



The Woman with the Wallet

(Costa Family #10)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Determined to rise up in the ranks of the Costa Family, Miko decided to pull off the heist of a lifetime. When he secures a fortune in stolen diamonds, he's closer than ever to proving his worth in the organization. But those plans hit a snag when a quick-fingered thief lifts his wallet—and the diamonds within—right out of his pocket.

Max has spent most of her life surviving on the streets with her quick wits and even faster hands. When she swipes a wallet whose coin compartment is stuffed with enough diamonds to change her life, she thinks things have finally turned around.

Until she's ambushed.

With the diamonds gone and a dangerous enemy closing in, Miko and Max have no choice but to team up to bring them back. But as the collateral damage starts piling up, the heat between Miko and Max is about to reach the breaking point, leaving them to wonder if they will survive this job with their lives—and hearts—intact.

* all books in this series can be read as standalones *

Total Pages (Source): 26

CHAPTER ONE

Max

I walked into the apartment, throwing my keys in the bowl, then tossing the wallet onto the kitchen table—a cheap folding card table with a torn padded top I’d found at the curb one day then had never thought to replace—where it landed with a thud, sending some markers flying and making my roommate let out a grumble.

“What’s this?” she asked, reaching for the wallet with her marker-stained hands, red, blue, and green streaks across her sun-kissed—despite the winter gloom—skin. “I didn’t think you were going to the financial district today.”

“I was in Manhattan,” I admitted, going for the coffee pot, knowing it was probably burnt since it had likely been sitting on the burner since I’d left the apartment hours before, but not caring.

“Then I don’t get it,” Megs said as she stroked the fine leather wallet.

We were a long way from my scrappy teen pickpocketing days, back when a stolen wallet would literally be the difference between eating that day or not.

Even then, I’d had my code of ethics. Mostly that I would take the cash if it was there. If there were only cards, I would just charge enough for a hot meal or essentials that we didn’t have—socks, warm gloves, feminine care products—then wipe the wallet down and toss it into a post box.

Sure, there'd even been some guilt then. But I'd been fifteen, living on the streets, and desperate.

It wasn't until I came across this epic asshole of a rich dude on the street who'd literally kicked a sleeping homeless man because he was slightly in the way of a door he was trying to enter, that I got an interesting idea.

Stealing from the rich. Exclusively.

It was hard to feel bad about stealing a few hundred, or grand, from the wallet of some man wearing a ten-thousand-dollar watch.

"It's like making them pay some of the taxes the government doesn't," Megs had said when I'd come back to her with the designer wallet a few hours later.

It had been a good score. Almost a thousand dollars. Enough to pay for a week or two of a cheap hotel room—plus the bribe to get someone to rent it for us, since we weren't of age yet—so we could be out of the shelter for a bit. Some decent meals. Maybe even a decent fake ID, so I could get a better job than the part-time gigs I strung together for cash since I was technically too young to work anywhere full-time.

From then on, when I wasn't working, I was down in the financial district, finding the most obnoxious finance bros and helping myself to the cash in their wallets.

Even when it was no longer strictly necessary for us to survive, I had to admit that I was a bit addicted to the high of it. Like adrenaline junkies who liked to drive too fast on empty roads. Or dive out of planes. Or lay money they didn't need to lose on black five times in a row in a casino.

I sighed as I sipped my burnt coffee.

“Have you ever seen a guy so fucking hot that you just want to ruin his day?” I asked.

“What? No,” Megs said, letting out an airy laugh. “But I guess it is a bit like cute aggression. You know, when something is so cute you have this weird urge to squeeze it really hard?”

“Yeah, maybe it’s like that,” I agreed.

“I mean, this city is packed full of attractive guys, though. How hot was he?”

“Hot,” I grumbled.

“Like surfer hot? Cologne ad hot? What kind of hot are we talking about?”

“Like... straight out of some classic mob movie hot. Slicked-back dark hair. Gooey dark eyes. Chiseled jaw. Broody brow. Nice suit. Great cufflinks. That mysterious air about him.” I flipped open the wallet to show her the man’s license picture.

“Oooh,” Megs said, lifting up her protest poster to fan herself dramatically with it, making her curly brown hair sweep back away from her pretty round face that was dominated by big, golden eyes.

“I know. It was either steal his wallet or smack him in that too-hot face. I figured this was the lesser of two evils.”

“It would be a shame to mark a face that perfect,” Megs agreed. “On a completely unrelated note, when was the last time you got laid?”

To that, I snorted, nearly making coffee come out of my nose in the process.

“Probably too long,” I admitted. “Not all of us can be as lucky in the romance

department as you are.”

Because Megs, my best friend and basically little sister, progressive queen, fighter for all good causes, was in a triad with her girlfriend and their boyfriend. Really, the only reason they weren’t all living together in one sexy tangle of limbs was because their boyfriend traveled more than he was around. And, possibly, thanks to my unwillingness to live away from Megs. Yet. I knew the day would come. But I was happy to delay it as long as possible.

“I do count myself lucky,” Megs agreed, reaching to uncap one of her markers to get back to her poster. “I even have a drawer full of batteries I can loan you for a little self-loving.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said, wincing. “I have been working too much,” I admitted.

“You think?” Nicole asked, coming out of Megs’s bedroom with her purple-streaked blonde hair messy and a big purple blanket wrapped around her. “It’s freezing in here,” she declared, leaning down to press a kiss to Megs’s temple. “Is that new?”

“In terms of the universe, yes,” Megs said as Nicole grabbed the coffee pot and lifted it up to sniff, her button nose wrinkling. “In terms of coffee, though...”

“Gross. How are you drinking that?” Nicole asked as she poured the contents out then rinsed the pot.

“She still can’t bring herself to waste coffee,” Megs explained, making her girlfriend’s face soften.

Nicole had been raised in a happy, two-parent, comfortable middle-class family in the suburbs. The kind of family who tossed out food if it hit its use-by date.

But for kids like Meg and me, we had to taste-test sour milk, eat around the mold on bread or cheese, use teabags twice, and choke down watery hot chocolate since we always had to share a packet to make it last.

Coffee has been a rare luxury that had been savored by me alone, since Megs didn't like the taste.

At one point, I even developed a sort of fondness for the burnt stuff, thanks to an employee at a bodega who used to pour the old pots into cups for me instead of pouring it down the drain to help me get through a particularly frigid winter on the street.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"It's fine, Nics," I said, waving her off. "It's something I need to get over."

Even though we all lived in a pretty nice apartment, had a fridge and pantry full of food, and had light, heat, and air to keep us comfortable, I couldn't shake the need to hoard things 'just in case' or reuse things until they were literally falling apart.

The holey black jeans I had on and the boots that were nearly rubbed through on the toes were prime examples.

I couldn't help it, though.

I liked knowing the money was in my account and in my safe spaces in the apartment rather than on my body.

The next time I got new shoes would likely be a gift from Megs when she noticed how bad they were getting.

Oddly enough, the need to save money didn't apply to Megs, though. I guess maybe that was also a holdover from our street days. I'd been fifteen when we'd met, already street-hard and scarred. She'd been a sweet, soft thirteen-year-old on the run after her mom overdosed, but this time in a lethal way, which Megs knew would land her back in the foster system where she'd had nothing but a hard time.

I'd taken her under my wing like a big sister, protecting her from the worst the streets had to offer, giving her more of the food, the warmer blankets, the extra socks, the less stale food.

The more money we got over the years, the more I would pass her way, not wanting her to be shackled with that scarcity mindset her whole life.

It was too late for me, it seemed.

But that was okay.

"But seriously about the working too much thing," Nicole said as she added fresh grounds to the filter. "I mean, I came out to get water last night at around three, and you still weren't home. And you were out again this morning," she said, glancing at the clock.

Nicole worked for herself, so she kept odd hours. Like stumbling out for morning coffee when it was getting close to noon.

"You have really been stretched thin lately," Megs piled on.

Megs worked for a nonprofit, doing what she liked most—helping people.

I was the only one still hustling to string together my income. Though, admittedly, the money was much better these days. And the pickpocketing of the ultra-wealthy

was more for sport than anything.

“What’d you steal last night?” Megs asked when Nicole excused herself to go take a shower.

While we both loved and trusted Nicole, neither of us actually told her the details of what I did for a living.

Namely, stealing shit.

Not the wallets.

This was more like stealing back things someone’s ex, or former business partner, or friend had wrongly taken in the first place. And when the legal channels were exhausted, well, they called in me.

Of course, this meant I did tend to end up working for the rich guys I would normally be picking the pockets of, but this way, I got to fleece thousands out of them instead of a few hundred.

It was a surprisingly in-demand job for someone particularly skilled in it. I figured that not many people thought to pursue a career in stealing shit, save for career bank or store robbers.

Sure, that had been an option. But, morally, I knew most bodega owners were independent and barely getting by themselves. And I didn’t exactly fancy the idea of getting shot by police while robbing a bank.

My job did, of course, involve some risk. Rich people had their own security personnel, systems, or even dogs. One or two even had guns. But the nature of the work meant I had time to follow the targets, to stake out their places, to find my little

windows for entry.

All that work beforehand was what kept me from home so much. The actual robberies were over in a matter of hours. But the prep could take weeks sometimes. And not all of it took place in the five boroughs. Long hours were part of the gig.

But the money made it all worth it to me.

“The ashes of a beloved dog,” I told Megs.

“Wait... what? Seriously?”

“Seriously. Apparently, Goober lived seventeen long, happy years with his dad. But his eventual wife hated the dog. And, apparently, her ex-husband. She stole the ashes and refused to give them back when she didn’t get the alimony she wanted.”

“Wow. That’s cold.”

“Right? She had him stored in a musty closet in her basement in upstate New York.”

“How much did you get for that job?”

“Eight grand,” I told her, smiling because I was still trying to wrap my head around that.

“He must have really loved that dog.”

“He cried when I brought him the urn,” I told her. “That was why I was in the Midtown area.”

“Where the hot guy annoyed you enough to steal his wallet,” she said, holding it out

to me to take before Nicole asked about it.

I stuffed it into my pocket and nodded to her sign. “When’s the protest?”

“Tonight.”

“Peaceful, right?” I asked, knowing things had gotten dicey at a few of the protests she’d been to over the past year. Police in riot gear. Rubber bullets. Tear gas. Arrests.

“This is a strike. It shouldn’t be dangerous,” she said, shrugging. Because we both knew that even if there was the threat of injury or arrest, if she believed in the cause, she would be there with everyone else.

“Take a burner out of my drawer,” I demanded.

We both knew that one of the rules of attending protests was you left your phone home. But burners weren’t traceable, and she could use it to call me for help if she needed it.

“You know,” Megs said, shooting me a smile. “I’m twenty-four now. You don’t need to protect me anymore.”

“And yet...”

“And yet,” she agreed, shaking her head. “Go get some rest.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, refilling my cup with the fresh coffee before going into my room.

Where I didn’t rest.

Instead, I sat on the edge of my bed and reached for the wallet, flipping it open and

seeing that annoyingly handsome face staring back at me from his license.

Miko.

Interesting name.

But not quite as interesting as something else I found inside that wallet...

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CHAPTER TWO

Miko

“I swear to fucking God, Nero, if you killed a bunch of people again, I’m gonna lose my shit,” I said as I walked up to my brother, who was standing on the sidewalk outside of a random coffee shop with two cups in his hands. “I just barely stopped getting my ass handed to me from Cosimo about the last time.”

“For the record, it wasn’t a bunch. It was two. And shit got out of hand. It’s not like I went looking for a problem,” he said, passing me a paper coffee cup, the heat of it immediately warming my freezing hands. “Cold as fuck today,” Nero said.

“And you got me doing a meeting on the sidewalk why?” I asked, looking around the street, catching sight of a bit of New Year’s Eve confetti that had been missed during the clean-up a few days before.

“‘Cause we’re not supposed to talk business over the phone,” Nero said, shaking his head.

I had three brothers. All of ‘em would be going into the ‘Family’ business eventually, but Nero was the only one currently working for me. And I was working for Cosimo Costa, a high-ranking capo. But I had hopes that, soon, the books would open up, and I would be my own capo, would get my own crew.

My pain-in-the-ass little brothers would all likely be my first group of associates or soldiers, depending on how much time they had been doing jobs for the Costas.

It was why I was probably harder on Nero than I needed to be. Because until the day when I was the capo, that I was the one everyone was answering to, their actions reflected on me and Cosimo. Their fuck-ups became my fuck-ups and, by extension, Cosimo's fuck-ups.

So they needed to be good.

No, not just good.

Exceptional.

And after Nero's screw-up a few months back with killing two guys he was just supposed to get some money from, I'd doubled down on rules with my brother.

So much so that the only time he was allowed to text me was about shit to do with our parents or sisters. And if he was calling about business, all he was allowed to do was give me a time and place.

Hence meeting on a crowded street during a frigid polar vortex.

"Alright, what is it then?" I asked, sipping the coffee that was steadily becoming lukewarm.

"Went to collect the money from those frat boy pricks who opened the brewery," Nero started.

There were a lot of jobs guys working their way up in the Family could do. One of the most important jobs, though, was working as the bagman. Meaning, they were the ones who went into businesses that paid for the Family's protection and collected the cash.

It was a pain-in-the-ass job that often required intimidation, if not outright violence, if someone was getting ideas of shorting us or deciding they were done paying as a whole.

The best bagmen didn't have to knock anyone's teeth in to get the results we all wanted. But they all had to be willing to do exactly that, should the situation call for it.

It sounded like the frat boys might be looking for a little roughing up.

"They didn't want to pay?" I asked.

I'd been in his shoes plenty in the past. Working as a go-between for the public and the capos. Not knowing exactly how far to go, or if permission was needed to do some shit.

But I'd always had good instincts with that sort of thing.

I was worried that if Nero was coming to me asking about this sort of shit, that I'd messed up his instincts by making him come to me about too much.

"Actually, no. They paid. In small bills. Even put it in this nifty reusable bag," he said, pulling a canvas tote out of his jacket that was wrapped tightly around a small pile of cash.

"Huh. Alright. What's the problem then? Shouldn't you be on your way to Cosimo to give him that?"

"He said he doesn't wanna see anyone before two today," Nero said with a shrug.
"Actually, they are having a problem."

“The frat guys?”

“Yeah. They have some local crew leaning on them.”

“For money?”

“Yep.”

“How the fuck’d that happen? That street has always been ours.”

“Maybe they’re new. There was an argument in the bar area. So we didn’t get to finish the conversation. I said I’d be back later to talk about it. Figured that gave me a chance to come to you and Cosimo about it, see how you two want to handle it.”

“Alright. Well, I’m cool with you going back and getting more information. But you can’t be making any promises on behalf of the Family. Just get the information and bring it to me and Cosimo. Then we will all discuss what can be done.”

“It sounds like you’re considering letting me run point on this.” There was a hopefulness under Nero’s calm tone that anyone else who wasn’t related to him would have missed.

“I got a lot of shit on my plate already. I know Cosimo doesn’t want the headache. Depending on who this crew is and what they’re into, we might consider letting you handle it with the help of someone like Venezio.

“It’s all gonna depend on what information you get. So make sure you learn everything there is to know before you bring this to Cosimo. If he gives you the go-ahead and this shit blows up around us, it’s gonna be your ass—and your future in this organization—on the line.”

“Got it,” Nero said with a nod. His posture straightened at the idea of being given another chance to prove himself.

As much as I ragged on him, he genuinely was a good kid. He wasn’t a fuck-up just because he’d fucked up once. We all did shit in this job that put us in danger, that made our bosses want to beat our asses. That was just part of making your bones in a criminal empire as powerful as the Costa Family.

“Anything else?” I asked, itchy to get a move on.

“Ma said she hasn’t seen you at her table in a month,” he said.

“I know. I’m gonna make it this weekend.”

“Been saying that every weekend,” Nero said as he was turning and walking away.

My family was important to me. All six of my siblings and my parents. That said, trying to secure your position as a capo in a syndicate like this was two full-time jobs. And that was being conservative. Because while my job was mostly being Cosimo’s right-hand man, I also had to run jobs of my own to kick money up to him and our Capo dei Capi. That kind of shit gained you favor.

And word was that Ant had been sworn in and given his own crew. So the books were somewhat open. I needed to work harder to prove my worth to get another spot before they closed shit down again.

Who knew how long they would keep them closed after this.

I wasn’t getting any younger.

That said, if I couldn’t make it all the way out to Greenwich for dinner, I could at

least call my damn mother every now and again.

I made a mental note to get that done sometime later. But for right that moment, I had something really fucking important to get to.

I was tempting fate to stay there in public for as long as I had already.

So I started walking.

I spotted her a whole block away.

Couldn't tell you what it was at first that caught my eye. The city was full of women, each with their own kind of pretty.

There was just something about this woman's pretty that made me look, made me stop to take her in.

She was tall and on the thin side under her cheap faux leather jacket and holey jeans. Her hair was cut into a long bob—or a 'lob,' I could hear my sisters saying in my head—and dark at the roots, but brightening to an almost white-blonde at the ends and around her face.

And what a fucking face, too.

High cheekbones flushed pink from the cold, plump lips, and eyes that I couldn't make out, but they seemed light from far away.

She was the kind of gorgeous that a man would change his plans for just on the off chance she might agree to get a cup of coffee with him.

Any other fucking day, I would have walked right up to her, tried to get a feel for

whether she was receptive to talking or not. Get some food with her. Spend the night trapped between her thighs.

But this one day, all I could do was admire her from a distance.

I could have sworn she looked right at me at one point. The kick to the gut sure felt like a mutual moment of acknowledgment, of mutual attraction.

But she just as casually looked away, flipping the hood of the sweatshirt under her jacket up over her head, hiding her hair and most of her face when she turned in my direction, hunched forward against the cold, and started walking.

She was so busy looking down that she didn't seem to notice me as she got closer that she was plowing right in my direction.

I couldn't seem to make myself do the gentlemanly thing and move out of the way, though.

Nope. I just let her pretty ass plow right into me.

I'd forgotten all about my coffee until I felt it sloshing down my hand, my suit jacket, and onto my new shoes.

"Fuck," I said, too distracted for a second to realize that the woman had just... kept walking.

No asking if I was alright.

No apology.

Nothing.

I turned, watching her as she continued walking like nothing at all happened.

Fuck if that didn't make me all the more attracted to her.

Hell, I almost turned and ran after her.

Almost.

But the coffee was literally starting to freeze on my skin thanks to the cold air, so instead, I tossed the cup and ducked into the closest café to go rinse the shit off of my hands, suit, and shoes.

It wasn't until I was making my way out of the restroom and thinking about grabbing something to take with me to eat later, or on the way, that I realized what had happened.

When I reached for my wallet.

And found it gone.

She hadn't put her hood up and ducked her head to resist the cold. She'd done it so I couldn't see her up close, so I couldn't identify her in a lineup.

And she hadn't rammed into me because she wasn't watching where she was going. She did it so she could use the impact and confusion to reach her fucking hand into my pocket and jack my wallet.

Honestly, if it was any other day—any fucking day of the week, month, year—I would have thrown my head back and laughed. I would have nodded in approval for her quick hands and her steel balls.

I would have called to cancel my cards and shrugged off the loss of cash. Gotten myself a new ID.

No big deal.

But this wasn't any day.

This was the one goddamn day when I had something irreplaceable in that wallet, something that I was going to use to secure my place as a capo in the Costa Family.

"Fuck fuck fuck ," I hissed, rushing out of the door of the shop and making my way back toward where the run-in happened.

But she was gone.

Of course she was.

She was clearly a pro.

And she'd just made off with the score of her entire fucking career.

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CHAPTER THREE

Max

Not quite believing my eyes, I zipped the coin compartment in the wallet before climbing off the bed, walking over to my bedroom door, and locking it.

The last thing I needed was Nicole—who was the sweetest girl but also kind of loosey-goosey with the concept of knocking before entering—to come barging in, see what I'd found, and start demanding answers.

I felt bad sometimes, knowing that Megs was lying to both of her partners about my job. But it was literally the only secret she kept from anyone. And we both knew it was what allowed us to afford a decently sized apartment, since both their salaries were likely too modest to afford anything other than a studio.

So, when we discussed my job in their company—which was almost never—we just said I was a courier.

It wasn't, in the strictest sense, a lie.

When pressed about my odd hours, we simply said that rich people were demanding. Which was also true. And that, to make the big bucks, I had to be on call whenever they needed me to move shit from point A to point B.

It wasn't a perfect system, but it was surprisingly infrequent that anyone actually asked specifics about my job. If anything, they were just saying that I worked too

much. And when their boyfriend was in town, he—being a fellow workaholic—was always was quick to jump in and defend me.

Lock secured, I kicked off my shoes, turned on the big light, then grabbed a simple black pillowcase from my closet to spread on my bed.

Then, stomach clenching, I reached again for the wallet, unzipping the coin pocket, and carefully shaking the contents onto the pillowcase.

There they fell.

Dozens of brilliant little diamonds.

Diamonds.

The man's coin purse was full of actual diamonds.

Or, at least, that was what my less-than-expert eyes said.

I grabbed the largest one I could find and walked over to the side of the room, careful to keep a grip on it as I ran the pointed end across the very corner of the window, and scratching it down.

Sure enough, there was a scratch.

It wasn't exactly conclusive. There were other gems that could scratch glass.

So I raised the diamond to my mouth, huffed some air onto it, and watching how quickly the fog faded.

"Hm," I murmured when it almost immediately cleared.

Those were really the only tests I could do at home without any equipment. But I was leaning toward them being genuine.

Diamonds weren't exactly my specialty, despite working closely for very wealthy men and women for years. If you held up your engagement ring to me and I saw it all sparkling and catching the light, I would assume it was a diamond. Even if it was cubic zirconia or moissanite.

The only way I could know for certain was to grab one of the diamonds—logically, the smallest of the bunch—and take it to an actual expert.

Decision made, I swept all the other diamonds back up, putting them into the coin purse, save for the tiny one I carefully tucked into my own wallet.

I slipped my feet back into my boots and made my way to the door.

I was all of one foot into the hallway when Nicole and Megs appeared in the opening, arms folded.

“Go back to bed,” Nicole demanded with a brow raised.

“Normally, you know I don't even try to tell you what to do,” Megs chimed in. “But it's been over twenty-four hours without sleep. You need some rest. Whatever the work is, it can wait until tomorrow.”

Megs almost never put her foot down about anything. She was content to be the easy-going little sister, letting me be the controlling and demanding one.

But every now and again—especially when she thought I was being a danger to myself in some way—she dug in her heels.

This was one of those times.

I could see her thoughts in her eyes.

Namely, that I'd just made eight grand, so there was no reason I couldn't take a couple of hours to recover before I got back to work.

I couldn't exactly tell her that I was running out because I had, potentially, stumbled into, what? A quarter-million-dollar stash of diamonds. Maybe more.

I didn't even try to contain the sigh that escaped me.

"I know sleep is hard sometimes," Megs said, eyes softening.

She did know.

Because when you were a very young, pretty, small girl living on the streets, sleeping was one of the worst things you could do. I'd spent years trying to stay awake as long as possible until the hypnic jerks would startle me awake again and again until, finally, my body gave in.

It wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence to wake up to someone—on the tame end—trying to steal my meager, but very precious, possessions, or—on the darker end—putting their hands on me, trying to get in my sleeping bag, rolling me onto my back and starting to...

"I'm fine," I assured her, thinking of how, when I found her on the street, I slept even less, staying awake all night long while she slept, holding a steak knife I'd found while dumpster diving, ready to gut anyone who tried to lay a hand on her. "I'm just restless," I admitted, but did what they wanted, retreated into my room.

I even caught a little catnap as I waited. Because I knew that neither of the girls could cook. So once they were both dressed and finished with their respective tasks, they would head out to get something to eat.

But the apartment door slammed sometime that afternoon, and I was off my bed in a second, rushing to get my shoes back on, grab my wallet, and stash the other one somewhere safe. There was no way I was going to be walking around with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of diamonds. I knew too well how easily something like that could be stolen.

The solitary diamond in my wallet made the whole thing feel like it weighed a thousand pounds as I made my way back out onto the street, head ducked down against the freezing breeze that seemed to get trapped down between the high-rises.

I could, of course, take the diamond to a reputable store, claim it had fallen out of a setting or something, and ask to have it appraised.

But if there was any chance that these diamonds were stolen—and, let's face it, what else could they be?—then I didn't want any alarms going up. Cops put calls out to shops about shit like diamond heists. It was why stolen jewelry was often hard to hock.

So I went ahead and walked past no fewer than three stores on the up-and-up, making my way, instead, toward an unmarked door down the alley between a dry cleaner and a shady-looking deli.

"Keep your panties on," a voice called from inside, making my lips curve up as the slide of locks sounded from the inside. "Or, you know, take 'em off," Lil said, her gaze moving down me in one quick sweep.

Lil was five-and-a-half feet of casual sex appeal, with her wavy brown hair around a

sharp, cat-like face with big green eyes and generous lips that were quick to offer a flirtatious smirk. She had a figure to die for—great tits, round hips, a narrow waist, and arms on the slightly muscular side.

She was dressed, as she almost always was, in a white ribbed tank top and a pair of jeans marred with various permanent stains and tears. On her feet was one of the many pairs of Converse she owned. In just about every shade known to mankind. And some she'd altered herself when she couldn't find what she wanted.

I had no idea—since I'd never asked—if Lil was like Megs and Nicole, who batted for both teams, or if it was just impossible for her to turn off her charm, regardless of who she was talking to.

“Aren't you freezing in that?” I asked as I took a step forward when Lil stepped to the side of the door, silently inviting me in.

“Think I'm probably warmer than you are. What is that jacket made of, tissue paper?”

As soon as I was inside, Lil closed the doors and slid all the locks. Which might have felt ominous if I hadn't known this woman for years and understood the reason for her paranoia.

Namely, the tables full of loose precious gemstones and diamonds, as well as racks full of jewelry she just hadn't gotten around to taking apart yet.

See, Lil was who professional thieves went to when they went and did something stupid, like steal a one-of-a-kind piece of jewelry that was easily identifiable. And, therefore, impossible to sell as it was.

She took apart jewelry, broke down the parts, and placed them into new settings. The end product was nothing like the original, so the thief could sell it.

I'd met Lil in my days on the street. She hadn't been unhoused like Megs and me and countless others. But she'd been a scrappy street kid, nonetheless. With shitty parents at home, she was better off hustling and eking a life out for herself. So that was what she did. Until she realized she had an uncanny ability to both make jewelry, but also spot genuine gems from a fucking mile away.

"What brings you down here?" she asked, walking over toward the side of the room where she had one of those coffee machines that ran in the thousands set up. "Coffee?"

I would never turn down a cup from one of those things.

"Whatever you're having."

"Raspberry vanilla latte coming up," she said, then shot me one of those smirks of hers. "Joking. God, you should see your face. Remind me to invite you to my next poker game," she said as she stuck a pod in the machine and the rich scent of creamy coffee filled the room.

Lil made bank, but you wouldn't know that by looking at her office-slash-apartment.

It was a small, dark space, save for the center filled with tables and bright, stark, blue-tinted overhead lights.

To the left was her kitchen. That was used mostly as a place to store condiments and leftover takeaway. To the right, there was her bedroom with its lush king-sized bed, tables, and an impressively large TV mounted to the wall.

There were two doors toward the back. One, I figured, was the bathroom. The other had to be some sort of storage since there was no wardrobe or dresser to be seen.

Lil brought me my coffee, then cradled her own in both her hands as she watched me for a second. “What does bring you here? Acting all nervous? Business or... personal?” she asked, green eyes twinkling.

“Lil, trust me, I wish I was interested in girls. Would make life so much easier.”

“Ain’t that the damn truth. So, business, then?”

“I, ah, stumbled upon something today.”

“And by ‘stumbled upon,’ do you mean lifted something from someone’s pocket?”

That was the thing about knowing people for so many years. You knew everyone’s secrets.

“Yeah,” I admitted, putting my coffee down on her desk, reaching for my wallet, unzipping the coin purse, then reaching inside to pinch the little diamond. “Is this real?” I asked, dropping it into her palm.

“First blush says yes,” she said, but she was already moving behind her counter, sticking her hand under a lighted magnifying glass.

“I did the fog test. And scratched my window with it. But I wanted an expert to tell me.”

Sitting, Lil dropped the diamond onto a little diamond scale, then sat back in her chair and nodded at me.

“That’s real, alright. Someone just had one of these in their wallet?”

“No,” I admitted, sucking in a steady breath as I reached for my cell phone,

unlocked it, scrolled to the most recent image I took of them all on the pillowcase, and turned the phone toward her. “Someone had all of these loose in their wallet.”

“Holy fucking shit , Max,” Lil said, eyes going wide.

“The one I brought here was the smallest of all of them,” I admitted. “What would that one be worth?”

Lil glanced again at the scale. “A grand, maybe. But what you have there, depending on the clarity of them, obviously, that’s an easy...”

“Quarter million?” I asked.

“More. Most likely more.”

“Half?”

“Half to seven-fifty.”

“Lil... how would someone come across that many loose diamonds?”

She glanced up at me, exhaling hard.

“There’s only one way,” she said, keeping unnerving eye contact. “They stole them.” She pinched the image in on my phone, looking at it for a long time before her head tipped up. Something in her gaze sent a shiver down my spine. “Not to be dramatic, babe,” she started. “But you’re in danger.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Max

In between thinking about how life-changing that kind of money could be, that was all I'd been able to think about.

That someone was now missing that same amount of money. And what they might be willing to do to get it back.

“Look, this isn't some idiot amateur breaking into a diamond store, smashing the display case, and snatching whatever they could reach,” Lil went on. “This is the kind of shit that is kept in the safe in the back. So whoever pulled this off is an insider or sophisticated as fuck. I mean... I haven't even heard of a big diamond heist. This shit should have been all over the news.”

“Unless...” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, passing me back my phone. “Unless.”

“If it is that...”

“Then you're dealing with some sort of career criminal. It's not easy to make those kinds of connections. To be able to pull something off under the radar. To keep it completely out of the news...”

“His name is Miko,” I told her.

“Miko. Interesting.”

“I stole his wallet because he was so hot that I wanted to fuck up his day.”

“Oh, you fucked it up, alright,” Lil said, wincing. “Miko doesn’t sound Russian to me. Maybe Eastern European. Unless he was Asian, because that could be, no?” she asked when I shook my head.

“No,” I said as my stomach felt suddenly full of lead. “No, he, ah, he looked like he stepped right out of a mob movie.”

“Oh,” Lil said, rocking back in her chair. “Shit.”

I slipped my phone away, wanting a sip of my coffee, but worried my hands might shake.

Because there weren’t a whole lot of rules when you operated in the criminal underworld. But one of them was simple and age-old.

You don’t fuck with the mafia.

“I could give it back,” I said, watching Lil for her reaction.

“I think you don’t really have any other choice. I mean, that’s a lot of diamonds. It would take a long time to unload all of that. And if the mob has feelers out and is looking for loose diamond sales...”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t have to tell you that they have their hands in everything. If my place had any sort of signage, I’m pretty sure they would shake me down for protection money.”

“How the fuck do I even go about giving this back? It’s not like they have a headquarters.”

“No,” she agreed. “But you have his wallet. And, I assume, his address.”

That I did.

“I don’t think you need to be pissing yourself,” Lil said, sensing my growing panic. “I mean, the mob is known for their code. And right at the top, just below loyalty, is no fucking with women or kids. And, you know, they’re criminals too. I think he’d understand that you were just doing your hustle. And that once you saw what you had, you brought it right back.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, writing off the idea of being a chickenshit and hiring a courier to do the dirty work for me.

Lil was right.

It’s not like I knew he had that many diamonds in his wallet.

What the hell was he doing walking down the street with that much money on him?

Really, he only had himself to blame.

Lil looked back at her diamond scale.

“Want me to hold onto this for you?” she asked. “I doubt he counted how many diamonds were in there. And one could have easily gotten misplaced when he put them in. Consider it your payment for doing the right thing.”

I knew it was stupid.

The diamonds weren't mine, even if I did steal them fair and square.

But I was still me. Forever paranoid about being without money again, without a home, without food and heat and clothes on my back.

"Okay," I agreed, nodding.

"Okay," she said, taking the diamond and sticking it in a little red velvet bag before tucking it into a drawer. "Babe, it's gonna be alright. You will give them back. He will do whatever he was gonna do with them and forget you even existed. No harm, no foul."

"Yeah."

"But get it done. ASAP. The sooner, the better. Then he doesn't get a chance to really panic or get pissed. Or, worse yet, get his boss on his ass."

"Definitely," I agreed. "Thanks, Lil. I appreciate your help," I said, already mentally planning what I was going to say to this Miko guy when I found him.

"Anytime. Come back when things blow over. I will give you back your little payday."

"You're the best," I said, finishing my coffee then making my way to the door.

This time, the cold air outside was welcome. It cleared my mind and steadied my nerves as I made the long walk back toward the apartment building.

It was the dead of winter, so by the time I made it back, it was already dark as fuck outside, and I was wondering if maybe I could delay the delivery by one day.

Exhaustion was starting to tug at my eyelids, was weighing down my body.

The apartment was dark when I made my way into it, and I figured the girls had likely come back, grabbed their stuff, and headed out to the protest, since the poster on the table was missing.

I made my way to the fridge, finding a sticky note taped to it.

Brought you home Chinese. Please sleep tonight.

XX Megs and Nicole

The longer I was home, eating fried rice and sinking into my mattress, the more and more convinced I was that it was okay to wait until the morning to drop the wallet back to that Miko guy.

The past twenty-four-plus hours without sleep was making me groggy and frazzled. I could use a couple of solid hours.

Decision made, I was out cold sitting up in bed, the damn carton of Chinese food still in my hand.

It was the footsteps that woke me up, frazzled, unsure what time of day—or day of the week—it was.

I shot up, knocking fried rice all over myself and my bed, as something crashed in the living room.

Logic tried to reason with me, insisting that the girls were likely stumbling around in the dark and knocked something over.

But so many years of expecting the worst, because that was all life had to offer, had my adrenaline surging through my veins, making me feel racy as my heart thundered against my ribcage.

I winced as I shifted my legs off the bed, annoyed at myself for not replacing my noisy metal frame that creaked and groaned like an old man. All the excuses I'd made in the past—it was free, it worked, it was kind of a vibe—suddenly seemed really stupid if it was going to give me away to potential intruders.

I sucked in a deep breath as I inched my weight up off the creaky frame and mattress. Just then, something else crashed in the apartment. Glass or porcelain.

Someone was looking for something.

My stomach flip-flopped, mind on the wallet, on the diamonds inside it.

Was this him? Miko? Coming for his stash? Had he somehow found out who I was so quickly?

Or, possibly worse yet, was this some random home invasion? Where some ragtag group of morons might come across the stashed diamonds, steal them, and put me at even greater risk from the mafia than I already was.

I wanted to rush to my hiding space, grab the wallet, and hold onto it for dear life. Common sense was the only thing that kept me from rushing to grab it.

They were safer where they were than on my body, where they could much more easily be found.

What I could do, though, was slide open my nightstand and grab my knife. Or get behind the door to the hall and grab the bat I kept leaning there. Or the mace in my

bag.

What can I say? I liked being prepared.

But before I could take a single step away from my bed, the bedroom door flew open, cracking hard against the wall and sending the bat I was going to go for shooting a few feet in the other direction.

Dammit.

“Where are they?” a ski-mask-clad intruder demanded, his voice all gravel.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, proud that my voice didn’t shake. My chin even tilted up, defiant.

“Bitch, I saw you take it from him,” he snarled, stalking toward me.

He saw me... take it from him .

So this wasn’t him? The Miko guy?

Could he work for him? A security guard or something? But if he did, why hadn’t he rushed after me? I hadn’t exactly been hauling ass when I walked off after lifting the wallet. I could have easily been chased down.

Why wait and break into my place?

Unless he didn’t work for Miko.

Maybe he’d been following him too, waiting for a chance to steal the diamonds.

Which meant I was still on the line with the mafia. So I really needed this asshole not to find the diamonds.

Decision made, I flew at the nightstand.

I managed to drag open the drawer.

But my wrist was grabbed and my body yanked back before I could close my fingers around the knife.

Pain screamed through my shoulder as I was whipped around.

I came out swinging, my fist colliding with the navy blue, scratchy material of his ski mask, though, softening the blow to his cheek, but pissing him off enough to swing as well.

When his fist met my jaw, there was nothing to absorb the impact.

“I won’t hurt you again if you tell me where they are,” he said between ragged breaths as I started to punch, knee, scratch, and kick.

It was when my fingers snagged the bottom of his mask and yanked it up and off that he lost whatever loose grip he’d had on his control.

The next blow caught me under the chin, the impact hard enough to have me lose my footing and free fall backward until I landed on my mattress.

“Fine. Have it your way,” he snarled, climbing up on top of me, his knees pinning my thighs.

But that pain was quickly dulled by panic as both of his gloved hands went to my

neck, closing around it and squeezing tight.

My first thought should have been of how to get away. But I somehow found myself thinking how strange it was how quickly I started to feel breathless and tingly, how there was a roaring sound in my ear, silencing everything else.

Then, worse yet, the stars in my vision, the way it was starting to go dark around the edges.

Like I was close to passing out.

Then what? Death.

No.

Dammit.

I had to fight.

I raised my hand with what little strength I had at that moment, swinging at his face, landing a blow to his nose.

But it didn't stop him.

He just kept squeezing.

My throat was screaming.

My chest burning.

Just when I thought it was lights out, though, his hands moved away.

It was embarrassing how I gasped, how I gulped, how I almost wept with relief.

“Where are they?” my attacker asked, his dishwater blond hair falling forward a bit to hide his blue eye.

I wouldn’t pretend to know much about the inner workings of the mob, whether they were more inclusive than they used to be or what. But I was pretty sure there weren’t a ton of blond-haired, blue-eyed Italians.

Which made me reasonably sure that I wasn’t dealing with the mob at all. That this was some other guy looking to rip them off.

And, hey, whatever. I wasn’t about to judge.

The problem was that I’d taken the diamonds first. The mafia could still blame me if this asshole stole them from me.

“Fuck off,” I managed, wincing at how sore my throat felt already.

Then I was fighting like I thought I would just moments ago. Flailing, wiggling, smacking, hitting, scratching.

“Fine. Do it the hard way,” he hissed as he fought me, rolling me until I was on my stomach on the mattress, my arm arched up so far up my back that I wouldn’t be surprised if it was dislocated.

Not that that mattered when his hand went to the back of my head and crushed it into the bed.

I had a bit of an unhealthy obsession with acquiring blankets whenever I found them on clearance or being given away. I guess it was another holdover from being on the

streets and nearly freezing to death some winters.

But it also meant I had a pile of them on my bed at all times, little actual security blankets.

They were great when the night temperatures dropped and the drafty windows did little to keep the cold out.

Not so much when your face was stuffed in them and you couldn't breathe.

I wanted to fight.

My fear was making me angry.

But with his body weight pressing into me, and my arm disabled, there was almost nothing I could do but rock and wiggle and try to inch forward, try to get closer to the edge of the bed so I could hang over, maybe get a good breath.

"You could stop all this if you tell me where to find them."

My free arm shot out, finding the pile of blankets and clawing at them until I created a pocket big enough to draw in a desperate breath.

The burn of oxygen in my starved lungs recharged me, making me grab for the footboard, using it as leverage to flip myself over.

Only to be on the receiving end of a blow. It was meant to hit my nose. And if I hadn't been moving, it likely would have broken it. As it was, he grazed off the side a bit.

The pain still exploded from the center of my face and ricocheted everywhere else,

making my eyes and teeth hurt.

But I managed to free a foot from his body, using it to brace on his stomach and kick off, sending him flying back and off the bed.

I scrambled off the other side and sucked in a breath to do something that bruised my ego to resort to.

Scream.

And pray someone would come.

Or at the very least, call the cops.

He was faster, though, rushing up and over the bed, throwing me back against the wall. The impact was enough to silence me, to make pain shoot through my skull.

He was done negotiating with me then.

Instead, he wrestled me to the ground, face smashed into the hardwood floors as he grabbed each of my wrists, securing them with what felt like zip ties. He pulled them painfully tight, biting into my skin when I tried to move.

The next thing I knew, I was being dragged backward, only to have something wrapped tightly around my mouth.

It wasn't until it was secured behind my head that I recognized it for what it was.

The sash from the thick fleece robe Megs had given me for Christmas. It had been on the foot of the bed and had likely hit the floor with the struggle, giving him the perfect gag.

“I’ll find them myself,” he snapped, shoving me back down toward the floor.

With my hands secured behind my back, and abs that weren’t in the best of shape to pull strength from, there was no way to stop myself from falling forward, from cracking my cheek off the wood.

There was something sharp beneath me—the edge of a jagged floorboard, maybe—that caught and sliced across my lip, the burn immediate. The trickle down my chin followed quickly after.

For just a moment, I let myself lie there, taking slow, careful breaths, trying to calm my frazzled mind, to think past the adrenaline flowing through my veins.

The intruder rushed around the room.

His movements weren’t random, though. The way he not only emptied my drawers but removed them to check under and behind told me he at least had some experience with robbing people before. Or, of course, hiding precious shit himself.

With a grumble, he made his way into my bathroom, sending things crashing to the floor, scattering all around as I finally turned over onto my side and started to fold upward.

I could get out of the zip ties.

I’d love to claim I knew how, thanks to my own badassery. But it was all thanks to Megs this time. She’d learned how from some of the more radical protesters who demonstrated it, so people who were being rounded up and mass-arrested could get out of their ties and away.

It was a simple thing, actually.

You raise your arms as high up your back as you can, then you force them down as quickly and hard as you can against your ass while trying to pull your wrists outward toward your sides.

I had one foot on the floor and was about to stand when he came stalking back, casually shoving me backward, this time sending me landing on my back with a muffled grunt as he made his way to my closet.

No.

Dammit.

Not my closet.

Granted, there was a lot of shit in there. But it wouldn't take him long to find the wallet with how hard he was tearing through things.

I rolled over, got to my feet, and bent forward, raising my arms and slamming them down.

Once.

Twice.

Nothing.

But the third time was the charm, making my arms fly apart toward my sides as the plastic snapped.

I was reaching up to pull down my gag when I watched in horror as he lifted the shoe, reached into the toe, and came back with the wallet.

No .

But even as I thought it, he unzipped the coin compartment and saw the diamonds inside.

He made a snorting sound, a smile tugging at his lips. Then he was tucking it into his pocket and standing.

I didn't stop to think, didn't spend a second trying to get to a weapon.

I just flew at him, sending him stumbling forward on his path around my bed and toward the door to the hall.

But he was done with me and my fighting.

He grabbed me, turned me, and slammed me face-first against the wall. His hand went to the back of my neck. Then he yanked my head back hard.

“Nothing personal,” he said, then slammed me forward.

And everything went black.

CHAPTER FIVE

Miko

God, I was fucked.

Not with Cosimo or the boss, Lorenzo Costa. Since they had no idea I'd been working on a job for literally months in an attempt to gain more of their favor again.

But fucked regardless.

Because I was out a shitload of money.

And the only clue I had was some random, hot pickpocket I'd been too busy eye-fucking to notice she'd seen me as a mark.

"What's the matter with you?" Cosimo asked as I sat in his apartment, running my hands over my face.

"Nothing," I lied.

I wasn't in the habit of lying to Cosimo. But, hell, I was already trying to repair my reputation after the fiasco with my little brother. I didn't need him to know I'd fucked up again.

Besides, it wasn't over.

I was going to figure this shit out.

I would get the wallet, sell the diamonds, and have a nice kick-up for Cosimo and Lorenzo. Plus a little bit left over for me.

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Looks like you got some shit going sideways.”

Shit.

The last thing I needed was him getting suspicious. Cosimo could be a dog with a bone when he was curious about something. I needed to give him something to make him drop it.

“It’s embarrassing as fuck,” I started, watching his brows lift.

“What is?”

“My wallet got lifted earlier today.”

“No fucking way,” Cosimo said, looking dangerously close to laughing. And he wasn’t a guy prone to humor.

“Cross my heart,” I said, shaking my head at the situation.

“Well, everyone has their hustle,” Cosimo said, shrugging.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“What’s the big deal? Cancel your shit. Couldn’t have had that much cash on you.”

“Nah.” Not cash, anyway. “But I had something... sentimental in it. Any chance you

know someone offhand who could maybe get me the camera feeds or something?”

It wasn't as easy to be a criminal in these days of cameras with facial recognition everywhere. As someone in the life, I hated it. But the cameras did come in handy when we were looking for someone too.

“Ah... isn't one of Nico's brothers handy with computers and shit? You could ask him.”

“Thanks, I'll... that's Nero,” I said when I heard his signature knock on the apartment door. “I'll head out. He's got shit to talk to you about.”

I passed my brother on the way out, giving him a nod of encouragement, then hit the street, heading in the direction of the closest of Nico's siblings.

Moody-ass Gavino.

“This better be good,” a voice grumbled from the other side of the door when I knocked.

It wasn't that Gav was busy. He rarely was. He just fucking hated interacting if he didn't have to. Which was an unfortunate personality trait when he existed in a massive family.

“You,” Gav said, looking at me with dark blue eyes that he got from his mother. Like Nico and Cesare, he was tall and fit with dark hair and tanned skin. But unlike Nico, who wore his goodness on his sleeve, and Cesare, who wore his charm the same way, all Gavino had to offer was an air of annoyance. “Cosimo's guy.”

“Miko,” I agreed, nodding.

“What do you want? I don’t have any work with Cosimo.”

Last I heard, he didn’t have any work with anyone. It was always one of his brothers who dragged him in on jobs. He would be a capo out of virtue of his birth, not necessarily because he busted his ass for it.

I could be resentful about that, but I knew what I was getting into from the jump. It was pointless to be frustrated about the very structure of the organization I wanted so badly to belong to.

“No. I actually just had a question. Cosimo mentioned that one of you guys was good with computers and hacking and shit like that.”

“That’s Zeno, not me,” Gav said, shaking his head. “I’ll give you his address, so you can go bother him instead of me.”

If I wasn’t close to losing my shit about the missing diamonds, I would have had a laugh about that. As it was, though, I memorized the address and rushed right back out, wanting to catch Zeno before he went out or went to bed.

If my memory of this branch of the family tree was correct, Zeno was the second-youngest of the siblings, older only than Lore, the Costa daughter who just married an Esposito to end the rivalry that had been around for over a decade.

He lived over in Hell’s Kitchen in an apartment one floor above a nightclub.

It wasn’t even late, but the noise coming through the floor as I went up the stairs vibrated into my shoes and up my legs.

Zeno, it seemed, must not be bothered by noise.

“You can just leave it there,” a distracted voice called through the door after I knocked hard enough to make the door shake in its jamb just to be heard over the music below.

“Zeno, open up,” I called, raising my voice to a near yell.

“That’s the oh-so-important sounding voice of a member of my family, isn’t it?” he called as something knocked to the ground inside the apartment before, suddenly, the locks disengaged, and the door whipped open.

I was pretty sure right then that I’d never actually seen Zeno before. Because the man was memorable.

Like his brothers, he was tall.

He was a bit on the thin side, and he seemed to be on a mission to out-tattoo his older brother Cesare with how much of his body was covered already. And I knew that because he was wearing nothing but a pair of pink sleep shorts printed with a bunch of ice cream cones on them.

That, a cross around his neck, and a towel wrapped around his head the way my sisters wore one after a shower, was all he had on.

His nails were short but painted black. And he had a ring in one of his eyebrows and one that peeked out on his tongue when he spoke.

“Oh, interesting. Miko, right?” he asked, reaching up toward the towel on his head and pulling it off, making shoulder-length black hair fall in a surprisingly untangled mass.

He reached up, running his hand through the mostly dry strands.

“Sat down after my shower to rest and lost track of time,” he said, waving at himself. “You know how it is.”

“Not really, no,” I admitted.

“Executive functioning,” he said, waving toward his brain. “Not always my strong suit. So,” he said, clapping so loudly he caught me off guard. “You need something from me, I’m assuming.”

“If you’re not busy.”

“I’ve been watching fuckers on social media clean carpets for three hours,” he admitted. “You’d be saving me from myself.”

“The cleaning thing,” I said as I stepped into his apartment. “It’s a spectator sport for you, not a hobby, huh?” I asked, looking at his cluttered kitchen cabinets, the bag of trash sitting behind the door, the desk littered with a dozen coffee cups and energy drinks.

It was a surprisingly small apartment, considering his place in the Family. Just your average-sized studio with the bed wedged against the wall in the corner and the kitchen on the other side. Directly in the center, where you might expect both the living and dining area, instead featured four desks put together to make one big square around a fancy-ass computer chair. Screens of various sizes and elevations were on the desks. There were several laptops open. And one was showing someone power washing some filthy red and tan rug.

“Yeah, I mean... I got this bad habit where I want to clean everything all at once, then start, lose interest, and end up making shit worse than it was to begin with. Here,” he said, finding a folding chair and setting it in front of his desks as he moved behind. “So, what do you need?”

“I was wondering what kind of access you might have into the cameras at an intersection.”

“In my experience, if you’re patient enough, you can get into anything,” he said, taking the address from me and starting to click around on three separate keyboards, each of them making different sounds. “Creamy, right?” he asked, making my brows squint.

“What?”

“The keyboard. The sound it makes? Smooth. Creamy.”

“Ah, yeah,” I agreed.

“Now, when I get in, what am I looking for?”

“Me,” I told him.

“And then a woman ramming into me.”

“She lifted your wallet, didn’t she?” he asked, shooting me a bemused smile.

“She did. I need to know who she is and where I can find her.”

“For what purpose?” he asked, suddenly wary.

“To get my wallet back. I’m not gonna hurt her.”

“Alright. Well, you want to make yourself comfortable or make some coffee, go ahead. This is gonna take a while.”

With that, he put on a pair of bright yellow headphones, and got to work, seeming to forget that I even existed; he was so focused.

Left to my own devices, I got up and made my way toward the kitchen, figuring we could both use a little coffee.

But the trash was overflowing.

So I went ahead and took that—and the other bag that had been behind the door—out. When I got back, it seemed natural to just... clear the counters of trash and bottles. And if I was going to be taking another trip down to the dumpster, then why not just clean up the crap all over his desks and nightstand while I was at it?

The next thing I knew, it was two hours later. My jacket was off. My sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. I had steadily worked my way through all the various dirty dishes and decided to pull all the shelves out of the filthy fridge to scrub.

I wasn't necessarily obsessive about things being clean. But I kept a tidy home myself. And when I was stressed or couldn't sleep, I found myself doing some sort of deep cleaning that I'd been putting off.

It was a habit I'd inherited from my mother. Both because she cleaned when she was restless as well, and because chores were simply part of our Sunday morning routine. It didn't matter how good of a housekeeper she was; when you had seven kids, shit got out of hand fast if they didn't all pitch in on occasion.

It just stuck when I eventually moved out on my own.

Besides, I'd always rather be productive than sit around and stare at someone else while they were working.

Once all the dishes and shelves were dried and put away, I found a broom and a mop that literally had their tags on, and gave the floor a good cleaning.

I might have even gotten to the bedding and the pile of laundry heaping over the basket that I figured might actually be the reason Zeno was only in shorts, but I had no idea if there was a laundry room in the building or not.

So I went ahead and finally made that coffee.

When I placed it next to Zeno's elbow, he reached immediately for it, making me wonder if he was as in his own world as he appeared or not.

I sat down with my own cup, catching up on texts until Zeno stabbed the space key hard, making my gaze lift.

"Found me?"

"Dude, that was smooth as fuck," he said as he pulled his headphones down to his neck.

"Tell me about it."

"Probably doesn't help that she's a bombshell. All kinds of distracting."

"Exactly," I agreed. "Can you rewind it to before she put her hood up? Get a good picture of her?"

"Already on it," he said. I moved my chair to watch his screen, watching the woman walk backward away from me.

"Play it back," I demanded after Zeno stole a screen grab and started to do...

something with it.

Distractedly, he hit the space key, and I saw something I'd missed on the street.

The moment her gaze landed on me.

And it wasn't intent I saw first, like she had immediately picked me out as a target.

If anything, it looked like interest. That was quickly, for some reason, chased away by annoyance, then determination as she pulled up her hood.

"Look at you, you pretty little criminal, you," Zeno said as I reached over to hit the space bar at just the moment I saw her stash the wallet in her own pocket.

"Just like you as a friend, man," I teased, making him shoot me a smile as he turned his screen for me to see.

"She was arrested for trespassing four years ago. The charges didn't stick, though. Looks like she had a killer fucking lawyer, actually."

A killer lawyer?

When she was wearing a shitty jacket and cheap shoes? That felt... off.

"What's her name?" I asked, unable to read the small print from so far away.

"Maxine Anne Taylor."

"Max," I said, thinking there was no way the woman in the video would go by such a feminine name. "You got a current address?"

“Let’s see,” Zeno said, turning the screen back to himself and starting to type.

“Seems like she lives in an apartment with some girl named Megan and another named Nicole. Those two are together.”

“Megan and Nicole?” I asked, annoyed with myself that I wanted Max to be into guys. Since she’d fucking stolen so much from me. But I couldn’t seem to help it, either.

“Yeah. And some dude who uses their address as his mailing one but seems to work as a flight attendant, so he’s out of town a solid fifteen or twenty nights a month.”

“So, he’s Max’s boyfriend?” I asked, pretending I wanted to know if there was going to be someone around who might pose a problem when I showed up to take my property back. Only I knew that I just wanted to know if she was single or not.

“No. No, seems like he’s with the other two girls. One, big, happy, ethical poly relationship. According to their social media presence. Max, well, Max doesn’t seem to like anyone but her roommates,” he said, smirking at his screen as he looked at Max’s socials.

“Alright. Let me see that address,” I said, leaning over the desk to look at it. “I appreciate it, Zeno. I will get back to you to pay you for your time.”

“Think you paid it in labor, man,” Zeno said, leaning back in his chair, cradling his coffee in both hands. “Don’t think the place was this clean when I moved in.”

“All you gotta do is your laundry,” I told him, finishing my coffee.

“It’s that or go naked,” he said, confirming my earlier thoughts. “Alright. Go get whatever precious shit is in that wallet to drag your ass all the way over here.”

With that, I made my way out.

Night had fallen by the time I got down to the street, the line for the club wrapping around the side street. Men in tight tees. Women in short dresses. Everyone shivering in the cold.

Taking a deep breath that mingled crisp air with car exhaust and the gyro cart a few buildings down, I made my way toward the subway, figuring it would be the fastest way to get where I was going.

Some part of me felt bad going over to her place in the middle of the night. Three women living alone had to be worried enough already about normal guys being creeps. Having someone like me darken their door was worse.

But I couldn't risk Max having my diamonds any longer than necessary. It wouldn't be easy to move that many of them. That said, she seemed smart and ballsy. She'd figure it out. I had to get them back before that.

Max lived in a typical high-rise right across from a newer super-high-rise. By contrast, her building seemed squat and ancient. But it easily had to house a solid three to five hundred people. The kind of busy building that allowed for real anonymity and a certain sense of safety.

Or, at least, that was what I thought as I raised my hand to knock on her door after lucking in by rushing into the lobby behind someone else down below.

But then her locks slid.

The door opened.

And I realized there was no such thing as safety sometimes.

Someone had fucked her up.

There were bruises on her cheek, jaw, and chin. There was a nasty fingerprint necklace around her throat. The whites of one of her eyes was blood red.

Not only beaten to high hell, but strangled.

“Miko,” she said, her swollen, split lower lip trembling a bit.

I knew right then that my diamonds were gone.

But, suddenly, all I cared about was finding out who the fuck had done this to her.

CHAPTER SIX

Max

I woke up slumped on the floor, half in my room, half out into the hallway.

For one blissful moment, there was nothing but confusion.

It wasn't long, though, before the pain started to settle in. Each ache seemed to fight for dominance, my body unable to feel all of it at once.

The throbbing in my jaw, cheek, and chin from being stuck. The migraine screaming behind my eyes from being slammed into the wall. The burn of my split lip. The sharp, stabbing sensation in my shoulder that was either from having my arm wrenched up or the fall to the ground after I'd been knocked out. And, of course, on top of all of that, the burning in my throat, the sensation of gargling glass when I tried to swallow.

I pulled myself up onto my knees in the bedroom doorway, raising my hands to cradle my aching head, my body just rocking back and forth, trying to find some comfort.

I didn't know how long I stayed there like that.

Eventually, though, I dragged myself to my feet and stumbled toward the kitchen to close and lock the door.

Not that I expected the guy to come back.

He'd gotten what he was after.

My whole body was crying out for medication or ice packs, but all I could seem to manage was to drop down onto the chair Megs had sat at earlier, pressing my palms into my eyes, trying to ease the migraine stabbing behind them.

When there was a knock at the door some time later, I just... knew it was him.

All I could think as I rose from the chair was that I was glad Megs and Nicole weren't home. The last thing they needed to do was witness what this man was going to do to me when he found out I'd not only stolen his diamonds but gotten them stolen from me on the same damn day.

There was no use not opening the door.

I had locks, but not strong enough to keep a mafia guy out.

Calling the cops would be pointless.

Pretending I was not home? Not an option.

So, I went to the door. I undid the locks. I sucked in a deep breath to try to steady myself for whatever was about to happen.

Then there he was.

Even more stupidly handsome up close.

The dim light in the hallway cast him partially in shadows. Maybe it should have

made him look threatening, but I found it made him mysterious.

I was so focused on his face for a moment that I didn't realize how relaxed his posture was until I spoke his name.

I hated how weak my voice sounded, like I was seconds from crying. Hell, maybe I was. I was so overwhelmed with shock, fear, and pain that I had no idea how I was going to react one second to the next. Even if I wasn't a crier. Even if the last thing I would ever normally do was cry in front of some guy.

"Max," he said, brows pinching. "Who did that?"

God, he had a great voice, too.

Both smooth and deep, with just a hint of gravel.

It was the kind of voice that could make anything he said sound sexy.

I was pretty sure if he told me the barometric pressure was at 30, I would slip out of my panties.

"That's the question, isn't it?" I asked, turning and moving back into the apartment, dropping down onto the chair I'd just abandoned, the brass band playing in my head making it impossible to do anything but try to rub the pain away.

Miko followed behind, bringing his scent with him. It was warm and rich—whiskey and tobacco. It made me immediately imagine walking into some speakeasy in the 1920s. Oddly enough, he would fit right in there, providing contraband booze, no doubt.

He closed and locked the door behind him but didn't come to sit across from me at

the table. Instead, he leaned against the counter in the kitchen.

I could feel his gaze on me. But I was too distracted, wallowing in my misery, to wonder what he was thinking.

“If you’re going to shoot me, can you just get it over with? It would be a mercy at this rate,” I added, cradling my head.

“Did you take anything yet?”

All I managed in response was a head shake.

“Okay,” he said, and I heard his footsteps moving through the wrecked apartment. The guy had done a surprisingly thorough job tossing the place in a short amount of time.

I wanted to get it cleaned up before Megs and Nicole got home. But I was pretty sure I’d throw up all over the place if I tried to move right then.

So I stayed exactly where I was.

Eventually, I heard Miko coming back. The fridge opened and closed. So did some cabinets.

And then, something clinked down in front of me.

“Water. Meds. You don’t have the good stuff, but this should help.”

I wasn’t even going to question him on that. I reached for the pills, throwing them back and swallowing a few sips of the water before going back to my rocking and cradling.

To his credit, Miko didn't shoot me. Or, worse yet, pepper me with a million questions while I was trying to just get through the next moment.

It wasn't until a solid half hour later that the meds started to take the sharp edges off the headache, and I sat back in the chair to suck in a greedy breath that he said anything.

"Little better?"

"Yeah," I said with a deep sigh.

"I'm not here to shoot you," he said as my gaze lifted.

"I dunno. I might shoot me if I were you. With, what, half to three-quarters of a million in the wind?"

To that, he exhaled, nodding. "Sometimes life fucks you in the ass, sugar. Not much we can do about it in the moment."

"If I'd just gotten to my knife..."

"You'd have pissed him off more. And you probably wouldn't be breathing. This sucks," he said, waving toward my face. "But you'll survive it. Though, three women living alone? What fucking reason could you have for not having a gun?"

"My roommate is a pacifist," I admitted.

"Defending yourself is a fuckuva lot different than gunning someone down on the street."

Honestly, I agreed. I'd debated getting one without telling Megs many times. It was

my fault she didn't see things the same way I did. I was the one who'd put those rose-colored glasses on her face. I couldn't be mad that she saw the world differently because of it.

Hell, she might even agree to it once she got a look at me.

Though, rationally, I knew what she would say. That I needed to get out of dangerous work. That I had to stop lifting wallets.

It wouldn't be victim-blaming, exactly. But she wouldn't just jump to the conclusion that we needed more protection—just that I needed to stop being in a dangerous field.

“Why does your head hurt so much?” he asked, still watching me with those inky eyes. Close like this, I saw the scar cutting through one of his brows that I'd missed before.

I waved at my face.

“Yeah, I get that. But did you get shaken? Struck? What?”

“Slammed into the wall. And lights out,” I said, gesturing outward. “Why?”

“Just wondering if you might have a concussion.”

I was queasy. But I was pretty sure that was from the pain. I wasn't dizzy or disoriented.

“I think I'm fine, all things considered. Can we just get this over with?”

“What do you think is gonna happen?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t imagine some mafia guy is going to get away with losing that much money. And since I was the one who initially stole it...”

“Gonna level with you, if you were a man, you’d probably be in a world of hurt right now. But I don’t put my hands on women.”

“It’s interesting on the rare occasion that sexist double standards actually work in our favor,” I said, sucking in a deep breath. “So then... what? I can’t just get away with this scot-free.”

“Doesn’t look like you got away with anything,” Miko said, watching me.

“I—“ I started, only to hear the key in the lock, the muffled chatter of my roommates. “Shit,” I managed to say before the door flew open, and Nicole immediately reached over to turn on the big light right over my head.

“Max?” Megs gasped, spotting me as Nicole looked past me at the wrecked common area.

“Who are you?” Nicole asked, stiffening next to her girlfriend.

That made Megs look over too. I saw it the moment recognition hit. The way she stiffened. How her jaw went tight.

Because the man was a walking-talking gangster movie. And Megs had always been good at putting the pieces of a puzzle together.

“A friend,” Miko said, making my brows shoot up. “Decided to drop by for a visit. Looks like I just missed the fuck who broke in.”

Megs was dubious, but everything about Miko was calm and casual. Unthreatening.

So she rushed to me, her eyes already filling with tears.

“I’m okay,” I assured her, though I was a long way from actually feeling that way.

“Peas. I have frozen peas,” Megs said, rushing to the freezer to bring back three separate bags. She’d been on a pea kick the month before, eating them with every meal. Until, inevitably, she got sick of them. It left us with quite the stash.

So within a minute, I had three of those little microwavable bags of peas in front of me.

“I don’t know where to put one first,” she admitted, a tear slipping down her cheek.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” Nicole asked, looking between all of us, confused by the lack of panic.

“They won’t do shit. If they bother to show up on a busy night like this,” Miko said. As if to prove his point, police sirens screamed down the street.

“But what did they get?” Nicole asked.

“Just a wallet,” I said, seeing no reason to lie about that.

“Why? Why not take more?” Nicole asked, likely thinking about their pricey electronics in their bedroom: laptops, tablets, a nice TV.

“I don’t think he expected anyone to be home,” I told her, not sure how true that was. “Or that I’d fight so hard.”

I reached for some of the peas as Megs held one bag to my cheek, seeing that there were red marks on my wrists that I suspected might darken to bruises, given some

time.

“Did you get a good look at him?” Nicole asked, likely still thinking about the police, sketch artists, shit like you saw on TV that didn’t often happen the same way in real life. Not over a petty burglary.

My gaze cut to Miko’s, knowing he was thinking the same thing.

I gave him the smallest of nods while I lied to the girls. “No.” Then, because I felt immediate guilt about the lie, I added, “He had a ski mask on.”

“Oh,” Nicole said, sounding disappointed.

Megs, bless her, sensed I had enough of the questions and suggested she and Nicole start setting things to rights.

“Guys, I’m gonna go get some ice pops for my throat,” I said, watching Megs’s eyes go sad again.

“I’ll go get them.”

“No, no. It’s okay. I want some air,” I said.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Megs yelped, rushing forward, making her girlfriend frown.

“Megs, it’s okay,” I told her, giving her a reassuring nod.

“No. We’ll all go,” Megs insisted, casting distrustful glances at Miko.

“Megs, you have something in your teeth,” I said, knowing Nicole and Miko were likely confused, but that Megs would get it.

When you were two girls alone in the world, it was important to have a little code. Things you could say that would let the other one know that something is okay, kind of shady, or outright scary.

For them, ‘You have something in your teeth’ was one that assured the other that, despite appearances, things were okay.

If she’d said something along the lines of ‘Crazy weather we’re having,’ then Megs would know shit was not good.

“You’re sure?” she asked.

“Yeah. Go check that out,” I said. “I’ll be back in a little bit. I have my phone,” I told her, reaching to grab it, then wave it at her. “Ready?” I asked, looking at Miko.

“Yeah,” he agreed, reaching for his own phone, shooting off a text.

With that, we moved out into the hallway together, then waited at the elevator, both of us ignoring the concerned looks from a group of passing women.

It wasn’t until the doors slid shut that anyone spoke.

“What does Megs know?” Miko asked.

“That I stole your wallet,” I told him.

“Not about the diamonds?”

“God, no. She would have lost her shit.”

“And her girlfriend?”

“Doesn’t know anything about my little… hobby.”

“You pick pockets as a hobby?”

“It used to be a full-time hustle,” I admitted. “Back when Megs and I were on the street. But I’ve branched out now.”

“To what?” he asked, but the elevator car stopped at another floor, letting a rowdy crowd of twenty-somethings get on and preventing any further conversation until we finally made it to the lobby.

“He’s with me,” Miko said when I spotted a man all in black waiting just outside.

The man in question didn’t look like a Made man to me. He was tall and a scrappy kind of fit in black jeans, a black hoodie, and Timbs.

He was handsome, with great bone structure, dark hair, and one and a half brown eyes.

Yep.

Half.

The other eye was half brown and half green.

It was a cool feature, but I imagined someone working in crime hated having such a distinctive look.

“Venezio, good timing,” Miko said, shaking the other man’s hand. “Wanna take a drive?” he asked, looking at me. “Go somewhere that people won’t be staring at you?”

“Where’s that?” I asked, immediately suspicious.

“Don’t worry,” Miko said, shooting me a smirk as he moved to open the back door of the car for me. “It’ll have lots of exits.”

Maybe it wasn’t the smart thing to go with this random mafia guy who was short half a million dollars because of me.

But he’d gotten me medicine and had given me time and silence when I’d needed it. That didn’t seem like the actions of someone who was going to kill me in the back of his car.

Even if it was, it was too late.

I was sliding in.

Miko was moving in behind me.

Venezio got in the driver’s seat.

And we were pulling away from my apartment building.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:00 am

CHAPTER SEVEN

Miko

There weren't a lot of places that guys in our organization felt comfortable having private conversations. Public spaces could so easily be wired, or people overheard shit they weren't supposed to.

The risk was too high.

That said, Cosimo had one place.

Apparently, it was a safe space because when the owner's daughter was drugged and assaulted, a young Cosimo went out into the city, tracked down the bastard, chopped off his balls, and brought them to the owner as a gift.

Ever since, there had been an understanding that Cosimo and his crew could use the place as much as they wanted. Even sweep the place for bugs when it was closed, just to make sure it was all on the up-and-up.

So that's where Venezia took us.

It was a little red brick bar that catered to blue-collar workers who were looking for a few drinks and a chill atmosphere.

"A bar?" Max asked when Venezia double-parked, ignoring the horns behind us.

“Told you. Lots of exits.”

Max looked out the window toward the bar before reaching back to flip her hoodie up over her head. It didn't escape me that she had her head ducked as we walked in too, not wanting to deal with the sideways looks from anyone inside.

I nodded at the bartender, then led Max toward the back of the bar, letting her sit with her back to everyone, so she was only facing me.

Satisfied with that, she pulled off her hood, sucked in a deep breath, then looked at me.

“I did see him,” she admitted.

“Gathered that,” I agreed as the waitress made her way over.

Max turned away, pretending to inspect something on the wall. “Two whiskeys. But heavy on the rocks,” I said, thinking of the marks on her throat, how much it must have hurt just to swallow, let alone keep talking. “Took a chance you take things straight,” I said when she looked back at me.

“So long as it's cold, I don't care. What do you want to know first?”

“Did he say anything?”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. “Yeah, he said he saw me lift your wallet.”

Whoever this was, he'd been watching me. Maybe lying in wait, trying to find his opening to lift the wallet himself or take it by force.

But who the fuck could it have been?

I'd been working this job quiet as a fucking mouse. Cosimo didn't know. My family didn't. So there was no way that the word had gotten out that way.

Which only left people who'd been involved with the job. Or anyone they had possibly spoken to.

Which, yeah, didn't fare well for me. Suspects could be in the dozens, hundreds.

Fuck.

"Did you see him?" I asked.

"At first, he had on the ski mask. But in the struggle, I pulled it off."

"Any chance you happen to be a whiz at sketching?"

"Sure," she said, but there was a sarcastic tug to her lips. "If you want a stick figure. A lopsided one."

I let out a small huff of a laugh as our drinks were dropped off, watching Max reach for it like a lifeline, then savor the cold first sip.

"Alright. Well, do you think you would recognize him if you saw him again?" I asked.

"I'll never forget that fuck's face."

"Anything distinctive about him?"

"No. He was almost painfully average. No birthmarks or scars. He was a dishwater blond with blue eyes. The bright kind of blue. Average to thin lips. Straight nose, not

overly prominent. Maybe six foot.”

“What about his build?” I asked, then watched Max raise a brow. “Let me guess. Average?”

“Yeah. Not bulky, but not skinny either. Strong.”

“What about what he had on? Any jewelry?”

“Not that I saw, no. He was dressed for a burglary. All black. But he came with zip ties. I guess they were in his pocket or something. Things were going in warp speed.”

“Scent?” I asked, knowing I was getting desperate, but I needed something other than dirty blond and blue-eyed.

“Actually,” she said, brows pinching as the memory came back. “Yeah. He reeked of cigarettes. You don’t find that much anymore,” she went on. “Everyone smells like fruity vapes or weed. But he smelled like cigarette smoke.”

A blond-haired, blue-eyed smoker. It was something to try to run with.

“Age?” I asked.

“My age? Mid to late twenties.” She took another sip, then sat back and exhaled hard. “It’s not much,” she admitted.

“No,” I agreed, “but it’s something. I’d be more worried if this was just a normal home invasion where he just happened upon the stash of diamonds. But since he was watching me, it narrows shit down a bit.”

“I’m down for looking at pictures, if you need. The least I can do.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna need you to do that.”

A silence fell for a second as the crowd toward the front of the bar got rowdy enough to make conversation difficult.

“I was planning to bring them back in the morning,” she said when things died down again. “I know that probably isn’t convincing, but I was.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because a... friend of mine and I concluded that you were probably in the mob. And that you’d track me down eventually, so it would be better for me to find you before you found me. My mistake was falling asleep. I’d been awake for well over twenty-four hours. I figured a few more hours wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“Could that friend have—“ I started, but Max was shaking her head before I could finish.

“No. She deals in stolen merchandise. Jewelry, specifically. Takes apart distinctive pieces and creates new ones that can be sold. I just brought one diamond to her to check to see if it was real. She was the one to urge me to get the wallet back to you as soon as possible.”

“But if she’s into...”

“Honestly, she likely has, easy, a million or two worth of loose gems around her place. Not only does she not need your diamonds, but she really doesn’t give a shit about money.”

“Everyone gives a shit about money.”

“Okay. Maybe it’s more appropriate to say that she has more than she needs. She lives very... humbly.”

“I get wanting to protect your friend’s identity, but I’m gonna want to talk to her.”

“Not without me, you won’t.”

She squared up a bit at that, chin lifting. Even beat to shit, she was going to stand up and try to defend her friend from any threat I might present.

“Yeah, you can tag along. I’m just gonna talk to her. But she might also be someone who has a finger on the pulse of underground diamond sales. I want her to keep an ear out for me.”

“Okay,” Max agreed, but her eyes were still hard.

They were prettier than I’d anticipated. A hazel that kind of flirted with both green and brown. Logically, I knew it was likely the lighting in the bar, but I couldn’t help but think maybe her mood had something to do with it.

Max’s phone started to ring, making her reach for it.

“Your worried roommate?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, picking up. “I’m fine , Megs. I will be home in a few, I promise. Keep the door locked. I’ll text when I get there.”

“Guess we should go get you those ice pops before your roommate calls the cops, claiming I abducted you.”

Max finished her drink. I dropped cash on the table. Then we both headed out to find

Venezio had found a spot half a block down.

There was a bodega between us and him, so we dipped in, going right to the freezer section. “This place has a milkshake machine,” I told her. “Want one? Chocolate?”

“Vanilla,” she corrected, perusing the ice pop options. “I don’t like chocolate.”

“Really?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure my sisters would chew through my arm if it was in the way of a chocolate bar.” But I went and got her the vanilla shake.

“Wait, no,” she said when she put two boxes of pops on the counter next to the shake and the bottle of throat spray I’d found, and I passed the guy behind the counter some cash from the clip I’d had Venezio bring me from my place.

I felt oddly naked without my wallet. The cash. The cards. My I.D. But I had more than enough cash stashed around this city to keep things going.

“Don’t listen to her,” I said to the owner, someone I knew paid the Family protection money. “I’m paying.”

“No, I am,” Max said, but the cashier wasn’t listening as he bagged her boxes, then handed me a receipt. “I stole over half a million dollars from you. Why are you paying for my ice pops?” She looked at me as I held the door open for her, her eyes rolling. “Oh, God. This is some old-fashioned ‘I’m the man, so I pay for everything’ thing, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Sorry, sugar. That’s just the way it works.”

“Sugar?” she asked, shaking her head at me. “Trust me, Miko, there’s nothing sweet about me.”

She ducked into the backseat of the car as she said that, leaving me to close the door for her.

I was sure she was wrong about that.

There was definitely something I'd bet good money on being real sweet about her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Max

“Finally,” Megs said the next morning when I finally peeled my aching self out of bed, forced myself to shower and dress, then made my way out into the common space. “I was worried you’d out-sleep Nicole.”

“Everything is fine, Megs,” I told her, but I kept my back to her as I started to make a pot of coffee, so the lying didn’t feel as big of a betrayal.

“You stole some guy’s wallet, then within the same day, he shows up at our doorstep,” Megs said. “And I’m really supposed to believe he had nothing to do with your attack?”

“He didn’t attack me. And he didn’t have someone else attack me,” I told her, this time turning because it was the truth. Sure, I may have been attacked because of him, in a roundabout way, but he had nothing to do with ordering it.

“Well, I don’t believe it,” Megs said, lifting her chin and crossing her arms.

Megs was too sweet to pull the move off, but I forced myself not to smile. She was worried. I needed to ease her concerns. The last thing I needed was her doing something stupid like trying to follow me around.

“Look, the truth is, the guy who broke in stole Miko’s wallet,” I told her. I could let her in on that truth without revealing anything about the diamonds. “That’s why Miko

was here. To get it back. But then he found me like this,” I said, gesturing toward my face. “And he was surprisingly good about it.”

“Oh,” Megs said, loosening up. “Okay. Well, that’s good, I guess. Why are you dressed? You’re not going out, are you?”

“I just had plans with Lil,” I told her. Another half-truth to feel guilty about. But it was all to protect her.

Our years together had been full of protective lies.

No, I didn’t nearly get raped when that guy caught me alone in the shelter right before you walked in.

No, the man who’d hired me to walk his dog hadn’t tried to ‘get more for his money.’

No, that dude I chased down the alley after he stole your sleeping bag hadn’t offered to give it back if I went down on him. And, no, I hadn’t found a random piece of glass and sliced him across the throat to get the fucking thing back so you didn’t freeze that night.

There were dozens, or hundreds, of lies like that between us that she didn’t know about.

It was okay with me that I had to be twice as hard just so she got the chance to know some softness.

I would deal with the diamond problem without telling her a word about it.

“Oh, that’s good. I like Lil.”

“Everyone likes Lil,” I agreed. “The woman could talk the sun into shining all night.”

“Do you want to borrow some of Nicole’s makeup? I don’t know if it covers bruises like that, but it might help a little.”

“No, I’m good. We’re just gonna hang at her place.”

“That will be nice. I would come, but Tyler is coming into town finally, and we all—“

“Oh, I know what you all plan on doing. Good thing I have plans. I could use not to be locked up in my room with noise-canceling headphones on for, what, six or seven hours?”

“We told him to pick up some electrolytes on the way over,” she said, already getting dreamy-eyed at having the third member of their little relationship home for a bit.

“Morning,” Nicole said, coming out of the bedroom wearing a comically oversized hoodie. “Oh, fresh coffee.” She took a deep breath as I reached for mugs for the both of us.

“Max has plans with Lil today.”

“That’s probably smart,” Nicole said with a wicked little smirk. “Though, personally, I think you would be better off spending your time with that hottie from last night. Looks like he could star in the next Scorsese movie.”

As if on fucking cue, there was a knock at the door.

Megs made her way to the door, glancing out the peephole, then unlocking the door and letting Miko into the apartment.

“Shit,” he said, wincing as he looked at me.

“That good, huh?” I asked.

The mirror had been too fogged after my shower to really get a good look at myself. But a little prodding around told me that my cheek, jaw, and at least under one eye were bruised.

The throat pain was halfway managed, thanks to the throat spray Miko had thought to pick up the night before.

“It’s not that bad,” Megs insisted.

“It is,” Miko countered.

“I’m inclined to believe Miko on this one,” I said, pouring my coffee into a travel tumbler. “Want a cup?” I asked. “Nicole has a whole collection of these things,” I told him, waving the travel mug at him.

“Listen, is it my fault that they put those damn cups right by the registers when I’ve been on line for long enough to fall in love with them?”

“Sure, I’ll take a cup,” Miko agreed, looking surprisingly comfortable in a room with three strange women.

Even Taylor, who was dating two women at once, would sometimes comment that our apartment could be ‘almost uncomfortably’ feminine.

It was then I noticed three separate hair ties and clips scattered across different surfaces. Too many blankets and squishy animal pillows on the couch to cuddle up and watch movies with. A heating pad was plugged in and draped over one of the

chairs. And someone had bought a box of tampons and hadn't brought it from the kitchen where they unloaded it to put it in the bathroom yet.

Miko was unfazed, though. But he had mentioned having sisters when I'd said I don't like chocolate.

"Black is good," he said when I finished filling his cup.

"Alright," I said, putting the cap on my own coffee, then grabbing my jacket. "We're heading out. You guys have fun. Preferably in your own room and not on all of our common furniture and surfaces," I said, getting a shared smile between the girls.

"Do I want to know what that was about?"

"Their boyfriend is coming into town. I'm glad to be getting out of the apartment for a while."

To that, I got a little laugh out of Miko as we moved into the elevator.

"Does it ever get awkward?"

"When I hear all three of them fucking? Yeah," I said, sipping my coffee, suddenly wishing I'd thought to ice it.

"I meant having them all in a relationship."

"It probably would if I was around all the time. But I work a lot."

"What do you do?"

So, he had my address and my arrest record, but he didn't dig deep enough to figure

out what I actually did for a living. Interesting.

“I’m a courier.”

“A... courier,” Miko repeated, tone as dubious as the look he was shooting me.

“Yep.”

“And you’re that busy?”

“Yes,” I said, moving out onto the street.

“What do you deliver?”

“Oh, this and that,” I said, heading off in the direction of Lil’s place, since I didn’t see that car he had the night before.

“You’re being deliberately vague.”

“I am.”

To his credit, he didn’t press. But I got the sense that he was not the sort to give up so easily. He was probably just biding his time until after we spoke to Lil.

“Is there anything I should know about Lil before we get there?” he asked when I mentioned it was one street away.

“She’s probably going to flirt heavily and relentlessly with you. It’s just how she is. I don’t think she can turn it off.”

With that, I made it to Lil’s door, knocking until I heard her shuffling around inside.

The door slid open, with Lil standing oddly half behind the door. It wasn't until both Miko and I stepped inside that I understood why.

Because her arm lifted.

And then there was a gun pointed at Miko.

It wasn't some small, girl gun, either. It was a damn cannon.

To his credit, Miko didn't cower or back up. Hell, I didn't even see him jerk or tense. If anything, he almost looked a little... impressed.

With her free hand, Lil reached out, grabbing me, and yanking me away from Miko's side.

"Whoa, wait, Lil," I said as she glared at Miko.

"You're going to wish you didn't put your hands on her, fuckface."

"Is this the flirting you mentioned?" Miko asked, looking over at me, lips actually curving up. Completely unbothered by someone holding a gun on him.

Just how crazy was his work that he didn't flinch when staring down the barrel like that?

"Because I'm worried about your past interactions with men, if that's the case," Miko went on.

"What is happening here?" Lil asked, not taking her gaze off of Miko. Hell, I didn't even think she blinked.

“Lil, this is Miko. Miko, Lil.”

“I don’t want to meet the asshole who beat in your face.”

“It’s not that bad,” I grumbled, my hand instinctively going to my cheek.

“It is,” the two of them said in unison.

“Miko didn’t do it,” I told Lil. “He showed up after it happened.”

To that, Lil exhaled hard and slowly lowered the gun. But she didn’t put it down. It stayed there in her hand as she took a step back to look at me.

“So, you have cameras I don’t know about, huh?”

“I’d be an idiot not to have security measures in place. Saw you coming, looking like that. Him next to you.”

“And decided to blow a hole the size of a cannonball in him for me.”

“Hey, we girls in this business gotta stick together.”

“So, you’re a... courier too?” Miko asked, eyes twinkling. “Side gig, I’m guessing. Precious gem business not paying the bills?” he asked, looking around the room.

“Yep. Me, I just love... delivering shit,” Lil said, turning to shoot me a confused look. “Good exercise.”

“Sorry to drop in on you like this,” I told her as Miko took a step forward, glancing down at the piece we’d clearly interrupted Lil’s work on.

“Is this what I think it is?” Miko asked, piquing my curiosity. When I moved beside him to look down at it, though, I had no idea what he was seeing that I wasn’t. Aside from a gaudy, ugly necklace that was already partially disassembled.

“Two million dollars’ worth of bad taste?” Lil asked as she moved behind her desk. She kept her gun in her hand and I had to respect her suspicion.

“Thought the cops had a lead on that,” Miko said.

“They do. It’s even the right guy. But they have no fingerprints, DNA, or video of the guy. And after a thorough search of his place and his storage locker, they never found the heavily insured, hideous necklace that they think he stole.”

“And now they never will,” Miko said, nodding. “Interesting racket you have going for yourself.”

“Almost as interesting as a mafia guy having half a million dollars of diamonds in his wallet while walking down the street.”

“In my defense, I was on my way to my fence.”

“Who the fuck said they could fence that many diamonds all at once?”

“One who knows they don’t have to worry about the cops. At least not for another week or so.”

To that, Lil nodded. “Okay. Now, why are you here?”

“Well, that’s a me problem,” I admitted, watching as her gaze slid to me, wincing at the look of me again. “I didn’t get to Miko’s place yesterday. And last night, someone broke into my place, did this, and took the diamonds.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, forcing the memories away when they started to replay across my mind. “Then he showed up,” I went on, waving an arm at Miko. “And here we are.”

“Under duress?” Lil asked, grip tightening on her gun once again.

“I mean, I think we’re both feeling a lot of pressure right now. Him, because of his money. Me, because I lost his money. And we’re here because I mentioned you to him when we were talking about what happened.”

“And, what? You thought I needed your money?” Lil asked, brow quirking up. “It wouldn’t be worth the headache of having to deal with you.”

Miko, not offended, shrugged. “So, what kind of cut are you getting on that?” he asked, gesturing toward the necklace.

“Ten to fifteen percent, depending on how big a job it is, or how much heat there is about a certain stone.”

Damn.

I mean, I figured Lil was doing well.

But this one job was netting her a couple hundred grand. And it was just one of many jobs she likely did a year.

I couldn’t help but wonder why she didn’t move her operation to a bigger place. Or, at the very least, move her home somewhere else. Unless she was scarred from her rough upbringing like I was. Though it was also possible she was just planning for her future, for a day when her hands would ache and refuse to do such careful work

anymore. Maybe she lived frugally and socked the rest away as a retirement plan.

“So, do you have any leads on who did that to her face?” Lil asked Miko.

“Got some descriptions. We’re... looking into it.”

Oh, we were, were we?

I mean, it wasn’t like I had a leg to stand on even if I didn’t want to. And, sure, some part of me was interested to know he’d tracked down that asshole and made him pay. Even if, objectively, I knew it had nothing to do with my face and everything to do with the diamonds.

“Well, I can keep my ears peeled. Someone is going to try to unload those diamonds eventually. That shit gets around in my circles. Everyone wants to know who got some good gems and from where.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Miko said, reaching toward her desk to grab a pad and pen and jotting down his number.

“If she’s looking into this with you,” Lil said, glancing at me, then giving Miko a hard look, “are you going to make sure no one does something like that to her again?”

“No one’s gonna put a hand on her when I’m around.”

I wanted to interject, to insist that I could take care of myself, that I wasn’t some helpless little girl. The thing was, those words would fall kind of flat with my face and neck in the condition they were currently in.

Sure, my history showed that I was more than capable of taking care of myself. If I had a weapon on me. If I was on my toes.

I still believed that if I hadn't been so overly tired, if I had been able to get to any one of my scattered weapons, the burglar would never have been able to do so much damage to me.

Though, it was entirely possible that was just my pride making excuses.

"I'm gonna remember you making that promise," Lil said as she pointedly placed her gun down on the table.

"Got it," he agreed. "Thanks for your time, Lil. Appreciate any help you can give us."

"And if you need someone to create any jewelry on the quick once you find them, I might have some time."

With that, Miko and I headed out onto the street.

The cold was like a slap to the face, but it was welcome for a change as it momentarily numbed my throbbing face.

"What would you say to coming with me to look at some pictures?" Miko asked when neither of us started to move.

"Come where?" I asked.

"Well, I'd need to stop home to get my laptop. But we could go somewhere in public, if you're more comfortable with that."

The fact that he was giving me the choice was what had me feeling comfortable enough agreeing to go to his place.

Which, I would find, was probably not the smartest idea.

CHAPTER NINE

Max

You could say I found myself more than a little curious about what the home of some mafia dude looked like. Especially one who dressed as well as Miko did.

The building itself was nothing to write home about. It was just your typical New York brick apartment building.

It wasn't until we moved into the lobby that I saw the luxury of it. My apartment building hadn't updated anything for a solid twenty years. This one looked like the decorator had just left. There were sleek dark wood floors, the shine still stunningly bright. The walls were painted a gray just shy of black. The whole effect should have made the space intolerably dark and creepy. But thanks to the chandelier and the brushed brass sconces and the golden light they spread across the space, it came off as cozy and expensive.

Even the elevator we took up to the second-to-last floor was nicer than any I'd seen outside of the fancy-ass ones in the private residences of the ultra-wealthy who hired me for my services.

The hallway featuring only four apartments was a carbon copy of the lobby. What struck me the most was the quiet.

No music from the other apartments, no chatter, TVs left playing for the dogs or cats. Just complete and utter silence. Hell, I didn't even hear the usual blast of a horn or

shrill shriek of a siren.

Miko both plugged in a code and stuck in a key before the door made a beeping noise and opened up to let us inside.

It was the scent of his home that hit me first.

I never fully understood the concept of a “house smell” until I started my work as a courier. I guess since I so rarely stepped inside an actual home most of my life. But once I began going to meetings at mansions or penthouses, I quickly realized that everyone’s home had a distinctive smell all their own.

I once asked Tyler what our home smell was. He said it smelled like a mix of all of us: Megs’s vanilla, Nicole’s peach, and my brown sugar scents. He said he always felt the urge to take a deep breath when he took his first step in after being away for a long time.

That was how I felt with Miko’s place.

Because that whiskey and tobacco scent that clung softly to him, just begging you to lean in to get a better whiff of it, filled this space.

As for the decor, Miko had taken a page right out of the building’s decor book, making it melt right in.

There were lots of grays and blacks in the open concept space, with lots of warm, golden lights from overhead and under cabinet lighting. There was even a glow under the slight step down into the living area and under the couches themselves.

Everything about the space begged you to kick off your shoes and shrug off all of the too-bright, too-loud, too-everything of the city, curl up on the leather sectional, and

just slip away into the peace this apartment provided.

“This is very cozy,” I said when I realized I’d just been awkwardly gawking around.

“Wish I could actually spend some time here,” he admitted, making his way to the kitchen with its modern, streamlined slate cabinets and an elongated island that served as the dining table. The apartment was big enough to allow for eight seats at that island.

Given what I knew about the price per square foot in Manhattan, my mind was working overtime to calculate just how much he might spend in rent. If he didn’t outright own the place.

Being in the mob clearly paid well.

“Are you a capo?” I asked, watching as he turned back from his fancy espresso machine to give me a slight smile. It said I was being inappropriate, but also that he liked it for some reason.

“The books aren’t open right now,” he told me, as if I had any idea what that meant. “But as soon as they open up, I’m hoping.”

“Why do the books close?” I asked as the scent of rich coffee filled the space. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to have more capos? Then more people under them to do more work and bring in more money?”

“There are all kinds of rules in the Family,” he told me, going into the freezer for some ice. I watched as he clinked them into a ribbed glass that brought back images of the 1920s. “By keeping the books closed, it forces those who want to be Made to bust their asses working to prove their worth when it does open. Since they limit the spaces. And if you miss it this time, it could be years before they open up again.”

That made sense, I guess.

“But aren’t you all, you know, family? Like, related?”

“Mostly, yeah. But some of us are more distant than others. And as you can imagine, there are a lot of us. Not everyone can be a capo at the same time. Building new crews of soldiers and associates—that shit brings risks, too many new people becoming connected at once. So the boss likes to stagger that shit to make sure the dust settles like it should.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed as he poured the latte over ice. “Milk?” he asked. “Or I got some vanilla creamer for my sisters that I’m dubious has actual milk in it, but smells good.”

“I’ll try it,” I said. I liked my hot coffee black. But even I had to admit that it tasted better iced when it had some sort of flavor.

“So, now I’ve told you a lot of shit about me and my business,” he said as he handed me my coffee, not making one for himself, just leaning back against the counter and watching me. “Why don’t you tell me what you really do for a living?”

“I really am a courier,” I told him, taking a sip of the coffee mostly as a stalling method. The vanilla was a sweet contrast to the bold coffee. I wanted to down it all in two gulps and demand another.

“Bullshit,” Miko said, his lips curving up, doing all sorts of sexy things to his eyes, making them look all gooey. Or maybe that was the golden lighting. Either way, he looked impossibly hot right then. About ten times hotter than he had on the street when his attractiveness made me want to haul off and slap him.

“I am. I have cards and everything,” I told him, reaching into my wallet to produce

one.

“Luxury courier,” he read off. “The fuck does that mean?”

“It means I deliver very, very expensive things to absurdly wealthy people. For example, right before I lifted your wallet, I had delivered the ashes of a beloved dog to some guy who paid me eight grand for the task.”

Something about that had Miko’s brow lifting ever so slightly. “And where did you find those ashes?” he asked.

Damn, he was perceptive.

I liked that more than I should have.

It was one thing to be hot and skate by on your good looks. It was another to actually have a brain in that pretty head, too.

“His ex’s basement.”

“I’m assuming she didn’t open the door and invite you in to fetch them, did she?”

“She was knocked off on two sleeping pills and a bottle and a half of wine. As she was every night.”

“So, you’re a courier in that you bring something from point A to point B. But in that in-between...”

“I’m a thief, I guess,” I admitted.

“That makes a lot more sense. How the hell’d you get into that?”

“It was actually happenstance. I was going through a phase when I was trying to go legit. Stop stealing the wallets of finance bros and rich assholes. I got a part-time job catering parties.

“One day, a woman came in who I’d done a party for a few months before.”

She was a tall, leggy, icy blonde, with a face showing some of those first signs of aging. She zeroed in on me, pulling me away from the salad prep I was working on, and taking me outside where she’d lit a cigarette, exhaling it on a sigh.

“I missed these,” she’d admitted. “Used to be the key to staying thin. But when I got married, I was worried they might create those little lines on my upper lip, so I gave them up.”

I didn’t know what she wanted, so I said nothing, just waited for her to get to the point before I got in trouble for slacking off work.

“You catered my anniversary party a few months back,” she’d continued.

“Yes.”

“I spotted you immediately. That hungry look in your eyes. I saw a younger version of myself in you. Made me keep an extra close eye on you all night.”

“I didn’t take anything.” I’d sure as hell thought about it, but I hadn’t.

“I know. But you debated it. And I think you would have gotten away with it too. That’s why I’m here,” she’d gone on, blowing more smoke before fully turning to me. “You have another party coming up. Same place. My husband’s sixtieth birthday party.”

“Yeah, that rings a bell.”

“I guess it is more appropriate to say it is my soon-to-be ex-husband,” she said with a deep sigh, her pretty blue eyes going hard. Like she couldn’t imagine how her life had gone so sideways. “He’s going to marry his slut secretary he impregnated. Twenty-three. How the fuck could I compare?”

I wanted to tell her that she was gorgeous. Because she was. She was probably one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen up close. But I knew what she meant. Men, especially the rich and powerful ones, liked new and shiny things—like she’d once been but was no longer.

“Anyway,” she said, biting off the words. “He is going through with the party I planned for him, but I am not invited. In fact, I am banned from the penthouse.”

That, clearly, pissed her off even more than being replaced. And why shouldn’t it? She was, no doubt, the one who had put the labor of love into it: paint, fabrics, the china in the cabinets, the impressive stock of every kind of liquor glass, from rocks to coupes and highballs. It was a slap in the face not to let her back into her own home because he went and followed his dick to greener pastures.

“Asshole,” I’d said, unable to help myself.

“Indeed, he is,” she’d agreed, flicking her cigarette to the ground and crushing it under her red-soled shoe. “That is where you come in. I was escorted out before I could do more than pack a single outfit.”

“You want me to steal something for you.”

“I want you to steal my entire jewelry collection for me. I am not going to let that cheating bastard give it to her .”

“I’m not a thief,” I’d insisted, but I’d watched the way her brow lifted and her lips twitched. “Anymore,” I’d conceded.

“In exchange for it, I will give you ten grand.”

“Ten grand was more money than I’d ever seen at one time,” I told Miko.

“So you agreed to do it.”

Of course I had.

I already knew the apartment from the last party. And thanks to the wife, I had an exact location as well as a code to get into the safe where she kept her finest jewelry.

From there, it wasn’t hard work. I would slip away from work and into a nice dress. I would put a wig on my hair and some heavy eye makeup, so my coworkers didn’t recognize me right away. A little superglue on my fingers to disguise my fingerprints.

Then it was just a little sidestep into the primary bedroom, into one of the walk-in closets, past tons of designer clothing, and toward the back wall where the safe was hidden behind a painting.

I didn’t know what I’d been expecting, but the entire vault was filled with shining pieces: rings made of brilliant red rubies or deep green emeralds, diamond earrings of every size and brilliance, bracelets, anklets, necklaces.

I was no expert, but I imagined it had to be a solid million dollars’ worth of jewelry that I shoved into my purse before closing the vault and putting the picture back into place.

My bag was already heavy, but it had some room—enough for me to go ahead and

pinch several bottles of her perfume, some silk scarves, and most of her makeup.

I'd half-expected to get caught. But I'd slipped just as easily out of the bedroom as I had in.

I stashed the bag and my wig inside my heavy winter jacket, got back into my work uniform, and went back to work.

No one knew anything had happened.

"The wife had been over the moon with the haul. Enough that she gave me an extra grand and told me she would be sending business my way."

I did go back to work, just in case anything got wonky with the safe. It would have looked extra suspicious if I quit right after.

It did hit the news.

But no one ever linked the heist to anyone.

The insurance paid out.

The wife hired a hell of an attorney and got the kind of alimony most ex-wives could only dream of.

"And I got business," I told Miko.

"Lot of ex-wives who got screwed?"

"At the beginning. That was that woman's circle, so, naturally, that was what came my way. But it slowly became something else after that. Now, it's a real mixed bag.

Angry exes. Bitter old business partners. A little bit of everything.”

“Can I ask the obvious question?”

“How the hell did I get broken into when breaking into things is my livelihood?” I supplied for him.

“Yeah.”

“I guess that’s a mix of things. First, compared to being on the streets, having a door with locks sure felt safe enough.”

“On the streets?” Miko asked. “Like...”

“Homeless,” I supplied. “Yeah. Megs and I were on the streets for years. But it was also a bit of bravado. And a mix of just stupidity. We never had anything worth stealing, so the risk felt really low.”

“Still. Three women, living alone.”

“Yeah, I see that now,” I agreed. “And I’m glad Tyler will be around for a few days. Gives me a chance to get some other systems in place.”

I’d already decided, when sleep had been elusive because I was jumping at every sound in the building, that I was going to devote most of the money from the dog urn to getting our apartment as safe as possible.

Better locks, a digital security system, and cameras were the top priority. After that, I wanted to make sure weapons were placed an arm’s length away all across the apartment.

Nicole would think I was crazy.

But Megs would understand.

As much as I had shielded her from over the years, she'd also managed to see some shit too. Enough to understand how invaluable the right protections could be.

Then, when the day came that Tyler did move in, I knew they were all safe when I had to go. The apartment was big enough for three, thanks to the fact that I worked a lot. But four people would be pushing it. Besides, they would all want their privacy.

There was an unexpected ache in my chest at the idea of going off on my own. I was so used to taking care of Megs, of having her around, that it was hard to imagine a life without her.

Who the hell would I talk to then? Often, the only people I spoke to on any given day were my roommates.

"Where'd I lose you?" Miko asked, suddenly close, making me jump to find he'd moved across the kitchen without me realizing.

"Oh, uh, preparations for more security," I told him. It was only a partial lie.

"Think maybe you should sit down," Miko said. Then his hand was suddenly at my elbow. Unexpected sizzles coursed up my arm at the contact, distracting me enough to allow him to turn and lead me toward the living room.

"What? No, I'm fine," I insisted when I finally came back to my senses.

"You're pale," he shot back.

Then I felt myself pressed down onto the couch.

Before I could even think to stand again, Miko was kneeling down at my feet to remove my shoes.

A blanket appeared seemingly out of nowhere to drape over me.

The TV turned on and tuned to a sitcom rerun.

I wasn't sure at what point the coffee was taken from my hand.

All I knew was that before the credits rolled on that first episode, I was out cold.

CHAPTER TEN

Miko

Sure, I wanted to get a move on figuring out who stole my damn diamonds. But there had to be some priorities. And the woman who seemed dead on her feet just twenty-four hours after she was brutally attacked in her own home getting some much-needed rest was more important than going over the images on my laptop.

Once she had finally passed out on her side, I pulled the blanket more fully over her, thinking of how her brown sugar scent was going to be all over the material for days. And liking that idea way the fuck more than I should have.

I took her half-drunk coffee back to the kitchen, made a hot one for myself, then checked my texts for a while.

When it was clear Max was out for the long haul, I went into my spare room that served as my office, finding and then loading all the images I had into one file for her to easily scroll through when she woke up.

Though, the more that I looked at them myself, the less sure that any of them were the right guy. Yeah, there were blue-eyed guys. But their hair seemed too dark to be described as blond. There were also blond guys who were too yellow to be called “dishwater” or “dirty.”

I wouldn’t know until I let her look at them, of course, but I was starting to think that maybe it was an accomplice of one of the guys from the company. A friend, brother,

or even just someone who overheard him saying shit he shouldn't have when he was drunk.

All I did know was that with every hour that passed by, the chance of finding the diamonds disappeared. With it, the chance to get back what I'd already shelled out.

I wouldn't be poor. But I would be busting my ass working other jobs for months, maybe even a year, to recover that buffer I liked to have around.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to go and wake up Max.

I checked on her twice, finding her still in the exact position she'd been in when she'd first passed out, then went back into my room, peeling off my clothes, and making my way toward the bathroom to take a shower. I needed to clear my head, to let some new thoughts come to me. I'd been rolling the same ones over and over ever since I found out Max had the diamonds lifted from her.

And for me, the best place to think was the shower. It was probably a layover from my childhood, from a house full of so many younger siblings that it was hard to find any time to myself. The splashing of the water onto the floor always managed to just about drown out the squeals, laughs, and cries going on in the rest of the house as I would just stand there and think.

It was still the first thing I did when life got too heavy or too confusing, when my mind was reeling and nothing was getting figured out. Take a shower. Let all the other shit wash away.

Almost without fail, by the time I climbed out, I had a new perspective, if not an outright solution, to whatever I was dealing with.

The longer I stood there under the hot water, the bathroom steaming up despite the

exhaust fan going at full tilt, the more my thoughts simply drifted in one direction.

The woman sleeping her bone-deep exhaustion off on my couch.

I couldn't pretend to relate to her early life, to the things that likely motivated her later on. I had both parents. A relatively comfortable life. Happy memories with loved ones. But I could relate to her hunger, that drive to push yourself harder and harder. Right up and through the point of complete exhaustion.

I knew too well the way your body would finally just throw up its hands and say 'fuck this' when you'd been going too hard for too long, leaving you damn near catatonic for days on end until it got a chance to recover.

Sure, she seemed motivated by the hardships of her youth, and mine was hunger for a better future. But burnout was burnout, regardless of what led you to drive yourself there.

I was more intrigued by her ambition than I should have been.

While I'd always had an appreciation for strong women, for the kind of balls it took for women like Max and Lil to not only survive but thrive in a male-dominated criminal underground, I always thought my type was softer women. Sweeter women. The ones without the sharp edges to get caught on.

So the way just the thought of Max putting her sights on me, then walking confidently toward me to take my wallet, had my cock stirring to life in the shower was unexpected.

One thing I did know, though, was that if I didn't deal with it, there was going to be no thinking straight around her.

So my hand slid down, grabbing my cock and stroking to the thoughts of how such a hard, strong woman could be made real fucking soft with the right words, with the right kiss, with the right touch.

The images conjured up had me coming so hard that I fell back against the shower wall, my fucking legs feeling weak.

“Great,” I grumbled to myself.

Really, the last thing I needed was to know that just the idea of being with someone like Max could have that kind of impact on me while I very much needed to work alongside her until this shit was solved.

Or at least, that was what I thought as I draped a towel around my hips and made my way into my bedroom.

And there was Max.

Looking for me.

But likely not expecting to find me practically fucking naked.

Even from across the room, I could hear the way her breath hitched, how her lips fell open, how her eyes went heavy-lidded as her gaze slid over me.

Yeah, correction.

The last thing I needed wasn't to find out that I was attracted to Max. But that she was also very clearly attracted to me as well.

“Feel better?” I asked, watching as her gaze flew back up to my face, the desire on

plain display for just a moment before she tamped it down, hid it back behind a mask of indifference, if not outright disgust. “After the nap,” I clarified.

“I, uh, yeah,” she said, keeping her gaze stubbornly on my face even as I moved closer. “I never knock off like that. I usually really struggle to sleep, actually. Apparently, all I need is a—what—five-thousand-dollar couch to sleep properly.”

“It was forty-five hundred, but I got a feeling it had nothing to do with the couch. Think you might have passed out like that on the damn subway; you were so dead on your feet.”

I made my way over toward the closet as I said this, leaving the door open as I grabbed a pair of boxer briefs, turned, and dropped the towel to pull them on.

I turned just quickly enough to catch her forcing her gaze back down to the floor. It took actual work not to smile as I slipped into socks, slacks, a shirt, tie, and jacket.

“Good God, do you ever just wear jeans? Sweats?”

“Not really, no,” I admitted. Appearances were important to me. A nice suit told the world that you were someone. It demanded notice and respect. And, in the Family, it said you belonged. “Gym, maybe. And sleep. Those are about the only times I’m not dressed,” I admitted, fetching a different pair of cufflinks, then slipping my cross necklace and watch back on.

The last things were my shoes and a spritz of cologne that I could swear made Max let out a little whimpering sound.

It was a sound I absolutely did not need to know.

But now I was stuck with it.

“How long was I out?” Max asked as we both moved back into the hallway.

I checked my watch.

“Four hours,” I told her.

“Shit,” she hissed, rushing back toward the couch where she fished out her phone from between the couch cushions, likely afraid Megs had called or texted.

“She’s probably drained and taking a nap by now,” I reminded her.

“Right,” she said, tucking her phone back into her pocket. “So, about the pictures.”

“I’ll bring ‘em up for you. After we order something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“By my estimate, you’ve already missed two meals today,” I said, reaching for the drawer I kept stocked full of menus.

“Why do you care?” she shot back, crossing her arms and shooting me a suspicious glance.

“Sugar, if I had ulterior motives, don’t you think I’d have taken advantage of them when you were passed out? I just want some food. You need food. That’s all there is to it. You want Italian or Chinese?”

For just a moment, I saw a flash of the real Max underneath all the guards she put up. Someone so used to taking care of everyone else that she had no idea what it was like to be taken care of.

And, fuck, if that didn't just make me want to care for her some more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Max

Okay.

Well.

Coming across him wearing just a low-slung towel that put an unexpectedly toned body on display when I was still a little slow and soft from sleep was definitely not part of the plan.

I'd woken up slowly, thanks to some siren blaring on the TV, then all at once, remembering where the hell I was.

I shot up off the couch, the blanket Miko must have draped around me sliding back onto the cushions as my sock-clad feet met the ground. And then I remembered him kneeling down to take off my boots.

How the hell had I let that happen?

How had this man that I'd known for point-five seconds managed to disarm me so easily?

Determined to try to get some of my dignity back, I went in search of Miko. I figured I would find him flipping through images on his laptop. Not walking through his bedroom nearly naked.

I learned a little secret about him right then, though. Not just that the man was incredibly fit, from his strong shoulders and chest to the cuts of his abdominal muscles and Adonis belt. But that, despite his very neat, old-fashioned appearance on the outside, underneath his clothes, he had a shitton of tattoos.

They were all black and gray and really well done, from the massive chest piece down to the ones that clung to his ribs and must have hurt like a bitch. He even had them on his legs and the tops of his feet.

There was an almost overwhelming urge to step closer, to see what all of the images were of, to ask if they had meaning, to run my fingers and my tongue...

No.

God.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Maybe Megs was right; it had been too long since I'd been with anyone. I was thirsting after the guy who held my life in his hands.

Because as much as he'd been good to me so far, I could never lose sight of the fact that he was a member of the mafia, that he wasn't even a capo, let alone the boss. Which meant that, while Miko was kind, that his bosses might not be. Orders could come down at any moment to take me out.

I couldn't forget that.

The problem was, my body just didn't want to get that memo as I stood there, my thighs tensed to try to ease the ache growing between them.

Then he had to go and walk into his closet and, with his back to me, whip off that towel and give me a view of his perfectly sculpted ass.

The most fucked-up part, though? That was how much I was just praying he might turn to the side and remove any further speculation. Even if, objectively, I had seen the outline of his cock through that damn towel. It wasn't good enough. That slutty little voice in the back of my head wanted to see the full monty.

Before he could catch me peeking like a creep, I let my gaze fall to my feet, observing how threadbare my socks were getting while the sizzle of attraction coursed through me as Miko got himself dressed.

Then, instead of getting right to work, annoyed that I'd wasted his time by passing out for so long, he went on to insist he feed me first.

There was this strange, not unpleasant, weight pressing on my chest at that, then spreading outward until it enveloped me completely, this unexpected blanket of comfort that I wasn't sure I'd ever experienced before.

The closest I could claim to have gotten was that tingly feeling I got each time I got a good paycheck, something that offered me a sense of security that so much of my early life had been lacking.

It was similar, but not quite the same.

And the uncertainty of it made me tamp it down until I could figure it out.

Half an hour later, we were sharing a thick Sicilian pie that made me want to moan, even if the crispy edges felt like swallowing glass with how inflamed my throat still felt.

I had to admit that with some sleep and a full stomach, I was feeling a hell of a lot more like myself. So much so that by the time Miko had served me a hot coffee—bringing with it that damn blanket feeling again—and produced the laptop to look at images, I felt ready to potentially face the bastard who'd put his hands on me, who'd stolen the sense of security I'd felt inside my own home.

“Alright. This is as far as I've gotten. I am considering there is a chance it isn't one of these people, but possibly someone associated with them,” Miko told me as he placed the laptop on his leg and started to click through the many images he had compiled.

I expected to have that big a-ha moment you saw on TV shows. When the victim flipped through to the right page to find her attacker staring back.

But it never happened.

There wasn't even that little uneasy feeling in my stomach that said maybe that one .

“He's not here,” I said once we toggled through them all twice.

“I guess that would have been too easy, right?” Miko asked, shooting me a small smile as he clapped the laptop lid closed.

“How the hell are you not losing your shit right now?”

To that, Miko shrugged as he placed the laptop on the end table. “I would be if this was a job one of the bosses put me on. But this was my own job. I put up my own money. So while it fucking sucks, I'm not risking my future.”

“Are you allowed to do that? Work jobs without asking?”

“It's actually encouraged. The more of an earner you are, the more chances you get

Made. Or if you are already Made, the better your chances of moving up in the ranks.”

“What are you?”

“Soldier.”

“Which is...”

“The first rung of the Made man ladder. Below us are associates. Directly above, caporegime. Or capo.”

“What’s above that?”

“The underboss, consigliere, and the boss. And at the very top, the capo-dei-capi .”

“What’s the difference between a boss and a capo-dei-capi ?”

“That title literally means ‘boss of bosses,’” Miko explained. “He is in charge of the whole organization. At least regionally. I think the days of the capo-dei-capi having control coast-to-coast are over. But Lorenzo Costa is our regional capo-dei-capi .”

“That’s your family.”

“Yeah. I directly work for Cosimo Costa. But he works directly for Lorenzo.”

“And your goal is to become an equal with Cosimo?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not aim higher?”

“Because you don’t get higher,” he told me. “Not unless someone dies.”

“Why?”

“The hierarchy is set once the boss takes over. He picks his most trusted friends to be right at the top with him. I don’t want to be at the top of the organization. I just want to have my own crew. I’ve worked my ass off for it.”

“Was this job your attempt to prove your worth?”

To that, he drew in a deep breath then exhaled it on a sigh. It was the closest to frustrated I’d seen him so far. “Yeah.” There was a beat before he said, “Don’t you dare apologize.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I admitted.

He turned, that charming little smile tugging at his lips, his eyes all gooey.

And damn if my sex didn’t clench so hard that I almost moaned. Right there in his damn face.

“So, uh, what now?” I asked. Then licked my lips. Damnit. What the hell was wrong with me? This guy just scrambled my mind, ripped away my usual guards. Just by being near. It made no sense.

“Good question,” he said, leaning the side of his head against the back cushion, making him angle ever so slightly closer to me.

I totally didn’t think of how easy it would be to just lean down, press my lips to his. And maybe his hand would raise, slide behind my neck to hold me against him as he deepened the kiss, as he reached to pull me to straddle him, and...

“Max?”

“What?” I asked. Coming back to the present wasn’t quite the wet blanket over my libido that I hoped it might be. If anything, I just wanted to make the fantasy a reality.

“How do you feel about a little stakeout?”

“A stakeout? Are we in a cop drama?”

“Feels like it sometimes. But from the other side. So, you down?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“The comfort of the car and the quality of the snacks.”

“Car is a luxury SUV with lots of room and heated seats, and I’m open to requests on the snacks.”

“Then I guess I can squeeze it in. Until my face is healed. Then I need to get my ass back to work.”

“Looks like I got a solid week or two,” he said, gaze moving over my face, his features going hard, then soft again for reasons I couldn’t begin to understand.

“I don’t think we have that long before someone moves those diamonds,” I reasoned.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong about that. Which is why I’m gonna ask if you’re willing to do the stakeout over the next day or two days.”

“Why do you make it sound like it’s not local?” I asked, suspicious.

“‘Cause it’s not.”

“How far away is it?” I asked.

“It’s upstate.”

“How far upstate?”

“Far enough that you’re gonna need to pack a bag.”

“Look, I get that I owe you half a million dollars, but not even that kind of debt is going to have me sleeping in a car with you.”

“Figure I could manage to rent a couple of rooms.”

“What the hell am I gonna tell Megs?”

“Does she know your exact work schedule?”

“No, not usually. I never want her to have to choose between lying to the cops and protecting me.”

“I get that. Same with my ma and sisters. Well, just tell her you got a job you couldn’t pass up. And since she’s gonna be busy with her partners, you figured there was no reason not to take it on.”

That could work. She would still have a million questions and more than a few concerns, but she wouldn’t be overly suspicious. I was always working. I could even be truthful to her about it being a stakeout.

“Alright. I can swing it,” I agreed. “What time do you want to head out?”

“Early. I’d like to get there before the place opens in the morning, get a good spot, watch everyone make their way in. Probably gotta be heading out of the city by five.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed, checking the time on my phone. “Alright. Well, I should get going.”

“Yeah, me too,” he agreed, standing with me.

“Work?”

“DMV,” he corrected, looking pained. “Even the fucking License Express office could take hours.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“Do you drive?”

“Where the hell would I have learned to drive?” I asked, shaking my head as I slid into my boots.

“Fair enough.”

“Why do you drive? Aren’t you from the city?”

“Sort of. My parents moved us to Greenwich when there started to be too many of us to comfortably live in a city apartment. The commute isn’t bad, but you kinda gotta do it by car. Been living in the city for all my adult life, but having a car and a license comes in handy for more than visiting my parents.”

“Like doing stakeouts upstate.”

“Yeah,” he agreed as we both filed into the elevator. “Even if it comes with the headache of having to deal with the damn DMV.”

“I should feel guilty about that,” I said.

“And yet...” he said, shooting me a smile as we exited the elevator.

“And yet,” I agreed.

“So, I’ll drop by to scoop... no?” he asked when I shook my head.

“No. I’ll meet you here. I don’t want Megs or Nicole seeing you and starting to worry.”

“Five,” he said.

“Five,” I agreed before forcing myself to turn and walk away from him.

I spent the entire walk back to my building thinking about all the ways spending several days with Miko might be a terrible idea.

Like, you know, knowing he would be in a hotel room beside mine. Possibly naked. And willing.

“Christ,” I grumbled to myself as I took the elevator up to my apartment.

I needed to get a grip.

So what if he was attractive? And kind? And gave me that weird warm blanket

feeling?

I was a grown-ass woman.

I could be with a hot guy for a few days without anything happening.

I hoped.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Miko

She was in the car for two minutes, and the whole space was already full of that brown sugar sweetness of hers. It was proving to be a fucking problem. I couldn't think straight, thinking about how good that would smell up close, my nose teasing up her neck as my lips pressed...

No.

Nope.

Couldn't let my mind go there.

We had a long drive to go, and I couldn't be doing it with a raging hard-on.

"This is my favorite time of day," Max said, pulling me out of my battle to try to stop imagining all the fun ways we could waste some time alone together while waiting for something else to happen.

"Five in the morning. Why?"

"It's right before the city really starts to wake up. I'm usually on my way home from jobs at this time. I've always preferred seeing morning from the 'wrong' side of it."

"Because, when you were on the streets, you didn't sleep at night?" I asked, watching

as her head whipped in my direction, her brows furrowing.

“How did you know that?”

“Doesn’t take a lot of imagination to figure that a teenage girl on the street wouldn’t feel comfortable sleeping when the rest of the city is too quiet to overhear if something happens.”

“To be fair, the city doesn’t typically give a fuck if they’re awake either. But the kind of men who take advantage like the anonymity of night for the most part.”

“I’m guessing that Megs slept like a baby with you as her watchdog, though.”

“She was younger,” Max insisted, straightening, ready to defend her friend.

“Seems softer too,” I agreed.

“Good.”

So, I’d been right about their dynamic. While not related, Max took on the mantle of big sister. And protector. She’d shielded Megs from the uglier parts of the world, trying to ensure that Megs didn’t become cold and jaded. By letting herself become enough of those things for the two of them.

It was sweet and sad in equal measure.

“How old were you when you got permanently off the street?”

“It was a slow process,” Max said as she fiddled with the heated seat button. “For a long time, we alternated sleeping on the street and staying in the shelters, depending on how much room there was. As I got more jobs, we tried to rent rooms by the night,

when possible.

“But it wasn’t until I really found my niche with picking pockets that there was enough of an influx of money for put down on first, last, and security. Been busting my ass ever since to make sure neither of us ever end up in a tight spot again.”

“But Megs works, right?” I asked. I understood the urge to protect and provide. I was especially guilty of spoiling my sisters. But it was important to make sure they could take care of themselves too. Especially given my lifestyle. God forbid something happened to me, I wanted to know they all could stand on their own. That was why I was so hard on Nero and would be on my other brothers as they joined the Family in an official way.

“Of course she works. But she doesn’t make a ton of money. Nicole is the same. They could probably pinch together enough to make it work, but it wouldn’t be as comfortable as it is now.”

“But you expect the boyfriend to move in eventually to make things easier on them.”

“Yeah.”

“Then you’ll be alone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Survivors like her always would. But that didn’t mean she would do well. It seemed like a lot of her identity was wrapped up in taking care of Megs. If that was off the plate, what would she have left?

The answer came as quickly as the question formed. Work. She would have work. As a fellow workaholic, I understood that. But my motivation for working so hard was to

get into a position where I no longer had to. I would have a whole crew to do a lot of the work. It would give me the freedom then to focus on what was important. Family. Both the family I already had and the one I wanted to make with the right woman.

As we drove along, Max fiddled with the radio, always managing to land on songs I loved, pointing out all the random wildlife we passed with the enthusiasm of a little kid. Or, more accurately, an adult raised in the city who'd only ever been exposed to pigeons, rats, and the occasional dog or cat.

"Ever have any pets?" I asked when we'd stopped to fuel up the car and she tried to befriend an extremely feral cat on that cusp of kitten and adolescence that kept hissing at her when she tried to just talk to it, not even get close.

"I used to feed the pigeons bread I got out of dumpsters that was too stale for me or Megs to eat. People hate on them, but they're actually kind of sweet. Megs tells me that pigeons were pets we used during wartime, and then we, in typical awful human fashion, just let them all loose. That's why they're kind of dependent on humans still for their food supply. They don't have the skills of wild birds."

"I always liked the pigeons too. Come in some cool-ass colors."

"Do you think there's any meat in there I can get for her?"

I figured it was maybe a little telling that she immediately imagined the feral street cat who hissed at everyone who got near was a female but chose not to speak on it.

"I'll find something," I assured her, deciding that I would walk my ass across the highway with cars flying by to get to the fast food place to get her some meat to feed that damn kitten if I needed to.

It didn't come to that, though. The rest stop included a typical convenience store that

had some likely two-day-old hot dogs and a soggy sandwich that I could pull the turkey off of.

“I wish you would let someone take you in,” she said to the cat as she tossed ripped pieces of turkey in its direction. “The kind of people willing to wait for you to warm up might actually be worth it.”

Funny, I was thinking the same damn thing about her as I watched.

We were half an hour behind schedule, but I couldn’t bring myself to tear her away from the kitten until some asshole who worked at the rest stop came by to shoo it away. He looked like he was about to scold Max for feeding it until she took a threatening step toward him and started to throw some impressively foul language at him for ‘possibly scaring a little kitten into traffic.’

“He looked ready to wet himself,” I said, smiling at her as we both climbed back into the car.

“He was a dick. I hate people who are assholes to helpless creatures just because they can be.”

Again, there was some projection there, and my heart fucking hurt at the idea of the shit she must have gone through as a homeless teen.

“Okay,” she said after turning down the music when I said we were turning down the right street finally. “How about you tell me where we’re going,” she demanded.

The street was like I remembered. A mix of residential homes and businesses. And they were the kinds of homes with too small driveways, so a lot of the residents needed to park on the street, allowing me to snag a prime spot close enough to the building across the street to be able to watch without binoculars.

“That’s the place,” I told her, nodding out the windshield to a long, low gray stucco building. There was only one window out front, and it had bars on it. It looked like a fortress because it was.

“What is it?”

“A diamond processing center,” I told her.

“Why come all the way out here? There’s a whole diamond district in the city.”

“Yeah, but that’s a really close-knit community. Wary of outsiders, given their work. There’s no in there. This is different. The security is still tight, but there are lots of people in and out of here that don’t exactly have a vested interest in its security.”

I’d spent the better part of a year planning this job, researching, schmoozing the right employees, waiting for the right opportunity.

All to have it fall apart because I got my wallet lifted.

“Can I ask something?”

“Yeah,” I said, turning to look at her since there was no activity at the warehouse yet.

“If you know who you were working with, why isn’t someone coughing up blood somewhere yet?”

“Because neither of them fit the description you gave me. I want to see if you spot him here before I start knocking heads. There’s a chance they weren’t to blame. I don’t take joy in hurting people if it’s not necessary.”

“So that thing about the mob having morals is true?”

“To an extent, yeah.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning we will do anything necessary, up to and including some gnarly torture,” I told her, thinking of Brio and the stories of his little ‘adventures,’ “to defend what and who is ours. But we don’t hurt women and kids. We try not to hurt anyone who is innocent. We might be wise guys, but we’re not bad men.”

“And you also don’t want to fuck up any insider you have at a place like this, in case your heist is never found out.”

“There’s that too, yeah,” I admitted. The mob was nothing if not greedy for more well-paying jobs.

“What happens if I don’t see him today?”

“We come back tomorrow for the night shift. Figure we’ll be miserable enough being here all day. Better to split it up. If you don’t see him then, it’s time to go make some visits.”

“While we’re still in this area?”

“Don’t worry. That’s not the kind of shit I’d bring you in on.”

“Why not? I think I might enjoy watching the bastard who fucked up my face get his equally as messed up. Oh, here we go,” she said, leaning forward toward the dash as the first car pulled into the lot.

It was a slow trickle. The ones who showed up twenty minutes before their shifts just to sit in their cars and mentally prepare for their days only climbed out when it was

five minutes to opening. The vast majority of the employees showed up with little to no time to spare. And a few were late.

Max fell back in her seat, sighing. Frustrated.

“There are others who come in later,” I told her, trying not to be frustrated too.

Sure, I’d shown her a bunch of the employees whose pictures I’d found on the website, but there were a lot of other random people who apparently didn’t warrant a headshot on the website. The people in logistics, janitorial, security, drivers, etc.

This was a reasonably large operation. That was the only reason I’d been able to pull off the job I had.

“Okay,” Max said, rustling around in the snack bag to pull out a bag of Twizzlers. “So, tell me the job. And don’t try to tell me it’s secret or some shit like that. I’m not going to try to rob a diamond warehouse.”

That was fair. If she wanted to, she clearly would have had the skills to do it. And we were already so deep in this together, what were a few more details?

“Part one involved making two contacts inside the building. One, an IT tech.”

“Who could fuck with the cameras to hide the heist.”

“Yep,” I agreed, loving how sharp she was. “The other was someone with access to the diamonds.”

“To grab them.”

“To switch them,” I corrected.

“With what? Zirconia?”

“Moissanite,” I corrected. “It’s slightly more expensive but it’s also more convincing. It does fade over time to be less of a dupe, but I only needed it to pass a quick glance-over inspection in case schedules ended up differently than we planned.”

“So, the person with access to the real diamonds just brought in the fakes, swapped them out, and brought them to you?”

“That’s about the gist of it, yeah.”

“Why, though? If they were capable of doing it, why not just do it themselves?”

“Obviously, the IT guy couldn’t do it himself. And the other contact couldn’t do it without the IT guy and the fakes. That was where I came in. They got paid in advance with strict instructions not to make any big purchases in case the heat started.”

“And you’re not only out the diamonds, but the advance you paid out to those guys.”

“Yeah.”

“Shit. You’re not at risk of, like, losing your apartment, are you?”

“Nah. Things will shake out. If I can’t recover them, I’ll just be busting my ass more than ever this year to try to recoup the loss.”

“Want a Twizzler?” she asked, flicking one toward my face.

“They taste like cherry plastic.”

“They’re strawberry,” she told me, taking it back and nipping a bite off of it. “I’m not

judging you and your boring-ass protein bars.”

“They might actually keep me full while stuck here for hours.”

“You underestimate how little I can survive on,” Max said, making my heart sink at the reality behind those words.

It was sometime in the late afternoon, our day full of snacking mindlessly, drinking cold coffee, and shifting around uncomfortably in our seats, that I finally had enough.

“Let’s call it quits for today,” I said, reaching for the gear shift. “Go get some real food. Some rest. Warm up.”

Turning the car on and off and idling for hours had been hell on the gas, making us need to have periods in the bitter cold just to last as long as we had.

Max was trying to be a trooper about it, but she looked pale, her stomach had been grumbling, and even when the heat and butt warmer were on, she was shivering slightly.

“Don’t tolerate the cold as well as I used to,” she said when the vents came on full tilt so she could lift her hands and hold them in front of the hot air.

Christ.

That was a bleak thought.

Luckily, though, she wouldn’t be cold for long.

I’d maybe splurged a bit on the hotel, even though I knew I should probably start being smarter with my money until I located the diamonds.

But I couldn't quite shake the urge to pamper someone who so clearly needed and deserved a little bit of spoiling.

Though as I pulled into the lot, I couldn't help but wonder if getting an adjoining room was a good idea after all. Or if the temptation was going to be too strong.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Max

For someone who was out half a million dollars, he sure reserved rooms at a fancy-ass hotel. I couldn't quite decide if that was incredibly reckless or a real flex.

Either way, we both climbed out of the SUV, stretching muscles that ached from being in a cramped space for so long. Then we went ahead and wasted a minute or so wrestling over my duffle bag—Miko won—before making our way toward the doorman-manned entrance.

I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disturbed by the fact that no one seemed fazed by the sight of my face. No wide eyes, no asking what happened. Just silent acceptance.

Was that because, while Miko was incredibly good-looking, he was also insanely intimidating?

Miko was not the kind of guy who could go out on the street in a suit and be mistaken for a businessman; everything about him screamed 'mafia.'

Even though he wasn't responsible for my face and neck, I bristled at the fact that no one had the balls to try to see if I needed any help. Even as Miko checked in at the front desk and I turned around to look at the grandeur—sky scraping stone columns, opulent chandeliers with thousands of tiny glass pieces to scatter the light around, the shining inlaid floors, the abundance of comfortable seating just asking you to take a

load off after a long trip—no one tried to catch my gaze; no one tried to help a woman who looked like she needed it.

“You ready?” Miko asked as he handed me a golden keycard.

I snatched it from his hands. “Yep,” I said, popping the p .

“Alright. What happened?” he asked, shooting me a bemused look as I leaned against the wall of the elevator car, my arms crossed.

“No one tried to offer me any help,” I told him. “Here I am, recently beaten to hell and strangled, standing next to a big, scary dude, and no one would even make eye contact with me.”

“In my experience, people can be really fucking brave—running into burning houses, tackling mass shooters, saving babies or animals from predators—but they can also be really fucking cowardly too. Especially around big, scary dudes,” he teased.

“Yeah, people kind of suck,” I concluded. “Animals are way better.”

“You’re thinking of that kitten, aren’t you?” he asked as the elevator dinged and we moved out onto our floor.

“It’s supposed to be so cold tonight. I hope she has somewhere to sleep.”

“She looked really scrappy,” he said, clearly trying to comfort me. “I’m sure she will manage. Last night was colder, and there she was this morning. Plus, now she has a full belly to help keep her warm.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, still sad for the poor thing. She was so small to be on her own against the big, mean winter. And, yeah, obviously, I knew that it had a lot to do with

my past trauma. I just hoped that one of those people who took in strays would be able to see past the hissing to realize she was trying to protect herself.

“I’m gonna go take a hot shower to warm up,” I told him as I shoved my keycard in the lock on my door.

“I’ll knock later so we can get something to eat,” he said, moving into his own room next to mine.

“Damn,” I said as the door clicked closed behind me.

The walls were painted the same warm cream as the rest of the hotel, with those classic wooden wall moldings that the cleaning staff probably hated because each had to collect dust like crazy. The carpet was thick and squishy as I kicked out of my boots and moved inside.

Miko had secured me a king-sized bed, and I had to admit I was looking forward to sleeping in a bed that didn’t groan each time I flipped around in my sleep. The bedding was luxe and warm and, incredibly, actually smelled like it had just known the inside of a washing machine.

After sleeping in many cheap hotel rooms, where I had to strip the scuzzy comforter off because I was reasonably sure it hadn’t been washed in a decade, it was real luxury to know the bedding was clean.

Across from the bed was a framed flatscreen made to look like impressionist art with its fancy screensaver.

I put my duffle down on the desk near the windows, reaching in to pull out the yoga pants and sweatshirt that were going to serve as my pajamas, as well as some panties and my bath products, then made my way into the bathroom.

“Jesus,” I said, nodding at my surroundings.

The entire space—from the walls, floors, and shower niche—was done in Calacatta Gold marble, the creamy white base with its gold veins making the room feel even more luxurious than it already was with its walk-in shower, double vanity, and clawfoot soaking tub.

The lure of that tub had me going back out to the other room and digging around in my duffle bag for the bleach wipes I always kept on me. There were some habits that died hard from my days on the streets. Like never taking food or warmth for granted. Like having trouble sleeping at night. And, of course, carrying just about everything with me that I could need to survive.

I’d downsized my purse since I was bringing the overnight bag, but I had food, electrolytes, spare gloves, a hat, a Mylar blanket, medicine, body wipes, bleach wipes, and disposable toothbrushes.

I had to talk myself out of packing more.

But I was glad for the bleach to be able to give the tub a little extra clean before rinsing it down and filling it, letting my fingers wiggle under the faucet as it filled, chasing the chill out of them and bringing their color back.

I stripped and slipped into the water, letting it ease the tension in my muscles from the stakeout. But finally alone, with the water teasing across my skin like a caress each time I shifted positions, the other kind of tension built once again in me.

To be fair, half the day had been spent trying to remind myself not to take deep breaths of his cologne, not to accidentally-on-purpose let our bodies brush, to stop letting my mind think of those strong hands of his moving from the gear shift and sliding up my thigh instead.

My own hand was following that direction without my even realizing it.

Objectively, it was probably not a good idea to engage in some self-satisfaction to the idea of Miko when life was going to keep forcing us together until this whole diamond fiasco was handled. But by the time my fingers teased to the top of my thigh, there was no stopping their path inward, between.

My head fell back on the porcelain as a little gasp escaped me, surprised by how needy I already felt, how sensitive to the tiniest of brushes I was.

I let my eyelids drift closed as my finger teased around my clit, while my other slid up my belly to squeeze my breasts, to tease my nipples to the idea of Miko's hands, lips, teeth.

It wasn't long before my fingers were slipping inside me, imagining Miko's longer, thicker ones rocking inside of me, his palm pressed against my clit as he worked me, whispering wicked things in my ear. As he pulled back, then surged inside of me.

I came with a strangled cry at just the thought of that, my body trembling with the intensity as the pleasure rolled through me, keeping control over me for what felt like ages.

Until, of course, the post-orgasm haze faded.

And I was left with reality.

Which was a cold, wet blanket over any lingering desire, making me climb out of the tub.

The whole time I dried off and slathered on my lotion—that brown sugar sweetness that had been my first 'luxury' self-care product I'd purchased when Megs and I first

got an apartment of our own and had a few extra bucks lying around.

It literally cost less than a cup of coffee, but at the time, it had been complete decadence. I was oddly attached to it. So much so that even all these years later, I couldn't use anything else. I even panic-bought backups in case they ever decided to stop making it.

Finished, I dressed and made my way out of my room just in time to hear a soft knock on the wall.

"Come to the door, you idiot," I called, tone light.

"This is a door, sugar," he called, that voice like a caress over my warm, satisfied body.

"What?" I asked, following his voice to the wall where there was, of course, a door. Curious, I slid the lock and pulled it open. To find Miko standing there in his own hotel room. His jacket was off, a few buttons undone. "I thought this was the closet," I admitted.

"Closet is on the other side," he said, nodding behind me, making me turn to find another door.

"Right. I didn't think adjoining rooms existed anymore."

"They use them for families with kids, I think. But it works for us too. You feeling hungry yet, or is all that cherry plastic still holding you over?" he teased.

"Strawberry," I corrected. "But, yeah, I'm starving, actually. But also... lazy."

"We can order in. Or order up. They have a full menu. Though, it's fancy shit."

“Which means the serving size is only enough to satisfy a toddler’s appetite.”

“Exactly,” he agreed, waving toward my room, a silent request to be let inside.

I knew it was probably a bad idea, but I moved out of the way and watched him stride into my space.

I did not look at his round, firm ass as he passed. Well, not for long anyway.

“Went for the tub, huh?” he asked, and I could still hear the sucking sound of the water slipping down the drain.

“Yeah.”

“It’s important to have some... self-care time,” he said, his voice a sexy rumble as he turned to look at me.

Wait, did his eyes just go heated for a second?

Did he know?

Oh, God , had he heard?

I’d been a little, you know, distracted. I had no idea if it was one of those nice, quiet Os, or if I’d been moaning and whimpering through it.

“Anyway,” he said, and all the heat was gone, making me wonder if I’d imagined it in the first place. “I brought up all the local places. Can get delivery from anywhere,” he told me, sitting down on the foot of my bed with his phone in his hand.

He was waiting for me to sit and look with him. Every alarm bell was going off in my

head, telling me that the two of us on the bed—even if we were both fully dressed—was a horrible idea.

Annoyed with my own thoughts, I walked over to sit beside him. Then I went ahead and pretended I wasn't taking deep breaths of his whiskey and tobacco scent or imagining that finger he was sliding down the screen to show me the options moving over parts of my body instead.

"Sugar?" he asked.

"The burger place sounds good," I said, shaking off those pesky, horny, clinging thoughts.

"Alright," he agreed, bringing up the menu. "Surprised you don't bite my head off for that."

"For what?"

"Calling you that."

He was right; I would normally give a guy an earful if he used a pet name with me when he didn't even know me. I couldn't come up with a good reason I let Miko do so unchecked. Except, of course, for the fact that I liked it when he did it.

"It's accurate too," he added, seeming to speak mostly to himself as he pinched the screen to zoom in on the scanned menu.

I knew I was supposed to be focusing on my options, but all I could seem to think about was the fact that I wasn't the only one who found themselves obsessed with scent suddenly. And, you know, the fact that he liked mine.

“... trying to make it hard,” Miko said.

I was clearly catching the tail end of something but I squeaked out a strange, strangled, “What?”

“Sides,” Miko clarified. “They’re trying to make it hard to choose. Shoestring fries, curly, steak, wedges, disco, and pizza.”

“That’s an impossible choice.”

“So maybe we will have to get small sides of each to share,” he said.

“What’s that look for?” I asked as a smile teased at his lips as he shook his head ever so slightly.

“Just hearing my ma’s voice in my head about not eating a vegetable.”

“I mean, potatoes are a vegetable. A starchy one, but still.”

“I like that logic,” he declared. “Alright, pick a burger and drink so I can place this order. Want any dessert?”

“I think I had enough sweets for the week,” I said, thinking of the pack of Twizzlers, fruit snacks, snack cakes, and sugary granola bars I’d managed to eat in the SUV.

With that, Miko placed the order and went down to get it from the delivery guy as I shot off a text to Megs to check in. I always tried to let her know I was okay when I was working, so not doing so would have immediately put up a red flag.

“So, are you seriously going to ‘relax’ in the hotel room in a full suit?” I asked when he returned and put the bags on the desk, along with two serving trays like room

service would bring, despite us not having ordered from the hotel itself.

“I took off the jacket. And the tie.” To my raised brow, he shrugged. “Alright. If you want to plate the food, I’ll go get changed. Unless you’d rather eat alone,” he said, turning back.

“The food is already in here,” I said, shrugging.

“I’d rather share a meal with you too, sugar,” he said, giving me a smile like he knew that was what I meant, even if I wasn’t willing to admit it aloud.

Alone, I pretended that plating our dinners required the utmost attention to detail. When in reality, I was hyper-aware of the sounds of Miko in the next suite since he left the door open between us.

Was he daring me to take another look?

No.

God .

What was wrong with me?

He figured I was busy with the food, so he didn’t see a need to close the door. Or he was changing in his bathroom.

I needed to get a grip.

I should not be so needy when I’d just had a damn orgasm.

“Alright. Happy?” Miko asked, making me turn to find him wearing a pair of thin

gray sleep pants that were doing very little to hide what was beneath, and a plain white tee.

“How is that t-shirt so unwrinkled?” I asked, shaking my head at him as I held out his tray.

“You have any objections to the idea of eating in bed?” he asked, looking around at the obvious lack of seating.

He could have fetched his chair from his room, and I could sit at the one in mine. But neither of us suggested that.

“It’s the only way we can both see the TV,” I said, taking my tray over toward the side of the bed furthest from the door. “Really?” I asked when he settled on a silly little lighthearted sitcom. “Not what I expected you to like to watch.”

To that, he shrugged as he put a curly fry in his mouth. “Real life tends to be dramatic enough. I like something light on the rare occasion I can even watch any TV.”

“I can see that,” I agreed, even if I did kind of still have a thing for action. Though, yeah, it was usually the kind of over-the-top craziness that could never actually happen—cars flying off the tops of one building to the next, guns that never ran out of ammo, people grabbing helicopter ladders while doing a spinning dive off a cliff.

I picked at my food, but couldn’t seem to focus on the taste with Miko so distractingly close. His scent was muted by the oily smell of the fries and I was irrationally annoyed by that fact as I kept casting discreet glances in Miko’s direction, watching him eat more than actually eating much myself.

“No good?” he asked, plucking some of my curly fries off my tray when he’d finished all of his different fries and most of his burger.

“How do you eat like this and keep in shape?” I asked. Granted, I could throw back some pretty epic amounts of food when I really sat down to do so, but most days, I was surviving on too much coffee and a stolen bagel or donut while working.

“I don’t,” he said. “Eat like this,” he clarified. “But there’s nothing wrong with a binge now and again. Especially when it’s this good.”

It went like that for the rest of the meal. Me picking at my food, Miko stealing more and more fries. All the while I couldn’t stop glancing over at his stupidly handsome profile, the way his shirt had gotten tight around his chest and midsection from his position, the way his gray sleep pant material clung to... every inch of him.

Then the fucker had to go and bust out laughing at a joke on the show I hadn’t even heard.

There was just something about a man as in control and reserved laughing with his whole chest, head thrown back, smiling so big his eyes crinkled, that had my belly tightening. Was that desire? Something else? I had no idea, but I liked it more than was probably appropriate.

“Oh, fuck,” he said on the tail end of the laugh, shaking his head. “You okay?” he asked when he turned to catch me staring at him. “Max?”

No.

Nope.

I wasn’t okay at all.

I was doing everything in my power to stay on my damn side of the bed, not climb that man like a tree, ride him hard and fast, and hopefully put an end to this effect he

had on me.

“Yep, fine,” I said, turning away from him to put my tray on the nightstand. “Just tired, I guess,” I said, slipping down lower to sell my lie. “But stay and finish your episode,” I said, since the opening credits were just starting to roll.

I really thought it was just a lie.

But as soon as my head was on the pillows, the weight on my lids became impossible to ignore.

I passed out to the sound of Miko’s laughter.

Then fell into a fitful, restless, sex-filled sleep.

I woke up on a frustrated whimper to find Miko’s face inches from mine, his eyes as heated as my body felt.

“Need me, sugar?” he asked, his voice a rough rumble that moved through me as his hand slid to my hip, ready but waiting.

I was too sleepy, too aching, and too damn tired of pretending I didn’t want him to say anything other than the truth I felt right then.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Max

There was no time to second-guess my decision.

Not that I wanted to.

Not once Miko's hands pressed on my hip, pushing until I rolled flat onto my back for him.

His body shifted closer, his scent overpowering me, dragging a little mewling sound out of me as his face leaned down, his forehead nearly touching mine, his dark, molten eyes boring into mine as his fingers drifted upward.

His touch moved across the sliver of skin between my shirt and pants—whisper-soft—making a little shiver course through me.

The TV was muted, but the lights still flashed around the otherwise darkened room, illuminating Miko on and off as he dipped a finger under the waistband of my pants, then panties, but refusing to slide further down.

On a frustrated whimper, I grabbed his wrist and pressed his hand downward. His little chuckle shivered over me. But then his fingers pressed over the material between my thighs, making a whimper work its way out of me. A deep rumble moved through him, finding me wet and needy for him.

That sound only ratcheted up my need, and I let my thighs slide a little wider for him, a silent invitation for more.

Miko's head dipped, his face in my neck. His breath was warm on my skin as he took a deep breath just before his fingers moved, pressing in, making me arch up as my breath shuddered out.

I could feel the brush of Miko's lips, just a hint of what I wanted, but I was too distracted by the way his fingertips were teasing down under the waistband of my panties to care to ask for more.

Just as his hand moved inside, fingers touching me without any barrier, his lips pressed into my neck as the throaty moan escaped me.

His finger traced up my cleft, finding my clit, but only working frustrating circles around it, refusing to touch me where I needed it most.

His tongue teased up the column of my neck, the shell of my ear, his own breathing heavy with desire. Even as the thought formed, I could feel his hard length pressed against my leg.

The ache was instantaneous, dragging a whimper out of me as I just barely fought off the urge to grab him, to pull him on top of me, to yank down his pants and feel him surge inside of me.

"Mmm," he rumbled against my ear. Like he knew what I was thinking. Like maybe he could feel the way my body was responding to just the idea of him inside of me.

"Miko," I whimpered, needing more, the ache in my lower stomach getting too acute to ignore.

I expected him to ignore the plea, to keep teasing me, but his thumb shifted inward, pressing into my clit as two of his fingers thrust inside of me.

The combination—unexpected, so so welcome—nearly undid me right then, making a choked moan escape me as my walls tightened around his fingers, as my hips ground up into the touch.

Miko's teeth nipped my earlobe, his words when he spoke a soft secret against my skin. "You're so wet for me."

There was no denying that.

There was no way I could ever try to tell myself, let alone him, that I didn't want him. My body was betraying me perfectly.

My hips rocked impatiently until Miko's fingers started to move, gently thrusting as his thumb began to circle my clit.

Reaching out, my hand slid up his forearm, grabbing him around the bicep and holding on as he kept working me, driving me up.

It wasn't long until the mewling sounds became soft moans as he drove me closer and closer to the edge.

"No," I cried when he suddenly pulled against my hold and slid his hand out of my pants.

He didn't say anything, but as the light of the TV flashed bright for a second, I could see the sexy, self-satisfied smile toying with his lips.

But before I could settle on any feeling other than utter disappointment, Miko was

shifting up onto his knees, reaching for my legs, and yanking me more toward the center of the bed.

My feet landed at each side of his thighs as his hands went out, grabbing the waistbands of my pants and panties and drawing them down my hips and legs.

Anticipation sizzled across my nerve endings as my pants were tossed off the side of the bed.

Miko's fingertips slid up the sides of my calves, knees, thighs—deliciously soft, deliberately slow. As if waiting for something.

It wasn't until his touch reached my hips, and my thighs fell open, that I realized that was what he wanted.

Grabbing my knees, he pushed them up toward my belly as he lowered down. His soft hair teased my inner thighs for the barest of seconds, making goosebumps rise up all over, before his lips were around my clit, sucking it into his mouth with an intensity that made a choked cry escape me as my thighs clamped to the sides of his head.

Too much.

Too good.

Too... everything.

My thighs shook as I slid them over Miko's shoulders while his lips sucked in a pulsing rhythm that made every muscle in my body tense.

Close. So so close.

But just as I was sure that clawing need would be relieved, his lips pulled away, his head shifted, planting a kiss to my inner thigh as my legs trembled with unmet need.

Too frustrated to think of anything else, my fingers slid into his hair, dragging him back to where I needed him most.

I felt the tip of his tongue moving out, tracing up and down my cleft, tasting me, but refusing to give me the contact I felt sure I might combust without.

If anything, though, the more I whined and whimpered and—yes—even begged, the more he seemed to move away from where I needed him most. Until, suddenly, I felt his tongue fold and press inside of me, the sensation foreign, shocking, intoxicating.

He thrust a few times, dragging ragged sounds out of me I didn't even know I was capable of.

Until suddenly, his lips were on my clit again in little pulsing sucks as his fingers thrust inside of me, turning, and stroking against the top wall as his tongue finally moved out and started to work me in lazy circles.

I felt completely out of control of my body—and I supposed that was the point. My thighs shook, every muscle in my body tensed, goosebumps rose, my breath panted in and out between soft whimpers that became desperate moans as Miko drove me closer and closer to the edge.

My fingers were fisted in his hair, my hips rising to meet his touch, my thighs clamped to the sides of his head, my heels digging into his back.

“Miko...” I cried, with this strange, overwhelming urge to push him away. It was too much. I wasn't sure I could take any more.

Seeming to sense it, Miko's fingers tapped hard against my top wall as he sucked my clit again.

And I just... shattered.

The sound that escaped me was a cry and a moan at the same time as my whole body shuddered hard, every muscle taut as my breath caught in my chest, breathing becoming impossible as the pleasure coursed through me over and over as Miko kept working me with his mouth and fingers, dragging it out until the orgasm finally released its grip on me.

My thighs relaxed, falling open, allowing him to move slightly, pressing kisses to my inner thighs, over my pelvic bone, the hollows of my hips.

I struggled to find my breath, to slow the frantic flickering beat of my heart. My hand rested there over my chest as the aftershocks set in and I tried to wrap my fucking head around what had just happened.

Because, fuck.

I mean, I was no starry-eyed virgin. I'd been with men before. I knew what it felt like when they touched, tasted, fucked.

But this? This was something I'd never experienced before. A connection that had my eyes feeling wet, a pleasure that seemed to tear me apart with its intensity.

Miko's chin had just planted on my belly, his face angling up to look at me, to likely say something that I didn't quite feel ready to hear yet. I felt too raw, too pulled apart at the seams for talk.

But just then, there was a shrill ringing—an old landline phone ring—coming from

somewhere inside Miko's suite.

Something about it made him stiffen, made his stupid handsome face go from sexy and self-satisfied to confusion that was quickly chased away by concern.

"I..." he said, but he was already moving away from me, moving off the bed. "I have to get that," he finished as he nearly tripped over my bunched-up pants on the floor in his rush to get to his room.

And, yeah, that was the cold, hard shock of reality I needed to get a damn grip on myself.

I folded up on the bed, watching him disappear through the adjoining door. Then, quickly, quietly, I rushed off the bed and carefully closed the door so it didn't make a sound.

It wasn't until I slid the lock that I felt like I could breathe again.

Was locking him out of my room the most evolved, mature way to handle my very intense feelings right then? Nope. Not at all. But I'd never claimed to be evolved.

Hell, most of the time, I barely recognized my own feelings, let alone analyzed them to understand their roots. I damn sure never shared my feelings with some random guy I'd hooked up with.

And that was all men had ever been to me.

Hook-ups. Even the ones that lasted weeks or months; the only use I had for them was fun and casual. Just mutually satisfying sex that scratched that itch that didn't want to be ignored anymore.

Men sure as hell were never anything I took seriously enough to actually want to open up to, to share my thoughts, fears, history, or future plans with.

The second I even got an inkling that one of them might be catching feelings, I was quick to put an end to things.

I didn't want that.

But I had to admit to myself, as I grabbed my pants and panties and made my way into the bathroom, this was already different from those men in my past.

Because I'd already opened up to Miko. I told him parts of my past, my present, my future. He'd seen me at some of my most vulnerable. He knew some of my habits, my likes, and dislikes. All before things even started to get a little physical between us.

"Get over it," I told my reflection.

The woman staring back at me looked different. Sure, the bruises were kind of darker than they'd been earlier that day—though there was that telltale green and yellow around the edges that said they were already starting to heal—but my skin was flushed, my eyes dreamy, and, yep, still a little teary.

I sucked in a deep breath, watching until my eyes went blank again.

This didn't have to be a big deal.

We were both adults.

We'd both had casual interactions with the opposite sex. Heat-of-the-moment physical touch didn't mean anything. Nothing had to be awkward.

At least that was what I was telling myself as I moved back out of the bathroom.

Just in time to hear Miko's door click closed. Quietly. Like he was trying not to be heard.

Suspicious piqued, I rushed to my own door, glad I was between him and the elevator, so I could look through the peephole and watch a warped, mini version of him make his way in that direction. But not before casting a worried look at my door.

What the fuck was he up to?

I mean, there was no way he could expect to sneak out and drive back to the city without me noticing, so it couldn't have to do with his bosses or anything like that.

Which only meant one thing: he was leaving to do something that had to do with the diamond heist.

Without me.

Well, we would see about that.

I was never good at sitting on my hands while someone else did all the work.

I rushed to my duffle, shoving some of the essentials into the small purse I'd packed, sliding my feet into my shoes, and then rushing out into the hall.

I went past the elevator, sights set on the stairwell, so I didn't run into Miko while I tried to figure out what he was up to.

I pushed open the stairwell door just in time to watch Miko move out the front doors, making a beeline for his car.

That fucker.

I rushed behind him, putting my finger to my lips so the doorman didn't greet me. I didn't want Miko to cause a scene in front of everyone. I just wanted to rush behind him and get to the car just a second behind him.

That was exactly what I did.

He bleeped the locks and climbed in as I ducked low and rushed up the passenger side.

I whipped open the door and jumped in before his head even had a chance to whip over and see me.

"Get out."

Oh, he was all businesslike and bossy right then.

I was annoyed at myself for thinking that was hot.

"Absolutely not."

"Max, I don't have time for this."

"And yet you're still sitting here," I said, shrugging as I reached to clip in my seatbelt.

"Max, seriously. Get out."

"You're gonna have to drag me out," I told him, chin lifting.

He watched me for a second, a frustrated muscle ticking in his jaw as he came to the right conclusion. That in a battle, I would out-stubborn him every damn time. And take pleasure in it.

“You’re a pain in the ass, sugar, just so you know.”

“Oh, I am fully aware,” I agreed as he turned over the car, shifted into reverse, and whipped out of his spot so quickly that my arm flew up to grab the ‘ Oh, shit’ bar.

I wasn’t so distracted by him trying to sneak out that I didn’t realize this was the best possible thing that could have happened. It immediately forced away any potential awkwardness that might have come from the little incident back in my hotel room.

I was all too happy to skip right past that and get back to business.

“I’m assuming this has to do with that phone call. What the hell kind of ringer was that anyway?”

“One so different from my normal phone that I wouldn’t accidentally confuse them,” he admitted as he turned off onto the highway.

“It’s your burner?”

“Yeah.”

“For this job.”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to clue me in, or should we play Twenty Questions?”

“The call came from my IT guy,” Miko explained. “It didn’t sound good.”

“What does that mean? You think he’s the one who took the diamonds?”

“It means that the person who did take them seemed to be in the apartment with him, shit sounded tense, and the call cut out.”

“Oh, shit,” I said, wincing at the sound of that. “Someone is... cleaning house.”

“Hopefully not if I can get there first.”

“We,” I corrected.

“Absolutely fucking not,” he said with enough ferocity that my brows shot up. Did my pussy clench a little at his bossiness again? Yeah, fine. But we weren’t talking about that. “You’re gonna keep your stubborn ass planted right there in that passenger seat,” he told me as he pressed his foot down harder.

I sat there silently, knowing damn well I wasn’t going to stay in the car when we got there, watching the speedometer inch close to ninety before he finally slowed and turned into an apartment building complex.

He’d clearly been here before.

It was one of those communities where every one of the buildings was the same. Just a labyrinthine collection of identical red brick buildings almost completely devoid of any personal touches. But Miko navigated it with enough familiarity that allowed him to speed around and into a spot.

“Stay,” he growled at me as he threw open the door and climbed out.

It was right then I noticed something I hadn't seen on him before.

A gun in a holster on his hip.

This whole situation seemed like it could possibly go completely sideways.

I wasn't going to sit on my ass in the car if Miko might need some backup.

I grabbed the key fob so the car would shut off and ran out to catch up with him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Miko

“Goddamn it, Max,” I growled when I heard her footsteps running up behind me.

“You’re wasting precious time if you try to argue with me on this,” she reasoned.

I hated that she was right.

Still, I stood there, struggling with my drive to defend her and the urge to get answers to what was going on with the diamonds.

I’d been calling Henry, the IT guy, endlessly since I realized someone who’d known about the diamonds had stolen them. It had been radio silence.

Until the call in the hotel room.

He had the worst fucking timing in the world.

I mean, Max had been all soft and sweet and trembling beneath me. I’d wanted to spend hours exploring her with my fingers, with my mouth, with other parts of me.

One taste wasn’t nearly enough.

But then the fucking call.

I wasn't an idiot, either. Everything about Max was cold and guarded again. It didn't take much thought to conclude she was glad for this interruption because it allowed her to put her walls back up and pretend she hadn't been rocking against my mouth, whimpering and moaning, just half an hour before.

The longer we had to focus on things outside of the two of us and what was clearly growing between us, the more she would push me away, pretend there was nothing going on.

It couldn't be helped, though.

This could literally be life or death.

That was another reason I wanted Max to keep her ass in the car. The last thing I wanted was for her to be in danger yet again. Even if, objectively, I knew she was a woman who was used to a certain amount of danger.

It was the door swinging open, a food delivery guy making his way back out, that finally spurred me into motion.

I moved inside with Max right at my heels.

Henry lived on the top floor at the back of the building, so Max and I took the elevator before running down the hallway toward the apartment in question.

I only slowed when I saw the door cracked open. Seeming to sense it at the same time, Max grabbed a handful of my jacket, a silent instruction to take notice.

I reached for my gun before moving into the doorway, pushing the door open with my shoulder before moving inside.

I wanted Max to stay in the hall, at least until I cleared the place. But there was no way to tell her that. So I could feel her behind me as soon as I took a step into the apartment.

“Fuck,” I hissed as my gaze landed on the man sitting in his ergonomic chair in front of a long desk full of screens. A fucking charging cord wrapped around his neck.

“What... oh, God,” Max said, trying to rush forward.

I grabbed her, pushing her back behind me as I carefully stepped around the space, making sure we were alone.

“Should we do CPR?” Max asked when we moved back into the living room.

“Wouldn’t do any good,” I said, looking at Henry with something akin to grief growing in me. If not for me, this guy wouldn’t be dead. He’d likely be playing his little shooter games on his gaming console, not strangled to death by... someone. “He’s dead. Was likely dead before we even got out of the hotel parking lot.”

“Don’t,” Max said when my hand immediately moved out, wanting to press his eyelids closed. “Here,” she added, rummaging around in the bag she had strapped at the center of her chest and coming back with... a tube of glue? “Give me your hands,” she demanded.

I did, watching as she held each of my hands in turn and covered my fingertips with the glue. “Okay, there. Now you can touch anything you want,” she told me as she carefully coated each of her fingers as well.

“Just carry that shit around, do you?”

“You never know when you might need to obscure your fingerprints,” Max reasoned

as I reached out to slide Henry's lids closed, saying a silent prayer, with no small bit of regret, before looking around.

"We looking for clues?" she asked, reaching to pull her hood up over her head. "What? Don't want to leave any hair DNA at a murder scene," she explained.

There would be time at another point to be really impressed by her ingenuity. But there was no telling if neighbors heard a struggle and called the cops; we were short on time.

So I moved through the apartment, looking for my wallet, for the diamonds, for any sign of what the fuck had happened with this job that had been so perfectly fucking planned.

The two times I'd been inside this apartment, I'd never set foot outside of the common area that served as Henry's office more so than a living or dining space.

Unlike Zeno's place, Henry liked things neat. Almost to an extreme degree. He had a collection of those cars you can build stacked on shelves around the room, each one of them completely free of dust. The condiments in the fridge were even organized in alphabetical order, with all of the labels facing out.

His bedroom was similar.

"He has fourteen pairs of... everything," Max observed. "Socks, underwear, pajamas, clothes, everything. All identical. Had ," she corrected, eyes going sad.

"Yeah, he was a creature of habit," I agreed. It had taken a lot of convincing to get him agree to work on the diamond heist. The only reason he'd done it was because he had some 'cutting edge' project he was working on that he needed funding for.

“So, where’s his roommate?” Max asked, snapping me out of my dark thoughts.

Turning, I found her standing in the doorway to the other bedroom.

“I... have no idea,” I said, suddenly realizing there was a lot about Henry I didn’t know.

I followed Max into the next bedroom, nearly tripping over a pair of kicked-off shoes in the process.

“Whoever his roommate is, he’s a slob. And that’s coming from someone who isn’t exactly a neat freak,” Max said, kicking a half-full box of cheddar cheese crackers out of her way. “See anything weird here?” she asked.

“The lack of cockroaches in this mess?” I said. “What are you seeing?”

“What’s missing,” she said.

“What is missing?”

“Laptop, phone, TV, charging cords, half the clothes in the closet... it’s like he took everything that he really needed and just left the mess. Why?”

“Lazy?”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “Or maybe he was trying to make it seem like he wasn’t cutting and running.”

“We need to figure out who the fuck the roommate is. Was. Whatever.”

I flipped through all of the carefully organized paperwork in the common area, and

Henry's rooms, but everything from the rent to all of the utilities was in Henry's name.

"Anything in here?" I asked, circling back to Max in the other guy's sty of a room.

"Nothing personal, no. He took his whole identity with him. Not a single piece of mail."

"Fuck," I growled, exhaling hard.

"We need to get moving," Max said. "The superglue will wear off. Neighbors might hear us moving around. It's not good."

She was clearly more practiced in the art of sneaking in and out of places. So as much as I wanted to hang around and go over this place with a fine-tooth comb, I had to trust her instincts and expertise.

So we both made our way back out into the common room, where Max stopped, staring at Henry's body.

"Come on," I said, my voice softer as I wrapped an arm around her lower back and led her back out of the apartment after checking that no one was in the hall.

It wasn't until we were back in the car that we spoke again.

"Was that your first dead body?" I asked.

"No," Max said, peeling at her fingertips to get the glue off. "God, no. I've seen... so many bodies."

"On the job?"

“On the streets. New York winters can be brutal, merciless. Then there was, you know, starving. Overdosing. Came across someone stabbed to death in an alley the second week I was on the streets. I’ve seen more bodies than anyone should.” She paused. “Were you close with Henry?”

“No. I mean... no. We talked several times, trying to iron out all the details for the job. But that’s the extent of it. I didn’t want any kind of personal connection. This was work. Not to sound like a dick.”

“I get it,” she said. “Still, this is a lot. You basically heard everything leading up to his murder.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, exhaling hard as I pressed my head back on the rest for a second.

“Did you hear anything? Voices? Snippets of conversation?”

“It was quick. It rang for a while. I think he was about to hang up. Maybe call the cops instead. But then he heard me and he just... he whispered that ‘he’s here.’”

“But didn’t say who ‘he’ was.”

“No,” I said, sighing.

“What about his social media?” Max asked.

“Henry didn’t believe in social media. Said it made people too easy to track down, gave away too many details without you even realizing it. He didn’t have any. Save for his gaming accounts, I guess.”

“We should have taken his phone,” Max said, shaking her head.

“I didn’t see it,” I said, thinking of his neat desk, the rows of screens and their different keyboards.

“What about that guy who found me?” Max asked.

“What about him?”

“Use him to find this guy. I mean, I’m assuming you tracked me down because of facial recognition software. Which is easier than tracking down someone whose name we don’t even know. But he can figure out Henry’s gaming history, right? That’s all stored somewhere. And maybe his text history or—I don’t know—something. That’s his job, right?”

Right.

Zeno was really my only choice, even if I didn’t love the idea of hiring someone in the Family to work on a job I was hiding from the family. That said, honestly, Zeno didn’t seem like someone who cared enough to snitch. He didn’t come across as cutthroat or ambitious. Hell, maybe he didn’t even want to be a capo. I could hire him when I got the position. Set him up for life as a thank-you for working with me discreetly on this.

“That’s a good plan,” I agreed.

“How about we go back to the warehouse now?” she asked.

“Why?”

“We can wait to watch the overnight crew leave instead of come into work. That way, we can just head back to the city early in the morning. Get in touch with your hacker guy. Get him working on this. Time is slipping away. This guy is clearly cleaning up

loose ends. How long until the diamonds are gone for good?"

I couldn't argue with that logic.

There were still several hours before sunrise, but we made our way over to the warehouse anyway, parking closer to the lot so we could see easily even in the dark.

"You have to turn the car off," Max said. "We could get away with it in the daytime when anyone could be idling in their car for any number of reasons. Not in the middle of the night."

I hated that she was right about that.

I didn't like the idea of her being cold. Even if, objectively, she would have a better tolerance for it than I would, given her past history with it.

"Don't bother," she added when I tried to blast the heat at full tilt for a moment. "It will chill immediately. Why waste the gas?"

"Alright," I said, cutting the engine.

"If you want to try to catch a few hours, go ahead. I'm good. I had some sleep," she added. "And I'm used to being up all night. Besides, you shouldn't be driving after being awake for more than twenty-four hours."

"I'm fine."

"Now who's being a pain in the ass? There's no one to impress here with being some sleepless zombie. Get some rest."

I didn't plan to.

But not long after my head rested against the window, I knocked the fuck out.

—

“Miko,” a voice called, toying with the edges of consciousness. But I was having dreams about peeling off Max’s clothes and watching her move to straddle me, riding me hard and fast, tits bouncing, eyes liquid heat, lips curling around my name as she came. “Miko, wake up,” the voice tried again.

“No,” I grumbled, trying to cling to the dream, but it was already evaporating right before my eyes.

“Dude, wake the fuck up,” Max demanded, hand suddenly slapping my thigh.

But she must have been reaching out without actually looking because her hand landed a lot higher than I imagined she intended. Her fingers were just an inch or so from my still-straining cock.

When my eyes shot open, though, I saw how she’d managed the miscalculation. Max was sitting at the edge of her seat, half-leaning over the dashboard to see, with just the flickering overhead streetlight to go by, as the front door opened and several men walked out.

She was so distracted that she didn’t even remove her hand from where it was placed. I just barely managed to stop myself from shifting, a move that would make my cock press against the side of her hand.

This was not the place and time.

Did I plan on getting more of her? Oh, fuck yeah. But when not only the diamonds were at risk, but also lives, I figured this wasn’t a good idea. No matter how much I

was aching for it, no matter how much I could swear I still felt her taste on my tongue, could hear her moans in my ears.

I forced my gaze out the windshield, watching the men, then looking over at Max to gauge her reaction.

“No,” she said when, after ten minutes, it seemed like no one else was going to emerge. “I mean, it was stupid to think he’d still be here, right? If he killed Henry.”

“I wanted to check just in case there was someone else involved. If one guy was in charge of getting the diamonds and someone else taking out Henry.”

“You still have to talk to the guy who handled the diamonds, though, right?” she asked, squinting at the car that pulled out of the lot.

“He’s not here,” I said. He hadn’t walked in earlier, either. I figured maybe he had a day off. But now I had to track down his ass too.

“What? Then what the fuck are we doing—“ she started, but cut off as she started to turn back, realizing she was still holding my thigh.

Her hand automatically jerked.

And the inevitable happened.

The side of her hand grazed against my cock.

I expected, with her guards fully back in place, that she would snatch her hand away, pretend it didn’t happen, that she didn’t even notice.

I was shocked to watch her eyes go hot, her lips fall open, and a little whimper escape

her.

I knew this still wasn't the fucking time. I had a man to track down. Diamonds on the loose. Zeno to get a hold of.

But, fuck, there was no reasoning with my desire right then.

Encouraged by her reaction, I went ahead and let myself shift in my seat, making my cock not only glide against her hand, but slip under it. The touch of her palm over the head—even through the layers of clothes—was enough to make a shaking exhale escape me.

That little sound moved through her again as she shifted in her seat, making her press her thighs together to ease the ache.

Gaze on hers, I rocked my hips, making my cock slide across her hand again.

She watched me as her hand started to move, cupped, rubbed. Then, frustrated by the barrier, she worked with my button and zipper as I turned over the car, not wanting it to get steamed up as my breathing got faster, more shallow.

Max's hand was bold, going right into my underwear to close her hand around my hard length, stroking it as she rocked a bit in her seat, lost in her own desire.

And, fuck, if the idea of her getting so hot just touching me didn't have my own need intensifying.

Max's fingers caught the hot liquid, teasing it around the head for a second.

Then, suddenly, she was shifting down and sucking me into her mouth before I could even fucking brace for it.

The suck of her warm, needy mouth around me had my hips bucking up, forcing my cock deeper into her mouth as she lowered down, making it hit against the back of her throat.

Her throat clenched in a silent gasp, but a low moan escaped her, vibrating against my cock.

“Fuck,” I groaned, gathering her hair as she started to work me. Bold and reckless, sucking me hard and fast, taking me deep, her fingers moving down to tease and squeeze my balls as she drove me mercilessly toward the edge.

Part of me wanted to fist her hair and drag her up by it, demand she slip out of her pants and panties, then pull her onto my lap, feel myself slip deep inside her in one stroke.

The other part was loving how much she seemed to be enjoying going down on me. The same way I’d enjoyed doing the same for her.

So I let her, sitting back, allowing the desire to overtake me. “Fuck, sugar,” I groaned as she worked me faster still, moving her head in little twisting motions as she took me. “You’re so good at that.”

She made another of those little moans around me, liking the praise.

But before I could give her any more, she had me right there at the edge. “Max, I’m—“ I started, breath panting, thinking of the glovebox, of the cleanup.

Max was having none of it, though.

Instead, she sucked me deep enough that when I came, it was right down her throat.

I swear my fucking vision went white at the intensity as a hushed curse escaped me and Max moaned again.

She waited until I was fully spent before moving away, turning her face away as I tucked my cock back away and redid my pants.

“We, ah, we need to find that other guy,” she said, head turned to look out her side window.

Was she embarrassed by her enthusiasm?

That shit wasn’t going to stand.

She was also right, though. Time was of the essence.

But, hey, I’d always been a good multitasker.

So I shifted the car into drive and started to move, holding the wheel with one hand as my other moved out, slipped under the waistband of her pants.

“What are you doing?” she asked, but her airy voice betrayed her need.

“Be a good girl and let me touch your sweet pussy again,” I said, glancing over to watch the internal battle play across her face. The part of her that wanted to be offended by being called a good girl. And the part that loved it.

It was the latter that won.

Mostly.

“You’re driving,” she said, but her head was back against the rest, her breath coming

fast and shallow.

“And, yet, I can still do this,” I said, my hand going into her panties, palm against her clit, and two fingers slipping inside of her.

Her moan filled the silent car as her pussy tightened around my fingers, begging for more.

I was too happy to give, happy for the distraction as we drove down the dead streets. Too late for the night shift, too early for the morning. The world felt like ours alone as my fingers fucked her, as she rocked herself against my palm, her moans getting louder and louder with each passing second.

Until, with the tensing of her whole body, she came, her walls clutching around my fingers over and over before the orgasm finally let go of her.

Finished, I slid my fingers out of her as I pulled into a parking spot. Then, waiting for her gaze to find mine, I slipped my fingers into my mouth, her sweet taste exploding across my taste buds once again.

Then, because I knew she would quickly start to try to put her guards back up, I cut the engine.

“It’s no use telling you to stay here. So, just stay behind me,” I told her as I climbed out and reached for my gun.

Unlike Henry, Chuck lived in a little house rental on a street full of similar ones. Capes and craftsman homes with postage-stamp-sized front yards.

Lots of people to look out, to see us.

Seeming to think the same thing at the same time, Max yanked up her hood as I suddenly became thankful that I never drove out on a job with the real plates on my car.

If someone saw us, it was dark. The best they would get was a tall man in a suit with dark hair and a slight woman. And a black SUV with the wrong plates.

Max grabbed my arm before I reached for the door, flashing her shiny fingertips at me. Sometime on the walk up the tiny path, she'd covered her fingertips with superglue again.

She reached around me for the knob, but it didn't budge.

Before I could go back to the car for my own, Max produced a fucking lock pick kit from that bag of hers and got to work.

Admittedly, she was a fuckuva lot faster at it than I would have been.

She stood, put the kit away, then moved to my side, but just a half a step behind.

"Ready?" I asked, not sure if I was, in fact, ready to possibly find another body.

But there was no going back now.

"Yep," she whispered as I pushed open the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Max

I had no idea what to chalk that momentary insanity up to. I thought my defenses were up, reinforced with rebar and cement. But clearly, that wasn't enough to keep me away from Miko.

I needed a moat. Filled with fire.

And a fucking chastity belt.

I couldn't describe the relief when Miko was quick to move on to the next thing when we pulled up to the quaint little cape-style house with overgrown holly bushes outside, their little red berries bright even in the dark early morning hours.

The inside of the house was dark as Miko moved inside in front of me. Normally, I would have bristled at that. But he was the one with the gun. And someone on this job was willing to choke me, hit me, and knock me out. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, straight-up murder Henry.

Sure, I was used to breaking into places. I was probably more the expert here than Miko was. But the houses I broke into didn't usually require me to be armed. The worst I'd ever encountered was a halfway trained security dog who was easily distracted from his job by a treat and some belly scratches, leaving him bounding behind me through the house like my new best friend.

I certainly never had to worry about someone strangling me with a fucking charging cord. I was totally okay having the guy with the gun put his neck out there first.

That said, it was my hold on the back of his suit jacket that had him avoiding falling over a strangely placed ottoman. What can I say? My ability to see in the dark was keen thanks to so many years doing my job.

The common area was small and, as far as I could tell, empty. Of people or corpses.

It wasn't until we made our way into the primary bedroom that there was a clatter to warn us just a second before the closet door flew open, knocking me back into the wall as a dark form flew at Miko.

His arm whacked the edge of the door, sending the gun flying.

I scrambled toward it, knowing I would be a hell of a lot more useful with a weapon than I'd be without it.

As I crawled across the floor, I heard the crunching sound of fists hitting flesh and my stomach dropped at the idea of Miko being on the receiving end of those punches.

The sounds of their grunts and curses filled the air, their bodies crashing into walls, into the dresser, items scattering all about. I finally saw the gun, wedged under a small desk sitting under the window.

It was as I crawled past the bed that a gasp rose up my throat. Because there, under the bed, was a man.

He was mostly in shadow, but there was just enough light in the room for me to see his wide, terrified eyes. And a finger pressed to his lips, begging that I didn't give him away.

I didn't exactly know my move right then.

Save for the fact that I needed the fucking gun.

So I scrambled forward, grabbed it, and turned with my back against the wall, holding it out in case I needed to use it.

But right then, the man wrangled free from Miko's grip and just... tore off.

"Max?"

"I'm fine. Go," I said, knowing how torn he felt.

But I had his gun; even if the guy under the bed decided to attack, I was safe.

That said, the guy must have disappeared quickly because Miko was back in under two minutes.

"Sugar?"

"Hey, we have a situation here," I said as his footsteps moved closer. "Turn the light on with your elbow," I demanded.

"What's—" he started as the light flashed on.

"Get out," I demanded of the guy under the bed.

He wiggled out, his dirty shoulder of his white tee and hair out first, then his face.

I recognized him instantly. Not from my apartment, but from the images Miko had shown me.

Black hair, brown eyes, kind of scrawny and nerdy-looking.

“Chuck, the fuck?” Miko asked. It was the relief in his voice that had me lowering the gun and focusing on Miko.

He had a small split in his lip, but was otherwise unharmed, save for his rumpled appearance from the scuffle. So most of those hits I’d heard must have landed on the other guy. Miko, it seemed, knew how to fight.

Great.

Like I needed another reason to find him hot.

“Kinda forgot to clean under there last... year,” Chuck said, swatting at the dirt on his shirt.

A little chuckle escaped me at that, making Chuck shoot me a sheepish smile. “Thanks for not selling me out.”

“You looked pretty freaked out,” I said, shrugging.

“Chuck, who the fuck was that?” Miko asked.

To that, Chuck shook his head as he hauled himself up onto his bed.

“I have no idea. I heard someone moving around in the house,” he told us. “Freaked me out, so I just... got under my bed. Then it wasn’t long after that when you guys came in. Who is this?” Then, looking at me, “What happened to your face?”

“I’m thinking a run-in with the same guy who was here to fuck you up,” I told him.

“Oh, shit,” Chuck said, blanching. And the poor guy was already anemic-pale. “You think he wanted to beat me up?”

“I think he wanted to kill you,” Miko said, surprising me with his blunt honesty. “He killed Henry before coming here.”

“What? No. I liked him. We played together sometimes,” he said, waving toward his desk, where his monitor and gaming console were set up.

Miko and I shared a look, both of us wondering if maybe Chuck had some information on Henry’s roommate.

“Alright, listen, Chuck. We can’t stay here. You can’t stay here.”

“Are you taking me with you? Protective custody?” he asked, sounding hopeful.

How the hell had this guy pulled off a diamond heist? He seemed so anxious and insecure.

Miko looked at me, then exhaled hard. “Guess so,” he agreed. “Pack a bag. And your gaming console.”

“Why?”

“Chuck, it’s been a fucking endless night. Just do it. Please,” he added to soften the demand.

“Where are we going?” Chuck asked, hopping up to rush to his closet, grabbing a duffle bag and stuffing random shit into it.

“The city.”

“Yeah? Road trip!” Chuck said, sounding excited, seemingly forgetting about the danger.

Miko nodded toward the hall. I followed him out, handing him his gun back. “You alright?” I asked.

“Worried about me, sugar?”

“I dunno. Might build character to get your face fucked up a little.”

“Like the way I look too much, huh?” he teased, then sighed. “Sorry about the tagalong, but we couldn’t just leave him here to die. He’s helpless.”

“Yeah, about that. How the hell did he pull off a heist?”

“Honestly, because it was so simple. He stole one of the empty bags from the warehouse. I filled it with the fake shit. He brought the fake shit in and put it in place of one of the real diamond bags. Though, according to Henry, he’d been antsy as fuck the whole time.”

“Why is he not at work? Didn’t you tell him to act normally?”

“Okay, all set,” Chuck said, moving out into the hall with his bag slung over his back, his console in one arm, and a fucking stuffed pig under the other. “It’s a pillow,” he insisted when both of our gazes moved in that direction.

“Alright. Need anything else?”

“Think I’m set.”

“Okay, we’re gonna do this fast, in case that fuck is still lingering,” Miko said as we

moved as a group toward the front door.

Morning was dawning, casting reds and oranges across the sky, brightening the shadows that could have easily hidden someone just half an hour before.

“We don’t run,” Miko instructed. “You got neighbors that are probably waking up about now. We do a brisk walk. Me and Max in the front, you in the back. Got it?” he asked, looking back at Chuck as he reached for the door handle.

“Got it,” Chuck agreed, still looking entirely too excited about the prospect of a ‘road trip,’ and forgetting all about the guy wanting to kill him.

With that, we moved outside.

Miko’s and my head were on a swivel, looking for anyone lingering around while Chuck lumbered on, clueless of any threats.

But we all made it into the car, and I breathed a sigh of relief when we finally moved away from the curb.

“This isn’t the way to the city,” Chuck said, leaning between the two front seats.

“We have to get our shit,” Miko explained, glancing over at me. “Why the fuck weren’t you at work today?”

“Oh, I, uh, got in trouble.”

“The fuck you mean you got in trouble? You’re supposed to be toeing the line. I explained that.”

“It wasn’t my fault! Not really. I was just doing my job, and someone moved

something in my way. I fell over it, sending millions of dollars of diamonds scattering around the floor. It was a whole thing. I was told to stay home until they could decide what to do with me.”

That kind of worked in our favor, I guess.

“You didn’t get a look at the guy in your house?” Miko asked as we drove around for what felt like too long, making me think that he was trying to make sure we didn’t have a tail before going to the hotel.

“I only saw his feet before you guys came in.”

“You didn’t recognize him?” I asked Miko.

“Was too busy trying not to get punched in the face to really pay attention. But, no, I don’t think I knew him.”

“Chuck, did you know Henry’s roommate?” I asked.

“Henry had a roommate? He never mentioned it.”

Great.

Well, we would just have to hope that the Zeno guy could work some magic.

“Did you get enough sleep to do this drive?” I asked when we finally turned into the lot of the hotel, figuring we could delay checkout for a few hours to let him get some rest.

“I’ll be fine. Come on, let’s get our shit so we can go grab some coffee and get back home.”

Get back home .

Those three words should have filled me with relief. Instead, as I climbed out of the SUV, all I felt was an unexpected sort of sadness.

After about a thousand comments from Chuck about the hotel's décor, the cost of it, and how big a shame it was that we couldn't spend the day there, we were finally on our way back to Manhattan.

“ So , how'd you guys meet?” Chuck asked in a singsong voice as he leaned between the seats again, even though Miko asked him three times to stop doing it.

“I stole his wallet,” I told him.

“Oh, that's a fun meet-cute.”

“That was full of diamonds,” Miko piped in, making Chuck's eyes go round.

“And then I got the wallet stolen from me, and got my face beat up in the process.”

“And strangled?” Chuck asked.

“Yeah, and strangled.”

“Does it make your throat hurt?”

“Yeah. It's like drinking glass,” I told him honestly, but watched as Miko's gaze slid to me, eyes concerned, likely thinking about what we'd just done a few hours ago in this very car.

“Hey, that place has hotdogs! Can we... oh,” Chuck said as Miko kept driving past.

“We just had bagels.”

“Yeah, but they were stingy with the cream cheese.”

“We will get something the next time we stop for fuel. What?” Miko asked, catching me smiling at his profile.

“Just a glimpse of what you’re like as a big brother. Or maybe what you’ll be like as a dad someday. If, you know, you want that.”

“I do,” he said, nodding. “Maybe not seven like my parents had, but definitely some kids in the future. You?”

“I’ve never given it a lot of thought,” I admitted.

“You were like a mom to Megs.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it? You did everything you could to take care of her, protect her, keep her innocent and happy.”

“Whose Megs?”

“Chuck, aren’t you due for a nap?” Miko asked, making me have to turn away so Chuck didn’t see me laughing.

“I’m not a baby,” Chuck insisted.

Lo and behold, though, twenty—suspiciously silent—minutes later, I turned back to find Chuck passed out, that silly stuffed pig between his head and the window.

“I’ve known toddlers who talk less,” Miko said, shaking his head as he turned off into a rest stop.

“And now you’re gonna live with him. Wait, is this the rest stop with the kitten?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

“Yep. Why don’t you go look for her while I get some food? Yo, chatterbox, you want to get some snacks?”

They came back a few minutes later, Miko seemingly a few hundred poorer thanks to Chuck’s need to get just about every damn snack and drink on the shelves, to find me leaning against the car, trying my damndest not to look as sad as I felt. Over a damn cat.

“Can’t find her?” Miko asked, coming up to me.

“I saw her go behind the dumpster back there,” I said, gesturing toward the building. “But she just hissed at me when I got close.”

I don’t know what I’d been expecting. That maybe she would remember me? Want to come to me? To, what? Come with me? I didn’t have time for a cat. I wasn’t even sure if Megs or Nicole were allergic.

But, yeah, I could admit to myself, at least, that some part of me did want to take her in off of the cold, hard streets. She, however, had other plans.

“Well, you can still toss food to her, right?” Miko said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, holding out a hand.

I tried to coax the kitten out with the food as Chuck prattled on to Miko about all the

things he wanted to see in the city since, amazingly, he'd never been, even though he'd only lived a few hours away.

“Alright. Let's get going,” I said, giving up when the cat wouldn't even come out to eat. I climbed into the car and reached for the coffee Miko had gotten me. “I want to meet the guy who had you darkening my door the first time.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Max

“Hey, it’s the pretty thief!” Zeno said as I followed Miko into his apartment.

Zeno was... nothing like I’d been expecting. I guess some part of me had been expecting someone like Henry or Chuck. A little nerdy. Pale from staying inside and staring at screens.

But Zeno was actually kind of hot. Tall and tanned with dark hair, great bone structure, and dark eyes, he could have been in ads for men’s cologne.

Though he was inexplicably wearing nothing but a pair of board shorts with little flamingo floats all over them. Sure, it put his nicely toned body on display. But it was the middle of winter. And there wasn’t a pool anywhere nearby.

“Still didn’t get to that laundry, huh?” Miko asked with a smirk.

“You know, I kept meaning to,” Zeno said, gesturing over toward the overflowing laundry basket. He’d gotten as far as putting the container of detergent pods on top of it, but hadn’t gotten to the actual washing part. “But then... I dunno. Other shit, I guess. But I’ll be damned if I could tell you what that other shit is now,” he admitted with a head shake.

“Did a small hurricane blow through here in the past few days?” Miko asked, shaking his head at the mess of the apartment. Scattered takeaway containers littered the desk

and kitchen counters, two trash bags sat behind the door but hadn't made it down to the dumpster, and coffee cups and energy drink cans were everywhere. Including, somehow, on top of that laundry basket.

"I need to hire a housekeeper or something," Zeno said, wincing. "All that hard work you did, gone."

"Well, I got more work for you," Miko said, exhaling hard. "So I can clean up again while you get started on that."

"I'm Chuck," Chuck interjected, making Zeno notice him for the first time.

"That your security blanket?" Zeno asked, nodding toward where Chuck was clutching his gaming console to his chest. "Word to the wise, it might just scare the chicks away."

"We brought it in case it might help you track down someone."

"O...kay," Zeno said, brows pinching.

"On my last job, I hired two guys to help me. Chuck, here. And this guy Henry. Who we just found killed."

"Oh, shit. Sucks, man." But there was a detachment in Zeno's voice that likely came from growing up around crime.

"He tried to kill me too," Chuck said, tone indignant as he puffed his chest a bit.

"Hence why he's here," Miko said with a wide-eyed look at Zeno. "The thing is, Henry seemed to have a roommate."

“A suspect?”

“Yeah,” Miko agreed. “We searched all through the apartment. We couldn’t find anything that gave away his identity. Chuck here played games with him sometimes, though. So I was wondering if you could check their conversations. Or if you could use Henry’s screen name to see who else he possibly played with. Or, you know, any trace of who that fuck is.”

“Well, it’s not much to go on,” Zeno said, walking over in his bare feet to the freezer, pulling out a pint of ice cream that already had a spoon sticking out of it, and making his way back to his desk. “But if you give me the screen names, address, phone numbers, socials, all that shit, I’m sure I can dig up something. Any physical descriptions I should be looking out for?”

Miko turned to me. “Dirty blond. Tall, but a little shorter than Miko. Thinner, but strong. Blue eyes. The bright kind of blue. There’s really nothing else. He was... average.”

“Alright. Well, blond is better than brunette, I guess. Accent?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Zeno said, reaching for Chuck’s console, actually having to tear it out of his hands. “Well, give me the list and get comfortable. It’s probably going to be a while.”

With that, Zeno got to work with Chuck sitting next to him as Miko started to straighten up. Knowing I would pass out if I sat still for too long, I got up and got to cleaning as well.

“This place was spotless when I left a few days ago,” Miko said as I piled more coffee cups into the sink already full of them that he was washing. “I’m concerned

that he will just start going around naked when he runs out of ridiculous shit to wear.”

“There’s a laundromat right around the corner. I can go get some loads going. Sounds like he’s going to be a while.”

“I don’t want you going anywhere alone,” Miko said with a head shake.

“What? We’re back in the city, Miko. I’m going to be going a lot of places alone.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Dude, you’re not my boss,” I reminded him, even if some part of me I barely wanted to acknowledge—let alone cop to—felt all warm and fuzzy at the idea of him being so protective.

“Shit is different now,” Miko insisted, shutting off the water to give me his full attention. “If you hadn’t gone with me upstate, maybe it wouldn’t be a big deal. But you were there. In that house. He saw you. He already knows where you live. It’s not safe for you to go anywhere alone.”

“If it’s not safe for me, then it’s not safe for my roommates either,” I said, stomach twisting. Sure, Tyler was a guy. But he wasn’t any sort of alpha guy. I doubted he’d ever hit someone in his life. And I didn’t even know how long he was going to be in town for.

“Been thinking about that. How do you think your roommates would feel about a little... trip?”

“A trip where?”

“I dunno. Anywhere. Just to get them out of the city for a while. There’s gotta be

somewhere they'd like to go."

They were always talking about trips but never took them. If I did it as an early anniversary present for Megs and Nicole, I really didn't think they could object to it. And they were both able to work remotely, so that wasn't an issue.

"Megs always said she wanted to see Vermont in the snow."

"Vermont it is, then," Miko said. "I will get it all set up."

"It needs to be set up like an anniversary gift."

"That's not a problem. I just need to know how soon they can leave."

"I'll ask Tyler," I said, reaching for my phone for the first time in what felt like ages.

"That was quick," Miko said when my phone dinged almost immediately.

"He's on his way to the airport," I told Miko. "Said the girls are sad. This kind of... really works out."

"Good," Miko said, nodding. "That's one less thing to worry about."

"Yeah, I'll be fine there myself."

"The fuck you will," Miko said, making me look up from my text.

"What?"

"You're not staying there. No fucking way. It's not safe."

“Miko, I’m a grown-ass woman. I can stay in my own home if I want.”

“Look what happened in your own home,” he said, gesturing toward my face.

Admittedly, it was easy to forget about my face since I so rarely caught sight of it in the past day or so. But Miko was always looking at it, always remembering what had happened to me.

“That was before I knew there was a threat,” I reminded him. “It’s different now.”

“I don’t care. You’re not staying in your apartment until I know it’s safe.”

“I’m not wasting money staying at a ho—“

“You’re staying with me,” he cut me off.

“I’m... no, I’m not,” I said, even as heat bloomed through my body, that warm blanket-hugging sensation wrapping tightly around my shoulders and chest.

“Sugar, this isn’t up for debate.”

“What are you going to do, cuff me to the bed?” Even as the words escaped me, I knew exactly how they were going to be received.

Miko struggled to keep his lips in a straight line. And failed pretty miserably. “I’m not opposed to that idea,” he said, a wicked glint in his eyes. “But I am choosing to believe that when you stop being stubborn, you will see it is the smartest, safest option.”

He wasn’t exactly wrong there.

We would be better as a pair until this was over. Especially since he was trying not to use his family on this case.

“What about Chuck?”

“What about him?” Miko asked, glancing over just in time to catch Zeno slapping Chuck’s hand away from one of his keyboards.

“He needs to be somewhere safe.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So you only have one extra bedroom,” I reminded him.

“We’re both adults,” Miko said, the beginnings of a challenge on his face. “We can share a bed.”

“Hey, if you want to share a bed with Chuck, I’m not one to judge,” I said, loving the way his eyes crinkled as he turned away to smile.

“Unless you’re worried you won’t be able to control yourself in the same bed as me,” he said, leaning close, his voice a secret just for the two of us.

He knew exactly what he was doing, damn him.

And that it would work.

“Get over yourself, Miko,” I said with an eye roll that I hoped made it impossible for him to see how revved up I was getting at just the idea of being in bed with him again.

“Good, it’s settled then,” he said, stupidly handsome with the joy of his victory.

It was about three hours later when Miko and I both got back from the laundromat, since he dug his heels in about me not going alone, that Zeno approached, a muscle ticking in his jaw with his frustration.

“Miko, you’ve got to get him—“ he started, then exhaled hard, his head tilting to look up at the ceiling. “If you touch that, I swear to God, I will go deep into your search engine history and find every embarrassing search—like wondering what the inside of a real, live pussy might feel like—and blast it all over your socials for all your friends and family to see,” he called back to Chuck in the dramatic frustration of a big brother being annoyed to his breaking point by his sibling.

“Need some peace to work?” Miko asked, his smirk indicating he knew the feeling Zeno was experiencing all too well.

“God, yes,” Zeno said, sighing hard.

“Alright. We’ll get going so you can focus. You got my number?” To that, Zeno shot him a bemused expression that said even if he didn’t, he could figure it out.

“Chuck, get your shit. We’re heading out,” Miko called.

“Where are we going?”

“Home to get some sleep,” Miko said, and it was right then that I noticed just how worn out he looked. I felt the same fatigue deep in my bones.

“Your home?” Chuck asked, nearly overturning his chair in his rush to get over toward us.

“Just... leave it,” Zeno grumbled when Chuck’s duffle caught the edge of his desk, sending a stack of shit tumbling to the ground. “And go. Please. For the love of God.”

“I’m picturing, like, a lair,” Chuck said as Miko half-shoved him out into the hall.

“Thanks for doing my laundry, you pretty little thief, you,” Zeno said with a smile that would have charmed the panties off any other woman in Manhattan. “Oh, and I give it half the night.”

“Give what half the night?” I asked as I moved into the doorway.

“You being able to keep your hands off of each other,” he said with a knowing little smile before turning and heading back to his desk.

That was some amazing hearing he had.

The sad thing was, I was worried he was right as we all made our way outside, piled back into the SUV, and made our way to Miko’s apartment.

“It is like a lair!” Chuck said, eyes about popping out of his skull as he looked around with the enthusiasm of a little kid.

“Yep,” Miko said, his tiredness making his usual charm wear thin. “This is you,” he said, opening the door to his office that also served as the guest room. “The couch pulls out. All the bedding is in the closet. There’s a closet hall. Towels are in the closet.”

“Nice. Nice. Where’s Max sleeping?”

“In my room,” Miko said.

“Oh. Oh. Nice. That’s cool, man,” he said, making Miko puff his air out through his nostrils, the closest he could get to a laugh, given how dead on his feet he was.

“Help yourself to anything. But do not, and I repeat do not , leave this apartment.”

“Go out there and get myself killed? No, not me, man.”

“And don’t go on any of your socials talking about where you are, either.”

“Got it,” Chuck agreed, rocking on his feet, still excited.

“We’re gonna catch a couple of hours. Then we will order something in for dinner,” he said before putting an arm around my hips and drawing me into his room.

“Just gonna take a quick shower,” Miko said, already stripping out of his clothes right there in front of me. And, I guess, I’d seen all of him now. There was no reason for him to feel shy.

The casual familiarity, though, had cartwheels going in my belly as I pretended to busy myself with digging into my duffle for a change of clothes myself, wanting to wash the dirt off of me from crawling on the floor, then on the ground outside of the dumpsters. But what I was really doing was watching as Miko peeled each layer off.

The shirt was gone first. Then there was a short pause of him topless as he took off his watch and cross.

Then off went the belt.

The shoes and socks.

And, finally, the pants.

I just barely managed to keep the little whimper that rose up my throat in as he hooked his fingers into his boxer briefs and lowered them down.

I was only getting a bit of a side and rear view until, suddenly, music blared seemingly through the whole apartment.

“Shoot. Sorry! Sorry!” Chuck yelled as Miko turned back, giving me the full, glorious view of him.

“Stereo can play through the whole apartment,” Miko explained as I tried to keep my gaze on his face.

Eventually, Chuck got the music to just play in the living area and hallway, a crooning singer-songwriter singing about love as that warm sensation wrapped around me again, willing me to acknowledge it, to put a name to it.

“Sugar?” Miko called, suddenly a lot closer than he’d been a second ago as I pretended to focus on my duffle bag.

“What?” I asked, refusing to look up, knowing he would see too much in my eyes, things I wasn’t even ready to think, let alone share.

“Nothing. Just... This,” he said as his hand grabbed the back of my neck, turning me so that his lips could claim mine.

Hard.

Hungry.

Possessive.

I was too far gone to pretend not to want it.

I melted into him, my hands sliding up his arms, feeling the chords of muscle, the warmth of his skin.

My arms wrapped around his neck as his free one went around my hips, crushing me to him, letting me feel the way his cock was hardening for me with each passing second.

Need pooled in my core, making a little mewling sound escape me.

But it was right then, when I was all warm and soft and ready that Miko pulled back, stepped away, leaving me actually freaking swaying at the lack of his closeness.

Then, with nothing else, he turned and walked into the bathroom.

Alone, I collapsed back onto the bed, hand pressed to my lips, too aching with need to do anything but sit there in my unsatisfied desire, listening to the way the water cascaded off of Miko's body and onto the tile floor as he showered.

He was done far before I could get a hold of my runaway desire, coming out in another damned low-slung towel as he made his way to the closet.

Not trusting myself not to jump him, I grabbed my change of clothes and ran into the bathroom.

It didn't help. The entire room was full of his whiskey and tobacco scent.

But by the time I got in the shower and washed the day away, the exhaustion was pulling so heavily at my eyes that I was surprised I managed to get myself dressed before moving out and falling into the bed.

Beside me, Miko was already still.

As for me, I was out cold before I could even draw the covers up over my body.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Miko

I woke up to something I could only describe as caterwauling. For one second, I thought an animal had gotten into the apartment, gotten stuck, and started making its objections known.

Until I remembered I wasn't alone.

That I had Chuck staying with me.

Even as I thought that, I could make out the words he was attempting to sing. And failing miserably.

Turning, I glanced at my alarm clock. For a second, I couldn't decide if it was four in the afternoon or morning. The darkness outside the window wasn't much help.

But the soft sigh beside me had me forgetting all about stupid shit like the time of day. When did that matter when you had a woman like Max in bed with you?

Turning, I realized how close she was.

She had no covers on, so I figured she was seeking my heat in her sleep. Her hair was still partially wet and half-covering her face. Reaching out, I slipped it away, excited for the day when I could see her face without all the bruises again.

I knew it was probably too early to say that kind of shit to her. Especially because she was so guarded. But I had a feeling that this thing going on between us, it was something different. Something more than I'd ever had with a woman before.

I was debating going ahead and waking her up to finish what I'd started right before I'd taken a shower.

But it was right then that there was a series of clatters in the kitchen loud enough to make Max grumble and turn over in her sleep.

"Whoops," Chuck said, making me sigh as I climbed out of bed, taking a second to pull the covers over Max, then going out to make sure Chuck wasn't breaking everything I owned.

"Chuck, the fuck you doing?" I asked as I made my way into the kitchen to find Chuck had damn near every one of my pots and pans out on the counter.

"Got hungry. You two didn't want to wake up when I came to check on you—"

"You what?"

"Came to check on you."

"You came into my room when we were sleeping?"

"I hadn't heard from you."

"Because I was sleeping . Did you knock?" I asked, a little concerned that I would have slept through that, regardless of how tired I was.

"No, just opened the door and looked in. Don't worry, I didn't see anything."

Christ. I had to make sure I locked the door the next time. In case there was anything going on that I didn't want his ass to see.

"Alright. What are you making?" I asked, seeing most of the contents of my fridge scattered around in various states of preparation.

"I don't know," Chuck said.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I'm letting the ingredients speak to me."

"Yeah? What are they saying?"

"Mostly that I don't know what I'm doing," Chuck admitted, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

To that, I huffed out a laugh, remembering when my baby sister had tried to cook a meal for our mom on Mother's Day, only to end up crying into her pancake mix until I moved in to help.

"Alright. Well, what do we have here?" I asked, clapping my hands as I moved in front of a pile of chopped food on the cutting board.

"Garlic, onion, tomatoes, and those green stick things."

"Green stick things. Or as the rest of us call them, chives," I said. "Well, you've got a good base for a pasta sauce. Stick it in a pot and get it simmering. Then boil some water for pasta."

"Can I tell Max I made it?" he asked as he dumped the whole lot of veg into a

saucepan.

“Yeah. But before you do, add some oil to that.”

“Okay. Like... coconut?”

Jesus.

“Like olive,” I corrected. “While you’re at it, add some water, a teaspoon of sugar, some basil, and salt.”

With any luck, the end result would be halfway edible.

“How about garlic bread?” he asked.

“Look, Chuck, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, alright?” I suggested, going to the coffee maker to get a cup brewing.

“Max still asleep?” Chuck asked, getting a box—of all the choices—pinwheel pasta out of the pantry, making me pluck it out of his hands and replace it with some spaghetti.

“Yeah, she’s had a long couple of days,” I explained, knowing I was guilty for most of it.

With that in mind, I reached for my phone, getting to work on finding a great inn for the girls to sneak away to a town that had lots of local attractions—from a cider mill that sold ‘the best donuts in the state’ to skiing and lots of shops and restaurants—and went ahead and booked a room, figuring they could be up there in five or six hours once Max told them to pack up and head out, so at most, the room would sit empty for a day.

“How do I know when the noodles are ready?” Chuck asked as he tossed them into the boiling water.

“Just set a timer for eight minutes,” I said, not trusting him to go by a taste test. “Then strain it into this,” I told him, setting the colander into the sink. “And try not to burn yourself. Alright. I’m gonna go wake up Max. She’s gotta be starving,” I told him as I moved down the hallway.

I closed the door as the music got louder again in the kitchen, making Max grumble and roll onto her back.

The covers slipped down her body. Her t-shirt slipped up, exposing a few inches of her stomach as her breasts rose and fell under the thin material. I was suddenly thankful I kept the thermostat cool to sleep because her nipples were pebbled up in the chill of the room.

I forgot all about my empty stomach as I pushed the door lock before moving deeper into the room.

I slid in beside her, just taking a minute to watch how soft she was in her sleep, that tension she usually had in her jaw slacked.

Reaching out, I brushed some of her hair out of her face again, making her nose wrinkle up as she lifted a hand to swat at me.

Finding my hand there, her eyelids slowly slipped open, fluttering for a second, trying to get her bearings before she glanced over to see me there.

“Oh,” she said, her voice thick. “Hey.”

“Hey, sugar. Sleep well?” I asked.

“Your bed doesn’t talk.”

“Uh, what was that?” I asked, worried she might still be asleep.

“My bed moans and groans when I turn over,” she told me with a little yawn. “What time is it?”

“Dinner time. Chuck cooked.”

“Oh, God.”

“I supervised,” I said as she turned to look at me.

“You cook?”

“Not often, but I’m capable of it.”

“I don’t want to move yet,” Max admitted, exhaling hard.

“We don’t have to go anywhere,” I said, letting my fingers drift down the side of her face, her chin, then neck.

Max took a deep breath, making her tits stretch the material of her tee. There was no stopping my hand from gliding down, from closing over one of the swells.

So close, I could feel the shiver that coursed through her even as her eyes went heavy-lidded.

“No?” she asked, letting out a little sigh as my fingers started to trace around her nipple.

“Nope, can stay here as long as you want,” I said, leaning over, then sealing my lips over hers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Max

Waking up with Miko beside me had warmth spreading through me, a gooey sensation in my chest that slowly spread outward until it overtook me completely.

Something about it just felt... right.

Him, me, together.

The way sleep was still clinging to me made it impossible for any of the doubts and insecurities to slip in, ruining a soft, sweet moment.

A soft, sweet moment that was quickly becoming more as Miko's hand slid down my shoulder, then over my breast, teasing around my nipple.

The warmth became a fire that burned through me in seconds, making a heaviness press down on my lower stomach.

Then Miko was shifting, leaning down, and sealing his lips over mine.

There was no stopping the way my hands reached for him, pulling him until his body shifted over mine. My legs spread, and he slipped between, the hard length of his cock against the aching need between my thighs.

I moaned against his lips as my hands slid down his back, sinking into his firm ass

and pulling him more firmly against me.

His lips grew harder, hungrier.

And I responded in turn as my legs hooked around his hips, my heels digging into his ass, pressing him more firmly against me.

His hips rocked, making my head fall back on a moan at the feel of him pressing where I needed him most.

Miko pressed up, looking down at me as he rocked his hips again.

At my whimper, he suddenly rolled me under him. Reaching down, he grabbed me behind the knees, pulling until I sat up to straddle him.

He folded up with me, reaching to snag the hem of my shirt and starting to draw it upward. I lifted my arms, allowing him to remove it completely.

The chill in the air and the heat within had my nipples twisting into tighter buds as Miko's hungry gaze moved downward, taking me in.

The rumble that moved through him teased across my nerve endings, making me rock against him.

Miko's hands slid up my sides, then moved inward to cover my breasts, squeezing, then releasing to roll my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. A moan escaped me as I leaned back, inviting more, pressing myself further into the touch.

He leaned inward, pressing his face to the center of my chest, breathing me in, as his soft hair teased over my skin.

When his head shifted and his lips sucked one of my nipples in, a shudder moved through me.

My hand raised, sliding into his hair at the back of his head as he sucked, licked, and grazed until the heat inside me threatened to consume me completely.

“Miko, please,” I whimpered as he moved across my chest, continuing to tease, to torment me with more need.

“Love the sound of you begging,” he murmured as his lips moved between my breasts then moved upward, whispering across my collarbone, the column of my neck, and the shell of my ear. “Almost as much as I love the sound of you calling my name when you come.”

There was no stopping the pathetic little whimper that escaped me as my hips rocked down on him, desperate for the friction.

“Then make me come,” I demanded, bold with my desire.

That rumble moved through him again, more of a growl this time, as he grabbed and rolled me onto my back.

Moving to his knees, he reached for my legs, pulling them up to press my feet to his chest. Reaching around, he grabbed the waistbands of my pants and panties and started to pull them down.

The second he removed the material from my feet, his hands were at my knees, spreading me wide. Then he was down between, his tongue sliding up my cleft.

There was no slow build this time, though.

He found my clit and worked it relentlessly as my hips rocked, as my thighs tightened around his head, as my back arched and my throaty moans filled the room.

His hand slid between us, his fingers slipping inside me, thrusting lazily at first, then harder and faster as he pushed me closer and closer to the edge.

“Miko, I...” I started, but broke off on a cry as the orgasm crashed through me, stealing my breath, leaving me helpless but to let it keep overtaking me until I fell back, gasping, thighs shaking.

“Mmm,” Miko groaned as he pressed a kiss to my inner thigh.

His fingers were still inside of me, thrusting lazily again before turning to stroke against my top wall as his lips continued up my thigh, across my stomach, then down the other thigh.

The need came rushing back at an impossible speed, leaving me writhing and whimpering as Miko’s fingers worked my G-spot with expert precision.

“Miko, please,” I begged again, but this time my own hands were moving out, touching, exploring.

My hand slid across his lap to find his cock straining against the material of his sleep pants. At the brush of my fingers, Miko’s breath caught as his head tipped back and his eyes closed.

Drunk on my ability to affect him so easily, I let my palm slide across the head of his cock, moving side to side, then in slow circles that had his abdominal muscles tensing and his breath going fast and shallow.

As my hand slid up to slip under the waistband of his pants, his fingers stopped

stroking inside of me and started to tap instead, the new sensation dragging a long, loud moan out of me.

My hand closed around him again, stroking him down to the base. Once, twice. Then harder and faster as the little hitches in Miko's breath spurred me on.

But just when I thought another orgasm might slam through me, his fingers were out of me.

Then he was grabbing my legs, pressing them together, then rolling me over onto my belly. His hands went to my hips, sinking into them to pull me back onto all fours, then up against his chest.

His hand anchored around my stomach as his lips met my neck, and he shifted so his cock could tease between my thighs.

"The next time you come, it's going to be around my cock," he murmured in my ear, his voice rough. His teeth nipped my earlobe as a moan escaped me. "See how wet you are for me?" he asked as his cock slid against said wetness, coating it in my desire as I started to rock against him. "Just aching for my cock, aren't you?"

The whimpering sound that escaped me clearly wasn't good enough for him, though.

"Tell me you need my cock," he demanded, his hand sliding up to close lightly around my throat.

There was no denying it.

I'd been wanting him too long already.

"I need your cock," I said, my head falling back on his shoulder as my hips wiggled a

bit side to side, needing more friction than he was giving me.

A rumble moved through him at that.

“How?” he asked. “Like this?” His hips rocked a little faster.

“Yes,” I whimpered. I didn’t care how; I just needed him inside me.

“Or this?” he asked, moving me with him as he sat off the edge of the bed, putting me in his lap but facing away from him.

“Yes,” I moaned, rolling my hips in a circle as his hand moved out toward the nightstand, pulling open the drawer to find a condom before turning me and pressing me back onto the bed again.

“Or like this?” he asked, kneeling at the side of the bed after sliding on the protection, his cock gliding against my pussy again.

“Please,” I cried.

“Please, what, sugar?” he asked, lips twitching, knowing just how desperate I was.

“Please fuck me,” I demanded.

He didn’t need more than that.

His hips shifted.

Then he was surging inside of me, taking every inch of me with one long thrust.

I’d never heard the sound I made just then, something caught between a cry and a

moan, as my walls tightened around him.

Miko sucked in a deep breath, his eyes closed for a second, looking for some self-control.

But I didn't have time to wait for him to find it.

The ache inside only seemed to grow with the fullness of him inside me.

So my hips started to rock, trying to ease the pressure in my core.

Miko's eyes slid open as he reached down to drag my legs up to his shoulders.

Then he was doing as I asked.

Fucking me.

There was no more teasing, no dragging things out.

He fucked me hard and fast, his forearm anchoring my legs to his chest as he moved, making it too hard for me to move, to meet him thrust for thrust, leaving me completely at his mercy as he drove me up.

"Fuck," Miko groaned as my walls tightened around his cock. "That's it, squeeze my cock. Let me feel you come."

And just like that, I did.

My whole body shuddered as the orgasm crashed through me. Miko fucked me through it, making the climax pull me under over and over each time I thought it might relent.

“Not done with you,” he said after.

He reached for my legs, pulling them down from his shoulders, pressing them together, then cocking them up at a ninety-degree angle on the mattress, making my pussy squeeze tighter around his cock as he started to move again.

This time, not as hard or fast. Just slow, deep thrusts, giving my body a chance to come back down before driving me back up.

Only when I was moaning again did he grab my hips, flipping me onto my belly, then all fours, before slamming back into me.

The new position and the borderline savage way he was fucking me had my fingers fisting the bedsheets, had me leaning down to press my face into them to muffle my cries.

“No,” he growled, reaching out to grab a handful of my hair and yanking me back by it, the sting across my scalp creating a pain/pleasure sensation that had an embarrassing groan escaping me. “I want to hear you,” he said, keeping a tight hold on my hair as he kept fucking me. “That’s it,” he murmured as my cries filled the room, as my walls clenched tight around his cock. “Be a good girl and come for me.”

I hated how much I loved him calling me that, but as the orgasm screamed through my system, all that mattered was how good it felt that he knew just what I needed to hear, that he understood just how I liked to be fucked.

“One more,” he said when I came back down, gasping, trembling.

“I can’t,” I whimpered, my legs feeling like jelly, my whole body tender and shaky.

“Yes, you can,” he said, but there was something softer in his voice as he released my

hair, letting me fall forward into the mattress before reaching for me, turning me onto my back, then coming over me.

His lips were on mine again.

But not so hungry.

Just hard and seeking, kissing me with an intensity that made it feel like he'd cracked open my chest, like he'd slipped inside.

Tears sprang up behind my closed lids as Miko started to move inside of me again.

They were long, unhurried thrusts as he kept kissing me, as the intimacy grew, becoming something beautiful—and terrifying.

It wasn't long, though, before he had me so close again. My arms slid around him, holding on tight as my body moved with his.

His head shifted, breaking the kiss.

The disappointment was short-lived, though, as his lips went to my ear, his voice soft as his words only managed to drive me up as well.

“You feel so good taking me like this,” he murmured, his lips teasing the shell of my ear. “ Fuck ,” he groaned, voice getting strained. “That’s it,” he added as my whole body started to tremble as the orgasm started to crest. “Fuck, that’s a good girl.”

“Miko,” I gasped, clutching him, holding on tightly as the orgasm started, a deep, hard pulsation that spread outward to take over me completely.

Miko rocked with me then surged deep and came with me.

His weight pressed down on me after, something oddly comforting to my overwrought system, to my fragile emotions.

The aftershocks rolled through me as I held onto him. Partly to hold on to the intimacy. But also partly so he didn't see the tear that slid down my cheek.

Because nothing had ever felt quite like that before.

Sex had only ever been, well, sex.

Just easy, mutual satisfaction.

Nothing more or less.

This was... something else entirely.

Even then, body spent, no more need to be found, that sensation of him in my chest persisted. And I wondered if he would always be there, if he maybe felt the same way.

It was my stupid stomach's decision to growl right then that finally broke the spell between us.

Miko's head turned, pressing a soft kiss to my jaw before pushing up and looking down at me, a sweet smile toying with his lips.

"Let's get some food," he said, even though I wasn't sure I could force my body to move right then.

"Okay," I agreed because, well, what else could I say?

That I wanted to stay like this with him for a few more minutes, hours, days?

No.

That was never going to work.

So when Miko went into the bathroom, I forced some life into my limbs, folded up, and slid off the bed.

By the time Miko came back, I'd managed to get back into my pants, but couldn't find my shirt. He stooped down, fetching it from where it had managed to slip under the bed, then came back to me, helping me into it before finding his own pants again.

Afterward, we moved silently toward the door.

I'd never wanted so badly for someone to speak, to tell me what they were thinking.

But Miko said nothing as I followed him down the hall toward the common area.

The air was filled with the rich scent of tomato sauce, making my belly rumble again.

"What took you guys so long?" Chuck asked from his cross-legged position on the couch, balancing a massive bowl on a throw pillow. There were only a few noodles left on the bottom.

"I heard you cooked," I said, sidestepping the question.

"Yep," Chuck said, puffing up a bit.

"I don't know how to cook," I admitted.

“Miko helped,” Chuck admitted. “But I did all the work.”

“Smells good,” I told him as Miko fetched bowls and started to fill them.

“Next time, I’m gonna make garlic bread too. I found a recipe.”

I sincerely hoped there wouldn’t be a ‘next time,’ since that meant someone was still out there with Miko’s diamonds and wanting to clear house so no one could talk.

And since I was the one who’d seen him the best, I had a feeling if we didn’t find this asshole, I would never be able to stop looking over my shoulder.

“Oh, the trip,” I said as I took the bowl from Miko.

“I already got it all set up,” he said. At my pinched brows, he shrugged. “I got up before you,” he explained. “They have a room at a nice inn, passes to a ski resort, and reservations at a few local restaurants.”

Wow.

That was impressive.

There was something undeniably hot about a man who not only talked about shit, but carried through with it. All without needing to be nagged about it.

Competence was the sexiest thing to find in the opposite sex.

“I will text Megs about it while we eat,” I said, glad for a distraction.

Not that I needed one when we had Chuck sitting between us, talking about all the local attractions, about new recipes he wanted to try to make, about how he was

thinking about a career change now that he was ‘rolling in it.’

Neither Miko nor I had the heart to inform him that ‘rolling in it’ in some small upstate town was likely ‘just scraping by’ in Manhattan.

“What did Megs say?” Miko asked when my phone chimed.

“A mix of suspicion and excitement,” I admitted.

“Why suspicion?”

“Because I’ve never sent them on a trip before. And she’s not an idiot, so the timing has to be setting off alarms.”

But Megs had a hard time holding onto her suspicions when I said that I’d talked to Tyler and he’d told me they’d been sad, and that I wanted to cheer them up with their anniversary coming up.

And once they got the name of the inn, it was all gushing about how gorgeous it—and the town around it—was.

“That sounds like excited texting,” Miko observed.

“It is. They’re stoked now,” I admitted. “But we did forget about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Neither of them has a car.”

“Oh, shit, yeah. Well, that’s easy enough,” he said, reaching for his phone.

“Are you ordering a car service?”

“More or less,” he said with a devilish little smirk.

“What’s that smile about?” I asked.

“Sometimes there’s a perk to having so many siblings,” he said.

“No, don’t make one of them drive them. I’ll hire a car service.”

“Nero is the Family’s car service,” Miko said. Then, sensing I was about to put my foot down, “I’d feel better if they were with someone I know. At least until they are in Vermont. If you want to hire a service for their way home, I’m cool with that. But I want to know they’re safe. They will be with my brother.”

“Oh. Okay,” I agreed. “But can he maybe... act like a car service? Megs will be suspicious if he doesn’t.”

“Yeah, he’ll do that.”

“Wait. Does he look like you?”

To that, Miko shrugged as he did something on his phone. A second later, a man’s voice came from it.

“Why are you video calling me?” Nero, I assumed, asked.

“Say hi to Max,” Miko said, turning the screen to face me.

My immediate instinct was to look away, to hide my face, suddenly insecure about the bruises, even if I’d just spent the past few days not giving a shit who saw me.

“Camera’s off on our end,” he said, seeming to read my mind. Which was both endearing and worrisome.

I wasn’t easy to read.

That was my thing.

Being a closed book.

How was he able to read me so easily?

“Um... hi, Max,” Nero said, looking at the screen as he walked around his apartment. “Wish I could say it was nice to see you, but, well...”

If you really looked, yeah, you could definitely see the family resemblance. Maybe it was just my feelings for him that made me feel that way, but I thought Miko was hotter. Though, to be fair, Nero was younger. And everyone knew that guys just managed to get hotter year by year.

“I have to know, is your brother’s stubbornness a family trait?” I asked.

“Miko? Stubborn? Think you’re talking about one of the other brothers.”

“Um, hi, I’m here too,” Chuck said, clearly wanting to be included.

“Who is that?”

“No one you need to know about. Alright. I’m hanging up. Clear your schedule for tomorrow. Then swing by here to get the car ready.”

“I might have had plans tomorrow, y’know,” Nero said.

“And now you have different plans. Get some sleep. Gonna be a long day of driving.”

With that, Miko hung up.

“What?” he asked, catching me shooting small eyes at him.

“I refuse to believe that your family doesn’t consider you stubborn.”

“I’m pretty go-with-the-flow, actually. You wanna meet stubborn, I can introduce you to some guys. Or, you know, show you a mirror,” he teased, shooting me a knowing smile.

“How come I couldn’t say hi to your brother?” Chuck asked.

“Because no one is supposed to know you are here,” Miko told him.

“Oh, right,” Chuck said, shoulders slumping.

“Listen, when this shit is done, I will go with you to the fucking wax museum, okay?” Miko said, looking pained at the very idea, but willing to do it for Chuck.

He probably really was a good brother.

Which meant he would almost certainly make a great father.

Wait, what?

Why the hell was I thinking shit like that?

“What’s got that look on your face?” Miko asked, frowning at me as he reached to take my empty bowl away.

“What? Oh, nothing,” I lied. One look at Miko’s face said he didn’t believe me.

But he was right about one thing.

I was stubborn as fuck.

And there was no way in hell I was going to let him know that I was suddenly imagining him holding a baby. Maybe even... our baby.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Miko

I won't lie; I was actually kind of relieved that by the time Chuck went to bed and Max and I cleaned up the epic fucking mess he made of my kitchen, Zeno still hadn't gotten back to me about anything.

Even if that went against everything I thought I knew about myself. Namely, that work was just about the most important thing in the world, behind my parents and siblings.

Nothing else, not even a woman, got in the way of work.

Then again, none of the women in the past were Max.

Even as I thought that, I glanced over to find her already watching me. Her gaze quickly fell, but not before I saw the mix of confusion and warmth on her face.

It was strange to be in a position where I was the one more in touch with my feelings, more determined to explore what was between us.

That said, it made sense.

Sure, my work forced me to be able to compartmentalize, to tamp down anything personal for the better of the organization. But I had come from a happy, loving family. I knew how to love and be loved.

Max, on the other hand, had all of the hard shit in life and none of the soft. Yeah, she had Megs. And she definitely loved her and was loved in return, but there was a certain level of anxious attachment in that relationship for Max. She thought that if or when Megs was ready to move on with her life, she would be all alone in the world again. There was no part of her that seemed to realize someone else could ever love her.

“Max,” I called, watching her look over, features guarded.

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something about your past?”

“Well, you can ask,” she said with a shrug.

“I know about your time on the streets alone and then meeting Megs. But... you’ve never talked about before then.”

“There’s not much to tell. I was raised by a single mom. My dad... is a big question mark.”

“What happened with your mom that had you on the streets, though?”

To that, she sucked in a deep breath through her nose before sighing it out.

“My fifth ‘step-dad’ happened,” Max admitted. “I was fourteen. He was a fucking pervert.”

“Jesus.”

“Nothing happened. Much,” she clarified. “But when I went to my mom about what

did, she was fucking enraged.”

“As she should be.”

“At me,” Max clarified. “She went on and on about how I was ‘leading him on’ by walking around in shorts and tank tops. That I was always flirting with him. I was fourteen. I didn’t know how to flirt,” she said, jaw going tight. “Anyway, she kicked me out.”

“She kicked you out?”

“Yep. She said she couldn’t have me around competing for her guy’s attention. Like I wanted that scumbag’s attention. But, honestly, I was okay with leaving. Living with my mother was somehow more unstable than being on the streets. Different guy every week. Not one of them even halfway decent. Between them, we were practically homeless anyway.”

“Have you ever seen her since?”

“Sad thing is, I walked right past her in a bodega once. She didn’t even recognize me. But she was hanging on the arm of some other dirtbag by then.”

“Life hasn’t given you a lot of breaks, huh?” I asked, walking over toward her. But when I reached for her, she turned away, pretending she didn’t notice the offer of comfort.

“I’ve done alright,” she said with a shrug.

“You’ve done more than alright,” I told her, walking up behind her to wrap my arms around her waist before she could try to move away again. My head went down on her shoulder, leaning in to press a kiss to her neck.

It took a minute, but she slowly melted into me, turning her head to rest it against mine, letting her eyes slide closed.

Suddenly, I wanted to share all my shit with her.

Me, my house, my bed, my security, my protection.

But just as much: my family, their love, their support. All the shit she'd never had before.

"You about ready to go back to bed?" I asked, feeling the way a little shiver of anticipation moved through her.

"Okay," she agreed, already getting all soft and sweet on me.

We passed Chuck's room, hearing loud snoring.

"I wonder if he's ever had an overnight guest to tell him that he should maybe get tested for sleep apnea," Max said as Chuck made a choking sound before going back to snoring.

"Looks like you know what the breakfast conversation will be."

"Are you going to let him cook that too?" she asked.

"The sauce was pretty good," I said, closing and locking my bedroom door, not trusting Chuck not to wander in like a kid who had a nightmare. "He might do something good with an omelet. Or pancakes."

"Maybe I should take some lessons from him," Max said as she dug around in her duffle for her toothbrush and paste.

“I could teach you to cook,” I offered, following her in to brush my own teeth.

It was the first time the his-and-hers sinks had ever been used at the same time. And it was yet another situation where something just felt... right about it.

“I’m not a very good student,” she warned as she glanced over at my reflection.

“I got a lot of patience.”

“I might enjoy testing that,” she admitted.

I had a feeling I would too. Though I imagined every one of those lessons would end up with her served up on the island and me feasting on her instead of whatever we were making.

“You and me, soon as we have Chuck outta our hair, we will do lessons. Start easy. Do you know how to boil water?”

“Ha ha,” she said, scrunching up her eyes at me. “And I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think you’re getting Chuck out of your guest room now that you invited him into it.”

“Christ. You might be right about that,” I agreed as we both moved out of the bathroom and toward the bed. “Wait a sec,” I called when she pulled back the covers.

“What?”

“You won’t be needing this,” I said, moving in front of her to reach down and pull up her shirt. “Or this.” My hands went to her pants next, pushing them down her legs. “And you definitely won’t need these,” I told her as I hooked my fingers into her panties, lowering down to the floor in front of her as I went.

“Miko,” she murmured.

“Yeah?” I asked, angling my head up to look at her, finding her eyes heated, her breathing going fast.

Her hand lifted, slipping across my jaw, then behind my head.

“You need something from me, sugar?” I asked, loving the way everything seemed to make her whimper.

“Yes.”

“Yeah?” I asked, head tilting to the side as her fingers sifted into my hair. “Tell me what you want,” I demanded, leaning in to tease my nose up her thigh. “Can’t give you it if you don’t tell me,” I warned as I pressed a kiss to the triangle above her sex. “You need me to taste your sweet pussy again?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, fingers tightening in my hair.

Her thighs parted for me, and I wasted no time leaning in, running my tongue up her pussy, then teasing little circles around her clit.

Her hips immediately started to rock, riding my face as I worked her.

My fingers slipped inside her, and a groan escaped me, finding her already dripping for me.

“Don’t stop,” Max whimpered, her fingers pulling my hair, her pussy squeezing my fingers.

My cock was aching at the sounds of her begging, enough that I had to reach down

with my free hand, grabbing my length and stroking as her moans filled the room. Then, as her whole body trembled and her pussy milked my fingers as she came.

She fell back on the edge of the bed, panting for breath.

Getting to my feet, I kept stroking my cock until her hands rose, slipping behind to sink into my ass, pulling me closer.

“You gonna suck my cock?” I asked, voice rough, as she brushed my hand away to grab me herself.

Then she was leaning closer to tease her tongue over the head, down the bottom of the shaft, over my balls, then back up again before finally—fucking finally—sucking me deep into her mouth.

“Fuck, baby,” I groaned, my hand grabbing the back of her head as she started to suck me hard and fast, nearly making me come down her throat before I grabbed her hair and pulled her back, my cock popping out from between her lips as her hungry eyes held my gaze.

“You gonna be a good girl and ride my cock?” I asked, my thumb teasing across her lower lip. “Yeah?” I asked when her head nodded.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

She crawled up the bed as I grabbed and slipped on the condom before joining her.

She didn’t even wait for me to reach for her, just climbed over to straddle me, lifting up, then reaching between us to guide my cock before sliding down.

Her head fell back with a throaty moan as she took me to the base, her pussy

tightening automatically, dragging a groan out of me as my hips jerked up instinctively. A gasp escaped Max at that, making me wonder for a split second if I'd hurt her until her hips wiggled, wanting more of it.

“Ride me, sugar,” I demanded, my fingers sinking into her hips.

She didn't need more encouragement than that.

She didn't even start slow.

No, she rode me hard and fast, sweat beading up on her skin, her tits bouncing, her moans loud and frequent.

“Love watching you fuck me,” I told her, my hips starting to rock up into her as her own movements began to get more erratic and her pussy tightened around me, getting close. “That's it, baby, squeeze my cock,” I said as the orgasm moved through her, making her fall forward into me, crying out her release into my neck as my hips kept rocking, dragging it out until she was just dead, trembling weight on top of me.

But I wasn't done.

Not just yet.

I rolled her onto her back and claimed her lips. Hard. Hungry.

As much as some part of me wanted to give her more slow and sweet, to show her an intimacy that I imagined she'd never felt before. But my own need for release had too much of a grip on me.

So I fucked her how I needed, how I already knew she liked it. Hard and fast. Whispering dirty things in her ear, telling her how good she was taking me.

Until she was tensing again, until her pussy was a vice grip before she started to clutch around me as she came.

Afterward, when I came back from the bathroom, I found she'd already rolled over to the far end of the bed, back to me, ready to slowly erect those damn walls again.

But we were beyond that.

We were working on building something new for both of us.

So I scooted right over there with her, curling my legs up behind hers, my arm over her waist, and my face in her hair.

And that was how we slept.

Until Chuck's racket woke us up early the next morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Max

Waking up in Miko's arms was like a physical manifestation of that tight, warm sweater sensation I'd been feeling around him more and more.

"What is that?" I grumbled, annoyed at the noises coming from the common area that I had a feeling was going to force us to untangle and climb out of bed.

"That is Chuck," Miko reminded me as he pressed a kiss to my neck. "Who is hopefully not burning down my apartment," he added, grumbling as he rolled away from me and got off the other side of the bed.

Alone, I couldn't bring myself to move yet. I knew that as soon as I did, the real world would come rushing back, and I would lose whatever this feeling was.

The closest thing I could compare it to was the first night that Megs and I could afford a hotel room. With a lock to keep everyone out. With a heater to keep us warm. With running water to wash away the filth.

It was comfort and security.

I never wanted to let it go.

But by the time Miko came out of the shower and got himself into his usual suit, I knew it was time to face reality.

“Stay,” he said, still slipping in a cufflink as he approached the side of the bed, leaning down to press a kiss to my forehead. “I’ll bring you some coffee.”

But as soon as he was gone, I grabbed my last set of fresh clothes out of my duffle bag and made my way into the bathroom.

“Can’t follow a single instruction, can you, sugar?” Miko called a few minutes later, making me jump and turn to find him leaning in the bathroom doorway, a cup of coffee in his hand as his gaze roamed over me.

“We have shit to do today,” I said, shrugging as I leaned back to rinse the conditioner out of my hair before squeezing out the strands, then reaching for a towel.

“Unfortunately,” Miko agreed as I dried off, then wrapped myself in the towel so I could approach him and take my coffee.

“Have you heard from Zeno?” I asked.

“No. But I didn’t expect to. I get the feeling that he’s not the best at getting back to people. I figured that once we ate and made sure Megs and Nicole were on their way, we could pop back over.”

“What about Chuck?”

“Chuck made slightly burnt scrambled eggs and definitely burnt toast for us to choke down. Then he’s going to spend the day here.”

“Is that safe?”

“I’m gonna have Venezio come and babysit.”

“That... probably won’t go well,” I decided. I didn’t know everything about Venezio, of course, but Miko had talked about him a bit on the ride upstate.

From what I could gather, Venezio was a man of few words. Chuck had enough for ten men. Venezio was serious and reserved. Chuck was slightly absurd and extroverted.

“I know,” Miko agreed, reaching out to catch a bead of water that slipped from the edge of my hair and was about to slide down between my breasts. “But Venezio is the only person I can call on to do a job and not have him ask me a single fucking thing about it. And if Chuck does something stupid like spill the beans, he also won’t feel compelled to call Cosimo or Lorenzo either.”

“Because he’s just an associate?” I asked, starting to get a hang of the mafia hierarchy.

“Because he’s used to being on his own. It doesn’t come naturally to him to run to someone else. I imagine that will come eventually as he works for us for longer. But this works for me for right now.”

“If Zeno hasn’t found anything, what is the plan then?” I asked.

To that, he exhaled hard. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Maybe check in with Lil; see if she heard anything.”

“We can do that,” I agreed. “I’m going to need to stop home at some point.”

“Why?”

“I’m out of clothes.”

“Not seeing a problem there,” he said, eyes warm as they moved down my barely covered body.

“So, you want me walking around naked in front of Chuck?”

I swear to God, a sound that was damn near a growl escaped him at that. It was way hotter than it had any right to be.

“Fine. We can grab some more clothes and anything else you might need for the near future,” he agreed. “Meet you out there?” he asked as I set down the mug and reached for my hairbrush.

“Yep. Five minutes,” I told him, then rushed through getting myself dressed before sharing a terrible breakfast with the two of them.

Venezio showed up not long after, giving Chuck a curt “Fuck no,” when offered rubbery eggs and burnt toast.

“We shouldn’t be more than a few hours,” Miko told Venezio as the two of us reached for our jackets.

I didn’t know about Miko, but I was eager to get the errands part of the day over with simply because I wanted to be back in bed with him sooner rather than later.

We hadn’t exactly discussed what was clearly going on with us. But it seemed we were both silently just agreeing to... go with the flow. Let it happen. Whatever ‘it’ was.

We grabbed more coffee on the way to Zeno’s, then spent a solid twenty minutes knocking and calling to him before he finally pulled the door open, bleary-eyed and wearing a pair of watermelon-print sleep pants and a massively oversized blue

hoodie.

“Good morning,” Miko said, holding out the coffee we’d brought him.

“Woulda been better at eleven. Or noon,” Zeno grumbled, yawning, as he walked over toward his desks.

“Long night?” Miko asked.

“Long frustrating night,” Zeno admitted, waking up all of his screens. “I’ve gone through years of chat records, bills, everything you can think of. I can’t find evidence of Henry ever having roommates. Though, I do have messages out to a few other people in the apartment building, asking about him.”

“Why would anyone answer that?” I asked.

“I may or may not have implied he’s a deadbeat dad with years’ worth of back child support due, and his very ill baby mama can’t find him.”

“Hey, whatever works,” I said, shrugging. “Why are you watching that?” I asked, looking at one of his screens to see the footage of me on the street just before I spotted Miko and set my sights on him.

“Forgot it was playing,” Zeno said with a shrug as he cradled his coffee like a lifeline. “You really are good at that.”

“I really needed to be,” I said, watching myself as I pulled up my hood before making my way toward Miko.

It was interesting, though, to see it from above. The ease of it. Miko’s complete ignorance of what just happened to him.

I was about to look away as I watched myself tuck the wallet away, remembering how satisfied I'd felt.

But it was right then that a face seemed to jump out to me in the crowd. Why, I had no idea. He blended in with everyone else. A sea of people moving down the streets as they did every single day.

Maybe it was the way his gaze was on me.

Intense.

Hard.

Familiar.

Even in a grainy street video, those piercing blue eyes made my stomach tighten.

"Max?" Miko called.

But I was rushing to lean across the desk, slamming down the space bar before he could disappear.

"There," I said, stabbing a finger toward the screen. "That's him."

"Him who?" Zeno asked.

"Are you sure?" Miko asked.

"How the fuck do you zoom in on this? Blow this up," I demanded of Zeno.

"Okay. Alright. Hold on," Zeno said, rolling closer, then not only making the image

larger, but clearer after a few clicks.

“That’s him,” I said, more sure than ever.

“It’s not very clear,” Miko said.

“Miko, he sat on my thighs and he strangled me. Over and over. I looked up into that face. I know what he looks like.”

Concern and anger crossed Miko’s handsome features in a blink. “Okay,” he said, voice soft. “Alright. Is that clear enough to try to run facial recognition?” Miko asked Zeno as he moved over to me, pressing a hand to my lower back, steering me away from the screens. Like he knew that the longer I stared at it, the more I was sucked back into my bedroom, to that night, to the fear, to the breathlessness, to the feelings of horrifying helplessness.

“Yeah, I think it will work,” Zeno said as Miko wrapped an arm around my hips and curled me into his side.

Normally, I would have thought that it would make me feel weak. But right then, I was happy to feel Miko’s strength, to lean into him, to allow him to comfort me.

“You okay?”

I didn’t give in to the urge to insist I was fine.

“It was like I was back on that bed for a minute,” I admitted, resting my face against Miko’s chest and breathing in his comforting scent.

“He’s gonna pay for it.”

“And the diamonds.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the diamonds,” Miko said, his hand sliding up and down my spine.

“Half a million dollars.”

“You’re more important.”

There was no helping the snort that escaped me at that.

“You don’t believe me?”

“No.”

“Why would I lie?”

“You’ve known me for point-five seconds.”

He opened his mouth, then paused, thinking.

“I’m sorry if I haven’t made it clear that you’re important to me,” he said, this time making me open and close my mouth, not sure how I wanted to respond to that. “I’ll do better moving forward,” he added, his arm giving me a little squeeze. “Do you think this will be as quick as it was for Max?”

“Way to make me sound easy,” I grumbled.

“Trust me, sugar, there’s not a damn thing easy about you,” he said, but the teasing smile and light in his eyes soothed over the barbed words.

“Depends on his social media footprint, really. But if he’s dark on there, I might be able to pick him up on more street cameras, see if he’s moving around the city. But if he went back upstate, there’s less I can do. Not as many cameras there,” Zeno explained.

“Shit,” Miko said after reaching for his phone.

“What is it?”

“Text from my boss. I’m gonna have to head out for... half an hour or so.”

“Okay,” I agreed, surprised at the way disappointment flooded my system. In such a short amount of time, he had begun to mean too much. So much, in fact, that I didn’t want him to leave. Not even for half an hour.

What the hell was that about?

“Okay. Well, while you do that, I’m gonna give Lil a call,” I said, moving away from Miko. Mostly because I liked being in his arms just a little too much.

“That’s a good plan. Zeno, you got a gun, right?” Miko asked, making Zeno look over, one brow cocked as if Miko was asking a ridiculous question.

“Alright. Good. I will be as fast as I can.”

“Miko, I’m a grown-ass woman. I’ll be fine.”

But, damn if his protectiveness didn’t give me that warm hug feeling once again.

As soon as he was gone, Zeno went back to work, music thumping, as I moved closer to the door for some quiet to call Lil.

I wasn't surprised when it rang and rang. Lil could sometimes be a bit like Zeno—getting lost in her work, blasting her music, letting the rest of the world fall away.

But I kept trying, knowing it would annoy her eventually and she would pick up with her usual Hey, Babe. Then maybe ask something wholly inappropriate, like if I'd climbed Miko like a tree yet.

What I didn't expect was a hushed, desperate, "Max, help."

My stomach bottomed out as my pulse rushed through my veins. "Lil? Lil, what's going on? Is someone there?" I asked.

But just then, there was a loud thunk followed by a pained cry from Lil.

I wasn't even sure I hung up my phone as I rushed toward the door.

"Max?" Zeno called. Then, as I bolted down the hallway, "Max, wait!"

But there was no waiting.

Lil was in trouble.

And I was the only person around to help.

I cursed myself for not grabbing Zeno's gun he'd mentioned. Or at the very least, a butcher knife from the drawer.

But there was no time to go back as I flew out of the building and ran down the street, thinking of how much damage someone could inflict on Lil in the time it took me to run from Zeno's place to her little side street.

I paused only for one second to draw in a breath before throwing open the door and rushing inside.

The place was a fucking disaster.

Tables were overturned. Brilliant blue sapphires, deep emeralds, and striking rubies were scattered around the floors, mingling with diamonds and various metals Lil used to make the settings.

There, in the middle of the mess on the floor, was Lil's gun. The same one she'd held on Miko what suddenly felt like ages ago.

"Lil?" I called, trying to be heard over the music bleeding from the surround sound speakers.

Some instinct had me stepping toward the gun.

But I'd barely gotten a foot inside of the apartment before the door slammed behind me and hands shoved into my shoulders, sending me stumbling forward.

If the desk was where it should have been, I would have landed on it, would have needed to struggle to scramble up.

As it was, I managed to slow my momentum, duck, and swing around.

Then there he was.

Those bright blue eyes immobilized me for a second.

"You're starting to be a real problem," he said, panting hard, blood dripping lazily from his nostril. From, I reminded myself, his fight with Lil, who I didn't see, who I

didn't hear.

"Shoulda killed you when I had the chance," he added, lunging. "Won't make that mistake again."

He was going for my throat, but I was quick enough to duck, to bend, and charge forward, ramming him back into the wall.

If I wasn't worried about Lil, I could have used his momentary shock to slip out of the door, to get onto the relative safety of the streets.

But I couldn't leave her. She wouldn't have left me.

Which meant he had a chance to straighten, to square up, and then land a blow to my jaw that sent me flying.

I crashed to the floor, a thousand little gemstones biting into me at the impact.

But there was no time to focus on that.

I flipped over and scrambled backward, knowing that if I just got far enough, I could get to the gun.

My attacker reached down, though, grabbing my ankle, and dragging me back across the floor. There was nothing I could do to stop him. He was bigger. Stronger. And there was nothing to grab to keep myself in place.

My hands flew out, grabbing for anything around me.

There was nothing as convenient as a knife. But my hand closed around a pair of the pliers Lil used for work. It wasn't the needle-nosed ones that I could have used to ram

through this bastard's eye. It was one of the blunted ones, meant for trimming metal.

But it was all I had.

So as soon as he had me in the middle of the room, likely trying to keep me from the gun, he lowered down again, hand going toward my throat.

Mustering every bit of strength I had, I plunged the pliers out toward his face.

Seeing it, though, he shifted just enough for the blow to land on his nose instead of his soft eye.

Still, he'd already been hit, and the impact had his eyes flooding with tears as he reared back, cursing.

It wasn't much of an opening but I scrambled away, heading toward the kitchen, to the knives, pans, or, hell, even a meat tenderizer I might find there.

It was then, though, that I saw something.

Someone.

Lil was crawling across the ground, her face so bloodied and swollen that I barely recognized her.

But in my distraction, our attacker caught up, slamming his hands into my back, sending me flying into the refrigerator so quickly that I couldn't even throw out my hands to brace the impact.

My wind knocked out, leaving me gasping, panic starting to swirl through my head when I couldn't draw in a proper breath.

He was right on me then, his forearm pressed against the back of my neck, his ragged breath in my ear.

“Max,” Lil called, her voice small. But it was enough to shock me out of my inaction.

Then I was fighting for my life. And Lil’s. Since I knew that if he finished me, he would go back for her. Clean house.

And I already knew he was cold and capable of murder.

So I flailed, scratched, bit.

When I got enough room to turn, I did. Then I could hit, slap, claw, knee, kick.

He stumbled back a foot when my knee came up to his crotch with as much force as I could muster.

“Max!” Lil called, making me look just in time to see her get to the gun, then whip it across the hardwood floor toward me.

I rushed forward, scrambling for it.

There was no hesitation once I had it in my hands.

I turned, slid my finger to the trigger.

And fired.

Once. Twice.

The third one hit.

Sure, it was only his thigh, but I'd never shot a gun before. I was proud to hit him at all. Especially because Lil's damn gun kicked like a mule.

Our attacker looked stunned for a moment. But as the blood bloomed down his thigh, he seemed to weigh his options.

Then turned and ran.

I didn't lower my arms, though.

I stood there, my hands trembling a bit with the surging adrenaline as Lil pulled herself over to my side, panting hard.

"Are you okay?" I asked, breathing heavily.

"Been better," she said, her voice smaller than I'd ever heard it. "Lock the door," she demanded.

That snapped me out of it, making me run across the room to slide her many locks into place before leaning back against it, panting for breath.

My gaze finally landed on Lil again as she tried to stand.

"Here. Wait," I said, rushing toward her.

I tucked the gun into my waistband before reaching for her, letting her slowly pull herself upward, hissing and cursing. When she finally got to her feet, she was sweating and pale, making the bruises and blood contrast like a fucking horror movie.

"Oh, fuck."

“That good, huh?” she asked, sucking in quick, shallow breaths.

“Hold on. Let me get your chair,” I said, rushing to find it and wheel it over to her.

“Music, off,” Lil called, making the room immediately go silent, save for our labored breathing and Lil’s little whimpers of pain as she tried to move.

Blood stained her tee and was sticky in her dark hair.

“What hurts the worst?” I asked, wondering if I needed to call an ambulance or not.

“Face. Ribs. Head. That order. But I think I fucked up my knee when I fell.”

Her hands, bloody knuckles from fighting back and all, went to said knee, cupping the sides of it. I could already see swelling through her tight pants. Something was fucked up there, that was for sure.

“Okay. I think you need to go to the emergency—“

The pounding on the door made us both jump and gasp.

My hand went automatically for the gun.

But then I heard it.

Him.

Calling through the door.

“Max!”

Miko was there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Miko

“I tried to get in touch with your brother first,” Cosimo told me as I walked up to him on the street. “And Venezia.”

“I have them both doing shit for me today,” I admitted, tone apologetic, hoping he wouldn’t ask follow-up questions.

I was okay with... avoiding telling him what was going on. But I was going to struggle lying to his face.

“What do you need?” I asked, wanting to push the conversation forward toward safer topics.

“Remember we gave that crew an extension on their protection money?” he asked.

“The one who had to go out of state for a funeral?”

“Yeah, them.”

“What about them?”

“Just got word that no one died. Instead, they are trying to pay a local street crew for protection.”

“Fucking idiots,” I said with a sigh. Sure, they were probably cheaper. But they would also be less effective, less connected, and more likely to keep raising the price of protection each month, then viciously enforce that raise. “Could this be linked to the frat guy shit?”

“We’re looking into it. But in the meantime, I need some head-knocking.”

“Owners?”

“For now,” Cosimo said, jaw ticking, annoyed that anyone would go behind his back.

“Alright. How big is this crew... sorry,” I said when my phone started to ring in my pocket.

I was just reaching for it to silence it since no phone call was more important than talking to your capo when he was right in front of you. But when I saw Zeno’s name on the screen, something had my stomach twisting.

“Do you mind?” I asked.

Cosimo shrugged as I swiped the screen.

“What’s—“

“Max ran off,” Zeno said, sounding like he was running, his breath coming out fast and shallow.

“What? What are you talking about?” I asked, stomach starting to twist.

“She was making a phone call... then she just... flew out of here. Didn’t say anything.”

She said she was going to call Lil.

Even if Lil had information, Max was too smart to run out of there alone to meet with her.

Something was wrong.

Lil was in trouble.

“Tell me you’re with her,” I said, knowing Cosimo was watching me, but not giving a fuck as I turned and ran.

“She was too fast. I’m on the street, but I don’t know where I’m going.”

I was closer anyway.

But I rattled off the address for him, wanting backup just in case shit was really bad.

“I’m ten minutes out, max,” I told Zeno before hanging up and focusing on pushing my body harder and faster, not caring who I rammed into on the way, or how many car horns blew at me when I rushed across the crosswalks when the signs were red.

It felt like it took a fucking lifetime, my mind racing with images of horrible things happening to Max. Hands on her. New bruises and cuts to heal.

Or...

No.

Nope, I refused to imagine losing her. Not when I was just starting to have her to myself.

My lungs were burning when I finally saw Lil's building.

I flew at it, ramming my fists into the wood when the knob wouldn't budge.

"Max!" I yelled loud enough to make a trio of pigeons startle and fly off.

"Max," I called again, ready to reach for my gun, to shoot off the fucking knob if I had to, consequences be damned.

But then the locks slid.

The door opened.

And there she was.

With Lil's cannon in her hand.

"Sugar," I said, the relief nearly enough to bring me to my knees as my hand went around her, hauling her to my chest. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay," she said, voice a little tight until I realized I was crushing her. I loosened my hold, and she moved back. "But Lil..." she added, moving to the side to wave toward the apartment.

The place was wrecked. Furniture overturned, gems scattered all around, drops and streaks of blood on the floors and walls.

In the center of all of it was Lil, seated on her rolling chair, beat to fucking hell.

"Oh, fuck," I said, taking a step inward when I heard footsteps behind me.

Max heard it at the same time, body stiffening, gun raising.

I reached out, pushing her wrist down, as Zeno came in the door. Still in his ugly sleep pants and oversized tee. But now with taco slippers on his feet.

And, I noticed, the glint of a gun poked out from his too-long sleeve.

“It’s okay. It’s just Zeno,” I told Max as I carefully pulled the gun from her hand.

She was trembling.

I didn’t know if it was fear, anger, or just the adrenaline that had no place to go.

I pulled her to my side as Zeno came in, closing and locking the door.

“Zeno, can you call Salvatore?” I asked as I approached Lil, more worried about the blood I saw on her than I was willing to tell Max. “Heya, Lil. How’re you feeling?” I asked.

“Pissed,” she admitted, chin jutting.

“I bet. Can I?” I asked, gesturing toward her face.

She gave me a small nod, and I carefully prodded around her nose and eye sockets, where the swelling and bruising looked worse.

Zeno moved in, finished with his call, and used the flashlight on his phone to give me more light to inspect the wound on Lil’s head.

“Oh, God,” Max whimpered, turning away.

“It’s alright,” I said automatically as I pulled apart Lil’s blood-soaked hair.

“It doesn’t look alright.”

“Head wounds bleed like a motherfucker,” I told her. “How far out was Sal?” I asked Zeno.

“He said he just needed to grab his kit. Twenty minutes, max.”

In the meantime, Zeno and I carefully wiped away as much blood as possible as Max put ice into bags for Lil to hold to her face and ribs while Max held one onto her worryingly swollen knee.

“It’s Sal,” Salvatore called through the door, making me move away from Lil to answer. “How is she?”

“It’s not great. But I’m trying not to worry anyone. She’s gonna need scans.”

“That’s not a problem,” Salvatore said, waving my worries away as he strode confidently into the room, completely unfazed by the mess.

Salvatore “the Surgeon” Costa was the Family’s one-man medical team.

He wasn’t formally a doctor or anything, but he’d always had a knack for it. And the stomach to be able to look at some of the gnarliest shit without a blink.

“Hey, honey, let’s get a look at you, okay?” Sal asked as he set one of the desks back on its feet so he could put his kit down.

“Come here. Let’s give him some space,” I said, pulling Max with me over to the other side of the room.

Each time Lil whimpered or cried out as Salvatore carefully inspected her injuries, Max jumped.

“She’s in good hands,” I assured her.

“I get that you guys use battlefield medicine, but she needs to get that knee looked at. Like... the inside.”

“I know. Salvatore has his ways. Trust me. But if she wants to go to a normal hospital, she can.”

“I don’t,” Lil called, making my brows raise at her hearing.

“Tell me what happened,” I demanded of Max.

“I was trying to call Lil to check in. And when she answered... she asked for help. So, I ran here.”

“And interrupted a robbery?” I asked.

Lil worked a job that had a lot of inherent risk. From clients. From people who got wind of how much money in precious gems she had just lying around at all times.

“It was him, Miko,” Max said, face going hard.

“It was him, who?”

“Him. With the blue eyes.”

“What? How the fuck did that happen?” I asked, glancing over toward Lil, knowing she was the only one who might have that answer, but knowing she was in no shape

to answer questions.

“I shot him,” Max said, making my head whip back toward her.

“What?”

“I shot him. In the thigh. I don’t know if that... helps at all.”

If it was bad enough to need to go to the hospital, maybe. But if he just tried to take care of it himself, probably not.

“Maybe,” I said. But it was right then that Salvatore started to speak again.

“Alright, honey. We need to take you to get a scan of your knee and head. Maybe your ribs. It will be at a facility. But we’ll be going in the back door and avoiding paperwork. After that, depending on what the scans say, you might not have any choice but to go to the hospital,” he warned. “If you don’t need surgery, though, I can take care of you at my office.”

“Alright,” Lil agreed. “But...” she said, looking around her place.

“We’ll take care of this,” I assured her.

With that, Salvatore led her out the door and into a car parked half on the sidewalk out front.

“You need to sit,” I told Max, trying to push her into a chair.

“No. No, I want to help.”

She wrenched away from me, dropping down onto the floor, finding various bins, and

painstakingly starting to sort the gems.

“I can help,” Zeno said, even though we both knew he was practically allergic to organization.

“No, I want you on this fuck,” I said, jaw tightening at the idea of what might have happened to Max if she hadn’t gotten her hands on that gun. “Find him. I want this done.”

He headed back out, leaving me to join Max on the floor for what seemed like an almost hopeless task.

“I’m starting to see why Lil thought it was absurd that I might think she had my diamonds,” I decided as we filled container after container of various gemstones.

“Yeah,” Max agreed, placing the last of the emeralds into a bin, then placing it on the table. “I guess this is her retirement plan when she gets sick of the work.”

“Did you happen to get a chance to talk to Lil?” I asked. “About why he was here?”

“No. There wasn’t time. He was here. Then we were fighting. She passed me the gun. Then he was gone, and I was trying to see how she was.”

“We can talk to her once Sal gets her patched up.”

“Does he actually know what he’s doing?”

“The whole Family uses him. He works out of an actual doctor’s office. And he’s been slowly adding fancy-ass medical equipment to it. He even has a surgery room now. She’s in the best hands. Definitely getting more one-on-one care than she’d get at one of the overcrowded hospitals.”

“Okay,” Max agreed, finished with the bigger diamonds, then reached for a piece of paper, using it to sweep the tiniest of them into a pile.

“As soon as he’s done, he will call me. We can go there, talk to her. Bring her home, if that’s what she wants.”

“She can’t come back here. She can’t be alone,” Max said. “She needs someone to help her. To... protect her.”

“We will figure it out,” I assured her. “I’ve got security covered. And if she needs help getting around, I can hire a nurse. Or have one of my sisters come and help. Whatever she needs. She’s not going to be alone.”

“Megs,” she said, looking up at me with wide, panicked eyes.

“Megs should be almost to her inn by now.”

“But what if...”

“Max, baby, focus, okay? If he was here, he can’t catch up to Megs and Nicole. If you want, I can make my brother hang in town, watch them from a distance. But I genuinely think they are safe where they are.”

“Okay. Right. Yeah, you’re right,” she said, and I watched as she started to compartmentalize her emotions, making them more manageable. “Let’s just hope Zeno can figure out who this asshole is, so this stops once and for all.”

“Did he say anything? Anything that might help us narrow him down?”

“No. He mostly said he should have killed me the last time. Then it was just a lot of cursing and fighting.”

We worked for another two hours before we had the place straightened. Not knowing where to put anything, we just left everything on the tables, so when Lil was well enough, she could organize how she wanted.

By the time we had cleaned up the blood, Salvatore had shot me a text, telling me we could come to his office to see Lil.

“Ready to hopefully get some answers?” I asked, offering Max my hand.

She glanced at it for a second but surprised me by reaching to take it, her fingers slipping between mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Max

Salvatore's office, from the outside, looked abandoned. There was paper on the filthy, barred windows, so no one could see inside.

But on the inside, the place had been completely redone, from the dark tile floors to the freshly painted walls. There was even an actual sitting room, but it was set up with long, comfortable couches, a huge TV, gaming consoles, and a snack and coffee station.

I guess even a mafia's doctor office needed a place for loved ones to sit, wait, worry, and convene with one another.

"Sal?" Miko called.

Not a moment later, Salvatore made his way down the hall.

"How is she?" I asked, my tone just shy of desperate.

"She's alright. She was really lucky, actually. The head wound looked a lot worse than it was. She's got two broken ribs. A lot of bruises and swelling."

"What about her knee?"

"That was where she was the luckiest," Salvatore said. "Swollen like that, I was

worried it was an ACL or meniscus tear. She ended up dislocating her patella—kneecap. It needs to be immobilized. And there's gonna be a fair amount of physical therapy in her future, but she's not going to need surgery."

"Thank God. Is she alright? In pain?"

"She refused pain meds until she got to talk to you guys. But she needs it," he said, giving Miko a look that said So make this quick .

"Got it," Miko agreed.

Sal waved us toward a room, and we moved in to find Lil sitting on one of those chairs like the dentists had. She was reclined back. There were bulges in her midsection, like maybe her ribs were wrapped, and there was a bulky brace on her knee.

In the hours since the attack, the bruises had really started to settle in, mottling her face in shades of purple and blue so dark they almost appeared black.

"Oh, Lil," I said, wincing.

"Yeah," she agreed, trying to sigh, only to wince and fold forward, her hand pressing into her ribs.

"Why are you being a hero about the pain medicine?"

"I don't want to be fuzzy about the details until I give them to you."

"Okay. Let's get that over with then," Miko said. "We want you comfortable."

"There was a knock at my door. I was expecting a delivery. So I didn't have my

guard up,” she admitted, launching right into it.

“But the second I opened the door, he pushed it wide and moved inside, blocking my exit.”

“Did you know who it was?”

“Not exactly. Not until he started talking about diamonds. I mean, he had the piercing blue eyes you mentioned. But so does the guy at the bagel shop I go to every week. But once he started talking about how many diamonds he had, how he wanted to move them, I immediately figured this had to be the same guy.

“I had been in contact with someone earlier this morning who works at a jewelry store. He said there was someone in claiming he had ‘family’ diamonds to sell. But given that they were all loose, the store got squirrely and asked him to leave.

“I should have been expecting him. Been ready for him.”

“Hey, no,” Miko said, shaking his head. “What you’re not gonna do is blame yourself for what that fuck did.”

“I was careless,” Lil said, shrugging. I understood why she was being so hard on herself. I had impossible standards for myself too. It was hard not to when you were a woman working alone in a potentially very dangerous field. You only had yourself to rely on. You couldn’t afford not to be on guard at all times.

“Anyway, he must have sensed I was getting suspicious. By the time I managed to get to my gun, he was on me. Then, well,” she went on, waving at her face. “I had no idea where my phone went in the mess until you started calling. Over and over,” she added, attempting a small smile. “I really have your impatience to thank for being alive right now.”

“Always happy to put it to good use now and again,” I said.

“What about before you were suspicious? Did he have anything to say? Where he was staying, his name, anything?” Miko asked.

“He didn’t. He was being careful. He gave me the same spiel he gave the jewelry store. His grandmother died, they went through her jewelry where they found all these loose diamonds. As if that is even halfway believable. I mean, even if someone did have that many diamonds just lying around, it wouldn’t be in a fucking jewelry box.

“The guy was clearly careful, but stupid. Definitely not any kind of pro. Anyone who knew anything about diamonds wouldn’t make up such an idiotic story.”

“What about your security system?” Miko asked as Lil started to absentmindedly rub her hand over the brace on her knee. She needed medicine. We had to finish this up.

“I will get that for you when we get back to my place,” she said.

“I would be remiss if I didn’t at least strongly suggest you don’t go home,” Miko said, though everything about his tone said he knew his words were falling on ears that didn’t want to listen.

“I’m going home. Believe it or not, it’s actually safe there. If I hadn’t opened the door for the fuck, he wasn’t going to get in. There’s a reason my windows are barred and the door has reinforced bars and so many locks. If I’m in there, and it’s not on fire, I’m safe.”

“That may be true, but I’m gonna have to insist I have someone watch your place,” Miko said.

“Hmm,” Lil said, looking at Miko for a second before turning her attention to me. “I get it.”

“Get what?” I asked.

“Why you’re into him. That protective thing is surprisingly hot.”

“Well, just wait until you hear his plan to hire a nurse to take care of you while you heal then,” I said.

“I’m fine. I can take care of myself.”

“Christ, are you all like this?” Miko asked, shaking his head at us.

“Like what? Strong? Independent?” I asked.

“Stubborn is the word that comes to mind.”

“Well, he’s got us there,” Lil agreed. “But, really, I’m fine.”

“You say that,” Miko agreed. “Until you try to get off that chair. Go ahead,” he invited, knowing she was going to rise to the challenge in his tone.

But she was quick to learn that none of her strength, independence, or stubbornness could save her from the pain ravaging her body right then.

“Fuck fuck fuck, goddamnit,” she hissed, fingers clutching the side of the chair when she finally got her legs off of it.

“Sal,” Miko called, moving toward the door. “I think she’ll take those pain meds now.”

“So, a nurse?” I prompted a few minutes later when Lil’s face wasn’t twisted up in complete agony any longer.

“Fine. I mean, I don’t need a nurse . Just someone to fetch me shit would be enough. And only for a couple hours a day. I like being alone.”

“Conveniently, I also know someone who likes being alone,” Miko agreed, reaching for his phone.

“Not Venezio,” I said, thinking of poor, defenseless Chuck.

“Nah. Gavino. He’s got nothing else going on. He will hate this as much as you do,” he said to Lil. “So, I think it’s the perfect match.”

With a plan in place, we waited for the meds to kick in before we moved Lil back into Salvatore’s car. All three of us helped her back inside her building.

“You guys are the best,” Lil said, looking around at the cleaned-up space.

“We think we got them all,” I said as she used Miko’s arms for leverage to lower herself into her bed.

Salvatore set up her nightstand with meds, propped up her leg on pillows, and got her tucked in as I rushed around to try to grab anything she might need to have nearby. Her phone and charger, the remote, drinks, snacks, her tablet, extra blankets, and her office chair to use to roll herself to the kitchen or bathroom.

By the time we were all done fussing, Lil was a mix of thankful and frustrated.

It was right then that her temporary nursemaid, Gavino, showed up.

Like seemingly all these damn Costa guys, Gav was tall and attractive with great bone structure and dark hair. The only difference with him was he had deep blue eyes that managed to look both annoyed and resigned as he moved into the room.

“Gav, this is Lil. Lil, Gav. He’s here to help you with anything you need. Getting you food, meds, pushing you in the chair to the bathroom, whatever.”

“We’re probably going to hate each other,” she said to Gav, getting a nod of acknowledgment from him.

“Gav hates everyone,” Miko said with a shrug.

Salvatore was the first to head out, promising to check in on Lil the next day as Miko pulled Gavino to the far end of the room, talking in hushed voices.

“Here,” Lil said, handing me her tablet. “The surveillance video. “Take it with you. See if the cute watermelon pants guy can do anything with it.”

Then, as Miko joined us again, she looked up at him with her one non-swollen eye.

“Get the bastard,” she demanded, voice hard.

“That’s the plan,” he agreed, wrapping an arm around me. “Get some rest, Lil. And don’t be a hero with the pain meds. We can get as much as you need.”

“I’ll be back to check on you tomorrow too,” I told her.

“I’ll be fine ,” she insisted. But I knew a guard when I saw one. I had too many of my own. And because I did, I knew all of the soft and squishy that was hiding behind that.

“And I will be back to check on you. And fuss over you. And make sure Gav here is doing enough fussing too.”

He gave me a little nod.

I got the feeling that while he wasn't happy to be a nursemaid, he would do a good job. If for no other reason than Lil was in awful shape.

We said our goodbyes and heard Gav locking up behind us.

“He's armed, right?” I asked when we both moved onto the street, heads on a swivel, keeping an eye out for Lil's attacker.

“Yeah. I made sure. And he knows the protocols for coming and going or answering the door. Gav can be a bit of a dick, but he has a baby sister. Each time he looks at Lil, I'm sure he's thinking about Lore and how he'd want her taken care of in this kind of situation.”

“Wait... Lore?” I asked as we started walking toward the cross street to grab a cab. “Isn't that Zeno's sister?” The Costa family was huge. It was hard to keep them all straight, but I was pretty sure that I was right about that connection.

“Yeah.”

“Wow. They're... nothing alike.”

“Yeah, not at all. But all those brothers are very different. Ready to go home for a bit?” he asked.

I knew I probably shouldn't be so happy to think of Miko's place as home so quickly, but I couldn't stop the warm feeling moving through my chest at the idea of being

able to keep spending nights there, wrapped up in his arms.

“We never picked up my clothes.”

“I’ll order new ones to be delivered,” he said as we slipped into a cab.

I should have objected to that. But all I could think of was getting some alone time with him. The last thing I wanted to do was insist on going back to my apartment to grab clothes.

“On a scale of one-to-ten, how frustrated do you think Venezio is after a full day of Chuck?” I asked as Miko plugged in his code.

“Knowing Venezio, he won’t say anything, but you’ll see it in his—” he cut off as we moved into the apartment.

And there was Chuck.

And Venezio.

But someone else as well.

“Cosimo,” Miko said, voice tight.

Cosimo?

Miko’s boss?

Shit.

I got a feeling things had just gotten even more complicated.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Miko

If I had been thinking clearly, I would have probably known to expect this.

There was no way I could run away from a meeting with Cosimo and not expect him to get suspicious.

I guess I figured it might be a phone call or a request for another meeting. Not a surprise drop-in.

But there he was.

Sitting on my couch in an apartment he'd never been in before, beside a tense-looking Venezio and a starstruck Chuck, who, I imagined, had been running his damn mouth since my boss showed up.

"So," Cosimo said, looking past me toward Max. "You must be Max."

"That's me," she agreed.

"Chuck here has been telling me all about you."

Great.

"I bet," Max said, giving Chuck a hard look. And the guy had the good sense to duck

his head, knowing that he'd probably fucked something up.

"I've been doing some digging around," Cosimo said, making my stomach twist. "Turns out Nero is on an out-of-state job for you. And Venezio here said he was doing a job for you. Gav mentioned you asking for Zeno's address. And then, as if that wasn't enough, I got word that Salvatore did an emergency job for you today."

Fuck.

"So, now the question is: What the fuck are you keeping from me, Miko?"

This was exactly what I had been hoping to avoid. But, objectively, some part of me knew that the more people in the Family I brought into this clusterfuck, the more chance there was of Cosimo or Lorenzo finding out what I was up to.

All I could do now was cop to it.

Apologize.

Pray Cosimo would understand.

"I was working on a job," I admitted.

"A job you didn't tell me about?"

"Yeah. I wanted to... get it finished first. Wanted to kick the money up to you, then to Lorenzo from there."

"But something went sideways."

"You could say that."

“Let me guess,” Cosimo said, his gaze landing on Max again. “She’s got something to do with that.”

“I picked his pocket,” Max admitted, making Cosimo’s lips curve up.

“Is that right? Isn’t it just like a Costa woman to start off in this family by causing some kind of trouble?”

I didn’t correct him.

Because the more time I spent with Max, the more sure I was that there was only one end to this.

Her, me, rings on fingers, promises of forever.

“I’m gonna need this story from beginning to end,” Cosimo said.

“It’s not over yet,” I admitted.

“Guessed as much.”

“Well, this is... none of my business,” Venezia said, slapping his hands onto his thighs as he moved to stand. “Chuck, it’s been... twelve hours.”

“It’s only been six,” Chuck said, brows pinching.

“No. No, it hasn’t,” Venezia said with a head shake as he made his way to the door.

My gaze slid to Max, a million things passing silently between us in a second.

“Hey, Chuck. How about we pick out something to order for dinner?” Max asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Yes, you are,” she said, grabbing his forearm to drag him off the couch and pull him into the kitchen with her, giving me and Cosimo as much privacy as she could with the open-concept floor plan.

I was aware of her deliberate lack of conversation, likely trying to overhear me as I started in on the whole thing with Cosimo.

He just let me talk, getting out everything I could from the first idea to leaving Gavino at Lil’s place.

“You’ve been busy,” Cosimo concluded.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“And up until today, you haven’t had any help.”

“Well, Zeno.”

“That doesn’t count,” Cosimo said, shaking his head. “And if it wasn’t for something completely unforeseeable, like a woman picking your pocket for shits and giggles, this job would have been done, and you would have made the Family half to three-quarters of a million dollars.”

“That’s the gist of it, yeah.”

“I always knew you weren’t going to be with me long,” Cosimo said.

“What?” I asked, feeling like the ground was falling out from under me.

“You were too ambitious,” Cosimo told me. “I was waiting to see when you’d get the balls to go off on your own,” he added.

“What was that?”

“I wanted to make sure you had them.”

“Balls,” I clarified.

“Yeah. It was one thing to do my bidding, to anticipate my needs. That is shit you can train a dog to do. I needed to know you would be able to go off on your own, to take chances, to handle shit without conferring with a boss.”

“But that’s... not how this organization works.”

“It is, though. I mean, none of us would ever admit to that. We don’t want everyone going off and doing whatever the fuck they want before they’re ready. But before we’re gonna recommend you for a capo position, we want to make sure you have what it takes.”

“And what it takes is defying orders?”

“If you’re gonna be the one running shit, you need to prove you can do it before you get promoted. You did better than I did on my first solo venture. I fucked that shit up to high hell.”

“I got two women beaten, a man killed, and another almost murdered.”

“I dunno. There’s no way to know what might have happened if Max hadn’t lifted your wallet.”

“The guy was tracking me.”

“Yeah, but you might have been able to fight him off, off him. There were too many variables. Besides, that Henry fuck clearly talked to someone that he shouldn’t have. His death isn’t on you. If he kept his mouth shut, he’d probably still be alive. And living much easier on your dime.”

“True,” I agreed.

“And it’s not over. Clearly, this fuck still has your diamonds if he was trying to get that Lil chick to take them. As soon as Zeno has a name for you, you go over there, make him pay for what he did to the girls, get your diamonds back, kick up the money, and finally get your own crew.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“When it comes to finishing this?”

“I’m good with you handling it yourself. Pull in your brothers or Venezio, if needed. But I’m not gonna step in. I have faith in you. Now that that’s done, I gotta get going. Got a fucking headache from that kid over there,” he said, glancing over toward the kitchen.

Max looked away quickly, but not before I caught her watching and listening.

“Thanks, Cosimo,” I said.

“Bet you’ve been worrying yourself sick thinking this was gonna go another way.”

“You could say that.”

“Take care of your girl. Looking forward to the wedding invitations.”

With that, he was gone.

The relief was strong enough to make my fucking legs feel a little weak.

By the time my ass hit the cushion, Max was across the apartment.

“That didn’t seem too bad.”

“It wasn’t. He essentially told me that he was waiting for me to take the initiative like this and that now that I have, he thinks I’m ready for my own crew.”

“Wait, what? Really? I thought the mob was all about its rules.”

“I thought so too. But, I guess, a part of it is knowing which ones to break and when.”

“Well, that’s good then, right? Is he pissed about the money?”

“Well, since it was out of my pocket only, no. Besides, he was right. The diamonds aren’t gone. So long as we can get to this bastard before he manages to unload them, that is.”

“Should we be calling hospitals or something?” Max asked. “See if anyone came in with a gunshot wound?”

“We could, yeah. But I want to look over Lil’s security footage first. Maybe send it over to Zeno. If he stays on busy streets, Zeno might be able to follow him to wherever he ends up.”

“I was thinking of tacos,” Chuck said, coming toward us.

“I thought you said you weren’t hungry,” Max said as she flicked through the security footage before handing the tablet to me.

“You don’t have to be hungry for tacos, though,” Chuck insisted.

Just to shut him up, we ordered tacos.

“So, what happened to your face?” Chuck asked after wolfing down eight tacos that he, supposedly, hadn’t been hungry for.

“The guy who tried to kill you tried to kill me too. And my friend.”

“He’s here? In the city?” Chuck asked, looking a bit green.

“Yep. That’s why you had a babysitter today,” I told him. “And will keep having one until we find him. Though, I think it’s safe to say we might not be able to get Venezio to do it again.”

I’d probably have to rotate Venezio, Gavino, and my brother between Chuck and Lil to keep any one of them from going too crazy.

Then, of course, the problem would become getting Chuck out of my apartment again.

Because, quite frankly, I wanted to fuck Max on just about every surface of this apartment without having to worry about being seen or heard.

“Have you heard from Megs?” I asked as I reached to pull Max’s legs over mine.

“Yeah. She sent about a thousand pictures of the inn and the town and hers and Nicole’s dinners. They seem really happy. And not at all suspicious.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“What happens if this takes longer than we plan?” Max asked, and I felt a surprising fluttering sensation in my chest at her using the word ‘we.’

“What do you mean?”

“With Megs and Nicole.”

“Oh, well. If it becomes necessary, the apartment will need to be fumigated. There could be a gas leak. Refinishing the floors. We could keep them out of there for months if we need to. But I don’t see this going past the weekend,” I told her. “He’s getting desperate. And he’ll be even more motivated with a hole in his leg to deal with.”

“Do you think he will still try to... come for us all, though?” Max asked.

“Hard to tell.”

“What would you do in his shoes?”

“Depends on my plans after. If I wanted to stay in the tristate area, I would probably still clean house. But if I were thinking of heading off somewhere with the money, I would leave well enough alone.”

“If he can get someone to move the diamonds.”

“If,” I agreed.

“What would you do if you were him?”

“I would stop trying to unload them all at once. That’s a rookie move. I would try to fence them in multiple states. But that’s assuming he has the money to hold him over.”

“What about Henry’s money?” Chuck asked.

“What about it?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t he have stolen that before he killed him?”

“Was it all cash?” Max asked.

“Yeah, of course it was.”

“We looked all over that apartment,” Max said. “There was no cash. But then why is he so desperate to sell the diamonds?”

“You know that most people who win millions in the lottery end up just as poor—or poorer—than they were before they won?” Chuck asked.

“Fun fact, man,” I said.

“Maybe he’s being reckless about the money,” Chuck said, shrugging. “Nice car. Expensive clothes. That kind of thing. Luxury hotel room...”

Max shot me a surprised look as I reached for my phone, ready to text Zeno the information about luxury hotels.

Right then, there was a pounding on my apartment door that had us all jumping.

I was about to tell Max to take Chuck into my room, to go into my closet and find some guns, when Zeno's voice carried through the door.

"Open up. It's creepy as fuck out here."

"It kind of is," Chuck agreed.

I looked to Max, brows furrowed. "I think it was peaceful how quiet it is," she admitted. "But I can see what they're saying."

It was one of the things I liked best about the building. How when they renovated it a few years back, they invested a ton of time and money into insulating it better. It kept heating and cooling costs down, sure, but it also made the building shockingly quiet. By New York standards anyway.

I looked through the peephole out of a protective sort of paranoia before unlocking the door and letting Zeno in.

He'd thrown an enormous faux fur, floor-sweeping jacket on over his already absurd outfit and was carrying a laptop in one hand as he rushed past me into the apartment.

"I half expected those twins from that horror movie to come riding up on their tricycles at me," Zeno said, suppressing a shiver. "This is nice, though. How's Lil?"

"She's recovering," Max said. "We're gonna check on her tomorrow."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"We were just going to call you, actually," Max said.

"About what?" Zeno asked, plucking a cold taco off the tray on the table and taking

crunching bite.

“Possibly looking at luxury hotels for this fuck,” I told him.

“Funny you mention that,” Zeno said, taking another bite with one hand as he opened his laptop lid with the other. One-handed, he clicked in a long-ass password before the screen came up.

“He ducked into a cab at the cross street outside of Lil’s place. He was limping pretty bad.”

“You were able to follow the cab?” I asked.

“It didn’t go far,” Zeno said. “You know that new tech hotel they built?”

“No,” Max and I said at the same time that Chuck said, “Yes.”

“Well, there’s a new tech hotel. Now, I like tech, obviously,” Zeno said. “But sometimes it goes too far.”

“Too far how?” Max asked.

“There’s no staff. Well, there is a cleaning staff, but only sometimes. The whole place is run on cards and scanners and apps and shit like that. Once those autonomous robots hit the market, I bet they will be doing the cleaning. You never have to actually speak to anyone. An introvert’s dream, I guess, but also a huge security risk.”

“Anyway,” I prompted.

“Anyway, our suspect is clearly some kind of intolerable tech bro. He couldn’t resist getting himself an overpriced, sterilized room there. That’s where the cab dropped

him off. Convenient, I guess. No one to see his bloody leg, to call the cops. He just scanned his card and made his way up.”

“Please tell me you have a name and room number.”

“Well, let me just say... these tech bros know what they’re doing. They’re good. But I’m better. Getting in was a lot of work, but not impossible.”

“What’s his name?” Max asked, voice tight.

“Devon Hoffman. Twenty-nine.”

“Wait... Hoffman?” I asked.

“Yeah. He was Henry Hoffman’s cousin. Fucked up family they got going on,” Zeno said with a head shake as he reached for another taco. “From what I can tell, he’s been a deadbeat a long time. Never holding a job down longer than a few months. Constantly getting into drunk and disorderlies. Seems like our boy Henry took him in as a favor to his aunt.”

“And Henry trusted the wrong guy with his secrets,” Max said, eyes sad.

“Alright. We know his name. And we know where he is,” I said. “Can you get me in there?”

“That, unfortunately, I haven’t figured out yet. But I do know from watching too much surveillance footage that this fuck is a smoker. And since the hotel is non-smoking, he has to go outside. Which he has since he got there. Several times a day. Now, I haven’t seen him emerge since he went in after getting shot. But I imagine it’s only a matter of time.”

That was something.

Snatching someone off the street was a lot easier than it should be in a city full of witnesses. From there, I could take him to one of Brio's killing rooms. It could be as clean or dirty as I wanted.

But it only solved one problem.

"Can I use his card to get into his room?" I asked. "Or would I be caught on all kinds of cameras?"

"Both. But... it's winter."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that no carefully placed code that overrides the current security footage will work quite as well as a guy in an oversized coat wearing a balaclava mask." He paused to chew. Then, "So long as you keep it on and wear gloves, you're golden. Get in, get the diamonds, get out. Disappear into the crowd."

"Keep the mask on in the room?" I clarified.

"Yeah. I mean, first, it protects from trace evidence. You wouldn't believe how much hair and skin cells we shed all around without realizing it. But also... I'm not entirely sure how they know that the rooms are empty and ready to be reoccupied again."

"You think there's a chance of cameras in the rooms?" Max asked, horrified.

"Normally, no. I mean, that's against too many laws. The only reason I'm suspicious is because there's a strange line in the terms and conditions. You know, the ten-page shit that everyone scrolls through and signs off on without actually reading it.

Something about not holding the company liable if they are filmed without their consent.

“So, yeah, you keep the mask on the entire time. Even as you walk down the street after, just in case. If I can get into the cameras and follow people, the cops are capable. In theory. Likely not in practice, but you never know. Not worth the risk. Just wear it, slip into a store, go into the bathroom, get rid of it, and walk back out. All done.”

“Alright,” I agreed, anxious to get to it. After I found and purchased a balaclava. I wasn’t even positive what that was, but I figured it was something akin to a ski mask.

“I’m coming with you,” Max said.

“Absolutely fucking not.”

“He kicked my ass. Twice. He nearly killed my friend. I’m going.”

“Sugar, you’re not.” I knew that stubborn set to her jaw. And, to an extent, I did agree that it was her right to fuck that bastard up for what he’d done to her and Lil. Not to mention poor Henry.

That said, there was no way I was putting her at risk. I couldn’t tell her that, though.

“You’d have a hard time stopping me.”

“Not if I bring some people on this to babysit you. Listen, this isn’t about you not being capable. Or not earning the right to beat his ass. But the thing is, this is Family business. I can’t let you in on it. That’s not how shit works. Maybe I could have if Cosimo didn’t find out. But now that he has, things have to be by the book.”

It was a relatively harmless lie.

Whenever possible, we didn't want anyone else involved in our business. Especially if that business involved murder.

On a personal level, though, I didn't want a body on her conscience. For me, that was part of the life. And I knew I'd feel different if it were a life-or-death situation. If, for example, she'd shot the bastard dead back at Lil's place.

This was different.

It wasn't self-defense.

It was straight-up murder.

I could live with that.

I didn't want Max to have to learn how to.

So she was keeping her pretty ass in my apartment. Even if I had to handcuff her to the bed to make that happen.

In fact, I might really like that plan.

"I don't want you going alone," Max insisted as I got up, wanting to get moving as soon as possible.

"Worried about me, sugar?" I asked, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. "I won't be doing anything alone."

Except, maybe, tossing Devon's hotel room.

Snatching someone off the street was, at minimum, a two-man job. Likely three.

With my brother out of town, Venezia needing a break after babysitting Chuck, and Cosimo not being an option, I had to branch out a bit.

“Yo,” Brio answered on the first ring, the sounds of yapping dogs in the background.

The Family’s resident lunatic was also our animal-loving rescuer. “You busy tonight?” I asked.

“Eh, could be... less busy, if need be.”

“Wanna have some fun?”

“Always,” he was quick to agree.

“Know anyone else who could be free tonight?”

“Nico don’t usually got much going on. I’ll call ‘em.”

“I need a car with fake plates. And a balaclava.”

“The dessert?”

“The mask.”

“Alright. We’ll scoop you in an hour.”

With that, we hung up.

“You’re going to be careful, right?” Max asked.

“Always,” I promised her, reaching to take her hand and pull her down the hall with me. “I plan on coming home to you. Every night,” I added as I moved into the closet to grab an extra gun and ammo. “But I want to leave this with you. Nothing points to there being anyone else involved, but just in case.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “At least it’s not as heavy as Lil’s gun.”

“I want you to keep it nearby, but do me a favor...”

“Don’t leave it around Chuck unattended,” she filled in for me.

“That’s my girl,” I said, placing the gun on the bed so I could pull Max flush against me, wrapping her up tight. “Don’t be worrying about me.”

“I’m not gonna be able to help that,” she said, voice muffled from burying her face in my chest.

“It’s gonna be a few hours, maybe half a day, then this is over. For good. After that,” I added when I felt her stiffen, likely thinking I meant we would be over, “I plan to take you to bed for a week straight.”

“Mmm,” she sighed. “Promise?”

“With short breaks only for showers and picking up food.”

“There’s one flaw in your plan,” she said when we both heard Chuck’s hearty laughter.

“I’ll pawn him off on my brother,” I said, kind of excited at the prospect of torturing one of my brothers. What can I say? Big brothers never get sick of tormenting their younger siblings.

“Okay,” Max agreed, pulling back to look at me. “So, be extra careful then. Because it wouldn’t be nearly as fun spending the next week with you in bed injured.”

“Sugar, even then, I’d rally,” I said, snagging her chin with my fingers, then leaning down to seal my lips to hers.

Things were getting a little hot and heavy when there was a knock at the door that had us springing apart.

“Ride’s here,” Zeno called.

“Gun,” I said, handing it to her before we both made our way out into the common area.

Zeno looked at ease with his feet up on the coffee table and the remote in his hand.

“I’m hanging,” he said, and I saw a gun sitting on top of his laptop beside him.

“Thanks, man,” I said, nodding.

Sure, Zeno was a bit of an... unconventional mafia guy. But he’d been raised in the life. He could handle shit if he ever needed to. And the instinct to protect was strong.

“So, kids, are we ready for some comedy gold?” Zeno asked, patting the couch for Max to join him and Chuck.

I felt her gaze on me the whole way out of the door, but I tried to push that away as I followed Brio and Nico out of my building and toward the waiting car.

I needed to focus.

The more I could concentrate, the easier this job would be. Then it would be done.

And Max and I could finally get some alone time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Miko

“Place is dystopian,” Brio declared as we waited outside of the hotel for the fourth hour in a row.

We’d all been on stakeouts before.

But that didn’t mean we were immune to the boredom and frustration. It only took the first hour for us all to catch up with one another’s lives.

So then it was just... waiting.

Shifting in seats.

Complaining.

“Yeah. Feel like the place must be a sausage fest,” Nico said. “What woman would feel safe without at least one other human to hear her if she needed help?”

We’d seen three people coming and going so far.

All of them had been men.

“How much this going for a night?” Brio asked.

“Almost six hundred,” I told him.

“Six hundred. And no one to call to bring you a fresh towel or meal?”

“I think the place is for bragging rights only at this point,” I said. I’d scrolled their social media on my burner in the second hour of sitting around. Their account was tagged in endless pictures of the rooms that were surrounded with TV screens.

I imagined the only thing that happened in those rooms were men with their hands around their cocks and porn playing all around them.

“How’s he paying for this shit if he hasn’t unloaded the diamonds yet?” Nico asked.

“Probably running up his cards,” I said, shrugging. “Thinking he will pay ‘em off when he gets the cash. He—“

“Wait, got some movement,” Brio said, sitting up in the passenger seat. “That him?” he asked. “He’s limping.”

Sure enough, through the windows that took up nearly the whole front of the hotel, I could see a man exiting the elevator. There was a distinct lameness in his gait as his hand reached into his back pocket, pulling out a small box.

His cigarettes.

Not even a bullet in the leg could get in the way of his next smoke, it seemed.

All the better for us.

“Let’s hope he goes around the... yep,” Nico said, nodding. “Predictable.”

With that, he put the car into drive and took us down the side street Devon was moving toward, smoke curling around his body as he hunched forward in the cold night air.

“Get ready,” Nico said as he pulled just in front of Devon.

Brio and I flew out of the SUV.

Brio was faster than I was, clamping a hand over Devon’s mouth and wrestling him toward the car.

I jumped in the back, reaching for Devon and dragging him in.

Brio jumped in the other side, grabbing his gun, and bringing down the heel of the gun into Devon’s head. The position was just right, making the bastard go still in an instant.

“He won’t be out long,” I said as his dead weight settled half on me.

“Doesn’t need to be,” Brio said, shrugging. “Besides, I can hit ‘em again. What’s a little concussion when he’s gonna be dead soon anyway?”

He had a point.

“Though, doesn’t seem like this idiot got treatment for his leg,” Brio went on, inspecting the red stain seeping through Devon’s jeans and onto Brio’s leg. “Or even did much for it himself. If we gave ‘em a few days, he’d probably die in that creepy-ass hotel.”

“I don’t want to waste a couple of days,” I said as Nico turned the car into a narrow alley between buildings.

I wasn't sure if it was happenstance or by design that the lights had all been knocked out.

"Give me a second," Nico said as Devon started to grumble and come to.

Nico climbed out, and I turned to watch out the back window as he went to the end of the alley and slid a privacy fence across the opening before walking back toward us.

"See that wall?" Brio asked, jerking his chin out of my window.

"Yeah."

"There are stairs on the other side. Door is already unlocked. Just push with your shoulder. We gotta do this quick," he went on as Devon started to struggle.

Nico was at my door then, pulling it open so I could slide out, grabbing Devon's upper body as I went.

Brio crawled across the seat while trying to grab Devon's kicking legs. He was just getting to his feet when Devon landed a kick to his jaw, making a dark look creep across Brio's face as he leaned down to grab the legs, yanking them at an angle that made his thigh twist.

A howl of pain may have escaped him, but Nico chose that exact second to literally slap a piece of duct tape over his mouth.

"You need me?" he asked as we wrangled Devon toward the steps.

"Nah. We got this," I told him, knowing the violence wasn't Nico's favorite part of the life.

“Might wanna detail the backseat while you wait,” Brio added.

With that, we struggled down the stairs.

I threw my shoulder into the door when we reached it. It groaned open as we moved inside.

Brio was the first to drop Devon, moving around me to slip a bar across the door, then secure several locks.

“You wanna question him?” Brio asked.

Honestly, like Nico, the violence wasn’t something I got off on like Brio did. I didn’t enjoy beating the shit out of people, let alone resorting to torture.

But sometimes pain came in handy.

Like getting the information for the location of the diamonds from Devon, so I didn’t waste hours and possibly drop DNA all over his hotel room.

“Gotta know where the diamonds are,” I told Brio as he grabbed Devon’s legs again and dragged him to the center of the room. Where, I shit you not, he shackled him to some ancient-looking, heavy chains. Then he moved across the room to where the chain was on some sort of lever system and started to lift Devon off the ground by his wrists.

He didn’t dangle him completely off the ground, but Devon was high enough that it was just his tippy toes that brushed the cement floor. His shoulders were likely screaming from the strain. But it was really the least of his worries when he was facing someone like Brio.

“Hold on,” I said, walking up to Devon and fishing in his pocket until I found the hotel keycard, then tucked it into my pocket.

“So, you and me, we’re gonna have a little talk,” Brio said, pacing around Devon like a cat stalking its prey. “And each time you try to lie to me, it’s gonna hurt. But this,” he said, suddenly cocking back to land a blow to Devon’s jaw so hard that he turned in half a circle from his chains, “is for kicking me before.”

Devon was panting hard.

But it wasn’t panic in his bright blue eyes.

No, it was rage.

I knew right then that Brio was going to have his work cut out for him.

“Oh, shit, man, I’m forgetting my manners,” Brio said, pressing a hand to his chest in apology as he half-turned to me. “You wanna have fun first?”

“I’ll have my fun once we get the information we need.”

“Cool, cool. Just you and me then,” Brio said with the creepiest fucking smirk as he turned back to Devon. “So, give me a nod if you’re ready to talk.” Devon just glared back. “I know. Everyone starts off tough,” Brio said, nodding. “Just makes it more fun for me.”

The pain started then.

I’d heard the stories about Brio’s legendary violence. The way he seemed to get a charge from putting the hurt on someone. How inventive he could get in his torture.

Hearing about it and seeing it firsthand were wildly different, though.

I'd beaten men to bloody pulps before. Both in self-defense and to enforce for the Family.

I'd never once enjoyed it.

But even with a blood-spattered face, Brio was grinning like a fucking demon.

"Oh, now you wanna talk?" Brio asked, sounding disappointed. "But I was just gonna start on your toenails. Damn. Alright. Well. Here we go," he said, peeling back the tape that was just barely hanging on with how much sweat, spit, tears, and blood were soaking Devon's face. "So, where are the diamonds, man?"

"In... my... cigarette... carton..."

"Smoking's a nasty habit, man. Just think, you'd live through the night if you didn't step outside to smoke."

Devon had clearly been holding out hope that he might walk away from this. But those words had the cold dread filling his eyes.

For the first time, I understood the enjoyment Brio felt at someone else's fear and pain.

Because I could just imagine the dread he'd made Max feel as he straddled her on her own bed, as his hands closed around her throat, as he squeezed until her lungs burned.

I pushed away from the wall, reaching for my gun.

Sure, strangling him would be more poetic.

But I wanted this over.

It had already been a long as fuck day.

And there was still the body to deal with when this was done.

“I’d have let you live if you didn’t put your hands on my girl. Twice,” I told him, watching as understanding dawned on him. “No one had to get hurt or die for this shit,” I added, thinking of Lil and Henry. Of what he’d almost done to Chuck. “But now you do.”

I lifted the gun.

Aimed.

Shot.

And it was finally over.

“Why don’t you go take a trip to the hotel?” Brio suggested, happy to start the cleanup by himself. “Then go home. I can handle the body. Know a place upstate—“

“Actually, Brio, you wouldn’t happen to have a live animal trap, would you?” I asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Figure we might kill two birds with one stone tonight. Get my girl safe once and for all... and get her a little present.”

Sure, I would be a lot later getting back to Max than I planned.

But I was pretty sure she would forgive me once she knew why...

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:00 am

Max - 1 Day

“You’re making me dizzy,” Zeno complained as I paced the living room.

I was going stir crazy.

Partly because I had been cooped up with Zeno and Chuck for too long—since Zeno refused to let any of us even step into the hall. But also partly because Miko still wasn’t back yet.

Zeno had gotten a text like ten hours before from a burner saying everything was good, that he would be in touch when everything was finished.

As if that told me anything.

If it wasn’t finished, how was it good?

And even if the danger was gone, was Miko okay? Had he gotten hurt? Could he have been seen?

I knew he was a damn Made man in a major criminal enterprise, that he knew what he was doing, but I couldn’t help but worry anyway.

Like, were these mafia guys still stuck in the past? Did they know as much about modern surveillance as I did? Would he remember to cover his hands and fingers and hair? Would some random camera catch him? If they did, could Zeno scrub it?

“I’m antsy,” I admitted, exhaling hard.

“I noticed,” Zeno agreed, wincing as Chuck started singing at the top of his lungs from the hall shower. “Gonna be too tired to welcome your man home at this rate.”

“Why hasn’t he been in touch in so long?”

“Because he can’t have his phone on a job. You know this,” Zeno added, giving me a surprisingly deep look.

It was easy to think someone like Zeno was all surface. But he clearly had layers. Maybe he preferred to be holed up in his messy apartment, fucking around on his computers. But he was a man raised by and living in the mafia, through and through.

“I know. I know. But why couldn’t he just get another burner?”

“Because he’s probably trying to be really fast and thorough to get back to you.”

“I’m not used to being the one sitting at home, wringing my hands.”

“I get that. But the life of a mafia girlfriend is gonna involve this sometimes. Just like Miko’s gonna have to learn to sit at home and wait on you when you’re doing jobs.”

That was fair.

“Look,” Zeno said, coming over toward me. Reaching down, he grabbed both of my wrists and gave them a squeeze. “If something had gone sideways, someone in this Family would have reached out to me already. He was with my brother, remember?”

Oh, right.

I forgot about that.

“Was?” I asked, making Zeno wince.

“Okay. Shit. Yeah, so... I can’t give you details. But... Nico was with Brio and Miko most of the night. During all the tense bits. But when things got... calm, Nico went home since there was no need for him anymore.”

If I was reading between the lines correctly, what he was trying not to say was that Devon was handled. And, I hoped, the diamonds were secured.

But that didn’t mean the work was done.

If Devon was dead, there was a body to deal with.

Maybe that was where Miko was.

That didn’t mean all the danger had passed, though.

If Miko was somehow caught with a dead body, he could be in a whole different kind of trouble.

“Look, given the timeline, I think Zeno will be back in another hour or two. You can get through it. The floor, though, might give way if you don’t give it a break.”

“I’m gonna make some coffee,” I said.

“Right. That’s what you need,” Zeno teased.

“There’s nothing else to do,” I grumbled.

“Call and check in on Lil. Curious if she’s ready to gut my brother yet or not.”

That was a good idea, actually. Especially since I planned on going to see her, but

now I wasn't allowed to leave the apartment.

I felt some of the tension falling away as she prattled on about how moody Gavino was, but also how good of a caretaker. She sounded in good spirits, considering.

And by the time I hung up and got that coffee I'd mentioned before the call, I heard a racket outside of the door.

Zeno was up off the couch in a second, grabbing the gun in one swift move just before the door slid open.

Then there was Miko.

He looked absolutely exhausted.

And filthy.

On his neck and cheeks, there were some nasty-looking scratches.

But he was there.

Alive.

Home.

The relief rushed through me like a wave, making my eyes actually flood with tears that I blinked back rapidly, embarrassed about their existence.

Then there was a strange, high-pitched shrieking sound coming from one of the bags in Miko's hand.

"Sorry I took so long, sugar," Miko said, giving me a tired smile. "But I brought you

home a present for being so patient.”

With that, he brought the bag over to the counter beside me and unzipped it.

I leaned over.

And there it was.

The little black dumpster cat from upstate.

Hissing at me and trying to swat at us.

So that was where the scratches had come from.

“Brio said she’s still young enough to tame. But I’m dubious,” Miko said, reaching up to run a finger down his cheek.

“Maybe put kitchen mitts on to handle her,” Zeno suggested.

“Brio said we should keep her somewhere more enclosed for a while until she settles in. He said lots of patience, comfort, and food will get her on our side eventually.”

“Hey, what’s that?” Chuck asked as he approached.

“Kitten. Why don’t you go get her set up in the hall bathroom?” Miko asked, shoving the bags at Chuck before zipping the cat carrier and handing that to him as well.

“I’ll help you, kid,” Zeno said, though he clearly just wanted to give us some privacy.

“I’m angry with you,” I told him.

“I expected that,” he agreed, giving me a soft smile.

“You could have sent off another text.”

“I couldn’t,” he told me.

“I know,” I agreed as he pulled me against him, his forehead pressing into mine. “Did everything go okay? Getting mauled, aside.”

“Everything is good. No more being worried about our loved ones. And I about secured my place as a capo,” he said, reaching into his pocket, then waving a bag of diamonds.

“Did he put them in a sandwich baggie?” I asked, snorting.

“Yeah, he did. But it looks like they’re all still here.”

“It’s all over,” I said as he casually tossed the diamonds onto the counter.

“Yep. And now... a week in bed,” he said, his hands drifting down my back to grab my ass.

There was no stopping the little needy sound that escaped me.

“Let’s get started now,” I demanded, reaching out to grab his tie, then pulling him down the hall with me.

Miko - 1 week

“Come on, Hissabella,” Max called, getting a shriek in response.

Hissabella Havoc, affectionately nicknamed Hissy, was not making it easy to love her. Which only made Max more determined to do so.

Maybe I was reading too much into it, but I had a feeling that Max teaching the cat to love and trust was also managing to heal some old internal wounds of her own.

“I know it’s scary,” she crooned, crawling backward down the hallway, tossing a trail of tuna as she went. “But there’s a big world of fun stuff out here we got you.”

That ‘we’ made my heart fucking squeeze in my chest. She’d been tossing it around more and more, getting comfortable with the idea.

I liked it more than was probably wise, given how new things were between us. But save for visiting Lil and grabbing food, she hadn’t left my place since we first got back to the city. What’s more, she didn’t even bring up going back to her place.

I had a feeling that might change a bit today, since Megs and Nicole were coming in from Vermont.

“That’s a good girl. We have plenty more tuna out here,” she cooed at the kitten as she cautiously kept moving forward, scooping up the bits of fish as she went.

She was right about the tuna.

We had about twenty cans.

And a fancy-ass cat tree, a cat bed that suction-cupped to the window, a bin of toys, and a litter box hidden in a cabinet.

“Can I just...” she started, slowly reaching out to the cat. Who hissed, swatted, then turned and ran back to the hall bathroom.

“She’ll come around,” I assured Max as she sat back on her heels, her shoulders slumped. “She’s already letting you hang out with her in the bathroom. Brio says that’s good progress.”

“I think she’s just salty about being turned into a cat burrito yesterday,” Max said, getting off the floor to come sit next to me. “But she needed that nail trim.”

Reaching, I pulled her up until she moved to straddle me.

“Have I mentioned that I’m glad we haven’t gotten around to getting your clothes yet?” I asked as my fingers slid up her bare thighs. Her uniform these days consisted of my tees and the occasional pair of panties.

Now was not one of the panties times.

So when my fingers pressed between her thighs, there was nothing to stop me from feeling the way she immediately got wet for me as my fingers teased between her lips, then found her clit and started to work it.

“Dunno why you insist on wearing this, though,” I said, my other hand tugging at the tee.

“Suddenly can’t remember either,” she agreed as she reached down to pull off the material, tossing it to the side.

Grabbing my wrist, she pulled it up to cover one of her breasts, letting out a sweet little whimper as my hand squeezed.

Her hips were rocking against my hand, already desperate for more.

“Miko, please,” she begged, her hand moving between us to slip under my thin sleep pants and curl around my cock.

For the first time in my life, I wasn’t getting up and dressed in a full suit every day. Instead, I was enjoying the easy access of nothing but pajama pants. And the way Max so easily started to stroke me reminded me how much I was loving being

dressed down.

“Fuck,” I groaned as she shifted up, then stroked the head of my cock between her lips, coating me in her need.

Given how often we found ourselves just like this, we’d had the talk days ago. About tests, results, history, and birth control. Everything said we were in the all clear.

So when she positioned me against her, she slid down on me without a barrier, her warm, tight pussy closing around me, inch by inch.

Then she was riding me hard and fast, her tits bouncing, her moans filling the apartment, as lost in me as I was in her until she came, screaming my name, her pussy pulsing around my cock, taking me with her.

She fell forward after, head on my shoulder, as we both tried to catch our breaths and calm our frantic hearts.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, sitting suddenly upright.

“What?” I asked, confused by the change.

“Look,” she said, jerking her chin to somewhere behind me. “Slowly,” she added.

I turned to find that Hissy had made her way back out of the bathroom and was actively swatting at the hanging ball on her playstand.

“Looks like she’s finally making herself at home,” I said, fingers drifting up and down Max’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Max agreed, smiling at the cat, then at me. “It’s a nice home,” she added.

“Better with you two here,” I told her, watching as her eyes warmed, knowing that with each little encouragement, I was doing with Max what she was doing with Hissy: giving her reassurance, making her feel safe, offering her love.

And, little by little, she was learning to accept it.

Max - 6 weeks

Okay.

I could do this.

Fast and painless, like a bandaid.

Sucking in a deep breath, I opened the door to the apartment I shared with Megs and Nicole. Though, to be fair, I hadn’t actually slept there since I’d come back from upstate with Miko.

I did come around on occasion, needing to grab things, or wanting to hang out with the girls when Miko was busy.

But, quite frankly, it no longer felt like home.

It never would again, since it turned out that Nicole was horribly allergic to cats, so I couldn’t live with her and have Hissy at the same time. And there was no way I was abandoning Hissy. She’d come so far so quickly, from kitten that hissed and scratched and startled at the smallest of sounds to a purring, snuggling, sweet adolescent.

“Oh, hey!” Megs said, beaming at me as she paused her sweeping. “Uh-oh,” she added as Nicole came out of her room in a thick robe, despite it finally warming up outside. “Max has her serious face on.”

“My face is always serious,” I said with an eye roll.

“Not so much lately,” Nicole disagreed.

“What’s up?” Megs asked, concern etched on her face. “Is everything okay with Miko?”

“Uh, that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about,” I told them. “I... there’s no easy way to say this. But I’m... I’m moving out.”

There was a second of tense silence before Nicole burst out laughing. “Max, you’ve been moved out for, like, two months now. There’s literally nothing left in your closets or drawers.”

I didn’t think they would have noticed that. But that was probably stupid. We were constantly going into each other’s rooms to borrow stuff.

“Actually, we’ve been wanting to talk to you about the same thing,” Megs said as Nicole wrapped an arm around her waist. Like they wanted to be a united front. “We... we are planning on not renewing the lease.”

“Really? Why?” I asked, knowing they likely couldn’t afford anywhere better.

“Well, it’s just that Tyler decided to take a job with his father’s business. Which means he will be in the city full-time, and making a lot more money. So his roommate is moving out. And he wants us to move in with him.”

“That’s great!” I said, meaning it. I knew how hard it was for all of them to be separated so often. Besides, I kind of liked the idea of the girls having a guy around. And living in a door-manned building like Tyler did. “I’m so happy for you guys.”

“We’re happy for you too,” Nicole said, giving me a smile. “I love Miko.”

How could she not after that epic vacation he'd sent them on?

"He's a pretty good guy," Megs agreed, slightly more reserved with her affections because she claimed she wasn't sure anyone was worthy of me. Which was absurd. But sweet. "And his apartment is amazing."

"And he rescued that cat for you," Nicole agreed, already starting to sniffle a bit, and I wasn't even anywhere near her.

"Wow," Megs said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "It's a whole new era for all of us."

It was that.

It had been over a decade that Megs and I had been surviving together. But it was time to stop just surviving. We deserved to thrive. With the people we loved.

I did, too.

Love Miko.

I had for longer than I'd even realized.

That warm, cozy sweater feeling?

Yeah, that had been the beginnings of it.

It had only gotten more intense in the weeks we'd been together.

Miko, to his credit, had been so gentle with me. Giving me space, but reassurances. Pulling me close but not smothering me. Letting me occasionally be my prickly self, but managing not to get hurt.

I wasn't obtuse.

He was treating me the way I'd been treating my cat. In a way, I guess we were both part-feral out of necessity. But once we found someone to give us a safe space, to offer us unconditional love, we were easily and happily tamed.

Miko - 8 months

"You know, I won't work any faster with you breathing down my neck," Lil said as she answered the door.

That was fair. This was the fourth time in as many days that I'd 'dropped by' to 'check on the progress.'

Lil had healed up pretty well thanks to a rotating number of Family members and their wives checking in on her, doting on her, and helping her recover. Still, there was a scar near her eye that would always serve as a reminder of what she'd been through.

"But it's kind of sweet, so I'm not annoyed by it," Lil told me, stepping back from the door to invite me in.

"I actually just finished this morning," she told me as she moved behind her desk. "Are you ready for it?"

You'd think I would be nervous as fuck about this step. But all I felt was a sort of calm. Like every cell in my body knew this was the right step.

"Fuck yeah."

To that, Lil beamed at me as she handed me the little navy blue velvet ring box.

Inside of it was the physical ring I'd seen the drawings of several weeks before. At

the center was the one single diamond we had left from the heist. It was the one Max had left with Lil for safekeeping. Then had forgotten all about almost immediately after.

“Fuck, Lil. It’s perfect.”

She’d somehow managed to make something beautiful without making it too feminine and fussy, things we both knew Max would hate.

“I know, right? It’s almost like I’m good at what I do.”

“The best,” I agreed.

“So, when are you going to propose?”

“This weekend. Unless a better moment presents itself before then. Make sure you keep a spot in your calendar open for being a bridesmaid.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Lil said as I reached for an envelope in my pocket to pass to her, the rest of the money I owed her for the ring. “I can’t believe Max is about to get engaged. But then again, I couldn’t believe that she’d fallen for you. Or moved in with you. Or—“

“Really building up my confidence here, Lil,” I said with a little chuckle.

“Come on. You know what I mean.”

“I do. But this is one of those pot/kettle situations, don’t you think?”

“Hey, I love love!” Lil said, shrugging. “I just can’t fathom sharing my space with someone. Fighting over covers, not having any hot water, having someone constantly annoying me with questions about my day and feelings...”

“Oh, Lil. It’s gonna be a real treat to watch you fall one day. And word to the wise... just get separate covers,” I said as I made my way to the door. “Thanks again for this,” I told her, waving the ring box before I slipped it into my pocket.

It felt heavy.

With meaning. With plans. With our hopes for the future.

“Okay. Alright,” Max said, rushing toward me as soon as I opened the door, hands up. “Remember how much you love me?” she asked.

“What’d you do?” I asked. “Take my sister to a male strip club again?”

“In my defense, I didn’t know it was a strip club,” Max said. “And it’s really not my fault that she volunteered to go on stage. But, no. Well, you know how I had a job this morning?”

“The salt Lil had a real knack for them. She loved when we all hung out together. It was really just my swollen ankles, aching back, and pea-sized bladder that kept me from socializing much these days.

“She was actually just dropping off something special,” he told me, pulling me to sit up on the bed with him and reaching to rub my throbbing feet. “Open it up.”

He nodded toward my nightstand where one of Lil’s personalized jewelry boxes sat.

She still did her old work here and there. But a few years back, she’d actually started her own jewelry line. The unique designs had gone a bit viral, leading to a thriving career that included a small line in a very big box store chain.

I didn’t wear much jewelry.

Lil knew that more than anyone.

Unless...

“Is this the gender reveal?” I asked.

For each of our kids, Lil had been the one in charge of telling us what we were having. By creating intricate, beautiful little pendants that would each eventually go onto a necklace for me to wear.

So far, that necklace of mine featured an emerald, sapphire, and a black diamond. Boy colors for boy children.

“Yep. She said she was sorry it took her so long this time. Open it.”

My stomach tightened, wondering if my instincts were right here.

This pregnancy had been very different from the others. I was carrying differently. I’d been much sicker, much more exhausted, and craving things I never had before. Like chocolate. Bars, cakes, milk; you name it, if it was chocolate, I was shoving it in my mouth.

Taking a deep breath, I flipped the lid off of the box.

And there, nestled in the black velvet backing was an intricately detailed pendant.

With a brilliant pink diamond in the center.

“We’re having a girl,” I told Miko, beaming at him.

“I bet she’s gonna be a little badass, just like her mother,” Miko said, moving up to the top of the bed to pull me close.

“But let’s hope she gets her father’s sweetness.”

“Oh, sugar,” he said, turning to press a kiss to my temple. “You’re plenty sweet.”

There was a loud crash in the other room, followed by a suspicious silence.

“You planning on doing something about that?” Miko asked.

“Nope.”

“Good, me either,” he agreed.

“Oh, wait, I lost it,” I said, heart sinking to find the little pink diamond no longer nestled in its box.

“What? You mean this?” Miko asked, pulling it out of his damn pocket.

“You lifted it?” I asked, smiling at him.

“Learned from the best,” he said, pressing a kiss to my lips.

XX