

Before Dawn

Laura F. Murphy

Other Titles by Laura F. Murphy
Reckless Perfection
Chasing Ghosts (A Reckless Perfection Novel)

Laura F. Murphy

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To my loved ones,

I cannot start off a dedication page without thanking God for giving me life and a passion to write. I am also grateful to my husband, parents, siblings, nephews, niece, along with all of my family and friends for their continued love and support.

Much Love,

Laura Francois Murphy

Prologue

As my heart tried to escape from my chest, I yanked my ski mask over my face. I shoved the door of the car open with all of my strength. Once I was out, I ran. For months I thought nothing mattered, but now it was as if everything did. If I didn't sprint quickly, I could lose the thing I valued the most. I picked up the pace, wondering why I hadn't joined the cross country or track team in high school. Though a smile formed on my face for a bit from this revelation, it quickly disappeared. This was no time for jokes. This was my life. My life was on the line.

I raced through the familiar city, dodging some of the sprawled over trash on the streets of Brooklyn. After hopping over a steel can of garbage I cut left to a street corner. Even though I knew there were people behind me, I blocked it all out. All I could think about was Sinach's song "Way Maker". I sang it in my head, while my pounding heart played the beat to the tune. Pondering the lyrics I felt God's presence. There was light in the darkness and all I had to do was go to God to find it.

"STOP RUNNING!" the cop screamed at me. That I heard. The music ceased. Stupid me glanced back and panicked. The cop who was chasing me had a gun pointing at my head. "Take one more step and I'll shoot!" he threatened as he edged closer to me. By then, I brought my running to a halt. "Put your hands in the air, Kid." I slowly raised my hands. I peeked at the opposite direction of the police to where I could try to escape. No such luck. It was a lanky fence. I knew I could scale the gate, but I wasn't dumb. He was almost at arm's length away from me. I didn't

have a chance of making it. Then again, I loved my freedom and I couldn't be free in jail...

*****Chapter 1*****

July 2016

“Welcome to my crib,” I told my favorite nephew, Ru, in my New York accent after I opened the door for him.

“I can’t believe you live in a hotel, Max,” he responded in a grin coming into my temporary home. Ru was a typical pretty boy. Other than being tall and fit, he had dark brown eyes and hair that was always fully loaded with gel that he claimed to be bullet proof since it never moved. He had a full sleeve of tattoos on one arm and a half a sleeve on his other. He was always wearing the latest clothes and would make sure he didn’t rock the same shirt going out more than once.

The suite I was currently residing in was transformed into a makeshift home. There was a small living room space with a sofa bed and basic coffee table. Across there was a small kitchenette that held a petite refrigerator, microwave and to my disappointment only a stovetop with no oven. The few cabinets held my cookware. The closet was filled with all of my dresses, purses, and jewelry most I had no business owning since I was a brand whore without the income to afford it. My shoe game was no different; red bottoms all day. The rest of my clothes were folded in the drawers of the dressers. A small bathroom was tucked in the corner. There was a king size bed next to the doors that led to a tiny balcony that showcased New York City’s beautiful skyline.

“I’d rather live here than a not so great apartment,” I replied resting my cellphone down annoyed my guy hadn’t replied to me in hours.

“Okay. So who’s this mysterious fool fronting the bill for you to stay here? I know you can’t afford this place on ya own working as a waitress,” he said taking a seat on the couch. Too distracted in my own thoughts, I went over to my closet deciding what wardrobe I’d wear to make him jealous at the club so he’d regret ignoring my calls and texts.

“I also get paid gigs here and there,” I finally replied not wanting to tell him or anyone else who was truly helping me pay my extended hotel stay and why. “With Facebook and Instagram I’m able to promote the shows I do.”

“Speaking of IG,” Ru started whipping out the latest iPhone, “Look at this chick that slid in my DM’s. She’s a looker. With social media I don’t even gotta put the work in. Girls just approach me. Her tonight and on to the next tomorrow,” he added in a chuckle showing me her promiscuous profile picture. I rolled my eyes at Ru as I grinned. He was the same ladies’ man he had always been as long as I could remember.

“Hey, Max, if ya need a place to stay, my folks will let you crash at our place.”

“Ru, I’m fine. Besides I’m too grown to be living under someone else’s roof having to abide by their rules. I wanna come and go as I please. I’m surprised you’re still living at home. We’re twenty-three for crying out loud.”

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“What can I say? I’m comfortable. Ma cooks and cleans for me and I get along with her and pops. I just give ‘em a little money each month and stack my coins so when I do end up moving out it’ll be a dope pad. Or, I can become a sugar baby like someone I know,” he joked.

“Funny. Anyways, you coming to Franco’s tonight?” I asked about the bar I worked at. I was over his and everyone else’s judgement about my living arrangements and discreet love life.

“For sure. Just like the old days,” Ru said going over to the balcony and looking at the priceless view. It was a bright summer evening in Brooklyn. A cool breeze came across the open environment, just like I liked it. I loved being free, living by my own rules.

I walked on stage as the audience cheered me on. As a regular, they grew to love my sultry voice. I gave them a coy smile as I approached the microphone on the small stage that sat in front of several tables.

I twirled my freshly straightened black hair mixed with weave with my fingers. My smoky black eye shadow brought out my honey brown eyes. My crimson red form fitting dress fit well against my caramel colored skin. My outfit was short enough to give the audience a sneak peek of my massive colorful floral tattoo on my right lateral thigh. Besides that one, I bore a tattoo of my ma’s name in cursive on my left wrist, “c’est la vie” in cursive on my right wrist, and a hidden tat of my guy’s name in a place for his eyes only. And of course I wasn’t going to perform without my go

to red bottoms even though I didn't need them since I was already 5'8.

As the music began to play, I slowly took the mike and began to sing Mary J. Blige's "I'm Going Down". Once I finished seducing the audience, I dipped my curvaceous body a bit before giving them another flirty smile. My local fans clapped as I got off the stage.

"You killed it, Max," Ru complimented as he gave me a hug. I smiled thankful I had my best friend for the night. As we released each other, I caught a glimpse of Tommy Lucca by the bar. Though he was as unavailable as can be I still found him attractive.

"Hey, can you go find us some seats? I'll meet you in a few." After Ru left, I approached Tommy. I glimpsed around before I reached over to subtly touch his arm.

"Dina's here," he told me in a low voice. I automatically pulled my hand away from him as my heart raced. Though I wanted to react to this news, I knew I couldn't risk it. I didn't want to lose Tommy. "I'll meet you at your place at one, after I drop her off." I glanced at the clock against the wall. It was already midnight.

I paced the hotel room as I impatiently waited for Tommy to come. It was already two in the morning, yet there was no sign of him. I tapped my fingers against my dress, wondering why I was still with him. Yeah, I loved him, but damn. I knew that I would never be a top priority for him. I had a feeling that I was never going to get all of Tommy, but

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I just couldn't let him go. How could I? He was the only man I ever loved. Okay, so he was about fourteen years older than me and married. That didn't change my deep feelings for him.

I hustled towards the door once I heard knocking. Tommy stepped in with a bottle of Moscato along with glasses in his hands. He kept his bald head covered with a tan retro newsboy cap. He had a well-trimmed light greyish beard. A few of his buttons were undone from his white top that was tucked in black slacks. He finished off his look with leather auburn Gucci loafers.

When I first met Tommy he had muscles for days, like he lived in the gym and had protein and steroids for his diet. As years passed by he obtained a tiny beer belly however his arms were still robust.

“Hey, baby,” he began as he tried to kiss me. I shifted my face, causing his smooch to land on my cheek rather than my mouth. “Okay,” he started placing the cups down by the stovetop. He poured out wine in both glasses and handed one to me. I reluctantly accepted it. I took a huge sip as I tried to calm down. I felt like ripping Tommy's head off. Who did he think he was just walking in as if everything was okay? “So ya mad?”

“What do you think, Tommy? You bring her to my place of work and expect me not to be mad.”

“She's my wife!”

“I get that. She gets to have you and go out with you in public and post about you on Facebook. But Franco's is my place! At least give me there to be with you freely.”

“It’s not my fault that she wanted to come to Franco’s. I didn’t know you were gonna be singing ‘cause you don’t typically sing on Thursdays. And besides, when you and I are at Franco’s we still act as if we’re not a couple.”

“Except when we’re banging each other in the bathroom stalls!” I snapped.

“Don’t get mad, Max. You know the deal, so don’t act stupid and know your role. Remember it’s I who put you up in this hotel so be grateful. I already have so much stress at work and home. I don’t come here to hear you yap my ear off. All’s I want from you is to be the girl I met years ago. Beautiful, fit, fun, carefree, and willing to please me in ways my wife can’t.” I shook my head. After all of these years I thought he would see me as more than just his sidechick. A part of me wanted him to leave his wife so we could openly love each other, but I was hit with reality when he would choose to stay with his spouse over and over again despite him threatening to divorce her whenever we were together.

“Do you just see me as your mistress?” Tommy ignored me as he drank what was left in his glass. I glared at him with disbelief when he didn’t correct me. “So that’s all I am to you, Tommy? Your mistress?” I yelled as I smacked the beverage from his hand.

“Do you know how expensive that costs!” he screamed back as it smashed onto the floor.

“I don’t care! Just like how you don’t care about me!” I hated being this upset. Tommy brought out the worst in me. I turned around in a frown and crossed my arms.

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“Non posso crederla. Più sono a lei della sua padrona!” I continued, telling him that I couldn’t believe him and I was more than just his mistress.

“Just ‘cause I don’t speak Italian, doesn’t mean I don’t understand the language. I do care about you! If I didn’t, I would be in bed with my wife, not here with you.” He sighed as he came closer to me and uncrossed my arms. “You’re not just my mistress, Max.”

“Really?” I asked, not sure if I should believe him. He nodded his head. “Love me?”

“I do,” he responded as he moved closer to kiss me. I didn’t pull away this time. Before I knew it, I was in his arms. “Your birthday is coming up,” he started. I held my breath. Because he was married it was hit or miss for him to be with me on my special day. If he was able to make it, it was typically a dinner some place in Manhattan, followed by a lounge or club and ending with a night with him at a hotel. “Dina and the kids are gonna be out of town in a couple of weeks so I thought maybe we can ring in your twenty-fourth at the Shore. We can spend the whole weekend there. Just you and me.”

“So I’ll see you the actual day of my birthday?” I asked hoping he’d say yes.

“The following day. Sorry, baby, but my kid has a play at school the day of ya birthday that I can’t miss.” Though disappointed I accepted his offer.

July 2009

I never planned to get involved with a married man. I mean, what girl intentionally goes after a guy who is already taken? Well, I guess there're plenty of women out there who are home wreckers especially in the age of social media and online dating. I'd like to believe that I'm not like those women.

It started back at my older brother Rudy's garage. I worked there throughout high school for side money. The funds my mother got from the government was only enough for the bills and some grocery so Rudy was nice enough to offer me a job at his business.

"Rudy!" I yelled as I slid out from underneath the car. I threw the socket I was using beside me.

"What's wrong?" he called back from the front of the shop where the cash register was. Rudy was an honest man who did all he could to be a good husband and father to his two kids. He was tall and kept the hair that didn't fall out yet, combed back. His wife's cooking helped him continue to pack the pounds on throughout the years.

"I need new gloves," I replied, as I pulled off the ripped ones. I was in the middle of draining the oil from the car, when the cheap gloves gave out. Just because I was a female working at a garage, didn't mean I didn't care about my looks. I didn't want my hands to look as if I was playing in a bucket of oil. Mama would not let me hear the end of it, if I came back with dirty hands. She always had a thing about females never getting their hands dirty so they could always be prepared to cook.

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“Again?”

“Yeah,” I responded as I wiped my arm against my forehead. I readjusted my ponytail that kept my kinky curls in place and not in my face. It was hot as ever. Not only was it a warm July afternoon, but I was just underneath a car. I’d rock a tank and shorts to work, but Rudy was adamant about me not showing skin, especially here. He thought the guys wouldn’t take me seriously if I dressed a certain way. When I first started here, the guys gave me a hard time, thinking that I was a spoiled brat who was just there because I was the boss’s sister. Little did they know that Rudy taught me my way around the car before he hired me. After months of hostility, the boys at the garage lightened up and accepted me.

The guys at the garage all had different personalities. First off was Dominic aka Dom, my second oldest brother. If there was ever a problem in the shop, and Rudy wasn’t available, Dom was there to handle the issue. Unlike Rudy, Dom was bald and in top fitness shape. If he wasn’t at work, he was at the gym.

Rudy had two kids. His first son was Rudy Junior aka Ru. He was Brooklyn’s resident player. I mean, every time I saw him, he was with a different girl. He even had women bringing him home cooked meals to the shop. He may not have been the best mechanic at the garage, but he sure brought in a lot of customers. Besides the girls he ran through, he was able to charm the pants off of anyone. The old lady who barely used her car, to the family from out of state. He even had his girls’ boyfriends coming to the shop. Rudy’s youngest kid was Carmine. He was the smart one out of us all. If there ever was a problem with the car that

involved a computer or whatever high tech stuff, he was the guy.

Then there was Mario aka the ultimate mama's boy. Most of the guys at the shop were mamas' boys, but he took it to another level. He was thirty-seven, still living in his mom's basement. Every day he worked there, his mother would bring him a hot meal. His ex-girlfriend even broke up with him since he called his mother more on the phone than her.

Last, but certainly not least, was Shifty Louie. He got his nickname from acting a little too much like he was in the mafia. This guy was always doing something shady, weather it was selling what seemed to be stolen merchandises whenever he thought Rudy wasn't watching to having guys you see on the Sopranos' come to the shop looking for him. The upside to Shifty Louie was that he was a good mechanic and he always knew where to get car parts for the cheapest.

"You're lucky Ma would kill me if you came home with ya hands dirty," he joked. I gave him a smile as I reached over to the pair of fairly new gloves he handed to me. "Oh, Max, meet Tommy Lucca. He's gonna be working at the garage for now on." I looked over to whom Rudy was talking about. Tommy was standing, sizing the garage up. He was a little short: only an inch taller than me. But that didn't matter to me. His other features made up for his height challenges. He was bald with small beady dark eyes, was muscular and tan skin. He had on a white buttoned down shirt with black slacks and fancy dark shoes. He wasn't wearing a wedding band. "And Tommy, this is my baby sister, Max..." Rudy kept talking, but I couldn't hear him.

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I was mesmerized by Tommy. It was something about him that I couldn't brush off. The song Anita Baker's "Sweet Love" started playing in my head. Though cheesy, I felt as if it was just Tommy and I in the room. He didn't make it easy either. He was looking dead at me. I could tell by looking into his eyes that he wanted to talk to me, just as bad as I wanted to with him.

June 2010

For about a year, we hardly spoke to each other. When we did, it was a “hi”, “how you doing” or “pass me the”... Tommy was guarded and to himself. Whenever any of my co-workers would ask him something personal such as his home life, he would quickly remind them he came to the garage to work, not to discuss his personal life; he also never came out to any work or non-work related get together. He never wore a wedding ring and didn’t have pictures of his family up. His mysterious background intrigued me to the point I tried searching for him on social media with no luck.

That at all changed the weekend I graduated from high school. Somehow, everyone at the garage, except Tommy and I, were working that Saturday. Even Rudy, who was there almost every day, was gone for the weekend to the Jersey Shore with his wife and kids.

It was a slow day, and I was jamming to Gloria Estefan’s “Turn the Beat Around”. Musically, I preferred more mellow songs, but I couldn’t get enough of this upbeat catchy tune. Every time I heard that song, I would stop what I was doing and start to dance. I even came up with a corny dance routine to the song back when I was in middle school. Once Gloria said “flute players play your flute...” I would always pretend to play the flute as I would hop on my right foot.

After I boogied to the song, I heard someone clap. I turned around in embarrassment. Had I known he was back from his lunch break, I would have skipped the theatrics.

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“Should I add dancer to your resume?” Tommy asked with a smirk. My heart skipped a beat as I blushed. It was a year since we met, yet I was still crushing on him.

“I don’t normally dance like that,” I defended as I walked over by the radio and turned the music down.

“Sure. Nothing to be ashamed of. It was cute, Max.” I gave him a goofy smile, loving the way he said my name. “I gotta sandwich from Catene Deli over on 9th Street. Wanna share?”

“I don’t wanna grub on your lunch-”

“You afraid I got the cooties or something? Come get half,” he insisted. We went over to the side of the garage where there was a table and a couple of chairs. As we chatted about what different music genres we liked, I tried to remember what my ma kept telling me about how to act like a lady. *Sit up straight. Cross your legs. Don’t talk with your mouth full.* I sat up right, crossed my legs that were previously wide open like a dude’s, and finished chewing before I spoke to Tommy.

“So does ya boyfriend ever get mad that you’re always working at the garage?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I blurted out with my mouth full. I blushed as I finished chewing. I didn’t want him to think I was taken. Tommy grinned as he leaned forward.

“Why do you work here so much?”

“The money my ma gets is only enough to get by. Sometimes she needs more and she’s too old to work. And besides, it’s nice to make my own money and not depend on anyone.”

“Good family woman. I can respect that.” I swallowed my salt and vinegar chips feeling my cheeks get red. He called me a woman. Though I was eighteen, I never had a boyfriend. It was hard being one of the few black kids at school and the neighborhood growing up. Guys looked right past me to date my Caucasian female classmates. When I straightened my natural 3c hair it gave me extra points with the boys I was around but even then it was few and far between.

Tommy’s hand reached over to my face. I froze as my mouth fell open. “Here, you got some honey mustard there,” he said, slowly wiping it off with his index finger. I gazed into his eyes as he kept his fingers on my face. “You’re beautiful, Max. I wanted to kiss you since I first saw you a year ago. But you were underage and ya brother Rudy ...”

“Well I’m eighteen and Rudy is miles away,” I quickly replied, hoping Tommy wouldn’t change his mind. My heart was racing faster than it ever had before. This was the moment I dreamed about all along. Tommy and me alone and us being together. It was actually happening.

Tommy grabbed my face. As our lips connected he pushed the table out of our way. Standing up he wrapped his arms around my body as we continued on.

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We always kept our relationship a secret. One of his many excuses for why it should be kept private was that Rudy would not approve and maybe even fire him if he found out there was something going on between us.

By the time October came, I was still working at the garage full time. Against Mama's wishes, I decided to take a year off before starting college.

All of the employees at the garage eagerly stood around Rudy as he made his infamous speech about the importance of work ethic and loyalty. I kept my fingers crossed, because I put in a lot of effort to show Rudy that he should keep me around for my skills over the fact that we were family.

"Come on, Pops! Do we really have to hear the same old speech? Just tell us who employee of the quarter is so I can get out of here. Seaside is calling my name!" Ru exclaimed with his arms crossed.

"So are a whole bunch of STD's," Mario joked.

"Awe, Mario. I always wrap it up and don't hate 'cause you ain't getting none. Maybe if you move out ya ma's basement things will change--"

"Quiet, Ru. I'm trying to move out. Things are complicated--"

"What? Still trying to find a woman who can cook as good of a meal of capellini pomodoro as ya mother?" Dom asked as the shop started to laugh. Though Mario seemed upset at first, he chuckled with the rest of us.

“I can get you a woman who can cook and who isn’t bad on the eyes for a small price,” Shifty Louie whispered to Mario.

“Pops, who won?” Carmine asked, shifting the conversation back to Rudy.

“Max!” He exclaimed as he clapped and looked at me. I beamed as the guys around the shop cheered. “That means you get a gift card to Catene Deli on 9th street, one extra day of vacation with pay, and the privilege of being the employee of the quarter.” Once the excitement died down, I approached Tommy by the car he was fixing. I glanced around before I engaged him.

“So, I was thinking, maybe we can go to the deli. Just you and me,” I said as I subtly touched his hand.

“Stop. I’m working,” he coldly replied. He brushed me away as he took the rag from his back pocket to wipe a part of the engine he was working on.

“What’s wrong?” From the couple of months Tommy and I had a secret relationship, I learned that he had his off days where he was moody. It must’ve been one of those days.

“Nothing-”

“Tommy.”

“Okay. Fine. Don’t you find it a bit suspicious that you were chosen?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

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“You are the boss’s sister and you’re the only black person working here. Affirmative action and nepotism at its finest.”

“Me being his sis or the color of my skin has nothing to do with this. I earned this,” I replied, trying not to get offended. Anytime he was upset with me he tended to bring up my race. No longer in high school, I thought maybe it would get easier being the darkest person among my family members and community, but times like this reminded me how much uncomfortable I was in my own skin.

“Not as much as other people here, including me. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago that it was me who helped you-no practically repaired Cerullo’s BMW on my own? Yet, I let you sit around and take all of the credit for it.”

“I didn’t just sit around. We did it together-” I defended in annoyance that he was implying I was lazy. In a matter of seconds, I went from feeling like I was on top of the world to feeling so stupid.

“No you didn’t, Max. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to work. Something, you know nothing about.”

“Where’s all this coming from, Tommy?” I asked, trying to keep my cool. If Tommy were any guy who talked to me like that, I would’ve already given him a fistful. But he was not just any man. I had already fallen for him.

“You come to my place of work and try to outshine me. Can you let me be a man? Or do you wanna try

to show how much better you are at being one than me,” he insulted.

“What do you want me to do? Quit working here?” I questioned as my voice got a little louder. I was trying to stay calm, but it was getting harder by the second. Tommy was starting to piss me off. Who was he to insult me like that? Was he forgetting that I was employed before him here?

“You guys okay over there?” Rudy asked from the front of the shop.

“Everything’s fine, Boss,” Tommy said, giving him a fake smile.

“Max?”

“Fine, like he said, Rudy. I was just asking him about...the transmission I’m working on.” Rudy nodded and went about his business.

“Yes to your question. Don’t and you give me up,” Tommy threatened as he went back to the engine.

*****Chapter 2*****

July 2012

Of course I chose Tommy over the garage. Maybe he was right about me letting him be a man. I was a tomboy, but after quitting the garage, I tapped into my feminine side. Tommy preferred my hair straight and wanted me to avoid getting tans since my natural caramel skin was dark enough for him. He loved when I got doll'd up to where all my natural curves were on display for him.

I started going to the salon to get weave to make my hair longer, acrylic nails, and pedicures. I kept my weight down by jogs every day and weight training at the gym. I'd always go for the outfits that would cost me about two weeks' worth of work. Loving my transformation, Tommy spoiled me every once in a while to make sure I was able to afford to keep up with my looks. Changes to my appearance led to more attention from men of different races; however I saw none of them. I had tunnel vision when it came to Tommy.

"You sure you can carry that?" Ru asked me as I picked up one of the coolers filled with soda cans and water bottles.

"I'm good. You forget I used to carry things this heavy at the garage?" I asked him. We both walked from Rudy's car over to the baseball field. Each year we held a softball tournament against rival garages. Though I hadn't worked there for two years, Rudy was nice enough to let me play in the game. Growing up with Rudy, I was taught at a young age about the importance of baseball and the Yankees.

When I was a kid, I used to play stickball with the boys. Once I reached high school, I played softball until I got kicked off of the team for fighting.

“I couldn’t tell. I mean, you got ya hair and nails done. Even your clothes is a little whorish-”

“It’s not whorish,” I responded as I set the cooler down on top of the picnic table. I unrolled the denim shorts I had on. I admit I was showing more skin, but I had to. Surprisingly Tommy agreed to come to the social. I thought maybe he was testing the waters to see how people would react to us being a couple. I wanted to look good for him. He seemed to want me more when I dressed whorish as Ru put it. “Better?” We both leaned against the table as we watched the others set up.

“Kinda,” he replied as he rolled his eyes. “Just ‘cause ya twenty and think you’re grown, know me and the boys are gonna make sure no guys ever mess with you.”

“Thanks.”

“So...who’s the fool that’s got you acting like a girl?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out who he is when the time is right,” I responded ignoring his comment about me acting like a girl.

“Whatever. I know this clown must be here. If not you wouldn’t have come here looking like that,” he responded as he scanned the crowd to see if he could spot my boyfriend. I gave him a smile before walking away. I ran my fingers through my hair before applying more red MAC

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lipstick on. I glanced back to where Ru was. Once I saw him trying to get a number from some female around our age, I sighed in relief. He was no longer interested in finding out what guy had me acting the way I was.

Tommy was standing by the home base, practicing a few swings before the game. This was my man. As I began to approach him, he turned to me and gave me a grin. I gave him a come-hither glance. I intensely eyed him, pouted my lips, and switched my hips as I walked one foot right in front of the other. It was as if it was just him and I in the softball field. I know this wasn't the most subtle way of hitting on my man, but I didn't care. After two years and some change of us privately dating, it was about time we came out as a couple.

“MAXIMILIANA ABBRACCIAMENTO!” I dropped my whole sultry look on my face. I recognized that voice. It was Mama from the bleachers, with Carmine holding an umbrella over her head. Since it was a hot July afternoon and she wasn't doing so well health wise, she had to be in the shades if she was outside. And if she was calling me by full name, I knew she was serious. She adopted me in her early fifties, a few years after her husband died from a heart attack. I gave Tommy an apologetic look before I went over to see what she wanted.

“Ma, che che ha torto?” I said, asking her what was wrong. Though Mama was fluent in English, she spoke mostly in her native tongue.

She moved from Sicily to Brooklyn in her twenties. I picked up the Italian language after hearing her communicate with myself, friends and family throughout the years. Mama was now in her early seventies, petite, pale with

short and thin light brunette hair that had a few streaks of grey. She kept it dyed as much as possible. She wore oversized sunglasses even when indoors.

I slid on the bench beside her. “Are you feeling shortness of breath? We can go home-” I began. Forty-five years of smoking caught up to Mama several years ago starting off with a COPD diagnosis followed by lung cancer earlier this year. Just a couple of months ago, she had to get her malignant left lung removed. Her right lung wasn’t so great either, but it was well enough for her to survive.

“Carmine, poterla mi prende una bottiglia di acqua?” she said asking him for a bottle of water. After Carmine left I held the umbrella over her head. Mama took hold of my hand and squeezed. *And squeezed.*

“Mama-” I started as my hand began to hurt.

“Don’t do it,” she warned me in a thick accent.

“What?”

“He’s a married man.”

“What?” I asked feeling lost and confused. Did she mean Tommy? She couldn’t have meant him. Not my Tommy. Why would Tommy get involved with me if he was married? Wouldn’t he have told me, or better yet wouldn’t he have broken it off after the first time I gave it up to him two years ago? All Tommy mentioned to me about his home life was that he had two daughters from a previous relationship and that he wanted us to keep our relationship hush to not upset his children.

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“Dietro noi. Sguardo. Sua moglie ed i bambini vengono,” she said telling me to look behind me to see that his wife was coming up to us with his two kids. Sure enough a petite and short woman along with her two very young daughters walked over towards the bench to us.

“Marie,” his beautiful wife said giving my mother a kiss on her cheek. After they greeted each other, his wife, Dina, turned to me. “Max, right?” she asked with an eager smile. Facing her, my hands got sweaty. How could Tommy cheat on a woman who looked like an Italian Barbie Doll with someone like me? She had the appearance of a former cheerleader. Dina reminded me of the many girls who were chosen over me time and time again back in high school. How could I possibly compete with her? “Hi, I’m Dina, Tommy’s wife. I don’t believe we ever officially met,” she said as she stuck her hand out.

“Hi,” I finally managed to say as Mama let go of me. After wiping my hands on my shorts I gave his wife a weak handshake. Here I was just a minute ago feeling all giddy and now I wanted to find a hole and crawl inside it. “I have to get ready. It was nice to meet you,” I added, forcing a smile. I quickly got up. Things turned a little black and I became a bit dizzy. I ignored my increased heart rate. I had to get out of there. I walked away from the field. I heard some people calling my name, but I didn’t stop walking. Once I left the field, I started to run. I had to. If I didn’t I was going to do something I would regret. Like smash Tommy’s head in with one of those softball bats.

It all made sense. He always came up with an excuse for us not being seen together from Rudy not approving to his children being too young to understand. We

would never go over to his place. Whenever we met up, it would be at my place, when my ma wasn't home, a hole in the wall restaurant outside of Bensonhurst or a hotel. Even when we would go out to these restaurants, he would refuse to hold my hand, kiss, or show me any other types of affection. Then there was his phone. He would never pick up during certain parts of the day when I knew he wasn't working.

As I stopped to catch my breath, I laughed. How could I have been so stupid? All the signs were there, right in front of my face, yet I failed to see them. My laughter soon turned to tears as I realized something. I was in love with Tommy. Now that made me go crazy.

I raced back to the softball fields. On the way there, I planned to call Tommy out and let the whole crowd know what had been going on between us. His wife deserved to know how much of a jerk he was.

Then I stopped, remembering that Mama was there. I couldn't do that. I hated getting her upset, especially since she wasn't doing so well. I cared about Mama more than I wanted to get back at Tommy.

Instead, I walked over by the parking lot. Once I found Tommy's royal blue Suzuki motorcycle, I pulled out my keys. Making sure no one was watching I slid it across his prized possession, making sure the key dug in deep, peeling off the paint with every mark.

"Who broke your heart?" someone in a deep voice said behind me. Startled I quickly hid my keys behind my back. It was a tall black man talking to me. He wore a plain white t-shirt against his smooth milk chocolate colored skin,

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black denims and leather Doc Martens boots. He had thick eyebrows, curl to his eyelashes, well defined jawline, a strong well-groomed mustache and trimmed goatee. His dreads hung low below his shoulders. The light brought his dark brown eyes out.

“Nothing,” I replied giving him a smile. “The bike’s my friend’s. We prank each other all the time. You see, just a couple of days ago he flattened two of my tires,” I lied with an honest face.

“Are you sure ya’ll are friends? It seems more like enemies,” he replied.

“We’re not enemies,” I responded, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

“I’d believe you,” he began as he took a step closer to me. I gulped. He was barely an inch away from me. Normally I wouldn’t like a stranger standing so close, but something about him made me stay where I was. After giving him another glance, I realized something: he was gorgeous.

He leaned in towards me, close enough to reach for the ignition. Close enough for me to feel his strong muscular arm and catch his tribal tattoo across his bicep. “But you see, this is mine,” he added as he slipped his key into the ignition and started the motorcycle.

“Oh,” I began as I laughed in embarrassment. I took a step back feeling my cheeks turn red. “Wrong bike.”

“Yup. Wrong bike,” he replied, crossing his arms.

“I’m so sorry,” I started as I quit laughing like a maniac. I gave him a serious look, hoping he wouldn’t call the cops. I didn’t think Mama could handle it if I got arrested. “I’ll pay you back.” I reached for my pocket for my cash. “Here,” I started as I counted the bills before handing it to him. “It’s only twenty-five...” He appeared to be upset, and I couldn’t blame him. I would be so ticked off if some crazy chick ran their house key across my bike, and tried to offer me chump change for the damages.

“Keep your money,” he finally said, uncrossing his arm.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He hopped on his motorcycle and proceeded to situate his helmet on. “Just don’t key anyone else’s bike anymore. Try boxing or something to get all that pent up anger out,” he finished. He gunned his vehicle and took off. I sighed in relief. He must’ve been some well off guy from upstate New York or Jersey to not care about the costs of repairing his ride.

“Boxing, right!” I called after him. He gazed back at me intensely, before zooming out the parking lot. I found myself staring back, unable to take my eyes away from him.

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February 2013

I cut him off for six whole months. No phone calls, no visits. Nada. I ignored the hell out of his lame attempts to try to get back with me. I was infuriated at him for not only playing me out, but also him stepping out on his wife. I loved him, I did, but I refused to let that be an excuse for me to take him back. I did anything to distract myself.

Besides laboring overtime as a waitress at Franco's I went back to college. I was undeclared because I didn't know what I wanted to study. I didn't even know why I was in school. I guess one of the reasons was that financial aid gave me enough money to not only cover my tuition and books it gave me some extra side money. It was safe to say I saw school as a job. I got paid to go.

School always gave me mixed feelings. I kind of liked learning as long as it didn't involve doing homework. But teachers and professors didn't like me much since I chose not to do their assignments, even though I made A's on their tests.

“Max. Max...MAAXXX!”

“ARGHH!” I yelled as I woke up from my dream about Tommy. After the customers at Franco's finished giving me dirty looks, they went about their business.

“Dang girl! Were monsters chasing you?” Larissa, my co-worker and best friend jokingly asked me as she took a seat next to me with a book in her hand. She was mocha colored, an inch shorter than me and slim. We met a couple of years ago working here and were instantly drawn towards

one another based on our shared experiences. She had an infectious personality; it was hard not to like her. She was bubbly and had the biggest heart.

She kept her natural black hair neatly dreaded down to her shoulders. She and I would talk during work and hang out sometimes. It was nice to have a female to talk to about things guy friends wouldn't talk about.

"More like Tommy," I responded as I stretched my arms out and yawned from the chair that I was sitting at.

"Again? Max, you gotta get out and find you a good man. One who isn't...Tommy."

"I don't wanna date anyone."

"Why not? How many guys wanted to date you after you and him broke up? Too many," she answered. "I'm telling you there are some fine brothers out there. Are you even into black guys?"

"I donno. You know there were hardly any black guys around me growing up and by the time I was eighteen, Tommy snatched me up. It's been six months since we broke up and I'm still not ready to date. I wouldn't even know where to begin." Not seeing any African American couples in my vicinity made it hard for me to picture ending up with a man of color. I always saw myself with a white man but a part of me wondered why I had those biased thoughts. After all it wasn't like I didn't find black men attractive. Heck, I was attracted to the guy whose motorcycle I keyed several months ago.

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“Guys hit on you but you don’t pay attention. I’m all for healing after a relationship but, girl, you gotta get back on the horse. Don’t give up on love, babe. I’m telling you, come to the single’s ministry at church and you might find Mr. Right,” she said singing Mr. Right.” I smiled at her effort of trying to help me out. I wasn’t opposed to going to church. But to go just to find a man? I wasn’t sure God would be too pleased about that.

“I’ll think about it. Anyways, are you doing anything after shift ends?”

“Yeah. I have a charity event to help organize with my soro sisters, then dinner with my parents and brothers at this new Jamaican spot, study for midterms then hopefully I’ll get a chance to finish this,” she replied holding up yet another self-help book. Larissa always kept busy and typically had her head buried in books.

“How is your major going? I know you said you weren’t sure if you still wanted to pursue healthcare administration.”

“I really don’t but I have most of my credits to graduate so I’ll push through then apply to nursing school. I think I’d rather have patient interaction like my mom,” she responded referring to her mother who was a nurse practitioner. “Speaking of school, aren’t you going to be late for your class?” she asked looking down at her watch.

“What time is it?”

“Ten before five.”

“Crap!” I exclaimed as I jumped from my chair. “I knew I shouldn’t have worked overtime last night,” I added making my way to the back of the kitchen as Larissa followed me there.

“You are working more than overtime. Eighty hours, right?”

“No... Okay so maybe a little over seventy,” I added clocking out before I threw on my bomber jacket along with a pair of gloves. After saying goodbye I hurried outside to the cold New York winter. The snow was still stuck to the ground from a few days ago.

I ignored the defiled snow and shoved my way through the crowded streets, down to the subway. After riding it from New York City to Brooklyn, I jogged inside Kingsborough Community College and into my calculus class. I quietly opened the door and tried to inconspicuously sit down.

“... and that’s how you find a limit,” the professor spoke. “Max, thank you for gracing us with your presence today,” he sarcastically said. I gave him a look before opening up my notebook. Unfortunately, the class was too small for me to slip in late without people noticing. Okay, I admit I have been late at times and skipped a few classes. “Max, since you decided that class starts a twenty minutes later than it does, why you don’t solve the equation on the board,” he said with a smirk on his face as he handed me a marker.

I got up from my seat and approached the board to solve the easy challenge. I was used to professors and

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students doubting my intelligence. They confused my lack of effort for stupidity and I loved proving them wrong.

After solving the trick problem on the board, I glanced back at the professor and smiled. The students chatted amongst themselves as they realized my answer was correct. “If I didn’t say it before, sorry for arriving a half hour late,” I sarcastically replied. Once I got to my seat, I grabbed my belongings and walked out of the class.

“Where are you going, Max? Class isn’t over yet,” the professor said.

“It is for me. I’ll be back for the test,” I added, realizing that it was pointless for me to go to class. All I needed to do was study on my own to make it.

I nearly fell off the sidewalk once I stepped outside of school. “Tommy,” I said. He was standing in the cold with a black skullie, a black North Face coat, along with his uniform. I stared at the smoke in his hand.

“Hey,” he said, walking closer to me with his cigarette. “Oh, right,” he added as he threw it on the floor and stomped on it. He knew me long enough to know I hated it when people smoked, even more since Mama was only surviving on one lung because of it.

“How’d you know I’d be here?”

“I got my sources,” he replied in a careful grin.

“Well, you shouldn’t be here, Tommy. You have a wife.”

“But she’s not you-”

“You’re right. She’s your wife. I was your mistress. Big difference,” I responded as I made my way to the bus stop. He walked beside me as if that was an invitation for him to join me. I tried to ignore him.

“Max, wait-” he said seizing my arm.

“No. There’s nothing left to say,” I responded. I shrugged his hand off of me. I tried to brush off the familiar hands that I once couldn’t wait to hold me.

“There is! Max, I love you,” he proclaimed, grabbing my face and pulling me in for a kiss. My mind wanted me to put my calculus book to use and slap Tommy across his bald head with it. But my heart was telling me to stay in Tommy’s arms like I secretly wanted to for those six months when we hadn’t spoken to each other. I might’ve been book smart, but boy was I stupid when it came to love.

*****Chapter 3*****

August 2016

I grabbed the cheap bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon by the countertop. Before I dispersed some wine into the two chicken filets, I poured a cup for myself. I guzzled some before placing the glass down. I tossed fresh garlic, thyme, and shallots on the pan, threw some olive oil on top of the meats and sprinkled salt and pepper on them before I put the heat down.

When I reached for my glass, I felt Tommy wrap his arms around me from my back. I admit I felt a bit conscience-stricken. I mean, here I was playing wifey to a man who was married. “How I love a woman who can throw down in the kitchen, my black princess,” he said in my ear as he rested his head on my shoulder. As the years passed by he seemed to be more attracted to my skin complexion, feeding me compliments over insults, even encouraging me to tan, as long as I didn’t get too dark. As for my hair he hated when even the slightest curl reared its head so I kept my natural hair away from him.

I tried to brush that guilty feeling I had and attempted to enjoy being able to have Tommy all to myself for the next few days. Just as he promised, he took me out to Seaside Heights for the weekend to celebrate my birthday. One of his buddies who knew that Tommy had a mistress let us stay in his Jersey Shore house.

“You’re gonna love me more once you taste this chicken saltimbocca,” I responded, loving the feeling of Tommy holding me. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Thankfully I hit up Saks Fifth Avenue before coming to this weekend getaway. I know it may sound kind of ridiculous, but I made sure I was looking fly, a reminder to him that I was more than a snack; I was a whole damn meal. Other than my freshly straightened hair I wore a cute sleeveless Diane von Furstenberg Aegis shantung seam dress, along with black leather Alexander McQueen heels. In total the entire outfit cost me a few hundred bucks. So maybe it wasn't wise to spend that much on an outfit just to cook, especially when I didn't have an income to afford buying clothes that expensive. I loved Franco's, but the local customers weren't always the best tippers.

This whole weekend, I tried to pretend that I wasn't Tommy's sidechick. I acted like I was his only girl. It was easy at times since we hadn't argued once and he treated me better than he had done in a long time. He even kept his conversations with his wife short when she called.

"That smells so good. How'd I get so lucky to get a woman who can cook?" he asked inhaling the smell of the food. Letting go of me, he began to poke around the Italian loaf I baked from scratch before tasting it.

"You can thank Mama. She's the one who taught me. Speaking of which, I'm gonna call her," I added taking the wine glass and downing what was left in it before going over to my phone. I hadn't spoken to her in two days which was unusual for me. I didn't just talk to her every day. Besides this weekend away with Tommy, I saw her every day at the nursing home, even if it was only for a short visit.

My siblings and I made the difficult choice of placing her in a local nursing home; back a couple of months ago, we realized she needed more care than we could give

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her. Not only was she getting confused, but she was falling all over the place hurting herself. She was also recently placed on oxygen 24/7.

“Come on, Max, do you have to call her? You talk to her all of the time. Besides, I thought we said no phones,” Tommy told me as he took my cell away from me.

Out of reflex, I yanked the phone back. “Back off, Tommy. She’s sick,” I snapped while I dialed the number to the nursing home. I didn’t care how much I loved Tommy. Mama came first. She was the one who raised me, who put up with all of my crap. Just as she had been there for me, I was going to be there for her, especially when she needed me the most.

“She’s been sick for years. Do you really think one day is gonna make a difference if you don’t call her?”

“Shut the hell up. I let you talk to your wife so don’t you dare question me if I want to call my family,” I retorted. I hated bringing his wife into the conversation, but I had to make my point clear.

“Your family? If I remember clearly, she’s not blood. Don’t believe me? Just check ya skin colors. She is the palest Sicilian I ever met and you are black-”

“Andare all’inferno che lei scatta!” I exclaimed telling him to go to hell and calling him a jerk. “Forget blood! If it was about blood, my parents wouldn’t have given me up in the first place! Think about it, Tommy. There’s a reason why I haven’t pushed to meet my biological family,” I added as I refilled my glass. I drank, trying to hold it

together. I wanted to cry, but I didn't. Wouldn't they try to find me if they wanted to know who I was?

"I'm sorry, baby. I don't wanna argue with you. I just want this time here to be about just me and you," Tommy spoke pulling me in his arms. Though a part of me wanted to push him off I stayed there, trying to forget my parental woes. "Love you."

"I love you too," I mumbled.

"Can't hear you."

"Said I love you, Tommy Lucca," I added, looking up into his eyes happy that he was encouraging me to say the "I" word.

After dinner, we commenced on the sofa. Tommy wanted to go clubbing afterwards, but I convinced him to stay at the Shore house. The last thing I wanted was to go to a club and be surrounded by a chunk of fist pumping, over tanned, too much gel in the hair, alcoholics. I barely got a chance to get Tommy alone, so heck yeah I was going to seize the moment and make sure it was just him and me.

"Close ya eyes," Tommy began getting up with a grin on his face.

"Okay," I replied with a small laugh anticipating my birthday gifts. He shuffled around to the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door and a few drawers open and close. He took a seat next to me.

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“You can look.” Tommy had a gourmet red velvet cupcake with cream cheese icing topped with glitter maroon sprinkles. A candle was lit in the center.

“Baaabbee...,” I started offering him a smile at my favorite cake.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart. Even though I missed ya twenty-fourth, I still love you and wish I could’ve been there. You mean a lot to me.” I held onto his hand trying not to cry by his sweet gesture. He gave me a kiss on my cheek. After wishing he and I would be end game, I blew the fire out. He pulled the candle away and handed me a napkin. I started to munch on the scrumptious dessert, trying not to get the sweet treat underneath my fresh manicure. After eating about a fourth of it, he spoke, “Don’t have too much cake. You already had pasta and bread today,” he said squeezing my thigh.

“Right,” I replied not wanting to upset him. I sat the rest down on the coffee table. Though Tommy had gained about twenty pounds since we met, he was very clear that he wanted me to stay fit, at times threatening to leave me if I became overweight.

“That’s my girl,” he responded with pleasure. “I got ya something better than that cake.” He grabbed my gift from the nearby closet and sat on the coffee table across from me. Handing me a Christian Louboutin bag I squealed.

“Red bottoms?” I questioned in excitement about the new addition to my shoe collection.

“Yup,” he replied scarfing down the rest of the dessert.

“These are dope!” I exclaimed admiring the Ombre red solo pumps after taking the top off the box. “Thanks, baby. I’ll take these over cake any day,” I said giving him a smooch.

“I got you some other gifts that you can model for me later,” he flirtily said. I winked at him as I slipped my new heels on.

“Bet,” I replied body warmer, already in the mood. I scooted closer to him and reached over for his belt.

“Let’s take our time before we get into anything. We actually don’t have to rush,” he said grabbing the bottle of Cristal and wine glasses. I agreed with him. Typically we were pressed for time and weren’t able to be in the moment especially since we were always paranoid of getting caught.

“To us,” I said a few minutes later, clicking my glass that was filled with champagne, against his with my legs on his lap. The lights were dim and we had on one of Tommy’s playlist playing from his phone that was filled with love songs of the 90’s. Jodeci’s “Come & Talk to Me” rang through the portable Bluetooth speaker. Right as we started to get closer to being intimate, my phone went off. I ignored it and kissed Tommy. The phone rang again.

“You said no phones,” Tommy said when he saw me reaching over to the coffee table to where it was. After seeing it was Ru, I went back to Tommy.

“Sorry, baby,” I said. “Now, where were we?” I rhetorically asked. I moved my hands over to his chest that bore a tattoo of a head of an eagle with the names of his daughters written in cursive beneath it. I slid my fingers on

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his silk top and started to unbutton his shirt. I ignored my cell as it rang again. The phone beeped, letting me know that Ru left me a voice message. As Tommy kissed on my neck, I wondered what Ru wanted. I figured he probably was looking for some advice about whatever new chick he was trying to get with.

RINGGGG!

Tommy and I sighed as we pulled away from each other. There was nothing more irritating than a phone ringing off the hook during a date. “I’ll turn it off and then we won’t have to worry about anybody calling,” I said, thinking about telling Ru to ease up on blowing my phone if it was about his quest on being the biggest man whore in Brooklyn. My face went from agitation to confusion as I saw it was Rudy calling me especially since it was a little after midnight.

I sprung up from the couch and answered, “Rudy, everything okay?”

“...Umm..”

“What’s going on?” I questioned in a panicked voice.

“I- something happened....God,” he continued in a shaky tone.

“What?” I said, voice rising along with my pulse. “Rudy, just tell me!”

“I’m so sorry, Max. She’s gone,” Rudy cried. My heart dropped along with my cell. I stood still as I went numb. Cold wind rushed through my body as the room began

to spin. Tommy kept calling my name, trying to figure out what bad news Rudy told me. He spoke loud in concern, but I couldn't hear him. All I heard were the words of Rudy replay over and over in my head: She's gone. She's gone. She's gone. SHE'S GONE!

Tommy came up to me and touched my shoulder as he said, "I'm sorry."

"THE HELL WITH YOU, TOMMY!" I screamed as I shoved him off of me. "I HATE YOU," I cried pushing him harder. No matter how hard I pushed, I still felt the knife ripping across my heart. Tommy grabbed hold of me as I broke down in his arms.

That night, Tommy took me straight back to my hotel room where I lived. He offered to stay with me, but I told him to go. I wanted to be alone. I needed my space to process what just happened. Yeah, I could've gone to Rudy's or the nursing home, to ask what happened that night and why the hell the damn health care providers couldn't save her.

I seized the Moscato from the top of the refrigerator. Tears fell from my eyes as I tried to down the drink. My lips trembled as I guzzled. Once wine sloppily spilled on my dress, I wiped my mouth. Madly, I rose up and hurled the bottle across the sliding glass doors that led out to the balcony.

"Why God? PERCHÉ? My only family and you take her away from me?" I screamed out to the ceiling loud enough for the "Big Man Upstairs" to hear me as the

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remnants of the bottle shattered to pieces. How could God take away my mama? The most loyal, honest, and caring woman ever. The one who put up through all of my ridiculousness, even though she knew I wasn't her biological daughter.

"I've been asking myself the same question all night," a woman said as she came through the door I accidentally left open. I glanced over to Carmela, Rudy's wife. She was a cool person. I actually admired her. She was the ideal woman to be. Other than being a devout Catholic, she was in her mid-forties and still kept up with her looks. She always made sure her blonde hair was done along with her nails and feet. She kept her body in shape and she always had a great sense of fashion. She did that while being married for over twenty years, being a hands on wife and mother.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with your family," I replied in a calmer voice, picking up the broken pieces from the bottle to avoid eye contact with Carmela. Her presence made Mama's death real.

"Max, you are my family too," she responded. She bent over to help me clean up the mess.

"We're not blood."

"That hasn't mattered since you came into our lives," she said taking hold of my arm. "Max, just because she's not here with us anymore, that doesn't mean we're no longer your family. We love you and that's never going to change," she softly said, lifting up my chin. As I glanced at her I started to cry again. I couldn't help it. Mama would always lift my chin when I was upset so I could see her, and

whenever I used to glance into her eyes, I knew everything was going to be alright. How was I to know everything was going to be okay now that she was no longer alive? Carmela pulled me closer to her, letting me cry in her arms. As I sobbed, I heard her shed tears too. Little did I know that I was somewhat of a comfort for her as well.

“Come live with us, Max,” Carmela suggested as she comfortingly ran her hand on my back.

“No, I can’t-”

“You shouldn’t be alone at a time like this. Stay with us, at least, for a little while. Until-”

“Until what?” I asked, getting up from the floor. “Until I get over her not being here anymore?” I sarcastically replied.

“You’ll never get over losing a loved one. You cope- deal with it. But you can’t do that alone. I won’t let you do it alone,” she added, standing up.

“Fine,” I agreed wiping my tears.

I sat across from the coffin at the funeral home. It was the day we were to lay Mama to rest and we were all dressed in our Sunday best, mostly in black. There was an HD screen TV that showed pictures of the joyous memories Mama had throughout the years. I struggled to watch the heartbreaking video of her pictures with the sad instrumental music playing in the background. I was in most of the photos.

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The images ranged from Mama as a child in Sicily, her along with her husband and their biological children growing up, me growing up. Then there were the silly pictures, one where we both dressed up in eighties clothes to attend a block party. The hardest one for me was her and I dancing together at the nursing home during this past Christmas party.

I actually managed to not cry that day yet, but I knew that would change very soon. Her children, including Rudy were sitting in the front two rows with their spouses and kids. I chose to stay towards the back in fear of what I may see.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the casket will be closed shortly,” one of the funeral directors announced to us.

“You wanna go see her?” Ru asked me. He was nice enough to stick next to me. I shook my head no. “Come on. I’ll go with you. I wanna see her one last time.”

“Fine.” He took my hand as we made our way to the coffin. My anxiety went through the roof. I let go of Ru’s hand as I saw Mama. She appeared to be peaceful. Her hair was pulled back and her makeup was done to where she almost looked like she was still conscious. She wore a purple dress that she had worn to one of her granddaughter’s wedding. Her hands that held a red and white Rosary cross were awkwardly folded across her chest. They made her look like she was alive. It was as if she was just sleeping.

“Mama, wake up. It’s me, Max. Mama, please. Per favore,” I spoke vociferously, hoping she could hear me. “I’m sorry for all I put you through, but you- you didn’t have to go. Why, Mama? Why would you leave me, huh, why?” I

wailed, when she didn't reply. "PERCHÉ?" A few of the men of the family all rushed over to catch me before I fell as my knees got weak. "Why? You don't love me? Now I'm all alone!"

"Max, you are not alone," I heard Rudy say as they all tried to comfort me.

"Yes, I am," I replied shoving them off me. Once they felt I was calm enough, they let me go. Everyone, except Rudy. He held onto to my arm as if I was going to fall apart. After a calmer funeral service at the local Catholic Church and burial, we all went back to the reception at Rudy's home. The guests chatted and laughed; they shared their favorite memories of Mama as they munched on the many elaborate Italian dishes.

Normally I would've loved to chow down on some good old home cooking while catching up with people but not today. The food was nauseating, especially the ones with sausages in it, and I was fed up with everybody pulling me to the side every minute to tell me how sorry they were for me and how things were going to get better with time.

I just wanted to get out of there to my room, aka Carmine's bedroom. Since he was attending Rutgers as a freshman, they let me crash there. But even Carmine's room was busy since some cousins from far away had been sleeping in his room with me for the weekend of the funeral.

I hung out by the wall, scrolling through Facebook hoping people would leave me alone if they saw me engrossed in my phone. They didn't care though; they still approached me with their condolences

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“I’m sorry for ya loss,” Mario said, kissing me on the cheek. “The epitome of a real authentic Italian woman. I’d be lucky if I find a woman who is half as good as she was. Especially the way she cooked...” Mario continued on. I nodded my head, trying not to let his words make me cry. “...the boys at the garage and I are gonna be here for you whenever you need us.”

“Thanks, Mario,” I responded.

“Mario’s right. We’ll forever look out for you, Max,” Louie stated, walking up to us with his hands in his pockets. I glanced down at my phone after it vibrated.

“I appreciate that, Louie. Excuse me guys,” I said, happy to get away from the depressing conversation. It was Tommy telling me to meet him outside. I sighed in relief at his perfect timing. I wouldn’t mind being with him right now. All I wanted was for him to comfort me and to tell me everything was going to be okay. Thankfully his wife already left the reception to go home.

“Tommy,” I said as soon as I saw him beside his old black Mercedes up the street. Knowing it was dark and there was no one around us, I reached over embracing him in a hug. I took a deep breath as I laid my head on his chest.

“Max-”

“I really don’t wanna talk. Just hold me.”

“Max-,” he said once more, pulling me away from him.

“What?” Sensing something was amiss I moved my hands over to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he replied, refusing to look at me.

“You’re sorry? What?” I held onto his sports jacket a little tighter, having a feeling of what he would say next.

“I can’t do it anymore. It’s not fair to Dina,” he said, taking my hands away from him.

“Don’t leave me, Tommy,” I begged feeling my heart rip again. How could Tommy dump me on this day? He might as well have grabbed the knife they used to cut up the sausage to cut my already breaking heart. Tommy leaned against his car with his arms crossed. “No, Tommy, not today. Not on the day of my ma’s funeral. Not on the day that I need you the most-”

“Was I supposed to tell you tomorrow? Do you hear yourself, Max? Are you that selfish that you can’t even listen? I am staying with my wife-”

“I don’t care if you stay with her, but stay with me too. Tommy, I need you- I love you,” I cried trying to convince him to continue our affair.

“You don’t love me. You’re just a kid.”

“I’m not a kid. I’m twenty-four,” I snapped. Tommy shrugged his shoulders as he reached in his pocket for a smoke. “So, that’s it? We’re done,” I said, hoping he would say we weren’t.

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“Yeah. Like you said before, you were just my mistress,” he said as he lit up his cigarette and took a huge blow before finally looking at me. “You had to know it would end. I love my wife and ya ma dying made me realize what’s important and how special Dina is. We have been together since high school. She always has my back, bore my two daughters, cooks and cleans and takes care of me. Besides she is one hundred percent Italian. She doesn’t have nappy hair like you do. You gotta straighten your hair, put weave in it and wear so much makeup to turn me on unlike my wife who is a natural beauty-”

Vexed, I impulsively threw my backhand across his cheek. “Screw you, Tommy,” I snarled pointing my index finger in his face. I was over all of his microaggressions, using my blackness against me whenever he was displeased with me. His eyes lit up from the slap.

“Sorry for ya loss,” he mumbled with his loosie hanging out the side of his mouth. Instead of reacting to me striking him, he climbed into his car and sped off leaving me behind.

I was in no state of mind to head home to have to deal with a bunch of people in my face so I roamed towards the stores a few blocks away. Not giving a care and my feet on fire from wearing my Jimmy Choos all day, I yanked them off.

Approaching the liquor store I contemplated what alcoholic beverage to purchase besides my go to white wine. Maybe vodka. I turned away from the store as my fingers barely touched the handle. I couldn’t get drunk today. Not on the day we laid my mama to rest. She deserved more than that. Besides, I didn’t want to go into a store with my

mascara running from all that crying and my heels in hand. I'd get even more of the dreaded question "are you okay". As I turned the corner of the sidewalk, I was nearly knocked off by some tall guy. He grabbed hold of both of my arms before I could fall. Rather than say thanks, I cried some more. What was wrong with me? I couldn't even walk correctly.

"What are you keying cars today?" I glanced up and saw it was the same guy whose motorcycle I keyed months ago. He had his dreads pulled back in a low ponytail. He was wearing a sleeveless Morehouse shirt along with a pair of basketball shorts and Jordan sneakers. On his right arm he had a tattoo of a portrait of an older woman with Psalm 23's Bible verse underneath it.

"No. I key cars on the weekdays. It's the weekend so I'm keying motorcycles," I replied, trying to lighten the mood. He smiled at my lame joke. I half smiled, but stopped as the tears came again. I couldn't be happy when my life was falling apart.

"What's wrong?" he questioned, with his strong hands around my arms. He held me in a similar way like Rudy had earlier, as if I would fall into a million of pieces if he was to let go.

"Nothing. Besides the fact that I had to put my ma, the woman who-who raised me, six feet under today. And the guy who I gave six years to decided to end it today out of all days," I told the stranger, thankful that I could talk to somebody about my issues instead of holding it in. I wiped my eyes with my fingers, trying to stop the endless tears.

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“Is it okay if I hug you?” he softly asked. I shrugged my shoulders, knowing that he wasn’t trying to hit on me, but rather, give me a shoulder to cry on. He gently came closer and placed his arms around me as I buried my head in his chest. He swayed back and forth with me in his arms. “I’m gonna keep you in my prayers. Turn to God. He’ll give you rest,” he told me.

November 2016

As I lied in a fetal position, I stared at the wall thinking of Mama and all the wrong I did to her. Like the times, I yelled at her for not letting me go out to party on school nights. Then there was what I felt most guilty about, when Mama found out that I had pawned one of her mother's emblems back when I was fifteen just to buy concert tickets. That day, she stopped talking to me and locked herself in her room to cry. Rudy told me that that emblem was the last gift her mother gave her before she died.

I started sobbing all over again. Whoever said time made things easier surely lied. Not one day had gone by without me thinking or crying about Mama. What made it worse was all of the guilt I had. I wished I said I love you to her once more. I even wish I hadn't listened to Tommy and called her the day she died.

I reached over by the nightstand where my tissue box was. Seeing there were none left I sighed; I got up from the bed planning to grab a roll of paper towel from the kitchen as a substitute. As I walked past the mirror, I paused. I was a hot mess. My natural hair was frizzed and hardly combed and I did nothing to remedy it. All I did was keep it hidden with bonnets and head wraps, too unmotivated to go to the salon to get my usual hairdo. I gained a few pounds and not to my surprise, my eyes were red. Even my clothes were rugged. I had on a baggy black t-shirt underneath an open sweater and grey rolled up sweat pants. My socks weren't even matching.

I ignored my looks and made my way to the kitchen. Rudy and Carmela were cuddled on the couch. He

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was reading the sports section of the New York Times as she read a novel.

“Hi, sweetheart. Want to join us for dinner? We’re going to eat out as soon as Ru gets home,” Rudy said. To his parent’s disapproval, he chose to forgo college to continue to work at the garage. His dream was to keep working there until he either took over the family’s business or save money until he had enough to open up a gym.

“I’m really not in the mood, Rudy,” I responded.

“You haven’t been outside the home since August,” Carmela said.

“How can I when my ma is no longer here?” The rest of my family was down in the dumps about her passing for maybe a couple of weeks, but after that, they moved on and continued to live their lives. Mine stopped. I quit school and stopped singing at Franco’s. My life consisted of the four walls of Carmine’s old room. I only came out to eat and use the bathroom. I wouldn’t even dine with the family. “At least the two of you have your sons,” I added, going to the kitchen. Once I got my paper towel, I headed back to my locked room.

“You can blame me for that,” Carmela said from behind me with her hands on her hips.

“Why? I’m not doing anything wrong. I just wanna go to bed,” I replied. Even though it was seven at night, I wanted to sleep. Or try to sleep. Although I had been spending most of my days in bed I lay awake drowning in my sorrow.

“You gotta get out of bed and live your life. I am not downplaying your loss. If you need help processing your grief lying around and just getting by isn’t doing you any good. We can make you an appointment for a grief counselor if you want.”

“Carmela, I’m not gonna see a shrink. Cut me some slack, okay. My mother just died,” I responded crossing my arms.

“You know the last thing she wanted was for you to stop living your life. Honey, she loves you and it would break her heart to see you like this,” She said walking up to me. She uncrossed my arms and lifted up my chin. I tried to ignore the tears that were coming down again. She did it again. Lifting my head and telling me that everything was going to be okay just like Mama used to. “Every time I look at you, I see your mother,” she said, softly, tears in her eyes.

“We looked nothing alike.”

“I’m talking about your spirit. You share her mannerisms. You love hard and have the same temper as her,” she added as we chuckled. Carmela wasn’t lying. So many people assumed Mama was my biological mother and that I was mixed race only because we were a lot alike. “Honey, I know it’s hard. I loss my mom and I thought I was never going to be okay. You never get over losing a loved one but it gets easier with time. You have to take steps forward. Just each day do a little more than you did the day before. Love you, Max.”

“Love you too, Carmela,” I responded as we embraced. I smiled back weakly at her, thankful that she wasn’t yelling at me for being so depressed.

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“So, you got her to join us for dinner?” Rudy asked coming in through the front door. Carmela turned to me, waiting for my answer.

“Yeah,” I responded, wiping my tears. “I’m gonna get ready.”

“What are you gonna do?” Larissa asked, as we walked through Prospect Park. Though it was November, the weather wasn’t too cold outside.

The vibrant yellow and orange leaves already polluted the pavement and grass of the park from the trees that surrounded the park. The rainstorm from the night before kept the air fresh and grounds of the park moist.

Since the talk I had with Carmela, I was taking better care of myself and getting outside of the house more. I didn’t have a job yet, but I knew I had to get one soon, especially with the big change in my life. I refused to go back to Franco’s, a place that was a constant reminder of Tommy. “I donno,” I responded, wishing that Larissa hadn’t brought up the one thing I didn’t want to discuss, but couldn’t avoid. I pulled the long sleeves to my black DKNY sweater down as we stopped walking and yanked a leaf that stuck from the bottom of my black flat rain boots.

“How do you feel about it?”

“Not good. This couldn’t have happened at a worst time.”

“Have you talked to anybody yet?” I shook my head no. “Max, have you even gotten checked-?”

“No, Nurse Larissa, I haven’t. Can we please stop talking about this?”

“Okay... just take care of yourself alright.” I nodded my head and kept quiet. “How do you like the braids? I know that’s not your usual go to look but it’s a protective hairstyle for our kind of hair.”

“I really like it. Thanks again for it,” I replied swinging my box braids to my right side. My natural locks reached my shoulders. Now that Tommy wasn’t in the picture I was open to trying something new with my hair. It felt freeing not to have to worry about always trying to meet Tommy’s version of standard of beauty. “How’s nursing school going?”

“Okay. Just a lot of studying,” she replied glancing down at her watch. “Speaking of which, I actually have to meet with my clinical group to plan our grand rounds. Call me if you need anything,” she added as we hugged each other goodbye.

By the time I got home, dinner was already made. Rudy and Carmela were at the table.

“Ru, Max is here, so turn the TV off,” Carmela said. Ru sighed as he pressed pause on the Madden football game he was playing on the PS4. He hopped up from the couch and sat down the same time I did. We dug into our braised beef and tortellini after saying grace during our Sunday dinner. I continued to chow down on my tender ribs as the family chatted.

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“I’m not gonna be home tomorrow. I’m hitting AC with the boys for the next few days and before I go Kayla- no Cecily. Ah, I think Kayla I’m meeting,” Ru said, referring to Atlantic City as AC. He grabbed the bottle of wine and poured some himself. Carmela tilted her glass over to Ru for him to fill her’s.

“I raised you better than that, Ru. All of that skirt chasing is going to catch up to you one of these days. Don’t you want to find a nice Italian girl to settle down with? Gina De Laurentis, Olivia from St Augustine’s daughter, is beautiful, smart, polite, and she cooks. I can set you up with her-”

“Ma, for real, I’m only twenty-four. I ain’t trying to get married now. One girl today, and on to the next one tomorrow. Right, Pops?” Ru said laughing along with Rudy as they slapped each other’s hands.

“Excuse me, Rudy,” Carmela said scolding him. “We were married, had Ru, and pregnant with Carmine at his age. Remember?”

“Yes, ma’am. Ru, your mother is right. When it comes to women, quality over quantity,” Rudy replied, trying to compensate for agreeing with his son. He leaned over to kiss Carmela on the cheek, as an apology. Watching them I wondered if I would ever have a life where I was happily married. Being single it seemed something so unattainable.

She smiled as she reached for her beverage. Rudy snatched the glass away from her. “Rudy, I’m not driving later today.”

Rudy placed the cup down as he took her hand. “You shouldn’t be drinking,” Rudy continued, despite the puzzled look across Carmela’s face. “Honey, I know that you and I are older and have two grown sons, but I don’t care. I am excited about you being pregnant. Maybe, this time around we’ll have a girl-”

“You think I’m pregnant?”

“Yeah, I saw the pamphlet you had about pregnancy.” I stopped eating. I slowly began to chew my asiago-filled tortellini again, trying not to give myself away. “You left it underneath the couch.”

“Wow!” Ru exclaimed.

“Oh,” Carmela responded, as she shot me a look so fast that only I could catch. Now she knew the truth: I was pregnant. I quickly glanced at my plate and began to play with the basil-marsala sauce, hoping that she wouldn’t rat me out to Rudy. I felt my face turn a darker shade of red. Yeah, I was old enough to have a baby, but I was also having a kid by a married man. A man whom was employed by my brother. “Can we keep this between us for a little while?” She asked, choosing her words carefully. Rudy nodded before giving her a hug.

When dinner was over, I started to wash the dishes as the guys went out to Dom’s house for a boy’s poker night. Once they left, Carmela approached me. I could feel her staring at my stomach, trying to see if I was showing. I had gained a few pounds throughout the months, but not enough to look like I was with child. “Great dinner. Your cooking never fails,” I said, trying to not talk about my pregnancy.

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“The elephant in the room is pretty big, so start talking,” she replied. I pretended not to hear her as I began to dry the dishes. “Okay since you won’t start, I will. How far along are you?” I yanked a new paper towel and began to dry yet another plate. Maybe she would stop with the interrogation if I ignored her. She took the towel away from me, crossed her arms, and gave me a “you better start talking” look.

“Three months. I think,” I responded, remembering that the last time I was with Tommy was back in August when he took me to the Jersey Shore.

“You think? Have you even gone to a gynecologist?”

“No.”

“Well, Max, are you planning to?” Carmela questioned sounding a bit annoyed with my irresponsibility.

“I guess,” I responded equally bothered, as I walked away from the kitchen.

“What do you mean you guess? This is a baby we’re talking about. Another human being. Do you get that?”

“Yeah, I get that, Carmela!” I exclaimed, getting upset that she was grilling me. “You’re acting like I had an abortion or something!”

“You might as well have, the way you’re carrying on, pretending this baby doesn’t exist,” she snapped, following me to my room.

“I’m not pretending the baby doesn’t exist!” I yelled back.

“Then why the hell haven’t you seen a gynecologist yet?” she fired.

“Because, it wasn’t planned! All of this is overwhelming. I never thought about having kids and here I am with child,” I honestly told her as I plopped down hard on my beige comforter. I pulled my pillow closer to me, brought my knees up and hugged the pillow. I tilted my head against it, trying to control myself so I wouldn’t start to sob. I had enough of that. As I rocked back and forth, I could tell she was trying to calm down also.

“I’m sorry for yelling. I just want what’s best for you,” she said in a much calmer voice. “Not to nag, but you do need to see a doctor. I can come with you,” she offered, taking a seat next to me.

“Thanks,” I said in a small voice, feeling like a child. I pondered if my birth mother thought the same way I did about my baby. How much she didn’t want a baby as much as I didn’t desire mine.

“You’re going to have to tell Rudy.”

“Do I have to? He is gonna lose it when he finds out especially since I’m not married. Can’t you tell him?”

“No, Max. It’s not my secret to announce, but I can’t lie to him. Whenever you’re ready to talk to him, I’ll be there by your side, okay. So, I think it’s safe to say that after you tell him we want to meet the father. I hope he’s Italian,” she joked getting up from the bed.

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“He’s not in the picture,” I mumbled with my head down in shame.

“Why not? So he finds out you’re pregnant and he bails-”

“He doesn’t know.”

“When are you planning to tell him?”

“Never.”

“Max, you may not like who the father is, but he is half of the reason why you’re pregnant. Or do you not know who the father is-”

“I know who the father is,” I reassured her as I hopped up from the bed. “I’ve only been with one guy, Carmela.” I loved Tommy way too much to fool around with other guys, even though there had been many opportunities to do so in the recent years. I loved him so much that I never imagined dating any other guy after he ended things. I hated how Tommy chose his wife over me, but if it gave him peace to be faithful to his spouse, then so be it.

“Why don’t you want anyone to know who the father is? Better yet, why don’t you want the father to know the truth? I don’t get it, Max,” she continued throwing her arms in the air. “For the longest time you’ve been hush hush about who you are dating but you have been clearly involved with someone for years. I don’t understand what all the secrecy was about. Never wanting this mysterious person to meet the family. What’s really going on, Max?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied thinking about if Tommy found out that his ex-mistress was carrying his baby. That’d probably be the most contention between us. I didn’t even want to think about what he would do to me. Force me to get an abortion and never speak a word of it of course. Besides, the last thing I wanted to do was home wreck, especially for the sake of his wife and two kids.

“Oh my goodness,” Carmela said, covering her mouth with her hands.

“What?”

“You were involved with a married man. That’s why none of the family has heard about him. And that’s why you don’t want to tell him, nor anybody else.” Her face dropped as she shook her head. “Please, Max, please tell me it’s not Tommy,” she said in a low voice. I turned away from her, trying to hide the truth. Just hearing his name out loud brought out so much. It made the pregnancy existent and I couldn’t escape it. What was worse was the secret I had kept for years about Tommy and my affair. “It all makes sense. How you and he only talk whenever you think no one is paying attention. And the way the two of you used to look at each other...” “Oh, Max,” she said coming over to me, letting me soak on her shoulders.

I gently rocked back and forth on my chair, trying to listen to what Carmela was saying. I didn’t hear any of it. All of my thoughts were on this baby I was carrying. I was about to be a mother. A single one at that. Giving up the kid for adoption was nowhere near my radar. How could I? I’d

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just be doing what my birth parents did: give up on a child who didn't ask to be born.

I stopped swaying as I felt my eyes get heavy. Yet again, I was feeling fatigued. I just wanted to go back to sleep. I was in the waiting room with Carmela for my first prenatal appointment.

“How are you feeling? I know this is hard for you. Look, even your hands are shaking.” I glanced down at my quivering hands. I placed them together to try to stop from trembling.

“I'm just nervous.”

“Max-i-mil-i-ana Abb-rah-see-ah-ven-too?” the nurse announced in a questioning tone. Carmela and I looked at each other and smiled at the failed attempt to pronounce my first name and our last name. People typically butchered our last name to the point where we knew they were calling us when we would hear a pause after our first name. We followed the nurse to the cold examining room.

“Okay, Maximiliana, we had you take a pregnancy test earlier today, and that test has confirmed you are pregnant. I need to ask you a few questions. Does your mother or father's side of your family have a history of diabetes?” the nurse asked.

“Umm...I don't know,” I replied, feeling a bit embarrassed that I was clueless about my biological family history.

“What about hypertension?”

“Not sure.”

“Cancer?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Do you know anything about your family history?”

“She was adopted,” Carmela finally said.

“Okay. Anyways, I want you to get some routine bloodwork including an HIV test and you can also get tested for other STD’s as well.” As the nurse drew blood from me, I wondered if I had been Tommy’s only mistress and if not, how many other females he had been with. I crossed my fingers, hoping I hadn’t been affected. Once I finished voiding in a cup, I went back to the room.

A few minutes later, the gynecologist came in. I lay back on the examining bed as my heart raced. I stared at the white ceiling as he placed a warm gel over my belly. I was too afraid to glance at the screen to what Tommy and I created.

“Sweetie, look, your baby,” Carmela said, taking my hand. My heart dropped as I gazed over to the screen. There was my child. Yeah, the fetus looked deformed and a little weird, but that was my kid. My baby that was growing inside of me. How could any mother just give up on their child? I didn’t understand, especially after seeing mine. There was no way in a million years I would do the same.

“That’s my baby,” I announced.

*****Chapter 4*****

December 2016

“How was work?” Rudy asked once I got inside the house. Carmela and her sisters owned a local salon for several years. She was nice enough to give me a job as a receptionist now that the former one was going to grad school.

“Good. I like working there,” I responded. I took off my winter gloves and shoved them in the pocket of my North Face coat before carefully removing it. I needed to make sure I didn’t expose my tiny baby bump. I was four months pregnant, and I was starting to show a little bit.

Thankfully, with the cold weather I was able to conceal it with loose fitting clothes and sweaters, but I knew that I couldn’t hide it forever, especially from Rudy. It was getting harder to lie to him about going to doctor’s appointments. Carmela told Rudy the day after she found out that I was pregnant that she wasn’t with child and how she must’ve accidentally picked up the pamphlet.

“I’m happy to see you getting back on ya feet, Max,” he said giving me a kiss on my forehead. A feeling of guilt passed over me. My brother had always been good to me and here I was keeping a life-altering secret from him. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I was done with secrets.

“Rudy, I have to tell you something,” I began.

“Go ahead.”

“Umm...” I said, not knowing how to start. I played with the diamond and white gold bracelet that my mama left for me. It was slim and made itself known as soon as someone saw my arm. It was kind of how Mama was. Every time she walked into a room, the attention turned to her. She exuded love and respect that nobody could deny. She even made anyone with a foul mouth talk as if they were a Saint or something.

“Max, is something wrong? You’re not sick?” he asked after I didn’t respond.

“No. I’m not sick,” I said as I went to go place my coat in the closet.

“Then what is it? I’m about to have a heart attack here,” he exaggerated with great concern.

“I’m pregnant. Four months,” I revealed looking him straight in the eye. Rudy’s jaw dropped as his eyes darted towards my stomach. I waited for his verbal response. He wasn’t the type to be speechless. “Rudy, say something.”

“So you kept this from me for this long,” he finally managed to say as he glanced back at me.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized in a small voice. “I wanted to tell you-”

“But you didn’t,” he accused sounding like he was on the verge of yelling. “Who’s the father?”

“He’s not in the picture.” Rudy upsettingly, shook his head. He made his way to the closet.

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On his way there he called, “RU! Downstairs, now!” Ru raced over to him from his room.

“What’s going on?” Ru asked approaching us.

“Go get ready and call up ya Uncle Dom and the guys from the garage,” Rudy replied as he came out of the closet with a wooden baseball bat.

“Whoa, whoa! Rudy, what are ya doing?” I asked, trying to take the bat from him, however he kept it from my reach.

“Yeah, Pops, what’s going on?” Ru asked as we all saw the anger in his eyes.

“Max is pregnant. And you can thank the low life that got her that way-”

“He is not a low life,” I snapped, defending Tommy. Even if Tommy and I weren’t together, I still cared about him and wanted to protect him. That’s why his name would never come out of my mouth as the guy who got me knocked up.

“Really, Max! Then why isn’t he right by your side, huh?” Rudy asked. “Ru, hurry up!” he said. Ru grabbed his coat from the closet and began to throw on his Timberlands.

“He’s right, Max. That punk ain’t gonna get away with this! He’s that same sucker that’s been making you look like a whore and now he’s forced you into bed,” Ru started, getting as riled up as his father.

“He didn’t force me to do anything, Ru! I-” The front door opened, to Carmela with her arms full of groceries.

“What’s going on in here?” she asked, placing them on the coffee table.

“Some low life dirt bag got my baby sister pregnant. And not only has he not put a ring on her finger, but he also has the audacity to bail out on her since she’s knocked up. He is not going to get away with this,” Rudy heatedly told her as he tightly held onto the weapon.

“What’s with the bat, Rudy?”

“What does it look like, Ma? We’re gonna find the bastard and beat some sense into him-”

“No you’re not! This family is not in the mob and you’re not Tony Soprano. So the both of you are going to calm down, put the bats and testosterone away and talk about this like a real family,” Carmela demanded with her hands on her hips. Though she didn’t yell, we all heard the authority in her voice.

“But-” Ru started.

“No buts, Rudolph Jr.”

“You think I’m going to stand around while someone messes with my sister?”

“No. I expect you to be reasonable and talk to Max. Trust me, I’d love to hurt this guy too, but you don’t see me swinging bats around. Max doesn’t need the stress,

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okay. When she's ready to let you know who this guy is, she will."

"Fine," Rudy reluctantly agreed, thrusting the bat into the closet in fury. I jumped when Rudy took off to his bedroom and slammed the door. Carmela gave me an apologetic look before going to the bedroom to console him. I went to my room and sat on the bed, replaying what had just happened. I had never seen Rudy this livid. Thank goodness he didn't know it was Tommy who got me knocked up. That'd be the end of Tommy Lucca.

I glanced up when Ru came to my door. After knocking, I let him in, hoping he wouldn't keep trying to find out the truth. "If you came here to yell at me you can leave," I told him.

"Nah. So ya really pregnant?" he asked in a calmer voice. I nodded my head as I placed my hands over my stomach. Since the talk with Carmela, I started to get into the idea of having a kid. Maybe being a mom wouldn't be so bad. I knew that I was going to have the support of my family. Of course, I eventually would save enough to get a place of my own. "It's kinda weird ya know. We used to play stickball and chase after ice cream trucks and now you're about to be a mother," he said coming into my bedroom. "It sucks that ya raising this kid without a father, but if Nonna could do it when she adopted you, you can too," he said putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Thanks, Ru," I said hoping that this was in fact true. I would be happy to be half of the mother that Mama was to me.

January 2017

“Can I get a Big Mac, large fries, five piece chicken nuggets with barbecue sauce, M&M McFlurry, three chocolate chips cookies and Diet Coke,” I told the cashier at McDonald’s. After paying him, I waited for my meal.

I bopped my head to the Mary J Blige’s remake of “Sweet Thing” that was playing on the radio in the restaurant. I sang in a low voice, thinking about Tommy. Despite my terrible break up I fantasized he was not married, knew about the baby and was so thrilled that he asked to marry me and raise our child together. I stopped singing at the silly thought. I was more afraid of his reaction to my pregnancy. I imagined him being hateful about the threat to his marriage and bringing a colored child into the world. He’d probably demand I get an abortion. The last thing I needed to be thinking about was being with Tommy let alone now especially since I didn’t trust him.

“Meeting someone?” The familiar deep voice asked behind me. I turned around, and to my surprise, it was the same guy whose car I keyed. His look changed a little bit. He now had medium length dreads with a fade. He wore a Morehouse hoodie underneath a black leather jacket, distressed jeans and tan Timberlands.

“No,” I said. After I saw him staring at my tray that was ready, I blushed and realized why he assumed I wasn’t alone. “The food. I’m eating for two,” I told him, showing him my growing stomach. I had on a grey long sleeved blouse underneath my bomber jacket and jeans with grey ankle length Ugg boots.

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“Congrats,” he responded flashing me his pearly white teeth. Caught off guard by his wicked smile I goofily grinned back, realizing that he was finer than I previously gave him credit for.

“Thanks. Let me treat you,” I offered. “After all, I owe you after I keyed ya motorcycle.”

“Right, ‘cause a value meal at Mickey D’s makes up for a scratched up bike.”

“No, but a meal and company with a beautiful girl is a start.” He laughed as he went to go order his food. Once I paid for him, we sat down at a booth and began to eat. Though I was eating for two, I felt fat for having this much on my tray. Why did I care anyways? It wasn’t like I liked this guy. I barely knew him. “So, what’s a girl gotta do to get your name?” I questioned taking a sip from my soda.

“Just ask. It’s Smith. You?”

“Is that your first name?”

“It’s actually my last name. First name is Nasha. My family calls me that or Nash for short.”

“That’s Nigerian right?”

“Yeah,” he replied as his eyebrows rose clearly impressed. “How’d you know?”

“I took African Studies in college,” I replied after popping a few French fries in my mouth. Though I skipped most classes until I ultimately quit school I found some courses insightful including African Studies.

“Okay, that’s pretty cool. What’s your name?”

“Max.”

“Is that short for Maxine?”

“No. Maximiliana. I swear my ma was trying to beat the world record of longest name ever. My last name is Abbracciavento which is fourteen letters long. Thank goodness she didn’t give me a middle name,” I joked.

“Wow. That is a long name. Does it even fit on your driver’s license or does it get cut off?” he teased before we giggled. “So are you half Italian?”

“Not sure. I was adopted. I don’t know who my biological parents are,” I admitted. I hadn’t a clue what my DNA makeup was. I always assumed I was half white and half black. Maybe both of my parents were black. Who knew? Mama was always elusive about the details of my adoption, despite my persistence to want to know more. When my ma got sick I convinced myself to fallback since every time it was brought up it always ended in us arguing and led to her getting more upset.

“I’m sure you thought about doing one of those DNA tests.”

“I did. But every time I go to buy one I feel like I’m betraying my adopted ma even now that she’s gone.”

“You shouldn’t feel bad for wanting to know the truth.” We took a few bites from our meals before we said anything else. It was a tough topic to have and for now I’d rather focus on my pregnancy instead of people who didn’t

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want me. “Last we saw each other you were in tears. Now if I’m overstepping, my bad. Is that guy who broke up with you the day of your mother’s funeral the dad?” I dropped the nugget I had in my hand and sighed. I didn’t want to think about Tommy, and how much I still loved him.

“It’s complicated and embarrassing...,” I mumbled with my head down as I played with the spoon of my McFlurry. Feeling my ears turn red I hesitated in fear of judgement. “I um...I was a sidechick to a married man. The first two years I was young and naïve. When I found out he had a whole wife I cut him off but six months later we got back together for three and a half more years. So this is what I get for knowingly sleeping with someone else’s husband,” I revealed waiting for him to look down at me and accuse me of being a home wrecker.

“That’s a lot to deal with.”

“Yeah and because of my foolishness I’m gonna be a single mom,” I said trying to contain my emotions. I still hadn’t wrapped my head around the fact that I was going to be the sole custodian of this baby, the main responsible party to raising this kid up, making sure he didn’t make dumb mistakes like me. “Well, go ahead. Tell me how awful of a person I am.”

“I’m not here to judge you. We all make mistakes and for me to throw stones when I’m not perfect is hypocrisy. Besides you probably beat yourself up more than anyone else,” he responded in his deep voice, staring me straight in my eyes. My heart skipped a beat as I felt myself blushing. What was wrong with me? I was pregnant with another guy’s kid and here I was finding myself wanting this Smith guy to be more than a friend.

“Right,” I replied, looking away from his enticing brown eyes. I took a large bite of my Big Mac. That was better than me eyeing the handsome man that was in front of me.

“Boy or girl?”

“Boy.” I was so excited that I started to hit up JC Penny and Target to find clothes and other baby items for him. For the time being I was going to stay with my son at Rudy and Carmela’s home as long as I wanted to especially since money was tight for me. “I actually have the sonogram pic,” I thrillingly told him. I wiped my hands with the napkins before I pulled them out from my Coach bag. “That’s his head. And those are his little hands and feet,” I gushed. I couldn’t help but get excited.

“That’s pretty cool. It’s fascinating to see the transitions that babies go through,” he added, truly engaged in the photos. I agreed as I gazed at Smith. At least with his attention on the pictures I was able to admire his beauty. I noticed how his right eyebrow rose a bit higher when he smiled than his left eyebrow. “Here,” he said handing them back. As he passed them to me, our fingers brushed against one another’s. I gulped feeling his warmth. “Sorry,” he said taking his hand away from mine. Thankfully he did. If he hadn’t I probably would have left mine there.

“It’s no big deal. It’s just hands. Everyone has hands and with our hands we touch things. Sometimes we touch what we like and other times we touch what we don’t like. Not to say that I didn’t like that our hands touched. I’m glad our hands touched. Your hands are warm-I mean not that I was dying to touch your hands. Okay, I’m gonna shut up now,” I responded. I blushed again as I tucked my natural

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curly hair behind my ears wondering why I was going on about hands. Could I be more awkward! I took a huge sip from my Coke as I glanced out the window, not wanting to see his facial expression. “I should probably go now,” I said, getting up from the booth.

He took hold of my arm just as I got up. “I’m glad I ran into you, Max. And, it’s good to know you know so much about hands,” Smith joked with a grin as we both laughed. “See you around,” he added. He gave my arm a squeeze before leaving.

I waited in SUNY Downstate Medical Center in the cafeteria for Larissa. We were supposed to meet during our breaks. Once I saw her I gave her a hug before we both sat down to eat. She sighed as she opened up the container for her jerk chicken along with rice and mixed veggies.

“Should I even ask how your day is going?” I started as I nibbled on my warm glazed blueberry muffin.

“Don’t. I think I’ll scream if I start talking about it. Clinical was a mess today,” she muttered, stabbing her carrots. She turned away from her food, looked up at me, and smiled. “Sorry. I’m having a bad day. Tell me some good news so I can forget.”

“I can’t get this guy out of my mind.”

“Please tell me you’re not talking about Tommy,” Larissa said rolling her eyes.

“No, not him. Smith,” I admitted. Smith was on my mind to the point I couldn’t go a day without thinking about him, even though three weeks passed since we ate together at McDonald’s.

“Smith? The guy who’s bike you keyed? The guy who you lectured about hands?” she asked with a smirk.

“Yeah, that Smith,” I responded as I grinned at her sarcasm. “It’s crazy. Here I want to be with this stranger when I’m having a kid with another man,” I said, placing my hands over my head. What was wrong with me? For the first time, I was open to the idea of being with someone other than Tommy. I still loved Tommy, but not seeing him in a while, helped me to kind of move on.

“Hey, any guy is better than Tommy. No offense-”

“None taken.”

“What do you like about him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s his looks. The guy is fine, Larissa. I’ve never seen a man look so good. He doesn’t do his eyebrows and he’s not all into buying the latest trends like most of the guys from the block. And get this, he didn’t even call me a home wrecker after I told him about getting pregnant by a married man.”

“So what’s the vibe like between ya’ll? Is it flirtatious or friendlier?”

“Friendly for sure. But that’s more than okay. I mean I’m in no position to be thinking about a relationship

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now. My focus is on this baby and being the best parent. Maybe in the future I—" I felt a weird little sensation against my stomach. "Oh my God," I said placing my hand over my belly.

"What's wrong?" Larissa asked.

"Oh my God," I repeated, feeling the same sensation again. My hand shook as I placed it over my abdomen.

"Oh my God!" Larissa exclaimed, jumping up from her chair. "Are you okay? It's not the baby is it?" she asked, kneeling close to me.

"It is," I replied in a shaky voice. "Oh my God!"

"Oh my God! Okay breathe, breathe. Crap! What'd they say in class again? Oh ABC, right! Airway, breathing, and circulation," she said panicking. I began to laugh at her fright. She probably thought I was dying or something. I guess I overreacted a little. "What?" she questioned.

"The baby just kicked," I told her, rubbing my stomach. It was crazy how a little human was actually growing inside of me and now he was making himself known. He kicking gave me so much comfort. It was like my son was telling me that everything was going to be okay. Time might be tough ahead as a single mother, but things were going to be alright.

"The baby just kicked?" she asked, looking for a split second like she was about to throw a few cuss words my way for seeming like I was dying.

“The baby just kicked,” I replied in a grin.

“Thank goodness that the baby kicked and you weren’t hurting,” Larissa added as she got up from kneeling.

“Here, come feel,” I said, grabbing her hand and placing it over my stomach. We smiled at each other as we felt my kid move again.

“Oh, girly, I’m so happy for you,” she said, giving me a hug. “This means we need to go do some retail therapy for your little man.”

“Hell, yeah. This weekend good for you?”

“I’m down.”

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February 2017

“How cute is this?” I squealed, holding up an adorable bright green onesie that had a picture of a banana in the middle of it at Macy’s.

“Awe!” Larissa gushed.

“No, no, no. Put that corny outfit away. No lil’ cousin of mine is rocking a bright shirt with a damn banana on it,” Ru began. Larissa and I decided to go baby shopping during the weekend. Since Ru loved rocking the latest name brands, he tagged along, hoping to grab a fresh pair of Jordans at Footlocker.

“Ru-”

“I’m serious. The kid ain’t even born yet and ya already paving the way for people to make fun of him. Come on, Max. We Abbracciaventos’ got a reputation to uphold,” he responded in the most serious face.

“Okay, Mr. Swag, if you got so much style, why don’t you help pick some clothes out,” Larissa suggested.

“Challenge accepted,” he replied, giving her a wink along with a grin. Larissa turned away. Before she did, I saw her smile. I rolled my eyes, seeing that Larissa could possibly be Ru’s next female conquest. For her sake, I hoped she wouldn’t fall for it. I saw way too many girls’ hearts get broken by my player of a nephew.

“I gotta use the bathroom. I’ll be back,” I told them before heading over to the restroom. I hated having to void this often. It was one of the things I wasn’t too fond of

being pregnant. That and needing to rest more. Feeling pressure on my back and pain in my ankles and feet I sat down on the bench by the food court after I went.

Fatigued I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes as I placed my hands over my belly. I was about to be a mother in a couple of months. Things were happening so fast. I was getting bigger week by week. I must've gained at least twenty pounds so far. It was very obvious that I was with child.

“Max?” someone called to me.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, half asleep.

“It’s me, Dina.” My eyes shot open. I clenched my jaw shut to prevent them from falling to the floor. Sure enough, Tommy’s spouse was watching me with her six and nine year old daughters in front of her who were both engrossed in a game on their Amazon Fire tablet. My heart pounded. I tried to calm down, but I couldn’t. I was over breathing. “Oh, I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to wake you up. I wasn’t trying to scare you,” she apologized. I nodded my head, thinking that it was I who should have been saying sorry to her.

“It’s okay,” I replied, in a small voice. I placed my hand on my back as I got up to politely greet her cheek to cheek.

“Girls, say hi to Miss. Max,” she requested. Her daughters briefly said hello looking up at me before regluing their eyes on their screen. Seeing the both of them made me sadder knowing Milo may never have a chance at a relationship with his siblings because of the secret affair.

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“Oh my! You’re with child. I heard some rumors about you being pregnant but I didn’t know they were true,” she added in a smile. “Has the father put a ring on it yet? You know how we traditional Italians are. If a guy can take time to get a girl pregnant, he’d better take the time to put a ring on her finger.” I slightly turned my head away from her. If only she knew the father couldn’t put a ring on it because he was married to her.

“No. He’s not in the picture,” I responded, avoiding eye contact.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Max. And I’m really sorry about you losing ya ma. How are you holding up?”

“Taking it one day at a time,” I replied, looking down at Mama’s bracelet on my wrist. As I played with it, I remembered her warning. If only I had listened to her and broke it off with Tommy back then for good, I wouldn’t be having a conversation with his oblivious wife about the child I was having with her husband.

“Things are going to get better. God is going to pull you through the storm. He always does,” she added as our eyes met. I stared back. As I continued to look, I felt tears of self-reproach. Here was a woman who loved her husband and thought the world of him just cheerful because she didn’t know this husband she had two kids with had an ongoing affair with someone fourteen years younger than him for over six years. “I’m sorry, honey. I don’t mean to keep upsetting you.”

“No. I’m sorry,” I began.

“What? Why are you sorry?” she questioned, looking confused.

“It’s nothing. Hormones,” I responded, wiping my tears. As much as I wanted to apologize, I didn’t, especially not in front of her kids. “Um... I have to go.”

I quickly left her. I went back to the baby department of Macy’s. Larissa had a goofy smile on her face as she listened to whatever Ru was saying to her.

“You okay?” Ru asked once he saw me. “Ya mad pale. It’s like you saw a ghost or something.”

“I’m a little tired. Can we go home?”

“Yeah. Are you sure you’re okay?” Larissa asked, in concern.

“Of course I’m okay,” I lied.

That night, I stared at the wall rather than sleep. After running into Dina, my mood dropped. I was starting to feel like I did the first few months after Mama died. I replayed the last interaction I had with Mama at the nursing home.

“Max, how are you?” the charge nurse asked at the nursing home at the counter.

“Good. How was the weekend in the Hamptons?”
I asked.

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“Amazing. Just too pricey,” she said, coming over to walk with me to mama’s bedroom.

“Well, I’m glad you had fun. So, how is she doing?”

“The same. We’re trying to make her comfortable.” We paused before walking into her room.

“Are you sure it was for the best? You know us not doing anything about her ruptured liver?” I asked. Just a few days, after Mama was having serious nose bleeds, they found out that her liver ruptured. The doctor advised Rudy and I not to take her to the hospital and instead make her comfortable. Whatever the hell that meant.

“She only has one lung left and that lung isn’t doing so well. And because she’s older, the risk is very high for the surgeons to repair her liver.” I nodded my head, trying to not think about what the nurse was saying to me. I hugged my Rosary cross with my hand that I had in my pocket before I walked into the room. I was praying to God to keep my Mama alive for years since she had been sick and it had been working so far, so why would anything else change? Forget what the doctors were saying.

“Bella,” Mama said with excitement when she saw me. She was lying on her bed, reading her Bible. I tried to ignore the nasal cannula in her nose. Without it she wouldn’t be able to get the appropriate amount of oxygen that she needed.

“Mama,” I greeted, giving her a kiss on the cheek along with a hug. “Come lei è?” I said, asking how she was.

“Sono buono. Sono felice che lei è venuto,” she replied telling me she was happy I came to visit.

“Lei sa che io sarò sempre qui per lei,” I told her saying that I was always going to be there for her.

“So. Mi occupavo di lei e so che lei si occupano di me,” Mama responded saying how she used to take care of me and now I was taking care of her. “So che non dico questo spesso ma l’amo.” I smiled, and handed her the Rosary. It made me feel more than happy to hear my mama tell me that she loved me.

“L’amo anche la mama,” I said giving my mother a hug. I gave her a kiss on the forehead before heading out. That night I was going on a weekend trip to the Shore with Tommy and for the first time since Mama has been in the nursing room, I wouldn’t see her. I didn’t want to tell her that I wasn’t going to be making my daily visits to her for the next few days. The last thing I wanted to do was upset her.

I sat up on my bed still trying to comprehend that that was the last time I spent time with Mama. Not being able to sleep, I went to the living room. As soon as I got there, I grabbed my North Face Coat and quietly walked out of the door. I needed to get out for a little while. It was about thirty degrees outside and past midnight, but I didn’t care. I felt as if I was going to suffocate with thoughts of someone I could never bring back.

I shivered as I made my way to Prospect Park. I knew it wasn’t the safest place to be at alone in night. That didn’t matter to me.

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I rested on a bare bench and placed my hands over my belly, hoping that my baby would kick, to give me some comfort. I waited, and it didn't happen. "I don't know if you can hear me, but..." I began, but drifted off, not sure if my kid could hear me through my uterus and placenta. "I just wanna let you know that I love you and I will never abandon you," I added. As I said this, I tried not to think about how unwanted I felt that my biological parents decided to give up on me.

"It's a little late for you to be outside at this time of night, especially since you're with child," some woman told me, as she stood beside me. I shrugged my shoulders ignoring both her and the fact that my toes were starting to get numb from the winterish weather. I continued to stare far to the other side of the park to nothing in particular. The stranger sat down next to me, as if my reaction was an invitation for her to join me in my sorrowfulness. We sat there quietly for a few minutes. Strangely, I didn't mind her being there. In a weird way, her presence caused me to feel a little less lonely. "Boy or girl?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"Boy."

"When are you due?"

"In May."

"You seem so down for what should be a happy time in your life."

"I am happy- or at least I'm trying to be-but you know what, it doesn't matter, okay. I'm fine," I began,

getting a little annoyed by her. I didn't mind her when she was mute, however, now that she was talking, not so much.

“You're not fine-”

“How would you know? You don't even know me,” I snapped finally turning to her. She appeared to be in her early forties. She had olive colored skin, hazel eyes and high cheek bones and she seemed to be a little taller than me. She had her straight dark brunette hair down.

“You're right. I don't know you. That doesn't mean you're not hurting. Anyone can see that.”

“What are you? A shrink?”

“No, I'm not a shrink,” she responded in a chuckle.

“Oh, so now my life is funny to you?”

“No. That's not why I laughed. It's just you remind me of myself when I was younger-”

“You don't know me!” I repeated. “Is this what you do? Go around the park at night time and try to find young women who remind you of yourself?” I sarcastically questioned, getting up from the bench. This lady was working up my nerves and the last thing I wanted was some nut job in the park trying to get her Dr. Phil on with me.

“You have to leave,” she demanded. I glanced down at her, placing my hand on my hip. This woman wasn't going to tell me what to do.

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“No,” I responded as I sat back down. Even though I was planning to head home, I refused to since she told me to. “I was here first.”

“I mean it, you have to go,” she said, with a low and somber tone. I heard the urgency in her voice. I folded my arms on top of my belly ignoring her warning. “Go home-”

“You got some nerve showing your face around here,” some guy said, walking with two other men behind him. Seeing the knife in his hand I gulped. My heart pounded, thinking about how stupid I was to go to a park in Brooklyn at this time of night. Though my toes and fingers were now numb, I was still sweating from my anxiety.

“And you got some nerve stepping up to me like this,” she responded protectively standing in front of me. “So if you don’t want to find a gun shoved in ya mouth, I suggest you and ya thugs go home.”

“Don’t come making threats on our side!” he snapped.

I uncrossed my arms and legs as I subtly tried to slide away from them. Once I was at the edge of the bench, I slyly stood up and began to walk away. Before I knew it, I felt one of them yank my arm, pull me over to him, and carelessly place his switchblade against my throat. He held onto my body tightly, as his hand with the weapon shook. I quickly prayed, fearing for my son and my life, especially since I could smell alcohol on his breath.

“Let her go,” the woman said, whipping out her 9 mm pistol so fast as if she had done so many times before.

She switched who got to see the end of the barrel between the guy who grabbed me and the leader. My eyes popped out in surprise that this woman was packing heat. All I wanted to do was go to the park and get some fresh air and here I was in the middle of what was most likely a gang war.

“Or what? You know it’s getting a little lonely at the crib. The fellas could use some entertainment,” the main guy started. “Right, Hector?” he said talking to my kidnapper.

“Right,” Hector replied. I flinched as I felt his mouth and saliva across the back of my neck. Deciding he enjoyed the first kiss, he pushed my hair aside before he began to suck on the back of my neck. I made an effort to ignore my feelings of being sexually harassed. All I needed to do was get out of the park. All I needed to do was survive.

As he started to enjoy himself, a little too much, he dropped the hand his knife was in. “Mami, I can rock your world, even though you’re pregnant. That’s even better cause I don’t gotta worry about getting you pregnant,” he said, grabbing my thighs. I winced in disgust by his vulgar comment.

“Keep touching her like that and see what’ll happen!” she exclaimed.

“What are you gonna do?” Hector asked as he dirty danced behind me and laughed. Before I knew it, I heard the gun go off. “OWWWW!” Hector screamed in pain as he hobbled with his bloody foot. I tried not to scream in disgust of the minute amount of blood that splattered over my coat.

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She raced over to Hector and snapped his neck, dropping him to the floor. She swiftly turned to the main guy who ran at her with a knife. Rather than try to brawl with him, she dragged the third guy in front of her, using him as a shield, just as the leader shoved his weapon in her direction.

“Juan!” the third guy exclaimed after he felt the sharp object puncture his abdomen. He clutched his stomach as he dropped to the floor.

“Look what you made me do you-” Juan upsettingly yelled.

“Me? You’re the one who did this to him! At least you had the decency not to stab him in the back,” she sarcastically replied squaring up.

“You think this is funny?” he asked, taking a swing at her. She ducked, missing his hands. She kneed his gut before throwing her fist against his jaw. He jumped back a bit and lobbed a punch right back at her. She stumbled in response. Before he had a chance to strike again, she blocked him with both arms. She took a huge step back and pulled out her gun again.

“I forgot about good ol’ faithful,” she said smirking, as she wiped the blood from the side of her mouth. Just as he tried to retaliate, she shoved her knee upwards against his chest and forcefully thrust her elbow against his back, causing him to crumble face down. She bent over and promptly rolled him over. Resting her high heel Alexander McQueen leather ankle boot on top of his chest she continued to point the pistol at him.

The guy breathed heavily as he curled into a ball in pain. Unbothered about his bloody face she reached down and violently rammed her gun down his throat. “See, if you listened to me earlier when I told you to leave, you wouldn’t have this gun in ya mouth! Now you tell Ruiz if he wants me, *come get me.*” She tucked her 9 mm in her denim waist and stepped away from him.

My mouth dropped in disbelief. Did this woman really take on three grown men and win? This was nuts. I felt like I was in some action movie or something. I knew I should’ve left, but I stood there, frozen. “You need to leave. *Now.* Walk away. Don’t run,” she said, walking beside me as we heard sirens.

“You just fought off three guys. *By yourself,*” I finally managed to say to the crazed woman.

“Yeah. It could’ve been worse,” she replied nonchalantly as she cracked her neck.

“I know they attacked us, but shouldn’t we at least call the ambulance? They could die,” I said, worriedly as I glanced to where they were. No matter what they were up to, I didn’t want their deaths on my hands.

“Don’t look back. You’ll look suspicious.”

“Fine, but can we at least call for help?”

“No! They had it coming, especially that *jadrool* who was touching you like that. The nerve of him!” she said through her teeth in wrath.

“But-”

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“Look, I’ll walk you home to make sure you’re safe, but in the meantime, no more questions, okay? And this night never happened. If the cops come asking questions you keep ya mouth shut. Capeesh?”

“Capeesh,” I replied as I nodded my head afraid to say anything else. Clearly this wasn’t this woman’s first rodeo. She seemed to have run in with the law a lot. I led her to where I lived. I knew she was withholding information from me to keep me from finding out who she was and to keep me safe. We walked the rest of the way back to my home in silence.

“Hey, thanks for protecting me tonight.”

“No problem,” she replied, sounding a bit ashamed. “Um... things might not make sense right now, but maybe they will someday. Take care of yourself and that baby of yours,” she said, looking into my eyes. “Goodnight, Max,” she said before leaving.

“Wait, how’d you know my name?” I asked, before she took another step.

“You told me at the park,” she replied without hesitation.

“Right.” I figured that I probably forgot. “Anyways, be careful.” She smiled back at me before walking away.

*****Chapter 5*****

March 2017

“Pass the gravy, please,” Ru requested.

“The gravy, Ru? You mean the sauce,” Dom corrected Ru. We would always get into weather the pasta sauce was called gravy or sauce. The generation before us referred to it as sauce as my generation referred to it as gravy.

“Kids these days. I swear you need to hang out with more Italians,” Louie said, shaking his head as he passed it over to him.

“My bad,” Ru replied, taking it and pouring it over his asiago penne pasta. “What do ya want me to do? Ask whoever I hang out what ethnicity they are?” Ru asked sarcastically.

“You should. Maybe then you’d finally find a good quality Italian woman instead of whoring around,” Dom said before taking a bite out of the vegetables mix of asparagus, carrots and mushroom.

“Says the forty-five years old who don’t even got a girl,” Ru replied back in a smirk.

“Ru, he does have a girl. Her name is G-Y-M,” Mario joked as the whole table laughed during Sunday dinner at Rudy and Carmela’s home.

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“First of all, I’m only forty-two. And at least I go to the G-Y-M,” Dom replied, patting Mario’s chubby stomach, before flexing his muscular biceps.

“Hey! Leave the big guys alone. Haven’t you heard big guys are in now?” Rudy stated before throwing a meatball in his mouth.

“Ya right, Rudy. Notice how the larger fellas at this table got significant others,” Mario agreed. Mario finally found a girl who could cook as good like his ma and was easy on the eyes.

“What’s Max’s excuse? She’s big but she don’t got a significant other,” Ru said with a smirk. I glanced up with my mouth full of penne and meatballs and gave him a dirty look. He knew that the identity of my baby’s father was a touchy subject and a secret.

“Knock it off, Rudolph Jr. That wasn’t nice,” Carmela jumped in at my defense.

“Yeah, Ru. I’m pregnant, not fat,” I snapped as I threw my middle finger at him. I hated being this big and here he was making fun of me. I felt like sitting on him, hard enough to squash him and his stupid too-much-gel-in-the-hair self.

“Ya mother’s right, Ru. That wasn’t nice...But I gotta wonder what kind of a man walks away from his kid.” I uneasily continued to chew and swallow what was left in my mouth. I knew Rudy was still a bit sour about me being pregnant out of wedlock. As awkward as the conversation was, I had to be careful what I said. I still feared that my

brothers amongst others would seriously harm Tommy if they found out.

“Can we not talk about this-” I started, feeling my cheeks get red.

“You can’t call a guy who walks away from his baby a man,” Dom added.

“Whoever got you knocked up is lucky he hadn’t shown his face around us. But if I ever catch this guy, I can make sure he never sees the light of day,” Louie warned.

“Are the threats necessary?” Carmela asked Shifty Louie.

“I’m just saying, Carmela,” Louie replied throwing his hands in the air. “I watched Max grow up. She’s like a niece to me. So sue me if I’m willing to put her baby daddy six feet under.”

“You and me both,” Rudy said, holding up his beverage as they clicked their glasses of rum together.

“I’ll drink to that too,” Dom said.

“To not letting Max’s low life-dead beat-good for nothing-loser of a guy get away with it. Bottoms up, boys!” Ru said. I rolled my eyes as the four of them drank to wanting to hurt Tommy.

“You guys are ridiculous,” Carmela said, shaking her head.

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“I really don’t wanna be the topic of conversation!” I exclaimed loud enough for them to finally hear me. I forgot that I had to yell sometimes to get heard whenever we had Sunday dinners.

“Did you see the Yankees game the other day...?” Mario began shifting the conversation. I mouthed thank you to the least confrontational guy I ever knew.

After the conversation got lighter, I rubbed my larger than life belly as I thought the other night at the park. I really had a knife to my neck. Though that was scary, the craziest part of that evening at the park was the woman I met. I admired her fearlessness; to take on three men without blinking an eyelash. Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t trying to be a gangster like her, but I wouldn’t mind not being afraid of anything, like being a single mother.

“Sweetie, are you okay,” Carmela asked, placing her hand on my arm.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” I replied, snapping out of my thoughts. I gazed around the table, thankful that I hadn’t told my overprotective family about the night at the park. I was also grateful for having family. It made me feel like I wasn’t going to be raising my son alone. Okay so they were over the top and too protective for their own good. But regardless of the fights and arguments, this was my family. I loved them and I knew they were going to be there for me and my son.

“Ya gonna be a great mom, just like Mama was,” Dom said before placing his hand on the back of my head and kissing my forehead.

April 2017

“How about Dante?” Carmine asked me, as he flipped through a book of baby names. It was the day of my baby shower, and a lot of family were coming, including Carmine who came back for the weekend from college. Rudy and Carmela were out getting the decorations that we ordered.

“Nah. Just name the kid after me, Max. Then you’ll know for sure he’ll be cool. Ru III. See, it has a nice ring to it,” Ru proclaimed from the table.

“I already got a name picked out,” I responded, turning the omelet over for the other side to cook. I had bacon sizzling and French toast made with brioche bread on another pan.

As I waited, I placed my hand on my aching back. I fanned myself from the heat of the pan. I was eight months pregnant and I was ready to get this baby out of me. I mean, bringing a child into this world was a beautiful experience yet uncomfortable. Not only did I sweat bullets at times, there were mood swings, and I had to deal with feeling fat. Okay, I know people would correct me and say “you’re pregnant, not fat” but trust me, I felt fat. This big ol’ stomach of mine got in the way of me seeing my feet, my rings didn’t fit, I looked pudgy, and I couldn’t even fit into any of my old clothes. Today I was wearing a large Yankees baseball t-shirt that I smuggled from Ru’s bedroom and rolled up grey sweatpants.

I couldn’t wait to meet my son. The baby shower was making me more anxious. This kid of mine was going to

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be looking up to me to do everything for him, such as feed, clean, and just love him.

“What’s the name?” Carmine asked, taking me away from my thoughts.

“Milo Rudolph Abbracciavento,” I responded, placing eggs, bacon and French toast on one of the plates.

“Ha! Hey, Milo, ya gonna be a cool dude now that ya named after me,” Ru exclaimed talking to my stomach before we laughed.

“I’m more naming him Rudolph after my brother. It’s just a coincidence that you’re named after your pops,” I teased. There was no way I could have a son without acknowledging Rudy, even though our relationship hadn’t been the same since he found out that I was pregnant out of wedlock. He wasn’t mean to me or anything like that. He just didn’t talk to me much other than to be polite. I hated it. I was holding onto the hope that our relationship would go back to how it was before once he met Milo.

“Here,” I said, handing Carmine his breakfast.

“Thanks,” he replied with a smile before throwing on some maple syrup before digging in.

“You give him food before me?” Ru asked, pretending to be offended.

“Yeah, only ‘cause he lost so much weight since he’s been at college,” I joked ruffling up Carmine’s overgrown shaggy hair.

“That’s fine. You can have the first bite, but the kid’s being named after me,” Ru teased. After the bell rang, Ru jumped up to answer. Right before I began to cook his eggs, he called out, “MAX! Some dude’s here asking for you. Is this the baby’s daddy?” he hollered. My face turned red. At first I thought he was talking about Tommy, but I knew Ru wouldn’t have acted so calmly. Soon after Ru made that comment, I heard Smith say no.

I yanked off my silk bonnet. I made a quick stop to the bathroom, brushed my teeth for the second time this morning, made sure to throw on some foundation, slide a coat of faint pink lipstick on, and I applied some gel to smooth down my edges. I spritzed some Red Door on before heading outside. Seeing Smith standing on the stoops, I pulled my hair tie off, allowing my microbraids to fall behind my back. I felt my heart beat faster. I ran into Smith the day after the incident at the park and we talked. Ever since, we’ve been keeping in touch. “Ru, Smith. Smith, Ru. Bye,” I said to Ru giving him a look. Ru glanced between Smith and me before going back inside. “I’m sorry about the whole baby daddy comment. He was joking,” I started, knowing that Ru was seriously questioning if Smith was the one who knocked me up.

“Of course,” Smith replied. I pushed down my shirt over my exposed stomach as I tried to catch my breath. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Just another joyous side effect of being pregnant,” I replied before we both awkwardly laughed.

“Are you sure the pregnancy is the reason why you’re out of breath? Or is it ‘cause you were trying to get away from gangsters again,” he kidded.

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“Hey, I told you not to tell anyone,” I playfully replied, with a smile, placing my hands on my back. My family was unaware of what happened that night because I didn’t want to worry them.

“I haven’t. I wouldn’t have said anything if someone was around.”

“I know.” It went silent for a couple of seconds. I took this time to really admire Smith. He wore a plain white t-shirt with a pair of light blue jeans and black on black Jordans. Even with his simplistic wardrobe, I could stare at him all day. It was more than his looks that got me. It was his heart, his soul.

“I’m glad we came up with the whole talking to each other, without any strings,” Smith finally said, breaking the silence.

“Me too,” I lied. At first the idea of us speaking to each other about our problems made sense. We were both strangers and because of that we could remain objective about possible problem solving since we didn’t know any of the people who were a part of our issues. Also, we didn’t judge each other, no matter what crazy shenanigans we got into. We felt like we couldn’t talk to our family and friends about certain things and most importantly since we were strangers, we weren’t supposed to care about how messed up the other person’s life was. Only thing was, I cared.

“And because of that, I can’t come to your baby shower,” he said. I nodded my head, trying to hide my disappointment. I really wanted to spend more time with Smith and I was hoping to have him there. “I know we’re not supposed to care about each other. But I can’t help it. I’m

only human. So,” he started as he slowly took my extremity away from my back. He slid his strong, yet gentle hand down my arm, until he got to my hand, where he placed a medium sized box and card. The gift almost fell. I was still frozen by our physical contact.

“Thanks,” I finally managed to say. Smith took his arm away and flashed a smile. “Um...I should open it,” I began, fumbling through my words. I tried to stop from shaking so I could reveal the gift.

“Here,” Smith offered, placing his hands on top of mine, taking it away from me. Not wanting to become tempted of holding onto his hands, I immediately pulled mine away causing the box to fall. He caught it before it could drop to the floor.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, face turning a bit red. Smith looked up and grinned before swiftly opening the gift. “These are too cute!” I said, at the red baby pair of Nike kicks. “Thank you,” I added. As he handed me the tiny sneakers, I held onto his warm hand trying to prevent the sneakers from taking yet another dive. As soon as the sneakers were in my hands, he pulled away. “How’d the race go?” I asked, shifting the focus off of me. I think I’d proclaim my feelings for Smith if we kept touching.

“It was alright,” he began. Throughout the past few months, I learned that Smith was a recent Morehouse College graduate. He was currently trying to make enough money to take the LSATS, pay for application fees for the law schools he was planning to apply to, and then some to pay for school. He was a teacher’s assistant during the day at NYU and at night he competed in under the table motorcycle races. “I only won,” he proudly said.

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“OMG!” I added, going over to him and embracing him with a hug. “That’s huge, Smith! That means you’ve got enough for the LSATS and application fees,” I gushed, happy that all that illegal and dangerous activity paid off. Of course there was a part of me that didn’t like him risking his life, but I was content that he was excited. I never saw him get so ecstatic. He was grinning from ear to ear. Seeing that his right eyebrow was slightly elevated than his left made me know his enthusiasm was real ‘cause it only got that way when he was genuinely happy.

“Facts. I had to tell someone and I couldn’t tell my parents ‘cause they’d kill me if they knew where I was getting this kind of money and my friends will try to talk me out of it. That’s why I came here. You’re who I thought about right after I won,” he admitted. I nodded, gazing into his loving brown eyes.

At that moment, I realized how close we were. How his strong physique embraced mine, in a gentle way around my stomach. The warmth of his body and eyes made me want to melt in his arms. “Smith...” I began, but drifted, as I placed my hand on his face and softly stroked his freshly shaven cheek.

“Max,” he started, taking my hand away from his face. “We shouldn’t.”

“Right,” I replied, letting go of him completely. Before I did, I felt Smith’s hand squeeze mine before releasing me. “Thanks for the gift again,” I said. After an awkward goodbye, he was off, zooming away in the motorcycle I had previously keyed. I waited for him to be out of my sight, before I went back inside.

I inspected my reflection in the mirror. I had to say, for the first time during my pregnancy, I felt pretty. I was wearing a beige double-layered cashmere shirt with matching spandex blend pencil skirt. I also decided to wear some champagne satin Onyx pumps. I wore my braids down to one side.

“Can I come in?” Rudy asked, knocking on my bedroom door. I let him in, wondering what he had to say to me. He came inside with his hands in his pockets. He was already dressed up in a buttoned down top and slacks. “You look beautiful, Max.”

“Thanks, Rudy,” I responded in a smile.

“I came here to talk to you. I’m sorry-”

“Why are you apologizing? You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who kept this pregnancy from you.”

“Doesn’t matter. That doesn’t make it right that I spent months barely talking to you. Yeah, you should have told me about the pregnancy sooner, but I was so consumed in my own pride that I wasn’t by your side during this time, especially now that Ma’s no longer here. You’re my baby sister and I made a promise to you and Mama that I would always protect and look out for you. I intend to keep that promise.” I glanced at my brother. This was one of the reasons why I loved him. He had a lot of pride, but when he was wrong, he was man enough to admit it. How could I not respect a guy like this?

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“Thanks,” I replied, trying not to get teary eyed.

“So, are you ready?”

“For the baby shower?”

“I meant about being a mom.”

“Yeah. I never thought about having kids, but now that it’s happening, I’m getting myself ready. Carmela came with me to some of the birthing classes and you know, most of the family has been calling me to give me tips on how to be a mom ever since they found out I was expecting,” I responded. I was truly grateful for my family and their support about this baby. I couldn’t have done it without them.

“Well, don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re going to be an amazing mother,” he added, giving me a hug. I let myself cry happy tears on his shoulders. Hearing Rudy say I was going to be a great mom was huge to me. He believed in me. He had faith that I could raise a good kid.

“I wasn’t supposed to cry!” I exclaimed once we let go of each other. I fanned my face with my hands, hoping my tears wouldn’t ruin my MAC makeup. We both laughed, thrilled that we were now on better terms.

My cell phone rang. “I’ll let you answer that. See ya soon,” Rudy said, giving me a kiss on my forehead before exiting my room.

As I wiped my eyes, I reached over for my cell to see who called me. I almost dropped it after I saw who it was. I stared at the phone trying to see if it was really

Tommy's number. Yup, it sure was. Even though I deleted him as a contact on my phone, I still remembered his digits. Seeing him buzz me again I glanced down at the phone in confusion, wondering if I should pick it up or not. I hadn't spoken to Tommy since Mama's funeral. After he tried calling me once again, I finally answered. I waited a while before saying anything.

"Hello? Max, you there?" Tommy asked. My heart raced, as I listened to the familiar voice of the man I loved.

"Yeah, I'm here," I responded in a cracked tone, taking a seat on my bed.

"Meet me in an hour."

"I can't. We can't." Staying away from Tommy was the only way I was to get over him. I had done so for almost a year. Especially now that I was a soon to be mother, I couldn't keep a volatile relationship with a married man, even though he was my kid's biological father.

"Max-"

"I can't do this-"

"If you really love me, you would come."

"You know I love you," I said in a low voice, disliking how he tried to manipulate my feelings for him to get me to do what he wanted.

"Prove it."

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“Fine,” I said, giving in, wondering what it’d be like to see Tommy for the first time in a while. “I can’t stay long though I have my-I can only meet for a little,” I corrected myself, not wanting him to know that my baby shower was today. As I took an Uber to meet Tommy, I kept thinking about the different reactions he may have when he saw that I was pregnant. I had a feeling that he already knew.

I took a deep breath before I approached the alleyway. Tommy was leaning against a brick wall, with one of his foot up against it, smoking. I stared at him for a while. Thoughts of our past, the love we once shared raced through my head. From the good times when he used to make me feel like I was the only girl in the world, to the bad times whenever he made me wish I never met him at all. I wondered what this time with him would feel like. “Hey,” I finally managed to say, deciding to keep my distance. He peered over to me and shook his head. I waited for him to finish his cigarette before he said anything to me.

“So, ya really pregnant. Dina told me she ran into you at the mall a couple of months ago. Surprised you didn’t say anything to her.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” I couldn’t believe that he actually thought for a second I would tell Dina. I felt it was unfair that Tommy was being unfaithful to his wife, but not to the point where I would home wreck.

“Is the kid mine?”

“Of course, Tommy,” I insisted as I approached him, taken aback that he was questioning my love and loyalty to him. As I walked over to him, I almost reached out to touch his arms, but I stopped myself.

“Yeah! How do I know you weren’t screwing some other guy when I wasn’t around?” he accused, getting away from the wall.

“Cause I wasn’t! You’re the only guy I ever been with! Tommy, I love you-”

“Sure you do. That’s why you didn’t get rid of the bastard when you had a chance to right? And now I gotta worry about not only my wife, but also my two daughters finding out. I bet you did this on purpose. You’ve always been selfish and you still are. Even to the point you’re using a damn baby to get back at me ‘cause I broke up with you!” he accused as the veins in his neck popped out. I watched Tommy, trying to figure out who this man in front of me was. This was not my Tommy. Then again, since when was he ever my guy? I never had him and never was going to.

“Say whatever you want about me, but you leave my son’s name out ya mouth,” I snarled in a low voice, before whipping away from him. He snatched my arm, and yanked me over to him.

“I will not have anything to do with that black baby ya carrying, and I swear on everything I love, if Dina or my kids find out about this kid being mine, *I will make you pay*,” he growled, fastening his grip on me with his nails. As I gawked back at the hatred in his beady eyes, I began to feel palpitations astonished by his racism. I was in disbelief he actually grabbed me like that too. Yeah, we may have quarreled many times in the past, but he was never physically violent towards me.

“Let go. You’re hurting me,” I responded in a small voice, trying to worm out of his grasp. He gave me a

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dirty look before releasing me. I turned away, unable to face him anymore.

I ignored him leaving. My thoughts were clouded of what just happened. His hatred for his son he didn't know was incomprehensible. It broke my heart to know my kid's father already had a problem with his most likely darker skin color. I faced prejudice growing up and even to this day at times. It was unfortunate to know some would judge him based off his hue over his character. Then there was the way he saw me. Like I was just a stupid girl who was dumb enough not to make sure precautions were taken to prevent a pregnancy. It was like I was a burden to him and as if all of the years we were together meant absolutely nothing to him.

I found myself leaning against the wall, sobbing over Tommy. With the passing of my mother and being pregnant, I never had the chance to really grieve the loss of the man I thought would be the love of my life.

After my phone rang for what had to be the umpteenth time, I finally picked it up. I had to take a few deep breaths before speaking to Ru. I didn't want him to hear my discontent over the line. "Hey."

"Max! Where you at? Everyone's at the crib for the baby shower, except for you. I can only take Cousin Vinnie sing opera in Italian for so long. You know how he is. Once he gets started he won't stop. And he's been drinking, so you know he's off key-"

"Aye, I hear him in the background," I said, in a smile, happy that I was able to get my mind off of Tommy. Our sixty-seven years old cousin was in the middle of singing a drunken version of "Il Balen" by Robert Merrill.

“Glad you hear him. So you understand the dire need for you to come rescue us,” Ru joked.

“Yeah. Of course that’s the main reason why I need to get there,” I teased back. “Can you come pick me up?” I asked, catching my breath.

“Where at?”

“9th Street.”

“9th Street? What are ya doing all the way over there?”

“Don’t ask. Just come pick me up,” I said, not wanting to rehash the situation with Tommy once more. It was time I focused on Milo and forget about Tommy anyways.

About fifteen minutes later, Ru swung by in his red Mustang. I climbed in the car thankful that I was in a better mood. I was looking forward to getting smothered by my overbearing family with gifts and little tips on how to be a better mother. I was also ready to stuff my face with the many cannoli different family members were bringing to the baby shower, in attempt to see which lady had the best recipe.

“So,” Ru began as he reached in the backseat and grabbed a small gift bag. “I got Milo a little something.” He began to drive off as I opened the present.

“Awe! Thanks, Ru!” I exclaimed, holding up the cute blue and white Yankees onesie with matching booties.

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“No problem, Max,” he said as he turned his head towards me and grinned. Refocusing his attention back on the road, I saw a panicked look come on his face.

“CRAP!” he shouted as an abrupt flash of light flickered in our direction. He quickly jerked the car to the left.

“What?” I asked in confusion before feeling a jarring impact crush the passenger side.

*****Chapter 6*****

July 2017

Blood...Everywhere...I struggled to open my eyes in confusion. Where was I? How did I get here? When I was finally able to pry my eyes open, I became alarmed when I saw the front shield window had imploded and that glass was sprawled all over the front seats.

“Ru!” I exclaimed seeing him out cold, with a huge gash of blood on the side of his forehead. I shook him, hoping he would wake up....

I slammed my gloved hands against the bag, trying not to remember what happened the night of the accident a couple of months ago.

“Maybe boxing was a bad idea,” Smith said after I punched the bag he was holding harder. I stepped back as I wiped the sweat away from my forehead.

“Wanna go out on a date?” I questioned, ignoring his statement.

“What?”

“With me. Tonight,” I responded, glancing at a shocked Smith. I didn’t see how he could be surprised. I mean, we had been spending much more time together, whether it was hitting up the gym or meeting at the park to chat or checking out new restaurants.

“You sure it’s not too soon?” he asked with much concern.

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“No. I broke up with my ex almost a year ago. Look, Smith, if you don’t wanna go out with me, that’s cool. I’m a big girl, I can handle rejection,” I responded, trying not to sound hurt.

“I wasn’t talking about your ex,” he responded, taking hold of my sweaty arm. I glanced away from him, over to a guy lifting weights who resembled Ru.

“Ru, wake up!” I exclaimed, shaking his shoulder, trying to get him out of his state of unconsciousness. My mouth dropped once I saw how much blood was coming out of Ru’s wound. As I sobbed, I grabbed the onesie he got me and placed it over his head, in attempts to stop him from bleeding. “HELP!” I screamed, in hopes someone near-by had heard me.

“Like, I said before, if you don’t wanna go out with me, no hard feelings,” I replied, shrugging him off of me. I looked away from Ru-look-alike, back to Smith. Back to the present. I was over memories of the past.

“Okay. Tonight, my neighborhood is having their annual block party. Music, food trucks, dancing. It should be a good time.”

“Cool. See ya tonight,” I replied, taking my gloves off. Even though I just worked out, I decided to jog back home. As I did, I blasted Kendrick Lamar’s latest tracks on my Beats.

I shoved my headphones down while I opened the front door. I washed my hands then tossed my brown leather book bag down on my way to the refrigerator.

“You look like you just ran a marathon,” Carmela said stirring the minestrone soup on the stove top. “Do you want to join us for dinner?”

“I’m okay. I got my meal here,” I replied grabbing a SlimFast shake. I started to chug on it, knowing this was how I was going to get back my pre-pregnant figure. So far, I lost thirteen pounds from the thirty-five I gained. I rolled my eyes, trying to suppress another memory from the ill night of the accident.

“Max, you need to eat more than those shakes,” she scolded. “Besides, you’ll have fun at dinner. Larissa is coming-”

“Again?” I mumbled.

“Again? Okay, so she’s not Italian. Big deal. Have any of the girls Ru dated come to visit him after the accident?” she rhetorically asked. “No. Larissa is the only one. It’s funny when you’re on top everyone wants to be your friend, but as soon as you hit rock bottom, the time you need your friends the most, a lot of them are nowhere to be found. And in your time of need, you’ll know who your true friends are, ‘cause they’re the ones who stand when you can’t,” Carmela said.

“Alright, I get it. Larissa’s a saint,” I retorted back, chucking my can in the recycling bin.

“What do you have against her, Max? She has been a great friend to you too. She’s always been there for you.”

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That was exactly the problem. Larissa was there for me emotionally, which meant she knew how much I loss in the accident. How much I wanted to forget about it, however she was always trying to insist I talk about what transpired to help me cope. It was to the point where I wanted her to back off. Hell, I wanted my entire family to leave me alone and stop trying to talk me into going to counseling. The only reason I spoke to my family was because they were family and I couldn't change that.

“What’s going on?” Ru called out.

“Yeah, I could hear you ladies from a mile away,” Rudy added, with Ru, who hobbled in with his crutches. He was healing from a fractured femur that required immediate surgery. He had a rod in his leg as a result of the crash.

“Nothing,” I replied, about to leave.

“Slow down, Max. Aren’t you eating dinner with us?” Rudy asked.

“No. I’m going out.”

“Okay. Well, is there anything I can do for you? We can talk-”

“Can everyone stop trying to shrink me?” I practically yelled in frustration. I had enough of people attempting to get me to open up about the damn accident. I was over it.

“You need to process what happened, honey,” Carmela stated.

“I’m dealing, okay. You don’t see me locked up in a room like I was when Mama died, do you?”

“No, but you loss your baby-” Carmela started.

“I know, Carmela!” I said, walking towards the front door, hating her for saying the truth out loud.

“Max, we just wanna help you out,” Rudy said, following me.

“If you really wanna help me, get rid of all this baby crap from my room,” I replied slamming the front door. My room still had Milo’s supplies including his crib, clothes, diapers, and bottles. I even had all of the gifts from the baby shower that I never made it to.

I headed to the hotel that I used to live at. Using the key I kept to the girl’s locker room I showered and changed into a black top along with a leather mini skirt and dark heeled combat boots. I threw on my silver link chain necklace to complete the look. Donning on makeup I thought about how I wanted Smith and there was nothing getting in my way.

Walking through the crowd and music filled block in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Smith and I chatted about our favorite rap artists. “...What? Nas won hands down. Dude’s got bars all day. Hov is just more commercialized,” Smith argued back as we discussed who was a better rapper.

“Jay-Z has always been better,” I disagreed as we paused by one of the high top tables to eat our New York cheesecake he purchased for us from one of the food trucks.

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“But I gotta give it to Lauryn Hill. She is the real deal. *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is still one of my go to albums.”

“Yeah she got skills.”

“Oh man, you were not lying. This is good,” I spoke after taking a bite from the dessert.

“I told you. And that cherry takes it over the top,” he replied eating as well.

“I appreciate that,” I said after finishing the pie.

“What?”

“You,” I responded giving him a coy smile. I felt butterflies. Yeah, I liked Smith, but I wasn’t trying to fall for him. I was just looking for a good time. “You said you had some Bacardi. Why don’t we go to your place and have some?” I suggested, throwing my body close to him. Not close enough that we were touching, but close enough he’d know I was flirting. “We could use the privacy,” I whispered in his ear. I backed away from him, waiting for his reaction.

“Yeah, we could do that,” he responded inconspicuously eyeing my body. I smirked as I followed him to his apartment close-by.

He had a small comfy one bedroom home. His small kitchen had a simple white refrigerator along with a stove which stood by a wooden table along with two matching chairs. His black leather couch rested in the middle of his living room, on top of a burgundy rug. A coffee table was placed near the sofa that had a couple of LSATS books along with the latest New York Time newspaper, turned to

the sports section. The walls were painted tan and there were a couple of motivational posters about not quitting and following one's dreams. He had his Morehouse Degree in political science along with a picture of some of his fraternity buddies next to it with their caps and gowns on the opposite wall. At the far corner, he had a pair of Yamaha speakers connected to a receiver, next to a mini cabinet that held his drinks.

Smith handed me a cup of Bacardi. Before sitting down on his black leather couch, he turned on his record player to Davido's "Fall". I stared at Smith while downing my beverage as I not so subtly checked him out. He had his dreads pulled up in a ponytail. He rocked a black Dashiki top with colorful embroidery along with khaki shorts and brown flip-flops that showed his well-groomed feet. I took the mango infused rum from the coffee table and dispensed more into my glass.

"Slow down, ma," he said, watching me guzzle down another serving size as he was still working on his first.

"Why? I'm not a lightweight." I placed my drink down and slid closer to him. "But if you wanna skip the drinks and do what we came here to do by all means," I seductively said. I held onto his face with both hands, pulling him in for a kiss. Once our lips collided his large hands grabbed hold of my hips and brought me closer to him. I dropped my hands to his chest. As his tongue snuck inside my mouth he caressed my thigh over my colossal floral tattoo. Feeling my body get hot I helped him lose his shirt revealing his tone body. He led me backwards on the couch.

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“Do you have protection?” I asked out of breath from making out.

“Uh huh,” he responded between our kisses.

“Wait,” he started as he lay beside me.

“What?” I asked sensing his mood shift. He pulled my curly hair away from my face before he ran his hand up and down my back.

“I like you.”

“Me too.”

“I mean I like you. Like a lot. Sleeping together can be the start of a beautiful thing or it can mess everything up. Let’s call it a night,” he whispered. Caught off guard by his rejection I gulped, a bit mortified that I threw myself at him. Not being able to make eye contact with him I rose up from the sofa ready to escape his awkward pad. “I’m sorry. Max, I-”

“Please don’t,” I interrupted. “I’m going home.” Here I was yet again in a situation where I wasn’t good enough for a man. I took my leather bag and walked out of his apartment and made my way to the subway pondering what was wrong with me that I wasn’t desirable to men.

I grabbed my Metro Card and hopped on the D train. I walked inside the packed vehicle and tried to decide where to sit: next to the drunken man who seemed as if he hadn’t bathed in years, the young semi-famous couple who was recording a vlog on YouTube about their first time in New York, or a man dressed in mostly red who had a tattoo

of a tear near his eye. As the train began to move, I grabbed onto the pole, choosing to stand by myself.

On my way home I thought of Smith denying me. I guess it wasn't too surprising since he knew too much. Did I really have room to judge him when he was aware I was a sidechick for years?

By the time I got home it was already midnight. "How are you?" Carmela asked once I unlocked the door. I took a step back, not expecting anybody to be waiting for me to get home. It reminded me of how Mama used to wait up whenever I was out late.

Carmela flipped the switch to the lamp on and got up from the couch.

"I'm okay, I guess," I replied in a sigh as I dropped my keys in the woven basket by the door. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier today, Carmela. I don't mean to be rude to you or Rudy or anyone. It's not you all who I'm mad at. It's this whole...situation. I just wanna forget about it all," I replied. The last thing I needed was to push my loved ones away, the people who I knew would always have my back.

"You're going through a tough time. And I can't imagine how you're feeling since I never loss a child. But know that Rudy, I, and the rest of our family are going to be there for you every step of the way."

"Thanks," I responded. Carmela kissed my forehead before I went to my bedroom. I turned the lights on. To my surprise, every baby furniture and gifts were gone. Though I still had my bed, desk, and closet, the room felt

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empty. I dropped my bag onto the floor and glanced around. Milo was really gone.

“Oh, come on, Kurt,” I started, as I leaned over the bar. “I’ve been nothing but loyal to Franco’s and I still can’t get my job back?” I asked the manager. Since I quit working at the salon, I needed money. The salon was a constant reminder of Milo since I was pregnant while working there.

“Sorry, Max, we’re not hiring. Besides, you should have thought about that when you decided to quit without telling us,” he added, carrying a tray of dirty dishes over to the sink in the back.

“Fine, I’m better than this place anyways!” I exclaimed, as a few of the employees and customers turned to look at me. I rolled my eyes before leaving the restaurant. The last thing I was going to do was beg.

“Max, hold up!” I heard Larissa say when I was practically out the door. I stopped and waited for her to catch up with me. I crossed my arms, in hopes she wouldn’t lecture me about getting counseling. “I’m sorry,” Larissa started. “As your friend, I shouldn’t have kept pushing you about dealing with the accident. Instead, I should’ve just been there and respected your feelings. Forgive me?”

“Yeah,” I responded, giving her a hug. “Sorry for pushing you away when all you were trying to do was be a good friend. Just gotta figure this out my way.” We had been friends for too long for me to hold a grudge over something

like this. “So, can you believe they won’t let me work here again?”

“That sucks, but you’re so much better than waiting tables, Max. You’re an amazing singer and there’s always school-”

“I’m not going back to school, Larissa. I tried it before and it didn’t work. And music is just for fun.”

“You were going through the loss of your mom. Come on, Max, you’re smart. I know you can - Sorry,” she said, stopping mid-sentence. “I’m doing it again. It’s your life and I’m gonna support whatever you wanna do. Legal things, of course,” she added before we both giggled.

“It’s okay, Larissa. I know you’re just looking out for me. Anyways, Nurse Larissa, you got a year left, right?”

“Yup. Then the NCLEX. I’m thinking about working as a nurse in the ER or ICU for at least a year or two before I decide if I wanna go to grad school.”

“And enough time to see what’s going on between you and Ru, huh?” I teased. “Wow. You really do like him,” I said, after seeing her grin.

“Yeah, I do. At first we were just having fun but since the accident things changed. He says he doesn’t wanna keep hooking up with all these women. He says he wants something real like his parent’s relationship. I’m not sure if I should give him a chance after all the talk about him being a player, but...I don’t know. Has he ever dated black women?”

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“Ru’s never had a serious girlfriend but he’s entertained all races,” I replied trying to be objective as possible. I loved Ru like a brother, but I didn’t want him getting involved with my best friend knowing he was just going to play games with her heart. I hoped that he would treat her with respect and only have eyes for her.

“Okay. Anyways, what’s good with you and Smith?” she questioned. “Max!” she exclaimed after I sighed. “Give me the tea.”

“We went out to a block party in his neighborhood,” I began replaying the date we had a week ago.

“Awe!”

“And I almost gave it up to him.”

“Oh?”

“But then he gave me the whole let’s be friends speech.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I haven’t talked to him since-”

“Larissa!” Kurt called out from the front door. “If you don’t wanna be unemployed like ya friend, you better get back to serving these customers!” Larissa and I both rolled our eyes.

“Okay, I’m coming!” Larissa responded. “Gotta go. We’ll catch up soon,” she added before we said goodbye.

September 2017

I removed the microphone from its stand as I made my way from the mini stage, around the white covered tables filled with people sitting around them. I walked over to the grand piano and leaned against it as I watched Mario waltz with his bride. Mario finally moved out his mother's basement and was marrying his lady.

Though "At Last" by Etta James was a short song, I sang it a little longer, to prolong the first dance for the married couple. Almost all of the employees at the garage and their families were at the Four Seasons in The City. I was gratified that I was able to get back to doing something I was actually good at. It felt so freeing to be back on stage. It had been over a year since I last sung in front of an audience.

Once I finished I said, "Let's give it up to the married couple." As the cheers died down I glanced over to the DJ who started to play the soundtrack to Celine Dion's "I'm Your Lady".

As I belted the tune, I tried not to think about my birthday tomorrow and the anniversary of Mama's death in several days. This was going to mark my first birthday without her and because of that I was in no mood to celebrate my special day. It was hard to swallow that she had been away from us for almost a year.

The audience clapped once I finished singing. Mario and his wife hugged me before I took a bow. As elated as I usually was after performing, I felt nothing. I was lonely. It was like I was never gonna be happy. My heart was ripped

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out of my chest with Mama gone. At first I didn't want to become a mother, however, that changed overtime.

Now that Milo was also gone, I was lost. A part of me felt I had nothing to live for especially since I kept losing everyone I loved with all I had in me. Including Tommy. I tried to ignore him with his family who were taking pictures from the corner of my eyes as I placed the microphone back on its stand. As I got off the stage, I subtly made my way outside. I couldn't take looking around at families anymore.

As soon as I made it outdoors to the humid night, I placed my back against the building's wall and leaned forward as my heart raced as I thought of the conversation I had earlier with the cops about the accident.

*"Are you sure you don't remember anything?"
Officer Ricci asked me.*

"Yes I'm sure!" I exclaimed as if I wouldn't say if I recalled what happened the night of the accident. I wanted to know what low life would hit a car to the point of total destruction and not even pause to see if the passengers were okay.

"Look, you getting upset isn't going to help us solve this crime," Officer Ricci replied, looking up from his pad where he was jotting notes down. Rudy and Carmela came along with me to the police station to answer questions pertaining to the accident.

"Can you blame her?" Carmela said, coming to my defense. "She loss her child because some lunatic driver hit her and my son and drove away not giving a damn. We're not asking you to bring her son back, Officer. All we're

asking for you to do is to find out who did this. We deserve to know that much."

"I understand, but we have to do things by the book," he replied...

I tried to control my emotions by repressing the memory, in hopes my panic attack would go away. Once the rate of my heart dropped, I stood up and took one last deep breath.

I heard footsteps approach me. I glanced over and saw it was Tommy. I got away from the wall, ready to go back inside. I wasn't in the mood to hear Tommy tell me how much he reviled me.

"I forgot how beautiful ya voice is," Tommy said, walking closer to me. I nodded, as I quickly looked at him. He looked handsome in his three-piece suit. I began to go back inside, just as he said, "I even forgot how beautiful you are, Max." I stopped walking.

"Don't say that to me," I replied in a lower voice.

"Why not? It's true," he said smirking.

"In case you forgot, your wife and kids are inside. So go be with them," I snapped, turning to him.

"What if I want to be with you right now?" he asked, walking closer to me. I did not desire to play these games with him. For so long he had been saying how much he wasn't into me and now he was practically saying he missed me?

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“I’m going back inside.”

“Max, I just wanna talk to you,” he said, jumping in front of me.

“We have nothing to talk about,” I replied, with my arms crossed.

“Really?” he questioned, placing his familiar hands over my stomach. Our eyes met once I felt his touch. “We made a baby together,” he whispered, staring at me. I tried not to let my pain show on my face. Rather, I searched into his eyes to see if he was hurting too. I pushed his hand away when I wasn’t able to read him.

“The baby is gone. So there’s nothing left to talk about.”

“If you love me, you would talk to me.”

“If I love you?” I asked, backing away from him. “All I ever did was love you! That’s why I never told Dina anything. That’s why I let people think I was some whore who didn’t know who the father was to protect you. And I never asked you to acknowledge the baby or even pay for any of the expenses!” I finished, over Tommy questioning my love for him. “I just want you to be happy, Tommy. Why can’t you see that?”

“I can now. You’ve been so loyal to me even though I haven’t. I’m sorry.” Tommy reached over and pulled me in for a kiss. I knew I should’ve pushed him away, but I didn’t. Out of habit I returned the affection. It had been so long since I was desired by any man. “I got keys to a hotel

room,” he started, slipping a card into my hand. “Meet me there in a few minutes.”

Thirty minutes later, I sighed, as I zipped up my BCBG stretch tiered hem dress before sitting down on the bed. As I began to place my quiet black lizard-embossed patent leather Jimmy Choo pumps back on, I tried to figure out why I let myself get so stupid around Tommy again. It wasn’t like anything would change. He was still going to stay with his wife and I would never be his priority.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately with ya birthday around the corner,” he started. I sighed refusing to relive that weekend we celebrated my birthday at the Jersey Shore when I found out my mother passed away. “It feels so good to be with you again. And it drives me wild when I see my name on your body.” Tommy said referring to my tattoo of his name. “You intoxicate me, Max,” he mumbled with his hand on my upper leg and lips on my shoulders. He gave me a kiss on my neck, as I crossed my arms. As he continued on, I thought of Smith. Of how I wanted to be with him rather than Tommy. And how I wished I hadn’t made a fool of myself by throwing myself at him. If only I could go back to before that night at Smith’s home.

I wondered if I was falling for Smith. I couldn’t be- I mean I didn’t want to. But then again, this was the first time I was with Tommy and all I could think about was Smith. It was to the point that I would rather just talk or be in the same vicinity with Smith than continue my affair with Tommy.

“Tommy,” I started.

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“Yeah?” he questioned, with his hand on my zipper, wanting to repeat what we did a couple of minutes ago.

“You love me?”

“Of course I do. Even though you put on some weight,” he replied. I shoved his hand away from my zipper, slighted by his statement. I knew I was about twenty pounds heavier than I was before I got pregnant. I didn’t need someone reminding me of how fat I felt. It wasn’t like I was going to Mickey D’s everyday asking the cashier to supersize my meal. I was working hard to get back in shape.

“I’m leaving,” I said, getting up.

“Awe, come on, Max. I didn’t call you fat-”

“You might as well have!”

“So what? You’re a little pudgier. I actually don’t mind you being heavier, just as long as you don’t gain more weight.” I rolled my eyes before I left, slamming the door shut.

“Louie!” I called, seeing him across the hallway of the hotel, trying to forget about Tommy’s insult.

“Great song out there,” Louie began, greeting me with a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks....Did you find anything else?”

“About the accident?”

“Yeah. I overheard Rudy and Carmela saying that the cops can’t find who was responsible for the hit and run.” Though I wasn’t going to discuss the crash, I still wanted to find the culprit that had the guts to kill my baby and run. Since the police couldn’t solve the case, I asked the one guy I knew who could somehow find out information that the law enforcement couldn’t: Louie aka Shifty Louie aka the guy who seemed to be in the mafia.

“You think they know something? Like there’s a crooked cop who’s not talking?” Louie asked.

“I don’t know. It’s New York. There’s bound to be some witness that saw the license plate of who hit us-”

“Then *again it’s New York*, where people do get away with committing crimes.” The hotel room opened and out walked Tommy putting his tie back on. Tommy gave us a smile as he passed us by. I blushed a little bit, hoping Louie hadn’t caught on to the fact that I just gave it up to Tommy.

Louie came closer to me, placed both of his hands on my head, and leaned his head against mine. “You are sleeping with your enemy,” he whispered in my ear. “He’s doing anything he can do to distract you. Be wise, Max. You’re too old to be this naïve.”

“What?” I said, not wanting to believe Louie’s conclusion.

“The baby was a problem and he fixed it. Think about it,” he ended, letting me go.

*****Chapter 7*****

September 2017

“Are you sure you want to work here again?” Rudy asked from the register at the front of the garage. “I mean you can always give school another go. And there’s your music-”

“I’m sure this is where I wanna be,” I responded leaning on the countertop.

“Well, okay. It’s been years since you worked here, so if you forgot how to do something or have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“That silver Nissan Rogue over there needs an oil change. Why don’t you start there?” Agreeing I pulled my hair up into a low ponytail. Just yesterday I started wearing my hair straight and added weave to it. “By the way, I’m leaving a little earlier to pick up Ru. I think Tommy should still be here if you have any questions.”

“I hope Ru gets better,” I said, feeling guilty about the night of the accident. He was still using his crutches.

“He will.”

“I wish I never asked him to pick me up.”

“Sweetheart, it’s not your fault. He broke his bone, but your baby died.”

“He sure did,” I mumbled, glaring at Tommy who was working on a 2007 Chevrolet. “I’m gonna go work on the car. Tell Ru I said hi,” I added, giving Rudy a kiss on his cheek.

I gathered my supplies for the oil change as I waited for Rudy to leave. Once I saw him drive off, I dropped the oil filter wrench. I walked over to Tommy and placed my hands on his back as I kissed his posterior neck. “Baby, I miss you.”

“What are ya doing?” he asked, pushing me off.

“What does it look like? Just being ya girl- I mean mistress,” I corrected, smirking at him.

“I told you not at work. You wanna work here, you can’t have me.”

“Right,” I replied, as I shut the hood of the Chevrolet before taking a seat on top of the car. “Cause that whole ultimatum between being with you or working here still matters.”

“It does. So if you wanna be with me, quit. If not stop trying to get in my pants-”

“You know, I thought about you’re little ultimatum and to be honest with ya, the terms and conditions kinda suck,” I started, leaning my back against the car, while I supported my weight with my arms. “So, here are the new rules. I’m gonna keep working here, and I get to have you.” I happily watched Tommy squirm. He frowned as the veins in his neck popped out.

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“If you work here, people are gonna find out about us,” he said through his teeth in anger. “Even my wife.”

“I’d be lying to you if I said I cared if people found out.” Tommy reached over the hood and snatched my arm. I tripped as he pugnaciously dragged me off the car. He forcefully gripped my arm. I tried to shake the fright that passed me by.

“I swear on my father’s grave if my wife or kids find out I’ll-”

“You’ll what? Make me pay?” I snarled back at him. I glared into his hateful beady eyes trying to come to terms that he was behind the accident. “Well go ahead. Do it. I don’t care anymore.” I yanked my arm away from him. He stared at me in frustration as I went on to do the oil change.

I pulled out my pocket mirror to verify my fresh blow-dried hair was looking right. Seeing that my MAC make-up was also on point along with my matching French manicure and pedicure, I finally rang the doorbell. I placed my hands on my hip as I nervously waited for him to open the door. I chose a simple maroon Calvin Klein romper with a simple pair of beige Balenciaga ankle boots.

“Hey, come on in,” Smith said welcoming me in. “It’s good to see you,” he added with a smile.

“Same,” I replied, trying to figure out how I should feel about Smith, especially since it was the first time

we talked since our date. He closed the door after I stepped inside.

“I was gonna call, but I wanted to give you space.” he spoke gazing into my eyes with sincerity. I took a step back, realizing how close we were. Being this near made me want to kiss him.

“Umm...maybe space was a good thing,” I replied in a cracked voice. I cleared my throat as I blushed. I sat down on the couch. Smith remained standing with his hands folded over his head. He wore a plain black shirt and grey sweats.

“How’ve you been, Max?” he asked, staying where he was.

“Okay. You?”

“A little stressed,” he started, coming closer. He sat on top of the sofa’s arm on the opposite side where I was sitting. “Getting ready for the LSATS,” he added, picking up one of the three prep books from the coffee table.

“When are you taking the exam?”

“Before January. I gotta make sure I apply to law school on time. I don’t wanna waste another year.”

“Don’t stress. I’m sure you’ll do fine,” I responded winking at him. “So, if I ever need legal advice I’ll know who to ask.”

“And if I need someone to sing me to sleep, or fix my ride, or cook for me- am I missing anything?” he asked

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with a grin. I blushed once again as I folded my hands on top of my lap. “Anyways, we should talk about what happened the last time we were together.”

“The *let’s just be friend’s* talk. What every girl wants to hear,” I replied, not looking forward to him telling me about my flaws.

“That’s not what this is. You are beautiful inside and out and I like you. But in this season we’re better off as friends. You’ve been through a lot of trauma including losing your mom and son in a short period of time, and I don’t think you’re healed from it. I’m gonna be there for you as a friend but that’s all I can be. If we try to pursue a relationship without you coping with it that can cause toxicity between us, and I don’t want that.”

I glanced away from him trying not to be offended by his words knowing there was truth to what he was saying. Tommy and I’s relationship was as poisonous as they came. I didn’t know how to be in a healthy relationship. “I still want us to be friends.” He offered me an awkward smile. I nodded my head agreeing with his choice.

October 2017

Trapped in the closet. That's where I was, trying to quietly zip up my little black dress. I quickly put my phone on silent mode as I ran through the layout of the house once more.

Backdoor leads to the kitchen. Straight ahead is the living room and family room and to the left is the half bathroom. Upstairs to the right is the bedroom and to the left is the master bedroom connected to a full bathroom.

Once I memorized the blueprint, I pressed my ear against the door to tune into the couple's conversation.

"You still didn't answer my question, Tommy. What are you doing home from work?" Dina asked.

"I...I wasn't feeling well," Tommy lied.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't wanna worry you." I peeked through the cracks of the closet's door to see their reactions. Dina had her hands on her hips while Tommy folded his arms across his chest.

"Well, what's wrong? Do you have a fever? You're sweating," Dina said reaching over to touch Tommy's forehead.

"Yeah. Nothing a little sleep can't fix," he replied, subtly pulling away, enough so his wife couldn't smell my Chanel^o 5 on him.

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“Let, me stay home to take care of you, baby.”

“No!”

“Why not, Tommy? I’m sure my job won’t mind-”

“You can’t, Dina. You just got this job. And besides, you always said you were tired of being a housewife and wanted to work, and now that you got ya chance ya gotta stick it out.”

“You’re right, Tommy. I’ll go back to work and I’ll see you and the kids later,” Dina replied, giving in.

“I’d kiss you, but I’m sick,” Tommy said, before, Dina could try to. After Dina walked out the door, Tommy glanced out the window to see her leaving. He backed away and sat on the bed. He placed his hands over his head before staring at the closet. “You can come out.” I walked out and looked down at a remorseful Tommy. “My wife almost caught us.”

“I know,” I finally said.

“No, I don’t think ya know. My wife almost caught us! Me cheating on her. Damn... Imagine if it was my little girls who saw me. I just can’t do this anymore,” he said, throwing his arms in the air, as he got up. “I told you it was a bad idea to come back here, Max.”

“You’re right. We can’t keep doing this,” I responded, thankful that the plan was going way better than expected. I looked down to the floor and folded my hands behind my back to appear more convincing. I needed to look

like I actually cared that his wife almost caught him and me in bed. “Our affair ends today. So you don’t have to keep deceiving your family,” I calmly added, knowing they wouldn’t be happy for long after I was finished with Tommy.

“Just like that, Max? Last year when we broke up, you begged me to stay with you and now you could care less?”

“It’s not like that,” I responded crossing my arms.

“Then what is it? Ya don’t love me anymore?” I rolled my eyes, in disbelief. Here Tommy was, trying to spin us breaking up on me.

“I do,” I reluctantly replied. I couldn’t say I love you to Tommy. It was hard enough to just say the words “I do”. It wasn’t that I didn’t love him. I did. I also hated him. I couldn’t even stand the sight of him. It took a whole lot to sleep with him, knowing what he did to my baby. But I knew I had to in order for my plot to flourish.

“Then what’s the difference between last year and now?”

“Everything. Tommy, I’m not the same person I was last year. Back then, I would have done anything to be with you, even though I knew you had a wife. But this year things are different. I can’t keep going on pretending that you’re not married or that I’ll ever be anything more to you than just your mistress.”

“You don’t sound like a kid anymore.”

Laura F. Murphy

“I know. Anyways, this is goodbye,” I lied, walking away from Tommy. As I left, I contemplated whether I should pursue my plan or not. It would’ve been so much easier if there weren’t children involved or if Tommy’s wife wasn’t so nice. And the last thing I wanted to do was hurt her or their innocent children.

I went back and forth between proceeding with my plan to avenge Milo or to let it go. At times, I wanted to forget about Tommy and go on with my life. Moving in with my best friend was one of those times I wanted to press forward.

It had been so long since I had my own place to call home. Okay, so the last time I had my own place wasn’t exactly an apartment or house, but hey, the hotel was still home for at least a couple of months. Now I was actually moving into a two-bedroom apartment with Larissa.

“Thanks, again for helping us move,” I said, unpacking the kitchen utensils Larissa and I just got from Target.

“Yeah, thanks guys,” Larissa piped in, beside me, as she began to put the brand new dishes away.

“No problem, Shnookums,” Ru replied, placing a box of Larissa’s stuff down. Thankfully, Ru was better. He was no longer using crutches, and besides an occasional limp, he was stronger.

He gave her a kiss, before wrapping his arms around her. “You wanna hit the clubs tonight after the sorority charity event you gotta go to?”

“I thought we were gonna come back here and do take out and watch that new documentary about social injustices on Netflix after volunteering.” Though Larissa was more into watching and reading more serious subjects, Ru didn’t care about reading books and preferred action and comedy genres.

“Baby, I got some new Jordans and a shirt to match and I need somewhere to get all this energy out-”

“You can get your energy out helping at the youth basketball game for the underserved community and if you’re looking for more ways to release all that energy I have some ideas,” Larissa flirtatiously told him.

“Netflix and chill, huh?” he replied in a grin before they kissed. “I like that idea. Love you.”

“I love you too, boo boo,” she responded. I turned away from their conversation. I was happy for them, but I was over their honeymoon phase.

“What’s got you so quiet?” Smith asked, approaching me. Though we agreed to not date, we were still friends.

“Nothing,” I began. “Anyways, thanks again for helping me move.”

“No problem.”

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“Why don’t I treat you to dinner? My way of saying thanks,” I quickly added to not make it sound like I was asking him out.

“To McDonald’s?”

“Do you want me to treat you there?”

“Well, I was thinking that we’ve progressed passed going to Mickey D’s in our friendship, to maybe Red Lobster or something...” he responded in a grin, as his right eyebrow rose higher than his left one. I smiled back.

“Or, I can make some food for you.”

By the time I began to cook, Larissa and Ru were gone. Now it was just Smith and I alone, and I was cooking for him. I swiftly sliced tomatoes, basil, parsley, oregano, onions, mushrooms, and red and green peppers for the tomato sauce that I was making from scratch. I chose to keep the meal simple so he didn’t think I was trying too hard.

“So you said your mother taught you how to cook right?” he asked, leaning against the countertop by where I was.

“Yup. I swear my ma started teaching me right around the same time I started preschool. I was a tomboy growing up and she was cool with that, but she made sure I knew my way around the kitchen in between me playing ball with the boys and working at Rudy’s garage,” I told him thinking about the times spent in the kitchen with Mama. There were many conversations that took place there between her and me, from the talk about the birds and bees to her telling me she had cancer.

“You must’ve gotten all A’s in home ec.”

“No. Actually, my home ec teachers hated me,” I replied, throwing the diced seasoning into a blender along with tomato plums. “They always got mad ‘cause I refused to use measuring cups. Even though I cooked the best, they knocked points off my grade ‘cause I didn’t follow directions. So one day my home ec teacher calls my ma into the office claiming I refused to use a measuring cup and therefore threatened to fail me,” I replied after using the blender.

“How’d she reply?”

“Oh she was pissed. The conversation started off with my teacher saying how I needed to learn how to follow directions to my mama lecturing my home ec teacher how the use of measuring tools sucked the authenticity out of real cooking,” I said chuckling at my teenage memory. “But that was Mama for ya. She always had my back,” I added, stirring the pasta.

“She’s sounds like an amazing woman. Just like you,” Smith said, as our eyes met. My heart beat faster as we just stared at each other without saying anything. I was unable to look away from his intense eyes. “You should probably turn the heat off, before the pasta burns,” he said reaching across to turn off the stove. I stood still as his body gently brushed against mine on his way to turn it off. Once it was no longer on, he stepped away from me.

“That’s all you’re going to eat?” Smith asked, looking at my plate once we settled on the new Ikea table for four.

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“Yeah,” I responded, glancing down at my extra small portion. I usually ate more than this, especially if it was home cooked food, but I was trying hard to lose the pregnancy weight, and besides, I didn’t want to eat a lot of food in front of Smith like I did back when we went to McDonald’s.

“My little cousin who’s four doesn’t even eat that little.”

“That’s probably ‘cause he’s not big-”

“You think you’re big?”

“Yeah, I do. Have you seen these love handles?” I asked, placing my hands on my hips.

“White people call them love handles. Black people call them curves,” he corrected. “Max, for real, you look good. Got curves in all the right places,” he added, checking me out. I blushed as I let out a light laugh.

“Thanks for the compliment. At least one guy thinks I’m not pudgier.”

“Who said you’re pudgier?”

“My ex.”

“Well your ex is a jerk who never deserved you,” he replied, before taking a huge sip of water. It felt good to have a friend who made me feel pretty, unlike Tommy who was quick to hurl insults my way.

“You’re right, I got a little curvier, big deal,” I said, going over to the pot to get more food. We continued to chat as we finished our meal.

“Your pasta and meat sauce are really good, but I have to go get ready-”

“For your race?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you made enough to quit,” I said, as we both got up from the table. I grabbed both of our plates and placed them in the sink.

“Well, kind of,” he replied, putting on his auburn colored leather jacket.

“What do you mean kind of?” I asked, upset he was still putting his life on the line every time he decided to speed with his motorcycle.

“It’s...complicated. I would tell you but-never mind. It’s no big deal,” he said sounding uneasy. I stopped myself from continuing to interrogate him. After all, I was just his friend, not his girl so I had no right to be all up in his business.

“Okay. I didn’t mean to be nosey.”

“I know you’re concerned ‘cause you care, Max,” he said, putting on his biker gloves.

“Yeah,” I said, coming closer to him. “Please be safe.”

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“Sure,” he replied in a grin. As we hugged, I held on tight, not sure if this was the last time I’d see him. I quickly prayed that God would keep him unharmed. Before he let me go, he kissed me on my forehead. “I’ll call you when I’m done.”

I flipped through the channels of the TV, not paying attention as I anticipated hearing from him. Maybe there was something interesting on, but I wasn’t able to concentrate on anything. What if he got caught by the cops? Or, worse, what if he didn’t make it through the race in one piece? Then he wouldn’t be able to compete at all. Maybe that would be a good thing so he wouldn’t keep putting his life on the line. But of course, I never wanted him to get seriously hurt. Just enough to stop him from racing, but not enough where he was gravely injured.

“I said what’s your name?” my Tinder date called out trying to compete with Drake, Wizkid and Kyla’s “One Dance” that was blaring from the DJ booth.

“No names,” I replied giving him a coy look before I turned around and dropped my body low in front of him. He dipped down to my level and wrapped his hands around my waist as we continued to dance to the beat. Once the song changed over to French Montana and Mariah Carey’s “Unforgettable” he spun me around so we were face to face.

“What are the chances that the hottest chick in the club is coming home with me?” he asked in my ear sounding a bit inebriated.

“Let me see,” I replied, grabbing his collar and pulling him in for a smooch, ignoring the fact that I was too tipsy to know if he was attractive or not. I kissed him harder trying to block Smith out of my mind. Even with the wine and champagne Smith was dead center in my thoughts. He never phoned me last night like he said he would. Normally I wouldn’t care if a friend didn’t call me back.

I pushed the stranger off me reminiscing how Smith thought I was too broken to be in a relationship. This was my reality: the guy I was crushing on didn’t return the same feelings. So I had no right to be mad that he didn’t call me back. I was acting like his girlfriend.

“Something wrong?” the stranger asked.

“Nope. Just waiting for you to come home with me,” I responded giving him another drunken smile. Hey, if I was single, I was gonna be single. Screw love.

“Well?” I asked arms folded across my robe, eyeing the man I apparently went to bed with last night. I tapped my foot as I impatiently waited for him to say something. Rather than tell me what I needed to hear, he took his sweet time to button up his shirt.

“Well what?” he finally said.

“Did you use protection?” I asked him slowly in a sarcastic tone.

“I don’t know,” he responded in the same tone. “What’s the big deal? It was just one time.”

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“It was just one time? It only takes one time to get pregnant, to get an STD!” I yelled, feeling my hangover headache even more.

“You’re not gonna get an STD, sweetheart-”

“Don’t call me sweetheart!”

“Fine. But like I said again, you’re not gonna get an STD. I’m clean.”

“ ‘Cause you recently got checked?” I sarcastically retorted.

“As a matter of fact I did. And everything came back negative,” he convincingly told me with a grin. “*Sweetheart*,” he added. I wanted to believe him, but didn’t. Not when he was a random guy I knew nothing about. He could be a pathological liar for all I knew.

“Lei l’imbecille-”

“If you weren’t throwing back shots last night, maybe you would’ve known what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter if I was throwing back shots ‘cause I’m a grown woman!” I snapped getting annoyed by the guest in my bedroom. I didn’t care that he was kind of cute. He wasn’t my type and I was more concerned about the consequences of our actions.

“Shut up!” he retorted.

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, I said shut up. I’m the one who should be mad. Even though I told you my name a whole bunch of times, you kept calling me Smith. And if that wasn’t bad enough you have a tattoo of some guy named “Tommy” on your tush.” I glared at him for a second before responding. I couldn’t even get my mind off Smith in a drunken state and then there was that damn tattoo of my ex’s name that I unfortunately got when I was twenty-one for him for his birthday; I made a mental note to either cover up his name or get it removed with laser sessions.

“Get out.”

“What?”

“GET OUT!” I screamed, throwing my arms in the air before leading him out the door. He gave me a dirty look before leaving the apartment.

Once he left, I placed my hands on my head, as I paced the small kitchen, trying to figure out how I ended up with a stranger in my bed that left me with a possibility of STDs’. Who knew what he had? I quickly made a mental note to get checked at the clinic ASAP.

Though I was worried about catching something, I was more worried about the likelihood of another pregnancy. Ever since I got knocked up, I made sure Tommy wrapped it up. Flashes of the accident flooded through my mind. In frustration, I ran my hands across the stovetop, causing the pot of pasta I cooked the afternoon before to fly before splattering all over the ground.

“Max!” Larissa exclaimed, coming into the kitchen from the front door. “Honey, are you okay? You

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look pale,” she noted, approaching me, trying not to step on the sauced-painted floor. “Maybe you should sit down. I don’t want you to faint-”

“Larissa, I don’t need you diagnosing me!” I barked. Larissa stood quietly. I looked over to her, waiting to see a pissed off look on her face for me talking to her like that. Instead, I saw a concerned friend who realized I was going through some issues. “Sorry,” I mumbled. I grabbed a paper towel before kneeling over. Larissa silently, joined me on the floor, helping to clean up my mess. Once the floor was spotless, I began to mop as Larissa washed the dishes. “I slept with someone last night,” I finally spoke, as I stopped mopping.

“Who? Tommy?”

“No. We’ve been really cautious-”

“You’ve still been sleeping with him even after the pregnancy? He is still very married, Max!”

“I know! What the hell is wrong with me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe your way of dealing with things isn’t working. You need to get help. I know I said I’d back off but you’re self-destructing. Sorry. I just don’t want you hurting anymore. Was it Smith?”

“No,” I replied sighing. “I don’t even know his name. Last night I went clubbing in The City and my Tinder date and I both drank a little too much. I woke up this morning not only with a headache, but with a stranger in my bed. He doesn’t know if he used protection-”

“This happened last night?”

“Yeah. Why is that a good thing?” I asked, as I saw Larissa smile.

“Because you are not gonna get pregnant,” she excitedly announced.

“What? How do you know?” I asked, wondering if she knew something about my cycle that I didn’t.

“Because, you still have time to get the morning after pill.”

“You’re right! I’ve seen commercials about it on TV. Doesn’t it have to be between seventy-two hours or something?” I asked, getting just as pumped about the resolution as she was.

“Yup! So grab your jacket and let’s go get it.”

“Thanks, Larissa,” I said, in a thankful smile.

“Hey, paying attention in OB class was well worth it.” We laughed as I made my way to my room to change.

As I walked I thought about what Larissa said. Maybe she was right. I needed to face the trauma I had been through. It was time I dealt with it. I felt my pulse rise as I thought about the next step in avenging Milo.

*****Chapter 8*****

November 2017

Sanity versus delirium. The line between the two was starting to become blurry as days passed by. It didn't help that I was on a reckless path of revenge.

Breaking into Tommy's house made me feel even more maniacal. Though I didn't like feeling as if I was losing my cool, it was the state of mind I needed to have in order to justify my current course of action, especially when there were children involved.

I ignored the angel on my shoulder as I walked into Tommy's bedroom. Before coming I made sure that Tommy and his wife were at work and their children were at school. I walked a little closer to his bed and reached into my tote bag. Once I found my lingerie, I squirted some Chanel N° 5 on it. I yanked the comforter off the perfectly made bed. Before placing the lingerie on the floor, underneath the bed, I tugged a few strands from my hair off, and positioned them messily across the pillow on Dina's side.

I fixed the bed a little less neat than before and sprayed a tad bit of perfume across the sheets. I grabbed a cheap hoop earring from my pocket that I was sure Dina had seen me wearing before. I tucked it underneath the throw pillow on the bed, pulling it out a little so Dina couldn't miss the earring.

Once I finished sabotaging the bedroom, a picture of Tommy, Dina, and their daughters posing in front of the same Jersey Shore house we went to the weekend my mom

died, on the wall, caught my attention. As I gawked at it I wondered how long until my plans blew up in Tommy's face. Since Tommy decided it was justified to take away the only biological family I knew, I plotted to expose our affair to his loved ones.

I didn't care that my tactic was going to uncover me as a mistress. I wanted Tommy to suffer like I have been. Unlike he who was blessed to see his daughters daily, I was never going to get to hold our son. Nor feed him, or change his diaper. There was no hearing him say "mama" or seeing him walk for the first time.

"Where's Milo?" I asked in a hoarse voice. I was still a bit sore from the accident and emergency C-section, but I still longed to meet my son. Despite the terrifying accident and horrible fight with Tommy, I at least had two things to be thankful for this night. One, Ru had survived and two, I was meeting Milo sooner than expected.

With tear-filled eyes, Carmela turned to Rudy, looking at him, for strength. Rudy glanced back at her. He opened his mouth then closed it.

"Where's my baby?" I asked louder afraid of his answer. Carmela covered her mouth as she cried.

"Max, I'm so sorry," Rudy struggled to say as he reached out for my hand.

"No. NOOO! Don't say it!" I yelled, refusing to take his hand. As my heart cleaved into a million of pieces I pulled off the IV I had in both arms and yanked away the nasal cannula from my nose.

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“Max, where are you going?” Rudy said, trying to keep me in the bed.

“I’m going to see my baby!” I shrieked at him as I tried to fight his grip off me.

“You can’t. He didn’t make it. Your son is dead.”

Enraged with the memory of losing Milo, I swung my fist across the family portrait. As the glass from the frame broke into pieces on the floor, I marched over to the corner of the bed and jerked the floor lamp from the wall. I smashed it against the bureau, as the memory of losing Milo replayed in my head. I kept swinging the lamp. I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop; I’d do anything to numb the pain. However, the more I annihilated the bedroom, the more rattled I got and the more I wanted it to be Tommy on the receiving end of the lamp.

“You’re beautiful, Max. I wanted to kiss you since I first saw you a year ago. But you were underage and your brother Rudy...”

“Well I’m eighteen and Rudy is miles away,” I quickly replied, hoping Tommy wouldn’t change his mind about kissing me.

“Ugh!” I growled flinging the demolished lamp on the floor, after my mind went back to the first time Tommy and I began our affair. Ignoring my bleeding hand, I ran down the stairs, trying to escape the room, trying to run away from the past. Attempting to catch my breath, I stopped by the kitchen, and rested my bloody hands on the countertop. I closed my eyes, in hopes of keeping my panic attack under control.

“I’m so sorry, Max. She’s gone,” Rudy cried over the phone. My heart dropped along with my cell phone. I stood still as my body went numb. Cold wind rushed through my body as the room began to spin. Tommy kept calling my name, trying to figure out what bad news Rudy told me. He spoke loud in concern, but I couldn’t hear him. All I heard was the words of Rudy replay over and over in my head: She’s gone. She’s gone. She’s gone. SHE’S GONE!

Tommy came up to me and touched my shoulder as he said, “I’m sorry.”

“THE HELL WITH YOU, TOMMY!” I screamed as I shoved him off of me. “I HATE YOU,” I cried...

I pushed my hair away from my face with my shaking hands. I wanted to scream, anything to get the thought of the night Mama died out of my mind. I needed to get rid of all of these memories of the past. Impulsively, I grabbed the keys to Tommy’s BMW that I saw on the table out of the corner of my eye.

I waltzed out of his house, with mascara running down my cheek. I knew I looked crazy walking out of my ex’s house, with blood covering my hands, and with his keys, but I didn’t care. I was done with it all. I couldn’t take it anymore and there was only one way I knew out.

I found myself driving his ride to an abandoned suburban area in Brooklyn. I turned off the engine and liberally dispersed some gasoline on the passenger seat. I admired the skull on the metallic lighter as I flickered the flame on and off. I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned the chair back before placing my feet on the dashboard. I rested a Cuban Cigar between my lips before lighting it up.

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I chuckled as I leaned my head back on the leather headrest. I wasn't sure how most people felt before ending their lives, but I felt relieved. I didn't have to deal with all of this pain. I wondered why I hadn't thought of leaving this earth sooner. And of course if I chose to quit living, I was going to do it in a bang wearing my favorite red bottom Louboutin combat boots while smoking a Cuban in my ex's car that I planned to set on fire.

Once I finished my smoke, I took a deep breath, trying to ignore the repercussions of my actions. I didn't desire to put my loved ones through that, but I was already too far gone. I shook the feeling away as I opened the glove department and grabbed the car's registration papers. Without hesitation, I dangled the piece of paper above the flames from the lighter.

The sane side of me told me to stop. But the devil on my shoulder yelled for me to finish the plan with being able to escape my problems and the added bonus of having my death on Tommy's hands. When the paper passionately engaged with the fire, I dropped the blazing document onto the seat of the passenger's side of the floor.

I closed my eyes, waiting for my demise. Would there be light, or was I going straight to hell? I knew enough from Bible school that suicide was a sin. Feeling the searing flames, I tried to remain calm, and not have a panic attack before the end. My heart beat faster and faster in the scorching hot car. I began to breathe more rapidly. I opened my eyes to find the fire was coming closer to me.

Sanity had my mind racing, trying to rationalize with me, reasons why I should leave the car. There was Rudy and Carmela, Ru, Larissa and Smith. And Mama. Even

though she was dead, I knew the worst way I could hurt her was by killing myself. “Jesus,” I called out in a whisper hoping the Good Lord could save me from myself. I didn’t know what else to say. I wasn’t praying like I used to when Mama was alive and it seemed like the more bad things kept happening to me the further I pulled away from God. All I wanted was peace and trying to harm myself was not bringing me any tranquility I thought it would; if anything I felt more lost and wretched.

Just as the torrid flames brushed against my skin, I saw blue and red lights flashing in the rearview mirror. All of a sudden it hit me; I wanted to live. I didn’t want to die.

As my heart tried to escape from my chest, I yanked my ski mask over my face. I shoved the door of the car open with all of my strength. Once I was out, I ran. For months I thought nothing mattered, but now it was as if everything did. If I didn’t sprint quickly, I could lose the thing I valued the most. I picked up the pace, wondering why I hadn’t joined the cross country or track team in high school. Though a smile formed on my face for a bit from this revelation, it quickly disappeared. This was no time for jokes. This was my life. My life was on the line.

I raced through the familiar city, dodging some of the sprawled over trash on the streets of Brooklyn. After hopping over a steel can of garbage I cut left to a street corner. Even though I knew there were people behind me, I blocked it all out. All I could think about was Sinach’s song “Way Maker”. I sang it in my head, while my pounding heart played the beat to the tune. Pondering the lyrics I felt God’s presence. There was light in the darkness and all I had to do was go to God to find it.

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“STOP RUNNING!” the cop screamed at me. That I heard. The music ceased. Stupid me glanced back and panicked. The cop who was chasing me had a gun pointing at my head. “Take one more step and I’ll shoot!” he threatened as he edged closer to me. By then, I brought my running to a halt. “Put your hands in the air, Kid.” I slowly raised my hands. I peeked at the opposite direction of the police to where I could try to escape. No such luck. It was a lanky fence. I knew I could scale the gate, but I wasn’t dumb. He was almost at arm’s length away from me. I didn’t have a chance of making it. Then again, I loved my freedom and I couldn’t be free in jail...

The cop came up to me, and quickly shoved my hands down and into handcuffs. I sighed in defeat. He yanked off my ski mask, allowing my straightened hair to fall to my shoulders.

“Abbracciavento? Rudy’s little sister?”

“The one and only,” I responded, recognizing he was one of the cops who was investigating the hit and run I was involved in.

“What the hell are you doing stealing Tommy Lucca’s car and setting it on fire?”

“I know my rights. No lawyer, no confession. Besides, maybe I was jogging to get some fresh air,” I retorted, angry that he wasn’t able to prove that Tommy was behind the fatal collision.

“Right. And that’s why you were wearing a ski mask, huh,” he sarcastically replied.

“The more layers you wear, the more calories you burn -”

“Don’t get smart! You should be lucky ya ain’t dead. If it was some other cop, you’d already be for resisting arrest.” By the time he said this, his partner pulled their cop car in front of us. Grabbing my arm, he read me my rights before pushing me into the back of the NYPD vehicle.

After a silent drive home from the police station, Rudy, Carmela, and I walked into their living room. Instead of taking me to my home, once they bailed me out, after I spent the night in the slammer, they brought me here. I was still shaken up about what just happened.

I almost committed suicide. There was no more making excuses. I was a wreck and my way of trying to deal with the cards life dealt me only led me to hate myself...to hate who I had become. One thing for sure was I didn’t want to keep dragging my adopted family into my shambles. It hurt even more knowing that they were still willing to support me even though we weren’t biologically related.

“Thanks for bailing me out,” I finally spoke ready to nurse my wounds by my lonesome. “I’ll pay you both back. I’m...I’m gonna go.”

“Where are you going?” Carmela asked.

“Home.”

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“That’s not a good idea. I think it’s best if you stay here for a while.” I folded my arms, trying not to feel the sense of disappointment that they felt towards me.

“I want to talk to Max alone,” Rudy said looking straight at me. Seeing the frustration in his eyes I turned away from him knowing I let him down.

“Fine. I’ll be in the other room if you need me,” she responded before leaving.

“Sit down,” Rudy said to me.

“I’m good with standing-”

“I said sit down,” he demanded. I rolled my eyes before plopping on the couch. I folded my arms and crossed my legs, awaiting a dreadful lecture from him. “For months I respected your choice to not talk about the crash thinking you would try to get help on your own. But boy was I wrong. I turn my back and you go and break into and trash Tommy’s home. Oh and since that wasn’t enough, you steal his car and set it on fire. What the hell were you thinking, Max?”

“Lei non capisce,” I mumbled.

“You’re right, I don’t understand! You don’t think I know about you and Tommy? How could I have been so blind?” Rudy added, throwing his arms in the air. “Right under my nose too.” My heart skipped a beat that he was aware. I shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, now everyone in Bensonhurst was going to know about the affair.

“That’s not tru-”

“That’s not what? True? Don’t you sit there and lie to my face like you’ve been doing for years.” As he paced in front of me, he placed his hands on his head. “That low life,” he cursed underneath his breath. “Did Tommy force you to do anything you didn’t want to do?”

“No. I wanted to be with him.”

“Even though he was a married man.”

“Yeah, even though he was a married man. Rudy, I loved him. It wasn’t a casual fling. We had a six year relationship. We made a baby together,” I added trying not to cry.

“So you loving him was worth trashing your life?”

“Guess so,” I sarcastically replied. Is that what he thought of me? A loser who had no purpose in life?

“You guess so? You know what. I’m sick and tired of your attitude.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m a grown woman!” I yelled angry that I was being spoken to like a child.

“Then act like it! You want respect. Earn it. Do something with your life. Go to school. If you think getting Tommy back for choosing to stay with his wife rather than be with you is going to make you happy, you’re wrong. You need to focus on bettering yourself, but that’s not gonna happen if you keep avoiding your problems with losing Milo, the son who you thought you were going to raise to be a man. Instead of coping with losing him, you walk around, pretending he didn’t exist-”

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“No!” I snapped jumping onto my feet in frustration. I could take him saying anything to me, but not him indirectly telling me that I didn’t love my son. “I can’t talk about him!”

“Why not?”

“Because it makes it real! There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about Milo and what could’ve been. He should be learning how to crawl and starting to eat his first solid foods. Milo should be here with me right now. Not six feet under,” I cried out in fury.

“I know you’re upset,” Rudy began in a much softer tone.

“No, you don’t know, Rudy. You’ve never been through this,” I responded, looking at him. “My son is gone. HE’S DEAD! There’s no coming back from death. It’s not as if I can go to sleep, wake up from this nightmare and go hold him in my arms!” He glanced back with sorrowful eyes. “When I finally get what I’ve been praying for all of my life, it just gets taken away from me.”

“You’ve always wanted a baby?”

“More like family.”

“Why is it that whenever it’s convenient, we’re your family, but whenever you get upset, or things don’t go your way, you don’t have family, as if just because you were adopted we would forget you in your time of need?”

“Sorry if I ever made you or anyone else feel that way. I know you guys love me,” I replied, drying my tears. I

folded my arms as I thought about what he said. He was right. They had been nothing but good to me, as if I was their blood relative. “What I meant was I always wanted to know where I come from. If not that, I’ve at least wanted to have someone who shared my DNA. I know it’s silly,” I said, leaning against the couch as I sighed.

“It’s not silly.”

“I actually tried to look for my birth parents a couple of years ago.”

“How’d that go?”

“Remember I’d ask Mama but she’d always stonewall me. I have had the Ancestry DNA kit in my Amazon shopping cart for years, but every time I go to purchase it, I stop myself.” Now that Ma is gone I can’t bring myself to buying it.”

“Hmm... well if you decided to go through with it, be careful. Something’s are better left alone.”

“Why would you say that? Do you know something about my biological parents?”

“When you’ve asked me that in the past, what’ve I said?”

“That you didn’t know.”

“That’s your answer. Anyways, it’s getting late and we’re all tired, so let’s call it a night,” he ended, coming close to me, and giving me a kiss on my forehead. “I love you, Max.”

Laura F. Murphy

“I love you too, Rudy,” I responded curious if he knew more about my birth parents than he was willing to admit. I rummaged through my mind to try to remember where I placed the address of my biological mother that Louie gave me years ago. It was time I faced my natural mom.

*****Chapter 9*****

March 2018

I leaned my head against the leather chaise and tapped my freshly black painted nails against the furniture. After a few more moments of silence, I sighed and crossed my arms.

“What’s on your mind today?” Dr. Lavano asked.

“You ever get tired of asking me that, Doc?” I questioned my shrink as I glanced around his office. On his wall were his undergrad degree from NYU and his graduate degree from The University of Florida. I wondered if I was ever going to go back to school. It had been four months since I lost my mind. Four months since I set Tommy’s car on fire. Four months since I came close to ending my life...

I almost killed myself. If I went through with my fatal plan, I wouldn’t have been there to support Rudy when he had a heart attack about two months ago. And Smith...He and I wouldn’t be as close as we were now.

As the reality of this hit me, my breaths became shallower and I felt palpitations. I leaned forward and closed my eyes hoping to calm my nerves.

“So you’re having a panic attack right now,” Dr. Lavano stated. What did it look like I was doing? Practicing to give birth or something?

After he handed me a brown paper bag I took it from him and began to breathe in and out of it. After a few minutes passed by, I settled it down on my lap. “What was

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going through your mind right before you just had that panic attack?" he asked, leaning forward.

"How much I'm dying for a slice of Lombardi's pizza," I joked.

"Seriously?" he asked, not believing me.

"Sure. I really want a slice but I'm on a diet. The thought of the amount of calories just pushed me over the edge. But you know what, screw the diet I'll just eat the pizza. After all, I only live once."

"Right," Dr. Lavarò began, shutting his notebook. "Our time is up for today. We'll pick up where we left off next week. And remember right after your panic attacks, write down what was going on in your thoughts along with what happened right before these attacks happen," he ended as I stood up.

In relief I walked out of his office. I rode down the elevators in excitement. Smith and I were planning to catch up after my session today. We communicated a lot over the phone and hung out once a week.

My feelings for him grew deeper however we kept our friendship platonic. At times I was grateful for us setting boundaries. Other times I dreamed of us being a couple. Intentionally I put a little more effort into my appearance whenever we decided to link up. Today was no different. I wore my natural curly hair down. I had on a simple scoop neck, thin strapped white tank top underneath a sleeveless and halter black vest and black skinny jeans with black Dolce Vita leather laced up boots.

“Let’s go to Lombardi’s!” I hollered as soon as I saw Smith on the sidewalk in The City.

“Hi to you too, Max. How have I been doing? Well, I’ve been doing well,” he joked about me not greeting him.

“We’ll exchange how our days been on our way to Lombardi’s,” I added, grabbing his arm as we began to walk fast, in order to keep up with the pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. We ordered the regular two supreme slices each and Coke on the side.

“So, how was therapy,” he asked on our way to our usual table. Through the months, Lombardi’s became our hang out spot whenever we wanted to grab a bite to eat. I shrugged my shoulders as I poured the Italian seasoning, crushed peppers and Parmesan cheese onto my slices.

I hated talking about therapy. It made me feel crazy. Then again maybe I was a little nuts. I was grateful that no one got hurt and that the Lucca family decided not to press charges. In exchange, I had to stay away from Tommy and his loved ones. I agreed, not having a problem with the request. Rudy and Tommy came to the conclusion that it was best for him to quit working at the garage.

Did I still think Tommy was behind the hit and run that killed my baby? Honestly, I didn’t know. If he was, I was over trying to pay him back. After all, that only got me close to ending my life and a weekly appointment with this damn shrink who enjoyed asking me “and how does that make you feel” along with “go on”.

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The one good thing that came out of this was my family and friends thought I was no longer crazy. Or at least they thought I was a little less insane.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, fine. Just know, I’m here to listen if you do,” Smith said. I nodded my head as I took a huge bite of pizza. I stuffed my face, with what had to be the best slice in this city.

“Oh I forgot to tell you, I finally went to my first appointment to get *you know whose name* off my body. I donno why I got it in the first place,” I started off.

“It’s good you’re moving on with your life. How did it go?”

“Painful. But worth it. Never again will I get a tat of some dude’s name. Lesson learned.”

“Growth,” Smith agreed giving me a high five.

“So, Mr. Nasha, how was your date last night? Which app did you meet this new girl?”

“Match. It was...I donno. I mean she’s cute and all but can’t hold a conversation. You know lights are on-”

“But no one’s home,” we said in unison before giggling.

“We met up at Junior’s. I had to carry the entire conversation. She would only talk if I asked her questions. She goes to order a chicken salad and that was my cheat day so I’m all over the broiled seafood combo. And then *Little Miss I Can’t Talk* just keeps making comments about how

much I just ate and how many calories and carbs and fats in the meal.”

“What? Who is she to judge you? You keep your body in tip top shape. Your biceps, six pack and calves,” I said nonchalantly.

“You checking me out when I’m not looking?” he teased. Jokingly I stuck my tongue at him.

“Anyways, how did the rest of your date go?”

“So after I kill the meal I go for some cheesecake. I ask her if she wants some and she says no.”

“Wait, she says no?” I asked in disbelief. Smith and I had a love affair with cheesecakes.

“She says no and starts staring at me as I eat it. She then pulls out her phone only to show me the nutritional information on my meal. So I order another slice,” he ended as we giggled.

“Wow. Which kind did you get?”

“Original first one and second order was strawberry shortcake cheesecake. Speaking of which,” he began pulling out a brown bag from his belongings. “I got you two slices, a strawberry and red velvet.”

“No way!” I exclaimed accepting the edible gifts. “I love you,” I impulsively said. Realizing the truth slipped out my cheeks reddened. “Sorry. I- I didn’t mean to say that. I meant the cheesecake. I love the cheesecake,” I rambled in

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an attempt to save face. Rather than respond, he grinned before finishing off his slice.

After our dinner we strolled towards the sidewalk with small talk. As I walked near him, I thought of us being one. Him and I. Smith and Max. He was all I wanted, yet I was too scared to tell him.

Once we reached the front steps of Rudy's home, he took hold of my hands.

"I care about you a lot. I keep going out with other women and all I can think about is you. I want you to be my girl."

"Yeah?" I replied with a goofy smile. "You and me together. I know you were hesitant about us getting involved. What's different now?"

"You. I see your efforts of trying to heal. I know you're still working on yourself and if this isn't a good time for us I respect that," he replied. Rather than say anything, I closed my eyes and leaned in to kiss his soft lips that I had been yearning to smooch on for the longest time. This time, it was even better than the first one we shared months ago in his apartment. "Is that a yes?"

"Mmm hmm," I replied as my heart melted.

We both smiled at each other while I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. After saying goodbye, I giddily went inside.

I skipped all the way to the kitchen as I sang Mary J Blige's "Be Without You".

“What’s got you in such a good mood?” Carmela asked, as she continued to cook tuna pomodoro.

“I got a boyfriend,” I sang, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek. She smiled as she tossed the chopped up crushed red peppers and anchovies to the olive oil ready skillet that already had diced up garlic in it. The carbonara, beside the skillet, was almost finished.

“Oooh, tell me everything! Is he Italian?” she asked.

“No, he’s not Italian,” I responded.

“Well is he cute?”

“Handsome is more like it. Tall, beautiful brown skin, dreads, soulful eyes, ‘stache like Burt Reynolds and wicked smile. And he’s starting law school this upcoming fall.”

“Are you talking about Smith?” After I nodded my head she said, “Are you ready to date again?”

“I think so. I mean Tommy and I have been over for a while and there is no part of me that wants anything to do with him. And I’m in therapy.”

“Well okay. I’ve seen Smith in passing but never had the chance to chat with him. So when does the family get to properly meet him?” I let out a laugh before walking into the living room. There was no way I was going to introduce Smith to my flamboyant family until I was sure we were serious. “That wasn’t supposed to be funny!” Carmela called out to me as I walked out to the living room.

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“Go, go! GO!” Ru screamed at the TV, as he jumped up from the couch. The baseball team member was on his way to home base.

“Way to go Yankees!” Rudy exclaimed at the TV after the player slid into home base. Rudy stood up and slapped Ru’s hands in happiness.

“Alright! The Yankees are up,” I said, looking over to the scoreboard. I didn’t keep up with baseball as much as I did back in high school, however, I would watch parts of games every once in a while.

“Hey, sweetheart, how ya doing?” Rudy asked, giving me a hug.

“Good,” I replied keeping my arms around him. “How’s the diet going?” I asked, patting his oversized belly.

“Good. Carmela’s been making sure I’m eating healthy.”

“And at work? Not sneaking any cannoli or biscotti, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Ru answered. “I got the boys at the garage watching him so he doesn’t. And me and Pops have been hitting the gym. If he sticks with me, in no time he’ll be the biggest stud in Bensonhurst,” Ru proclaimed as he playfully punched his belly. Just as I let go of Rudy, he blocked Ru’s next round of punches and pulled him into a headlock.

“Pops, ya gonna ruin the hair!” Ru exclaimed, as he flailed his arms, trying to get out of the hold.

“You shouldn’t have been throwing punches than,” Rudy joked before letting him go. Ru rushed to the mirror to make sure his gelled up hair was still up and pretty. I laughed before I made my way to my old bedroom. It was good to see that things were slowly getting back to normal.

As soon as I got inside, I closed the door. I loved my family; however my reason for visiting them was to get a document that I haven’t seen in years. I opened the drawer next to me and pulled out the file that Louie gave me years ago. I looked at the Monmouth County address that was listed on the sheet.

While I took a seat on the chair, I slid my hand over the power button on the computer and ran my finger across the name that was also on the page. “Carlotta Jones, it’s about time I found you,” I mumbled saying my biological mother’s name out loud. Once the computer finally loaded, I went online and Google searched her. To my surprise she was an emergency room physician. She was also on Facebook however her profile was on private. Going back to Google I inquired more information about her. She was old enough to have given birth to me. As I saved her work address to my Google map on my phone, I pondered if she gave me up in order to pursue her career. I sighed as I glanced down at the photo I printed out of her, as I tried to figure out how I would introduce myself to her and if she was open to us having a relationship.

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I intensely glanced out the window. My feelings raced from excitement to nervousness, to pure anger. I was eager that I was finally going to meet my mother. I wanted to know everything from what kind of a person she was to what she liked to do for fun. I was curious to find out what she and I had in common. Did she like to sing like me? Was she good at fixing cars? Did she know how to throw down in the kitchen? Did she also have horrible luck when it came to relationships like me? Was she aware about my father's whereabouts?

I was also nervous. What if she didn't want to meet me? That thought irritated me. After all, I wasn't asking her for money or anything like that.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Smith asked, bringing me away from my thoughts. Smith picked me up earlier in the morning in his Toyota Camry. We were both sitting in the parking lot at Monmouth Medical Center hospital. We were able to figure out her work schedule.

"I'm old. There's no more putting it off," I responded, still looking out the window.

"Babe, you're only twenty-six. That's not old. If you're old, what am I? A senior citizen?" Smith joked. I grinned as I turned to look at my thirty years old boyfriend. That's right, my boyfriend. This man wasn't ashamed to call me his girl and was proud to have me by his side in public.

“I care about you,” I told him. I unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed on top of his lap. He wrapped his arms around me as I rested mine on his broad shoulders.

“I care about you too. I love you, Max,” he responded. My heart skipped a beat when I heard this. I knew he loved me and I loved him too.

“When did you realize you felt that way?”

“Maybe a month ago.”

“Even though I have a lot going on?”

“Yeah. That’s the weird part about it. That’s kinda what made me like you. You were always honest with me, despite me being a stranger. I mean, you told me about your whole situation with your ex and the baby among other things. I even saw past your fetish of hands-”

“Oh whatever, Smith!” I exclaimed as we both laughed. I lifted my head and placed my hands against his freshly shaven cheeks. “Where do you see us in five years? If you even see us.”

“I do see us together in five years. Definitely more in love with each other. Hopefully married. Successful careers. Me a sought out attorney and you being successful as a musician, chef, or mechanic or whatever else-”

“Or I can be successful in all three. Who says I can’t have it all?” I asked, letting go of his face.

“You can have it all. I believe in you,” he said, before kissing me. I loved the sound of what he wanted the

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future to be like with me in it. I wasn't sure if I wanted to get married, but I was sure I wanted to be with him.

The only part I didn't like was about his vision of my future. It sounded so frivolous. As much as I loved singing, I didn't want to become famous because I valued my privacy. I wouldn't have minded opening a restaurant, however I didn't have the money for it, and I was sure that I didn't want to work at Rudy's garage for the rest of my life.

“Anything else you see in our future?”

“Yeah. Living in a penthouse or condo in The City or a nice home upstate and maybe someday we can have a little Max and Nasha running around.” I pulled away from Smith. Don't get me wrong, I was excited about becoming a mother when I was pregnant, however I didn't- no I couldn't go through losing another baby. I would rather just live without kids then have to go through that hell again. “What's wrong?”

“I don't know if I want kids anymore.”

“Oh,” Smith replied in disappointment.

“I mean maybe in the future, but now...,” I replied sighing. Smith nodded his head, as he looked out the window. “I hope that's not a deal breaker.”

“Isn't that her?” he asked, rather than answer me. I glanced out the window of the driver's seat. Indeed it was Carlotta Jones getting out of a Mercedes Benz.

“It is,” I replied as I looked from the person to the picture of her that I found from the internet and printed out. I

squinted to see what she looked like in person. From my distance, I could tell that we at least had the same colored hair. I got off his lap and sat back in my seat.

“How are you going to introduce yourself to her?”

“Easy,” I replied. I braced myself before punching the dashboard on the passenger side.

“Why would you do that?” Smith asked.

“This is my- my way of meeting her. She is a doctor,” I replied cradling my slightly painful fist as I got out of the car.

“You could’a just said hello to her. You don’t have to act crazy.” I shook my head as I stared him down. You’d think he’d be a little bit more sensitive about using the “c” word now that I was seeing a shrink.

“So you think I’m crazy,” I said through my teeth in a low voice.

“No. I didn’t say you were-”

“Yes you did! Or maybe I’m just hearing things since that’s what happens to people like me.”

“I said stop acting crazy. I never said you were crazy,” he replied, trying to clarify.

Hastily, I slammed my right arm against the window of the passenger side of the car. The glass shattered downwards from the impact. “Guess that wouldn’t have

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happened if I wasn't crazy," I retorted, as a sudden sharp pain radiated from my hand to my wrist.

"Max, you okay?" Smith asked hopping out of the car. I ignored him and walked away. I didn't like how he was making me feel like I was truly losing my marbles.

"Hey! Honey, why don't you come in so we can take a look at that hand," someone said, jogging to catch up to me. I realized that it was my birth mother. She too had brown eyes. She had natural hair in long twists and was a few shades darker than me. I was a bit taller than her.

"Don't act like you care."

"I do. I'm a doctor-" she replied in concern.

"I know who you are, *Dr. Jones*," I snapped in frustration, as the pain became unbearable in my knuckles.

"I'm just trying to help you out. There's no need for the attitude."

"It's a little too late for you to try to help me out," I continued, as I got livid by the second at this woman who had enough compassion to aid others, yet not enough for her own daughter.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, appearing confused.

"Oh, I apologize for not introducing myself. I'm Maximiliana Abbracciavento. Your daughter. You know the one you gave up over twenty years ago so you could pursuit

your dream of becoming a physician.” Carlotta’s mouth dropped a bit. She shook her head as she took a step back.

“I am not your mother. You can’t be my daughter-

“Why? ‘Cause it’s not convenient for you?” I questioned, feeling even more upset that she wouldn’t even claim me now.

“That’s not why.”

“Then why? Are you trying to tell me that you didn’t have a kid adopted?”

“I did. But it was an open adoption. So I was able to see my biological daughter at least once a year, even now that she is twenty-six.” Hearing this, my heart dropped. After all of these years, right when I thought I found my mother, I just hit a brick wall.

I walked away cradling my hand, feeling more muddled than ever. Who was I and where did I come from? “Look, I’m sorry,” she called out to me. I kept it moving as I wiped the tears from coming.

I rested my arms down on my lap. Glancing at the clock at the wall I blew out air. I still had forty minutes left before the end of the session.

I attempted not to think about how I acted towards the lady I thought was my biological mother. I made a fool out of myself, trying to get her attention when she wasn’t even the right person. I didn’t want to think about how

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pissed off I was at Shifty Louie for giving me false information. I wondered if he did it on purpose to try to *protect me* or if he really thought that was the name of my mother. Regardless, I was planning to confront him. I just wanted to wait, because if I did it anytime soon, I knew I'd cuss him out. Out of frustration I finally clicked the Ancestry DNA kit from Amazon and planned to use it to find out more answers. My ma, God rest her soul, hopefully could forgive me.

Then there was Smith. The best guy a girl could ever ask for yet we hadn't spoken in a few days after the quarrel in the parking lot. I missed talking to him, his hugs, his kisses.... I even missed one conversation we had about the future. I wondered if we even had a future-

Fighting for air, I began to over breathe as my heart raced. Dr. Lavarro handed me a paper bag without saying anything. I thankfully took the bag and began to breathe in and out of it. "Why don't you share with me what was going through your mind right before your panic attack," he suggested. I shook my head no as I placed the bag down feeling more at ease. "You've been quiet since you got here. Really, what's on your mind?" Dr. Lavarro asked, looking up from his notepad. I shrugged my shoulders, noticing that his short grayish black hair was parted to the side. He wore his rectangular glasses above his fairly large nose. He had on a simple buttoned down light blue shirt along with khaki slacks and black shoes. "I see your hand and wrist is splinted. What happened?"

"A car," I replied, holding up my cast used to protect and heal my boxer fracture.

"A car accident?"

“I don’t know if I would call it an accident,” I replied, remembering my rage from the other day.

“Are you saying that you intentionally tried to hurt yourself?” After observing his concern I realized something: he thought I was attempting to kill myself.

“I’m not suicidal, Doc.”

“A few months ago you were in a burning car. A car that you set on fire that you barely escaped-”

“Allegedly,” I cut in. “If you did your research you’d know that I was simply borrowing my ex’s car with his consent, and I accidentally dropped my lighter on the car seat. That’s why the car set on fire,” I lied the same lie that was used as a cover up to the cops.

Rudy and Tommy had an agreement. Though Rudy fired Tommy, he would pay him until he found another job as long as he and his wife went along with the lie. I also had to stay away from his family.

“Mmm hmm,” he said, jotting some notes down. “Sometimes denial is a way people cope with dealing with the truth-”

“I know what denial is. It’s a defense mechanism. It helps people avoid their painful feelings or events that took place in their lives that they don’t want to admit.”

“You took psychology?”

“I may not have finished college, but I paid attention in class. Trust me, Doc, I think I know the

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difference between lying and denial,” I added. If anything, the defense mechanism I was displaying was acting out, as evidence by all that I did that dreadful night. I knew that I was lying about setting Tommy’s car on fire. I knew I intentionally did it and that I was planning to...to kill myself. My heart beat a little faster. It was still a hard pill to swallow, knowing that I almost ended my life.

“So you know that people can lie and be in denial at the same time?” I smirked at the man who thought he knew it all. “I just want you to know that as long as you don’t tell me that you intend to hurt yourself or anybody else, what is said here is confidential,” Dr. Lavano reminded me. “I’m going to write you a prescription for Xanax. Take it three times a day as needed for anxiety. Don’t take it with alcohol and don’t drive after taking it,” he said as he scribbled on a prescription pad.

“Got it,” I replied, getting up from the couch and accepting the prescription. Tucking the piece of paper in my knock off Gucci bag, I wondered if I was so unstable mentally that I needed meds.

I tripped over the doorstep once I got outside. There was Smith listening to music on his AirPods.

“You okay?” he asked, grabbing hold of my arm, helping me up from the floor.

“Yeah.” Once he let go of me, I brushed off the small pebbles from my hands from the fall. “I wasn’t expecting to see you,” I admitted.

“I promised you I’d come after each one of your therapy sessions,” he replied, taking off his headphones. He

slipped his phone in his denim pocket before he stepped closer to me. A warm fuzzy feeling passed over me as I gazed into his giving brown eyes. We embraced each other. He held me tight against him.

“I’m sorry,” we both said at the same time.

“I shouldn’t have called you crazy the other day. For that word to even come out of my mouth when I was talking to you was dumb of me,” he apologized.

“And I’m sorry for making you so uncomfortable the other day and embarrassing you. And your car. Bring it to the garage and I’ll pay to fix it... You’re right by the way. I should’ve just said hello. I got a fracture for some random lady who isn’t my bio mom.”

“You’ll find the truth one way or the other about your origin.” I nodded my head and placed it against his chest as I smiled, grateful he wasn’t breaking up with me.

“Let’s not ever fight again.”

“How about we promise never to let the sun go down, being angry at each other.”

“Okay. I love you,” I whispered, feeling his heart beat against my ear.

“I love you too, Max,” he replied. I took a deep breath as he continued to hold me tight.

*****Chapter 10*****

July 2018

“Don’t ya’ll ever get tired of eating pasta?” Smith asked with a grin.

“Nope,” Ru replied from the couch where he and Smith were playing NBA Live on the Xbox One that Ru brought over to our apartment.

“Is that a serious question? Pasta runs through our veins,” I replied from the kitchen. Larissa and I were making angel hair pasta mixed with veggies and chicken wings. I sautéed the mushrooms, garlic, and peppers. “Hey, Larissa, can you grab the cheeses from the refrigerator?” I asked as I continued to dice up more tomatoes in the pan. Larissa took charge of making jerk and barbeque chicken wings as I handled the pasta.

“Which ones?”

“The parm, mozz, Romano, asiago, and prov,” I replied.

“Why am I not surprised you have nicknames for cheeses,” Larissa joked, retrieving them from the refrigerator. I smirked back at her before going over to Smith. I wrapped my arms around him, from behind.

“If you don’t want the pasta, I can make you something else. Risotto sound good?”

“I’ll eat whatever you make.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he replied, as he continued to press on the buttons on the controller. I kissed his cheek and let him go.

“Yo, Max, I don’t mind if you make some risotto along with everything else,” Ru stated.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” I teased.

Smith pushed his chair back from the table after we all finished eating. “Man, I’m stuffed,” Smith announced. “That food was good. Thanks.”

“No room for dessert?” I asked, disappointed.

“Sorry. But I enjoyed every bite of the food,” he replied leaning in for a kiss.

“Well too bad ‘cause ya missing out on the best torta di mele in Bensonhurst,” I replied, pulling away from him.

“You got it from Bobby the Baker?” Ru asked as his eyes lit up.

“Yup!” I exclaimed hopping up from my chair. I went over to the refrigerator and yanked out the apple cake.

“*Torta di* what?” Larissa asked.

“*Torta di mele*. It’s moist apple cake,” Ru responded.

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“Remember when we were kids we used to run away with a bunch of samples from the bakery whenever Bobby the Baker wasn’t looking?” Ru spoke as he and Larissa made their way to the countertop.

“Like those mini cannoli with the sprinkles that he used to make and those biscotti!” I said, laughing as I grabbed a knife to cut the dessert. “Baby, you sure you don’t want any?” I asked Smith, taking a piece over to him. I sat down on his lap and wrapped my cake-free arm around his shoulder. He ran his hands against my back and opened his mouth, allowing me to feed him. He laughed when I playfully pulled the food away from him. I giggled when he reached over and managed to take a bite. “Taste good?”

“Mm hmm,” he replied with a smile on his face. I tucked my hair behind my ear before I kissed his soft lips.

“Get a room, you two,” Ru said.

“I would, but I actually have to go,” Smith replied, pulling away from me.

“Stay,” I pleaded.

“Can’t.” I got off his lap and crossed my arms. “I... gotta take care of something. I’ll call you when I’m done.” He got up and kissed me on my forehead and said bye to Ru and Larissa before leaving. I followed him and closed the door behind us.

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

“Out, babe. I told you I’ll call you when I get home,” he responded, as he scratched the back of his head

while looking away from me. I glared at him, reading his body language as guilty. Here he was already keeping secrets from me. I had enough of that with Tommy.

“That’s not good enough.”

“Come on, Max. I’m not cheating on you.”

“I didn’t say you were. Smith, I’m your girlfriend. I get to know these things.” He sighed and leaned against the wall. “If we’re gonna be together, we have to be honest with each other. Tommy I were not and look where that got me-”

“I’m not Tommy. But you’re right. We gotta be honest with each other. “I uh...,” he started. “I blew most of the money I saved for law school on a race I had a couple of months ago-“

“Smith! I thought you were gonna stop racing after you made enough money for your tuition.”

“That was the plan but the guy who runs the races said I’d surely win a couple of months ago since most of the bikers were inexperienced. So I bet a lot on it. I was in lead most of the time ‘til this dude came out of nowhere and passed me the last few seconds.”

“How much did you bet?”

“Fifteen grand. I’ll win it all back though. So far I won about five grand back.”

“I don’t want you to keep racing. You worked so hard to get into law school. If the cops find out you might not be able to go at all. Besides you could get killed or

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something,” I responded, upset at his dangerous habit. I loss way too many people I loved, and I wasn’t going to stand around and lose another one.

“If law school doesn’t want to keep me, than I was never meant to be a lawyer. And don’t be dramatic. I’m not gonna die,” he recklessly replied.

“Non sono il drammatico. Lei è l’un essere ridicolo. Non voglio che lei correndo perché l’amo. Perché lei non può vedere ciò?” I spat out in Italian in outrage, telling him that I wasn’t being dramatic, but he was being ridiculous, and telling him why he couldn’t see that I didn’t want him racing since I loved him. “What?” I demanded placing my hands on my hips after I saw him grinning at me as his right eyebrow rose higher than the other.

“I don’t know what you just said, but that was sexy as hell.” Smith grasped my hips and pushed me against the wall. Before I could object, he grabbed my face and kissed me. As our lips met, I completely forgot that I was mad at him.

“I promise I’ll be safe,” he said after our passionate kiss. I nodded my head like a fool, feeling flushed all over.

“Max.” Larissa called out as she knocked on my door. “Max,” Larissa said a little louder. I rubbed my eyes as I turned on the lamp from my bed stand. Though I planned to wait for Smith before going to bed, I fell asleep around midnight watching a rerun of General Hospital on Hulu. I blamed my ma for getting me into soaps.

“Come in,” I replied tossing my iPad I used to watch the show beside me. I glanced at my alarm clock. It was two in the morning. Larissa walked into the room with a worried look on her face.

“Smith’s in the hospital.”

“What!” I exclaimed yanking the covers off me. I hopped out of bed as my heart raced. I threw off my silk bonnet and ran to my closet and grabbed my Juicy Couture velour jacket. “What happened?” I asked quickly trying to tame my curls with Cantu coconut cream and a brush.

“My friend Keisha who works in the ER told me she saw them wheel Smith into the hospital. I called you as soon as I found out.”

“Ugh,” I complained, breathing heavily as I incompetently struggled to find flat shoes to wear. Apparently, most of the shoes I owned, other than my work shoes were at least a couple of inches tall. The few boots I had that were flats I let Carmela borrow.

“He’s gonna be okay,” Larissa said trying to reassure me. I nodded my head as I grabbed the closest jeans and shoes I could find: my skinny jeans and my black Cosmic leather Jimmy Choo pumps. I internally scolded myself for even wasting a second trying to find flats when Smith was lying in the hospital bed.

“Can you come with me?”

“Of course. Finish getting ready while I call Ru,” she replied untwisting her hair as she went to her room to change. As soon as she left, I opened my drawer and grabbed

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my bottle of Xanax. Not wanting Larissa or anybody to know my shrink put me on meds, I quickly twisted the bottle open and popped a few pills in my mouth before hiding it underneath my pink tank-top. I was skeptical about taking them, but if it was going to prevent me from having a panic attack when Smith needed me the most, I was for it.

On the way there, all I could think about was how much Smith meant to me. I loved him and I didn't know what I would do without him. I felt safe with him and truly cared for, especially since he didn't treat me like a second choice. He also never made me feel as if I was inferior because of the texture of my hair or the tone of my skin like Tommy had. He always encouraged me to embrace my natural hair and didn't care if my skin got darker.

Who would love me like he did? Take me as I was, with all of my flaws, without holding them against me? Despite my imperfections he still only had eyes for me.

As soon we reached our destination, I pushed the car door of Ru's Nissan Altima and rushed inside the hospital.

"I'm looking for my boyfriend. His name is Nasha Smith," I told the secretary of the emergency room.

"Oh..." the lady replied before going to the charting system on the computer "He's in room three." I nodded my head as I pulled off my leather gloves from my sweaty hands. In just a few minutes, I'd be able to see the love of my life.

By the time she led us to where Smith was through the busy waiting room and into the back of the ER,

Larissa and Ru were by my side. The security guard withdrew the curtains. Smith was lying in the bed with his eyes closed. He had a nasal cannula in his nose with 2 liters of oxygen and an IV in his arm that had normal saline going in.

My heart broke, seeing his cuts and bruises on the right side of his face.

“Baby!” I exclaimed, reaching over and placing my hands on his wounded face.

“Max,” he said, opening his eyes. I wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. I buried my head against his neck as I cried.

“I’m okay-” Smith started comforting me by running his hand up and down my back.

“If you were okay, you would not be lying in a hospital bed,” I interrupted, pulling my head away from him.

“The doc says I only fractured a couple of ribs. That’s it,” he said trying to reassure me.

“A couple of ribs! Do you hear yourself? You could’ve died tonight.”

“Max, I’m gonna be okay.”

“For real. Relax, my boy’s gonna be alright,” Ru piped in as he and Smith slapped each other’s hands in agreement. Larissa and I glanced at each other, happy that our boyfriends got along. “What happened?”

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“I was driving back home, and this car nicked the back of my bike. It flipped over and I fell off to the side of the road. I’m alive, but my motorcycle is wrecked.”

“Dang, bro! Living the fast life. I wanna get back to riding my bike-”

“Really, Ru?” Larissa began. “Do you not see Smith lying on this hospital bed?”

“Ya always sucking the fun out of life,” Ru replied, crossing his arms.

“You’re gonna regret you said that,” Larissa snapped, giving him a dirty look.

“My bad. I didn’t mean it like that. You know I love you, girl,” Ru said, placing his arms around her before giving her a kiss as Larissa rolled her eyes.

“The final verdict is that you are going to be okay. Other than a couple of fractured ribs, you’re fine. The CT scan of your brain and cervical spine are normal. It may take a few weeks for you to start to feel better. Remember to take a couple of deep breaths throughout the day and do not splint your ribs to prevent pneumonia. I’ll also prescribe you some Flexeril for pain,” the doctor announced coming into the room. “Your nurse will give them to you along with discharge instructions.” I sighed in relief thankful that he was not seriously hurt. I secretly wished that his accident would be enough for him to quit racing. I don’t think I could handle Smith being in the hospital again.

“God is good,” Larissa stated, raising her left arm in the air. “I’m happy you’re gonna be okay, Smith.”

“I agree,” I spoke grateful that God protected him from greater harm.

“Thanks, Larissa,” Smith replied. He turned to me and held onto my hand. “I told you I’d be fine. Love you,” he added giving my hand a squeeze.

After I screwed the lugs on the wheel to the 2003 Nissan Versa, I made sure the wheel fit flush against the brake hub. I sighed as I lowered the jack before removing it from the car. I was still tired from being at the hospital the previous night. Smith was starting to feel the pain from the accident. I planned to bring him some food after work.

I was still employed at Rudy’s garage. I didn’t know what I wanted to do career wise, but in the meantime I needed the money to pay my rent amongst other things. At times it was hard being there since it reminded me of Tommy. Every once in a while I thought of the old times, when things were good between us, back before I knew he had a wife. But having Smith made me not want to go back to Tommy.

“Hey, kid. How you doing?” Louie asked coming over to me. I shook my head as I took the jack away from the car. Unfortunately, he and I were the only ones working at the garage today. “You still mad at me ‘cause of the whole *ma thing*?”

“Yeah, I’m mad about the *whole ma thing*. You know how important finding my mother is yet you gave me some random lady’s name making me think she was the right person. Thanks to you I made a fool out of myself in front of a stranger. I hope lying to me was worth it,” I sarcastically

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added grabbing the jack in anger as I moved it to where we kept the jacks. I was planning to confront Louie a long time ago. Now that he approached me, I was trying my hardest to keep my cool.

“Was it worth it to injure ya arm over this?” Louie shot back. I kept the jack were it was and walked over to him, wondering how he knew that’s why I injured my arm.

“How do you know?”

“I’m not an idiot. You go to meet the woman you think is ya mother, you find out she ain’t who ya looking for so you get mad and hurt yourself. You always had a temper problem, Max.”

“You think you got me all figured out,” I snapped, angry that he was right about the situation.

“Actually I do. I knew about the little affair you and Tommy had going on when it started back when you were eighteen. So it was no surprise when you got pregnant and didn’t want to tell anyone who the daddy was.”

“Then why did you pretend you didn’t know?” I replied, trying to call his bluff.

“The threats were so you would stay away from him. And I knew if I hurt that low life you called ya lover you might never forgive me.”

“Well, thanks for not hurting him,” I finally replied, still in shock that Louie knew more than he was telling. Regardless of how much Tommy hurt me, I still didn’t want anyone harming him especially on my behalf. “I

still don't get it, Louie. Why not just say you didn't wanna help me find my mother rather than lie to me?"

"I didn't want you to get hurt. Once you open that Pandora box, there's no going back. So be careful what you wish for," he cryptically replied.

"What do you mean?" Louie laughed as he walked over to the other side of the garage where the cash register was. "Perché lei ride? Non ho detto niente buffo," I snapped in fury asking him why he was laughing since I didn't say anything funny.

"Spiacente. Non leggere troppo in tutto dico," he replied saying that he was sorry and how I shouldn't read too much into everything he said.

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Larissa grabbed the dark cashmere Bajra scarf from the rack and wrapped it around my neck. “How gorge is this scarf?” she asked as we both admired the accessory on me in the mirror at Saks Fifth Avenue.

“Gorge,” I replied. It was going to pair well with the simple black knee length Ralph Lauren dress that I planned to buy. “But do you think it’s too much?” I asked her.

“No. Hey, they’re gonna love you,” Larissa said sensing my nervousness. I took off the scarf and sighed. In just a few days I was going to meet Smith’s family.

“Were you nervous when you met Rudy and Carmela once you and Ru started dating?”

“A little. I mean at first I wasn’t sure if they would be okay with their son dating a black woman. I was a bit guarded but they embraced me for who I am, on the inside and out. They’re always so supportive of our relationship and have been encouraging me during my nursing school journey. And my parents are on the fence about Ru. They’re worried about him being a player and feel like he won’t ever want to get married and that I may be wasting my time with him.”

“Ru grew up seeing what a healthy marriage looks like. He may not be ready now but I think he will be in the future.”

“I really hope so,” Larissa mumbled in disappointment. “Anyways, I’m sure things will go fine between you and Smith’s parents.”

“What if it doesn’t? I can just picture them asking me questions like what I do for a living,” I replied as we made our way to purchase our clothes and accessories.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re also an amazing cook and singer-”

“But I’m not doing anything with them. I hardly sing. I’m not a certified chef. And I’m twenty-seven still doing the same job I’ve been doing since I was sixteen. If I stayed in school, maybe I’d have a career in my hand by now.”

“It’s not too late to go back to school.” I sighed again. Even if I returned to school I didn’t even know what I wanted to major in. “How do you like nursing so far?” I asked. Larissa graduated this past May and was now working at the progressive care unit at SUNY Downstate Medical Center. Now that she was no longer in school, she only had to work three to four days a week.

“It’s challenging at times, especially with all there is to learn and having to deal with death every once in a while, but it’s worth it. It feels good to know I’m doing something that’s making a difference.” I nodded my head, wondering if I was cut out to do something in the medical field. It would be nice to work just a few days a week and get a decent paycheck.

“Tell me more about nursing,” I said, as we waited in the short line.

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“What about it? Are you interested in becoming one?” Larissa asked, as her eyes lit up.

“I donno, but if I want to do something in my life, I gotta start somewhere, right?”

“Right, but make sure you do it ‘cause that’s what you want to do,” Larissa reminded me.

“Yeah, yeah of course,” I responded, trying to imagine myself as a nurse. I wondered if his folks would judge me for being a mechanic.

After paying the cashier, we walked out the store, and made our way outside. We both buttoned our coats and shoved on our gloves before slipping out into the cold evening. I shuffled through my bag, making sure the receipt was still there just in case I wanted to return the dress after I met Smith’s parents.

Larissa grabbed onto my arm tightly. I glanced up and realized she was warning me. There was Tommy and Dina with their two daughters, walking up the sidewalk towards the mall, where we were leaving. The airways in my lungs tightened up. I tried to breathe normally and ignore their presence. I kept my eyes on my bag as Larissa and I continued to make our way to the subway. My nostrils flared out, as I failed to pace myself. Though I knew I shouldn’t have made eye contact, I did. Right into Dina’s eyes.

“I need to talk to her.” I leaned by the bedroom door to try to figure out who was at the front entrance. A couple of days had past since my destruction at Tommy’s house, and I was still staying at Rudy’s home.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I heard Carmela say.

"Why are you trying to protect her? If she was grown enough to sleep with my husband, she sure the hell is old enough to face me!"

"Of course I'm going to protect her, Dina. She's my sister-in-law. Look, if you came here to cause a scene, you can leave," Carmela warned her. My heart dropped, hearing it was Dina. A huge wave of guilt passed over me. I couldn't imagine what Dina was going through, knowing that her husband had been cheating on her for years.

I took a deep breath as I reached for the handle of the door. I walked out of my room and headed towards them. Dina was right. She deserved to know the truth about Tommy and me. I owed her that much.

"It's okay, Carmela. Can you give us a minute?" I asked.

"You sure?" Carmela asked protectively between Dina and me. I nodded my head. Carmela paused for a second before she left the room. I felt my cheeks get red, as Dina stared me down. I noticed her eyes move towards my stomach as if I was still pregnant.

"I'm really sorry, Dina," I started, keeping my head down out of shame. I was completely embarrassed by my affair. "I-"

"No. You don't get to talk," Dina interrupted. Dina covered her face with both hands. I stood still unsure of what I should say to my ex's wife. She took a couple of

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breaths before she uncovered her face. "How long? How long have you been sleeping with my husband?" I bit my bottom lip, looking away as my heart beat a little faster. "Answer me!"

"Since 2010, on and off," I mumbled, afraid of her reaction. Dina shook her head.

"For seven years," she stated. "Tommy and I have been married for twelve years and together since high school. That means more than half of the time we've been married, he's been with you including when I was pregnant. The mysterious phone calls. Sneaking off in the middle of the night. And the countless nights when he wouldn't touch me," Dina added through her teeth in anger. "Perche? Why? Why Tommy? Out of all of the single men in Brooklyn, let alone Bensonhurst, you had to go after my husband."

"Dina, I'm sorry," I said, close to tears. I didn't know what to say to her. Nothing I said would make things better. It wouldn't take the years back of Tommy's infidelity. There were still many nights Tommy spent with me, his mistress, rather than his wife and kids. Then there was Milo. Even though he was gone, he would always be the best thing that Tommy ever gave me.

"Don't say you're sorry. I didn't come to hear you apologize-"

"I didn't know he was married when we first got together. I broke up with him when my ma told me he had a wife and kids. I stayed away from him for six months," I started, trying to explain myself.

“Don’t you dare stand there and play the victim role. You were innocent and quite frankly dumb in the beginning but what about the rest of the years? All of those times you would see me, smile in my face, and kiss my cheek like nothing was going on. And how can I forget that day I ran into you at the mall. You kept crying and saying how sorry you were. Little did I know you were having my husband’s baby!”

“I was never supposed to get pregnant.”

“But you did. And you almost gave him something I never could. A son,” Dina cried. I turned my head away from her, hoping to avoid the pain I saw in her eyes. Pain that I caused. Yet again, Dina covered her face with her hands. I stood there awkwardly, feeling like crap as I watched her cry.

After a minute, she removed her hands away from her face and wiped her tears from her now red eyes. “Like I said before, I didn’t come to hear you apologize. I also didn’t come here to guilt you. I’m here because of my two daughters. If I didn’t have them, I swear on everything, I would have left Tommy in a heartbeat. But my two little girls love their daddy and it would break their heart if I divorced him. And because of them I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep my family together. Back off my husband. Leave my family alone. You do that and I can promise you Tommy and I won’t press charges.”

At the same time, Dina and I looked away from each other and walked past one another without another glance. I sighed in relief, thankful that my affair with Tommy was in the past and that Dina and I came to a compromise that was for the best.

I took in a spoonful of Jollof rice, as I noticed four pairs of eyes staring me down, waiting for my response.

“Max, did you hear the question?” Smith asked. I quickly nodded my head before covering my mouth. Yes, I heard Smith’s mother, Amara, ask me about what I did for a living. And of course I was trying to avoid the question by stuffing my face. I knew I wouldn’t be able to avoid the question completely, but making sure I had food in my mouth was buying me some time. I already survived the round of questions of what my intentions of dating their son were and if I loved him. Now it was time to face the question I had been dreading the most.

Smith invited me to meet and dine with his parents at their home in upstate New York. To my surprise, his parents lived in a pretty ritzy area. His father was a cardiologist and his mother was the president of Columbia University. His younger twenty years old brother was a freshman at Columbia University. So sue me for not jumping to tell an educated driven traditional Nigerian family that I barely finished my freshman year at a community college.

“I did,” I responded, covering my mouth. I picked up the napkin from my lap and wiped my lips with it, as my mind raced trying to figure something to say. “I uh.... nurse!” I blurted out, the first profession that came to mind, remembering the conversation Larissa and I had earlier this month. “I’m going to go to school to become an RN. And maybe grad school after that.” While I spoke, I realized that it didn’t sound like a bad idea. Okay so this was me planning my career out of pressure, but it beat me stressing out about the future.

I grabbed the wine glass and chugged the remainder of the red wine in nervousness, waiting for his parents or anybody to say something. Noticing Smith give me a look because I never mentioned nursing to him, I reached over for the bottle and poured more in my cup. Guzzling the second glass of wine like it was a shot of tequila, I knew that one of the rules for “meeting the parents” is not to appear like an alcoholic. But what was I to do when my anxiety was through the roof. I hadn’t taken any Xanax pills that day, and the last thing I wanted was to have a panic attack in front of his parents, let alone Smith, who wasn’t even aware of my Xanax prescription.

“This must be some good wine,” Smith announced, snatching the bottle.

“It is. Your father and I got it at the Wilsons’ vineyard a couple of months ago during our anniversary trip,” Amara said pointing her cup towards Smith. Smith dropped some in his mother and brother’s cups.

“You ain’t lying,” Abeo, Smith’s brother said taking a huge gulp of the wine. “I can drink this all day.”

“But you won’t. What’s the matter with you, son?” Nasha Sr., Smith’s father stated, yanking the glass away from Abeo. I learned over dinner Smith went by his last name instead of his first since he and his father shared the same name. Smith told me his paternal grandfather was African American and that’s why they didn’t have a traditional Nigerian surname.

“Dad! Come on. I’m in college. I’m twenty!” Abeo exclaimed.

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“Which makes you too young to be drinking in the first place. I don’t mind you having a glass of wine or champagne every once in a while at dinner, but that’s it. Understood?” Amara piped in.

“Yes, ma’am,” Abeo replied, in a disappointed voice.

“Don’t be so eager to grow up, brother,” Smith said, placing his hand on Abeo’s shoulder. “Enjoy your life while you’re still young.”

“Oh stop it, Nash. You’re still young,” Amara said, squeezing his cheeks. Smith smiled at his mother before she let him go.

“Since when was thirty young?” Abeo joked as the table laughed.

“Watch it, Abeo,” Smith replied back, playfully punching his arm. Abeo rubbed his injured arm.

“Boys,” Amara said, rolling her eyes.

“Max, nursing is a great profession. As you know, I am a cardiologist. Other than my family, I trust the nurses I work with the most. They are the ones who are taking care of my patients at the hospital,” Nasha Sr. spoke changing the subject as he, cut into the turkey. “I can tell you are going to be a great nurse. If you ever need a letter of recommendation or a job, let me know and I’ll make it happen.”

“Thanks, Dr. Smith,” I replied appreciative that he seemed to like me for his son.

“Please, call me Nasha,” he insisted. I nodded my head and smiled. After having puff-puff, a traditional Nigerian dessert, Smith helped me put on my black pea coat.

“It was nice meeting you, Max. Smith is so much giddier with you,” Nasha Sr. said before we hugged each other. “Here’s my business card in case you need anything,” he added, handing it to me.

“Thanks... you both have a beautiful home and the food was amazing. Thanks again for having me over.”

“You’re a lovely woman, Max,” Amara added before embracing me. She leaned towards my ear. “If my son gets hurt by you, I won’t be happy. Got it?” she whispered. I nodded my head as I gulped. I had no intentions of hurting Smith, but the threat made me realize that Amara wasn’t so sure if she liked me for her son.

We all prayed prior to saying goodbye. Smith and his family were Baptist; they were used to saying grace and praying before saying goodbye to each other. Smith and I went to church together on Sundays taking turns going to mass because of my Catholicism and to his Baptist church. We prayed together every once in a while as well.

I stood by the door and waited while Smith hugged his parents. After embracing his mother, Smith subtly grabbed his ribs and grimaced.

“Baby, are you okay?” I asked, stepping closer to him. I worriedly held my hand over his. He shot me a quick look. I shot him one back. His parents had no idea their son got into a motorcycle accident. Hell, his parents probably didn’t know he had been racing in the first place.

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“Nash, are you hurt?” Amara asked.

“I’m alright. I fell a couple of weeks ago,” he replied, forcing a smile. I glared at him upset that he didn’t tell me that he was still hurting from the accident. Why couldn’t he confide in me?

He kissed his mother’s cheek one last time, before we walked into the cold night. Too bothered to actually button up my coat, I simply held both sides close together and marched over to his car.

“Are you mad at me?” Smith asked, after I slammed the car door. He turned on the engine and waited a while for the cold car to warm up. I shoved my seatbelt on before I folded my arms across my chest and crossed my legs.

“What do you think? You didn’t tell me you were still in pain,” I accused.

“It’s not a big deal. It hurts sometimes but it ain’t to the point where it’s affecting me,” he replied, turning the heater on.

“Maybe something is wrong if you’re still in pain. But you’ll never know if you don’t get it checked.”

“Max, I’m fine,” Smith tried to reassure me. I shook my head and glanced out the window. I didn’t want to be the annoying nagging girlfriend, but I was concerned. What if the doctor missed something at the ER? Or what if Smith reinjured himself? What if – “I’ll go to the doc if it gets worse,” he said interrupting my thoughts. He unfolded my arms and held onto my hand.

“Promise?”

“I do, “he replied, squeezing my hand. “So nursing, huh?” he asked, smirking.

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about it. I’ve wanted to start another career, and after Larissa told me more about the profession, I realized that it’s something I can get into.”

“Well, if you’re going to be a nurse I guess I won’t have to go see a doctor after all,” he joked before we both laughed.

“So why race if your parents can obviously afford to put you through law school?”

“I hate asking them for money. If I ask them for help with the cost of law school and don’t finish, they’ll hold it over me. I’d rather make it with my own money so if I decide I don’t want to be a lawyer I won’t be obligated to finish because my folks are footing the bill,” he replied. I nodded my head. It was definitely a pride thing, but I couldn’t blame him.

“I had a lot of fun with your parents. They’re really nice,” I announced once we reached the door to my apartment.

“Yeah,” Smith replied. He placed his strong arms around my waist and tugged me closer to him. I hooked my purse free arm around his neck before we kissed. He ran his fingers through my hair as he nuzzled on my neck. “I want you bad.”

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“Then come get me,” I seductively responded, seeing his right eyebrow come up. I grabbed hold of his black Lacoste shirt before sinking my teeth on his bottom lip.

“Eh em.” Recognizing the voice, I immediately pulled away from Smith. I didn’t mind showing PDA but not in front of my brothers. Smith wiped my lipstick off of his lips and took a huge step back when he realized Rudy was accompanied by Dom, Louie, and Mario. Rudy had his arms folded across his chest. Dom and Louie were on his right and left side respectively and Mario was behind him holding food in a couple of Tupperware’s.

“Rudy, what-what are ya doing here?” I asked, stuttering. I took a deep breath. I was acting like a schoolgirl who had just been caught making out by my father.

“Since you decided not to eat with the family, I thought I’d drop some food off for you. But I guess I came at a bad time,” Rudy snapped giving Smith a dirty look.

“Rudy, you remember Smith, right?” I said, trying to break the tension in the hallway.

“No, I don’t. You kinda failed to introduce me to him,” he accused.

“What are we not good enough for ya lawyer boyfriend?” Dom questioned, flexing his muscles, as he kept them crossed.

“You do realize if we don’t want her seeing you, *she won’t be seeing you,*” Louie said stepping up to Smith.

“I mean no disrespect, but that’s up to Max,”
Smith replied.

“Louie, who I see is none of your business,” I said stepping in between the two. I glared around at the men, annoyed that they were meddling.

Rudy raised his right hand up, silencing us all. “If ya dating my little sister, ya gotta respect that family means everything to us. When one of us succeeds, we all rejoice - when one of us cries, we all cry. So you can only imagine what this family went through when Max loss her baby. My point to all of this is that when Max hurts, we hurt. And we don’t like getting hurt. *Ya understand me?*” Rudy said in a whisper yet harsh tone.

“In a nutshell, Rudy’s saying: ya break her heart, we break ya neck,” Louie threatened. “Capeesh?”

“Louie!” I exclaimed.

“Don’t “Louie” him. I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Dom said.

“Come over for Sunday dinner to get to know us,” Mario *the peacemaker* insisted.

“Yeah. Only if that’s cool with you, sir,” Smith said to Rudy.

“I’ll let you know what Sunday is good,” Rudy replied, giving Smith a slight tap against his cheek with his hand. He grabbed my shoulders and kissed my forehead before they all left. Smith sighed once they were all gone.

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“I thought I was in the Sopranos for a second,” he admitted laughing; I giggled along with him as I hugged him.

“I promise you, my family is not a part of the mafia. Even, if they were I would never let anyone hurt you.”

“Ooh that’s awkward,” Larissa said. We both were sitting on the couch at our apartment on a Sunday night in our pajamas, catching up. I just finished telling her about meeting Smith’s family and Smith’s run in with Rudy and the other guys.

“I could tell Smith was nervous, but he held his own. I’m just waiting for Rudy to invite him to Sunday dinner. They don’t like him now since Smith had his tongue down my throat the first time they met him,” I replied. I reached over for my black nail polish from the coffee table. I removed the top off and began to paint my nails.

“So you’re really serious about nursing huh?”

“Uh huh,” I said, blowing the nail polish on my right hand dry. “I’m gonna apply to Kingsborough Community for my prerequisite classes for this upcoming semester. I’ll knock those courses out then I’ll apply to some nursing schools in Brooklyn.” Ever since I told Smith’s parents I had been getting into becoming a nurse more. I would get to help people and I’d have a decent paying career that would allow me to have a few days off each week.

“Good for you.” Before I could say something, Larissa held onto her stomach as her face cringed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah...Just cramps.”

“On your period?”

“No. Max...I’m pregnant. Hence why I’m reading this,” she said pulling out a book called What to Expect When You’re Expecting from behind our throw pillows. My heart dropped as my face went pale. I got up from the couch, not wanting her to see whatever facial expression I wore. I couldn’t let her witness my reaction, not when it looked like I wasn’t thrilled for her.

I kind of didn’t know how to feel. A part of me was of course happy that she was going to be a mother and that would make her an even more permanent fixture in my life since she was having the baby with my nephew. The other side of me was jealous that she was gaining something I loss. It had been over a year and a half since Milo died.

I brushed away my emotions to focus on Larissa. This wasn’t about me, it was about her. “...I should have told you. I was gonna, but I didn’t know how you would react. I was trying to find the right time.” *How you’d react?* How did she think I would react? Go bat crap crazy like I did back when I was out to get Tommy?

I nodded my head, ignoring the fact that Larissa thought I was a basket case who couldn’t handle tough situations. I took in a small breath before sitting back down. I forced a smile and gave her a hug. “Congratulations.”

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“Thanks,” she replied, giving me a squeeze. She sighed in relief. “I’m so glad I finally told you. Ru and I wanted to let you know before we told Rudy and Carmela.”

“They’ll be hyped about their first grandchild. But be prepared for them to pressure you and Ru to get married.”

“My parents want us to get married ‘cause of this baby too. Don’t get me wrong, I wanna marry Ru. I know he’s the one and all. He says he wants me to be his wife, but we don’t agree on the timeline of when to get hitched.”

“What were you and his reaction when you found out? Were you guys planning it?”

“We hardly talked about having kids, so this definitely caught us off guard. I was nervous and scared. When I told Ru he was shocked but excited. He says he wants us to move in together so we can raise our baby in the same household, which is a big step since neither of us lived with a significant other before. I always thought I’d be married before I started a family. But life happens. And don’t worry. I will continue to pay my share of the rent until my lease is up or we find someone to take over my lease.”

“Okay. Wow, uh things are moving pretty fast, but I get it,” I mumbled trying to process all that she was throwing at me. Not only was she pregnant but I was also saying goodbye to my bestie living with me. At least I didn’t have to have her pregnancy shoved in my face every day especially since that would be a constant reminder of Milo’s death. “How far along are you?”

“Four and a half months. I found out half a month ago.”

“Lucky. You’re not even showing.”

“I have a little pouch,” Larissa responded lifting up her hoodie to show her tiny baby bump.

“You’re gonna be a great mom,” I said, holding her hand.

“Thanks. That means a lot to me,” Larissa responded, giving my hand a squeeze.

*****Chapter 11*****

December 2018

“I’m happy for her.... Really, I am,” I said trying to convince Dr. Lavarro and myself that I was truly content about the baby news. “I should be, right?” I asked my shrink as I continued to pace about the floor of the office. “I mean, Larissa is my girl. She’s the sister I never had. And Ru, we grew up together. He’s practically my brother. I love them and because of that, I should be beyond excited that they’re having a baby together, but there’s a part of me....” I drifted off as I began to struggle to let air in. I leaned over as I started to hyperventilate.

“Thanks,” I managed to say as I took the brown bag Dr. Lavarro handed me. I took several breaths in the bag. Once I felt calm, I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair.

“Tell me about your panic attacks.”

“What about them?”

“How often are you getting them?”

“Not as often as before. The pills help.”

“What do you do to try to manage them? Have you been trying the techniques we talked about?”

“Have you ever had a panic attack? ‘Cause if ya did, you’d understand that it comes with no warning and it’s really hard to think straight when it’s happening.”

“Max-”

“Can we talk about something else? We barely have twenty minutes left of an hour, which is already pricey. If we go over the time it’s extra money; so I don’t wanna spend it analyzing my panic attacks. I wanna talk about the baby. What’s wrong with me, Doc?”

“Well,” Dr. Lavarro started as he adjusted his glasses and glanced up from his notepad. “It seems that the revelation of Larissa’s pregnancy is bringing up some buried feelings that you have. What is causing you to struggle with finding happiness in this pregnancy?”

“I donno,” I said shrugging my shoulders. “It’s just, I’ve been thinking about him.”

“Him?”

“Milo,” I admitted looking straight at him. “He’s ummm...he’s my baby. Was my baby. I was on my way to my baby shower when I loss him. I met up with my ex-the baby’s father before my baby shower. We got into this huge argument in the alley. As you know he was a married man and was threatening me to keep our baby a secret. He left me there alone so Ru came to pick me up in his car. I was opening a gift Ru gave me, when a vehicle out of nowhere slammed into the passenger side,” I cried out. Dr. Lavarro picked up the blue tissue box and held it up to me. I grabbed a few as I stood up. “Larissa gets to have a baby when I’m left with nothing. The only time I held him, he was dead. He was cold and pale with no heart beat.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. These feelings that you have coming up is a step forward in the right direction. It’s the end of the session.”

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Before leaving the building, I made a quick trip to the bathroom. I pulled my hair up in a bun and pulled out a packet of my makeup remover tissues from my Coach Bag. After wiping the mascara run down make up, I splashed water on my face.

“So this is what I look like without makeup,” I announced to Smith as soon as I walked out the door. “Don’t laugh,” I added as I looked down to quickly zip up my leather bomber jacket as I felt a burst of cold air. I glanced up to see Smith staring at me. “What?”

“You’re even more beautiful without make up,” Smith said to me as he pulled me in for a warm kiss. My heart melted as he kept me in his arms. “So, how was therapy?” he asked, pulling out his chapstick from the pocket of his jeans and placing them on his lips.

“I finally opened up about Milo. I gotta say, for a guy who doesn’t say much, Lavaró’s got me talking about something I hadn’t been able to talk about with anyone. The guy’s good,” I added, pulling on my winter gloves.

“How did it feel to open up about Milo?” he asked as we started to walk on the less than crowded sidewalk that had dirty snow on the side that had been there for the past few days.

“Good. It feels like some weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“I’m glad that it’s working out for you. Just so you know I’m here if you ever want to talk.”

“Thanks. So are you ready for the surprise?”

“Yes. Where are you kidnapping me to?”

“Well, I’m *adultknapping* you to Bensonhurst to La Casa di Romano. It means the house of Romano. Bobby the Baker owns the bakery and let me tell you he sells the most delicious pastries. The-”

“Wait, *the Bobby the Baker?* The one you and Ru won’t stop talking about?”

“Yes that Bobby the Baker. Look once you visit the bakery and meet him, you’ll understand why we can’t get enough.”

“Ahhh, Maximiliana,” Bobby stated as soon as we stepped inside the welcoming restaurant. Bobby was a large and fairly short man. He had a thin amount of grey hair that he swept to the left side of his head to cover his bald spots. His oversized belly stuck out in his apron. He walked around the counter to give me a kiss on the cheek and a big hug. “Everybody è la nipote di Marie,” he said to the customers, telling them that I was Marie’s daughter. I tried to hide my sadness in a forced smile at the sound of Mama’s name. Years later it was still at times hard to even hear her name.

The small bakery had a display of traditional Italian cookies, cakes, pastries separated by shelves. On top of the glass counter were muffins, cannoli shells, and bread amongst other baked goods. The walls were painted pale yellow and forest green. Covering the walls were pictures of the Romano family from when they lived in Italy to when they first moved to Brooklyn. There were several round tables that were fit for two along with a few booths.

“Come sta lei?” I said asking Bobby how he was as he helped me take off my coat.

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“Good. Chi è questo?” Bobby asked pointing his chin towards Smith.

“Il mio ragazzo,” I replied telling me that he was my boyfriend.

“Il suo ragazzo?” Bobby said. “La tratta ristabile?”

“Sì, mi tratta bene,” I answered telling him that Smith did treat me well.

“Okay,” Bobby said giving Smith another hard look. He walked closer to Smith and gripped the back of his head. “Treat her well,” he told him in a thick Italian accent.

“Yes, sir,” Smith responded. Bobby gave Smith a wide grin before giving him a light tap against his cheek. Smith awkwardly smiled back at him.

“Sit, sit! I make cannoli and biscotti for two of you,” he said leaving us. Smith and I took a seat at the booth by the window.

“So, what did your folks think about me?” I questioned.

“They think you’re cool.”

“Do they have a problem with me not coming from a traditional Nigerian family?”

“I mean yeah they ideally would want me to be with another Nigerian however they like you and understand I’m grown and make my own choices,” he replied as I took

hold of his hand. I nodded my head wondering if that was his watered down version of what his parents thought of me. “What about your fam? Are they gonna be cool with me being black?”

“Hello, I’m black,” I responded. “Why do you ask?”

“Your brothers didn’t seem to like me.”

“Rudy and the guys didn’t like you ‘cause the first time they met you, you had ya tongue down my throat, not because you’re black. Besides if they had an issue with your race, they’d have an issue with me and Larissa since we’re black too.”

“I guess you’re right,” he responded taking off his coat.

“I am. They are gonna love you,” I reassured him as I took his hand.

“Maximiliana,” my mama’s older sister Rose said as she waddled over to me with her walker.

“Zia Rose,” I said, getting up from my seat. I leaned over the elderly short lady to give her a kiss on her cheek and a hug. “How are you?”

“Good. I know you go to church but what about the choir? We miss your beautiful voice.”

“I know. It’s just hard to go back with Mama gone.” The choir at church was a huge reminder of Mama since she forced me to join when I was a teen to keep me out

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of trouble. I didn't care for it at first but with time I grew to love it. I stopped going as much when I turned eighteen and quit completely after Mama died.

"Maximiliana, you know she would want you to go back to singing... You look so much like her," Zia Rose added as she placed her thin frail hand over mine.

"I was adopted remember-"

"Does that matter? You have her chin," Zia Rose said as she touched my chin. I tried to hide a smile at the comparison. "Who is this handsome guy," she asked, letting go of me as she saw Smith.

"Smith," he said, getting up from the chair as he went over to kiss her cheek. "I'm her boyfriend."

"Oh, Smith, you are a good looking man. When are you two getting married?"

"Whoa, Zia Rose, we are not getting married," I interrupted, forgetting that she was the type to ask those questions that at times you want to ask but don't have the guts to. "I mean not yet at least."

"Why not? You two are in love. I can tell by the way you two look at each other. And who wouldn't want to marry him? He's a hunk!" she added, as she wrapped her arm around his waist. Smith and I both laughed as Smith placed his arm around her shoulder. I couldn't believe the seventy-eight years old was flirting with my boyfriend. It was too comical. "If you don't marry him, I will. I don't think my husband will mind," she joked giving his waist a squeeze.

“Well, thank you for the offer,” Smith said flashing her a smile. After Zia Rose left us, we both went back to sit at the booth. “She’s something else.”

“She is. That’s my ma’s older sister and best friend. Anyways, I’m glad you came with me here.”

“Me too. Even though I got hit on by a senior citizen. But that was the best part of the trip here. You don’t watch out, Rose just may steal my heart,” he continued as we both laughed.

“Cannoli,” Bobby announced as he brought two fresh cannoli with sprinkles. “My son love conolo,” he said as he placed the food down. We thanked him as he went over to the wall and pulled one of the black and white portraits down. “I have four kids. Three girls and one boy, Bobby Jr. Here Bobby Jr. is,” he told us showing us a picture of the Romano family. The photo was of a younger Bobby next to his three daughters and son. I took hold of the frame. His son looked oddly familiar.

“What’s wrong? You no remember Bobby Jr.? He play with you and Ru when you guys kids,” Bobby reminded me. “Then my wife left and took the kids with her. Bobby Jr. was eight. But Bobby Jr. come back to live with me for past year.” I nodded my head as I handed him back the frame. Though Bobby said I knew his son from when we were kids, I had a feeling I knew him from some other time.

“Christian, thirty, in law school and working as a TA at NYU. It all sounds good on paper but that doesn’t mean much to us if you don’t treat her right. That means you

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need to show her love, respect, loyalty and trust,” Carmela said to Smith. Smith and I were sitting on the leather loveseat in the den across from Rudy who stood beside Carmela.

“Carmela is right. Look, Smith, I know we got off to a wrong start, but I know how much Max cares about you. I’m willing to give you a chance, so don’t disappoint me.” I rolled my eyes. Of course Rudy made it sound as if he- no, as if the entire family was a part of my relationship with Smith. I hoped Rudy and the rest of the family didn’t plan on meddling in our business. “All’s I’m saying is, you treat her right, and we won’t have a problem with you. Got it?” Rudy asked.

“Yes, sir,” Smith replied in a cracked voice. He cleared his throat. “Yes sir. I understand and I will always treat her right,” he said in a stronger voice. I covered my mouth to hide my smile.

“Good. Stand up,” he demanded. As we both stood, I held onto Smith’s hand. He let go of my hand and wiped the sweat from his palm against his black slacks before he held onto mine. “Enjoy the rest of the party,” he added. They shook hands before Smith and I went over to the living room where the Christmas Eve get together was. All over were family and close friends, chatting, eating, dancing, taking photos for social media and laughing as they caught up with one another. When they weren’t scarfing down food, the kids were sharing the toys and new gadgets they received for Christmas while the adults were letting each other in on their resolutions for the upcoming year.

“It was cute how nervous you were,” I said after we found an empty tiny corner by the den.

“I wasn’t nervous.”

“Then why were you sweating? And your voice cracked,” I added laughing as I touched his neck.

“Ya’ll invited all of Bensonhurst in here. How can you expect me not to be hot or sweat? And my voice was not cracked,” Smith replied. He began to giggle as I playfully moved my finger up and down his neck, tickling him.

“Stop,” he said in laughter as he turned his head and grabbed my hands. He brought me closer to him and blew on my neck, returning the favor. I laughed as I wrapped my arms around his waist. He brushed the hair away from my face. He leaned down to kiss me. “I love you,” I said between our kisses.

“I love you too,” he replied. “Thanks again for the old school Nas records on vinyl and the new Doc Martens.”

“And thank you for the spa gift card and for getting me a new laptop. That Dell one was on life support.” Earlier that day he came over my apartment, we ate breakfast together, exchanged gifts before going ice skating prior to coming over here. “I appreciate all the presents you got me but all I want for Christmas is you,” I sang to him just as Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas” came on the radio.

“You are so corny, but I love it,” he said winking, before he picked me up and spun me around once. I giggled as he placed me down and kissed me a bunch of times on my cheek.

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“So there are a lot of us. I’ll give you a 411 on who’s who,” I said holding onto his bicep. “That’s Cousin Vinnie. He thinks his life is an opera. Whenever he is spoken to, he’ll answer by singing,” I said, pointing to Cousin Vinnie who indeed was responding in melody in a conversation he was having with Dom and Mario.

“Maximiliana, come help bring this bowl out to the table!” my sister, Angelica, called out to me from the kitchen.

“Coming!” I hollered back. “That’s my older sister Angelica. She’s the mother hen of the family. Every like one or two years she has a baby. She’s on her eighth kid so far,” I informed Smith in a low voice.

“Smith, come play!” Ru exclaimed from the family room, where he along with the male cousins around his age were surrounded by the TV playing the latest Madden on the XBOX One.

“Go ahead. We’ll meet up later,” I said, heading over to the lively kitchen. In the kitchen, the women were all over finishing the food. They had already begun to cook the pasta they made from scratch along with baccalà, one of the many fishes that were traditionally cooked on Christmas Eve for the Feast of Seven Fishes. Other women and a couple of men had their hands tied making biscotti, panettone bread, along with torrone. They were all catching up loudly while listening to Rosemary Clooney. Most of the antipasti dishes were done.

“Try,” Angelica requested with a toothpick filled with mozzarella, an olive and salami. Before I had the chance to object, she shoved it in my mouth.

“It’s good,” I said, with my mouthful.

“Why are you dating a black guy, Maximiliana?” Gilda, my other older sister in her fifties asked as she stirred the lasagna pasta.

“Gilda, really?” I asked putting my hands on my hips. “Are we not living in the twenty first century? Besides I’m black,” I added, frustrated by her racism. I shouldn’t have been surprised. She didn’t have a filter and said everything that came to her mind. She was at the center of the gossip in the neighborhood.

“Just because that married man lied to you doesn’t mean all Italian guys are bad,” Clara, an elderly cousin of mine piped in.

“So what if you are *black*? You were raised white. Do you think mama would be proud that you brought home un negro?” Gilda asked placing her hands on her hips.

“Lei è sconvolto che lei non ha l’amore?” I yelled, as my hands flew in the air, asking her if she was upset that she didn’t have love. I couldn’t believe she was meddling. Who was she to tell me who was acceptable or not? Even though she was trying to make me the exception to her racism it was as if she was rejecting me as well. “And you know Mama didn’t have a problem with any races.”

“Non parlarmi ama ciò. Lei è una bambina poco rispettosa,” she yelled back. I rolled my eyes as she told me not to talk to her like that and how I was a disrespectful little girl.

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“Lay off, Gilda. She loves who she loves,”
Angelica said.

“Of course you would say that! All you do is love, Angelica! That’s why you have eight bambinos. So why don’t ya chiudere la sua bocca e le sue gambe!” Gilda replied telling her to shut her mouth and legs. Angelica’s mouth dropped before she started to cry.

“Nice, Gilda. Does her crying make ya feel better?” I asked. I yanked a paper towel from the roll and handed it to Angelica. I forgot how Gilda could be so vicious with her words. By now, all of the women were yelling louder than usual and taking sides what race I should or shouldn’t date.

“Abbastanza!” Zia Rose said, slapping her cane against the wall to get everyone’s attention in the kitchen. Everyone stopped talking to look at the tiny lady. “My ears cannot take anymore. No more arguing. Cook, eat and shut up.”

“But-” Gilda started.

“No. Cook, eat and shut up!” Zia Rose repeated a little louder.

“What is all the screaming about?” Carmela asked, coming into the tense room.

“Nothing. We’re just cooking, eating and shutting up,” one of Angelica’s daughter said before we all started to laugh.

“What?” Carmela asked, looking confused. Before anybody else had the opportunity to lecture me how I needed to find an Italian guy to date, I grabbed the fruit punch from the counter.

Angelica’s eight years old son ran by, playing his Nintendo Switch. Not paying attention, he almost ran into me.

“Aye, Tony, be careful!” I exclaimed, trying to keep my balance and prevent the bowl of juice from spilling.

“Sorry, Max!” he apologized with a smile before he dropped to his knees and slid to where the kids his age were playing with the new toys they got for Christmas. After safely placing the bowl down, I walked over to Smith who was playing video games with Ru and our cousins.

“Yo! I got an announcement to make,” Ru said cutting the music down. I stopped smiling as soon as I looked over to him and saw that he had a glass of champagne in one hand and Larissa in his other arm. I had a feeling that he was going to announce their bun in the oven.

Larissa was wearing a loose fitting black dress that hid her pregnancy. She had her natural hair down against her mocha colored skin. She wore a fabulous Kate Spade gold sequin dress with matching wedges. She was definitely glowing and pregnancy made her look even prettier.

“First of all, we all wouldn’t be here if the Lord hadn’t taken His precious time to make us. And let’s not forget He loved us even more. Because of His love He gave us a son, knowing that His son would have to sacrifice His life so we can live. Let’s not forget that Christmas is not

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about the material gifts that all of these stores try to get us to buy. It's about the greatest gift of all, Jesus. With that being said, I'm not only thankful to spend this day with my wonderful boyfriend Ru. I'm also grateful to be spending it with my best friend Max who is like a sister to me and this amazing family including Carmela and Rudy, who have been nothing but good to me," Larissa finished as she looked around. "Ru and I have exciting news."

"We're having a baby!" Ru exclaimed as the house cheered. The family all clapped and grabbed glasses to get a drink. Carmela and Rudy were among the first to go over to embrace them.

"I can't believe I'm going to be a nonna," Carmela said as she placed her hands on the side of her face in shock. She hugged Ru and gave him a kiss on his cheek. "Oh my goodness, you're going to be a dad," she said in tears.

"Don't cry, Ma," Ru replied.

"Don't worry, sweetie, these are happy tears," she reassured him as she backed away from him and smiled.

"We're so glad for you two," Rudy said after giving Larissa a hug. "You better put a ring on her finger."

"It'll happen, Pops."

"You're gonna be a great dad, son," Rudy said, kissing Ru's forehead.

"Since I met you I always knew you were different from the rest of the girls Ru has dated," Carmela

said going over to Larissa. “And I was right. Ru has never been happier and I can’t think of anyone else I’d want him to have a child with.”

“Thank you, Carmela. That means a lot to me,” Larissa said. “This baby is going to be so lucky to have all of you in their lives.” Rather than go up to Larissa, I froze. I heard all of the enthusiasm and I was paying attention to everything that was happening. But I just stood there. I noticed Smith go congratulate the joyous couple, but yet I remained where I was. I thought I was going to be okay with Larissa’s pregnancy however here I was acting as if I heard some tragic news. Not wanting to be a downer, I quietly grabbed my coat and slipped away in the dark, cold night. I sighed as I leaned against the railing of the stairs. I pushed my hands into my pockets before they had a chance to get numb.

Blood...Everywhere...I struggled to open my eyes, confused for a moment. Where was I? How did I get here? When I was finally able to pry my eyes open, I became alarmed when I saw the front shield window had imploded and that glass was sprawled all over the front seats.

“Ru!” I called out seeing him out cold, with a huge gash of blood on the side of his forehead. I shook him, hoping he was alive. “Ru, wake up!” I exclaimed, shaking his shoulder, trying to get him out of his state of unconsciousness. My mouth dropped once I saw how much blood was coming out of Ru’s wound. As I cried, I grabbed the onesie he got me and placed it over his head, in attempts to stop him from bleeding. “HELP!” I yelled, in hopes someone was near-by or had heard me in the dark night.

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I held pressure against his head with one hand while I used my other hand to find my cellphone. I glanced down, to where my phone was on the floor of the passenger side. "Oh no," I cried, noticing that I was bleeding down there. I bent over and grabbed my phone. My fingers shook as I struggled to quickly dial 911. I tried not to think about the possibility of losing Ru or my baby.

"911, what's your emergency?" the operator asked.

"I just got into a car accident," I started in a frantic voice. "We were hit on the passenger side. The driver is unconscious and he has blood gushing from his head-"

"Ma'am, is he breathing? Does he have a pulse?" the operator asked in a calm voice. I dropped the phone and placed my finger against the side of his neck. I sighed in relief as I felt one. After noticing that he was breathing, I picked up the phone.

"Yeah, he- he has a pulse and he's breathing. There's something else, I'm bleeding a lot and I'm eight months pregnant. I'm scared. I can't lose my baby!"

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Louie asked, snapping me out of my memory of the night Milo died. "Right when ya think you've come to terms with losing a child, there someone goes about to have a baby and then you realize how ya really not okay. It's then when ya think about what ya kid would be doing right now if they were still here," Louie said.

"I didn't know you loss a child," I said turning to him.

“There’s a lot of things ya don’t know about me. But, yeah, it happened twice. Fifteen and ten years ago. It hurts to know I would’ve been a dad to two kids had they survived. The first one, me and my then girlfriend miscarried when she was seven months and the next baby survived out of his mother’s womb for only two days. He had respiratory complications. Look, Max, I’m not saying ya ever gonna get over this, ‘cause ya ain’t. But you learn to deal with it and there will come a time when you’ll be able to be okay with pregnancy and people you know having kids. You’re strong. You’ll make it through,” he said, giving me a kiss on my forehead. I gave him a hopeful smile. Maybe he was right. I was gonna be okay.

Chapter 12

January 2019

“...Everybody scream,” the DJ shouted on the microphone before pointing it out to the crowd. The group cheered on as “What is Love?” by Haddaway played. I pumped my fist in the air and moved my feet along with the others in the packed penthouse.

“Look who I found, Max!” Ru exclaimed loud enough over the blaring music as he danced his way to me with Carmine by his side.

“Carmine!” I exclaimed, giving him a hug. He was as skinny as he was since he started college. He got taller and paler and now wore his longer locks in a low ponytail. Ever since Carmine left for college, I hadn’t seen much of him. To Rudy and Carmela’s disapproval, he didn’t visit home often. “You guys look ridiculous!” I laughed, as I squeezed Carmine’s cheeks. Both of them had matching red velour sweat suits, old school white Adidas sneakers, and fake big chain necklaces.

“I know you don’t got jokes. Who are you supposed to be? A gangster pirate?” he asked, pointing to my eye patch.

“Very funny, Run *NO*-MC. It’s a tribute to Aaliyah,” I replied. I had my recently straightened hair pulled up in a high ponytail with my hair parted to the side of my forehead and an eye patch on. I wore a black tank top along with baggy jeans and a red oversized jacket I borrowed from Smith along with tan Timberlands for the 90’s themed

bash at one of our high school friend's home. The DJ was only spinning tunes from the 90's; I already ran into a bunch of Madonnas and Michael Jacksons from that decade.

“Yo, Max, we gotta hold this guy down and cut this hair of his. The seventies are over, bro.”

“The ladies love it, and that's all that matter,” Carmine replied. We all laughed as Ru pulled him into a headlock.

“My lil bro's getting girls! I couldn't be prouder,” Ru said in excitement before letting him go.

“Man, how I've missed you guys,” Carmine said.

“Maybe if you came home more often you wouldn't miss us so much,” I replied.

“You're right. It's just crazy how much things have changed since I left for college. Ru settled down and is about to be a dad and you've finally found a good guy-”

“What do you mean finally? You knew about Tommy?” I asked him.

“Yeah. I knew ever since you were eighteen. It's kinda embarrassing. I accidently walked in on you and Tommy together at the garage-”

“You're right. That is embarrassing. You should've kept that to yourself,” Ru said.

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“Well if you knew all this time, why didn’t you say anything? I mean not about you walking in on us, but about the affair.”

“Okay to clarify, I didn’t see anything. I just heard the two of you going at it. And since then I saw how you two would behave when you thought no one was looking. I didn’t say anything ‘cause it wasn’t my place. Your mom figured it out too. She asked me if I knew anything about you two and I told her I couldn’t say.”

“So you gave me away, Carmine? No loyalty,” I joked, poking him at his side as we laughed. Ru grabbed a few bottles of beer and handed us each one.

“Here’s to me about to be a dad, Max finding a good dude who’s *not* married...” Ru started. I playfully punched his arm as he continued his toast. “...and Carmine who’s not only got just a year left in school, but who’s finally getting girls.”

“Salud,” we all said, clicking each other’s bottles before we drank up. Before we knew it Ru was livestreaming us on Instagram just as Prince’s “1999” came on.

“Aye yo, IG Live, I got my bro and my favorite aunt who’s like a sis with me. It’s lit here and we are turning up! 90’s Bash, baby!” He started panning the camera over to Carmine and I. As Carmine gave a quick wave and shy smile, I puckered my lips and winked at the camera. “Let’s show them how the Abbracciaventos’ get down!” Ru yelled, putting his phone down on the coffee table with an angle to film our time. Ru dropped his beer down and spun around and began to dance. I placed mine on the coffee table and

began to do the cabbage patch as Carmine did the running man.

“Catch the wave!” I exclaimed as I wiggled my left arm, body, and right arm respectively before passing it on to Carmine, who sent it on to Ru. We all giggled. It was nice to know that though we were adults, we could still be silly with each other.

“Yo, *Vanilla Ice*, catch the wave!” Ru said picking up his phone to record the guy next to him who was dressed up like that rapper. We all cheered when the guy caught it and began to boogie his way down to the level of the floor before he started to do the worm.

When the guy got up from his dance move, I stopped cheering. My hands dropped to my side along with my jaw. I turned away from him and grabbed my bottle and began to drink hoping that the stranger I had in my bed last year wouldn’t recognize me.

“Ru!” the guy said, giving him a handshake. “Man, it’s been years,” he said as Ru ended the live stream. I glanced at them in the corner of my eye. I knew Ru was pretty popular in Bensonhurst, but I wish he didn’t know the one guy I had a one night stand with.

“For real, man! I almost didn’t recognize you. You’ve been hitting the gym.”

“I have been,” he replied. “I gotta work out. School for IT and paramedic by night.”

“Smart with the computer and saving lives. That’s what’s up. Yo, you remember Carmine?”

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“Of course I remember your little bro,” he said as he and Carmine shook hands. “You were too young to remember but I used to live in the same block. Me, Ru and Max used to run amuck in the neighborhood when we were kids. I moved away with my ma when I was eight...”

I couldn’t believe my luck. Of course the one guy I hooked up with once had to be a childhood friend. “...speaking of which, is Max here? I haven’t seen her in years. My pop said she and her boyfriend came into the bakery a couple of months back.”

I mouthed a cuss word before I turned to face him. This time, his jaw moved a little south as he looked at me. “Bobby Jr., we meet again,” I said.

I tapped my foot along with the beat of Michael Jackson’s “Smooth Criminal”. As the chorus began, I found myself bopping my head to the tune. I sang out loud not being able to control myself. I smiled as the other students around me at the library gave me dirty looks for daring to make noise. I pressed pause on my Amazon music and pulled off my Beats headphones.

I was in the library trying to write my paper about the effects media has on gender roles. The paper was due in about a week. Though I was already caught up in my chemistry and calculus classes I wanted to get cracking on this assignment.

This time around with school I wanted to do better than before. I knew I needed to put in the work in order to become successful. I was keeping up with my classwork and

I hardly skipped class. Because of financial aid and grants, I was able to afford school, and a part of my rent. The extra cash also allowed me to cut back in my hours at the garage.

“Is this seat taken?” It was Bobby Jr. standing up next to me. I gulped as I glanced down at my laptop. He was cute. His short brunette hair was gelled upwards. He was a little taller than me. His muscles showed through his tight grey metrosexual hoodie. “Max?” From the corner of my eyes I saw how kissable his luscious pink lips looked. My ears turned red as I tried to focus on the Google search. I already had a man who I loved and adored. The last thing I needed was to lust after another guy.

“It is. *Mylegs* are sitting on it,” I sarcastically replied as I sat my legs on top of the chair that was next to me.

“Well, tell *Mylegs* this will only be a minute,” Bobby Jr. said. Before I could object, he gently placed my limbs down from the chair. He rested his laptop bag on the table as he sat next to me. “I was gonna talk to you during the party, but you ran off-”

“We have nothing to talk about.”

“Do you call sleeping with someone nothing?”

“In this case, yes. I don’t even remember any of it. Sorry, you’re just not that memorable,” I snapped at him. The nerve of him to bring that up in public!

“Ouch!” he replied with a smirk. “I get it-”

“Okay. I’m glad you do. You can leave now-”

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“You have a boyfriend and it’s absolutely unacceptable that you’re even having thoughts about another guy. But that Smith guy must be something else. After all, you kept calling his name the night we-”

“I’m out!” I announced, jumping up from my chair. “So you can enjoy this table by yourself. And the next time you talk to me like that, ya gonna find soap in that dirty mouth of yours. Capeesh?” As I slammed my laptop shut, a few studious students “shushed” me.

“Good,” I heard a girl next to me say. I ignored her as I shoved my laptop along with my sociology book into my bag and swung it over my shoulder.

As I took one step, I found Bobby Jr. standing right in front of me, hardly giving me any space to move.

“Look, I’m sorry, Max,” he said. “After living with four women, you’d think I’d learn to be less insensitive. Hearing sincerity in his voice, I sighed as I took a step back, realizing our bodies were practically touching. I tapped my fingers against my purse, impatiently waiting for him to finish his apology or get out of my way. “I um... I thought you were cool when we met at the club. All carefree and gorgeous. I guess I thought I would get more than just one night with you.” I nodded my head, surprised that he had a crush on me. I tried to ignore the part of me that wondered what would happen between us if Smith wasn’t in the picture.

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard when the girl you fall for after a night on the dance floor is calling you another guy’s name and yelling at you in Italian.”

“I could’ve been nicer. Sorry.” If a guy had done the same thing to me that I did to him, I would’ve been in my feelings too.

“So where do we go from here?”

“I have a boyfriend. And the fact that we did what we did makes it hard for us to be friends.”

“Understandable. We could at least be cordial with each other, right?”

“Yeah,” I responded, looking into his greenish blue eyes. I stared into his eyes for a second longer than I should’ve. I tucked my hair behind my ears as I gulped. “See you later.”

“Stay. My class is starting soon,” he said, grabbing his laptop bag. He gave me a grin before he left me standing there in the middle of the library.

Laura F. Murphy

February 2019

“Well, Max, everything looks good. No UTI, no STDs’, no cervical cancer. All of your tests came back negative,” Dr. Lee, my gynecologist informed me.

“Good,” I replied in relief on one of the chairs of the exam rooms as she sat on a stool with her laptop on the countertop.

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yeah, actually, I do. It’s about birth control.”

“I can write you for the pills,” she said, grabbing her prescription pad.

“I need something a little stronger than birth control pills. What if I forget to take the pill one day? I don’t wanna be caught up *in a situation*.”

“The situation being pregnancy,” she replied, saying out loud what I wanted to say.

“Exactly. I’ll be fine with never having kids. I wanna get my tubes tied.”

“Max, I’m sorry. I won’t be able to help you with that.”

“Then I’ll go to someone who can help me with it.” Who was she to tell me that I couldn’t get my tubes tied? It was my body and my choice.

“You can go to as many gynecologists as you want. But you’re probably going to get the same answer. Because you’re under thirty years old, many will refuse to do this procedure for you. Look, Max, you’re still young. You may change your mind when you get older-”

“And if I don’t change my mind?”

“Then we’ll talk about it. Max, getting your tubes tied is a drastic measure of birth control. The procedure is reversible, however after the reversal there is a higher chance you may not be able to conceive. Now if you want something other than birth control pills, there are other options. For example, IUD, Depo-Provera and NuvaRing,” she said handing me a few pamphlets.

As I listened to her inform me of the risk and benefits of the other birth control options, I thought about what it meant to never have children again. It wouldn’t bring back Milo. And it would put a wedge between Smith and me since he wanted to have kids in the future. I sighed realizing getting my tubes tied was extreme. Though I couldn’t see having kids at the moment, maybe I would in the future with Smith.

“Okay. Well with an intrauterine device it seems I don’t have to worry about the upkeep compared to the other options.”

“Great. Just so we’re clear an IUD will not protect you from STDs’ including HIV, and there is a very small possibility that you still may get pregnant. The best way to prevent a pregnancy is abstinence.”

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After mashing the cassava mixed with Himalayan salt, black pepper and olive oil for the fufu I was making, I rolled them into individual balls. I lowered the heat down on the Ogbono stew. I reached out to Smith's mother for some traditional Nigerian recipes, and she was kind enough to share them with me.

I danced my way over to the portable Bluetooth speaker, putting the volume up to Dean Martin's "Ain't That a Kick in the Head".

"Coming!" I yelled after hearing a knock on the door. Before I answered, I pulled out the bottle of Xanax from the pocket of my apron, twisted the cap off and popped a couple of pills before downing it with water.

I took a deep breath before opening it to Smith who was wearing a baby blue buttoned down top underneath his auburn colored leather jacket. He had on jeans along with a classic pair of black Doc Martens. He had a fresh fade with his shorter dreads braided to the side. "Hey, you," I said, feeling butterflies. Seeing Smith made me realize though I thought Bobby Jr. was cute, I was even more attracted and in love with Smith and he was the only one I wanted. Saying hello he kissed me before handing me a bouquet of red roses. He let me go and walked into the apartment, leaving me at the door with a goofy smile on my face.

I thanked him and placed the flowers at the center of the table, near the candles, that was already set for two. As I went back to check on the food Sade's "No Ordinary Love" came on from my playlist.

“It smells good,” he said, taking off his jacket, revealing his muscular arms. “Is that fufu and stew?” he questioned impressed by the menu and its aroma.

“Yeah. I got the recipe from your mom.”

“Okay, babe. I see you,” he replied in a wink. “By the way, you look mad good.”

“Thanks. You look very handsome,” I replied, closing the door as a warm feeling came over me. I looked away from him, afraid if I did gaze his way, my knees would get weak. “I uh... I went to the doctor last week.” I grabbed my mitts before going over to pull out the cranberry macadamia cookies that I made from scratch out of the oven.

“Everything okay?” he asked as I turned the oven off.

“Yeah. Everything’s okay. I got an IUD.”

“Okay. What’s an IUD?”

“It’s a form of birth control,” I told him, placing the baked good on top of the stove. “I guess what I’m trying to say is...” I started as I pulled off the mitts and dared to glance at my gorgeous boyfriend. “...that I’m ready,” I told him, staring into his brown eyes as my heart beat fast.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. After dinner, of course.”

“Of course,” he said coming closer to me. He initiated yet another passionate kiss. He pulled off my hair

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tie, allowing my medium size box braids to fall down to my upper back. He slowly ran his fingers through my hair before his strong, yet gentle hands made their way down the small of my back. He loosened the string of my apron helping me to take it off.

“I love you so much.”

“Me too,” he mumbled. His hands were ready to explore my body by the time we made it to my bedroom. I felt flush all over as my heart raced faster than I ever thought it could. Never would I imagine I would ever feel this way about a guy. My feelings for Smith were stronger than they ever were for Tommy. So much that it kind of scared me.

“Hey, babe,” Smith said, coming behind me. He slipped his hands around my waist as he kissed my neck.

“Hey, love,” I said leaning my body against his. I smiled as I glanced out the small window that sat above my sink in the kitchen. The perfect sunny weather fit my mood. I couldn’t be happier about my relationship with Smith. After last night, things couldn’t get any better. I was wearing his blue buttoned down shirt along with one of my short shorts and he had on his jeans. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. Even though you snore.”

“I do not snore!” I said turning to face him.

“You do,” he said as we giggled. “It’s cute though.”

“Well at least I’m a cute snorer,” I responded, wrapping my arms around his neck as we kissed. “I hope you’re hungry,” I said, rubbing his abs. I grabbed the food that we never had a chance to eat from the refrigerator. “Because I know I didn’t spend hours in the kitchen without you even tasting the food I made.”

“I’m pretty hungry,” he said, picking up a piece of the fufu and popping it in his mouth. “Wow. This is really good, boo. You might give my mom a run for her money. But don’t tell her I said that.”

“You don’t tell her that either,” I joked back pleased he was satisfied with my efforts.

“You mind if I watch the news? I wanna know how cold it’s gonna be today.”

“Go ahead. The remote should be on the coffee table.” As I finished warming up the food, Smith sat on the couch to watch Good Morning America. I poured the Ogbono stew in two bowls and warmed them up. Smith grabbed a couple of spoons and plateful of the fufu. I sat on my right leg and leaned towards Smith on the sofa. We both began to dig into the food as we watched the news.

“What’s up with the money you lost from the race?” I asked. Since Smith’s motorcycle was totaled, he had to stop competing. Selfishly I was glad his bike was irreparable. I was scared I was going to lose him in a future accident if he kept his risky side hustle. I didn’t want to imagine if he hadn’t survived.

“I meant to tell you that I talked to my parents and they are gonna help me with my school tuition. Only catch

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is, they don't want me riding anymore. Guess my racing days are over," he added in a sigh appearing bummed.

"It's good they're helping you out."

"The food is good," he replied instead, with his mouthful.

"Thanks," I replied, realizing he didn't want to talk about this. After we ate, I rested my head against his bare chest. He placed his arm around my waist and I closed my eyes, taking a little nap.

Later, I had to study for a test I neglected to prepare for until two days before. I didn't mean to procrastinate when it came to studying. It's just my way of studying worked. So far because I was doing my school work I was passing all of my classes with A's. I never had a problem with taking tests in the past. I was pretty fortunate that I had a photographic memory when it came to school and I usually got what they taught me the first time around.

By the time I woke up fifteen minutes later, Smith was fast asleep, with his head tilted back against the sofa. I smiled as I took the remote from his lap to put the volume down to avoid disturbing his sleep. As my finger slipped on top of the down button on the volume, I stopped.

"...Alleged mob boss Teresa "One shot Reese" DeSimone was arrested this morning with connections to the murder of alleged mobster Manuel Ruiz," the reporter announced as a tape of DeSimone in hand cuffs played. She held her head down and as a true gangster, she wore a grey and black fur coat, black sweater and killer designer boots as the cops walked her to the NYPD vehicle. The press

surrounded her along with the cops all the way to the backseat.

“Ruiz...,” I mumbled, trying to remember where I heard that name.

“Ruiz’s body was found in the lake late last night after a man who was fishing accidentally reeled in a part of Ruiz’s coat. When authorities were notified, a rescue team came and sure enough, his body was found at the bottom of the lake with a bullet in his head and two in his chest.” A video of the lake with the rescue team rolled as the reporter talked. Once they placed a mug shot of Teresa DeSimone on the TV screen, I gasped.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed, recognizing DeSimone. She was the same lady I met that night I was pregnant at Prospect Park. No wonder she didn’t want me to know who she was.

“What?” Smith asked, waking up from his slumber. I pulled away from him, leaned forward and turned up the volume, not worrying about waking Smith since he was already alert.

“Hold on,” I replied.

“...DeSimone allegedly runs the smaller Rizzetti crime family in New Jersey. The Rizzetti crime family was once run by DeSimone’s father Johnny “The Shark” DeSimone for fifteen years before he was gunned down by one of the Five Family’s in 2004. After a flux of leaders for ten years, Johnny’s daughter worked her way up to where no female has ever been. Being in the mob as a female is rare, and running the mob as a female is near impossible.

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However, Teresa DeSimone has been running- excuse me- allegedly running the Rizzetti crime family for the past several years. With her as a leader, there has been more peace up until the past two years when a feud between the Rizzetti family and Brooklyn based Puerto Rican mob family started over control of the sewage in upper New Jersey,” the news reporter continued as they showed old footage of Johnny and his daughter from private family pictures to various mug shots.

“We will take a deeper look into the Rizzetti crime family tonight during 20/20,” another reporter stated before they went to commercial.

“Wow,” I said, turning off the TV. I ran my fingers through my hair, still trying to grasp the fact that I ran into a well-known gangster without realizing it. I thought back to that crazy night where Teresa fought off three guys, protecting me. “I know that woman. She’s the one I ran into at Prospect Park that night,” I finally told Smith.

“Her? Max, she’s gotta be the most dangerous woman- no person in the tri-state area. She’s been arrested a bunch of times from things like money laundering to murder, but they’ve never been able to convict her. I’m glad she didn’t hurt you,” Smith said, holding on to me a bit tighter. “I can’t believe you didn’t recognize who she was. She’s always on the news.”

“Well sorry I don’t watch the news,” I sarcastically replied as I got up from the couch and grabbed the bowls and spoons we left on the coffee table. “Look, I know she’s probably done a lot of bad things in her life, but if she wasn’t at the park that night, I don’t know if I’d be

here.” I felt a chill run down my back as I began to wash the dishes. “She saved me and my baby from those guys-”

“Don’t give her too much credit. She probably attracted them to the park that night.”

“Can we not argue about this? I don’t want us to end our morning in a disagreement.” Smith and I didn’t see eye to eye on this topic and I couldn’t blame him. DeSimone was pretty ruthless and committed more crimes than anyone could count.

“Okay. Just forget about her,” he said, getting up from the couch. As we embraced, I thought about how I couldn’t disremember her. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to know more.

Almost every free time I got, I searched information about Teresa DeSimone. Yeah, she was a criminal by trade, but she was still a fascinating person. Her rap sheet was ridiculously long. There was petty theft, racketeering, money laundering, perjury, assault, battery, and multiple murder charges. Though she had been accused of all of these the most she spent in jail was a few months at a federal prison. Other than that, her lawyers managed to get her off charges.

Currently, she was out on bail awaiting trial, of which she plead not guilty, for the murder of Manuel Ruiz. According to the news, she was keeping a low profile at her heavily guarded mansion in New Jersey.

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I learned about her glamorous childhood as the daughter of Johnny and Sicilia DeSimone. She was born and raised in Elizabeth, New Jersey and had the best of everything. She grew up in a mansion, attended private schools, went to lavish parties, traveled to the most glamorous places in the world, and had an endless amount of cash coming her way from her father's involvement in the mob. Of course, her father had a couple of businesses as fronts to cover the blood money they were obtaining on the low.

As I read, I wondered what happened to her back in 1992. A couple of websites talked about how she was noticeably absent for a little over a year. She didn't have pictures of her at any lavish parties or anything. Most of them stated she was away so long getting multiple plastic surgeries.

Right as I typed "Teresa DeSimone plastic surgeries" into the Google search box of my iPad, I felt a stab against the side of my stomach. I jumped out of my seat a little as I hit the home button, not wanting anybody to see me researching a criminal out of pure curiosity. "Sheesh, Larissa, ya almost gave me a heart attack!" I exclaimed, with my hand over my heart.

"Sorry," Larissa said, as I stood up to give her a quick hug. We were both meeting at SUNY Downstate Medical Center during her break at work. Since she moved out and was living in an apartment with Ru, we weren't able to spend time as we used to in the past. "I guess I was a little aggressive with the poke," she added smiling.

"That's an understatement," I replied returning the smile. Larissa placed one hand on her back and used the

other to hold onto the table, as she sat down. Now that she was seven and a half months pregnant, it was very apparent that she was with child. Before she even said anything else, she caught her breath.

“You okay?”

“I’m okay. Just feeling tired as usual. I can’t wait to get this baby out of me,” she admitted as she readjusted herself and leaned back against the chair. She sat her Tupperware of fettuccine chicken Alfredo that had Carmela written all over it down on the table. “Do you hear that, baby boy? Two and a half more months ‘til you’re out of me,” Larissa spoke to her belly as she rubbed it.

“You’re having a boy,” I said, feeling a little hurt she didn’t tell me.

“We were gonna wait until the birth to find out the sex of the baby, but I wanted to start decorating the nursery and Ru was way too impatient to wait that long. So last doctor’s appointment, the doc told us the gender.”

We both fell silent. Larissa started to eat her pasta as I began to poke around in my olives and salami that was in my salad. “I was gonna tell you about the gender of the baby. And I was gonna tell you how we painted the nursery baby blue with a New York Yankees decal on one of the walls, and how we plan to name our baby after Ru and about all my cravings, okay! But I can’t talk to you about that or anything regarding this baby ‘cause I have to walk around eggshells whenever the topic of my baby is brought up,” she cried, looking downwards. She used the sleeves of her scrub top to wipe the tears that were coming down as her lips trembled.

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Like a crappy friend that I was, I glanced away from her and tried my hardest not to cry. There were countless times, Larissa had been there for me such as when Mama passed away, through my pregnancy, Milo's death and when I lost my mind. And here she was a few months shy of giving birth and I wasn't being supportive. "I see you as my sister and I can't even talk to you," she said through tears. "I know your baby is gone and maybe I'm being insensitive to what you've been through, but... I just want my best friend back."

"You're right. I've been a horrible friend to you and I'm sorry. I can think of all the times you've been there for me, but I struggle to think of the times I've been there for you. This is supposed to be one of the happiest times of your life and instead of being happy for you, I'm sulking around in grief. Nothing is gonna bring my son back. Avoiding talking about him, trying to avenge his death, even going to counseling isn't going to bring him back." I spoke as my voice cracked and I broke down.

I stopped talking for a bit to breathe from all the crying. "It hurts waking up each morning to nothing. To knowing I'm never gonna see or hold my son. Losing Milo is making it hard for me to be there for you. But that's no excuse for my lack of support. Larissa, I wasn't there for you for the entire pregnancy, but that's gonna change. I will be present for you and your baby. I promise you," I vowed, hoping she would finally look at me.

I knew it was gonna be hard at first to see her have something that I no longer had, but with time I would be okay with her and the baby. I loved Larissa and her

unborn child and not being there for them would be the cruelest thing I could ever do to her.

Larissa glanced at me and gave me a hopeful smile through her tears. “That’s all I ask,” she said. I smiled back as I cried. I got up and gave her a hug. “I love you, girl.”

“I love you too,” I said, kissing her forehead.

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*****Chapter 13*****

March 2019

After attending Larissa and Ru's baby shower I headed to a place I once called home. I placed my hands on top of the hotel roof's edge and took a deep breath. It felt great to be out in an open space in the middle of the night. Because the weather was starting to warm up, all I needed to wear was my leather jacket, a pale blue tank top, black tights and boots without getting cold.

I grinned, glancing at the view. The stars were shining bright and it was a full moon. I admired the lights from all of the building that lit up the city. The streets were less crowded, but there were still the endless Ubers and Lyfts along with pedestrians trying to make the most of the perfect evening.

It had been a while since I came back to the hotel that I once called home. I ran my fingers across the ledge as I walked and reminisced on when I was living young, and free. I was making a living waitressing and off the tips I made singing at a local bar. Mama was alive and I was somewhat close with my family. The only thing that sucked was my love life back then. I wasted years on a man I knew would never choose me.

I closed my eyes as I thought about the past. Before the deaths of the ones I loved, before I almost tried to kill myself, before the therapy sessions.

I was now living in an apartment, in love with a wonderful man who loved me for who I was, embracing my

caramel tone, curls and curves without any hesitation or microaggression. I was closer to my family, on my way to starting a career, and finally healing from my trauma. I opened my eyes and hugged myself, grateful of where my life was now. I didn't want to go back there.

"There's something special about the night in the city, huh?" Bobby Jr. spoke.

"There is," I replied, giving Bobby Jr. a small smile. He stood across from me, wearing a tight black t shirt underneath a casual crème blazer along with semi tight dark denim jeans and off black boots. He had a tan folder tucked underneath his arm.

"No cap. I was surprised you hit me up after all of this talk about us not being friends," he added with a confident smirk on his face. I remembered Bobby announcing that he was a computer science major at the party, so after much thought, I DM'd him on Instagram. I planned to fill in Smith at a later date.

"What happened between us is in the past and it won't ever happen again," I reminded him. "If we're gonna be cool, ya gotta stop bringing up what was."

"You're right. I'm sorry, Max. I'll be on my best behavior. Promise," he replied, as he cautiously walked closer to me. He stopped when he was four feet away. I shook my head as I laughed. "What?"

"Do you think I find you so irresistible that if you get too close I won't be able to control myself?" I asked, approaching him.

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“Hey, those are your words. And didn’t you say no bringing up the past?”

“I did. So, do you have it?”

“I do,” he replied, handing me the tan folder. “Is this the only reason you wanted to talk to me again? To pump information out of me?”

“If you want me to lie to you, the answer is no.”

“I feel so used,” he said, placing his hand over his heart as if he was offended. I glanced at him as we both laughed. “What is it about Teresa DeSimone that’s got you so fascinated?” he asked as I opened the folder. I walked away from him as I flipped through what had to be at least thirty pages of information. I knew that later I would sit down and carefully read each page. “Max?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I found you everything the internet couldn’t about DeSimone. You owe me that much.”

“Fine,” I replied, taking a seat on top of one of the wooden boxes. Bobby sat next to me on another box. “A couple of years ago, I wanted to get away so I went to Prospect Park. I was sitting on the bench and this lady comes up to me and starts asking me questions about my pregnancy-”

“You were pregnant?”

“Yeah. I got into a car accident and my baby died.”

“Sorry.”

“Thanks. Anyways, at first I didn’t mind her questions but when she starts to give me advice, I tell her to leave me alone. That’s when she tells me to go home. Of course I see it as her trying to tell me what to do so I refuse to leave. Three gangbangers come up to us, so I try to leave when one of the guys grabs me. She shoots his foot, he lets me go, and then-”

“Wait a sec, she shot him? With a gun?” he asked in surprise.

“Yeah, with a gun! I was shocked too. And after that she fights off the two guys and shoves a gun down one of their mouths and threatens their leader. Then she walks up to me all nonchalant like she hadn’t just beat these dudes up. So I’m all shook and she tells me to walk and be all casual. It’s like she knew what she was doing and this wasn’t the first time she was caught in a situation like this. She escorts me home and tells me that things may not make sense now but it will in the future.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Was she referring to your baby?”

“I thought that’s what she meant back then, but the more I think about it, the more I feel she was referring to who she was. It makes sense ‘cause she’s Teresa “One Shot Reese” DeSimone.”

“Wow! You meant the infamous gangster. I’m kind of jealous. I wouldn’t mind her protecting me from thugs. She’s hot for her age,” Bobby replied in a grin.

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“She’s only forty-four. You make her sound like she’s ancient,” I responded.

“True. When did you find out who she was?”

“I hate watching the news ‘cause it’s so depressing. Always a mass shooting, hate crime, racial injustice. However a couple of months ago, my boyfriend had the channel on the news, while we were on the couch. We fell asleep and when I woke up, I was about to turn it off when they started talking about how she was the prime suspect in the killing of Manuel Ruiz- Ruiz!” I exclaimed hopping out of my seat. “That’s who DeSimone was threatening that night. She said something like if ‘Ruiz wants me tell him to come get me’. This is crazy,” I added, placing my hands on my head.

“It is. Well, I hope you find all the answers you’re looking for in there,” he said, getting up.

“Thanks again for the help.”

“No problem. I even managed to find out the doctor’s notes on her plastic surgeries she’s had in the past. You know it’s a tad bit creepy you wanted to know details about her cosmetic operations,” he jokingly said.

“Whatever,” I teased back. “It’s just she started getting plastic surgery at age seventeen. That’s pretty young.”

“That’s not true. She was twenty-five when she had her first one.”

“Bobby, I saw online on a few websites that she was gone away for a year when she was seventeen because she was having work done on her body.”

“No. She was gone for a year because she was pregnant. Her family wanted to keep it a secret, so they sent her away to Italy for a little over a year. After she gave birth, she came back to America to live with her family. Here,” he said taking hold of the folder. He flipped through pages and stopped. “Look, there are the hospital records of her birth in Italy,” he said, pointing to the paper.

Glancing at the familiar date she gave birth to a baby girl, I shook my head in disbelief. Making sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, I grabbed the document and carefully read the entire sheet. Yup, it was right there. DeSimone had a daughter August 12, 1992, the same date that I was born.

“What's wrong?”

“I'm not sure,” I replied, closing the folder shut as my mind went nuts trying to figure out what this could all possibly mean.

I glanced at Smith as he watched the Warriors play the Brooklyn Nets on TV in my apartment. It was Sunday and we were both relaxing on the couch after mass at the Catholic Church and Sunday dinner with the family.

“Irving with a three!” Smith exclaimed, jumping up from the couch as he pointed at the screen with approval. I focused my attention where Kyrie Irving's teammates were

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congratulating him after he scored yet another long shot. I didn't mind watching sports with Smith. Being a tomboy at heart, I got into the games, and at times I would get just as hyped about it as he. However, this day was different.

It had been a little over a day since I found out something strangely alarming. Teresa DeSimone could possibly be my birth mother. Last night when I got home, rather than look at all of the documents like I planned to, I went straight to bed. Knowing that I may have found my biological mother scared me. I couldn't take getting my hopes up about finding out who my parent was to be let down if she wasn't. "This game is good," Smith said with a smile as he sat back down on the couch next to me.

"It is. Smith, we need to talk," I said, not being able to keep this amongst other things from him anymore.

"Can it wait? The game is almost over."

"Sure," I said, seeing that there was only a minute left. Besides, that bought me time before we had this intense conversation, especially since he wasn't a fan of DeSimone.

"Thanks, babe," he said giving me a kiss before turning his attention back on the game. I hugged his bicep with both of my arms as I leaned my head against his broad shoulder. As he continued to watch TV, I thought about Smith's reaction to this news along with who I got the information from. Once the game was over, he turned off the TV. He shifted his body to face me as he held onto both of my hands. "What's up?"

"You know that I love you, right?"

“Yeah. Do you know that I love you?” he asked back giving me a peculiar look, unsure of what I was going to say next.

“I do. I love you and because I demand honesty. I have to be honest with you.”

“What are you trying to say, Max?” Smith asked, holding onto my hands a little tighter. I squeezed his hands before letting them go. I got up from the couch realizing that this was going to be a bit harder than I thought it would.

“Do you remember that day I cooked for you?”

“Which time? You’re always cooking for me.”

“It was before we started dating. I made you spaghetti and you raced that night.”

“What about that night?”

“Not that night. A couple of nights later, I umm... I slept with someone-”

“I don’t need to know about all the guys you’ve been with in the past.”

“*All the guys I’ve been with?*” I repeated, insulted by his comment. Did he think I was some hussy who had been around the block? “You make me sound like a whore or something-”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I-”

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“I’ve only been with three guys. Tommy, Bobby Jr. and you-”

“Wait. The baker’s kid?” he asked getting up from the couch.

“Yeah. I didn’t know it was him at the time. He left the neighborhood when he was eight and next time we met was on Tinder. We had a little too much to drink, and we slept together, that once and that’s it. It wasn’t until this January when I found out the guy I slept with was Bobby Jr.”

“Why are you bringing this up now? Have you seen him since?”

“I saw him at the 90’s party and I ran into him at school. I also messaged him on IG since he’s into hacking.”

“What information was so important that you had to go to him?”

“Teresa DeSimone-”

“Her again? Why do you care so much about her? She almost got you killed and-”

“Do you see? This was why I didn’t tell you before. You don’t want to hear anything about her! She’s not all bad. Did you know she’s a philanthropist and she is a part of multiple charities-?”

“That doesn’t negate the fact that she kills people for a living. You’re acting like she’s a hero when she’s really a criminal-”

“Who may have given birth to me, Smith!” I exclaimed throwing my arms in the air.

“What?”

“Yeah, she might be my birth mom. Back in ‘92 she was gone for almost a year. The media all thinks she went away to get plastic surgeries, but she was actually pregnant in Italy. Her parents didn’t want people knowing about the pregnancy, so they sent her there until she gave birth and after she put the baby up for adoption.”

“Are you sure that she’s your mother?”

“I was born in Italy at that same hospital at the same date Teresa gave birth. My ma who raised me must’ve adopted me right after I was born hence why my name on my birth certificate isn’t DeSimone. This is hard for you, but imagine how it is for me? For years I’ve wanted to know who my birth parents are and finally I may be getting some answers. It may not be who I thought it would be, but I have to know the truth. I’ve been so misled trying to find my biological family. Now that I may have found her I’m scared to know what’s next. If she’s really my mother, I’m not asking you to be okay with it. I’m just asking for you to be there for me. Please.”

“Of course I’ll be there for you,” he said, coming over to me. He opened up his arms. I went over to him and let him hold me. “So you don’t have to ask Bobby for help anymore.”

“You don’t want me talking to him?”

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“I’m not gonna tell you what to do. Just remember you have a boyfriend.”

“I would never cheat on you,” I told Smith, grabbing his face with both hands. “You are the only man that I love and want to be with. You remember that,” I added, giving him a kiss of reassurance. Did I find Bobby Jr. attractive? Yes. Did that mean I wanted to be with Bobby Jr.? Absolutely not. Smith was the only man for me and I didn’t need a second to question that. Out of respect for Smith, I wouldn’t even be friends with Bobby Jr.

Feeling a vibration, I pulled out my phone from my pocket. “Larissa’s having her baby!” I exclaimed to Smith after reading the text Ru sent to me. “We gotta go to the hospital,” I added, hurriedly grabbing my leather jacket and throwing on the same shoes I wore for mass earlier today.

I held onto Smith’s hand in the waiting room. By the time we arrived to the hospital, Larissa was already in the operating room for a cesarean section due to the baby’s breached position. The labor and delivery floor only allowed for one visitor with her during her C-section. Other than the healthcare providers, Larissa chose to have Ru with her. Rudy, Carmela and Carmine were with us along with Larissa’s parents and brothers.

“You think we’ll ever have kids someday?” Smith whispered in my ear.

“Someday,” I replied giving him a hopeful smile. My love for Smith made me not totally hate his idea of

having kids. He would be a great father, and I know that I would love to be a mother. What scared me was the possibility of losing another child. I couldn't emotionally nor mentally go through that again.

I glanced over at Rudy and Carmela. When they weren't taking phone calls from family and close friends updating them about the baby, they were chatting with the rest of us including Larissa's family. I wondered how much they knew about my adoption and how much they were keeping from me.

Seeing Rudy go off towards the elevator, I impulsively got up. "I'll be back," I said to Smith, following him. I ran to catch my hand on the elevator door. As it opened, I slid inside.

"I'm gonna go get some coffee at the cafeteria," Rudy informed me, pressing the level one button.

"Coffee can wait," I said, slamming my hand over the hold button since it was just him and I in the elevator.

"What are ya doing, Max?" he asked, giving me an odd look.

"I want answers, Rudy." I crossed my arms and stood in front of the elevator buttons. "And I'm not talking about the story you and everyone else have concocted. I want the truth. Who's my mother?"

"I told you I don't know," he replied, looking dead at me.

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“Of course you *don't know!*” I exclaimed sarcastically, throwing my hands in the air. “I guess you’ve lied so much about this that you’ve convinced yourself that it’s the truth-”

“Watch how you talk to me, Max,” he said through his teeth. Trying to calm down, I paused and placed my hand on my hips. I didn’t want to catch an attitude with Rudy especially on the birth date of Larissa and Ru’s son.

“Is Teresa DeSimone my mother?”

“Where did you hear a crazy story like that?” Rudy asked, as one of his eyebrow rose. He gulped as he looked to the left for a second. Finding Rudy in a lie, I shook my head as I let out a little laugh. There was the truth. My entire life I wanted to know who I was and here I was in the elevator with confirmation that a mob boss was my parent. Though I had time to think about this since Bobby Jr. showed me Teresa’s hospital records, I still didn’t process what all of this meant.

Rudy glanced away from me and crossed his arms. “So there’s my answer,” I said in disbelief. I hit the button so we could move. Once we reached the first floor, Rudy walked slightly ahead of me with his head down and both hands in his pants pocket. Without asking me, he bought himself and me Colombian coffee. I took the drink as I tried to read him.

This time, Rudy banged on the hold button of the empty elevator once we got in. “After my papa died, mama traveled back and forth from New York and Sicily. One Sunday dinner she comes and tells us she’s adopted a baby. We thinks she’s crazy ‘cause she’s already in her fifties. If

anything we thought that at most maybe she'd get a dog to help cope with the loss of her husband not an infant. Our skepticism didn't stop us from loving the baby though."

"Did you guys ever ask where I came from?"

"All of the time. And she would always tell us how she met a scared pregnant seventeen years old at the Catholic Church in Italy and after constantly running into each other, the young woman asked mama to keep the baby."

I played with my silver stomach length necklace as I listened to him. The more he told me, the more I wanted to know. Why did she give me up? Did a part of her want to keep me? Who was my father? Did she even know who my dad was and was he even alive?

"When did Mama tell you who my birth mother was?"

"Right around the time we put her in the nursing home. I was surprised when she said it was Teresa DeSimone. I didn't believe her at first so I started doing my own research, and all of it made sense. And if my research wasn't enough, I got confirmation at her funeral."

"DeSimone was there?" How could my own mother be in the same place as me and I not even sense it? You would think that she would have the guts to step up and talk to me rather than wait for a random night at the park to meet for the first time in years.

"Only for the burial. Once I saw her, I knew it was the truth. I approached her and she kept telling me how

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sorry she was for our loss and how good of a woman Mama was.”

“Did she even ask about me?”

“She did. I told her you were going through a lot with Mama’s death, and how the entire family would help you cope with it all. I gave her my word that our family would always care for you. Now regardless of running into her or not, our love for you wasn’t going away and never will. You are an Abbracciavento. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t,” I replied with pride of being a part of our family. “Did you ever see her again?”

“That was the last time.” I nodded my head, trying to figure out if my mother even considered saying hello to me or if she ever wanted to get to know me.

“What about my father? Do you know anything about him?”

“I don’t,” Rudy said, taking hold of my arm. “I didn’t keep this from you out of maliciousness. It was because she’s a part of organized crime and my job as ya older brother is to protect you. Okay?”

“Okay,” I replied, trying to make sense of all of the new pieces of information I just found out.

I lightly knocked on the door before Smith and I went inside Larissa’s hospital room. Larissa had her baby

rested in her arms as she gazed at her son in amazement. She was in a hospital gown. She had a bag of normal saline going in her peripheral intravenous line in her arm and a nasal cannula in her nose, delivering 2 liters of oxygen. Ru lay next to her with the same awestruck facial expression.

After a cesarean section, a healthy 7 pound, 8 ounce baby boy, Rudolph Rocco Abbracciavento III had been born.

“Hey, guys,” I said in a low voice, not wanting to wake up the sleeping baby.

“Hey,” Larissa responded in a soft tone as she looked at me and smiled. Ever since our talk, I had been much more supportive of her pregnancy. Even though it was hard for me at times, I was there helping her with shopping and decorating the rest of the nursery along with chats about her pregnancy, baby, and motherhood.

“Do you want to hold Rocco?” Larissa asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I brushed the thoughts of what Rudy and I talked about in the elevator to focus on their son, my grandnephew.

I hesitated for a second before I reached over to hold Rocco. My heart skipped a beat in remembrance of the last time I held a baby.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Lee whispered in tears keeping her head down as she handed me a cyanotic and nonviable baby. I jumped when his glacial skin touched mine. How could Milo be so cold? There was only one explanation and I didn’t want to believe it.

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As my hands shook, I unwrapped Milo and placed my hand over his torso. I looked intensely at my son's chest in hopes if I stared hard and long enough, he would miraculously come alive.

"He's not breathing," I started in utter shock. This couldn't be happening. How could someone be here one minute and gone the next? A child at that. It didn't make any sense to me. "You have to do something," I frantically told Dr. Lee.

"Max, we can't. Remember I told you before coming in here that Milo is dead. We did everything we could, working on him for over an hour-"

"Then work on him longer!" I cried out, quickly pressing two fingers up and down Milo's chest. The room full of nurses, Rudy, Carmela, Ru, and Larissa halted, watching my failed attempt to resuscitate Milo.

"Max, we tried everything. He's gone," Dr. Lee said softly, taking hold of my hand.

"No," I replied, refusing to give up on my son. I pulled my hand away from her and continued to do CPR. "NOOOOO!" I screamed, realizing that it was too late. I had to face the music: Milo was dead.

Feeling palpitations I pulled my arms back as my hand went over my heart. The room went a little black as I battled for oxygen. I stumbled backwards, trying to maintain my balance. I saw a confused Smith and Ru try to help me in midst of my panic attack. Not wanting to ruin this special day for Larissa, I reached for the handle of the door to escape. By the second it was getting harder to breathe and

the room became pitch black and nothing was audible. My fingers barely stroked the door knob before my body couldn't take it anymore.

“Max! MAX....!” I heard a bunch of times. Everything was still black and my memory was foggy. Though my vision was a bit blurry, I made out Rudy, Carmela, Smith, and Ru. I rubbed my eyes, trying to get back my vision.

“Are you okay?” someone in scrubs asked me.

“Yeah. I'm fine,” I started in a raspy voice, looking around in disorientation. I was in a hospital bed with my street clothes on.

“What's your name?” the nurse asked.

“Maximiliana Abbracciavento.”

“Where are you?”

“SUNY hospital.”

“The year and president?”

“2019 and Trump. Are ya done with the questions?” I asked, trying to get up. Feeling the room spin, I sat back down and placed my hands over my head.

“Take it easy,” the nurse said as she helped me lie back down. “I recommend you at least get some blood work and an EKG. You can get it done in the emergency department-”

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“I don’t need all of that. I’m gonna be okay.”

“Max, maybe you should get checked out,” Carmela suggested.

“She’s right. Have you ever passed out in the past?” Smith asked.

“No.”

“What happened before you passed out?” the nurse questioned.

“I was standing in the room and...” I started as I tried to trace back my thoughts. “Oh my goodness! Larissa!” I exclaimed, slapping my forehead. The last thing I wanted was to mess up Larissa and Ru’s son’s birth date, and here I was having a panic attack. “I gotta go see them,” I started about to get up. Rudy arrested my movements by holding out his hand in front of me.

“Rudy-”

“Stay here. We gotta make sure you’re okay,” he insisted.

“He’s right, baby. You’ll get a chance to see them,” Smith said, taking hold of my hand. Seeing his worry, I stayed put and gave his hand a squeeze.

“Ru, I’m sorry. You should be with Larissa and Rocco now-”

“I wanted to make sure ya okay,” Ru replied.
“That junk was mad scary. You were gonna hold Rocco then

all of a sudden you had a panic attack or something like that and passed out. I thought I was watching a telenovela,” Ru joked with a smile.

“Well, sorry for being dramatic,” I responded in a grin, thankful that Ru wasn’t mad at me.

“Is it true what he said? About you having panic attacks?” Smith asked. I nodded my head.

“How long have you had them?” Carmela asked.

“Early twenties,” I admitted.

“And ya now just telling us?” Rudy accused.

“Sorry. It’s not something anyone really wants to broadcast. My shrink knows about them.”

“Did he talk to you about different methods of dealing with them?” Smith asked.

“Yeah. I’m still working on them. Now can I go see Larissa and the baby?” I asked.

“I still think you should get checked by a doctor, but it is your choice,” the nurse informed me.

“If you’re gonna go, at least go in a wheelchair,” Smith said. I nodded my head. Though I felt Smith was being overprotective, I let him make me wheelchair bound. Once the commotion died down, Smith wheeled me a couple of doors down to where Larissa was. Before he knocked on the door, he bent down and took my hand. “It scared me when you passed out. I hated seeing you like that. I’m glad

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you're okay, and I want you to know you can talk to me about anything. You don't have to go through this alone. I'm with you and I love you."

"I love you too, babe," I said wrapping my arms around his broad shoulders. After knocking Smith held the door open for me and pushed me inside the room.

"I'll let you two talk. Let me know if ya'll need anything," he added before leaving.

"Max! Are you okay?" Larissa asked in a worried voice as she sat up from her lying position. She was the only one in the room.

"I'm fine. I'm really sorry. The last thing I wanted was to ruin this day for you and Ru," I apologized, wheeling myself closer to her.

"You didn't ruin anything. You scared us. I know you've been suffering from panic attacks, but I didn't realize how gnarly they were until now."

"You knew about it?"

"Yeah. I saw it happen when we ran into Tommy's wife years ago. I thought nothing of it. I assumed you would've told me if it was serious. How bad is it?"

"I get them here and there. It got worse after the accident. My shrink wants me to find ways to cope with the attacks."

"I'm guessing it's not going so well."

“No. Xanax usually works.”

“You’re taking Xanax?”

“Yeah. Don’t laugh,” I responded, as my ears turned red from embarrassment. Everyone probably thought I was nuts. I wondered how crazier they would think once they found out about me taking pills. “When... when things get a little intense I take a few pills. I should’ve had some before coming here-”

“A few pills? Max, you should only be taking Xanax, three times a day, and not more than one pill at a time.”

“Yes, Nurse Larissa,” I replied agreeing. Of course I knew that popping more than one pill at a time was a big no no but the bigger doses helped to calm me down.

“How much Xanax are you taking a day?” I tilted my head back hating that Larissa was making this about me. This was Larissa’s day and my possible pill problem was becoming the topic of conversation.

“I don’t have a drug problem, Larissa. I don’t take it every day. I take it maybe once a week or whatever-”

“Max-”

“Look I’ll talk to my shrink about it. I promise.” I wasn’t sure if I would talk to Lavarro or not about the pills. I wasn’t addicted to it. I just took more than was prescribed. “Anyways, you’re a mother. That’s dope!” I exclaimed wanting to change the subject.

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“Yeah! It is exciting. I never thought I could love anybody like I love my son. I can’t even explain it.”

“That’s great,” I said, forcing a smile, thinking how I would have known the feeling had Milo survived. “I’m sorry that I freaked out. I assumed I’d be okay, but...,” I began however drifted off. “I need more help than I thought I did. I’m getting that help with prayer and therapy. And one day I’ll be okay with everything. I don’t know when that day will be, but I’ll get there. I love you, and Ru, and Rocco and if I pull away or seem distant, don’t think it’s because there’s love lost between us.” I glanced away, hoping she would understand where I was coming from and that I wasn’t trying to hurt her.

“I understand,” Larissa said, holding my hand.

*****Chapter 14*****

May 2019

I glanced down at the address that Bobby Jr. gave me earlier in the week. I ventured off to Jersey on a Saturday to do what I've wanted to since I found out I was adopted. Slipping the piece of paper that had the address in the back of the pocket of my leather jacket, I felt my bottle of Xanax.

Just take one. A voice in my head said. I glimpsed down at the pills contemplating if I should take them or not. I didn't want to have a panic attack meeting Teresa DeSimone. But I also wanted to kick my habit of taking more than the recommended dose to ease my nerves. I talked to Dr. Lavarro more about my issues with babies and about management of my panic attacks. I left him out about me using more than prescribed. After all he probably wouldn't refill my antianxiety med if he knew I was abusing it.

"You can do this," I spoke trying to pump myself up for the meeting. I untwisted the cap and poured the rest of the meds in my hand. I took one last glance at the pills. "God, help me," I said, saying a quick prayer. I threw my fingers on my forehead, chest, left than right shoulders respectfully before I tossed them in the nearby trash bin.

I walked towards the shop, a bit proud that with the grace of God I was strong enough to not overuse them at the moment. The last thing I wanted was to abuse meds to deal with life. If I wasn't even thirty and I was already taking more than I should how was I going to carry on? I didn't want to become an addict. Yeah I was scared of what this meant regarding my panic attacks, but I was going to try my

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hardest. If I needed meds for my anxiety there were ones that I couldn't get addicted to that I could talk to Dr. Lavarò about. It didn't hurt that I knew Mama would have my butt if she knew I was misusing Xanax. I smiled at thoughts of Mama's reaction.

I continued to make my way to the shop that was located at a low key plaza that didn't have much activity. A lot of the stores were closed. The only opened ones were a jewelry shop, Chinese restaurant, and dry cleaner. Approaching the door, I took a deep breath, thinking about the techniques Dr. Lavarò and I talked about during our sessions. I felt one coming on. My view was becoming blurry and my respirations got faster and shorter. I turned away from the door.

Don't panic. Don't panic. I tried telling myself. I angled my body against the brick wall and closed my eyes. "Just breathe," I mumbled. I inhaled in through my nose and slowly let air out of my mouth. A few minutes of concentrating on changing my respiration pattern, helped to calm my nerves. I opened my eyes. I had survived an attack without flipping out.

I swung the door open of the small coffee shop. The walls were painted beige and grey. There stood the cash register in the front. There were several black and white photos of infamous places in New Jersey such as Atlantic City. There were a few booths occupied with very little customers, all of them men. Gazing at them, I wondered if they were truly customers or if they were a part of the Rizzetti crime family.

“Can I help you, doll?” an enormous man, dressed in an all-black business suit asked, coming up to me. Seeing how much of a giant he was, I walked backwards.

“I’m uhh... I’m looking for Teresa DeSimone-”

“What for?” I glanced away trying to figure out what to say. I should’ve realized it’d be much harder to get a hold of her. Teresa was on bail however she wasn’t allowed to leave the state of New Jersey.

“Business reasons.”

“Look, sweetheart, if you’re a journalist, you gotta go. Reese doesn’t talk to the press,” he replied, reaching for my arms. Realizing he was about to physically throw me out of the shop, I ducked and took a huge step back.

“Didn’t ya ma ever tell you not to lay hands on a woman.”

“My job is to protect Reese and that’s what I plan on doing,” he said in a harsher tone. “I told you to leave, *little girl*. If you won’t I will make you,” he threatened, snaking his way over to me.

“Whoa, whoa, Mister! We must’ve gotten our wires crossed. I’m not a journalist. I just wanna talk to her,” I added taking steps away from him and towards a door that had an office sign on it.

“Not gonna happen.” He ran over and grabbed my arms. About to throw me over his shoulders, I thrust my left elbow against his jaw. He grunted before holding on to me tighter. Feeling my heart accelerate, I jerked my knee hard

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against his shin. “Uggghhhh!” he exclaimed, loosening his grip. Before I had a chance to hit him again, I felt a piece of metal against the side of my stomach. “Didn’t *your* mother ever tell you to respect your elders?” he sarcastically asked.

“Don- don’t shoot! I’ll leave!” I yelled. I couldn’t believe I was being held at gunpoint. As if being held by knife point wasn’t enough.

“Hey, Big Jim, back off. She’s just a girl,” one of the wise guys said, getting up from the table. I rolled my eyes. Now he wanted to say something. He could’ve done so minutes ago.

“I don’t care. My job is to protect Reese at all cost,” he added, jamming the gun into my side. I grimaced from the pain. This is not how I wanted it all to end. Shot dead at barely twenty-seven for trying to meet my biological mother.

“You shoot her, you’re a dead man.” I looked over in confusion. There was Shifty Louie standing in the middle of the shop pointing his pistol at Big Jim. I sighed in relief, thankful that Louie was overprotective. “I don’t think Reese would take it so well if she found out ya off’d her first born.” Big Jim immediately released me and slipped his weapon in his back pants.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” he apologized. I brushed off my shoulders as I looked over to Louie in surprise. What was he doing here? Did he follow me or was he affiliated with Teresa’s criminal organization? I had so many questions but held off.

“As you should be. Now be a *good little boy* and tell Reese she’s got a visitor,” Louie added. Right before Big Jim had the chance to head over to the office, Louie lobbed his arm around Big Jim’s neck. “You do as much as look at her the wrong way, I will make it my personal business to get rid of ya!” he added, choking him. Seeing his face and neck turn red, I grabbed onto Louie’s arm, attempting to pull him off. I didn’t want him harming anyone, especially for my name’s sake. “*Got it?*” he said through his teeth. Louie gave him one last squeeze before shoving him. Big Jim stumbled back and held onto his neck, trying to catch his breath.

“Got it, sir,” he said, making his way to the office in pain.

“You okay?” Louie asked.

“I’m fine,” I replied in a low voice, realizing we just put on a show for everyone at the shop. Probably having seen worse, they hardly budged.

“Reese is ready to see you,” Big Jim announced holding the door open. I anxiously walked into the simplistic office. Teresa- excuse me Reese was sitting on a chair behind her wooden desk going through a couple of papers in a file. She wore her loose curly dark hair down against her tan skin. She had on a chic red Calvin Klein dress with black and gold Tom Ford open toe stilettos.

“Hi, Max,” she said, without looking up. She penned a few more notes before shutting her folder. “Take a seat,” she added, pulling off her Gucci reading glasses. I slid down on the padded chair, mind racing, trying to figure out where to begin. I had so much to say, however, nothing came

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out when I opened my mouth. I kept quiet hoping she would take the lead. "I'm sure you've got many questions for me. So fire away," she added, noticing my hesitation. I glanced at my mother, trying to take it all in. We both shared homogenous round shaped faces. Her nose was also on the long side just as mine. Though we didn't have similar eye color, the shapes of our eyes were alike.

"Ever since I found out I was adopted, I always thought about how it would be meeting my biological parents for the first time. Who would've thought it would be in the middle of the night at a park?" I finally mustered the courage to say.

"I'm sorry about that. I had a meeting that night in Brooklyn. Afterwards, I saw you walking in the park. I knew it was a risk coming up to you, but I took a chance. I thought maybe you'd sense who I was. I know it's stupid."

"It's not stupid."

"I even contemplated telling you the truth that night, but you were consumed in your own problems and I didn't want to drop a bomb on you. And because of my own selfishness, I almost got you killed," she said in remorse.

"You saved me that night." I didn't want her feeling guilty for yearning to reconcile with her estranged daughter. It made me feel good to know that she wanted to meet me.

"I brought those goons over by talking to you. I was pretty much cleaning up drama that follows me almost everywhere I go."

“You sound like my boyfriend.”

“The black guy in law school.”

“Louie told you. What does he spy on me for you?” I asked offended.

“He’s specific job in this business is to look out for you. I hired him before you turned one. I had your Ma convince Rudy to employ him at his garage.”

“So he was employed by Rudy just to protect me. He’s like a brother to me. It’s unsettling that he was paid to be close,” I admitted, upset that Louie was after all a part of the mob.

“He cares about you, Max. I trust him with your life and-”

“So you had to hire some wise guy to find out everything about me. You didn’t have the guts to inquire yourself?”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“Were you trying to protect me when you gave me up over twenty-seven years ago?”

“Yes. Actually I was.”

“Yeah, okay,” I sarcastically responded, crossing my arms. I bitterly looked away from her to a map of New Jersey she had on her wall. Reese infuriated me. She seemed to have an answer for everything. What would her excuse be about giving up on me? “When I first found out I was

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pregnant I wasn't thrilled and I admit I considered my options. But when I saw my baby on that monitor during my ultrasound, I fell in love. There was not even an ounce of me that wanted to give up on my kid. How could I? He didn't ask to be born. I didn't care that I was gonna be a single mother. All I cared was about loving him. It's sad that people who can't even love their kids have them and those who do lose them," I raged on, unable to control my temper.

"If you expect me to apologize for trying to protect you by giving you up, I won't. I did it to keep you safe. My life was dangerous then and it still is now."

"Why did I come here?" I muttered, abruptly getting up from my seat. "My bad for wasting your time, *Mom*," I sarcastically added in fury. I came here to finally connect with my birth mother and all I got was a gun to my side and a lady full of bull. I could be doing other things like spending time with my loved ones or studying for my finals.

"Wait," she started. I ignored her and reached over to the door handle. Before I had a chance to push it open, I felt her warm hand over mine. For years, I've yearned for my mother's touch and here I was in her office, pissed at her. I kept my hand in hers, trying to capture the feeling of being held by my birth parent. "Please. Let me explain myself." I turned around and let go of her hand. Giving her another chance, I slanted against the door and folded my arms.

"It was never safe. My father and his associates tried to shun me away from all of the violence that comes with this so called glamorous life. However, I still witnessed murders from being in the wrong place at the wrong time growing up. I was threatened many times just because of

who my father was. I was brought up spoiled, with the motto that if I wanted something, get it, no matter the means. When my dad found out I was pregnant, he was pissed and ashamed 'cause I was only seventeen and since I was having a baby by an African American. He was also scared of what would happen had his enemies caught wind about me being with child. I never wanted that life for you, especially since your father was a part of a rival gang.”

“Is my dad still alive?”

She lowered her head and gulped. “Jerel- that was his name, he um... he was gunned down three years after you were born,” she replied tapping her fingers against the desk. I nodded my head sad about not getting a chance to form a relationship with him. It wasn't fair I never got to know him especially since he was the reason I was half black, a side of me I only started to truly embrace a few years ago. I wondered what he looked like, about his personality, and if we shared similar qualities. How much was I like him? Or did Reese and I have more in common?

“Who killed him? Was it you?”

“Of course not. We were madly in love 'til the day he died, and I cared about him deeply. He grew up in the streets and was pulled into the gang life at a young age, but he always wanted to leave that lifestyle.”

“Then why didn't he?”

“Once you're in, you can't just get out. When he tried to disassociate himself from the gang, the leaders wouldn't let him. He knew too much and they thought he was planning to cooperate with the Feds. So they put a hit

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out on him. He was ambushed at a local diner on Valentine's Day...I was with Jerel that night. Watched him take his last breath," she revealed in a shaky voice. "I'll spare you the details on how it happened."

She paused, taking a breath. She covered her face before running her fingers that shook through her luscious dark hair. I watched her a bit surprised. She was just as nervous as I was about this meeting. It kind of made her a little vulnerable, more human. I uncrossed my arms, letting her know I was listening and was trying to understand. "Max, I could've given you diamonds, mansions, private schools, luxurious vacations and everything else money could buy. I think that I'd even be a decent mom, but what held me back were the things I witnessed growing up. I wanted you to have a better life than me. I wasn't going to be able to keep you safe so I did what I had to do to protect you. I would never put you in the line of fire." She irresolutely played with her hands before taking mine for the second time. "Giving you up for adoption wasn't because I didn't love you enough. I loved you enough to let you go," she whispered with tears in her eyes. She held onto my face as her lips trembled.

I swung my arms around my mother's body and broke down. I don't know what got me. Maybe it was her opening up to me or perhaps her confession about her love for me, a love I never thought I'd experience from my birth parents.

January 2020

“Trains go choo, choo!” I said toying with the vehicle. Rocco joyfully yelped in front of me on the hefty beige rug. “Yay!” I exclaimed as we both clapped together. After Rocco joined me clapping, I kissed his forehead. “You’re so cute,” I said, playing with his dark curls. Rocco had Larissa’s big brown eyes, Ru’s smile, and Larissa’s nose.

I was babysitting for Ru and Larissa while they worked. It took me a couple of months to become comfortable around Rocco after he was born. However, with the help of my shrink, I was able to do it. We started off slow. I began with seeing him, holding him, spending a few minutes with him, and progressively, I would spend more time with him. The point was for me to ease into having a relationship with children while dealing with my feelings of losing Milo.

There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think about my son, but I was no longer letting his death affect my relationships with others in a negative way. I was thankful that I chose this route because I couldn’t imagine not having Rocco in my life. It didn’t hurt that I was his Godmother.

Rocco pulled away from me to roll his train on top of the rug of the floor as he crawled. I grabbed a yellow toy Chevrolet and wheeled it with my hands over to him while I crawled alongside him. Reaching the edge of the coffee table, he dropped his toy and began to pull himself up, with the help of the furniture. “Be careful, Rocco,” I said, getting up from the floor. I rolled my grey sweats up and tugged on Smith’s Morehouse hoodie that I was wearing. While I

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closely watched him, I pulled my natural hair into a high bun.

Rocco was able to stand for several seconds by himself and for much longer if he had something to hold him up. Rocco looked at me for a second before he stood up. “Stay right there,” I added, hearing the phone ring. I ran over to the landline phone in the kitchen and answered, “Hello...Stupid telemarketers,” I mumbled hanging up on the automated voice of a loan agency.

Hearing Rocco cry out I dropped the phone on the table and raced over to a tearful Rocco on the floor. His big brown eyes got even bigger as the tears rolled out. He shrieked as he held his mouth wide open. “It’s okay, sweetie,” I said, swooping to pick him up. After doing a quick visual assessment, I sighed in relief, realizing he wasn’t hurt from his fall. I rocked him back and forth to soothe him before kissing his forehead. “All better?” He nodded and snuggled his head against my chest. I smiled, enjoying his warm soft touch. I wondered how much more love I would have for Milo. I brushed the sadden thought of a three years old Milo running around the apartment.

My head turned when I heard the sound of keys opening the front door. “Hey, fiancé,” I said, giving Smith a kiss as soon as he stepped inside. Though we had been together for a couple of years, my heart still did a couple of summersaults just by seeing him. I played with my emerald engagement ring Smith presented me with a few months ago after a candle lit dinner and cheesecake at his place. We weren’t cohabitating however we were over each other’s places so much it was like we were.

Smith loosened his forest green tie and unfastened a couple of buttons before throwing his sleeves up. I took his suit jacket and placed it in the coat closet.

“Hi, fiancée. Hey, buddy,” Smith said with a grin. As he gave Rocco’s shoulder a tiny squeeze, I saw his right eyebrow lift up higher than his left. “Having fun with Zia Max, huh,” he added, taking Rocco away from me. I smiled, seeing how well he was with kids. Whenever we babysat, he was always hands on helping. There was no doubt he was going to be an amazing father one day.

After playfully, yet safely tossing him up in the air a couple of times, he kept Rocco in his arms as he handed me my mail. I tossed the smaller envelopes on the coffee table and ripped open the larger one in excitement. “I got in!” I exclaimed jumping on the couch after reading the congratulations at the beginning of the letter. Smith and Rocco laughed as I did a little dance on the sofa before jumping off. “Zia Max just got into nursing school,” I told Rocco, squeezing his cute chubby cheeks. I was happy that all my hard work paid off. In two more years, I would be a nurse.

“That’s what I’m talking about, boo!” Smith said, giving me a high five. “We’re celebrating tonight,” he said winking at me.

“Oh tonight it’s on,” I said in a seductive voice as I danced with my hips for a few seconds.

“We celebrate too much, we may end up with one of our own,” he said giving me a look like he wanted me.

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“Maybe,” I said in a grin before picking up the rest of the mail. “But that’ll have to wait after I come back from the nursing home.”

“That’s right. How are you feeling about directing the choir?”

“It gives me a chance to sing again without any pressure. As you know I don’t wanna be famous, but I love to sing, and I feel a connection to the nursing home my ma used to live. I’m gonna teach them the song “Way Maker” by Sinach,” I revealed. I took on a volunteer position as a choir director at the nursing home recently. Every once in a while it made me sad going to the same place she died but most times I was content knowing there were programs for the patients there to help them live the best rest of their lives.

“That’s your favorite worship song. I’m sure they’ll love it. Let me know how it goes.” Smith placed Rocco back on the ground and began to play with him on the floor. I happily glanced at them wondering if Smith and I would have kids in the future. He would bring up the topic of having children occasionally. I was much more comfortable talking about the possibility of starting our own family and becoming a mother now more than ever.

“How was the internship?”

“It was alright. They are starting up the case against Reese. I can’t join since it’s a conflict of interest,” he informed me as he and Rocco began to make a tower made of Legos.

“I’m glad you won’t be on the case. That’d be really uncomfortable,” I told him, sitting down on the couch.

Reese was being accused of first degree murder. I know that she did a lot of bad things in her life, some hard to forgive, however she was still my biological mother. Of course I didn't want her to get locked up; however there were consequences to her actions. Still to this day, we couldn't agree on Reese. Though Smith didn't think it was safe for me to be around her, he respected my choice of choosing to have a relationship with her. Ever since Reese and I spoke in her office, we met up at least once a month in a discrete location in hopes to get to know each other.

"I agree." He picked up Rocco's toy motorcycle and toyed with the front wheel while he intensely stared at it. "You ever want to go back to how things used to be?"

"You miss riding?"

"Yeah. I haven't gotten on a motorcycle since the accident years ago. I can't believe riding used to be such a huge part of my life and now it's not," he spoke, placing the toy down. "I wish I could get on my bike again. Just for fun though."

"You're not eighty, babe. You can still ride," I added, coming onto the floor. I slipped my hands on his back and leaned my head against his shoulder. "But next time you go, I'm coming with you."

"Is that right?" he asked grinning. He tugged my hips, pulling me onto his lap before kissing me. Remembering that Rocco was right there, I giggled. I held onto his bigger hands and sank into him, allowing, his strong yet warm self to comfortably hold me.

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“To answer your question, no. I’m exactly where I want to be. In your arms,” I added, gazing into his soulful brown eyes.