on him a few times in the past. He's a creature of habit, and tonight, I'm really glad for that. Tonight, I needed that familiarity. One whiff has the power to bring back memories of happy times we shared with Mom, and they comfort me now, knowing that she'll always be part of my life and my work.

"I'm so proud of you," he whispers, rubbing my back. "So is Mom."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

I nod because if I try to speak, I'll end up blubbering like a child who just suffered her first skinned knee. When I pull back, I see Jules making eyes in Dr. Kiley's direction. He's speaking to Mr. Bane, but I catch the quick glances he shoots in my direction. His blue eyes twinkle in the soft glow of the chandeliers hanging throughout the dining room, and it's impossible for me not to smile right now.

"He's totally checking you out," Jules mumbles under her breath. "Papa C, what do you think of the doctor? She should totally go out with him, right?"

Dad glances at Dr. Kiley, whose gaze is still fixed on me. "I think she should do whatever feels right to her." He grins. "He does seem like a fine young man, and from what I see, he can't take his eyes off of you for longer than thirty seconds."

I giggle, a hot flush warming my cheeks. "Can you guys please stop talking about him? He's only a few feet away. He can hear you!"

"Maybe he needs to hear us," Jules says with a snarky smile. "Maybe it'll give him the push he needs to finally ask you out on a proper date."

Dr. Kiley picks that very moment to push through the crowd and join our little group next to the podium. "Great news. I was just speaking to one of the board members, and she said that she'd like to make a donation on behalf of her own foundation." His smile widens, exposing a tiny dimple in his right cheek. Funny, I never noticed that...

"She wants to donate fifty-thousand dollars, Sloane." Dr. Kiley continues. "And that is just one person who your words managed to touch tonight. That speech was perfect, and you clearly have won over this crowd with your candor and your heart."

Jules claps her hands. “Oh, my God! Sloane, that’s incredible!” She turns to Dr. Kiley. “I think this calls for a celebration, don’t you? I’m thinking champagne, candles, maybe some chocolate?”

She did not just say that! I gasp and stomp on her foot before she can utter another word. Her jaw drops at the sneak attack, and her eyes widen. “So, you think so, too, don’t you Sloane?” she manages to rasp before biting her lower lip.

“I, um,” I clear my throat. “I think there is definitely a lot to celebrate tonight for our patients. I’m really hopeful that—”

“I think Jules makes a really good point,” Dr. Kiley says, his eyes laser-focused on mine. “You deserve much more than champagne, candles, and chocolate for all of your hard work, but it’s a good start. What do you say?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know, I mean, I came here with my father, and I’d hate to just ditch him...” I twist in Dad’s direction, but he’s smiling and shaking his head like a freaking bobblehead doll.

“Don’t be silly. I will be just fine. You go out and have some fun. You deserve it. I’m ready to head out anyway.” Dad drops a kiss on my forehead and shakes Dr. Kiley’s hand. “Enjoy your evening.”

Jules backs away next, grinning wildly at me. “Forget the pepperoni calzone and have some fun tonight!” she hisses into my ear before waving goodbye. “I think I’m going to get another drink. I see a tall, dark glass of something delicious over at the bar that I’d like to sample. Have fun, you two!” She disappears into the crowd, but not before she does her little rump shaker dance behind Dr. Kiley. I clamp my mouth shut before the garbled laughter erupts from my throat.

I look up at him, twisting my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He furrows his brow, his expression puzzled.

“Well, because I don’t want you to feel obligated to stick around with me. It’s really not a big deal. I can still find my dad if you want to just take off and enjoy the rest of your night.”

He smiles and offers me his arm. “I can’t think of a better way to enjoy it, Sloane. Except, if we’re being totally honest, I’d like to skip the chocolate part. I’m deathly allergic to the stuff.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

Max

I press the gas, a sharp pain shooting straight up my leg and exploding in my gut. “Motherfucker!” I yell, speeding through yellow lights, praying that I don’t get pulled over by a cop looking to bust me. I screech to a halt when my luck runs out and the next traffic light turns a bright red.

Who the fuck can I call? If I dial Nico’s number, I’m gonna have to tell him more than I’m ready to right now. I need to get to my dad. He may be a fucking lying sack of shit, but he’s still my father, and he might be in bad shape.

Or worse, knowing Mikey.

I grab my phone while my truck sits at the light, and I stab Rocco’s number. I hate like hell to do it, and putting trust in people who’ve fucked you over before really isn’t my thing, but I’m desperate right now.

A few seconds later, I hear his asshole voice on the line. “Yeah? You ready to apologize yet, dickhead?”

“Rocco, I need help.” I swallow hard, making a turn onto Route 46. It’s a straight shot to the job site, and I don’t have a second to spare. “I need you to find Sloane. She was at some benefit tonight for the hospital. Find her, okay? I’m afraid something is about to happen, and I don’t know what, but I need to make sure she’s safe.”

“Max, what the hell are you talking about? What’s about to happen? Where the fuck

are you?”

“Something about my dad. I can’t tell you any more than that right now.” I press the heel of my hand against my forehead. “Just find her. And leave Nico out of this right now, okay? I don’t want Shaye finding out and going ape-shit until I can get some answers.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to tell anyone anything? You haven’t given me dick here!”

“I know, and I hate to ask you of all people for a favor, but I need help. Fast.”

“You’re a real prick, you know that?”

“Yeah, but right now, I’m a prick that needs backup. So get the fuck to it.”

Rocco is silent for a second. “Fine. But only cause you asked nicely. Now tell me how the hell to find her.”

“The benefit is at the Essex House. Get over there because I don’t know how long she’ll stay. Text me as soon as you find her.”

“Okay.”

I click to end the call and drop the phone in my lap. The bloody, severed fingers are wrapped in a t-shirt, sitting in the passenger seat. Like I could call Nico right now, when he’s home with Shaye, and tell him what I just heard about my father. I’m betraying the family by holding back this information. I’m rejecting the code to protect my own, and that’s very fucking bad.

Is it true? Did he fucking sell Joe Salesi out to the Cappodamo family? Christ, I may

despise my dad, but I have to know why he pulled this shit. I need him to explain what the fuck he was thinking when he made these asinine decisions that put all of our asses on the chopping block.

Was it for the money? Was it for the power? Or was it that he's always been jealous of Joe and wants nothing more than to take him down once and for all?

My thoughts are all over the place right now, and it's hard to make sense of anything flying through my mind.

An image of Sloane's smiling face takes center stage and my gut clenches. I let her down, too. Christ, there's no shortage of people I haven't disappointed in my life.

Please let her be safe. Please don't let them have gotten to her.

I have texted and called her no less than twenty times since I got into my truck. And nothing went through. Calls go straight to voicemail, texts go undelivered. That alone makes me panic. If I can't get to her, nobody else can either, right? And if she's at the benefit, she'll be surrounded by people, right?

Yeah, Gianni could be one of them...

I slam my fist on the steering wheel. I'm the reason Sloane is in danger, and why my father has been sliced up like a fucking salami. Those pricks aren't after anyone but me...and they'll take down whomever they can to make sure I suffer just as much.

I swing the wheel around, the tires squealing on the pavement. I slam on the brakes and the truck stops short right in the center of the empty lot. I push open the door and run across the gravel, slipping on the icy patches but managing to keep myself from landing on my ass. Construction vehicles line the perimeter of the space, and scaffolding covers the exterior of the buildings. The large shed where our offices are



set up is dark, so I jog past it. If they were going to torture him somewhere, they'd leave him in the cold afterward because that's just the kind of sick assholes they are.

My fingertips are numb from the cold, and I stuff them into my pockets to thaw them out. Gusts of air whish past me, my breath clouding in front of my face. The beads of perspiration drizzling down my back only seconds earlier are now tiny balls of ice clinging to my skin. But throwing on a coat was the last thing on my mind when my eyes hit those fingers.

“Dad!” I yell out, running as best as I can into the maze of framing. It's dark, except for the moonlight shining through the piles of wood and metal. I turn on my iPhone light, and it prevents me from crashing into a massive concrete mixer. My heart thuds as I round corners, going deep into the center of the soon-to-be strip mall. “Dad!” I call out again, my voice echoing in the eerie silence.

I strain my ears to hear anything, any indication that he's here...and alive.

But there is no sound at all, other than the blood rushing between my ears.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:50 am*

I collapse against a metal beam, squeezing my eyes shut. A shooting pain makes my leg spasm and my teeth clench. I press my hand to my ribs and let out a yelp. I need a fucking doctor, but there's no time.

There's never enough fucking time. It's the one thing I'm always out of.

Rocco still hasn't texted me back. Shouldn't he have found her already?

I scrub a hand down the front of my face, the realization sinking in. They baited me. They led me on this fucking wild goose chase, made me believe they'd gotten to my dad. They took a gamble that I'd buy their fucking story.

And I did. I made that choice, just as they'd predicted. I chose my father, tried to do right by the man who has always done everything to tear me down because I couldn't ever live up to his expectations. I betrayed my best friend and the code. And I put everyone at risk.

Nobody is safe. Anyone can be compromised.

For years, I lived in Nico's shadow, hearing over and over from my father that I'd never amount to anything, that nobody would ever trust me with anything important, that I'd never run the show.

And here I am, trying to save the guy who did nothing but pummel me into the ground and criticize me at every turn.

I'm not a bad person.

I'm just fucked in the head.

Thanks for that, Dad.

I swipe through some screens and dial Sloane's number again. This time, it doesn't go straight to voicemail. It just hangs. No bars. No fucking service. Motherfucker! "Ahh! Goddammit!" I scream, hurling my arm backward, ready to let the fucking phone fly and shatter against the concrete foundation.

A loud clatter stops my arm mid-throw, and I twist around in the direction of the noise echoing through the space. Another bang pierces the otherwise still air, the sound coming from the same general direction.

I straighten up, cringing as my spine stretches. I throw an arm over my midsection, hunched over as I creep toward the noises coming from a far end of the space. I shine my flashlight and a few mice scurry past me, the sudden motion making me stumble into a metal beam. "Sonofabitch!" I yell, still creeping. Another clanging sound assaults my ears, and I pick up the pace, not knowing what I'm walking into and as usual, not stopping to strategize.

Attack first, think never.

No weapon. No light. No backup.

How the fuck do I keep finding myself in these situations?

I strain my ears to hear anything, the slightest whimper, anything to indicate that there's something...or someone...to be found.

I rush through one of the doorways and hold up my trembling hand to shine the light in front of me.

Two seconds too late.

“Fuck!” My head crashes into a thick piece of metal dangling from the ceiling. I jerk backward against a workbench, collapsing against it with a loud groan. My phone clatters to the ground, plunging me into pitch blackness. The force of the hit scrambles my brain, and I blink fast for a few seconds, trying to remember where the hell I even am.

“Mnmph!”

The sound is faint, and for a second, I think it might just be my own moaning that I hear. I clutch my temples, staggering forward, my eyes on the tiny dot of light under my phone. I scoop it up and drag myself to my feet, holding up the light again to find the source of the muffled sounds. A pang of anger jolts me when my eyes finally adjust. “Dad...”

I rush forward, ignoring every agonizing ache and cramp, kneeling beside my father’s bloody and bruised body. At fifty, he’s in pretty good shape. He’s tall, built, and muscular, but no comparison for the bunch of goons that launched their attack on me earlier tonight. Thank God my mother is away in the city this weekend with Shaye. I don’t even want to think about how I’d explain this fucking mess. Dad looks like a prize fighter right now, one eye swollen completely shut. I’ve never seen him look so defeated. He may not always come out on top, but he sure as hell acts the part.

He never folds. He never crumbles. He never shows any sign of weakness.

But now, he just looks like he’s given up, like he’s got nothing left to fight for.

I swallow hard, blinking back the tears that spring to my eyes. How many times had I wished to see this exact scene play out? To see someone torture my father exactly the way he’d always inflicted his own brand of torment on me? And every time I’d

imagine it, it would make me feel better. I guess it was my own form of self-healing. And it worked. Every time. But the reality I'm faced with now gives me pause.

Seeing him tied to this chair, wheezing through his nose, unable to draw in a deep breath because of the duct tape plastered across his mouth, blood drizzling down the sides of his face, two stubs on his right hand...it's exactly as I imagined it. But instead of feeling vindicated, I want fucking retribution on the cocksuckers who did this.

I tried for years to get this man's approval. I did things that made my stomach turn, all to prove my strength and my loyalty. None of it worked. He never gave me so much as a pat on the back. It was never enough. I was never enough.

His one good eye is half-open and focused on my face, his expression vacant. I take a deep breath. "Dad, I'm gonna pull off the tape, okay? Real fast so it won't hurt."

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His head bobs back and forth, and I yank the tape off with one swift tug. He draws in a deep breath, choking on the air, gasping like a fish out of water.

I look around the floor for something I can use to cut off the tape binding his hands and feet.

“Max,” Dad rasps as I kick crap around on the floor in search of a blade.

“Fuck! I need a knife!” I rake a hand through my hair, afraid to look back at him. My self-control is wavering, and I’m afraid I’ll lose my shit if he says a word. All of the feelings of inadequacy and rejection tumble over me like a crashing wave, and I’m suddenly swept away in a sea of emotions I don’t know how to process.

“Max,” he croaks again, and I fist my hair, spinning to face him.

“Fuck you, Dad! Fuck you for making my life miserable for twenty-seven years! For rejecting every fucking thing I ever did to make you proud!” The fury that had consumed me for years finally erupts out of me like an active volcano. Words spew from my mouth faster than I can formulate thoughts, exploding like bullets. I drop to my knees in front of him. “All I wanted was your approval, but I was never good enough to get so much as a ‘Hey, good job, son’ from you. Nope, it was always, ‘You’re not enough like Nico. You’re not smart enough to make something of yourself. You’re not strong enough to take your rightful place.’ I was never like the son you’d always wanted, and you spent my entire life making sure I knew it. But you know something?” I point a finger at his face. “I always tried to do the right thing. I always tried to protect my friends and my family. You’re a backstabbing scumbag, and you know what else? You fucking deserve everything they did to you

tonight! You deserve it all!" I cover my face with my hands, sobbing into them. My shoulders quake and the tears fall.

Weakness. In front of the man I'd always vowed would never break me.

"I'm sorry," he rasps, a deep, hacking cough making his body shudder. "I'm sorry for everything."

"Why the fuck did you do it? Joe could've been killed that day. But you didn't care about that, did you? You only cared about how it would benefit you if you helped the Cappodamos, our fucking mortal enemies!" I scream, my eyes narrowed to slits. I rise from the ground, still searching for something to cut my dad out of that tape.

"Max," he says, his voice weak and tired. "I needed the money. That's why I did it."

"For fucking what?" I yell. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have helped you. But instead you...you..." I let out a tortured growl. "Do you know what you did, Dad?" I lean over him. "You fucking killed us. All of us. How the fuck am I supposed to get us out of this? Nico will have you killed for betraying the family! And then he'll kill me because he'll assume I knew about it!" I pace in front of him. "And I did. I knew something was up with you. I didn't say anything to Nico. I ignored it because I knew it would come to this!"

"I don't care about myself. But Mom and Shaye. They need to be protected. I'll make sure that they know I acted on my own. I just..." He shakes his head. "I let you all down. I'm so fucking sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry? How is that gonna save us, Dad? And did you think about Mom and Shaye when you were fucking around with the Cappodamos? When you were selling us all out to them?"

“I couldn’t tell anyone, Max. They told me they’d kill my family if I said a word to anyone. And it’s the only way they’d help me.”

“Help you with what, for fuck’s sake? Tell me why you’re here, Dad!” I find a switchblade behind some cut wood, and I grab it.

“Gambling, Max. I had a debt to pay. Working with them was the only way to settle up.”

“You got in a little over your head with fucking blackjack? That’s why you sold out the Salesis?” I slice the duct tape and free his wrists before attacking the tape wrapped around his ankles.

“It wasn’t a little, Max. It was ten-million dollars.”

My jaw drops along with the knife. “What the fuck is wrong with you? How could you...and all that money you dropped on shit for the house, the cars, the jewelry...where did that come from?”

“More debt. Max, I’m not proud of what I’ve done, but I promised your mother a life. I intended to deliver on that.”

“Two of your fucking fingers are sitting in my goddamn truck right now! Was it really worth it, Dad? Jesus Christ! How the fuck am I going to explain this to Nico? You’re fucking dead! We both are!” I pace again as my father stretches his limbs. My own aching body is an afterthought right now. “I need to get you out of here. You need to get on a plane. Tonight. You can’t talk to anyone. You can’t go home.” I think fast, trying to come up with a solution, any solution, that will keep us alive.

“Max, you know that won’t work.”



“Yes, it will! I can’t stand the fucking sight of you right now for doing this to us, but I can’t have any more blood on my hands! I can’t watch Mom and Shaye deal with this! I need to protect them. I have to find a way—”

“The Bonnaros know, Max. It’s only a matter of time before they come for me.” He pauses. “Let me make things right with the Salesis. I’ll tell them everything, and I’ll deal with the consequences.”

“Don’t, Dad. We can figure this out. It doesn’t need to be this way.” I kick over one of the benches. “Why didn’t you just tell me? I would have helped you! We would have figured it out!”

Dad sighs, cringing as he cradles his hand. “I know I’ve been hard on you all of these years, and it wasn’t right. But I didn’t want you to end up like me. I wanted you to be able to stand on your own two feet so you wouldn’t have to rely on anyone. I messed up, Max. I’ve been messing up my whole life, and I never wanted to see you in that position...making mistakes that you can never recover from. All of this time, you’ve always been such a hot head, always ready to lash out, never thinking through consequences. That’s how I always was and look where it got me?” He shakes his head. “I’d hoped that if I laid into you, you’d eventually find your way. Another way that wouldn’t come back to haunt you.”

“You should have been honest with me,” I grunt.

“I couldn’t. I was embarrassed. Broken. Weak. I was under someone else’s control, and I couldn’t manage to find my way out. I thought once Luca and Frank were out of the picture, I’d be in the clear. But Mikey wasn’t about to let me forget what he lost out on because of me. There’s no shortage of people I fucked over to save my own ass, Max. And I’m sorry. I don’t expect you to forgive me or to understand. But please take care of your mother and Shaye. I don’t want them to know about this. I don’t ever want them to see me for the person I really am. Just do me that one favor

and keep this away from them.”

“I will, Dad.” I hoist him up and anchor my arm under his shoulder, helping him sidestep the construction debris scattered across the floor. Using my flashlight, I navigate us out of the job site and toward my truck. My eyes dart left and right, but the lot is still desolate.

Luckily, or unluckily, for us.

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I manage to load him into the passenger seat and pull the seat belt around him, watching him cringe as I buckle him in. I slam the door shut and run around to the driver's side, watching the road.

Still black.

Still quiet.

Still undetected.

I gun the engine and peel out of the parking lot heading away as fast as I can. Except I don't know where I'm going. I slam my hand on the steering wheel. "Dammit!" I shout. "I have to get you out of here before anyone finds out. I need to tell Nico before Mikey and Gianni do...if they haven't already. Argh! I fucking can't believe you, Dad! What in the hell were you thinking? Were you thinking at all, for Christ's sake?" I slam my foot on the brake as a traffic light turns red and twist my head every which way to make sure we aren't about to be railroaded by a car or five.

It's only a matter of time before that happens. I'm sure there's already a hit on both of us, and Nico is the only one who can make it all go away. I need to tell him. He has to hear it from me. It's the only way.

His loyalty is to the family. He worships the ground my sister walks on, but at the end of the day, he bleeds Salesi blood, not Oriani blood. He'd give the order to take out Shaye's whole family if it meant preserving his own.

But he's also reasonable. If I can explain the whole thing, if I can figure out some

way to redeem us both for this betrayal, there may be a chance...a slim one, but at least it's something to cling to.

"There's more, Max." Dad murmurs, staring out the window. "Mikey and Gianni, they're not just out for blood. They have plans to take over our territories, and they have money. And lot of fucking backing."

"Who are they working with?" I hold my breath, not sure I want to even know.

"The Cinqes from California. You know they've always been tight with the Cappodamo crew. They lost out on a lot of business when Frank and Luca were killed, and now they want their money. Mikey and Gianni are their puppets, and they'll do whatever the Cinqes say because it feeds them even more power. They want to crush us, Max. They won't stop until that happens. They want to take down the Salesi family, exactly the way we took down theirs."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

The Cinqes are bad news. They recruit the worst of the worst, low-lives who spend more time in lock-up than out, and they're heavy into drugs and trafficking on the West Coast. They make sick cash smuggling in drugs and young Mexican women to sell on the black market. They are also probably one of the wealthiest families in the country, so I doubt they want money as much as they want revenge.

And for the Cinqes, revenge isn't sweet. It's fucking brutal. I've seen the evidence. Sticking my cock in a vise would be a vacation compared to what I've seen the Cinqes do to people who cross them.

"Sonofabitch," I mutter under my breath. "When did you find all of this out?"

"About a week ago. Once Gianni was released, Mikey let a few things slip out during

one of our meetings. They thought I was with them since they were payrolling me and wanted me to get information.”

“What kind of information?” I ease my foot off the brake and press the gas, following a darkened back road toward my house. It’s the only place nobody will look for him. Everyone knows we’re at each other’s throats most of the time. It’s not exactly like we’re known for doing any father-son bonding garbage. I turn on my brights so I can at least see a few feet in front of me.

Maybe taking this road wasn’t such a great move after all.

I grit my teeth and tighten my grip on the wheel, pressing harder on the gas. I just need to make it to the next traffic light and we’ll be back on a main road. And Christ only knows, it’s damn easy to get lost in northern Jersey traffic.

“What kind of information, Dad?” My voice is strained like there’s a noose around my neck, squeezing my throat closed and slowly suffocating me. Death by asphyxiation would be a welcome blessing compared to the Cinques’ alternative punishment.

“They want Nico.” His shoulders sag and he slumps back against the seat. “They know he’s pretty much running things now that Joe is out of the game, and they’re after the club.”

“What do they want with the club?”

“They see it as a safer way to move drugs and women around. They can use it as a front and do the exchanges all in one place.”

“How the fuck do they plan to do that? He’ll never—” My mouth stops working. They don’t plan to take him on as a partner. They’re gonna kill him and infiltrate

Culaccino, his exclusive nightclub.

And who the fuck will be left to stop them with Nico out of the picture?

My heart thuds harder and louder with each second that passes. I have no idea what to think or who to trust. It doesn't make sense that they'd let my dad in on something like that. At the end of the day, he's the biggest lying snake of them all. None of this makes sense. "What if it's all bullshit? What if they made it all up so you could pass off bad information, making us cover our asses when their big play is something completely different?" Wait... "And how the fuck does all of this even make sense if they beat the shit out of you tonight? Why would they come after us if you were supposed to be their mole?" I spin the steering wheel left and right, weaving around cars to get to my exit.

"Because I told them I wouldn't do it, that I was done with this whole thing. That's why they came after me, why they threatened you. They took me to the job site and tried to convince me to change my mind. I told them they could cut off my whole damn hand and it wouldn't matter. I was done." He lets out a labored sigh. "But I didn't know they were coming for you. I figured they'd just leave me for dead."

"They knew I'd go after you. The question is, what were they planning to do after sending me into their trap? If they wanted us dead, we'd be lying in a ditch somewhere. That means they need us for something. I just need some time to figure out what." I glance over my right shoulder and stomp on the gas to get ahead of a car in my blind spot and careen around the exit ramp. A blaring horn incites me, and I stick my arm out the window to flip the guy off as I screech around him.

"You should never do that. The guy could have a gun," Dad mutters, shifting again in the seat.

I let out a dry laugh. "Do you really think that scares me, Dad? After what you just

told me? Let him fucking pull a gun on me!” I scream, maneuvering the car around a bend.

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Putting the pieces of this jagged puzzle together is making my head spin, but there's one thing I need to do before any more time passes. I grab my phone and hand it to my dad. "Call the Doc. Have him meet us at my place in fifteen minutes. I can't take you to the hospital, and I have no idea how to sew, so if you wanna keep those fingers..."

"Fuck the fingers. I'll be dead soon enough, anyway."

"It doesn't have to be that way," I say, taking deep breaths to control the fury rising inside of me. I try to talk myself off the ledge, but that doesn't really work. I'm too wound. For years and years, I kept so much bottled up deep inside of me — so much anger, so much disappointment, so much sadness inflicted at the hand of my dear old dad, bleeding out next to me. His caustic words and heartless actions, the ones he claims were so well-meaning, ended up causing deeper scars than any weapons ever could. He made me feel small, insignificant, worthless, and for what? To convince me to become something better? To reverse-psychology me into the man he always aspired to become?

Deep down, I only ever wanted his approval. I wanted to feel like he was proud of me, of what I could do on my own. It might not have been up to his standards, but if it was enough for me, shouldn't it have been enough for him?

And after all of these years, I still only want to please him. I want him to say he's proud of his son. So I'm putting my ass on the line because I need to hear it from him. How sick and twisted is that? Shaye never needs to go looking for subjects for her psychology case studies. She has one right fucking here. I'm a head case and a half.



I tap my fingertips on the steering wheel as I pull to a stop in my driveway. It winds around the back of my house so I can get my dad inside without anyone seeing us, not that my neighbors give a shit about whether I'm coming or going. I don't talk to any of them, they don't bother with me. We all have a mutual disinterest in each other, which suits me just fine. I sure as hell don't need any more friends. I can't even trust the ones I have.

I help my father out of the truck and hook an arm around his waist, guiding him up the short back staircase. I fumble with my key and manage to get the door unlocked before I drop him. He's like dead weight right now, and my side is fucking killing me.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

Christ, here we go.

I fish my phone out of my jacket pocket and squint at the screen as I walk my dad into the mud room. But it's not a text from Nico.

It's from Rocco.

Why is Sloane out with some guy in a monkey suit that isn't you?

He found her. My throat tightens, and I stab a reply. Where are you?

Couzin's. Stopped by for a drink and spotted her. Without you. You fucked up again, dude?

I toss my phone onto the counter in the kitchen and help my dad onto the sofa. Blood splatters on the ceramic tile floor and onto the hardwood floor leading into the living room, and it barely registers. All I can see is Sloane and some faceless guy pawing at

her. Who the fuck is with her? And why isn't she still at the benefit?

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

Anyway, she looks fine to me right now. She replaced you pretty fast, man. Your cock broken or somethin'?

I grab a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a highball glass from a cabinet. I twist off the top and pour a double, slinging it back like it's water. She's safe. And with another fucking guy.

Unfortunately, what's been broken is something that is now clearly beyond repair.

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Sloane

“I’m really glad we got a chance to do this tonight.” Dr. Kiley...Steven...smiles at me and sips from his flute of champagne.

I force a smile and pretend to take a tiny sip. The truth is, I really hate champagne. The bubbles always give me a hangover headache before I can finish a single glass. But I didn’t want to tell Steven that when he seemed so excited to celebrate properly.

I had some celebratory ideas, too. None of them involved champagne...

Argh! Stop thinking like that! Why should you waste another second pining over a guy who found something more important to do? Again?

I push thoughts of Max to the far corners of my mind to clear the way for someone new, someone who actually has taken interest in me and things that are important to me. I can’t believe I opened myself up to that jackass, but I won’t make the same mistake again.

I’m moving on. No, I have moved on.

Max is over.

“I really appreciated your support tonight. It means a lot to me.”

Steven smiles. “I’m really impressed with you, Sloane. You’re one of the most selfless people I know, and you deserve all the success in the world.”

“Thanks. It feels good to help, and I’m just glad so many other people feel the same way.”

Steven slides away the glass of champagne after only having a couple of sips. He picks up a glass of water and gulps it down. He grins at me afterward and shrugs. “I’m not really much of a drinker, but it just felt like the night needed champagne, you know?”

“I don’t drink much, either,” I confess. “And if we’re being honest, champagne gives me monster headaches.”

Steven chuckles and holds up his water glass to toast. “I’ll remember that for next time. If, um, there is a next time.” He slides his glasses up his nose. “I’d really like there to be.”

I nod slowly. “That would be really nice.”

His grin widens, and it makes my stomach roll. I can hear Jules in my ear right now, telling me I’m crazy for having second thoughts about getting involved with Steven. But then again, she’s never had a Max. Come to think of it, I don’t think she’s had anyone more than once. Self-protection, she always says.

Maybe I should have been smart and done my own form of self-protection. Instead, I feel like there’s a Welcome mat plastered across my forehead where Max is concerned.

I clench my fists under the table, as if the sudden force will block the images of his face from my mind. I want to focus on someone else now, so take a hike, please!

But still they float around, taunting me, torturing me, and cock-blocking me, if I’m being honest. I place my head in my hand, smiling politely at Steven as he explains

how he decided to become a doctor and tells me about his adventures in medical school. He's really animated and talks a lot with his hands, so much so that you'd think he was Italian.

I let out a sigh and swallow a groan. Italian. Great, and the hits just keep coming.

"How about you? What made you decide to go into nursing?" He grabs a thin breadstick and munches on an end.

"I did it because of my mom. She died years ago. Cancer." I glance down at the table, not really wanting to elaborate. I don't want to talk about my mom right now. It's so strange, but I just don't feel ready to share any of that with Steven. With Max, the emotion just poured out of me even though deep down, I always knew his feelings were questionable. Steven has made it pretty clear that his feelings are real, so what the hell is my problem?

Am I doomed to make bad guy choices forever? Am I always going to shy away from the decent ones and run into the arms of scumbags?

"I'm sorry to hear that," he murmurs. "For what it's worth, I think you made the right choice. You're great with people, compassionate, smart, funny."

I let out a tiny giggle and waved a hand at him. "Stop, you're making me blush."

"I'm serious. You're the whole package, Sloane." Steven's eyes take on a lust-tinged look that makes me squirm a little bit. Uhh, I am not ready for that. At all.

He blinks and pulls out a tiny pager from his pocket. He adjusts his glasses again, squints at the number, and stands up. "Excuse me for a minute. I'll be back."

I pick at the now-cold appetizer in front of me with my fork. I forced down as much I

could, and now it sits in my stomach in a hard lump.

“Hey, Sloane!”

I look up to see a pair of brilliant blue eyes staring down at me.

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“Kat, hey.” I furrow my brow. “What are you doing here? Are you with Shaye?”

“Nah. I came with those guys.” Katarina nods her head at a group of muscular, dark-haired, thuggy-looking guys I kind of remember from Shaye’s birthday party. I definitely recognize one of them. Rocco. He’s kind of hard to miss since he’s about a foot taller than the other guys. I’ve heard from Shaye that he has a thing for Kat. Staring up at her, it’s clear why he’s so smitten. She looks like a Victoria’s Secret model from head to high-heeled toe, and I’ve heard she can snap a neck faster than most people can pull the bottlecap off of a beer. “I just beat their asses at poker. They’re nursing their losses right now, and I needed a break from the testosterone.” She rolls her eyes and grins wider, her long, dark hair cascading down one shoulder.

“Oh, wow. That’s cool...” My voice trails off since I don’t really have much else to say. Kat studies me pretty closely right now, like she wants to say something else but is still debating how much.

She grins, her bright white teeth practically sparkling in the dim light of the restaurant. “Yeah. So, Shaye told me about your thing at the hospital. Congrats. That’s really awesome for you.”

Weird. I don’t know Kat very well, only through Shaye, but it seems odd to me that they’d discuss my work at the hospital. I can’t imagine I’m a hot topic of conversation for those two, but it’s still nice of her to mention it. I smile. “Thanks. It was a really good night.”

Kat’s glance darts toward the doctor in the back of the restaurant. “That good, huh?”

I follow her eyes and shrug. “He’s a colleague.”

“Does he feel the same way about you?”

“I don’t really know. This is the, uh, first time we’ve done anything outside of work, so...” Why is she so interested, anyway? I’d think she would have her hands full with Rocco who’s staring at her from across the room and stripping her bare right in the middle of the restaurant with his hungry gaze.

“And he does it for you, huh?”

I fold my napkin down into my lap and cock my head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Kat, but why do you care? I barely know you, and it’s—”

She leans down, a conspiratorial smile lifting her lips. “To be honest, I really don’t care, Sloane. But someone else does. Even though he may act like a dickhead some of the time, he usually has pretty good reasons for it. I know we’re pretty much strangers, but Max is a friend, and I take care of my friends. He’s a good guy who makes dumb ass moves sometimes.”

My jaw sits on the table next to my plate, and I snap it shut when I see Steven walking back to our table. Kat straightens up and flashes him a bright smile. “Hi, I’m Kat. I was just congratulating our girl, Sloane.”

Steven smiles and nods at her. “Nice to meet you, Kat. I’m Steven.”

“Pleasure.” Kat glances back at me with a knowing wink. “I’d better get back to my crew over there. Enjoy, you too.”

My heart sinks further and further into my insanely tight shoes with each step she takes back to the guys. Rocco turns his head in my direction, a suspicious expression



on his face that's overshadowed by a whole lot of something much more X-rated when Kat sidles up to him and whispers something into his ear. Luckily, that occupies him more than my celebratory dinner with Steven.

Did they talk to Max? Did he ask Kat to come up to me?

Ugh! Why do I even care? He chose not to be here with me tonight! He knew how important this was to me and he opted out! So even if he did send Kat over, it doesn't matter.

It shouldn't matter.

He's a good guy who makes dumbass moves sometimes.

He is a good guy. I know it. I believe it.

But it's the dumbass moves I can't handle anymore.

"...so sorry, but we have to cut this short."

I blink fast. Did I miss something?

"Oh, um, it's fine," I stammer, not one hundred percent sure what I'm even agreeing to.

"That's another reason why I don't really drink." He grins and waves over the waitress to get the check. "You never know when you're going to get paged and have to perform emergency surgery."

I force a polite laugh. So that's what happened. Jesus, Sloane. Wake up!

“I really hope we can do this again. The right way where I don’t have to ditch out in the middle of dinner.”

I wave a hand in front of my face, relief crashing over me. “It’s totally fine! I understand, and I had a really great time with you.”

His face relaxes into a smile. “Great.” He signs the check and gets up to pull out my chair. “You know, you’re really incredible, Sloane,” he murmurs against my ear as I rise to my aching feet. He places a hand on the small of my back and leads me out of the restaurant.

But instead of a warm, fuzzy, fluttery sensation in my belly, the one I get when Max is near, I feel...sick. And sad. And disappointed. And just plain pissed off.

I’m such a jumble of emotions right now, a big heaping pile of things that I can’t even begin to process. But nowhere in that jumbled mess is a single shred of anything remotely resembling excitement and anticipation of another date with the handsome doctor. There’s no throbbing pulse, no thumping heart, no spark.

Sure, he may feel all of that. But me?

I’m just empty.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:51 am*

Max

I drag myself up the final flight of stairs toward Nico's office at Culaccino after I left my dad. I rap my fist on the door. "It's me."

"Come in," he calls out.

I twist the knob and shut the door behind me. Some of the security guys are hanging around at either end of the floor, as always, to make sure Nico's office is protected. Especially since he's the reigning head of the family right now.

Nico takes no unnecessary risks and he pays his guys plenty to keep his ass safe.

"Wow. Who'd you piss off this time?" He smirks and twists off the cap of a bottle of Vitamin Water and takes a long gulp.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I got jumped tonight by Mikey Bonnarro and his crew of fucking rejects."

"And why do you think that is?" Nico cocks an eyebrow. "Didn't you know they'd be back to collect?"

I clench my fists. "Are you really going there?"

"This is exactly why we keep having the same conversation, Max. Because you've done plenty and never considered the consequences. You planted those drugs in Gianni's car and got him sent to the can. How many times have I told you to stand

down and not act out of pure rage because you got an itch up your ass?” He sighs and sits back in the chair. “You knew they’d be back. Hell, I knew they’d be back.”

“What else do you know?” I grunt. “Because I’m not fucking stupid enough to believe you had no idea what was going on with them.”

“I’ve had Mikey under watch ever since Luca Cappodamo was killed. He was on his way up in that family until we took it down. The guy’s a fucking lunatic, and I knew he’d be back at some point to collect.”

“Well, you were right. And now is the time. I guess you know who’s financing them, too.”

“Yep.” He takes another sip of his Vitamin Water.

“You motherfucker!” I jump out of the chair. “You knew what they were gonna pull and you never even said a goddamned word! “

“Calm the fuck down!” He stands up and points at me. “My responsibilities are to know who our enemies are and figure out how to protect the family. Period. I don’t owe you information. I tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it.”

“Yeah? Well, they’re in our back fucking yard, Nico! What the hell are you gonna do about it, since it’s your responsibility?” I shout, mimicking him.

“I can’t do anything until they make a move. They’re working with the Cinques, bringing drugs and women into our territory.” He sits back down and scrubs a hand down the front of his face. “I know they have some buyers coming into the area in the next few days, so shit’s going to go down. But I don’t have a location yet. I’m still working on it.”

“With who? Rocco?”

“Are you seriously going to get pissy about me working with Rocco?”

“If you tell me he’s the one you trust with this shit, then yeah! I am gonna get fucking pissy!”

Nico rolls his eyes, grabs a football, and spirals it at me. “Stop crying like a bitch, will you? I haven’t been working with Rocco.”

I catch the short pass and hold it tight, just in case he pisses me off and makes me fire it back at his head. “So who’s involved? And why the hell am I always the last one to know? Maybe if you’d given me a heads-up, I might not have gotten my ass handed to me tonight. I might’ve been a little more prepared!”

“Look, it doesn’t matter who—”

“It does to me! Because whoever you’ve been working with has information that can get us all killed. I’d like to know what the hell we’re up against here.”

Nico stares at me hard for a solid minute. Feels more like an hour though when you aren’t breathing. “You’ll find out when I decide the time is right. Right now, I’m still trying to pinpoint a location for the exchanges. If we can’t stop them and they keep trafficking in our territory, it makes us vulnerable. They’ll leak everything to the feds and then they’ll fucking overrun the place, breathing down our necks, just waiting for us to make the wrong move while the Bonnaros dance their asses back to fucking Brooklyn. This whole operation can cripple us, and that’s exactly what the Bonnaros and the Cinques want...to put us out of business for good. To crush our family once and for all so they can take over the area.”

“Why the fuck are the Cinques even involved? Aren’t they tearing shit up on the west

coast?”

Nico averts his eyes and flips through some papers on his desk. “They all hold grudges, Max. Every alliance we form with another organization and every choice we make comes with consequences. Serious fucking consequences. And they will always come back to bite us at some point. You get me?” He focuses on my face, his mouth stretched into a thin line.

I grip the football tight, my fingertips turning white.

Does he know?

## Page 15

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The words hang in the air between us, and his gaze confirms the exact thing I was afraid of.

He fucking knows.

Goddammit!

I drop the ball onto his desk and let out a deep sigh. “What are you going to do about it?”

“About what, exactly?”

He won’t fucking say it. “You know what! Because you know every fucking thing, Nico!”

“I already told you. I have to keep tabs on anything that’s a threat to my family.” He pauses. “And that includes you.”

A disbelieving laugh escapes my mouth. “So you’re just gonna off me, too? Your best fucking friend?”

Nico shrugs. “You know the rules. The priorities. It’s not personal, Max.”

My jaw drops. “I’ve given you everything, you dickhead! I’ve always had your back! Who fucking helped you take out Frank Cappodamo? Did you forget that already, Mr. CEO? And who showed up to that face-off at Luca Cappodamo’s place to have your back? Me! I’ve had a target on my fucking forehead for months because of

you!”

“Bullshit!” Nico jumps up from his chair. “You have a target on your forehead because of your own dumbass moves! Don’t blame me for this thing with Mikey and Gianni! You and your father brought that down on yourselves! And on the family!” He rakes a hand through his hair. “Tell me what the fuck I’m supposed to do here, Max. Let you walk? Let your dad off? After you decimated us and put us in this position where we can lose everything?” He paces the floor behind his desk. “My dad almost died because of Tony! Am I supposed to forgive him for that? Am I supposed to look the other way when he went behind our backs and tried to make a deal with the Cappodamo family? Am I expected to overlook all of that because you’ve managed to get Daddy’s approval after saving his traitorous ass?”

How in the fuck does he know so much? It’s as if he’s everywhere and knows and sees everything, all while being invisible. And he makes the final call about who lives and who dies.

It’s like he’s God.

Or the devil...

I take a deep breath. “I didn’t know about any of this until tonight.”

Nico nods and flops back into his chair. “I know that, too.”

“And I came here to tell you—”

“You came here to tell me what you found out about the trafficking ring.” Nico folds his hands and stares at me. “Be honest.”

“Yeah...” I sigh. “There’s no way out of this for me, is there? I’m pretty much



fucked. My dad..." I shake my head. "He really messed up. Got himself in a deep fucking hole and there are some evil fucking assholes just waiting to bury him once and for all. I didn't know about his gambling. I didn't know why he'd treated me like such a schmuck. All I knew was that I'd never seen him so beaten." I cover my face with my hands. "I let myself get sucked in because I wanted him to finally look at me like a son he was proud of, not like some fucking cockroach who crawled out from under a rock. And yeah, I hid him away. I didn't sell him out even though he doesn't deserve my help after the bullshit he put me through."

"He's still your dad though." Nico mutters.

"He's still my dad," I whisper through my hands. "And he's Shaye's father."

Nico's face twists into a grimace. "None of that matters to me, Max. I have responsibilities."

"I know you do, and I don't expect you to spare either of us, but I am asking for time."

"Time for what? To let you and your dad come up with another way to run my family into the ground?"

"No, time to figure this thing out with the Bonnaros. You need me."

"I don't, actually." His eyes narrow to slits.

I let out a groan. "Okay, fine. You don't. But you know they're back because of me. Because of my dad. At least give me the chance to help you exterminate the fuckers and protect our businesses."

Nico is quiet for a while. I don't know why he's going through this whole

deliberation process when he already has a plan in place to handle all of this. Hell, even I know what he's gonna do, because he's a good guy, too. Why is he bothering with the fucking dramatics?

"I'll spare you. Both of you, for the time being. Not because you're my best friend, but because you're one of my top guys, and I'm giving you a chance to fix this fucking mess before it splashes all over me." He leans forward. "But your father no longer has my protection, Max. I won't interfere with whatever the Bonnaros have planned for him. The fact that my dad is still alive is the only reason why there isn't a bullet between his fucking eyes right now. Understand?"

"Yeah." I understand. And I also know that as soon as we wrap shit up with the Bonnaros, my dad is a dead man. I don't know who'll ultimately pull the trigger, but I know he'll end up face-down in some ditch in the very near future. Nico isn't willing to risk this operation for a traitor like my dad. He'll just deal with it later. Unless I do something first. "Thanks."

“Do you have a plan?”

“I kinda figured you already did.”

The corners of his lips curl upward into a slight smile. “I always do. And I want you on the front line this time. You want to prove yourself? You want me to change my mind about you? This is your chance. When I give the word, be ready.” He taps his fingertips on the desk. “You can’t tell Sloane any of this, either. Keep her away from your house. I don’t want her to find your dad there.”

My eyes widen. Sonofabitch! Doc must have told him even though I begged him to keep my dad’s location quiet.

“Yeah, never assume people are going to listen to you when you tell them to keep things quiet. Their loyalty is to me, Max. Never forget that.”

I never fucking learn. I can’t trust anyone.

No, scratch that. There’s one person I could trust. But I fucked that up, too.

“I wouldn’t worry about Sloane. I think I managed to completely screw that up for good tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

I rub the back of my neck, trying to ease the big stress knot at the base of my skull. It doesn’t work. “Tonight was the annual hospital benefit. Sloane was asked to be one

of the speakers. She was going to talk about her charity program, and she asked me to go.”

“And Mikey cock-blocked you.”

I lift an eyebrow. “You could say that. I’m actually glad my cock is still intact. Those assholes were ready to pull out the bats until he called them off me.”

“Why do you think he did that? I mean, if he really was out for revenge, why not just kill you then and there?”

I make a face at him. “Thanks, jackass. I guess it would’ve saved you the trouble, huh?”

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead and not sitting here right now.” He takes another sip of his Vitamin Water.

“Yeah,” I grumble, running my hands through my hair. “So they beat the shit outta me, sent me on a mission to find my dad, and...” I throw my hands up. “What the fuck was I supposed to do? Go to her house to meet her and her dad looking like Rocky Balboa after his fight with Clubber Lang wearing a shredded tuxedo? How well do you think that’d go over with her dad who, by the way, already hates my fucking guts?”

Nico nods. “What did you do?”

“I sent a text, okay?”

“Oh, Christ. Not another text.”

“Yeah. So if you’d just do me a solid and not tell my sister about any of this, I’d

appreciate it. It'll buy me a little bit of time."

"To do what?"

"I don't know. Hide?" I roll my eyes. "Kidding. I'm kidding. I know you'd find me anyway."

"You bet your ass I would." Nico smirks at me. "And I'll keep it quiet."

"Thanks." I stretch my aching legs. At least the pain in my midsection has subsided. The doc told me I don't have any broken ribs after he examined me, but he taped me up just in case. If I didn't have a breathing problem before, I definitely do now. I don't know how women wear this kind of crap under their clothes. I'd rather let it all hang out. "I don't have long. I know they'll talk tomorrow, but she'll never give me another shot after this. Not that I deserve it."

"It wasn't exactly your fault."

"Doesn't matter. How the hell can I tell her any of this?"

"You can't," Nico says with a pointed look.

"I know, dickhead. Besides, she should stay away from me anyway." I stare at the phone in my hands. "Rocco texted me earlier and said he saw her out with some guy before."

"She moved on pretty fast, huh?"

"I don't know. I guess..."

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“You didn’t tell him anything about...”

“No! He reached out to me.”

“Did he talk to her? Maybe it was just a group of people getting a drink after the benefit?”

“It was her and a guy. That’s all he said.” I look at him. “Why do you care, anyway? A few minutes ago, you were threatening death. What does this even matter?”

“Because I don’t want to actually kill you, Max. I mean, yeah, I do sometimes, but not right now. I know you’re trying to do the right thing here. You’re looking out for your own which means you’re not the insanely sadistic fucker everyone thinks you are. That guy would’ve gone right after Mikey and Gianni and fucked their shit up beyond recognition. But you didn’t. You’re here, telling me what happened, the way you’re supposed to. You didn’t take things into your own maiming hands.”

“Wow, I’m flattered.” I hold out my palms and examine them. “Maiming hands. I like the sound of that. I can snap necks with these babies.”

“I’m well aware of what you can do. That’s why I want to keep you around. I know what you’re capable of, and I also know you want to do right by the family. And Sloane, even though it sounds like she kicked you to the curb already.”

I grit my teeth, not wanting to think about her and her sloppy seconds. Fuck, I don’t want to think about that at all.

Great. I had to open the floodgates.

Is she still wearing her dress? Or is she in that black lacy thing she wore last time I was there? Is he in her house? In her room? Did she light those vanilla scented candles again? Those smelled really good. I'll miss them. Is he gonna fuck her in the shower? Uhhh, not against the tile. That's my thing, goddammit!

Nico snaps his fingers. "Max! You want to come back to Earth for a second?"

I blink fast, trying to focus on anything except this faceless guy nailing the woman I love. "Yeah, I'm with ya."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything we can act on. Just lay low in the meantime. Don't do anything stupid. They'll be watching."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:51 am*

Sloane

I lean onto the handrail on the elevator as it creaks up to the Pediatric Oncology floor, my eyes heavy. Even though my impromptu 'date' ended early with an abrupt page from the hospital last night and I was in bed by eleven, I still can't seem to open my eyes fully.

That might have something to do with the fact that they were open for the better part of the night, imagining what Max was doing and with whom, wondering why he wasn't with me, and why I keep allowing him to disappoint me.

Over and over and over...

Those were the things looping through my mind in the wee hours. I should have been fantasizing about a certain doctor who has made it crystal clear that he's into me. I peek down at my watch. Jules should be popping over soon. I know she's going to want details, not that there are any juicy ones to share. I kissed Steven, but it was strictly PG-13 stuff. Nothing too hot and heavy. He was respectful, and I appreciated it, especially since I'm still trying to conjure up the faintest of sparks.

Seems like he's fighting a raging fire on his side, but mine is more like a flickering ember.

I use my pen to scratch an itch deep inside my messy bun and let out a sigh as the elevator doors open. My sneakers squeak on the shiny tiled floor as I walk down the hallway to see my favorite kiddies and share the amazing news I received last night.



One of the head nurses, Clara, greets me with a warm smile as I walk toward the large desk at the front of the ward. It's cold, gloomy, and cloudy outside but in here, the sun shines bright. Always.

Christmas may be over, but you'd never know it from all of the decorations still adorning the space. We always try to make the floor as festive as possible, as early as possible, so all of the kids can participate in the merriment. And we let the decorations stay up well into January to keep their spirits up. But it's hard because...well, as positive as they try to be, their little bodies don't always respond well to the treatments.

So we try to keep Christmas around as long as possible. Christmas always brings hope and cheer, and that's what we strive to do here every day.

Maybe we need to have a little Christmas all year round...

"Hey, Clara," I say with a smile. "How are you this morning?"

Clara nods to the controlled chaos around us. "Couldn't be better, sweetie. And tell me, how was your night? How did your speech go?"

"It was fantastic!" I clasp my hands together, reminiscing about the offer I'd received and the promise of what's to come. "It was such an honor to speak to all of those donors and they seemed really interested to help us. I think we're going to have a really great New Year!"

"That's so wonderful, dear! You have done so much for us, raised so many spirits, and given people the chance to do some good around here. You're a real angel, you know that?"

"I completely agree."

I jump with a loud gasp, spinning in the direction of Steven's voice. He pushes his glasses farther up his nose and smiles at me. "Good morning."

"Morning," I murmur, a shy smile teasing my lips.

Steven winks at Clara. "You should have seen her in action last night. I think everyone there was ready to open their checkbooks."

"That is wonderful to hear!" Clara pats my hand and gets up from her chair, carrying a pile of folders. "I'm so proud of you, sweetie." She flashes a conspiratorial smile at me before turning to walk toward the file room.

I smooth down the front of my scrubs. "How was your night? Have you been here the whole time? You must be exhausted!"

Steven nods. "I was until a few seconds ago. Seeing you perked me right up. I was hoping we could continue our date...what do you think about lunch?"

"I'd like that. Hey, have you seen Jules today?"

Steven shakes his head and sweeps a hand through his thick, dark blond hair. "Not yet. Maybe she had a late night."

"Maybe," I murmur, looking at my iPhone. It's so strange that she didn't even text me. She usually does when she's running late. I quickly shoot off a message to her and look back up at Steven. "So...lunch. I can't wait." A tiny lie, but at the very least, I know I'll be ravenous by then, so it won't be a complete fabrication when the time comes.

"Great." Steven looks around at the kids wrapping themselves in silver and gold garland. "Looks like you'll have your hands full until then."

I giggle as some of the kids run past, dragging homemade construction paper chains along the floor.

“Max! Can you help me put this on the tree? I can’t reach!” Cassidy’s tiny voice jolts me, and I jump about a foot into the air, my heart still in my throat once I land.

Max? Here?

I clutch the edge of the desk and watch his tall, muscular frame scoop up Cassidy so she can pop a star onto the tree. She giggles and claps her hands.

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“Yay! It looks so pretty, don’t you think?”

“Not as pretty as you,” he says with a chuckle, setting her down on the floor. He hasn’t shifted in our direction yet, and I finger my necklace, biting down hard on my lower lip, just waiting to see his face.

Because I need to know what he’s thinking right now.

My stomach churns even though I haven’t eaten a bite this morning. I tap my foot, berating myself for allowing this anxiety to take hold when I should want to rush up to him and clock him in the jaw for standing me up last night.

He bends down to ruffle Cassidy’s hair and slowly rises to his full height. My breath catches as I catch a glimpse of his profile...his bruised and swollen profile.

Looks like someone already beat me to the punch. Literally.

Oh, my God...

“Sloane?” Steven asks, touching my arm. “Are you okay? You look a little shaken.”

I nod my head. “Y-yes. I’m fine. Just fine.” I force a smile, dragging my eyes away from Max. Raspy breaths and quivering knees for the guy who ruined me. Just freaking fabulous.

But much as I try to force my eyes in any other direction than his, they betray me and catch his gaze. My chest tightens, and it suddenly feels like all of the air is being

sucked out of the space. “Holy shit,” I mutter under my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Steven asks, but I don’t answer. I can’t. And I am desperately fighting the urge to fling myself into Max’s arms and hold him close.

“Sloane.” Max’s voice is low and gravelly. “I, uh, didn’t think you’d be here this morning.”

My mouth opens, but no words come out. Stringing together a coherent thought is beyond my grasp at this second. Steven clears his throat next to me, and then I remember. Everything comes rushing back.

I’m mad. So freaking mad!

But devastated. And disappointed. And heartbroken.

But most of all, confused.

I finally find my voice. “Max, this is Dr. Steven Kiley. Steven, this is Max.”

Max looks at Steven and nods a silent greeting. They’re about the same height, although Max could probably crush him like a cockroach in the blink of an eye.

Steven nods back, eyeing him up and down. Interesting. I’ve never actually seen two guys size each other up like this before, but they’re staring at each other like they’re about to throw down at any second. “Are you part of The Buddy System?”

Max shakes his head. “Nah, I’m a friend of one of the kids up here. Was just visiting with him.”

“Oh.” Steven looks at me. “And is Max a friend of yours, too?”

“I hope so,” Max murmurs, his gaze steady on my face.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, gingerly placing a hand on the bruises shading his face.

Max shrugs and flashes a smirk. But there’s no laughter reflected in the depths of his dark eyes. “I’ve seen better days, but hey, I’m still standing.”

A sad chuckle escapes my mouth. “So now you’re quoting Citizen Kane and Elton John in the same sentence? I didn’t think you even listened to songs with lyrics.” He listens almost exclusively to that noise otherwise known as electronica. Ironically, I think it helps quiet things in his head, things he can’t process. Things he doesn’t want to acknowledge. It’s a bad joke, but for some reason I feel the need to cut the tension between us.

“You know me too well,” he quips in a monotone voice. It’s not sarcastic or playful. Just...sad. And the sound makes my chest ache.

What the hell happened to him last night? Why couldn’t he just be honest with me?

I bite down on my lower lip.

Would it have made a difference?

My eyes flit over to Steven’s face. A tight smile stretches across his face, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. Not like the smiles he always flashes when he looks at me. Not like the ones that were plastered on his face last night and this morning when he spotted me here.

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“Max, you look like Two-Face!” Johnny yells out, running past with a black Batman cape streaming behind him. “From Batman! Because his face is normal on one side and all beaten up on the other side! Like yours!”

“Thanks, little dude,” Max salutes him. “Does that make me a superhero, too?”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “No, Two-Face isn’t a superhero! He’s one of the bad guys! Batman’s the hero!”

Max nods, and his vacant gaze flickers back to me. “Sounds about right. I guess I’ll see you around.” He nods at Steven. “Good to meet you, Doc.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?” Johnny trails Max toward the exit.

Max gives a high-five to Johnny. “I sure hope so, bud.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

I tuck a stray strand of hair back into my bun and look up at Steven with probably the most artificial smile I can muster. I clasp my hands, my voice rising about three octaves. “So, I’ll meet you around twelve in the lounge?”

Steven nods. “Yeah. Sounds good.” He rubs the back of his neck and gives me a quick smile before retreating to the end of the ward for rounds.

Clara picks that moment to return to the desk, her lips curled into a wide grin. “Sweetie, how does it feel?”

I furrow my brow, dropping my arms over the top of the desk. “How does what feel?”

She leans closer, her blue eyes sparkling. “How does it feel to have two strapping young men drooling over you?” Her light chuckle rings out amid the excited chatter and caroling. “My, my, I loved the days when handsome men would chase me like that.”

I let out a snort. “Nobody is chasing me, Clara. You’re misreading things.”

She cocks a thin eyebrow. “Is that so? I may be an old lady, but I sure ain’t blind, dear. Now, tell me, which one are you going to choose?”

My shoulders droop. “There isn’t exactly a choice to make. Dr. Kiley and I work together, and Max...Max is just a friend.” Damn, it hurts like hell to speak those words.

“I think you’re mistaken. And I think we need Jules to straighten you out.”

Speaking of... I frown and pull out my phone. The text I sent her is showing as delivered, but not read. That part doesn’t alarm me since I know she adjusts the setting on her messages so she can read messages from guys without them knowing it.

The fact that she hasn’t shown up for work is the part that’s worrying me. And she would have been the first to grill me about my night with Steven, too. I rub the back of my neck. I don’t want to think about Steven right now.

I just want to find Max.

Dammit.

I’m in love with him, but he doesn’t want me. He’s made that pretty darn clear.



“Argh!” I throw my hands in the air. “I have no choice!”

Clara snickers as I head in the direction of Eli’s room. “That’s what you think, dear!” she says in a sing-song voice.

I roll my eyes and walk down the hallway toward Eli’s room. I don’t know why. It’s not like he was overly excited to see me the last time I showed up ready to chat. He’s bitter. I get it. I know I would be. But Max was able to crack his seemingly impenetrable shield. Max was able to get through to him on some level.

Max has had his fair share of father issues. Maybe that was how they connected?

Part of me just wants to hear someone talk about Max, to reinforce why I fell so hard for him, why I keep falling, and why I can’t seem to stop myself even after last night.

Did he tell Eli what happened to him last night?

That may have a little to do with why I want to drop in. There are a lot of dots I need to connect, and if Max won’t give them to me, maybe someone else will.

Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Eli’s brother Tommy looks up, an alarmed look on his face. He pulls his cell phone from his ear, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. “Hey,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck and looking very uncomfortable.

And guilty.

Weird.

“Hi, Tommy,” I flash a bright smile. “I just wanted to stop by and see how Eli is doing.”

Tommy nods quickly, averting his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. He’s, uh, inside. Playing some game Max got him.” He shuffles his feet, a dark red flush coloring his face.

“Okay.” I knock on the half-open door and push it open when Eli calls for me to come in. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see Tommy’s jaw set as he returns the phone to his ear.

I step inside, my ears straining to hear snippets of his very heated conversation. I shouldn’t be listening, but his behavior is so strange. Scary, almost. My skin prickles with some odd sensation as I catch a few grunts.

“...not what I signed up for...contract...don’t care...never be enough...”

I try to ignore the rest and focus on Eli...Eli and anything he’ll divulge about his new buddy.

“Hi,” I say. “How are you doing today?”

Eli shrugs, not looking up from his game. “Okay, I guess.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Yeah. Max had breakfast with me. He’s a cool guy. Sucks at Fortnite, but still cool to hang out with.”

“I hope you didn’t tell him that. He’s a pretty sore loser.” I laugh. “Have you taught him any of your tricks?”

“Nah.” Eli drops his game onto the bed and leans back against his pillow. “I don’t trade secrets. I mean, I helped him out a few times, tried to show him some things. But you know, he kinda does what he wants to do, even though I told him he’s doing it wrong.”

I snicker. “That sounds like Max. He gets an idea in his head and it just sticks.”

“He’s pretty stubborn.”

“Yep.”

We both laugh, for the first time. And it makes me feel so good. He may not be telling me anything earth-shattering, but he’s actually talking to me. He’s not just sitting on his bed with a scowl on his face. He’s smiling, laughing, and engaging.

Because of Max.

Max, who is the most impulsive person I know, who never thinks first, who’s always quick with a sarcastic comment, who tries so hard to do the right thing...

Tries to do the right thing.

What the hell happened to him last night?

“Are you really good friends with him?”

Eli’s question stops me mid-giggle. “With Max? Um, well, technically we’ve known each other for a long time. He’s my best friend’s brother.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because you know someone for a long time doesn’t mean you’re really good friends.”

“True,” I say, patting the top of my head.

“He talks about you a lot.”

My hand flies to my heart. “He does?”

Eli smirks. “Yeah.”

“Well, what does he say?” Good Lord, my voice is so high I’m actually squealing.

“Stuff like you’re really pretty and cool, and that he wants to take you on a date...”

“He does?” I whisper, my heart thumping in my chest. Tiny goosebumps pop up along my bare arms.

Eli nods. “Yep. I told him he should ask you out.”

“You did?”

“Mm-hm.” The smile fades from his face. “But he said he can’t. That he messed up.”

“He did.” My head falls into my hands. “Big time.”

“Did he do something really bad? Like when my mom got sent to jail and left me and my brother?”

“No...”

“Then maybe you should talk to him. Whatever it is, he wants to make it better. My mom...she doesn’t give a crap about me or my brother. She only cares about herself and partying. She doesn’t care about making things better for us.”

“Eli, I’m so sorry to hear that. I-I didn’t know.” How could any mother desert her

kids like that? Especially with Eli being so sick? How could she leave them on their own and put that responsibility on Tommy? It's criminal!

"Hey, Tommy and I are good because we have each other. It's hard, but we get by." He plays with a corner of the bed sheet. "Maybe Max needs someone, too. Maybe he needs you. Maybe you can figure things out and make it okay again."

I swallow hard. Good God, am I really getting life advice from a thirteen-year-old?

And am I actually going to take it?

Eli looks at me. "Like I said, he's a good guy. Isn't that the important thing?"

"Sometimes when you're older, things get a little more complicated."

"Maybe when you get older you just make things more complicated."

A giggle escapes my mouth. "Maybe you're right."

Eli picks up his Nintendo DS again and peers at the screen. "You were right about one thing though."

"Oh, yeah, what's that?"

Eli snickers, his fingers moving at light speed over the control buttons. "He is a really bad loser. And it sucks for him because if he keeps playing with me, he's gonna lose a lot more."

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Max

I can't keep my mind busy enough to block out images of Sloane with that douchebag doctor. Is he the one who Rocco saw her with last night? He couldn't keep his eyes off of her until she saw my face and kind of forgot he was standing there. I noticed it, and then I got the death glare from him which tells me he noticed it, too.

Good. She's not yours, asshole! Just because I keep fucking things up doesn't mean she's yours!

She's still mine. I can feel it. If I can just explain things—

No! Explain what? That me and my dad are about to be iced because we violated the mafia family code and betrayed everyone? That I have to figure out where Mikey and Gianni are trafficking drugs and women in our neighborhood to stay alive? That by the time the FBI is done with us, it's gonna feel like we've been ass-raped without lube?

How exactly are you supposed to sugar coat all of that?

So I keep thinking. And planning. And obsessing.

None of it helps. I'm no closer to figuring shit out. I can't trust anyone...not the Doc, not my dad, not even Shaye.

I don't know what to do. I hate not knowing what to do. I hate waiting around. And what the hell am I even waiting for? A text from the Bonnaros saying, 'Hey, Max,

we're selling drugs and women. Here's the address. Come and join the party!'

I mutter to myself as I drive the streets of my neighborhood, not having a real destination, but not wanting to go home and face my father. I flip off the radio, but the ringing in my ears persists.

I want to run, but I can't. I won't leave my dad on his own, especially in his condition. Broken ribs, bruises that cover his entire body from the beating he took, broken nose, sawed off fingers...they fucked him up bad. I grip the steering wheel tight, my shoulders slumped. There's a heaviness in my chest—it's made up of dread, panic, fear, a whole shit storm of emotions that plague me. Ones I don't know how to process.

But there are a lot of people counting on me right now.

Gabe counted on me, too...

I slam my fist on the dashboard as I slow at a red light.

And then there's always the possibility that Nico really doesn't want me to do anything, that his plans for me have already been set, and I'm the walking dead.

The thoughts pelt me like paint balls. He's just keeping me occupied out of respect for my sister and until he can come up with a clean way of disposing of me and my dad to make it look like an accident.

The light turns green, and I drive, not paying attention to direction. Just turning the wheel as if on autopilot. I weave through quiet, tree-lined streets until I come to Sloane's house. I slow to a stop across the street and just sit there, my head in my hands. I know she's not home, but somehow I feel close to her just being here.



I scrub a hand down the front of my face and recline in my seat. How can I come so close to getting my shit together only to have it blown apart again? I rub my stomach, but the knots are tied too tight. Regrets. I have too many to count.

Funny, it doesn't seem to change the way I live my life, though.

I turn up the radio and let the pulsating dance beats fill the truck. Thinking only makes me angry. It makes me realize just how out of control I am of my life, and how that control keeps evading me.

How the fuck do you bring another person into that existence? How is that fair?

I bounce my leg to the beat, still staring at Sloane's place like a stalker.

In my blacked-out Ford Raptor.

That shouldn't call any unwanted attention to me at all.

I pick up my phone and scroll to the last text message Sloane sent and reread it.

I tried to do the right thing and ended up fucking myself.

That happens a lot, more often than I'd like to admit.

It's good she has the doctor. I bet he couldn't hit a beachball with a baseball bat, not that it's any qualification for him to become a doctor, of course, but maybe that'll be good for her. If he gets called away in the middle of the night, it's to save a life, not take one. Or five. The only drugs he messes with are the prescription kind, and I bet he's never stashed a load of them in someone's car to make a very fucking stupid point.

He also probably doesn't have a target on his forehead, which makes him a long-term contender for Sloane's heart.

Fuck, by this time next week, I might be six feet under.

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Maybe not even that deep.

Maybe not even that far into the future.

I squeeze my eyes shut and pinch the bridge of my nose. This is torture of the worst kind. Why am I still here?

Rap, rap, rap!

My eyes fly open, and I twist to my left to see a very pissed-off face staring into my window. I press the button to lower it, my eyes drooping when I see him.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sloane’s dad growls, arms folded.

“Hey, Mr. C. I, um, I was just—”

“I don’t care why you’re here!” he bellows, sticking a finger right in my face. “Do you know what you did to my daughter last night? Do you know how devastated she was?”

“Yes,” I say, dropping my eyes to my lap. I have no defense, not one I can let him in on, anyway.

“Look at me!”

I raise my head. “What I did was wrong—”

“Wrong? Wrong?” He lets out a dry laugh. “What you did was exactly right, Max! For once! I shouldn’t have worried about you. I knew it was only a matter of time before you messed up again. But Sloane...you crushed her. She wanted you to be there last night, and as usual, you found something better to do with your pathetic life.” He nods at my bruised face. “Exactly the kind of thing I don’t want my daughter around. So I really am here to thank you, not to berate you. Sloane will be just fine. She’s beautiful, smart, and a good person. You...you’re a fucking disaster with no goals, no direction, and no understanding of how to treat people who care about you. I don’t want you tainting her anymore. Just let her go, Max. She doesn’t need someone like you messing up her life.” With that, he turns and walks to the front door of his house, looking back only once to shake his head at me before going inside.

My chest tightens when the door slams shut behind him.

I know I fucked up, and I do want a chance to make things right with Sloane.

But I’m on borrowed time now.

Sloane

I stand in the cafeteria, shifting my weight, clutching my phone. My eyes dart in every direction, wishing and praying that Steven doesn't show up. That he got an emergency call. That he has to file some paperwork. That—

“Hey,” A low voice murmurs behind me.

I spin around, almost stumbling into the column next to me. “Hey,” I reply breathlessly. “How's it going?”

Steven doesn't return my fake smile. He doesn't return any smile at all. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I say, confused. His shoulders are squared, and the usual glimmer in his eyes has been replaced with a somewhat somber look. The light is out. Something extinguished it.

“I saw how you reacted to that guy this morning.” Steven rubs the back of his neck. “Why he wasn't with you last night?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Come on, Sloane. I could tell there was something between you guys. And he wasn't at the benefit, but he was supposed to be, right?”

“Yes,” I whisper, looking at the floor. “He was. But something came up and we...I

just...I decided things weren't right between us."

"But this morning you couldn't keep your eyes off of him. You barely acknowledged me when we ran into him." Steven sighs. "I knew immediately that you had feelings for him. That look on your face...I knew right then I could never compete with him."

"Steven, I...I'm so sorry," I whisper. "I wish it wasn't the case. You're so amazing,. And you deserve a girl who isn't hung up on some other guy, a guy she should stay far away from." I shake my head. "I never meant to hurt you. I really wanted to get to know you better, to see where things could go."

"But you can't say goodbye, can you?"

His words sting, but I can't argue with them. "No," I whisper. "I can't. I hate myself for even saying that, but it's the truth. I'm so sorry."

Steven nods. "I understand. I hope he knows how lucky he is."

"Thank you."

"You're a really special girl, Sloane. You deserve the best, and I hope he's up to the task."

Yeah. Me, too.

Max

I pull into the driveway of my house later that evening, peering left and right to make sure I haven't been followed. I've been out all day, trying to avoid my dad, trying to figure out what the hell my next steps are, wondering if Nico got any more information that he's planning to hold over my head. But after hours of avoiding shit I can't change and that face-off with Sloane's dad, I had the urge to go home and drown myself in a Jack Daniels bath.

I slam the door of the truck shut and jog up the back steps, turning the key in the lock. I walk inside the darkened kitchen. "Dad?"

It's silent, though. No television, no stereo. Just an eerie quiet that makes the hair on my arms stand at attention.

I creep into the living room. One lamp is turned on, but it doesn't give off much light. I glance to the side of the room where the sofa is set against the wall. My dad is stretched out on it, face-up like a corpse, his hands folded on his chest. My heart thumps a little harder as I approach, tiptoeing over the hardwood floor. I clench my teeth every time one of the boards creak under my weight. With stilted breaths, I scour the room, glancing back over my shoulder. The door was locked, so nobody could have broken in, right? A whish of air blows through the blinds at the front of the room and an icy sensation crawls through my insides.

Fuck. The windows. Why the hell would they be open right now in the dead of winter?

Dead of winter.

Bad choice of word.

I twist around and grab a fireplace poker, just in case. There were no cars out front that I noticed, but it's not like I was anticipating a break-in. I figured they'd just wait until my dad left the house to whack him, just like they got Jackie Junior on that episode of The Sopranos. They shot him in the back of the head. Broad daylight. And he went face-down in a pile of snow.

Exactly the reason why I've made him lay low. I don't want a personalized Jackie Junior scene in my front fucking yard.

I raise the poker behind me, ready to attack if I need to, and I bend over my dad. There are no visible gunshots and no streaks of blood that say he was tortured, but hey, this is the mafia. They have ways, very fucking murderous ways.

I lean closer. No rope marks on his neck means he wasn't strangled.

His chest doesn't move, his eyes don't flutter.

I let out a shaky breath. What if one of his broken ribs punctured something that the Doc didn't catch? What if there was internal bleeding? Christ, what if he drowned in his own fucking blood?

I swallow hard, my hand over his pale face, poised to feel his skin. A floorboard creaks behind me and I gasp, spinning around with the poker in my hand, ready to strike. A loud crash makes me yelp, and I pull out my gun, cocking it. I move toward the kitchen, slowly and quietly.

I know I locked the back door.



Didn't I?

Was someone outside, just waiting for me to get home so they could take us both out at once?

Did I just sign my own death certificate by forgetting to lock the goddamn door?

I flip on the kitchen light and crouch behind the island in the center of the room. I pull out my iPhone and stare at it. Who the hell should I even call? Before I even finish dialing a number, I could be dead, for Christ's sake. Another creak sends me leaping into the air, pointing the gun right at my father's face.

His hands fly above his head. "Max! What the hell are you doing?"

"Dad?" I put the gun on the counter and lean back, pushing back my hair. "I thought you were fucking dead! You looked like you were lying in a coffin a few seconds ago!"

"That's always how I sleep." He sinks onto one of the counter stools. "And I took an Ambien to help me rest. I guess I didn't hear you come in."

"You didn't hear..." I shake my head and point to the open windows in the living room. "What the hell is the deal with those? It's below fucking zero outside!"

Dad shrugs. "It got really warm in here, and I couldn't figure out that thing on the wall. Whatever happened to the thermostats with the buttons? How do you fix the temperature with only a screen? I waved my hand in front of it a few times, but nothing happened. I was roasting, so I opened a couple of windows. Then I fell asleep."

"It's a touch screen," I groan, collapsing against the counter, my head in my hands.

“You know, for years, I wouldn’t have given a shit if you’d been left for dead somewhere. But this just freaked me the fuck out.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Dad makes a low grumbling sound as he swivels around on the stool. “Should I be flattered?”

“You should be grateful,” I mutter, reaching for the refrigerator door handle. I pull it open and grab a can of Coca-Cola from one of the shelves.

“Why is that?” Dad rubs his lower back, squeezing his eyes shut. I furrow my brow. I really hope the Doc was thorough in his exam. I wanted to take him to the emergency room and was ready to tell them that he was assaulted or some shit like that, but he insisted that he was fine, just a little banged up.

He’s more than a little banged up, but he’s also damn stubborn. It’s something I might have picked up from him over the years.

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“Because Nico’s not gonna whack your ass. At least, not yet.”

Dad lets out a dry laugh. “With the way I feel right now, death would be a welcome change.”

“Dad,” I say, sliding my can across the counter and leaning forward. “It buys us time...time to figure out where to find Mikey and Gianni and to take care of them once and for all. With all of the distractions, I know I can get you guys out of here. We can get Mom back from her girls’ trip, and put you both on a plane—”

Dad holds up a hand. “Max, stop. You know it’ll never get that far. And if you do that, your head will be on the chopping block. I’m not going to have that on my conscience.”

I make a face. “Really? You’ve suddenly developed one of those? After all the years of screwing over people, including me?”

“Better late than never,” he quips, nodding to my can as I raise it to my lips. “That crap is pure poison, by the way. You should drink more water.”

“I like poison. It’s tastes good. And I need something good right now.” I smirk and take a long sip. “But I appreciate your concern. Again, better late than never.”

We stand at the counter for a few minutes, staring at the granite top. Neither one of us says a word, but there are plenty hanging in the air between us.

“I can arrange it,” I say quietly. “I know we can do this, Dad. We can figure out a

way to get you and Mom out of here.”

“She’d never go,” he says in a flat voice. “She’d never leave you or your sister to follow me. I fucked everything up, Max. Do you really think she’d go when she finds out what I’ve done and the danger I’ve put you all in?”

“She loves you. She’d never let you go by yourself.”

“She shouldn’t have to make that choice.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Besides, we both know I won’t make it long enough for her to even get home from the city. My hours are numbered, Max.”

“Listen,” I say, trying to control my voice so it doesn’t quiver like the rest of me. “I talked to Nico, and he’s busy trying to figure out what to do about the Bonnaros. He’s not going after you right now. He’s got a bigger mess to handle.”

“You do know Nico, right?” Dad smirks and leans his arms on the counter. “He always has a million things going at once, but he’s a master at making you believe it’s only one. Until he wants you to know what else he has cooking. There’s no way he’s going to let me escape. Not after what I did to the family and to his dad. He doesn’t abandon the code, Max. not ever. And to be honest, it scares the hell out of me that your sister is still with him. I fear for her, for all of you, because he’ll always do what’s expected of him. He won’t shuffle priorities around because of his emotions.”

“Like me,” I mutter.

“If his dad had been in my position and was making underhanded deals to save his own ass at the expense of the family, do you think he’d have helped him get away?”

I let out a deep breath. “I’d like to think he would.”

“Nico has a lot of good qualities, but he’s ruthless. You don’t get to his position without that gene.”

“I think he’s just been really lucky.”

“Luck plays a part, yes. But he never forgets his objective.” A sad smile lifts my father’s lips. “And he never acts out of desperation. He’s very calculating, and he doesn’t take unnecessary risks.”

“Yep, he’s basically the exact opposite of me.”

“Yeah, but, Max, none of that means he’s a better person than you. You’re hot-headed, impulsive, and you don’t bother with consequences, but you always try to do what’s right. I mean, look at us. If you were like Nico, you’d have already popped me even though I’m your father.”

“I really don’t think Nico would have killed his dad.”

My father shrugs. “Maybe he wouldn’t have pulled the trigger himself. But I wouldn’t put it past him to have someone else do the job.”

“I think you’re wrong. He’s a good guy, he’s just in a different place than me. He has to deal with more bullshit.”

Dad nods. “And I know there are a lot of responsibilities that go along with it. He’s kept things moving since his grandfather died and since his dad has been out of commission. He had to step into a very demanding role without any notice, and he’s very good at it. But you saw first-hand that he’ll turn on you in a hot second if he thinks you’ve crossed him.”

I nod, recalling the time not too long ago when he fired me from my security job at

Culaccino because he thought I'd gone behind his back and screwed him over.

I didn't, and it was actually Shaye who'd opened her mouth without knowing she shouldn't.

But the fact that he could attack me without a second thought and without even confirming if I'd hung him out to dry has bothered me ever since.

I clench a fist and give the counter a little pounding. That really pissed me off, and my dad knows it. Why the fuck is he trying to get under my skin? Now of all times?

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“See? You know what I’m talking about.”

“Why are you telling me all of this, Dad?” The knot at the base of my skull is so damn tight. If it gets any tighter, I’m afraid the pressure will pop out my eyeballs.

“Because I just want you to be aware. Watch your own back because you can’t count on anyone else to do it. I won’t be around much longer, and you need to hear these things. You’re a good person, a smart person. You can read people if you take the time to do it. Don’t be so quick to act, just think first. It’ll save you a lot of headaches later.”

“I hate listening to this stuff.”

“You need to hear it, and I didn’t do a good enough job saying it over the years.” Dad struggles to slide off the stool and slowly walks around the island so he is next to me. He places a hand on my back. “I’m proud of you, Max. I want you to know that. I was shit at telling you because I never wanted to see you relax. I always wanted you to be on your guard, never feeling comfortable because that’s too fucking dangerous. It makes you vulnerable.” He grins and ruffles my hair. “But you’re too much of a lunatic, and that’ll make you vulnerable, too.”

I smile. “I’ve gotten better.”

“Yeah, you have. Just remember to always keep them guessing what your next move will be. Don’t be predictable. Everyone always expects you to fly off the handle. If you don’t, they’ll watch their asses because they won’t know what you have up your sleeve. Don’t make bad choices, Max.” He places his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t

get sucked into things that will leak poison into your life and the lives of people you love. And always be careful who you trust. I think you've learned that lesson the hard way."

I nod. "You're making me want to grab a notebook and pen right now."

Dad cocks an eyebrow. "And you actually have those around?"

"No." I snicker. "I said you're making me want to grab one, not that there's a stash to pull from."

"Look, Max. I've done a really shitty job at being your father. My reasons don't matter anymore, and I'll never have the time to make things right between us, but—"

"Hey," I say, clapping him gently on the back. "We're good, Dad. You've given me what I need."

He stares at me for a second, shifting his weight. "I've got to lie down again. My head is a little messed up."

"Are you dizzy? Do you want water?" I hoist him up and help him over to the couch when my iPhone vibrates in my pocket. He settles into the cushions, and I grab my phone on my way back to the kitchen. I scroll up to see a text from Sloane. My throat tightens as I read it.

Are you okay?

With a thudding heart, I lean against the refrigerator door. That's all. Nothing crazy.

So why do I feel like there's more behind that question?



I'm good. Thanks for asking. How was last night?

I hold my breath, waiting to see those three gray dots flash on the screen and when they do, I let out a slow shaky breath. Good Christ, what's wrong with me?

Then the dots disappear. And no message flashes on my screen. I busy myself with pouring my dad a glass of water and check my phone obsessively over the next minute, watching, waiting, hoping...

Until the dots appear again.

And I actually want to cheer.

How fucking pathetic?

It was good. And bad. Not that I should admit it to you.

I walk into the living room with the water and flop onto a chair across from my dad, still focused on my phone, like a horny fucking teenager who's waiting for a text from his girlfriend saying she wants to have sex with him.

Is the good part about donations?

I hold my breath, waiting for a response, hoping like hell it doesn't have to do with that doctor instead. Hell, he might be the good and no donations might be the bad. Why should I assume anything different?

It takes way too fucking long to get a response, but when I see it, the tiny little ember of hope flickering deep in my heart ignites.

Yes.

My fingers hover over the keyboard. Do I write what I really want to write? Or do I just ignore it because it's better for her? Her father's warning is still fresh in my mind. How can I just ignore all of that? How can I pull her into my toxic life when my days are numbered? It's not fair. It's not what she deserves. It's selfish and self-centered.

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I can't be that guy anymore.

I swallow another gulp of Coke. How is it possible to feel this empty? How did I let this even happen to me? To have these feelings about a woman...it was never supposed to happen. I'd trained myself to not show emotion, to not be impacted by a woman because it's dangerous when mixing business with pleasure. My business is a dirty one, and it's impossible to keep anyone clean and protected.

I get up from the couch, wander back into the kitchen, and drum my fingertips on the counter, waiting. Do I say something? Do I just let this go? Do I tell her that the pain from my beating is nothing compared to losing her?

Uh, no. I will not be saying that, for fuck's sake.

These feelings are screwing with my head. Like I need any more help on that front. I'm messed up enough as it is.

I glance over the half-wall at my dad sitting on the couch. His head is leaned back, and his eyes are closed. How the fuck am I gonna explain this to Mom and Shaye when they get back from their trip? It was only a short shopping trip in the city. I don't have a month to figure this all out.

"Max," Dad calls out to me.

"Yeah?" I pick up my phone, staring at the screen, still trying to figure out how to keep this communication thing going with Sloane. I'm panicked that if I say the wrong thing, I'll fuck myself forever.

Ha. As if I'm not already.

"What are you doing in there? I can hear you pacing. Nobody is going to storm the house."

"It's not that." I let out a deep breath and slump against the counter.

"What's the problem? I can't fall asleep with your grunting and groaning." He smirks and his eyes open. "I told you not to worry about me."

"Well, ah, this time it's not entirely about you." I wave my hand in the air. "It's Sloane."

Dad's eyebrows lift. "Sloane, as in Shaye's best friend, Sloane?"

"The one and only."

"So you finally made your move." He sighs, his face twisting into a grimace as he shifts his weight. "About fucking time."

"I guess everyone was watching and waiting, huh?"

"After seeing you together for so many years? Yeah. We all were." He nods at my phone. "What's the problem?"

I sink onto the couch next to him, my head in my hands. "Last night, I was on my way to pick her up for an event when Mikey jumped me."

Dad nods. "You stood her up."

"Again. So I could save you. And remember what happened on Thanksgiving?"

“How could I forget?”

“Well, I chose to go to Brooklyn that night and save Layla instead of going to see her.” I clutch my head. “And I saw Sloane this morning at the hospital.”

“Why’d you go to the hospital?”

I shake my head. “Long story. But she was there with some doctor who was drooling all over her. Rocco saw them together last night at Cousin’s. I can’t blame her. He probably won’t go running out on her because he found some sawed-off fingers in the front seat of his car, ya know?”

“Did you tell her—?”

“Hell no!” My eyes widen, and I sit up straight. “How could I? But she still saw me, like this, and she just texted me to see if I’m okay...” I groan and fall back onto the plush couch cushion. “I just want to be with her. I want simple. And happy. And easy.”

Dad’s breathing is labored. “That’s not our life, Max. It never will be, and you have to accept that.”

“What if I don’t want to accept it? What if I don’t want it anymore?”

“You know you don’t have that choice.”

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“Dammit! I know!” I cover my face with my hands. “But how can I just let this thing with Sloane fall apart? How do I explain that this shit is gonna keep happening, and I need to handle it? That it’s my job?”

“You need to find a way to be honest with her if she’s that important to you. Yeah, it’s a dangerous life, but nowadays,” Dad shakes his head. “You’re not safe anywhere. Jesus Christ, you can go to a bar or a movie or to the post office or even get on a damn plane to Disney World, and boom! It can be over that quick.”

“I can’t put her in danger. This whole thing with the Bonnaros is a goddamn mess, and if anything happened to her, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I say the same thing about your mom and Shaye all the time. But it’s just our reality. You need to be honest about what you can offer her and about what she can expect. You know she’d be taken care of, Max.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah.” I trace a finger over my screen. She hasn’t texted me back yet, and I feel like the window is closing. I don’t want it to slam shut. I’ll have lost my chance, and I can’t live with knowing I let the greatest thing in my life slip right through my damn fingers.

I stab a few words, my thumb hovering over the Send button as I read them.

Mine was bad, too. Can I come over? I want to explain.

She’s the only person I trust. I need that right now. I need her, if she’ll have me.

Again, I wait, holding my breath until I see the flashing gray dots.

Yes.

I leap off the couch. Fuck, yeah! A smile spreads across my face. I have one shot to make this right.

Dad's face clenches in pain and he squeezes his eyes shut. I fall to the floor on my knee. "Dad, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Ah!" He grits his teeth and slides himself backward, so his head is leaning on the pillow. "Yeah," he mutters. "I'm fine."

My eyebrows knit together. "I think we need to go to the hospital. We should have gone last night, and now you might be—"

"No. I don't want to go. Too many questions. And I don't want to be in a public place. It's not safe. For anyone."

"But you could have internal injuries. We could have just told them you were robbed or something, and that would have been the end of it. You need to see a doctor."

"Then the cops would have gotten involved." He shakes his head. "I've been through this before. I'll be okay. I just need to rest."

"You're a lot older now." I frown, watching his chest rise and slowly deflate. "I'm gonna call the Doc. I think he needs to check you out again."

Dad waves his hand at me. "Stop. I'm stronger than I look." He turns his head toward me, a thin smile on his pinched face. "Get out of here. I know you want to see her."

Ping! My eyes fall to the screen. I swallow hard, gripping the phone tight with my fingers.

No.

My heart plummets into my Nikes. I really screwed up this time. I bite down hard on my lower lip. Do I beg? Do I just go? Or do I just deal with the fact that I've lost the best thing that's ever happened to me because I keep making bad fucking choices?

"Max? What are you waiting for?"

My mouth drops open. "I—"

Ping!

Yes.

That one word that means the door is still open at least a crack. I can still get inside. She may have been a little resistant, but maybe she's coming around. Maybe she misses me, too, even though I'm a fucking walking disaster. She obviously doesn't realize that part yet.

My lips stretch into a smile, a real one, a hopeful one.

Christ, I'm like one of those girls who listens to Taylor Swift and shit like that.

Another loud ping startles me and I look down.



No!

You know the saying, I feel like a ping pong ball being batted around?

Yeah, this feels a thousand times worse than that.

“I, um, I don’t think she’s up for it tonight, Dad.”

Ping!

Wait...

I grit my teeth. Patience has never been my thing. I’m more of a go into something, guns blazing kind of guy. I type a response.

Been waiting.

Those damn gray dots are back to haunt me again. They flash then stop, flash then stop. Again. And again. And a third time.

I collapse on the chair across from my dad, covering my eyes with my hand.

“I’ve never seen you like this, Max. Hanging on the edge of your seat, waiting for a girl.” He smirks, his eyes still closed. “Do you want me to put on some Taylor Swift for you?”

I throw my head back and let out a loud chuckle. Oh, Christ. Does that mean we’re

actually on the same wavelength? That's fucking frightening.

Ping!

OK, I want you to come over. Smiley face emoticon.

"Sounds like you might be wrong. If she keeps sending those texts, she must want to see you, too." Dad murmurs, closing his eyes.

I narrow my eyes at the screen, waiting. No gray dots appear. Thank God. I still watch for a few more seconds before typing another response.

Is that your final answer?

Laughing emoticon. Yes. No lifelines for me. I kind of gave up on them when you came back around.

I guess that's a good thing since I'm outta lifelines myself.

"Go," Dad murmurs.

"Are you sure?" I stand up from the chair, rake a hand through my hair, and look around. "I can tell her I'll be over later. Why don't I just—?"

"Max."

"Yeah?"

"It's your time. Don't leave her hanging again."

I nod. "You'll call if anything changes?"

“I promise.” Dad settles deeper into the cushions, resting his hands on his chest again.

Still like a corpse.

I block the thought from my mind. We both know the end is near, although it’s still not clear exactly whose end it might be.

“I’ll be back soon.”

“Not too soon, I hope.” He snickers, and it’s followed by a hacking cough.

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He lays still, eyes closed. Dad knows what comes next, and I think he sees it as punishment for his sins against the family. Maybe that's why he refused to go to the hospital. Maybe he feels things will just be easier if he stays here until his time comes. Staying in the hospital would only prolong the inevitable, but it would give my mom and sister a chance to see him one last time.

With a tightness in my chest, I grab my leather jacket and pull it on. I shut off all of the lights, leaving only the bathroom light on. There aren't any windows in there, so I leave the door open a crack. Nobody will be able to see the light from outside, and Dad will be able to see if he needs to get up for any reason. I take one more long look at him on the couch before I open the back door.

Twenty-four hours ago, I'd have never guessed a lot of things would have happened. But most of all, I'd have never thought I'd actually want to keep my father alive. He's pulled a lot of shit over the years, so finding out about his betrayal didn't really shock me.

Sad to say.

But the desire to help him...that shocked the hell out of me. Never in my life did I think I'd ever want to do anything for him after he'd been such a bastard.

But he's still my father. He may be a selfish and ruthless prick, but I think he realizes all the damage he's done over the years. And he's sorry for it, making up for it in his own twisted way.

I hate that I've always needed his approval, but now I finally have it. I got my

closure. And I think he got some as well.

It's a fucked-up dynamic, this thing between me and my dad. But even after all he put me through, I still forgive him. I don't want to carry this anger around with me forever. I did the right thing, helped him when he needed it most.

I don't want to give up on him. Not now.

And I don't want to see him give up, either. I'll figure out how to nail the Bonnaros and that'll fix things with Nico and save my dad.

Yeah, I'm gonna keep saying that to myself. Maybe at one point I'll actually start to believe it all.

I pull the door closed behind me and twist the key in the lock. I peer around me, in the shadows surrounding my backyard. Anyone could be lurking, just waiting for me to leave. They have to know Dad is inside.

I can only hope Nico would give me a heads-up if he put out a hit.

I wouldn't blame him.

But I would still hate him for it.

I sidestep patches of black ice on my driveway and climb into my truck, gunning the engine. I peel out of the driveway and head in the direction of Sloane's house, praying her dad isn't sitting outside her door with a shotgun in his hands.

He's already given me a warning.

And I'm ignoring it.

If he blows off my cock at some point, it'll be my own fault.

I weave my way through side streets, trying to figure out what I'm even going to say to her when I show up on her doorstep again. The streets are still slippery from all of the sleet that's freezing from the drop in temperature, and even though I want to get to her as quickly as possible, I'd like to actually make it there in one piece.

Last night, I didn't think that would even be a possibility.

But here we are.

I slow to a stop around the corner from her house, just in case her dad has the urge to take a brisk walk outside to find my big ass truck sitting in front of his house. I hop out of the driver's seat and jog to her front door, the rubber soles of my sneakers making me slip and slide each step of the way.

So long as I don't break anything, I'm good. Something tells me I'm going to need full use of all limbs over the next couple of days.

I climb the steps and knock three times, still a little out of breath from my impromptu run. I bounce on my toes, pulling my jacket tighter around me since I didn't bother to zip it. Finally, the door opens, and Sloane narrows her eyes at me, one hand on her hip. "I was about to tell you not to come."

"Again?" I shiver, fidgeting around to shift the cold blasts of air assaulting me. "Should I go? I parked around the corner so your dad doesn't know to come after me with a machete."

"Fuck you!" She widens the door and pulls me inside, shoving me once I'm standing in front of her.

Wow. I've never heard a word stronger than hell come from her beautiful lips. I can honestly say I have no idea how to navigate this situation right now, so I keep my mouth shut and just let her go. I at least owe her that.

"I hate you, do you know that?" She shoves me again, this time with her hands. "I hate that I gave you this...this power over me! To make me feel things that clearly aren't real and to wish for things that can never fucking become reality!"

I swallow hard, tiny beads of sweat forming on the back of my neck. "Sloane, I don't blame—"

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“Shut up!” She pokes me in the chest, her teeth clenched. “I’m not finished.” Her face is all twisted and pinched like she’s just taken a sip of some hundred-year-old milk. “Do you know how hard it was for me last night? Knowing you’d chosen something over me again, having to deal with my father and my friends, looking out at all of those faces and not seeing yours...” She pushes back her hair and squeezes her eyes shut. “I felt like a complete fucking idiot for letting myself believe things could be different this time!” Sloane lets go of her hair, letting it fall around her face in thick waves. “But it can’t be. It never could, and deep down, I guess I knew that. I let myself get sucked in anyway. I fooled myself into thinking you’d change, that I could make you change. But you don’t lo...you never could...” Her voice trails off and she shakes her head. “My fucking bad.” She sinks down to the floor, her shoulders sagging, her head in her hands. “But then I saw you this morning at the hospital, beaten to hell. And you’d just been visiting with Eli, which you never even told me you’d done.” Her head raises, eyes brimming with tears. “All of my anger just kind of disappeared for a minute because I was worried about you and about all of the things I don’t know, the things that might have kept you from me last night, the things you never said when I saw you this morning.”

I hesitate for a moment then sink to my knees in front of her, not sure if it’s okay to talk or if she might take a swing at me if I don’t let her finish first.

“But whatever happened, it didn’t stop you from being at the hospital early and visiting with someone who really needs you. You did the right thing by him because you’re a good guy. And that’s why I’m in love with you, why I’ve always been in love with you. But I hate myself for it, because even when you do the right thing, I end up getting crushed.” A sad smile lifts her quivering lips. “And I can’t let that happen to me anymore.”



She snuffles, and my dick gets hard. I know, I know. I'm a sick man. I can't help it, though. She just said she loves me. And while I hate like hell to see her this upset, part of me wants to fling her on the bed and show her just how much I love her.

Forget the cocksuckers who are plotting my death right now. Forget my dad's severed fingers, Nico's threats, and all the trafficking bullshit.

Sloane loves me.

Now I just have to convince her to give this another shot.

No pun intended.

And, oh, yeah, I need to figure out how to keep those assholes from exterminating me. One tiny detail cockblocking our happy ending.

But even the thought of death doesn't scare me as much as losing Sloane.

"I need to..." My mouth snaps shut, and I recoil when she narrows her eyes at me. Maybe I'm not supposed to say anything yet. Maybe I'm supposed to wait for her to give me a cue.

"You don't speak until I say you can speak," she hisses, swiping at her eyes with her hand. "Do you realize how badly I wanted to talk to you last night, to tell you how amazing the event was, and how everyone reacted to my speech?"

I fold my hands because I'm just not really sure what the hell else to do with them. If I try to touch her, she might break one...or both...of them. My lips are pressed tight together in a straight line and I shake my head. I guess that's allowed, right? Just to acknowledge what she said?

I don't know. This is all new to me. I've never seen this side of Sloane before, having her take the reins and shit. It's kind of hot, I won't lie. I feel all submissive, and that only makes my dick harder.

I never thought I'd be so turned on while being reprimanded.

Although...

It's kind of like the teacher-student thing. I've been a very bad boy, and I need to be punished. Maybe she'll keep me in at recess and shake her ass in that short, plaid, Catholic school girl skirt. Damn, that's a fantasy I never knew I even had in me.

I give my head a quick shake. Christ, this is definitely not the time for all of that.

"I should have been happy!" she yells, leaping to her feet and stomping around the foyer. "I should have been excited! I should have wanted to sleep with the hot doctor!"

Oh, crap. Well, there's a dick deflater if I ever needed one.

"He actually prioritized me! Imagine that! But you know what?" She leans down and sticks a finger right at my face. "I don't want him! After everything, I still want you! Argh!" She slaps her hands against her legs and keeps stomping.

My mouth twitches, but she hasn't tagged me in yet. And I'm a little scared her dad is gonna come barreling through that door with a rifle any second.

On the other hand, it's hella hot to see her leg muscles tense and tighten as she paces. I want to bury myself between them so fucking badly right now. And the pink spots in her cheeks...she is fuming right now, and to see her so heated over this is a real turn-on. I want to strip off those flimsy shorts and yank that tank top over her head so

I can taste every inch of her flushed body. I need it, and I want it all, dammit.

Jesus, Sloane, let me talk! Let me tell you how much I fucking love you, too!

Her breaths become fast and furious as her voice gets higher and higher. I just sit and watch and fantasize.

Finally, she faces me, her shoulders quaking. “You can talk now,” she whispers.

I jump up and place my hands on her shoulders and then pull them back. “Wait, is it too soon for contact?”

She rolls her red and puffy eyes. “You’re such an asshole.”

“I know. But even though there’s so much more you need to hear, I have to start with the most important thing.” My lips curl upward, and I lean my forehead against hers. “I’m fucking crazy about you, Sloane. I’ve wanted to tell you for a while, but I was always afraid I’d fuck things up between us. So I’ve kept it buried for a long, long time. I don’t want to hide it anymore. I want you to know what you’ve done to me.” I smooth her hair out of her face and watch her eyes fill with tears once again. “I love you. So much,” I whisper. “And I’m so sorry about last night. And Thanksgiving. And whatever stupid shit I pulled every time before that. I want this, Sloane. I want you. I want us...if you can forgive me.” I wipe away the tear that streams down her cheek. “Please don’t cry. Me being in love with you isn’t that horrible, is it?”

She laugh-coughs and then hiccups. It’s fucking adorable.

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“Max,” she murmurs, tracing a finger down the arm of my leather coat. “I want this to work. I really do. I just don’t know how to handle you.”

I grin. “I’d say you know how to handle me just fine. Like a pro, even.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.” She wipes her eyes and stares at me. “I never really know what’s going on in your head. You don’t want to scare me or have me think less of you or whatever.” She shrugs. “You’re kind of an island.”

“One where sex on the beach is legal? Yeah, that sounds pretty cool to me.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Getting arrested for public fornication ain’t much fun.”

“You have a life, Max. A life that I know nothing about. A life that’s dangerous and full of people who do that to you.” She points to my face. “And that.” Her finger moves down toward my chest where all of the ink covers a past I’d very much like to forget. “And what’s worse is you not being honest with me about any of it. I’d never judge you. I just don’t see how we can ever be if there are all of these secrets blocking our way.”

“You know that I’d never want to hurt you, right? That I’d do anything to protect you?”

She nods. “Yes. I think you really believe that, but what you don’t realize is that’s

just physical protection. When you hide things from me and not show up without an explanation, you're still hurting me! But it's almost worse because you aren't trusting me enough to be honest."

"The truth is harsh, Sloane." I scrub a hand down the front of my face and collapse against the wall. "It's scary. And a lot of it is out of my control. You...you're so pure and good. I hate myself for even thinking about bringing you into this life. But I hate myself more when I let you down and when I see you with other guys like that douchebag doctor because I screwed up again."

"I'm scared, too." She crawls toward me and lays her head on my shoulder. "But I feel like I'd be less scared if I knew what we were dealing with instead of just guessing."

A tiny shiver runs through me.

What we were dealing with.

She is fucking amazing. After everything I've put her through, she still thinks of us as a we.

"Your father wouldn't be happy about it."

"I'm not living my life for my dad. I'm living it for me." She pulls away and tilts my face toward hers. "Do you get that? This may be stupid, and it may be the wrong decision for me to make, but it feels right. I'm empty when you're gone, Max. I go through the motions, smiling when I need to even though I want to cry." She lets out a little groan and hits her forehead with the back of her hand. "Ugh! I always give away too much. I really should've kept you guessing for a while longer. You don't deserve to hear all of this so soon."

“I don’t.” I trace a finger over the outline of her lips. “I don’t deserve a lot of things.”

“But I was serious before, Max. You’re a good guy. Whatever you’ve done in the past is done. I don’t care about who you used to be. I care about who you are now and who you’ll be in the future. We’ve all made mistakes and done things we’re not proud of. I’d never hold that against you.”

“Your dad doesn’t seem to have an issue with harboring, though. He might try to kill me in my sleep.”

Sloane shakes her head. “Nah, I think he’d go a little bigger than that. He’d want you to be awake. Maybe he’d plant a bomb in your truck or something.”

“Great. Something to look forward to.” My grin fades. “Speaking of which, I think we need to talk. I mean, really talk.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Should I be nervous?”

“I’d like to tell you no, but that’d be lying.” I lean down, offer her a hand, and pull her to her feet so that our foreheads are almost touching. I breathe in, her sweet, floral scent consuming my senses. It almost stops me from what I’m about to do. It’s a sign, I’m sure. Of her innocence, her goodness, her pureness.

I’m about to strip all of that away.

Is it selfish of me, even if she wants it, too? Letting her in on things that she should never have to hear? I want to do right by her, but bringing her into my world can change things. Will change things.

Everything.

She says she wants me to be honest, but she really doesn't. She can't possibly.

Her hand grazes the side of my face, her eyes curious. "Max, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. "Nothing," I murmur, pulling her tight against me. I press my fingertips into her back, inhaling her coconutty shampoo. A few more seconds of her body melting into me, and I'll be too coconutty to remember why I'm here and what I need to do.

"Well, I like the way this talk is going so far," she whispers, her fingers traveling up the back of my neck. My knees buckle a little when they start to massage the base of my skull, the place where that big, fat knot had taken up permanent residence.

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Sloane's strong fingers massage the area until I no longer feel the stress choking me and the knot is sent packing.

Evicted, bitch!

Fucking finally.

My body feels like a limp noodle, and it would be so damn easy to just collapse onto her bed and make love to her all night without saying a word. So tempting.

I pull away from her grip and look down at her. "Babe."

"I know. You want to talk." She smiles. "I'd rather do other things, though."

"Oh, I want to do those things, too. Believe me. But there are reasons why I came here tonight, and I have to let you in on some stuff. If you really are serious about the whole honesty thing. Because we can just forget all of that and jump into bed, maybe not come out of your bedroom for the next week or so, and then—"

"I know we need to talk, Max. I was only kidding." Her grin widens. "Kind of. But there will be plenty of time for that. Later."

She takes my hand and leads me into the living room, flopping onto the couch. "Come here and tell me what's on your mind because it looks like there are a lot of wheels turning, or maybe those are fires that need to be put out, either way, the look is very intense."



I sink into the cushion next to her, taking a deep breath. “There’s a lot I’ve done in the past that I’m not proud of. I want you to know that.”

Sloane tucks her legs under her. “I don’t care about what you’ve done in the past, Max. I care about the person you are now.”

“Yeah, I know.” I push back my hair and sigh. “But a lot of that is because of who I am. My dad, you know how he is. He beat me into the ground every chance he got, and for years, I did everything I could to get his approval. Trying to advance in the Salesi family businesses, taking chances and risks to set myself apart, making a name for myself...it was all to make him proud of me. But it all backfired. I did stupid crap. I hurt a lot of people. I caused a lot of issues for the family, and my dad saw me as a liability. Reckless, impulsive, a loose cannon.” A hint of a smile lifts the corners of my lips. “That was his favorite description, anyway.”

“Was?”

I nod. “Yeah, well, I’m thinking his feelings about that have changed recently. Hoping is more like it.”

A confused look shadows Sloane’s face and she shakes her head slowly. “I’m not getting this at all. If this is you being honest, I’m not really sure how to read it.”

I take a deep breath. “Last night, I stopped at the florist I know you like. I wanted to bring you flowers on your special night.”

“That was a sweet thought.” Her face relaxes into a smile and she leans forward, her eyes wide as if she’s expecting what comes next. Not like she ever could.

“Well, I tried. But before I could get to my car, I had an, um, altercation with someone.”

“Someone you knew?”

“Yeah, someone who I’d run up against in the past. You remember Gianni? And the fork,” I mumble.

“Yes...”

“This was his brother Mikey. Another dangerous guy. And, um, well, there were some words. Some punches,” I say, waving a hand at my face. “That one’s kind of obvious. And, uh, he was coming to let me know something about my dad. Something that required my immediate attention.”

“Like what? How does he know your dad?”

“Everyone knows everyone, babe. And as it happens, my dad was involved with some pretty serious stuff. Stuff Shaye doesn’t know about. Stuff that can be really bad for all of us. Stuff you can’t repeat to anyone.”

“Are you going to tell me about the ‘stuff’?”

“Let’s just say that he did some pretty bad things for money. Things he never should have done. All because...” I scrub a hand down the front of my face. Do I tell her? How can I dangle a carrot and keep yanking it away? At least I didn’t say anything about the fingers. I want to forget about those... “He has a gambling problem. I never knew about it. Nobody did, except the dirtbags who he kept borrowing money from. Mikey and Gianni were two of them. There were others, though, and he has a pretty big debt to pay off.”

A hand flies over Sloane’s mouth. “Oh, no. Your poor father. Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. They went after him and beat him up pretty bad. He’s...” I pause.

“He’s staying with me right now. My mom and Shaye are away, so I didn’t want him home alone.” I rake a hand through my hair. “But last night, after I found him, he told me everything. What he’s been hiding from us for all of this time...the reasons why he’s been so hard on me, and why he made me believe I was disappointing him. He didn’t want me to ever be vulnerable or weak like he was. He figured if he kept laying into me, I’d eventually become the man he’d wanted me to be...someone so different from him. But instead I kept trying to figure out ways to make him proud. When I couldn’t...when I kept failing...I let the anger and rage swallow me whole. It drove me to do a lot of bad shit.” I shake my head, tearing my eyes away from her pained expression. I shouldn’t be telling you any of this. There are a lot of bad people after him. And for me, it’s guilt by association.”

“They’re coming after you, too?” She leaps up from the couch and rushes over to the windows, pulling the blinds and curtains down so nobody can see inside.

“Sloane, my car is a block away. It’s not right outside. I’d have never put you in jeopardy like that.”

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“We’ve already been seen together. Gianni has seen us together!”

“I know. And I hate myself for doing that to you. Who the fuck knew he’d be awake so goddamned early that day?”

“What happens if they come here looking for you and break in?”

“I’ll take care of it.” And I will. I’m never going anywhere again without my fucking gun. “But if they wanted me dead, they’d have killed me already.”

“Are you sure?” She paces in front of the coffee table, nibbling at her nails. “Should we do something? Or call for help?”

“No, babe.” I get up and walk over to her, wrapping my arms around her and holding her tight to my chest. “That’s not how things work. Nico knows the deal, and he’s got our backs.” It sounds good, even though it’s complete bullshit. Anything that will set her mind at ease.

“What about your dad? Do you want me to check him out? I can go to your house and examine him, and we can always call the hospital—”

I shake my head. “He won’t go anywhere. He’s too damn stubborn. I shouldn’t even be here right now, but I needed to see you and to explain why I didn’t make it last night. My dad was pretty insistent that I come over here to apologize to you. And I needed to tell you why it killed me when Rocco texted me and told me about you and that guy.”

“Rocco texted...oh, that makes sense now,” she muses.

“What does?”

Sloane looks up at me. “Kat was with Rocco and the guys last night. She came up to me at one point, singing your praises. Talking about what a great guy you are. It was a little weird since I really don’t know her, but she seems to be a fan of yours. I guess Rocco sent her over.”

I lean my forehead against hers. “It’s nice to know Rocco isn’t a complete cocksucker and that he actually gives a shit about my happiness.”

“You know, Kat didn’t need to tell me why you’re so amazing, Max.” She rests her hands over my shoulders. “I already know that. I’ve seen it firsthand. It’s part of the reason why I knew I could never be happy with any other guy.” She shrugs. “I want you. For better or for worse. And based on what you just told me, it gets a lot worse.”

“It does, and I hate like hell to be here. I’d never want to put you in danger, but I can’t walk away, either.” I let out a sigh. “I’ve pissed off a lot of people. I don’t have a lot of fans, Sloane.”

“You have me.” She caresses the bruises on my face with her thumb and forefinger. “I’m your biggest fan.”

“That might not be the smartest thing you’ve ever said.”

She shrugs. “Maybe not, but it’s how I feel. Am I completely insane for letting you stay here right now?”

“Definitely.”

“And you’re sure your dad is okay by himself?”

I nod. Is it technically a lie if I don’t say anything? “Where’s your dad?”

“He’s over at his place.” Her hands slide down to my waist, slow. “I already saw him tonight, so I don’t think he’ll be back again.”

“You know your dad will kill me if he finds me here. You might be in danger of suffering his wrath too, just saying.” My breath hitches as her hands travel underneath my jacket, reaching up my back to slide it off, one arm at a time.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.” My jacket falls to the floor and her fingers work the bottom hem of my t-shirt, taunting me every time her fingers dip into the waistband of my jeans.

“I used to think you were smart, Sloane,” I murmur as she massages the small of my back. Her fingertips drift higher up my spine, reaching around my neck again. A low moan escapes my lips, and I grip her slim hips tight. “I don’t think you are, though. I think you’re really stupid.”

“Maybe so,” she murmurs. “But I can’t help the way I feel. And you being so honest with me only makes me love you more.”

“I keep violating the fucking code,” I groan, her fingers fumbling with my belt and yanking open the top button of my jeans. Her soft fingers reach into my boxer briefs and massage my throbbing cock. “I really suck at following rules.”

“I love you, Max,” she breathes against my ear, stroking my shaft and sliding her finger over the head of my cock. Her hands are so warm, so soft. She slides my jeans and boxer briefs to the floor, and I kick them and my sneakers off one foot at a time. I pull my t-shirt over my head and toss it next to the rest of my clothes.

My knees buckle, and I fall forward against the wall, my arms bracing the impact. My body presses against Sloane's. I can feel her heart racing against my chest. Her hooded stare makes my cock throb harder, and all I want is to dive into her, to feel her legs lock around me, to lose myself completely in this woman.

The woman.

I lean my forehead against hers, my lips hovering over hers. "I didn't like hearing you were with another guy." I trail my fingertips down the side of her torso, dipping them into her panties. She gasps, desire dripping over my fingers as they plunge into her wet pussy. "This is mine, do you understand me? Nobody else gets to touch you like this. Nobody else gets to fuck this pussy."

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She squeaks out a reply, her eyes squeeze shut as my fingers slide in and out, drenched in her sweet juices.

“I didn’t get that,” I growl. “Tell me what I want to hear.” I pull off her panties and line up my cock at her entrance. Her legs fall open as the head of my dick takes over for my hand. “Whose pussy is this, Sloane?”

She lets out a moan as the head of my cock teases her clit, pressing against it then pulling away. Her fingernails press into the small of my back, digging into the flesh, making me feel more than I’ve ever allowed myself to experience. “It’s yours. Always yours,” she whispers. “Please don’t tease me. I need to feel you, Max. Please!”

I swallow a groan. This self-inflicted torture is killing me, but I love that she’s begging for my cock. Christ, knowing how much she wants it...wants me...makes me even harder.

I didn’t think that would be possible.

“Good girl,” I murmur, reaching around to grab her ass. I push into her, crashing my lips to hers. She wraps her arms tight around me, sliding one leg around my waist. I hook one arm under the leg, lifting her hips so I can fuck her deeper. Her pussy clenches around my dick, and I want to scream, it feels so fucking amazing.

I fist her hair with my one free hand, my tongue coiling with hers. Her hot mouth consumes me, drinking me in. I’m desperate for this connection — I can’t get any closer, but that doesn’t stop me from trying. Teeth cracking, tongues teasing and



taunting — our mouths won't be sated.

I thrust harder and deeper, her velvety walls tight around me, pulling me farther and farther into a place where I know I'll never, ever try to escape.

She jumps up without warning, but I catch her other leg and grip her ass tight. She slides herself against my cock, her legs locked around my waist. She throws her head back. Slamming it against the wall.

“Are you okay?” I ask, breathless.

“Oh, my God, yes. Yes!” she screeches, thrusting her hips against me, faster and faster. My dick is filled right now, but no way can I come yet. No, this is just for her.

I can wait.

I've waited what has felt like my whole fucking life, I can handle a few more minutes.

Her juices flow over me, drowning me in some combination of lust and love that keeps me hovering on the edge, ready to plunge into the deep, dark unknown.

She collapses over my shoulder after the orgasm tears through her. “Holy sh...oh, my good Lord,” Sloane pants. “You...are...” She shakes her head. “Jeez, I don't even know. Amazing and incredible don't really do that justice.”

“I think you're being a little premature,” I say, my dick still buried inside of her. “I haven't finished with you yet.”

“Maybe I haven't finished with you, either.” She lowers her lashes and gives me a hooded gaze that has my cock pulsating again. “Take me inside.”

I walk into her bedroom, still clutching her in my arms. I lie her down on the bed, hovering over her. “Now what?”

She doesn’t reply, but she rolls me over with the speed of a ninja and slides off my cock. With a mischievous smile, she dips her head over me, her hair falling over my torso, tickling the skin. Her tongue trails a scorching path over the swirls of ink that cover my chest. When her lips close around my cock and start sucking and stroking, I almost lose my shit.

“Oh, you are such a bad girl,” I mutter, fisting her hair as she rides my dick with her devious mouth. “Sucking my dick after I fucked you...oh, Christ, that is so hot. You’re so fucking bad. I need to fuck that pussy again right now.”

But she doesn’t stop. Her mouth swallows me whole, the head of my dick hitting the back of her throat. It only makes her suck harder. Her hands cup my balls, the deep ache such delicious torture.

Only she can relieve that ache.

And I need that to happen right now.

I gently push her away from my cock, and yeah, he fucking hates me right now.

Don’t worry., buddy. Give me a couple of seconds and all will be fucking amazing again.

She looks at me, wide-eyed with an expression of confusion on her flushed face.

“You didn’t—?”

I sit up, running my hands down her back. “Oh, I absolutely did. But it can’t replace

the real thing. I love your mouth, but that pussy is what I need right now.” I place my hands on her shoulders and back her down to the mattress, straddling her. “I hope you’re ready for more.”

She gazes up at me, leaning up to lick the outline of one of my tattoos. Her eyes are hooded, desperate, and hungry for more.

That’s the only invitation I need.

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I sink into her wet heat, pulling her shirt over her head before sliding against her soft skin. Her tits bounce as I thrust faster. I grip her ass, lifting her hips so I can drive myself deeper. Our bodies slap against one another, beads of perspiration exploding on our flushed skin.

I cannot get enough of her.

Our limbs twist and tangle, our mouths greedily drinking each other in. My gut clenches as the eruption rumbles in my groin, shooting out to my arms and legs. My limbs tingle, blasts of white light flashing behind my eyes, blinding me as the orgasm rips through my core. It slices through my insides like lightning, igniting every cell. My ears fill with white noise, muting her cries for God. A pleasure so intense, so otherworldly, paralyzes my mind. I can't think. I can't speak. I can only feel, and she's right.

Amazing is a fucking understatement.

I thrust one last time, filling her with everything I have and everything I want to give, feeling closer to her right now than I ever have.

Realizing I'm more in love with her than I'd ever imagined.

Knowing right here and now that I'd lay down my life for this woman in a hot second if it would keep her safe.

I'd do anything for her.

Anything.

I roll myself off of her and collapse on the mattress next to her. I let out a low moan and fling an arm over my face. “Holy fuck, that was insane.”

Sloane lets out a breathless giggle and rolls onto her side, tracing one of the tattoos I got after my first kill. I still feel the pang of guilt as her finger navigates the hard lines. It never dies. It’s always with me. Just like the ink.

“So, was that make-up sex?” she murmurs.

“Um, I guess so. Kind of? I don’t know. Were we in a fight?”

“Well, I told you I hated you, so…”

“Point taken.” I reach for her and roll her on top of me. “Can we fight all the time, then?”

She grins at me, her eyes wide and sparkling. Soft light from the night stand lamp glows around her head, making it look like there’s a halo sitting on top of it. It’s probably not my eyes seeing things. She’s just that good of a person, and that’s the universe reminding me of what I’m doing to her.

I tighten my arms around her waist, her breasts pressed against me, her legs straddling me.

She’s the only one I trust, the only one I’d sacrifice myself for.

I will do anything for this woman. Anything.

Except what’s expected of me by the family.

Because I can't follow the rules. I can't keep the code. And I sure as hell can't leave things to anyone but myself. It's up to me to keep her safe.

And I won't turn myself inside out for anyone else.

My life and my choices no longer own me.

Only she does.

She dips her head and grazes my lips with her pink and swollen ones. "Will you stay tonight?"

My cock twitches, sliding against her pussy, pleading its case to stay put.

But I know it's not a smart idea. I have to go home to my dad. I need to get my truck out of her neighborhood. And I really don't want to deal with another run-in with her father. I've had enough of those lately.

"I want to more than anything, but I really have to go." Her deflated expression almost makes me change my mind, but it's getting late, and I don't want to be too much longer. Hell, I didn't think I'd last ten minutes after she yelled at me and told me she hated me. I figured she'd have kicked me out pretty quickly after that.

I'm glad she didn't.

I'm so fucking in love with this woman.

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And she loves me, too.

I don't want this to end, so it's up to me to keep it going. Forever.

That means finding out what the hell Mikey and Gianni have cooking up in their sicko heads so I can terminate their asses. Permanently.

Yeah, there will be others. There always are.

But icing those asswipes will send a clear message to our enemies — both new and old.

Fuck with us and die.

Short, sweet, to the ice pick point.

I rub the back of her head. "I'll be back, babe. Tomorrow. I promise."

"Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?" She reaches for my hard cock and strokes it long and hard.

"Come on," I groan. "That's not playing fair at all. You know I'd stay here forever if I could. But I don't want to leave my dad alone. I want to keep an eye on him."

She drops my dick like a hot potato and gasps. "Oh, my God, I can't believe I forgot about your dad! Of course you should be with him! Do you really think he's going to be okay? Seriously, I can come with you and check him out, just like I said before."

“No way, gorgeous.” I lean upward and kiss her hard on the mouth. “I’m not taking you there. You stay here, far away from me, got it?”

Sloane nods, long strands of hair cascading over her shoulders. “Got it.” She takes a deep breath. “Please be careful.”

I cup her chin in my hand and smile. “Babe, I’ve never had so much to live for. You bet your hot ass I’m gonna be careful.”



Sloane

I wake up the next morning and stretch my arms in the air, letting out a loud sigh. A contented sigh. One where you just let out every stress and let your body bask in the after-sex glow that seems to radiate throughout your insides. My limbs feel like Jell-O, and I could be very happy just lying here in my bed, reliving every salacious moment I spent with Max last night.

Good Lord, I want more.

Is this how it feels when you're in love? Does it really make the sex that much more fabulous? I pull my pillow over my head and let out a squeal. Oh, my God, it was so worth the wait!

I snuggle under my comforter, breathing in Max's signature spicy scent, letting it infuse my senses.

All of my senses.

I've been counting the minutes until I can see him again. Heck, I think I was counting before he even left last night.

Last night...

The make-up sex was otherworldly, but the heaviness in my gut remains. My heart thumped for a solid twenty minutes until he'd texted me that he was home safely, and his dad was sleeping.

I have a feeling I'm going to deal with a lot more of those scenarios in the future. And maybe this isn't my brightest move, but my heart evidently belongs to the mob and nothing anyone says can change that.

I nibble a loose cuticle. Dad isn't going to be thrilled to hear Max and I are back together. And how the hell am I supposed to explain why he stood me up the other night?

It's really okay, Dad. He had a good excuse for standing me up and explained it all to me. You see, he was jumped after these criminals attacked his dad and left him for dead at a deserted construction site because he'd defaulted on massive gambling debts. So you see, he was just fulfilling his family responsibilities.

Um, yeah. I'm going to have to come up with another, more plausible, explanation.

I inhale deeply, pressing the fluffy pillow to my face, a smile lifting my lips.

Later. Much later.

A loud knock startles me and I toss the pillow aside and sit straight up in my bed. Jesus, did I actually mentally summon my father? I roll off the bed and throw on a sweatshirt and leggings. I don't even know what time it is, and Dad doesn't usually pop over unannounced, but you never know. Stranger things have happened.

I think I'll be saying that a lot more in the future.

I pad to the front door and pull it open without looking out the side window first. I grit my teeth and peer around the door as it creaks open. Rookie mistake. Max would flip if he knew.

A tall man in a policeman's uniform nods at me and flips open a badge. "Sloane

Camarena?”

I nod, hugging my arms around myself. A cold feeling snakes its way through my insides, an impending dread “Yes?” A million thoughts flit through my mind. Max is hurt. Max is dead. Dad is hurt. Dad is dead.

I swallow a gasp. Oh, my God...is it always going to be like this now? Am I always going to be wondering, panicking, wondering some more?

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about a missing person. Jules Marquez. May I come inside?”

Oh, my God...Jules! I’ve been so focused on my own drama that I forgot about my friend and the fact that she didn’t show up for work. My throat tightens. “Actually, I’d feel more comfortable if we sat outside, Officer.” No way am I letting him into my house. I’ve seen enough movies and television shows to know that you can fake a badge. And since I’m dating Max Oriani and now have to be a little more vigilant, as in not opening the front door without looking out the window first, so I’m not about to take any chances that this guy is impersonating a cop. I look across my street, and my heart sinks when I see that my neighbors’ cars are missing from their driveways. I have zero witnesses or possible saviors, at this point.

Still...I can scream. And run.

I smack a hand to my forehead. Yeah, I definitely watched too many movies and shows.

He cocks an eyebrow and nods at my feet. “In this cold? You’d better put something on your feet.”

I bend and grab my UGG slippers, sliding them on while standing on my stoop. A

lump forms in my throat as my friend's reality sinks in. I'm afraid to ask the big question because I really don't want to hear the answer.

But I still do it...

"Is she..." I swallow hard. "Has she been...?" I try a couple of times, but the words just won't make it out of my mouth.

The officer clears his throat. "I'm hoping you can help us answer the questions, actually. I understand you work together at Holy Name Hospital. Are you aware that she didn't make it home after a benefit two nights ago?"

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I shake my head. “N-no. But she was supposed to work the next day and never made it to the hospital. But that wasn’t completely unexpected. Everyone knew she’d probably had too much of a good time the night before and that she slept through her alarm or something. It’s not the first time that had happened.” I lean against the side of my house and let out a shaky breath, racking my brain for any last details she might have shared before I left with Steven. Something about a glass of something delicious at the bar. Knowing Jules, it wasn’t a cocktail.

“When did you last see her?”

“It was around nine o’clock, I think. I’d just given a speech and she was congratulating me. I was going to leave with a...a friend, and she said she was going to the bar.”

“Was she alone?”

“Yes...” I furrow my brow and drum my fingers on the railing. “At that point, she was. But I think she had her sights set on a guy. She wasn’t ready to leave yet. But I don’t know who she ended up with. I left before she did, and never heard from her afterward. I figured she’d give me the scoop at work the next day, but that never happened either. I texted and called her so many times and nothing. I just figured something came up.” Tears pool in my eyes. “I never thought she was in any trouble, that she...” I choke on a sob. “That she might be hurt. Or worse.”

The officer nods. “Unfortunately, we have no confirmation either way, just that she’s missing.”

“Do you have any leads? Did anyone see her with a guy?”

“I do have reports of her being seen with a young man about twenty-five with dark hair and dark eyes. By all accounts he was on the taller side, nicely dressed, tattoo on his left hand.”

My blood runs cold.

Tattoo on his left hand. Gianni?

He was there. She was horny.

Oh, my God.

“Did you say he had a tattoo on his left hand?”

The officer peers at his notebook. “Yes. No color, just black.”

“I think she might have been with a former patient. I’d been the one to treat him when he came to the hospital about a week ago. I know he was there last night because I spoke to him early on. He fits your description, and he has a tattoo on his left hand.” Chills invade my body, blasting my insides with a cold frost, and I hug my arms tight around me.

“Do you have a name?”

I tug on a strand of my hair. “His first name is Gianni, but I can’t remember the last name. Aren’t there any ticket sales you can check? Maybe the hospital has a record of buyers you can cross-reference?”

The officer’s lips curl upward. “Yes, we have the guest list. If he’s on it, we’ll find

out the name. Did you have an exact date that he came into the hospital?”

“It was definitely last week, but I’m not sure of the day. I work twelve hour shifts so days kind of blend together.”

“I understand. I’m sure we can get the records from the hospital. This has been very helpful, Miss Camarena.” He flips his notebook shut and sticks it in his pocket.

“But isn’t that information confidential?” It’s such a stupid question, and I don’t even know why I said it, but for some reason it’s at the top of my mind. Patient confidentiality and all that.

“Not in this type of investigation. If there’s just cause to access it, we will get it.”

I nod. “Is there any way I can follow up with you? Do you have a card? If it’s okay, I’d like to reach out to see if you find anything out.”

The officer hands me a card. “That’s my direct line. And please, Ms. Camarena. If you hear anything from Ms. Marquez, don’t hesitate to contact me as well.”

“Do you...” I bite down hard on my lower lip. “Do you think you’ll find her, Officer?”

His face takes on a grim look. “You gave me a good lead, and I really hope it will help our investigation. In cases like this, it’s hard to tell. We will use every tool at our disposal to make sure your friend is found, but unfortunately there are no guarantees. We lose a number of women each year in circumstances like this. Hopefully, your friend won’t be part of that tally.”

I swallow another sob that’s rising in my chest and nod. “Th-thank you. I’ll be in touch.”

The officer tips his hat and turns toward his squad car. I watch as he slips inside and drives down the street, disappearing around a bend.

I sink to the cold concrete. Dammit, how could I have not remembered Gianni's last name? Something Italian...I need to figure it out. I need to help them find my friend. I'll just get dressed and go to the hospital and check the computer down in the emergency room. Screw privacy laws. I can't sit around and just wait. What if the cops need to get a warrant? I'm sure there will be lots of red tape to cut through and it may take too much time, time that Jules may not have.

I gasp and jump up. Wait! Max! He knows Gianni's last name, of course he does since he wanted to stab him with a fork. I just need to get it from him, and then I'll call the officer back.



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I run back into the house and grab my phone. Still nothing from Jules, which makes my heart sink further into my stomach. I dial Max's number and listen as the line rings. Once, twice, three times.

And...nothing.

I leave a message when his voicemail message picks up. My voice is shaking, and I'm trying not to have a panic attack here in my kitchen. I stab at the keyboard and send a text just in case he can't take a call but has his phone close.

A few minutes pass and nothing. Again.

"Dammit!" I slam a fist on the table and take a deep breath before I dial Steven's number. We didn't exactly leave things warm and fuzzy at lunch the other day, and I have no idea if he'll even take my call, but I know he's on call and he can get me the information I need.

I hold my breath with each beep and finally his curt voice comes on the line. "Hey, Sloane. How are you?"

"Steven! Thank God you answered." The loud thumping sound in my chest almost drowns out his voice, but by some miracle, I got through to him. "Jules is missing. An officer came to my house this morning asking questions about the last time I'd seen her. It was at the benefit, Steven. And according to the officer, she'd been spotted with someone who fits the description of a patient I'd treated. I only have a first name, though, and I can't for the life of me remember the last name." I swallow past the lump in my throat. "I know I'm the last person you want to hear from right now,

but we need to help Jules. Who knows how long it'll be before the cops get the name from the hospital? If we can just—"

"Sloane, slow down," Steven says, his voice softening a bit. "I'm sorry to hear about Jules, and of course, I'll help."

"Okay," I whisper, tears streaming down my face. I collapse into a chair, my shoulders quaking. "Thank God I got in touch with you. I know it violates all kinds of laws, but if we wait, something really bad could happen to her." I sniffle. "Something bad may have already happened."

"Her safety is what's important. Now, do you remember any details? Things I can check out on the system?"

"Um, he was in the emergency room sometime last week. It was a...a..." I squeeze my eyes shut and snap my fingers. "A rotator cuff injury! His first name is Gianni. Let me know what you can find, and I'll call the officer back right away."

"Okay. Just try to relax. I'll take care of it."

"Steven, I'm really sorry about...everything, but thank you so much for helping me. For helping Jules."

He clears his throat. "It's fine. I'm glad you called. Just sit tight and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

Click.

I stare at my phone. The text I sent Max is only showing as delivered, not read. I send another one, just in case he does see it and gets back to me before Steven does.

I cover my face with my hands, my fingers clammy and trembling uncontrollably.

Oh, God, what if we're all too late?

Max

The elevator creaks up to the Pediatric Oncology unit, and I rub the back of my neck. I should've stayed with Sloane last night. At least I might have gotten some sleep. I tossed and turned in my bed for hours, wondering who might be waiting for me when I walked outside this morning.

Fortunately, Sloane's dad didn't follow through on the car bomb since I've driven my car twice since leaving her place. I'd really like not to die in an explosion or raging inferno. I've always been panicked about my body burning but my mind still being alert enough to feel myself crisping up in the flames. Sick and twisted, I know, but one of the hazards of the job.

I'd rather take a shot to the head any day.

The elevator doors open and I step into the hallway, the kids' loud shrieks and giggles echoing in the space. I have garbage bags full of toys for the kids on the floor. Not all of them come from families with a lot of money, and even though Christmas just passed, I figured I'd play Santa Claus one more time for them. The second I set foot into the playroom, it's like I turned into the goddamn Pied Piper. The kids come running, crowded around me, pelting me with questions.

"What's in the bags?"

"Did you bring us surprises?"

"Are you one of Santa's elves?"

That one gets a loud chuckle.

“Talk to Nurse Clara. I’m putting her in charge of handing out your surprises.” I nod at the white-haired nurse who actually kind of looks a lot like Mrs. Claus. And since it’s after Christmas and the North Pole is on break, why wouldn’t she be here, spreading cheer? “I’m her elf.”

The kids laugh and crowd the nurses’ station, jumping up and down, hands out.

Clara winks at me. “You’re a real prince. You just made their day!”

I shrug. “I’m a sucker for big post-Christmas sales.”

Her face falls. “I’ll have to save a gift for Eli.”

“Why? Where is he?”

“He woke up this morning with a very high fever. Poor thing is running an infection from the high-dosage chemotherapy, and the doctors have to speed up the timelines for his bone marrow transplant.”

“Damn.” I lean across the desk and drop my head in my hand. “What do they do in the meantime?”

Clara shrugs. “They aren’t really saying anything yet. His body needs to get stronger before he can undergo surgery, so right now they’re just working on bringing down the fever. And finding a donor, which has been tough. They moved him this morning into the isolation wing until they can bring down the fever. If he has an infection, being here could be even more dangerous for him.”

I nod. “Yeah...” I turn around, watching the kids ransack my large trash bags. They

can't have sugar, so why not more toys? You can't ever really have enough of them.

"His brother Tommy is here. I think he's in Eli's room. He was gone when Tommy arrived, and I think he wants to stay close to make sure everything stabilizes."

"I'll stop by to see if he needs anything."

"Unfortunately, a sack full of toys won't help them," Clara says with a sad shake of her head.

If only it were that simple, right?

I swallow hard and walk toward the corridor where Eli's room is located. I flex my fingers and roll my neck as I creep closer. Mentally preparing, physically preparing...for what, I have no idea. I can't imagine the things he's had to deal with, watching his little brother suffer with leukemia, hearing that he has a slim chance of survival, panicking that his weak body has to now fight off an infection before the doctors can try to save his life with surgery...

I love my sister. Adore her and her smart-ass mouth. Seeing her like that would destroy me. I fist my hand and knock on my head three times. Yes, it's my substitution for wood.

I knock on the door once and push it open slowly. I feel like I may have broken through to him last time, but who knows what he'll be like today? Not that I'd blame him. I probably shouldn't even be here right now. I'm sure the last thing he wants to do now is talk anyway.

He's sitting in a chair across the room, right under the window. His body is hunched over, his head in his hands, shoulders shaking.

Fuck, he's crying. I stand still, not sure what to do...should I say something? Just walk out of the room? My chest tightens, and I clear my throat.

Tommy looks up, his eyes red-rimmed, face blotchy. Christ, what the hell do I even say?

He clasps his hands together. "Eli is in bad shape," he says, his voice cracking.

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“I heard. Clara told me about the infection. I’m really sorry, man. But they’re working on it, right? So he can have the surgery?”

Tommy lets out a dry laugh. “That’s the thing. Yeah, they’re planning the surgery, but I just spoke to the insurance company this morning when I found out.” He shakes his head. “They’ll only cover about half. Turns out my mom let the policy run out and defaulted on the last few payments. Guess she needed her drug money. So they aren’t covering the whole amount I’d planned. They’ll only cover what my mom paid into. And the doctor who’s going to do the surgery isn’t in network, which is another reason why the insurance company is being a dick.” He scrubs a hand down the front of his stubbled face. “But I don’t want just any dipshit doctor working on Eli. I want him to have the best. I want him to get better. I can’t...”

His voice cracks and trails off.

“Tommy,” I say, crossing the room and sitting on the arm of the chair opposite him. “Let me help. Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it for you. We can work something out.” I barely know this guy, barely know Eli, but I can’t just stand by and watch this happen. Hell, I don’t even know what the surgery costs, but watching him suffer like this, carrying this ridiculous weight because his deadbeat mother took off and left him carrying the burden...I have to help them. I may have made a lot of dumbass mistakes in my life, but I want to be better. Sloane makes me want to be better. And being better means helping people who need it.

Just like Tommy and Eli.

He shakes his head. “I’m not a charity case, Max.”



“This isn’t charity. This is a friend helping you out of a bind. I’m sorry you have to deal with this, but you don’t have to do it alone.”

“Do you know how much the surgery costs? Not the treatments, the hospital stay, or any of the other shit they tack on. Just the surgery?”

I shake my head.

“Two-hundred-and-fifty grand. Makes me think I shoulda gotten better grades in science and gone to med school, ya know?”

Fuck me, that’s a lot of coin. “We’ll figure it out. I’m not gonna leave you hanging, Tommy.”

“I’m not taking your money,” he says in a flat voice.

“Fine, then you can work it off. I run a construction site, and we need help. The job pays well, and you can always arrange some kind of payment plan with the hospital, right? I get that you don’t want a handout, but I can still help you come up with the cash you need.”

His lips lift into a faint smile. “I appreciate it, but I’m actually working on something right now. If all goes well, I should be making some good cash soon.”

I don’t like the sound of that. I get the deeper meaning, I’ve said the same words before, plenty of times. Bad choices. Nobody ever makes good money fast unless one of two things happens: they hit the lottery or do illegal crap. It’s not going to do Eli any good if his brother ends up in jail. Or dead. “Don’t do stupid shit to make fast cash, Tommy. It’s not worth it. You need to be around for Eli.”

“I know,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. Just seeing him do that makes the

knot at the base of my skull pull tighter. “But it’s what I have to do, Max. I need to take care of my brother. I appreciate your offer, but I’m good right now.”

“Look, I get that it’s tempting to do something for a quick buck, but there’s a big downside, too. The more money you can make, the more dangerous the job. And the last things you want are to get pinched or killed.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’re a pro at this kind of thing.”

“I used to be. But not anymore. I finally get how important it is to do things the right way, not the easy way. It’s taken me a long time to get there, but now I have reasons to keep myself out of that shit.”

“Like Sloane?” He flashes a hint of a smile and gives me the thumbs-up.

I grin. “Yeah, exactly like Sloane. And I’m not gonna fuck things up with her. I’m trying to straighten out my life. It’s hard, but she’s worth it. And you’ve got a reason to keep yourself straight, too. A really big one. One who doesn’t have anyone else.” I stand up and pace around the room, pushing back my hair. “It’s a dead-end life, Tommy. People will promise you a lot, but who’s gonna have your back if shit goes sideways, huh? Do you think anyone’s gonna care that your little brother is sick and needs you? Let me tell you, they won’t.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“It’s more than just being careful. You need to be smart. Who are you working for?”

“I’m not really sure. A friend of mine in the city is the contact. He called me when he heard about the job because he knew I needed money.”

I stare at Tommy’s pained expression, and I really feel bad for the guy. I mean,

nobody ever asked me if I wanted into this life. It was just expected that I jump into the fire. But this kid, he doesn't need to. He's making a choice. A choice I sometimes I wish I had.

And he's making the wrong fucking one.

We have some associates in the city since Nico's club is down in lower Manhattan, and we have plans to open a new one this year. But it's not our official territory, so even though I can make a few calls, I can't do much else. We work alongside the Sardisco family, who runs that territory. If there's anything going down in the city, they're the ones who oversee it. "What's the job? You running drugs?"

He pauses then nods.

"Serious shit or just weed?"

"Serious shit."

I don't handle drug distribution for the Salesis. Nico has an arrangement with Viktor Ivanov, Kat's father, and the Russian mob boss is the one who handles our drug business, so maybe this is a good thing. Viktor also works with the Sardiscos thanks to Nico. This might not be bad. We have a lot of 'friends' in the city. I nod. "Okay. So here's the deal. I'm gonna give you my number. If things go bad or you need help or anything, call me. Don't wait and think about it, just dial my number."

Tommy nods. "Yep."

I give him my number and the faintest hint of a smile appears on his face. But I feel like I need to leave him with more. He needs to know that his choices will impact Eli more than just the money. "Listen, Tommy. I get that you need to do this for your brother, and that you're taking care of him. But just remember something. People

who dangle a lot of cash in your face only care about what you can get them and do for them. And when you can't get or do for them anymore or if you fuck up just one time, guess what? There are no second chances or do-overs. You got me?"

He nods, laying his head back against the chair. "I hear you. But this is a one-time deal. I don't want to do it forever. And once they pay me, I'm out."

I let out a dry laugh. "That's the thing, Tommy. Once you're in, it's really damn hard to get out."

Sloane

“I forbid you to see him again!”

I let out a deep sigh. My dad’s bark was always worse than his bite, and while it would scare the heck out of me when I was a kid, now it just adds to my stress. As if I don’t have enough to worry about right at this very second. “Daddy, I know you don’t approve of him, but—”

“Approve of him?” My father slams a hand down on my kitchen table. “I don’t want you living in the same state as him! No, I take that back. If he lived in California, it would still be too close. He’s a smart-mouthed asshole who had every opportunity to make something of himself and instead chose to beat people up for a living. How do you figure that he’d be good for you? You work so hard and you help people for a living! How can you even entertain dating someone whose job is to hurt people?”

Interesting. My dad thought Max had potential once upon a time, and if it’s one thing my dad hates, it’s wasted potential. He worked too hard to get where he is today, so watching someone else go in the opposite direction drives him insane. Too bad Max’s own father didn’t lay into him the same way my dad always came down on me. Maybe today things might be different for him. For them.

“Didn’t you ever make bad choices, Daddy?” I fold my arms and take a long gulp of my iced tea.

“No,” he growls.

I roll my eyes. “Come on. Don’t you believe in second chances? Shouldn’t he get one, too? He doesn’t beat people up for a living anymore. He has a perfectly legitimate job running a construction site.”

Dad snorts. “Oh, because that’s not a front for anything illegal.”

“He’s working as a foreman, Daddy. He’s responsible for getting the building completed. Period.”

“That’s what he tells you.”

“Yeah, but I believe him now. I have faith in him. He’s a good guy, Daddy. I know you were never wild about him, but he’s changed. He’s not the same guy you remember from when we were younger.”

“People like Max never change. It’s in their DNA. They don’t know anything different, and they can’t just walk away from that. It’s too much a part of them. They grow up living in that world, a world you know nothing about. A world I’ve always tried to protect you from, even though you and Shaye were always close.” He rubs a hand over his head. “I always knew there was a risk of you picking up with Max, but I figured as you went your own way...college, your career...you’d have just found someone better suited to you. I never figured you’d go backward.”

What he doesn’t know is I never really moved forward, but we don’t need to unpack that right now. I tap my fingernails on the side of my glass and glance at the clock again. “It’s not like I’ve never dated other guys, Dad. I just...” I shrug. “I just haven’t really connected with them in the same way. I know you don’t understand, but it’s different this time. He’s different.”

Dad groans and throws his hands into the air. “What about that doctor from the benefit the other night? He couldn’t keep his eyes off of you! Would it be so bad to

give that guy a chance? A nice guy with a career and a head on his shoulders who clearly is interested in you? Don't you think you should date and see what's out there before you go down this rabbit hole with Max again? You've held a candle for that kid for a long time, Sloane. I've seen it firsthand. But lucky for me, he always managed to mess things up. What makes you think he won't do the same thing this time? Why are you putting so much trust in him? He's hurt you more times than I can count. He doesn't deserve you!"

I sit down across from him and place a hand over his. "Daddy, I know you don't approve, but I love him."

All of the color drains from my father's face and he closes his eyes. "Your mother would be devastated."

"Are you seriously pulling the Mom card on me?" I roll my eyes. "Don't you think she'd be happy because I'm happy?"

"Are you happy, Sloane? Because all I've seen so far today are frown lines on your face. No smiles. A lot of pacing, a lot of staring at the clock. Am I supposed to read all of that as happiness?"

"Daddy, it's complicated." I lean forward, my head in my hands. "Besides, I'm just worried about Jules, especially after that cop showed up this morning. That's what I've been focused on. Not Max." The partial lie slips out easily enough. I'm nervous for my friend, but yes, I'm freaking out about Max, especially knowing what he told me last night.

Be careful what you wish for...

I'd wanted him to be honest with me. Ha! Hindsight is always 20-20.

I get up and put the oven on broil. A quick glance at my phone confirms no missed calls or text messages have come in since the last time I willed it to come alive and reach out to me with something. Anything. It's been two hours, and I haven't heard anything back from Steven or Max.

My stomach flips, just as it's been doing since I realized that there are many reasons why Max may not have called me back, chilling reasons that I don't even want to acknowledge because they scare the crap out of me. Not that I can tell any of this to my father. He'd have a coronary.

Last night, Max let me into a part of his life I'd never really known. Sure, I had my suspicions, but he made it real. Very freaking real. There are threats out there, lurking and ready to strike at any time. If he doesn't text or call, I will always panic that one of those threats became a reality as soon as he left my bed.

And my dad...well, he's very aware of those threats and the danger they pose.

As I prepare the grilled cheese sandwiches, a million scenarios race through my mind, all of them giving me heart palpitations. Someone killed Mr. Oriani. Someone killed Max. Someone killed both of them.

Shaye is away with her mom so who would even let me know if something happened?

I look down at the bread I'm buttering, or rather the bread I butchered with the knife as my panic rises. Jesus, am I always going to be such a basket case? Is this what I signed up for when I gave my heart to Max Oriani?

And is Steven ever going to call with the last name I need?



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I let out a huff and place the sandwiches on a pan and slide them into the oven, flipping on the light so I can watch them.

“That there?” My dad points at me. “The way you’re standing, tapping your fingers on the counter? That look on your face? How you’re biting your lip? None of it screams happy to me, Sloane. It says something very different.”

I peek into the oven and then look at my father. “I trust him, Dad.” I can’t very well say I’m nervous about his safety. And I wouldn’t dream of telling him how Max was jumped the night of the benefit and how Tony Oriani was pummeled at a construction site.

Ping!

I spin around and grab my phone from next to the stove, my heart thumping so fast and so hard, I can barely breathe. I stare at the screen and let out a little yelp. “Oh, thank God! Daddy, keep an eye on the sandwiches, okay?”

Dad narrows his eyes at me. “More happiness, I take it?”

My lips curl upward. “Yes! It’s Jules!”

I slip on my UGG slippers and pull open the door, running down the steps and hurrying around the corner to find a black Range Rover parked along the curb. The engine is still running when one of the back doors pop open. I run toward the car to find Jules sitting...or rather, laying like a limp noodle, in the bucket seat, her bare feet on the console in front of her. She’s still in her dress from the benefit, although

it's only half-covering her from what I can see. Her head rolls to the side, her eyes glassy. My chest tightens, and I gasp. There's a hollow look in her eyes, like she doesn't know where she is or who I am at this very second. What the hell is happening here? Her text said someone was dropping her off, so I ran outside, not thinking about why they'd drop her off here. All I cared about was getting my friend back safely.

Her eyes focus for a split second and she lets out a sigh, then smiles. "Hey," she murmurs. "Are you coming, too?"

I peer into the car, but I can't make out any other heads. She obviously didn't drive herself here. "No, sweetie." I swallow hard, wondering why the driver hasn't made an appearance yet. "Who brought you here?"

"Oh, just some friends..." Her voice trails off, and she lets out a moan. "But I'm so tired."

"Is somebody in there?" I say, getting no response in return. "Jules, can you get out of the truck? Let's go inside, okay? You can rest." She's doped up on something. I have no idea what, but it's powerful enough to turn my sassy, mouthy friend into a freaking puddle of goo with no idea who she is, who I am, or what planet we're even on.

Jules lets out a sigh and sinks farther into the seat. "It feels so good to sit. I don't want to get up. You come in here."

Someone has her phone. She isn't the one who sent that text. I have to get her out of there and away from this car. I'm still standing a few inches from the car. I pat my jacket pockets, but my phone isn't there. It's inside the kitchen, exactly where I'd left it once I read her message. "Jules, who's in there with you?" I repeat, trying to control my voice. A deep chill slithers through my bones, and it's not because of the

frigid temperature. “Why didn’t they bring you home instead of here?”

“Because then I would have missed seeing your pretty face one more time, Nurse Sloane,” a deep voice hisses into my ear, something hard pressed into my spine.

A startled shriek escapes my mouth, and I’m suddenly spun around, greeted by Gianni’s evil smile. And whatever was shoved against my back is now pressed into my stomach. He brings a finger to his lips. “Now, Sloane, don’t do anything stupid. Lucky for me, all of your neighbors are at work right now, but you never know if someone might come home for a late lunch, so I want you make sure you behave yourself. If not, I’ll kill you and your friend. And don’t worry. I didn’t forget about your dad. Make a stupid move and I’ll also go inside, keep him company while he eats his grilled cheese, and then I’ll kill him, too.” He leers at me. “What do you think? I bet you’re wishing your dipshit friend Max had stabbed me with that fork after all, huh?”

“He—!” But before I can get the word out, he slaps a hand over my mouth, sealing it closed with duct tape, and presses his mouth against it as he shoves me to the open car door. That bastard! Anyone who might catch a glimpse will just assume it’s an innocent kiss and that I’m leaving with him.

Hell no. Not happening! I swivel to the right before I fall into Jules’s lap, my back slamming into the side of the car. Even though he’s still blocking my path, the sudden motion catches him off-guard, and I take full advantage while the gun isn’t pointed at me. I drag my fingernails down the sides of his face, digging them into his flesh, and drive my knee up into his groin. If I can get in one good hit, he’ll drop to his knees, forget the gun, I can run the hell away from this nightmare. Outrunning a bullet is a calculated risk, but I have no choice. If I end up in the back of that car, I’m dead anyway.

Ahhh! His dark eyes taunt me, and I wince as my kneecap crashes into something

hard hidden away in his jeans. Sonofabitch! How many times has this asshole been kneed in the balls that he knows to wear a cup for protection?

Gianni grips the back of my head and I hear a clicking sound down below. “Keep fighting me, and then after I fuck you, I’ll blow off your goddamned head.”

Tears flow freely from my eyes as he presses the gun harder into my skin. “Are you finished now? Are you going to stop trying to be a hero?”

My whole body shakes. I turn to see Jules’s face. Her eyes droop closed, her arm laying limp over the side of the seat.

I try to scream, but the tape muffles the sounds.

He turns me around so I’m facing the inside of the car. The cold metal of the gun barrel is pressed into me. “If you even think about making another stupid ass move, I will shoot you dead right here. Do you understand?” I nod, sniffing, whimpering against the tape. Each sharp breath I take slices away at my lungs. “Layla, make room for our new guest. I think she’s gonna make us a bundle,” he says to someone inside of the car.

A brunette appears from inside of the car, a grimace on her pretty face.

My God, I’ve seen that face before...

The girl shoves Jules into the backseat and narrows her eyes at me as Gianni pushes me inside, still at gunpoint. I remember that death glare. I saw the same exact one on Thanksgiving night. At Max’s house. From the bitch who was wearing my AC/DC t-shirt.

Oh, my God, why is she here? Is this some elaborate revenge plot? Why is she with

Gianni? He's supposed to be Max's enemy! Max, Max, Max...oh, God, no. Please no! If they're here for me, have they already gotten to Max? They used Jules to get to me...did who knows what to her since the night of the benefit...and now, they have us both.

The mere thought of what they may do to us has my heart on the verge of exploding out of my chest.

"I guess it's only fair, right? You stole from me, so now I'm stealing you." Layla sweeps a hand down the side of my tear-streaked face, malice dripping from her lips. "You could never be enough for him. You'll never understand who he is or where he came from." With a shrug, she flashes a malicious smile and holds up a needle. "But none of that matters anymore. You'll never see him again. You'll never see anyone again. Once that car door closes, you will vanish. Forever. Just like all the others."

Max

“So, visiting this kid at the hospital makes you feel better about yourself, huh?” Nico kicks his legs up on the desk in his office, tossing a football into the air and catching it.

I shrug. “I guess. But I’m not doing it for me. I just wanted to do something good for someone else. Sloane...she’s always doing stuff for everyone else. I figured I could do something to help, too. She started that whole charity at the hospital and its really helping a lot of people — kids, their families. I wanted to do my own part. I’m not a completely self-centered prick.”

“No, not completely.” Nico snickers and holds the ball and sits straight up in his chair. “This is a new side of you, Max. I didn’t realize you got the sensitivity gene.”

I let out a snort. “Me either. But this kid...he’s really in bad shape. I was there this morning, and he’s got some kind of infection that’s keeping him in isolation. It’s serious, Nico.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. It does. I feel bad for the kid’s brother, too. Their mom’s a druggie who got her ass thrown in lockup after he was diagnosed. The older brother takes care of everything, and he needs cash. I offered to help, but he said he’s got something going on here in the city that’ll pay him decent money.” I rub the back of my neck. “Some drug deal. He didn’t know much more than that, but—”

“What drug deal?” Nico drops the ball on the desk and grabs his phone. “Did he give you a name?”

“No. His friend pulled him in to help. But if it’s here in the city, the Sardiscos should be involved.”

Nico narrows his eyes and stabs a few numbers into his phone then slides it away. “I just sent a text to Viktor. If there’s a drop and the Sardiscos are running it, we should know the details.”

“Maybe Viktor just forgot to say anything to you.”

Nico lets out a dry laugh. “To cut me out of the take when I gave him access to distribute in the city? Ah, no. He wouldn’t fuck himself up the ass like that. The Sardiscos wouldn’t go behind my back and deal with him directly, either. Someone else is running it.”

“You think the Bonnaros are behind it? Would they pull shit in the city knowing we’re tight with the Sardiscos? Would they fuck around like that and risk everything they’re trying to build?”

“If they think they can take both families down at once? Yeah, I’d say so. Gianni and Mikey know we’d back the Sardiscos. And we’re the only things standing in their way of taking over the whole territory.” Nico nods at his phone. “That’s why I sent that text to Viktor. We need to be prepared. Things are gonna happen fast, Max. Be ready.”

I lean back in the chair and push back my hair. “Aren’t I always?”

Nico lifts an eyebrow. “It might be worth it to tell your friend to watch his back. You know how these things go and getting caught in this kind of a family crossfire isn’t

ideal for a guy in his situation.”

“I told him not to get involved. I know he’s in a bind and doesn’t want to take handouts from anyone, but he doesn’t get how dangerous this is. I wish he’d have just taken the fucking construction job I offered.”

“Sounds like Sloane’s do-gooder ways are really rubbing off on you, brother.”

“You know, I’m trying to do the right thing here and all you do is give me shit.”

“Don’t get your dick in a twist. Maybe you’re a little too sensitive now. Are you gonna start binge-watching Lifetime movies now?”

“No, jackass. I’m gonna call Louie Sardisco and find out if he knows about any of this. If something’s happening and they are involved, I need him to keep an eye on the kid.”

“Not a bad idea. You haven’t pissed Louie off, so he may actually do it for you.”

I roll my eyes. “I know my list of enemies is long—”

“Max, there isn’t enough paper on the Lower East Side that can hold all those names.”

“Fuck you.”

He smirks. “Oh, so you wanna add one more name?”

“I keep things interesting. You’d never feed me to the wolves.” I say it, believing it about ninety-five percent. But I know Nico’s loyalty is to the family. He honors the code, the one I keep breaking.



That's me. The rule breaker.

And someday, the rules are gonna break me...my neck...my knees...my arms...

You get the idea.

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FUBAR.

I pull myself out of the chair and reach into my pocket for my phone, but it's empty. Dammit, where the hell did I leave it? Is it still at the hospital?

Nico presses his fingertips together and looks up at me. "I feel like you have more to say."

I sigh and stuff my hands into my pockets. "I'm really trying here, Nico. I want to help you nail these assholes."

"I know. And you will when the time comes."

"Yeah, but will it be enough? Will it ever really be enough to prove that I can handle being more than just a fucking muscle to be flexed when shit goes bad?" I rake a hand through my hair. "I want this thing with Sloane to work out, and it can't if all I do is crack skulls."

"And Thanksgiving..."

"It was a mistake. A major fuck-up that'll never happen again. But you're the boss of this family, Nico. People trust you. They look up to you. They respect you."

"Because I don't pull dumbass stunts that cause major problems for the family."

I let out a deep sigh. "I know! Okay? You're fucking perfect! But I'm your best friend, and you know I've always had your back. I need to know you have mine, too."

“If I didn’t, you and your father would be dead right now.”

“I need a chance to prove myself, Nico. A real chance, not some bullshit peon job.”

“If you’re talking about the construction job, you ungrateful fuck—”

“The job is fine. It saved my ass. But nobody takes it seriously.”

“I sure as hell do. We’re gonna make a shit ton of cash once that strip mall is finished.”

“I want my own place.” Christ, I don’t even know where those words came from. I mean, yeah, I want my own thing, but am I ready for it? It’s a big move, and I can’t screw it up. That’ll just confirm what everyone already thinks about me, what I’m so desperate to change.

Is it because I could never get my own father’s approval? Is that why I want it so badly from everyone else? Jesus, the fucking baggage I have to drag around is damn heavy. Like, concrete boots sinking a dead body to the bottom of the Hudson River mafia-style heavy.

Nico cocks an eyebrow. “What makes you think you deserve it?”

I lean over the desk, stabbing the desk with my index finger. “Because I’ve devoted my life to you, dickhead. I’ve put my ass on the line plenty for you. And I know what it takes to make it a success. You taught me a lot, Nico. Let me use what you gave me.”

He’s quiet for a second. At least he didn’t shut me down right away. I furrow my brows. It looks like he might actually be considering my ask. Who the fuck knew he’d ever entertain putting me in charge of my own club? Shit, I’d have asked sooner

if that was the case. I'm not a hardhat kind of guy. I use hammers for smashing jaws, not fixing nail pops. And table saws? Great tools, but not so much for cutting wood.

But that's all part of my very dark and very fucking demented past. If Nico gives me my own place, I'll finally be on my way up the ladder, out of the quicksand that can swallow me whole if I let down my guard.

If I have any shot to make things work with Sloane, it's what I need.

One shot.

And I can't mess it up because I know there won't be another one.

"I don't know if you're ready," he says in a low voice.

"Bullshit! You know I am!" Panic consumes me. What the hell is it going to take to convince him? If Nico brings in someone else to run his new nightclub, I'm fucked. I'll never get out of that dead-end construction job. How the hell is anyone going to respect me when I can't even respect myself? How can I expect Sloane to respect me?

"You still haven't proven you can take on that responsibility. The way you're reacting now proves my point. I respect that you want to move up in the organization, but—"

"Why are you trying to hold me back?" My voice drops. "Why won't you let me show you what I can do for the family?"

"Because even though you're the most loyal person I know, the downside of that attribute is that you're the most loyal person I know. And everything with your dad throws a wrench in things. I don't trust that you're going to do the right thing for the

family, Max. Not that you wouldn't want to. I just think there are too many other things clouding your judgment because you're loyal to the people you care about first. I don't think you can separate yourself from the business end. And to be successful, you need to table all of your personal shit and focus on the task at hand. You have to be ruthless and cold and calculating. Business is never personal, Max. And I don't think you are capable of separating the two."

"I've done so much for you! How the hell can you say I can't handle it?"

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“Because everything you’ve done for me has been out of loyalty. You’re always ready to jump, and you’ve saved my ass plenty. But has it always been for the right reasons?”

“If your ass was kept intact, isn’t that the most important thing?”

Nico shakes his head. “No. If you were backing me up because of my role in the family, that’s one thing. But you weren’t. You were there to defend your best friend, to make sure I was safe. Those aren’t the right reasons. You get too involved, Max. It’s almost like you can’t even help yourself sometimes. And even when you know things will come back to bite you, you do them anyway because they make you feel better. When you planted those drugs in the back of Gianni’s car last year and got him arrested...I told you not to, that it would fuck us later. You didn’t care, though. He screwed you over, and you wanted to pay him back even though it would be an issue for the family.”

I lean against the doorway. “That was a long time ago.”

“Yes, and look what we’re dealing with now because of what you did back then.. He sighs. “We have to stay under the radar. That’s why it’s so important to run the businesses without emotion. When you get all caught up in anger and rage, it’s hard to make decisions. You need to keep a clear head.”

These are all reasons why I went to Brooklyn on Thanksgiving night. Everything Nico is telling me right now is exactly the opposite of how I handle things. He takes a few breaths, figures out a plan, and executes it. But that makes me crazy because I just want to run in, guns blazing.

Act first, think never.

Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm not cut out for business after all. But does that mean I shouldn't try? "I think I at least deserve a shot."

"Show me you can put the family first, Max. Then I'll consider it." Nico's lips stretch into a thin line. "You have to separate yourself, no matter what happens."

"I can do that."

"We'll see."

We look at each other for a few seconds, silent. The look in his eyes chills me. When I told Sloane I couldn't fully trust anyone but her, I was right. There have been plenty of times when Nico has kept me in the dark or iced me out to protect 'the family'. Would he sell out my sister, too? I finally get why my dad was so against them being together. He really does know Nico better than I do. I was just against it because I didn't want him fucking around with his whores on the side. I never thought she'd ever be in danger.

I guess nobody is ever really safe.

"We good?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah. I'm gonna get going. I'll let you know what I hear from Louie."

"Just be ready, Max. And stay close." He lifts an eyebrow. Fuck. He knows I'm gonna try to get my dad out of here.

And just like that, I'm letting shit get personal again.

Does he expect me to just wait for someone to put a bullet in my father's brain? Is that what he'd do?

I open the office door and walk down the hallway, jogging down the back staircase that leads to the parking lot.

Yeah, I think he just might.

I turn up the collar of my coat once the cold air blasts me. Damn, it's cold. How nice would it be to get the hell out of here for a few days and lay around on a beach somewhere? With Sloane in some tiny bikini...or naked...naked would be better.

I pat the pockets of my jeans again, why, I don't know. The phone hasn't magically appeared since the first time I checked.

The walls are closing in, something is going down.

And time...dammit, it's running out.

For a lot of things.

And a lot of people.

I pull my keys out of my jacket pocket and click the alarm to unlock the door. After pulling open the door, I let out a loud sigh and start digging around for my lost phone. I look in my gym bag, under a sweatshirt, on the floor in the front and back seats...nothing.

Christ, did I leave it at the hospital?

After a few more minutes of searching, I start the car and gun the engine. I should've



had Nico call Louie before I left the club to find out what the hell is happening with this drug deal that Tommy got himself messed up in. An uneasy feeling knots my stomach as the thought of Tommy in the middle of some fire fight blasts through my mind. I can't sit back and let the kid go into something like that.

I slam my hands on the steering wheel as I round the turn headed into the Lincoln Tunnel. I can't fucking do anything without my damn phone!

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I'll go back to the hospital and check there. Maybe Tommy will be there. Maybe I can talk some sense into him. Maybe Eli will be doing better.

Maybe everything can work out after all...

I press my foot on the gas and zip around the annoyingly slow-moving cars on the New Jersey Turnpike. Speed limit is sixty-five, bitches! Can we move a little faster? Am I the only one who needs to save someone's ass today?

Back in Black by AC/DC blares out from somewhere in the depths of my truck, and I nearly take out a Saab to my right. With a quick turn of my wheel, I cut across two lanes of traffic and screech to a halt on the shoulder of the road. My phone! It's in here. Somewhere...

The song is on full blast, and I lower my head to try and figure out where it's coming from. I peer into the little spaces between the seats and see a tiny stream of light coming from the center of my console. I slide my hand as far as it'll go and it's not enough. "Goddammit!"

I grab my gym bag and unzip it, feeling around for anything I can use to free the phone. My fingers grip my switchblade and a grin spreads across my face. Fuck, yeah. Cause you never know if you're gonna need to go head to head with some wise-ass 'roided-up meathead who just lost a benching contest to you.

Yeah, that happened.

I slide the blade into the narrow area between my seat and the console and push the

phone out of its hiding place. It gets caught on some chair gears or something, and I grit my teeth. Come on! I've been cut off from the world for the past couple of hours, and I'd like to establish contact again. Very fucking badly. A few more seconds and it jumps out, landing on the floor mat at my feet. I scoop up the phone and furrow my brow at the missed call. Unknown number. I roll my eyes. Never fucking answer those. Goddamn telemarketers.

I unlock the phone and see a bunch of texts from Sloane and then read the voicemail transcript. What the—?

Her friend Jules is missing. The cops came around asking her about a guy who looks like Gianni.

Oh, Christ. It doesn't take much to finish connecting the dots. They're fucking here. In our backyard. All thoughts of calling Louie Sardisco fly out of my head, and I stab Sloane's number on the screen.

"Max?" A deep male voice answers as soon as the line rings. "Thank God!"

"Who the hell is this?" I growl.

"This is Pete Camarena. I've been trying for half an hour to get into her phone to call you, but I can't figure out the passcode."

"Why didn't you just ask her?" A deep chill settles into my bones. There'd only be one reason why...

"She's gone, Max. There was a cop here this morning asking her questions about her friend Jules. She never made it home from the benefit the other night. Sloane said she thought she might know who Jules was with, but she couldn't remember the guy's last name, said you might know what it is." Pete's voice rises in panic. I've never

heard the guy shaken up like this. Not even close to this. He's always so controlled. No bullshit. Lot of grim threats. Barely any smiles. At least, in my own experience.

I guess if something happens to your kid all of that changes.

I throw my truck into drive and press my foot on the gas, zooming back onto the turnpike. "Tell me what happened. Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She got a text from Jules when we were about to have lunch. She seemed relieved and ran right outside. But it's so cold...and they never came in..."

"And?" I need to keep him on track if I'm gonna figure out what the hell happened.

"I went outside after a little while, and there wasn't anyone there. No car, no people. Nothing. This neighborhood is empty during the day, and whoever was out there just vanished. With my little girl."

My throat clenches.

Business is never personal, Max. And I don't think you can separate the two.

Fuck, no! Those bastards made it personal when they kidnapped Sloane.

This is the play. They took my girl to bait me. Again.

All thoughts of Tommy fly out the window. I need a plan. I need guns. And I need backup. I won't make the same mistake twice with the asshole twins.

Whose blood will be on your hands tonight, Max?

A shiver runs through me despite the heat blasting in my face from the air vents.

“Max,” Pete’s voice cracks. “I-I need your help. The cops won’t do anything until she’s gone for at least twenty-four hours, but I can’t wait that long.” He lets out a shaky sigh. “I know I said a lot of things to you the other day, things I can’t take back, but—”

“Forget it. None of it matters right now. I told you I’d never let anything happen to your daughter, and I meant it. Whoever did this...” My voice trails off, and I swallow hard to regain some degree of composure before I erupt like a fucking volcano. “Will pay,” I hiss, teeth clenched. “And I’ll find her and get her back, safe and sound. I promise you that.”

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Sloane

My eyes fly open, and I sit up straight with a loud gasp. The skin around my mouth stings like a bitch, and I wince as my fingers lightly graze the area. With a thumping heart, I clutch the bedsheet in my fists, my head twisting left and right to take in my surroundings. It's dark and eerily quiet, wherever the hell I am right now. I can barely make out any shapes in the room, and my eyes adjust to the tiny sliver of light creeping under the closed door.

I'm alone.

At least, I think I am.

It wasn't a horrible nightmare after all.

A sob catches in my throat, but I'm too scared to let it out.

It's...reality.

Jules! Where is Jules?

I rub my temples, trying to remember how I even got here. The truck. The knife. Gianni. The girl from Max's house. Jules...Jules...Jules...she'd been drugged. Jesus, she was barely conscious when they let me see her. They had her phone. Lured me out of my house. But why? What are they doing with her? With me?

My head is full of cobwebs, and I'm trying to piece everything together through the

murk, but damn, the throbbing between my ears won't quit. The bedsheet falls from my hands, and a chill assaults my bare skin. My hands fly to my breasts. Holy shit, I'm naked!

Where the hell are my clothes?

Did someone—? Was I—?

Oh, my God, oh, my God...

My breath hitches, and I grab the sheet, covering myself to keep my teeth from chattering. Deep breaths, Sloane. Deep breaths. Stay calm.

I swallow hard, gathering the sheet around me, and tiptoe toward the door. I fall to my knees to listen to any sound coming from outside this room. There's some distant mumbling, but nothing I can make out clearly.

Tears pool in my eyes, and I blink fast to make sure they don't dare fall. Crying isn't going to help me right now. I need to find my clothes, I need to make a plan, and I need to get the hell out of here!

I crawl along the thin carpet, peering around in the darkness for anything I can use as a weapon. There's a dank, musty smell coming up from the floor, and something tells me that if the lights were on, I might not be so anxious to slither around down here. Something skitters over my leg, and I jump to my feet, launching myself back onto the bed. Good thing I remembered to slap a hand over my mouth before the bloodcurdling screech exploded.

"Well, how are you going to get him here if he doesn't even know where to look? Someone has to make the call!" A loud, female voice shouts from outside the door.

A startled gasp escapes my mouth. That voice...it sounds so familiar...

“Shut the fuck up, Layla! Don’t tell me how to run my business!” Gianni’s deep voice rumbles through me and my stomach rolls, recalling his lecherous leer the night of the benefit. Bile rises in my throat. Is he the one who undressed me? Did he—?

I clap a hand over my mouth again to keep from gagging. I don’t even want to let the thought percolate.

“You wanted my help! That’s why you came to me...because you knew I could help you get to Max. If you don’t let me do this my way, this whole thing is going to blow up in all of our faces!”

I huddle with the sheet, shaking. There’s a lot of banging and shouting. A glass shatters against a wall.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch!”

“Gianni!” Another commanding, male voice, this one unfamiliar, pierces the air. “Cut it the fuck out! Let her make the call! I know you have some fucking hard-on for this chick, but I don’t really give a shit. The buyers are coming, and we need to get these girls ready.”

“Don’t you talk to me like that, Mikey! I’ll fucking slice your throat!”

“Oh, really?” Mikey’s voice drops. His tone is menacing, daring Gianni to challenge him. He’s the one who jumped Max....

Max! Why are they trying to get him here? Layla...she’s the girl from his house. From the truck. But I thought she had a thing for him? They’re supposed to be friends...why is she here with these guys? His enemies?



I grip the sides of my head and shake back and forth on the bed. No windows, locked door, no clothes...

Fucking psychopaths getting who ready for what?

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This is too much to process. I clutch my stomach and lean over the side of the bed, my body shuddering as the gagging commences. I cough and sputter until it passes, my breaths morphing into short and sharp gasps.

“Watch your fucking step, Gianni. I got you out of that shithole prison cell, and I’ll make sure you go right back there if I hear one more useless thing come outta your fucking mouth!”

There’s a pause. I release a shaky breath and wipe my mouth with a corner of the sheet, straining to hear the voices.

“Fine,” Gianni growls. “So explain it again.”

“Okay, Gianni,” Mikey says in a mocking voice. “I’ll explain it for the tenth fucking time. Try and keep up ’cause I’m not saying it again! The only way to make this plan work is to get Oriani and Salesi down here in time to ‘meet’ the buyers. They need a reason to haul ass down here, and we gave ’em a big one. We’re trying to pin this whole thing on them, so we need to be out once Layla shows up with them. The feds bust in on the deal after we give them the tip off. And instead of her being fingered as an accomplice of ours, she tells them she’s one of their sex slaves. The feds release her, and she’s back with us. And then the Salesi family goes down the shitter, charged with drug and sex trafficking.”

“What about the buyers?” Layla asks. “How do we handle them?”

“They’re fucking scumbags from some third-world shithole who don’t even know who the hell they’re buying the drugs and pussy from. They can’t pin anything on us,

especially since everything was done online using encrypted networks under aliases. We decimate the Salesi family once and for all, getting them back for everything they've pulled, put a bullet in Tony Oriani's fucking head for crossing us, and call it a day." Mikey lets out a dry laugh. "And then their empire becomes our empire."

My stomach revolts again without warning when I hear the last bit of their plan. They're going to kill Max's dad.

Are they going to kill Max, too?

Bits and pieces are coming together rapidly now.

Buyers...drugs...women...

Holy shit, are they going to sell me? Jules? Are there others?

Tears flow freely in torrents, and I don't bother to force them back.

I need a plan...I need a plan...I need a plan...

The door to my private hell slams open, hitting the wall, and a tall, dark figure flips a switch somewhere near me, flooding the room with light.

Jesus, I preferred the darkness.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a group of black cockroaches scatter and seek refuge in holes at the bottom of the molding. Wallpaper is peeling off the walls. Large, yellow stains cover the pieces of rotted sheetrock that are exposed. The windows are boarded up tight, and my clothes are strewn over some dirty brown chair in the center of the room. I hold the sheet tight against me, cowering against the broken wooden headboard.

It's not like I can run...can I? Even if I got out of here, where would I go? How would I escape?

"So, this is the big reason, huh?" A carbon copy of Gianni steps into the room. Same leering stare. Same evil smile. My throat tightens even before he grips it in his hand. For a second, I can't swallow oxygen, and then he releases me with a smirk. He tosses a glance behind him, nodding to a couple of other guys I can barely make out through my blurred vision.

"You three," he barks. "You're gonna get all of these bitches ready for the buyers. Drug them and put them into their own separate areas set up down the hall, got it?"

Nobody says a word. I squint through my tears and swallow a sob rising in my throat. Holy shit...please don't tell me...

Mikey snaps his fingers at the guy on the far left...the one whose eyes look like they're about to pop out of his head... the one named Tommy. As in, Eli's brother Tommy. "Hey! Whatever the fuck your name is! Why do you keep staring at her? You wanna fuck that pussy?" He stands up, grabs Tommy by the jacket, and throws him against the wall. "Guess what? It ain't for you to taste, asshole. Get your ass moving. Now!"

What the hell is he doing here? He works for these criminals?

He stares at me for a second too long, and Gianni grabs him by the collar and pulls him out of the room, just far enough so I can see them. "You speako any Engleesh, my man?" He pulls a gun from the waistband of his jeans and waves it in front of Tommy's face. "You speako this language, brah?" He swings his gun around and smacks Tommy on the side of the head with it. Tommy stumbles backward, steadying himself with his hands.

Gianni points the gun at him. "Get going before I fuck your shit up." He looks at Mikey and rolls his eyes. "Nice job picking fucking morons who don't know their ass from their elbow."

"It doesn't matter. They'll do what we need, and when the shit hits the fan, we'll be long gone. If they get caught in the crossfire, no skin off our backs. We don't want to risk our own guys for this." He turns back to me, and panic bubbles in my veins. If I can just get to Tommy, I know I can convince him to let me go. He's not a monster. He can't be messed up in this whole thing, right?

"It's Sloane, right? I've heard a lot about you." Mikey leans closer and yanks the sheet away, and my hands fly up to cover as much of myself as possible. "It's a shame. You know, what we have planned for you." He slides a hand down my neck and squeezes one of my breasts before letting his fingers roam down the front of my torso.

"Get your fucking hands off of me!" I lean forward and bite down on his forearm as hard as I can. I sink my teeth deeper and deeper until I taste blood, and I don't stop until he screams like a bitch and pulls his arm away from me. I spit out whatever is in my mouth, panting as he eyes me like a caged lunatic.

"You fucking whore!" His fist connects with my jaw, and an explosion of heat brings even more tears to my eyes. "Did your boyfriend teach you that? I wonder if he'd like to watch me fuck you. Maybe I should get Layla to bring his ass here early so I can pound your tight pussy right next to him. And then right before I kill him, I'm gonna shove my dick in your mouth and come until you fucking choke. That's the last thing I want him to see before he dies, bastard that he is. Yeah, that's a little adjustment I think I'm gonna have to make to my plan. I wanted his ass in jail, but now I think I want it in a fucking shallow grave, right next to his jackass father's. Fuck all the 'eye for an eye' bullshit." He leans closer so I can smell the stench of stale cigarette smoke on his breath. "You cross me, you die."

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Max

I slam on the brakes after screeching into the driveway of my house. I jump out of the truck and let myself into the back door. “Dad!” I yell. “Dad!”

I hear the toilet flush, and I roll my eyes. Of course he has to be in the bathroom now.

I don’t wait for his response before I pull out a duffel bag for supplies. The key code for my gun safe bleeps, the door pops open, and I fill the bag with guns and bullets. I take it all. Who the fuck knows what I’ll be walking into?

A few seconds later, when the water finally turns off in the guest bathroom, my dad appears. “Sorry, I’m not moving as fast as I’d like these days.

I look up from my crouched position on the floor. “They have Sloane.”

“Are you sure? How do you—?”

“Look, just trust me, okay? I have to get her back.”

Dad’s face darkens. “Max, this is a bad idea. You can’t do this alone. You got lucky on Thanksgiving because Mikey wanted to keep you alive. But this is a different game. You know that.”

“Look, they’re either gonna sell her or kill her.” My voice shakes. “I can’t let either of those things happen.”

“Do you know where she’s being held? Are there other girls?”

“I have no fucking idea where they are. And yeah, there’s at least one more girl. A friend of hers was snatched, too. Probably used her to bait Sloane.” I rake a hand through my hair and pull on a baseball cap.

Dad sinks to his knees, his face pinched with pain as he nears the floor. “Max,” he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. He’s slightly out of breath, and one of his hands is glued to his side. “You can’t go alone. Even if you knew where you were going, it’s too dangerous. They’re expecting you to storm in so they can take you out. It’s not a good plan.”

My hands shake as I load one of the guns. “Dad,” I whisper. “I have to save her. Nobody else can do it.”

“I know. But be smart about it. What are you gonna do? Load your arsenal into the truck and just drive around, hoping you pick the right address?”

“What the hell else am I supposed to do? Call Mikey and ask where he’s holding her? For Christ’s sake, Dad!” I throw my hands into the air.

Dad struggles to his feet and straightens out the Yankees’ sweatshirt he’s wearing. “Don’t do this again, Max.”

“You know exactly what Nico will—”

A blaring guitar riff explodes out of my pocket. AC/DC. I grab my phone and click on the incoming call without even registering the name on the screen. “Yeah?”

“You home?”

I swallow a groan. Fucking Rocco. I need him like I need a hole in the head. “Yes.”

“Good. Don’t move. I’ll be there in five.”

“Look, I’m not in the mood to listen to your new sound system right now,” I snap.

“You’re a real dick, ya know that? Just sit tight.”

I click to end the call and pace the room, phone clutched tight in my hand. What the fuck does Rocco want? Now, of all times?

The doorbell jolts me. I crane my neck to check out the living room. Dad is still lying on the couch, eyes closed. He doesn’t stir. I stomp toward the door and fling it open. That was a fast five minutes. Too fast for my taste.

“Rocco, I’m not in the fucking mood—”

Small, strong hands shove me backward into the wall. “Goddammit, Max! You had one last chance to make things right, and you fucked up again!”

I stumble and clap a hand onto the wall to steady myself. “What the hell are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be in the city?”

Shaye gives me the stink eye and pushes past me to get inside. My mother stands behind her, shaking her head. “Shaye! Language!”



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Shaye snorts and waves a hand in front of her. “Mom, please! I’m upset! This jerkoff,” she snarls, pointing a finger at me. “Had a chance to do the right thing. And again, he messes it all up! How could you ditch Sloane like that? On such an important night?” She screams in my face, fists balled at her sides. “My God, what could have possibly been more important?”

I narrow my eyes and slam the front door shut. “You still haven’t told me why you’re here. This isn’t a good time, Shaye. You should have called!”

Shaye lets out a dry laugh. “Why? To give you time to think of some lame-ass excuse for why you’re such a screw up?”

“No.” I scrub a hand down the front of my face, peering out the front window. “So I could tell you to get as far away from here as you could. It’s not safe here.”

“It’s not safe anywhere, Max! Did you forget who we are?”

Mom grazes my arm. “Sweetie, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

I peer out the side window next to the door. “Look, you guys just need to get out of here, okay?” I turn to my sister. “Please, trust me. Take Mom to Nico’s. Don’t bring her home.”

“Why are you being so evasive? And where’s Dad? We’ve been trying to call him, and it keeps going straight to voicemail.”

“Dad’s...okay. Just go. Now.” I open the door. I really didn’t want to have to deal

with my mother and sister on top of the rest of the shit show that's about to blow open. There are too many things they don't need to hear...too many things they definitely shouldn't see...

"I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me what's going on! And why you blew Sloane off!"

"Look, I need to focus right now!" I yell. "And while you're so stuck on the reason why I didn't show up for her that night, I'm worrying about how the fuck I'm gonna save her life tonight!"

Shaye's eyes widen and her mouth damn-near hits the floor. "What the hell are you talking about? Did something happen to her?"

"Max, are you okay? What's going on, sweetie?" Mom asks, putting an arm around me. Rage courses through my veins, my body shaking with a deep-rooted anger at the fact that, yet again, I'm completely out of control. I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going. I only know I have something big to lose if I don't act.

Only problem is, even though I'm ready to strike, I have no fucking clue how, when, or where it needs to happen.

"Mom," I say, my voice trembling. "I've always tried to be honest with you, but this time—"

"It's not up to you to deal with this, son," Dad wheezes, limping into the foyer.

"Daddy!" Shaye shrieks and runs over to my father. "What happened?"

"Tony?" Mom whispers, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, my God. You're all..." Her hand flies to her mouth as she inches closer to him and caresses the side of his

bruised face. “Honey, how did this...?” Her voice cracks and the tears spill over, taking her makeup with them as what looks like realization slams her in the gut. “No, please don’t tell me...”

“I’m so sorry. I never meant for this to happen.” Dad drops his head into her cupped hand.

Shaye pulls away from my dad, her eyes red. “Never meant for what to happen? What the hell is going on here?” she screams. “Why is Daddy all beaten up? Who did this?”

My parents exchange glances, having their own silent conversation. “You told me you’d handle it,” she says in a low voice. “You promised me that it was over!”

“That what was over?” Shaye sobs, turning toward me. “Max, what is happening here?”

I put an arm around her shoulder and pull her close. “Give them a second,” I whisper.

Dad lets out a deep sigh, leaning on the wall behind him for support. “I’ve been dishonest with you all, and now it’s coming back to bite me and a lot of other people. I’ve done things...bad things...and now these people want me to pay. But they aren’t interested in money. They want a different kind of payment. One that’ll crush the Salesi family for good.” His eyes flicker to my mom’s tear-stained face. “Lina, I’m sorry for everything.” He looks at me and Shaye, his eyes returning to me. “I wish I had more time to make up for everything. I wasted so much of it, and I...” His voice trails off and he drops his head.

“I don’t understand. What does Sloane have to do with all of this?” Shaye asks, sniffing loudly.

I glance at my father. “The people who did this to Dad...they’re planning something big. Something that can take down the whole family if we don’t stop it. They...they took Sloane, and I have to get her back and figure out a way to end this. Now. And that’s why you need to get out of here. I know they’re out there watching, and if anything ever happened to you guys, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Oh my God.” Shaye laces her hand with mine and leans her head against my arm. “What about Nico?” she murmurs, her shoulders quivering. A sharp pang assaults my heart. I finally get how hard it must have been for Sloane, not knowing what happened to me any time I’d fall off the face of the Earth to take care of ‘business.’ But Shaye...Christ, I can’t imagine how she feels every time Nico leaves her. The knowledge that every kiss may be their last has to eat away at her, especially after everything they’ve been through together with the Cappodamo family. My sister is a tough cookie, but even she falters from time to time. How can you not, when you live the lives we do?

It sometimes makes me wonder...is it easier to know what you’re dealing with? Or safer to keep your head buried in the sand?

Looking at my sister, seeing the fearful expression on her face conflict with her struggle to remain calm, I’d say she’d choose ignorance.

It is bliss, after all.

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“He—”

The doorbell rings again, and Shaye lets out a loud yelp, jumping about ten feet into the air. “Relax,” I say. “It’s Rocco. Lemme get rid of him.”

I pull open the door. “Listen, it’s not a good time—”

“It is time, douchebag. That’s why I’m here. Did you think I was gonna let you do this alone again so you could fuck things up for us?” He pushes past me, joining my family in our decidedly dysfunctional moment. “Wow. The whole gang is here, huh?” He looks back at me. “You know I’ve only got a two-seater, right?”

“Shut up, asshole,” I mumble, pulling on my jacket and grabbing my duffel. “They’re staying. And I’m going alone.”

“Going where?” Shaye moans, clutching my arm. “You are not doing this again, Max! Didn’t you learn your lesson last time?”

“She’s gone because of me! I won’t drag someone else down with me. I can’t do it...not like with Gabe...”

Rocco grabs my arm. “Stop. We’d never let Nico do this kind of shit alone. And even though I hate your guts, I still don’t wish you dead. Don’t be a hero, Max. You can’t help Sloane by yourself.” He points to my jacket. “Look at you, all ready to run out and save the day. But do you even know where you’re going?”

I sink to the floor, holding my head in my hands. “I don’t know. I don’t fucking

know, okay? I don't know how the hell I'm gonna find her, let alone save her before Christ only knows what will happen!"

Shaye sits down next to me, her arm around my shoulder. "I know you're still beating yourself up over what happened to Gabe, but you can't. You want to save Sloane, but you need to act smart, okay?"

I look up at Rocco. "How did you know I'd even be here?"

"Because I called you and asked."

"No, dick. That's not what I meant."

Rocco smirks. "Nico sent me over. He thought you'd be ready to run. He was right, as usual."

"How the fuck does he even know—?"

Rocco shrugs. "Don't ask me. He's got eyes and ears everywhere, I guess. And they got him an address. But we've gotta move fast. He doesn't know how long they'll stay in that location." He clasps my shoulder. "He knows about Sloane, too. We're gonna help you get her back, bro. Now get up and grab your big boy purse. Let's get going."

"I'm going, too."

"Tony, no!" My mom weeps into my father's neck. "You can't. Please, just stay with me and Shaye."

"Lina, I've made so many mistakes. I can't ever make up for them. But I can at least do the right thing now. I might not be able to save myself, but maybe I can save

someone else.” His eyes flicker toward me. “I caused this. I should be the one to end it.”

“Dad—” I start, but he holds up a hand and grabs a coat from the closet, struggling to pull it on.

It takes him a few minutes, and he’s slightly out of breath. He nods at me, and I know he’s in bad shape. He knows it, too. This is what he’s been waiting for. A chance for redemption. Who the fuck am I to deny him that?

After so much lost time, we finally fixed what was broken.

I just wish we hadn’t missed out on so much of the past. I wish he’d have come to me sooner, told me about the gambling. I wish he’d have talked to me instead of tearing me down. I wish he’d have been more of a father to me.

I could have helped him. I could have saved him and saved myself at the same time.

But all of that is moot now. The only thing that matters is Sloane.

“Don’t say another word. I’m going. Period.” He turns to my mother and slowly wraps his arms around her, nestling her close to his chest. I can tell every movement brings him excruciating pain, but still he holds her tight against him. Her body shakes from the sobs, but calms when he whispers in her ear.

She tilts her head up toward him and manages a watery smile. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” He places a kiss on the top of her head, and gathers Shaye for a long hug. “And I love you, pumpkin. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

She smiles through her tears and nods. “Okay,” she whispers, kissing him on the

cheek.

Shaye stands next to my mother and puts an arm around her. “Be careful,” she says, her voice strong. “Take care of each other.”



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I nod, pulling open the door. “Always. Lock up and set the alarm. I’ll send some of the guys over to stay with you, and I’ll call later.”

Rocco follows me and my dad outside. “Uhhh...”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll take my truck.” I unlock the doors and help my dad into the backseat. “This is a bad idea,” I murmur to him.

“It’s actually the best one I’ve had in a long time,” he answers, letting out a deep sigh as he settles into the leather seat.

“Thank you,” I murmur. “In case I forget to tell you later.”

“Save it. I want you to tell me later. Give me something to look forward to,” Dad manages a half-smile before resting his head on the seat.

I nod, a pang assaulting my chest. “You’ve got it,” I say, my voice thick.

We both know there won’t be a later.

Not for him, anyway.

But still, we pretend.

I close the back door and jump into the front seat, turning on the ignition. “Okay, where am I going? And where the hell is Nico?”

“He had to make some arrangements first.”

“What kind of arrangements?”

Rocco turns away. “I think you’d better talk to him about it.”

I slam my hands on the steering wheel. “Are you fucking kidding me? Sloane is being held somewhere with Christ only knows how many other women. If we don’t find them, they’ll be lost. For fucking ever! And he wants to have a goddamn meeting?”

“Look, I get that you’re frustrated, but he makes the rules. You know the deal.”

“Fuck the rules!” I yell, stomping my foot on the gas and speeding around cars. “So where the hell are we going, Rocco? You know, since he actually tells you things!”

“There’s an abandoned factory in East Rutherford.”

“Is that where they’re being held?”

“No, that’s the meeting spot.” Rocco shrugs. “Dude, he doesn’t tell me everything.”

“You’re driving like a lunatic, Max,” Dad grumbles from the backseat. I can see him wincing as I swerve left and right, and I release a shaky breath. “Calm down. We can’t help anyone if we’re dead.”

“He always pulls this shit! Do we really need a meeting to talk about how we’re going to rescue the girls? I don’t remember him holding a fucking kumbaya session before we stormed that warehouse looking for Shaye when Frank Cappodamo kidnapped her!”

“This is different.”

“How? Because it’s not someone important to him?”

“Relax,” Dad mutters. “Just follow Nico’s lead. You’ve gotten into enough trouble before handling this shit on your own, always wanting to storm the castle.”

My fingers grip the steering wheel so tight, I lose feeling in the tips. My breaths are ragged, my pulse throbbing against my neck and ready to explode like a ticking time bomb. I screech to a halt at a red light.

I clench my teeth, impatiently tapping my left foot against the floor. This damn light takes fucking forever. A couple holding three little kids by the hands, all bundled from head to toe in huge puffy jackets, jogs across the road. I narrow my eyes at the group, laughing as if they don’t have a care in the world with their perfect family and their perfect fucking life. My lips stretch into a tight line as the seconds tick pass and the woman gives her husband a quick kiss when they reach the sidewalk.

The light turns green and I slam my foot on the gas, the wheels screeching as they skid forward on the pavement. East Rutherford is still a few minutes north, and I have no idea why the hell he needs to call us off-course to sit on our asses for a goddamn strategy session.

There’s one strategy, and it works every time.

Storm in and fuck their shit up.

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A red Audi slams on its brakes in front of another of the one-million strip malls in this state. I lean on my horn, letting it erupt with the pent-up rage and frustration coursing through my veins. I finally sit back and rotate my neck. It's so stiff from stress, and massaging it with my fingers doesn't do a damn bit of good. I rub the back of my skull, twisting it left and right, my eyes landing on a white minivan next to me. There are a bunch of kids bouncing around in the backseat, and a woman in a giant fuzzy hat in the passenger seat, singing, laughing, and clapping her hands. There's a guy in the driver's seat, and he turns to her, pulling her in for a kiss before letting her get back to her performance. It happened so fast, if I'd turned my head in Rocco's direction...something I normally try to avoid...I'd have missed it.

I'd have missed it.

I don't want to miss it...any of it.

I've never worried about consequences. I act. There's not usually any thinking involved...or worrying about what happens afterward. I take care of things and walk away without a care.

This time is different. There is a lot at stake. Hell, my whole future is at stake. I never bothered with that concern in the past. Maybe deep down I knew my future wasn't worth the fear of losing it.

All those years of being told I'd never measure up, that I'd never amount to much, that I'd never rise up in the organization because I didn't have what it takes...I started to believe it, and I acted as if I had nothing to lose.

Because I didn't.

Now I do, and it scares the hell out of me.

But Nico has already figured this out. He's counting on me to come to the same conclusion so we can end this war without anyone getting hurt.

"Fine!" I bellow, pressing my foot on the gas when the light turns green. "We'll do it your way, dammit!"

"Who are you yelling at this time? Is it the people in your head again?" Rocco snickers, tapping his fingers on the window.

I take the next left turn. "We're gonna go to the meeting spot."

"Thank fuck." Rocco lets out a sigh and types something into his phone.

"Who are you texting?" I swing the steering wheel around and head in the opposite direction.

"Nico. He said he knew you'd come around." Rocco snorts. "I had my doubts."

An image of Sloane's smiling face floats in front of me, and my chest tightens.

My future...the one I'm now petrified of losing.

Max

A few minutes later, we pull into the back parking lot of an abandoned factory. It's only a couple of blocks away from the building where the girls are being held, based on what Rocco found out from Nico in a text. My tires screech to a halt and as soon as I shut off the engine, I fling open the door and jump to the ground. I pop open my Dad's door. "Stay here," I say. "Let me handle this."

"I'm part of the team, right? I'm coming in," Dad says, struggling to get out of the car.

"Dad, listen," I say, my voice low. "We both know you're in bad shape. You didn't want to go to the hospital, which I think is a stupid fucking decision, but hey. It's your call. At least rest when you can. There's no need for you to go inside and deal with—"

Dad puts his hand up. "Stop. We both know why I didn't go to the hospital. Why should I spend my last days being poked, prodded, and X-rayed? They did a lot of damage, yeah, but it's not going to matter. I can still move and breathe." He grins. "Kind of. And I'm not going to leave you hanging out to dry on your own, not when I put you in this situation in the first place."

What started as a tiny lump in my throat has grown to the size of a golf ball in milliseconds. Why the hell couldn't we have had this whole 'come to Jesus' thing years ago? So that instead of standing around in a parking lot lamenting about my father's numbered days, we could be enjoying them? And not worrying about our enemies killing us and the people we love?

I fist my hair and nod. “Okay,” I finally say. “Let’s go.”

My dad hobbles next to me, but refuses my arm. He’s not about to go in front of Nico looking like a broken-down cripple who can’t stand on his own two feet. He always puts on a show, no matter what the circumstances. He’d never show fear, and he doesn’t intimidate easily.

Even with the knowledge that his time is running out, and if he doesn’t keel over from internal bleeding, someone’s gonna put a bullet in his brain.

Neither are great options.

Rocco is ahead of us, scouting the area for any signs of movement. He creeps toward the entrance, almost completely hidden by overgrown bushes, waving us on. I stick close to my father, just in case. Somebody is watching.

Somebody is always watching.

But the million-dollar question is are they gonna act?

I pull out my phone again and stare at the screen. Still no response from Tommy. I pull my jacket tighter, trying to ignore the fact that someone may have found him texting me and iced him. He’s my only link to Sloane right now, and if he’d just text me something...anything...to let me know she’s okay...

I swallow hard as we follow Rocco into the dank, dark interior. It stinks of mold and mildew, and we haven’t been inside for longer than thirty seconds before I see rats the size of puppies scurry all over the rotted floor.

One of Nico’s club security guys, Ray, nods at us. He’s about six-six, three twenty. So massive he almost doesn’t need to use the guns hooked around his waist. “They’re

around the corner,” he grunts.

We walk into a dimly lit room where Nico is standing in the middle of a group of guys — some of the guys from the construction site who work for me and have arrest records a mile long and some guards from the club. I furrow my brow, eyeing the lineup. This is more than our usual crew, and he’s never used club security before for an ambush like this. There is a small arsenal arranged on the floor, and Nico is holding three different phones in his hand, waving them around as he instructs the group. He stops talking once we approach and points at my father. The guys fall into separate lines on either side of him, parting like he’s the Dead fucking Sea.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the guy who caused this shit show in the first place. What the hell are you doing here?” He inches toward my dad, his lips pressed tight together. He nods at the group of guys behind him and points to the door. “Leave us for a minute and get ready to move.” he says, his glare laser-focused on my father’s face. “I’m waiting, and time is short, Tony. For both of us.”

My dad stands as straight as he can, still holding on to his side as inconspicuously as he can without arousing suspicion. The man could be bleeding out his eyes and still charge an enemy like a ferocious bull. “I came because—”

“Because you really wanna fucking decimate this family?” Nico grits his teeth, interrupting him. “After everything my father and my grandfather did for you! You’re an ungrateful sonofabitch, Tony, and Bonnarro should have left your ass to rot in that fucking concrete block!”

Dad doesn’t respond, but his gaze never wavers. “I made a mistake.”

“Just one?” Nico sneers. “That’s supposed to be a joke right? Tell me, does your betrayal not count because my dad’s still alive?”



“It wasn’t supposed to happen that way.” My dad shifts his weight. I can tell standing up is causing him some major discomfort, but I hang back and say nothing. “That hit on your father was never part of the plan.”

Nico circles him like a ravenous lion eyeing his dinner. “Yeah, I get it. Dealing with mobsters can be so unpredictable sometimes, right?” He stops about an inch from my father’s face and screams at him. “You betrayed us all! Including your own family! Shaye, Max, Lina — you fucked them all, Tony! And you think being here right now fixes all of the shit you’ve pulled? Hell fucking no! This doesn’t change a goddamned thing, Tony. You went against the family. I don’t care about the reasons why — desperation, jealousy, revenge...whatever the hell. None of it matters. And you’re gonna pay.”

“Nico!” I hiss, pressing my fingertips to my temples. “They fucking have Sloane! Can we focus on getting her the hell out of there and save the ass ramming for later?”

Nico turns his icy gaze in my direction. “Oh, so now you’re going to trust me? It’s about fucking time. You know, I don’t stand around and make grandiose fucking plans just to hear myself speak, dammit! You need to start trusting me, Max. You want to get out of that dead-end job? You want something bigger and better? Something that’ll give you a future? Stand the fuck down unless I tell you otherwise!”

I clench my fists, trying to grasp some sliver of control when all I want to do is pound the ever-loving fuck out of my best friend. “Do you remember how you felt when Frank Cappodamo kidnapped Shaye?” I hiss. “I don’t recall you sitting your ass down to come up with a grand plan for how we were gonna get her back. You called, and I came running, no questions asked. And we stormed the place like we owned it. Rocco shot himself as a diversion, for fuck’s sake! Why is this different? Why aren’t we over there now, taking those bastards down? Because you’re not fucking Sloane? Is that the reason?”

Dad lets out a low groan, but I don't care. I know I took things too far, but no shocker there. It's what I do. It's my MO. And I'm tired of following orders, sick of being the peon. Let Nico shoot me if he doesn't want to hear the truth.

I narrow my eyes. "You know what? I don't give a fuck why you're sitting around on your ass, thinking about how to save them. I'm gonna go in there and do it!"

"You're not going anywhere," Nico snarls, gripping my arm.

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“The hell I’m not!” I shrug out of his grip, my fist twitching. In another second, I’m gonna lay him out on that concrete floor, making him wish he’d just let me go by myself in the first place.

“No, you really aren’t.” His voice drops. “Look, I know you want to get Sloane out of there, but there’s a reason why we haven’t gone in yet.” Nico looks around and lets out a sigh. “The guys from the club are here because if things goes sideways, they’re the only way to protect the Salesi family from being implicated in this thing.”

“What are you talking about?”

Nico rakes a hand through his hair and looks at my dad, who hobbles over to an empty metal chair on the side of the space. He sinks into it, his face pinched with pain. “The feds are coming, just like I said. The Bonnaros set us up. That was their plan from the beginning. The Cinque family supplied the drugs and the women, and the Bonnaros found a few buyers. The plan was to have you show up when the feds arrived to make the bust. Everything would have pinned on us because the Bonnaros would have been long gone by then. Grabbing Sloane was just icing on the cake for them. They wanted to get to you and your father, at exactly the right time. And you were about to walk right into their trap.”

“Goddammit, I need to get Sloane out of there! I did what you wanted. I didn’t go after those bastards. I fucking trusted you and came here! So, tell me, Boss, how the hell are we supposed to avoid their trap?”

The scenarios run through my mind like wildfire, torching all rational thought. What if we’re too late? What if she’s already gone? What if something messed up their

plans and the Bonnaros needed to make a run for it early? What if...?

No, I will not even think that.

I can't.

"We avoid it by getting in there before the buyers show up."

"How the hell do we know when that's supposed to happen?"

"That's why I was waiting for you, dickhead!" Nico yells. "Do you ever think that maybe I know what the hell I'm doing? You know, every once in a while? Just fucking once in your life, trust that I can run this goddamn show better than you can."

"Sorry," I grunt. "How long do we have to wait?"

"Not long at all." Nico holds up his phone. "I just got the go-ahead. The buyers aren't scheduled to show up for another hour, which means the feds will be close behind. We're going in now, and we're taking out Mikey and Gianni."

"How do you know all of this? Who do you have on the inside?"

"The one person who can sell out the Bonnaros for us and crush their asses before they can ram ours."

"That still won't stop the Cinques. You know they're a bunch of maniacs who'll take out anyone they need to, with or without the Bonnaros. They're fucking brutal, and they want blood...Viktor Ivanov's blood because he crushed their drug business. That's the only reason why they teamed up with Mikey and Gianni in the first place. Revenge. And they won't stop until they destroy him. And you for working with him."

“I know exactly what they want. But the Cinques are going to have big problems very fucking soon, something they’re going to find out when I decide the time is right.” Nico claps a hand on my shoulder and turns me toward the doorway. “I told you to trust me, didn’t I?”

“It would be nice if you trusted me a little bit, too,” I grumble. “Why do I always have to be in the dark?”

“Listen,” he says, stopping me. “I get that you want to be on the inside, but there’s only room for one. Me. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Max, and I have a lot to protect. There are too many risks, too many threats. I have to keep this all very close. But I’ve got your back. I always have. And if someone ever had a gun to my head, I know you’d be there to take him out.”

“I would.”

Nico grins. “Good. I’m glad to hear you agree, especially before we move in on the Bonnaros.” He looks past me at my dad, who lets out a deep sigh and slowly stands. He faces Nico, silent.

“He’s in bad shape,” I murmur to Nico. “He shouldn’t be here right now. He’s really dragging, and I don’t know how much more he can take.”

“He needs to pay,” Nico grunts through clenched teeth. “He went too far, too many times.”

“I know, and I get how you feel. But just let him do this. He wants to help. Give him a shot to make up for all of it.”

“Look, you forgave him for everything, and I respect that. He’s your blood.” Nico narrows his eyes at me. “And you needed that closure. For years I’ve watched you try

to get it, so I'm glad you finally did. But he's not my father. He tried to kill my father, remember? He betrayed us over and over and over to our biggest enemies. That's something I will never forget." Nico walks toward Tony. "This doesn't change anything between us, Tony. You being here...I know you're looking to ease your own conscience, but in my eyes, you're still no better than a rat." Nico glares at my dad so hard that I fully expect to see him explode into flames at any second. "No," he growls after a few seconds, his face twisting into a grimace. "Worse than a fucking rat."

"I don't expect you to let it go, Nico," Dad says, resting against the side of the chair, his voice a bit breathless. "I know the way this ends."

His words are dripping with regret and remorse, but as far as Nico is concerned, it's too little, too late. The end is coming, one way or the other, and we all know it.

The how, though...that's still up in the air.

"You walk in there, and you're on your own. Do whatever you need to make yourself feel better about the shit you've pulled, but you don't have my protection."

Dad nods. "I understand." He pauses, still looking directly at Nico. "And I'm sorry, for whatever it's worth."

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“Not a fucking thing.” Nico grunts, storming toward one of the cars parked outside.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask.

Dad lets out a thick cough. “Yeah,” he rasps. “I have to.”

“You really don’t. You can stay right here. I’ll call one of my guys to get you. Go home to Mom and Shaye.”

Dad shakes his head, walking toward the exit. “Let me die with some dignity, Max. I know it’s asking a lot, but it’s what I need. I did this to myself. I started it on my terms. I’m gonna end it that way, too.”

I follow him to my car where Rocco is waiting for us. I help my dad into the backseat and slide into the front seat.

“Are you okay?” He murmurs once I turn on the ignition. “I heard all of that. Not sure why Nico bothered to send us out.”

“Yeah,” I say, swinging around the steering wheel. Nico didn’t want me here for a meeting. He knew my dad would be coming with me, and he wanted to make it clear to him and everyone else in the family that Tony Oriani was finished.

One way or the other.

“The building is on the corner of Sixth and Carney. Deserted street. Commercial area. Perfect for a firefight.” Rocco reads the address from his phone. I know it. I’ve been

there plenty of times, beaten up more scumbags than I can count within those dilapidated walls. Left a bunch for dead, if memory serves me correctly.

Today will be no different, except when it's over, I'll be walking out of there with one less family member, but instead with a purpose.

And my future.



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Sloane

I clutch the sides of my head, squinting in the dim light. I look down at the lacy bra and panties I'm wearing.

When did I change? And where did this stuff even come from? I don't own anything this red or see-through...

I squint, slowly turning my head left and right. The room is spinning, and I clutch the sides of the cot I'm sprawled across. Why is everything so hazy? All of the lights have little halos dancing over them. I blink a few times to clear my vision, but it's useless.

I struggle to sit up, but my legs feel like limp spaghetti noodles. They give me no help at all. My arms aren't really in any better shape. The room spins like a carousel on high speed and a tiny moan escapes my lips. A wave of nausea washes over me, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

A wad of imaginary cotton fills my mouth, and I am suddenly desperate for water.

And answers.

But I'm so tired.

I just want to lie here for a little while longer. I drag a hand across my chest. What happened to my clothes? I don't think I left the house like this...

Not that I can remember leaving home in the first place.

My hair hangs in loose strands around my face, and I smooth it back. The ringing between my ears is deafening, and I want to cry out except I don't know who will respond...who put me here...who dressed me.

I roll my head to the side, peering down at my left arm. There's a tiny dot of dried blood on the inside of my elbow.

I've been drugged.

Who would drug me? And why?

A tiny groan escapes my dry lips.

I can't think because it hurts too much.

I can't scream because my mouth is too dry.

But maybe I can move...

I try to swing my legs to one side of the cot but they're heavy...like cement blocks. As soon as my feet hit the floor and I try to stand, my ankles give out, and I fall back on the makeshift mattress, sinking deeper into the fitted sheet.

I just need to lie down for a minute, and then I'll figure out how to get away from here. A shiver runs through me, but there's no blanket on the cot. Or anywhere in the room. I let out a deep sigh and let my eyes drift closed once my head hits the hard pillow. It lands like an anchor. Lifting it zaps any sliver of energy left in my body.

The door creaks open, and my head falls in the direction of the two guys who walk

inside. I think they're guys. I can't really tell because it's too dark. I shift around, trying to cover myself up, but my limbs refuse to work. My teeth chatter as they creep toward me.

"She's fucking nice," one of them says. "I'd love to tap that ass."

Okay, definitely guys, and I start to shiver at their intentions.

My eyes fall on a belt on the chair next to me. If I can just grab it...

Then what? What the heck am I going to do with a belt? And since I can't even move my head, I think that's probably a half-assed plan that's only doomed to fail.

The other guy is taller and bigger. His face is turned away, so I can't really make out what he looks like, but he gives the first guy a shove. "Shut the hell up. Don't you even think about it, dick."

Somewhere in the depths of my foggy brain, I recognize something about that voice. But I still can't see him. He's turned toward the door. I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out. Only what sounds like a squeak.

I can't move. I can't cry out for help.

What the hell is going on? And why am I so relaxed, not knowing the answer to that question?

"Don't be so uptight, T. You needed cash, so I got you this job." The shorter guy circles me, licking his lips. I peer up at him, willing my leg to kick him in the teeth. But my leg stays put, flat on the cot. It's too heavy to move, and since all of the energy has been drained from my body, rolling my head from side to side is about the best I can do right now.

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“I didn’t agree to this.” The other guy, T, says in a low, menacing voice. “You said we’d be dropping off a package. Drugs. Not women!”

“Plans changed, man. Deal with it. These guys don’t play by our rules, you get it? Besides, this is gonna make us a fucking bundle. What the hell is your problem?”

“I didn’t agree to drugging anyone! Or selling sex slaves!”

Drugs...sex...slavery?

I glance down at my lingerie again, trying so hard to connect the dots that are splattered across my mind. They kidnapped me? Are there...others?

A hazy image of Jules flashes in front of my eyes....Jules limp like broccoli, sprawled on a bed next to me, face down, not moving...

I swallow a sob. “Who are you? Why am I here?” I manage to whisper.

T finally turns around and my throat tightens when I see his face. He crosses the floor and kneels down next to me. “Sloane, it’s okay. Don’t be afraid. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Tommy,” I murmur. I’m too lethargic to feel any bit of relief flood my insides. “What did you do to me? Why am I here?” I repeat.

“You’d better cut this shit out,” the shorter guy, whose name I still haven’t caught, mutters. “If they come in here and find you talking to her, they’ll fucking kill you.

And me, so shut the fuck up!”

Tommy turns to look at the other guy. “You got me into this, Dino.”

“I was trying to help you, cocksucker!” Dino whisper-shouts.

“Please help me,” I say, my voice thick, like there’s a wad of peanut butter on my tongue.

“Look, you were kidnapped. There are other girls here, too. Someone is coming here to—”

“Shut up, dick!” Dino hisses. Footsteps from outside of the room get louder and heavier. The door opens, slamming against the wall. Tommy jumps to his feet, and Dino starts sputtering some unintelligible words to the beefy-looking guy staring them down.

“What’s going on in here? Why the fuck aren’t you downstairs with the rest of the guys?” He takes a few steps toward Dino. “You thinking about taking her for a spin?” He grabs Dino by the hair and throws him against the wall with a loud thud. “Is that why you’re in here? You got a fucking hard-on for her, Dino?”

“N-no,” Dino stammers. “We were just, ah, checking to make sure everything was okay. There was a noise, and, ah—”

Crack!

Dino goes down, face-first into the carpet after the hulking guy shatters his jaw with a gun. A scream rises in my throat, but I swallow it. I let my eyes float closed, pretending to be asleep before he notices that I’m taking in everything.

Please don't let him hurt Tommy...

"And you," he says in a deep, growling voice. "You're new. You wanna get more jobs with us? Don't fucking take lessons from this asshole."

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The sound of the gunshot reverberates between my temples, sending a tremor through me. Holy shit, he just shot Dino...oh, my God, oh, my God...

I open my eyes a crack to see Tommy looking directly at the barrel of a gun. "Get the fuck downstairs. Now!"

Tommy doesn't look back at me. He just walks out of the room, shoulders squared, leaving Dino bleeding on the floor at the foot of this cot.

"Did you really need to shoot the motherfucker in there?" Another angry voice floats into the room. Must be someone out in the hallway. "Mikey is gonna be pissed, man. She's the one going for the most cash. You have to get that guy outta there. Nobody's gonna wanna fuck that pussy with brains and shit all over the floor, dumbass."

The door slams shut behind them, shaking the walls. My shoulders quake as the tears stream down my face. I fling an arm over my mouth to muffle the sobs rising in my chest.

I grit my teeth and grip the sides of the cot, sliding myself to a seated position. I collapse against the back wall, panting from the effort. Blood pools on the floor around Dino's head. His vacant eyes stare up at me, and I clap a hand over my mouth to prevent the horror from escaping my lips.

Screaming won't help. It'll only get me killed.

My breaths come fast and sharp, like tiny shards of glass slicing away at my lungs and throat. I slither closer to the side of the bed where Dino lays. Maybe he has something on him, a gun, a knife, a cell phone...anything that can help me escape this hellish nightmare.

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I slowly roll onto my side, my arm dropping off the side of the bed. It's like I'm dragging an anchor.

My whole body is dead weight.

Dead...

I slither closer to the edge, my eyes drooping closed.

Rest. I just need to rest for a minute.

No! My mind screams at me, willing me to keep going. I fall off the mattress, bracing my fall with my hands, trying not to make any noise. But my limbs are so numb...and my hands feel like they're being pricked with pins and needles. I flex my fingers, staring at them wiggle in front of my eyes. I need them to work, dammit!

The floor bounces and dips, like I'm sitting on a raft in the ocean. I clutch the sides of my head. Whatever they gave me has an odd effect. I'm calm, but freaking the hell out at the same time. If they shot me up with an IV, I should be comatose right now, without a care in the world, dead Dino or not.

But I don't have time to catalogue the side effects of whatever it is. Someone cut the dose. That's the only explanation. I shouldn't be able to think right now, let alone move.

I push back my hair and dig through Dino's jacket pockets. My fingers grip something square and hard. Cell phone. But it's locked. Dammit!



Who the hell would I call anyway? What would I even say? I have no idea where I am or how I got here. There are no windows in this concrete cell, so I can't even peek outside for clues.

I push the phone under the cot, just out of sight.

Just in case.

I keep digging, but there's no gun. No knife. Just a wallet, keys, gum...keys.

I hold up the ring. One of them is long and sharp. Not a typical house key. My mind spins. If I can just hide it in my palm...if someone gets close enough...if, if, if...

If is about all I can hope for right now.

Within seconds, I have the key off the ring. I stick the rest of the ring back in his pocket. The dirty, thin carpet scratches the skin on the underside of my legs as I skitter away from Dino and his bloody half-head.

I take a few deep breaths, eyeing the bed like I'm at the starting line of the New York City marathon. I grab onto the side of the mattress and the little nightstand next to it, slowly rising to my feet. I can do this, I can do this! If I'm going to get out of here, this is the first step! I grit my teeth, dragging myself to full standing position before my knees buckle, and I pitch forward, face-down onto the mattress.

Tears pool in my eyes. Even if I didn't get the full dosage of whatever they hit me with, it's still enough to paralyze my movements. I won't get very far unless it starts to wear off, and at this point, I don't know how much time I have left.

A loud click comes from the doorway, and the knob jiggles. I gasp and will my legs to join the rest of my body on the bed. I manage to get my limbs on the mattress

before the door pushes open again. I'm still face-down, so I can't even see who's behind me. All I can make out is some loud grumbling.

"Fucking asshole. Does he want this whole plan to blow up?" One voice mutters. There's a rustling next to the bed, followed by a few thuds and thumps. Sounds like something being dragged across the floor.

"Eh, fuck it." Another voice snarls, getting farther away from me. They must be headed out the door. "Dino was a dickhead anyway. He never listened. Always thinking with his dick. Always making shit hard for the rest of us. I'm glad someone finally shut him the hell up for good."

I bite my fist, still on my belly, still clutching the key.

Those guys weren't coming for me. They were just getting rid of the body.

Eyes squeezed shut, I manage to calm my breathing. They didn't bother with me. They saw firsthand what happens when you act out of line.

Nobody is taking any chances.

I grip the key tight against my palm, the jagged edge slicing at my flesh.

Nobody except me.

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Max

Tires screech around a corner in a run-down, deserted area of Rutherford, just off the New Jersey Turnpike. “Sorry, Dad,” I mutter, sharply swinging my truck into an alleyway.

He grunts a response from the backseat, and I grit my teeth.

The other two cars separated from us so we could attack from different entrances. They won’t be far behind. I stare up at the crumbled brick of the abandoned building. There are barely any windows and iron bars stretch across the few that are visible.

Sloane is in there.

I need to get her out.

AC/DC blares from my jacket pocket, and I grab my phone, stabbing the Accept button. “Yeah?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for Max Oriani. Do I have the wrong number?”

My brow furrows. I’m not used to hearing such a sweet, grandmotherly voice. “Who’s this?”

“This is Clara from Holy Name Hospital. I’m looking for Max—”

“Clara, yeah, it’s me.” I rake a hand through my hair, shrugging at Rocco. “Sorry

about that. I thought you were someone else. What's up?"

"I wanted to call because I was hoping you could help me. You said to give you a call if Eli ever needed anything." She lets out a soft sigh. "I'm afraid he's in very bad shape. The medication hasn't helped the infection, and the doctors are trying to find Tommy, his brother. I've seen you talking to him, and was hoping you might know where I can find him. I've tried his cell phone number, it's the only one we have on file. But the calls go straight to voicemail. I didn't know who else to call. I was just hoping—"

I swallow hard. Fuck. "H-how bad is Eli?"

Clara sighs. "It's not looking good, Max. The doctors aren't hopeful that things will turn around. His body is just too weak. Do you have any idea how I can get to Tommy?"

I stare up at the building again. "I might. Listen, hang tight. Let me see if I can find him for you, okay? I'll call you back."

"Thank you, Max."

I drop my head back against the leather seat and rub my eyes with the heels of my hands. Where the hell is he, and why hasn't he texted me back, dammit? It's been hours and nothing. "Fuck!"

"What the hell was that all about? Who's Clara?"

I poke my head out the window, peering into the dusk. No cars are in sight. I pull two guns from the duffel bag at Rocco's feet and load them, handing one to him. "I don't have time to wait on these guys. I need to get inside there now." I look at Rocco. "Stay here with my dad. Wait for them, okay?"

“Are you insane? You can’t just go in there packing with no fucking clue who you’re up against. You won’t make it through the door! Do you have a death wish or something?”

I turn my head toward my dad. “I have to get inside. Stay here with Rocco.”

Rocco grabs his gun and cocks it. “The hell you will. Pops, lay low. I’m gonna tail your idiot son so he doesn’t get his ass shot up before we can find his girl.” He nudges me. “I’ll bet she’s gonna want it in one piece. Just sayin’.”

I nod. “Okay, let’s go.” I point at my dad. “Stay.”

Dad narrows his eyes. “Are you giving me an order?”

An impatient sigh escapes my lips. “Look Dad, I don’t wanna be a dick about this, but you’re in a lot of pain. And slow as shit. No disrespect, okay? But I can’t worry about you while I’m trying to beat down these assholes. You’re here, and that means a lot to me. I know you’ve got my back. But right now, the best way to help me out is to sit in that seat and not move. You’ve got a phone. If you see anything or anyone I need to know about, text me. That would be really great. A huge help.” I keep talking as I load my guns.

“How many guns are you planning to stuff into your jeans?” Rocco cocks an eyebrow. “Just curious.”

I smack in the last clip. “I think I’m good.”

“Finally. Let’s go.” Rocco pushes open his door and steps out of the car.

I turn to look at my dad for the last time. “Like I said, sit tight. Text me if you see anything.”

Dad nods, his forehead pinched. For a fleeting moment., I wonder if he'll even be alive when we get back. All the more reason for him to stay put. He's already got a target between his eyes. I shake off the thought before it sinks in deeper. I know his story is coming to a rapid close, I'm just not ready to turn the page and read the ending.

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I stick two of the guns into the back waistband of my jeans, one hanging from my hand as we dodge dumpsters and sewer rats that are the size of fucking raccoons. Puddles of dark water splash onto the concrete as we jog through them. My eyes dart in all directions and I hold out an arm before Rocco pulls on the large, metal door handle to enter the building. I stare up. There are a few dim lights coming from a few floors up. She has to be up there.

And I'm sure there are plenty of thugs who are lurking beyond that door, just waiting to stop us from finding her.

"Wait," I whisper.

"For what? For the fucking feds to show up?" Rocco mumbles back.

I strain my ears and my neck to see if there are any headlights turning down this alleyway. "Nico and the guys. They should already be here."

"Maybe they went into a different entrance. He said there were a few." Rocco nudges me forward. "Come on, you wanted to do this on your own anyway, right?"

A sharp pain assaults my chest. So many memories of that night come crashing back. The darkness, the cold, the panic that I'd be too late...

I take a deep breath. "I did. I'm just—"

Rocco claps me on the shoulder. "I'm not Gabe. Nobody is gonna clip me tonight. Okay? So stop worrying about me, ya pansy. And open the fucking door!"

My heart thuds like a hammer to a nail as I pull open the heavy door. It creaks open, revealing an empty, dark expanse. The silence is deafening. I exchange a quick look with Rocco as we creep inside. I hold out my arm, gun tight in my hand as I step deeper into the darkened lobby, or wherever the hell we are. Rocco hangs onto the door so it doesn't slam shut. It's comforting to know he does actually think a few steps ahead sometimes.

I turn on my phone flashlight so we can at least see how to get upstairs. I take a few steps toward a doorway in the corner.

"Where are you going?" Rocco hisses.

I point. "There were lights on upstairs. Are we just supposed to sit down here and jerk each other off while we wait for Nico?"

"I don't know why you had to go there, man, and make shit weird. Why couldn't we just sit here jerking ourselves off? Why would we need to jerk each other off?"

I roll my eyes, not that he can see them. "Would you just shut the fuck up and get over here?"

"Are you gonna get frisky with me? Now I'm thinking I should've stayed with your dad in the truck."

I point my gun at him. "How about I just shoot you in the fucking head instead? Put us both out of our fucking misery."

"Don't get pissy because I didn't want to jerk you off."

"Rocco, I swear to God—"



Crack!

A single gunshot explodes, piercing the still air. We both dive to the floor, pointing our guns in every direction, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Minutes pass, feeling like hours, until a smattering of bullets pop, the sharp sounds ricocheting against the concrete floors.

Rocco is huddled against a wall, covering his head. “Sonofabitch! I knew they’d never just let us waltz in here. Where the fuck is Nico?”

Dammit, they have us trapped. We can’t go any farther inside because we’ll get massacred. And if we try to escape...well, I’m pretty sure the perimeter is covered. Someone must have tipped them off that we rolled down this alleyway.

Suddenly, a blinding white light fills the space. It’s so bright I have to cover my eyes. It’s like staring into the sun. I blink fast, jumping to my feet. I hold out my arm again, pointing the gun in every which direction.

Rocco leaps to a standing position. “Who the fuck is there?”

And they say I’m the loose cannon.

Three large-muscled guys who look more like linemen than hitmen appear in a corner of the dingy lobby. The place is a real shit hole. Broken concrete floor, bare and stained sheetrock walls. Broken beer bottles cover the floor, along with metal beams, saws, and nails.

The kinds of things you don’t want to see in the same room with these three guys.

And I doubt they’re using that stuff for construction purposes.

I stand with my arm straight out, focused on the guys coming toward us. A gurgling sound makes me jump, and I swivel around to see a thick arm looped around Rocco's neck. He struggles to loosen the grip, his face turning a disturbing shade of purple as the seconds tick past.

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“Don’t kill him yet. That would mess up the plan.” A female voice calls out from the shadows cast by the lights.

Click, click, click.

A tall, curvy brunette emerges from a different corner, strutting toward us with a gun in her hand pointed straight at my head. My jaw just about drops to the damn floor.

She stops directly in front of me, an evil smile tugging at her lips. “And the plan is going to make us very fucking rich.”

“Layla...” My voice trails off, my mind unable to find words. That doesn’t happen to me often, but right at this minute, I have no fucking clue what to even say.

“What are you going to do, Max?” She sneers at me. “You’re here to save the day, but it looks like you’ve just been outnumbered.” Layla leans toward me, resting the tip on my forehead. “Who do you think is going to save you now? Can you even save yourself?”

My throat tightens, my fingertips white, still hovered over the trigger. “What the hell are you doing here? And where is Sloane?”

“Put the gun down, Max,” she hisses. “You aren’t going to shoot me. We both know that. You want to get your girl, and I’m your only chance to find her.” She waves a hand at the guys around us. “If you try to take one of us out, you know exactly what will happen. And that would make some people very angry...angry enough to do things that will make your head spin right off your body.”

“Where is she?” I growl.

Layla lets out a shrill giggle. “Oh, sweetie, the where is not what you should be concerned about.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Layla pushes my hand down because she knows I’m not going to shoot her. If she’s the only link I have to finding Sloane in this fucking tenement, she knows I’m not about to hurt her. “You’ll find out soon enough.” With a glance at her bodyguards, she nods at me and Rocco. “Take them upstairs.”

A meaty fist grabs my hair, yanking my head backward. “Drop the fucking gun, asshole,” he snarls. I drop the metal piece and it clatters to the floor. Fucknut doesn’t bother to frisk me, and he’s gonna be sorry about that later.

Very fucking sorry.

Another guy drags Rocco to an elevator in the far corner of the lobby, shaking the gun from his hand.

“Things didn’t need to turn out this way, Max,” Layla murmurs, following me as I’m thrown in to the elevator next to Rocco.

“What do you think your father would say, Layla? To see you working with our enemies? To see you working against the family with those assholes? I thought we were—”

“Friends?” She lets out a loud, dry laugh. “Come on, Max. You made your choice. You never gave a shit about me. I thought maybe you did, but I was wrong. You came to rescue me on Thanksgiving because you wanted to take out Bonnaró. But

you didn't. You knew what was going to happen, that he wouldn't rest unless he got his revenge on you and your family. You let him win. You gave him the power to do all this because you didn't take your shot. So, really," she leans in close, eyes narrowed. "This is all your fault. Everything that happens tonight comes down on you alone."

I clench my fists. I knew going after Layla on Thanksgiving would lead me to Bonnaroo, and yeah, I wanted to fuck his shit up. Mikey and Gianni kidnapped my sister. They were part of the hit on Nico's dad. They went after our businesses. But I lost focus for a second too long when Mikey plugged Gabe that night. I saved Layla, but I couldn't save Gabe. I couldn't save a lot of things.

"You fucking bitch!" I struggle in the grip of one of the guys. "You betrayed the family by working with those assholes! Don't think you're gonna survive this. You're fucking dead, and you know it!"

"Shut your fucking mouth," the guy behind me growls.

Rage bubbles in my chest, and I spin around, landing a hard punch into the guy's insanely tight and hard abs. Sharp pains shoot up my arm to my elbow, but I go for a second punch anyway. Another one of the guys grabs me by my hair and flings me into the elevator wall just as it dings.

The doors creep open, and I'm pulled back to a standing position, just in enough time for a thick fist to crack me in the jaw. I double over, the taste of blood filling my mouth. Layla bends her head down next to me. "I would worry more about you not surviving this than me, sweetie."

She turns and walks out of the elevator, and Rocco and I are pushed out, guns pressed to our backs. They shove us past a group of guys playing cards and smoking weed around a cheap folding table in the middle of the floor. Doors line either side of the

hallway. Some are open, some are closed. I peer into the open ones as we pass and catch glimpses of women laying listless on makeshift beds. Some are dressed, some aren't. They're all motionless. No sounds emerge from any of the rooms. Clouds of smoke come from the room at the end of the hallway, and the whole place reeks of horror.

What in the fuck did we walk into?

Layla stops in front of one of the doors and pushes it open. She crooks her finger, motioning for me to follow her inside. The guys push me and Rocco into the room and slam the door shut. It's dark, and I can't make out much beyond a few shapes. A light switch is flipped, and I blink fast to adjust my eyes.

For a second, I wish I hadn't.

My fingers twitch to grab one of the guns stuffed into my jeans but the barrel pressed into my spine stops me. My heart thuds hard against my chest. "It's about fucking time. Max." Gianni takes a long drag from a joint and drops it into an ashtray next to a bed...the bed where Sloane is sprawled out in nothing but a bra and panties. He blows out a thin stream of smoke, watching me take in the scene. My eyes burn. The air is so damn cloudy, but my mind is clear as day. I want to leap at him and claw his fucking eyes out, right before I stick the barrel of my gun so far down his throat I make his body explode from the inside fucking out.

But I don't. I can't. I've got a gun in my face and one pointed at the back of my head.

Gianni grins at me, waving a gun at Sloane's head. He leans down, dragging the metal down the side of her pale face. I swallow hard. Her eyes are closed but I can make out a slight flutter. Her head rolls back and forth a couple of times, so I know she's alive. I catch a glimpse of the paraphernalia on the end table, and my gut clenches. They've drugged her. With what, I don't know. But it's enough that she's

barely responsive.

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“I’ve been waiting for you, Max. I didn’t want to fuck her until you showed up.” He snickers and takes another long drag. “I like an audience. I want you to watch, you asshole. And then when I’m done filling her with my cum, I’m gonna walk outta this hell hole and leave you and your dumbass crew to rot.”

His words make no sense to me. They don’t register at all. I can’t process anything at this second. All I can think about is how the hell I’m going to manage to get Sloane out of here without getting myself killed in the process.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Gianni?” Rocco says. “What the hell are you doing here with all these girls? Did you fucking kidnap them?”

Gianni lets out a low laugh. “You trying to talk tough, Rocco? Huh? I don’t think you should open your fucking mouth right now. I might be tempted to blow it off your fucking face. Besides, you’re in enough trouble with my partners. They don’t wanna see you get sent up the river with the others. They have other plans for you.” He looks back at me and smirks. “The Salesi family. So high and mighty, right? You think you can get away with anything, don’t you?” With the gun still on Sloane, he points to Rocco with his other hand. “You fucked with the wrong people, Rocco. The Cinques are coming, and they don’t forgive and forget. And you know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you? Oh, sure, you thought your little secret was safe. But it wasn’t. Because nobody has any loyalty these days. Everyone talks out of both sides of their fucking mouths, and everyone is out for themselves.”

I turn to Rocco in time to see the color drain from his face. Shit, if Gianni means what I think he means—



“And you,” Gianni points at me. “You fucked me hard, Max. So did your Pops. So consider this payback.” He laughs and looks at Layla. “But that isn’t even the best part. This is...you’re not gonna fucking die today. You’re gonna watch me fuck this sweet pussy before I shoot her between the eyes, and then you’re gonna watch me leave this room with you still in it, playing with your dicks while you wait for the whole fucking Salesi family to go down in flames for running a drug and sex trafficking ring. I want you to know how it feels to live in that fucking hellhole. And I want you to live with the memory of how I killed your girl. I want it to haunt you, Max!”

I clutch the sides of my head. “What the hell are you on, Gianni? How do you plan to manage all of that? How fucking doped up are you?” My eyes are still on Sloane. She slithers around on the bed, her eyes fluttering open and closed. Those fucking animals! The only thing that calms me is knowing that I’m going to tear that bastard apart, limb by fucking limb. And then I’m gonna find Mikey and do the same to him. Tiny moans escape her dry lips, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to lunge for his gun.

But Gianni knows exactly what I’m thinking. He’ll also shoot her in the head without thinking twice, and that’s the reason why I stand down.

The only reason.

He turns to Layla, the gun still pressed to Sloane’s forehead. “Where is Salesi?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get him down here in just enough time to meet the feds when they storm the place.”

The feds. Fuck me, Nico and my dad were right. They had it all figured out.

I narrow my eyes at Layla.

Didn't he?

Layla glares back at me, her lips stretched into a tight line.

Gianni nods. "It's only a matter of time before these guys go down, and the Bonnaros are taking over the whole fucking territory." He snickers and faces me again. "Do you know what that means? It's all ours! You assholes yanked it all away from us before, but look who's fucking at the top now! It's our time. We're making the rules. We're calling the shots. Do you get that? You are fucking history." Gianni looks back at Layla. "You did good work. You really went above and beyond for me, and I appreciate it."

She smiles. "Thanks."

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "But I'm done with you now." He pulls his hand away from Sloane, points the gun at Layla and pulls the trigger. She crumbles to the floor in a heap.

"Fuck!" Rocco groans.

"Yeah, I know. It's too bad. She was a nice piece." Gianni winks at me. "But there are always more pussies out there waiting, you know what I'm saying? Besides, she was getting too greedy. She kept wanting more and more." He waves the gun at Sloane. "I never trusted her anyway. Fucking whore."

My mouth feels like it's been swabbed with a bag of cotton. So fucking dry. The guns in my jeans are burning a hole into my skin. But he's too much of a lunatic. He just shot Layla in cold blood. He won't think twice of decimating what's left of my world. Revenge is what he's after. That's the reason behind his whole plot. There's no way he's gonna show Sloane mercy.

Gianni looks over at me as if he can read my mind. “You wanna kill me for doing this. I can see it. But the old Max...he’s really gone, isn’t he? The old Max wouldn’t give a fuck about the consequences. He’d attack first and think never. Right? Wasn’t that your catch phrase?” He looks back at Sloane and pulls one of her breasts out of the bra, massaging it with a nasty smirk on his face. My gut clenches. “But you’re not making a move. You’re a fucking pussy now, huh? That’s why it was so easy for me to get you down here. And now that I have you, I’m not letting you go. And I’ll keep your bitch and use her for as long as I need her.”

Sloane’s head rolls toward me, and her eyes open fully. They’re filled with terror, but if I make a move, I risk it all.

I can’t do that.

Not when I finally have everything I’d been missing.

What’s worse is Gianni knows it.

“Hey, how’s your Pops doing?” Gianni fumbles with his belt buckle and yanks open his jeans. “You still hiding him at your house? Buying him a little more time?” With his free hand, he rubs his fingers over Sloane’s panties and her eyes squeeze shut.

“Get your fucking hands off her,” I yell. Crack! The metal gun crashes against the side of my face. A fierce throbbing follows. I clutch the side of my face, grateful he didn’t clock me in the temple. The last thing I need is for my brain to be shaking around in my skull. I’m going to need every functioning cell to figure out how the hell I can save Sloane and my own ass to escape this nightmare.

“Oh, you’re giving me orders now, Max? You’ve gone and grown a spine, huh? Instead of hiding drugs in my car and running off like a little bitch, now you’re ready to go head-to-head with me.” He climbs off the bed and comes toward me, the gun

pointed right at my chest. “Good. This should be fun. I’ve been waiting for it for a long time.”

A blast of gunshots from down the hall rings out, ricocheting off the walls. Sloane’s eyes fly open and she cowers against the headboard.

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“What the fuck?” Gianni mutters through gritted teeth and nods at the guy behind Rocco. “Go check it out.”

The guy lets me go and pushes open the door. A second later, a loud thump follows another burst of shots.

Gianni walks back toward the bed and reaches for Sloane. He yanks her off the bed, his arm around her throat, gun to her head. She whimpers against him, her hands clawing at his arm. “Don’t fight me, sweetheart, or you’ll end up like Layla over there and will be zero fucking use to me and my dick.” He nods at me. “Get out. Now.”

The guy behind me pulls me toward the door and shoves me out into the hallway. I edge past Rocco, rubbing my back against his arm, lifting the back of my jacket. I feel him grasp one of the guns, and I let out a sigh of relief. It’s short-lived, though, since I may just get my head blown off the second I set foot in the line of fire. More gunshots explode into the air and a rush of footsteps stomps around the place. I slide around the corner of the doorway. Fucker really should have picked smarter guys who knew enough to frisk me before they brought me up here.

Gianni nudges me forward, his arm around Sloane’s neck with the gun pointed at her temple. Calm. I have to keep calm. If I lose my shit, this will end very badly. I need to just—

Another blast of gunshots peppers the walls next to us. An angry face appears from one of the rooms, a gun hanging from one hand. He steps into the hallway, shirtless, hair mussed. “I thought Layla was gonna make the call when we gave the word,” he

screams at Gianni. “Who the fuck is in here?”

“Would you shut the fuck up, Ant?” Gianni screams back, cocking his gun.

“You guys wanna come out here and see how big your fucking idiot crew is now?” Nico’s voice rings out in the wake of the bullets.

Ant nods toward Gianni. “Get out there and take care of them. Bring the girl. This is your show, remember?”

It dawns on me who Ant is...Anthony DiBiasi. I thought I’d recognized him. He’s part of the Cinque family. He’s been away for a long time, but not long enough as far as I’m concerned. If he’s here, more of them are coming. We need to get the hell out of here and fast. My breath hitches as Sloane’s whimpers float through the air. If I make a move, I’m dead. She’s dead. Rocco is dead.

Too much blood.

I need a plan.

And time.

But I have neither.

Gianni pushes Sloane past me. Her body trembles and her eyes meet mine. Think, think, think!

They creep toward the end of the hall and pause for a second to peer around the corner. One of the doors next to them flies open, and a long metal pipe swings at the side of Gianni’s head. He pitches forward onto the floor and on top of Sloane. The guy behind me shoves me into a wall and plugs the open door with a round of bullets.

Whoever nailed Gianni falls to the floor next to him, covering his head with his hands.

I don't think. I don't breathe. Reaching behind me, I grip the handle of my gun and pull it out. I don't aim, I don't pray. I just shoot. One shot to Ant's chest, and he flies into the door before hitting the floor, sputtering blood.

Rocco pushes past me to roll Gianni off of Sloane. He helps her up and pushes her into one of the rooms. "Lock the door!" He yells, crouching down and peering around the corner. "I'm gonna check things out. You okay?"

"Yeah," I mutter. "Just find Nico, okay?"

Ant is sitting upright against the door, blood pouring from the wound in his chest. Blood drizzles out of his mouth. I bend down next to him. "Hey, Ant, are you the best the Cinques had to send? Didn't you learn anything working for them? Never fucking open a door if you don't know who's waiting for you outside."

Ant's chest heaves, his breaths coming fast and furious. But I don't feel even a shred of remorse. A wave of rage took over once they snatched my girl, and I'm riding it hard.

I struggle to my feet and rake a hand through my hair. Another round of gunshots rings out, and I clutch my gun, edging closer to the end of the hallway. Fuck! Please let that be Nico. I have no idea who's still left around this building, but Sloane is here, along with a number of other innocent women. We need to get them out before anyone else happens to drop in on us. Like the feds or the rest of the Cinques.

I slowly creep forward, my arm extended.

"Hey, you know something? I never got to fuck that hot pussy. Think I'm gonna take

my shot. Now. One for you and then one for her.”

I spin around to find Gianni’s sadistic smile covered with blood. The side of his face is smashed in, blood running down the side of his head and shoulder from the open gash over his ear. I pull the trigger and my body flies backward into a wall, the gun crashing to the floor. A searing pain follows as the bullet tears through my flesh like a hot poker, slicing away at my insides. My head crashes into the hard plaster behind me, blurring my vision. I blink fast, gritting my teeth.

Have to get up. Have to get the gun. Have to save Sloane.

I try to keep my eyes open, try to focus, try to stay alert.

Gianni grins, waving the gun in my face. “Mighty Max. God, it feels fucking good to see you like that. Mikey told me not to kill you. Said you’d suffer more if you were thrown in jail, knowing we sold your girl and that you couldn’t save her. But you know what? I’ve decided to kill you anyway. And I’m gonna fuck your girl and then sell her ’cause she’s no fucking use to me six feet under. So you can die knowing that you fucked with the wrong guy and that I’m about to take everything from you.” A maniacal laugh escapes his lips, and he spits blood onto the floor. “I’ve waited a long time to do this, and I’m gonna enjoy every second. Wanna beg for mercy first?”

“Fuck you!” I sputter, clutching my arm. My fingers are so numb, I can barely stretch them. But that gun...it’s somewhere on the floor next to me. If I can just feel around for it without him noticing...

He cocks an eyebrow. “Do you really think I’m going to let you get that gun and shoot me, Max?” He kicks it away from my outstretched fingers. “Hell no. I’m not. And if you don’t have any final words, then let’s just get on with it, yeah? I’ve got a plane to catch.” He cocks the gun, points it at my forehead, and smirks.



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Images loop through my mind at record speed as I eye the barrel of the gun pointed at me. The couple crossing the street, hugging and kissing. The family in the minivan, laughing and singing. The look on Sloane's face when I told her I loved her.

I knew both my time and my dad's had a definite expiration date. I just never thought I'd go before he did.

I wanted forever.

Instead, I got a small sliver of what could have been.

It wasn't enough. It could never be enough.

My pulse throbs, my chest heaves. The pain slices through me like a machete, but still I grit my teeth and stare up at Gianni. "Just leave her alone. Don't hurt her, Gianni. Walk away. Please," I sputter.

A flash of confusion clouds his expression for a split second, almost like he didn't expect me, a killer, to ask him, another killer, to show mercy to someone. I don't give a shit what he does to me, but her?

I'd go straight to hell and burn down there for infinity if it meant she'd be spared. And for that split second, it looks like I may have gotten through to him.

Then the mask lifts and the evil replaces it. His lips curl into a grin. "Maybe I won't kill her after all. Maybe I'll just take her with me. Then I can fuck that pussy any time I want while you're fucking rotting in some hole." He nods. "Yeah, I like that plan

better. Bye, bye Max.”

Crack!

The exploding shot reverberates between my ears and a deafening clanging sound follows. I’m fucking deaf, but I didn’t feel another shot tear through me. I look down and pull at my clothes. I can move. I can breathe. My head is still attached.

What the hell just happened?

Is this what death feels like?

Gianni staggers forward, collapsing to his knees, blood oozing from his mouth. He has an incredulous look on his face, and I kind of feel the same way right now. Where the hell did that shot even come from?

“Fuck you, Gianni,” A low voice mumbles about a foot away from me. The guy behind the door who attacked Gianni with that pipe...he’s still alive.

With a final breath, Gianni clutches his chest and pitches onto the floor, his body dropping like a cement block at the bottom of the Hudson River.

I slide my legs away just before he crashes next to them. I look down at the blood soaking my shirt and jeans. My arm lies limp at my side. Numbness creeps down to my fingertips, but my shoulder...fuck. I wish I could say it was numb. If I’d been stabbed with scalding hot daggers, it’d be a picnic compared to the searing pain incinerating my insides. I feel around on the floor for my gun with my good hand, but there’s nothing but ratty carpet beneath my fingertips.

“Don’t bother...I’ve got it...” The same voice that told Gianni to fuck himself rasps next to me.

Shaky breaths make my chest quiver. My head rolls to the side, not knowing entirely what to expect, but thinking a shot between the eyes is looming.

The door squeaks open, looking as if it had been used for target practice. My gaze falls to the guy lying on the floor. Holy fuck.

Tommy.

He's still clutching my gun in his bloody hand. He looks up at me and nods, his breaths short and sharp. "Jesus...Christ, man. You almost...got your...head...blown off."

A dry laugh escapes my lips as Tommy drops the gun and drops his head to the floor, as if the effort required to choke out those words was too much for him to bear. "Yeah, well, I hope you already got paid, man, since you just iced the cocksucker who hired you." I clench my teeth, trying to straighten up.

"I tried to text you when I found Sloane," Tommy says, his voice thick. "But they took my phone when they caught me typing. Fucking smashed it. Killed my friend Dino, too." He shakes his head, clutching his temples.

"How bad are you hit?" I ask, wincing as I shift against the wall.

Tommy lets out a moan. "Bad enough. He got me in the leg. Christ, if I'd have been standing in front of him, I don't know that he'd have taken me out. He can't shoot for shit."

"Damn straight."

I turn my head in the direction of the pained female voice. Layla slithers out of the room, pulling herself by one forearm.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter. “You’re fucking alive?”

She drops to the floor, her head in her hand. “For the moment.”

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“Good. Then you can fucking die there.” My voice hardens. “You kidnapped Sloane and brought her here, drugged her and the others, and were waiting for the feds to take down the family? Your family, you bitch! Why? Because you needed money? You screwed us all over for money? Or was it just because you were pissed off that I chose her over you?”

Layla raises her head, and with a roll of her eyes, she lets out a snort. “You know something? You’re a real self-centered asshole.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that a lot, too.” Kat’s amused voice joins us in the hallway, which now resembles a massacre.

“So Rocco hauled ass out of here and fingered you to come and save the day. Typical. Pussy,” I mutter.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Kat cocks an eyebrow at me. “His fingers didn’t come anywhere near me, okay? That shit only happens in his dreams.”

A loud snort comes from behind Kat. “You mean nightmares.”

Kat rolls her eyes and flips her long hair. “Okay, tough guy. Nico said the feds are still coming, so we need to move fast. Let’s get them out of here.” She walks over to Layla and bends down to help her up.

“No, she stays. She fucking betrayed us all. Leave her there!” I bellow, struggling to my feet.

The door next to me slowly creaks open. “No, Max. She’s with us.”

I twist my head to look at Sloane. I crawl over to her and pull her tight into my chest. The movement hurts like hell, but I need to feel her in my arms. Well, at least one arm. The other one is pretty much dead at this point. Better one limb than my whole body.

She shivers against me, teeth chattering. Still dressed in only the lingerie I found her in, she peers down at my arm and eyes it like the pro she is. With a half-smile, she says, “I think you’ll live.”

“Thank fuck for that.” I bury my head in her neck and fist her hair. “I got you back. I got you back, baby. God, I love you so fucking much,” I murmur.

“I love you, too,” she whispers, tears pooling in her eyes. “I was so afraid I’d never see you again to tell you that.”

I rest my back against the wall, still holding her as close as possible. She tilts her head upward. “Layla came to find me. She told me Nico was on his way to rescue me. All of us. She made sure I stayed in a room by myself, away from everyone. But Gianni...” Her voice breaks and my gut clenches. What did that motherfucker do to her?

She sniffles and wipes her eyes. “He was doing so many drugs. He was higher than a kite. So Layla stayed close to make sure nothing happened.” She opened her hand to reveal a key. “I was able to get this, but I never got to use it. I never got the chance before...” Her voice breaks off, and I rub her bare arms. I try to shake off my jacket but there’s a big bullet hole that’s causing me a little bit of a problem.

Kat smirks at me struggling and shrugs off her coat. She tosses it to Sloane who pulls it on with lightning speed.

I turn to look at Layla, who's pulled herself to a sitting position. "Yeah, so before you feed me to the wolves, Max, those are just a few things you should know about."

"What the hell were you even doing here, Layla?" I narrow my eyes at her.

She lets out a frustrated sigh. "Look, not that it's any of your damn business, but things have been really hard since my dad died. My mom and I were pretty much left with nothing, and even the money she gets doesn't cover a whole lot. I needed cash, okay? Nico said he'd take care of things for us." She throws her hands into the air. "And now I'm fucked because the Cinques will find out I was working with Nico the whole time."

"You're not the only one who's on their radar," Rocco mumbles, running a hand through his hair. Kat furrows her brow and turns toward him, but he looks away.

I shake my head. I can't worry about Rocco or Kat right now. We'll worry about all of that tomorrow. I need to get my girl out of here before any other surprise guests show up.

Layla accepts the hand that Rocco holds out and grunts as she stands up. He wraps an arm around her waist and hoists her up.

She looks at me. "The feds will be here soon. Mikey and Gianni set this whole thing up with the Cinques. It's bad. They want to take over this whole territory but not before completely destroying the Salesi family."

"I know. Well, I know what Nico thought I should know." I roll my eyes. "But I never thought you were the one on the inside."

"A friend in need is a friend indeed." Layla shrugs. "We helped each other out. But we need to move fast. There isn't much time. And Mikey..."

“Yeah, where the hell is Mikey?” Rocco asks.

Layla shakes her head. “I don’t know. He could be on a plane by now. That was his plan, anyway. He was going to leave the other guys here to deal with everything so he could save his own ass. I don’t even think he’d give a damn to find out Gianni is dead.”

“What a dick,” I mutter. “And I was really looking forward to plugging some holes into him, too.”

Loud thumping sounds shake the floor beneath us, and Nico runs in with the rest of his crew following close behind. “The feds are close. Johnny is downstairs watching for them. Sirens are getting louder. We need to move.” He points to me and Rocco. “You guys need to get out of here now. Take Sloane and Kat.”

“Wait, what about the other women? My friend Jules is in there,” Sloane waves toward the door behind us. “They’re alive, but either passed out or strung out from the drugs. They need medical attention. We can’t leave them! I won’t leave them!”



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“Sloane,” I murmur. “We need to get out of here. If the feds catch us here, we’re all fucked. We’ll take Jules with us. The feds will take care of the others.”

Sloane shakes her head. “I’m staying. I’ll tell them the truth when they question me. I was kidnapped, for Pete’s sake! But I can’t leave knowing they’re here, by themselves. What if they have a reaction? It’s my responsibility to make sure they’re okay. It’s my job.”

I look up at Nico. “I’m not going. I won’t leave her again.”

Layla nods. “Okay, that’s fine. We’ll take care of things here. Nico, you need to get the hell out of here, though. Like, now.” She exchanges a look with Nico and he lets out an impatient sigh.

“Fine!” He says, throwing his hands in the air. “Max, you stay with the girls. You’re licensed to carry a firearm because of the security work you did at the club.” He points at a few of his other guys. “Same with you. The story is simple. Layla was kidnapped and kept as a sex slave by the Bonnaros. She managed to escape and came straight to you guys. When you got here, you did what you needed to do to save them. No time to call the cops. Got it?”

Kat claps her hands. “Very nice work, Mr. CEO. Always ready with a story, huh?”

Nico smirks at Kat. “You should know better than anyone that you always need an alibi.” He motions for the rest of the guys to follow him. “Johnny just texted me again. We need to move.” He stares at his phone and moves past the elevator. “Let’s take the stairs. The last fucking thing we need is for this elevator to get stuck.” He

reaches for the door handle and pulls it open. “Johnny said we probably have about ten min—”

“Ten minutes, huh, Salesi? I don’t know about that. I think your time’s just run out, you motherfucker!” A low, gravelly voice growls from inside the stairwell, pushing Nico forward with the barrel of a gun. Mike pushes about five of his guys ahead of him so they cover ours. “You really thought you were gonna just come in here and blow this whole thing open? You didn’t think I was on to you? On to all of you?” He laughs, a crazed, sinister sound that sends chills through me. I shove Sloane over to the room at the end of the hallway to keep her out of sight and away from this standoff. I look around on the floor, but my gun is too far out of reach.

There are about six of our guys with guns on Mikey, but he’s got one gun on Nico and a handful of guys ready to take us out. That means nobody shoots until he gives the word. And Mikey knows that, bastard that he is.

“Hey, Max,” Mikey calls to me. “You’re next, you sonofabitch. I should’ve finished the job the night I popped your dad, but you know what they say. An eye for an eye. You took, and now I’m gonna take!” he screams, shoving Nico against a wall.

Sloane’s whimpers cut me like shards of glass, and I slide a finger to my lips, shifting around...to do what, I have no idea. I’ve never felt so fucking helpless and useless in my life.

Mikey’s goal is to take down the Salesis. If he can’t get Nico indicted for sex trafficking, he’ll do the next best thing and kill him in cold blood in front of his own crew. You cut the head off a snake and it goes fucking nuts. We saw that first-hand when we took out the head of the Cappodamo family.

Is that his plan?

The eye-for-an-eye bullshit?

Did he lure Nico here with that plan in mind? Did he feed Layla bad information to get Nico down here?

Did he know?

The throbbing between my temples paralyzes my mind for a few blissful seconds. There are so many unanswered questions, too many to worry about right now. Although, Nico looks cool as a fucking cucumber right now. He'll never show any signs of fear.

Fear makes you weak.

Weakness gets you killed.

That's always been his mantra.

And he's sticking with it.

Rocco's hand slides behind his back and he grips the handle of his gun. I try to catch his eye. I know we don't have a better option, but Mikey won't think twice about shooting Nico, even if it means he dies, too.

Time stands still. There isn't time to dick around for much longer. Mikey must know that. He's getting ready to make his bold move. That's why he has his guys here, ready to attack. They're gonna be his armor once he pulls that damn trigger.

"You fucking assholes took too much!" Mikey screams, yanking Nico back by the collar of his shirt. "Especially you, Salesi! Your grandfather put my dad in prison. He was killed on the inside because of an order your fucking family gave!" He twists

Nico around to look at him. “Did you know that? Or were you too busy screwing the chicks at your sex club?” He narrows his eyes. “And don’t think I’m done after I plug your ass, Salesi. I’m going for Shaye.” Mikey looks at me, a wild look in his eye. “That’s right, Max. I’m taking every fucking thing! This doesn’t end today. Oh, no. This ends when I fucking say it does!” He thrusts the gun deeper into Nico’s spine, and I can see him wince. But it’s so brief, I could have almost missed the pinched expression on his face.

Nico’s voice is calm and reassuring, even with this crazed lunatic pressing a gun to his temple. “Mikey, my grandfather—”

“Shut the fuck up, Salesi! I wanted to see you rot in prison, but that was before you assholes killed my brother! Now you’re gonna rot right next to him, six feet fucking under!” He cocks the gun and our guys scramble, exchanging panicked looks, knowing they have no chance to save him.

Mikey looks at me again, his eyes wild and desperate. “Hey, Max, once I blow Nico’s head off, think about taking over for him as the head of the family. You should be able to drive it into the ground in no time, you good for nothing asshole!”

I slide myself up the wall with no gun in my hand but a whole lot of rage bubbling in my veins. Tommy shoots me a look, but I shake my head.

I look at the guys, all poised to take Mikey out, but the sick fuck is ready to die. The only thing is, he won’t die alone. He’s taking Nico with him.

“This is fucking poetic. Your fearless leader! He doesn’t look too fearless to me, does he, guys? Nope, he looks like he’s about to shit his Armani pants, don’t you think?” Mikey gets close to Nico’s ear. “I’m gonna end this for you, Nico. Any final orders for your crew? Yeah, I didn’t think so!”

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Piercing screams ricochet off the walls, echoing in the space. I throw my body over Sloane to protect her as bullets fly through the air. I don't have time to mourn my best friend. I don't even know if I have time to pray that one of our guys took the fucker out after he pulled that trigger.

"Max!" I peek over to Tommy, still covering Sloane's head with my hands. He slides the gun toward me, and I grab it with one hand. I swallow past the lump in my throat and twist my head toward the carnage. I blink fast to make sense of the scene and then slide Sloane out from under me before leaping to my feet. I ignore the sensation that my chest is being impaled with a searing hot piece of metal, raise my hand, and shoot in the direction of Mikey's guys. One of them lands on the floor next to Mikey with a loud thud. My chest tightens when my eyes fall to Nico where he lays on the floor a couple of feet away from Mikey.

There's no blood...

Where's the fucking blood?

I point to the guys behind me. "Get Nico away from him!"

Mikey flails around, his back to us, screaming about revenge and betrayal, bullet holes peppering his shirt. I can't tell where they're even coming from at this point since a couple of our guys are now dragging Nico out of the line of fire. Rocco and Kat crouch on the floor next to him, taking them out one by one. Mikey's been hit plenty from what I can see from my spot against a corner wall. But still he doesn't

drop. He doesn't show any signs that his body is being used for target practice right now. It's almost as if his hatred of our family makes him impervious to pain and death. The loud cracks of the bullets explode into the air, reverberating between my temples. I shoot once, twice, and finally, he collapses on top of a couch.

I collapse against a wall, ragged breaths slicing through my lungs. Sloane runs over to me. "Oh, my God!" she screams. "Are you okay?"

I grunt a response because forming words is a little tough right now. I hold her tight and look over at Nico. He clutches the side of his head. Blood oozes from a cut over his left eye, and he swipes at it. "Max," he rasps, standing up.

"Let me guess. I'm your favorite again because I saved the family and killed the bad guy, right?" I snicker. "It's about fucking time you—"

"Max!" He shouts, pointing behind a chair in the corner of the room. He runs over to the spot and crouches down next to something I still can't quite make out from this distance. "Shut the hell up and get over here!"

I drop Sloane's hand and creep toward him, my throat tight as I approach. I drop down next to Nico.

"Dad?" I choke out, my hand shooting out to the dark red stain spreading over the black wool overcoat. I trace my fingers over the damp fabric, the sound of my father's labored breathing making my chest ache. Only this time, it's not because of hot poker impaling me. "Fuck, Dad, why didn't you stay in the car? Why would you...? Goddammit! We could have taken care of you. I told you to stay. I begged you to stay," My voice drops to a choked whisper.

Dad covers my hand with his and squeezes. He looks up to Nico and gives him a slight nod.

“You saved my life, Tony,” Nico murmurs, clasping his shoulder. “You put yourself on the line for me after...everything.” His voice cracks and he rakes a hand through his hair. “Thank you.”

Dad’s eyes flicker toward me. His skin has already transformed from his normal olive shade to a pale ashen, and although his fingertips grip mine tight, they’re cold. So fucking cold.

The page turned, and I now know how this story ends...

“I’m so-sorry,” Max,” he rasps. “For everything. But you...I know you will make it all right. You’ll keep making me proud. I should have told you that so many times before. I want you to know it.”

“I do know it, Dad,” I whisper, a sob creeping into my throat. I swallow it down, but it stays stuck in the back of my throat.

“Take care of your mother and sister,” he whispers, bringing an ice-cold hand to the side of my face. “I love you, son.”

“I love you, Dad.”

The grip on my fingers loosens until his fingers go completely slack. His eyes droop closed, his head dropping back against the wall. It’s almost as if he was waiting to hear those final words before he could let go.

And the sobs I tried to keep buried finally erupt from the depths. My shoulders quake as the silent tears pool in my eyes, spilling down the sides of my face.

So much lost time. So much anger and disappointment. Such a fucking waste.

I squeeze my eyes shut for one second, trying desperately to process everything.

My dad is dead. Christ, how many times had I wished for this over the years? And now that he's gone, all I want is to bring him back, to start over, to resurrect the relationship we'd begun to form over the past few days...the one we should have had for my entire life.

Nico places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Max."

I nod, turning to Nico. "Get out of here."

His brow furrows. "Are you sure you're okay with all of this?"

"Yeah." I struggle to my feet and run a hand through my hair. Somehow, the pain in my side has subsided. Maybe it's because the ache in my heart has taken over and blunted everything else. "I'll handle it."



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Rocco and Kat inch closer, murmuring their condolences. Sloane throws her arms around my neck. "I'm so sorry, Max," she whispers.

Rocco clears his throat and claps me on the back. "Let me know what you need, man."

"Right now, we need to salvage this family, so we need to move." Nico points at his security guys. "You stick with Max and the girls. Keep me posted." He looks back at me. "I owe you both my life."

"Fucking-A right, you do." I manage a small smile and nudge him toward the exit. "But right now, you need to get the fuck away from here. Tommy!" I call out, waving him over. "Go with them. You have to get to the hospital now. It's Eli." My chest tightens when I see a look of fear shadow his face. "Nurse Clara called me this afternoon. She was looking for you and thought I might be able to help find you. Eli's gotten worse. He needs you. These guys will take you to the hospital. I'll meet you there."

Tommy claps me on the back. "Thanks, man," he says, voice cracking. He runs out of the building with Rocco and Kat, leaving Nico with me, Sloane, and Layla.

"You gonna be alright?" Nico asks.

I pull Sloane tight to my chest, rubbing my hand down her back. "Yeah," I manage. "Actually, I think finally I am."

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Max

“So you decided to run in there and shoot the place up instead of calling the cops?” The federal officer standing next to my bed in the Emergency Room at Holy Name Hospital...I think he said his name was Torres...asks with a cocked eyebrow. “That doesn’t seem like a smart plan to me.”

I look at him and cock an eyebrow. “You think I was gonna risk my girl getting sold to Christ only knows who while I waited for the cops to get off their Krispy Kreme-eating asses to get their warrants in place?” I shake my head. “Not a shot in hell. I’m licensed to carry a firearm, and so are the other guys who were with me.”

“And your father? He was identified at the scene. How do you explain him being in the middle of that? He’s got a record about ten miles long and some known affiliations with the Bonnaros. You sure he wasn’t involved in some way?”

“He came to back me up. He didn’t want me to handle things alone. I don’t know anything about him and the Bonnaros.” I somehow manage to keep my voice even. Seeing him carried out of that place in a body bag...it’s something I never thought I’d personally witness. He knew he wouldn’t last...knew it was only a matter of time before that target on his forehead exploded.

He wanted to make things right...for all of us.

And he did.

It was his final play.

And it was fucking epic.

Thank you, Dad...

Torres narrows his eyes. “What are you not telling me, Max? Was your father with the Bonnaros? Was he involved with the trafficking ring they’d set up?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I already told you everything. Layla DiVincenzo had been kidnapped by the Bonnaros and held as a sex slave, along with my girlfriend and a few others. Layla somehow escaped earlier today and came to find me. She told me the Bonnaros contracted with some buyers from overseas and made arrangements to sell her and the rest of the women, and—”

“I know, I know.” Torres rolls his eyes. “Big twist. The buyers were no-shows, you ran in to save the day, took out all the bad guys, and survived to tell the story. What a fucking hero. And, oh, by the way, the only evidence of a sale just happens to go up in smoke along with the alleged perpetrators when you took them out.”

“If you guys didn’t have all that red tape to cut through, you’d have been there before the shit hit the fan. Jesus, how the hell do you ever catch criminals?” I shake my head, knowing I’m just pissing him off even more than my lack of cooperation is. “Listen, Agent Torres, are we done here? I don’t have any more to tell you, and I’d like to talk to my mother and sister now, to tell them my dad is dead.” I grit my teeth, wishing like hell I had more morphine to get me through that conversation. I’d gladly take a bullet through my other shoulder to avoid dropping that bombshell on them.

Torres leans in close, his dark eyes narrowed. I guess this is how he does menacing. If I wasn’t laid up here at the hospital, he’d probably try to beat some more information out of me. “I think you know more than you’re letting on. But don’t worry, I’m gonna be back for more. Don’t think this is over, Max. We’re watching you and your pals Nico Salesi and Rocco Lucchese. You’re all on our radar.” He

turns on his heel and moves toward the door, shoulders squared.

“Hey, Agent Torres.”

With a swift turn, he flashes a look of annoyance at me. I didn’t give him what he came for, but how much did he really think he’d ever get anyway? Is that why he waited to interrogate me? Did he think I’d give shit up just because there was morphine running through my veins? He doesn’t know shit about me.

“You never showed me your badge.”

He stares me down for what seems like a damn long minute until words actually come out of his mouth. “We’re watching you, Max. Don’t forget it.” With a hard glare, he turns his back on me and stalks out of the room, past the doctor on his way in. I grit my teeth. Yeah, I definitely need more drugs.

This life.

It becomes more toxic every day.

Someone is always watching.

And waiting to strike.

I don’t know who the fuck Torres is, but he knows us.

And he’ll be back.

They always come back.

The doctor looks up from my chart, his mouth stretching into a tight line. “How are

you feeling, Max?”

“Like someone torched my right side and then sliced into me like I’m a fucking ribeye.” I lean back against the pillows and let out a deep sigh. “Any shot you can refresh my morphine?”

He stares at me, not making a move to do a damn thing. “I saw Sloane come in with you before.”

Fuck. This must be the doctor. I squint to read the name attached to his white coat, not that it matters. Dr. Steven Kiley. I scrub a hand down the front of my face, never in a million years thinking I’d run into him, now of all times. Not that I’d ever be able to pick him out of a lineup. The last time we met I’d been pretty beaten up and my eyes were probably still swollen shut enough not to get a good look at him.

“Is she outside?”

Dr. Kiley checks my shoulder and nods. “She’s a really special girl. You’re a lucky guy. I hope you know that.”

“I do.” I wince as he presses a finger into the flesh around my wound. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t an accident. Dick.

He backs away. “We’re getting an operating room prepped to remove the bullet. But there’s no sign of infection, no redness.”

“Thanks,” I say in a flat voice.

“You know, I’ve been working here for a long time. I’ve never seen so many cops in the waiting room.” Dr. Kiley says, his tone sounding vaguely accusatory. “Not even for major accidents.”

“What are you getting at?” I narrow my eyes, clenching the bedsheet in my fists.

“Sloane is a good girl. I don’t think she needs to be involved in whatever kind of life you lead. Sex trafficking, drugs, kidnapping from what the cops are saying...did I hit on all the highlights?”

“You don’t fucking know anything about me,” I growl, my face twisting, my heart thudding hard against my chest. I want to grab this asshole by his coat and shove him through a goddamn wall. “Don’t you dare judge what you don’t understand.”

“Seems like I understand it pretty well.” He folds his arms across his chest. “And you’re right. I don’t know you, but what I do know is that I’ve never been interrogated by a federal officer. I’ve never been shot. I’ve never had a girlfriend of mine kidnapped by sex traffickers. I don’t live that kind of life. And it’s not the one Sloane deserves.”

I sit up straight on the gurney, my fingers twitching to unload fucking fury on this asshole. “Don’t you fucking stand there telling me how bad I am for Sloane. I would lay my life down for that woman.”

“Yeah, but maybe Sloane should be with someone who isn’t faced with that choice quite so often.” Dr. Kiley cocks an eyebrow, and I want to scratch it off his condescending face. “Think about her future instead of your own.”

Fury consumes me, and I grab a pitcher of water from the side table and fling it across the room, ice and water splashing everywhere. Dr. Kiley jumps to avoid getting hit, his arms flailing to protect himself from the chilled water. His foot catches a puddle, and he skids around on the slippery floor until he crashes into a wall.

He came damn close to wiping out.

And he never saw it coming.

“Shit gets dangerous in places we least expect, don’t they, Doc?” I snarl. “At least Sloane can feel comfortable that I’m always ready for anything that comes my way...unlike you, who almost took a nose dive into some ceramic tile because you let your guard down.” I point to the IV stand next to me. “Now, if you can please do something for this pain, I’d appreciate it. I don’t want to ask again.”

Dr. Kiley narrows his eyes, but he adjusts the morphine drip. I take a deep breath and settle back on the pillows, waiting for the numbness to set in.

“Thanks,” I say.

The doctor nods and stalks out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

A few minutes later, the door opens, and Mom and Shaye run toward me, their faces streaked with tears.

“Sweetie, are you okay?” Mom grazes my shoulder with her fingertips. “Oh, my God, what happened? Nobody will tell us anything, and we’ve been waiting and waiting, and nobody has seen Dad.” Her voice cracks, dropping to a whisper as she strokes the side of my face. “Why not, baby? Where’s your father? Why haven’t they brought him in yet?”

Shaye cries softly into my good shoulder, gripping my hand tight. “Daddy is...” she murmurs. “He’s not coming, is he?”

I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes. “No,” I murmur, stroking Shaye’s back. “He isn’t.”

Her body quivers against me as the sobs rise from her throat. Mom’s hand flies to her mouth. “No,” she whimpers through her fingers. “God, no, please tell me it’s not true! I told him not to go! I begged him to stay with us!”

I reach for her, gritting my teeth as I stretch my hand toward hers. It hurts, yeah, but nothing like the pain tearing apart their hearts right now. I struggle to keep my voice steady. “He did what he felt he had to do, Mom. There was a lot he wanted to...needed to...make up for. And he did.” I turn my head toward Shaye. “He saved Nico’s life. He saved my life. He saved a lot of lives today. The Salesi family won today, all because of Dad.”

Tears stream down Mom’s face, her shoulders quaking with sobs. “He carried all of



that with him for so long. Why didn't he say anything? Why didn't he tell us?" she whispers. "We could have helped."

"You know he'd have never say a word about any of it. He tried to do right by us and he made some big mistakes along the way. But he came through in the end. He knew his time was short, guys. He was hurt really bad. He'd made a lot of enemies, ones who wanted him to suffer. He beat them at their own game, and he saved us all." My voice quivers, and I squeeze my mother's hand. "He loved you guys so much. Loved all of us."

Take care of your mother and your sister.

Keep making me proud.

I love you, son.

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A gaggle of tears catches in my throat, choking me, just like the grief. Just like the guilt.

So much time wasted.

So much anger, so much despair.

But we came together in the end.

We fixed in a very short amount of time what had been broken for far too long.

We made promises.

We exchanged words.

We re-sealed our shattered bond.

Never to be broken again.

Sloane

I smooth back of Jules's matted hair and smile at her as her eyes flutter open.

"What the fuck?" she mutters in a groggy voice.

I lace my fingers with hers and squeeze. "Not to say I told you so, but how many times have I warned you about going home with strange boys?"

Jules lets out a groan and clutches her head. "Jesus Christ! I just wanted to have a little fun! And next thing I know, I'm thrown into the back of some minivan, drugged, and tied to some bed with a bunch of derelicts watching me squirm around in my fucking underwear.

I bite down on my lower lip. "Did they...did anyone...?" I don't want to finish the question.

Jules shakes her head, her expression shadowed by anger. "Yeah, a couple of them did. I guess that's how I got these." She points to the bruises around her neck, wrists, and jaw. Tears pool in her eyes. "I didn't think I'd ever manage to escape. And if I did, I doubt I'd be alive long enough to tell anyone what happened."

I lean down to hug my friend without pressing too hard against her. The last thing I want to do is cause her more pain. She's suffered more than enough already. "Your mom is outside. She's been waiting for you to wake up."

Jules groans and shifts on the bed. "Yeah, whoever doped me up today did a fucking

bang-up job. I didn't know what planet I was on until a few minutes ago." She narrows her eyes. "And what about the assholes who snatched us? Did the cops catch them? Please tell me they're gonna be ass-rammed hard when they get thrown in prison."

"They're dead, sweetie. Max showed up right in time to help us get away. Some of the guys he works security with found out where we were being held and they took care of Gianni and his brother."

"Like...killed them? With guns?" Jules sits up slightly, her dark eyes wide.

I nod. "Yes, well, they're all licensed to carry, so when they heard we were kidnapped, they came running."

"Damn." She taps her bruised cheek with a broken fingernail. "So, Max...he's like...connected or something?"

I furrow my brow, trying as hard as I can to look confused. I know from Max what details to admit to, and what questions to avoid answering. I hate lying, but I have to think of it more as protecting from now on. "Connected? No. He's just..." I pause, a smile playing at my lips. "He's just a badass who happens to carry a gun for a living, that's all."

My badass.

Jules nods. "Well, I guess he must be pretty good at his job, huh?"

"Guess so."

"I'm sure Dr. Kiley is devastated." Jules waggles her eyebrows at me.

“He’ll make some other nurse a very happy lady one day.”

“And what about you? Are you going to be a very happy lady one day? Is this guy Max going to give you what you’re looking for? Because you’re giving up a lot to be with him, sweetie. You know that, right?”

The grin spreads across my face, so powerful that I can’t stop it if I tried. “Max has already given me more than I ever knew I needed.” I wink at her. “And just for the record, I’m a very happy lady right now.”

What can I say? I knew I loved him the first time he threw a worm at me when we were kids digging around in the dirt together. Stupid little girls and their fantasies about knights in shining armor coming to rescue them from evil.

Who knew it would ever become a reality?

Sloane

I pull the door to Jules’s room closed and head down the hallway to Max’s room. She drifted off a little while ago, and now I need to get back to Max. He’s headed in for surgery soon, and even though it’s minor, I want to spend some time with him before he goes under.

I knock on the door and push it open when I hear his voice. I recoil once I step inside of the room. “Daddy? What are you doing here? I thought you said you were going to the cafeteria.”

Dad stands up and smooths the front of his pants. “I did, but I, uh, wanted to come back here to wish Max well.” He looks down at Max and nods.

Max gives him a salute. “I appreciate the talk, Mr. C.”

“Take care of yourself,” Dad says in a gruff voice. He holds out a hand to Max, and Max grasps it. “And thank you again for everything you did. Thank you for rescuing my daughter.”

I throw my arms around my father’s neck. “Thank you, Daddy. That means so much to me.”

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Dad clears his throat and backs away. “Good luck with the surgery.” He looks at me. “I’ll be waiting outside.”

I smile. “Okay. I’ll be there in a bit.”

Dad turns and walks out of the room, pulling the door closed behind him. I collapse into the chair next to Max and reach for his hands, putting them each to my lips. “How did it go with your mom and Shaye? I must have been in with Jules when they showed up because I still haven’t seen them.”

“I think they went to the chapel.” Max struggles to sit up. He lets out a deep sigh, running his good hand through his hair. “I think deep down they know he wasn’t coming back. But the shock of the news...” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t mean it’s any easier for them to swallow.

“I know. And I’m so sorry. I wish he was still here and that you had more time together.” I swallow hard. “And that none of this ever happened in the first place.”

Max’s mouth presses into a tight line. “Is this really what you want, Sloane? Does this make you happy? Knowing what could have happened to you today? To your friend? All because of me?” He cups my chin in his hand. “Do you really want a future like this? Because I can’t promise you the perfect life that you deserve. I can only promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe and happy. But I get it if that’s not—”

I place a fingertip to his lips to prevent his next words from being spoken. “That sounds pretty perfect to me,” I whisper, tears pooling in my eyes.

“I don’t want to see you suffer like my mom and my sister.”

“Then you’d better be really careful.” I smile through the tears spilling down my cheeks.

“I’ve taken a lot of chances in my life. Made some pretty fucking stupid decisions, too. I never believed I had a good enough reason not to. But now...being with you...” The corners of his lips curl upward. “It’s the only thing that keeps me going. I don’t want to be that asshole guy anymore. I want to be the responsible guy, the one who takes care of the woman he loves, the one who will do fucking anything he can to protect her.”

I lean my head toward his and graze his lips with mine. “You are that guy. And that’s why I’m so crazy about you.”

He smiles, and my insides melt. Just like they always do when those lips curl into that mischievous smirk I’ve grown to adore. “Have you seen Tommy?”

“Yes. He’s with Eli now.” I rub the back of my neck. “He’s stable, thank God. But the doctors still have him under heavy observation. I’m so thankful Rocco and Kat got him here in time. I can’t imagine...” My voice trails off. “Tommy helped save me. He helped save you.”

“Yeah, and I’m gonna try to help him this time by making sure he doesn’t make any more jackass mistakes.”

“But his bills...what’s he going to do? He doesn’t have any money. And his mother,” I shake my head. “She’s useless. And in jail.”

Max laces his fingers with mine. “Do you trust me?”

Butterflies swarm in my belly under his heated gaze. I slowly nod my head. “I do,” I



whisper.

“Then you know I’ll take care of everything, right?” A shiver zips down my spine as his fingertips graze the column of my neck.

“Yes,” I breathe, my eyes floating closed. How is it possible that even the most innocent touch from this man can make my knees buckle and cause my name to be a distant memory?

One of the trauma nurses, Marcie, walks in and my eyes fly open to find a playful grin on her freckled face. “Sloane, it’s time to prep this handsome guy for surgery. Your dad is outside waiting for you.”

I nod. “Thanks, Marcie.”

Max’s fingers tighten around mine. “I’m not done with you yet. Get over here,” he whispers as Marcie starts putting an IV together.

I dip my head, his warm breath tickling my cheek. “I love you, Sloane. I always have, and I always will. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, and I probably will make a hell of a lot more. But you’re it for me, and I won’t fuck up again. At least...” He smirks at me. “Not on purpose.”

I let out a soft giggle and stroke his cheek with my fingertips. “Great.”

“Just be ready,” he murmurs. “When the doctors put me back together, I’m going to show you how crazy I am about you.”

“Mmm. I can’t wait. My shower or yours?”