

THE GREATER GOOD

REVELATIONS

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CHAPTER 1

THE GIFT

He was trapped. The grim situation gave no options that could lead to a positive effect. It was quite the zugzwang. Terror raged inside of him. What could he do in a dangerous predicament such as this? The blazing sounds of the merciless shots being fired through his only means of protection, the door, rang loudly in his ears like knives piercing his very soul, and shearing it from his wretched figure. Then, it happened. One of the shots clipped him maliciously on the shoulder. Then another cut through his weak chest and punctured his broken heart. Pain, a brutal, inevitable pain filled his whole entire body, like a raging fire inside of him, painful and unstoppable. This is what it feels like to die, he thought, sadly beginning to cry, relaying the recent events in his mind. And indeed, he was dying.

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“Happy birthday, Max!”

Lights flashed as Max’s mother, Anita, took pictures of the birthday boy. It was a calm, bright day, not a cloud in the beautiful blue sky. Peace and serenity, just how Max liked it. There weren’t many guests at Max’s party, just his mom, Matteo, Max’s best friend, and Bianca, Matteo’s girlfriend who quickly befriended Max upon their first meeting.

The situation was fine, DEFCON 5, as Max always jokingly referred to it as. The three Musketeers were incarcerated; Max was graduating high school (he had returned to high school after the situation of his grandfather’s death was neutralized, spending countless days studying, and also spending summers to catch up on what he missed), and now he was finally able to take a break from everything bad he had experienced in recent years.

Now was the important time in every young man’s life where he was becoming the man he was going to be for the rest of his life. The experiences of the highest vitality that Max was undertaking were shaping him into his full personality more and more every second of the day. And this day, the twenty-seventh of August, marked Max’s eighteenth year of existence among civilization and among the other people sharing the small but yet spacious planet.

Matteo had already accomplished this large and important feat. That was the day he had met the love of his life, Bianca, a tall, beautiful brunette with green, dazzling eyes that mesmerized those who were lucky enough to stare into them. They met when Matteo was renting shoes at the Bowl-R-Ama, and Bianca was working behind the counter. Matteo was stunned by her substantial beauty, and immediately turned on what he called the "charm". Max watched, laughing himself to tears, covering his face that was stained with red from his nonstop and painful guffawing.

So now here they were, the calmest day of the short feeling year. The weather coincided perfectly with Max's gigantic milestone, and the birds were singing their graceful songs of pleasurable happiness.

"Blow out your candles before there's a pool of wax on your cake, dear," said Anita with her enthusiastic grin.

"Don't forget to make a wish," Matteo added, seeming silly but also at the same time serious.

Max nodded in reply. What should he have wished for? There were so many things he wanted, and so many things, if not more, that he needed, too. There were family members he dearly missed that he would literally pay arm and leg for to come back. But that would have been a wasted wish for Max knew that they were gone and would not, no, could not return.

He could also have wished for a better and more effective love life. It seemed that Matteo had all the luck in that particular category, and that he also had all the charm. He had a way with words that locked the women around him into a stimulating conversation. Whenever Max and Matteo would go around the city to hang out and relax, the women walking by would look at Matteo, not even noticing Max's existence in the cruel world he lived in. He was invisible to them, just an empty space beside a natural treasure.

But now, what with Matteo finally meeting the love of his life, Max had a chance to shine. Matteo couldn't and definitely wouldn't even think about cheating on Bianca, and risk losing the beautiful connection they had with each other. This gave Max the opportunity to be noticed, and possibly even meet his own love of his life. So why waste a wish on something he could do for himself?

And another reason for not wishing for a better love life, which he was bound to have sooner or later, something was yearning in the back of his mind, competing with Max's other

ideas to become the first thing in his thoughts. A thought, a continued thought that Max had tried to avoid for so long. His father, Santo. He missed him. Despite his terrible murder, Max missed him. He missed his smile, his strong determination in perfectly parenting Max, his terrible jokes that seldom made Max laugh, his queer attitude towards Max's problems; he missed them all.

But should he have missed Santo? He murdered Ben, his own father, and Max's relief from the stress he had built up inside of himself. And even worse still, when Max tried to rat him and his whole operation out to the cops, he had tried to kill Max, just to save his own neck!

Max touched the scar he had received that night in Ben's house when he was hiding in the closet. He had been shot because of Santo.

No. It wasn't Santo's fault. The fault was the Blazer twins'. They tried to kill Max. Santo had tried to stop them, but had failed miserably. Was that one act of sheer justice enough to compensate for Santo's vile crimes committed before? Did Santo even regret his own foul actions? The bubbling of these questions in Max's head caused confusion, pitiless confusion.

I wish dad was here, Max wished. And with that, Max blew the candles out, a soft, quick breath that silenced the burning flames forever.

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"That cake was really good, Anita, thank you," Matteo said after finishing his third slice.

"Thanks, sweetheart," she replied with a smirk of pride on her face, "but no more for you, you don't want to get fat."

Max chuckled to himself. He loved it when Anita tried to mother other people.

"Alright Max, open your presents, and hurry up, Grey's Anatomy is on in fifteen."

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your hair in a knot, I'm coming," he replied. He walked over to a table where the three presents were displayed. He took the biggest one and returned to his friends and his mother.

It was decorated in Montreal Canadiens wrapping. Because of this, Max easily deduced that this present could only be from Matteo. He ripped it open, eager to find out what it was. It was a huge pile of notebooks and textbooks.

"For when you go to University," Matteo explained.

"Thanks," Max answered, happy to be prepared and grateful for Matteo's recurring generosity.

He took the next biggest one that was wrapped carelessly in wrapping paper stained with goofy faces. Max knew from this that it could only be from Bianca, who was always joking and making people laugh so hard they cried. He ripped it open, awaiting and anticipating another one of Bianca's hilarious practical joke, but was shocked to find a regular, plain chemistry set.

"Thanks, Bianca," exclaimed Max.

"Try not to smash this one like you did to the last one your mom gave you," laughed Bianca.

He took the last gift, a small, rectangular, black box that could only be from Anita through the process of elimination. He opened it carefully, and stared, his mouth gaping open, at a shining, bright, silver watch.

"This isn't... it can't be..." Max stammered, "... OH MY GOD, IT IS!"

His face lit up like a candle, bright and hopeful.

"Ben left it for you in his will. Said we should give it to you on your eighteenth birthday," Anita explained, noting Max's obvious excitement.

"Thank you so much," Max didn't know whether he was thanking Anita or Ben.

He happily put it on, a smile stretched on his face so wide that he was surprised it didn't tear. For he had always admired this particular watch. Max recalled Ben telling him that his father, Max's great grandfather, had given it to him before leaving for the war. That was the last time Ben saw his loving father. Sir Gabriel was his name, and the park adjacent to Ben's house was named after him for his bravery portrayed in the war. It was a family honour that no one shared with anyone.

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He was sitting in his room, staring at the blank ceiling, deep in a vast sea of thought. Everyone had left the party and returned to their homes, and Anita was getting ready to sleep. And that left Max, eighteen and responsible, calm, peaceful, and yet unsatisfied. He didn't know what he was thinking, and yet he was thinking. Maybe he was thinking about his future, or maybe he was thinking about the party. He might even have been thinking about Santo. But no matter what he was thinking about, he was thinking nonetheless, undisturbed, and continuous. He thought so much in his short life that he was surprised he didn't have brain damage, and he was surprised he still had things to think about. But then again, he didn't know what he was thinking about at the moment. But thought was what he needed to occupy his time with, especially in tough times.

So there he sat, thinking. About what, he didn't know, but he was thinking nonetheless. But something was disturbing his deep thought, a small rustling of leaves and then the sound of a man with a baritone voice clearing his throat. Thinking it was nothing of great importance, and thinking it was something that certainly didn't concern himself, Max resumed his deep thought, but now he knew exactly what he was thinking about: the noises outside, creeping up on him during the cold dark night and wringing his neck with a cold hand created from the shadows of the night.

And then, the loudest and most disturbing of all the noises Max heard that day. The doorbell rang loudly, echoing in Max's ears, and a knock at the door, a loud, aggravated knock, and finally, steps from outside, like a sprinting kind of sound. Max lifted his head, curious about the sprinting noise.

"MAX!" Max heard Anita call from her room, obviously sounding disgruntled, "GET THE DOOR!"

Max stumbled carelessly down the steps to the family room, afraid to open the door, but not afraid enough to stop him from doing so, for the knocking wasn't a soft, casual knock, but a hard banging that disturbed any living creature within earshot.

He cautiously approached the door, ready for whatever was waiting on the other side. He gripped the cold, metal handle, and swung the door open. And what he saw puzzled him greatly for he was face to face with a cold, dark, uneasy and malevolent nothingness. He stepped outside to see if the man who made the noises was anywhere within Max's view, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared into the night, becoming and joining the shadows that lurked in the blackness surrounding Max's house.

He stepped back into his house, but his foot caught something on its way. He looked for the annoying obstacle and found, to his surprise, a small box wrapped sloppily in lacerated paper. On it was a poorly done bow that looked like it was done in haste.

He picked it up, bewildered from its random appearance, wondering who it came from. He walked slowly back to his room, and plopped himself precariously on his bed, holding the package with care. He just looked at the sad gift, many questions bubbling in his mind. Who was it from? Why didn't the giver present themselves to Max instead of giving in secret? What was that running sound from outside supposed to mean?

“MAX!” Anita called once again from her room, startling Max so greatly he almost dropped the gift.

“WHAT?” he called back, angry at her for startling him so.

“WHO WAS AT THE DOOR?”

“MATTEO! HE FORGOT HIS JACKET!”

“DID YOU LOCK UP?”

“YES!”

Max awaited yet another call from Anita, but was happy to hear nothing. Now he could examine the gift further.

And so he took the bow off, and tore the wrapping off. He stripped it down to a small, tattered cardboard box. Then, he ripped that open, revealing inside a small piece of paper and a card. First he took the paper, and saw it was an invitation to “Le Bonquiqui” restaurant, the most expensive restaurant within driving distance of Max’s house. The reservations were for 7:30 p.m. the following day.

Then he took the card and opened it. In it was one hundred dollars, which Max held with open eyes, and also there were words handwritten hastily on the blank side of the open card. Max read:

Dear Max,

I am excited to see you tomorrow. I haven't seen you in a while and I hope when we meet you will share the same happiness I will have towards meeting you. We've known each other for so long that I'm surprised I didn't invite you to a dinner earlier. I hope to see you soon, and remember,

WIT BEYOND MEASURE IS MAN'S GREATEST TREASURE.

That was it. No name anywhere to be seen on the card. Max looked all over the card and the dinner reservation card, but found nothing.

So Max went to sleep, excited, befuddled, flabbergasted and in the deepest state of thought he had been in for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORST NEWS POSSIBLE

He was waiting patiently in his uncomfortable seat, twiddling his thumbs, looking around the room for a sign of the person who invited him. The restaurant was beautiful, what with the big marble columns with baskets of flowers on either side, the calm music playing softly, but just loud enough to be heard over the loud chattering of the people eating the amazing food. The perfectly decorated tables were what caught Max's eyes, with the utensils organized flawlessly, a large bouquet of flowers in the middle of the table, and many other small components contributing to the overall beauty of the establishment.

So he sat silently, once again thinking, and hoping. He was excited to find out who the person was that invited him to this prestige palace of wonder. But he didn't have to wait much longer. A tall, hooded figure was walking slowly and judiciously towards Max, his arms swaying haphazardly at his sides. Max couldn't tell who he was because his hood stretched low over the figure's face.

He sat down in front of Max, breathing quickly and loudly, and seeming nervous. And then he spoke in a deep baritone voice.

"Hello, my son."

He pulled his hood off his face so he could look at Max. He beheld Max with a happy but also extremely miserable expression. Max stared in wonder, and horror, bewildered from the appearance of this man. He couldn't speak for words failed him. He stuttered until he finally managed to muster a few words.

"How did you...when...what?"

"I have quite a bit to explain, Max," Santo said.

"NO! SAY NOTHING! YOU'RE A FILTHY ROTTEN MURDERER, SO GET THE HELL OUT OF MY FACE!"

"Hey! I did what I had..."

"DON'T GIVE ME ANY OF THAT 'FOR THE GREATER GOOD' CRAP! IT'S JUST A BUNCH OF B.S!"

"Max! Please listen, I beg you! I regret what I did! I did what I had thought was right, but now I know that it wasn't! But none of that matters right now! There are more important things going on!"

"I seriously doubt that! You wasted your time in coming here. It was much better when you and your best friends for life were out of my way!"

"Max!"

"And I doubt you actually regret what you did! You're just trying to buy into my thankfulness!"

"Not a single day has gone by since the twins tried to kill you that I didn't regret it, and you must believe me! After seeing what it had done to you I couldn't bare the pain I felt! It was wrong, not only to you and Anita, but to Ben himself. I feel absolutely dreadful right now."

And indeed Max could tell by Santo's expression that he had been feeling terrible for quite a while; his smile was weak, his voice was weak, and his eyes were stained with tears.

Santo was about to say something, but the waiter came and interrupted. He seemed awfully nervous, but full of zeal.

"Hi," he said in his boyish voice, "my name is Rick and I'll be your waiter for the day! Would you like to start off with some water?"

Both father and son shook their heads. Rick gave them the menus, and was on his way to serve other tables.

"Look," Santo started, "you need to trust me."

"Folly!" Max yelled.

"No, it is not folly! You need to trust me, not as an escaped convict, but as your father, and as your friend. I didn't mean you any pain."

Max sat in silence, once again thinking. Should he have forgiven his father, this man he had loved but had turned his life upside down? Was he deserving of Max's pardon? There were so many things Max was mad at Santo for doing that it was very tricky for Max to form an appropriate response. He murdered Ben, for goodness' sake, and had not properly informed Max of Chiara's death! What was Max supposed to say?

"I forgive you, dad," he said, finally understanding what had to be done and why, "I don't believe anymore that you meant for all of this to happen. I don't think you meant anyone much harm. But you must know that my forgiveness is not enough for you to feel like you have been

let off the hook. I want you to really feel remorse for what you have done. It was cruel, malicious and awfully stupid of you. Do you understand?"

Santo nodded, taken aback from his son's scolding. And then he absolutely just lit up with overflowing glee. Father and son both stood and hugged each other, literally jumping into each other's arms, laughing and crying at the same time, not caring about the bizarre expressions of the people surrounding them and watching them quizzically.

After settling down and ordering their food, a task that proved quite difficult for Rick kept having to repeat the orders to get it right, Max resumed his questioning.

"So you need to tell me," he began, "how in the world did you get out?"

"Not now," Santo replied, moving closer to Max and bringing his voice to a lower register, "not around people. And I also just want to enjoy a nice, calm dinner with my son, undisturbed and without grief lingering over us."

And so they feasted.

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After a long but very nice night of eating and of deep conversation, Max and Santo finally left the restaurant and walked. They walked all the way from the restaurant to Sir Gabriel's Valley, and sat down in the same spot where Max had last talked to Ben.

"So, how did you escape?" Max asked eager to find out the answer.

"Well," Santo said, beginning his long explanation, "you are definitely not gonna like it, but I must admit I had to totally rely on the twins for this one. No, don't roll your eyes at me, it was the only way! Well, we were eating in the little crowded food court, me and the twins, going through the plan for we had been working on it for quite a while, and had gathered enough information about the place that we knew where everything was.

"So, to start our long shot plan, I threw all the slop I had received from the fat old lunch ladies at the toughest and most feared- or respected I'm not really sure which- guy in the whole place. Robert Karnaggy was his fowl name. He stood up, his seat toppling to the ground, red-eyed, looking for the person who threw it. And that's where Dave came into the picture.

"He stood up, acting all brave and all, and screamed in that terrible high pitched screech of his, 'YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT YOU LITTLE PANSY!' Rob was not impressed. He yelled something that I would rather not repeat to you, and made a beeline for Dave. We had

anticipated this. And we had also anticipated that Dave's new convict friend, Jeff Stewart, would try to fight Dave's battle for him. So far the plan was working.

"The guards blocking the exit to the cafeteria ran to interfere in the ruckus we created, also as expected. We left, but just before we did, Danny stole one of the guards' guns. I looked at him disappointedly, but he just said, 'just in case, Santo, just in case.' When we got out we were spotted by two other guards just outside of the cafeteria, and being the idiot he is, Danny shot 'em both before they could raise the alarms. But, as I thought it would, the loud shot attracted even more unwanted attention, so we just sprinted away.

"Eventually we made it through the torturous maze, followed by a few guards behind us. We quickly ran, jumped over the wall- don't ask me how, adrenalin erased that memory- and just kept running. We made it to a city and, of course I regret it but, we robbed some guy of his clothes 'cuz taxi driver is gonna willingly let a bunch of prisoners hitch a ride with them, and we took some money to pay the driver. So long story short we hitched a long, boring ride to Sir Gabriel's Valley and have been hiding out in Ben's house ever since. We've only been there for about two days or so."

Max was stunned because not only had Santo done the impossible and escaped from jail, but he also witnessed the brutal murder of two innocent guards. Max cursed Danny for his cruelty, and resumed his conversation with Santo.

"Wow," he said, unable to say anything more intelligent about Santo's escape.

"And now I raise the topic I need to discuss with you that is more important than anything I have told you so far," Santo said, urgency residing in his speech.

"And that is?"

"It's Dave and Danny. They're crazy. They're hungry for revenge. They're gonna murder Thomas, and then they're coming for you."

CHAPTER 3

AT THE POLICE STATION

Max had finally arrived home with Santo, fear and hatred raging inside of him. It was one in the morning, and Anita was probably still asleep.

"You nervous about seeing mom?" Max asked.

"No, more excited," Santo replied, "I already spoke to her over the phone, just before I saw you, and, just like you, she forgives me. But I'm pretty sure she's gonna give me an earful for bringing you home so late."

"You already talked to her?"

"Yeah, why?"

"How? You don't have a phone!"

"It's called a payphone!"

Max stepped to the door and opened it slowly so Anita wouldn't hear them. But it didn't help much. Anita was sitting on the couch right in front of Max and gave a stare that could kill. Max braced himself for the screaming he knew was about to take place, but this time he wouldn't be the person who was being yelled at, he was just the bystander watching innocently as his parents were arguing.

Anita just looked at Santo, her expression digging into Santo, making him exceptionally uncomfortable. After mustering up some strength, Santo made a sad attempt to reciprocate the expression, but failed to do so and immediately began to stammer.

"Yes, yes, yes! I know what you're gonna say and I'm sorry for being irresponsible and late! You don't need to give me that look, I fully understand everything I know you would say to me and I accept the future consequences that you will be giving me in a matter of days. There, happy?"

Anita said nothing. She just smiled the devilish smile she smiled whenever she won an argument (even though she didn't have to say anything in this case), and proceeded to her room to sleep soundly, relieved that Max was unharmed and alright.

"Well that went well," Max said plopping himself onto the couch and flipping on the television.

"Don't you smirk at me!" Santo complained, "we still have quite a bit to talk about! I need to hide you from the twins!"

"No," said Max, "I don't want to hide or be hidden."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you know of the twins' plans?"

“Believe it or not, I know everything about their plans because those bozos tried to include me in them!”

“Well then, start talking!”

“Well, Thomas is known to be the last person in the police station, you know to answer emergency calls. Everyone else leaves either to go home or rest for the next day or to go start their patrol shift. So that’s where. How? Well, they’re really dim-witted, and tremendously crazy, so they’re just gonna go open fire on him. And when, well that’s the problem. They want to attack... what time is it?”

“Six after one.”

“Well then they want to attack today.”

Max gaped at this information he had just received. If this was true then that only gave Max and Santo a few hours to prepare, and when Max said this, Santo was a bit taken aback and confused.

“What do you mean prepare?” Santo asked, quite gobsmacked.

“What do you mean what do I mean? You don’t seriously think I’m gonna let those damn twins attack Thomas, do you? We can’t just let them murder another innocent person! No more deaths! No more sadness! I’m absolutely sick and tired of it all!”

“Well, what the heck? I can’t let you risk your life just to save Thomas’! If you get in the way of the twins, they will kill instantly, without any hesitation. You must understand this!”

“No! I refuse to stay hidden while another innocent person gets murdered! If you want to seriously prove that you feel remorse in killing Ben then not only do you have to let me do this, but you have to come with me too! I’m not asking this of you, I’m telling you right now! It’s time for you to step up to the plate and prove yourself, and that is that!”

And that certainly was that. Max wouldn’t listen to any arguments or any disagreements Santo had with Max’s train of thought. It was set in stone. They were going to help Thomas no matter what. But Santo kept trying to sneak his way out of it, not out of cowardice, no, not that. It was out of fear. And he almost saved himself from the daunting task in front of him. While they were planning what they would do, Santo brought up a very good decision.

“Why don’t we just alarm the cops and alarm Thomas about this?”

Max thought about this, but quickly found a problem with it.

“Well,” he started quite matter-of-factly, “if we do that then the twins will certainly find out. And when they did they would forget Thomas and would come for us right away. And another reason is if anyone sees you, you’ll be arrested all over again! That would disrupt everything, and it would lessen my protection from the twins.”

Santo admired Max’s quick wits and observed the situation further.

“We should at least warn Thomas about all of this. Don’t you think he deserves to know about the plot against his life?”

“I agree that he deserves to know about it, “Max began to reply, “but if he found out he would alarm other officers himself. We need to inform him right before the twins attack. But how?”

That proved to be the most difficult task. How were they supposed to tell Thomas about the plot too late for any other officers to know about it and before Dave and Danny attacked? Max told Santo not to worry about it, that they would just wing it when the time came.

Eventually Max and Santo chose the strategy they would use to stop Dave and Danny from killing Thomas. They chose the dumbest and most problematic one. They were to attempt to reason with the twins, and if that didn’t work, to fight back. Not to wound, no, they were smarter than that. They had to fight with the same mentality the twins were fighting with. They both knew that in a matter of hours, they would be involved in a bloody fight to the death.

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They were waiting unwearyingly outside the police station, silent, watchful and patient. It was a quarter to eleven and the police station had emptied itself out to just a few occupants that would be leaving any moment soon. Except Thomas. Thomas would be stuck there with only two inexperienced guys with no clue what to do if the situation escalated to a blood thirsty battle. They would just grab a few guns and start firing malevolently at the twins who would certainly be laughing at how easy the situation looked for them.

Max was sweating, terrified and anxious from the events that were about to occur. The moon was merciless in the cold night sky, and spread darkness over Max’s heart, a darkness that refused to be lifted.

An officer made his way out of the place and into his car. He started the engine and drove away, unable to spot the hiding father and son. That left, by Santo’s calculations, three more

people inside the police station, three lucky people who would be able to rest their heads on their warm, comfortable beds that night. Max envied them for that.

“So where are those scums?” asked Max, his blood ice cold.

Santo was about to answer him when a sound was heard out the black darkness engulfing the area. A sound of creeping, a walk that didn't want to be heard, but at the same time did want to be heard. Like a tip toe, but still not quite. Max looked around for the source of the sound, but was disappointed to find nothing.

He looked to his father, but he was gone, abandoning Max to an even greater state of fear than he had already felt. Max's uneasiness grew, but he was saved from terror by a quiet, faint “psst!” coming from ahead. It was Santo beckoning to Max. So Max got up and snuck to Santo's side.

“What's up,” Max asked, noticing Santo's apprehension.

“I saw Danny,” Santo answered, “but there's no sign of Dave.”

“So what now?”

“I'm not sure. Thomas isn't alone yet so I think we still have a few moments to spring into action.”

But Santo had spoken too soon. The doors to the police station swung wide open, permitting two cops, one female and one male, out. They also drove off leaving Thomas alone in the station for the night. It wouldn't be a while until other police officers entered the station, and so Max and Santo sprung into action.

They ran into the station before Danny or Dave would be able to spot them. They then began to frenetically search for Thomas, yelling his name and running down halls, stopping only to look through doors for the officer. It was Max who finally found him. He called for Santo who quickly appeared by his side.

“Hey, Max, what's up?” Thomas greeted Max with enthusiasm. He seemed content until he spotted Santo standing next to Max.

“I can explain later” said Max, trying to amplify the urgency in his voice so Thomas would understand, “but right now we've got an even greater problem on our hands. Dave and Danny will be trying to murder the both of us tonight so we thought, you know, it would be pretty nice on our parts if we came to help you.”

Thomas stared, his mouth gaping wide open, stunned at this shocking revelation. Max was about to explain further when they heard running steps from down the corridor.

Suddenly, a voice was heard. A cold, shrill, murderous voice like a blade being grazed against rock. It was violently calling for Thomas.

“Thomas! Oh Thomas! Come out and play, Thomas!”

The voice was followed by laughter; the most aggravating laugh Max had ever had the displeasure of hearing.

“Damn it!” Max exclaimed, cursing his and Santo’s tardiness in finding Thomas.

“Well hello there!” the voice called from just down the hall, “what a pleasant surprise this is!”

The three turned around quickly to find Danny standing unaccompanied, holding a gun in his hand, staring with a devilish smile while looking back and forth between Max and Thomas.

“Leave now, Danny, or pay the ultimate price,” said Santo.

So much for reasoning with him, Max thought.

“No thanks. I see you’ve chosen where your loyalties lie. Well that’s alright I guess, if death is what you crave.”

And with that last snide remark, Danny shot at Thomas, but he was too quick and anticipative. He was just barely able to jump out of the bullet’s path and into a room away from Danny. Max and Santo followed, also barely avoiding Danny’s firing.

Thomas threw Max and Santo some guns and ammunition. It was heavy in Max’s hand, but he was brave enough to wield it.

“Where’s Dave,” Max wondered aloud, but Santo and Thomas were both unable to answer the question.

“Lock the door,” Thomas told Max, “it should give us enough time to get prepared.”

Max did as Thomas asked, and swiftly returned to Santo’s side. They both watched in awe as Thomas easily overturned two tables. Danny shot the lock on the door and barged in just quick enough to overturn his own table and he started firing rapidly at the three who were cowering behind the other tables.

Shot after shot echoed vividly in each person’s ears. Max hated every moment of what was going on.

“Give up!” Thomas yelled from behind his wooden shield, “you’re greatly outnumbered!”

“So?” Danny replied, each word aggravating Max more and more, “what’s the pain in a little challenge for me? It’s you who should be giving up!”

Max stopped shooting. He knew what he had to do, but he would have to be patient if he wanted his plan to succeed.

As the battle raged on, Danny laughed his evil laugh, seeming to enjoy the near death situation he was in. The battle wasn’t going well for anybody. No one was able to hit their target. Then, to Max’s pleasure, Danny stopped shooting to reload. Max seized this opportunity and jumped over his table. He ran across the room, jumped Danny’s table and pointed his gun right in Danny’s face.

“Drop it,” he said with a wide sneer on his face.

Danny did so, and Max gave him a blow to the head, enough to knock him out. Thomas and Santo went to Max’s side and congratulated him, praising him for his bravery. But the celebration was short lived. Something changed the happy mood to a mood of utter terror. Max got a call on his phone just a short while after everything settled down.

“Hello?” Max answered.

Max heard, to his dismay, a high pitched screech that he knew only too well.

“If you want your friends, Bianca and Matteo, to live, come to Sir Gabriel’s Valley immediately. Bring no one. If you are accompanied, they will die. You have half an hour.”

CHAPTER 4

THE CONFRONTATION AT SIR GABRIEL’S VALLEY

Max arrived alone, armed and terrified to death. What had Dave done to his friends? Why did he have to be so cruel? He continued on until he heard whimpering coming from ahead that he guessed belonged to Bianca. He was unaccompanied, as Dave told him to be. Thomas and Santo agreed to wait at 598 Lobar Street for Max. If he didn’t return in half an hour, they were to go looking for Max. Santo was extremely reluctant to let Max go alone to Dave, but in the end he did, having no other choice.

So here Max was, following the sad cries of his friend, and the terrible silence of his other friend, hoping upon hope that they and he would be able to escape the terrible clutches of the evil and merciless Dave Blazer. Just the thought of seeing Dave again was enough to send a cold chill down Max's spine.

He passed through a dense patch of trees and entered a clearing. The sight he saw was horrendous. Dave had Bianca held by her hair in his left hand and Matteo at his feet, holding a gun in his right hand that was pointed at Bianca's forehead.

"Put the gun down!" Max yelled, his voice almost abandoning him in this dreadful situation, "they didn't do anything to you!"

"No!" Dave yelled back while Max looked into Matteo's eyes noting his fear.

Matteo gave him a stare that said, "you have to at least save Bianca." Max understood it only too well.

"Why should I let them go?" Dave complained again, "you've ruined my life and my brother's life!"

"Your anger and your hate made you do that yourself!" Max yelled in replied, "you have allowed, your hatred and self pity to twist your mind until now... until now you have become the very thing you should be avoiding."

"Don't lecture me, Max! I see through your lies, your trickery, and your deceit! You can't change me like you changed Santo!"

"For God's sake, Danny, put the gun down!"

"You want it down, do you? Then beg for mercy! But it won't help. No, it won't help at all. I'm gonna make you experience the pain and loneliness you made me experience locked up behind bars!"

"Please... please... don't..."

Max had been hoping that Dave would listen to some kind of reason, but his uncooperativeness forced Max to do what he was dreading. Quickly, way too quickly for Dave to react, Max pulled out his gun and shot Dave square in the chest. He fell to the ground, releasing Bianca from his grasp, choking on blood that was pouring from his open mouth. Max cried. He had killed a man. It was a feeling he would never forget, a feeling of hatred and of dread. It was for the greater good, yes, he knew that... but he had still ended a man's life. Whether Dave deserved it or not, it had been done, and it was almost impossible for Max to deal with.

But Dave made a move, the last move he would ever make in his sad, miserable life. He pointed his gun and shot. At what, he didn't know, for his eyes were rolling back into his head. He laid motionless and silent, never to move or breathe again.

Dave's last motion had succeeded. The bullet had hit an unintended but also intended target. Bianca. She was bleeding to death.

Max watched in horror as Matteo ran to her side, and held her in his arms, crying. Matteo had never cried before, not even as a young child, but this was too much for him to bear. He held Bianca in his weak arms, refusing to let go while he cried over her limp form, blood gushing from her wound. Bianca looked into Matteo's face, and then her head fell back, her breathing growing quieter and quieter.

Max patted Matteo's shoulder. Matteo looked at Max and understood. They couldn't just wait for her to die. So they picked her up and flew, out of the clearing, through the trees and towards 598 Lobar Street where Thomas and Santo were waiting on the porch. It all happened so fast, but at the same time so slow. They drove Bianca to the hospital, Matteo never letting go of her cold hands.

"I don't want to die," muttered Bianca.

"And you won't," said Matteo, "I promise."

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They were waiting in the waiting room of the hospital. Matteo sat in an uncomfortable chair while mournfully holding his head in his lap. Thomas was pacing back and forth. Max and Santo were conversing deeply off in a corner of the room.

"I'm sure she'll be okay, Max," said Santo, trying so hard to ease Max's sadness and emotion.

"Why did we have to get in to this?" asked Max, crying out the words, "it was your fault! You started all of this by murdering Ben!"

"I'm sorry! I told you that I didn't want all of this to happen! I thought it would help our family! But I'm wrong. I know, please don't shove it in my face."

"I'm sorry... it's just, I'm scared and angry and a bit shell shocked."

"Well, how do you think Matteo feels?"

Max hadn't thought much of how Matteo felt. But he knew exactly how Matteo would feel. He would be on the verge of snapping into a violent rant of hatred. Tables would be tossed, papers flying in the air. Max just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"I have news of Bianca for those concerned," a voice announced. It was a doctor who spoke. Max, Santo, Thomas and Matteo all stood up, eager to hear the news.

"Well," the doctor started, "she has suffered serious injuries, and she has lost a lot of blood. But, I think if you give her a few days with us, and a few weeks to rest up, she's gonna be alright."

And so all the pain and suffering ended with this good news, and with Max and Matteo staring at each other, too happy to put it into words. It was the happiest moment of their lives. Nay. The happiest moment of their lives so far...

THE END