

Chapter One

Max

Bile crept up my throat as pain churned in my head. Yet it didn't stop me from chugging back more of my beer, searching for oblivion. Unfortunately, it wasn't at the bottom of the bottle. The din of the place grew, competing with the pounding in my skull. I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Lights off!" someone shouted.

Christ. I winced, the yell reverberating in my head as total darkness enclosed me in its stifling hold. Slouching lower in the armchair, I opened my eyes and squinted at the tiny, flickering flames casting an eerie glow over several grinning faces.

Damn idiots! Just how many candles had they stuck on the cake? Because it sure looked like it could light up a small town.

"Happy twenty-first, Max!"

My head protested the loud chorus viciously. Twenty-one, and I felt a hundred. As if I'd lived a lifetime.

"Blow 'em out. Make a wish." Jack, the bastard—and my best friend since the crib—gave me a crooked grin. Near him, War, our other buddy, lifted his beer in cheers, then guzzled the thing down.

Jack just had to use my birthday as a reason to party and celebrate my return to civilization after my hiatus in the "wilds" as he called Peru.

Feeling as if my body weighed a ton, I pushed to my feet and crossed to the table in the dining room of the house I shared with Jack, each step jarring my throbbing head. I blew the candles once, twice...three friggin' times before the flames hissed out.

The noise in the room ratcheted up with whoops and cheers. Slaps resounded, pelting my back, accompanied by well wishes as I headed to where I'd dropped my tote near the front door when I'd walked in a few hours earlier. I needed the relief it held. A blonde lunged at me, and I hit the wall like a stumbling drunk.

"Happy birthday, Max." She hiccupped, her hands wandering over my chest. Her mouth slid over mine. She tasted of liquor and pizza.

My stomach revolted violently. The beer I'd swallowed backtracked up my throat. "Get off me, or I'm gonna puke on you."

She flashed me a drunken grin. I pushed away and lurched in the opposite direction toward the bathroom. I slammed inside, just in time to embrace the porcelain god for several long minutes.

Feeling as if I'd hurled my guts, along with the contents of my stomach, I collapsed against the wall, mouth vile and my brain looking for ways to escape the pressure in my skull. I rubbed my temples and prayed for nothingness.

Christ, I hated these fucking headaches.

"Damn, Max, I didn't realize you were so shit-faced." Jack's voice came from a distance. I didn't care what he thought or bother to correct him, really wishing I were drunk.

"Come on, man, let's get you out of here." He grabbed me. I was no lightweight. At six foot three, I stood an inch taller than him, but he hauled me up with little effort.

I pushed him away and shuffled for the basin, rinsed my mouth, and caught a glimpse of my reflection. Red-rimmed eyes, waxy-looking skin, and a bisected left eyebrow, the scar giving me a sinister air. For the rest of my life, the latter would serve as a reminder of the horror I was responsible for, the blood on my hands.

My fingers clenched the basin. Before my fist could meet the mirror, Jack dragged me out into the corridor.

“Let us, Jack.” Two giggling girls blocked us. “We’ll take good care of him,” one of them said. “We know ways guaranteed to make him feel heaps better. He’ll regret leaving San Francisco for so many months.”

Jack laughed. “You up for it, bro?”

Not so long ago, headache or not, I’d have taken them both upstairs, their warm bodies the only thing that could give me a moment of reprieve. Now? My dick didn’t even stir at the promise of sex.

Jack peered at me, then his brow creased in understanding. Wanting to avoid another one of his little talks—those ice-gray eyes, too damn perceptive at times—I made for the living room.

A shattering of glass exploded around me. I froze. Unable to breathe, to move, feeling as if a tanker had landed on my chest. I stared at the broken beer bottle lying in a wet, bubbling mess on the floor. The sounds yanked me by the throat to another place, another time...

Slashing rain, glass splintering, crunching metal...screams...

Jack grabbed my arm, hauling me back to the present. “It’s okay, it’s just a bottle.”

“Okay?” I rasped. “How can anything ever be *okay*?” Breathing hard, I wrenched free. “I have to get outta here.” I headed for the front, grabbed my tote lying near the door.

“Fuck, Max, you’re not fit to go anywhere!” Jack came after me.

“And I can’t be here. Sorry about the party.” Jerking open the front door, I stumbled out into the pelting rain. Pain bleeding into me, I tore down the street and cut through another gloomy thoroughfare, trying to escape the whirlpool of darkness closing in on me.

Finally, running out of steam, I slowed down and leaned against the wall of a gloomy building. My tote fell to the sidewalk with a thud. Panting harshly, I rubbed my eyes, banged my head against the hard surface behind me, trying to dislodge the screams from my mind. I might have run to Peru to escape, but I couldn’t outrun my nightmares, the accident, or my fucking faulty memory, with its holes the size of the Grand Canyon.

The blast of my cell cut through the drumming rain, piercing through the pained haze I was trapped in. I retrieved it from my jeans pocket.

“Maxwell?” A girl’s breathy voice filled my ear.

Shit, not now. “How did you get this number?”

“Don’t be mad. It’s Anabel. I told Jack I had a special birthday present for you, so he gave it to me. Why did you leave your *own* birthday party?” Her scolding tone grated on my already raw nerves. “It’s barely seven. Where are you? I’ll come over, and we can celebrate together. We had such a wonderful time before you took off for Peru.”

I had no idea who the hell she was. Or cared. At this point, the women all blurred together. I slept with them, took what their bodies offered—a brief moment of forgetfulness.

And they wanted a piece of me, of who I was, heir to a dynasty of pain and death. The fact that it was backed by money made it more appealing. Added to my temper

more unpredictable than the fault lines of San Francisco, and my penchant for getting into fights. Yeah, I was the ultimate dangerous draw.

I could hang up. Bottom line? She wouldn't give up now that she had my damn number. Jack was so fucking dead.

"I don't date, don't do relationships. I fuck and leave—"

"Damn you, Max," she shrieked as if I'd broken her heart. They knew the rules when they hooked up with me. Still, they tried for more. Every time.

I ended the call. With my head buzzing from sleep deprivation, I moved like a robot on autopilot and continued down the street. Had no idea where I was going, just hoping for something to pull me back from the nightmare that wouldn't quit. Longing for an end. For nothingness.

Scrubbing a hand over my burning eyes, and wet to the bone, I slowed, stopping beneath the awning of a darkened shop. Cars swished by on the busy street. Buildings loomed. I had no idea where I was, probably somewhere deeper in the city. The bright lights streaming out of the huge windows of a laundromat opposite me drew my attention. The ebb and flow of people as they came and went, none lingering beyond the job... the way I wished my life would be.

My cell beeped. About to switch it off, I hesitated at the abridged message. *Hey, Maximus—you okay?*

It took a moment to make sense of the text. Ray. She was the only one who persisted in calling me that name. Said I reminded her of a horse from some Disney movie. Stubborn and aloof but with a marshmallow heart.

True. Except for the latter. Yeah, I had one, all right. It simply didn't function any longer.

Ignoring the text, I reclaimed my lighter and a half-smoked cigarette from a squashed pack in my jeans pocket, put the thing between my lips, and lit it. My gaze returned to the bright lights on the opposite side of the street. Leaning against the darkened windows of the tailoring shop behind me, I blew smoke skyward.

The few people in the laundromat cleared out after a while, and as the last woman left, another walked into the brightly lit place. The girl dropped her bag on top of the machine, then picked up something from the floor. A small, navy t-shirt. She dashed outside, looked left and right, then took off after the woman. "Hey? Excuse me," she yelled. "I think this is yours!"

I didn't know what the hell it was, her voice—her—but everything inside me stilled. Quieted. Before starting up again. My heart pounded hard like it was minutes from escaping its cage just so it could be with her. Mesmerized, I watched her.

A car droned by, and the rain continued in a rustle, drowning out her conversation with the other woman. With no idea of the upheaval she'd caused inside me, she calmly headed back, pulling out white earbuds from her pocket and popping them into her ears.

In the shelter of the laundromat, she peeled off her jacket and tossed it on an orange chair there, revealing a tank top and dark yoga pants riding low on her hips. Moments later, her laundry sorted, she dumped them into two machines. The chore done, she stepped back, rolling her neck and shoulders, the movements sliding down her spine. With liquid grace, she undulated, moving her hips to whatever song played in her ears. And I stared, held captive.

As she danced, something inside me loosened and eased, as if she soothed the part of me that remained in constant pain and turmoil. She spun around once more and halted just as quickly, casting a wary look around, then she smiled wryly. She radiated like a glowing light bulb.

If I walked over, would she let me into some of the light burning so brightly within her? Because the cold seeping into my soul, one no jacket could ever warm, was slowly killing me. Even my messed-up brain understood that.

As if under a hypnotic spell, and before my thoughts connected with reality, my feet were moving across the pavement, back into the drizzle, wanting to get to her. A car blared its horn as I crossed the street. I barely heard it.

I neared the open door, and her cell erupted, sounding like a gunshot. I tripped on the curb and back into awareness. Then I just stood there, staring at her like some stalker. Her pretty, tan features tightened as she glowered at her phone.

“Why now?” her frustrated words drifted to me. She shoved back her dark, wavy hair with an impatient hand. Then, in a fast move, her fingers flew over the display as if deleting the text.

The urge to go over and ask what was wrong took hold, but hell, I couldn’t handle my own shit, how would I help her? I exhaled roughly.

My cell vibrated. I snatched the device from my pocket and swiped the screen. Ray. *If you don’t call me in exactly one minute, I’m telling the tabloids you stole my cell. Jack called me.*

My teeth clacked down. I turned away from the laundromat and speed-dialed the bastard. He answered on the first ring. “You okay, man?”

“Stop with the hasslin’, for Christ’s sake! And stop sending people after me. I’m fine!”

“You’re an idiot,” Jack grunted, undeterred. “You should come back. Rest. Though I have to warn you, Anabel’s here. And she’s pissed.”

Rest? What was I? A geriatric?

Not interested in a hookup that wouldn’t take no for an answer, I rang off and called Ray. “What?”

“Hello to you, too,” she retorted, one of the few unfazed by my black moods and snarls. “Stop ignoring your friends. Come over. I’m off tonight. I have muffins and battery acid, er coffee. Don’t worry, it’s strong enough to burn a hole in your belly, exactly the way you like it.”

About to feed her the same line I had Jack, the truth hit me. I really had no place to go—and I badly needed some shut-eye or at least a place to pace in private. Though I shared the house with Jack, I couldn’t face another endless party. Ray, however, never pried and let me be. Hopefully, she’d let me crash on her couch again because I didn’t want an empty hotel room, or worse, my own company.

“Fine.”

At my abrupt agreement, her snort coasted through the line, crowding my ear. “Hold it, dude, I’m no longer at the dorm. I moved in with my sister. Here’s the addy.” She rattled off the address.

Damn. I’d have to go back to Jack’s afterwards. The pain in my head amplified. Unable to ignore it, I finally dug out the prescribed meds from my tote. My hands shook as I tried to open the bottle—damn childproof caps. Finally, I got it off and popped two pills.

Taking stock of my surroundings, I glanced once more at the dancing girl, but she wasn’t looking my way and was now engrossed in a book. Shifting my tote over my shoulder, stuffing my hands in my pockets, I headed up Pine toward Fillmore Street.

What felt like years later, I rapped on the wooden door of a modern building. Thankfully, my headache had eased somewhat. The door jerked open, revealing a tall girl of nineteen sporting a short cap of inky hair with pink-streaked bangs.

“C’mon.” Rayen Logan grabbed my arm and pulled me inside, as if sneaking in an

undesirable. The way I undoubtedly appeared in my wet, rumpled clothes, I didn't blame her if she didn't want the neighbors to see exactly what she hustled into her home. But I also understood that was just Ray's way.

With her assistance, I entered the contemporary, two-story apartment, drenched with the scent of coffee. The foyer opened straight into the living area on the left, with another closed door on the right side. A wooden staircase against the wall led up to the second level.

In the open space, a large, old-looking, maroon couch leaned against a faded cream wall next to a stuffed armchair piled with cushions. In the corner near the window stood a wooden dining table. The place was too calm, too peaceful, nothing at all like Ray's bouncy personality.

A painting on the wall caught my attention. I'd never seen San Francisco from that point of view. Dark and eerie. A web of spidery branches crept around the city as if to swallow it whole. Whoever had created the painting possessed a shitload of darkness. The thing suited my gloomy mood.

Ray skipped off toward the kitchen and waved me along. "Come on, Maximus. Quit studying our boring décor."

I dropped my tote on the wooden floor and followed, propping a shoulder in the arched doorway of the small kitchen. A window above the sink showcased the rainy night. The open door on the other side revealed a tiny laundry space. The digital clock on the microwave blinked the time. 8:04 p.m.

Jesus. The night had barely started. Exhaustion weighing me down, I rubbed my eyes as if the action could wipe away the grittiness there. Lack of sleep, a delayed flight, followed by a ten-hour journey back to the States would do that to a guy.

Ray poured coffee and set the mug on the counter. "Sit."

I dropped on one of the three stools. Hell, I really didn't need the added stimulant to stay up. I did just fine on my own.

She leaned on the opposite side of the counter and blew the overlong bangs from her brow into disarray. "Shoot, I forgot the muffins." She jumped up and brought out a flimsy white box. The multiple stud piercings she sported in one ear glinted in the light. "Here. And happy birthday."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"You look tired, Maximus," she said like some old soul who understood the depths of my pain. Truth? I just felt empty.

"It will be okay." She patted my hand on the counter.

I stared at her in bafflement as she got the OJ from the fridge and poured herself a glass. How she'd integrated herself into my life, I still had no idea. Since the day I'd kicked the asses of some drunken jocks who'd cornered her after her part-time waitress shift down in the Mission, we'd sort of fallen into this relationship, a friendship of sorts.

She was pretty, with striking, hazel eyes and naturally tan coloring due to her mixed-race parentage, so no surprise she was hit on all the time. But Ray didn't seem interested in hooking up with anyone. All she cared about was school and her job at Mulligan's.

She filled me in on what had happened while I was away, about moving in with a sister I never knew existed, and then something about her folks who'd just celebrated their twenty-sixth anniversary. Ray could talk the ears off anyone without so much as a pause for breath at times, and, obviously, had a friggin' fairytale family life.

I tuned her out and stared at my now calloused hands cupped around the mug.

"Want to talk?" she asked quietly.

“No,” hovered on my lips, then I shrugged. “I had enough of the party. I left.”

She said nothing for a second. “Are you going back to Jack’s?”

I shook my head. “I can’t deal with the people. I’ll book in somewhere.”

“You’re welcome to our couch. It’s old, a relic from way before I was born, I’m sure. My sister rescued it from my folks. It used to open into a bed, it’s jammed now. But it’s very comfy, I can vouch for that. It’s yours if you’d like.”

I met her compassionate gaze. Yeah, she was forever watching out for the underdogs. Probably why she’d adopted me. And why I liked her.

Why *she* liked me, I had no idea, considering she knew most of my shit and the wreck I was. It was no secret I avoided my family home and my father whenever possible. Yet Ray never probed.

“You sure? What about your sister?”

“Oh, she won’t mind.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I have friends staying over at times. She’ll be okay with it.”

“Thanks.” I pushed to my feet, weariness taking hold. “Shower? I need to get out of these wet things and get the dirt of Peru off me.”

“You just got back?”

“A few hours ago. Had no time to do much with the surprise party Jack laid out.”

“Jack’s an idiot.” Her mouth thinned in irritation. It was no secret she couldn’t stand him. “Bathroom’s upstairs. Last door in the hallway. Max, there’s no need to rush off in the morning. Stay a few days, sort yourself out.”

“Thanks.”

She cut me a dimpled smile, opening her laptop again.

As I turned to leave, one of the snapshots tacked on the fridge door caught my attention. Ray was licking the face of another girl whose features were scrunched. Again, the need to be included in the warmth drew me. Strange, I never felt that way about Ray—if anything, I saw her more as a kid sister.

The image of the dancing, laundromat girl flickered through my mind, along with the momentary flash of sunshine. The urge to go back, to find her, talk to her, took hold.

Truth was, even if I did return, it wouldn’t take long before I destroyed her life, too. Like I had the only person I’d ever loved.

Chapter Two

Ila

The warmth of my apartment was a familiar comfort, my safe haven. Gratefully, I shut the door behind me, inhaling the aroma of coffee-infused air. Books were strewn on the coffee table and the couch.

I adored my sister, but Rayen was like a walking tornado, one with a really keen brain. She had decided to major in math, which I never understood. But then she was the smart one, unlike me. Balancing my checkbook was like tackling a quantum equation.

Dumping the heavy, linen bag on a chair, I retrieved the laundry, sorted through the items, then left my sister's stack on the dining table. "Ray?"

"In here."

As I walked into our tiny kitchen, I found her in the middle of eating a muffin and working on her laptop. The girl was a bottomless pit, ate like a horse, and didn't gain a pound. Lucky for her, she was also tall while I was short and petite.

"Your things are on the table. It's your turn to do the laundry next." I cut her a stern look so she'd know I was serious. Ray barely tackled chores, and laundry was a dead zone for her.

"Aww, man. I hate hauling that ugly bag down to the laundromat." Her lips curved in a sulky pout. "When are you gonna get the washing machine fixed?"

I pulled off my damp jacket and dropped it on the stool. "Feel free to call Mr. Wong. If you can get him to move any faster, I'll give you—"

"Five hundred dollars?" she asked with a bright smile.

A snort escaped me. My sister could wheedle almost anything she wanted out of anyone, probably because of those dimples of hers, or, maybe because of her big heart and compassion for the downtrodden. "You wish. A big smoochy kiss is what you'll get."

She scrunched her nose, then grabbed me and licked my cheek.

"Gross, Ray! Really?" Scowling, I swiped my face with the back of my hand. "Must you do that?"

"Yup." She grinned. "So you wouldn't do it to me." She picked up a cranberry-orange muffin and stuffed more of the crumbly cake into her mouth.

Sniffing, I shook my head. "At the rate you inhale food, good thing I don't have to pay Mrs. Renner the kind of rent this place goes for, or we'd be living on the street."

"Good thing I'm here, or everything in this kitchen would gather fungus," she shot back. "We'd probably discover a new species of spores living inside our fridge and cause the next big disaster worse than the Ebola virus. Scientists would call it the Ila—"

"Shut up, Ray." Amusement tugging my lips, I freed my hair from its ponytail and headed for the stairs. Shower, then work.

"Ila, wait—"

I sprinted up, ignoring her frantic cry. She must have discovered something else that needed expounding upon. Mold? Grimacing, I pulled off my clammy tank top and dashed into the—steam-filled?—bathroom, nearly tripping on a pile of clothes

strewn on the floor. “Dammit! What the...?”

My mouth fell open. My gaze locked on the vision in front of me.

A naked, golden Adonis stood just a touch away, towel-drying his dark blond hair. A light scruff shadowed his jaw. With his lean face and chiseled jaw and chin, he was utterly gorgeous. Built like a swimmer, he sported black and gray tattoos on his biceps, snaking to his forearms. More ink ran to his back and parts of his chest, a striking contrast against his golden skin—

Holy mother! He had both nipples pierced!

He was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

Jeez, but he was tall. I probably stood waist-high or something. As if my eyes had a will of their own, they traveled down his well-defined abs, past his navel—

Whoa—ugh, dammit! Tearing my gaze back up, I clashed with eyes the color of a lake hidden deep in a verdant jungle. And stilled. What secrets did they conceal? God knew my own smiles hid an abyss of hurt and pain. My ex filled my mind, and just as quickly, I shut him out when despair threatened to resurface.

He, however, didn’t seem to care about my staring. His cool indifference took on a spark of interest. His left brow, bisected by a scar, rose, and a smirk lit his handsome face.

Reality smacked me upside the head. Here I stood, half-naked, and ogling him. Heat scorching my face, I pulled on my tank top again.

“That’s a shame.” At his teasing words, I cut him a cold glare.

Instead of yelling, “who the hell are you?” I barked, “Raaaaay!”

Shaking his head and pressing his lips together as if trying not to smile, he wrapped a towel around his lean waist just as Ray made a winded, laughing appearance.

“Sorry, sis! But Max is hanging with me for a few days.”

Hanging? I sincerely hoped she meant ‘just friends watching movies’ type of hanging and not that they’d been doing the horizontal tango while I’d been at the laundromat, because...because...I had no idea why I’d even think there was a because.

Heck, who was I to preach after the mess I had made of my life? I’d chosen to live like a virtual recluse at nearly twenty-five, sheltered within the walls of my home and buried in my work, much to the dismay of my family. But that didn’t mean Ray could break my rules by bringing random hookups into our home.

I glared at my sister. Didn’t trust the mischievous sparkle in her eyes, while *he* crossed his arms over his bare chest and listened, no doubt highly amused by our exchange. “You couldn’t tell me this downstairs? Or yell it?”

“I tried to warn you,” Ray grumbled. “But, jeez, you’re damn fast when you don’t want to be caught.”

“Explain.” I pinned Ray with a gimlet glare, more out of embarrassment that I’d been caught staring at her guest than anything else.

“Max needs a place to crash for a few days. I said it was okay.”

Aware that *he* still hadn’t uttered a word except for the provocative comment moments ago, I remained silent. Ray’s mouth had a tendency to run at full steam sometimes. Worse, we were having a conversation in the bathroom with a nearly naked guy who was standing far too close. Or maybe our bathroom was shrinking because I could literally feel his body heat, or, maybe menopause had hit early. Ugh. Clearly, I’d lost my mind.

I walked out, then ran downstairs to the living room, rubbing my heated face. I picked up my laundry and carried it back to my room.

Ray appeared and hesitated in the doorway. “I’m sorry, sis. I tried to warn you I

had a friend over. It's okay, right?" Worried hazel eyes searched mine. "Max is really nice. He needs a quiet place to stay for a while, and *he* saved me from those drunken assholes last year after I left work. He got hurt in the fight, too."

Instantly, all my protective instincts raced to the forefront. Ray had told me about the incident, but the pissed-off fighter named Max didn't line up with the sexy, beautiful man in my home.

Just because I had no interest in men at this point in my life didn't mean I wasn't aware that he was good-looking.

He had saved Ray. The least I could do was let him stay. More, it was the first time Ray had shown interest in any guy or had one stay over. But she was still my little sister. "Fine, but he takes the couch."

"Gotcha." A cheeky grin appeared. "Hey, he could totally share my bed, and it would mean nothing."

"Ray, enough." I didn't want to hear it, or how they'd hooked up. "Go do something. Order dinner. Surely you must be hungry by now?"

She smirked. "Yeah, I am. In fact, I didn't finish my muffin, which is all your fault. So, what shall I get?"

"Whatever you want."

She dashed off. Seconds later, the thud of knuckles banging on wood sounded. "Hey, Maximus, what would you like to eat?"

"I'm good with whatever." His quieter, muffled tone drifted to me. A door squeaked open, then his heavy footsteps followed my sister's lighter ones down the stairs.

I pulled out a change of clothes and headed for the shower, which, of course, brought my encounter with Max back in vivid detail. Warmth flooded my face—eesh, you'd think I'd be used to nudity instead of blushing like a teen, considering I'd painted nudes while at university.

Irritated at myself, I stripped off my dank clothes, tossed them in the hamper, and stepped into the shower.

A half hour later, as I changed into jeans and a tee, my cell beeped with a text. *Food's here.*

Right, now I'd have to go face my sister's guest. I stared at my cell, biting my thumbnail. Then realizing what I was doing, I grimaced, pocketed my cell, and trudged downstairs. If Ray didn't call me to eat, she'd probably find my skeletal form slumped over my easel. Time ran away when I painted. Unlike my day job.

As a window designer, the job should be fun, creative, but my boss, Kate, made the Dementors seem like paragons of happiness. I'd leave if I could, but I needed a steady income until my paintings took off.

As I cleared the bottom stair, soft voices drifted to me from the television, and the teasing aroma of savory, cheesy pizza had my tummy rumbling.

Ray sat on the floor while Max stood near the window, staring outside, his cell pressed to his ear. At the sight of Matt Smith's cute face on TV, I wasn't surprised she had him watching *her* favorite show, a *Doctor Who* rerun.

"Thought you'd never come down," Ray said. "Pizza's getting cold."

"It's okay." I crossed to the low table, aware that Max had turned and now watched me as he ended his call. Ignoring him, I selected a cooling pepperoni slice from the box and took a bite. As I straightened, my gaze met his, and my stomach tripped at the intensity of his stare.

Darn, I needed a drink. I made for the kitchen, retrieved the merlot from the cupboard, and poured a glass of red. One hefty gulp later, and the miracle wine eased

the tension inside me.

Calmer now, I headed back to the living room and bit off a disgruntled sigh. Max had claimed *my* armchair. My pillows stacked on a chair. He slouched in my comfy spot, long legs stretched out and those muscled, inked arms folded over his flat belly.

Since I couldn't physically pick him up and move him—the guy was way tall and outweighed me by more than a hundred pounds—I kicked off my flip-flops and sat on the couch near Ray, curling my legs under me.

My sister gabbed nonstop, mostly about people I didn't know, gaming, and then she asked Max how far he'd progressed on his "piece."

A gamer? It fit.

Usually, any episode of *Doctor Who* grabbed my attention. But not today. Now, it was next to impossible when our unexpected houseguest sat just a short distance away. Ack. Shutting him out of my thoughts, my mind drifted to my meeting with a new client this evening—well, more, it was the other half of an engagement portrait I had to complete. I'd finished Sue's part and was meeting with her fiancé, Gus, to set up a schedule so I could work on his.

As the end credits rolled on-screen, I made my way to the kitchen and tossed the pizza crust in the compost bin under the sink. Despite having work to finish, I stood there for a second, a strange restlessness stirring within me. I wanted to go to the rooftop, lie on the chair there, and stare at the stars until my head cleared, but it was raining.

Exhaling roughly, I turned and almost collided with a hard body. Crap, I jumped back, my heart thumping wildly against my ribs. He smelled really, really good. Woodsy, with a hint of cedar and warm male...and a trace of my apple shampoo.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there."

"Or in the living room," he said quietly.

He didn't just say that, did he?

When he continued to watch me with those inscrutable lake-green eyes, I decided it was best not to say anything. He set the pizza box and soda can on the counter. I walked around him. He stopped me, a hand on my arm. My breath caught. My blood buzzed like a lit fuse at his touch. And I stood there stunned for what felt like years—a lifetime.

"Tell me your name."

"What?"

"Or is it a state secret?"

My hazy thoughts finally connected. Oh, shit. He'd asked my name.

"Okay, then,"—a slight smile tugged at his lips—"I'll just call you *the sister* or Logan."

At his teasing, heat rushed to my face. Dammit, I should have just told him. Now I appeared like a gaping, witless idiot. It took everything in me not to step back, uneasy at how a simple touch rattled me.

"It's Ila. My name's Ila, okay?"

"That sounds very nice, but too late, *Logan*."

Oh, man. Safer to change the subject. "Did you want something?"

His gaze skimmed over my face and lowered to my mouth. "Yes."

Warmth seeped into my cheeks. Before he saw how his words flustered me, I picked up a glass, filled it with water, and swallowed some.

"Is it okay if I stay here?" he asked.

Leave. Go. Yet, my conscience wouldn't let me voice that. No matter my unfortunate reaction to him, he did save Ray. The doorbell rang. I breathed in relief.

My appointment was here, and I could escape this suddenly stifling space.

I set the glass down and turned, and found him raking back his overgrown blond hair. His actions drew my gaze to his bulging, tattooed biceps. It was so tempting to step closer and study the spiraling musical design on his forearm. I said instead, “Yes, it’s fine. If you need anything, ask Ray.”

“Sis?” Ray sprinted into the kitchen and dumped her plate and soda on the counter. “Your client’s here—whoa, he’s one yummy, silver-haired fox. Said you’re supposed to show him what you do, so I left him in your room of shocking activities.”

She enjoyed teasing me about my closed door. I didn’t like disturbances when I worked.

“Hey, Maximus,” Ray said. “You’re probably beat with the kind of day you just had and on your birthday, too. Do you wanna crash early?”

“No.” He shook his head.

As I went off to greet my client, Ray’s words echoed in my mind. It was his birthday, and he spent it without his family?

My cell beeped. Absently, I pulled it out of my pocket. At the shortened text, an unstoppable jolt of pain flooded my chest.

Ila, please, please talk to me. I miss you—

Devyn.

In the last two weeks, out of the blue, his texts had started again, pleading to see me. Earlier tonight in the laundromat, he’d text-hounded me repeatedly. Damn him. I’d finally managed to find some peace after the devastation he caused. And now, he would do this?

Chapter Three

Max

It was her, the girl from the laundromat.

Ila Logan.

I still couldn't connect Ray's cool, prickly sister to my dancing girl. For a brief moment, she'd pulled me out of my dark hell. It made sense now why I'd been drawn to the photo on the fridge door earlier.

I stood there unable to believe the odds of this happening. Of course, the fates probably enjoyed screwing with me for their own perverse pleasure when I'd chosen to walk away from this one.

I turned to Ray. "I didn't know you had a sister?"

"You never asked." She swept her laptop off the counter and headed for the living room.

Right. I was too busy steeped in guilt and hating myself. I followed Ray, stopping at the living room window while she set her laptop on the dining table. My gaze drifted to the foyer and the door opposite that hadn't shut properly. Laughter reached me, then low voices. The door closed.

Ray had said "client." What exactly did Logan do that required a locked door? Usually, when I was enclosed behind one, it was to fuck.

At the thought, something fierce tore through my chest. I had no idea why it should piss me off, but it did. I walked outside, pulled out my smokes from my pocket, lit one, and deeply inhaled the shit I was trying to give up.

Ray appeared beside me. We stood protected by the porch and out of the drizzle. She leaned against the wall. "You're gonna kill yourself early, the rate you inhale that crap."

I barely heard her. As if compelled by some unknown force, I asked, "What does your sister do?"

Ray cut me a curious look. "Why are you interested?"

Good question. I shrugged, winging it. "I'd probably want to use her services. What's her price?"

She frowned. "Ila's really good at what she does, or so her clients say. But I hardly see you as the type who'd want more—"

"Her price, Ray," I snapped.

"Lord, you're grumpy." She rolled her eyes at my curt tone, not in the least bit fazed. "It starts at around three grand, but it frequently depends on size."

What the fuck?

"It usually takes about a month, sometimes a little longer. Mostly, it hinges on the client's availability. Ila is thorough..." She glanced at the closed door. "So, you want your portrait painted?"

It took a moment to wade through the haze and pounding that had sprung up in my head again. "Portrait?" I repeated.

"Yes. Why else would you be interested in Ila's prices for painting people?"

An artist? She was a damn *artist*? I had thought a masseuse or something as the reason for the closed door. But Ray's size comment had nearly given me an

aneurysm. I stood there for several long seconds, unable to understand the relief flowing through me. “So she’s showing him her work in there?”

“Yep. It’s her studio and off-limits when she’s working...” Slowly, Ray straightened from the wall. “Oh, no you don’t, Max.” Her eyes sparked dangerously. “I like you a lot, but I love my sister. So don’t make me choose sides. You do anything to her, I will hunt you and kick your ass all the way down Pine.”

“Noted.”

“That wasn’t my approval. Note that, too.”

“How would I hurt her? She’s barely given me the time of day.” And I wondered if Logan had a boyfriend—which I doubted, considering Ray’s words.

Hazel eyes narrowed to slits. “I may not be on your campus, but news travels, as do your hookups. Heck, when your brotherhood’s named *The Players*, there’s a reason for it, though *Hookup Kings* might be more apt. I’ll tell you up front, it won’t fly with my sister. So for both your sakes, stay clear of her. She doesn’t do players.”

Hookup Kings? Players? Several months ago, in another life, sure. I merely lifted an eyebrow at her analysis, but it also raised more questions about Logan.

“I’m not blind—” Ray sliced me a dark glower. “When I walked into the kitchen earlier, the tension between you two was so thick, it’s a miracle I could get to the sink unscathed.”

Biting off my smile, I inhaled another lungful of smoke. So I hadn’t imagined the sensual pull. I did get to Little Miss Prickly.

“As my friend, Max, I’m asking you to stay away from her.”

Shit. I didn’t want to ruin my relationship with Ray. So I said nothing. My gaze drifted down the wet street. I killed my smoke and dropped it into my pack. “You want to go get a drink?”

“God, yes! Been hitting the books the entire day—”

Voices sounded, I turned. Logan and the silver fox appeared.

“See you soon,” the guy said, nodding at Ray, but giving me a puzzled look before bounding down the steps. No doubt he’d make the connection soon enough.

Logan turned to leave. It struck me just how petite she was standing next to Ray and me. Probably around five-four or something. The top of her head barely reached my shoulder.

“Ila, wait.” Ray stopped her as she turned for the door. “Come with us, we’re going out for a drink.”

Logan’s gaze shifted to me, then back to her sister. She shook her head. “I have work—”

“Ugh, c’mon, sis. You work a day job and then this painting one. We all need to take a break sometimes,” Ray grumbled. “We haven’t done anything in ages. It’s just one drink. And it is Max’s birthday—he just got his official grown-up card.” She grinned.

I snorted. Great, point out my age.

Logan sighed. “Fine. One drink.”

“Awesome, give me a minute.” Ray dashed into the apartment.

Alone at last. Before I could speak, she said, “Happy birthday.”

I smiled. “Now it is. Thanks.”

Color tinged her cheeks at my deliberate provocation. Yeah, I was a bastard, but I enjoyed having her react to me.

She eyed me warily, then straightened her spine. Yup, here it came, the set down.

“Look. You’re Ray’s friend—”

“But not her boyfriend.”

“And you’re young.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

Her lush lips pressed together in an annoyed line. Nope, she had no comeback for that. Score for me.

She walked back into the foyer and changed her flip-flops for a pair of boots tucked near the coat stand there, then shrugged on a hip-length black jacket. She cut me another narrowed-eyed glare when she found me watching her. I smirked.

“Right, let’s roll.” Ray hurried out. Logan appeared relieved as she locked up. She’d soon learn I had the tenacity of a bulldog. I wanted to know this prickly girl with the striking amber eyes.

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