



The Torturer's Target

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Description: She broke into his house like an angel of the night, so incredibly beautiful—her eyes bright with pure hatred, and a dagger aimed unerringly at him.

"Who are you?" Max demanded, his voice cutting through the lingering haze of sleep. "Who sent you?"

With unsettling calmness, she responded, "I'm the last face you'll ever see. Tonight, I'll take your life in the most graphic way you could ever imagine." Then, she threw the dagger straight at him.

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Tesiera Anderson is popularly known as 'The Torturer' in the underworld, due to her unmatched skill in inflicting unfathomable pain and torture to her victims.

Just her name alone strikes fear into the hearts of the most merciless crime lords, for all her targets end up dead—some in methods more gruesome, more graphic than anyone could ever imagine.

She answers to no one, serves no master—a woman with a heart carved out of stone. Humor eludes her; she never learned how to smile. Some argue she possesses no soul; her brown eyes, cold and devoid of life.

A new prey has been marked by her, and his name is Maximilian Kingston. A multimillionaire at the helm of a vast hotel empire, and for personal reasons, he has become a special target for her. She harbors an intense hatred towards him to the extent that her entire existence revolves around the day she can at last bring an end to his life.

And that day finally came.

However, when she goes after him, she is bound to discover that things aren't as they seem with the devilishly handsome multimillionaire. Not only did it seem like everything she'd thought she knew was wrong, but the man tempted her in ways she'd never been tempted before.

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PROLOGUE

Tesiera and her father Roman were walking home from an outing at the park on a pleasant Wednesday evening. The weather was delightfully warm, and they reveled in the gentle breeze around them.

“Did you have fun today, sweetie?” Roman asked, happiness coursing through him. She beamed with excitement.

“Yes! Thank you, Daddy,” she beamed. Roman’s heart ached with love at her radiant grin.

Roman lifted his daughter onto his hip, and remembered she wasn’t his little girl anymore. The eight-year-old was becoming quite heavy to carry, and he groaned as he lifted her. She giggled in childlike delight. She still loved it when her father carried her.

“You know, I’d do anything for you, Tesiera. You’re my beautiful, smart, and strong angel,” Roman promised, planting a loving kiss on her forehead and squeezing her in a tight hug.

“Daddy, why don’t we see Uncle Damian anymore?” Tesiera asked, pulling away from the hug and gazing at her father with curiosity.

Roman was taken aback by the unexpected question but didn’t let it show. He hadn’t expected his little girl to notice the strained relationship between him and his brother, but then again, he shouldn’t be surprised. Tesiera was remarkably astute.

“Your Uncle Damian is a busy man, Tesiera. I know he misses you,” Roman fibbed with a forced smile. The truth was his brother wasn’t a good person by any measure. But he wasn’t certain that Damian missed his niece. Roman had been avoiding his brother’s calls and distancing himself from the only family he had left. Roman didn’t want Tesiera to get entangled with Damian, or worse, with the family business. It was why he had walked away years ago.

“You’re lost in thought again.”

Her voice brought him back to the present. “I’m right here, sweetheart,” he assured her, gently placing her back on the ground and holding her soft hand. Together, they continued their walk down the quiet alley leading to their neighborhood. They jumped at the loud crack of gunfire. The sound echoed off the buildings, making it impossible to know from where the shot was fired.

Tesiera burst into tears as Roman instinctively scooped her into his arms, desperate to find shelter to protect him and his daughter from danger. He turned on his heel, nearly ran into a menacing man dressed in black, a ski mask covering everything but his eyes. Roman let out a startled yelp, and a shiver ran down his spine as he noticed the rifle in the man’s grip, just a trigger-pull away from unleashing death.

More footsteps echoed in the alley. Three more men, all clad in the same black attire and ski masks, appeared behind the man, sending Roman’s fear skyrocketing. Their numbers had grown, and the weapons in their hands heightened the threat.

“We don’t have time for this, Jaden; the police are already closing in!” one of the men hissed nervously, glancing over his shoulder.

“Now they know my name, asshole. We must do something about them,” Jaden replied with a smirk, his focus on Roman and his daughter never wavering. “Drop the girl.”

“Please, just let us go. We didn’t see anything. We were just at the park. We were just coming home from the park,” Roman pleaded, repeating himself as he gently placed Tesiera on the ground, pushing her behind him. The frightened little girl trembled in fear, clutching the hem of her father’s shirt tightly.

Roman noticed Jaden’s black outfit was distinctive compared to the others, and he had more sophisticated weaponry. But the man beside him was a slightly smaller figure, resembling a young teen.

“Take them,” Jaden ordered. The armed man in front of them aimed his gun at Roman’s heart.

Roman quickly put his hands up, his body trembling with fear and beads of sweat forming on his brow. “Please. We don’t have any money. Spare us!” Roman clasped his hands and pleaded with the men, revealing a golden locket on his wrist.

Jaden’s eyes gleamed.

“But you have that. Give it to me,” he demanded, pointing at the locket. Roman gasped and quickly pulled his sleeve over it, but it was too late. Jaden had seen it.

“I said give it!” Jaden repeated, his face contorting in anger.

“No!” Roman refused, an act that startled both the men and even Tesiera. What gave him the courage?

Jaden stepped closer, towering over Roman, with the teenager following suit. “You dare defy me?”

Roman couldn’t hold back his tears. “Please, this was my wife’s. It’s all I have left of her. Don’t take it from me. I’m begging you,” he pleaded.

He cherished the locket; the thought of losing it crushed his soul. It was the last memento he had of his wife—a precious keepsake that he gazed at each night, reminiscing about the wonderful moments they had shared.

They couldn't take that away from him.

“No, Daddy!” Tesiera screamed in terror, tears streaming down her face. “Let them have it.”

Hearing the terror in his daughter's voice brought Roman back to the present, and to his daughter's safety. His hands trembled as he pulled up his sleeve and struggled with the clasp.

But Jaden stepped closer and delivered three harsh slaps to Roman's face.

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The pain was excruciating. Roman struggled to stifle his moans of agony as Tesiera screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Shut your mouth, you little brat!” Another member of the group advanced, pulling Tesiera away from behind her father. His grip on her hair was so tight that strands ripped from her scalp.

“No!! Please, don’t hurt my daughter.” Roman rushed forward to protect his little girl, but the teenager blocked his path, smirking.

“Your daughter is quite pretty. It’s a shame she’s so young,” Jaden tsked his disappointment.

“We haven’t had any fun in a while,” another one said, hope in his voice.

“How about we have some fun with these two?” Jaden smiled. The men behind him chuckled.

That was the last thing young Tesiera remembered.

She woke up in an abandoned house. They had tied her father on the floor, spread-eagle, naked, and brutally beaten. Tesiera’s eyes widened at the sight of blood oozing from her father’s battered body.

“Leave him alone!!!” she screamed, pleading.

The four of them laughed. Tesiera looked up, finally noticing them. Their faces were

unmasked. The teenager locked eyes with her as he plunged a knife into her father's arm and dragged it across his flesh, leaving a long trail of blood, carving into him like a chicken.

Young Tesiera screamed and then passed out in horror. She didn't know how long she remained unconscious. But she subconsciously heard her father's screams.

Then, she heard chilling words...

"Shoot him."

Her eyes snapped open, and she looked at where her father had been. Tesiera could no longer recognize him; he was nothing more than a broken, bloodied figure.

"Shoot him," Jaden said again.

The teenager pulled the trigger.

Tesiera screamed. Her father was no longer breathing. The teen pointed the gun at her face when, suddenly, the sound of sirens filled the air.

"Damn it! Let's get out of here!" one of them shouted, already making a run for it. The boy swiftly stowed his gun in his pocket and fled with the rest, leaving Tesiera alone with her father.

"Daddy...?" Tesiera cried and fell to her knees, shaking her father. Why wouldn't he open his eyes? Why wouldn't her daddy look at her? "Daddy!" she screamed.

Tesiera continued to scream her father's name until the police arrived and pulled her away from his lifeless body. She screamed his name when the ambulance arrived, during the ride to the hospital, and when he was pronounced dead in the trauma room.

She screamed his name over and over again until her voice grew hoarse, and her eyes became as puffy as a winter coat.

And night after night, the faces of his killers flashed in her mind, until the image of the four of them was embedded into her soul.

The universe does not always have a way of working things out. Sometimes it gives, and other times, it takes.

This time, it took away her father, the most precious person in Tesiera's life. The only family she had left in the entire world.

CHAPTER 1 MESMERIZINGLY BEAUTIFUL. LETHALLY DANGEROUS.

Twenty years later

The door to Vicker's lounge opened and his assistant, Oliver, stepped inside. Vicker had been pacing around the room, lost in thought. He was particularly worried that the informant he had finally managed to capture after years of searching had refused to talk, even after being kept in the basement and tortured for four days.

It seemed he had reached a dead end.

"Good evening, sir. I wanted to inform you that—"

Vicker had no time for small talk or whatever Oliver had to say at this point. All he wanted were results. "Has he started talking yet?"

Oliver shook his head in disappointment. "No, sir. He still refuses to say anything."

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“That son of a bitch in there knows what happened to the drugs and who stole them. He knows! Why won’t he talk?” Vicker slammed his fists on his desk, his rage overwhelming him. He wanted answers, goddamnit!

Oliver chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry, sir. He will talk.”

Vicker turned to him, glaring. “What are you talking about, Oliver? He's refused to talk for four fucking days. We've beaten him, tortured him, starved him! What could possibly make him talk now?”

“The Torturer.”

The Torturer. A name known by all, feared by all, commanding the highest level of respect and terror. The mere mention of this title was enough to instill fear, sending chills down the spine.

Vicker's eyes widened as if he had seen—or in this case, heard—of a terrifying monster. “The Torturer? She's here?” He kept his voice low.

Then, as if on cue, a scream of immense pain erupted, shattering the quiet. It came from the basement of Vicker’s house, where the informant was being held.

And he knew she was, indeed, here and was already doing what she did best. Inflicting pain.

“How did you get her, Oliver? Where did you find this woman?” Vicker hissed, his voice tinged with an excitement he couldn't hide.

Although everyone knew her name and knew the terrible harm she could inflict, she was rarely seen and rarely accessed. If you could lay your hands on her, or see her with your eyes, then you had struck gold. Whether or not you would be alive to tell the tale was another story.

Oliver smiled smugly. “I have my ways, boss. No need to worry about it.”

“But Oliver, you have to tell me where you—”

The sentence was cut short as another horrifying scream—even louder than the first—erupted, so loud that their skin pricked with goosebumps.

Oliver and Vicker shared a look.

“Let’s go see,” Vicker stated and rushed out of the lounge, with Oliver following closely behind. They walked down to the basement and, just as they were contemplating whether to knock and go in or wait for her to come out, the door opened, and she stepped out.

Their jaws dropped.

The woman before them exuded a unique beauty, one that could be described as otherworldly. Her looks were so ethereal, that it was almost as if she were an angel sent from heaven. A striking contrast to her demonic actions, really.

Her hair was dyed a striking burgundy that shone like molten lava, flowing down her back in a sleek ponytail. Her olive skin was silken and smooth, perfectly complementing the fierceness of her hair. She was dressed in black leather and matching leather boots. Foreign letters were tattooed on her upper left arm.

But it was her eyes that truly captivated anyone who laid their gaze upon her. The

gleaming brown orbs seemed to radiate their own light, like jewels. They were mesmerizing, yet dangerous. Lifeless. One could see the beauty in them, but one could never truly touch it, as they gleamed with a menacing glint that suggested danger for anyone who dared to come too close.

Her brows were furrowed, and her plump coral lips were permanently set in a scowl, as if she had never smiled in her entire life. She was a woman of enduring beauty, yet also savage and dangerous.

“Water,” she said, paying no mind to the two men visibly admiring her beauty.

“Water?” Vicker repeated. He looked down at her hands and was taken aback by the sight of blood staining them. His eyes shot back up to her, and he couldn’t believe how unbothered she seemed by the fact that she had just tortured a man.

“Yes, water. To wash my hands,” she replied, irritated. Her voice crisp and sharp.

“Yes, j-just a moment,” Oliver said, scurrying off to get some water for the Torturer, leaving Vicker alone with her, more than a bit scared. A frown marred her brows as she looked at her perfectly manicured blood-stained fingers.

Oliver returned with a bowl of soapy water and a towel. The Torturer washed her hands and dried them off.

“Is he dead?” Vicker asked.

She paused in her towel-drying, looking up at Vicker. “He’s alive. It was not in our deal to kill him, or he would be dead,” she handed the bloodied towel back to Oliver. “Vladimir attacked your ship and stole your drugs. The man in there is one of his men. Vladimir went back to Russia, currently hiding from another rival.” She finished by giving him the address of the Vladimir’s hideout.

Vicker was happy for the first time since his shipment was stolen. Finally, he would get the bastard that thought he could get away with stealing billions of dollars of his drugs. But how did this woman get that man to talk? Vicker's men had worked on him for four days, giving him no food or water and tortured him with various devices and electricity, yet he refused to say a word.

But this woman, in less than twenty minutes, had made him reveal everything. What kind of woman was this?

Exactly the type of woman he wanted to get to know better.

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“My payment?” She pulled her throwing knives from her leather boots, completely ignoring the way the two men stepped away from her. Flipping them around expertly before slipping them right back where they came out from.

“Already paid in full. Please check,” Oliver said instantly.

They waited nervously like reprimanded children while she confirmed the transaction. It was the longest two minutes of their lives, and when she gave a curt nod, they released audible breaths of relief.

She turned to leave when Vicker’s hand shot out and grabbed her arm. “Please, wait...”

Pausing, she swiveled her head and scowled at his hand. Vicker let her go immediately, clearing his throat. “I was...um...hoping we could...um, you know, get dinner sometime. What do you say?”

“No.”

“Oh, alright. Um...” He cleared his throat again. “Okay, then.”

But the woman didn’t leave immediately. Instead, she walked back to him, until she was invading the trafficker’s space. “The next time your hands, or any other appendage of yours touches my body, I’ll cut it off.”

The frosty tone sent a chill down Vicker’s spine. He hated that he cowered for a mere woman. A boss like him should be respected, by everyone. His ego was in tatters.

Especially since it was happening in front of Oliver and two security guards.

He wanted to say something to save face, but Oliver rushed forward, stepping in front of him. “Please forgive my boss, Torturer. He is still distraught about the news he got. He’s not thinking straight. Is there anything else we can assist you with—”

She was already out the door, leaving it to slam shut behind her.

Tesiera Anderson was in the grip of a nightmare, her face twisted in a grimace as she thrashed about on her bed, mumbling incoherent sounds.

The dream always started the same way, with memories of the happy times she shared with her father—the joy, laughter, and thrill of their father-daughter bond. She could hear her father’s genuine, hearty laugh—a laugh that seemed to stem from deep within him—and she would smile. He was always in good spirits and his happiness was contagious.

But as the dream progressed, that laugh would slowly transform into pained screams, the sounds he made as he was murdered.

Tesiera relived the last moments of her father’s life—the instant the doctor closed his eyes and covered him with a sheet—and with that moment, she felt like she lost her own humanity. All the pain, sadness, and agony would come flooding back and she would scream, until everything faded away.

She woke up with a jolt, tears streaming down her face and her breathing heavy. The wound opened again, just like it did every night. Her finger rose to her cheek, and she collected a tear, scowling at the liquid.

Her chest hurt. It hurt badly.

She reached under her pillow, withdrew her pocket dagger, pressed it to her thigh, and cut a clean line atop one of the thin scars from similar cuts she'd made in the past.

A calmness settled over her heart as she watched the blood spill out of the wound and drip down her thigh. The physical pain was almost delicious because it numbed the emotional pain that came from her nightmares. Physical pain she could deal with; emotional pain...not so much.

With a sigh, she left her bed and went to the window, staring out onto the rain-soaked streets. The stars had vanished from the sky and the moon shone exceptionally bright in the clearing sky.

As she looked out into the night, she remembered the girl she once was—the girl who screamed in terror—and she felt disgust and anger. Screaming was a sign of weakness, and she hated being trapped in her nightmare doing just that. For twenty years, she channeled her pain into strength until she was almost unbeatable. The Torturer, as most people in the underworld called her.

For ten years she had searched for her father's killers. It was hard since she only had their faces in her memory as the only lead on those four people, but when she wasn't torturing people, she dedicated her entire life to finding those murderers. Five years ago, she finally made a breakthrough and found their leader, Jaden Newman.

He was a boss in the criminal underworld, and most of his wealth came from human trafficking—selling women. Her eyes closed as she remembered Miselle.

Miselle had been her only friend for ten years and the only person who knew everything about Tesiera. Miselle was helping her gather information about her father's killers; she was the one who got the only information they had on Jaden Newman. But when Miselle had begun to dig deeper, her body washed ashore in the

Bahamas.

Tesiera was almost sure that Jaden Newman was the one who killed her only friend, just like he'd killed her father. Well, he ordered her father's murder, and the teenager pulled the trigger. Without hesitation or thought.

She'd never forget that part. Or the look of utter enjoyment on the kid's face as he pulled the trigger.

They will pay. Every last one of them.

Just as she was about to head to her in-home gym downstairs, her cellphone rang. The caller ID showed "Big Cat".

CHAPTER 2. THE TEENAGER.

Tesiera walked into Big Cat's mansion. He was a very dangerous and powerful mafia lord. She had been there countless times, and the interior, which was luxuriously decorated with gold, didn't faze her anymore. The mansion was heavily guarded, with security so vast that it was even complicated for someone like her to understand.

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As she approached the fourth floor, which was Big Cat's main domain, she reluctantly surrendered her weapons at the floor's security checkpoint. It was a rule that every single person who entered the mansion must obey. She was an exception when it came to carrying weapons around the other floors, but no one bent the rules on the fourth floor.

The guards bowed their heads and made way for her to pass without further question. Having known where Big Cat would be this time of the night, she walked straight to the training room. The big lion painting at the end of the hallway brought back memories. It was her favorite painting of the many scattered throughout the mansion. She'd lived there for six years, starting when she was eleven.

Most of the training she'd got to become what she was, came in this room. She learned from the best three experts in each field. The instructors taught her how to handle throwing knives, fight in hand-to-hand combat, and torture. As for guns, she learned from Big Cat himself. The mafia godfather was exceptionally talented and lethal with firearms; his business associates feared him and had good reasons to.

She leaned against the door frame of the training room and watched Big Cat spar with one of his men in a hand-to-hand combat in a ring in the center of the room. She watched how swiftly he moved and the sneaky ways he delivered those punches. The man might be in his late fifties, but he didn't look it—he was well-built without an ounce of fat. You'd only guess his age when you saw that his once black hair was a mixture of black and gray.

Big Cat lifted his opponent and threw him on the ground. The few other men watching clapped and cheered. That was when Big Cat saw her. She waved at him

reluctantly and he gave her a smile.

“You’re here, Siera?” he asked, stepping out of the ring, taking the towel that was offered to him and wiping his sweaty face and neck.

“I am,” she responded, walking deeper into the room.

“Let’s call it a night. Everybody, leave,” he said to his men before returning his attention to her. “I’m sorry for calling you out here so late at night. I know you had a stressful day. How was your mission?” He walked toward the door, and she fell into step with him.

“It went well.”

“As always. Let’s take a walk, shall we?” Big Cat offered, and she nodded, following him.

He led the way out of the fourth floor down to the second floor and took her to the terrace. They leaned against the railing. The gentle breeze carried the scent of fresh rain and the near-midnight sky was illuminated with stars.

“I heard your stats recently. Your reputation is growing in every corner of the underworld. Your missions always came out a success,” he said, pride in his eyes. She shrugged. “You make me so proud, Tesiera.”

She remained silent, staring out into the night. Never much of a talker, Big Cat knew that. His eyes surveyed her carefully. She was a beautiful woman but as lethal as Tsar Bomba—the most destructive bomb ever made.

“You like it? The serenity of the night and how calm the city looks even though there’s always danger looming around the corner. The people are oblivious to it,” Big

Cat expressed, but all Tesiera did was nod. He wished she would at least try to converse with people more—he had been trying to make her talk since he brought her under his care—but she never said more than was absolutely necessary.

After he heard what happened to her father, he had raised her. She'd already been taken by social services and placed in a foster home. He found her two years later and took her under his care. By then, she'd moved from one foster home to another. Horrible experiences, all of them.

But what he was about to tell her tonight would definitely drag words out of her. "How have you been, Siera? Any serious man in your life yet?"

"No."

Big Cat sighed heavily. Sometimes, he felt a prickle of guilt about the way she turned out. Tesiera had no social life and zero social skills. All she knew was the dark world. She was the only family he had left and the child he never had. Good thing, too, because apparently his parenting skills were lacking.

"You said you had something to tell me." She pulled away from the railing and stared at him.

"I found what you've been looking for." A pause. "Or who you've been looking for."

Her brown eyes darkened. "Which of them?"

"The Teenager."

The target that had eluded her for ten good years. She'd combed every nook and cranny for information—anything at all—on that bastard but she'd come away with nothing.

“Finally.” Her fists clenched on her sides. “Finally,” she repeated in a whisper.

Big Cat smiled. “Let’s go see, shall we?”

“Yes, please.” She allowed him to lead the way, following close behind him. Familiar emotions flooded her: pain and fury. The Teenager’s face flashed in her mind; it was the usual visual. His face as he pointed the gun to her father’s forehead and took the shot without pause. Those gray eyes that glistened in twisted glee as he shifted the gun and pointed it at her own face.

Big Cat and Tesiera took an elevator down to a conference room. Upon entering, he gestured for her to take a seat. He then switched on the television, where a clip was already queued up on the screen. Lifting the remote, he pressed the ‘play’ button. An image popped up, and Big Cat smiled in satisfaction. “There he is.”

For a full second, Tesiera was taken aback by how handsome he was.

Over the years, she had made up a lot of images of what The Teenager would look like as an adult, and not one of those times did she envision him to look like...this.

“His name is Maximilian Kingston, but he is mostly known as Max. This profile is an intriguing one,” Big Cat began. “He is a thirty-seven-year-old multimillionaire who owns several hotels spread out all over the States and beyond, but he is also a successful neurosurgeon at Med Stone Hospital, one of the most prestigious hospitals here in the States. He has won several awards in neurosurgery, and at such a young age, he has risen to the position of Chief of Surgery.”

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Tesiera couldn't tear her eyes away from those gray eyes. Those very familiar gray eyes haunted her in her nightmares almost every night. The boy who murdered her father right in front of her, in cold blood, was a fucking doctor? The man who put a bullet through her father's brain was a freaking brain surgeon?

"So, he's a doctor and he owns a hotel?" she asked when she could finally get her throat to work.

"Chains of hotels," the mafia godfather corrected. "He has so many of them, fucking loaded and he's a public figure too. The image he shows the world says he can do no wrong. The world loves him. According to our intel, he pursued his dream of being a doctor after his father—who had always wanted him to take over the family business—died. Now he has capable hands handling his businesses while he pursues his dreams. But all those hotel managers and executives answer to Maximilian Kingston. He's the big boss."

Maximilian Kingston. She rolled the name through her head, hating the motherfucker's name as much as she hated the man. Her brows arched. "With all that money, he's a doctor? He made himself an easy target to his enemies; it's a surprise he's still alive."

"There's a reason for that. Although Max Kingston doesn't move around with paparazzi and entourage, he has two shadows that are always looking out for him, protecting him. According to reports, those two men are highly skilled in all kinds of combat. Dangerous men that are very good with knives, guns, and hands. They have killed every threat against Max Kingston's life. We couldn't get much information about them apart from their names: Bose and Clinton. Apart from that, they are

almost ghosts.”

Interesting. Tesiera’s eyes went back to the video on the screen, which had looped to the beginning. She noted the way her target smiled and the way he received the award like a man of dignity and integrity. Like he couldn’t hurt a fly and would rather go to the ends of the world to save it. A cold-blooded murderer who killed a man over a locket and then pointed a gun at his eight-year-old.

“Is that everything we’ve got?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so. The Kingstons might be public figures, but they managed to keep their lives away from the media. That’s all we could get for now.”

“It’ll do,” Tesiera simply said. For the first time in a long time, an unfamiliar feeling surfaced in her. Impatience.

She was well-known in the underworld for her patience. She could torture her victims for days to get what she needed from them. And she could tail her targets for weeks. But now that she knew the face of the fucker who killed her father, all she wanted was to plunge a knife deep into his chest. And to do it now.

Her hands itched for blood—his blood. Her fingers itched to pull the trigger and blow his brains out. Her ears ached to hear his dying screams.

Taking a deep, unsatisfying breath, she asked, “Where does he live?”

Big Cat studied her face carefully, then he turned around and picked up a folder from the table and held it out for her. “All the information we have is in this here.”

Tesiera rose from her chair and collected the file. “Thank you so much for this.”

“You’ve had a long day. Go home and rest. I know you’ve waited a long time for this, but I don’t want you to make any rash moves. Think about your next step before you take it, Tesiera. If those two guards he has shadowing him protected the man enough to keep him alive for this long, they must be damn good at it. Be careful. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He smiled at her again, then she left the conference room and took the elevator to the bottom floor, leaving the mansion.

She held the folder in her hand tightly. For the first time in a very long time, Tesiera could feel happiness. A hint of a smile played on the sides of her lips.

With this, she would carefully draft out a plan to make this bastard pay for what he did. He was her new prey.

I’m coming for you, Maximilian Kingston.

CHAPTER 3. MAXIMILIAN KINGSTON

Two weeks later

“Congratulations, Dr. Kingston, on another successful surgery,” Nurse Pattie said, beaming with pride as they left the operating room after a six-hour-long surgery. “Mrs. Jones will hear again, thanks to your handiwork.”

“Thank you, Pattie,” Max replied, stopping in front of the sink to remove his gloves. He disposed of them in the bin before turning to face her.

Pattie couldn’t help but admire the man before her. She had only worked with Max

for two months, but in that short time, she had realized that he was exceptional in every way. He was a genius physician and a generous philanthropist, known for his exceptional skills in the operating room and his charitable donations.

Just the previous week, Max had channeled significant amount of funds to help children diagnosed with cancer, covering their treatments and medication. He was a role model—a man to admire and look up to, and even more so, a man to swoon over.

As if his intelligence and kindness weren't enough, Max also had impeccable good looks. His fair skin, sharp jawline, piercing eyes, and masculine aura set him apart from the crowd. His impeccably groomed black hair was styled in such a way that a lock would fall over his forehead, which Pattie found incredibly attractive.

Despite his prestige, pride, and authority, Pattie would sometimes catch a hint of pain in his eyes, which would vanish as quickly as it appeared. Max was an enigmatic man, shrouded in rumors and secrecy. Rumor had it that he still owned the Kingston Hotels Group, but it was mostly unfounded. The company had belonged to his family for generations, but after the death of his father, former CEO Hales Kingston, Max sold his shares to Alexo Graham who became the new CEO.

For Pattie, it was an honor to work with a man like Max, even if it meant he had to give up his hotels. She couldn't imagine choosing to be a doctor over the wealth of owning and managing chains of hotels, but Max had, and that made him even more impressive in her eyes.

Just then, the door opened, and Nurse Olivia, stepped in. "Dr. Kingston, your friends are downstairs in the waiting room. They said to let you know that they're here," she announced.

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“Tell them I’ll be right out,” Max said with a nod. Olivia smiled and left, closing the door behind her.

“Don’t forget to submit all the records for the month to me. I’ll be here on Monday for my next shift, and I want everything to be ready by then,” Max said, turning to gaze to Pattie.

“Yes, Doctor, everything will be ready,” Pattie assured him.

“Great, I’m heading out now,” Max said before leaving the surgical preparation room, and going to his office. He changed out of his scrubs and into his regular clothes, a crisp blue shirt and black pants. He grabbed his phone and briefcase before leaving his office.

Max felt a sense of peace as he made his way to the waiting room where his friends, Bose and Clinton, awaited his arrival.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” Max greeted with a smile as he approached the men. They were more than just friends to him; they were his trusted protectors, lethal, efficient, and dangerous in the face of peril.

“Not at all, sir.” Bose and Clinton stood up, paying their respects to their boss as he approached. Bose stepped forward, taking the doctor’s briefcase from him. “Shall we?”

They stepped out of the hospital. It was drizzling, and the air was crisp. Clinton opened an umbrella and positioned it over Max's head.

“Not the car. Let’s walk around and talk for a while before heading home.” Max didn’t want to talk in the car, even though the rain was getting heavier. Bose nodded and placed the briefcase in the vehicle before shutting the door.

“Bose, you said that you had something serious you wanted to tell me. So, what’s up?” Max asked, curious. The only thing that was urgent in his life was making it to the hospital on time for an emergency call and operating on a patient fast enough to save their life.

“I’m not really sure about this boss, but I think we’ve been tailed for the past few days,” Bose answered.

Max raised a brow. “On second thought, let’s get in the car.”

Bose and Clinton nodded. They led him to the special edition Mercedes Benz G-Class. The car was luxurious and it was upgraded with bulletproof armor and glass. As Clinton opened the door for the doctor, Bose shadowed his back closely, using his body as a shield to protect against unseen threats.

“Now, repeat what you said earlier,” Max said after they were seated at the power-adjustable rear bench seat.

“I think someone has been on our tail, sir,” Bose repeated.

A threat to his safety was nothing new to Max but definitely not what he expected Bose to tell him. He hadn’t had any drama in his life for some time. Since he paid the Mevials News Media to publish several articles on him giving up his shares and right of ownership of the company, and swore his executives to secrecy, his life had been an almost simple one. Work, eat, a little me-time, a little fun time, and sleep. Rinse and repeat.

“Are you sure about this, Bose?” Max looked from Bose to Clinton and back again.

Bose hesitated. “No, I’m not. It’s just a gut feeling I have. I haven’t been able to get any evidence, despite my best efforts.”

Max pondered that admission. Bose and Clinton had been with him for ten years and kept him alive over multiple attempts. He wasn’t one to dismiss a hunch from either of them. “What do you think, Clinton?”

“I think Bose is being paranoid, boss. I would have picked up a tail if we had one, but I didn’t.” A small smile played on the tough guy’s face. “Maybe it’s because we haven’t had any action in a while, and it’s making Bose edgy.”

“That’s not it,” Bose protested.

“Or, perhaps, it’s because his girlfriend left him. He hasn’t exactly been himself since that happened five months ago.”

Bose glared at him. “You are full of shit, Clinton.”

Clinton smirked and gave him the middle finger.

Max leaned back in his seat and shook his head as he watched the two of them banter. They might be elite soldiers and best friends, but most times they came off like twelve-year-olds with their childish exchanges.

“I think Clinton is right,” Max announced. They stopped playing around and stared at him, turning serious once again. “Not the girlfriend part, but the inactivity part. Before working for me, you two had missions all the time. There was always one dangerous task after another, but now, you gotta live in my house, guarding my regular, boring life. So, yeah, I think you are probably edgy. But let’s not laugh it off

just yet. Let's be more cautious of our environment, shall we?"

"Yes, sir," they responded. Clinton said, "Well, truth be told, it hasn't been all that regular. Walker did send an assassin to kill you six months ago. The second attempt in thirteen months."

Max hadn't forgotten that. The Homers Group was a major rival of Kingston Hotels Group, led by Carter Walker, the sixty-five-year-old founder and CEO. The man would do anything to wipe Max off the surface of this earth. Not just because it would benefit his company but also for a far more personal reason. All the man's attempts at his life had been professional, but so far unsuccessful. Walker's assassins never left evidence, which was why the man wasn't in jail yet.

"It was him, but we have no evidence to prove it," Bose said, his eyes darkening in anger. "If only the boss would give the orders, he would be a dead man."

"We don't get blood on our hands, Bose." Max repeated the mantra he had been drilling into them for the past ten years. They lived in a dark world, but he lived by that code. No staining the hands unless it was unavoidable.

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“I’ll kill that motherfucker for no fee at all, sir, and I’ll do it with a big smile on my face,” Boss huffed and stared out of the tinted, tempered glass window.

“I know you would, Bose. I know you would.” A smile feathered Max's lips.

An hour later, Max stood in front of the large, ornate front door of his home, and with deft fingers, he entered his security code. A low beep echoed through the entryway as he waited three seconds for the door to unlock. He pushed it open and entered a well-lit foyer with marble flooring stretching out before him, leading to the upper part of the mansion.

As he stepped into the living room, he could hear Zeus barking in excitement. The dark-furred pit bull rushed to welcome him, wagging his white-stained tail with elation. Whining and barking cheerfully at him. Max smiled at Zeus and knelt down to his height, opening his arms. Zeus jumped on him, placing his paws on Max's chest, and licking his face.

“Hey, boy, did you miss me?” Max greeted, petting Zeus affectionately.

Max had had Zeus since he was a pup, and now he was nearly six years old. Zeus was one of his favorite things in the world.

“Let’s head upstairs,” Max said to Zeus, and got up from the floor. Zeus followed him, his tail wagging behind him excitedly.

When they reached Max's room, Max opened Zeus’ treat jar and gave him some special treats, which Zeus gobbled up almost instantly. Max let Zeus stay on his bed

and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

“Gotta wash off the stress and germs from work,” Max took off his damp clothes and stepped into the shower.

Tesiera was dressed in her usual all black leather outfit. Straps and sheaths crossed her leather pants so she could keep her weapons handy. She tied her fiery hair in a ponytail.

He was home now. It was time to strike, and she was ready for it.

She tucked a Sig in small of her back, and another in a shoulder holster. Her leather jacket provided ample concealment. She shoved a stun gun in one jacket pocket, and a small can of pepper spray in the other. She had a holster strapped to each thigh each with semiautomatic pistols nestled inside. Tesiera tucked a small revolver in an ankle holster.

Underneath the hem of her trousers was a hidden sheath with one of her favorite knives. She had a collection of blades ranging from daggers, bushcraft knives, boot knives, SEAL knives, and Bowie knives; name a knife and she'd pull it from her collection and demonstrate a hundred ways she could use it to end a life.

But this one was her favorite; she'd be delighted to use it to slit that bastard neurosurgeon's throat.

“This fucker is going to hell tonight.” Venus smirked as she watched Tesiera strap on her weapons. She knew Tesiera never went out without a weapon, but she was suited up with nearly ten now, just for one mission.

Venus. That's all anybody knew her as, because she didn't have a known surname. In fact, no one knew where she came from. She suddenly showed up at Big Cat's house

one evening over fifteen years ago, and he'd been training her ever since. Tesiera first met her when she was thirteen, and Venus beat her in hand-to-hand combat. But fifteen years and hundreds of duels later, Tesiera could easily best her.

Now Venus a member of Big Cat's Soldiers and on her way to being the first female capo he had ever had. Tesiera liked her because of her strength and her intelligence. She had brown hair and hazel eyes, and her ebony skin was inked with numerous tattoos—bizarre and so intricate that no one could really grasp its concept.

And she liked to smoke.

“So, what's your plan? How are you going to end him?” Venus asked and took a puff of her joint.

“I'm going to sneak into his house. And then I'll kill him,” Tesiera answered, still working on her hair.

“Do you think it will be that simple?”

No, Tesiera didn't think it would be that simple. She had shadowed the man for two weeks and confirmed that his two bodyguards were highly skilled just like the files had said. Tesiera was never one to underestimate her enemies, so she planned to kill the surgeon before both men could sense what was going on. She had spent the last two weeks digesting every bit of information her uncle gave her, tracking down Max and following him. She will succeed tonight.

“I will kill him tonight,” she repeated with conviction. The job should be done in less than an hour. She'd torture him so that he'd beg her to end him while squealing like a pig. She'd make sure of that.

Venus chuckled, taking another drag. “What about his two bodyguards? They live in

that mansion, right?”

“I have everything planned out. Unless they sleep in the same fucking bed with him, they won’t know I’m there until it is too late,” Tesiera shrugged.

Venus believed her. If anyone could sneak into a heavily guarded mansion and assassinate its owner, it would be Tesiera. She took another drag from her joint, and as she exhaled, she said, “Finally, after twenty years, you’ll avenge your father’s death, huh? I’m happy for you.” She was always cautious when approaching the topic of Tesiera’s father’s death; she knew how much Tesiera hated talking about it or hearing anyone talk about it.

Tesiera nodded curtly. She picked up the last gun, checking its magazine before slipping it into her holster and strapping it on. Next, she picked up her favorite knife, running her thumb over its cold, sharp blade, before tucking it into the sheath at her ankle. Turning, she walked out of her apartment.

The countdown to Max's final moments had now begun.

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CHAPTER 4. THE MISSION.

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Max felt a disturbance. An off-putting wave. He could sense that he was no longer alone; there was someone else in the room.

Just as he opened his eyes, a knife embedded itself in the headboard above him.

His body reacted on instinct and he pushed himself away, rolling over and falling to the floor to dodge the second knife. His heartbeat surged with adrenaline in response to this threat.

He scrambled to the head of the bed, popping his head over the edge to get a visual on the threat. He couldn't see anything other than the reflecting shadow of the knives in her hands and the striking, voluminous red hair.

She had not only broken into his house and snuck into his room but tried to kill him with a knife? How could someone be that skilled with a blade? Max knew it was a close miss, and he was lucky to have rolled off the bed. If not for that, it would've hit a vital part of his body.

Max dared another look, and the sound of another knife flying at him filled the air. He quickly grabbed a pillow and ducked. He heard the soft thunk of the knife striking the pillow.

"Shit," he hissed, tossing the pillow aside and hurried to the other side of the room. But the sound of her footsteps followed him. He had nothing to defend himself with, and his room was soundproof, which meant that he calling for help was pointless.

It was a woman. A dangerous one who was after his life for reasons he couldn't

fathom.

He had to deal with this woman alone. But she had four knives, probably more, while he had nothing. Facing off against an expert like her, who was now blocking the door with her body, chances are; he wouldn't last long. Max contemplated jumping from the window but quickly discarded the idea. His bedroom was thirty feet above the ground; his brain would decorate the yard if he fucked up that jump.

She had him trapped.

The fourth knife came out of nowhere, and his quick reflexes saved him again. Max spun away from the weapon, satisfied to hear the 'clang' sound of it falling to the floor.

As the pale light of the moon vanished behind a cloud, the room was shrouded in darkness. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage: she couldn't see him, but he couldn't see her either. He could only hear her footsteps, but then they abruptly stopped.

Heavy, uneventful seconds of tension-filled silence passed.

He heard the brisk and brief sound of a blade slicing the air. But it was really hard to dodge something he couldn't see. He darted from the spot anyway.

"Fuck," Max grunted as pain ripped through his thigh, and he fell on the floor. The gushing blood stained his blue, striped pajama pants.

His breathing heavy, he slowly got to his feet. "Who are you? What do you want from me?" His voice was strong, hiding the pain he felt.

She took one step forward and stepped into the soft glow of moonlight. That was

when Max finally saw the face of his attacker.

Her luminous brown eyes were filled with ice-cold hate. The disdain, and the intent to kill was apparent in the glare she gave him. She was gorgeous, and she looked at him like he was the demon she had been sent to exorcise.

It stunned him silent. Never in his life had such hate been directed at him. Not even by the person who once tormented and made life hell for him.

She was quick—way too quick—and the next second, she was in front of him. She stabbed another knife deep into his right leg and withdrew it just as fast.

Max grimaced at the pain, his blood flowing like water from a loose tap. This close he could only see the coldness and rage of her eyes.

“W—who sent you?” he asked.

Tesiera admitted to herself that she had gotten a few things wrong tonight.

On rare occasions, highly skilled fighters might dodge one or two of her knives, but that was where it ended. But this surgeon had expertly—skillfully—dodged four of her knives.

“Who sent you?” he asked, slowly getting to his feet again. “Was it Walker? Did Walker send you to kill me?”

Tesiera didn’t give a shit about whoever this Walker man was; she was still reeling from the way this man handled pain. Most of her victims would be screaming by now, crying like a child, and fear would be written all over their faces. But not this man.

He had grunted when her knife made contact, but that was it. His eyes held confusion, wariness, and pain, but there was no sign of fear in his eyes. He was composed as fuck for a man who took two blades to his legs. She was livid.

Tesiera withdrew the sixth knife; she went for his heart. But it didn't make contact. Instead, the man sidestepped her and swiftly swung his hand into her fist, knocking the knife away from her hand. A completely unexpected move.

Taking advantage of that surprise, Max limped to the other end of the room. She followed after him, withdrawing another knife from a hidden sheath. Tesiera jabbed it toward his direction. But he dodged it again.

“Who are you?” he asked again, wondering just how many more weapons she had in that outfit of hers.

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“I’m the last face you will ever see, you cold-blooded murderer.” She continued her slow walk towards him.

“What the hell do you mean by ‘cold-blooded murderer?’ Who the fuck are you?” Max's back met with the wall which halted him.

Tesiera’s smirk deepened. There wasn’t anywhere else for him to go. Time to finish this.

Angling her knife, she aimed it at his throat. “I hope you rot in hell, Maximilian Kingston.” She raised it high to strike.

Suddenly, a blaring alarm went off and the entire house flashed red.

Tesiera was stunned. That was when she saw his hand resting on something on the wall. Not something, she thought as he moved his hand. It was a button. A red button labeled ‘Emergency’.

There was a fucking alarm here?

The bedroom door burst open, and the two hefty men she’d seen before rushed in but stopped short when they saw her with a knife in her hand and their boss sliding down the wall to the floor, his thighs drenched in his own blood and a knife stuck in his left leg.

What the hell?

His protectors held guns, Tesiera noted, and one of them was already cocking his.

She whirled around and sprinted for the nearest window, the sound of heavy footsteps chasing her. But agility was one of Tesiera's greatest skills, and before they could squeeze the trigger, she leaped through the glass.

"Did she just jump out? We are thirty fucking meters above the ground!?" Bose raged, racing toward the window with Clinton following hotly on his tail.

"Well, she will be deader than dead. Saves us a lot of stress—holy shit. "Clinton cut off suddenly. They watched with their mouth gaping open as the feminine figure somersaulted three times then rose from the ground and ran away into the night.

A grunt from their boss sprang them into action again. They pocketed their guns and hurried to him.

"We are so sorry, boss. Goddamnit!" Bose swore, his rage directed at himself.

"We gotta get the boss to the hospital. I'm calling 911," Clinton said, tapping the screen of his cellphone. "Stay with the boss. I'll gather our men to get the cars ready!"

Max couldn't follow what was going on around him; instead, his mind focused on what the woman had called him. A cold-blooded murderer.

That a stranger would call him that hurt almost as much as the fucking knife wounds. For the life of him, he could not figure out why she would label him like that. He had never murdered anyone in in his entire life.

CHAPTER 5. THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT.

The private hospital room smelled of saline drips and disinfectant—a smell that Max didn't mind as a doctor, but after smelling it as a patient for the past three days, he concluded that he hated it. He asked to be brought to this hospital because it would be easier to conceal the attack and keep it from getting out to the public than if he had been treated where he worked.

He had lost a lot of blood and required a transfusion after the trauma surgeon stitched up his wounds. Max had spent three days at the hospital, receiving treatments and stitches on his wounds. He'd been given medications, and now both his thighs and his left hand had bandages wrapped around them.

On the bright side, he would be getting discharged soon. Though, he worked in a hospital he finally accepted the universal truth that doctors made the worst patients.

“We may run out of places to keep flowers soon, sir. Harvey is the tenth child to give you flowers since you were admitted. And let's not talk about the array of flowers and get-well cards that hundreds of nurses have brought in.”

“Five. Five nurses,” Max corrected with a chuckle and leaned back onto his pillow. He grunted at the twinge of pain that the movement created.

“Same difference, sir. Five is way too many,” Clinton insisted, which made Max snicker. “I know you hate being the patient, boss, but fortunately, you'll soon be discharged.”

“I think you hate being on that chair more than I hate being in this bed. You've been as grumpy as me these past few days.”

“I'm pissed about what happened. I should have taken Bose seriously when he said he had a feeling that we were being tailed. I should have known better, dammit.” The big guy's eyes darkened. “I'm going to kill that skinny-ass, red-headed bitch if I ever

get my hands on her.”

Max said nothing. His bodyguards had been beating themselves up since it happened. Bose, especially. Max had spent the first twenty-four hours after the attack listening to Bose’s angry tirades and the very graphic details the man went into about how he would kill the attacker if he ever discovered who the hell she was. Which was exactly what Bose had gone out to do for the past forty-eight hours.

Max still hadn’t figured out why the woman attacked him. Granted, he had a few enemies who had come after him over the years, but none of them were as skilled as she was. Her face a constant image in his mind since he woke up the next morning attached to drips filled with saline and painkillers.

He thought about her striking hair, her poise, and the way she seemed so elegant yet dangerously lethal. A woman who handled knives with expert proficiency.

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The way she moved so quickly with agility and dexterity was mesmerizing and etched to his mind. The memory of the attack played over and over, striking him with awe at the graceful way the woman moved. Then he would wonder how someone so young had such skills. He'd never seen a person throw knives like that before. A highly skilled assassin.

An exquisite, highly skilled assassin.

He'd seen a lot of beautiful women in his life, but only a few of them were as remarkable as her. Her features were impeccable; her lashes were long and lush, and those brown eyes... Those luminous brown eyes that held menace and a clear intent to kill him. He saw a tattoo on her arm, written in an unfamiliar language, and he would bet that that wasn't the only tattoo his assassin had.

He was intrigued by the strange woman who nearly ended his life. It was funny, really.

"Boss, do you think Mira was the one who sent that woman to assassinate you?" Clinton reasoned out loud, and that snapped Max out of his thoughts.

He assessed what Clinton had suspected, and it didn't take time for him to dismiss it. Mira might be a viper, but he knew she was incapable of doing something like this.

Kamira McDonald, his ex-girlfriend—crazy ex-girlfriend, if he was to quote his younger sister, Valerie—was obsessed with him, but she wouldn't want him dead. They'd dated for two years—the longest he had ever dated any woman—but he had to end things with her when her toxicity had gotten out of control.

Max did not know when what they shared grew from love to obsession but that was where they ended up. She'd cheated, lied, and manipulated him. Mira was crazy, but not crazy enough to send an assassin to murder him. He shook his head. "I don't think she'd do that. We've been broken up for over a year, and she's still in France, the last time I checked."

Clinton responded with a dubious grunt. If it wasn't Mira, then who was it?

"Well, did her face seem familiar? Have you seen her before, boss?" Clinton asked.

A hint of a smile played at the edge of Max's lips. "Clinton, if I had encountered a woman like that before, I would definitely remember." A woman like that would be a hard one to forget.

"Well, what about Walker? I knew the man's quietness had been a fluke. What if he'd laid low all this while because he had something like this planned? It makes sense. That rat bastard. I'm going to kill him. "

But Max also doubted that Walker was behind the attack. He had the look in her eyes burned into his memory. That expression was way too raw and visceral to have been hired by someone else. The attack seemed more personal...

But why?

That question had troubled him since he woke up.

Before Max could give Clinton an answer, the door opened, and a man appeared. It was Jonathan Miller, one of the execs of Kingston Hotels. He was dressed in a crisp, black suit and a white button-down shirt, and a suitcase in his hand. Clinton figured the man was there for business.

“Good afternoon, sir. May I come in?” he asked uncertainly.

“I really don’t think you should, Mr. Miller. As you can see, the boss is—” Clinton began, but Max cut him off.

“It’s okay. You can come in, Miller.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m really sorry to bother you, but HJT Airlines sent in a business proposal for the partnership. You told me to update you if there was movement on this.” Jonathan took an empty seat beside the bed and went into details about the proposal.

Clinton sat there, glaring at the man. There were others in the organization the exec could have gone to for this, people like Alex Graham, the new CEO. Couldn’t he see that the boss was hurt?

“You have done a great job, Miller,” Max said at last after listening attentively to the man’s narration.

“Thank you, sir. I figured I should report to you before I sent the report to Graham, because I know you’re very much interested in this deal. Besides, Graham might be the man in the office, but you’re still the big boss, sir,” he said.

Max snorted. “You can’t go around saying things like that, Miller. I’m sure Graham wouldn’t appreciate it—not only because it undermines his authority, but because we wouldn’t want the press to find out that I still own my shares.”

The exec nodded. “You’re right, sir. I wasn’t thinking. Here is the folder I compiled for this project,” he added and handed the folder to Max.

Max opened the folder and flipped through the documents. “When is the next

meeting?”

“That’ll be on Monday, sir.”

“That gives us four days to put everything in place and get ready for this meeting. Get in touch with our legal representatives. I will be there for the meeting.”

“I’ll do that, sir.”

“You may leave.”

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Jonathan got up, bowed his head to Max, and gave the grumpy bodyguard a nod in acknowledgment before he walked out of the door.

“Don’t give me that look, Clinton,” Max said without looking at him.

Clinton grimaced. “I think you work too hard, sir. You are healing from stab wounds, which I know from experience, hurts like a sonofabitch. You should be getting rest and taking as many painkillers as you can, but here you are, letting these execs bring in office work for the past three fucking days.”

Max sighed. “I know you care about me, Clinton, but doing nothing will drive me insane. Because then, I’d have to think about a certain woman who wants me dead for reasons I can’t comprehend.”

“I’ll kill the bitch if I get my hands on her. I don’t care what her reasons are, I’ll skin her alive,” Clinton hissed. “I’ll make her eat her own damn tongue.”

Max chuckled. “Hopefully, Bose comes back with something about the woman. If we know who she is, we might get answers we need.”

Just then, the door opened.

“Oh, to hell with this! Don’t step into this room, or I swear to God, I’m going to cut off your—oh, Bose, you’re back.” Clinton stopped his angry tirade when he saw that it wasn’t another businessman there to talk business.

Bose walked in. “Calm your balls, man. It’s just me.” He faced the boss and bowed to

him. “How are you doing, sir?”

“I’ve been better. We were just talking about you. How did it go?”

Bose looked around the room. “Maybe we can discuss it at a more secure location. I don’t trust these walls.”

Max thought about it, then nodded. “That’s a great idea. I’m getting discharged soon. When we get home, I’ll take everything you got on that woman.”

Mickey—or was it Ricky? Tesiera couldn’t remember and didn’t care.

She had the man suspended above the ground from two pillars. Tesiera had stripped him nude, and tied coarse ropes to his wrists and ankles to hold him in a starfish position.

The pain that alone caused his straining muscles wasn’t enough.

She’d scraped the skin off his left arm and half of his face with a blade so hot, it had turned red. Tesiera took her time with the process, ensuring he was awake for every slice. All while engaging the screaming man in a discussion about the weather. She’d run the blade through his skin, slicing and peeling off his flesh. Blood was everywhere, his face flayed open.

The finesse and precision with which she worked would have impressed even the most skilled plastic surgeons.

“Please! Please!!” he screamed.

Tesiera took a deep breath and turned her back on Mickey/Ricky. An overstuffed chair, covered in a garish floral pattern, was positioned in front of him to provide her

with the best view. The only other piece of furniture was the table where her tools sat in order, gleaming from the care she gave them. Except the ones she'd used already. She lowered herself to her chair and gave Mickey, or Ricky, a leisurely grin. "We can do this all day, Dave. I don't have anything else to do today. And your screams make for pleasant music. I could listen to it for days."

"You're a monster! A fucking monster!!" he roared, writhing on the ropes.

"Thank you, Dave. That's quite a compliment. I do aim to please" She gave him a cold smile before she rose from the chair and stepped in front of him. "You like when we play though, don't you?" she asked silkily. "You must since you keep avoiding my question so let's play some more, shall we?"

Her hands moved with precision and grace as the incredibly shallow cuts sliced through multiple layers of skin exposing his muscles. His screams filled the air as she gently yanked a sliver of skin from his face, and the blood seeped from the capillaries she'd severed. She watched, her expression dead, while Mickey/Ricky screamed in agony.

"I'll ask again. Where is Cyrus's daughter?"

"The boss will kill me if I tell you! He will kill me!" the man roared, his body convulsing with the strength of his sobs.

Tesiera sighed. "Honey, you're going to die before your boss gets the chance." She set the scalpel on the table, and chose a modified cigar cutter. She lifted his left hand and sliced off his pinky finger, asking, "Where is the girl, Dave?"

"No! Stop!!"

She chopped off his ring finger.

Agonized screams shook the room. “I can’t! I can’t!!”

She next removed his middle finger.

“We sold her! We sold her!!” He confessed.

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Tesiera stepped back, staring at her bloody dagger. She really hated it when her equipment got bloody. They were a bitch to clean. “Go on.”

“We sold the girl to Hans! He’s a human trafficker. Last I heard, the girl works in his brothel!”

“Well, I need location of this brothel, honey. Don’t keep me waiting.”

The man blurted out the address and Tesiera memorized it.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Y–yes. I swear it, that’s all. Please, don’t kill me!”

Tesiera shook her head. “It’s not in my contract to kill you, Dave. If it was, you’d already be dead.” She turned and started packing her things, ensuring the contaminated equipment was wrapped neatly and separately from her sterile tools. Her job was done.

As soon as she closed the door to Mickey/Ricky’s sobs, her client showed her the bathroom where she cleaned up. She confirmed her payment, gave the information she had extracted, and took her leave.

Another successful mission, she thought to herself. She would like to think that it made up for the failed mission from three days ago, but the satisfaction of a job well done just wasn’t there. Apparently, her mind didn’t buy it.

Maybe it was because she failed the one mission that had ever mattered to her. The one mission that was personal. It bugged her that she failed that mission as much as it bugged her that her father's killers still walked the earth.

The thought weighed heavily on her mind, like a boulder lodged in her skull. She forced herself to think of something else, but the memory kept creeping back in, refusing to be ignored. It was impossible for her to let it go. She hadn't expected things to end that way; for him to be a fighter, for him to have an alarm, and for him to be that good looking.

That last thought bothered her the most.

Tesiera had never cared about a person's physical appearance; it was not something she paid attention to. But now, her mind couldn't help but conjure up images of Max: his soft, silvery-gray eyes and the peaceful expression he wore while sleeping that night. It bothered her how gentle he looked, as if he wouldn't harm a soul.

Those piercing gray eyes held a mixture of pain and surprise when she accused him of being a murderer. That she couldn't shake the memory of that look only served to further irritate her.

As she delved into her research on him, she devoured countless videos of his charismatic personality on the internet. She couldn't help but notice his infectious smile that made his eyes crinkle and his nose scrunch up in an endearing way.

She remembered being taken aback by how genuine his smile seemed, especially for a murderer.

But she knew better than to trust appearances - men like him were masters at putting up a facade. After all, she had become quite good at it herself.

It was a pity that such a handsome man would soon meet his demise at her hands. But she was determined to try again, and this time, she would succeed.

With determination coursing through her veins, she slipped into her car and started the engine. As she drove away, the thought lingered in her mind - the one that had been plaguing her for days.

Why did those familiar eyes now hold emotions so different from what she had seen twenty years ago? Why did he look...kind? Almost...changed?.

CHAPTER 6. TESIERA ANDERSON

“Please don’t kill me! Please don’t—” The scream was cut short as Rex pulled the trigger. He watched in satisfaction as the man’s head snapped back and the life left his eyes.

“Eishh, he got blood on me,” Rex muttered angrily as he stepped back, giving room for his men to take care of the body. He hated it when blood touched his body. Damn stuff was a nuisance to clean.

He was still mumbling about it when his cellphone rang. At the sight of the caller, Rex quickly moved to the other side of the empty house to make sure he would not be interrupted. He cleared his throat as he pressed the accept button. “Hi, Siera. It’s been four months since I saw you! You stopped taking my calls and I don’t even know—”

“Where are you?” she asked crisply. Always the same question. Tesiera, the torturer, was not one to make small talk.

“I can get to your house in two hours,” Rex was quick to answer.

“Not fast enough.”

“An hour! I’ll be there in an hour,” he added desperately, hoping she hadn’t already hung up. He would break every fucking traffic rule out there, but he’d be fucked before he passed up on this opportunity.

Silence. Then. “I want to see you in my house in an hour. Not a minute later, Rex.”

“I swear it. Not a minute later.” Rex could already feel the excitement building. “Should I get condoms—” The beeping sound he heard cut off his words. She’d already hung up.

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Rex grinned. “Alright boys, wrap things up here. I gotta go see my lady.”

“You only smile like that for one woman. The caller was The Torturer, right, boss?” one of his men asked.

“You got that right, Dorn. I’m outta here.”

Dorn pursed his lips and shook his head. “You might be a killer, boss, but you hold no candle to that woman. I don’t know how you can sleep with a woman like that. She might be beautiful, but when I think about who the devil would be, it’s always her image that comes to mind.” He shivered. “That woman is all iron. All ice. I’m surprised your dick hasn’t frozen over.”

Rex snorted and strode past his second-in-command, saying nothing. He couldn’t tell them the truth about his arrangement with The Torturer because it would only hurt his pride. Dorn was right about one thing, though.

Tesiera Anderson, The Torturer, was made of iron. And no one—man or woman—could ever penetrate her defenses enough to reach her.

He would know. He had been trying for three years. And failing miserably.

Tesiera Anderson earned more than enough money from her job to afford the indulgences of life. She had a penthouse apartment, fully furnished and luxurious. But she barely stayed in it; she was nearly always on a mission. Some of her jobs would have her travel across the world and require her to stay at various locations for weeks simply observing before she would strike.

Her handler always had one job or another for her, but Tesiera was a picky contractor. She chose her missions according to the most dangerous because she loved challenges. She didn't give a shit about the law, or what was right and wrong. Tesiera did what she wanted, however she wanted.

Tonight was one of those few nights she slept at her home. And after a hard day's work, she felt tense and needed to unwind.

Which was why Rex was lying on the couch and she was straddling his face.

"God, you're so sexy," Rex mumbled against her pussy, skillfully running his tongue around the folds of skin, sucking and teasing her clit, down to the entrance of her core.

"Don't go further than that," she commanded.

Rex immediately obeyed, curbing his wandering tongue. Though it had been worth a try. In all the times she'd used him for her pleasure, he had learned one crucial fact: The Torturer detected any kind of penetration.

She thrust forward, holding his head still where she wanted him and began riding his face the way she wanted to. He licked, raved and sucked her expertly until her movements lost uniformity and her breathing changed before she tipped over the edge.

A deep breath left her lips as she straightened and pulled away from him. He straightened too, her juices dripping from his mouth, and smiled in satisfaction. "Ah, that felt too good."

Rex was currently Tesiera's favorite among her array of playthings, comprising of different men and women. Like most of them, Rex was a killer she'd met through the

job. For him, it was three years ago. She called for him more often than the others.

“You taste so good,” Rex said, licking his lips. He was over his bruised ego that he could never get her to really moan or cry out or scream during their oral play. She wasn’t a noisy woman; the most he’d heard from her was a grunt and a hiss as she came. Mostly, he knew she was enjoying it by the change in her breathing. That was just the kind of woman Tesiera was, and he’d made peace with it.

She arranged her clothes methodically, her face hard like granite. You’d never know she’d just rode someone’s face like it was her playground. “Leave.”

Hell, not this again. He needed to get off. “Um, I was hoping you’ll let me take you to bed...”

“Leave.” Tesiera eyed him, his refusal to obey her command irking her, especially since he made her repeat it.

“Please, Siera. I want to fuck you, please,” he practically begged her, and he was ready to do anything—literally anything—to make that happen. The thought of fucking her had kept him awake at night more times than he cared to admit.

“I don’t bend over for any man. Ever. I do the fucking, never the other way around. So, unless you’re ready to bend over this couch for me, you’d better leave my sight,” she said, looking him dead in the eyes.

“You know I’m not into that,” Rex whined and pouted.

“Don’t make me repeat myself again.”

“Okay, what about a blow job? I’ll take that instead. I want a blow, please,” he was quick to add. The anticipation was beating at him. Tesiera was as skilled with her

mouth as she was with her weapons.

No one would look at him now and believe him to be the lethal assassin he was. He would keep whining until she gave in. Tesiera couldn't just kill the guy—he was among the few people she actually liked. “Take off your pants,” she ordered.

Rex had never taken his pants off so fast in his life. He stood naked; his dick coated in precum.

“Get into that room.” She pointed behind her. “Get on the bed and spread your legs for me.”

His smile dimmed. Spread his legs? What the heck? Rex would have protested if he wasn't so aroused, so he did as she commanded and headed for the bedroom.

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In the bedroom, she climbed in with him, got into the space in between his spread legs, and before Rex could say in a word, her head dipped. He let out a raspy groan as she took him deep into her warm and welcoming mouth.

Her tongue drew imaginative patterns on his tip, as she glided around it and went further down his dick with calculated strokes and skill. And after a while of teasing, she increased her pace and took him in further, until he hit the back of her throat. Then she simply held him there and sucked him so damn hard that Rex was howling and twitching in pleasure, his hands trembling and his toes curling. He was in heaven.

She didn't let go until he crashed over the edge and she reluctantly swallowed his release. Then she straightened and wiped the smeared side of her mouth with the back of her hand. Rex laid there, reveling in his aftermath. So languid, he could feel sleep hovering.

“Get out.”

“What?” Rex's eyes shot open and met with her sinister eyes. She had been generous with him today, making him come. He didn't want to anger her. He pushed himself up from the bed. “Can I get a moment to put on my jeans?” He picked up his pants from the floor.

Tesiera shook her head, pointing toward the door.

Rex nodded and started walking out of the room, half naked. He was about to open the door but paused, turning around to face Tesiera. “Um, do you think I can spend the night?”

So quick that she was almost a blur of movement, she reached for a knife and threw it at him.

The knife made contact with his thigh, and he grunted. His eyes widened at the exceptionally tiny knife that stuck out of his thigh and the blood that trickled from the wound it made. "Fuck!"

She walked forward and ruthlessly pulled the knife, taking her weapon back. Her scowl deepened at the blood contaminating her precious knife. She pinned him with furious eyes and said through gritted teeth. "The next time I say walk, you run."

"Yes, ma'am. "

She took his hand and shoved the knife into his palm. "Have her cleaned and returned to me tomorrow morning."

"I will, ma'am."

"Now go."

Rex practically ran out of her bedroom. Within seconds, she heard the front door open and close.

Suddenly, her phone rang and she checked the caller ID: it was Big Cat. She answered and listened as he gave her the address to an underground club, requesting her immediate presence. She asked what was going on.

"It's about Maximilian Kingston," he replied.

Tesiera agreed to go and hung up before pocketing her phone.

“Try to get some rest,” Pattie said to Max. “I know you love to work but try not to overdo it. Fortunately, the hospital is relieving you of your duties for a week. That’s enough time to give your legs a break.” Nurse Pattie continued. “You make it seem like getting stabbed in three different places is a walk in the park, but I know those wounds must be hurting like hell.”

Max replied with a kind smile, “I’ll be fine, Pattie. Stop worrying so much.”

Pattie still looked concerned. “I still can’t believe someone would stab someone in a fighting ring. I thought weapons were prohibited.”

“They are,” Clinton answered, “but this guy has a grudge against the Kingston family. He pretended to be a fighter and snuck into the arena. By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late.” Lies with a bit of truth were the best way to keep things private, he thought.

The nurse shook her head, clearly upset. “I’m just glad you and Bose were there to put pressure on the wounds before help arrived. If he had bled out...”

Max interjected. “Hello? I’m still here.” He waved at them from the bed. “Stop worrying, Pattie. I’m a doctor too, remember?”

The nurse muttered under her breath as the door opened and Bose entered with a wheelchair. “Your doc told me he’d discharged you. It’s okay to go home, boss.”

Max sighed in relief. “Thank God. I thought I was going to go crazy.” Getting discharged had taken far more time than he’d expected; it was already night.

Clinton helped the doctor get into the wheelchair, and Bose began wheeling him out of the room. Pattie followed them to the entrance of the hospital and said, “Don’t forget to schedule your follow-up appointment, Dr. Kingston. It’s imp....” The

automatic doors cut her off as they shut behind the men. Max chuckled and shook his head.

Bose said, “That pretty nurse has a huge crush on you, boss.”

“I don't think it's just a crush. I believe she's in love with him,” Clinton added with a smirk.

“Pattie is friendly towards everyone—patients and doctors alike,” Max explained.

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His bodyguards snorted disbelievingly.

“You haven't had sex in months, sir. Why don't you ask her out? I'm sure she would say yes without hesitation,” Bose suggested.

“I prefer not to get involved with nurses or staff members in that way. It's better to keep business and pleasure separate, plus it goes against ethical guidelines,” Max replied. Although there were no specific policies preventing him from dating nurses, his busy work schedule had prevented him from feeling attracted to anyone in months.

Maybe he should have sex. Before he forgot what it was like.

When he got home, his dog was overjoyed to see him. His pit bull barked happily and jumped on him, showering him with licks of joy.

Bose helped Max sit on the couch, and the doctor petted his dog. “Buddy, how are you doing? I know you missed me; I’ve missed you too.”

Zeus’s attention quickly shifted to the toy he took from Max's hand. Zeus settled into his dog bed, happily chewing the stuffing out of the squeaky sloth.

Max signaled Bose who handed Max a pair of crutches, which were familiar to him from countless childhood trips to the hospital. With practiced ease, Max maneuvered himself onto the crutches and they made their way to his large office the floor below them.

The guards sandwiched him, with Bose in front and Clinton behind him. They opened doors and helped him down the stairs. Despite his injuries, Max moved with an impressive agility.

The office was spacious and well-furnished, resembling a conference room. A large table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by comfortable chairs. The sideboard held refreshments and a bookshelf displayed various titles. Brightly colored paintings adorned the walls, and a vase of freshly cut flowers sat on a nearby cabinet which held a large, flatscreen TV. A whiteboard hung from the wall next to the cabinet, ready for use.

Max took his seat at the head of the table, while Clinton sat next to him. Bose walked over to the screen and turned it on, quickly setting up the file on the connected laptop.

Within seconds, a 30-second video clip began playing on the screen. It showed a woman in a sleek black leather outfit engaging in hand-to-hand combat with a heavily muscled man in broad daylight. Max couldn't help but notice her stunning features, her expressionless face was as unyielding as granite. Despite himself, his body reacted to her presence, and he cursed under his breath.

Concern etched across Clinton's face as he immediately asked, "Are you alright, boss? Do you need painkillers for your injuries?"

"I'm fine," Max replied dismissively. It wasn't his wounds that were bothering him, it was the woman who had inflicted them.

Though still uncertain, Clinton took his seat again as Max gestured for Bose to begin the briefing.

"Her name is Tesiera Anderson, also known as 'The Torturer'. Her mother, Lara Anderson, died of lung cancer when she was six, and she lost her father, Roman, who

took his wife's maiden name, two years later. She bounced around multiple foster homes until she was taken in and raised by a mafia boss, Big Cat. According to our sources, Big Cat is also her uncle," Bose reported.

"The Torturer? Why the hell does that name sound so familiar?" Clinton pondered that for a moment before exclaiming, "Holy Shit!"

Max and Bose turned toward him. "What's the matter? Do you know her?" Bose asked.

Clinton cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. "I used to work for Naruto Nakamura, the Japanese mob boss, and he often mentioned 'The Torturer' and 'Big Cat' during my time with him. Nakamura wasn't afraid of anything, but whenever he mentioned those names, there was a look of pure terror in his eyes."

"Interesting. So, my attacker is The Torturer," Max acknowledged, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "To have a name like that, I take it she knows a thing or two about torturing people?"

"A thing or two?" echoed Clinton and Bose in unison. Bose continued. "The woman is a torture savant. She's invented ways to torture her victims. She uses specialized weapons. Even powerful mob bosses fear her reputation. She's a sadist and a psychopath."

Max recalled the woman's ferocity when she attacked him, and he had no doubt that his bodyguard was right. "What else do you know about her?" he asked.

"Nothing extensive," Bose replied. "Just mission reports detailing some of her past assignments. And let me tell you, this woman is a savage. Our sources say she has never failed a mission."

“That makes me her first failed mission?”

“Yes, boss,” replied Bose.

“Hmm.” Max tilted his head in thought. “Which means she’ll be back to finish what she started.”

Clinton clenched his fists. “She can try, but she won’t succeed.”

“I’ve already instructed the chief of security to increase surveillance around the mansion. He’ll come over to speak to you soon, sir. Now that we know what to expect, we’ll make it impossible for her to succeed. If she ever shows her face again, we’ll eliminate her,” Bose said confidently. “She’s a threat that needs to be dealt with.”

Max didn’t respond, knowing Bose wasn’t wrong. The woman was dangerous and had made it clear she wanted him dead. “Why am I her target? Have you found any connection or motive behind her actions? Anything that could give us insight into why she wants me dead?”

“No, sir, not yet,” Bose replied honestly. Then he paused before adding, “But I uncovered a possible link. However, I’m not sure if it’s relevant or just a coincidence.”

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“We're not ignoring anything you might find important again, no matter how small. Tell us what else you've found,” Max ordered, his tone serious.

Bose quickly pressed some buttons on the remote control while he spoke. “Big Cat. His real name is Demyan Nikolai Sokolov. He's Russian but grew up in America and changed his first name to Damian. The Bratva boss seems to have gone legitimate. In recent years, powerful bosses have been investing in legal businesses. They've invested in a lot of successful companies in all the leading industries around the world, such as energy, arms, agriculture, manufacturing, etc.”

Clinton furrowed his brows in confusion. “But how does that connect to our situation?”

Bose nodded. “Two months ago, Demyan Nikolai Sokolov met with the Homers Group.” An image of two older men shaking hands appeared on the screen. Max recognized one of them as Walker, while the other was a stranger with a large stature, gray hair in a bun and a face that looked larger than life.

Max sat up straight at the sight. “Walker?” Carter Walker, the CEO of the Homers Group, who saw the Kingston family as his worst enemy.

“Yes, boss,” Bose confirmed. “Maybe Sokolov wants to invest in hotels and resorts and chose the Homers Group for it and this meeting has nothing to do with your attack. Or, he and his niece, The Torturer, may have accepted a contract from Walker to kill you.”

This observation created more questions for Max. Could the Bratva boss be involved

in this? Did Walker orchestrate the meeting? Did Carter Walker hire Tesiera Anderson to kill him?

CHAPTER 7. THE REQUEST.

The dimly lit alleyway leading to the rundown building was eerily quiet. The only sounds were the faint chirping of crickets and the steady click of Tesiera's boots against the pavement.

She came to a stop, surveying her surroundings. The only visible sign on the building was a large 'R' hanging precariously from its mounting. At first glance, it appeared deserted, but beyond the creaky doors lay things too taboo to speak of.

Tesiera entered the building, formerly an office space but was now transformed into an underground den for indulgence and amusement. A second door stood at the end of a long hallway, guarded by two burly men dressed in all black.

But they didn't need to check her or ask for identification. They knew Tesiera and were intimidated by her presence. They promptly opened the door with a greeting that she ignored as she strode inside.

Behind the towering doors was a staircase, and Tesiera descended the steps until she reached another door, this one unguarded but equipped with a digital scanner. This was the main entrance to the den,

a hub for high-profile individuals of the underworld. Strict security measures were in place to ensure that only those with proper validation could enter.

Tesiera approached the scanner and held up her hand, revealing a ring on her index finger. The scanner detected the ring and granted her access, opening the doors automatically.

She entered the room, which was shrouded in dim red lights that gave it a seedy atmosphere. In the center of the room was a stage where various scenes played out - a sex club, specifically catering to BDSM activities.

Why had Big Cat asked to meet here tonight?

Tesiera was not there to enjoy the erotic scenes playing out in front of her; she was there for work. Her expression twisted into a scowl as she entered the crowded room. She despised being surrounded by so many people.

The strippers, dressed in revealing attire such as miniskirts, thongs, crop tops, and bralettes, also served as waitresses. Some were barely covered with only pasties hiding their nipples. The men in the audience shamelessly groped them, stuffing money into their clothing. When one caught their eye, they would giggle seductively and approach the man who beckoned them over. Some men requested strip teases and lap dances, while others even shamelessly asked for blowjobs and other sex acts.

Only the most important guests could witness the most explicit scenes on the dais, separated from the rest by red velvet ropes. On stage, an iron bed and various sadistic and masochistic items were displayed. The performance had just begun, with a female actress dancing sensually on a pole. Both male and female members of the audience. Then a male actor joined her and continued to entertain the cheering crowd with exotic dance moves.

Tesiera strode confidently through the crowded arena, making her way towards the entrance to the private rooms at the far end of the club. Her presence turned heads and sparked whispers and murmurs as men gawked at her stunning beauty. She had an alluring but mysterious aura that drew attention, yet also instilled a sense of danger that made some men step away in fear. Tesiera was both admired and feared by all who knew her. And those who didn't.

She reached a metal door at the back of the room and opened it to reveal a small office where a blonde woman sat behind the desk. Despite being the secretary, she could easily pass for a stripper with her perky demeanor and revealing outfit.

“Welcome Tesiera,” she said with a smile. “Here to see the boss?”

“Yes,” Tesiera replied. The receptionist nodded before typing some information into her computer.

“Follow me,” she said, getting up from her desk and leading Tesiera to another metal door at the end of the office. As they walked, the receptionist's short skirt rode up her thighs, causing her to constantly adjust it. Her low-cut top revealed most of her cleavage- typical secretary attire in this establishment. Tesiera called the club's secretary “Perky Blonde” because of the consistent rotation of new secretaries who were always blonde and full of energy.

She tapped the code into the security pad by the metal door and it slid open revealing a hallway of private rooms with closed doors.

“Room 18,” Perky Blonde said, and Tesiera curtly nodded before walking down the corridor. The metal door shut behind her.

Tesiera knocked on Room 18 and entered without waiting for a reply. Big Cat was seated on the bed, two barely dressed women were with him—one behind him, massaging his back, and another on his lap, giggling in a way that immediately put Tesiera on edge.

Two men were also in the room, and she recognized them as her uncle’s soldiers. They were in the middle of a discussion, which stopped as Tesiera walked into the room.

Big Cat's face lit up with a smile as he caught sight of Tesiera. “My dear Tesiera, welcome. I apologize for summoning you on such short notice.”

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“It's no problem,” Tesiera replied, leaning against the wall and crossing her arms. The two strippers gazed at Tesiera in wonder, trying to figure out who this stunning, unsmiling woman was. They were even more perplexed because she was fully clothed in a sex club.

“Alright, boys. We'll continue our talk at the office tomorrow. But for now, I have something important to discuss with The Torturer.” Big Cat dismissed his soldiers, who bowed respectfully before leaving.

Turning back to the two girls, Big Cat chuckled. “Stacy, Riele—let us have some privacy. I'll send for you later.” The girls pouted but eventually got up and left the room. As they made their way back to the main area, they couldn't help but gossip about Tesiera's intimidating presence.

Standing up from the edge of the bed, Big Cat motioned for Tesiera to follow him. “Let's find somewhere quieter to talk. What I have to say is for your ears only.” With that, he opened the door and led them down a path deeper into the underground space.

Tesiera furrowed her brows in confusion. Wasn't this place already quiet and discreet? They were underground for Christ's sake.

She followed Big Cat as he led her further underground. He'd said it was about Maximilian, but now she was weary.

Big Cat pulled open a door that led to what looked like a soundproofed room. It was so quiet and empty, that even their footsteps were muffled.

He turned to face his niece and paused. “Promise me, Tesiera,” Big Cat pleaded, “that you will hear me out until the very end. His statement surprised Tesiera. It was so unlike Big Cat, it almost made her anxious. Almost.

“Alright. What is this about?”

Big Cat took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “As you know, I’ve been working towards legalizing our operations for the past two years. Two of our top syndicates are fully on board with this plan. In that time, we’ve built and invested in businesses that have brought us profit, a better image, and safety.

“It’s also taken the cops and FBI off our backs for some time now. It’s the longest we’ve gone without being investigated, having one of my men take the fall and go to jail for the Mafia. This move to go legitimate has helped us to cover our tracks more than we’ve been doing for the past twenty-five years.”

“I know all this,” Tesiera said, looking for the angle. Big Cat gave her these details whenever he wanted a “normal conversation”. He would use any grift to keep her on the phone for as long as possible, even if it meant that he carried the conversation alone.

“Good, that’s good. Anyway, five months ago, we decided to invest in hotels and resorts. Two months later, I met Carter Walker, the CEO of Homers Groups. But after a couple months of research, learning about their businesses and its competition, I realized that there were better companies to invest in than Homers Group. Well, one other company, to be exact. Two of my associates also recommended this other company because it is much more profitable and better run. Three days ago, we finally got the statistics back and if we can successfully secure a deal with this company, we’ll be looking at billions of dollars of profit. “

Tesiera's suspicions were rising as she watched Big Cat's expression. Her eyebrows

furrowed in suspicion, and the guilty look on Big Cat's face sent a chill down her spine. No, she most certainly did not like where this was going.

She balled her fist, her nails digging into her flesh. “This ‘other company’ you’re talking about is Kingston Hotels and Resorts, isn’t it?”

Big Cat winced and inhaled deeply. “Yes, the company owned by Maximilian Kingston.”

Tesiera blinked. Twice. And then fixed her gaze on him, wearing a mask of indifference.

Her blank look made Big Cat more wary, because he knew he was looking at a mask at the moment. He might as well finish everything he had to say. He cleared his throat. “I knew he owned Kingston Hotels and Resort after our investigation, but I never thought we would be switching sides. Three days ago, my investigator uncovered hidden documents that shows that Homers Group is not as financially great as they make out to be, and if we invest with them, it will be a great loss.

“Never in my wildest dream did it ever occur to me that I would need Maximilian Kingston, but I do. I know you’ve waited for all this time to finally avenge your father’s murder, and I know it’s too much to ask, but can you put aside your vendetta, Siera? Just for a while longer, and then —”

“How could you suggest something like that?” she whispered. Her once indifferent eyes blazed with fury. “How can you even think something like that?”

“Tesiera—”

“That man murdered my father, your brother. How can you tell me to spare his life?” The more she talked, the more her voice rose in fury. “I have been searching for that

sonofabitch who pointed a gun at my innocent father and took his life without hesitation. I have been searching for that monster for ages! Now, I finally found him and you're saying what!? I should not kill him? How could you, Uncle Damian!?"

"I know. I know it's difficult. I know it's difficult; I understand." He rushed in, moving closer to touch her, but she stepped away from him. He stopped and shook his head. "I understand how you feel, Siera. I also want the man dead. I am literally burning with the need to kill him like he killed Roman. However, I know it's not my fight but yours, and I trust you to bring justice to my brother. All I ask is that you give me some time. Two months. Just give me two months and this deal will be finalized, then you can do what you wish. If he dies now, there's a 90% chance we might lose the deal if there's a shift in power. We need Maximilian Kingston. Just for two months, Tesiera. Please?"

"I'll kill him," she stated matter-of-factly. She moved so close to him that he could see nothing but the fiery anger in her eyes. "I don't care about your business deals. I don't care about the shift in power. Maximilian Kingston is going to Massachusetts in fourteen days on a boat cruise, and I will be waiting for him. I will gut him like a pig, decorate his luxurious boat with his entrails, and paint it in his blood."

"Oh, Tesiera..." Big Cat felt helpless. "A week ago, I had Tiger, one of my best private investigators, do more digging on Maximilian Kingston, and the truth is, that man does not seem like a killer. His image was too...spectacular. The truth is, I'm starting to doubt if we have the right man here. I asked Tiger to do more digging, and I was hoping you would agree to give the man more time—"

He was putting her own thoughts into words, and that made her angrier. "Men like him know how to hide their true selves. They put on a façade and make the world see them differently. You should know that better than anyone. After all, the authorities have nothing on you, even though you are the head of the Bratva."

“Fair enough,” he conceded. “But still—”

“I am burning in here.” Tesiera lifted her hand and placed it over her heart, clutching her chest. “I cannot sleep at night because I live with the memory of that day every time I close my eyes. I cannot rest because that bastard is out there living and breathing like a free man after killing my father in cold blood. His death is twenty years late, but I’m not wasting anymore time.”

She stepped back and turned to walk toward the door. Then she stopped and faced him. “His clock is ticking, Big Cat. In a matter of weeks, Maximilian Kingston will be a dead man. “

She walked out of the door without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 8. THE HUNTED HUNTER

Max stood in front of the kitchen counter, slicing vegetables to add to the scrambled eggs he was preparing. Bread was toasting in the toaster, and coffee was brewing. It had been two weeks since the attack on his life, and the wounds had mostly healed; only an occasional throb or ache reminded him of his injuries.

He enjoyed cooking. It was more of a hobby than a passion, and he cooked most of his meals. Even his poor chef, Alan, had given up on trying to keep him out of the kitchen. Alan had made peace with the fact that his boss loved spending time experimenting with new recipes.

Zeus was lying on his back at Max's feet, trying to get a hold of the hem of Max's pajama pants and tug on them.

Max finished chopping up the vegetables and breaking the eggs into a bowl before seasoning them. He picked up the chopping board and the bowl and turned towards the stove, but Zeus had the hem of his pants in his mouth, and Max's movement caused the pants in Zeus' mouth to rip off, nearly tripping him.

The dog winced, staring up at him.

“Zeus! I almost fell, buddy,” Max reprimanded, and Zeus spat out the piece of cloth then scurried out of the kitchen.

Max sighed, shaking his head. He made it to the stove, took out a pan, and poured some oil into it, then turned on the burner. He placed the oiled pan over the flames and poured the seasoned eggs into the pan.

Just then, his phone rang in the pocket of his apron, and he took out the vibrating device. He smiled.

“Good morning, Valerie.”

“Max! Oh, my goodness. I’ve missed you so much. How are you?” Valerie’s voice came in a rush, and he could imagine her beaming from the other end of the phone. Max pressed the phone against his ear with his shoulder and used his free hands to continue making breakfast.

He poured the veggies into the eggs. “I’m fine. How was your vacation with your husband? I’m sure it was fun, which is why you got so carried away and didn’t call me once in the past two weeks,” Max chided, and Valerie laughed.

“Come on now, it’s not like that. We got back two nights ago. Don’t worry, to make it up to you, I’ll text you all the fun pictures and memories from our trip to France.”

Max smiled as he scrambled the sizzling eggs. “I’d like that. So, how’s Jack doing?”

“Jack is fine, and the best husband in the whole world for taking me on that wonderful trip. And Hazel misses her uncle dearly too. Wait until you see the pictures we took of her at the Eiffel Tower. We’ll definitely be using them for her upcoming fourth birthday party.”

“I can’t believe my girl is almost four. I remember being in the hospital room when she was born and carrying her newly born tiny self in my arms. Now she’ll be four in a month? Makes me feel kinda old.” Max chuckled. He heard the toaster pop, and the

browned bread shot out of the machine.

You are getting old, Max,” Valerie teased. “You’re not the only one who can have beautiful nieces. I want some too, along with a beautiful sister-in-law I can gossip with and love.”

Max turned down the heat and attended to the bread. Valerie often teased him about being “single and lonely,” as she liked to call it. He rolled his eyes even though was used to it by now.

“In due time, Val.”

“Oh, dear, I almost forgot about the attack! Please forgive this terrible sister of yours. How are you doing now? I hope you’re okay. Were you hurt?”

“I’m fine; don’t worry about it,” he said. Max had another attempt on his life five days earlier. It wasn’t the Torturer, but his mind strayed to the elusive beauty anyway. Not that he’d ever tell Valerie about her. “It was Walker.”

“How could he send people to attack you again? This isn’t the first attack this man has made on your life, brother. That bastard, old man. Our father is dead. Why does he keep transferring his hate for Daddy to you!? You weren’t the one who slept with his mistress, for Christ’s sake!”

Max chuckled. “Calm down, Val. All I need is one piece of evidence that points at him, and he’s done for.”

“At this point, I don’t even want the law to handle him. Can’t you send one of your lethal guards gunning for his ass? Send the hot-tempered one. What’s his name again... Oh yes, Bose. Send Bose to assassinate his old ass,” Valerie hissed angrily.

Max laughed at Valerie's vehemence. "You know I don't operate that way, sister."

"You're too righteous for your own good, brother. I say you kill the rat bastard. After everything we went through at the hands of Maxi, why should we take his bullshit? I don't want to lose my only brother just because you're being a goody-two-shoes."

"I think something is going on with his company these days. They are being very secretive about it, but I feel—"

The cry of a child in the background interrupted their conversation.

"Ugh, I'll have to call you back later, brother. Hazel is throwing a tantrum because she lost her teddy bear. We haven't finished unpacking, so our things are all over the place."

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“Alright, give my regards to Jack and my love to Hazel,” Max said as he dished the eggs out onto a plate.

“I’ll let them know. Don’t worry, Hazel and I will come to visit you soon.”

Max smiled. “Looking forward to it.”

“Goodbye!” The line went dead.

Max shook his head. Valerie had her hands full with Hazel. He looked up when the kitchen door opened, and Bose walked in.

“Boss, Harvey is here,” Bose announced, taking in the pleasant aroma that filled the kitchen.

Harvey Shaw was his chief of security. “Ah, great. Someone to share my toast with since you and Clinton are hell-bent on your jock lifestyle and can’t eat carbs,” Max said as he retrieved two mugs—one for himself and one for Harvey. “Send him in.”

A few minutes later, Harvey greeted his boss as he walked to the dining table, with Bose carrying two plates of his breakfast.

“Good morning, Harvey. Come on in and take a seat,” Max said with a smile, gesturing to the chair across from him. “I was just making breakfast, so you can join in if you’d like.”

Harvey gladly accepted the offer and took a seat. Max motioned for Bose to bring

over the coffee, and he did so with a quick nod before standing at attention behind Max. The fragrance of freshly brewed coffee and cooked eggs filled the room, making Harvey's mouth water.

"Thank you, sir," Harvey said, taking a sip of his coffee. "This is great."

Max smiled. "I'm glad you like it. So, what have you got for me?"

Harvey leaned forward, his eyes meeting Max's. "Everything is ready, sir. Rest assured that you're going to be safe there."

Max raised his eyebrows. The grand opening of their new hotel was in two days' time in Massachusetts, and Max would be spending most of his time in The Cardel, his yacht. If there was going to be another attempt on his life, it would be on The Cardel or at the new hotel. That was the main reason Harvey was here today.

Max took a bite of his toast and scrambled eggs before asking. "What measures did you take?"

Harvey put down his coffee cup and leaned back in his chair. "I hired additional contractors, all with special forces experience. There will be a unit at the new hotel, and a team of twelve will be deployed on your jet and twenty-three on your yacht, sir."

Max nodded, impressed. "Alright. Walk me through the security for The Cardel. How are you fortifying it against Tesiera Anderson. That woman is an expert."

Harvey paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "With the help of the special surveillance and security team, we are setting a trap for her. We'll be prepared for her, sir. We expect her to attack you in your hotel room or on the yacht, and that's where we'll get her."

Max nodded in satisfaction, taking a bite of his breakfast. “What about Walker? I’m getting tired of his antics.”

“The additional contractors are aware of the threat Walker poses. They are running drills to prepare for Walker’s preference to attack you while you’re moving. I’m confident in their abilities to spot and neutralize any threat Walker throws your way,” Harvey replied.

Max sighed. “Just how many new men will be following my every step, exactly?”

“Five, plus Bose and Clinton. Seven total,” Harvey answered.

Max shook his head. “I can’t do that. You know I don’t like an entourage. It will only thrust me into the public consciousness and bring more danger to me.”

“Sir, Bose and Clinton are just two men. Though highly skilled, I believe you need more bodies to protect you at this treacherous time,” Harvey tried to convince him.

“Nope.”

“Okay, how about one additional guard for you, sir? That will bring you to three bodyguards.”

Max hummed thoughtfully, considering the offer. He had survived two major attacks on his life in as many weeks. Neither pursuer would give up their quarry. He could protect himself in normal circumstances, but this situation was now far from normal. He had no choice but to agree. “Alright then.”

“Excellent, sir. Thank you.” Harvey replied, relieved to have cleared this hurdle. “As for The Torturer, if she attacks you in Massachusetts, she will walk right into our trap.”

Max's lips twitched. If everything went according to plan, in two days, he would capture Tesiera Anderson. The hunter had no idea she had become the hunted.

CHAPTER 9. A MISSION IN MOTION.

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Big Cat leaned against the door to Tesiera's bedroom, watching as she busied herself with preparations for her mission. The room was dimly lit, with only a small lamp on the nightstand casting a faint glow over the leather-clad figure in front of the mirror. Tesiera was strapping various weapons to her body, fastening a variety of knives to her boots and waist, and concealing two more in her jacket. She checked her gun, loaded it with bullets, and placed it in her hip holster.

"Tesiera," he said in a low tone, trying to reason with her once again.

She ignored him, concentrating solely on the task at hand. She had expected his attempt to stop her, especially after he had called her the day before, a call she had chosen not to answer. It wasn't a surprise when he showed up at her doorstep hours earlier. She knew, however, that he wouldn't forcefully stop her from going on the mission, as he would with one of his soldiers.

In Big Cat's world, what he wanted, he got. He was a powerful man, greatly feared in the underworld, and she was the only person who'd ever seen the softer side of the fearless, authoritarian godfather.

"I don't feel good about your mission tonight," Big Cat said, trying to persuade her to back down. "What if you walk into a trap?"

Tesiera paused and looked at him over her shoulder, considering his words. But then she shook her head. "Nothing is stopping me tonight," she replied firmly. "I'm going to kill him."

"Tesiera, please," Big Cat pleaded. "Rethink this."

She turned to face him, her face expressionless. “I have to do this,” she said. “For my father.”

Big Cat shook his head, a hint of sadness in his eyes. “Just two more months, and you can have the man’s head on a platter.”

Tesiera stepped towards Big Cat, her eyes gleaming with anger. “I’m not putting this off another day.”

Big Cat sighed, his shoulders slumping. He had raised this woman until she was eighteen years old, and he knew how stubborn she could be.

“I appreciate your concern, Big Cat,” Tesiera said. “But I have to do this. It’s something that should have been done a long time ago.”

Big Cat looked at her, his eyes sad. He knew he had failed, and he couldn’t convince her otherwise. He stepped aside as Tesiera walked towards the door.

“Tesiera,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Be careful.”

Tesiera nodded, not looking back. A bad feeling churned in her gut—as if even her instincts were wary of tonight’s mission. For the first time, she chose to ignore it. She was acutely aware of the risks, yet willing to take them. She had waited for too damn long.

As she stepped out of the house, with moonlight casting shadows around her, she knew this was it—the moment she had been waiting for. Tonight, she would attempt once again to kill Maximilian Kingston.

This time, she would succeed.

After successfully picking the lock, Tesiera pushed the window open and entered the boat, relieved to have found a way in despite the potential risks. She quickly surveyed her surroundings, finding herself in a corridor leading to Maximilian's location further down the hallway. Moving slowly, she wasn't overly concerned about noise; her bare feet were quiet on the floor. Checking the map, she identified the third room on the left as her target. Just as she reached for the door handle, the sound of footsteps and chattering reached her ears.

Noticing a ladder leading to a hatch, she realized it was her only option. Quickly, she climbed up and slipped through the hatch to avoid detection.

And there she was, on a glass ceiling. Who the fuck has glass ceilings? she thought in disgust, before quickly realizing the advantage it offered. From her vantage point, she could see everything happening below, across several rooms. The crawlspace she found herself in was dark, rendering her virtually invisible to anyone below unless they were specifically looking up.

As she watched, three men came into view, and Tesiera's instincts homed in on the man in the middle. It was Maximilian Kingston. He was talking with his two bodyguards, and from the look of it, they were headed to his suite of rooms.

Tesiera followed them by crawling on the ceiling above them until they finally reached their destination, a large golden door with Maximilian's name on it. Tesiera rolled her eyes as she stayed as still as possible and watched. They spoke for a while, before his two bodyguards left and took the elevator. Then Max opened the door and entered it.

Bingo.

A smile hinted at the edge of Tesiera's lips as she realized that her target was right where she wanted him. She moved until she was above his room and could see

everything happening inside. He was preparing for a shower.

Perfect. She would have a surprise waiting for him in the bathroom.

She made her way towards the bathroom, but then her eyes caught another glimpse of the man, and she paused, watching him. Maximilian took off his shirt, but his phone started to ring just as he was about to take off his pants. He answered the call and began pacing around the room.

“Yes. I want everything to be in place by the time I arrive. I’m meeting with all the executives.”

Tesiera’s eyes momentarily ran over his impressive features. Now shirtless, she could see how gracefully toned Maximilian was. His muscular frame spoke volumes about the time he spent working out. Each muscle was well-defined, his body fat extremely low. He was a work of art.

“Exactly! I trust you, Jones. I know you will do a great job handling everything.”

Tesiera ripped her eyes from her enemy and scanned for a way to drop down from the perch into the bathroom, preferably with as little noise as possible. She used the wrench she’d grabbed from the engine room, pushed the board aside, and slipped through the space, lowering herself onto the toilet. Her thoughts were on the look on his face when she finally had a gun to his head.

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The sudden blare of an alarm was deafening, forcing her to cover her ears. In an instant, she was on the ground, struggling to stay awake.

As consciousness began to slip away from her, she heard footsteps approach her. “We got her! We got her!” An unfamiliar male voice shouted with glee.

“It’s definitely her! We caught her,” said another voice.

She tried to focus, but her mind was slipping away, elusive like sand through her fingers. The sounds surrounding her became muffled and distorted, as if underwater. Her thoughts, once sharp and clear, now felt like a jumbled, incoherent mess.

What happened?

She struggled to get up. To get away.

She raised her head up when she heard footsteps approaching her. A tall shadowy figure crouched over her, and she recognized that peculiar masculine build.

Maximilian Kingston.

“It took a while, but now I have you, Tesiera The Torturer,” he said.

She succumbed to the irresistible force pulling her under. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her body went limp. She was suspended in a state between consciousness and unconsciousness. I should have known, she thought. The first time I ignore my instincts—which are never wrong—is the day I get caught by my enemy.

The world faded to black, as she slipped into the deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 10. FAÇADE: THE REAL MONSTER.

“I think she’s awake.”

Tesiera heard a distant voice say as she floated back to consciousness.

Gradually, she became more aware of her surroundings and her vision started to clear. Tesiera tried to move, but she was secured upright with something that dug into her skin.

She jolted awake and found herself chained to a chair in the middle of an unfamiliar room. The realization hit her as the fog cleared: she had failed her mission. Again.

“Oh, thank fuck,” said another voice. Footsteps approached her, but before she could look up, a strong fist connected with her jaw.

Tesiera spat out a mixture of blood and saliva, then raised her head to see the two hefty men standing before her. From her extensive surveillance, she knew them well: the one on the left, with long black hair pulled back and a beard, was Clinton; and the one on the right—the one who had struck her—sporting a high-and-tight blond haircut and brown eyes burning with anger, was Bose.

The man looked like he would enjoy nothing more than to torture her with her own torture devices.

Another unexpected punch broke her nose. Tesiera grunted; the blow hurt like hell, but she was no stranger to pain. In her life, pain was a familiar presence, and she let out only a grunt. Blood gushed from her nose.

“That’s enough, Bose,” Clinton said. Bose stopped mid-swing. After a moment of hesitation, he dropped his hand, glaring at Tesiera. If looks could kill, she’d be dead already.

“I could kill her—” He lunged at Tesiera, his hands about to wrap around her neck. Clinton restrained him before he could get to her.

“Remember, the boss said we shouldn’t touch her. He said to tell him when she wakes up,” Clinton said in a soothing voice, releasing him. Bose’s chest heaved with angry breaths, while Tesiera watched them.

“Fine,” Bose conceded and straightened his shirt. He and Clinton left Tesiera’s side and began walking to the door, but then Bose paused and turned around to face her.

“Each punch was for each attempt you made to kill Max. If not for him, I would’ve fucking killed you,” Bose seethed.

Tesiera didn’t respond to his little speech.

Bose and Clinton exited the room, leaving Tesiera alone with the million-and-one thoughts that filled her mind. She had never been captured before. Ever.

She’d ventured into a lot of dangerous places in search of her targets, most of whom were the most dangerous people in the world. Paranoid underworld men who had surrounded themselves with the best security money could buy. Yet, she had done her job and done it well.

However, in the space of two weeks, she had not only failed her mission twice, but she had also been captured—not by the underworld lords, but by a neurosurgeon and business tycoon. Tesiera let out a derisive laugh, even though her body ached from the action.

She had no one to blame but herself. In a world like hers, doing a job like this, one has to stay incredibly alert. Trust their instincts, be aware of their fucking surroundings on the job. And be one hundred percent present every moment of every mission. She'd allowed revenge to blind her so much that she failed all those rules, ignored all the warning signs, and worse, underestimated her enemy.

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So, yes, she had no one to blame but herself.

The door opened and Tesiera lifted her head. Max entered wearing a crisp pinstriped suit and flanked by his two bodyguards. It didn't escape her notice that the man was power personified. She'd never seen any man carry himself with such grace and poise as this doctor.

"Enjoy your nap?" Max asked as he walked towards her. The only sound was the rhythmic taps of his designer shoes in an otherwise empty room.

Max arched a brow at her injured face. "I thought I said not to touch her." He turned to face Bose.

"I'm sorry boss. I... I just lost it."

Max took a deep breath and returned to face Tesiera. His keen gaze missed nothing. His mind raced as he tried to figure out why this woman was trying to kill him.

In that moment, Max was glad he listened to his chief of security and had installed the trap in his bathroom. He'd be a dead man otherwise.

His attention narrowed onto her expressionless face. Her fiery brown eyes were filled with the promise of death as they met his gaze.

"Who sent you?"

Tesiera took a moment to respond. "If you let me go then maybe I'll think about

telling you.”

Max wasn't falling for the bait. She was beginning to piss him off. His eyes darkened. “You are going to answer me, Tesiera Anderson. Who sent you to kill me?”

She was taken aback by Max's tone. She didn't know he had it in him.

Maybe he's finally showing his true self, she thought. It was about time; she was exhausted by the façade he put on for the world.

She gave him a wolfish smile through the drying blood. “Come closer and I will tell you.”

Bose snorted. “Boss, just let me kill her. We can make this whole thing go away and no one would ever know.”

Max directed an unspoken command at his bodyguard and Bose let out a breath. “I'm sorry, boss.”

He turned his attention back to this woman with the unrelenting resolve to withhold the information he wanted.

“Bose, Clinton. Leave,” Max instructed. The two shared a look before protesting. But then they saw the look on their boss's face—an unfamiliar one. It was anger, a measure of anger they had never seen from him before.

“Alright, boss,” they said as they exited the room.

Max heard the click of the door shut and then he asked, “Did Walker send you?”

“No one sent me to kill you.”

“Then why are you here?” Max retorted.

Tesiera raised her gaze to his. “I want you dead.”

“Why?” Max circled her chair, waiting for her answer. “You know, a lot of people have wanted me dead. Ever since I was young. Some have even gone to the extreme to get the job done. I’ve gone through hell; The worst moment of my life is because of people like you.” Max went around her twice before pausing right in front her. He crouched before, his gray-orbs locking her gaze with his. “Be assured, you won’t get out of here unless you tell me who sent you. And if you don’t comply, I will unleash Bose on you.”

Tesiera said nothing, her expression unreadable.

Max straightened. “My private investigator got some interesting information about you. The Torturer—” He paused a bit. “That’s what they call you, right? You torture people for days using different incredibly successful and incredibly painful methods—a lot of things I can’t even bring myself to say, let alone think about. You do not care about human life. You’re a monster, Tesiera the Torturer.”

He looked at her with disgust.

“Your eyes are so cold, an embodiment of so much...evil. You’re the only cold-blooded killer in this room.” He paused. “So why would you want me dead? I get why the others do. But you? I can’t figure it out.”

“I am a killer, and I don’t pretend to be anything else. Unlike you, Maximilian Kingston. You pretend to be righteous. But behind that façade, you’re just like me. A murderer. A killer. Evil,” she threw his words back at him. “You robbed children of their childhood. Robbed people of their entire lives. A murderer that stared into the eyes of an old man, pleading for his life and yet still fired the round that killed him.”

“I know people like you because I am you. And I hate it when people pretend to be who they’re not,” she emphasized.

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Someone knocked on the door. For a moment, Max wanted to dismiss whoever it was, but he decided against it. He'd told them not to disturb him unless it was important, so he called for the person to enter.

Harvey stuck his head in. "I'm sorry to intrude, sir, but Mr. Anderson needs your attention."

"Keep an eye on her. I'll be right back," Max said before leaving.

Tesiera watched him walk away, and once he was out the door, she allowed herself to consider the impossible. Could this be a mistake? Could this man be innocent in my father's murder?

It was scary to think about, so she quickly shut it out of her mind. He was an expert at deceiving people, that was all.

The door opened again, and she expected to see her tormentor, but it was Clinton. He closed the door behind him.

"If it was up to Bose, you would already be dead. And frankly, I think that's what you deserve," he said crisply. Tesiera arched her brows as he continued. "You see, my cousin was an orphan. Forced to live on the streets, eating from dumpsters, sleeping with one eye open, until Max saved him." A hint of a smile played on his face. "He's the only family I have left, and I thought he had died a long time ago."

Not only did Max save Kegan, but he also searched for me to reunite us. I was working for a cruel Yakuza Oyabun. Max paid so him so much to cover the cost of

my loss. I didn't even know what Max did, and I didn't care. I'd do anything for him. He's the first employer who's ever truly cared about me, about the lives of those around him. I've never seen a man with his level of power lead the kind of life Maximilian Kingston does." He paused, locking eyes with her. "I don't know what the fuck you think he did to deserve death, but I'm certain he didn't do it."

"I was there. I know what he did," she retorted. She knew what she saw twenty-years ago, dammit! She knew those fucking eyes. Yes, they seemed annoyingly kinder now, but they were still fucking familiar.

"Go and investigate the shooter, whoever he was, not the person you think ordered the hit. Whoever it was must have been a fucking scumbag," Clinton said in a softer tone.

Tesiera suppressed the anger that rose, the doubt that surfaced. "He didn't give an order; he took the shot himself, and his victim was an innocent man."

"That wasn't the boss," he said simply, before he turned and walked out of the door.

By the time her captor came back, Tesiera was just tired. Tired of his façade, tired of her rage, tired of the doubt, tired of everything.

"How did you get these people to believe your lies?" Tesiera asked, genuinely curious. "How do you sleep at night, knowing that you deceive millions of people? How do you keep up with this façade and hide your true self?"

He simply stared at her, expressionless.

She shook her head. "You should kill me now while you have the chance. Kill me now, because that's the only way you're going to get out of this alive."

“Let’s see if I’m understanding this correctly. You believe I killed someone from your childhood. Did I do that to someone you know? A niece, a nephew, a cousin?” He paused. “Is it you?”

Tesiera desperately tried to hide the emotion his question evoked. A muscle ticked in her jaw, and his words had traveled deep enough to strike a nerve.

Max caught the reaction. “You think I killed your grandfather? Your father?”

She averted her eyes and silence descended.

“When was he killed?” he asked, his voice gentle.

For the first time since she woke up restrained to this godforsaken chair, Tesiera struggled against her bindings, glaring at the man who murdered her father but had the audacity to forget about it. He’d killed so many people that he forgot their faces, their names, and the events surrounding their deaths!?

The fire burning in her eyes as she struggled caught him off guard. He’d never seen rage so raw before.

But it was fruitless. She went still and blinked before she focused her eyes on him again, her expression was blank. “You know, anyone can call me a monster, but you cannot. Ever. I have killed, but I remember the names of every target, every victim. I would remember if I pointed a gun at a man whose crying eight-year-old daughter begged me not to kill him. If I tortured and killed a man over a locket and left his daughter alone with his corpse. I would remember it.” She paused. “I am a monster, Maximilian Kingston, but you are the devil himself.”

One moment, he was sympathetic, and the next, his face just went...hard. The easygoing energy evaporated like it was never there before, and his muscles bunched

with tension.

Silence descended and stretched between them.

“I thought those demons were gone.” His voice was so low that she wouldn’t have heard it if the silence of the empty room wasn’t so deafening. “I thought I’d never have anything to do with him again.”

“So, you finally admit it? You finally remembered it?” She let out a hollow laugh. “If I’d known telling the story would remind you of your brutality towards an eight-year-old, I would have done it hours ago and spared us some time.”

He rose from his chair and circled her. “I’ll tell you a story. There was this boy who was a giant bully, a major pain in people’s asses. People avoid him in school because if you caught his eye, you’d be his next target. He delighted in the fear he instilled, by the power he held over people because of his cruelty and their fear. This boy had a favorite target. Someone who he hated on sight. The second boy avoided the bully as much as he could, but it was hard to do when they both went to the same school and attended the same social events.”

Why is he telling me this? Tesiera asked herself, staring at a spot on the wall while he continued to circle her.

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“One day after school, the bully gathered his friends and used a soldering iron to brand the boy’s back. They burned their artwork into his flesh. Practicing their art skills, they said. Finding all sorts of things to try out on their canvas of flesh, anything they could use to elicit bigger and better screams. They laughed at this boy’s pain. They tortured him for days just to listen to his scream.

He drew to a stop in front of her and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tesiera asked.

He shrugged out of the shirt, displaying his back to her. Words died in her throat as she took in the scars.

She recognized most of the tools that would cause those scars. Cigarette burns, iron burn, belt marks, knife trails and so much more she couldn’t make out before he turned again and faced her.

Tired, gray eyes held hers. “The name of the bullied boy was Maximilian Kingston, and the boy who bullied him was Maximus Kingston. The man you’re looking for is my half-brother.”

CHAPTER 11. DENIAL

Tesiera simply didn’t believe him. Her face told him exactly what she thought about his revelation.

“I didn’t kill your father,” he repeated.

“How can you look me in the eyes and tell such a bald-faced lie?” Her nose flared as she spat.

“I don’t lie, Tesiera Anderson. I have no reason to do so.”

“I don’t believe you,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Max shrugged. “Then I think we have reached an impasse. I told you the truth. There’s no point in lying to a woman who is completely at my mercy.” He reached for his discarded shirt and put it on again. “If I were the murderer you accused me of being, I’d kill you now and throw your body out to sea.”

That made sense, but she wasn’t backing down. It had to be a lie. There was no record of any half-brother. She did extensive research as she did for all her missions. She was meticulous with her information gathering, and Big Cat was worse.

The godfather worked with all kinds of people, both legit and not so much. He had all kinds of investigators looking for his brother’s killer. And after so many years, they finally identified the man who pulled the trigger. And she verified their findings, adding more detail to the file. She knew this man’s paper history, and his family’s, inside and out.

“There is no record of a half-brother,” she argued aloud.

“I know,” he admitted. “But that’s because it’s not in the public record. We might be public figures, Miss Tesiera, but we try to keep our private matters private.” He averted his eyes and muttered, “Not everyone likes being in the spotlight.”

She’d figured that he didn’t. A man of his wealth and status could be followed by the paparazzi, but as far as she knew, it was only his two strong-headed bodyguards shadowing him. Her cheek still hurt from where Bose had hit her. She bet that shit did

some real damage.

“It’s simply not possible to hide something of this magnitude from the public, Mr. Kingston,” she retorted. “A new business idea, yes. A financial crisis, that’s possible. But a member of the family, a living human, for more than thirty years? Excuse the fucking hell outta me because I don’t believe you. Do you think you can make a fool out of me and I’ll let it go?”

Max sighed deeply, staring at the raging, gorgeous killer in front of him. The woman tried to kill him—twice—and he didn’t owe her any explanation. But somehow, he wanted her to believe him.

Maybe because he knew what it was like to be helpless while watching someone you love being hurt. It might be because he understood on a personal level the pain that lurked behind the deep-seated anger and hatred this woman wore as a cloak. He had the same demons. Only the mask was different.

“You probably know about my mother and father. My parent’s marriage wasn’t one of love but a marriage of convenience, for connection and the growth of business. A year after I was born, the problems in my parents’ marriage became intolerable and they separated.”

Tesiera didn’t understand why he was telling her more stories, but she would take advantage of his reverie. Her deft hands fiddled with the lock of the chains that bound her, looking for a way for her free herself.

“Now, my father was a dick. A bully in his own right. He never missed an opportunity to throw gasoline on a fire,” he stated. “The Kingstons and the Walkers have been enemies for generations. They fight for dominance in various aspects of the business world.

“During their separation, my father had an affair with a woman he met at the club. Her name is Lisa. And she was Walker’s fiancée.” Max shook his head. Until today, he hadn’t really understood how dramatic the story was. A soap opera storyline for sure. “My father insisted that he slept with her because he was attracted to her, but I know how manipulative my old man was. I always thought he seduced the woman to fan the flames of the family feud. Liking the woman was probably just icing. Anyway, she got pregnant during the affair.”

Tesiera stilled. She was getting interested against her better judgment, she admitted to herself.

“She insisted the child was Carter Walker’s. My old man knew it was his. Lisa was determined to keep the affair a secret from her fiancé, but one night, my father and Carter had one of their squabbles, and my father told him bluntly that he slept with Lisa, and it was his baby she was carrying.” Max winced, imagining what that might have felt like. “Carter confronted Lisa and she finally admitted it.

“Since the world didn’t yet know about Carter Walker’s engagement, or of his relationship with Lisa, the two families came to an agreement to bury the story and keep it away from the press. Walker broke off the engagement but still kept Lisa as his mistress. My hard-headed father agreed to all that only on the condition that when they confirmed that the child was his, he’d get to name the child. Including the last name.” Max snorted. Virgo Kingston had always had a mean streak.

“I take it that this Walker didn’t agree to this?” Tesiera asked reluctantly and resumed fidgeting with her locks.

“Not at all. In the end, they came to a compromise. They decided the child would take his mother’s last name. This would prevent anyone asking too many questions. So, he agreed to it...but only if the child’s middle name was Kingston.”

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“Your father really wanted to stick it to Walker, didn’t he.” she muttered.

Max smiled. “Yeah. It was probably his way of giving Walker the middle finger. Of reminding the man what he had taken away from him. Anyway, the child was born, DNA was taken, and confirmed my father was indeed the biological father. The child was the spitting image of me when I was a baby. My father named him Maximus Kingston. The child became Maximus Kingston McCarthy—taking on Lisa’s surname.”

“Which brings us to your claim that this imaginary Maximus Kingston McCarthy is the bully in your fairytale and the man that killed my father,” she chirped in a mocking tone.

Max ignored her. “My parents got back together three years after being separated, and I think they found love much later in the marriage. My father made sure that Maxi never lacked for anything. Lisa raised him on her own. The child grew up to be a dick. He knew he had two powerful families behind him, so he used it to his advantage to do whatever he wanted and get away with it. My father wanted Maxi to have the best education, we ended up in school together. We looked identical, but no one seemed to put two and two together. And our characters were so different.

“Maxi always hated me. Always,” he deadpanned. “According to him, we were the reason his father couldn’t love him,” he scoffed and shook his head. “Useless sonofabitch. His father couldn’t love him because his father didn’t know how to show love. Our father showed love through his money, and the bastard never lacked for anything. Anyway, Maxi was a druggie during school, and a big-time bully. I simply avoided him. He tried to rape a girl in school and got expelled. My father covered up

the crime, but he was so mad at Maxi that he brutally cut him off. Maxi blamed me for that. That same week, he... he and his gang The things they did to me..." Max averted his eyes. Memories assailed him, and his hands balled into fists as he tried to suppress them. He hated those memories as much as he hated the man responsible for them.

"After I escaped, Maxi was nowhere to be found. My father died two years later of a heart attack, and the bastard came back to get his share. I was in med school when I got the news of what he did." He swallowed tightly. "That monster attacked my poor mother. He assaulted her."

The emotions in his eyes... Tesiera was starting to believe his stories. The man looked murderous.

Finally, he took a deep breath and continued. "The things Maxi and his gang did to me didn't hurt me as much as what he did to my mom. I hated violence since I was a child, and I was going to be a doctor. Because of Maxi, I vowed I would never let him hurt my family again. So, I learned how to defend myself and protect my family. I learned how to fight. I learned to use guns and knives. I was trained by skilled men who were each a master of their art."

That would explain why he was able to defend himself that night, she thought. The man wasn't just a fighter, he was a professional.

"I vowed to kill Maxi for what he did to my mother. I went after him for years, but Maxi was good at hiding. Seven years ago, my men found him. He was a big-shot drug dealer who'd changed his name, but it was him. I went after him, but the bastard escaped." Max paused. "Weeks later, rumor had it that he was killed in a gunfight with another drug dealer."

She scoffed, derisively. "Isn't it convenient that the man is dead? There's no one to

refute your little story.”

His eyes bored into hers. “I don’t believe that he’s dead either. I think Maxi faked his own death to avoid being caught by me or the law enforcement. But it doesn’t matter. I never gave up searching for that asshole. I will search until I see his lifeless corpse. I’ll never believe that he’s dead otherwise. My scars are nothing compared to my mother’s demons. I will find that bastard, and I will kill him myself,” he stated vehemently.

“I don’t believe you,” she told him bluntly.

He shrugged. “That’s too bad, Tesiera Anderson, because that is all you’ll get. Over the years, I have had a lot of people mistake me for Maxi. I have been attacked by people he wronged before; you are not the first.” He angled his head, his eyes lighting up at what he saw. “You have doubts. I see it in your eyes. The battle to believe or to deny.”

When had she become transparent? Tesiera narrowed her eyes, her anger bubbling to the surface. She hated that he could read her so clearly. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He bent down to be eye level with her, and firmly said, “I did not kill your father.”

“I don’t believe you,” she repeated just as firmly.

Max stared at her for a moment. Then he reached into his pocket and withdrew a key. Still holding her eyes, he reached behind her and inserted it into the lock.

I could get lost in his eyes.

The thought that came out of nowhere startled her as much as his actions confused

her. “What the hell are you doing?”

He ignored her, unlocked the key, and yanked the chains off her, freeing her arms. He did the same to her feet before he stepped back to give her room. As Tesiera rose, he withdrew a dagger from one of her sheaths and raised it between them.

She instantly assumed a defensive stance at the unexpected action. But he didn’t attack. Instead, he moved closer to her, his eyes holding hers captive again as he pressed the dagger into her hand.

He didn’t let go of her hand; instead, he raised it to his throat and pressed it there. “Cut me,” he ordered.

“What!?” she hissed, completely caught off guard.

“You believe I killed your father, and I have told you that I didn’t. Since you don’t believe me, kill me. After all, you want to avenge the death of your father, right?” He was completely calm as if they were discussing the weather.

She looked down at the knife and then back at him. She couldn’t believe this man. Just when she thought she’d figured him out, he went and proved her wrong.

“Do you think I won’t do it?” she hissed, tightening her grip on the knife.

His hand dropped, but hers remained. “Then do it.”

Tesiera glared at him. She hated being caught unawares and she wasn’t one to hesitate when an opportunity presented itself. So why was she hesitating now?

A flick of her wrist and she’d kill him. Dig into his trachea, then gut him like a fish. So why the hell was she hesitating?

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Probably because he was right. She was starting to doubt that he was really her target.

When she hesitated for too long, Max simply stepped back away from the dagger. “I did not kill your father,” he said again.

The man was messing with her head. He was messing with her. “I still don’t believe you. I can’t believe you. Prove to me that Maximus Kingston McCarthy ever existed. I don’t care how you do it but prove it. But you will never get me to believe you aren’t the killer I spent twenty years searching for by your word alone. ‘Cause that is never going to happen. Do you hear me!?” she spat, getting into his face, her eyes brimming with anger.

They stood toe-to-toe in a face-off. She noticed that the man was more than a foot taller than she was, and she was a tall woman.

Silence hung in the air again.

Finally, he took a step back. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a cellphone—the man seemed to have more than a few of those. Her eyes followed his every movement.

He tapped away for a few seconds. Then he lifted the phone and showed the screen to her.

Tesiera’s heart stopped as she glanced at the screen. For a moment, she felt lightheaded and took a step back.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “This can’t be.”

Two teens were standing together at the screen. They looked like identical twins and they both looked like the teen who had pulled the trigger that killed her father twenty years earlier. But one had kinder, sadder eyes, and the other had cold, cynical eyes.

“This was taken freshman year after a game,” Max said.

“No.” She shook her head again, her eyes pinned to the screen. They stood together and looked the same, but she knew the boy who killed her father instantly. And it wasn’t the man standing in front of her.

“Fuck.”

She tore her gaze from the phone and looking into the eyes of the man standing in front of her. The kinder eyes that had planted doubts in her from the very first night she’d attacked him in his bedroom. “This can’t be...”

Her brain denied the realization over and over again. Because it was easier to deny than to accept.

To accept this would mean that she had the wrong target all along. Worst of all, that would mean that she almost murdered an innocent man in cold blood. Twice.

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CHAPTER 12. SHAKEN.

Someone knocked on the door, and he glanced at Tesiera before quickly turning his attention to the interruption. He remembered instructing Clinton and Bose to prevent any interference.

Harvey said, “Good evening, Mr. Kingston. I believe there is another intruder. One of the wires has been tampered with, and one of the staff sensors has been stolen. Are you all right, sir?”

Max was puzzled. Was it another intruder, or was it still about Tesiera? “Check the perimeter and the CCTV. I’m fine. There have been no disturbances here. I’m sure Bose would alert me if there’s another invader.”

“Alright, sir. I’ll make rounds and send the guards to sweep the boat, just to be sure.”

Carter Walker would be foolish to send one of his assassins here tonight. Max nodded.

Turning back, Max found an empty room. His eyes swept the room, scanning for Tesiera Anderson, but she was nowhere to be found.

He took a deep breath, not surprised. He knew it was only a matter of time before she escaped when he unchained her. But she was so good that it only took brief diversion of his attention for her to escape. He was impressed.

Bose and Clinton straightened as he walked out of the room. “Have you heard from the marketing director? Where are the Chinese investors?” Max asked Clinton.

“Yes, sir. I heard Marshal is keeping them entertained in the VIP lounge. A few business associates came to look for you earlier, but we told them you weren’t to be disturbed.”

“That’s good. Let’s join them before the commissioning speech.” Max led the way.

“But what about the woman, sir? Are we going to leave her tied up there all night?” Bose’s tone was filled with hopeful glee.

“Not exactly. I untied her, and she has escaped,” Max answered nonchalantly.

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Bose and Clinton stopped abruptly. “What!?” they exclaimed at the same time.

Max simply shrugged, unsure of how else to explain it. He wasn’t sure he had done the right thing by letting her go, but only time would tell.

Bose gritted his teeth in anger. “If you’d given the order, I would have killed her earlier.”

Max continued walking. “Not to worry, Bose. I don’t think she will attack again.”

“How can you be so sure, boss?”

He wasn’t. Before tonight, he had been convinced that Tesiera was a monster after seeing footage of her torturing people. But the emotions he had seen in her eyes tonight...

Well, only time would tell.

As Tesiera stumbled into her apartment in the wee hours of the morning, the silence that had once comforted her now seemed suffocating.

Tension hung heavily around her like a rain-laden cloud as she tried to push the night’s events out of her mind. She was completely exhausted and desperately in need of sleep, but the prospect of a good night’s rest seemed unlikely. Mother Nature was always cruel on that aspect.

It was either she was wide awake until morning, or the nightmares came back. The

worst enemies are always those you can't see or touch.

Tesiera entered the bathroom, undressed and stepped into the shower, hoping the hot water would ease her frazzled nerves. However, she didn't feel any different as she emerged from the bathroom thirty minutes later.

An hour later, she bolted from the bed, screaming. She felt a sharp jolt of pain run through her body, waking her up completely. The nightmare was back, replaying the events of that dreadful evening on permanent repeat. And then her horrible life for the two excruciating years after father's death.

The emotional pain was all too familiar, and Tesiera clutched her chest tightly, hoping to suppress the feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. The voices in her head echoed like a broken vinyl record, taunting her with their hurtful essence.

Desperate to silence them, she reached for a small knife from her bedside table, bared her thigh, and made another clean cut on one of the thin scars. She almost moaned at the physical pain. It was a blessing because it numbed the ones she didn't want to feel. She calmed down as she watched the blood trickle down her thigh.

She had a pounding headache. Her home was too quiet.

Rising from bed, she ambled to the other side of her room and retrieved an aspirin from the bottle atop the shelf. After swallowing the tablet with a glass of water, she walked back to her bedroom window, gazing out at the night sky.

Her mind returned to her conversation with Max. It was hard to forget as much as she wanted, to simply eject that whole chapter from her brain.

She was still reeling that she had almost killed an innocent man. Feelings she hadn't had in a long time—so long that they seemed alien, flooded her. Guilt. Regret. Self-

doubt. Shame.

She hated them, but she couldn't make them stop. You almost murdered a man the same way they murdered your father.

"I thought we agreed that we don't believe him..." Tesiera's innermost thoughts had escaped in a low whisper. "I thought we agreed that he might be lying."

She sighed again, burying her head in her hands.

The house was way too quiet.

Big Cat was sound asleep when a loud alarm abruptly woke him.

It was the second-floor alarm that indicated the presence of an intruder in the mansion. He grabbed the two guns that were neatly arranged on his nightstand and dashed out of his room.

As he made his way down the hallway, he met with one of his captains who informed him that all the soldiers had been deployed and were searching for the intruder. Big Cat could see the men scurrying around the mansion, determined to apprehend whoever had broken in. He decided to remain upstairs, ready to pounce with his guns if anything threatening occurred.

A few moments later, the alarm stopped blaring, and his captain returned with news. "Sir, it's The Torturer," he reported.

Big Cat was taken aback. "Alright. You can go now."

He took the elevator up to the second floor, where he found an open door. Stepping into the room, he realized that the light was broken. He could barely see anything, but

a shadowy figure with signature red hair seated on the other side of the bed, staring out into space.

For a few seconds, he simply watched her. She always came through the door—always did the security checks because she didn't care enough to object. As far as she was concerned, the world could burn around her so long as it didn't disrupt her peace or her mission.

But tonight, she'd risked being gunned down if sighted by any of his trigger-happy security forces. What the hell was going on?

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He walked deeper into the room and sensed a different aura from her—an unusual one. Big Cat approached his niece and observed her distressed features. He sat beside her on the bed as she looked away from the night sky and faced him.

He refrained from commenting on the bruises marring her face, his attention drawn to something in her eyes he had never seen before.

After a period of silence, Big Cat said, “I didn’t see anything about Maximilian Kingston’s death on the news. Either you didn’t carry out the mission, or you failed.”

Silence.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

As expected, Tesiera said nothing to Big Cat.

“What happened out there, Siera?” He tried again.

He exhaled. She was always stubborn and kept to herself, even with him. He rose from the bed, about to give up, but her voice stopped him.

“I keep telling myself not to believe him. I keep telling myself he’s lying. But the truth is that I think I’m lying to myself,” she said in a whisper.

She might as well be speaking a foreign language to him. The words didn’t make sense.

“I know I believe him.” She paused to touch her chest, clutching it slightly. “Maybe that’s why I feel so uncomfortable here.”

“What happened?” Big Cat asked and sat down again on the bed.

She took a moment before answering, and then she faced Big Cat and said, “I almost killed an innocent man. Max Kingston didn’t kill my father.”

Big Cat grimaced. He’d previously suspected something of this nature. Apart from seeing the man’s records, it had simply felt odd to him. The man didn’t send out the vile vibes he knew so well.

“Investigations can be wrong sometimes. That is why it’s better to keep a clear head so you can recognize the discrepancies when they appear.”

“I know that. I—” She breathed deeply. “I was so sure it was him. If not for that picture, a part of me still wouldn’t believe his claims.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Tesiera,” he said.

She snorted. “You think I don’t know that? I don’t even want to beat myself up for it. But I can’t seem to let it go. I unleashed twenty-year’s worth of rage on an innocent man. I was going to gut him like a fish. Torture him the way my father was tortured; kill him the way he was killed. And it turns out he is not the guy I was looking for. I came this close to killing him,” she stated, bringing her thumb and her forefinger so close that they were almost touching.

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, looking away gazing into the darkness.

Big Cat wanted to be there for her—to offer her comfort and support in his own way.

“Sleep here tonight,” he offered half-heartedly, expecting Tesiera to say no as she always did.

“I sleep in my own home,” she said.

“I know,” he said softly. “However, you are welcome to stay over if you’d like. You can sleep in this room, sleep in your old bedroom, or anywhere of your choice.”

Tesiera remained silent, her gaze fixated on the view outside the window.

Sighing, Big Cat got up from the bed. “Goodnight, my dear,” he said, patting her on the arm before leaving the room.

Tesiera sat there, lost in her thoughts. Her mind was a jumbled mess. But deep inside, she was happy she’d come here. The familiar surroundings made her feel better.

Eventually, she made her way to her old bedroom. She switched on the lights as she entered, and everything was just as she had left it. Cleaned, but otherwise untouched.

Turning off the lights, she removed her clothes and got into bed, pulling the blanket over her body. She couldn’t help but feel a sense of nostalgia wash over her.

Sleep was elusive. She twisted and turned, trying to find a comfortable position, but was restless and her mind was racing. She has killed countless people before, and she’d never felt like this. Why was this so different?

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But she knew why. This case was very personal to her, and she almost unleashed herself on an innocent man. She might not give a shit between right or wrong, but she'd like to believe that she'd never killed a man that didn't deserve it. All her victims were part of the criminal underworld. Men and women who'd earned it.

As time passed, her mind continued to race, while her body grew increasingly heavy with exhaustion. She recognized the need for sleep, yet her mind stubbornly refused to cooperate. She attempted to calm her racing thoughts, focusing on her breathing, but it was futile.

Suddenly, she remembered something. Reaching over to the bedside table, she opened the drawer and gently pulled out an old music box.

It was the only thing left of her father. She avoided it because of the flood of memories it brought, but tonight it couldn't hurt. She was already at her lowest.

The delicate, rickety device emitted a cracking sound when she pressed the button. But then the music started to play softly, filling the room with a serene melody.

Tesiera closed her eyes and listened to it. It didn't take long before the music began guiding her into a peaceful slumber. And before she fell asleep, she knew she didn't want to wake like this. Didn't want to live like this.

There had to be a way to make this stop. There had to be something she could do to bury all these uncomfortable feelings and get on with her life.

Maybe she would pay the doctor another visit.

CHAPTER 13. A SEED PLANTED. A SEED NEEDED.

Three days later, Max stepped into the sterile operating room, his hands already scrubbed clean. The surgical team was assembled and waiting for him, dressed in their blue scrubs and masks.

Max approached the table where the patient lay, covered in drapes. He looked over the scans and notes, making sure he had everything he needed.

“Let's begin,” he said, nodding to the anesthesiologist. The machine beeped as the patient was put under, and Max picked up his scalpel.

The procedure was delicate, but Max was an expert. He worked carefully, slicing through the meticulous tissue with precision. He was in the zone, focused on the task at hand.

Hours passed as he worked, sweat beading on his brow. He was almost done when he heard a beep from the machine. He looked up, his heart jolted. The patient's heart rate was dropping.

Max knew he had to act fast. He ordered the surgical team to get ready for an emergency bypass procedure, his mind rapidly analyzing the situation to pinpoint the error and the solution.

Then, in a moment of clarity, he understood the issue. He asked for a scalpel and quickly made an incision, exposing the compromised blood vessel. He worked quickly, repairing the damage and getting the blood flowing again.

The patient stabilized, and Max breathed a sigh of relief. He finished the procedure, carefully closing the incision and dressing the wound.

The patient was transferred to the ICU, and Max walked out of the operating room, exhausted but proud. He was greeted by Nurse Pattie. “Dr. Kingston, that was amazing,” she said, a smile on her face. “You saved that patient's life.”

Max nodded, the adrenaline still pulsing through him. “It was a close call, but I'm glad it turned out okay,” he said.

“You’re truly a miracle worker,” she said. “The patient’s family will be forever grateful for what you did for them today.”

Max smiled, feeling another surge of pride and accomplishment. “It’s all in a day’s work,” he said. “But it’s always great to know that I made a difference in someone’s life.”

Nurse Pattie nodded, her smile still wide. “You sure did, and you do it every day. You’re a true hero, Dr. Kingston.”

Venus had come over to visit Tesiera. Or at least that's what she had thought.

After spending hours alone in the living room, idly watching TV, with no sign of Tesiera emerging from her seclusion, Venus's worry deepened. Deciding to investigate, she switched off the television, rose from the couch, and began a thorough search of the apartment.

Passing by a door, she heard the distinct sounds of boxing. Pausing, Venus retraced her steps and opened the door. Inside, she found Tesiera, completely absorbed in her vigorous workout, punching a red, sand-filled bag hanging from the ceiling. Tesiera's body, glistening with sweat, moved rhythmically and forcefully. The air around her seemed charged with tension.

Venus understood that something must have disrupted Tesiera's mission, especially

since there had been no news about the billionaire doctor's death. Knowing Tesiera wouldn't discuss it with her, Venus had sought answers from Big Cat. He had revealed that the mission was complicated because the target turned out to be the wrong person.

The memory made her wince. She knew how hard that could be.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Venus's voice was barely a whisper.

“No,” Tesiera replied curtly, not even sparing Venus a glance. She kept her focus locked on the boxing bag.

Venus, understanding Tesiera's disposition, decided not to press further and turned to leave. But then, she paused and added softly, “I’ve had the same experience.”

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At those words, Tesiera ceased her punches, processing Venus's admission. "You have?" she asked reluctantly.

Venus simply shrugged in response.

Tesiera knew Venus talked about herself about as much as Tesiera did. Her life was shrouded in mystery. She turned and looked at Venus now and instantly knew, from the look in her eyes, that she was telling the truth.

"If you don't do something about it, the burden will only grow bigger, heavier. It will never get easier. You will feel the weight here," Venus said, touching her chest. "You'll never be able to concentrate on your missions the way you did, and you'll question every decision you make. The self-doubt, regret and guilt are the worst. If you don't do anything about it, it will consume you." She blinked, pushing her own memories away.

Tesiera said nothing; she just stood there and watched the only real friend she had.

Venus turned and started for the door.

"Is there a way to make it go away?" Tesiera asked in a quiet voice.

Venus paused and faced Tesiera. "You have to embrace your mistake and move on," Venus said, watching as a mixture of emotions played across Tesiera's face. "But the best way is to try and make amends for the mistake."

"Make amends for it?"

Venus jerked her head once. “Especially if you hate being indebted to people. You owe that doctor. Make up for it somehow. You’ll feel better if you do. It’s like a salve for your soul.”

Tesiera simply stared.

“A man like him must have a lot of enemies, threats to his life,” Venus continued. “Why not eliminate one of his enemies for him? Or work for him for a few weeks or a month? You almost killed him twice, so save his life a couple times. That is the best way to appease your aching conscience,” Venus finished, and she could see the wheels turning in Tesiera’s mind as she considered the suggestion.

Tesiera was silent for a moment before she finally said, “Thank you, Venus. I will think about it.”

Venus nodded before finally leaving the room.

“Sir, we have successfully screened and tested thirty candidates for the bodyguard position. After conducting rigorous tests, we were able to narrow down to two top-notch individuals,” Harvey reported to Max as they strolled down the dimly lit hallway that led to the training room in one of his secure houses.

“The best, huh?” Max raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

“Yes, sir. One has a black belt in karate and a military background, while the other has served in various security organizations and won numerous accolades. I have personally observed their fighting abilities, and they are exceptional,” Harvey replied proudly.

“And they’re here now?”

“Yes, sir. Waiting in the training room.”

Max halted at the door, and Harvey opened it for him. “I want to fight them,” Max declared, removing his wristwatch.

Harvey was taken aback. The boss was known for his dislike of fighting and seldom got involved in it. “You do?”

“If this bodyguard will be shadowing me every moment and invading my personal space, then I might as well test their capabilities myself. Besides, I need to let off some steam,” Max answered, tossing a glance over his shoulder at Harvey. “Have you ever seen me fight?”

“No, sir,” Harvey replied.

Bose and Clinton stood leaning against the door, arms crossed, eagerly anticipating the show. Although the boss rarely fought, they loved to watch him in action.

Max entered the ring, and his eyes were fixed on the two bodyguard candidates. They bowed their heads in respect, and he reciprocated the gesture. “For right now, I am not a potential employer but an enemy trying to kill your protectee. Give it your best shot because if I win, then you both failed,” Max challenged them.

“Roger that, sir,” they responded.

As soon as the fight commenced, Max moved with lightning speed, his movements smooth and precise. He easily dodged their attacks, countering with a series of punches and kicks that left the two men gasping for air.

Harvey watched in wonderment as Max displayed a level of grace and power he had never seen before. It was like watching a master at work, with every move calculated

and lethal.

The two aspirants struggled to keep up with Max, their attacks becoming increasingly frantic as he pressed his advantage. With one swift move, he took both men down simultaneously, his limbs moving so quickly that they were a blur.

In less than ten minutes, the fight was over, and Max stood in the center of the circle, breathing heavily. He turned to Harvey, a slight grin on his lips.

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“That was remarkable,” Harvey exclaimed, still in awe of what he had just witnessed.

Max simply nodded, scanning the room with his eyes. “My watch,” he requested, and Harvey handed it to him.

After putting on his watch, Max turned to face Harvey. “You have to keep searching,” he instructed.

“Of course, sir,” Harvey replied dutifully.

“Cast your net wide this time, Harvey. Don’t limit yourself to just the state; broaden your scope,” Max advised.

“I will keep that in mind, sir.”

As they made their way out of the room, Max couldn’t help but think of Tesiera Anderson and the night of her attack. He replayed the moments when she displayed her extraordinary skills in his mind. She was an excellent fighter.

He turned back to glance at the two men still lying on the floor and shook his head. He knew that men like them wouldn’t stand a chance against a woman like The Torturer.

That’s the kind of skill he needed. That was the kind of person he needed.

CHAPTER 14. A NEW DAWN.

The early morning rain had left the air feeling fresh, and the pathways were dotted with puddles, while the trees still dripped with water. Venus called Tesiera to invite her for an early morning run together, and she agreed reluctantly.

It had been two weeks since Tesiera's second attempt on Dr. Kingston's life, and equally two weeks since she learned he wasn't her father's killer. In that time, she had undertaken just one mission, a stark contrast to her previously hectic schedule with cases lined up back-to-back, leaving her barely any breathing room. Her handler had been persistently calling, curious about the sudden slowdown of the 'Torturer', but Tesiera remained as tight-lipped as ever.

Gasping for breath, Venus suggested they take a break. Tesiera nodded in agreement, gradually coming to a stop. Venus, panting heavily, exclaimed, "Thank fuck. I'm so tired, I think I'm out of shape."

"You're not out of shape. We've been jogging for hours," Tesiera responded, equally breathless.

As they stretched, Venus broke the comfortable silence. "I saw an ad a few days ago and did some digging."

"Digging?" Tesiera arched her back, stretching her arms.

"Yeah, OBTN Security Company posted an ad. They're looking for a full-time lifeguard for a big company."

"Alright," Tesiera acknowledged. In their line of work, 'lifeguard' was a code for a bodyguard assigned to offer round-the-clock, close-proximity protection. A human shield. A personal protector. "So, you're thinking of applying?"

"Nope."

“So, why are we talking about it?”

“The big company is Kingston Hotels and Resort,” Venus said.

Tesiera paused and lowered her leg, staring up at the tattooed blond in front of her.

Venus shrugged. “I figured you would want to know.”

“Why would you think that?” Tesiera asked, averting her eyes.

Venus let out a deep breath. “I don’t know. Maybe I thought you might still be feeling guilty about what happened, and you might still want to make up for what you did.”

“I’m fine. It’s all in the past,” Tesiera lied.

“No, you’re not,” Venus said. “Killers like us might not have a lot of morals, but you and I have principles we live by. I know you, Tesiera. You might try to convince yourself that you’ve put it all behind you, but it’s a lie. You compromised your principles, and until you make things right, you’ll never fully move on.”

Tesiera’s brow furrowed. She had never pegged Venus as an emotionally intelligent person. And she hated that the woman was right.

“I thought of you as soon as I saw it,” Venus continued. “I figured that it would help you get over what happened.”

“I’m not working as a protector for anyone. I don’t work for anybody, period.”

“I know you don’t.”

Silence descended between them as they resumed jogging. Tesiera tried to keep her mind away from the discussion they just had. After what happened that night, she’d decided to give it some time before restarting the search for her father’s killer. This time around, she vowed not to make any mistakes. She would catch Maximus Kingston, and she would make the bastard pay.

But what about the Kingston you almost killed? What about the Kingston you had wronged?

Tesiera gritted her teeth. She hated that annoying voice as much as she hated the mistakes she’d made.

“It’s pointless,” she said at last, slowing to a stop again.

“What is?” Venus asked.

“Being his protector. It’s not possible. I almost killed the man. What makes you think he would allow a person that tried to kill him to guard his life? Maximilian Kingston is a smart man; he would never employ me—an assassin that made two attempts at his life.”

“That’s right. A smart man would never do that. But a man who commands chains of hotels and also happens to be a neurosurgeon is probably smarter than most and unpredictable at best. You won’t know unless you try. Who knows—he might hire you if you show him your sincerity. After all, you have the skill it takes to get the job

done, and he's already seen a demonstration."

"I doubt that. I failed the mission to kill the man. Twice. If anyone has a reason to doubt my skills, it'll be him," Tesiera stated.

Venus angled her head and thought about it. "True. But the man probably knows that you failed because you attacked him in his territory, and he caught you off guard twice. Not to mention that you didn't know he was a fighter, but he turned out to be highly skilled."

"All that shows incompetence. I would never hire me if I was in that position," Tesiera stated.

Venus chuckled, unable to help herself. "You're a real piece of work, you know that?"

Tesiera resumed walking. Venus fell into step with her. "Try, Tesiera. Giving yourself all the reasons why it'll never work wouldn't counter the fact that you never made an effort in the first place. Try, and if you're hired, you can work for a few months. Eliminate an enemy for him and resign. Puff, guilt disappears, and order in the world is restored."

They didn't talk about the job for the rest of the workout. Venus went into details about the politician she was currently working for and all his shady ways, and Tesiera half listened.

When they were about to go their separate ways, she turned back to Venus. "Can you send me the link to the ad?"

Venus grinned. "Of course."

Three days later, Max was in his office reviewing his patients' charts when there was a knock at his door. Harvey's familiar voice announced his presence. Max paused his paperwork and gave him permission to enter.

"Sir, we have arranged for a new set of candidates. A total of twenty people, and they will begin their training next week. After two weeks, we will make our pick," Harvey said. Max rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated groan.

"I'm getting tired of all this, Harvey."

"I know, sir, but I assure you that we're almost done."

"If they end up being a disappointment again, we're done with this search, and I will only work with Bose and Clinton. Those that are very skilled can be hired to guard the house and tighten security protocols, but I won't have an amateur invading my space twenty-four hours a day. It's bad enough that bodyguards follow me to work."

Harvey exhaled deeply. "I apologize for the way things have been going, but I can't be at ease unless we bolster your personal security detail. You hired me to ensure your safety, and I'm committed to that. If we can't make this work, I'll resign from the company and offer my services directly to you."

"Don't do that," Max interjected, shaking his head. "It would cause quite a stir with Alexo. Besides, I'm reassured knowing the company's security is robust because you're at the helm. I don't want to change that arrangement."

Before Harvey could reply, the air was suddenly filled with commotion.

"What's going on?" Max furrowed his brows.

Harvey was already on his feet. "I will find out." He was almost at the door when

Clinton hurried in.

“She’s here,” Clinton gasped.

“Who’s here?” Harvey asked. From the pissed-off expression on Clinton’s face, Max had an idea who it was.

“The female assassin. That Torturer.” Clinton confirmed his thoughts.

“She’s got some nerve,” Harvey said, his eyes narrowed in anger. “What the hell is she doing here?”

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“I have no idea, but our team engaged her. She knocked out two guards, but the rest managed to overpower her. She won't escape this time,” Clinton reported.

At that moment, the door swung open, and three security men entered, forcibly escorting Tesiera Anderson between them. Max blinked, stunned. Why was she here? And how had she been captured so easily?

Ares, pressing down hard on her shoulder, forced her to kneel. “We caught her attempting to breach the property,” he announced.

Max's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Tesiera snorted derisively. “Dumbass,” she muttered under her breath.

The guard's jaw tightened. “What did you just call me?”

“Who the hell invades an enemy's heavily guarded property by walking through the front door in broad daylight?” She shook her head. “Dumbass.”

Ares growled in frustration and advanced on her.

“Ares.” Max's voice was barely more than a whisper, but it immediately halted the guard in his tracks.

The security guard shot a glare at the leather-clad woman, and stepped back. “Forgive me, sir.”

Max looked at Tesiera, the red-haired woman who had ravaged his life like a wild tornado. He suddenly noticed a change in her appearance; her striking red hair was now a few shades lighter, complemented by black highlights that added a new edge to her look.

But instead of the usual icy hatred, her face was without expression. She was as gorgeous and enigmatic as she was the very first night he saw her standing in his bedroom dressed like an avenging angel with knives in her hands.

What the hell was she doing here?

He didn't think she was here to attack him.

"Let her go," he ordered the security men.

They were surprised but they stepped away from her. Tesiera rose, hiding her own surprise. She'd half-expected him to order them to deal with her or something along those lines. Definitely not to let her go.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her, bluntly.

"I'd like to speak with you," she looked around. "In private."

He simply stared at her.

In a low voice he almost wouldn't have heard if he wasn't so attentive to her, she added, "Please."

"Leave us," Max ordered at last, holding eye contact with her.

"You can't possibly mean—"

“Leave, Clinton,” he stated firmly, cutting Clinton off. He then glanced at his chief of security. “You too, Harvey.”

“Alright, boss. We will be outside. Call if you need anything,” Harvey stated.

His men were well-intentioned, but they often forgot that he was perfectly capable of handling himself. He nodded as they begrudgingly stepped out of the office, and he was finally alone with her.

As she swept her hair away from her face, his gaze involuntarily followed the motion. Instead of her signature ponytail, her hair was loose, cascading down her back like a silken waterfall.

He realized he was paying her too much attention. Dangerous lines. It was time to send the woman away.

“What exactly are you doing here?” he asked again, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “You escaped. So, why did you come back?”

For a moment, he caught the look of indecision on her face. But it was replaced with resolve. She walked closer to his desk and stopped in front of him.

“I want to apply for the position of being your full-time protector,”—a pause—“sir.”

CHAPTER 15. THE LIFEGUARD ASSASSIN.

Max blinked twice, his mind trying to process the unexpected proposal that Tesiera had just made. He straightened in his chair, his brows knitted together in confusion.

“Excuse me, what?” he asked, hoping that he had misheard her.

“I want to come and work for you,” she repeated, her gaze locked on his with an inscrutable expression.

Oh, he heard her right. Max shook his head in disbelief, wondering what had led her to come to him with such a request. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He rose from his chair and approached her, causing her to turn to face him, her face blank. His mind raced with questions, suspicions, and doubts.

He surveyed her carefully, taking in every detail of her appearance, her eyes, and her body language. He tilted his head slightly and let out a small chuckle. “Let me get this straight. You’re the same assassin who tried to kill me just a few days ago, and now you want to keep someone else from killing me?”

She nodded, “Yes, that’s correct.”

Max shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t understand. Why would you want to protect the same life you tried to take—twice?” he asked incredulously.

Tesiera’s lips curved into a small smile, but her eyes remained impassive. “I saw your ad for a job vacancy and thought I could use the extra money.”

Max stepped away from her and walked towards the wall, where a painting hung. It was a birthday gift from Valerie, two years ago. The painting was of a beautiful sunrise over the ocean, and Max found it to be a calming and peaceful piece of art. He took a moment to collect his thoughts before turning back to face her.

“You tried to kill me, and now you want to work for me? I’m sorry, but I find that hard to believe,” he said, his tone firm.

Tesiera looked him in the eye and held his gaze, her expression unreadable. “It’s the truth. I have the skills, and I promise to do a good job.” She swallowed tightly, “Sir.”

He couldn’t help but notice the woman’s immense effort to address him with such honorifics as “sir”, a struggle that seemed more challenging than the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II. The irony of it was amusing enough to make him laugh if the situation wasn’t so grave.

Max folded his arms across his chest, studying her carefully. It was apparent to him that she wanted to make amends. “You feel guilty, don’t you?” he asked her, his voice softening.

Tesiera’s eyes widened slightly, and a muscle twitched in her jaw. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You feel guilty about trying to kill me. You know I’m not your father’s killer,” Max took a step closer to her, his eyes piercing.

Tesiera remained silent, but her body language betrayed her. Her shoulders sagged, and her gaze dropped to the floor. Max knew that he had hit a nerve.

“You only want this job to soothe your conscience, don’t you?” his voice was gentle but firm.

He was right and she hated that he could see right through her. She did feel guilty, and she did want to make amends. But she couldn't bring herself to admit it out loud to him.

When she remained silent, he stepped closer to her, looking deeply into her eyes. "Does it mean that Tesiera the Torturer still has a conscience?" he drawled, a small smile playing on his lips.

Tesiera could feel the anger rising inside of her, threatening to spill over. "That is not what this is about," she said in a crisp voice at last. "I know you're offering to pay for this position and I need that money; that's what I'm here for. The money. I'm not here for guilt, forgiveness, or whatever you think."

Max raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Hmm. For the money, right?" he said, his tone skeptical. "Are you sure about that, Tesiera? Because I went through your records, and I know you have a lot of money. Finances aren't an issue for you."

He stood there, just a few inches away from her, and their eyes met. In this proximity, he could see the emotions that she had been trying so hard to conceal laid bare in front of him.

He saw defiance. She knew he was right, but she wasn't ready to admit it out loud, and she didn't like the fact that he was trying to force her, either. Well, too bad for her because she either admitted it or he would send her out and pretend this conversation never happened.

"You're getting it all wrong," she said, this time her voice was strained.

But Max knew the truth, and he wasn't going to let her off the hook that easily. He turned away from her and walked back to his desk. "Well then, you can see yourself out, Miss Anderson. I'm afraid that I can't hire a person who obviously hates me, and

almost murdered me twice.” He sat down and gave her a hard look. “I can’t entrust my safety to such a person.”

A look he couldn’t read crossed her face for a second before it disappeared. “Okay,” she said. “Thank you for hearing me out.” She turned and made her way to the door.

Max watched her, saying nothing.

She pushed the door open, paused and turned back to look at him over her shoulder. “I understand that you can’t hire me. I expected that before I stepped into this hospital today, but at least I had to try.” She exhaled. “There is a man after your life: Carter Walker. You don’t need to hire me as a bodyguard. But I can assassinate him before the end of today. You don’t need to pay me for it, but I will do it. All you have to do is say the word.”

He leaned back against his chair and crossed his arms. “Why would you want to do that?” That was the most he’d heard her say at once.

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She averted her eyes. Max waited patiently for her to speak, sensing that she was struggling with her innermost thoughts and feelings.

Finally, in a voice so low he almost didn't hear it, she said. "I don't like to owe people. I hate being indebted to anyone."

It was the closest she could bring herself to admitting that she believed he wasn't the man that took her father's life, and Max smiled in triumph.

"I don't want to assassinate him. I want him to suffer in prison. But I can't do that because I have no evidence, so it's been a hell of a time." He couldn't hide his frustration either.

"You're kidding, right?" Tesiera huffed. "If all you told me about the man was true, then Carter Walker is a dangerous man, and he wants you dead. In my world, you don't need evidence to gun a man down. Just be sure that it's him and pull the fucking trigger."

"Like you did to me?"

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her. That reaction, so unexpected, shocked him. She really does feel guilty about the mistaken identity. She truly feels bad for almost killing the wrong man. Her being here is not a ploy; it is genuine.

He sighed, the tension bleeding out of him. "I don't plan to simply murder the man, especially since there's no evidence to prove that he's the one sending these assassins after me. I could say that I know it was him, but sometimes a person's solid belief

could be wrong. Besides, I'm not a fan of dirtying my hands unless it's absolutely necessary. You should know that by now. I'm doing this the right way," he replied, his voice firm and resolute.

"Fine. I believe you're not the killer," she said, surprising Max with her admission. "I don't have hatred for you as a person, Dr. Kingston. I hate the man that killed my father... whoever he is. Since you're not him, I don't hate you."

He didn't expect her to actually say it. He watched her carefully, trying to figure out the kind of person she was—not as an assassin but as a woman.

Tesiera continued. "Let me do this, Maximilian; let me protect you. I promise to protect you with my life. I'm giving you my word. My word is my bond; my word is gold. I have to do this for you. I'll be with you for a month, or more than that if you need me. I will be here until Carter Walker is dead, or behind bars—whichever you want or whichever comes first," she offered, her voice unwavering.

She waited for his response, but he didn't say a word. His face was inscrutable. Max had been easy to read, but now he was a maze, and she was lost trying to read him.

Tesiera hung her head in resignation. "Alright." She turned to leave again.

"You will have to protect me with your life, Tesiera."

His voice halted her in her tracks. She swiveled to face him again, relief coursing through her. "I know how it works," she replied coolly.

"You would have to live in my house and be at my beck and call whenever I want you."

The double entendre didn't get past her, and the image that formed on her head made

her breath hitch. Inwardly shaking her head, she replied out loud, “I understand.”

“And you must promise to try and get along with the others, for as long as you work for me.”

That was a hard condition. She didn’t get along with people. She was certain she’d never get along with Bose. “I’ll try.”

“If you work for me, you will work only for me. No outside work, no taking side contracts, and no new missions, unless you’ve sought my approval and I’ve consented,” he stated, his gaze boring into her.

“I can do that.”

His brow arched. “You would have to address me properly, with respect, professionalism and politeness.”

A pause. She swallowed hard, her throat constricting with tension. But he saw the resolve in her eyes. “I understand, sir.”

“You will stay beside me at all times, even if it means a twenty-four-hour, or longer, shift; traveling here to work with me or going on business trips when required.”

She nodded firmly. “I will, sir.”

He stood up then and extended his hand. “Then congratulations, Tesiera Anderson; you’re hired.”

CHAPTER 16. FACE-OFF

Tesiera stepped out of Max's office, her mind racing with what she had just agreed to.

She had always valued her independence and cherished her solitude. The idea of living in someone else's house and being at their beck and call did not sit well with her.

The thought of having to endure the nightmares that haunted her every night in someone else's home was the most daunting aspect of the arrangement. She couldn't bear the thought of them hearing her screams when nightmares assailed her.

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She had to start taking her medication again. She hated the way it made her feel sluggish and weird, but it was the only way she could get a dreamless, peaceful sleep.

Cursing Venus under her breath for talking her into this, she gritted her teeth. Although a part of her had wanted to do it, now that she was faced with it, she couldn't shake off the feeling of unease that clung to her.

"You can always quit when you want, Tesiera. No one is forcing you," she muttered to herself, navigating the hospital's long, winding hallways. The walls were a sickly shade of off-white, and the floors creaked under her feet, adding to the already eerie atmosphere. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered every now and then, casting strange shadows on the walls.

As she turned a corner, Tesiera found the restroom. She hesitated for a moment before pushing the door open and stepping into the small room. The air was thick with the scent of disinfectant, making her nose wrinkle in disgust. The sound of running water filled the room, echoing off the tiles that lined the walls.

Tesiera strode over to the sink, the cool metal of the faucet feeling refreshing against her skin. She turned the knob, watching as the water flowed from the spout, creating small ripples on the surface of the basin.

As she lifted her gaze to the mirror, Tesiera caught a glimpse of her reflection. She couldn't help but notice how drained she looked. The bags under her eyes were darker than usual, her skin pale and sallow. How long it had been since she had gotten a good night's rest?

The sleeplessness had worsened in recent years, especially since she started hunting her father's killers. She stared at herself for a moment, taking in the image before her. Her face was stern, her eyes cold and unyielding. She had always been a stoic person, but now she wondered if she had become too hardened, too unfeeling.

Tesiera's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening. She glanced at the mirror's reflection, she watched a young nurse step inside. The other woman's eyes widened in surprise as she took in Tesiera's appearance. She certainly didn't look like a patient.

The nurse gave Tesiera a wide berth, as Tesiera pulled her eyes away from the mirror, dried her hands, and walked out of the restroom.

Bose stepped into the neurology ward, a can of soda in hand. He took occasional sips from the beverage, as he returned to his post after evaluating the latest group of prospective bodyguards.

Then, something caught his eye. Or, rather, someone.

He narrowed his eyes, struggling to believe what he was seeing. There was no mistaking it, as clear as day: it was indeed the red-haired assassin. She'd just emerged from the restroom and was now walking towards the boss's office.

"Shit. What the fuck is she doing here?" Bose snarled under his breath, feeling his good mood dissolve into anger. With a surge of irritation, he crushed the can in his grip.

"Now I can finally finish this." He tossed the crumpled can into a nearby bin, disregarding the puddle at his feet.

Bose soundlessly snuck behind his target and grabbed her, hoisting her over his

shoulder.

Caught off guard, Tesiera was momentarily stunned. “Let me go!” she demanded, pounding on his back and kicking her legs in a desperate attempt to break free. But his grip was unyielding. Fucking bastard.

She made a sharp twist in an attempt to escape, but Bose anticipated the move and held firm. Knowing he couldn't restrain her for long, he quickly dashed into the nearest room, relieved to find it empty. He shut the door behind them.

“Get your hands off me!” Tesiera demanded, pressing a pressure point on his neck just enough to force him to release her. She landed nimbly on her feet and, seizing the moment of distraction, hurled a powerful punch at Bose.

“Fuck!” Bose cursed, cradling his throbbing face, momentarily dazed by the force of Tesiera's punch.

Wasting no time, Tesiera moved to launch another attack, this time a kick. But Bose recovered quickly, catching her leg midair, twisting it, and forcing it down. As he raised his fist to strike, Tesiera deftly pushed his wrist aside and kned him in the stomach, eliciting a pained groan from him.

Despite the searing pain, Bose lunged at her, grabbing her neck and slamming her against the wall with a thud.

Clinton whistled absentmindedly as he scrolled through his phone, his mind still churning with the revelations from the boss's office. Initially, he had thought the boss was making a poor joke when he mentioned that the female assassin would be joining their team. However, that notion vanished as soon as he realized the boss wasn't smiling.

The next thought to cross his mind was that the boss had lost his sanity. Apparently, his expression betrayed his thoughts, because the boss had then assured him with a smile that his mind was perfectly sound. Before Clinton could respond, a nurse interrupted, needing the boss's attention, and he had to step out.

Now, on his way to the visitor's restroom, Clinton was still grappling with the reality that the boss had hired the very assassin who had nearly killed him. The boss had explained that she knew it was his half-brother, Maxi, who was responsible for her father's death, not him. Yet, the decision to employ her as a protector still baffled Clinton.

As Clinton passed by the conference room, a familiar but unexpected sound made him pause and return to the door. Then he heard it unmistakably: the sounds of a fight.

“Who the hell fights in a freaking hospi—” he began to mutter as he opened the door, only to be rendered speechless by the fierce brawl between Bose and Tesiera.

“Of course, it's these two,” he sighed, more irritated than surprised that they were practically trying to kill each other.

Tesiera was using a mop stick to fend off Bose, who was skillfully dodging her strikes while attempting to land his own punches.

“Alright, that's enough, you two. Stop,” Clinton commanded, but his words fell on deaf ears as they were too engrossed in their battle.

Bose finally managed to grab the mop stick, yanking it from Tesiera's grasp. With a swift downward swing, he struck her kneecap, causing her to stumble and lose her balance.

“Bose, stop!” Clinton yelled.

“No way, bro. I'm ending this now!” Bose lunged at Tesiera again, wielding the stick like a weapon.

But Tesiera caught the handle, pushed it back into Bose's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. She then snapped the stick in half and tossed it aside, before delivering a crushing blow to his jaw.

His jaw cracked under the force of Tesiera's punch, a low groan escaping his lips. She didn't relent, unleashing a series of jabs at his face, his blood staining her shirt.

Bose's face was battered and so was Tesiera's. He recovered quickly and grabbed her, spun her around, and then smashed her into the wall.

“I need to get the boss.” Clinton quickly left the cleaning closet and dashed to Max's office. He knocked as he entered.

Max looked up from his computer at the interruption encroached on the little time he had to finish reviewing the day's reports before he could go home.

“Bose and Tesiera are killing each other,” Clinton said without preamble.

Max slammed his hands on the table and loosed a frustrated sigh, “Already?”

“They are going at it like rabbits,” Clinton confirmed.

“Not the right phrase, Clinton; they are not having sex.” He snorted, hurrying out of his chair. At times like these, it was evident that English wasn't Clinton's first language.

Max followed Clinton to the cleaning closet, exhaling a long, weary sigh at the sight that greeted him. On the floor, Tesiera had her hands tightly wrapped around Bose's neck, while Bose desperately swung at her, trying to break free. Both were bloodied and drenched in sweat.

“Stop it,” Max commanded. At his words, Bose instantly ceased his struggles, his arms dropping limply to the ground. However, Tesiera only tightened her grip around Bose's neck even further.

“Tesiera, let him go. Now,” his voice edged with authority. She tightened her fingers even, glaring at a very purple Bose.

“He started it,” she snapped angrily.

“And I'll finish it. Let him go,” Max stated crisply. “You promised.”

Tesiera gritted her teeth, slowly loosening her fingers. Bose coughed as he dragged air into his deprived lungs. She stood and turned her back on Bose.

“Boss, I found her walking to your office,” he eyed her.

“Bose, Tesiera, stand down.” Max rubbed his head tiredly. He could feel a headache developing.

“You come at me next time, and I'll fucking slaughter you,” Tesiera growled, her eyes blazing.

“You’re welcome to try, princess,” Bose shot back and advanced on her again.

“Bose, for Christ’s sake...” Max groaned.

Bose winced and drew back. “Sorry.”

“Enough of this,” Max said. He grimaced as he realized how much he really wasn’t looking forward to this. “Bose, meet Tesiera Anderson. My newest bodyguard.”

CHAPTER 17. THE BEGINNING OF THE TURNING POINT.

Bose stilled and the mirthless smile he gave Tesiera died on his lips, leaving behind a perplexed expression on his face. It took a moment for his boss’s words sink in, but they didn’t quite penetrate into his consciousness. They didn’t make sense to him at all. They were English, he was sure of that. But the order they were arranged left him mystified.

“I—I don’t understand,” he said, puzzled. He turned to look at the woman in question. Tesiera Anderson. The same woman who had twice tried to murder his boss.

Bose wondered if his boss’s overwhelming workload had finally scrambled his brain. Or perhaps Tesiera was some sort of witch and she bespelled him.

“This is a joke, right?” Bose’s gaze moved from Max to Clinton, who just shrugged, then to Tesiera, who was already on her way out of the room.

She deliberately bumped into Bose and threw a glare at him as she passed by. Her eyes burned with a fierce intensity—the eyes of a cold-blooded killer, not the eyes of a lifeguard protector.

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“Hello? Answers, anyone?” Bose questioned, his gaze finding Clinton again, who averted his eyes and scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

Max exhaled audibly and took a step forward. “Tesiera is my new bodyguard. The three of you, will be working together starting today.”

“She almost killed you! Why would you hire her to be your bodyguard? Why are you making it easy for her?” Bose asked.

“I told you that this was a case of mistaken identity. She came here to make amends.” Max stared after her. “Even though she’ll never admit it, I think that’s actually why she’s here.”

“Making amends would be to beg for forgiveness, while rolling around and making puppy eyes,” Clinton injected with a grumble, a small smile forming on his face at the image he created.

Max rolled his eyes. “To make amends in her own way,” he corrected.

“But why are you giving her this chance, sir?” Clinton asked, turning serious. “You don’t owe her anything. I mean, the woman was gonna murder you without a second thought.”

Silence descended. Max knew that he had a point. That wasn’t what a rational person would have done, so why did he do it?

“Her eyes,” he said at last.

Bose and Clinton shared a confused look. “You hired her because of her eyes?” Clinton inquired.

“Those are damn fine eyes, boss—a sparkling brown as cold as ice and as glittery as topaz,” Bose said. “I could understand wanting to get lost in them if they couldn’t cut you like glass. But do you really think you should be employing someone because you like their eyes, boss.”

Max groaned and shook his head. “That wasn’t what I meant. That day at the boat, when I explained things to her, the look in her eyes...” He paused. “That unguarded pain I glimpsed when she realized she had almost killed an innocent man has stayed with me. Then today, when I dismissed her, I saw that look again. This time, it was laced with heavy guilt. One that will probably stay with her for the rest of her life. I figured she already had enough demons, and since I had the power to rid her of this one, I would do it.”

Max still wasn’t sure he’d made the right decision, but he knew what it felt like to carry long-term guilt.

Both guards shared another look, an understanding in their eyes. They knew why the boss had hired her.

“We understand, boss. Thank you for clarifying,” Clinton said and bowed his head. “You didn’t owe us any explanation, but you still gave us one. Thank you.”

Max waved it away. “Now that everything is settled, I have to get back to work and magically finish everything within thirty minutes.”

“You’re good-hearted, boss, but I don’t trust her,” Bose muttered.

“But you trust me, Bose, don’t you?” Max replied, his voice calm and steady.

That question, more than anything, put the stubborn man's mind at ease. Max saw the tension dissolve from Bose's hunched shoulders and his body relaxed,

"I trust you," Bose stated firmly, his voice filled with unwavering loyalty.

Max nodded once, stepped forward, and patted the man's shoulder. "Then trust me on this."

Bose nodded once, then sighed as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know how I'm going to get along with her. I don't know if I can."

"You gotta try, big guy. Rome wasn't built in a day, right?" Max stepped back. "She won't be with us for long—perhaps a month at most—but I expect cooperation while she's here. I trust you both to make that happen."

"Okay, boss," Clinton replied. Bose simply nodded.

"Great, now that we're all on the same page, I'll see you later." Max turned and walked out of the room. "Have one of the nurses look at those bruises, Bose. I'm sure you don't want to go around looking like you got beat up by a woman," he threw over his shoulder with a smile.

"Hey! She looks worse than I do," Bose growled, and Clinton snickered.

"I doubt that. Bro, you look like you wrestled with a lion." Clinton tried to hold back his laughter, but couldn't.

Bose glared at Clinton, spitting blood into a garbage can and giving Clinton the middle finger. Clinton's snickering turned into full-blown laughter that echoed in the room. "I'm glad she didn't completely defeat you. You wouldn't have been able to live that down."

Bose rolled his eyes, and it hurt a lot. He felt his jaw and knew it was broken or dislocated. “She’s skilled,” he admitted begrudgingly.

“That’s a good thing. The boss will be safer.”

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Bose shrugged, knowing Clinton was right.

“You haven’t had a good fight in a long time. I know it felt good.” Clinton’s laughter died down as he stepped closer to Bose, who was examining the damage on his face from the broken window glass.

“Leave me alone,” Bose huffed.

“Come on, big guy; tell the truth,” Clinton urged, nudging his side. “Admit it—it felt good as fuck.”

Bose chuckled, giving in. “OK, it felt good.”

“Ha, I knew it. Someone finally worked the tension out of those shoulders that Sharon left on them, huh?”

At the mention of his ex-girlfriend, Bose glared at his best friend and gave him the middle finger again. “Go to hell, man.”

Clinton burst into laughter again.

The end of Max's shift had finally arrived, and he was eager to go home and relax. Bose and Clinton were the first to exit the building, with Bose carrying Max's briefcase and Clinton opening the door for him. Tesiera walked behind Max, keeping a watchful eye out for any danger.

As they stepped out into the warm sunshine, a car pulled up, and a little girl burst out

of it, running straight toward them.

“Uncle Max!” the little girl squealed with excitement.

Max's tired face lit up with joy at the sight of his niece, Hazel. He picked her up and spun her around, causing her to giggle uncontrollably. Her cute, cheeky smile was infectious, and Max couldn't help but feel his own weariness melt away.

He kissed her forehead and asked. “Did you miss Uncle Max, my little princess?”

“Yesssss!” Hazel replied, hugging him tightly.

“I missed you too, sweetheart,” Max said with a smile. He then spotted his sister in the distance. She was wearing a lilac two-piece outfit, and her blonde hair was pulled back. She waved at him, and he waved back before walking towards her.

“So, Hazel, how did you get here? Did you fly here with the fairy wings Princess Strawberry gave you or with the flying bubble gum chariot you told me about last month, the one driven by rainbow unicorns?” Max asked his niece.

“The fairies brought us!” Hazel replied excitedly, flashing her missing front teeth. Her imagination was unparalleled, and Max loved indulging her in any conversation she wanted to have. No matter how absurd.

Valerie rolled her eyes playfully. “You two and your magic talk again. I just can't with the both of you.”

She approached them and hugged Max. “Oh, I've missed you so much, big brother. It's been too long.”

“I missed you too, Val,” Max replied, kissing her forehead. Hazel wiggled in his

arms, signaling to be put down.

Valerie stepped back and cupped Max's cheeks. "How have you been? You look so stressed. Are you getting enough rest?" she asked, turning to Clinton and Bose before he could answer. "I told both of you to make sure he got enough rest, didn't I?"

"We do our best, ma'am. It's just that the boss doesn't listen to—" Clinton began but when Max glared at him, he cleared his throat. "He is getting more than enough rest, ma'am," he finished.

"Tsk, ts, tsk." Valerie pursed her lips in obvious disappointment. Her eyes landed on Tesiera. "Oh...who's the new..." she trailed off, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Tesiera stepped forward. "I'm Tesiera Anderson. I'm his new protector."

"His bodyguard, huh?" Valerie extended her hand. "I'm Valerie, his younger sister, and that little girl captivated by your clothing is Hazel."

Tesiera didn't expect the extended hand, but she shook it anyway, saying nothing. She hadn't had much experience interacting with normal people. People usually avoided her, so she had no idea how to respond to the friendly woman.

"What are you doing here at the hospital?" Max asked, changing the subject. "I hope everything is alright?"

Valerie waved her hand dismissively. "I am just here for a check-up. I may have the flu or something. I have an appointment with Dr. James."

"Then you should hurry. Ann doesn't appreciate patients being late," Max replied.

"Heh, she likes me. Probably because I am the only sister of the almighty

neurosurgeon and chief of surgery, Dr. Maximilian Kingston.” Her smile showed all her teeth.

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Max rolled his eyes. “Where is your bodyguard? Why isn’t he with you?”

“Kane? I fired him last month. The poor guy hates kids, and Hazel couldn’t seem to leave him alone,” Valerie replied while shaking her head.

“I can’t believe this! So, you have been going around unprotected?” Max asked disapprovingly, pursing his lips.

“Worry about yourself, big brother. Walker isn’t after me, and I sure as hell don’t look like Maxi,” Valerie teased.

At the mention of his name, Tesiera’s hands clenched into fists.

Max looked at her and their eyes locked. The world around them disappeared, and sparks seemed to fly between them. They got lost in each other’s gaze.

Valerie cleared her throat, and they both looked away, breaking the connection.

What the hell was that? Tesiera wondered.

Max turned to face his sister, who arched her eyebrows, with a suspicious smile on her face. He deliberately ignored it. “I would have assigned a team to you, but Harvey just left with his team,” he stated.

Max had informed his chief of security that he’d hired the new protector he required, and Harvey had packed up his men and left an hour ago. It felt satisfying to see the dozens of security personnel depart.

“Bose and Clinton will accompany you to your appointment, and I’ll take Hazel home with me. The three of you can come to my home when you’re finished,” Max said.

“That’s not necessary,” Valerie protested.

“Bose, Clinton, go with my sister. I don’t need to remind you that I’ll have your balls if anything happens to her on your watch,” he said to the men.

“We’ll protect her with our lives,” Bose declared.

“Anything to keep the balls safe, sir,” Clinton confirmed.

Max nodded firmly. Valerie knew how her brother was when he’d made up his mind, so she let out a loud sigh and gave in reluctantly. He watched her go into the hospital, flanked by his best men, and best friends.

Hazel put her hand in Tesiera’s, jolting the woman. Tesiera stared at the three-year-old. “My name is Hazel. Who are you?”

Tesiera looked at the little hand holding hers in bewilderment. She had never seen hands that small up close. Her brows knitted as she stared at the little girl like she was an alien.

Thankfully, the child didn’t wait for her to respond before she rattled on, “My birthday will come soon. You will come to my birthday party, right?”

Tesiera blinked twice.

“What happened to your face?” The girl asked. “Did you fall down?”

She turned and glared in the direction of where Bose had gone.

“I like your hair. It’s purple,” Hazel said, and then scooted back to her uncle. “Can you tell Mummy to make my hair purple for my birthday?”

“That’s red, sweetheart. And I don’t think your mama will agree to that.” Max lifted her up and began walking to the parking lot.

Tesiera followed closely behind them. Unconsciously, her hand touched the hair the child just complimented. For a split second, Tesiera wondered just how broken she was; she couldn’t even communicate with a child. An unfamiliar feeling coursed through her, but it made her uncomfortable, so she pushed it away.

They were a few steps from his car, when she noticed his eyes on her. He was watching her intently. It made her uneasy, so she averted her eyes.

“I’ll get Hazel in the car and—” Max’s sentence was cut short when a knife, hurtled from out of nowhere, flew towards him. He twisted to shield Hazel, and Tesiera just as quickly shielded him, stopping the knife between her hands, a hair’s breadth from her forehead.

Hazel shrieked in panic. “It came from over there,” Max pointed as he bounced the crying child in his arms.

She nodded, her keen eyes skimmed their surroundings, looking for any sign of the threat. “We’re being attacked!”

Five motorcycles headed toward them at full speed.

CHAPTERS 18. CHANGE OF PLANS

Max sprang into action as soon as he saw the motorbikes approaching his vehicle. His heart pounding in his chest, he rushed to the passenger seat and strapped the crying Hazel into her car seat before locking the door. She was his first priority.

He turned to face the group of men who had surrounded them. They were dressed in black, ski masks and helmets covering their faces, making it impossible to identify them. Only two of them had guns, but the others held spiked clubs, ready to engage in a fight. Max knew they were in for a rough ride.

Tesiera withdrew two pistols from her belt and tossed one to Max. He gracefully caught it, and the two of them stood back-to-back, ready to face their attackers. Max gestured with a tilt of his head, and Tesiera nodded her understanding.

She fired a shot as she separated from Max, leading the attackers away from the car. But it missed. Three of them went after Max, while the remaining two approached Tesiera. The man with the spiked club swung it with deadly precision, but Tesiera ducked and dodged his attacks with ease.

She felt something hit her shoulder blade, and pain rippled through her body. Hell, she'd been shot.

She whirled around and there the attacker stood with a revolver, about to fire another round. Tesiera dashed behind a car, but the man followed her, firing as he went. The car was now littered with bullet holes, and Tesiera was panting heavily, her shoulder throbbing.

She scooted to the end of the car and took a peek around the corner to see what was happening. The man with the club was nowhere in sight, but the machine gun guy was still after her. He was hiding behind a board, with only his head and hands exposed. Tesiera aimed carefully and fired. The bullet hit him in the shoulder, and he cried out in pain, dropping his weapon.

Afterward, she got out, reached behind her back to her left shoulder blade, and dug out the bullet—fortunately, it hadn't traveled deeper—but it came out shattered. Her leather attire was useless there, so she hurried over to one of the attackers she'd taken down, ripped out some pieces of his shirt, and wrapped it around her arm and shoulder to stop the bleeding.

Meanwhile, Max had knocked the pistol from one of the attacker's hands with a single move and caught it as it dropped to the ground. He fired a shot at the man, taking him down.

The other two men were armed with clubs and bulletproof clothing. He slotted the guns into his back pocket and grabbed a long piece of wood that was lying around to engage them. He swung the wood with deadly precision, hitting one of the attackers on the shoulder, causing him to stumble.

The other attacker aimed his spiked club at Max's face. Max dodged it, but it was close enough to scratch his cheek.

"Fuck," he grunted in pain and returned his focus to the fight.

The two attackers were coming at him from both sides. Max swung around quickly, grabbing the end of a club.

A spike pierced his palm, but he used it to his advantage. He pushed the club into the guy's head and kicked the other in the groin with a backward kick of his leg.

The man doubled over in pain, dropping his club. Meanwhile, the other assailant lay on the ground with a cracked skull, blood trickling from his nose and mouth. Max picked up the wooden club again and slammed it against the man's head with all his might, delivering a fatal blow.

The other attacker, who had been writhing in agony, was about to launch another attack on Max. But Max swung the club against the man's shoulder joint, breaking it with a loud crack. The attacker let out a piercing cry of pain that echoed in the lot. Max then quickly removed his helmet and ski mask and pulled out a gun from his pocket. He aimed at the man and fired a shot that silenced his cries.

With the two attackers down, Max tucked his gun between his back and his pants and headed towards Tesiera, who was in the midst of a gunfight. But as he approached her, another man appeared out of nowhere, brandishing a gun. Max was surprised. He had only seen two men with guns earlier, so where did this third man come from?

Max turned towards Tesiera and saw that she was locked in a fierce shootout with the man wielding the machine gun. The third attacker, who had attacked Tesiera with a club earlier, was nowhere to be seen. Max immediately realized that the third attacker must have swapped weapons with the fourth attacker and was now pointing his gun at Max.

"Drop your weapon," the man ordered Max, who complied by letting go of the wooden club he was holding. "Put your hands up in the air. Right now."

Max eyed the man warily before slowly raising his arms above his head in surrender. The attacker approached him, his gun unwavering.

Meanwhile, Tesiera was struggling to take down the machine gun-wielding attacker. She had reloaded her gun for the second time, but her hands were shaking from the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Her heart was pounding, and her breaths came

in ragged gasps as she tried to steady herself.

Suddenly, she caught sight of Max with his hands up in the air and a gun pointed at him. She felt a surge of anger, and without a second thought, she was about to dash to his aid, ignoring the risk.

But then she saw Max move. In a swift motion, he grabbed the gun pointed at him, spun it away, twisted the attacker's arm, flipped him over, and wrenched the gun away. He stomped hard on the man's chest, causing him to cough up blood.

Tesiera watched in awe as Max executed those moves with precision and ease. Her gaze then shifted to the three dead attackers on the ground, their blood pooling around them. Max had taken them all down by himself. She felt a mixture of admiration and respect for him.

Max had told her he could take care of himself, and he had more than proven it. No wonder the man escaped her at her first attempt on his life that night. She was impressed with him. Not everyone could cleanly execute that tricky move in seconds like he just did.

Tesiera stepped out from behind the car and walked towards a gunman, who was out of ammo. Her lips curled up into a smirk, and her eyes glinted with menace as she got closer. He turned and ran away, leaving his guns behind.

"Lucky bastard," Tesiera muttered under her breath, unimpressed by the gunman's cowardice.

Meanwhile, Max was still standing over the last man, but before he could shoot him, the man pressed the pressure point on his ankle, causing the muscle to spasm. Max cried out in pain as his legs lifted off from the man's body reflexively.

“What the fuck?” Max muttered through gritted teeth, trying to contain the pain. He couldn’t shoot the running man, who fled on his motorbike.

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“They got away.” Tesiera helped Max up from the ground, but he was already on his feet. “Should I go after them?”

“Let them go. I hear Hazel crying. Let’s get out of here,” Max said, hiding the pain from his voice. He was already moving toward the car, when Tesiera fell into step with him. They got into the car, and Max took Hazel from the car seat and into his arms, soothing her.

Tesiera let out a deep sigh. This was her first day at work, and she was already in a gun fight. The sting on her shoulder was persistent, and she wondered if there were still bullet fragments left in the wound.

But what the hell was this about? Who were they, and who sent them?

The car ride felt like it lasted forever as they drove around for over three hours. Tesiera sat quietly in the back, watching the driver navigate the winding roads. She could feel the heavy weight of exhaustion on her eyelids but refused to give in to sleep. She knew they were far from Manhattan now, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she watched Max cuddle the little girl, Hazel.

The child had cried until she drifted off to sleep. Max held her gently, rocking her back and forth, his eyes never leaving her face. Tesiera couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy at the way the man cradled the child with such tenderness. Once upon a time, her father had held her that way.

She blinked hard, to dispel the old memories.

After what felt like an eternity, Max finally spoke up. “Drive to Hamptons,” he ordered the driver.

Tesiera raised an eyebrow, confusion etched on her face. “What’s in Hamptons?” she asked.

“A beach house,” he replied simply. “The sun is setting; we’ll spend the night there. It’s been a long day.”

Tesiera nodded, relieved for the break.

The moment Max' phone began to ring, he quickly pulled it out, concern evident on his face as he saw Clinton's name on the caller ID. He answered immediately.

“Oh, thank goodness! Boss, are you okay? We've been trying to reach you, but your number was unreachable. We even tried two of your other lines, and they weren't available either,” Clinton's voice was laced with worry.

“Yes, I'm alright. We didn't have any cell service where we were, but we're currently en route to the Hamptons. We'll be spending the night there.”

“That's a relief to hear. We learned about the attack shortly after it happened. How are you holding up, sir?” Clinton asked, his tone tinged with almost desperate concern.

“I'm fine, and so is Hazel. It was a close call with the attack, but thankfully, we managed to escape unharmed.” Max glanced at Tesiera. “Miss Anderson was exceptional. She saved my life.”

Hearing this, Clinton let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God! Madam Valerie has been extremely worried, and Bose has been pacing for hours. I'm relieved to hear you're

both safe, sir. I'll pass the message along.”

“Please do. Tell Val there's no need for excessive worry; we're safe. I'll call her once I settle in.” Max instructed.

“Will do, sir. We're back at home now. By the way, we captured one of your assailants trying to flee the premises. He's currently detained. What should we do with him?”

“That's the best news I've heard today,” Max responded, a hint of relief in his voice. “Excellent work. For now, do nothing with him. I intend to be there for the interrogation. I need to find out who orchestrated this attack, whether it was Walter or someone else. It's crucial that I know,” he said, his voice tight with anger. The mere thought of Hazel being in danger made his blood boil. He would never forgive the perpetrators.

Within thirty minutes, their vehicle pulled into the driveway of the beach house. The car came to a halt, and they all alighted. Max stepped out with Hazel in his arms, still sleeping soundly against him.

Tesiera exited and stretched her limbs, enjoying the fresh breeze that brushed her skin. She felt a sharp pain in her left shoulder and knew that she needed to deal with it soon. She didn't say anything, not wanting to scare the little girl more. And not wanting to draw attention to herself.

She walked away to further explore the house, wanting to have a better lay of the land in case there any more surprises.

“You were shot,” he stated matter-of-factly.

She didn't answer at first, but then she spoke firmly. “I'm fine, sir.”

Her tone suggested otherwise, and Max could see that she was in agony. He took a step closer to her, reaching out to touch her shoulder, but she drew away.

“It’s not my first time taking a bullet. I’ll be fine,” she said, her tone firm but polite. But she was starting to feel dizzy.

Max could sense her discomfort, but she made it clear that she didn’t want his help. He sighed and backed away. “Are you sure you don’t want me to take a look?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Tesiera reiterated. “So, we’re gonna spend the night here?” she asked, changing the subject. Her eyes took in the stunning beach house that stood tall, its exterior adorned with smooth, white walls and a sleek, modern design. The lush, green garden surrounding the house added a touch of natural beauty, completing the picturesque scene.

“Yes. We should be ready to go back tomorrow, but we can’t tonight. It’s late already and Hazel needs to sleep this horrible day off,” he responded, patting Hazel’s back in a soothing rhythm.

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Tesiera nodded and took a step toward the beach house, when her head spun. The world around her seemed to sway, knocking her off balance. She braced herself for the inevitable fall, steeling herself for the impact that was sure to come.

But just as she was about to hit the ground, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her close.

Her heart raced as she found herself pressed against the firm, rippled muscles of Max. She could feel the heat radiating off his body, warming her skin and sending shivers down her spine.

“It’s the blood loss. Are you alright?”

His deep voice sounded distant. As she looked up into his eyes, she saw a tenderness there that she had never allowed herself to notice before. His gaze was intense.

For a moment, she laid cushioned in his arm, lost in his gray eyes, and she could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Another wave of dizziness hit her.

Tesiera decided that she would kill herself if she did something as embarrassing and mortifying as faint in his presence...in his arms.

But then she fainted anyway.

CHAPTER 19. THE STUBBORN TORTURER.

A faint smile played at the corners of Max's lips as he watched Tesiera lose

consciousness in his arms. The look of utter horror that had crossed her face just before she fainted had not escaped his notice, and he was aware that he was the cause of it.

Noticing Max's predicament, the driver quickly approached to assist. "Here, take Hazel," Max instructed, his tone commanding yet gentle as he passed the sleeping child to him. "Put her in the master bedroom."

"Yes, sir," the driver responded, carefully holding Hazel in his arms before disappearing into the beach house with her.

Max remained still for a moment, holding Tesiera in his arms, as he watched the driver disappear into the house with Hazel. Then, with a slight adjustment, he securely lifted Tesiera and followed the driver inside.

As he carried her, Max found his gaze lingering on her face. Despite the cuts and bruises marring her features, she looked incredibly beautiful. In her unconscious state, the usual tension that defined her had melted away, and she looked unexpectedly vulnerable in his arms. He could feel the warmth and softness of her body pressed against his chest.

She feels good in my arms, he thought against his better judgment.

Memories of the way she had fought relentlessly earlier in the day flooded his mind and how she had thrown herself in front of a bullet to save him. At that moment, the little misgivings he'd had about hiring her died. She had looked him in the eyes and told him that she would protect him with her life, and now he knew that she had meant it.

He walked into his bedroom and went through to the adjoining bedroom, laying her down on the bed. Her head lolled to the side, and he couldn't help but drink in the

sight of her elegant neck. As he looked at her, he felt a strange pull in his chest, an attraction that he knew he shouldn't be feeling.

This is a very bad idea.

A bone-chilling scream pierced the air, jolting Max into action. It was Hazel. He raced to his room, where he found the child thrashing in her sleep.

"Sir," the older driver said helplessly.

"Don't worry, Fredrick. I'll handle this," Max reassured him, moving closer to Hazel. As he approached, Fredrick stepped away from the bed, making room for Max. "Please, go to the car and bring me the treatment bag."

"Right away, sir." The driver hurried out of the room.

Max gently tried to soothe Hazel, but the little girl continued to cry and thrash about. He attempted to wake her, all the while waiting for the driver to return with the necessary supplies.

Tesiera jolted awake to the sound of a child's screams, her head pounding as she tried to piece together how she ended up in a soft bed. Hell, she had fainted.

Slowly rising from the bed, she suppressed the mortification and groaned while palming her aching head. She strained to hear his voice in the other room, but she couldn't make out what he was saying.

Tesiera made her way to the adjoining bathroom, leaving a trail of her bloodied clothes behind. She turned on the shower, and as the water cascaded over her, she winced sharply. The stream hit her injured left shoulder blade, where a bullet fragment was still lodged, sending waves of pain through her.

Facing the mirror, she scrutinized the wound, taking a deep breath before tentatively probing it. Gritting her teeth, she endured the excruciating pain without a scream. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead as she struggled to remove the fragment. The task was made all the more difficult due to the awkward angle of her arm and the depth of the wound.

A soft knock on the bathroom door interrupted her thoughts, and she froze, her eyes trained on the closed door.

"I see you're awake," came the deep, calm voice from the other side. "I advise you to stop poking around that wound. You're only causing yourself more pain."

Tesiera, fighting back the pain, responded with a firm, steady voice, "I'm good, sir."

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"Don't forget, I'm a trained physician. A surgeon, in fact."

"Experience is the best teacher," she retorted sharply, then reluctantly added, "Sir."

Tesiera had always despised the idea of anyone touching her. Over the years, she had become adept at treating her own injuries, a skill born out of necessity and solitude. She didn't know how to react when someone offered to help her, especially him.

The feelings he stirred within her were confusing, uncharted territory. She couldn't shake the memory of how it felt when he had wrapped his arm around her waist to prevent her fall – a sensation both foreign and unsettling.

"Bullet wounds are tricky," his voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts. "Just because you've managed this kind of thing before doesn't mean it's always possible to do it yourself."

Tesiera remained silent, and Max decided to back off. He took a deep breath and turned to leave the room, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the background.

She remained in the bathroom for over an hour, trying to remove the bullet from her back. In the end, she gave up, wrapping a white towel around her body and opened the bathroom door.

As she stepped into the bedroom, she stilled at the sight of a big box on the bed with the label "Box 3" boldly written on it. What was this?

Curiosity piqued, Tesiera walked towards the box and opened it. Her eyes widened in

surprise as she saw medical supplies ranging from bandages to surgical tools. Everything she needed to take care of her most pressing injury.

All except a pair of helping hands. She slammed the door against the unwanted thought.

Tesiera needed to thank him, so she opened the door of her bedroom and saw Max coming out of the master bedroom. They paused for a moment in the hallway, and an awkward silence ensued.

She noticed that he had also freshly showered, and she couldn't help but admire his still damp hair that was sleeked back. His gray eyes were the highlight of his face, and their mesmerizing essence appealed to Tesiera, even though she'd couldn't bring herself to admit it.

Her nose crinkled in disgust at herself for letting herself ogle at him. She shook off the thoughts. "Thank you for the supplies, sir," she said politely and inclined her head.

Max simply nodded and headed towards the sitting room. She watched him leave, wondering what the hell was wrong with her. Normally, she wasn't one to linger on the physical features of a man, no matter how good looking he was. But for some reason, Max made her forget about the bullet in her arm.

Back in her bedroom, Tesiera opened the box on the dresser and dug around the kit until she found the tool she was looking for—an angled microfracture chisel. A thin metal with a small curve at the end.

Tesiera washed the injury and disinfected the entrance. She opened the sterilized tool and prepared herself for the excruciating pain. She sucked in a breath and then inserted the chisel into the wound.

The harsh, brutal pain hit her with a paralyzing intensity, making her clench her jaw tightly. It was enough to make her scream, but she didn't. She further slotted in the chisel and the pain increased threefold, blood gushed out, and she put the arm over the sink, letting the blood flow down the drain. She navigated the wound, searching for the bullet, but it eluded her.

Tesiera continued to carefully dig about her flesh to find the bullet, and the more time she spent swiveling the chisel around, the more it hurt, and more blood flowed.

A single tear streamed down her shut eyelids. Hospitals would administer anesthesia so the patient would not feel any pain. But in the absence of that, Tesiera surfed the agonizing waves of pain she inflicted on herself. Yet, she couldn't find it.

Tesiera felt a large pair of hands over hers as they stopped her from going any further with her botched attempt.

So engrossed was Tesiera in her struggle that she didn't notice someone entering the bathroom. The fact that she had left the door unlocked escaped her entirely. Thank goodness she was in a towel.

She tilted her head and her teary eyes met with gentle gray spheres filled with worry.

"I can handle it on—"

"Let me do it, Tesiera." His voice was so gentle, it felt like a caress.

Slowly, she let go of the chisel.

"Thank you," she replied in a whisper as she stared at their reflections on the bedroom mirror, watching as he skillfully examined the wound.

“Christ, you’ve made a mess of this. Are you trying to lose your arm?” he chided, but she caught the underlying worry and annoyance at her carelessness.

She remained silent, as she didn’t know what to say—she was used to solving her problems alone. Letting somebody actually help her was foreign to her.

“This is going to hurt a lot. But at least it will be safe. Are you ready?” Max added. She gave a slight nod, then Max began tenderly attending it.

A sheet of paper laid on the bedside table and the three fragments stained with blood rested on it. Max and Tesiera sat on the bed, and he was bandaging her wound.

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The procedure was a success, and a lot quicker than what she could have done. Tesiera hadn't spoken a word since she gave her thanks, and Max knew that she was probably lost in her mind.

He silently wished she'd ease up around him a little; he wished her rigidness would fizzle away and they could start on a clean slate. But then again, she was this way with everyone. She was a socially detached and broken yet scarily fierce woman.

As he carefully bandaged her wound, he couldn't help but notice how enticingly soft her skin was—a contradiction for a woman like her. He almost expected her flesh to reflect the strong and cold exterior she presented.

Max lost his self-control and let his gaze study every detail of the red-headed woman in front of him.

It was just the two of them. But this time she wasn't trying to kill him, or he trying to capture her. Now, the air was clear between them.

He was seeing her in a brand-new light, and he was fascinated. He could get used to this side of hers; it was thrilling. She was thrilling.

He'd never met anyone who withstood pain better than she did. He'd just removed fragments of bullets from her shoulder blade without anesthetics, but she had swallowed the pain. No wonder she was The Torturer.

The woman was breathtaking. Gorgeous. Despite her swollen and bruised face.

His dick hardened in his pants. “Shit,” he cursed underneath his breath.

“What’s the matter?” She craned her head around, trying to look.

“Nothing,” he muttered, pasting a smile on his face. He shifted uncomfortably on the bed and awkwardly cleared his throat.

You’re attracted to a woman who nearly killed you twice, man. It doesn’t get more stupid than that.

You shouldn’t be attracted to her. You shouldn’t, he told himself firmly.

Perhaps, if he said that enough, he could kill the damn feeling before it fully took hold. Right?

CHAPTER 20. WAVES AND CURRENT.

“All done,” Max announced, delivering a soft pat on the fresh bandage he’d wrapped around her wound.

Tesiera looked down at her injured arm and then back at her boss. “Thank you, sir.”

“I know you struggle with that word,” he said, turning her around to face him. He smiled a little, picked up a clean hand towel, dipped it in the bowl of water resting on the nightstand, and began to wipe the cuts and bruises on her face.

Tesiera had forgotten all about the bruises she got from her fight with Bose. The silence between them was almost deafening as he worked.

“You can call me Doc instead of sir,” Max offered as he pulled out a small bottle of antiseptic solution. “This will sting a bit,” he warned before applying the solution to

her cuts.

Despite the stinging sensation, Tesiera didn't flinch. She found herself looking into Max's eyes, noticing the smoothness of his face and the shape of his mouth.

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, she looked away and cleared her throat. "I can't call you that. You're my boss." Why the hell do I keep getting distracted by him; what the hell is wrong with me?

"Well, now you're also my patient, so it's fitting," Max responded with a little smile. He took a good look at her unsmiling, tired face and then took a deep breath. "Call me anything you want, Tesiera. Doc, sir, whatever. I want you to be comfortable."

Tesiera didn't say anything, but Max didn't expect her to. He knew she wasn't much of a talker, and that was perfectly fine with him. It was a welcome change from his loquacious bodyguards, Bose and Clinton.

"I've never worked for anybody before. I work alone—always," Tesiera finally said.

"I know," Max said, recalling all the research he had done on her before hiring her. "When we get back, you'll get all your supplies as the new protector, including bulletproof vests. I didn't plan to hire one at work today, so we were ill-prepared. This"—he pointed at her bullet wound—"shouldn't have happened."

As their eyes met, Max studied her compelling features and read the pain etched into them with fascination. "No wonder you're The Torturer," he murmured.

Tesiera looked confused, wondering about the sudden remark.

"You take pain quite well," Max said, pulling out a small adhesive strip from the box and covering the bruises on her face.

Tesiera didn't take offense at his statement; instead, she shrugged and said, "Physical pain is a language I understand." When you deal with something for such a long time and spend years training to work with it, you become an expert at it. However, she kept that thought to herself.

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“All done,” he announced, closing his kit.

Max and Tesiera stood up from the bed, their faces just inches apart, and their eyes locked in a deep and meaningful gaze. The tension in the room was so thick, it could be cut with a knife. It felt as if time had slowed down, and they were lost in their own world, oblivious to everything around them.

Max couldn't help but marvel at Tesiera's beautiful eyes. Even though she was injured and was now technically his patient, he couldn't help but feel drawn to her. Her brown eyes were like warm caramel, deep and rich with flecks of gold that shimmered in the light. They held a world of enigma and depth, drawing him in like a magnet.

Tesiera, was acutely aware of Max's gaze. She could feel the intensity of it pulling her towards him. She knew she should break the connection, that it was dangerous, but she couldn't do it. There was something about Max that simply drew her in.

Finally, Tesiera broke the gaze and took a step back. “You get some sleep,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. It was a struggle to regain her composure. “I will take the night shift and make sure we're safe.”

Max shook his head firmly. “No, you took a round to the back. You should sleep. This beach house is protected; no intruder can successfully get in without triggering the alarm.”

“I'm fine. I'm the bodyguard here, and I'm supposed to keep watch. You go ahead and sleep.”

“You’re wounded; you’re tired. Get some sleep, Tesiera.” His voice strengthened into an order, and from the look in his eyes, she saw that he wasn’t going to back down this time.

“Alright, Doc. I’ll do a perimeter check and make sure all alarms are turned on, then I’ll go to bed,” Tesiera reluctantly gave in. She was exhausted and ready for bed, but whether she would be able to sleep was an entirely different matter.

Max nodded. “Alright. Goodnight.” As he turned to leave, he heard his name on her lips.

“Max,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

He stopped and looked back at her.

“Thank you for this,” she said, slightly lifting her injured shoulder.

He gave her a small smile. “You’re welcome, Tesiera,” he said before he exited the bedroom.

When she lay down later, she was able to fall into a dreamless sleep.

Early the next morning, Tesiera was in her bedroom sharpening her collection of knives one by one. It was one of her favorite pastimes—a soothing activity that helped her relax and focus her mind.

Max had told her an hour ago that they’d be staying a few more days there because Hazel had a fever the night before. Then she’d seen him going into the study—probably to work—and that was where he’d been since then.

There was a small knock at her door. “Aunt Tetiena? Can I come in?”

Tesiera paused and glanced at the door. Tetiena? What was the little girl doing at her door? Maybe if she kept quiet the child would go away.

“Aunt Tetiena?” she knocked again.

“Come in,” Tesiera responded against her better judgment.

The door rattled a bit. “It’s locked,” came the little voice.

Tesiera set her Malaysian parang knife aside and went up to the door wondering why the girl came to her room.

She opened the door to see Hazel beaming up at her. The girl wore a colorful dress and a bow wrapped around her curly black hair. “I’m hungry, Aunt Tetiena.”

“What about the doc—your uncle?”

“He’s on the phone for a long, long, time. I’m really hungry. Please make breakfast, Aunt Tetiena,” she pleaded with doe-eyes, her lips pursed in a pout.

Tesiera’s brows furrowed at the strange request. She knew nothing about feeding a hungry child. Living alone and avoiding the company of other people, she cooked most of her meals. But she was almost sure those concoctions would end up poisoning the little girl. She was a terrible cook.

“Please, Aunt Tetiena!? Pleeeeeease?”

“Give me a minute,” Tesiera agreed reluctantly and went back into the bedroom to put her knives away. Hazel followed Tesiera into the room and saw the knives lying on the bed. Her brows squished together in curiosity.

“Aunt Tetiena, are those knives used for slicing vegetables?” she asked.

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Tesiera was about to say, “Nope, for slicing people,” but she bit her tongue in the nick of time. Rather, she answered, “Yes, that’s right.”

Tesiera hurriedly put the knives away to avoid more questions and ushered Hazel from the room. “Let’s head to the kitchen, shall we? You’re going to help me with the cooking,” she stated.

“Yaaayyy!” the girl squealed, beaming.

The girl was as bright and happy as she was before the attack, and Tesiera wondered if perhaps Hazel had already forgotten about the attack.

An hour later, Tesiera sat alone in the living room, lost in a sea of aimless thoughts. Her young companion, having played and eaten to her heart's content, had finally succumbed to sleep. Max, meanwhile, remained preoccupied in the study. From the snippets of phone conversations Tesiera had overheard, it was clear he was deeply involved in investigating the attack.

“Are you even watching that?”

She jumped, as Max's voice suddenly broke through her thoughts. Startled, she turned to see him standing behind her. It seemed he had been there for a while.

“I don’t like reality shows. They are boring,” Tesiera said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Likewise. It’s all scripted and that defeats the purpose, don’t you think?” Max

replied, moving closer to her. He stood in front of her, hands on his hips, looking amused.

“What?” Tesiera asked, feeling self-conscious.

“You look really, really bored,” Max said, a small smile playing on his lips.

Tesiera shrugged, feeling a bit defensive. “Are you done working?”

“For now. Thank you for keeping Hazel company. I bet you haven’t been around a lot of children before. It must have been hard,” Max said.

"It wasn't so bad, actually," Tesiera found herself saying, a touch of genuine surprise in her voice at her own admission. "The housekeeper who came over was a big help too."

“Oh yes, Mary and James. They love her so much. I’m so glad to see that Hazel is back to her playful self. “He took a seat beside her, leaving only a small space between them.

Tesiera was about to put more space between them when his hand touched her bandaged shoulder. “How’s the wound today?”

“Better,” she answered, relieved that her voice was firm in contrast to her fluttering insides. No one had ever been this observant about her before.

“It’s a good thing you changed the bandage already. Does it look alright?” Max asked, his eyes examining the bandage closely.

“Yes,” Tesiera replied, feeling a bit uncomfortable with Max's close proximity to her. “An expert handled it, so it’s healing well.”

He nodded in satisfaction. “I’ll examine it when we get back.”

“I’m fine—” Tesiera started to say, but Max interrupted her.

“I have an idea. How about doing something for fun while we wait for the driver?” Max suggested, his eyes twinkling mischievously as he changed the subject.

Tesiera remained unamused. “Not interested.”

Max ignored the flat statement. “There’s a gun range in the basement. How do you feel about a little challenge, huh?” he teased, waggling his eyebrows playfully.

“A challenge?” Tesiera’s ears perked up.

“Yep. Come on, let’s go.” Max led the way to the basement door.

Tesiera hesitated, then she got up and followed him down the stairs.

Max opened a door at the bottom of the stairs and the basement transformed into a state-of-the-art gun range. There were three automated target retrieval systems with remotes, a high-quality HVAC system, she was positive it kept the air filtered and breathable. There was a shelf displaying several different firearms and boxes of ammunition. Tesiera gave an impressed nod as they chose their weapons and stepped into adjacent stalls.

“Whoever hits the bullseye most wins. Let’s start with a round of ten,” Max proposed.

Tesiera racked her pistol and aimed. Max stood with folded arms and watched her as she steadied her grip, and she pulled the trigger.

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Taking the gun away, she saw that the bullet was slightly off target. She'd missed the bull's-eye.

"That's a very good shot," he clapped.

His praise did something to her insides that she refused to acknowledge. "Thanks."

Max returned to his stall and picked up his gun. He focused on the target then took the shot.

It pierced the center of the bull's-eye. A clean, perfect shot.

Tesiera was caught off guard and her jaw fell open in astonishment. She was excellent in all kinds of combat, but she was way better with knives than guns. It was rare for her to see a shooter hit bullseye so perfectly.

She felt his hand gently lift her chin, guiding her jaw to close her mouth.

"You'll catch flies," he drawled with a smug smirk. "I'm in the lead. We should've placed a bet on this; would've made it more interesting."

Tesiera rolled her eyes and stepped away from his proximity.

Max watched as she positioned for the next shot. Tesiera's senses were heightened, every muscle in her body taut with concentration. She was on the cusp of pulling the trigger when a sudden brush of warm air caressed her neck. Startled, she turned to see him looming behind her.

He pressed his body to her back causing her heart to skip a beat. His hands glided down her arms, adjusting her body so her left side was slightly forward of her right. “If you stand like this, you will have better sight alignment and better balance. Fire at the bottom of your breath and squeeze the trigger. Don’t pull it.” He moved her finger so the trigger rested almost at the tip.

Tesiera found her attention drawn to the lack of space between their bodies. She had been close to men before, but they’d never created this kind of chaos inside her.

The sensation this man stirred inside her was entirely foreign to her. Normally, she would have pushed such thoughts from her mind, but this time, it was impossible to ignore them.

Her hands lowered, and she swiveled her head to look at him. Their eyes met and held. They lowered their gazes to each other’s lips.

“Hell,” he cursed lowly. He wrapped a strong arm around her waist, he turned her and pulled her close to him.

Then their lips inched closer...

CHAPTER 21. THE TORTURER OF THE NIGHT.

Tesiera could feel Max's breath on her skin, his lips mere inches away from hers.

But just as their lips were about to meet, a small voice filled the air. “Uncle Max! Uncle Max! Come play with me!”

Hazel’s voice shattered the moment, and they pulled away from each other. The three-year-old girl bounded down the stairs and into the basement, a smile lighting up her face when she saw her uncle.

Max turned to Hazel, his disappointment at being interrupted quickly replaced by a wide grin. “Hey there, little one! What do you want to play?”

Hazel grinned at him, her big brown eyes filled with excitement. “Hide and seek!”

Max chuckled. “Alright. I’ll count to ten and you go hide. Ready?” Hazel nodded eagerly, and Max began to count.

By afternoon, Max received a call from Harvey. Another assassin had been spotted en route to their home. The situation had escalated, and the assassin was killed during the attempt to apprehend him. That means they were back to where they were—with no new leads on the mastermind behind the attacks, and their current detainee still wasn't talking. With the day's events weighing heavily on his mind, Max decided not to risk Hazel's safety. He announced that their return to Manhattan would be postponed until the next day and also spoke with Val to alleviate her concerns.

Later that evening, after Hazel was safely tucked into bed, Max made his way towards the kitchen. The narrow hallway echoed with the sounds of grunts and heavy breathing.

Against his better judgment, he stopped by Tesiera’s bedroom, noticing that her door was slightly ajar. As he peeked in, he observed her executing pushups with precision, her back straight and core engaged, displaying both strength and stamina.

As she lowered herself back down, she counted aloud, her voice steady and unwavering. “Fifty-five,” she said, her muscles quivering with effort. “Fifty-six.” Her form was perfect, her movements controlled and fluid. She was an athlete, a warrior, and she was pushing herself to her limits.

Max stood behind the door and watched her in admiration. He was in awe of her strength, her power, and her determination. He could see the muscles rippling beneath

her skin, the sweat glistening on her forehead. She had a bullet wound yet she was unstoppable, unbreakable, and a force to be reckoned with.

His body reacted to her. “Down, boy,” he muttered inwardly. She’s not for us.

She continued to push herself, counting each rep as she went. “Seventy,” she said, her voice a little louder now and breathless. She was deep into the rhythm, well in her groove. He watched as she powered through the set, her breathing becoming more erratic, her muscles trembling with exertion.

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Max forced himself to walk away. None of his exes were like Tesiera—he had a type. Or he thought he did. He was attracted to the woman in a way he'd never been with anyone else.

Trouble, Max. The woman is trouble.

That night, Max worked until he was overcome by exhaustion and finally went to bed. The moment he lay down, his eyelids grew heavy, and he drifted off into a deep sleep. Until a piercing scream shattered the stillness of the night, causing him to jolt awake in alarm.

At first, Max was disoriented and wondered if he had imagined it. But then the scream echoed once again, louder this time, sending a shiver down his spine. Without hesitation, he leaped out of bed, shoving his feet into his slippers and hurrying towards Hazel's room.

With a sense of urgency, Max flung open the door to the child's room, but to his surprise, she was fast asleep, her small face serene and peaceful. He frowned, wondering if he had misheard. However, as he thought about it, he realized that it couldn't have been Hazel's.

The scream came again, sending chills down Max's spine. "Tesiera!" he gasped and shut Hazel's door.

He made his way to Tesiera's room, kicking himself for thinking it was Hazel screaming. Tesiera's room was literally next to his, so what had he been thinking?

He pushed Tesiera's door open, his heart pounding in his chest. As he entered the dimly lit room, he saw her thrashing around in her bed, drenched in sweat and whimpering incoherently.

Her distress was palpable, and she cried out, her voice trembling with fear. "No...! D-don't shoot...!" she begged. "Daddy, give it to him...!"

Max stood frozen to the spot. It wasn't the firm, hard voice of the Tesiera he'd become accustomed to but the voice of a little girl.

That was when the realization hit him hard. Not only was she having a nightmare, but she was reliving the night her father had been murdered.

Max's countenance fell, and a heavy weight settled in his chest. He couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible for what had happened to her. After all, it was his half-brother who had killed her father. Perhaps he had his own share of guilt to bear.

As he watched Tesiera struggle through her nightmare, Max couldn't help but feel a sense of sympathy for her. Was this a frequent cross she had to bear, reliving that dreadful night over and over again? Despite the years that had passed since the tragic incident, she still suffered from the effect.

His hands fell to his sides as he let go of the door handle, moving to wake her. But before he could reach her, she jolted upright, heaving heavy breaths.

The room was dark, and Max stepped back behind the door, unnoticed. As he observed her, he noticed emotions that he had never seen before. She appeared frightened and overwhelmed, and he could tell that she was struggling to keep her composure.

Max knew she wouldn't appreciate being seen in such a vulnerable state, so he stayed

where she was.

Suddenly, Tesiera reached for her bedside table and pulled out a knife. She pushed her nightgown away and bared her thighs...

Max stilled, and he tilted his head to the side, gazing with confusion. His mouth fell open in horror as he realized what she was doing. By then, she had already sliced open her flesh.

“What the hell are you doing?” Max stepped out from behind the door, racing towards her bed to try and stop her. Tesiera was startled by his sudden and unexpected presence, visibly flinching.

Approaching her bed, Max saw the blood streaming out of her thigh, and he was appalled. He blinked at the sight before him, unable to believe what he was seeing.

“I should be asking you the same, Doc. Why are you in my room?” Tesiera retorted.

“Helping you. I can’t stand here and watch you do this to yourself,” Max opposed, grabbing a hold of the knife and taking it away from her.

“I don’t need your help,” Tesiera spat, yanking the knife out of his grip and making another attempt to cut in her inner thigh.

“I know you think you don’t, but I will stop you anyway.” Max wrestled the knife away from Tesiera.

She stared up at him with narrowed eyes, fury surging in her veins. Tesiera glared at him with the glowing eyes of a menacing killer.

Yet Max refused to return the knife to her. She grunted in frustration, opening the

drawer again and taking out another knife. But just as she was about to use it, he snatched it from her.

“What the fuck?” she barked. She attempted to reclaim it, but he took the blades out of her reach.

“What are you doing?” Max repeated, his tone sharp. “I told you, I’m not letting you hurt yourself,” he continued, his voice unwavering. “I saw you having that nightmare, and I know it’s about that night. But self-harm is not the answer.”

Tesiera’s jaw clenched at the realization that he had witnessed her at her most vulnerable. She felt exposed.

“Get out of my room, sir,” she snarled, her voice dripping with sarcasm as she emphasized the honorific.

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Max didn't budge, unfazed by the venom, he refused to leave.

Tesiera's frustration grew as she banged her fists against the mattress.

"You don't have the right to be in my room or stop me from doing anything," she seethed. "It's my life, and my choices, and I would appreciate it if you butt the fuck out. Now give me the fucking knife!"

"Fine then!" He slammed the knives on the bedside table before stepping back. "You wanna bleed yourself out like a stuck pig? Go ahead and be my guest."

Tesiera picked up the knife, her eyes brimmed with raging fire and held his own angry stare firmly. She parted her thighs and carved another slit beside the first cut, relishing the prickling pain that followed.

He lowered his eyes to the blood dripping from the cut and a muscle ticked in his jaw. He watched her closely, noting the tension slowly dissipating from her body.

Silence descended upon them.

Then Tesiera stood up and brushed past him without a word, disappearing into the bathroom. She turned on the shower and stepped under the water, letting it wash over her as it stung her newly formed wound.

As she stood there, her thoughts began to race, and the image of horror and concern on his face filled her head. She knew he was worried. Whether it was because he was a doctor or he simply didn't want to see her blood on his expensive mattress, she had

no idea, but he had been genuinely concerned about her, and she had shut him out.

But it wasn't as simple as just stopping. She didn't want to cut herself, but it was the only escape she had. After a while, she turned off the shower and put on her nightdress before returning to her room.

Max was still there, leaning against the door jamb, his arms crossed. She was surprised but it didn't show on her features.

Ignoring him, Tesiera made her way back to her bed and lay down, covering herself up. She could feel his eyes on her.

Then she heard him turn to leave before he paused.

“Just know that there won't be a repeat of what just happened here. Not on my watch; not when I'm around. I swear to God, next time, I will stop you.” Then his footsteps faded.

Hours later, she couldn't shake the vow he'd made. It continued to ring in her head.

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CHAPTER 22. THE TORTURER'S NON-EXISTENT SIDE.

Tesiera stood in front of the bathroom mirror, her gaze fixed on the bullet wound on her shoulder. She had just finished her shower, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. As she removed the old bandages, she winced at the sharp pain that shot through her. Despite the discomfort, she remained stoic and focused on the task. With a steady hand, she cleaned the wound and applied fresh bandages.

They were preparing to leave the beach house and return to Max's mansion. Tesiera's

phone rang. She picked it up from the bathroom counter and saw Big Cat on the caller ID.

She answered, holding the phone against her ear with her good shoulder she put the left over first aid supplies back into the kit.

“Sierra, dear, how are you doing?” Big Cat asked.

“I’m fine,” she responded, fastening the lock on the first aid kit.

“I heard from your handler that you’re taking a break. He said something about a month or two hiatus, and you won’t be taking any new missions. Is that so?” he asked, his tone tinged with surprise.

“Yes. Just some time away to recuperate. I’ll be back afterwards,” she said, taking the first aid kit in her hands and walking out of the bathroom. She made a mental note to remind Max to replace the disinfectant.

“Recuperate, huh?” Big Cat chuckled. “Or is it because you’re Maximilian’s new bodyguard?”

Tesiera remained silent, neither confirming nor denying Big Cat’s statement.

“Regardless, I’m very happy you decided to work with him. Now I can finalize the deal with his company,” Big Cat said.

She had forgotten about his plans to invest with Max's company. Even after two years of activity, it still surprised her that he was going legit. She wondered if he knew the real reason she decided to work with Max, or if he assumed that she was supporting his desire to own Kingston Hotels and Resorts.

“Has the deal been signed yet?” she inquired, now sitting at the edge of her bed.

“Well, not yet. But everything is in motion. Hopefully, the deal will take place soon,” Big Cat stated.

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She hummed, staring blankly at her lotion on the table.

“I heard there was another attack on Max's life and you got caught up in it. I hope you didn't sustain any serious injury.”

Tesiera's gaze shifted to her arm. “I'm fine.”

“That's good to hear. Find out why he keeps getting attacked. Don't keep flying blind. I know you can take care of yourself, but I don't want you in any danger because of him. Just be careful.” He was speaking to her in that rare, soft tone only Tesiera ever heard.

“I'm always careful,” she replied, ignoring the little voice at the back of her mind that called her a liar.

The truth was, she took risks. She cared about getting the job done than about being careful. Probably because she had never really cared much about her life.

It was all about taking risks—reckless risks. For instance, climbing up a luxury boat as high as forty feet with bare hands above a deep body of water that guaranteed a chilling death if anyone were to fall into it from such a height.

A person who was being careful wouldn't attempt to take out a bullet themselves.

She lived to avenge her father's death. She regularly pondered what her purpose on Earth would be when her father's murderers were found and killed. What would she do with herself? Would there be anything else worth living for?

“Siera? Are you still there?” Big Cat’s voice pulled her out of the thought.

“I’m here. What were you saying?”

“There is another reason for why I called you today,” he said. “It’s about your father’s killers.”

The hand that was rubbing her leg stilled. Fierce anger filled her. The rage that built in her heart made her chest burn. “What do you have for me?”

“My men got some intel. We got the location of one of the killers and tracked him down. I sent everything we have on him to you.”

Her fists clenched in fury as anger was the prominent feeling in her mix of strong emotions.

There was a sense of impending victory, as the news meant she was a step closer to achieving her revenge. Anxiety and an impatient urge to grab her knife and finally destroy the bastard.

“Thank you, Big Cat. I’ll go through the information.” She was such a mess of raging emotions that that was all she could manage to say.

“Good. This time, don’t let your emotions make your decisions for you, and for Christ’s sake, don’t ignore your instincts just because you wanna get the killer. Make your own assessment before you act. Do not allow a repeat of what happened with Maximilian,” he rebuked.

She would not make the same mistake.

“See you later,” Big Cat hung up.

Tesiera's mood had soured. She'd gotten carried away with Max and being so focused on being his protector that she had forgotten the rage her father's death. But now its revolting taste was back and had settled unpalatably in place.

Her emotions overwhelmed her, and Tesiera got up from her bed, her chest heaving with angry breaths. She hurled her fist into the nearest wall, punching it with a frustrated grunt. Her knuckles cracked and were busted, traces of blood lacing the new bruise.

Revenge is nigh. Once she confirmed the identity of the man, she would gut him like a pig,

Max exited his room dressed casually—a black T-shirt, a pair of jeans, and white laced sneakers. At that same time, Tesiera had also stepped out of her room and was moving in his direction.

His smile faltered as she brushed past him without looking at him, her presence leaving a chill in the air. His brows furrowed in puzzlement, wondering what had upset her so early this morning. Tesiera was never sunshine and roses, but this was different.

Was it about last night?

Just the thought of the night before made him angry. Angry and sad. He had barely slept, as their fight replayed itself over and over in his mind. He'd seen her in a different light, one he'd never thought he'd see her in. This, woman who was all iron and steel had a vulnerable side deeply hidden beneath layers of impenetrable ice.

The thought that she resorted to self-harm as a coping mechanism filled his throat with bile. His mother had done that in the past, and it had gutted him.

Fortunately, his mother got better with counseling. She was able to face and overcome what Maxi had done to her.

Would Tesiera ever face her past? He had a feeling that she wouldn't. He wanted to help her, but he knew the worst patients were those who didn't want to be helped.

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But one thing was for sure: he was not going to sit back and watch her cut herself next time.

An hour later, they were ready to go. Hazel's face lit up with a smile and she ran towards him as Mary ushered the child out of the beach house. Max grinned at his niece as he crouched, opening his arms wide to welcome her.

"Good morning, Uncle Max," she said as she raced past him and went to the person behind him: Tesiera.

Max frowned as he realized Hazel was fixated on Tesiera.

He watched as Hazel wrapped her arms around Tesiera's leg. Tesiera's face contorted into the most unfeeling scowl he had ever seen her manifest.

"Aunt Tetiena." Hazel tugged on the hem of Tesiera's leather jacket, and Max chuckled at how the little girl always messed up her name and it would forever be funny to him.

Hazel got Tesiera's attention, and the red-haired woman gave the child a glance from those unusually cold eyes of hers. But even that didn't cause her enthusiasm to waver, and she spread out her arms, beckoning Tesiera to lift her up.

She looked down at Hazel and blinked in confusion.

"Up, up." Hazel bounced repeatedly. "Please." She gave her doe-eyed, pleading face.

Max snickered, unable to help himself. Hazel seemed ready to get Tesiera's attention and she wasn't going to take no for an answer, no matter how much the woman scowled. He was a little worried that the woman might hurt Hazel's feelings.

"Please? Aunt Tetiena," the child insisted, pouting.

He knew there was no way Tesiera would carry Hazel, and he didn't want the little girl to cry. He moved to intervene only for Tesiera to lean forward and lift the child into her arms. Max gawked at them, unable to believe it. After a few seconds, he composed himself and continued toward them.

She inclined her head in greeting as he got closer, her face blank. Together, they walked toward the car. Max noticed the way she held Hazel. Gently, protectively.

Woah, hold the breaks there, lover-boy, he cautioned himself. You're treading dangerous ground that might get you a kick—or seven—at the balls.

He cleared his throat. "Here, let me take her," he said to Tesiera, reaching for Hazel to put her in her seat.

"Nuh-uh." Hazel shook her head, shifting away from Max and leaning into Tesiera. "I want to stay with Aunt Tetiena."

Max thought he saw a flash of pure terror cross Tesiera's face, but when he blinked, it was gone. Had he imagined it?

Max pitied her, so he tried to persuade Hazel. "I bought this seat specifically for you, Angel. It was designed with pink unicorns. Don't you want to sit in it?"

The little girl shook her head, and tightened her arms around Tesiera's neck. "No, I like it here. I can stay here, right, Aunt Tetiena?"

Tesiera swallowed hard but said nothing.

Max doubted if 'Aunt Tetiena' was in the mood for bonding with children. He didn't want Hazel's feelings to get hurt. Knowing Tesiera, holding Hazel was already bothersome. The thought of having to hold the child in her arms back to Manhattan may just cause her to lash out.

"What if I hold you?" he offered the girl with a warm smile. "I'll hold you all the way home." Max tried to take the child from Tesiera's arms again.

"She feels like Mommy. I miss my mommy." Hazel's lips trembled, and he saw that she was on the verge of tears. "I want Aunt Tetiena to hold me."

The adults stood frozen after Hazel's outburst, unsure of what to do next.

"I'll hold her," Tesiera said at last, glancing at Max. "She can sit with me."

Max was taken aback, and it showed. "You will?" he asked. "All the way to Manhattan?"

Tesiera nodded, her eyes fixed on the child who had buried her head into Tesiera's neck. "Do you think I'll harm her, Doc?"

He shook his head firmly. "None of that. I was just worried that you'd be uncomfortable."

"I'm good," Tesiera responded. Hazel's small arms were wrapped tightly around her neck.

Max watched as Tesiera entered the car and gently secured Hazel in her arms. He could see the hesitation in her movements, as if holding the child was something

completely foreign to her.

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“Let’s go,” Max said to the driver.

Max studied Tesiera’s face as the car began to move, trying to read her expression. He knew she was a woman of few words and even fewer emotions, but he couldn’t help but wonder what was going on inside her head.

“Are you okay with this?” Max asked, trying to gauge her comfort level with holding the child.

Tesiera looked down at Hazel, her eyes softening slightly. For a moment, Max thought he saw a glimmer of something in her expression—perhaps a hint of warmth or affection. But just as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

“Yep,” Tesiera replied simply, and Max could tell she was trying to keep her voice steady.

He noticed how delicately she held the child. Her movements were calculated and careful, as if she were handling a delicate glass figurine. She cradled the little girl against her chest, making sure that she was comfortable.

Hazel’s small hands clung tightly to Tesiera’s shirt, her eyes focused on Tesiera’s face. Tesiera felt unnerved and out of her element. Never before had she had a problem with meeting people’s gaze, but with this three-year-old, she struggled, so she kept her gaze averted.

Max could see the muscles in her arms flexing as she held the child close. It was clear that she was determined to keep Hazel safe and protected throughout the journey.

“Look at me, Aunt Tetiena,” Hazel demanded, taking Tesiera by surprise.

She looked down at the child, and their eyes met. There was no smile on her face, but Hazel didn’t seem to mind. Instead, she gave Tesiera a wide smile. “I like your hair,” the child commented.

“I know,” Tesiera responded.

“How did you know?” Hazel asked, wide-eyed.

“You said so the first day we met.”

“Oh. I’ll get this color for my next birthday.”

“I don’t think your mother will agree to that, kiddo.”

The child grinned and rested her head back on Tesiera’s chest while she began playing with Tesiera’s ponytail.

As the car continued its journey, Max watched them—how the child’s head rested comfortably against Tesiera’s chest, and how Tesiera’s arm was positioned to keep Hazel from falling off.

He noticed how Tesiera’s gaze would sometimes drift down to the child, lost in thought. Max wondered what she was thinking about. Perhaps memories of her own childhood or contemplating the child’s innocence and vulnerability.

Tesiera, on the other hand, was unaware of his scrutiny. She was completely focused on the child in her arms. The restlessness she felt had abated, and she felt warmer and more relaxed. It was a soothing feeling she hadn’t felt in a long time.

After a while, Hazel's eyes grew heavy, and she started to drift to sleep. Tesiera noticed the child's drooping eyelids and stroked her hair gently. "It's okay, Hazel. I've got you," she whispered, the words escaping her lips before she knew she was going to say it.

Her eyes flashed in disorientation. She turned to see if Max had witnessed that embarrassing moment but was relieved to see he focused on his cellphone. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the sleepy child and glanced at her in disbelief, as if she were an alien.

Hazel snuggled closer to her, her small hand reaching up to gently tug Tesiera's hair. "Aunt Tetiena, can I braid your hair?" she asked sleepily.

Tesiera remained silent, but her gaze didn't waver from the child's face.

"Mm?" The child persisted.

"You can," she replied at last. "But we'll have to do it another time when you're not so sleepy."

Hazel nodded, her eyes closing again. "Okay, Aunt Tetiena," she murmured.

As Hazel began to doze off, Max saw Tesiera adjust her hold on the child to make sure she was comfortable. He could see the care and tenderness in Tesiera's movements, which was a stark contrast to the tough exterior she usually displayed.

He had also caught her slip-up earlier but had pretended like he wasn't paying attention because he knew it would be easier for her. Her guard was down, and he didn't want it going up again.

He felt a strange mix of emotions as he watched Tesiera and Hazel. He had just

witnessed a different side of her—a softer, more nurturing side that he was certain she didn't think she had. A side that Tesiera the Torturer never showed herself or the world.

The woman was breathtaking but seeing that side of her made her even more enthralling to him. How the hell does a man fight an attraction for a woman like her? He had thought he'd gotten a handle on it, but he was clearly wrong, judging from the way his heart beat faster as he watched her.

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As Hazel slept, Tesiera adjusted her hold again to make sure that the child was secure in her lap. She used one hand to support Hazel's back and the other to cradle her head, creating a secure little cocoon for the sleeping child. She was completely focused on the task at hand, but her face had the gentlest expression he had ever seen from her.

Perhaps it was time he took Patty up on her invitation for a date. The nurse had worked with him for two years, and he knew she had a thing for him.

There wasn't a policy against staff dating at the hospital, and she had given him all kinds of signals, but he had chosen to ignore them all simply because he didn't want to complicate the relationship they had. Also, he hadn't really seen her as a woman.

But Nurse Patty was a beautiful woman, and maybe it was time he went out again. His damn feelings were all over the place because he hadn't gotten laid in months.

His newfound solution to the unexpected affection he felt for Tesiera calmed him.

CHAPTER 23. FACE-OFF 2

As the privacy gates of Max's mansion slowly opened, the sound of a car engine hummed in the tranquil air. The vehicle drove into the compound and to the front of the mansion, drawing everyone's attention. Clinton and Bose were eagerly waiting for their arrival, the anticipation was palpable.

Valerie's heart pounded in her chest. Tears sprang to her eyes, blurring her vision as she waited impatiently for the car to halt. The moment it stopped, she bolted towards

them, her emotions overflowing.

Without thinking, she punched Max squarely in the chest, once, twice, venting her pent-up anxiety and fear. Max caught her hands gently. "I'm so sorry, Val," he murmured.

"I was so w-worried!" Valerie sobbed, her voice breaking. She struggled momentarily, then surrendered to her emotions, collapsing into Max's arms, her tears flowing freely. He held her in his arms for a few moments.

Then, he opened the car door, revealing Hazel snugly nestled against Tesiera. The child stirred, still groggy from her long nap, looked up at her mother and gave her a sleepy smile. "Mommy," she murmured, snuggling into her embrace.

"Oh, my darling, I missed you so much," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. Valerie took her daughter and held her close, her arms wrapped tightly around her, savoring the warmth and comfort of her little body. "I love you so much, baby."

"Love you too, Mummy."

"So sorry we scared you, honey," he said to his sister. He couldn't imagine how hard it must have been for her to be apart from her daughter after knowing the child was involved in a shooting attack.

The sight of Tesiera with Hazel sent shockwaves of horror down Clinton and Bose's spines. They looked at each other, their faces contorting into a look of sheer disbelief.

Finally, Valerie turned to Max with a concerned gaze. "Are you okay?"

Max patted her back. "I'm alright, Val."

“Are you sure?”

He nodded, “No need to worry. How have you been?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Bose and Clinton have been taking good care of me.” Valerie walked away from him and toward Tesiera.

She pulled Tesiera into a tight hug. “Thank you so much for bringing them back safely,” she whispered into Tesiera’s ear.

What is up with today? This is all kinds of weird, Tesiera thought as Valeria hugged her. She didn’t pull away from the woman’s embrace, but she didn’t return it either.

“The boss did most of the job himself,” she responded simply. Valeria didn’t seem to care, or believe her, because she only tightened her arms around her. “Still, thank you so much.”

Tesiera could clearly see where Hazel got her persistence and warm attitude from. Finally, the woman pulled away, gave her a smile, and went back to her brother.

“Welcome back, boss,” Clinton said, patting Max on the back.

Bose’s eyes flickered with concern as he surveyed Max’s face. “Are you okay, sir?”

Max nodded. “I’m fine,” he assured them. “Just a few bruises and scrapes. Nothing serious.”

Bose’s expression turned grim. “The attackers are still in the basement. I’ve tried making them talk, but no joy.”

“I had to force Bose to leave them alone,” Clinton interjected. “Or you’d be coming

back to corpses, boss. Bose is a hot-tempered sonofabitch; he almost killed one of them.”

Tesiera leaned idly against the car, observing the scene unfold before her.

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“The asshole mocked my hair,” Bose growled, touching his military buzz cut. “I would have broken his fingers, but Clinton got in the way.”

“You can’t blame the dude on this one, though,” Clinton grinned. “He made a lot of sense. That cut is hilarious on that funny-shaped head of yours.”

“Fuck you, man,” Bose shot back, flipping him the bird.

“Hey, stop it, you two!” Valerie covered Hazel’s ears and glared at them. “We don’t use curse words in front of children, or have you two forgotten?”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Bose and Clinton responded simultaneously, looking guilty.

Max smiled. He had missed the duo’s banter and the sense of normalcy they brought. It was good to be back again.

The butler opened the door, and they all walked inside. Bose and Clinton took turns briefing Max on important security matters and the mansion’s current state.

“Patty asked about you when we took Valerie to the hospital,” Clinton added, mischief glinting in his eyes.

“Patty, huh?” Max hummed.

“Oh, yes. She—”

“Hazel!? Where are you going!?” Valerie shouted at her daughter, who darted back

outside.

They all turned to watch the little girl running toward Tesiera, who was leaning against the car in her leather jacket with a stern expression on her face.

“Let’s go inside, Aunt Tetiena. The sun is hot!” Hazel said.

Tesiera’s expression softened as she gazed at the child. Hazel took her hand and began walking back to join the others, and Tesiera allowed the girl to lead her inside.

Max watched her walk with little Hazel. Oh yeah, he was definitely going on that date with Patt

Night had settled in, and an hour had passed since Max, Tesiera, and Hazel had returned to the mansion. They had all enjoyed a good meal prepared by Valerie, with the help of the staff. Max had wanted to cook, but Valerie said he needed rest, and she took up the task.

After dinner, Max, Clinton, and Bose were in the living room enjoying a football game while drinking root beer and eating wings. Valerie and Hazel had left almost immediately. Valerie quickly tired of the testosterone-filled room with their obnoxious cheers and arguing. Plus, Bose and Clinton were supporting opposite teams and they argued about every single play made. They couldn’t go more than a few words without dropping the F-bomb. With Hazel picking up words pretty fast, Hazel decided the best thing to do was leave before they guaranteed she’d get a call from her preschool teacher about her daughter’s language.

“Pass the fucking ball, man! You gotta get your head in the game!” Bose yelled at the player on the screen, chugging down the rest of his beer.

“Ha! Your players are whack, and that’s why they’re losing to us!” Clinton teased

with a snarky edge to his tone and then he focused on the screen again. “Come on boys, go for a third goal. Let’s show this loser how it’s done.”

“Your team will lose and you’ll end up being the loser.”

Clinton gave a dubious laugh. “That’s so impossib—”

“You two better shut the hell up so I can hear what the commentator is saying!” Max interrupted the bicker with his own raised voice.

Tesiera came in from the backyard, where she had just finished having a smoke. They hadn’t even notice that she had joined them.

The chief of security had come over for a while and given Tesiera a detailed rundown of her duties as Max's protector. They work 8-12 hour shifts and rotate every so often. Duties range from guarding Max, to gate duty, and then to perimeter checks.

She leaned against a wall and watched the men, wondering why they were so wrapped up about a green pitch and twenty-two players tossing a ball around it. She wasn’t a fan of football. It didn’t and would never make sense to her.

She could see Max was enjoying the game, but Bose and Clinton were at each other’s throats over every little thing.

Max was the first to notice her holding up the wall near the stairway. She looked at him, granting him a small wave, and Max gave her a brief smile. He turned his attention back to the game, and the antics of his bodyguards.

“Goal!” Clinton shouted as he rose with his hands in the air. He whirled around and laughed at Bose. “In your face, bozo.”

“You sonofabitch. I’m going to—”

“Hold that thought, Bose,” Max said, spotting the impending fight from a mile away. Both men were sore losers. Either one of them would start a fight whenever their team lost. “I need you to show Tesiera her room.”

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“Me? Show her room? Right now?” Bose’s lips turned down in displeasure. “Can’t Clinton do it? She and I don’t get along.”

“I’m sure the feeling is mutual,” Clinton added with a snicker.

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Bose shot back, which made Clinton laugh out loud this time.

“Clinton isn’t the sore loser at the moment,” Max responded. “Besides, you can take this opportunity to acquaint yourselves better now that we are all working together.

Bose pursed his lips in displeasure and his head swiveled to Tesiera, who was idly watching them with a blank expression on her face. Her indifference infuriated Bose and he swung around to face his boss again. “Boss,” he protested.

“Stop being a cry-baby and go do what the boss asked,” Clinton said, his eyes glued to the screen. “After all, someone has to show her to her bedroom; that’s what good hosts do. But that someone is definitely not me. You have to do it, bro.”

Bose rolled his eyes and slumped his shoulders, relenting. “Fine.” He got up from the couch, swinging his arms like a frustrated child throwing a tantrum.

Clinton laughed again as Bose walked away. “The game is almost over anyway, but not to worry... I’ll record the rest of it for you so you can watch later.” A dramatic pause. “Not,” he added, watching Bose’s hopeful expression dissolve into a sneer. He burst out laughing again.

Bose ignored him and sneered at Tesiera. “Let’s go,” he said curtly and stalked away.

Tesiera's followed him, unfazed.

As they made their way through the hallway, their footsteps were swallowed by the plush carpet that lay beneath their feet, muffling every sound. The hallway was flanked by closed doors on either side, concealing the rooms behind them. They came to a halt at the third one on the right—their destination.

"I can't believe I'm missing the match because of this" Bose muttered underneath his breath.

"What exactly is your problem? Are you always so annoying or do you pick which days to shine?" Tesiera's voice filled the air.

He pushed the door open before he faced her. "Are you always this annoying, or do you pick which days to suck the fun out of things?"

"Unlike you, I don't yell at screens like a deranged man, and I most certainly don't cry like a baby when the scores aren't going my way," she said, her tone neutral.

Bose's eyes narrowed in anger, and he advanced a step. "Smoked a little blunt and now you're feeling feisty, huh?" He pointed at the bandaged part of her shoulder. "I don't give shit about that bullet wound you're coddling. I'm not above throwing a punch, and this time around, I'm gonna break a jaw."

Tesiera gave a cheesy grin. "You can throw that punch, but I guarantee you that there'll be no fingers left on it by the time you get your hand back."

Max and Clinton heard their conversation through the intercom system that Max had turned on after their departure.

Max paused game and shared a look with Clinton, whose attention was fully focused

on the intercom. They sprang from their seats and made their way towards Tesiera's bedroom.

Bose smirked and advanced another step toward her. "I'd like to see you try, lady. I'll fuck you up. Oh, I will fuck you hard."

The atmosphere was thick with tension, the air crackling with electricity. Tesiera closed the remaining distance between them, until their faces were an inch apart.

"Oh, Bose. No man fucks Tesiera Anderson. In any sense of that word." Tesiera brushed a speck of dust off his shirt that only she could see. With a mocking smile, she continued. "I'm the one who does the fucking."

Max and Clinton halted at the entrance of the hallway. They shared another look; this time it was filled with shock.

"Did I hear that correctly?" Clinton leaned closer to Max and whispered. "Did you hear that, boss?"

"Interesting," Max muttered to himself. Was she a lesbian?

Disappointment welled up inside him. He had nothing against the LGBTQ+ community, but it bothered him that she was gay.

Because you were hoping to get into her pants? a voice inside him asked.

Shut up, Self.

"Well, I guess it's not that hard to believe," Clinton interrupted his thoughts. "I mean, look at the woman. She is dominant. She's a fucking torturer for Christ's sake—a full-fledged assassin. It'd be weird if she were into men, don't you think?" he

exhaled. “Bet she’s a top.”

Max half-listened. If Clinton is right, then it was a good thing she’s a lesbian, Max thought. He liked taking control in the bedroom because he was confident in his ability to satisfy his woman and have her begging for more.

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He liked being in control and sure as hell wasn't a sub. And, in that case, it was a great thing that they had different sexual preferences.

So why the hell are you getting mad?

"No man in his right man would wanna fuck you anyway, you frigid, heartless murderer," Bose shot back, pushing her hand away from his shirt. "You'd freeze the poor man's dick off. It'd be like fucking a corpse."

Tesiera punched him so hard his face whipped to the side. "Tell me, does that feel like being punched by a corpse?" she drawled with a smirk.

"To hell with this." Bose raised his fist—

"Stop it, both of you," Max barked.

They turned and looked at him, even Clinton, whose eyes flared at his boss's sudden anger. Bose gritted his teeth and dropped his fist.

"What is wrong with the two of you?" Max continued. "This how you behave every time you're alone? You are adults, and no one is going to babysit you. Better figure out how to work together or one of you is fired. And don't think you're immune, Bose," he added, looking at Bose.

The smugness disappeared, and Bose carefully surveyed him. We must have stepped over a line because Max is furious.

“I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again,” he stated, lowering his head in a respectful bow.

“It better not.” Max said and turned his attention to Tesiera. She inclined her head in acknowledgement of his directive.

Max turned and walked away, leaving them all to stare after him.

An hour later, he ended a call with Dr. Albertson, the neurosurgeon caring for his patients while he was off, and prepared to shower. As he was undressing, there was a soft knock on his door.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the door to find Tesiera standing in front of him, a calm expression on her face. “May I come in?”

He stepped aside to let her pass. She walked in and stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, her eyes downcast.

“I’m sorry for what happened,” she said quietly. “It was unprofessional.”

Max had calmed down and had admitted to himself that he had overreacted, so her apology took him by surprise.

However, he didn’t let it show. Instead, he nodded. “Apology accepted. It would be nice if you got along with Bose, Tesiera. He has been with me for ten years. I know he can be...prickly, but he does have the best intentions in mind. He’s still angry with you because of what happened.” Because you tried to kill me twice, he thought, but didn’t add.

“I understand. I’ll do better.”

Max nodded. “That’s all I ask.”

Silence descended upon the room; the ticking of the clock on the wall was the only sound they heard.

His eyes settled on her injured shoulder. “Punching Bose must have hurt.”

Tesiera shrugged. “I didn’t notice.”

“Let me see it.”

She hesitated, then she unbuttoned her shirt enough to pull her arm out, revealing a tightly wrapped bandage.

Max covered the distance between them and carefully removed the bandage to inspect the wound. The wound was red and slightly swollen but scabbed over, and new tissue had started to form.

“It looks good,” he said, his eyes focused on the wound. He began to redress it.

“It’s fine, Doc. I really don’t mind,” she attempted to push her arm back into the sleeve, but he stopped her with his hand.

“I care about it, so let me do this. It won’t take long.” He turned away and went to his dresser to retrieve the first aid kit.

Tesiera was trying not to look at his biceps. She never thought it’d be so difficult to keep her eyes to herself but it was proving to be impossible. His defined muscles flexed as he grabbed the kit and her mouth fucking watered.

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Get a hold of yourself, she snapped at herself. You're here to apologize not to eye-fuck the man, for crying out loud.

Max returned to her side and nudged her toward the bed. They sat facing each other. Gently, he cleaned the wound with antiseptic, then applied a fresh bandage.

Tesiera watched him silently, her face devoid of emotion, but her insides were molten. Maximilian Kingston was a work of art and she was very attracted to him.

"Are you a lesbian?" he asked quietly. When she glanced up at him, he gave her a small smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"You overheard me with Bose."

It wasn't really a question, but he nodded. "Every damn word."

Silence descended again—a surprisingly comfortable silence that seemed to stretch on forever.

"I don't care for labels, but if I was to throw one on, I'd say that I was bisexual," she responded at last. "In general, I'm more attracted to men than I am to women."

"You are attracted to men?" He was surprised, and it showed not only through his words but also on his face.

She looked up and their eyes met. "Is that so hard to believe?"

“But you said— “

“I know what I said.”

Max pulled back and looked at her. “All done.”

Tesiera looked at her freshly dressed wound and then back at him. “Thank you, Doc.” She got up and arranged her shirt before walking to the door.

As she reached the door, she stopped and turned around. “Doc?”

“Yes?” he said from the bathroom door.

“A lesbian probably wouldn’t notice your broad shoulders and toned arms. The way your muscles ripple under your skin as you handled that first aid kit, and those chiseled abs that slide under your towel. They wouldn’t notice the natural sex appeal you exude and the way you carry your powerful physique with ease and poise. And they wouldn’t find all of that so goddamn appealing either,” she said firmly, looking him in the eyes. “You’re a very attractive man, Maximilian Kingston.”

Then she walked out of the door and closed it behind her.

CHAPTER 24. LETHAL BARBIE

“I really hope that son of a bitch shuts his mouth, because I’m more than ready to beat his brains out this morning,” Clinton growled, his voice dripping with anger.

Clinton was leading Max towards the basement the next afternoon. Max half-listened, his mind preoccupied.

After the bomb Tesiera dropped last night, he barely got any sleep. Her boldness had

taken him by surprise, and that she found him attractive had left him reeling. It was probably a new record for most of the words she had said so far.

Her detailed description of him had replayed in his mind all night, leaving him with a non-stop boner and distracting him throughout the day.

He had barely paid attention when Valerie told him she was pregnant, and barely noticed when she had left with Hazel two hours earlier. Thanks to Tesiera, he couldn't focus on any of his tasks for the day.

Did it mean she was attracted to him? And if she was, did she want him to do something about it?

From any other woman, Max would have taken it as a blatant invitation to act. But Tesiera wasn't like any other woman he had met. He wasn't even sure she'd meant it as a compliment, or if she was simply telling him the way she saw it. Stating facts.

It took all of his self-discipline to not go after her and kiss her until they were breathless. He had come dangerously close to inviting her to bed. Damn the consequences.

"Boss, are you listening to me?" Clinton's voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

He looked at his confused bodyguard. "Sorry about that. What did you say?"

"I was telling you about the weak points I found during the perimeter check today. There's a spot where someone could climb over, and the overgrown vegetation at the south end could provide cover for an intruder to hide while attempting to gain access to the property," Clinton repeated as they came to a stop at the basement door. He held it open for Max. "We're already fixing it."

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Having been repeatedly singled out over the years due to his resemblance to his half-brother, Max had inevitably learned a thing or two on how to handle such situations. He walked through. “Good job, Clinton.”

“Thank you, boss.,” Clinton replied, and he started walking towards the inner door, which was made of heavy-gauge steel. “I still believe it’s better to have The Torturer work these two.”

“I’m going to try to have a normal conversation with them first. If they don’t cooperate, then we can bring in Tesiera,” Max said. He’d sent her to escort Valerie and Hazel home, as the new security detail he had hired for his sister wouldn’t start until the next day.

As the security door swung open, the room was flooded with bright lights, revealing two figures sitting in chairs. One was lean and wiry, while the other was slightly overweight. Both men had their hands and feet shackled to their chairs.

Max entered the room, shutting the door behind him. He then approached them, and they raised their heads to look at him. He stopped in front of them, looming over them, his lips thin and his arms resting at his sides. He narrowed his eyes at them, giving each of them a silent, appraising gaze.

“Who sent you?” he asked curtly.

The men didn’t react. They lowered their heads as the door opened again, and Bose walked in.

“It’s done, boss,” he announced.

Max nodded solemnly, his expression grave as he focused his attention on the captives once more. “I asked you who sent you.”

The two men exchanged a knowing look before bursting into a scornful laughter.

Bose clenched his fists in anger and stepped forward, getting in their faces. “How dare you laugh at the boss? I’ll make you swallow your teeth,” he threatened, aiming his fist at the overweight captive. But Max was quick to intervene, grabbing Bose’s fist and holding it back.

“Calm down, Bose,” Max implored, his voice steady but firm.

The personal bodyguard huffed and glared at the two men, but he nodded and stepped back. “Sorry, boss.”

“No need to apologize. I get it,” Max replied, his piercing gaze fixed on the captives. He arched an eyebrow and asked them. “Did I say anything funny?”

“Like I told the funny-headed big guy over there, it’s better you kill us now because you’ll never get any information from us. You’re wasting your time, boss” the slim captive said sarcastically.

Clinton snickered at the mention of “funny-headed,” and Bose flipped him off in response.

Max crooned thoughtfully. “Interesting. That means you’re ready to die then. Bose is certainly ready to oblige.”

The overweight captive snorted, while the slim one shrugged nonchalantly. “We

really don't care. Just get on with it."

"Give me a few minutes with them," a familiar feminine voice said from behind them.

They all turned to see Tesiera casually leaning against the door. It was the same voice that had haunted Max the night before. He wondered how he hadn't heard her enter. The woman moved so soundlessly it was almost unreal.

"I like this idea." Clinton grinned. "I like this idea a lot."

"Here comes Barbie," the slim captive laughed, looking at Tesiera. He turned to the overweight captive. "Hanks, Barbie wants to take a shot at us."

Hades looked amused. "I think this must be a circus, because I'm having too much fun."

"She's beautiful. Hey Barbie, come and kiss Daddy," the slim captive beckoned.

Tesiera didn't react. Her eyes were on Max. "May I?"

"Hell, yeah, you can play with us," Hades replied. "I'll let you play with me as much as you want."

Max finally spoke up, addressing Tesiera. "I hired you as my bodyguard, not as an interrogator. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Oh, I really want to," Tesiera replied firmly.

Max stepped back, allowing her to take charge.

“She has a very generous boss, Kane,” the overweight captive said.

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Kane and Hades shared a look and burst out laughing again.

“Oh, I will enjoy this,” Tesiera drawled as she stepped forward, a deadly glint in her eyes. She felt the rush of adrenaline fill her system, and she smirked. “I hope you two are still laughing by the time we’re done. It’ll be disappointing otherwise.”

Bose, Clinton, and Max sat on wooden chairs set out in one corner, folding their arms as they watched intently.

Thirty minutes later, Henry and Kane, now in agony, were barely recognizable.

Blood oozed from where the skin had been carefully peeled off, and fingers and toes lay scattered on the ground. They each had one eye plucked out, and their legs hung limply, broken and mangled. Some of their teeth were missing, leaving random gaps in their smiles. Not that they were likely to smile again. Their screams cut through the air like a knife, reverberating through the basement and sending shivers down the spines of the witnesses.

The three men watched the gruesome scene in disbelief, their mouths agape and their eyes wide with horror. Clinton’s voice broke the silence, filled with awe as he spoke in a hushed tone. “They’re still alive because she wants them to be. She knows exactly how to keep them alive. How to inflict pain but not to kill. How to cut and slice with precision.”

Bose gave a grim nod, his eyes fixed on the gruesome spectacle before them. “No wonder she is infamous. She is a living, breathing executioner,” he muttered.

Clinton winced as Tesiera chopped off another one of Henry's toes. "Look at her face," he whispered. "She doesn't feel an ounce of remorse for them. Even I feel pity for them."

"I don't. I enjoy their screams," Bose said with glee, his face lit up like a child at Christmas.

Clinton shook his head, appalled. "You're cut from the same monstrous cloth as she is."

Max, kept his eyes fixed on the scene before them.

"You know, I don't mind an attack from people like you. I don't mind monsters who injure and kill others as a profession—I'm a monster myself," Tesiera lectured, her attention on her captives. "However, I draw the line at any sort of attack involving or in front of children. You scarred Hazel for life." She finished that last line by chopping off yet another toe.

"Please, stop!! I'm sorry!!" Henry screamed in agony.

Max tilted his head to the side in thought. Three weeks ago, when she had attacked him on his boat, she had revealed that her father had been killed in front of her when she was a child. Was that why she drew the line at attacks in front of children? Because it had scarred her for life?

Tesiera, continued her merciless assault on the captives. "Smile for me, love. You promised me you would," she taunted them with a cynical smile on her face. "Smile for Barbie."

"Cruel. She is so cruel," Clinton whispered, horrified. "That woman is a maniac. I would never want to be on her bad side." To Bose, he added, "You see the fire you

have been playing with? I would never wish that woman on you, buddy.”

Bose, still captivated by the scene, shot back at Clinton, “Fuck off, Clinton. I can handle her.”

Clinton patted him on the back, a sympathetic expression on his face. “I suggest you make peace with her, bro. She’s not above tearing a man’s body apart.”

Ten excruciating minutes later, Tesiera finally stepped back and calmly asked who had sent them to kill Maximilian Kingston.

“Tsk, ts, ts. The Boogeyman? People still go by that ridiculous name?” Clinton scoffed as they ascended the basement stairs half an hour later. “Typical.”

“So, we know that it wasn’t Carter Walker who sent them to kill the boss, but they don’t know the identity of who this Boogeyman is,” Bose said. “Fucking awesome.”

“At least they gave us everything about the contractor that handed them the job. We can run checks on this Boogeyman and track him down,” Max stated.

“Yes, boss. I’ll brief Harvey on the situation so he can get our investigators on the case as soon as possible,” Bose replied as they took the stairs.

Max nodded, his attention divided. Tesiera wasn’t with them. After she had finished with the captives, she had left before immediately, saying she needed to clean up. They had stayed behind while the security team cleaned up the mess.

He had finally witnessed the infamous Torturer. He had seen what she was capable of, and he was conflicted.

The part of him that was a doctor, who saved people’s lives, was horrified, appalled,

and disgusted. She had tortured those men as if it meant nothing, showing a disturbing lack of empathy. The doctor in him despised The Torturer and all she represented.

Yet, the other part of him, the man in him, couldn't help but admire her. The methodical way she had made them spill their guts was mesmerizing. He hated to admit it to himself, but the man in him had been captivated by her professionalism.

As they reached the living room, Max was lost in his thoughts. He noticed Tesiera waiting for them in the hallway, her expression unreadable.

She had changed into a fresh outfit, her red hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Her eyes met his, and for a moment, he saw a glimmer of vulnerability before it disappeared behind her steely façade.

“Boss.” She nodded at Max, acknowledging his presence. He nodded back, his conflicting emotions swirling inside him. He couldn't deny the undeniable attraction he felt towards her, despite everything.

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Hell, even now, his little man reacted at the sound of her voice.

You really have a death wish, Cock. There are so many women out there, so why the hell are you insistent on standing for the one that could chop you off without blinking twice?

He stopped in front of her. “Bose, Clinton, leave us,” he ordered while looking at her.

They nodded and bowed their heads before they walked out and closed it behind them.

Max and Tesiera stood in silence for a moment, the tension thick between them. She took a step towards him, her eyes blazing with defiance. “What?” She spoke with a mix of anger and curiosity. “Say what you’re going to say. I know you want to.”

“I’m a monster, right? I know that better than anybody, Doc. So, if you’re gonna give me a talk, you can save it for your patients.” Her words were sharp, her eyes locked onto his.

Max closed the distance between them until there was only a breath of air separating them. He leaned in, his voice low and gentle. “You did a good job today, Tesiera. Thank you,” he whispered into her ear, and then took a step back, watching her closely.

He was as surprised at his words as she was, but as he said them, he realized that he meant them. He continued, sincerity lacing his voice. “The doctor in me is appalled and uncomfortable about the things you did. But a different side of me—a bigger

side—feels gratitude and satisfaction. I don't know what that says about me, but that's how I feel. I am indebted to you, Tesiera Anderson. You did what we couldn't. You got us what we needed. Thank you."

Her expression remained blank, but Max noticed some tension leaving her shoulders and her arms relaxing by her sides. She shrugged noncommittally. "You're welcome."

There was a white lie in that statement she made, after all. Max thought as he watched her. She did care about what he thought—no matter how little it might be. She gave a damn and that was all that mattered.

Did that mean that she was even half as attracted to him as he was to her?

Only one way to find out.

He covered the distance between them once again. Tesiera's eyes met his, and he noticed her gaze lingering on his mouth.

It did something to him, made him hot inside. He couldn't help but focus on her beautifully shaped lips, aching to taste them. "About last night..."

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CHAPTER 25. THE BARBIE AND THE PRINCESS

"About what you said last night..." Max began, but he was interrupted by a knock at

the door. A security personnel came through. “Sir, there’s someone out here looking for you.”

Max frowned, annoyed at the interruption. “They can wait. I don’t want to be disturbed—”

A high-pitched squeal interrupted him. “Honey, where are you!? I’m back in town and I miss you so much, baby!”

Max froze. He knew that voice all too well. It was Kamira McDonald, a twenty-seven-year-old supermodel with an unbearable attitude. He had dated her in the past, but their relationship had ended badly, and he had no interest in seeing her again.

Tesiera stepped back and blinked as if to clear an unfamiliar, persistent fog. When she looked up at him, it was her usual blank expression.

“I’ll take my leave now,” she said, inclining her head.

“Get our stuff ready. I’m already late for work.” He glanced at his watch. “We have to leave soon.”

Tesiera tilted her head in thought, but then she nodded again before walking out.

Kamira burst into the room, grinning widely like a Cheshire Cat, throwing her arms out to hug him.

Max caught her before she touched him and he pushed them down. “What are you doing here, Mira?”

Her grin turned into a pout. “Aren’t you happy to see me, honey?”

He was decidedly not happy to see her. Her presence grated on his nerves, and he wished she would stay away.

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He wondered why he hadn't been able to see how annoying she was during the early stages of their relationship. He would have saved himself the trouble of putting up with her craziness at the end of it.

She was unrelenting, and her hands were around Max's shoulders again. She batted her eyelashes at him in flirtation. "Hm, baby? Didn't you miss me? I know you did." She giggled.

"No. To answer your previous question, no, I'm not happy to see you. You're ruining a perfectly good day, Mira," he informed her reluctantly, shrugging her arms away and moving away from her.

She hurried to catch up with him and bumped into Tesiera, who'd just returned with his suitcase. Tesiera stepped back and acknowledged the woman with a polite bow.

"Who is this..." Mira ran her accusatory, judging eyes over Tesiera. "...woman?"

"None of your concern," Max responded with an arch of his brow. He collected his suitcase and said, "Thank you. Are Bose and Clinton ready to leave?"

Tesiera gave a curt nod, completely ignoring the woman.

Mira stepped closer and held Max's shoulder. "I just got here; you can't leave!" she whined.

Max turned to face her, irritation written all over his face. "I told you not to come here again," he replied curtly.

“I know, I know. Okay, I’m sorry, babe, huh?” Mira wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. “But I’m here now, aren’t I?” Her voice took on a pleading tone, hoping to pacify him. Or guilt him.

Tesiera watched the scene unfold before her, taking in every detail. She couldn’t help but wonder who this Mira woman was to Max. An ex-lover, perhaps? The way she clung to him, all touchy-feely, spoke volumes about their past relationship. Max seemed to barely tolerate her presence, as if she was a fly and he simply didn’t have the strength to squash her.

“Boss?” the security guard interrupted.

“What is it?”

“Bose said he needed a few more minutes in the surveillance room, but he’ll be out as fast as he can,” Paul informed him.

“Alright. Tell him I’m waiting,” Max replied, dismissing the guard with a wave of his hand.

“While you’re waiting, your favorite girl will give you a massage. I know you overwork yourself, Max,” Mira drawled seductively, getting behind him after he’d settled down on the couch.

“You don’t give good massages, Mira,” Max said flatly.

She ignored him and began rubbing his shoulders. “I’ve improved. I’ll make you feel so good, baby.”

“Leave me alone, Mira,” Max ordered, turning to face her.

Mira folded her arms and pouted. “You’re being harsh, babe. That’s not fair. I wanted to surprise you, and I also came so that we could—” Mira’s words trailed off as she noticed Tesiera standing nearby.

“Why is she just standing there anyway?” Mira glared at Tesiera, her eyes dark with anger. “What is she?” Her tone turned venomous. “Is she your new whore?”

Max's calm demeanor vanished in an instant. “Do not speak about her that way.” He warned, his voice low and dangerous.

Mira seemed to realize she’d gone too far. “I’m sorry, babe, so sorry. I didn’t mean it,” she said contritely, turning to Tesiera with a forced smile. “Apologies.”

Tesiera simply ignored her and pulled out a stick of gum from her pocket, unwrapping it and popping it in her mouth. She chewed slowly, her eyes never leaving Mira’s face.

Mira hated being ignored and shot a deadly glare at Tesiera but refrained from cursing at her. She couldn’t afford to make Max angrier than he already was.

It grated on her nerves that the whore was so beautiful, and she couldn’t help feeling jealous. As a supermodel, she was used to being the center of attention, but with this whore around, she felt like she was fading into the background.

“Can’t she get out and...I don’t know, go stand guard somewhere else? We need some privacy,” Mira suggested with a fake smile.

“No, we don’t. Mira, meet Tesiera Anderson, my protector,” Max introduced the women. “Tesiera, meet my ex-girlfriend, Kamira McDonald.”

Tesiera inclined her head, but was otherwise indifferent.

“Oh, she’s your bodyguard?” Mira regarded the woman with derision, but her jealousy had largely dissipated. This woman was definitely not in Max's league; Mira had nothing to worry about. Bet she is just another leech that glommed onto him.

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“There are a lot of men out there qualified to protect you. Why did you choose...this?” She gestured towards Tesiera.

This Tesiera woman might have toned, firm skin that clearly showed she worked out, but she had no bulging muscles to indicate someone capable enough to protect someone high profile like her Max.

“That’s enough, Mira. Like I said, it’s none of your business,” he responded harshly.

Tesiera simply continued chewing her gum. She was too lost in her own thoughts to notice the condescension. Like, the incredibly thick sexual tension between her and her boss.

She hadn’t given two shits about what people thought about her since she got out of foster care. Her earlier outburst had bothered her even more than what came afterward. Tesiera could deny it all she wanted, but if she were honest with herself, she had wanted to know what he’d thought of her work, and that desire annoyed her.

The world could burn around her, and she wouldn’t blink twice. So why the hell does she care about what Maximilian Kingston thinks of her?

That man is dangerous for you. It’s best to avoid any involvement other than a professional one with him.

That decision firmly in place in her mind, she leaned against the wall, crossed her arms, and watched Mira crawl all over Max. Tesiera hated everything about her—her petty and condescending behavior, and the sound of her obnoxiously loud, and

annoyingly squeaky voice that made her skin crawl.

The woman got on her nerves in a way she couldn't even find the words to explain. It has to be that infuriating attitude of hers, Tesiera thought.

Max's cell phone rang.

Mira puckered her brows and asked. "Who's calling? Is it another woman?"

Max ignored her and answered. His mood became lighter as the conversation progressed.

Mira took that opportunity to plop herself on the couch beside Max. She laid her head on his chest, snuggling herself against him as she wrapped her arms around his body. Max spared her an irritated scowl, and continued with his call. Mira grinned and kissed his chest.

Tesiera had the sudden urge to wrap her fingers around Kamira's skinny neck and see how long she could squeeze before Kamira's oxygen ran out.

She frowned at the unbidden thought. Must be her torturing instincts kicking in, she decided.

"Hell yeah, I'll meet you at the bar tonight. I'll see you after work," Max said, and after a few more minutes, he hung up the phone.

"You can't hang out with friends tonight. I planned something special for us," Mira whispered seductively.

Max's expression remained indifferent, and he responded with a surprisingly even tone, "There is no us. And I have no plans to spend any time of the day with you,

Mira.”

Mira whined, “Don’t be like that, babe. I promise, I’ll make up for everything—?”

Max cut her off pushing her away from his body. “Go away, Mira. Whatever we had ended a long time ago. It’s only because I respect for your father that I haven’t filed the paperwork for a restraining order. But don’t push it,” he said. “Do not push it.”

Tears filled Mira’s eyes as she looked at Max like a kicked puppy, but Max ignored the façade. What the hell had I seen in her in the first place?

When she saw he wasn’t buying it, she sniffled. “Okay. How about I tag along with you and your friend? Forget about a date; let’s just hang out together. It’s just a one-time thing, I promise. It’ll be just the three of us,” Mira proposed instead.

Max sighed, exhausted. Sometimes he wondered if she was really that daffy or if she was acting like it so she’d get her way.

“Just say the word, and I’ll throw her out,” Tesiera’s calm voice broke the silence.

Max swiveled his head to face her, only to find her examining her nails.

“I won’t hurt her...much,” Tesiera continued. “But she’ll be out of your hair forever.”

Mira rose from the couch and advanced on Tesiera. “How dare you!? Who the hell do you think you are!? I will claw your eyes out!”

Tesiera smirked, unperturbed. “If you come close to me, you will regret it.” Tesiera hoped the woman would accept her challenge. She found herself really wanting to get her hands on Kamira McDonald.

Max quickly grabbed Mira by the waist and pulled her away. “Do you have a death wish?” he hissed at her. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I’m done, boss. We can go now.” Bose’s voice filled the air as he entered the living room, with Clinton trailing behind him.

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Their smiles faltered as they saw Mira.

“Good day, Ma’am,” they said politely before standing behind Max.

Mira ignored them and struggled against Max. “How could you allow this...this...brainless Barbie to insult me? Let me go. I want to teach her a lesson!”

Clinton and Bose winced at Mira’s outburst. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Clinton said, trying to diffuse the situation.

But Mira didn’t hear him. “You’ll never have him. You’re just a bodyguard!” she hissed, kicking against Max, her frustration boiling over. “Let me go, Max! I’m gonna kill her.”

Clinton smirked, enjoying the absurdity unfolding before him. “You know what? On second thought, maybe let her attack The Torturer. It would be a good show to watch.”

However, Max was not amused. “Tesiera will get blood on my floor, and I happen to have a particular liking for this rug,” he grunted. He lifted Mira and started marching towards the door.

Mira was mortified. “Let me down! Let. Me. Down,” she screeched, her face contorted with anger. As Max carried her, her gaze fell on the other woman, who smirked and gave her a superior look, infuriating Mira even more. She kicked out, trying to get free. “Stop! You are embarrassing me.”

But Max ignored her. He exited mansion and not-so-gently handed her over to one of the hefty security guards stationed in the foyer. “Escort her off of the premises,” he said.

The guard nodded and grabbed Mira by the arm, trying to lead her out of the mansion. But Mira was not one to go down without a fight. She struggled to get away from his grip, desperate to join Max. “How dare you embarrass me like this, Max!” she raged, her voice echoing through the halls.

“Good riddance,” Bose growled.

CHAPTER 26. UNSEEN CHAINS.

That night, Bose was snuggled deep under the covers when he was jolted awake by crying.

“What the hell?” he mumbled; his voice groggy from sleep. He rubbed his eyes and tried to shake off the drowsiness.

Tiny, terrified whimpers filled his ears. He would have thought it was Hazel, but Hazel wasn’t at the mansion tonight.

Bose left his room to check it out, just as Clinton emerged from his.

“You heard that too?” Clinton whispered, keeping his voice low, and Bose nodded, perplexed.

“What the fuck could that be?” Bose asked, his voice filled with confusion.

“I think it’s coming from The Torturer’s room,” Clinton said, looking equally perplexed.

Bose looked at Tesiera's bedroom door with doubt. "No, I don't think—"

A loud, pain-filled wail echoed through the hallway. Bose and Clinton shared another look, their eyes widening in concern.

They walked to the door of Tesiera's bedroom, tested the handle and it opened. Bose pushed it open slowly, squinting to see through the nearly black room.

Tesiera lay on her bed, trembling and moaning. Her eyes were wide open, and tears streamed down her face. Bose and Clinton exchanged another worried glance.

"She must be having a nightmare," Clinton whispered. "We should wake her up. She needs our help."

Bose hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. "No, let's not do that," he replied. "That woman would never want us to see her like this. Hell, she might wake up throwing daggers."

They looked back at Tesiera, helpless about what to do. Her cries were getting louder, and her head and arms glistened with sweat.

"The pain in her eyes..." Clinton swallowed tightly. "It's like looking into Vera's eyes." He shook his head at the memory of Max's mother after Maxi's attack and took a step forward. "No, I have to wake her—"

"Don't," Bose grabbed him. "Let's call the boss instead. He'll know what to do."

Clinton nodded his agreement, and they walked out of Tesiera's bedroom as quietly as possible and headed for Max's bedroom on the other side of the mansion.

Max answered the door with a frown, wearing a towel around his hips. His hair and

body dripping water from the interrupted shower.

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“Is everything alright? Is there a security problem?” he asked reluctantly.

They hesitated.

“What is it?” Max asked sharply.

“It’s The Torturer, boss,” Clinton said at last. “You need to see this.”

Max's expression shifted to one of confusion. “What’s happened? Is she alright?”

Bose shook his head. “I don’t know, boss. You need to come and see for yourself.”

“One moment.” He returned to the door wearing robe, then allowed his men to lead him to Tesiera’s room. His mind raced with what he’d probably see.

Bose and Clinton stepped aside to allow Max to enter Tesiera’s door first. He took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the room.

Then he heard a low, almost inaudible whimper.

As he moved further into the room, he could see her body drawn taut on the bed, tears and sweat streaks on her face. She was panting, as if struggling to breathe.

“N-no, no,” she said again, her voice barely above a whisper.

Max felt a sense of dread wash over him. He had witnessed her nightmare a week ago at the beach house, but it had never occurred to him that it might come in the form of

sleep paralysis. He wondered how frequent these chapters were and how she coped.

An overwhelming amount of concern, guilt, and pain filled him. Is this what she goes through all the time?

Here is another life you've ruined, Maxi. Look at the agony she is going through because of you. This woman is so strong that she could fight several men at one time and win without breaking a sweat. But here she is, fighting unseen demons you created. Just how many lives did you ruin, Maxi?

Max closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. Is this what she goes through at night, living alone? Goddammit, no wonder she cut herself. Tesiera Anderson's scars went way deeper than he had realized.

"I'll take it from here," he dismissed Bose and Clinton, keeping his voice low and hoping to God that his pain wasn't obvious to them.

Clinton and Bose exchanged a look before nodding and closed the door behind them. Max was left alone with Tesiera, feeling a mix of emotions—pity, concern, and a sense of responsibility to take care of her.

Max's footsteps were soundless as he approached her bed. He looked at her with a heavy heart, watching her pant with terror.

Slowly, he got to the other side and crawled into bed with her and touched her arm gently. "Tesiera," he called softly, "it's okay, it's just a dream."

Her open eyes widened, and she stared at the ceiling, unseeing. Her cries got louder and tremors wracked her body.

He slid an arm under her shoulders and forced her to sit up. "I've got you. I've got

you,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around her.

His tight hug dragged her out of the clutches of the night terror that held her captive, leaving a trembling, struggling Tesiera in his arms. He squeezed her tightly as she screamed.

“Hey, hey, it’s gonna be okay. You’re going to be okay,” he said.

She erupted into another scream, and struggled against him.

Tesiera continued to scream, tears streaming down her face. “It hurts. It hurts so much,” she cried, deliriously.

Max held her tightly. “I got you. You’re safe with me,” he whispered in a soothing tone.

Her screams died down, and she wrapped her arms around him. She squeezed him tightly, like a frightened child, who was terrified of letting go. Her body was already flush against his, but she kept pushing closer to him as if she would like to disappear into his body.

Max felt every inch of her soft, feminine body plastered against his. It shook him to his core. . He forced the thoughts away and focused on getting her through the next minute.

He’d thought he’d seen her at her most vulnerable that night at the beach house, but he now realized that had only been the tip of the iceberg. This was a completely different woman in his arms than the tough-as-nails protector that worked for him during the day.

And Max realized that he wanted to know both sides of her.

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Tesiera suddenly pulled away from him, her body still shaking from the night terror. She'd known it was Max holding her even before she looked into his eyes. His scent filled her nose, surrounded her, and his arms... They had felt good around her. She'd felt safe.

"Are you alright?" His voice was soft and gentle to her ears. Tesiera didn't answer, couldn't answer.

She felt raw, like her soul had been ripped from her body. Her too heavy heart rested in her throat, stopping any words she had from passing through her lips.

Frantically, she reached for the drawer, her fingers fumbling as she dug inside for the familiar silver handle of her knife. A breath of relief and desperation filled her as her fingers wrapped around it and she jerked it out.

Max grabbed the knife from her, threw it across the bedroom and held both her hands in between their chests.

"Let me go!" she screamed, brown eyes brimming with anger and desperation. She needed to release the voices in her head, dammit! "Now."

Her ears filled with the siren of her father's ambulance, the beeping of the heart monitor they'd hooked him up to, her own screams and pleas as she begged him not to go, the promises she made to him if only he'd wake up and take her hand again, the distant voices of the paramedics...

They were too loud, threatening to drive her to insanity.

“I told you that you wouldn’t do that in front of me again,” Max said, tightening his hold on her. She wasn’t fully awake yet, but he was determined that she wouldn’t cut herself, even if that was what she needed to dull the pain and regain her composure.

“Get off me!” Tesiera kicked out and caught his left thigh. Max took the hit with a grunt, and pressed himself on top of her, preventing her from landing a kick to his groin.

She tried to kick again but he held her legs captive. “Stop, Tesiera!”

She slammed her head into his with so much force that another man would have passed out, but Max groaned through gritted teeth. She struggled against him. “Leave me the fuck alone, or I swear to God, I will kill you!” she raged.

Tesiera started trying to roll them over and get the upper hand.

But Max stopped her as his thoughts whirled on what to do next. Between her desperation and being a skilled fighter, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to hold out for long. He had to do something before she gained the upper hand and things became more dangerous.

Max did the first thing that crossed his mind. He seized Tesiera’s face with his hands and slammed his lips onto hers. It was probably a stupid thing to do.

The force of his kiss was violent, and Tesiera’s head snapped back against the bed. She let out a shriek of horror, but Max swallowed it, his lips continued to move over hers.

As she struggled frantically underneath him, his tongue darted into her mouth, probing and exploring. He tilted his head and applied more pressure as if he were trying to conquer her with his kiss.

Tesiera stilled as he devoured her mouth. She noticed a different feeling rising above her anger, fear and desperation. The more he kissed her, the more those voices in her head grew distant until they faded completely. The pain in her chest went numb and her body, which felt cold and raw a few moments ago, was filled with warmth.

She had no idea what was going on, what he was doing, or how a simple kiss could have this effect on her. She couldn't explain it, and she stopped trying to.

One thing was sure, though: this felt way better than cutting, and she had to hold onto it.

As Max explored Tesiera's mouth with his tongue, he expected her to physically retaliate. He nearly fell out of bed when she wrapped her arm around his neck and drew him closer to her.

She lifted her head slightly, tilting it to assume control of the kiss. Her lips hungrily consumed his.

CHAPTER 27. THE TORTURED TORTURER

Everything else faded away, leaving only the intense sensations of their mouths moving against each other. Max could feel her warm breath mingling with his own as they devoured each other's lips, and the erratic sound of their breathing was the only sound in the room.

The taste of her on his tongue was a heady mix of sweet and salty, driving him wild with desire, clouding his head and making him forget why he was in her bedroom, on top of her, in the first place.

As he explored the depths of her mouth, he couldn't help but notice the softness of her lips against his own. They were full and plump, with just a hint of a pout that

made them even more alluring. He felt himself getting lost in the sensation of her body underneath him, the way she glided her lips against his mouth and her hands up his body.

Meanwhile, Clinton sat on the brown chair in Bose's bedroom, staring at the wall in silence. Concern bright in his eyes at the sudden silence after Tesiera's scream was cut off.

They had heard The Torturer scream at the boss and what seemed like they were fighting before the sudden silence. It bothered Clinton.

"You sure one of them hasn't killed the other?" he asked, worriedly. "This silence is disturbing."

"The boss can take care of himself," Bose said.

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“Yeah, when it’s an equal opponent on an equal ground. When she woke up swinging, I’m sure the boss wouldn’t defend himself with an attack of his own.”

Silence descended between them. Bose reached into the cabinet and withdrew one of his rifles. Hell, he might as well keep himself busy since it was obvious he wasn’t falling back to sleep anytime soon. As he cleaned the rifle, he couldn’t get the image of The Torturer lying on her bed, crying and helpless against the ruthless grip that held her captive.

“After what we saw tonight, I think I understand her motives better,” Clinton said, breaking the silence.

“What motives?” Bose asked reluctantly.

“Her attack on the boss. Her resolve to kill him. I think it goes way beyond the fact that her father died, and it’s more like how he died. Max said he died in front of her, and the ambulance didn’t arrive on time. I can’t imagine how that felt to an eight-year-old as she watched the life drain from her father’s body.”

Bose’s hand paused, and he raised his head to focus his eyes on Clinton. “Don’t do it.”

“Do what?”

“This,” he gestured with his hand. “This pity. She wouldn’t like it. She might have your balls for it.”

Clinton sat upright in his chair, nodding. “I would never do this in front of her,” he said, his voice low and resolute. “I know that she doesn’t want to be pitied. As far as I’m concerned, tonight didn’t happen. I didn’t hear her scream and I didn’t see anything in her room.” He paused, his eyes drifting off to the distance. “But I’m glad I did,” he added after a moment of silence.

Bose looked at him incredulously. “You are?”

“I mean,” Clinton replied, his voice still low, “it makes it easier for me to forgive her for trying to assassinate the boss.”

Bose shook his head, a scowl forming on his face. “You’re crazy,” he muttered.

“Shut up, dude. I know you’re thinking the same thing too.” Clinton rose from his chair, stretching his arms and letting out a long, tired sigh. “I going to bed,” he said, his voice weary. “Gotta catch whatever sleep I can from this fucked up night. Goodnight, dickhead.”

“Fuck you, asshat,” Bose replied without heat, his eyes fixed on Clinton’s retreating form. Once the door was closed, Bose stared into space, his task forgotten.

The Torturer had always rubbed him the wrong way. He didn’t like her, but he hated to admit that Clinton was right. Now he could understand what drove her.

He’d thought the woman was simply a killing machine that operated without a second thought and that was working with the boss to get close enough to finish the job. Bose had never bought into her bullshit about trying to make up for going after the wrong man, because from all he’d seen—and read about her—she had no conscience.

But tonight changed his perspective of her.

And just what the hell was going on in there now?

Tesiera kissed Max's lips with a fervor she hadn't felt in her life. When she'd allowed herself to think of it, she had wondered what kissing Maximilian would be like. And now it was happening. It was better than she'd imagined.

Her body responded to him in ways she never thought possible. His lips were silky and warm against her own. She felt a new intensity she hadn't before, aching with a need she couldn't explain.

When he broke the kiss, it was all she could do not to tangle her hands in his soft, black curls and force his lips back to hers again. It took an incredible amount of willpower, but Tesiera managed it. Barely.

"Damn," he murmured, his breathing heavy like hers and his gray eyes studied her carefully.

Silence lingered between them before he ran a hand through his hair and said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"No, you shouldn't have," she agreed, her voice barely above a whisper. Tesiera was becoming aware of her surroundings.

Her warm skin chilled when she remembered that she'd had one of her rare chapters in his house. The fact that Max was in her bedroom filled her with dread and she was as confused as she was disgusted with herself.

Just how loud was I?

"I'm sorry for the disturbance I caused." The room was shrouded in darkness, with only a faint light seeping through the curtainless windows, casting shadows on their

faces. She was grateful it shielded her face from Max's gaze, and the emotions she was struggling to control. She could feel the weight of the room bearing down on her.

Max stood up from the bed and straightened his robe, his movements slow and deliberate. "Get some sleep, Tesiera. We can talk about this in the morning," he said.

Tesiera crumpled onto the bed as soon as he left. Her fingers gripped the sheets hard enough to turn her knuckles white. The memories of her father's death that still haunted her after all these years were as vivid as the day they happened. The image of his lifeless body, lying before her, was etched into her mind forever.

I can't go on like this. How much longer can I hold out before I snap?

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She felt like she was reaching her breaking point, the haunting memories and the nightmares becoming too much to bear.

She was in a race against time. She needed to kill the men who murdered her father before the brewing storm within her overcame her.

The next morning, Max sat hunched over his laptop keyboard in his home office. The air was thick with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, and he took a sip from the steaming mug beside him as he sifted through the files.

Despite the caffeine coursing through his veins, Max felt a persistent sense of fatigue weighing him down. His mind had been restless, haunted by the memory of Tesiera's kiss. He never expected kissing her to feel that good. Her lips, soft and warm against his own, had left him longing for more. He couldn't help but recall how her fiery red hair cascaded down her back, and how her curvaceous figure had felt pressed against his own. Sleep was impossible with those images and sensations running through his mind.

With a shake of his head, Max pushed the memory away. He returned his attention to the work in front of him. Files to review and endorse for the hospital and for the business.

A soft knock came at his door, interrupting the silence. Max paused and gazed at the door. "Come in."

Tesiera strode in, looking as stunning as ever. She wore a black form-fitting sleeveless leather top and pants that hugged her curves, and black combat boots with

heels on them. Her fiery red hair was pulled into a high, tight ponytail, held in place by a few black hairpins. Max couldn't help but appreciate how her outfit highlighted her stunning figure, causing a ripple of desire to course through him.

He wanted nothing more than to bend her over his desk, push her pants down and fuck her in that attire.

His first instinct was to ask her how she was feeling, but he hesitated as he gazed at her face. She wore a blank expression that betrayed nothing of her thoughts or emotions.

"I wanna apologize for the night before," she announced.

"You did that last night."

"I want to do it again. I promise that it won't happen again," she said.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked, deciding to risk it.

"I'm okay, sir." She saw the small bruises on his face, probably from their fight. "I'm sorry about the bruises."

"It's nothing." He brushed it off with a wave of his hand.

He heaved an inward sigh when he heard her call him 'sir' again. He thought they'd gotten over that. Max surveyed her carefully and her eyes rose to meet his, challenging him. It was obvious that she wanted that professional ground between them. So, they were gonna pretend that kiss never happened, huh?

He got the message loud and clear.

“Where are Bose and Clinton?” he asked keeping the disappointment out of his voice.

“I’ve not seen them this morning, but Paul said they are with Maintenance in the surveillance room.”

“Good. Tell them to get ready; we leave in the next thirty minutes.” If he hadn’t witnessed it, he never would have believed this was the same woman as the one he’d seen the night before. The woman who’d crawled into his arms for protection and held on tight while sobbing against him.

“I’ll do that, sir,” she said. “I would like to adjust our agreement so that I can take on missions without your permission.”

He regarded her carefully. “You know, I was skeptical in your sincerity when you asked to work for me. It’s why I made those demands. You can do whatever you need to do. You’ve more than paid for your mistake when you took a bullet for me in the hospital’s parking lot. You can leave my employment at any time you wish.”

Her eyes pierced him, and he could see the wheels in her head turning in the silence that followed.

She gave a small nod. “I appreciate your understanding, sir. Is there anything else you need me to do?”

Max gritted his teeth. He hated that ‘sir’ as much as he hated her cold demeanor. “That’ll be all,” he said calmly.

Tesiera inclined her head and made her way to the door. She was just about to step out when Max asked, “Have you thought of going to therapy?”

The silence that followed was deafening. Tesiera turned to face him. “I don’t care

enough for one.”

“It might help,” he said gently. “What I saw last night ...” His head shook. “You need help, Tesiera.”

“I’m fine,” she said curtly. “I can take care of myself, sir. And like I said before, I’ll make sure what happened last night never happens again.”

Outside the door of his office, Tesiera headed for the surveillance room. She wouldn’t let her mind be poked and probed by some stranger. Only those who had a will to live, who fought to live and loved their life so much that they didn’t want to lose it, got therapy to repair themselves.

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She was none of those people. It'd be a waste of her time. She didn't expect to live a long life. Not that she would go looking for death—not yet anyway—but she wouldn't run from it if it found her.

She'd made an appointment with Big Cat's doctor to get a pack of the pills that helped her sleep at night because she was determined that last night would never happen again.

That kiss...

It was all she could do not to jump him in that office. He was so fucking handsome in that tailored suit.

In the light of the day, she wondered if their kiss had really felt that good or if it was just her mind playing tricks on her. The latter made more sense because a kiss could never feel as good as that did. A kiss would never make her desire the high she thought she'd felt.

But it was best to keep things professional between them. No matter how attractive he was, Maximilian Kingston was a complication she didn't need in her life.

So why the hell did she feel like going back to that office, locking the door, and kissing those intoxicating lips of his over and over again? Why the hell did she feel she needed his damn tongue buried in her throat until neither of them could breathe?

Tesiera's leather jacket creaked as she as she reached the door of the surveillance room. Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

“What’s up?” she asked as she answered Big Cat’s call, her voice devoid of any emotion.

“Tesiera, we’ve got everything we need on Jacob Blake,” Big Cat said, his voice oozing with satisfaction. “We know where he lives, where he hangs out, who he talks to, and his entire pattern of life. Come to the house and let’s review this material.”

Tesiera felt a flicker of excitement ignite within her. She turned away from the surveillance room and toward the entrance of the mansion.

“I’m on my way,” she replied, her voice steady, but she could feel the adrenaline pump into her system. She ended the call and immediately dialed her own private investigator and gave him some instructions as she made her way to the exit.

She gave a security guard Max's message for Bose and Clinton, and then she texted Max before walking out of the mansion’s gates.

My next job came earlier than expected. I’ll be back.

CHAPTER 28. PERCHED ON THE HEART

Three weeks later.

The room was thick with the heavy scent of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and the sounds of men playing a board game while watching the scene at the other end of the room.

The only female present lay motionless on the bed, her body aching and bruised, her mind clouded by the drugs they gave her. Despite her disorientation, the young woman was aware of the man thrusting into her mercilessly, inflicting pain that made her cry out in agony.

“S-stop, please,” she cried in a thin, shaky voice that could barely be heard above the grunts of pleasure and the jeering laughter of the three men playing poker.

As the man slammed into her repeatedly, handling her body so roughly, she could only cry and plead with him to have mercy on her, even though she knew it a fruitless effort.

A fifty-year-old man dressed in a black tailored suit, his long, salt and pepper hair held stylishly behind his back.

The three men rose to their feet as their boss strode by. Jacob Blake sighed in exasperation, as he took in the scene on the bed.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to fuck with new goods? Askin, we got that merchandise two days ago, right?” the boss asked.

Askin paused mid-thrust and glanced at his boss. “Yeah, boss, but I figured our client wouldn’t mind since everyone here had already taken their share with her.” He let out a deep sigh. “I’ll stop.”

“Nah, don’t stop on my behalf,” Blake responded with a dismissive wave of his hands. “Finish what you started. We have time before we deliver her to Dragon.” Even he recognized that the new merchandise had a pretty good ass on her, so he understood his men. Plus, he was a generous boss that way.

“Thank you, boss.” Askin grinned, and continued the task at hand, ignoring the girl whose tiny cries never abated.

Blake’s men resumed their game, as he watched Askin rape, then beat the girl. After Askin was satisfied, he sat beside the boss, smiling like a satisfied cat. The girl rose on shaky legs, but Blake ordered her to get back on the bed. He stood and unbuckled

his belt as he approached her.

An hour later, Blake and his men were on their way to meet one of their drug suppliers.

“Boss, I don’t know if I should tell you this...” he began hesitantly.

“What is it, Ian?” Jacob Blake asked, his tone sharp, irritated with the hesitance.

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“Somebody’s been asking around about you,” he continued. “He might be a private contractor, but no one knows who he is or who he works for.”

Blake didn’t break his stride. He walked on confidently, his hands clasped behind his back and a smirk on his face. “A lot of people have asked questions about me over the years, Ian,” he said. “They are free to come find me. He’ll die just like all the others who came before him.”

His men chuckled, nodding their heads in agreement. Blake feared no one and nothing. He had done a lot of horrific things over the years, gone against a lot of powerful men from the underworld, and gained a lot of enemies. But only a few had been able to get close enough to harm him.

But they never succeeded. His men were the best at what they did.

“Whoever is looking for me is free to come and get himself killed,” he said again as they emerged from the hallway into the dimly lit tunnel. “We’ll be ready for him.”

“Is everything ready?” Big Cat asked.

Tesiera lounged languidly on the plush couch, her body sunk into the soft cushions. “Yes. I have everything I need, but I’ve been waiting for Blake to make a move for weeks. So far, I’ve gotten nothing.” Her posture was relaxed and graceful, her eyes surveyed her nails as she added, “I decided to attack him in his residence. The one he’s currently at.”

“Absolutely not,” Big Cat protested and stood up in one swift motion. “That would be

a suicide mission.”

“I have done a lot of suicide missions in my life, and I’m still here, aren’t I?” she replied. “I’ll be fine.”

“That man has a reputation of being slipperier than a fish. You saw how complicated his security details were. You shouldn’t attack him in his home—”

Tesiera waved him off. “If I made it into Maximilian Kingston’s home without getting caught, I can manage it here.”

Big Cat relaxed back on his seat. “How is it going with him?”

She fixed him a stare. “How is what going with him?”

The mafia godfather studied her carefully, before saying, “I’ve known you for almost nineteen years, and you’ve changed since you went to work for him.”

“Changed?” Tesiera’s brow shot to her hairline.

“It’s subtle—those who don’t know you well wouldn’t even notice—but it’s there. You talk more now. You used to talk to me in short, monosyllabic sentences, or nothing at all and now we’re having real conversations. There are other changes to you, I just...” He shook his head incredulously. “I just don’t know how to explain it.”

Tesiera gave him a look that suggested that he might be suffering from a concussion, but Big Cat only smiled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Must be the regular sex messing with your head,” Tesiera said tersely.

Big Cat’s smile got bigger. “You saw her, huh?”

“Milane? She was grinning at me when I walked in. How the hell could I have missed that?” Her disgusted tone made Big Cat snort in laughter.

The godfather’s on-again/off-again mistress for nearly a decade and was one of the very few people who got emotionally close to him. Milane was a decent person—Tesiaera begrudgingly acknowledged that—but the woman’s overly friendly nature made Tesiera extremely uncomfortable. It’s a fact that may have encouraged Big Cat to have Milane visit more frequently over the years.

“Be kind to her, Siera,” Big Cat chided softly, amused.

Tesiaera rolled her eyes and stood. “Gotta go. I’ll get Jacob Blake tomorrow night.”

“Tesiaera,” Big Cat’s face turned serious. “Be careful.” A pause. “Please.”

Tesiaera’s brows furrowed, and it was her turn to study him. “From what I can see, you’re the one that has changed. What’s with the concern?” She shook her head and headed toward the door. “I’ll be fine.”

Tesiaera headed straight to her bathroom when she got home, dropping her weapons on the couch as she walked through the living room.

She turned the shower on and let it heat up while she undressed. She stepped under the water and took a deep breath, allowing the steam to fill her lungs. She stood under the stream of water for what felt like an eternity, letting the warmth seep into her flesh, soothing her muscles.

Tesiaera let her thoughts drift as she lathered her hair and body with her favorite lavender-scented shampoo and soap. It had been three weeks since she last saw Max, and she couldn’t stop thinking about him. Her feelings about their indiscretion evolved over the weeks.

Throughout her adult life, she had encountered men who caught her eye and piqued her interest, yet she had never pursued them for one reason or another. Despite finding them attractive, none had ever managed to occupy her thoughts for long. Max had not only penetrated her thoughts, but he also dominated them for a significant amount of time, leaving her bewildered. Even the men she did fuck had never made it past her bed and into her thoughts.

After the confusion, she started making diversions for herself. She buried herself deep into planning her next mission but it didn't erase the thoughts of him. The memory of their kiss. She finally accepted that Maximilian Kingston now lived rent-free in her head.

She thought about him constantly; it was appalling and embarrassing. Despite having had no contact with him in the past three weeks, she couldn't get him out of her mind. She knew that the likelihood of him going through the same torture was slim to none, and she the thought of that pissed her off, no matter how irrational it was to expect him to feel the same way.

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The lavender mingled with the steam, creating a soothing aroma that filled the room. As she was rinsing off the soap, the doorbell rang.

She turned off the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. She made her way to the front door, still dripping with water, and peered through the peephole. She opened the door for Rex.

“Hey, babe!” He moved to hug her but Tesiera stepped back. He pursed his lips, his arms dropped to his side. “I couldn’t get a hold of you for more than a month. I’ve missed you.”

“How did you know I was back home? Are you spying on me? And what’s with the ‘babe’?” She turned and walked back into her living room. Rex followed, looking happy as ever.

“I’d never spy on you. One of my men had an errand to run for the big guy and he saw you coming out of his place.” Rex moved to get in front of her. “Come on, Siera. I’ve missed you so much. Didn’t you miss me? Even a little bit?”

While she simply stared at him, his eyes devoured her body. “Just say one word and I’ll take that towel off.” He moved closer and whispered into her ear. “You know I’m gonna make you feel so good.”

“No one has ever made me feel ‘so’ good, Rex,” she said flatly, before she headed to her bedroom, leaving him standing there.

Except for a kiss from a particular doctor.

She abruptly turned and reached out, gently clasping the back of his head. She pulled him close and pressed her lips against his.

He wrapped his arms around her waist with a growl and kissed her hard. As time passed, Tesiera decided his kiss felt...pleasant—Rex was after all one of the few people she actually liked. But it was nothing compared to what she'd felt when Max kissed her.

When Rex tried to remove her towel, she smacked his hand as she broke the kiss and stepped back. "That's enough. Leave, Rex."

"Huh? You can't possibly—" Rex began.

"I can. Leave. I'm done," she said.

Rex looked like she'd hurt his feelings. "At least let me cook for us while I'm here—"

"Another time," she cut him off. "Go through the door, before I push you through it. I have work to do."

"Alright, alright. I'll leave." He raised his hands in surrender. "I'm going, but you owe me a meal."

"Fine. You cook though," she conceded, and he grinned in satisfaction. "Now go."

An hour later, Tesiera reached for her cellphone, found the number she was looking for and dialed it. The call connected in the second ring.

"Kingston here, how can I help you?" came the deep familiar voice of Max. The sound of it sent shivers down her spine.

“You did something to me, Doc,” she sighed in resignation.

“Tesiera?” he asked.

“This has never happened to me before,” she said in a soft tone. “I keep getting sidetracked at the weirdest times because I can’t stop thinking about you. And that kiss we had? Was it as amazing as I thought it felt, or is it all in my head? I can’t get you out of my mind, Doc. So, tell me, why the fuck can’t I stop thinking about you?”

CHAPTER 29. THE PHONE CALL

Max had just finished another long, exhausting day at the hospital. The last three weeks had been particularly challenging, as he had seen a significant influx complex cases and had performed more procedures than typical.

He had also begun collaborating with a team of cardiologists to provide specialized care to less privileged patients pro bono. The work was demanding, but he found it incredibly rewarding to be able to make a difference in the lives of those who needed it most.

Despite his busy schedule, he couldn’t shake the thoughts of Tesiera that haunted him day and night. He had tried to distract himself with work, but nothing could fully take her off of his mind.

He had prided himself on being a mature and respectful man, it was why he had honored the boundaries she’d set when she visited his office that morning three weeks ago before leaving to take care of her affairs.

So, he had been taken aback when he saw her name on his caller ID, but that was nothing compared to the way he’d felt when she’d spoken.

“Pardon me?” Max's mind reeled as his exhaustion disappeared. He stood frozen in the center of his bedroom with the phone pressed to his ear.

“I don’t feel a lot of things, you know. But I’m distracted all the time. I’m asking you why. Why do I think about you all the damn time, Doc?” she asked just as bluntly as the first time.

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“Wow,” he breathed, and a sudden stillness seemed to permeate the air. A tangible silence settled between them.

Max was rendered speechless by Tesiera’s words. He had never met a woman like her before—so unapologetically bold and blunt. He had always thought that women were more subtle in their approach to sensitive issues like their feelings, but Tesiera had shattered that assumption with her straightforwardness.

He was at a loss for words. The thought that she couldn’t stop thinking about him floored him. Max had always prided himself on being unflappable, but Tesiera’s boldness had thrown him for a loop.

“Are you there?” she asked.

Max cleared his throat. “I’m here. It’s just...um, I don’t know what to say.”

“You sound shocked.” Tesiera’s tone was calm and collected, like she didn’t just drop a bomb on him.

“For a number of reasons,” he replied. “First and foremost is that no woman has ever said anything like this to me before.”

“I’m not most women, Doc.”

His lips played at the corners of his lips, amused by her firm tone. With a deep breath, Max made his way to the edge of the bed and sank onto the soft mattress. “Right, you’re not. That is incredibly obvious.”

“I don’t know if you mean that as a compliment or not—”

“I do. I mean it as a compliment. You’re an extraordinary woman, Tesiera Anderson,” he said in admiration. “The truth is, I don’t know how to answer to your questions. Do you even know what you’re admitting to? Confessing to?”

“I’m not admitting or confessing anything. I have a problem and I was hoping you’d have some sort of solution for it. This has never happened to me before, Doc,” Tesiera replied, lowering herself onto her sofa.

Max's lips curved into a smile. Somehow, he wasn’t surprised about what she was saying. “I don’t know what to say to that. But since we’re being honest with each other, I need to tell you something.”

Tesiera leaned forward, her expression serious. “What is it?”

“I can’t stop thinking about you either, Tesiera.” Max's voice rumbled low in his throat, like a primal growl that echoed through the room.

The admission hung in the air between them, heavy with a raw intensity that left her speechless. “I... Oh.” He’d caught her off guard too, her mind was blank, and she couldn’t form a response.

“Are you there?” he drawled, the corners of his lips twitching into the hint of a smirk.

A strange, fluttery sensation danced in Tesiera’s chest—a sensation that she struggled to put a name to. Excitement? Yep, that was preferable to the alternative.

“I thought I was the only one with the problem,” she said at last.

Max chuckled. “It’s not a problem, Tesiera. Well, not in the way you think.” A pause.

“Most people would say that we are attracted to each other or we’re in love.”

Her excitement fled. Tesiera’s expression hardened at the mention of the “L” word. “The latter is the wrong reason,” she began firmly. “I don’t love, Doc. It doesn’t exist. A man uses it to lure a woman he wants to fuck or keep fucking, while a woman uses it to lure a man she wants money from or wants to keep getting money from. Either way, there’s always some ulterior motive they disguise under that word, but in the end, it is merely someone using someone.”

“Wow. For someone who isn’t much of a talker, you have quite a bit to say on the topic,” Max said playfully. “Don’t worry, Tesiera. For what it’s worth, I agree with you that the latter is also the wrong reason. We don’t love each other.”

“No, we don’t,” she agreed matter-of-factly. Then paused. “Attraction though...” She relaxed back on the couch, relieved that they weren’t in love. “I’m very much attracted to you, Doc. I’ve told you before.”

Max's lips curled into a grin as a wave of excitement washed over him. He rose from the edge of the bed, still clad in his towel, and laid down on the bed. “You said that I was an attractive man, Torturer. But you never said anything about being attracted to me.”

“Potatoes, potahtoes, Doc.” A ghost of a smile graced her lips as she gazed into the empty space before her.

“Indeed. I thought about it for days, you know. I was going to ask you about it, but—”

“But your girlfriend came asking for you,” she finished for him, her voice neutral.

“Mira is not my girlfriend. Not for a long time. And yes, I am very much attracted to

you, too, Tesiera Anderson.”

“So, what are we gonna do, Doc?” she drawled, her voice dropping an octave.

He loved the way she called him ‘doc’. It sounded particularly sexy coming from her.

“I say we remedy the situation. I’ll take you out for lunch tomorrow.”

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A pause. “I’m going to be very honest with you. I don’t date. I don’t do relationships,” she said.

Max only nodded his head—not that she could see him from the other side of the phone. Somehow, that revelation didn’t surprise him.

“I propose a physical relationship. Let’s fuck with no strings attached,” she said bluntly.

Max saw it coming but he was still floored at how straightforward she could be. “Wow,” he breathed.

Tesiera shrugged. “I mean, it’s a good solution. I am...” she hesitated, then admitted, “Distracted. Like I said, I think about you at the oddest times. Nothing but the mission occupied my mind before, but the last three weeks? I know you were as distracted as I was with work, so I say let’s—” She stopped when she heard the deep rumble of his laughter.

She almost asked him why he was laughing, but then thought better of it. Despite his easygoing nature and joking around with Bose and Clinton, she couldn’t remember ever hearing him laugh like this before. The sound of it was...pleasant.

“You don’t need to sell me on the idea, sweetie,” he said at last. “I want you, Tesiera Anderson. I have never wanted a woman the way I want you. It was so hard to respect the boundary you created before you left, but I forced myself to do it.”

“I didn’t want to complicate our professional relationship. But that was before I

started getting...distracted.” That word is somehow always hard for me to say, Tesiera thought. “Now, I simply wants us to fuck each other out of our systems.”

It was only a phone call, but Max could not recall the last time he had had such a good time. “Do you always say the first words that pop into your head? No matter how shocking they might be?” he asked incredulously.

Tesiera shrugged even though he couldn’t see her. “What is the worst that could happen? Even when I was little, I never sugarcoated words. Growing up, I got into a lot of trouble for my frankness. Adults saw me as insubordinate. And bullies came for me in high school because of it.”

He snorted, unable to picture her that reality. “You went to high school?”

“Dropped out. It was too much of a hassle. I was a loner and I enjoyed the learning, but the other kids always seemed to have a bone they wanted to pick with ‘the Barbie doll.’ The math teacher’s words, not mine.” Tesiera smirked. “I wiped the floor with the bullies and found I enjoyed it.”

“I’m glad you did. Did you ever have a dream growing up? I mean, something you really wanted to be. I can’t imagine you dreamt about being a torturer as a kid,” he said.

Silence met him at the other end of the line. The seconds ticked by each stretching out into eternity.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” Max apologized, gently. “It wasn’t my intention.”

“It’s okay, you didn’t. Let’s just say that those dreams are long gone. I don’t need them anymore,” she said at last.

“I understand.” He hated the negative tension he could feel. Tesiera had been very relaxed with him and he wanted that woman back. “So, you are so attracted to me that you can’t seem to stay focused, huh?”

That did it. He heard her scoff. “Don’t kid yourself, Doc. I focus just fine.”

“That wasn’t the impression you gave me when you started this phone call, Torturer,” he drawled. “I could come over to your apartment tonight, you know. All you have to do is say the word.”

That drew a smile from Tesiera, and a weird, pleasant feeling spread through her chest. She was grateful that no one was around to witness her reaction to the strange feelings she had toward Max. “As much as I want to say the word, I can’t. I have to finish preparing for tomorrow night.”

“What is tomorrow night?” he asked, but when she didn’t respond, he added, “It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me.”

“I found one of my father’s killers,” she said after considering what to share. “His name is Jacob Blake. I’ll take him out tomorrow.”

It was Max's turn to consider what she said. “Do you need my help with anything? Ask and I will get you what you need.”

“I’m fine but thank you for the offer.” The thought that he was willing to help her felt...nice.

“Alright. Be careful, Tesiera.”

“I will be.” There is no way she was going die before having him in her bed...or in his. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back, Doc. We have plans to keep.”

“Excellent. I’ll be waiting,” Max said. “Looks like you got yourself an appointment, Miss Anderson. After your mission.”

“After my mission,” she agreed.

“Tesiera?”

“Mmhm?”

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He paused, then said, “I can’t wait to have you in my bed. When you get there, you’ll have a very hard time getting off of it,” he drawled seductively, his tone held promise.

A warm, fuzzy feeling lit up inside her at that pledge. “Mmm. Interesting.”

“You know, I’m glad you called me. I enjoyed every minute of it,” he confessed.

“Me too,” Tesiera admitted. She usually relied on working out, training or an orgasm for winding down, but she felt incredibly relaxed as they ended the call.

Who would have thought that talking with someone could feel so refreshing?

Tesiera stood in the shadows, gazing at Jacob Blake’s heavily fortified residence, the gates loomed over her. The plan was to put a bullet through his skull and leave. A simple, swift assassination.

She had spent weeks studying the layout of the estate grounds and knew exactly where each sensor and camera was located. She moved quickly and quietly, carefully avoiding each one as she made her way to the power supply and cut off the electricity, rendering the security system irrelevant.

She entered the mansion through a normally locked, and unguarded door. Tesiera moved from shadow to shadow as she made her way to Blake’s room. She held her breath as she watched the security guarding her target’s door, her mind running through her options, discarding them as quickly as they came to her. Until she decided on the one she liked. She nodded her head and moved out of the shadow.

CHAPTER 30. THE MISSION: JACOB BLAKE

Jacob Blake towered over the girl beneath him, anger flashing in his eyes. “Stop moving, or you’ll regret it. This is the last warning I’m going to give you,” he barked.

The young woman froze, her body slick with sweat and trembling with fear. Tears streamed down her face as he continued to pound into her without mercy, his roughness amplified by the threat of his warning.

His large hand wrapped around her pale, slender neck, cutting off her air supply as he squeezed with increasing force. His hips slapped against hers repeatedly, each impact sending waves of pain and misery throughout her body.

The girl felt like she had been submerged into the fires of hell, while Jacob relished her pain and suffering as he carried out his twisted desires on her bruised body.

His cellphone rang, interrupting his assault. Annoyance flickered across his features as he stopped his thrusts. With a grunt of anger, he reached for the phone on the nightstand and placed it at his ear. “I said I didn’t want to be interrupted.”

“I apologize, sir,” the voice on the other end of the line said. “The power to the main building has been cut. Management is already taking steps to rectify the situation, but we wanted to make sure you were ok, and aware.”

“I’m fine,” Jacob snapped, his impatience mounting. “Fix it, and do not disturb me again.”

“Understood, sir,” the voice replied before hanging up.

Jacob tossed the phone aside and resumed his thrusting. The girl beneath him whimpered and moaned, her body writhing as he violated her.

Tesiera stood in the shadows, concealed behind a massive wardrobe, her eyes locked on the scene unfolding before her. Her entire being was consumed with rage, the intense emotions shaking her to the core.

The sight before her triggered a flood of terrible memories that she had buried deep within her. Memories that she thought she had left behind ages ago. She would never forgive this man for resurrecting those memories tonight.

As she watched Jacob Blake brutally assault the girl beneath him, Tesiera's heart pounded with fury. She had calculated every risk before coming here while meticulously planning this assassination. But she hadn't counted on the visceral reaction this provoked. It was almost too much for her to bear.

Her heart raced in her chest as sweat poured from her forehead, her hands shaking uncontrollably. The tremors that wracked her body were so intense that she felt like she was being ripped apart from the inside out. She felt like she was the woman beneath him. Tesiera tasted bile on her throat at the sickening feeling of violation.

There was no way she was going to just put a bullet through this man's skull and leave. It was too merciful for him.

Tesiera would have normally suppressed the overwhelming emotions, but she had to force herself not to. She needed the rage boiling in her, so she could properly carry out this mission.

She emerged from the shadows and swiftly crossed the room, grabbing Jacob Blake and pulling him off the woman.

His face contorted with anger and confusion as he stared at the masked intruder. "What the fuck?"

Ignoring his question, she watched him with rage-filled eyes.

The naked woman remained still, her body shaking with uncontrollable sobs. Jacob Blake hurried to where he stashed his weapons.

“Looking for this?” the intruder asked, and he spun to see her holding his guns. With expert precision, she unloaded the bullet from the chamber dropped the magazine onto the floor.

He dashed for his phone but the intruder was faster, and within a few seconds, the woman had his phone in her hand. Her eyes holding his, she threw it across the room, out of his reach.

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Jacob Blake glanced over at the alarm on the other side of the bed, and the intruder noticed the movement. Her eyes narrowed, and she took a step closer, her hand inching towards the knife she had hidden in her pocket.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she said with chilling composure. “Because I’ll kill you before they get here.”

Jacob Blake was rattled by the intruder’s calm response. It had been a long time since anyone had managed to scare him. He was used to terrorizing others, not the other way around.

The intruder ordered his merchandise to leave the bedroom and not come back, and the girl quickly fled, naked. He glared at the intruder. How dare she!?

“We meet finally, Jacob Blake,” she said, her voice low and menacing.

He glared at her. “Who the hell are you? You won’t get out of this place alive!”

Tesiera merely shrugged. “I will. But you won’t.”

Jacob Blake realized that he might have underestimated this intruder. He stepped back, uncertain of how to proceed.

“Why are you here? Who sent you?” he asked, his smugness slipping away.

“I’m here to kill you because I want you dead,” Tesiera said as though she were discussing the weather.

Her words sunk deep into his chest, and he caught a glimpse of the knives strapped to her body. His gaze lifted to meet her cold eyes and then downward to see her gloved hand wrapped around a sharp knife.

“I’ll triple whatever you were paid if you let me go.” He watched her as she remained silent. “I’ll give you four times the money; how about that?” he asked.

“No amount of money can save you from me,” she said at last, advancing toward him, her knife pointed toward him. He began to back away. “Twenty years ago, you and your friends murdered a man in front of his eight-year-old daughter. Do you remember?”

Jacob Blake cocked his head, then snorted. “I’m sorry, but I’ve killed so many people. It’s hard to keep track of them all, especially one of such insignificance.”

Tesiera froze in her tracks. Her body shook with a raw anger that threatened to consume her. How dare he dismiss the death of her father as insignificant?

All the pain, all the tears, all the years of suffering, and this bastard had the audacity to dismiss it with a laugh. The event that had ruined her life and haunted her dreams for the past twenty years?

She lowered her head and laughed. It sounded empty and mirthless to her own ears, and as she laughed, her eyes watered. That more than anything snapped her out of her daze. She would not cry for this bastard. She would not shed a tear in front of this monster.

She raised her head and looked at him. “You killed my father.” She said in monotone. “You destroyed my family and my life, and you have the nerve to call it insignificant? I’ll make you suffer like you’ve never suffered before.”

And she did.

Thirty minutes later, Jacob Blake was unrecognizable. She had dragged him to the adjoining bathroom, tied his hands behind his back, and stuffed his mouth with a sponge. She'd beaten him mercilessly before carving him up like a chicken. His muffled screams were music to her ears. Parts of his body dangled at odd angles.

“The name of the man you killed was Roman Anderson. I want you to know his name as your life bleeds out of you. This face”—She removed her mask then—”will be the last face you ever see. May you rot in hell knowing that all the ‘significant’ people you killed weren’t your demise, but one of those which you had no memory of,” she said before taking two steps away from him.

Then Tesiera put a bullet through the base of his skull.

She put her mask back on and reached for the door handle. As she opened the door, she was startled to find the young woman still in the bedroom.

She couldn’t have been more than 18 or 19 years old. Tesiera knew she had wasted too much time and needed to leave before Blake’s men discovered their employer was in trouble. She ignored the girl and rushed for the exit, but the girl grabbed her arm.

“Please, take me with you! I want to go home,” the girl begged, her English heavily accented.

Tesiera shook her head. “I can’t. I need to go now before it’s too late.”

The girl’s eyes filled with tears as she tightened her grip on Tesiera’s arm. “Please. Don’t leave me here, please!”

Tesiera hesitated for a moment before relenting. “Okay. Let’s go.”

A deafening alarm blared through the house. “INTRUDER ALERT!” The power was back on and Tesiera could hear the heavy steps of guards running towards the bedroom.

CHAPTER 31. ALONE IN DARKNESS

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Max lay in bed, tossing and turning. Despite the exhaustion that weighed heavy in his bones from a long, grueling day at the hospital, he couldn't sleep.

His thoughts drifted to Tesiera. He couldn't shake off the worry that filled him. How was her mission progressing? Was she alright?

A smile formed on his lips when he remembered their phone call from the night before. He'd smiled so much at work, Patty had even asked what was up. he'd fallen asleep smiling about their conversation.

The shrill ring of Max's phone came through. He fumbled for his phone, his eyes closed. "Hello?" he mumbled into the phone.

"Dr. Kingston," the hospital's answering service said. "A patient with a severe head injury has just been brought in. We need you to come in right away."

Max rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his head. "I'll be there in twenty minutes," he said before hanging up.

He scrambled to get dressed and raced to the hospital with Bose and Clinton . He was met by the emergency team, who quickly briefed him on the patient's condition.

"The patient is a young man in his twenties. He was involved in a serious car accident, suffered a severe head injury, and was unconscious when he arrived at the hospital."

Max quickly assessed the patient's condition and announced that he should be

prepped for immediate surgery. Then he scrubbed in, entered the theater, and got to work.

“Scalpel,” he said.

After several tense hours, Max had successfully repaired the damage to the patient’s brain. He sutured the incision and bandaged the wound.

Then he stood aside and watched the nurses wheel the patient into recovery. He followed them out of the operating room, exhausted but relieved.

“Great job, everyone,” he said, wiping his forehead with a towel. “Let’s keep a close eye on the patient during recovery. Let me know if there are any changes in their condition.”

“Definitely,” the nurse replied with a smile before walking away with the others.

Max was walking back to his office when Patty fell into step with him. “You did a great job, Doc. I admire the way you work.”

He gave her a polite smile. “Thank you, Patty. You did a good job, too. Go home and get some rest.”

“I’ll do that.” She paused. “Are you going to the department dinner tomorrow night?”

Max shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t. Maybe another time.”

“Of course. Good night, doctor.”

He watched her leave. He had no intention of doing anything with anyone until Tesiera became available.

Anticipation sizzled through him; his exhaustion momentarily forgotten. Who would have thought that he would prefer to spend his free time with The Torturer instead of his hospital family?

Tesiera's heart raced as the alarm blared throughout the house. She grabbed the young woman's hand and calmly led her through the door, pulling it shut behind them.

She glanced around, trying to decide which direction would be the best to go. No matter which one she chose, she'd still be screwed.

"I know a way. Follow me," the young woman said, pulling Tesiera's hand and began running. Tesiera was surprised but she allowed the girl to lead the way.

She led them to a large bookshelf on the far wall. It looked out of place, but Tesiera couldn't see any advantage there. "What are we doing here?" she asked.

"He has a secret passages that run out of the house. He and his men talk about them when they don't think I'm listening. There's supposed to be one around here..." The girl trailed off, her eyes darting around frantically.

The bookshelf does look out of place in this hallway, Tesiera thought. She gently pushed the girl aside and scanned the books carefully, ignoring the heavy sounds of footsteps she heard in the distance.

Then she saw a hidden button and pressed it. The bookshelf slid away, revealing a narrow passageway.

"Hurry!" she urged the young woman, and they both squeezed into the tunnel. The space was tight, and the air was musty.

They followed the tunnel, which twisted and turned, and finally led them to a door. Tesiera pushed it open, and they emerged into a small room filled with dusty crates and old furniture.

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“I’ve not been here before,” the girl said, her voice shaking with fear.

“What is your name?” Tesiera asked, her eyes darting around. “We need to find a way out of here.”

“Maddie,” the girl responded. “Can I see your face, please?”

“No, Maddie. Trust me; it’s safer for you that way.” Tesiera scanned the room quickly, and her eyes settled on a small window near the ceiling. It was too high to reach.

But then she spotted an old crate nearby they could use as a makeshift ladder.

“Stand on this,” Tesiera ordered, pulling the crate over to the wall under the window. She boosted the young woman onto the crate, then climbed up behind her.

Together, they pushed the window open and crawled out. They found themselves in a dark section of the mansion’s backyard. There were three guards within sight, their eyes scanning the area for any signs of trouble.

Tesiera palmed the dagger hanging from her hip, as she silently assessed the situation.

“Stay behind me,” she whispered to Maddie before she slowly approached the guards.

In a swift motion, Tesiera lunged forward, her knife slicing through the air and striking one of the guards in the neck. The guard fell to the ground, blood pooling

around him.

The other two guards turned towards Tesiera, their weapons drawn. Tesiera dodged their attacks, her movements fluid. She landed a punch to one of the guards' jaw, sending him reeling backwards. Maddie grabbed a nearby rock and threw it at the remaining guard, striking him in the temple and knocking him out. The distraction was enough for Tesiera to kill the guard.

They quickly made their way towards the small gate, Tesiera pulled out a pick set and quickly got to work. The sound of the lock unlocked filled the air. They swung the gate open and dashed into the wooded area surrounding the mansion.

They ran until they got to a grocery store. The young woman clung to Tesiera, tears streaming down her face as they ran.

They were out. They made it out.

Two hours later, Tesiera sat on the cold floor at one corner, the darkness of her bedroom swallowing her whole. Her body was still damp from her shower, it had done little to ease the tension that coiled within her.

She'd cleaned Maddie up, gave her a bunch of money and put her on a bus with enough money to find her way home safely. Now she was alone in the darkness, her shoulders slumped with an invisible weight pressed against them.

Finally, she had killed one of the men who had taken her father's life. Revenge felt great, the victory tasted so damn good, but yet she felt hollow inside.

I don't remember. A death like that is too insignificant for me to even remember.

Tesiera's eyes were closed, the sound of the ticking clock loud in the silence. In the

end, Jacob Blake had confessed that he remembered killing her father.

“You know, I do remember him. The pathetic man that wanted to hold onto the locket of his dead wife.” He’d laughed, spitting out blood. “You’re the little brat he was protecting that day? I would have put a bullet through your head then if I’d known a day like this would come.”

Every nerve in Tesiera’s body felt raw and exposed as though she had been stripped bare of all her defenses. It was a painful, agonizing feeling that she couldn’t escape from, no matter how hard she tried.

She’d wanted to sleep but her heart felt too heavy. The house was too quiet.

Memories flooded her mind, unbidden and unwanted.

“Keep quiet, baby. I will make it all go away. Daddy will make it all go away.”

“But it hurts,” young Tesiera cried, pushing at his hips to let up. “It hurts, Daddy, stop.”

“It won’t hurt for long, baby. It’s okay. I’ll make it all go away. Shhh, you don’t want Mommy to hear now, do you? Mommy won’t like that I’m consoling you and she will spank you like a bad child.”

The memory of that familiar voice in her ear made bile rise to her throat. She’d kept quiet and swallowed every scream that rose in her throat. Young Tesiera didn’t want to be a bad child. She didn’t want to be thrown out of her foster home.

Tesiera took a deep, shaky breath, trying to steady herself. “You killed the man that created that memory, and you killed the one that resurrected it. Now, get a hold of yourself,” she muttered out loud.

Instead, a shudder went down her spine. She couldn't stop the raw, pained feeling that consumed her like an open wound that refused to heal.

She felt exposed and vulnerable. Two feelings she despised as much as she despised 'love'. So why the hell couldn't she make it stop?

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I can't remember. A death like that is too insignificant for me to even remember.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over. She swore and stubbornly blinked them back. What the hell was wrong with her? She didn't cry, damn it.

The house was just too quiet.

Max's eyes abruptly sprang open in the pitch-black room. He sensed it immediately. He was not alone.

Instinctively, he reached for the bedside lamp and illuminated the room in a soft glow. His gaze wandered to a figure that was leaning against the wall.

Tesiera.

He blinked a few times to make sure he was not dreaming. He wasn't. It was indeed her.

"Tesiera?" he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

She remained motionless, staring off into the distance. But he was sure it was her. She was dressed in her usual attire; black leather. But something seemed...off.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his concern growing with every passing moment. Judging from the open window beside her, he didn't need to ask how she managed to enter his room.

Instead, he got out of bed in his sweatshirt and approached her.

“Don’t. I shouldn’t have come here,” she whispered. “Don’t come any closer. Please.”

He halted in his tracks. Her tone was calm, but there was a crack in her voice that broke something in him.

“Are you alright, Siera?” he asked in a soothing voice. “Baby, please talk to me.”

Silence hung in the air, and the tension in the room was palpable.

“The house was too quiet.” Her voice barely audible.

Then she stepped out of the shadows, and Max could finally see her face. Her expression was composed, but her eyes...

Tesiera Anderson was fighting to hold back tears. And she was losing the battle.

As she approached him, Max instinctively opened his arms for her. And held his breath, afraid he’d scare her away.

A tear escaped from her eyes. “The house was way too quiet, Doc,” she repeated, and her voice trembled slightly.

Then she walked into his open arms.

“Work your magic, Doc. Make this pain go away so I don’t have to do it my way,” she whispered, against him.