

## Chapter Forty-One

One morning, Maeve entered Max's room and said, "We're going into town, today."

"Wow. Sounds like a big step up in my progress."

"Well, Doc thinks you're capable, and so do I. Besides...I have some shopping to do."

The confidences buoyed him, so he slapped his thighs, stood up and said, "Okay, then. Who am I to say no to a little shopping?"

They made it with no trouble, just as Doc had predicted when Maeve had asked about the possibility. Max looked around at all the people and commented, "It's strange."

"Have you never seen a small town, before?"

“No, not that. I find it strange that not as many people as I expected actually have red hair. I mean, you think of Ireland, you think redheads.”

“Oh, my goodness,” she playfully chastised. “Not *everyone* of Irish blood has red hair. Haven’t you ever seen U2? I mean, I could ask why you aren’t always eating a triple cheeseburger while wearing an American flag baseball hat?”

Max laughed. “*Touché.*”

As they wove their way through the bustling main thoroughfare, Maeve occasionally stopped them at a shop or a vendor on the street, slowly filling her wicker shopping basket. It didn’t escape the attention of either of them that some in the crowd and the stores were giving them odd looks or sideways glances.

“We seem to be attracting attention,” Max finally observed.

“I was hoping you didn’t notice.”

An older woman carrying a basket filled with vegetables quickly diverted her gaze when Max’s eyes locked with hers. “You know, it’s like they’ve never seen an American who was shot twice on a yacht, left for dead in the ocean and retrieved by a local fisherman, before.”

Maeve laughed, maybe a little too loudly, and said, “I know exactly how to fix this.”

Ben and his crew had recently pulled up to their dock. Liam and Kieran were lashing the boat, while Ben and Finbar were prepping the day’s haul. Maeve guided Max toward the dock. When they got close enough for both Ben and the crowd around them to hear, she waved and called out, “Hello, Dad!”

Ben looked up and waved back. “Hello, Darling Daughter! Hello to you, too, Max! Out doing a bit of shopping, I see?!”

She held up the basket. “Yes! I needed some things for Sunday dinner, along with a few odds and ends!”

“Well, don’t let me keep you two! I’ll see you at home!”

“See you then! Bye, Dad!”

“Bye, Maeve! Bye, Max!”

“Goodbye, Ben!” Max returned. He thought he even saw Ben wink at Maeve, but he couldn’t be sure from that distance.

Their walk to O’Reilly’s was more pleasant, with the stares replaced by smiles, even a casual, “Good day,” here and there.

When they sat at the table in the pub, Max realized he’d been looking forward to getting off his feet for a little while. He still felt stronger by the passing minute, but the trip to town was pushing him close to his limit. So, the rest was going to do him good.

Maeve had noticed the relief in his face. “Would you like me to go up to the bar?”

“That would be great. If you don’t mind, of course.”

She smiled and said, “Not at all. What would you like?”

Max placed a finger on his chin in a thoughtful manner, hemmed and hawed a little before finally saying, “I’m thinking something sweet, like a tequila sunrise or a sea breeze.”

Maeve's jaw dropped and Max let out a hearty laugh. "Only kidding, but you should see your face. I'll just take a pint of whatever's darkest."

When she returned, Maeve smiled and commented, "Dinny said he can probably scrounge up the ingredients for a cosmopolitan if you really wanted."

Max glanced over at the bar and saw the bartender hold up a bottle of something red and—based on the lack of movement when the bottle was shaken—probably congealed. Max gave Dinny a no-thank-you wave.

They sipped their beers and chatted. Eventually, Maeve said, "I think it might finally be time to hear your story, Max Calvert."

He set his beer on the table. "I was wondering when the subject would come up again." He took a deep breath and asked, "Where should I start? My childhood?"

Maeve nodded. "It's where I did."

"Well, I grew up in West Des Moines, Iowa, a suburb of the state's capitol city, Des Moines..."

Max told her all about his upbringing, which inevitably led to talking about Rich and Vanessa. He moved on to his time in the service and, while he left out the more gruesome details—as well as those still classified—it was in the middle of this portion when he realized just how easy it was to talk to Maeve. He had feared opening up, but her kind nature allowed him to let it all flow out, like a verbal Kerouac novel. He stopped after telling her about buying the farmhouse, his voice trailing away as his mind returned to the land of concealment.

It didn't stay there long.

Maeve looked him in the eyes and inquired, “Does this have to do with your friends?”

“In a way...yeah.”

“You can tell me if you want. Or not. That’s up to you.”

“I do. I really want to. It’s...”

“Maybe I can help a little? There’s something I’ve been wondering about since the funeral. What did you mean when you said you knew they were truly gone?”

He’d left out their criminal activities when talking about them earlier, so he started there, then paraphrased what they had told him in Toronto and, before very long, she knew everything, his entire journey to reach that moment he woke up to find her reading to him.

She sat there, not saying a word. Max began to feel his ears get warm with the fear that he’d said too much, that he’d frightened her. He closed his eyes, hoping she would still be in her seat when he opened them.

Then, he felt her gather his hands into her own. He opened his eyes to see her smiling, her eyes glistening with tears. “It’s okay,” was all she said, and they sat like that, in silence, for what felt like a blissful eternity.

Max had made the midnight strolls to Rich’s grave a regular thing, so regular he was certain Doc knew he was leaving the house in the middle of the night. The first few visits after that initial time, Max would still cry but, as the days passed, he no longer felt the need. He would sit on the ground and talk with his best friend.

Tonight, the grass was damp with the residue of an early evening storm. He was sitting, as had become his habit, at the foot of the grave, looking at the cross.

“Hey, buddy. How ya been?” he began. “Me? I’m doing well, all things. Today was...interesting, to say the least. First of all, you’d be proud of me. I made it all the way to town, even walked around it for a while. Maeve had to do some shopping...”

He told Rich about the town and the people, about how they didn’t seem to take too kindly to her and him walking together, about how, as Max put it, “...she did the coolest thing to get their approval...” and about their talk in the pub.

“It was almost like I was with you guys, again. The way it was so easy to talk to her, how I really, truly wanted her to know everything. Hell, I almost mentioned a couple of the assignments I was on that are still considered classified. Not that it probably would’ve mattered all the way out here. I doubt it would get back to anyone of importance who would want to silence us, but I definitely don’t want to take that chance. Not with her.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

For the residents of Drumdowney, the sight of Maeve and Max walking together, holding hands as they went, had become a regular sight over the past few months. They hardly even noticed the couple, anymore, at least not in the way they initially had. Within a couple weeks after their first sighting, the entire town knew that the walks were part of The Stranger's—despite knowing his actual name, some still thought of him that way—rehabilitation, so the frequency made more sense.

Situated on the clifftop at the edge of town was Overlook Bench. It was a commemorative bench dedicated back in 1976 in memory of Fergus and Patricia Mahoney. It's said the Mahoney's would walk down to this very spot every evening, spread out a blanket and watch the sunset, and they did this for their entire sixty-two years of marriage, until his death.

Patricia continued the tradition, and as her own health began to fail, she wrote the funds to construct the bench into her will. Maeve had told Max this tale the first night she brought him to Overlook Bench.

“What a beautiful story,” he responded. He turned his gaze to the setting sun and asked, “Do you think they’re smiling down on us, seeing their special spot used in that way again?”

“Well, there *is* a local legend about the bench.”

He looked at her with amused suspicion. “And what does the legend say?”

“It holds that if a couple observes the Mahoney’s tradition in the early days of their courtship, they will be together at least as long as the Mahoney’s were.”

Max pulled Maeve closer and said, “Now, that’s the kind of legend I can get behind.”

Needless to say, they observed the tradition every night, watching the sunset while wrapped in a blanket and each other’s arms.

“I guess you’ve figured it out, by now, buddy.” Max said to Rich one night. “I’m in love. She’s so amazing. So down to earth, yet almost an angel. I know, you probably think it’s that Florence Nightingale effect or something, but I swear it’s real. The only thing I hate about all this is that you and V never got to meet her.”

He paused and imagined what a nice dinner between the four of them would’ve been like. The warmth. The joy. The laughter. The love.

“I’m telling you, man, I may never want to leave.”

Talking with Rich seemed to do the trick for Max. He had been nightmare-free since beginning the occasional excursions.

Then, two nights after telling Rich he didn’t want to leave, his mind played a nasty trick on him. The dream replaying the moments on the yacht returned, with Moone killing Rich, Moone shooting Max and him drowning instead of surviving. He woke to find his heart palpitating, his clothes and sheets drenched with his sweat.

The same happened again the next night.

And the night after that.

Then, the following night, it got even worse.

Moone lifted his gun and fired.

When Max looked at his dying friend, it was now Maeve.

Unable to compel himself to wake, he was forced to watch her bleed to death on the yacht’s deck.

When he woke, he had to talk to Rich, to see if it helped rid his subconscious of this horror.

“What the hell does this mean?” he asked Rich after relating the nightmare. “I was having a hard enough time coping with reliving *your* death, now *this* is piled onto it? Is my mind trying

to tell me something or warn me about something? Do I have to worry about Moone finding me?  
Or killing Maeve?”

He put his face in his hands. For the first time in months, he cried.

He was forced to watch Maeve die three more times. After that final time, he trudged out to Rich’s grave and informed his friend, “I know what I probably need to do. But...I’m scared.”

Maeve had been feeling Max get distant for about a week.

One evening, while on Overlook Bench, she watched his face as he watched the sunset. She could tell he was somewhere else in his mind.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

He kept his gaze straight ahead. “I was hoping it wasn’t obvious.”

She summoned up the courage to take the next step. “Is it about us?”

“No. And yes. Yet, I also don’t know.”

“Whatever it is, I wish you would tell me. Please.”

He looked down into her big hazel eyes. Something within them always made his heart swell. He kissed her and said, “I...never want to keep...anything from you. Ever.”

“And I never want you to think you have to.”

Max took a deep breath and told her about his nightmares, and the worries they'd instilled deep within him. She didn't know what to say, so they sat in silence. She looked up at him again, his face stone cold as he watched the last sliver of sun disappear and the whitecaps turn a dark grey in the moon's light.

"You have to go back, don't you?" she asked.

He eventually nodded, and replied, "I think I do. I have this suspicion it will haunt me forever if I don't. I think I really need to at least try to do something about these apparently unresolved feelings I've pushed down inside me."

"I understand."

He looked at her with surprise. "Do you? Really?"

She thought about it for a moment, then said, "No. Not really. I'm sorry. I don't think I could ever understand that side of your life. The secrecy. The crimes. The violence. It's all so...so not the man I know."

He reached over and lightly ran his fingers down her cheek. "It was me. Once. Might still be, in some way. I don't want it to be, anymore, but I'm not certain it's completely purged from my soul. Not yet. I think this might be how I figure that out."

When he returned to Doc's, he walked slowly back to talk to Rich.

"I finally know what I have to do. For one particular part of it, though, I need to ask your forgiveness, brother."

He sat down with Doc and Ben the next day and explained everything. They weren't sold that his plan was the best idea, but Max assured them, "I can't be the person I want to be, or that Maeve deserves, if I don't travel this last road."

He explained what he needed from the two of them, since he didn't think he was physically up to the task, quite yet.

He walked into town and popped into the antique shop. He found exactly what he was looking for, paid Mrs. McShane and carefully transported it back to Tully Farm.

There, waiting for him, was Ben, Doc, Maeve...and Rich. He was wrapped in burlap, lying upon the old picnic table from Ben's barn. Doc was holding a makeshift torch, made from a tree branch with a rag wrapped around one end. Max could smell the kerosene as Doc handed it to him.

"Everything's ready," Doc told him.

Max set the vase he'd purchased on the ground.

Ben handed him a lighter.

The torch blazed bright.

Max simply laid it on Rich's body.

After the fire had burned itself out, Ben helped him gather the cremains into the vase.

They packaged it so it was well protected. Max addressed it to his home, and Maeve promised to mail it for him.

Borrowing Doc's cellphone, Max made the call. After several attempts, George finally answered.

## Chapter Forty-Three

“What were ya doin’ in bloody Ireland?”

Max had kept the initial call quick, telling George to round up Sean and be ready to meet in two nights at Sean’s gym.

“Recuperating.” He lifted his shirt to show the scars.

“Jesus,” George responded. “What the hell happened?”

“To start with, I was flown to a yacht about three hundred miles west of Ireland.”

“Whose yacht?” George asked.

“I’ll get to that in a minute.” Max proceeded to tell about Rich being there and about the yacht’s owner shooting them and falling into the water and waking up in a doctor’s exam room.

Then he talked about how he got to the doc's, according to the fishermen who found him, and how he spent the time getting his strength back. He left out all the names and details, especially anything involving Maeve. It wasn't that he didn't trust his friends. He simply felt the less people who knew the major details, the better for the people of Drumdowney.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you go alone." George commented.

"Then ya'd probably be as dead as his friend," Sean said. "There's no tellin' if ya'd've survived, too. Sounds like it was pure luck he did."

"Exactly," Max said. "Even more so when you consider that the owner of the yacht is...Sylvester Moone."

It took a moment for that to sink in for George, but Sean instantly blurted out, "Bullshit!"

Max shook his head. "I had the same thought, at first."

George was dazed, his brain trying to process this information that contradicted every ounce of logic he knew to be true. "No...that's not...possible."

"Trust me. He *really* exists."

Max filled them in on why Moone had been after Rich and Vanessa, how if anyone would know if the man was real it was them, and that Rich had confirmed it to Max personally.

"Well," Sean finally responded after a long moment of silence from them all, "that sure fucks my worldview more ways than the Kama Sutra."

George looked up at Max with concern. "Is that the reason for all the secrecy?"

“Yes. I can’t be sure that Moone believes me to be dead. He might be keeping a lookout for any sign of life. I need to soar under the radar, for the time being, which is going to cause some small problems, initially.”

“How so?” George asked.

Max couldn’t believe he was about to say what he was about to say. “I need to somehow get to Geneva to see my forger. After that, I should be golden. Just, getting there will be tricky without my old fakes.”

“Ah, that’s no problem, mate,” Sean said. “Y’re talkin’ to *the man*. I can get a sugar cube from the Prime Minister’s pantry and place it in the Queen’s tea without anyone bein’ the wiser. Geneva’s no sweat.”

“Great! And now I also know who to go to for my sweetener needs, too.”

George wrung his hands together. “I’m afraid to ask what the rest of the plan is.”

“You mean the part where I say I’m going to take down Sylvester Moone?”

“That’s the part.”

Around midnight, they all went their separate ways, clear on their roles. Max spent the night on the couch in Sean’s office, so not to attract much attention, and to be there the next day, ready for his trip to Geneva. Max gave Sean some cash and asked him to pick up a burner phone on his way back in the morning.

Sean was true to his word. In the few hours between meetings, he had arranged to slip Max onto a FedEx flight, even getting him a uniform so he looked the part. By noon, Max's feet were on Swiss soil.

He changed clothes in an airport bathroom stall, then caught a cab into downtown. He found a nice-looking wine shop, asked the employee for a good recommendation.

When the door to his apartment swung open, Leonz yelled, "*Mon ami!*" He went in for the hug so hard it almost knocked Max off his feet. "So glad to see you're alive!" Max was surprised how much strength the old man possessed. When he broke the hug, Leonz held Max at arm's length and said, "Let me look at you. You look thinner, maybe. Or, at least, 'less.' Yes, that is the word for it. Anyway, come in, come in. Get out of that hallway."

Max shut the door behind him, then presented the bag with the wine. "I come bearing gifts."

Leonz removed the bottle and looked over the label. "Very nice. You know your wines."

"More like the lady at the shop does."

"No matter, as long as someone does, no? Let me get glasses." He went to the kitchen. "I was so worried when your friend called, asking about you. What's his name?"

"George?"

Leonz re-entered the room. "Yes! Sounded like a very nice man. Cares for you a lot, I can tell." He poured the wine and they sat. "Now, tell me, what brings you by? Other than to prove you're alive."

"A few things. First, and most important, I have some bad news."

It was one of the most difficult conversations Max ever had.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Max spent the next few nights on another couch, Leonz's. During the days he checked out the sights he didn't get around to the last time. Once the forger was finished with the new ID's and had acquired new credit cards, Max packed up to leave.

“Thank you, again, for your hospitality, Leonz.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Max pulled out his wallet. “How much do I owe you for this round?”

Leonz placed his hand on the wallet and pushed it back down. “Just...be careful. This journey you are on sounds more like a suicide mission.”

Max returned his wallet to his pocket. He mulled over Leonz's words and said, "You might be right. Though, I have faith in myself and my friends, and sometimes that's all one needs to see themselves through a difficult task."

They shook hands, and Leonz pulled Max in for a goodbye hug, saying, "I sincerely hope you are right, my friend."

When Max landed in Des Moines, he wasn't at all surprised to find his car had been towed from the long-term lot. He was too exhausted from all the flying to worry about it right then, so he grabbed a taxi. When it dropped him off at his house, he stood there for a moment, taking it all in. The place looked comfortably familiar, and he was glad to be back, yet...it didn't feel like *home*.

He walked to the porch and set his bag on the steps. Then he walked around the house's perimeter, looking it over, scanning up and down the building. When he got to the backyard, he paused and stared at the barn before heading to it and entering. He walked around inside, running his fingers over various pieces of the equipment. It all felt almost ghostly.

Back at the house, he picked up his bag and gathered the small pile of mail off his doormat. Obviously, the mailman—a nice old man named Bob Smoot, who had been doing the job for some forty-odd years—had noticed the box at the road getting full, so he'd begun bringing it up to the porch. Good thing Max didn't normally get a lot of mail, in the first place, so the pile wasn't too large. He could usually go more than a week without checking the box and be good. It was practically all junk, anyway.

The desolateness of the house's interior helped flip the necessary switch, and he finally knew why he felt the way he did. He'd spent so much time being alone out here on the farm, unintentionally isolating himself, that he hadn't realized how much he missed being around people. He'd just spent the majority of a year interacting with all kinds of people, most of them new to his life, which now made his former existence seem like a mere memory.

He went to his bedroom and unpacked. The morning he left Ireland Maeve gave him a framed picture of her. She'd had her father take it the day before so she could run to town and get a nice frame for it. Max had safely tucked it in the middle of his clothes, and it was the first thing he reached for after unzipping the bag. He could almost hear the breeze that had caused a lock of hair to angle across her forehead.

After unpacking, he went down to the kitchen and, from a drawer next to the fridge, retrieved the pad of paper he usually used to make his grocery list. He sat and did some calculating, figuring out what supplies he was going to eventually need. Then he made a sweep of his premises, placing a check next to everything he already had, and a "GS" note next to the items he'd need from George.

The next day, he took a cab to the impound lot, paid for his car and went shopping for the rest of his supplies. Also, for groceries, since he discovered every bit of food in the place either smelled sour or was greener and fuzzier than Oscar the Grouch.

A week later, the package from Ireland arrived.

Max drove up to Frank and Sarah's. For the first time since his early teens, he knocked.

"Oh, my heavens," Sarah exclaimed when she saw him. "We've been so worried something happened to you." She gave him the biggest and warmest hug, and he had to force himself not to tear up. *Not yet*, he told himself. "Where have you been, young man?"

"It's a very, *very* long story."

He gave Frank a big hug as Sarah went to the kitchen. She returned with a can of cola—store brand, of course—and said, "Sit. Sit. Tell us everything." She seemed not to have noticed the box in his hands, which he set on the floor next to the chair, and that was alright with him. He needed to build up to it.

He'd thought the conversation with Leonz was difficult. It was nothing compared to shattering the illusions of Gram and Gramps. Instead of leaving out details, this time Max spilled it all. If Moone wanted to try to get any information from these two, he'd be wasting his time. They'd both lived long and fulfilled lives. They wouldn't be afraid of dying, not if it meant keeping Max and anyone he cared about safe.

Sarah sat in silence the whole time, listening, never once interrupting with any questions.

When he described what went down in Toronto, a few tears rolled down their cheeks.

When he told them about holding Rich as he died, more tears came from Sarah, and Frank openly wept.

He gave them a moment to recover before continuing.

When he talked about Ireland and his recovery, he saw a single tear fall from Sarah's right eye.

When it came to the moment, Max opened the box and removed the vase. "I had Ben and Doc help me with this. I figured it would make it easier to get him back here if he was cremated." He held out the vase to Sarah. "Here you are."

She stared at it for a long time, long enough for Max to begin feeling the weight. Finally, she shook her head and said, "That's very sweet, dear, but no thank you."

Max was stunned. "I'm sorry?"

Sarah reached out and placed her hands on the vase. "Listen, it's a beautiful gesture, and it touches me deeply. But, you see, we made peace with his death long ago. For us, Rich is buried at the cemetery, despite whoever's in the ground under his tombstone.

"That's ridiculous, Gram. He should be here with you two. He belongs here."

"Really, it's fine, and I don't feel it will do either of us any good to have a reminder here in the house. I think you should keep it, and I think Frank would agree."

Max looked over to the old man, who nodded.

"I'm not..." Max said. "I don't..."

Sarah smiled. "Tell you what. I think I have an idea, but you'll need to drive."

Twenty minutes later, Sarah was on her hands and knees in front of Rich's tombstone. Using a trowel, she peeled away a chunk of sod then dug a hole in the dirt. She reached toward the vase in Max's hands, and he handed it over to her. She shook out about half the contents into the hole, then refilled it.

“There,” she said as she stood, brushing the grass from her skirt, “now he’s where he should be.” She handed the vase back to Max. “And now he’s *also* where he belongs.” Sarah stood up on her toes, gave him a peck on the cheek, patted the spot and walked back to the car.

Max stayed for a few more minutes. “There you go, buddy. I got you home.”

As they drove away from the cemetery, Sarah turned to Max and said, “Now...tell me about this woman in Ireland.”

## Chapter Forty-Five

One of the things Max had asked George and Sean to do was to keep an ear out for any reference to a man named Alphonse, or any last-minute requests for helicopter landing permission. “I got the impression this was a regular part of his duties for Moone,” Max said at their meeting. “He’ll be our best inroad.”

A little over a month had passed since that day, and during that time both George and Sean had had near misses, getting info with too little time to react. If all the tips had all been this Alphonse guy, then he was slippery...and smart. He knew exactly where he could get in and out quickly, leaving little to no trace.

One afternoon, Sean got a call from his friend Nico. “Remember putting out word looking for copter landings?”

“Yeah. Ya got somthin’ for me?”

“Someone’s requested passage to a private rooftop pad in Brussels for three hours from now.”

Sean checked his watch. Just enough time. “Perfect! Thanks, Nico. Text me the address, will, ya? And your Venmo.” He shot out of his office, yelling, “Team One! Go time!”

They convoyed in Jeeps to Sean’s own private airfield north of London, where he kept two of Airbus’ fastest helicopters. On the way, he called another friend at Brussels Airport.

“Theo, it’s Sean. I need the usual.”

“You’ve got it, *amigo*.”

They were only going to need one copter, and it was fueled and ready when they got to the airfield. By the time the team was in the air, it had only been twenty minutes since Nico’s call, and the flight would take less than two hours.

When they landed, Theo had SUVs ready for them next to the helipad, and he’d arranged for them to slip out a gate without going through any inspections. Or as it was nicknamed: the usual. Sean punched the building’s address into the GPS the instant he was in his truck, and they raced into the heart of downtown. Traffic was heavy, but their vehicles were heavier, and they were able to forcibly persuade the other cars to allow them passage.

When they arrived at the location, they hopped the curb and blocked the entrance with their vehicles. People walking by scattered as the men in tactical gear piled out of the SUVs. Sean heard the familiar rotor sound as he climbed out, looked up and saw the helicopter arriving. “Plenty of time still! Let’s go!”

Since it was quicker, and only 25 stories, they took the stairs. Sean stopped at the door to the roof and listened. The copter’s engine was winding down, and he could just barely make out voices, though not what they were saying. He opened the door a crack and saw two people. One was obviously the pilot, and one was obviously not.

“Two men,” he stage-whispered to his men. “The douche in the suit is who we want.”

The readied themselves, and on Sean’s count of three they burst through the door, instantly spreading out in a fan pattern.

“Everyone down!” Sean yelled.

The pilot drew a gun from a side holster. He was taken down by shots from two of Sean’s men before he could even get it pointed in their direction.

The man in the suit raised his hands in surrender, getting down on his knees.

Sean quickly moved to him while the rest kept their guns trained on the man. He zip tied the man’s hands behind his back, then patted him down, first removing a 9mm from a shoulder holster—which he tucked in his own belt—then removing the wallet he found in the right inner pocket of the man’s jacket. Sean flipped it open and looked at the ID.

“Can’t tell you how nice it is to finally meet ya, Alphonse.”

Sean grabbed hold of the zip ties and yanked Alphonse to his feet. Just as he did, the elevator dinged, the doors opening to let out an important-looking gentleman and what looked to be his lackeys. They stopped in their tracks at the sight of the scene before them. Sean's men pushed past the newcomers and into the waiting elevator.

As Sean himself passed them, he said, "Sorry, gents. Ride's closed."

The elevator doors closed, leaving the gentleman and his lackeys on the roof.

Max was sitting on his porch, sipping his morning coffee when his phone rang.

"Sean!" he answered. "Tell me you have good news."

"Sure enough! We have the package. It'll be on a flight to the States in a little over two hours."

Max punched the air in celebration. "Finally!"

"We'll see ya soon."

Max hung up the phone and sat back, taking another sip.

The morning felt somehow brighter.

## Chapter Forty-Six

Max left to meet up with Sean later that day, arriving well before him and his men. The meetup location was a place Max rented two days after his return to Iowa. A week later, when he had everything he needed, he drove out to the site and got it all prepped.

It was just after 9 p.m. when Sean showed up, two of his men right behind him, leading Alphonse by his arms, his head covered by a black cloth bag. There was no question where to place Alphonse, the room being empty save two pieces of furniture. One was a chair, bolted to the floor in the middle of the room.

The other was a table with many implements spread out across it.

Max tossed chains to Sean's men, and they bound Alphonse to the chair. With him secured, they all stepped over to the door. Max pulled out a wad of cash and handed it to Sean. "Have one hell of a night on the town. On me."

"Thanks, partner," Sean replied. He clapped Max on the shoulder. "And I hope ya get what ya need."

Max looked across the room at Alphonse. "I hope so, too."

"Listen, don't hesitate to call if ya need any backup."

Max smiled and said, "Will do."

Max took his time before even speaking to Alphonse, let alone taking off the hood. He set up a cot in the corner and unrolled a sleeping bag upon it. He carefully examined every tool on the table, making certain they were all in working order, even though most of them had been recently purchased. He double checked the security of the chains around the man.

Finally, he pulled the bag from Alphonse's head.

"You!" the man spat out.

"Surprise," Max said, with no trace of amusement in his voice.

Alphonse looked around. "Did your little friend manage to survive, as well?"

"No. You succeeded in killing him."

"Good."

“Hmm. Pretty superior for a man in your position.”

“I’ve been in worse.”

That made Max chuckle. “I doubt you’ll think the same way in a couple hours.” He walked over to the table and began slowly circling it, letting his fingers brush across the contents. “I’m going to guess Moone got ahold of plenty of details about me, maybe even somehow acquired my military records. Am I right?”

“You should always thoroughly know your enemy, even if they aren’t aware of being your enemy.”

“Not exactly Sun Tzu, but I get your point.”

Max made it back around to the front side of the table and sat on its edge. He picked up a flathead screwdriver, began twirling it around in his hand.

“You may think you know something about my time in the military, but you don’t know everything. I know you don’t because I’ve seen my file. There’s a lot—and I mean *a lot*—not in there. I don’t mean just the redacted stuff, either. I went on plenty of missions so classified there’s probably no record of them anywhere.

“Of course, I was just the ‘computer guy,’ there to record and upload, sending it to a server...” he waved the screwdriver through the empty air, “...somewhere. My guess is the Pentagon, but it could be in a bus station locker in Akron, for all I know. The high and mighty military muckety-mucks just needed to review whatever info we got from the insurgents. So, that’s all I did. I wasn’t one to interrogate, just—as I said before—record and upload. Hell, sometimes I even had to leave the room to puke. Especially at the beginning.” Max set the

screwdriver down and became pensive. “It's funny how quickly you get numbed to things, though.”

He stood and started to pace in front of Alphonse.

“You know, the mind's a curious organ. Point in fact, while I may not have *actually* tortured people, you watch something enough, the mind has a tendency to retain things. To learn. To memorize.” He paused and slowly turned, meeting Alphonse’s eyes with a cold stare. “To teach.”

He moved back to the table.

He picked up, examined and replaced several items, figuring out which would be the best to begin things.

Once he made his decision, Max divulged, “The purpose of what’s about to come is to get the answer to one...simple...question: How do I get Moone off his yacht?”

## Chapter Forty-Seven

The woman at the front desk scrunched up her nose when the rancid smell of human exertion wafted her way. She looked up to find a man wearing clean clothes, yet whose skin was slick with the greasy sheen of the unbathed. He smiled and said, "I'd like to speak with Special Agent Hanigan, please and thank you. Tell him it's Max Calvert. He'll know what it's about."

"Alright," she replied as she picked up the receiver of her phone. "I'll see if he's available." She pointed to some chairs. "You may have...er...you may *stand* over there."

Both Hanigan and Myers stepped out of the elevator, staring at Max in disbelief and walking with a speed to match.

"Ho...ly...shit," Myers said. "He's alive?"

“Hanigan,” Max greeted when they were near. Then, to Myers, “Skippy.”

The pair stared, mouths agape.

Max offered, “Shall we continue this stimulating confab somewhere more private?”

The second the door to the interrogation room shut, Max said, “Let me start by answering your first question: I’ve been in Ireland. The answer to your second question is recuperating. Now that we’re past the preliminaries, allow me to elucidate.” From there he told them everything that had happened since Toronto.

They were aware someone had grabbed Arijana.

They were also aware someone had her killed.

They were also aware—a surprise to Max—that Sylvester Moone really existed.

“Did you know he was after Rich and V?”

“No, I swear,” Hanigan said. “Honest.”

Max believed him, so he continued, stopping short by simply stating he was picked up by fishermen. “They took me back to their town, where I spent months recovering at the local doctor’s house.”

Hanigan and Myers sat back in their chairs, looking like the proverbial cat. “What?” Max asked.

Hanigan leaned forward, arms on the table. “Do you know how many agencies across the globe want to nail Sylvester Moone? And here you are, in our laps, a living, breathing eyewitness to one of his crimes. You’re like the Hope Diamond of witnesses.”

Now it was Max’s turn to eat the canary. “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” He reached into his pocket and removed a digital recorder, placing it in front of the agents.

“What’s on this?” Myers asked.

“This is quite the lengthy testimony from Moone’s personal assistant. You’ll need to excuse the sound quality. There’s a lot of screaming and power tools—”

“Wait! You tortured him?!” Hanigan exclaimed.

Max kept silent.

“You realize,” Hanigan continued, “we can’t use testimony derived that way?”

“I know that. I’m not a fool.” He tapped the recorder. “This is just a backup.” He reached into his shirt pocket, retrieved a slip of paper and slid it across the table. “If you want to hear this album performed live, he’s waiting at this address. Oh! Almost forgot.” He dug in the pants pocket he pulled the recorder from and came up with a key, which he tossed onto the table.

“You’ll probably need that.”

Hanigan looked at the paper and his eyes widened. “This is nearby.”

“Yep. I even walked over here.” Max pointed at a wall. “It’s just a few blocks that way.” Then he pointed at the opposite wall. “Or is it that way. I’m a little turned around.” He thought for a second, changed his mind and pointed back in the initial direction. “Nope. I’m sure I was right the first time.”

Hanigan handed the slip to Myers. “Take some men.”

“On it,” the junior agent replied, then ran from the room.

Max watched Myers go, then said, “I forgot how fast he was.” He turned back to Hanigan. “The way I see it, with everything Alphonse knows—”

Hanigan interrupted, “Alphonse?”

“Yeah, I know, right? It can’t be a real name. Anyway, with everything he knows, you should be able to take down Moone’s entire network. All the people on his payroll, such as everyone he’s paid off to move the chess pieces in his favor, all of that. And maybe sprinkle some of the huge death toll he’s responsible for on top.”

Hanigan ran his hand through his hair let out a long breath. “You have just handed me a career-defining case. This...this is something I never thought I’d see. Not at my age. I figured I was past it.”

“Well, you’re welcome. Also, if you need some help with the international end of things, I know a guy at INTERPOL.”

“*You* do?”

“Hey, I can have friends on your side of the law.”

Hanigan chuckled. “Okay. I need a new contact. What’s his name?”

“Coby Reid. Tell him I sent you. He’ll probably curse my name, but he’s a good egg. Trust me.” What Hanigan just said hit him right at that moment. “You need a new...oh shit. Was that the friend you were talking about in Toronto?” Hanigan nodded. “Damn, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t know. Maybe this Reid and I will hit it off just as well? Um…” He paused, taking a moment to swallow. “Speaking of Toronto, I’ve got something to tell you.” He paused again, trying to find the words. “We couldn’t return Vanessa’s body to anyone.”

“What do you mean? What about her dad?”

“That’s the deal. See, he died in a drunk driving accident a couple weeks before she did.”

“Huh,” Max responded. “Can’t say I’m shocked.”

“Yeah, that’s the impression I got from the locals, too. Since there aren’t any other relatives, I thought of you. I tried to get ahold of you for a month. Now, I know why I couldn’t, of course, but I had to pull a lot of strings to keep her on ice for as long as I could. Eventually, I had to have her cremated. There wasn’t a whole lot left of her to begin with, anyway. I saw to it personally, because if the Bureau had done it, they would’ve just dumped the ashes in the compost at some park.”

Max was genuinely touched. “Thanks. That was nice of you.”

“Least I could do. It probably sounds weird, but I felt a kind of connection to them, too. That happens on some cases, where you hate to see the chase end. Something like that, anyway. I had the cremains shelved in the cold case evidence locker for safe keeping, if you want them.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I want them. Tell you what, I’m not heading back home for a while, so can you send them to Rich’s grandparents? Frank and Sarah?”

“No problem. I still have their address.”

“That’ll be great, thanks.”

“Now, can I ask a favor of you?”

“Sure. What?”

“Go somewhere and take a damn shower.”

When Max was outside the FBI Building, he phoned Sarah, told her a package was coming for him and asked her to hold it until he came to pick it up.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Moone sat in his office on the yacht, fuming.

His inbox was filled with panicked emails, with most of the subject lines starting with, “Urgent!” or “Need to talk IMMEDIATELY!” or “WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU!!!!” or variants thereof, and more popped up every second. His phone had told him forty-two texts were waiting to be read before he turned off the notifications.

His cell was lying in front of him on the desk, and he was staring at it like he was trying to burn a hole right through it. He hadn’t heard from Alphonse since the CEO he was to pick up called, saying some—in his words—paramilitary group had taken him. There was no question today’s flood of bad news and luck was connected, Moone just needed to know how.

On the off chance Alphonse would pick up, he dialed his assistant's phone. It went straight to voicemail. Moone took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves, then pushed the intercom button for the yacht's bridge.

"Yes, Mr. Moone?"

"Change of course. I need to go to New York."

"Right away, sir."

With his helicopter stuck on top of a building in Brussels and its pilot dead, Moone had to be driven in from the dock. He was met in the lobby by a six-man security team. Of the relatively small number of buildings he owned—each through a vast structure of holding companies for anonymity—this was the only skyscraper. The rest were squat server farms, spread across the world.

The sole floor that was occupied by anything was the top. He had an office up there, but it rarely got used. It was for those times he needed to meet someone who had a phobia of coming out to the yacht, or for times like this when he needed to be boots on the ground, so to speak, needed to have direct access to his files and his network of comrades and connections. For a large undertaking such as this, it was much easier to access what he needed from the office than the yacht.

Nothing else of any consequence was kept in the office, hence the need for just six security guards. Usually, only two were on duty at a time, but he had the rest called in for safety. Two stayed at their post in the lobby while the others accompanied Moone up to his office.

“You four stay here,” he said when the elevator let them out into his outer office. “If anyone shows up, shoot first. Fuck the questions.”

Moone shut the doors behind him. The highly tinted glass in the windows made the room nearly pitch dark, so he flicked on the lights. The sudden illumination revealed a figure sitting in one of the Bernhardt chairs around the Calacatta Marble-topped coffee table in the section of the room he referred to as the relaxation area.

“What the...?” Moone exclaimed, his heart leaping.

“You know, I’ve been sitting here in the dark, trying to figure out something clever to say when you walked in, and I’ll I came up with was, ‘Hey.’”

That’s when he recognized the man. “Why am I not surprised you’re still alive?”

“Because I’m from Iowa. We’re born with an unkillable spirit.”

“That’s not a real word.”

“Which? Spirit? Yes, it is. It’s the name of a horse.”

“I see I also wasn’t able to kill your smugness.”

Max smiled a huge, toothy grin and said, “It’s the only part of me made from Kevlar.”

Moone headed for the bar setup along the wall directly opposite Max. “Care for a drink?”

“Nah. I’m good.”

Moone smiled to himself. He surveyed his choices, finally settling on a gin and tonic. He opened one of the two ice buckets, dropping a couple cubes into a glass. While he began to mix the drink, he said, "So, you're the one behind all the fires I've been having to put out the past couple of days?"

"I can't take all the credit. Most of it goes to your assistant with the made-up name."

Moone opened the second ice bucket, reached in and found...

"It's not there, anymore," Max notified him. "Though, I admit that's a good idea. Who's going to question, 'Why are there two ice buckets?' Oh, and the rest of your weapons are long gone, too."

Moone turned to face Max, taking a sip as he did.

"I had a lot of time on my hands," Max finished. He glanced at his watch. "Speaking of gone, your goon squad should be vanished about now. Go ahead and check, if you like."

Moone set his drink down on the bar and made his way to the door. The outer office was empty.

"Clever," Moone stated as he walked back to the bar. "Are they dead?"

"Only if they pissed off my friend or any of his men."

Moone took another sip. "The ones who grabbed Alphonse, I take it?"

"Probably, though his guys all look the same to me. Like Central Casting for a bodybuilding movie."

Moone finished his drink and began to mix another. “Well, this reunion has been fun, but I really have a lot of work to finish, plenty of meddling to fix. So, if you don’t mind...”

“Oh, I mind. I mind plenty, asshole.”

Moone had finally had it. He slammed the gin bottle down and spun around. “What is it?! What do you hope to achieve, you insignificant little prick?!”

Max kept his calm, speaking directly and slowly. “I’m going to end you. For good.”

Despite how comically maniacal it sounded, Moone couldn’t help laughing at this preposterous idea. “Do you actually think you can succeed?”

“Believe it or not? Yes. One hundred percent.”

“Really? *Really*?! You do remember who you’re up against, right? I mean, I don’t remember any of my shots hitting you in the head.”

“I’m well aware.”

“It doesn’t sound like you are. Let me remind you, just in case. I’m Sylvester Fucking Moone! You said it yourself: my name is synonymous with crime...across...the...globe. I’m way too ingrained into the fabric of so much that happens in the world that no one can touch me without collapsing *everything*. In the long run, this...whatever it is you’re doing...this will mean nothing more to me than a stubbed toe. A slight irritation at first, but quickly forgotten. You can come at me with everything you think you’ve got, with whatever resources or agencies you think can help you, and I will swat you away like King Kong would an airplane.”

Max tried to keep his eyes locked on Moone’s, tried to stay tough. Eventually, though, he dropped his gaze. “You may have a point, there.”

“You’re damn right I do.”

Max took a deep breath and let it out slow. “You know,” he finally said, “maybe I will take that drink, after all. Scotch. Neat.”

Moone poured the drink. When he was halfway across the floor, four quick flashes appeared from the armrest of Max’s chair, and his stomach exploded in pain.

He stopped and looked down.

Blood was soaking through his shirt.

He dropped the glass.

He dropped to the floor.

The .22 Beretta was small enough to be hidden by Max’s hand the entire time they had conversed. The chair being in a darker corner of the room didn’t hurt, either. It was the gun Moone used to keep in the second ice bucket.

The man from the yacht was writhing in agony, smearing his blood into the hardwood.

Max stood and walked over to Moone. He held up the weapon for the man to see and said, “This was a pretty handy little find. Thanks. I think I’ll keep it as a souvenir of our time together.”

Max stepped out of the office to find Sean waiting, holding the elevator.

“Need a... ‘lift?’”

Max shook his head and groaned.

George was sitting cross-legged on the security desk in the lobby when Max and Sean exited the elevator.

“Oh, thank God,” he said to them. “I really didn’t want to be the one to push the button.”

George tossed the remote control to Max.

Moone started dragging himself across the floor the moment Max left the room. He had made it to his desk and used the handles on the drawers to help pull up into the chair. He managed to pick up the phone and push a single button.

The phone next to George began to ring.

“Oh! *Someone’s* trying to call security.” He looked at the bound and gagged men on the floor behind the desk. “Guys? Any of you want to answer that?” He turned back to Max and Sean. “I guess they’re a little tied up, right now.”

“Really?” Max asked. “You went *there*?”

“You don’t hold the patent on being smug.”

“I’ve rubbed off on both of you. This can’t be good.”

“Will ya just push the damn button, already?” Sean demanded.

The plastic explosives, that Sean acquired and George strategically wired up in various places around Moone's office, vaporized the entire floor.

The trio felt the building shake, their cue to leave.

They slipped out into the gathering crowd, passing through them to the vans waiting at the curb with Sean's men inside and drove away.

## Epilogue

Maeve was in the kitchen of what was formerly her father's farm. He now lived in a nice apartment in town, close to his dock. She stood at the stove, stirring the stew. She spooned some up and took a sip, nodding at her satisfaction with the taste. She turned the heat down to let it simmer while she finished preparing the sides. Though, before anything else, there was one item that needed attention. She opened the front door and called out, "Max! Dinner will be ready soon!" then went back to the meal.

As she pulled the rolls from the oven, a pair of arms wrapped around her waist and lips kissed her neck. "Smells delicious," Max commented.

"The meal or me?"

"I was going to say you, but now that you mention the food..."

Maeve turned in his arms and playfully smacked his shoulder. They kissed, then she said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you from your nap, yet. I was going to give you a few more minutes.”

“Meh. What’s a few minutes? Besides.” He held up his right hand, palm up. “Dreams.” He brought the left hand up to join. “Real life.” He moved them up and down like a scale. “Not much of a difference between the two, for me.”

Maeve gave him another kiss and said, “That was sappy.”

“Darn. I was going for syrupy.”

She glanced over his shoulder and surveyed the room. “Can you call for me, again? Your voice carries better.”

“Sure.”

Max opened the front door and yelled, “Max! Dinner time!”

A child’s voice came from near the barn, “Coming!”

Seconds later, a five-year-old boy ran from the far side of the structure toward the house. He was wearing one of his father’s old Def Leppard shirts, tied in a knot at his waist so it didn’t flop around him like a dress and trip him up every few steps, and his bright red curls were blown back and out of his face by the breeze. When he was close enough, the boy jumped up into Max’s arms.

“How’s my big guy?”

“Good! I was building a castle!”

“You were? Where?”

“Behind the barn.”

Max carried his boy into the house, “I can’t wait to see it.”

“After dinner?” Little Max asked excitedly.

“Definitely.” They had reached the mantle over the fireplace. “Now, give your aunt and uncle a kiss.”

The boy kissed his fingertips then reached out and touched them to the vase. It was now mounted on a base with a plaque that read, “Richard & Vanessa: Forever Together.”

Max set Little Max down and told him, “Okay, Great Castle Architect, go wash your hands.” The boy ran off to the bathroom. “And make sure you get under your fingernails,” Max called after him. “You remember what happened the last time you went digging in the dirt.”

“Yes, Daddy!”

Max took another look at the mantle. The vase was flanked by two framed photographs.

On the left: a candid of him and Maeve, in the middle of their first dance on their wedding day.

On the right: the homecoming picture of him, Rich and V posing around his old car.