

Chapter Three

“I told you I don’t need a wingman,” Max said for the fourth time.

Not that Derek was listening. He was too busy taking in his surroundings as they trailed a uniformed police officer through the interrogation area of the ninth precinct.

“You keep saying you don’t need me,” Derek murmured. “But you don’t live in New York. I do. And believe it or not, I know people. People who can help if necessary.”

Max looked at him sideways. “Why do you have to make it sound like you’re some crime boss? You run a company that peddles makeup and three-day cleanses, for crying out loud.”

Derek grinned. “You’re on to me. Maybe I tagged along because I wanted to see what kind of chaos is being swept off the streets on New Year’s Eve.”

The policeman chuckled. “It’s always a circus on New Year’s. You wanna see some real characters? Take the stairs to downstairs holding.”

“Please don’t encourage him,” Max advised as the officer held open the door to what looked like a small conference room.

Parker Dern was seated in a chair, his shoulders hunched over a metal table. He looked up expectantly before his expression fell, guilt warring with shame in his bloodshot eyes. Lori stood from where she sat beside the rookie.

Max wasted no time on pleasantries. “What are the charges?”

She read from her phone. “Reckless driving, speed in excess of ninety miles an hour. Minor in possession of alcohol.” She drew in a sharp breath. “Drug possession. Cocaine”

Parker shot from his chair. “I told you the blow isn’t mine!”

“It never is,” Derek mumbled. “Although, I’d love to know where you can go ninety miles an hour at eight o’clock in the evening in this city.”

“The West Side Highway,” Lori replied.

“Mm.” Derek nodded.

“The coke isn’t mine.” Parker pleaded with Max. “I swear. It must have already been in the car when I drove it. I want nothing to do with that stuff. I’ll pee in a cup every day to prove it.”

Max was about to ask a litany of follow-up questions when the door to the room flew open. A woman wearing a red leather dress that barely covered her ass charged in. Her mane of wild brown curls fluttered out from around her head. There was a streak of mascara across one cheek and—*Christ*—was that a ring through her nose? She’d clearly lost her way from the downstairs holding area.

Both Max and Derek moved to intercept her before she did anything to harm Max’s most expensive investment.

“Pecker,” she huffed.

The husky timbre of her voice momentarily caught him off guard, sending a jolt of awareness coursing through him.

Parker seemed to know the intruder, however. He sighed as he slumped back down into the plastic chair. “Olive.”

Her thigh-high boots tapped against the linoleum floor as she hurried across the room to wrap her arms around Parker. The rookie practically buried his face in her bosom.

An unbidden fantasy of doing the same thing had Max stifling an angry groan. This woman was so far from his type it was laughable.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly before kissing Parker on the head.

His reply was muffled against her chest. “Yeah.”

“Good.” She untangled her arms from around him then slapped him behind the head. “What did you do?”

“Ow!” Parker patted down his hair. “I didn’t do anything!”

She gestured to the interrogation room. “So we are all standing in a *police station* for shits and giggles on New Year’s Eve?”

Parker dragged his fingers through his shoulder length sandy hair. “My friend Tommy got a Lamborghini Urus for his eighteenth birthday. I’ve always wanted to drive one. He let me take it for a spin.”

The woman’s hands were on her hips now. “And you thought it was a good idea to take open beers along for the ride?”

Parker groaned. “I got caught up in the experience.”

The tall guy who had slipped in behind the woman took that moment to speak up. “Let’s not say anything else right now, Parker. I need to speak with the arresting officer to see what I can do to get the charges dropped.”

“Too late for that.” Parker looked between the two newcomers, a despondent expression in his eyes. “I wasn’t sure if you guys were coming.”

The woman slapped her palm against her forehead. “You didn’t?”

Parker threw up his hands. “I didn’t know what else to do when you didn’t respond right away. So I called him.”

There was no need to ask who because the door opened yet again and in stalked the senator. All the air seemed to get sucked out of the space with his arrival. He didn’t bother looking at his son. Instead, he aimed his gaze at Max.

“My lawyer has arranged for the charges to be dropped,” he announced. “Parker will be back at the hotel well before curfew. Now it’s your job to convince the commissioner to overlook any game suspensions since no charges were filed.”

Max’s jaw grew painfully tight. He could sense Lori bristling next to him. Who did this man think he was?

“It doesn’t matter what the commissioner decides to do because I’m suspending him regardless,” Max countered.

Senator Dern flinched slightly. The man was quiet for several painful seconds before he spoke.

“Why the hell would you want to do that?” he demanded.

“Because Parker is a member of a *team*.” Max couldn’t believe he had to explain this to the guy. “The rules are the same for every player on the Mayhem. They do something asinine? They face the consequences. No one is allowed to hide behind their father’s skirts.”

Derek’s rapid throat clearing told Max he probably should have left that last part unsaid. Max didn’t care. The senator needed to know that his power only extended to the people he represented in Colorado, not to the owner of the Mayhem.

“You can spit polish his record all you want but the story will get out,” he continued. “Given the sleazy media’s interest in your son, they likely already have it posted online. The other guys on the team won’t respect him if he goes unpunished. The fans won’t, either.”

Senator Dern shook his head. “You really don’t know anything about this game. The only thing your fans care about is winning. But you do you.”

The man finally acknowledged his son. “I’m disappointed in you, Parker. We will discuss this further tomorrow. I have donors expecting me at a gathering.”

He was turning to leave when the woman spoke up.

“Hi, Dad.”

The senator stopped in his tracks and looked over at her. He appeared as if he hadn’t noticed the mesmerizing woman standing next to his son. His own daughter. That familiar sick feeling roiled through Max’s belly.

“Olivia,” he drawled. “Dressed for success as usual, I see.”

Max had to hand it to the woman, though. Her chin remained tilted up, her shoulders high. If her father’s disapproval had any effect on her at all, she didn’t let it show.

He studied her eyes looking for any hint of pain. They really were the most extraordinary eyes—an unusual mix of earthy green with flecks of vibrant gold. They were a little too large for her heart shaped face, making it easy to fall under their spell.

“I was at a work party,” she explained.

Her father acted as though he couldn’t care less. “As I mentioned, I’m on my way to an event. I’ll expect you at the hotel for brunch tomorrow, Olivia, whether your brother is playing or not.”

And then he was gone. Olivia's sidekick, the tall guy, moved to follow him out. "I'll just check in with the desk captain to find out when Parker can leave."

Parker sighed. "I'm sorry, Liv. Now you're stuck with dad for brunch, and you won't even get to see me play before you head out on the tour."

She tenderly stroked her hand over her brother's hair. "Um, yeah. About that. It seems I'm not going on tour after all."

Some sort of nonverbal exchange occurred between brother and sister.

"No way." Parker slapped his palm down on the table. "Did dad have something to do with it?"

She shrugged. "I don't think it was intentional this time."

"What will you do?" Parker asked. "Where will you live?"

His sister looked uncomfortable before she forced a smile. "That's tomorrow's problem. Right now, we need to get you out of here."

Derek cleared his throat. "Your mom is wondering where we are," he said to Max. "If things are settled here, maybe we should head back to the party."

Shit.

His mother's party. Where Alisha was likely fuming at his absence.

Parker jumped to his feet. "I'm sorry for the trouble I caused tonight, sir. It won't happen again. I promise. I'll do whatever it takes to make it up to you."

His sister looked at her brother with a mixture of pride and sympathy.

Max stared the kid down. “You’re a smart young man, Parker, with a brilliant hockey future ahead of you. I don’t want to see you blow it. These bonehead stunts of yours end today. Is that understood?”

Parker swallowed roughly before he nodded. “Yessir.”

“Good.” Max wasn’t foolish enough to believe Parker wouldn’t mess up again. After all, he’d been an eighteen-year-old once. But he also recalled what it felt like to be straddling the line between careless teenager and adulthood and needed someone to believe in you. “Then let’s move on from this.”

Now his sister was beaming in Max’s direction. Her lopsided smile was nowhere near Alisha’s perfect pout, but there was something so earnest about it that he was grateful to be on the receiving end. Derek didn’t see the charm, apparently. He nudged Max toward the door.

“I’ll be right back, Parker,” Lori said. “I just need to arrange transportation back to the hotel.”

The three of them stepped out into the noisy hallway. Max glanced back through the window in the door to see Parker resting his head on his sister’s shoulder.

“What’s her story?” he asked his assistant.

Lori swiped her finger across her phone screen. “Olivia Joyce Dern, the oldest of the senator’s two children. Ten years separate her from Parker. She’s worked for multiple non-profits—mostly those who oppose her father’s politics.”

Derek snorted. “Good judgment and moxie. There’s hope for Parker yet.”