

The Devil's Fire by Mariam El-Hafi Chapter 121 - 130

Damiano

My fist connected with the punching bag, making it swing before it came back to me once again as I kept throwing punch after punch at it. Sweat was dripping down my face and my muscles were sore from the constant workout. I wasn't giving myself a break. I knew I was overworking my body by spending hours in the gym but it was the only thing that could keep me from going to her.

One week.

It has been one fucking week since she left and not once have

I heard from her. I had no idea why I had expected to hear from her when she had begged me to let her go. And she left the next day as if she couldn't wait to get away from me. Her tear-streaked face was burned in my mind and I felt guilty for letting her go through this much pain.

I kept punching the bag, throwing one powerful punch after the other but no matter how much I was working out or kept punching the shit out of this bag, the tension and anger. wouldn't subside. Sweat continued to go drip down my face as I kept going, pushing myself to go harder and faster, in need to do something else to take my mind off of her.

At least she is safe now.

It was for the best for her to leave. She couldn't be happy with someone like me, and she had only ever been in danger ever since we got together. I almost lost her too many times

already and I still had no idea who had been behind this, or

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what kind of mess her mother was involved in. I was going to get to the bottom of this shit, make sure no one was ever going to hurt her again, and just let her live a quiet and safe life like she was meant to.

And far away from me because that life didn't exist with me.

My world wasn't for her. She was too pure. Too innocent to have this shit happen to her, and it broke her to the point where her bright green eyes that I fell in love with, had lost all spark. I hoped she was doing better and healing, even if it wasn't with me. I just wanted her to be happy and I knew it couldn't be with me.

I wanted to see her. Even if it was just for a mere second, I so desperately wanted to see her one last time. Fucking hell... Even working out for hours couldn't distract my mind completely from thinking about her.

The bag hit the ground with a loud thud, making me snap out of my thoughts. I kept punching the bag until it fell off its chain. I let it be on the ground and sat down on the bench as I wiped my face of sweat with a towel, and tried to calm down my heavy breathing.

I picked up my phone and looked at the picture I had saved of her, the one she had sent to me after I had gifted her the earrings. It was my favorite picture, the way she was smiling and her eyes had so much life in them.

My phone started to ring, the caller ID blocked me from continuing to look at the picture as I have done ever since she left. I kept telling myself it was the only thing keeping me sane right now but I was only torturing myself by looking at her picture, knowing I wouldn't be able to see and hold her.

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"What." I snapped into the phone once I had decided to answer the call.

"Hello, handsome." Rafaelle replied with a chuckle.

"What do you want?" I didn't try to hide my annoyance that he had disturbed me.

"Are you in the gym again?" He said in a disapproving tone.

"Are you trying to become a bodybuilder?"

"If you don't have anything useful to say, keep your mouth shut."

"What's the fun in that?" I could hear his grin through the

phone and I made my way out of the gym, not in the mood to listen to his bullshit.

“Fuck off.”

“Now, wait a minute!” He said quickly before could hang up the phone.

“Get straight to the point before I fuck you up.” I said annoyed.

“That sounds hot.” Rafaelle started to laugh. I hung up the phone and went upstairs to take a shower. My phone

continued to ring when I didn’t pick up but after the fifth time, I had enough.

“What’s the point of working out this much if you’re still going to be an ass?” He said once I had answered his call.

“Where are you?”

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“Warehouse by the port, why?”

“So I can come and fucking kill you.” I sneered at him.

“Calm down! I was just trying to make a joke, geez...” He kept on mumbling something about me being an unbearable ass these days. I closed my eyes, imagining smashing his skull into a wall over and over again.

“We might have found something.” I snapped my eyes open.

“What is it?” I said impatiently. If there was one thing I hated, it was not getting straight to the point and wasting my time.

“Get your ass over here and you will find out. You could use some fresh air.” Then he hung up before I could curse at him.

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After taking a shower, I got ready and drove to the port where our products were shipped to. The warehouse was the main location where everything was weighed, counted, and repacked before it got distributed and sold. We had the most sought-after product in the game, giving our competitors no chance to even come close to what we have. We had the highest purity of cocaine and it was, of course, much stronger than the shitty cocaine everyone else sold because they had no knowledge about the purity of their own products.

If the cocaine was very dilute or if the user has developed a tolerance then they would experience little or no rush. The purer the cocaine was, the better the experience. It only took one line of my product to get that surge of calm euphoria and a sense of power, energy, and happiness they all sought after.

A second line wasn't even needed to get the kick you wanted.

The night had fallen when I stepped into the warehouse. I took a quick glance around, seeing how smoothly everything was going. I made my way to the back where Antonio and Rafaelle were standing, and I glared at Rafaelle, still wanting to beat the crap out of him for the phone calls.

"Whatever you have to say, it better be good for your own sake." I gave him a cold stare.

"It is. Turns out you were right about someone would eventually brag about what had happened." Rafaelle said.

"I made sure there were eyes and ears everywhere as you wanted. Emilia was the first one to report back and it looks like the Koreans were involved." Antonio added and I furrowed my brows at him.

"She couldn't get much more information since they spoke in

Korean. But Emilia found out they are going to The LuxePalace in two weeks for a celebration."

"The LuxePalace..." I scoffed. The Luxe Palace was a high-end casino hotel exclusively for the elites, which meant that a bunch of low-lives like those wouldn't be able to get in.

Unless someone with a higher power was involved.

Whoever had ordered the kill, was getting them in as their fucking reward.

“They’re probably attending the Untamed Event. Should be even crazier and wild this year.” Rafaelle grinned, looking excited about it.

“Looks like we have a party to blow up. You know what to prepare.” I told them.

“You don’t find it weird the Koreans are involved? They usually keep to themselves...” Rafaelle wondered out loud.

“That’s what we are going to find out at the Untamed Event. Make sure we have people there and girls working specifically in the private section.” I ordered and turned around to leave.

“Where are you going?” Rafaelle called after me but I continued my way out.

“None of your business.” I said curtly and got to my car.

“I’ll drive.” Antonio said behind me before I could open the door. I turned slightly to face him, raising a brow at him.

“Get a ride with someone else. I’m going somewhere.” I opened the door, only for him to block me, preventing me from going inside.

“I know where you are going, let me drive.” He gave me a blank look as I stared him down.

“When was the last time you got some sleep?” Antonio raised a brow at me when I didn’t answer. I couldn’t remember the last time I had a decent sleep.

“That’s what I thought because you look like shit. You will end up falling asleep behind the wheel and crashing on your way. Can’t let that happen, I made a promise.” I stared at him for a long time before giving a nod, knowing he wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Fine.” I said and got in the passenger seat and we drove off.

“Any new updates on her?” I asked.

“No. Still the same condition.” I nodded and leaned back in my seat.

The drive was long and silent. I could feel the lack of sleep was getting to me and I almost wanted to close my eyes to rest a bit. But I couldn't fully rest without having her by my side.

"She's going to hate you for keeping this from her." Antonio broke the silence.

"I know." I said to him and looked out of the window.

"I don't expect her to forgive me for it but it's for the best." I had thought of every single possible outcome from this. But for their safety, it had to be done. Even if it meant Althaia would hate me.

He didn't say anything else and continued to drive in silence.

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Soon, the beach house entered my view and Antonio stopped the car further down the street to keep the car out of view. I got out of the car and made my way toward the house and looked around. No lights were turned on and there were no movements, meaning she was most likely asleep now.

I came to a stop in front of the door, disconnecting the alarm system before unlocking it. I closed the door quietly behind me and waited for a minute to listen for any movements, but it was as quiet as it could be. I stepped further inside the house, moving silently before a sound made me stop. The sound came closer and I looked down when I felt something rub against my leg.

Is that... a kitten?

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It made a high-pitched sound and kept circling me, rubbing its head against my leg before standing on its paws and climbing on me. I watched it as it continued up before I took a hold of it. I shook my head a little, amused that she had gotten herself a kitten. It started to make purring sounds. When I rubbed its head with my finger. It didn't seem it wanted to leave me, so with the kitten still on my arm, I made my way to the master bedroom on the ground floor to see if she would be there before checking the upstairs floor.

The door was open and I saw her sleeping peacefully on the bed. The kitten jumped down from my arm, ran to the bed, and made itself comfortable next

to her. I walked closer to her, feeling my heart beating faster at the sight of her. A bottle of pills on the nightstand caught my attention. Frowning, I picked it up and saw it was sleeping pills.

She still had trouble sleeping?

I sat on the bed next to her and I saw how she was looking better and healthier now the bruises on her skin were gone. I'd had longed for her... I couldn't help myself and placed my hand on her cheek, lightly caressing her. I had almost forgotten how soft her skin was and I felt relieved that she was taking care of herself.

I was only supposed to see her for a second, just to ease my mind a little, but now that I was here and watching her, I couldn't get myself to leave. Not yet.

Thad missed her too much.

I lay next to her and carefully pulled her closer to me as I wrapped my arms around her. It felt like an eternity had passed since the last time I had been able to hold her like this,

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and it filled the void inside of me. I placed a kiss on her forehead and continued to caress her head, watching every single feature of her perfect face. Her beauty was beyond compare and no woman could ever come close to her beauty, especially her striking green eyes.

Her eyes suddenly flew open and she looked at me. I lay still, watching her unfocused green eyes as her brows furrowed a little before she closed them again. She snuggled closer to me, making me smile before I closed my eyes, listening to her soft and deep breathing.

A small high-pitched sound woke me up, seeing the kitten moving around on the bed, trying to wake her up. I looked over at the window, seeing it was light outside.

Fuck, I fell asleep.

Althaia stirred a little in my arms, letting me know she was starting to wake up. I moved as quietly and carefully as I could and slid out of the bed, and I quickly walked out of the

bedroom before she could see me.

“Hi.” Her voice made me freeze in my step and I felt my chest warming at the sound of her voice.

“Are you hungry? All right, let’s get you some food.” She chuckled when the kitten continued to make those high- pitched sounds. I walked into another room to hide when I heard her move and mentally beat myself up for falling asleep. I would have to climb out of the window now.

“You must have been really hungry.” Althaia let out a small laugh. I rested the back of my head against the wall, closing

my eyes as I listened to her voice.

It was making me feel all sorts of things right now and I moved a little to look at her. She was sitting on the floor, watching the kitten eat while she stroked its fur. The sight of her was making my throat dry and I desperately wanted to go out to her, but instead, I stayed put and watched her from afar. She let out a sigh and looked out of the window and watched the beach waves.

“It almost felt like he was here...” She said quietly.

“I miss him... but I’m not sure I’m ready to face him yet.” My chest tightened at her words but I couldn’t blame her. I was probably a constant reminder that I had dragged her into this fucked up world.

I watched her as she opened the door to the back porch and stepped outside with the kitten. I took this opportunity to get to the front door while she had her back to me and I quietly made my way out.

I saw Antonio leaning against the car as I made my way down the street.

“Feeling better?” He asked, making me stop before I could get inside. I looked back at the house, feeling more at ease now that I got to hold and see her. I gave him a short nod before we got in the car and drove away.

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Althaia

“Kiara!” I yelled after her when she once again ran over to the neighbor. I had found Kiara all by herself when I had gone for a small walk just down the street. She had come out of nowhere, immediately running to me and I tried to look around to see if she belonged to someone, but it turned out that she was just a small stray kitten. She was all alone and my heart couldn’t take it. I took her with me and nourished her, fed her, and she became the happiest and cuddliest kitten I have ever met.

I never went far away from the house and always stayed close in case something were to happen. I knew the chances were very slim as I was pretty sure some of his men were somewhere, out of my view but constantly watching me. I knew he wouldn’t have let me stay here if he didn’t have anyone to report back to him that I was safe.

Now that I had Kiara, I had to explore the town to get all the necessities for her. It was a very small and quiet town, not much was happening here but I really liked it as it seemed everyone knew each other in one way or another.

I still hadn’t gotten my credit card back and still had Damiano’s, but I wasn’t comfortable using it. Luckily, there was some cash I had found in one of the drawers.

Some was an understatement.

The whole drawer was fully stacked with hundred dollars bills

and my eyes went as wide as they could when I saw the

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money. I guess you couldn’t call it a safe-house if there weren’t emergency stacks of money in it. And since I hadn’t sorted out my own card yet, I thought I could borrow some until then.

“Kiara!” I called after her again but she ignored me and snuck inside the neighbor’s backdoor, which was slightly open. I let out a sigh as I walked up to the back porch and lightly

knocked on the glass door. This wasn’t the first time she had done this and for some reason, she just loved going to the neighbor whenever we were out for our daily walk.

"I'm so sorry! I don't know why she keeps sneaking into your house." I gave Samantha an apologetic smile when she opened the door with Kiara in her arms.

"Don't be! It's a nice surprise and she is so cute!" Samantha chuckled and rubbed Kiara's head as she kept purring. Since Kiara kept going into the neighbor's house, I got introduced to Samantha, who lived here with her roommate, Ava. They were extremely nice and would always greet me whenever they bumped into me on my beach walks.

"She really is." I agreed with her with a smile- I shook my head as I looked at Kiara, who was very much enjoying being in her arms.

"Would you like to come in? I've just baked some chocolate chip cookies."

"You know I can't say no to that. It smells amazing!" My mouth was watering a little at the delicious smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Samantha was very much into baking and was constantly trying out new recipes, and I had now become her taster for

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whatever she had baked to get an opinion as Ava had gotten tired of it. I had the biggest sweet tooth so of course, I wouldn't pass on that opportunity.

"Make yourself comfortable." Samantha gestured to the couch as she continued her way to the kitchen.

"Oh, and would you like a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon? It goes well with chocolate chip cookies."

"Sure." I smiled and got comfortable on the couch with Kiara on my lap, playing with her until Samantha came back.

"Is she making you try her baking again?" I looked up and saw Ava taking a seat on the couch.

"I don't mind, and it's not like I have any self-control either." I chuckled a little and Ava shook her head just as Samantha walked in with a plate full of cookies and wine.

“Well, I need someone to tell me if it’s good or if it’s crap.” Samantha said to her defense.

“Shut up. You know you’re a good baker. Also, I think Althaia is scared to give you an honest opinion and just says it’s good to be polite.” Ava raised a brow at me and sipped her wine.

“That’s not true! I didn’t like that lemon cake.” I pointed out to her.

“Only because we found out you don’t like anything with a citrusy taste, and yet, you said it was good.” She gave a small smirk as she tried to prove her point. Truth was, everything Samantha made was heavenly good, and even though I didn’t like anything citrusy, it was still good despite that.

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“If you don’t have anything useful to say, don’t say it at all.” Samantha scolded her and handed me a plate with a big cookie, which I happily took. It was still slightly warm and I didn’t waste any time and took a big bite and I almost closed my eyes in happiness.

“This is probably the best cookie I’ve had in my life.” I praised and took another bite. It was soft yet had a crunch on the outside and the big chunks of chocolates just melted right on my tongue.

“Eat as much as you can.” She said with a pleased smile and ate one herself. Even though Samantha was only a couple of years older than me, she was quite motherly in a way while Ava was the wild teenager.

“I’ve been wanting to ask, do you live alone in that big house?” Ava asked and I grabbed my glass of wine, hesitating a little with my answer.

“I’m just here on a little getaway.” I decided to answer, which wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Got a boyfriend?”

“Ava, don’t pry into her life, it’s rude.” Samantha frowned.

“What? It’s a normal question...” Ava argued and innocently shrugged her shoulders.

"It's okay." I smiled at Samantha before looking at Ava.

"And no, I don't have a boyfriend." I didn't want to give too much information about myself, and I didn't want to risk them asking me why I was alone and my boyfriend wasn't with me.

I didn't want to go down that road.

"Good for you. Men suck anyways and they cheat on you while saying they love you." Ava said bitterly and almost chugged down her wine.

Ava was a very open person and had talked about her ex- boyfriend cheating on her when one day I found her crying on my walk on the beach. I couldn't just walk past her without asking her if she was okay, and that was when she let everything out to me and I just listened as she poured her heart out.

"Did I tell you that I found his dick deep into some girl's ass in our bed?!" She said angrily while Samantha rubbed her arm in a comforting manner.

"Should have cut his dick off and flushed it down the toilet." I shrugged my shoulder and they both looked at me a bit shocked at my answer before they burst out in laughter.

"I knew I liked you the moment I saw you." Ava said, and I let out a grin. I ate another cookie while she kept talking about what trash her ex-boyfriend was.

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After too many cookies and some wine, I thanked Samantha for the invite and made my way back as it was starting to get late, and I didn't want to stay out while it was dark. Ever since that day, I found it too uncomfortable to be outside in the dark and would immediately get back inside the house to feel safe.

I got back into the safe-house with Kiara and turned on the security alarm, which I had been doing religiously every single day. I went to the bedroom and plopped down on the bed, feeling tired from all the sugar I had consumed in one sitting.

It has already been a week and a half since I got here, and while I was feeling myself getting physically better, mentally I was still struggling. Sometimes I did

feel lonely and I strongly longed for him... But I wasn't courageous enough to face him just yet.

I opened the drawer on the nightstand, grabbed my phone, and turned it on. Ever since I got here, I had turned off my phone so I wouldn't be disturbed and focus on getting better.

As soon as it turned on, my phone started to constantly buzz from the many text messages and missed phone calls I had received.

All were from Michael.

The buzzing went on for a while and I couldn't do anything other than just wait and let it pass before I could use my phone. Just as it had stopped, my phone buzzed in my hand and showed me an incoming call.

"Hello?"

"What the fuck, Althaia! I thought you were fucking dead!"

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Michael practically yelled at me, and I bit down on my lip as guilt filled my body.

I had completely forgotten all about Michael and my father.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered to him.

"Why haven't you been answering my texts or calls?" He sounded angry.

"My phone has been off. I just needed to clear my mind." I explained to him. He went quiet before he let out a sigh.

"How are you doing?" Michael asked softly and I took a deep breath before answering him.

"I'm doing... better."

"That's good." He sounded relieved and I got comfortable under the covers.

"How are you? And dad?" I asked.

"We're all right, don't worry about us. You're definitely missed around here... If you'd like, I can come and get you tomorrow?" He sounded hopeful. I hesitated, not knowing what to tell him about my situation.

"I, uh, I'm not staying at the manor right now." I trailed off and he went quiet for a while.

"What do you mean you're not staying at the manor? Where are you?" Michael said firmly and I hesitated a little as I didn't know if it was okay to tell him where I was.

But it was Michael, not a stranger.

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"I'm somewhere safe, I promise. I just needed to be alone." I tried to reassure him but it wasn't too much of a help.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Thaia?! Did he leave you alone? That son of a -"

"Michael, that's enough." I said firmly, not liking how he was talking. Michael was furious as he let out a string of curse words. I let out a sigh, waiting for him to calm down.

"Where are you? I will come and get you right now." He pressed on, still sounding angry.

"Michael, I understand you're worried but I promise I'm safe. I just had to get away for some time... I was getting

overwhelmed and I didn't know what to do with myself, and with everything that had happened... Please, understand that." I explained softly to him and it seemed that it had calmed him down.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get angry and yell at you." He sounded apologetic as he spoke.

"I was just worried since I couldn't get in contact with you, and it's not like he's providing us with any information." He spat out, and guilt filled my body even

more for not at least giving them a heads up that they wouldn't be able to reach me.

"Can I at least come and see you? I just want to make sure you're okay. Please?" I thought about it but then again, it was just Michael.

"Okay." I said, giving in as it didn't sound like he would take no for an answer, and I kind of owed it to him since I just

disappeared with no warning.

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"Just send me the info, and I will be there tomorrow. I've missed you."

"I've missed your goofy ass too." I chuckled and he let out a small laugh.

"Of course you have! It's me we're talking about." I could hear his grin through the phone and I rolled my eyes at him, even though he couldn't see me.

"Right, I will see you tomorrow then. It's late and I'm kind of ready to sleep now." Just as I said that a small yawn escaped my lips.

"See you tomorrow! Stay safe and sleep tight."

"I will. Goodnight." I hung up and went to scroll through my phone, reading the text messages he had left me and seeing how worried Michael had actually been.

I opened a text message I had received from Cara, reading that she was hoping I was doing better and briefly explaining. the wedding had been moved to a different date, and that I shouldn't worry about it. I had truly isolated myself from everyone and everything I had also completely forgotten that there was supposed to be a wedding. But I was happy when she said she was doing better too, and hoped I would be back

soon.

There were still many things I needed to think about and figure out. I didn't have a place I could call home anymore, and I already knew that living with my father wouldn't do me any good. Carlos and I weren't exactly on good terms and Morella was too prying to let one have a little privacy.

Truth was, staying here had me miss everyone at the manor.

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Especially a certain person with golden-brown eyes. I didn't want to stay here for much longer and decided I would make a call tomorrow after Michael's visit.

I was nervous to see Damiano again. Scared I would see on his face how much he despised me...

I went to the photo album on my phone and looked at the picture I had of him. I swallowed hard as I looked at him and tears welled up in my eyes.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered out, the tears making their way down and onto the pillow as I clutched the phone in my hand.

"I'm sorry for losing our baby."

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Althaia

Ever since I had gotten here, my routine was going to bed early and waking up early as I liked to watch the sunset. I have never been a morning person, but staying here made me because I just had to watch the amazing scenery.

I had been drawing a lot more too as I couldn't resist when I had a beautiful view of the beach with the sun rising from the horizon, making the water glisten. I would sit outside with a cup of coffee. and just enjoy the peaceful morning. It was a simple routine I had every day and for that, I was grateful because slowly I could feel my soul heal piece by piece.

I bought blank canvas and paint supplies when I wanted to deeply focus on art. Drawing had always been my way of relaxing and I often found something beautiful here to draw. I did sketch Kiara a few times, she was too cute not to when she would lie next to me and sleep, or lie on her back, playing with a mouse toy.

Sometimes my hand would work on its own, not having me realize what I was drawing until I was done. Often it would be of him, more specifically his eyes. I

would have several pages of him in my sketchbook, and not miss a single detail when it came to his tattoos.

There wasn't a day that went by when I wasn't thinking about him. But also, whenever I did think of him, shame washed over me to the point I would feel nauseous, and I would then push him to the back of my mind. No matter what, the feeling wouldn't go away and I had no idea what to do when I see him again.

Sometimes my mind would get dark, thinking the reason he let me go this easily was because of what had happened. I had been carrying his child, and I lost it. Guilt and shame were eating me up from the inside and I couldn't imagine what he must be thinking about it.

I had one job. One fucking job and that was to protect it but even that I failed to do.

How couldn't he blame me for it?

I shook my head, trying to get away from all those thoughts as I didn't want to go there when Michael was supposed to be here any minute now. I stepped outside just in time to see Michael's car pull up, feeling myself smile at the sight of him.

Maybe it was a good thing that he was here... This way, I wouldn't be swallowed by my dark thoughts.

"Thaia!" Michael said cheerfully and pulled me into a tight hug.

"Good to see you too." My voice was muffled as my head was practically crushed into his chest. He leaned slightly away with a smile, his ocean-blue eyes looking intently at me as he lightly caressed my cheek.

"You look better now."

"Are you saying that I looked bad before?" I raised a brow at him in teasing manner. His smile dropped at my words.

"No, I was just saying – What I meant was -" I couldn't help but laugh at him as he kept stumbling over his words, looking distressed.

"I know what you meant, I was just messing with you a little."

Michael's shoulders sagged in relief and slightly shook his head with a small smile on his lips.

"You did me dirty there. God, how I have missed you." He pulled me into another hug.

"I've missed you too." I smiled.

"Did you have breakfast yet?" Michael asked when he walked back to his car.

"Not really."

"Good, 'cause I brought some on my way here." He reached into the car and took out a brown paper bag.

"And your iced coffee! I think this is the one you usually get, right?" He showed me the iced caramel macchiato, and my eyes widened in excitement when I saw the coffee.

"Oh, yes! It's my favorite!" I quickly walked over to him and took the coffee out of his hand.

"You're the best, thank you!" I grinned at him and he gave me a wink.

We got inside the house, and Michael took a look around, nodding a bit, impressed with the safe-house.

"Not bad." He said while he kept looking around when he sat on the couch. I took a seat next to him and didn't waste any more time and immediately put a straw into my iced coffee and drank greedily.

"You should see the view on this side, it's breathtaking." I gestured to the beach while I got the bagels out of the bag.

"It's nice." Michael agreed as he looked out of the window. At the same time, Kiara decided to make an appearance and jumped onto the couch.

"Wait, you got yourself a pet?" He stared at her with a funny expression when she sniffed him.

"She was a stray and decided to take her in. I couldn't leave her alone." I said with a smile and rubbed her head a little.

“She keeps me company.”

“She’s a cute one.” He chuckled and gave her a small pet.

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“How are you holding up?” Michael asked once we had finished eating. I shrugged a little and leaned back on the couch as I thought about his question.

“I have my days, you know. Sometimes I feel I’m doing okay, but then the next moment I feel like I’m hitting rock bottom.” My feelings were often all over the place and my thoughts were chaotic, making me constantly overthink every single thing and I had to force myself to do something to calm down.

“I’m sorry you have to go through this...” His expression saddened and held my hand in his.

“It’s just... I miss her so much.” I looked down at my lap as I spoke.

“Everything happened so fast, and there wasn’t anything I could do to stop it...” A lump formed in my throat and I took a deep breath to calm down.

“You can’t blame yourself, it wasn’t your fault.” He tried to reassure me and I gave him a half-smile, not saying anything.

If I had just been stronger, I would have been able to help her... Instead, she was the one who died trying to protect me, and for that, I couldn’t forgive myself.

“Just so you know, your father is doing everything he can to find those fuckheads.” He said firmly.

“There hasn’t been anything yet?” I asked and he shook his head.

“No. We would probably have found something, a clue of some sort if Damiano just wanted to cooperate with us, but he is shutting us completely out of it.” He frowned, and I looked at him in surprise.

1288 Vouchers

Damiano wasn’t letting my father in on this?

“Why is he shutting you out?”

“Beats me. He’s a fucking mystery and didn’t even give a reason.” I had a feeling why he wasn’t letting them in on this. This was a personal matter to him but I wasn’t about to tell him that.

Michael let out a sigh, making me look at him.

“I know I shouldn’t be asking you this... But is there anything you can tell us that might help?”

“I’m just as confused as you are...” I mumbled. One moment I was sleeping, the next we were running for our lives.

“Wait, maybe there is something?” I said as I remembered something.

“What is it?” He shifted on the couch to look at me.

“I think I heard some of them speak Korean?”

“Korean?” He looked surprised but then his frown deepened when I gave a nod.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t really make sense... Why would Koreans be after my mom?” I wondered out loud. Michael looked in deep thought as he processed the information.

“Definitely weird, but this is a good start and I promise I will look into it.”

“Thank you.” I gave his hand a small squeeze, truly grateful they were doing everything they could to help me. I had been trying to connect the dots, to see if there was something I help them to find out who those people were, and why they were after us.

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Or more specifically, my mother.

But I would always end up with nothing. It was not like I had sensed anything suspicious going on with my mother. They had much more experience in

matters like these. They knew this world and knew how things worked, and I just hoped I would get some

answers soon.

“Can I ask you for a favor?” I bit down on my lip, not knowing how to ask him.

“Of course!”

“I want to go back to the house.”

“What house?... Wait, you don’t mean yours?” He asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Absolutely not, Althaia!” He erupted angrily with a scowl.

“Calm down, I didn’t mean that I want to stay there.” I quickly said to calm him down, but he continued to shake his head at me.

“I just want to grab a few things off my mom’s stuff to keep. I don’t have anything of hers and I just thought if I had some of her things around me, it would make me feel better.” I explained to him. It looked like he was debating something in his head as he looked at me for a long time.

“I don’t know, Thaia... It’s risky for you to go back and I don’t want to take that risk.” He shook his head.

“I can go there for you and grab whatever you need?”

“No, I want to do it. I’ve been thinking about it for a while, and I know I can’t go there by myself. And since you’re here... So..

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please?” I asked him, hoping he would help me with it. He let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.” The little hope I had in me died at his words.

“But... I guess if we had to do it, it would have to be during the daytime to be on the safe side.” He said and I felt hopeful once again.

“Do you think we go today? I know it’s a long drive but I thought the sooner the better.”

“I’m not driving there.” Michael said and checked the time on his watch.

“Oh...” I said disappointed and he looked at me with a playful smile.

“Come on, think a bit highly of me. I’ve got connections and can get us on a flight in no time.”

“Really?” I asked, cheerfully. I hated flying but I was willing to do it if it meant we could be back as fast as possible.

“Just need to make a phone call, and I can get us on a private flight. It’s small, not anything fancy so don’t get disappointed.” Michael joked.

“Yeah, because I know what it’s like to be on a fancy, private jet.” I rolled

my eyes as I chuckled. I was feeling a little anxious about going back but I knew I would be okay with Michael.

“Quick question.” I said before he could make the phone call.

“How can you get on with your gun?” I asked. Michael laughed at my question.

288 Vouchers

“You’re such a newbie.” He teased, making me roll my eyes at him in a playful manner.

“It’s private for a reason and also, I’ve got lots of contacts to help me out. If you’re ready, we can leave now.”

“Let me just grab a coat and we can go. I just need to ask my neighbor if they can watch Kiara for a few hours.” Michael gave a nod and made the phone call.

I went into the bedroom to get a small bag for Kiara’s toys and food. I opened the drawer on the nightstand, biting down on my lip as I looked at the gun Antonio had given me. Not giving it much thought, I grabbed it, making sure the safety lock was on before tucking it into the waistband of my jeans behind my back. I put on a coat to make sure the gun wouldn’t be noticeable.

It felt weird to have a gun on me like this but after everything that had happened, I didn't want to take any chances and I for sure didn't want to be defenseless this time.

I grabbed the bag and took Kiara in my arms and went to Ava and Samantha. I rang the bell door, hoping someone would be home.

"Oh, hi Althaia." Ava said with a bright smile. It looked like she was doing better today than when I left last night.

"Hi, Ava! I know this is sudden, but I just wanted to ask if it was possible to watch Kiara for a few hours for me?" I asked with a hopeful smile.

"Yeah, sure. Are you going somewhere?" She looked over my shoulder and I followed her gaze, seeing Michael leaning against his car, waiting for me.

Ava gave me a small smirk when she looked back at me.

"I thought you said you didn't have a boyfriend? He's hot." She winked and I rolled my eyes at her.

"I don't, he's my friend. He's just visiting."

"Right." She dragged the word out and wiggled her eyebrows at

"I'm just messing with you, we will take good care of her."

"Thank you so much! Again, so sorry about it being so sudden." I said once again but she just gave a dismissive wave and took the bag and Kiara.

"Don't mention it. Have fun." Ava winked at me again before laughing. I just shook my head and walked over to Michael.

"Ready?" He asked with a smile and opened the door for me.

"As ready as one can be."

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Althaia

I could feel myself getting more and more anxious the closer we got. The gun behind my back didn't help to ease my nerves, making me constantly think what if something truly were to happen, even in broad daylight?

What if someone was still there, keeping an eye on the house and hoping someone would be back to finish what they had started?... But they weren't after me. They were after my mother and they got what they wanted.

The thought of me having to use the gun to defend myself didn't settle that well with me, but I knew I had to do it if I wanted to stand a chance. I was not a killer... I was still traumatized by what I had done, and the image of the man's bloodied face still haunted

I took a deep breath when I felt nausea building up.

"Hey... Hey, you're going to be fine." Michael glanced at me and took my hand in his as I kept tapping my hand against my thigh in uneasiness.

"I don't know... I'm starting to think it's a mistake. What if something does happen?" I kept rambling on, sharing my fears with him instead of keeping them to myself.

"I won't let anything happen to you. Trust me." He gave my hand a small squeeze, but I was still thinking that we should have gotten extra protection with us.

Just as I thought about that, I looked in the side mirror, trying to

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see if any cars were following us. I still haven't spotted any of Damiano's men so far, making me wonder if there were even anyone watching me, or if they were truly keeping themselves out of my sight.

I also just realized that they would be reporting every single thing back to him, and he probably already knew Michael was with me. But I had no idea if they had managed to follow us. We had taken a flight, it was short but still, and now we were in the car on our way to the house.

"It's highly unlikely someone would do anything during the daytime. It's too easy to get caught like that." Michael said, pulling me out of my dark thoughts.

"I hope you're right." I sighed and tried to relax.

I felt my heart beating just a little faster as we neared my house. I squeezed his hand in an attempt to comfort myself in some way. We drove closer and closer, only to get confused when he drove past the house and didn't stop.

"Wait, why are you not stopping? You just missed it." I looked at him confused but he just looked focused as he scanned the area.

"I'm just going to drive around the block to make sure it's safe

before we get out. Just in case." He slowed down a bit as he kept looking around. I did the same, my eyes scanning the area to see if anything looked suspicious.

Michael was being careful and thorough as he drove around a few times, then stopped and parked somewhere further away from the house to see if someone would have started to follow us. Luckily, there wasn't anything and he pulled up in front of the house.

288 Vouchers

My heart started to beat like crazy when I got out of the car, and I could feel my legs losing a bit of strength as I looked around.

Every single thing came back to me; gunshots, screaming, running, and blood. I knew this would be hard but I hadn't even taken a step inside the house and I was already feeling like this.

Michael pulled me close to his side as he kept looking around, and I noticed he had his gun in his hand but still hidden if anyone were to look our way. I let out a breath as we stood in front of the door, and I hesitated a little before I pulled the handle down.

Only to find it locked.

"Huh, that's weird..." I muttered out and tried again in case it was just stuck, but it was locked.

"Who could have locked it? It's not like we had the time to lock the freaking door before running for our lives." I frowned at the door but then it hit me.

It could have only been him. Who else would bother to do this?

“Don’t you have a key?” Michael turned his head to look at me as he was still keeping an eye out.

“No...” I sighed in frustration. We had come all the way here for nothing.

“I didn’t expect it to be locked.” I said and took a look around the front porch.

“Want me to kick it open?”

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea.” I raised a brow at him and he just shrugged his shoulders at me as if saying ‘I tried’.

288 Vouchers

“Actually... No, wait! Maybe there still is a spare key out here?” I went to the small bench we had on the porch.

“I just remembered she would put a spare key here because there was a time when I kept forgetting my keys.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” He grinned at me when I flipped him off.

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288 Vouchers

I crouched down and reached under the bench, feeling around until I came across the tiny hole my mother had made to place the key inside.

“Found it!” I said happily and pulled the key out. I unlocked the door, only to get stopped before I could pull the handle down.

“Let me go in first but stay close behind me.” He carefully opened the door with his gun ready if someone were suddenly to pop out of nowhere. We walked further into the house, listening for movements but it was quiet. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding when Michael said it was safe.

At least for now.

I looked around and it was surprisingly clean. And thank goodness there were no dead bodies in the house, making me think that they had at some point come and taken care of it.

To be inside the house again overwhelmed me with feelings, so much I had to bite my lip just so it wouldn't tremble. This was my home for years and now it couldn't be anymore... The memories were too painful.

I swallowed hard and made my way to my mother's bedroom which was on the ground floor. I wasn't saying much and neither did Michael as he looked around the house, and I think he knew this was hard for me as he didn't try to make conversation.

"Can you stay out here, or maybe grab the photo albums for me while I go in? I just want to do it alone." I said to him as we stood in front of my mother's bedroom. He gave a nod and went to the living room after telling him where he could find them.

I closed the door behind me, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. It was hitting so hard to be here.

I shoved my feelings away and cleared my head as I knew I wouldn't have that much time again and started to look around. The main reason why I wanted to come back was to see if there was anything I would find that could give me an answer or just a clue on anything. There wasn't even a moment where I found my mother suspicious, or even suspected that she was hiding something from me. But now I know that my mother was involved in something. And whatever that was, lead her to her death.

I looked in her closet, going through her clothes and feeling around to see if there would be a secret hiding place for something. I didn't know why but I felt like if there was something she needed to hide, it would be somewhere in her bedroom, to keep it close but it would still be hard to find. I kept looking around, searching everywhere but the more I kept going, the more frustrated I got when I didn't find anything.

I huffed and placed my hands on my hips, frowning as I looked around and tried to think if I was my mother, where would I hide something no one was supposed to know about? But then again, it turned out my mother had a completely different side I had no idea about. I only knew the loving and motherly side of her.

I almost gave up when I stared at the large carpet that was under the bed. I mentally groaned when I realized I had to move her big bed and the large carpet to see if there was anything there. I was already slightly sweating when

I managed to move the bed enough, and it took a lot more strength than I realized as it was a heavy bed.

Grabbing the corner of the carpet, I lifted it to check underneath it. I got down on my hands and knees and started to feel around the wooden tiles in the hopes of finding a secret hiding place. I had no idea if it was even possible to hide anything under the tiles but then again, I have already experienced enough to know that

anything was possible.

I kept adding pressing the tiles with my hands but they all seemed to be pretty steady and glued to each other. I gritted my teeth in frustration

Maybe I was reading too much into this? What if wasn't even as deep as I had made it out to be? Yet, deep inside of me, I knew it had to be something much bigger... There must be something! I just needed one thing that could lead me to some answers.

Just give me one damn thing!

I slammed my fist down to the floor in pure frustration, not realizing my eyesight was getting blurry from tears. I rapidly blinked when I felt one of the tiles move slightly when I slammed my fist down. I touched it again, trying to shake it just to make sure I wasn't tricked.

But it moved!

Chapter 130

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? Views, Released on February 11, 2024

My heart was beating faster, now knowing that I might have found something. I was so anxious about it that even my hands started to shake, and I had to take a short moment to take calm down. It wasn't easy to remove the tile and I had to use my nails to get underneath it to get a hold of it. After a few tries, I finally got a hold of it.

A knock on the door startled me, and I almost let out a scream but stopped when I realized it was just Micahel on the other side. I was completely focused that I had forgotten about him.

“Thaia, are you okay?” He didn’t open the door and kept outside.

“Yeah, I’m just taking a moment... Processing everything.” I grimaced at the bad excuse.

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

“It’s fine, take your time.” He said softly before I heard him walk away from the door, probably to give me a bit more privacy. I let out a sigh of relief before and went back to the now-removed tile. I looked down, seeing it wasn’t that deep but it was dark. I didn’t hesitate one bit and I reached down and started to blindly search for something.

I kept moving my hands from side to side when I finally felt something. It was something hard and I pulled it out. It was a small treasure chest of some art, made out of wood and it had some engraving on the lid that I couldn’t recognize or read. It was just large enough for it to contain some stuff in it. To my luck, there wasn’t a lock on it and only had a simple metal hinge flip to keep it shut.

I quickly opened it in impatience, eager to see what it contained since I wasn’t supposed to see it, or anyone else for that matter. Just as I opened it, I saw some papers and something that

seemed to look like letters and... was that a picture? It was an old picture of my mother when she was younger but she wasn’t alone in the picture.

A man was next to her, and not someone I had seen before.

I kept rummaging through the small chest before I decided this had to wait so Michael wouldn’t become suspicious as to why I was taking too long when I was only supposed to grab a few things. I also didn’t want to risk our safety by staying here for too long, so I forced my curiosity down and quickly arranged everything back to how it was.

I grabbed a small box from my mother’s closet and placed the chest at the bottom before grabbing a few more things of hers to keep around me. I made sure to fill the box enough to hide the chest as I wanted to keep this a secret until I had the chance to look through it.

I glanced around her room one last time, hoping I would somehow be able to avenge her death.

"I'm ready to leave." I said to Michael once I stepped out of the bedroom. He looked at me as if trying to see if I was okay, and I just gave him a small smile to let him know I was.

"Do you need anything else besides these?" He held up the photo albums.

"No, I don't really care about the rest. I just took the stuff that I knew my mom... liked." It was still weird to talk about my mother in the past tense. It did make me slightly uncomfortable to do so, and I knew it was because there was still a part of me that refused to believe that I had lost her.

"Okay." Michael gave me a comforting smile before we got out.

I locked the door but kept the spare key with me. Michael was scanning around the area once again but I wasn't as worried as I was before. If they wanted to attack, they would have definitely done it while we were in the house to keep things out of sight.

"Can you take me to the boutique while we're here? I should put up a sign or something to let customers know we're permanently closed." I asked him once we were in the car. There was no way I would want to run the boutique alone, and also for some very obvious reasons, I couldn't stay here.

Even though I enjoyed my job, it wouldn't be the same without my mother.

"...You don't know?" Michael looked at me with a frown on his face.

"Don't know what?" I looked at him confused. He sighed as he ran a hand through his hair and looked at me with a sad expression.

"It was burned down."

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