**Unveiled: A Max McCollum Thriller**

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# **Chapter 1: A Brush with Death**

Max McCollum strolls through Brooklyn with his hands in his pockets, moving with the easy gait of an unhurried, unencumbered man. Sundays are when he steps off the tightrope of city tension and lets himself get lost in something softer, quieter. He starts at his usual gallery circuit, barely noticing the familiar industrial-chic storefronts along the way, where trendy folks wander in and out murmuring words like “intriguing” with the enthusiasm of people just relieved to be somewhere they think they’re supposed to be.

Inside, this gallery is all gleaming wood floors and muted light, with a few patrons drifting from canvas to canvas in hushed appreciation. Max is here for a bit of beauty, maybe a reminder that life can be more than back alleys and gritted teeth.

He moves through with a calm eye, noting landscapes, abstractions, portraits—beautiful, he thinks, but nothing he hasn’t seen variations of a hundred times. Until he reaches the far wall.

And there it is. The painting doesn’t fit with the others. It’s a landscape, but not one that soothes. The strokes are wild, almost violent, dark colors clawing at the edges of a pale, washed-out sky. Max feels something cold settle in his chest, a sense of familiarity laced with warning.

He steps closer, examining the rough texture of the canvas. It’s unsettling, the way it seems to almost vibrate with tension, as if the artist had poured every fragment of a fractured mind into each brutal stroke. Max’s hand inches to his side, an unconscious habit, and he stops himself before he looks like a man ready to draw a gun on a painting.

“What the hell?” he mutters under his breath.

A few lines stand out to him, almost like encrypted symbols woven into the brushstrokes. It’s a language only visible if you know where to look. Max has worked with encrypted images before, hiding secrets in the swirl of paint, but it’s not something you just stumble upon—unless someone wanted you to.

Max’s eyes narrow, and he takes a steadying breath, the kind he reserves for when things start feeling less like a Sunday and more like a setup. He steps back, letting the painting fill his vision from a new angle. Still nothing. He scans the room for someone who might know more. His gaze lands on a woman talking with a couple near the entrance—a striking brunette with a kind of cool, easy authority that marks her as the person in charge.

Max waits until she’s done and approaches, his tone low and casual. “Excuse me. Are you the owner here?”

The woman turns, her expression a careful blend of polite interest and mild wariness. She’s tall, with dark hair that falls just past her shoulders and a dress that’s both sleek and subtly powerful—a kind of armor for a world where people wield wealth and influence like weapons.

“I am. Rosalee Turner,” she says, proffering her hand. Her grip is firm. Confident.

“Max McCollum,” he replies, noting the way her gaze sharpens slightly at the name. “That painting in the back—who’s the artist?”

Rosalee tilts her head, giving him a measured look. “You’re interested in *that* one?” She glances over his shoulder, her mouth curving with the faintest hint of a smirk. “Not exactly the usual choice for Sunday window shoppers.”

Max shrugs, holding her gaze. “Guess I’ve never been one for the usual.”

She raises an eyebrow, then gestures for him to follow her back toward the painting. “It’s a recent acquisition. Came in last month. Not much is known about the artist—a reclusive type who prefers to remain anonymous.”

They reach the painting, and Rosalee crosses her arms, studying it as if seeing it anew through his eyes. “There’s something… unsettling about it, isn’t there?”

“You could say that,” Max replies, his voice casual but his mind racing. “I’ve seen something like this before—paintings hiding messages, coded into the brushstrokes. Whoever made this one knew exactly what they were doing.”

Rosalee’s eyes flicker with a hint of surprise before her expression smooths back to neutral. “A hidden message? That’s… an unusual take.”

Max studies her, watching for tells. “You ever notice anything strange in here? Anything that makes you think this place is being watched?”

Rosalee hesitates, her gaze darting briefly to the shadows in the corners of the room. “There’ve been… incidents. Anonymous calls, letters, a few visitors who seemed a little too interested in certain pieces. But I wrote it off as standard gallery drama—art attracts all sorts.”

“Maybe,” Max says, nodding slowly, “but maybe not.” He leans in slightly, lowering his voice. “If this is what I think it is, someone might be using your gallery for more than art exhibitions. You might be in danger.”

Rosalee’s smile fades, and she crosses her arms, considering him with a sharp, assessing gaze. “And what exactly do you think this is?”

Max glances around, making sure no one’s listening, then lowers his voice even more. “An encrypted message. I think someone used this painting to send information, and if that’s the case, it could be the kind that people will kill to protect.”

Rosalee doesn’t flinch, but her gaze turns colder. “Mr. McCollum, are you trying to scare me out of my own gallery?”

“Not at all. But I am saying that if someone went to the trouble of putting this here, they didn’t do it as a favor.” He steps back, letting his words sink in. “I can help you, if you’re interested. Figure out what this is, who put it here, and why.”

She regards him in silence, her expression unreadable. Finally, she sighs. “Fine. If you think you’re onto something, let’s see where it goes. But if this is some kind of elaborate sales pitch for security services, I’ll show you the door myself.”

Max grins. “Fair enough. Let’s start with the painting.”

They spend the next few minutes analyzing the piece, Max pointing out patterns and hidden shapes that don’t seem to fit the landscape. Lines that curve and break in unnatural ways, as though forming letters, symbols. Rosalee’s skepticism gives way to intrigue, and soon she’s nodding along, her initial wariness shifting to genuine interest.

“Have you ever seen this kind of thing before?” she asks, glancing at him sidelong.

“Once or twice,” he replies, keeping his tone casual. “But never in an art gallery. This is more like something you’d find hidden in a bunker, somewhere the sunlight doesn’t reach.”

Rosalee shivers slightly, though her expression stays steely. “Then why here? Why my gallery?”

Max tilts his head, considering. “Either it was chosen specifically, or it’s part of a larger network. Maybe your gallery’s one of several. Or maybe…” he pauses, watching her reaction, “maybe it has something to do with you.”

Rosalee looks at him sharply, but doesn’t respond. Instead, she turns her attention back to the painting, fingers tracing a line in the air just above the canvas. “You really think this could be a warning?”

Max nods. “Someone went to a lot of trouble to make this piece as cryptic as it is. And if I’m right, they didn’t do it for the aesthetic. Whatever message is hidden here, it’s meant to be understood by a select few. And I’m betting they’d rather no one else got curious.”

They stand in silence for a moment, both of them staring at the painting. The weight of Max’s words seems to hang between them, thickening the air with a tension that feels as real as the paint on the canvas.

Rosalee lets out a slow breath, her expression unreadable. “So what now?”

“Now,” Max replies, “we dig a little deeper. I need to know more about this artist, and you need to make sure there’s nothing else in this gallery that might be hiding messages.”

She nods, a trace of her earlier confidence returning. “You’ve got a sharp eye, Mr. McCollum. But if we’re doing this, you’d better be sure. I don’t play well with empty theories.”

Max smiles, a sharp, knowing edge in his eyes. “Good. Neither do I.”

They agree to meet again later, after Rosalee’s had a chance to dig through her records. As Max turns to leave, he casts one last glance at the painting, its dark colors seeming to pulse in the dim gallery light. He’s not sure if it’s a warning or an invitation. But one thing’s clear: he’s already in deeper than he intended.

Outside, the city roars back to life around him. Max steps into the steady flow of Brooklyn’s streets, his mind already racing through possibilities, every instinct telling him that this isn’t just a painting. It’s a puzzle—and one he has no choice but to solve.

As Max steps out of the gallery, the familiar hum of the city wraps around him, but today, it’s as if every sound, every shadow is sharpened by what he’s just seen. This isn’t just another gallery or another artist; something about that painting feels alive, as if it’s holding its breath, waiting for the right eyes to decode it.

Max doesn’t head straight home. Instead, he detours down a quieter street, ducking into a café with a view back toward Rosalee’s gallery. He needs a few minutes to think, to let the implications sink in. Sitting by the window, he orders coffee and pulls out his notebook, flipping to a fresh page. He sketches out the rough layout of the painting from memory, adding the jagged lines and strange symbols that seemed hidden in the chaos of colors.

He’s just starting to make some connections when his phone vibrates on the table. The caller ID is private, but Max knows who it is. Theo—a semi-reliable, semi-honest informant Max uses now and then. Max answers, keeping his voice low.

“Theo.”

“Max,” Theo’s voice crackles over the line, low and urgent. “Heard you were sniffing around the art world. Thought you were taking a break.”

“So did I,” Max replies, glancing around the café out of habit. “But I found something interesting.”

“You’re not the only one. Word is, something big’s moving through the underground right now. A lot of high-value stuff—art, cash, info. Whatever you’re looking at, be careful. Some of the players aren’t exactly Sunday shoppers.”

Max chuckles, feeling the weight of Theo’s words settle into his gut. “Appreciate the warning. Anything specific I should know?”

There’s a pause on the other end. “Just watch your back. I’d say you’re in shark-infested waters, but that might be understating things. Good luck.”

Max pockets his phone, his mind racing. Whatever Rosalee’s got herself wrapped up in, it’s bigger than he thought. And if Theo’s information is right, it’s only a matter of time before the real players show up to protect their interests. He finishes his coffee, tossing a few bills on the table before stepping back out onto the street. He needs a plan, and fast.

Back at his apartment, Max clears a section of his living room wall, taping up his rough sketches of the painting alongside scribbled notes. The lines and shapes begin to form a pattern, something he’s seen before in military encryption work, where messages were hidden in abstract designs, intended only for those who knew how to decode them.

He pulls out his laptop, logging into a secure server where he keeps files from his old SEAL days—encrypted photos, patterns, algorithms he’s picked up over the years. As he scans through the files, he notices something: a series of shapes and lines that matches parts of the painting. The symbols aren’t random—they’re coordinates, directions masked within the strokes. Whoever painted this knew exactly what they were doing.

Max leans back, exhaling slowly. He doesn’t like where this is headed. Coordinates mean movement, location, possibly even a meeting point. He jots them down, his mind already mapping out potential destinations, places that might intersect with the coordinates he’s seeing.

His thoughts drift to Rosalee. She’s holding something back, he’s sure of it. Maybe she’s not directly involved, but there’s no way this painting ended up in her gallery by chance. Tomorrow, he’ll go back and press her for more information. If she’s hiding something, he’ll get it out of her one way or another.

The next morning, Max is at the gallery as soon as it opens, slipping inside with the early crowd. Rosalee spots him immediately, her eyes narrowing slightly in a mix of surprise and amusement.

“You’re back,” she says, crossing her arms. “Couldn’t stay away?”

Max nods, ignoring her sarcasm. “I couldn’t stop thinking about that painting. I need to know where you got it.”

Rosalee’s gaze flickers, just for a moment, but it’s enough. She glances around to make sure no one’s listening before gesturing him toward the back room. They slip through a door marked *Staff Only*, entering a small, cluttered office that’s a far cry from the polished elegance of the gallery.

“Okay, Mr. McCollum,” she says, leaning against the desk, arms folded defensively. “What exactly are you trying to say? That painting is a recent acquisition, nothing more.”

Max shakes his head, his tone low and even. “Rosalee, I’ve seen encryption work before, and that painting isn’t art for art’s sake. Someone encoded information in it. Coordinates, maybe more. I think it’s meant to send a message, and I think you know that.”

She stares at him, the mask slipping just a little, revealing something darker, something wary. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Dead serious,” Max replies, holding her gaze. “You’re in over your head, Rosalee, whether you realize it or not. Whoever created that painting knows what they’re doing, and I have reason to believe they’re willing to kill to keep that information hidden.”

Rosalee’s face pales, her earlier confidence crumbling. She sinks into the chair behind the desk, rubbing her temples as if warding off a headache. “Alright,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe… maybe I did get a strange feeling about it. But what am I supposed to do? Close the gallery? Call the police?”

“Neither,” Max says. “If this is as big as I think it is, you need someone who knows how to handle dangerous situations. Someone like me.”

She hesitates, her gaze drifting to the half-open door, as though expecting someone to burst in at any moment. Finally, she nods. “Alright. But if you’re going to do this, you’d better not drag me down with you.”

Max allows himself a small smile. “Don’t worry. You’re safer with me than without me.”

They spend the next hour analyzing the painting in detail, each of them noting different elements, drawing connections neither had seen before. Max shows Rosalee the symbols he recognized as coordinates, explaining how they might relate to locations across the city. She listens, her initial skepticism giving way to a mix of curiosity and fear.

“So… what now?” she asks as they step back from the painting, both of them staring at it as if it might suddenly reveal its secrets.

“Now, we follow the coordinates,” Max says. “See where they lead. But we’ll need to be careful. If someone else is looking for this information, they won’t be happy if we find it first.”

Rosalee takes a deep breath, nodding. “Fine. But I’m coming with you.”

Max raises an eyebrow, a half-smile tugging at his lips. “You’re sure about that? This isn’t exactly a Sunday stroll through the gallery district.”

She gives him a sharp look. “I’m not exactly fragile, Mr. McCollum. Besides, it’s my gallery, my painting, my risk. I have a right to know what I’m getting myself into.”

“Fair enough,” Max replies, secretly impressed by her determination. “But if things go sideways, you stick close to me and do exactly what I say.”

Rosalee smirks, crossing her arms. “I don’t take orders well, but I’ll consider it. Lead the way.”

They leave the gallery, slipping into the steady pulse of Brooklyn’s streets, blending into the throngs of pedestrians. Max keeps a close eye on their surroundings, watching for anything out of place, his instincts on high alert.

The first set of coordinates leads them to a quiet street in DUMBO, the area deserted except for a few locals and tourists admiring the view of the Manhattan Bridge. Max scans the buildings, searching for anything that might stand out, any indication of a hidden entrance or a message left behind.

And then he spots it—a small, faded symbol painted on the corner of a building, barely visible against the weathered brick. It’s the same symbol he saw in the painting, a jagged, almost violent mark that seems to pulse with an unseen energy.

Max steps closer, studying it carefully. “This is it. Someone left this as a marker.”

Rosalee peers over his shoulder, her expression a mix of fascination and trepidation. “So… what does it mean?”

Max doesn’t answer right away, his gaze focused on the symbol. He traces it with his finger, feeling a strange sense of foreboding settle over him. Whatever they’ve stumbled into, it’s bigger than he’d thought, something that goes beyond the world of art and into something far darker.

He glances at Rosalee, his tone grim. “It means we’re in the right place. And it means we’re not alone.”

They both look up as a shadow moves in the distance, a figure disappearing around the corner. Max tenses, instincts firing on all cylinders. He steps forward, gesturing for Rosalee to stay close. “Come on. We’re not done here yet.”

As they move deeper into the city’s shadowed underbelly, Max can’t shake the feeling that they’re being watched, that every step they take is being tracked by unseen eyes. The painting, the coordinates, the hidden symbols—it all feels like a trap, one carefully laid and waiting for them to take the bait.

# **Chapter 2: The Timeless Clue**

Max wakes early, not from an alarm but from a feeling deep in his gut—one that tells him the game is on. He throws on his leather jacket, slips his mil-spec SatNav phone into the pocket of his 501s, and scans the coordinates he’s marked on a crumpled map on his wall. Today, he’s following the lead from the painting—and bringing Rosalee with him. Whatever the mystery is, it’s starting to look like something that might just get them both killed.

He arrives at her gallery just as the morning light filters through the narrow Brooklyn streets. Rosalee is already waiting, looking more polished than most people do by ten in the morning. She’s donning a leather jacket of her own over her usual gallery chic—a departure that tells Max she’s gearing up for something way outside her comfort zone.

“Morning,” he says, eyeing her attire with a wry grin. “Skipping Fashion Week?”

She smirks, folding her arms. “Something tells me my Mary Janes wouldn’t make it through the day.”

Max laughs softly but his eyes stay serious. “You ready to step into the deep end?”

“I probably shouldn’t think too hard about that,” she says, meeting his gaze. There’s something steely in her eyes, a hint of excitement tempered with caution. Max has met her type before: she’s existed within a sphere of wealth and safety for so long that doing something adventurous is like entering a portal.

They head out together, blending into the morning flow of the city as they make their way to a bar Max frequents in Midtown. It’s one of those places where the furniture looks like it hasn’t changed in decades and the regulars know to mind their own business. Max likes it for that low-rent reliability, and for Theo—an informant in his network who seems to obtain knowledge just by existing.

The bar is empty at this hour, except for Theo nursing a beer at the counter. He’s a wiry guy with a face that seems to have been in the wars; scarred in places, his nose slightly crooked from one too many close encounters. But his eyes are sharp, clocking Max and Rosalee before they approach.

“McCollum,” Theo says, nodding. “I see you brought a friend.”

“Would be that it were,” Rosalee snarks before giving Theo a thirty-three-degree smile.

Theo gives her a once-over, something in his expression suggesting he’s seen her type before—rich, cultured, and utterly out of her element. But he doesn’t comment on it. “So, what’s the trouble this time?”

Max slides onto the stool beside him, leaning in just enough to keep his voice low. “Rosalee owns a gallery. There’s a painting there—something’s hidden in it.”

“What kind of something?”

“If I knew that, it wouldn’t be hidden. What’s the song on the streets when it comes to the art world?”

Theo narrows his eyes, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the counter. “Might’ve heard a few things.”

“Might’ve?”

“You know how it goes: you’re sitting around, minding your own business, and then, boom, you hear something.”

Max rolls his eyes—and then rolls two hundred-dollar bills off his money clip and hands them to Theo.

“People moving high-value items, like they’re shuffling pieces on a chessboard before the clock runs out. You might have tripped over something more than you bargained for. But that’s how you like it, isn’t it?”

“I like to stay on my toes. Know anything about an art auction happening today?”

Theo sips his drink, considering. “Word is, there’s a private auction in Times Square. Invite-only, and they’re not handing out invitations at the door. Your usual crowd won’t cut it. These folks… they’re more particular.”

“I can be a very natty dresser,” Max quips.

Rosalee cocks a brow. “I know most of the major collectors and auction houses, and none of them mentioned anything about an auction today.”

“Because they wouldn’t,” Theo says in a flat tone. “This isn’t the kind of event they’re talking about at The Harvard Club. Think of it as a show-and-tell for people who prefer not to do either in public.”

Max’s jaw tightens. The pieces are starting to fit, but he can’t see the full picture yet. “Anything we should know before we walk into this?”

Theo gives him a long, hard look. “I can tell you this: you twos are not the only ones looking into this. Watch yourself, Maxwell.” He tosses back the last of his coffee, stands up, and without another word, makes his way out of the bar, leaving Max and Rosalee with more questions than answers.

Max turns to Rosalee, who appears even more reluctant than she did five minutes ago. “Guess we’re headed to Times Square. But if Theo’s right, we’ll need to blend in. No sudden moves, no questions. Just… you know, keep your eyes open.”

Rosalee raises an eyebrow. “I think I can handle that.”

The two make their way to Times Square, where the dizzying lights and flashing billboards are a surreal contrast to the silent tension building in both of them. Max guides Rosalee to a quieter corner where they have a clear view of the auction venue—a converted loft above a theater, its entrance concealed behind a black velvet curtain. A few men in bespoke suits hover near the door, scanning every passerby with vigilance.

“We’ll need to slip inside without attracting attention,” Max murmurs.

Rosalee’s mouth curves into a sly smile. “Follow my lead.”

Before he can protest, she strides toward the door, her posture shifting from wary to confident, her face slipping into the polished smile of someone used to commanding a room. Max follows, a few paces behind, blending into her shadow as she approaches the guards.

“I believe my name should be on the list,” she says smoothly, her tone as cool as a winter breeze. The guard raises an eyebrow, glancing down at his clipboard.

“Name?” he asks, his tone more interested than skeptical.

“Rosalee Turner,” she replies without missing a beat. “I brought along my intern,” she adds, nodding toward Max.

The guard’s eyes narrow slightly, but after a moment’s hesitation, he nods and pulls back the curtain, allowing them inside. They step into a dimly lit room filled with shadowed figures, each one emanating an air of mystery—and questionable intent.

Max scans the room, his gaze sharp and searching. The walls are lined with paintings and sculptures, each piece obscured under a thin veil of secrecy. He notices a few familiar faces—collectors, dealers, even a couple of old military contacts who probably aren’t here for the art. The auction hasn’t started yet, giving them a chance to survey the scene.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Rosalee whispers.

“We’ll know it when see it.”

“Walk me through that.”

“It’ll be what it isn’t supposed to be here.”

They split up, moving along opposite sides of the room. Max keeps his pace casual, his gaze never lingering too long on any one piece. But he can feel the eyes on him—people watching from the corners of their vision, tracking his every step. He’s used to the constant awareness of potential threats, but he gets the feeling that they’re more concerned with his choice of attire.

As he nears the back of the room, a figure brushes past him, slipping a folded piece of paper into Max’s jacket pocket before disappearing into the crowd. Max resists the urge to react, instead quietly finishing his circuit of the room before regrouping with Rosalee near the entrance.

She raises an eyebrow, nodding toward his jacket. “Christmas card?”

Max pulls out the paper, unfolding it slowly. The message is scrawled in a tight, hurried script: *Grand Central Station. Platform 23. 3 p.m.*

Rosalee’s eyes widen slightly, but she keeps her voice steady. “What’s at Platform 23?”

“Guess we’re about to find out,” Max replies, slipping the note back into his pocket.

They arrive at Grand Central with minutes to spare, weaving through the crowd toward Platform 23. Max keeps Rosalee close, his senses on high alert. The station is bustling, filled with the typical noise and motion of commuters and tourists commingling.

Max scans the platform, his gaze landing on a man standing near the edge, his back to them. He’s dressed in an unremarkable trench coat, a hat pulled low over his eyes. Something about his posture sets Max’s nerves on edge. He nods to Rosalee, signaling for her to stay back as he approaches the man.

“You need to work on your handwriting,” Max says quietly, his tone casual but laced with a warning.

The man turns slowly, revealing a face half-hidden in shadows. His expression is blank, but his eyes are sharp, calculating. He looks Max up and down, then glances at Rosalee, his mouth twisting into a faint smirk.

“Didn’t expect you to bring company,” the man says, his voice smooth and low. “But I guess that’s your business.”

Max’s jaw tightens, his gaze never leaving the man’s. “Actually, it’s *her* business—literally. Why are we here?”

The man shrugs, his smirk widening. “Think of me as a friend. Someone with a vested interest.”

“In what?”

“In keeping things quiet.”

“Quiet,” Max echoes, his tone flat. “Funny, I don’t see anything quiet about the way you’ve been sending messages.”

The man chuckles, a sound that lacks any real humor. “A bit of mystery keeps things interesting, don’t you think? Besides, it’s the better part of valor.”

Max’s patience is wearing thin, but he keeps his expression calm, his gaze steady. “Safer for who?”

The man’s smirk fades, his expression turning cold. “For you, if you’re smart enough to leave this alone.”

Max doesn’t flinch. “What the hell is in that painting?”

The man hesitates, glancing around as though assessing the risk of being overheard. Finally, he leans closer, his voice barely above a whisper. “There are people in this city with secrets they’d rather keep buried. People who don’t care how much blood they spill to make sure those secrets *stay* buried.”

Max’s jaw tightens. “I don’t need a history lesson.”

The man steps back, his face slipping into a mask of indifference. “Then take a lesson from the right-here: you’re in over your head, McCollum. Walk away while you still can.”

But Max doesn’t budge. Instead, he shifts his stance, blocking the man’s path. “If you know who I am, then you know I’m a stubborn guy. And I don’t scare easy. So unless you want to find out just how stubborn I am, I suggest you start talking.”

The man’s gaze flickers with something—fear, perhaps, or respect. He leans in, his voice so low that even Rosalee, standing a few feet away, can barely hear him.

“The painting,” he murmurs, “is a map. A guide to something bigger than you can imagine. A network of places, people, items of… interest. People who know how to read it can trace those connections. But it’s a dangerous web. Touch one part of it, and the whole thing shakes.”

Max’s mind races, pieces of the puzzle clicking together in his head. The painting isn’t just a message—it’s a blueprint. A key. But a key to what?

The man steps back, his expression hardening. “Please do consider this your one and only warning, Max. Walk away, or you’ll find yourself in the middle of a war you are not remotely equipped to fight.”

Without waiting for a response, the man slips into the crowd, disappearing in a matter of seconds. Max watches him go, his fists clenched, and every fiber of his body coiled with frustration. The man’s words swirl in his mind.

Rosalee steps up beside him, her face pale but resolute. “What did he say?”

Max turns to her, his expression grim. “He said the painting is some kind of map. A guide to something they want hidden. And if we dig too deep, they’ll bury us along with it.”

Rosalee’s eyes widen, but she holds his gaze, her voice steady. “So… what’s our next move?”

Max glances around, scanning the bustling station, the layers of noise and movement that suddenly seem sharper, more sinister. “We follow the map. See where it leads. But we’ll need to be careful. Whoever’s behind this, they’re watching. And I’d bet dollars to yen that they’re not the forgiving type.”

They leave Grand Central, minds racing with possibilities. Max leads them through the crowded streets, his pace brisk, his gaze sharp as he scans the surroundings for any signs of a tail. Rosalee keeps up beside him, her expression tense but determined.

“So, if this is a map, what’s it leading us to?”

Max shakes his head. “No clue. But I have a feeling we’re about to find out.”

They make their way toward the West Side, following the coordinates Max pieced together from the painting. The address is tucked away in a quiet part of town, a narrow alley that seems worlds apart from the bustling heart of the city. As they approach, Max slows, his senses on high alert.

The alley is deserted, lined with weathered brick walls and rusty fire escapes that cast long shadows in the fading afternoon light. Max spots a small metal door at the end of the alley, its paint chipped and faded, as though it hasn’t been used in years. But something about it feels off, like it’s been deliberately hidden in plain sight.

He turns to Rosalee, his voice barely above a whisper. “Stay close. And keep up your guard.”

They approach the door, Max’s hand hovering near his side, ready for anything. He reaches for the handle, his grip firm, and slowly pulls the door open, revealing a narrow staircase leading down into darkness.

Rosalee glances at him, her eyes filled with a mix of fear and excitement. “Are you sure about this?”

Max nods, then pauses. “No, not really. But there’s only way to find out.”

They descend the stairs, the air growing colder and more oppressive with each step. At the bottom, they find themselves in a dimly lit basement, the walls lined with shelves overflowing with boxes and papers, stacks of files covered in a thin layer of dust. It looks like an archive, a place where secrets go to be forgotten.

Max scans the room, his gaze settling on a table in the center, where a small, black leather-bound book lies open. He steps closer, picking it up and flipping through the pages, his eyes widening as he reads.

The book is filled with names, dates, places—a detailed record of meetings, transactions, and connections that stretch across the city. It’s a map of power, a blueprint of influence and corruption that spans every corner of New York’s underworld.

Rosalee peers over his shoulder, her expression a mix of shock and awe. “This is absolutely insane. This isn’t an art deal. This is… hell, I don’t even *know* what this is.”

Max nods, his mind racing. The painting was only the beginning. This book, this archive—it’s a treasure trove of secrets, a weapon that could bring down empires. And now that they’ve found it, there’s no turning back.

They spend the next few minutes scanning the pages, absorbing the weight of what they’ve uncovered. But as they turn to leave, a sound echoes from the staircase—the unmistakable creak of footsteps.

Max’s pulse quickens, his instincts kicking in. He grabs Rosalee’s arm, pulling her toward a dark corner of the room, motioning for her to stay silent. The footsteps grow louder, closer, until a shadow appears at the top of the stairs.

Max watches, his muscles tensed, his mind racing through their options. They could try to slip out, but the staircase is narrow and any movements would give away their position. Instead, he waits, laser-focused on the figure descending the stairs.

The man reaches the bottom, his gaze sweeping the room. He’s dressed in dark clothes, his face obscured by a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, clearly knowing the placement of CCTVs and how to avoid them. A professional. He moves with purpose, his steps steady, as though he knows exactly what he’s looking for.

Max tightens his grip on Rosalee’s arm, his gaze never leaving the man. He watches as the man approaches the table, picking up the leather-bound book they had just examined. The man flips through it briefly, then tucks it into his jacket, his expression unreadable.

As the man turns to leave, Max’s heart races, the urge to act battling against the need to stay hidden. But Rosalee’s hand on his arm keeps him grounded, a silent reminder that this isn’t the time for heroics.

The man reaches the stairs, pausing for a moment as if sensing something. Max holds his breath, his pulse pounding in his ears. But after a few tense seconds, the man continues up the stairs, disappearing into the shadows.

Max waits until the sound of footsteps fades, then releases a slow breath, his muscles relaxing. He turns to Rosalee, his expression a mixture of relief and frustration. “Havin’ fun yet?”

She shakes her head, face pale but resolute. “That’s not funny. What now?”

Max thinks for a moment, his mind racing through their options. They can’t go back the way they came, not with the risk of running into the man again. But there has to be another way out.

He scans the room, his gaze landing on a small, narrow vent near the floor. It’s barely big enough for them to fit through, but it’s better than nothing. He motions for Rosalee to follow, and they crawl through the vent, their movements slow and silent as they make their way toward the other side.

After what feels like an eternity, they emerge in another alley, the air fresh and cool against their skin. Max helps Rosalee to her feet, both of them breathing heavily.

They stand in silence for a moment, letting the gravity of what they’ve uncovered sink in. The painting, the map, the archive—they’re part of something much bigger than they’d realized. And now, they’re caught smack dab in the middle.

Max glances at Rosalee. “We’re in this now, whether we like it or not.”

“I know, Max. I’m ready.”

“You sure about that?” Max can tell two things: this is a woman who won’t back down from a fight, and this is a woman who has never been *in* a real fight.

“Don’t ask me that again. I might change my mind.”

And they disappear into the concrete jungle.

# **Chapter 3: A Gallery of Secrets**

The morning light glints off the city’s glass and steel as Max and Rosalee make their way through Midtown Manhattan, the hum of New York’s hustle and bustle serving as a constant, reassuring presence. They don’t say much—no need to. Max senses the tension building in her, though she hides it well beneath her composed exterior. Today, they’re heading to MoMA, Max’s choice of rendezvous for more than just the cover it provides. If they’re going to put their hands in the lion’s mouth, better to do it somewhere public.

Rosalee keeps her gaze focused as they walk, her shoulders straight, her jaw set. Max can tell she’s coming to grips with just how deep they’re in. The painting, the encrypted message, and now the archive in the basement—each layer brings them closer to something dangerous, something vast.

As they approach the iconic museum, Rosalee speaks up. “So why MoMA? Is this really just a public meeting spot, or is there something more?”

Max glances at her, his expression unreadable. “Little bit of both. MoMA’s got a new exhibit. It’s supposed to be some kind of 3D printed sculpture. Figured it’s worth a look. A sculpture’s a great medium for hidden layers.”

Rosalee’s eyebrows lift slightly. “A piece with ‘hidden layers’? Sounds like someone’s idea of a joke. A bad one, at that.”

“Exactly why I want to check it out. Criminals love to hide things in plain sight. It gives their ego a boost. Besides, this gallery isn’t exactly friendly territory. Whoever set up that painting has contacts—if there’s one place in New York they’d feel comfortable, it’s here.”

They make their way through the museum’s entrance, past the bustling crowds and up to the exhibit hall. The space is open and minimalistic, with white walls and glass displays that allow each piece to stand alone, basking in its own aura. They navigate through, Max scanning for any familiar faces, Rosalee’s gaze lingering on each piece as if weighing its secrets.

They reach the new exhibit—a massive, gleaming sculpture of an albino jaguar, printed in white resin, with layers so intricate it almost seems alive. As they circle it, Max notices small inscriptions along its side, symbols etched in patterns that could almost pass for decorations.

“It’s beautiful,” Rosalee says.

“Indeed.”

Rosalee leans in, her expression skeptical. “You really think this is part of it?”

“Could be.” Max traces a line with his finger just above the surface, careful not to touch it. “Look at the lines—whoever designed this knew how to conceal information in details most people wouldn’t notice.”

A voice interrupts them from behind. “Admiring the jaguar, I see.”

They turn to find a curator standing nearby, her expression polite but her gaze sharp, assessing. She’s in her early forties, with sleek hair pulled into a low bun and a look that suggests she’s seen more than her share of secrets hidden behind gilded frames.

Rosalee nods, her voice smooth. “It’s remarkable work. Who’s the artist?”

The curator’s lips twitch in a small, knowing smile. “Ah, that’s the mystery. This piece arrived with no information beyond some strange, cryptic note about ‘secrets in the shadows.’ It’s been quite the topic of speculation in our world. People are convinced it’s from a well-known artist going incognito.”

“Secrets in the shadows,” Max repeats, his gaze returning to the jaguar. “Now there’s an interesting choice of words.”

The curator’s gaze sharpens slightly, as though gauging his interest. “Art has a way of hiding things—sometimes in the places we least expect.”

Max keeps his expression neutral, belying his excitement at having found out more information without having to buy anyone drinks.

This piece is more than just a sculpture—it’s a message, one that someone left deliberately, perhaps as part of the map they’d begun to trace. He thanks the curator, nodding politely as she drifts away to greet other patrons.

As soon as she’s out of earshot, Max leans in closer to Rosalee, his voice low. “Whoever made this knows exactly what they’re doing. They’re marking territory.”

Rosalee frowns. “Marking territory? Like… signaling to other players in this network?”

“Exactly. Think of it like a breadcrumb for those who know where to look.” He pulls out his phone, snapping a quick picture of the jaguar’s side, capturing the symbols etched in its surface. “These look like coordinates again. Or maybe codes? I don’t know. We’ll cross-reference them with what we found in the painting.”

They continue through the gallery, keeping to the outer edges of the room. Max’s instincts are on high alert, his gaze flickering over the other patrons, noting the subtle glances that follow them. He’s seen this behavior before—the quick, careful looks, the way people drift a little too close.

They’re being watched.

As they approach the exit, Max catches a glimpse of someone slipping out of a side door—a figure he recognizes from his days in the SEALs, a face he thought he’d left behind. He stops, his body tensing, and Rosalee notices, following his gaze.

“Do you know that man?” she whispers, a hint of urgency in her tone.

“Used to. His name’s Carter.”

“Did you two have a falling out?”

“Something like that.”

They follow, slipping through the side door and into a narrow corridor that leads to the back of the museum. The corridor is dimly lit, casting long shadows that stretch across the walls, giving the place an eerie, almost surreal feel.

Carter is waiting at the end of the hall, his back to them, his hands tucked casually into his pockets. Max approaches cautiously, every sense on high alert, knowing that this could be a trap as easily as a coincidence.

“Carter,” he says, his tone carefully neutral.

Carter turns slowly, his face breaking into a sly grin. “Max McCollum. Been long.”

Max studies him, his gaze steely. “What brings you around? Taking in the sights?”

Carter shrugs, his grin widening. “I didn’t grow stupid, Max. I came for the same thing you did. Funny thing about art—people will do anything to keep the truth hidden in it.”

Max’s hand twitches at his side, his instincts screaming for him to be ready. “And what secrets are you hunting, Carter?”

Carter chuckles, a dark, humorless sound. “Let’s just say I’m doing a little research. Gathering some… leverage.”

Max keeps his expression calm, though his mind races. *Leverage*. In Carter’s world, that word means blackmail, control, manipulation. Whatever network they’ve stumbled into, Carter’s right in the thick of it.

Rosalee clears her throat, stepping forward with a fierce look in her eyes. “And what do you know about the painting?” she asks, her tone sharp.

Carter’s gaze shifts to her, a gleam of curiosity in his eyes. “Ah, right, the gallery owner. You’ve gotten yourself mixed up in some nasty business, sweetheart.”

Max bristles at the condescension, but he keeps his voice steady. “I’d think real carefully about my choice of words when you’re addressing her.”

Carter raises an eyebrow, a mocking grin on his lips. “Oh, how valiant.” He glances between them, something calculating flickering in his eyes. “Well, if you’re looking for answers, I’d start with the Chelsea galleries. That’s where the real players are working. But watch your six—they don’t take kindly to trespassers.”

He turns to leave, but Max steps in his path, blocking his way. “Why the warning, Carter?”

Carter’s smile fades, replaced by a glint of something harder, darker. “Let’s just say I’ve got a personal interest in keeping certain people off my back. And if you two stumble into the wrong nest, you’ll make things harder for me. Consider this a professional courtesy.”

“But you’re not professional. Or courteous.”

Max doesn’t move, his gaze locked on Carter’s. But after a tense moment, he steps aside, letting him pass. Carter disappears down the corridor, his footsteps echoing into silence.

Rosalee releases a shaky breath, her eyes wide. “Who was that?”

“Someone I’d hoped not to see again.”

She crosses her arms, her expression a mix of frustration and fear. “You think he’s really trying to help us, or is this some kind of setup?”

Max hesitates. “Could be both. But right now? He’s the only lead we got.”

They leave MoMA and head toward Chelsea. Rosalee is on edge, her gaze darting around the unfamiliar neighborhood as they make their way toward the heart of New York’s art scene. She’s spent years navigating these galleries, making connections, building relationships. But now, each gallery feels like a trap, each contact a potential enemy.

They enter a small, unassuming gallery tucked between high-rise buildings, the air inside heavy with the smell of paint and dust. The space is cluttered with canvases, sculptures, installations—pieces in various stages of completion, some hidden under tarps, others propped against the walls like discarded relics.

Max examines the pieces, his gaze sharp, his mind racing. As they leave MoMA, Max processes the brief encounter with Carter. The man’s presence is a curveball, a wild card that might lead them to the answers they need—or straight into a trap. Max doesn’t like relying on people like Carter, but in his line of work, you don’t always get to pick your allies.

Rosalee’s expression is tense as they weave through the crowded streets toward Chelsea. Her confidence is fraying, and Max can see the gears turning in her head. She’s a gallery owner with a life built around art and connections, not someone accustomed to following cryptic messages and shadowy informants into the underbelly of her own world.

“What’s his deal?” she finally asks, breaking the silence as they near the heart of the gallery district. “Is Carter someone you trust?”

Max shakes his head. “Trust isn’t the word I’d use. Carter’s got one loyalty—to himself. But he knows things, and he’s useful when he wants to be.”

She frowns, crossing her arms as they walk. “Useful how?”

Max glances at her, weighing his words. “Let’s just say he has a knack for finding skeletons in closets—and he’s not afraid to sell a few to the highest bidder. But he also has a good sense of survival. If he says we’re walking into something dangerous, that’s one of the few things I’d trust him on.”

They arrive at a narrow, unassuming gallery sandwiched between a luxury apartment complex and an old diner. This gallery, like many in Chelsea, doesn’t advertise itself loudly; instead, its clients know what they’re looking for. Inside, the space is dimly lit, walls lined with paintings that seem to whisper secrets, each canvas casting dark shadows.

As they step inside, a wave of hushed conversation sweeps over them, punctuated by the low clinking of glasses. The patrons here are worlds apart from the typical gallery crowd. Max catches glances from a few of them—suspicious, assessing. It’s clear they aren’t just here for the art.

Rosalee leads the way, her expression carefully composed, as though she’s merely visiting a peer’s space. Max follows closely, his senses tuned to every sound, every movement. His gaze drifts to the paintings lining the walls, each one abstract and fragmented, as though the artist was trying to capture something broken. But there’s a pattern here—a theme that reminds him of the hidden symbols they found in the jaguar sculpture at MoMA.

They’re scanning the room when a voice calls out. “Rosalee! Didn’t expect to see you here.”

They turn to see a tall, slender man with a tailored suit and a charming, if guarded, smile. His hair is slicked back, and he has that look of easy confidence Max has seen in powerful men who like to keep their power hidden.

“Graham,” Rosalee says, her tone carefully neutral. “Nice to see you.”

Max steps forward, keeping his voice polite but firm. “A friend of yours?”

Graham looks Max over with the faintest hint of a smirk, though there’s no warmth in it. “I wouldn’t say ‘friend,’ exactly. Ms. Turner and I share a few professional acquaintances.”

Rosalee’s smile is thin, her eyes never leaving Graham’s. “He’s… a collector of sorts.”

“Of sorts,” Graham echoes, his tone silky. “And you, Mr. McCollum?”

Max shrugs, offering a nonchalant smile. “I’m just expanding my horizons.”

Graham chuckles, though his eyes remain watchful. “Well, you’ve come to the right place. This gallery prides itself on exclusivity—art you won’t find anywhere else. Many of the pieces here have… histories.”

Max doesn’t miss the hint of menace in Graham’s words. “Love to hear that. I’ve always had a thing for art with a story.”

Graham’s gaze sharpens, as though weighing Max’s intentions. “Is that so? Then perhaps you’d be interested in a piece from our private collection. We’ve recently acquired a series that’s been making waves—a bit of a mystery, if you will.”

Max glances at Rosalee, who nods subtly, signaling her interest. “We’d love to see it.”

Graham gestures for them to follow, leading them through a side door into a private room at the back of the gallery. The room is smaller, dimly lit, with only a few pieces on display. But these aren’t the usual gallery fare. The paintings are dark, twisted, each one seeming to pulse with a kind of chaotic energy. They feel raw, visceral, as though they were created by someone haunted.

Graham stops in front of a piece near the back wall—a canvas covered in jagged lines and dark, muted colors, shapes that seem to shift under the dim light. Max recognizes the style immediately. It’s almost identical to the painting they found in Rosalee’s gallery, the one with the hidden message.

“This one’s been quite the enigma,” Graham says, his voice a mixture of reverence and intrigue. “The artist prefers to remain anonymous, but their work has attracted… certain attention.”

Max steps closer, studying the painting. His eyes trace the lines, searching for the hidden symbols, the marks that might reveal another piece of the map they’re following. As he leans in, he notices a series of shapes near the bottom corner—a series of letters that could almost be coordinates.

“Mind if I take a closer look?” Max asks, his tone casual.

Graham hesitates, but nods. “Of course. Art is meant to be appreciated up close.”

Max leans in, squinting slightly as he examines the markings. He’s about to speak when Rosalee clears her throat, drawing his attention. She’s watching Graham, her expression a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

“Graham,” she says smoothly, “where did you say you acquired this piece?”

“Nice try. I didn’t.”

Max steps forward, his expression telling Graham that he won’t hesitate to sock him in the jaw. Graham’s smile doesn’t falter, but Max catches the slight tension in his jaw as if he could read Max’s thoughts.

“Let’s just say it came from a very private collection. A bit of gray area in its history. You understand, Rosalee.”

Max exchanges a glance with Rosalee, both reading between the lines. Gray area, in this world, is code for illegal provenance—a piece obtained through channels most gallery owners wouldn’t touch.

“Fascinating,” Rosalee murmurs. “It must be worth a pretty penny, then.”

Graham’s smile tightens. “In art, worth is relative, Ms. Turner. Some things have value that goes beyond money.”

Max straightens, letting the implications hang in the air before following up with: “And what sort of value are we talking about here?”

Graham’s gaze flickers, a shadow passing over his expression. “The kind that attracts attention from those who prefer to keep their lives… oh, I don’t know… complicated. People willing to take risks for the right reward.”

Max nods slowly, piecing it together. Graham knows exactly what kind of game they’re playing—one where art, information, and power blend into a high-stakes puzzle. And this gallery, with its “private collection,” is a key piece of that puzzle.

“Thanks for the tour,” Max says, his tone nothing if not polite, though he barely tries to conceal the distaste he has for this guy. “You’ve given us a lot to think about.”

Graham inclines his head, his smile returning to its usual charm. “Anytime, Mr. McCollum. It’s rare to find patrons who truly appreciate art with a story.”

Max and Rosalee exchange a final nod with Graham before making their way back through the gallery and out into the street. The air outside feels colder, sharper, as though the city itself is aware of the secrets they’re unraveling.

As they walk, Rosalee glances at Max. “You think Graham knows more than he’s letting on?”

Max nods, his gaze distant. “He knows just enough to stay on the right side of danger. But he’s tangled up in this, just like the others. No doubt about it. He knows what’s in these paintings—or at least what they mean to certain people.”

They walk in silence for a few blocks, each lost in their thoughts. Finally, Rosalee stops, turning to face him. “So where does this leave us? We’re chasing shadows, Max. Clues in paintings, whispers in galleries—what’s the move?”

Max pulls out his phone, glancing at the coordinates he photographed at MoMA. “The move is to keep following the trail. There’s something big here, something that connects all these pieces—the painting in your gallery, the jaguar sculpture, and now this collection in Chelsea. Whatever it is, we’re getting closer.”

She watches him, her gaze steady, her expression a mix of fear and resolve. “And what happens when we get too close?”

Max’s mouth curves into a grim smile. “Then we’ll see who else is willing to play this game.”

They start walking again, the city’s noise folding around them like a blanket, concealing them in the pulse of its endless movement. But Max’s mind is racing, calculating their next steps, preparing for whatever—and whoever—awaits them in the shadows of the art world’s darkest secrets.

# **Chapter 4: Portrait of a Killer**

The Chelsea district is quieter than usual, with the low hum of early evening life filling the streets as Max and Rosalee navigate the maze of galleries and studios. They make their way toward DeeDee’s place, a narrow, unassuming building tucked between boutiques and upscale cafés, its facade marked only by a small brass plaque that reads “D. Espinosa Studio.”

Max had worked with DeeDee on a few cases in the past, cases that required her sharp eye and even sharper tongue. She’d built a reputation in the art world for her unapologetic honesty and near-photographic memory, qualities that made her both feared and revered by her peers. She wouldn’t play games or sugarcoat anything. And tonight, he needs that brutal honesty.

Rosalee pauses, casting a wary glance down the street. “Are you sure we can trust her? I’ve heard she’s… difficult.”

Max smirks, rapping his knuckles against the studio door. “Difficult is putting it mildly. But she’s also the best. If anyone can help us unravel this ball of yarn, it’s DeeDee.”

The door creaks open, revealing DeeDee herself, a petite woman with silver-streaked hair pulled into a messy bun and paint splattered on her oversized sweater. She eyes them both with a sharp, assessing gaze before stepping aside to let them in.

“Max McCollum,” she says, her voice tinged with bemusement. “Didn’t think I’d see you on my doorstep again. And you’ve brought company.” Her gaze flickers over Rosalee, curiosity mingling with faint suspicion.

“Good to see you too, DeeDee,” Max replies, his tone dry. “We need your help.”

She raises an eyebrow, crossing her arms. “You always need my help. But I’m guessing this isn’t one of your usual cases.”

Max glances at Rosalee before pulling out his phone and showing DeeDee a photo of the mysterious painting they’d discovered—the one with the hidden coordinates embedded in jagged brushstrokes, a signature as sinister as it is obscure.

DeeDee studies the image, her expression shifting from curiosity to intrigue, then to something sharper, more calculated. She tilts her head, narrowing her eyes as she takes in the details.

“Interesting choice,” she murmurs, almost to herself. “The style is… unusual. And these marks—they’re deliberate, like someone’s trying to send a message.”

Max nods, watching her closely. “You see it too, then. The marks aren’t just random—they’re coordinates, symbols. It’s a message hidden in plain sight.”

DeeDee meets his gaze, her expression unreadable. “This isn’t just any artist’s work. This kind of coded language… it’s old-school, something people stopped doing years ago. Except…” She trails off, biting her lip.

“Except?” Rosalee presses, her tone urgent.

DeeDee glances between them, her expression grave. “Except there’s one person I know who still works like this. Jeffrey Mercer.”

The name hits Max like a punch to the gut. He’s suspected Mercer’s involvement for days, each new clue weaving a web that seemed to lead directly to him. But hearing it from DeeDee—hearing her confirm that this painting, this message, could only be the work of Jeffrey Mercer—solidifies the horrifying realization.

Max exchanges a look with Rosalee, the weight of DeeDee’s words settling over them like a shroud. Mercer was the last person they wanted to involve, the last person they thought they’d need to confront. But now, there’s no escaping it.

“Do you know where he is?” Max asks, his voice steady, though his hands clench at his sides.

DeeDee nods slowly. “If he’s following his usual routine, he’ll be at the Empire State Building tonight. He likes to visit the observation deck, watch the city lights. Says it ‘clears his mind.’” She rolls her eyes. “If you’re going to confront him, you’d better be prepared. Mercer’s not the type to get flustered easily.”

Max nods, his mind already racing with plans, strategies, contingencies. “Thanks, DeeDee. You’ve been a huge help.”

She smirks, folding her arms. “Just remember this favor the next time I need a hand.” She glances at Rosalee, giving her a brief, appraising look. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

They leave the studio, stepping back into the night, the chill in the air a stark contrast to the tension simmering between them. Rosalee looks at him, her face pale but resolute.

“Are we really going to confront him?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper.

Max nods, his expression hard. “It’s time we get some answers.”

They make their way to the Empire State Building, weaving through the evening crowds, the city’s lights casting a surreal glow over everything. Max’s mind races as they approach the entrance, every nerve in his body tingling with anticipation. Mercer. The man he once considered an acquaintance—if not quite a friend. Now, he’s something else entirely. A puppet master, a shadowed figure pulling strings that stretch across the city.

They enter the building, blending in with the tourists as they head toward the elevators. Max’s heart pounds as the floors tick by, one after the other, carrying them closer to the top. He glances at Rosalee, noting the determination in her gaze, the steel in her posture. She’s nervous, he can tell, but she’s also ready.

The elevator dings, and they step out onto the observation deck, the cool night air washing over them. The city sprawls below, an endless sea of lights and shadows, stretching as far as the eye can see. But Max isn’t here for the view. His gaze sweeps the crowd, searching, scanning each face, each figure that lingers near the edge.

They split up, moving through the clusters of tourists, each step calculated, every movement purposeful. Max feels the weight of the silence, the hum of the city filling the air, a reminder of just how close they are to the man who has orchestrated everything.

And then he sees him.

Mercer stands near the far end of the deck, leaning casually against the railing, his back to them as he gazes out over the city. His posture is relaxed, almost careless, as though he’s completely unaware of the tension crackling around him. Max feels a surge of anger, a fierce need to confront him, to demand answers for the chaos he’s caused.

He signals to Rosalee, and they approach slowly, keeping to the shadows, their footsteps muffled by the soft hum of the crowd. Max’s heart pounds, each step bringing him closer to the man he once trusted, the man who has hidden behind a mask of charm and sophistication, concealing the darkness beneath.

They’re only a few feet away when Mercer turns, a slight smile playing at his lips, his gaze calm, calculating. He looks at Max, his expression one of mild amusement, as though he’s been expecting this all along.

“Hello, Max,” he says, his voice smooth, untroubled.

Max stops, his fists clenching at his sides. For a moment, he’s back in the early days, when he’d first met Mercer at a gallery opening, thinking he was just another art collector, another player in the endless social games of the city. But now, he sees the man for what he truly is—a manipulator, a puppeteer who has woven himself into the very fabric of the city, using art as his cover, his weapon.

“Mercer,” Max says, his tone cold, barely containing the fury simmering beneath the surface. “You’ve been busy.”

Mercer chuckles, folding his arms as he studies Max with an air of detached amusement. “You always did have a knack for understatement. But yes, I’ve been… productive.”

Rosalee steps forward, her eyes blazing. “You’ve been hiding behind your art, pulling strings, using people like they’re pieces on a chessboard. Why?”

Mercer’s gaze shifts to her, his smile widening slightly. “Why? Because I can, Ms. Turner. Because there’s a power in secrecy, in control. And some of us know how to wield that power to our advantage.”

Max steps closer, his voice low and deadly. “You think this is a game? You think you can just manipulate lives, destroy people, and walk away unscathed?”

Mercer raises an eyebrow, his expression calm. “Max, you know as well as I do that power doesn’t come without casualties. You of all people should understand that.”

The words hit Max like a punch to the gut, stirring memories he’d tried to bury, moments from his past that he’d rather forget. But he shoves them aside, focusing on the man in front of him, the man who has caused so much destruction.

“This ends here, Mercer,” he says, his tone cold, unyielding.

Mercer’s smile fades, his gaze hardening. “Does it? You think you can stop me? That you can tear down everything I’ve built?”

Max’s jaw clenches, his fists tightening. “Watch me.”

But Mercer only laughs, a low, mocking sound that grates against Max’s nerves. He steps back, his posture relaxed But Mercer only laughs, a low, mocking sound that grates against Max’s nerves. He steps back, his posture relaxed, almost arrogant, as though Max’s threats are nothing more than idle words.

“You still don’t get it, do you, Max?” he says, his voice dripping with condescension. “This city, this world—it’s a game, and I’m just better at playing it. You’ve spent your life trying to ‘fix’ things, trying to be the hero. But in the end, it’s people like me who make the rules.”

Max takes another step forward, his fists clenched at his sides. “Those rules are about to change, Mercer. I’ve seen what you’ve built, how you’ve used people and places like pieces on a chessboard. But you’re not untouchable.”

Mercer’s smile shifts into something colder, darker, as he studies Max with a gleam of twisted satisfaction in his eyes. “And yet here we are. You’re still one step behind, Max. Always one step behind.” He glances over at Rosalee, his gaze lingering a beat too long, his smirk widening.

Rosalee stiffens, her anger boiling just beneath the surface. “If you think you’re invincible, you’re deluding yourself. We know what you’ve done—how many lives you’ve put at risk for your twisted games.”

Mercer’s eyes narrow, a flash of something dangerous flickering across his expression. “Be careful, Ms. Turner. The last thing I’d want is to see you get… tangled up in something beyond your control.”

The subtle threat in his words isn’t lost on either of them, and Max steps in front of Rosalee, his stance protective, his gaze steely. “She’s not the one who should be worried. You are. The game’s over, Mercer. We know where to find the proof, and when we have it, your empire is going to crumble.”

But Mercer doesn’t flinch. If anything, he seems more amused than before, his expression calm and composed. He looks at Max with a patronizing smile, shaking his head slowly.

“You’re going to ‘expose me’?” he mocks. “You think anyone cares about the so-called ‘truth’? People see what they want to see, Max. And the ones who know the truth—the ones who matter—won’t lift a finger to stop me. I’ve made sure of that.”

Max feels a chill run down his spine, a creeping realization of just how deeply entrenched Mercer’s power really is. But he pushes the doubt aside, focusing on the fire of his own resolve. He’s come too far to back down now, to let Mercer walk away as if nothing’s happened.

“We’re done with your lies, your manipulations,” Max says, his voice hard. “This ends here.”

But instead of responding, Mercer’s smile returns, colder than ever. He takes a deliberate step back, giving Max a long, appraising look. “Oh, Max. Always the stubborn one. But the world doesn’t change just because you want it to.”

He turns, slipping toward the stairwell at the edge of the observation deck. Max takes a step forward, ready to follow, but Rosalee catches his arm, her grip tight.

“Don’t,” she whispers. “That’s what he wants. He’s setting a trap.”

Max hesitates, every instinct urging him to chase after Mercer, to corner him and force him to face the consequences of his actions. But Rosalee’s right. If he follows, he’ll be playing into Mercer’s hands, falling for yet another of his manipulative ploys.

Mercer pauses at the door, casting a final, mocking glance over his shoulder. “See you soon, Max.”

And then he’s gone, the door clicking shut behind him, leaving Max and Rosalee alone on the observation deck, the weight of his words hanging in the air.

# **Chapter 5: Unwarned Allies**

Max has always believed, like Gordon Gekko, that the most valuable commodity is information. Information could buy you time, leverage, loyalty—or, in Mercer’s case, silence. Tonight, though, he isn’t looking to trade secrets. He’s looking to catch one, like a fish on a line, and reel it in before it flips out of his reach.

With a twelve-pack of cold beer tucked under his arm, Max knocks on the door of his friend Howie Call, an ex-SEAL with a knack for navigating the parts of town most people avoided. It’s been a long time since he’s seen the old team, and with Mercer’s shadow looming larger than ever, there’s no better time for a reunion. Trusting someone with a piece of himself that goes beyond words—that’s what made his team different, and right now, he needs that.

The door opens, and Howie’s familiar face greets him, framed by the dim light of the apartment. He looks as scrappy as ever, his hair buzzed close, his eyes sharp. “McCollum, you brought the good stuff,” he says with a grin, nodding at the twelve-pack. “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

Max claps him on the shoulder as he steps inside. “Gotta keep you hydrated, don’t I?”

They enter the apartment, and Max is met by the sight of a few more familiar faces from his old SEAL days. There’s Levi, with his wiry frame and easy smile; Hank, his imposing build contrasting with a quiet demeanor; and Cody, the youngest of them, who had always been quick to laugh and quicker to act. Each man’s gaze sharpens as they spot Max, their expressions morphing from relaxed camaraderie to wary respect.

“McCollum,” Levi says, cracking open a beer. “When Howie said you were dropping by, I thought he was joking. Figured you’d finally turned civilian.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Max replies, taking a beer as he settles into an armchair. “If anything, I’m about as far from that as you can get right now.”

Hank raises an eyebrow, his voice low and steady. “Sounds like there’s a story behind that.”

“There is,” Max says, letting out a slow breath. “A hell of a story. And it ends with a guy named Jeffrey Mercer.”

A hush falls over the room, the air thickening as the name registers. Mercer’s reputation is no secret, even in their circles. He’s the kind of man who knows how to hide in plain sight, the sort who manipulates from the shadows, leaving no trace. But his reach, his influence, had somehow managed to slip past even these men, men who had seen every angle of corruption and betrayal.

Levi takes a swig of his beer, his gaze thoughtful. “Mercer, huh? That’s a name I didn’t expect to hear in this lifetime.”

“Neither did I,” Max replies, his tone grim. “But he’s running something big, something dangerous. And he’s got people everywhere.”

Howie leans forward, his eyes sharp. “You think he’s got someone inside our circles? In our network?”

Max nods, his gaze hard. “I’d bet on it. I’ve been tracking his moves, piecing together his connections, and he’s always one step ahead. Every time I close in, he’s already gone. It’s like he’s got eyes on me, eyes that know every move before I make it.”

A silence settles over them as the implications sink in. Each man glances at the others, their expressions unreadable, masks perfected over years of high-stakes missions, close calls, and trust forged in the fires of battle.

Cody shifts in his seat, his gaze wary. “So what’s the plan? We take him down?”

Max shakes his head. “Not yet. First, we flush out the rat. Someone close to me is feeding Mercer information, and I need to find out who.”

Levi chuckles, though there’s no humor in it. “Sounds like old times, doesn’t it? Trusting each other with our lives, while wondering who’s about to stab us in the back.”

Max gives him a wry smile. “Yeah, except this time, the stakes are higher.”

They spend the next hour strategizing, tossing ideas back and forth, each man offering insights, tactics, old SEAL habits that they haven’t forgotten. Max watches them closely, noting every glance, every pause, every hesitation. Each man is part of his past, but tonight, he can’t afford to trust blindly. The room feels both familiar and foreign, each man a friend and a suspect in equal measure.

As the night deepens, Howie leans back, his gaze fixed on Max. “So what’s your endgame here, McCollum? You going after Mercer alone?”

“Not if I can help it,” Max replies, his tone even. “But I won’t let him get away, no matter what it takes.”

Hank nods, his expression thoughtful. “You’re going to need more than muscle for that. Mercer’s the kind who uses his influence to twist things, to make people look the other way. You’re not just fighting him—you’re fighting the system he’s built around himself.”

Max nods. “Exactly. And that’s why I need each of you to stay sharp. If Mercer has someone in our ranks, I want to know who it is before we make any more moves.”

A silence follows his words, heavy and tense, each man lost in thought. Max can feel the weight of their gazes, the questions lingering just beneath the surface, but none of them say a word. In this world, suspicion is as much a part of life as trust, and tonight, it’s the only thing keeping them safe.

But just as he’s about to speak, the silence is shattered by a loud crash from the other side of the apartment. Everyone’s on their feet in an instant, weapons drawn, their bodies tense, ready for whatever comes next.

“Who the hell—” Howie mutters, his voice barely more than a whisper as he signals for them to spread out, to cover the exits.

The front door slams open, and two figures step into the room, their faces hidden behind masks, their movements precise and controlled. Max’s instincts kick in, his mind racing as he assesses the threat, calculating their angles, their escape routes.

“Who’s here for me?” one of the intruders snarls, his voice muffled but sharp. “We know you’re close to Mercer. And if you think you’re going to stop us, think again.”

Max’s blood runs cold. Mercer’s men. He’d expected spies, but he hadn’t counted on a full-blown ambush. And from the look in Howie’s eyes, neither had he.

Levi’s already moving, slipping behind one of the intruders, his movements fluid and deadly. Before the man has a chance to react, Levi’s disarmed him, pinning him to the ground, his face twisted in anger.

“Who sent you?” Levi growls, his voice low, dangerous. “Tell us, or I’ll make sure you regret this.”

The second intruder pulls out a knife, his gaze darting between Max and the others, his desperation clear. But before he can make a move, Max lunges forward, grabbing his wrist, twisting it until the knife clatters to the floor.

“Talk,” Max says, his voice calm but unyielding. “Who sent you?”

The man hesitates, his gaze flickering to his partner, then back to Max. “You’re in over your head, McCollum. Mercer’s got eyes everywhere. He knows you’re trying to take him down, and he’s not going to let you get close. You don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

Max’s grip tightens, his voice cold. “And you don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

But before he can press further, the man’s partner lets out a choked laugh, his gaze defiant. “You think you’re untouchable? You’re nothing to Mercer. Just another thorn to be plucked out and tossed aside.”

Max releases his grip, stepping back as the words sink in. He glances at the others, his gaze hard. “Take them outside. We’ll deal with them there.”

Howie and Hank drag the intruders out of the apartment, their expressions unreadable as they disappear into the night, leaving Max and the others alone, the tension in the room thick enough to cut with a knife.

Once they’re alone, Max turns to his team, his expression hard. “Someone sold us out. Mercer knew exactly where we’d be tonight, and that means someone here isn’t who they say they are.”

A silence follows his words, each man glancing at the others, their expressions wary, guarded. The bonds they’d shared, the trust they’d built, all of it feels fragile, as though one wrong move could shatter it completely.

“McCollum,” Levi says, his voice low, “we’ve been through hell together. You know me. You know I’d never turn.”

Max nods, though his gaze remains sharp, unreadable. “I know. But until we figure out who’s feeding Mercer information, we’re all suspects. I need each of you to keep your guard up. Trust isn’t a given tonight—it’s earned.”

The weight of his words settles over the group, each man processing the implications in his own way. Levi’s face is unreadable, a mask perfected over years of survival, while Howie shifts uneasily, his gaze darting between them. Hank and Cody share a glance, their postures tense, muscles coiled as though expecting a fight to break out at any moment.

Levi breaks the silence, his voice steady. “So, what’s the plan, McCollum? You brought us together for a reason, and if we’re going after Mercer, I say we take the fight to him. No more sitting in shadows, waiting for him to make the next move.”

Max considers this, his mind racing as he pieces together the fragments of Mercer’s web, the clues they’ve gathered, the betrayals yet to be uncovered. “I want to,” he replies, his voice calm but laced with iron. “But this isn’t just about Mercer. Someone in our own circle is working for him, and I don’t know who. Until I do, we’re vulnerable.”

Howie clears his throat, his voice softer than usual. “Max, you know me. You know I’d rather take a bullet than betray my own team.”

Max nods slowly, though he keeps his gaze steady, assessing. “I know, Howie. But right now, words aren’t enough. I need each of you to prove your loyalty, to show me you’re not the one feeding Mercer information.”

The room falls silent again, the tension thick and stifling. Each man is a brother in arms, someone Max has trusted with his life in the past. But tonight, everything feels different, as though the bonds they’ve built are hanging by a thread.

Finally, Hank speaks, his voice low and steady. “You want us to prove our loyalty? Fine. Tell us what you need, and we’ll do it.”

Max nods, his gaze sweeping over them. “I need eyes on each other, ears in places Mercer wouldn’t expect. If he’s got someone in our ranks, we’re going to find out who, and fast.”

Cody, who had been silent for most of the night, finally speaks up, his tone bitter. “So what, we spy on each other? Set traps to catch a traitor? This isn’t the kind of fight we signed up for, Max.”

Max meets his gaze, unflinching. “No, it’s not. But right now, we don’t have a choice. Mercer’s playing us from the inside, and if we don’t turn the tables, we’ll all be picking up the pieces.”

Levi lets out a low chuckle, though there’s no humor in it. “Well, isn’t this cozy? The old team, watching our backs while keeping an eye on each other. Feels just like the old days.”

Howie nods, though his expression is wary. “Except this time, there’s no mission briefing, no extraction plan. Just us, Mercer, and a rat in our ranks.”

Max looks around the room, meeting each man’s gaze in turn. “We’re in this together. But the moment I find out who’s working for Mercer, they’re done. No second chances.”

A murmur of agreement follows, though the air is thick with suspicion, each man gauging the others, looking for signs of weakness, of betrayal. Max knows that by morning, trust will be in shorter supply than ever, but it’s a necessary price to pay if they’re going to take down Mercer.

They settle in, each man keeping to his corner, the once-familiar camaraderie replaced by a tense silence. The night stretches on, the city’s hum filtering through the apartment as they keep watch, each one a sentinel, each one a potential threat.

Max’s mind races as he replays the night’s events, every conversation, every glance, every word that could have been a signal, a tell. But the more he thinks, the more he realizes that trust, the very foundation of his old team, has become the first casualty in the fight against Mercer. And in the back of his mind, he knows: the real fight is just beginning.

# **Chapter 6: Broken Time**

Rosalee stares at the painting in front of her, the dim light of her gallery casting long shadows across the canvas. She’s been at this for hours, her eyes tracing the brushstrokes, looking for something—anything—that could break the code. Every instinct tells her that this piece is a map, a message meant to lead them closer to Mercer’s operation. But something in it remains hidden, like a secret just beyond reach.

After Max had left to reconnect with his old SEAL buddies, Rosalee had felt a creeping sense of unease, a feeling that something was lurking just outside her line of sight. Sleep didn’t come easily; every time she closed her eyes, her mind swirled with images of Mercer, of the silent, mocking smirk he’d worn when they last saw him. It was enough to send her back to the gallery in the dead of night, determined to uncover whatever the painting held.

As her gaze lingers over the edges of the canvas, she notices faint markings—a series of barely perceptible symbols hidden among the broader strokes. They’re irregular, almost imperceptible to the untrained eye, but unmistakably intentional. She quickly grabs her phone, taking high-resolution photos and using software to sharpen the image, revealing the symbols more clearly. Her heart races as she realizes what they are: coordinates. They form a trail, a map to a location in the Financial District, embedded within the chaos of abstract shapes and colors.

Without hesitation, she dials Max’s number, her fingers trembling as she waits for him to pick up. He answers on the second ring, his voice low and wary.

“Rosalee?” he asks, the faint noise of the city in the background. She can tell he’s on the move, his tone tense, as if he’s waiting for something to go wrong.

“Max, I think I found something,” she says, her voice barely more than a whisper. “There are symbols hidden in the painting—coordinates. They lead to a location in the Financial District.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other end before Max replies. “Text me the address. I’ll meet you there.”

The Financial District feels like a forgotten corner of the city tonight, the narrow streets deserted, the towering buildings casting long shadows that make the air feel heavy and thick. Max arrives first, slipping through the shadows as he surveys the area. His pulse is steady, his instincts sharpened as he considers the possibility of a trap. He hasn’t told Rosalee about the betrayal within his team, the sense of isolation pressing down on him. Right now, the only person he trusts is her.

When Rosalee arrives, she’s wrapped in a trench coat, her face illuminated by the faint glow of a nearby streetlight. She’s focused, her gaze sharp as she approaches.

“Are you ready for this?” she asks, her voice low but steady.

Max nods. “If Mercer’s hidden anything here, we’re going to find it.”

They enter the building, a non-descript structure sandwiched between two high-rise towers. Inside, the lobby is dark, only a faint security light casting an eerie glow over the marble floors. They move silently, navigating the hallways until they reach a heavy metal door tucked at the end of a narrow corridor. Max examines the lock—a high-security model, the kind that would usually require clearance.

“This is it,” he murmurs. He pulls a small device from his pocket, hooking it to the lock and watching as it overrides the system. The door clicks open, and they slip inside, finding themselves in a small, dimly lit vault lined with shelves and filing cabinets.

Rosalee gasps softly, taking in the stacks of documents and files, each labeled with names and dates that hint at Mercer’s far-reaching network. There are files on art transactions, offshore accounts, high-profile clients—all the markers of a well-oiled machine working in the shadows of the city.

“This is… this is everything,” she whispers, her voice tinged with awe and horror. “He’s been running this operation right under everyone’s noses.”

Max begins scanning the files, his face set in grim determination. “This is his blueprint. Proof of everything he’s built—banks, media, politicians. He’s got connections everywhere.”

As he flips through the pages, he finds records of payments made to influential people, people who could cover up his tracks, people with the power to make problems disappear. Each file is another piece of Mercer’s web, another thread in the network that’s kept him untouchable.

They work quickly, snapping photos of each document, their movements swift and precise. Max feels the weight of the evidence settling over him, a mixture of anger and disgust burning in his chest. Mercer isn’t just a player in the game—he’s the one making the rules, the one pulling the strings.

Rosalee pauses, holding up a file with a familiar name scrawled across the top. “Max, look at this. It’s a list of assets… people he’s bought. There are names here I recognize. High-profile collectors, gallery owners, even law enforcement.”

Max’s jaw clenches as he reads the names, each one another betrayal, another reminder of the rot festering beneath the city’s surface. “He’s got people everywhere, covering his tracks, making sure no one gets close.”

They’re so absorbed in their work that they barely notice the sound of footsteps approaching until it’s too late. Max’s head snaps up, his instincts kicking in as he senses movement outside the door.

“Rosalee, get down,” he whispers, grabbing her arm and pulling her behind a row of filing cabinets.

The door swings open, and two figures step inside, their faces obscured by the shadows. Max recognizes one of them instantly—Carter, his old friend, his former SEAL teammate. A wave of anger floods through him, and he has to fight to keep his composure as he watches Carter scan the room, his gaze sharp, calculating.

“Max?” Carter’s voice is a low murmur, barely audible. “I know you’re in here. Mercer sends his regards.”

Max steps out from his hiding place, his fists clenched, his gaze locked on Carter with a mixture of betrayal and fury. “You’re working for him,” he says, his voice laced with contempt.

Carter shrugs, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. “It’s nothing personal, McCollum. Just business. Mercer has resources you couldn’t dream of, and he rewards loyalty.”

“Loyalty?” Max’s voice is a low growl. “You sold out our team, Carter. You sold me out.”

Carter’s smile widens, his eyes gleaming with malice. “Like I said, Max, it’s just business. You should’ve learned by now—Mercer always wins.”

Before Max can respond, Carter lunges forward, his movements quick and deadly. Max barely has time to dodge as Carter’s fist swings toward him, grazing his cheek and sending him staggering back. He recovers quickly, countering with a sharp jab to Carter’s ribs, his anger fueling every punch, every strike.

The two men grapple, each movement a brutal clash of force and precision. Carter’s strength is matched by Max’s agility, each punch, each twist a testament to their shared training, their history as teammates now turned enemies.

Rosalee watches from her hiding spot, her face pale but resolute as she clutches a metal rod she found on the floor, ready to jump in if necessary. She knows she’s outmatched, but she’s not about to leave Max to face this alone.

Carter lunges again, his fist connecting with Max’s jaw, sending a burst of pain shooting through his skull. But Max shakes it off, his mind focused, his gaze hard as he sidesteps Carter’s next attack, delivering a swift kick to his knee, forcing him down.

“You chose the wrong side, Carter,” Max says, his voice cold. “Mercer doesn’t care about loyalty. The moment you’re no longer useful, you’re expendable.”

Carter sneers, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “Keep telling yourself that, McCollum. But you’re the one who’s outmatched. Mercer’s got people everywhere, people who’ll hunt you down until there’s nothing left.”

Max doesn’t give him a chance to continue. With one final punch, he knocks Carter to the ground, his breath coming in harsh gasps as he stares down at the man who’d once been his friend, now a pawn in Mercer’s twisted game.

Before he can process the moment, a noise from the doorway draws his attention. Another figure steps into the room—a tall man with a scar along his jaw, his gaze cold, calculating. Max recognizes him instantly: one of Mercer’s top enforcers, a man known for his ruthless efficiency.

Rosalee’s eyes widen, but Max signals for her to stay back. He meets the enforcer’s gaze, his body tense, every muscle coiled, ready for a fight. The man smirks, a faint glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Mercer sends his regards, McCollum,” he says, his voice a low drawl.

Max doesn’t wait for him to make the first move. He lunges forward, his fists flying, each punch driven by the fury and betrayal that’s been simmering beneath the surface. The enforcer counters, his movements precise, calculated, each strike landing with brutal efficiency. Max grits his teeth, his focus narrowing to this single moment. Every instinct, every ounce of his training sharpens as he ducks a punch aimed at his head, then retaliates with a sharp uppercut that connects solidly with the enforcer’s jaw.

The man stumbles back, his smirk faltering, but he recovers quickly, his eyes narrowing with cold fury. He lunges forward, his arm swinging out in a brutal arc, but Max sidesteps, using the man’s momentum against him to drive him toward a nearby support beam.

The enforcer collides with it, momentarily dazed, and Max seizes the opportunity, delivering a swift kick to his midsection. But the man recovers faster than Max expects, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back, forcing him down onto one knee. Pain lances through Max’s shoulder, but he grits his teeth, refusing to give his enemy the satisfaction of seeing him falter.

Rosalee, watching from the shadows, sees the man tighten his grip on Max’s arm, his face set in a cold sneer as he leans in close, his voice a low, taunting whisper.

“You think you can stop Mercer?” he hisses. “He owns this city. You’re nothing but a loose end.”

Max clenches his jaw, his gaze hard. “Then let’s see how he feels when his loose ends fight back.”

With a surge of strength, he twists free of the enforcer’s grip, using his other arm to deliver a sharp elbow to the man’s ribs. The enforcer stumbles back, his face twisted in pain and anger, and Max doesn’t waste a second. He lunges forward, his fist connecting with the man’s jaw in a punch that sends him sprawling to the ground.

As the enforcer struggles to stand, Max steps forward, towering over him, his voice cold and unyielding. “Tell Mercer his time’s running out.”

The man glares up at him, his expression a mixture of defiance and fear. But he doesn’t reply. Instead, he scrambles to his feet and disappears into the shadows, leaving Max and Rosalee alone beneath the bridge, the quiet settling around them like an uneasy truce.

Max stands there, catching his breath, his body bruised and aching, but his resolve stronger than ever. He glances at Rosalee, who emerges from the shadows, her face pale but determined, her eyes filled with a mixture of worry and relief.

“You… you didn’t have to do that alone,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

Max gives her a faint, weary smile. “I’ve got a habit of it. But tonight… I’m starting to realize that maybe I shouldn’t.”

They stand there in silence for a moment, the weight of the night’s events settling over them, each one feeling the gravity of what lies ahead. Max knows he’s closer to the truth than he’s ever been, but he’s also more vulnerable, more isolated. He can’t afford to keep pushing forward on his own, not with Mercer’s network closing in around him.

Rosalee reaches out, her hand resting lightly on his arm. “Come back with me, Max,” she says, her voice soft. “You don’t have to do this alone. Tonight, you shouldn’t be alone.”

Max hesitates, his gaze lingering on hers. He feels the pull of her words, the warmth of her presence a stark contrast to the cold isolation he’s been fighting for so long. Finally, he nods, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Lead the way,” he says, his voice low.

# **Chapter 7: Animal Crackers**

Max lies awake in the dim room, the sounds of the city a low murmur through the thick windows of Rosalee’s apartment. Sleep eludes him. Images keep flashing through his mind: the look of betrayal on Carter’s face, Mercer’s smug, calculated expression, the enigmatic painting now leaning against the wall across from him like a silent witness to everything. This isn’t just a chase; it’s a puzzle where every piece they uncover only adds to the mystery.

Beside him, Rosalee stirs slightly in her sleep, her arm draped across his chest, her breathing slow and steady. Her presence here grounds him, reminds him he isn’t alone in this fight. But despite the calm her touch offers, he can’t shake the feeling that something crucial is hidden in that painting—something they’ve missed.

Quietly, he slips out of bed, careful not to wake her. Crossing the room, he kneels before the painting, letting the dim light illuminate the layers of color and texture on the canvas. He’s studied it for hours, picked apart its colors and patterns, applied codes and ciphers, but something tells him there’s more hidden here, a secret buried within the very strokes and shadows.

Max pulls out his notebook and begins to work through the cipher again, taking a different approach this time. He recalculates, considering each brushstroke, every subtle shade, reconfiguring his previous assumptions. And then, almost as if the painting itself has revealed its secrets to him, a series of faint symbols emerges in his calculations—a secondary layer of coordinates hidden even deeper in the design.

A chill runs through him as he deciphers the coordinates, his pulse quickening when he sees the location. They point to a familiar place: the Central Park Zoo.

It’s a strange choice, but also perfect. The zoo is a public space, crowded and safe during the day but remote and quiet at night. If Mercer’s hiding something there, it could be critical—a piece of evidence that will blow his network wide open.

Max pulls on his jacket, grabbing his phone to text the location to Rosalee, but as he turns, he sees her sitting up in bed, watching him.

“Max?” she says, rubbing her eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I found something,” he replies, showing her the coordinates on his phone. “The painting led me to the zoo. If Mercer has anything stashed there, it could be the proof we need to expose him.”

Rosalee’s eyes flash with determination as she gets out of bed, throwing on a sweater and her coat. “Then let’s go. If this is as important as you think, we can’t waste any time.”

The night air is cold and sharp as they make their way through Central Park, the usual sounds of the city softened by the vast, empty spaces. Shadows stretch long and dark over the pathways, and even the trees seem to lean in close, as if hiding secrets of their own. The zoo looms ahead, its familiar structures casting eerie silhouettes in the moonlight, a stark reminder of how different the world feels when it’s shrouded in darkness.

They enter through a side gate, slipping through the zoo’s empty pathways. The enclosures are dark and silent, the usual sounds of animals replaced by an oppressive quiet that heightens their senses. Max leads the way, every instinct on high alert, his footsteps silent as they approach the coordinates marked by the painting’s cipher.

The trail leads them to a remote part of the zoo, near the penguin exhibit. The air is heavy with the smell of wet stone and salt, the faint sound of water trickling from a fountain nearby. Max spots a maintenance door at the far end of the path, slightly ajar, casting a thin beam of light across the ground.

“This feels like a trap,” Rosalee whispers, her voice barely audible.

Max nods, his gaze fixed on the door. “It’s definitely suspicious. But if Mercer’s hiding something here, it’s worth the risk.”

They slip through the door, stepping into a narrow hallway lined with shelves filled with maintenance tools and cleaning supplies. The dim overhead light flickers, casting eerie shadows along the walls as they move deeper into the building. Their footsteps echo in the silence, each step amplifying the tension, the unspoken fear that something—or someone—is waiting for them.

At the end of the hall, they find a small, unmarked room. Max pushes the door open, revealing a compact space crammed with file cabinets, shelves filled with old binders, and stacks of paper scattered across a table. The room has a faint smell of dust and old paper, the kind of scent that comes from records left untouched for years.

Max’s heart races as he moves to one of the shelves, scanning the labels on the binders until he finds one marked with a series of numbers. He pulls it down, flipping through the pages, his pulse quickening as he realizes what he’s looking at: records of art transactions, but with a darker twist. These aren’t just purchases. They’re payments—bribes, favors, exchanges that weave a web of influence reaching into the city’s art scene and beyond.

“Max,” Rosalee whispers, holding up another binder she’s found. “These names… they’re some of the biggest players in the art world.”

He glances at the list, recognizing names of gallery owners, collectors, and patrons. But the list doesn’t end there. At the bottom of each page are notes, secondary entries marking payments to people outside the art world: city officials, journalists, even a few names he recognizes from law enforcement.

“This isn’t just an art operation,” Max murmurs, flipping through the pages with a growing sense of dread. “This is blackmail. Mercer’s using these people, turning them into his allies, his pawns. And they’re all complicit.”

But before they can process the full weight of their discovery, the door creaks open, and two figures step inside, their faces obscured by shadows. They’re dressed in dark clothing, their movements controlled and precise, betraying the stance of trained fighters.

“McCollum,” one of them says, his voice cold and mocking. “Mercer sends his regards.”

Max doesn’t wait for them to make the first move. He lunges forward, grabbing the first man’s arm and twisting it behind his back, slamming him against the wall. But the second man moves quickly, swinging a fist toward Max’s head. Rosalee steps in, grabbing a heavy metal file holder from the table and striking the second attacker with surprising force.

“Max!” she shouts, her voice laced with urgency.

They fight in close quarters, every movement amplified in the tight space. Max ducks as the first man swings a knife toward him, countering with a sharp jab to his ribs that sends him staggering back. The second attacker grabs Rosalee, his grip like a vise as he tries to pull her down, but she twists, using her momentum to knock him off balance.

The first man recovers, lunging at Max with a fierce intensity that speaks of training and precision. Max sidesteps, delivering a brutal kick to the man’s knee, sending him to the floor. The second man stumbles as Rosalee hits him with the file holder again, this time with enough force to send him crashing into a shelf.

They’re almost free when the first man pulls out a gun, aiming it squarely at Max’s chest. “You’re in over your head, McCollum,” he snarls, his voice dripping with contempt.

Max freezes, his gaze locked on the barrel of the gun, his mind racing. But before the man can pull the trigger, Rosalee moves, slamming the file holder into his arm with all her strength. The gun clatters to the floor, and Max seizes the opportunity, grabbing the man by the collar and delivering a punch that sends him sprawling.

They don’t waste a second, grabbing the files they’ve collected and making their way back through the hallway, their footsteps echoing as they retrace their steps to the exit. The zoo feels different now, the silence thicker, the shadows darker as they move through the empty paths, every step a reminder of the dangers they face.

As they step into the cool night air, Max feels a sense of clarity settling over him, the realization of what they’ve uncovered hitting him with a force he can barely process. This painting isn’t just a map or a ledger—it’s an indictment, a record of those who’ve used Mercer’s network to further their own interests, people with everything to lose if he goes down.

Rosalee’s voice is barely a whisper, filled with awe and horror. “These aren’t just clients. They’re accomplices. People who’ve used Mercer’s mercenaries to cover their tracks, people with everything to lose if he’s exposed.”

Max nods, his face set in grim determination. “This is Mercer’s empire. And this painting… it’s the proof.”

They walk in silence, the weight of their discovery pressing down on them like a shroud, each step a reminder of the battle they’re waging against an empire built on secrets and lies. Max knows that they’re closer to the truth than they’ve ever been, but he also knows that Mercer won’t rest until they’re silenced.

As they reach Rosalee’s apartment building, she stops, turning to face him, her expression a mixture of worry and resolve. “You shouldn’t be alone tonight, Max. Come upstairs. We can figure out our next move together.”

Max hesitates, the exhaustion finally catching up to him, but he nods, offering her a faint, weary smile. “Lead the way.”

They make their way up the stairs, moving in silence as the adrenaline from the night slowly fades, replaced by a bone-deep fatigue. Once inside, Rosalee flicks on a small lamp, casting a warm glow across the room. The familiar comfort of her space feels surreal, a stark contrast to the chaos and danger they’d just escaped.

Rosalee sets down the files they managed to bring with them, her gaze lingering on the scattered papers, the names and dates that document Mercer’s sprawling empire. She lets out a shaky breath, her shoulders slumping as the reality of their discovery sinks in.

“This is… massive, Max,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “This painting—it’s more than a map or a message. It’s a list of everyone complicit in his network, a record of all the people who’ve used his power for their own gain.”

Max nods, feeling the weight of her words. “It’s an indictment. Mercer’s built a system of control that extends into every corner of the city. He’s got people in his pocket who could ruin lives, shift markets, manipulate justice. And this painting—it’s the key to exposing it all.”

Rosalee looks at him, her eyes filled with a mix of fear and determination. “We can’t let this stay hidden, Max. People need to know. This is bigger than Mercer; this is about the whole system he’s built.”

He nods, feeling a renewed sense of purpose settling over him. “You’re right. But we have to be smart about this. We can’t just go public—Mercer has too much control. If we want to take him down, we need more than just evidence. We need a plan.”

They sit together on the couch, pouring over the files, sifting through names, dates, and transactions, each one a piece of the puzzle, a thread in the web Mercer’s woven. The hours tick by as they work, their exhaustion momentarily forgotten as they delve deeper into the heart of Mercer’s empire, piecing together the scope of his influence, the lives he’s manipulated, the power he’s amassed.

As dawn begins to break, casting a faint light over the city, Max feels a sense of calm settling over him. This fight is far from over, but now, with Rosalee by his side and the truth laid out before them, he feels a glimmer of hope—a reminder that, even in the darkest of nights, there’s a path forward.

He looks over at Rosalee, who’s leaning back, her eyes heavy with sleep but her expression resolute. “Thank you, Rosalee. For everything. I don’t know how far I’d have gotten without you.”

She smiles, a soft, tired smile that reaches her eyes. “We’re in this together, Max. Whatever it takes, we’re going to bring him down.”

They sit in silence for a moment, the weight of the night’s events settling over them as they prepare for the battles that lie ahead, knowing that they’ve only just begun to scratch the surface of Mercer’s empire—and that the real fight is yet to come.

# **Chapter 8: Shadows of the Past**

The Cloisters rise above the treetops of Fort Tryon Park, a tranquil enclave of medieval stone and shadowed archways overlooking the Hudson River. Despite the calm that envelops this secluded museum, Max’s thoughts churn with tension. He and Rosalee weave through the early morning visitors, their eyes sharp, observing each passing face. Max feels his heartbeat quicken as they reach the courtyard where he’s arranged to meet Logan, an old friend and cybersecurity expert who’s agreed to do some delicate digging on their behalf.

It’s here, amid the stone relics and ancient gardens, that Logan appears. Tall and lean, with sharp, fox-like features, Logan has the look of someone who’s learned to live in the shadows. He greets Max with a brief nod, his gaze flicking warily over Rosalee before settling on Max with a look of resigned curiosity.

“This had better be good, McCollum,” Logan mutters, glancing around as though Mercer’s eyes might be watching from the very stone. “You know I don’t resurface for just anything.”

“It’s better than good,” Max replies, his voice low. He hands Logan a USB drive filled with the encrypted files they’ve managed to gather. “I need you to go deep on Jeffrey Mercer. Not just surface-level stuff. I want every hidden connection, every alias, every digital footprint.”

Logan sighs, inserting the drive into his laptop. His fingers hover over the keyboard before he speaks, his tone cautionary. “Mercer isn’t just some name, Max. You’re talking about a guy who’s turned ghosting into an art. The people he’s tied to aren’t the type you mess with.”

Rosalee steps forward, her voice steady. “Then we’ll be careful. But we need to know how Mercer’s pulled this off—how he’s stayed hidden and untouchable all these years.”

Logan’s fingers finally hit the keys, and he nods. “All right. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.” He begins typing, scanning databases, cross-referencing information, his expression growing darker as each layer peels away, revealing something more disturbing than the last.

“Dishonorably discharged from the SEALs,” Logan begins, frowning. “Not for standard issues either. Mercer was running a smuggling ring—narcotics, weapons. From what I can see, he leveraged his military contacts to establish a pretty sophisticated operation. The higher-ups buried it as much as they could, but not before he was shown the door.”

Max crosses his arms, feeling the cold weight of Logan’s words. He already knows this, but he isn’t about to bring Logan into his world of trouble any more than he already has. “So he built his foundation on military smuggling. And no one questioned it?”

Logan shakes his head, scrolling through more files. “They didn’t have to question it. After he left the SEALs, Mercer went underground, building layers upon layers of digital proxies and false identities. His first move was cybersecurity—he got his hands on blockchain encryption technology, courtesy of some contacts in the dark web. He used that tech to hide his assets, transferring money through shell companies and offshore accounts that even the feds couldn’t trace.”

“Smart move. He created a system where he was everywhere but nowhere.”

“Exactly,” Logan replies, his fingers flying across the keyboard. “He had an eye for art, too—saw the art market as the perfect front. He could launder money, funnel funds through high-profile auctions, all under the guise of legitimate business. Every painting sold, every sculpture commissioned—it all fed into his empire.”

Max feels a chill as Logan continues. “But that was only the start. Mercer doesn’t just own art. He owns people. Politicians, gallery owners, brokers in the art world, even a few military buddies who traded their loyalty for Mercer’s protection. And he has them all in his pocket.”

Logan pulls up a new file, a financial document listing payments, kickbacks, and strange donations tied to an entity that doesn’t even exist on paper. “See this? Mercer’s got a nonprofit on file. Officially, it’s a ‘philanthropic initiative to support underprivileged artists.’ In reality, it’s a holding company, storing assets he’s acquired over the years. The government doesn’t question it because he’s protected by his ‘friends’ in the right places.”

Rosalee stares at the screen, her expression a mixture of horror and anger. “This isn’t just about money or power. It’s about control.”

Max nods, piecing together the threads of Mercer’s influence. “He’s created a system where he’s above the law. Every person he’s tied to is a buffer, a layer that protects him from accountability. If anyone tries to get close, Mercer can cut them off, pull a few strings, and they’re out of the picture.”

Logan stops typing, his face grim as he looks at Max and Rosalee. “And here’s the part that’s going to make things worse. He’s got powerful allies, people in tech, finance, and the art world. People who’ve depended on him for years, trading their loyalty for his silence and protection.”

“Which means taking him down won’t just be about Mercer,” Max says, his voice hardening. “It’ll be about dismantling an entire network. One wrong move, and everyone we’re after will close ranks.”

Logan leans back, his gaze cautious. “You’re playing with fire, McCollum. Mercer’s not the type to let people walk away if they threaten his empire.”

Max meets his gaze, his expression unyielding. “I’m aware. But I don’t intend to walk away.”

As Logan packs up his laptop, Max and Rosalee sit in silence, the weight of what they’ve learned settling over them. The courtyard is still and quiet, a sharp contrast to the chaos lurking behind Mercer’s facade. But they know that once they leave The Cloisters, their world will only become darker, more dangerous.

Logan pauses before he leaves, his gaze lingering on Max. “I’ll keep digging. If I find anything else, I’ll let you know. But remember—Mercer isn’t just a man. He’s a machine. You’re going to need more than a good plan if you want to take him down.”

Max nods, gripping Logan’s shoulder in a silent acknowledgment. “Thanks, Logan. We’ll be careful.”

Logan gives a slight nod, then disappears into the shadows of the museum, leaving Max and Rosalee to process the enormity of their task. They leave The Cloisters in silence, making their way through the winding paths of Fort Tryon Park, each lost in their thoughts as they piece together what they’ve learned.

Finally, Rosalee breaks the silence, her voice laced with determination. “We need a new plan. Mercer’s influence runs so deep, we can’t just go after him directly. If he’s untouchable, we have to be smarter.”

Max nods, his mind racing. “We need to find a way to create cracks in his network. If we can turn his allies against him, get them to question his power, we might have a shot.”

Rosalee looks up at him, her gaze filled with fierce resolve. “And how do we do that?”

A slow smile spreads across Max’s face. “We give him just enough reason to think he’s in control. Let him believe he’s got the upper hand, that he’s one step ahead. Then, when he’s overconfident, we make our move.”

The city is a blur as they head downtown, the streets crowded and noisy, a stark contrast to the quiet stillness of The Cloisters. But beneath the surface, Max feels a renewed sense of purpose, a fire stoked by the revelations they’ve uncovered. Mercer isn’t just a target; he’s a puzzle to be dismantled, a complex network of corruption and power that will take every ounce of cunning and strategy they have to bring down.

They stop by a quiet café, grabbing coffee and settling into a secluded corner to go over the notes they’ve gathered. Rosalee flips through the files, her face pale as she takes in the sheer scale of Mercer’s influence.

“He’s everywhere,” she murmurs. “Every name on this list is another piece of his empire. And every person connected to him has something to lose if he’s exposed.”

Max’s gaze hardens. “Which means our best move is to make them doubt him. Show them he’s vulnerable, that he can’t protect them forever.”

Rosalee nods, her eyes flashing with determination. “If we can plant that seed, get them to question his control, we might be able to turn them against him.”

They sit together in silence, the weight of their mission pressing down on them as they plan their next steps. Max knows the road ahead is fraught with danger, that Mercer will stop at nothing to keep his empire intact. But with Rosalee by his side, he feels a renewed sense of purpose, a determination to see this through to the end.

As the sun dips lower, casting long shadows across the city, Max and Rosalee rise, their course set. They’re walking a dangerous path, but they know there’s no turning back. With every step, they’re closer to exposing the truth, to tearing down the empire that Mercer has built—and they’ll stop at nothing to see him fall.

The night stretches before them, filled with possibilities and dangers, but Max feels a renewed energy—a sense that, even in the face of Mercer’s vast empire, there’s a path forward. They step out of the café, the sounds of the city surrounding them as they walk in silence, each lost in thought, but moving in step, bound by a common purpose.

Rosalee finally breaks the silence as they approach the subway entrance. “Mercer won’t see it coming, you know. He’s so used to having everyone under his thumb. If we can just show his allies that he isn’t as powerful as he seems…”

Max nods, his gaze focused. “Exactly. People like him rely on fear and intimidation. The moment that starts to slip, the whole foundation begins to crumble.”

They descend into the subway, the air thick with the sounds of trains rushing past, the muffled hum of conversations, and the occasional blast of a horn. They move through the crowded platform, finding a quiet spot where they can strategize.

“We’ll need to start small,” Max says, his voice barely a murmur. “We pick a target in his network, someone with influence but a reason to doubt Mercer. If we can turn even one person, the rest will start to fall.”

Rosalee considers this, her eyes scanning the crowd absently. “Vincent Hale,” she says suddenly. “He’s a gallery owner who’s deeply invested in Mercer’s network but also has his own ambitions. If we can make Hale see that aligning with Mercer could be a liability…”

Max’s expression shifts to one of careful interest. “If we can get Hale on our side—or even just scare him enough to distance himself from Mercer—it might start the domino effect we need.”

They stand together on the platform, the train lights flickering as one approaches, casting shadows across their faces. The path before them is treacherous, filled with potential pitfalls and betrayals, but Max feels the weight of their mission driving him forward. Every move they make will need to be precise, every action calculated to chip away at the empire Mercer has built.

As the train doors open, Max and Rosalee step inside, finding seats near the back where they can speak quietly. The city blurs by outside the windows as the train hurtles forward, and Max feels a sense of determination settling over him like a shield. This isn’t just about revenge or justice; it’s about dismantling a system built on lies, corruption, and fear.

“We’ll start with Hale,” Max says, his voice filled with quiet resolve. “And from there, we’ll go after every piece of Mercer’s network until there’s nothing left.”

Rosalee meets his gaze, her expression fierce and unyielding. “Whatever it takes, Max. I’m with you.”

They sit together in silence as the train speeds toward their next destination, the path ahead filled with uncertainty but laced with a shared purpose. They may be up against a titan, a man with seemingly endless resources and allies in high places, but they have something Mercer doesn’t—a willingness to risk everything for the truth.

As they disappear into the depths of the subway, Max feels a sense of clarity, a certainty that, no matter how dark the path becomes, they’ll find a way to bring Mercer’s empire down.

# **Chapter 9: The Art of Deception**

The air in SoHo is thick with anticipation, the streets bustling with art lovers, tourists, and eccentric collectors who wander between galleries with a casual confidence that Max finds unsettling. The neighborhood, known for its cutting-edge exhibitions and avant-garde works, holds a different allure tonight. For Max and Rosalee, it’s a maze, a place where they hope to unravel yet another layer of Mercer’s web.

“Are you ready for this?” Rosalee asks, her voice laced with a mixture of excitement and dread. She adjusts the strap of her bag, her expression wary as they approach the first gallery on their list.

“Not really,” Max replies, his tone dry. “But I doubt Mercer gave his people any days off, so neither will we.”

They step into the gallery, an intimate, dimly lit space filled with paintings that seem to vibrate with an eerie familiarity. The pieces are abstract, rich with layers of color and hidden forms. Max’s eyes scan the room, and he feels the same unsettling tug he experienced with the first painting—the feeling that there’s something more beneath the surface, a secret waiting to be revealed.

Rosalee guides him to a piece in the corner, her voice barely a whisper. “That one. It’s the same artist, Max. Look at the technique—layers of paint that feel chaotic, but they’re hiding something.”

Max steps closer, his eyes narrowing as he takes in the painting. It’s a riot of colors, each layer blending into the next, but as he adjusts his focus, he begins to see faint shapes hidden within the strokes—a sequence of symbols embedded in the paint, just as they’d found before.

He turns to Rosalee, his voice low. “Can you see them? The symbols?”

She nods, her face tense. “Yes. I thought it was a fluke with the first one, but… this is a pattern. The artist isn’t just creating these paintings. They’re leaving messages, encoding them into the art itself.”

Max feels a chill. “If Mercer’s using these as messages, then this isn’t just art. It’s communication, a language of its own.”

Rosalee moves closer to the painting, her eyes scanning the canvas as if searching for answers. “The messages aren’t just hidden,” she murmurs. “They’re layered with intent, structured. I’ve seen this kind of coding before—artists who use colors, shadows, even brushstrokes to create messages only visible under certain conditions.”

They move through the gallery, examining each painting in turn. The symbols are there, subtly woven into each piece, a silent thread connecting every canvas. It’s as if the artist has embedded a trail, one that only those initiated into this world would understand.

Halfway through the room, they’re interrupted by a well-dressed woman in her fifties with sharp eyes and a knowing smile. “You seem captivated by the work,” she says, her gaze lingering on Rosalee. “Are you familiar with the artist?”

Rosalee recovers quickly, offering a polite smile. “I’ve seen similar pieces before. The technique is… intriguing.”

The woman’s smile widens, a gleam of understanding in her eyes. “Indeed. This artist is quite talented. Their work speaks to those who know how to listen.”

Max’s instincts go on high alert. There’s something about the way the woman says it—almost as if she’s testing them, looking for a reaction.

Rosalee gives a slight nod. “We’d love to learn more about the artist, if you’re familiar with their background.”

The woman tilts her head, considering them for a moment before replying. “You could say I’m familiar. I represent the gallery. If you’re interested, I can arrange a private viewing, a chance to see pieces that aren’t displayed to the public.”

Max senses the invitation comes with strings attached, but he gives a slight nod, feigning casual interest. “That sounds fascinating. We’re always interested in learning more about unique collections.”

The woman hands him a sleek business card. “Tonight, 10 p.m. If you’re serious, meet me here.”

As she walks away, Rosalee leans in, her voice a low murmur. “Do you think she knows?”

Max slips the card into his pocket, his gaze following the woman as she disappears into the crowd. “She knows something. Whether it’s about us or Mercer… we’ll find out tonight.”

They leave the gallery and continue their journey through SoHo, stopping at three more galleries where they encounter similar paintings, each one with the same hidden symbols embedded within the layers of paint. The more they see, the clearer it becomes: these aren’t just works of art; they’re pieces of a puzzle, a network of coded messages that connect Mercer’s operation to a web of collectors, dealers, and gallery owners.

As they walk down the cobblestone streets, Max feels the weight of their discovery pressing down on him. “These paintings… they’re more than just messages. They’re contracts, markers that tie Mercer’s allies to his operation. Each piece is a reminder of the secrets they’re all keeping.”

Rosalee nods, her face pale. “It’s worse than we thought. If he’s using these paintings as a way to communicate, it means the entire art world could be implicated. Including my gallery.”

Max stops, his gaze sharp as he looks at her. “What do you mean?”

Rosalee hesitates, her voice barely a whisper. “The artist behind these pieces… I recognize the technique. I’ve seen it in paintings I’ve handled at my gallery. It means my gallery could be part of this syndicate, even if I didn’t know it.”

The realization settles over them like a dark cloud. If Rosalee’s gallery is involved, then Mercer’s influence stretches further than they ever anticipated, reaching into places they thought were safe.

As the clock approaches ten, they return to the gallery where they met the woman, slipping inside just as the last patrons are leaving. The gallery is dimly lit, casting long shadows across the walls as they make their way to the back room where the woman waits.

She greets them with a nod, her expression calm but watchful. “You’re here. Good. This isn’t something we offer to just anyone, but I can tell you’re both… discerning.”

She leads them into a small, private gallery room, where a single painting hangs on the wall. It’s similar to the ones they’ve seen before, but more elaborate, the colors and shapes swirling together in a mesmerizing pattern that draws the eye.

The woman gestures to the painting. “This piece is unique. It’s part of a collection reserved for our most… trusted patrons.”

Max studies the painting, his gaze narrowing as he notices the symbols hidden within the brushstrokes. But these are different—more complex, as if they’re part of a larger code, a message that goes beyond the previous ones they’ve encountered.

The woman watches them closely, her voice soft but charged with meaning. “If you can decode this, you’ll understand the true nature of the artist’s work. It’s more than art. It’s a language.”

Max glances at Rosalee, feeling the weight of her words. “What happens if we understand it?”

The woman’s smile is faint, almost conspiratorial. “Then you’ll have proven yourselves worthy of the artist’s trust. And perhaps… more.”

They spend the next hour studying the painting, dissecting every detail as they work to decode the symbols. Max realizes that the pattern is more intricate than before, a series of overlapping layers that require a specific sequence to unlock.

Rosalee takes a deep breath, her fingers tracing the air in front of the painting as she deciphers the pattern. “It’s a combination of numbers and symbols. They’re layered so that only those who know the sequence can read it.”

As they work, the message begins to emerge, a chilling confirmation of Mercer’s influence: The art world isn’t just a cover; it’s a network of power and control. Each painting is a mark of loyalty, a promise sealed with hidden symbols that bind the patron to Mercer’s syndicate.

Max feels a cold shiver as he processes the message. Mercer’s operation isn’t just a criminal enterprise—it’s a carefully orchestrated empire that reaches into every corner of the art world, binding its members to him through a language only they understand.

Rosalee steps back, her face pale as she realizes the implications. “This… this means everyone involved is complicit. Every collector, every gallery, every dealer. They’re all part of it, whether they know it or not.”

Max’s expression hardens. “And that includes your gallery.”

The weight of their discovery presses down on them, a stark reminder of the scale of the empire they’re fighting against. They’re not just taking on Mercer—they’re challenging an entire system of power and influence, one that could destroy them if they make the wrong move.

As they leave the gallery, Max and Rosalee exchange a look of steely resolve. The path ahead is more treacherous than they’d imagined, but they know they can’t turn back. Mercer’s empire is vast, but they’re one step closer to exposing the truth, to pulling back the curtain on a world built on secrets, lies, and corruption. And they won’t stop until they bring it all crashing down.

# **Chapter 10: Lethal Revelations**

The air in Rosalee’s gallery is thick with silence as she and Max stand amid the darkened exhibits, the weight of their discovery pressing down on them like a physical force. Rosalee’s face is pale, her gaze fixed on the paintings that now seem more like warnings than works of art. She can feel a chill creeping into her bones, a stark realization that she’s been a pawn in Mercer’s game, unwittingly sheltering his operation in the very gallery she’d worked so hard to build.

Max watches her, his expression guarded but thoughtful. He doesn’t want to let doubt creep in, but he can’t deny the unease he feels. For a moment, he wonders if Rosalee knew more than she’s letting on, if she somehow turned a blind eye to Mercer’s infiltration. But as he looks into her eyes, he sees the fear and betrayal that mirror his own. He takes a breath, steadying himself.

“Rosalee,” he says quietly, his voice breaking the silence. “You didn’t know. I can see that now. But we need to stay focused. We’re close to something big, and Mercer’s not going to give us another chance.”

Rosalee swallows hard, her hand brushing over a painting’s frame as though grounding herself. “I thought I’d kept my gallery clean. I thought I knew every artist, every piece that passed through these walls. And now…” She trails off, the weight of her words filling the room.

Max steps closer, his voice softening. “You were used, Rosalee. Just like everyone else Mercer’s manipulated. He exploits people’s strengths, their passions. You’ve built something incredible here, and that’s exactly why he wanted to use it. But now we’re going to make sure he can’t use you—or your gallery—anymore.”

Rosalee nods, taking a steadying breath as she processes his words. “So, where do we go from here? We have all these fragmented clues, all these trails leading back to Mercer. But it’s like trying to assemble a puzzle without knowing the picture on the box.”

Max pulls out his phone, opening up the encrypted file they uncovered from the gallery’s records. “This file was embedded in the sales data, hidden in plain sight. If I’m right, it’s another piece of Mercer’s puzzle. The coordinates point us to the New York Public Library. There’s something there he didn’t want anyone to find.”

Rosalee raises an eyebrow, her face hardening with resolve. “Then that’s where we go. If there’s even a chance of exposing Mercer, I’m not backing down now.”

The New York Public Library looms before them like a fortress, its grand columns and statues casting long shadows across the steps. The bustle of tourists and students contrasts sharply with the sense of unease that follows Max and Rosalee as they make their way inside, their steps measured, eyes scanning for any sign of trouble.

Inside, the library’s marble floors echo underfoot, the grand reading rooms filled with the hum of quiet conversations and the scratch of pens on paper. Max leads the way, his expression unreadable as they head toward the back of the building, where the rare documents collection is kept. He glances around, searching for anyone who might be watching them, but the room is quiet, filled only with a few scattered patrons hunched over ancient volumes.

They find a small alcove near the back, secluded from the main room. Max pulls out his phone, typing in the coordinates from the file. They match the shelf they’re standing next to, a collection of historical documents preserved in glass cases. Max’s fingers skim over the titles, landing on an unassuming volume labeled *Strategic Operations of the Early Republic.*

“This is it,” Max murmurs, pulling the book from the shelf. He flips through the pages, his eyes scanning the text, searching for any sign of Mercer’s influence.

Rosalee leans in, her gaze sharp as she reads over his shoulder. “Military strategy. Operations. This is Mercer’s language. But how does it tie into the art world?”

Max’s fingers stop on a page halfway through the book. There, hidden in the fine print, is a series of numbers—a sequence that looks suspiciously like coordinates. Max jots them down, feeling a jolt of recognition as the numbers align with locations they’ve seen before, sites tied to Mercer’s operations.

“These aren’t just coordinates,” he says, his voice tense. “They’re markers. Locations where Mercer has established strongholds, places he’s embedded himself. And this book… it’s like a ledger of every operation he’s conducted. He’s been using these sites to build his network, hiding in plain sight.”

Rosalee’s face pales as she realizes the scale of Mercer’s reach. “These sites aren’t just random locations. They’re landmarks—places no one would think to question. Art galleries, historical sites, museums. Mercer’s been using the very institutions meant to preserve history and culture to build his empire.”

Max nods, his jaw tightening. “He’s been camouflaging his operation within the city’s most respected institutions, using art as a cover. And he’s left a trail of ‘claw marks’—these faint traces we’re only just starting to see.”

They work in silence, piecing together the fragments of Mercer’s plot, each revelation drawing them deeper into the web he’s woven around the city. Rosalee pulls another book from the shelf, flipping through the pages until her eyes land on a passage marked in faint pencil. It’s a quote about loyalty, about sacrifice for the greater good—a chilling reminder of Mercer’s ruthless philosophy.

Max reads over her shoulder, feeling a knot form in his stomach. “Mercer doesn’t just want control. He wants loyalty. Blind loyalty. Every person he’s recruited, every name we’ve uncovered—they’re part of a system, a machine he’s built to keep himself untouchable.”

Rosalee closes the book, her face hardening. “Then we need to find the weak link, the piece that will make his machine crumble.”

But before they can continue, a flash of movement catches Max’s eye. He glances up, his instincts on high alert. At first, he sees nothing unusual—a few patrons milling about, a librarian pushing a cart down one of the aisles. But then he sees it: a faint, almost imperceptible red dot moving across the room.

It lands on Rosalee’s forehead.

“Down!” Max yells, grabbing her arm and pulling her to the floor as the red dot vanishes. The sound of a suppressed shot echoes faintly through the library, followed by the shouts of startled patrons as they scatter, searching for cover.

Rosalee’s eyes widen as she realizes what just happened. “Was that…?”

“A sniper,” Max says grimly, his mind racing. “We’ve been made.”

They scramble to their feet, keeping low as they weave through the aisles, the faint red dot reappearing sporadically on the shelves around them as the sniper tries to reacquire his target. Max pulls Rosalee behind a large bookshelf, his gaze darting around as he assesses their options.

“We need to get out of here,” he says, his voice low. “Whoever’s watching us isn’t going to stop.”

They move quickly, ducking from shelf to shelf, the chaos of the library providing temporary cover as they make their way toward the exit. Max keeps his hand on Rosalee’s arm, guiding her through the maze of aisles as the red dot flits across the walls, a deadly reminder of the sniper’s relentless pursuit.

As they reach the back exit, Max pauses, his gaze sweeping over the room one last time. The sniper has gone quiet, but Max knows better than to assume they’re safe. He pushes open the door, leading Rosalee into the narrow alleyway behind the library, the cold air hitting them like a shock.

They sprint down the alley, ducking into side streets and weaving through the city’s maze of back roads until they’re sure they’ve lost their pursuer. Finally, they slow, catching their breath as they lean against a graffiti-covered wall, their hearts pounding.

Rosalee’s hands tremble as she looks at Max, her face pale. “We were being watched this whole time. They knew we’d go to the library.”

Max’s face is grim, his mind racing with possibilities. “Mercer’s network is bigger than we thought. If he’s got snipers tracking our movements, then he knows we’re getting close. And that means he’ll stop at nothing to keep us quiet.”

They stand in silence for a moment, the weight of their situation settling over them. The scale of Mercer’s operation is staggering, a machine built on secrecy and fear. And now, with their lives on the line, they realize just how dangerous this game has become.

Rosalee’s voice is barely a whisper. “Who can we trust, Max? If he’s watching us this closely, how do we know we’re not walking into another trap?”

Max’s jaw tightens, his eyes hardening with resolve. “We can’t trust anyone. Not entirely. But we keep moving forward. We use what we know, we keep digging, and we stay one step ahead.”

Rosalee nods, her gaze fierce despite the fear that lingers in her eyes. “Then we go after him. We find the weak link and make sure he knows we’re not backing down.”

They stand there, the city’s noises growing louder around them, grounding them in the reality of the fight they’re about to take on. Despite the fear, Max feels a surge of determination—a fierce, unrelenting drive to tear down the empire that Mercer has woven through the city’s fabric, an empire built on deception, control, and a ruthless disregard for human life.

“We’ve made it this far,” Max says, his voice steady. “Mercer’s watching, yes, but we’ve seen too much to stop now. He may have his eyes on us, but we’re closing in on him, too.”

Rosalee nods, her face a blend of anger and defiance. “We know how he operates now. He’s using these landmarks, respected institutions, as cover. But we also know his weakness—he needs control. He needs everyone in his network to believe he’s untouchable.”

“And we can use that against him,” Max adds, his mind racing as he pieces together a plan. “If we expose the cracks in his control, show the people in his network that he isn’t as powerful as he claims, they’ll start questioning their loyalty to him.”

They pull themselves off the wall, their adrenaline beginning to settle, but the weight of their mission still heavy on their shoulders. Rosalee takes a deep breath, steadying herself. “The library files we saw… they’re enough to show that Mercer’s been creating strategic nodes throughout the city, but we need proof that ties those nodes directly to him. We need something that will turn his allies against him.”

Max nods, feeling the enormity of their task. “Agreed. The challenge now is finding someone within his circle who has doubts, who might be willing to talk. Mercer’s powerful, but he isn’t invincible. There’s got to be a crack somewhere.”

They step out of the alley, blending back into the flow of pedestrians on the bustling street. The sniper, the red dot, the close call in the library—it all sits in the back of their minds as a reminder of how easily Mercer’s reach could close in on them. But Max knows that fear is the very thing Mercer relies on to keep people in check, and he’s determined not to let it stop them.

Rosalee glances at Max, her eyes steely with resolve. “We’ll start by digging into the people connected to my gallery, looking for anyone with a tie to the sites mentioned in that library ledger. And then… we go after his network from the inside out.”

Max meets her gaze, a fierce grin breaking through his otherwise serious expression. “Sounds like a plan. Mercer won’t know what hit him.”

They walk in silence, their path clear, their purpose unwavering. Every step forward feels like they’re stepping into a darker, more dangerous world, a world where allies are scarce and every move could be their last. But with each new revelation, each new clue, they’re one step closer to unraveling the empire Mercer has so meticulously built.

As they disappear into the heart of the city, they know they’re moving toward a confrontation that will test their every strength, a battle of wits, will, and courage. And they’re ready, no matter what it takes, to bring Mercer’s reign crashing down.

# **Chapter 11: Midnight in Manhattan**

Max paces the apartment as he listens to the caller’s words, his hand gripping the phone tight enough to make his knuckles go white. The voice on the other end is calm, almost taunting, with a familiarity that sends an icy shiver down his spine. Whoever this person is, they know far too much—details only Max and Rosalee would be privy to, buried deep within Mercer’s twisted network.

“The Bronx Zoo,” the voice says, with the casual tone of someone inviting him out for coffee. “Midnight. You’ll know what you’re looking for when you see it.”

The line goes dead.

Max stares at the phone for a moment before turning to Rosalee, his face set in a grim expression. “They knew details, things no one else could know. Whoever this is, they’re inside Mercer’s operation. It could be a trap, but… they’re holding something we need.”

Rosalee’s eyes darken with a mix of fear and determination. “If it’s a trap, we’re prepared. But if there’s even a chance they have valuable information, we can’t pass it up.”

Max nods, pulling his jacket on and securing the extra gear he always carries for encounters like this. “Then let’s go. Whatever happens, we go in and get out quick. If it’s a setup, I have a plan.”

The Bronx Zoo is a strange place at night, its usual warmth and energy drained by the cold emptiness that settles over the deserted pathways. The sounds of distant animals add an eerie layer to the silence, their cries echoing through the dark as Max and Rosalee make their way through the gates, each step heavy with the tension of the unknown.

They follow the winding paths toward the center of the zoo, moving quietly, their eyes sharp as they scan for any sign of their contact—or Mercer’s men.

“Why the zoo?” Rosalee murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper. “Why here, of all places?”

“It’s isolated, a maze,” Max replies. “If they’re planning an ambush, it’s the perfect place. A lot of cover, plenty of places to hide.”

They reach the edge of a large enclosure, where the trees and dense foliage provide natural camouflage. Max signals for Rosalee to stay low, his instincts kicking in as he scans the shadows for any movement. The seconds drag on, each one filled with a sense of impending danger, until they hear it—a faint rustling, a shuffling of footsteps behind them.

Max tenses, his hand moving to the small bag at his side. “We’re not alone.”

In a flash, they’re surrounded. Figures emerge from the shadows, clad in black tactical gear, their faces obscured by masks. There are at least six of them, their weapons trained on Max and Rosalee, their stance professional and unyielding.

“Welcome, McCollum,” one of the men says, his voice muffled but cold. “Mercer sends his regards.”

Max’s mind races, calculating the odds. He expected this—planned for it, even. But now, surrounded and outnumbered, he knows they’ll need every ounce of skill and luck to get out alive.

He exchanges a quick glance with Rosalee, her face set in steely resolve. “Stay close,” he whispers, his tone fierce. “Follow my lead.”

In one swift motion, Max reaches into his bag, pulling out a smoke grenade and tossing it toward the mercenaries. The canister hisses, releasing a thick cloud of smoke that fills the air, obscuring their vision as chaos erupts. Shouts echo through the darkness as the mercenaries stumble, their coordination disrupted by the sudden cover.

Max grabs Rosalee’s hand, pulling her into a sprint as they weave through the smoke, dodging between trees and ducking behind enclosures. He feels the adrenaline pulsing through him, his senses heightened as he listens for any sign of pursuit.

Behind them, the mercenaries recover quickly, their training evident in the way they regroup and advance, moving through the smoke with calculated precision. Max can hear their footsteps closing in, the sound of boots crunching over gravel as they close the distance.

“Max, they’re gaining on us,” Rosalee says, her voice tense but steady.

“Just keep moving,” he replies, his mind working through their options. He knows the layout of the zoo, the twists and turns of the paths, the natural barriers they can use to their advantage. If they can reach the aviary, they might have a chance to lose their pursuers in the dense foliage and narrow pathways.

They make a sharp turn, heading down a narrow path lined with tall bamboo. The mercenaries are close, their figures barely visible through the smoke as they follow, their weapons at the ready. Max feels a surge of frustration—whoever these people are, they’re good, too good. Mercer’s best, undoubtedly.

As they reach the edge of the aviary, Max pulls Rosalee to the side, pressing against the wall as the mercenaries pass by, their eyes scanning the area for any sign of movement. For a brief moment, they’re hidden, concealed by the shadows and the thick vegetation.

Max leans close, his voice a low whisper. “We can’t outrun them, not like this. I need you to trust me. Do exactly as I say.”

Rosalee nods, her eyes fierce with determination. “Whatever it takes.”

He nods, pulling out a small flash grenade from his bag. “When I throw this, cover your eyes. It’ll buy us a few seconds to get out of sight.”

He counts down, his voice steady despite the pounding of his heart. “Three… two… one.”

He tosses the grenade, a blinding flash filling the area as it detonates, disorienting the mercenaries and sending them stumbling. In that split second, Max and Rosalee slip past them, darting down another path as they make their way deeper into the zoo, the sounds of chaos fading behind them.

They reach a small clearing, pausing to catch their breath as they assess their surroundings. Max knows they’re still not safe, but for the moment, they have a brief reprieve, a chance to regroup and plan their next move.

“Are you okay?” Max asks, his gaze scanning Rosalee’s face for any sign of injury.

She nods, her breathing heavy but controlled. “I’m fine. Just… tell me we have a way out of this.”

Max’s mind races, piecing together a plan as he assesses their options. “There’s a service exit near the back of the zoo. It’s usually locked, but I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. If we can make it there, we might be able to slip out before they catch on.”

They move quickly, staying low as they navigate the winding paths, the sounds of the mercenaries echoing faintly in the distance. Max can feel the tension building, the knowledge that they’re playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse, every move calculated, every step bringing them closer to freedom—or capture.

Finally, they reach the service exit, a heavy metal gate locked from the inside. Max pulls out a small set of lock picks, his hands steady as he works the lock, his focus intense as he listens for any sign of pursuit.

“Come on, come on,” he mutters, his frustration mounting as the lock resists his efforts.

Just as he feels the lock give, a shadow falls over them. He looks up, his heart sinking as he sees two of the mercenaries approaching, their weapons trained on him and Rosalee.

“Don’t move,” one of them says, his voice cold and unyielding. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Max feels a surge of defiance, his gaze flicking to Rosalee. They’ve come too far to be stopped now, too close to freedom to let Mercer’s men win. With a silent nod, he signals to her, his hand slipping into his bag one last time.

In one swift motion, he pulls out a small blade, hurling it toward the first mercenary with deadly precision. The man stumbles back, momentarily distracted, giving Max the opening he needs to pull Rosalee through the gate as it swings open, their escape path finally clear.

They run, their footsteps pounding against the ground as they leave the zoo behind, the sounds of the city growing louder with each step. Behind them, the mercenaries regroup, their shouts fading as Max and Rosalee disappear into the streets, blending into the shadows as they make their way to safety.

They don’t stop until they’re miles away, their hearts still racing as they lean against a building, catching their breath in the dim glow of a streetlamp.

Rosalee looks at Max, a mixture of relief and awe in her eyes. “You planned all that, didn’t you?”

Max nods, a faint smile breaking through his otherwise serious expression. “I had a feeling Mercer wouldn’t make it easy for us. But you held your own out there. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Their eyes meet, a moment of unspoken understanding passing between them. The ambush, the escape—it’s cemented something between them, a bond forged in the fire of survival, a trust that goes beyond words.

Rosalee finally breaks the silence, her voice soft but steady. “You didn’t have to trust me, you know. When you found out about my gallery… you could have walked away. But you didn’t.”

Max’s gaze is unwavering as he responds. “I knew you didn’t know about Mercer’s network in your gallery. The look on your face when we found those records—that wasn’t the reaction of someone complicit. And I don’t leave my friends behind, Rosalee.”

A faint smile touches her lips, her eyes reflecting the gratitude and relief she feels. “Friends, huh? I’ll take that.”

They share a quiet laugh, a brief respite from the tension that hangs over them, a moment of light in the darkness that surrounds their world. But as the laughter fades, the reality of their situation settles back in, and Max’s expression grows serious once more.

“Mercer’s men won’t stop coming,” he says, his tone grim. “We made it out tonight, but they’ll regroup. They know we’re onto something, and they’ll be watching every move we make from here on out.”

Rosalee nods, her gaze resolute. “Then we stay one step ahead. Whatever it takes, we’ll find the leverage we need to take down Mercer’s empire. He’s gotten away with too much for too long, and I’m done running.”

Max watches her, a mixture of admiration and determination in his eyes. “Agreed. But we’ll need to be smart about this. Mercer’s got eyes everywhere, people in his pocket who won’t hesitate to come after us if we get too close.”

They push away from the wall, stepping back into the flow of the city’s late-night crowd. The streets are alive with the hum of people, the neon lights casting a surreal glow over their surroundings, reminding them that the city never truly sleeps.

As they walk, Rosalee speaks, her voice steady. “I know where we can start. There’s a man—an art dealer I once did business with. He was… nervous, cagey, like he was hiding something. If he’s connected to Mercer, he might be a weak link.”

Max’s eyes light up with interest. “Someone who could lead us to the bigger players in Mercer’s network?”

“Exactly,” she replies, her expression fierce. “He’s small enough that he’d be overlooked, but he’s got connections that run deep. If we can get him to talk, we might get a lead on Mercer’s inner circle.”

Max nods, his mind already working through the details of their next move. They’re getting closer, piece by piece, to the heart of Mercer’s empire, and every step brings them closer to tearing it down.

They disappear into the night, the weight of their mission pressing down on them, but their bond stronger than ever, their purpose clear. They know the road ahead will be filled with danger and deception, a treacherous path that will test their every limit. But with each other to rely on, they’re ready to face whatever comes next, knowing that together, they’ll stop at nothing to bring down the man who’s been playing fast and loose with their lives.

As the first light of dawn begins to creep over the horizon, Max and Rosalee are already planning their next move, their minds focused, their hearts steeled. And for the first time, they feel a flicker of hope—a sense that, no matter how dark the night has been, there’s a chance to bring Mercer’s empire to its knees.

# **Chapter 12: Betrayal’s Notes**

The wind bites sharper than expected as Max and Rosalee step off the subway platform onto the bustling streets of Coney Island. The air smells like sea salt and fried food, a gritty reminder of the city’s old charm, but tonight it feels more like a mask hiding something sinister underneath. The lights from the boardwalk stretch out ahead, flickering over the rides and midway games, a contrast to the dark purpose that’s brought them here.

Max scans the crowd, his eyes catching on every shadow that seems out of place, every passerby whose gaze lingers a second too long. There’s an instinct humming in his chest, that feeling he’s learned to trust—a faint, persistent sense that things are about to go sideways.

“Tell me again why we’re trusting Cris,” Max murmurs, his voice low as they keep moving.

Rosalee’s face is set in a grim expression. “I’ve known Cris since my gallery’s first days. She’s been with me through everything. If there’s anyone I can trust with this mess, it’s her.” She glances over at him, something hesitant in her eyes. “I know it sounds naive, but she’s never given me a reason to doubt her.”

Max doesn’t reply immediately, his jaw tight as he processes her words. He wants to believe it, for Rosalee’s sake, but experience has taught him to be cautious. Trust is a luxury they can’t afford right now, not with Mercer’s people lurking in the shadows, pulling strings from the safety of their hidden empire.

They make their way toward the meeting point, a small, unassuming diner tucked into the corner of a quiet street, its neon sign flickering like a half-forgotten relic. Max holds the door open for Rosalee, his eyes sweeping over the empty tables, the lone server behind the counter, and the middle-aged man nursing a cup of coffee by the window. A classic scene, but one that feels off, like they’ve stepped into a movie set for a film noir.

Rosalee spots Cris at a booth in the back, her face shadowed under the dim lights. She looks up as they approach, giving Rosalee a small smile, but Max notices something—an unease in her posture, a stiffness in the way she glances over her shoulder. His instincts are on high alert.

“Thanks for coming,” Cris says, her voice soft as she motions for them to sit. “I know this isn’t easy, and I wouldn’t have called if it weren’t important.”

Max slides into the booth, Rosalee beside him, but he doesn’t let his guard down. “We’re here, Cris. Now what’s so important that we had to meet this late?”

Cris hesitates, her gaze darting to the windows, the door, before she finally leans in, her voice barely a whisper. “I’ve been keeping tabs on Mercer’s connections—people he’s reached out to in the gallery scene, names that shouldn’t be connected but are. I thought you should know… it’s worse than we thought.”

Rosalee’s face tightens, a mixture of anger and hurt flickering in her eyes. “And you’re just telling me this now?”

Cris looks down, her hands clasped together tightly. “I didn’t know how deep it went. By the time I pieced things together, it was too late. Mercer’s got his claws in more than just a few galleries, Rosalee. He’s using them as fronts, moving assets, covering his tracks. And he’s been using your gallery to help launder it all.”

Rosalee’s expression hardens, but she manages a nod. “Tell us what you know. All of it.”

Cris takes a deep breath, her eyes darting between them before she speaks, her voice barely above a whisper. “He’s got contacts high up—art dealers, curators, collectors who are all in on it. They’re siphoning funds, hiding pieces that should be flagged, using art as a currency to launder his money. And he’s got his eyes on you, Rosalee. I think he knows what you’ve been digging into.”

A silence stretches between them, heavy and unyielding, and Max can feel the tension ratcheting up like a taut wire. Something doesn’t sit right, and he knows Rosalee feels it too.

“So why meet us here?” Max asks, his voice hardening. “If you knew all this, why bring us out in the open?”

Cris shifts, her eyes darting around the diner, her nervous energy almost palpable. “I didn’t want anyone at the gallery overhearing… I thought it would be safer here.”

Max’s gaze doesn’t waver. “Safer? In a crowded public space, with no cover? We’ve been doing this long enough to know what a setup looks like.”

Cris’s face pales, her expression faltering as she glances over at Rosalee. “You don’t… you don’t think…”

Rosalee’s eyes are sharp, calculating. “Cris, look me in the eye and tell me you had nothing to do with this.”

There’s a flicker, a split second of hesitation in Cris’s gaze, and that’s all it takes. Max feels a chill run down his spine, and before he can react, the doors swing open, and three men step inside, their movements too coordinated, their faces too composed for ordinary patrons.

Cris stumbles over her words, her face flushed. “Rosalee, I didn’t want—”

Max doesn’t wait for an explanation. He grabs Rosalee’s arm, pulling her to her feet as he scans the room for an escape. “We’re leaving. Now.”

But it’s too late. The men are already closing in, their expressions impassive, like this is just another routine assignment. Max tenses, his hand moving to his jacket pocket, where he keeps a small but potent stash of distractions for moments just like this.

“McCollum,” one of the men says, his voice cold, almost amused. “Running again? Mercer expected more from you.”

Max’s jaw clenches, his gaze flicking between the men and the diner’s narrow exit. “Funny. I expected more from him than sending stooges who can’t even pull off a proper ambush.”

The man’s smirk falters, but only for a second. “We’re not here for the banter, McCollum. You’re coming with us. Both of you.”

Max pulls a small device from his pocket—a flash-bang disguised as a key fob. He meets Rosalee’s eyes, giving her a slight nod. “On three,” he murmurs, his voice low. “Two… one.”

He presses the button, and the diner explodes in a flash of blinding light and a deafening bang. The mercenaries stumble, disoriented, and Max seizes the moment, pulling Rosalee through the chaos as they make a break for the door. Shouts echo around them as they burst onto the street, the cold night air a shock against their faces.

They don’t stop, weaving through the late-night crowd as they sprint toward the boardwalk, the sounds of pursuit growing fainter behind them. But Max knows they’re not safe yet. Mercer’s men are trained, relentless, and it’s only a matter of time before they regroup.

Rosalee glances over her shoulder, her breathing heavy. “Max, they’re catching up!”

He scans the boardwalk, his mind racing as he looks for an escape. Then he spots it—a service alley running parallel to the main drag, dark and narrow but offering a potential escape route.

“This way!” he says, pulling her into the alley. They dodge between stacks of crates and dumpsters, their footsteps echoing against the brick walls as they press deeper into the shadows.

But as they reach the end of the alley, they’re met with another group of mercenaries, blocking their path, their expressions steely and unyielding. Max feels a surge of frustration, his mind working furiously as he calculates their odds.

“We’re surrounded,” Rosalee whispers.

Max’s hand tightens around hers. “Then we fight.”

The mercenaries close in, their steps measured, their weapons drawn. Max raises his fists, his body tense, ready to go down fighting if he has to. But just as the first mercenary steps forward, a voice rings out from the shadows.

“Hold it right there, boys.”

The mercenaries pause, their heads turning toward the source of the voice. A figure steps into the dim light, tall and lean, with a confidence that seems to radiate off him. He’s dressed in dark clothing, his face partially obscured, but there’s something about him—an air of authority, of someone who’s been in these situations before.

“Ty,” Max breathes, a mixture of relief and surprise flashing across his face.

Ty gives a slight nod, his gaze sweeping over the mercenaries with a look of disdain. “Didn’t anyone teach you not to gang up on people? You’re outnumbered, anyway.”

One of the mercenaries sneers. “Outnumbered? There’s six of us.”

Ty’s smile is cold, almost predatory. “Yeah, and you still don’t stand a chance.”

In a blur of motion, Ty moves forward, taking down the first mercenary with a swift punch to the gut and a brutal uppercut In a blur of motion, Ty moves forward, taking down the first mercenary with a swift punch to the gut and a brutal uppercut that leaves the man sprawling. The remaining mercenaries hesitate, their confidence faltering as they realize they’re dealing with someone who’s clearly in his element.

Max doesn’t waste the opening. He lunges at the nearest mercenary, ducking under a wild swing and landing a solid punch to the man’s ribs. The mercenary doubles over, giving Max just enough time to throw him aside and shift his focus to the next opponent.

Rosalee, staying close to the wall, watches the fight unfold with a mixture of fear and awe. Ty moves with lethal precision, dispatching each mercenary with a calculated efficiency that leaves no room for error. He’s calm, controlled—a predator picking off prey with practiced ease.

“Didn’t your boss teach you anything?” Ty taunts, dodging a swing and countering with a kick that sends another mercenary crashing into a stack of crates. “Mercer really should hire better help.”

One of the mercenaries stumbles back, his eyes wide with fear as he realizes they’re outmatched. “Fall back!” he shouts, but it’s too late. Ty’s already on him, knocking the weapon from his hands and delivering a knockout blow that sends the man crumpling to the ground.

Max takes down the last mercenary with a sharp elbow to the temple, the man collapsing in a heap. He catches his breath, turning to see Ty standing among the scattered bodies, his expression unbothered, as if this were all just a warm-up.

Rosalee steps forward, her eyes wide. “Ty… who are you?”

Ty gives her a wry smile, glancing between her and Max. “Just a guy who doesn’t like to see friends backed into a corner. You two looked like you could use a hand.”

Max meets his gaze, a mixture of gratitude and suspicion flickering across his face. “We didn’t expect to see you out here. What’s your angle, Ty?”

Ty shrugs, his expression inscrutable. “No angle. Mercer’s been running this city like his personal playground, and it’s about time someone pushed back. I’ve been watching you two make waves, and it seemed like you could use an ally.”

Rosalee steps closer, her gaze searching his face. “If you’ve been watching us, then you know how dangerous this is. Mercer’s reach is… it’s bigger than we thought. He knows where we are, what we’re doing. He even got to my gallery.”

Ty’s expression hardens, a flicker of anger in his eyes. “I know. I’ve seen what he’s done, the way he pulls people in, uses them, tosses them aside when they’re no longer useful. That’s why I’m here—to put an end to it. I’m in this as long as it takes to bring him down.”

Max watches him closely, weighing his words. He doesn’t trust easily, but there’s something about Ty’s resolve, the fire in his eyes, that makes Max want to believe him. He nods, offering a hand. “Then we do this together.”

Ty clasps his hand, his grip firm. “Together.”

They stand in silence for a moment, the sounds of the boardwalk fading as they process the enormity of their alliance. With Ty’s arrival, they finally have an edge, a chance to fight back against Mercer’s seemingly invincible empire. But Max knows that every step forward will bring them closer to the final confrontation, to a battle that will test them all.

Rosalee glances between them, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. “So… what’s the plan?”

Ty’s smile is grim, his gaze steady. “The plan is to hit him where it hurts. We know his network, his strongholds, but there’s more to find—weak links, people who’ve been waiting for someone to stand up to him. We’ll make sure they know Mercer’s days are numbered.”

Max feels a surge of determination, his heart steady as he looks between Rosalee and Ty. They’re standing on the edge of a fight that could bring them everything they’ve been working toward, a chance to finally tear down the empire Mercer’s built on fear and betrayal.

He takes a deep breath, feeling the weight of their mission settle over him. “Then let’s make it happen. For everyone he’s hurt, for everyone he’s used. We bring it all crashing down.”

As they turn to leave, the first light of dawn begins to creep over the horizon, casting a faint glow over the city. They know the road ahead is fraught with danger, that Mercer won’t go down without a fight. But with Ty by their side, they feel a renewed strength, a glimmer of hope that they’ll emerge from the shadows victorious.

They walk into the sunrise, knowing that they’re that much closer. But there’s still plenty of work to be done.

# **Chapter 13: Brutal Bedfellows**

The Guggenheim Museum rises like a coiled nautilus against the New York skyline, a stark reminder of how art, power, and ambition often spiral into the inexplicable. Max and Rosalee approach the entrance cautiously, their eyes darting across the thinning crowd of tourists. The late afternoon sun slants through the distinctive windows, casting golden streaks across Rosalee’s determined (if a bit uneasy) expression.

“What are we even looking for?”

“We’ll know it when see it,” Max mutters.

Rosalee arches an eyebrow but doesn’t argue. She has learned by now that Max’s instincts, maddeningly vague as they often are, rarely lead them astray. They pass through the revolving doors into the museum’s atrium, where the spiral ramp stretches upward, inviting and disorienting all at once.

“He hides things in plain sight,” Rosalee muses, glancing at the modern sculptures scattered around the base of the ramp. “What if he knows that we know that?”

“Look who’s playing some 4D Chess.”

“I mean, seriously, what if he’s counting on us to spend hours walking around here? Like, what if he’s actually *hiding* it?”

Max tilts his head, considering her theory. “It’s possible. Where, though?”

“Follow me,” Rosalee says with a wink.

They weave through the gallery, Rosalee’s heels clicking softly on the polished floor. Max’s gaze sweeps over the displays with that trademark functionality, cataloging every shadow and clocking every detail. He leads them toward a less trafficked wing, where a locked storage room lies concealed behind an unmarked door. His hand brushes the lock, and he glances at Rosalee.

“Keep an eye out,” he says, pulling a tensile wrench and lockpick from the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Rosalee hesitates for a beat before stepping back toward the hallway. Her gaze lands on a nearby security guard—a young man with a nice-looking face and an unassuming demeanor. Smiling, she strides toward him.

“Excuse me,” she says, her voice smooth and tinged with urgency. “You work here, right? I think I dropped something near the entrance to the sculpture exhibit. Could you help me find it?”

The guard’s cheeks flush faintly as he nods. “Uh, sure. What did you drop?”

“A silver charm bracelet,” she improvises, tilting her head just enough to convey a mix of gratitude and helplessness. “It is my grandmother’s.”

As the guard follows her toward the exhibit, Max works swiftly on the lock. The mechanism clicks open just as Rosalee’s voice carries down the corridor, still charming the guard. Max slips inside, leaving the door slightly ajar for her to follow.

Inside the storage room, he switches on a small flashlight, its beam illuminating racks of paintings and sculptures awaiting their turn in the spotlight. And a CCTV comera. Getting caught is the least of his worries, though, and he’s betting it’s too dark for that thing to be capturing anything meaningful.

He scans the collection with a practiced eye, searching for anything that doesn’t quite belong. His breath catches when his flashlight lands on a small watercolor painting tucked in the corner. The pattern of brushstrokes is unmistakably similar to the coded artwork they’ve been chasing.

Rosalee enters silently, her eyes narrowing as she spots the painting. “That’s it,” she whispers, retrieving a large purse from her shoulder.

“I know. Keep your voice down,” Max warns, but Rosalee is already sliding the frame into her bag.

A sound echoes down the hallway—a sharp, deliberate step. Max’s hand darts to the concealed holster beneath his jacket, and he motions for Rosalee to stay still. Together, they edge toward the door, peering out to find not the security guard, but a man Max recognizes instantly. Dante.

Dante, a former SEAL and once an ally, stands with his arms crossed, his stance casual but charged with the kind of menace that suggests he takes his work seriously—and enjoys the power it gives him. Two more men flank him, their hands resting on concealed weapons.

“Well, look who couldn’t resist poking the bear,” Dante says, his voice dripping with mockery. “You were warned to back off, Max.”

Max steps forward, blocking Rosalee from view. His voice is cold steel. “And you were always good at being on the wrong side of history. Mercer must pay well.”

“Better than Uncle Sam ever did,” Dante retorts with a shrug. “You should try it. Fewer rules and better perks. As for history, he doesn’t get those commas in his bank account by betting on the wrong side.”

The tension crackles like static electricity. Rosalee grips the strap of her purse tightly, her knuckles white. She catches Max’s eye and shakes her head ever so slightly, urging him to de-escalate. But Max has already calculated the odds, and he knows there’s no talking their way out of this.

With a lightning-quick motion, Max draws his gun and fires. The two men flanking Dante crumple to the ground before they can clear their holsters. Dante freezes, his hands raised halfway in surrender, his smirk faltering.

“That’s two warnings,” Max says, his voice low and dangerous. “There won’t be a third.”

“Max, stop,” Rosalee says sharply, stepping forward. Her eyes are wide, her voice trembling with the weight of what she’s just witnessed. “He’s not worth it.”

Max hesitates, his gun still trained on Dante. The two men lock eyes, an unspoken history passing between them. Finally, Max lowers the weapon, though his grip remains firm.

“Tell Mercer to sleep with one eye open,” Max says, his tone deadly calm.

Dante laughs, shaking his head. “You don’t get it, do you? No one *tells* Mercer anything. He always knows. And if you were smart, you’d go back to your sad, lonely, pathetic little life.”

Rosalee stiffens at the words, her gaze flickering to Max. For the first time, she sees something vulnerable in his expression—a fleeting shadow of the isolation he carries. Before she can say anything, Dante spits on the ground and stalks off, his footsteps fading into the distance.

They leave the storage room in silence, slipping out of the museum unnoticed. The weight of what just happened settles over them like a storm cloud. Outside, Rosalee finally breaks the silence.

“Is it true?” she asks softly.

“Is what true?”

“What he says—about you being lonely?”

“My personal life could not be any less relevant right now,” he snaps back. “What matters is figuring out what’s on that painting.”

Rosalee doesn’t press further. They hail a cab and climb inside, the city lights casting fleeting patterns across their faces. Rosalee opens her purse and studies the painting as the cab weaves through traffic. Max watches her for a bit before pulling out his phone and typing into an encrypted app.

“What are you doing?” Rosalee asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Staying one step ahead,” Max replies, his tone resolute.

The cab stops in front of Rosalee’s apartment. They step out, their footsteps heavy with exhaustion as they ascend the stairs. Inside, Max spreads the painting on the dining table, pulling out a notepad and pen. The room is silent except for the scratch of his pen and the faint hum of the city outside.

Rosalee watches him work, a mixture of admiration and apprehension in her eyes. “Do you ever stop?” she asks, her voice tinged with something softer than frustration.

Max doesn’t look up. “I’m a shark, remember? Move or die.”

As the cipher begins to take shape, Rosalee leans closer, her breath catching as the message reveals itself. The coordinates are unmistakable—another location, another step closer to unraveling the conspiracy.

Max’s pen halts mid-scratch as Rosalee’s voice cuts through the tense silence. “This has to be our next step.”

He glances at her, his brow furrowed. “Yup. Let’s go.”

Rosalee exhales sharply, pacing the room. “Max, we barely got out of the Guggenheim alive. Let’s not tempt fate. We need a plan here.”

Max leans back in the chair, his gaze fixed on the decoded coordinates on the paper in front of him. “This isn’t an ambush site,” he says, his voice steady but grim. “It’s an Easter egg, a breadcrumb.”

“To what?” Rosalee stops pacing, crossing her arms. “Another trap?”

“Maybe,” Max admits, standing and stretching. “Or maybe it’s the key to finally putting him away for good.”

Rosalee runs a shaky hand through her hair, adrenaline still coursing through her veins. “They can miss as many times as they want. One shot is all it takes. We’re not bulletproof.”

He smirks faintly. “I never says we were.”

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn’t argue further. Instead, she picks up her coat and bag. “You know what? Fine. Let’s go.”

“Wait. There’s something else in here.”

“What?”

“I.T. It’s in some ancient font, but look…”

Rosalee sees it but shrugs it off. “That could be anything.”

“Isabella Tramiza’s in the city this week. That’s why they closed off half of—”

They take deep, audible breaths together as if on cue.

“They’re taking her off the board.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when she gives her speech, there’s gonna be a well-trained sniper in some abandoned room a mile away.”

“Then we’ll get to her people. They’re not gonna try anything yet.”

“We?”

“I’m safer with you than without you.”

Max stifles a knowing grin and grabs his jacket, sliding his gun back into its holster. Together, they leave the apartment, the chilly night air wrapping around them as they step onto the sidewalk. A faint drizzle begins to fall, the streetlights reflecting off the wet pavement in scattered bursts of gold and white.

The coordinates lead them to a warehouse in the Lower East Side, its exterior unassuming and weathered by time. Max and Rosalee approach cautiously, their footsteps muffled by the damp ground. Max signals for her to stay behind him as he pulls a flashlight from his pocket, its beam cutting through the darkness.

Inside, the warehouse is a cavernous expanse of shadows and silence. Wooden crates are stacked haphazardly, their labels faded and indecipherable. Max moves quietly, his steps deliberate as he scans the area. Rosalee follows close behind, her eyes darting nervously at every creak and groan of the old building.

“It’s too quiet,” she whispers.

Max nods, his hand brushing the butt of his gun. “Stay close.”

They move deeper into the warehouse, the air growing colder and heavier. The flashlight’s beam lands on a stack of crates marked with an insignia—a jagged, red circle with a serpent coiled around it.

“This is it,” Max mutters, gesturing for Rosalee to help him open one of the crates. Together, they pry off the lid, revealing an assortment of weapons and documents. Max rifles through the papers, his brow furrowing as he recognizes names and addresses—politicians, art collectors, military contractors. Each one is tied to Mercer’s network.

“This is a gold mine,” Rosalee breathes, her voice tinged with disbelief. “It’s everything we need to finally bring him down.”

Max nods, his mind already calculating their next move. “We need to get this to someone we can trust.”

Before they can close the crate, the faint sound of footsteps echoes from the far end of the warehouse. Max freezes, his hand moving to his gun as Rosalee’s breath catches in her throat. The footsteps grow louder, accompanied by the metallic clink of weapons being drawn.

“Here they are,” Max whispers, pulling Rosalee behind a stack of crates. “Stay low.”

A group of men emerges from the shadows, their faces obscured by scarves and hoods. At the center of the group stands Dante, his smug grin illuminated by the faint light filtering through the warehouse windows.

“Well, well,” Dante calls out, his voice mocking. “Doesn’t think you’d make it this far, Max.”

Max steps out from behind the crates, his gun trained on Dante. “Drop the act. You’re a mope playing the slick.”

Dante laughs, a harsh, grating sound. “And you’re still clinging to your self-righteous bullshit, huh? You really should’ve taken my advice.”

Rosalee peers around the crates, her heart pounding as she watches the confrontation unfold. She grips a metal pipe she found on the floor, ready to fight if necessary.

“You don’t want to do this,” Max warns, his voice low and steady. “Walk away while the choice is still on the table because I assure you, it won’t be there for long.”

Dante’s grin widens as he gestures to his men. “Sorry, Max. No can do.”

The next moments are blurs of hastily orchestrated chaos. Shots ring out, ricocheting off the metal walls of the warehouse. Max moves with military precision, his training taking over as he fires at the approaching men. Rosalee ducks behind the crates, her hands shaking as she clutches the pipe.

“Rosalee, stay down!” Max shouts, his voice cutting through the noise.

But one of Dante’s men spots her, his .45 aimed directly at her hiding spot. Without thinking, she swings the pipe with all her strength, knocking the weapon from his hand. He stumbles, and she seizes the opportunity to run toward Max.

Max takes out the last of Dante’s men, his breathing heavy as he turns to find Dante himself fleeing toward the warehouse’s exit. “Stay here,” he orders Rosalee before taking off after him.

Rosalee doesn’t listen. She grabs one of the discarded guns and follows Max, her adrenaline overriding her fear. She catches up to him just as Dante bursts through the warehouse doors and into the rain-soaked night.

“Dante!” Max calls, his voice echoing across the empty street. “It’s over!”

Dante stops, his shoulders heaving as he turns to face Max. “You don’t get it, do you?” he sneers. “Mercer’s already won. This? This doesn’t change anything.”

Max’s grip tightens on his gun. “We’ll see about that.”

Dante’s hand moves toward his pocket, but Rosalee fires a warning shot into the air before he can draw. The sound startles him, and he freezes, his eyes darting between Max and Rosalee.

“Don’t move,” Rosalee says, her voice trembling but firm. “It’s done.”

Dante raises his hands slowly, his smirk replaced by a scowl. “You two are in way over your heads.”

Max steps forward, his gun still trained on Dante. “Maybe. But you’re going to spill everything about Mercer.”

Dante chuckles, shaking his head. “You think he’s scared of you? You’re nothing but a thorn in his side.”

“Then start talking,” Max growls, his patience wearing thin.

Before Dante can respond, the distant sound of sirens pierces the night. Max glances at Rosalee, his expression grim. “Time to go.”

They leave Dante behind, disappearing into the shadows as the police arrive. Back at Rosalee’s apartment, they collapse onto the couch, their exhaustion finally catching up with them.

“What now?” Rosalee asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Max looks at her, his eyes tired but resolute. “Maybe you should just think of this as shark week.”

“You and your shark metaphors…”

“I’m serious. We keep pushing forward or we *will* get caught with our hands in our pockets.”

Rosalee nods, her hand finding his as they sit in silence, the weight of their mission pressing down on them. Outside, the city hums with life, unaware of the battle being fought in its shadows.

# **Chapter 14: The Final Countdown**

Isabella Tramiza’s office reeks of expensive disinterest. The kind of space where deals are signed with pens that cost more than a month’s rent in Midtown, yet the people wielding them care less about the ink than the power behind it. Max sits stiffly in a leather chair, his posture military-straight. Across the desk, a staffer with the air of someone who alphabetizes their socks shakes her head, her lips pulled into a tight line.

“She gets threats before breakfast every day,” the staffer says, flipping through her tablet. Her voice is cool, detached, a tone that Max suspects has been perfected through years of deflecting frantic calls. “We have protocols for this sort of thing. It’s being handled.”

“It’s not being handled,” Max says, his voice sharp enough to cut through the staffer’s professional indifference. “This isn’t a crank call or some random internet troll. This is a credible threat from someone who knows how to execute.”

Rosalee shifts in her seat beside him, her frustration simmering just beneath the surface. “We’re not here to iste your time,” she says, leaning forward with the polished urgency of someone who knows how to command attention. “We’re trying to save her life.”

The staffer glances at Rosalee, her expression softening slightly but still unmoved. “We appreciate your concern, Ms. Turner, but unless you have concrete evidence to substantiate these claims, there’s nothing more we can do.”

Max clenches his fists, his patience wearing thin. “If you don’t take this seriously, you’ll all be out of jobs because you won’t have anyone to protect. Do you understand that?”

The staffer straightens her spine, clearly unimpressed by his intensity. “Mr. McCollum, we’ve dealt with situations like this before. Isabella has one of the most efficient security teams in the city. I can assure you, she’s in no danger.”

Max stands abruptly, the chair creaking under the force of his movement. Rosalee rises with him, her expression caught between anger and desperation. “You can’t ‘assure’ anything,” Max says, his voice cold. “And when this blows up in your face, don’t say we doesn’t warn you.”

The staffer doesn’t respond, her face an unreadable mask as Max and Rosalee leave the office. The hallway outside feels stifling, the air thick with the weight of what they couldn’t accomplish. Max pulls his phone from his pocket, his fingers hovering over the screen.

Rosalee watches him carefully. “What now?”

“We don’t have time to sit around,” Max says, dialing a number. “If her people won’t listen, we’ll figure it out ourselves.”

The call goes straight to voicemail. Max curses under his breath and stuffs the phone back into his jacket. They step out into the bustling chaos of Lower Manhattan, the city alive with its usual cocktail of noise and energy. Rosalee struggles to match his brisk pace as they weave through the crowd.

“This isn’t a needle-in-a-haystack situation, Max,” she says, her voice tight with urgency. “We just need to figure out where the hit’s going to happen.”

“Easier says than done,” Max replies. His mind churns, piecing together scraps of information like a jigsaw puzzle. “If I were Mercer, I’d pick somewhere public. High visibility. Maximum impact. We need at

Before Rosalee can respond, Max’s phone vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out, his eyes narrowing as he stares at the unknown number. Without hesitation, he answers.

“Max,” he says, his tone clipped.

“Your judgment’s still terrible, but your instincts are still sharp.” The voice on the other end is smooth, confident, and maddeningly familiar. Max stiffens, his grip on the phone tightening.

“Jeffrey.”

“Surprise,” Mercer says, his tone almost playful—almost. “I hear you’ve been busy. Making friends, breaking rules, all that good stuff.”

“What do you want?” Max growls, his voice low enough that only Rosalee can hear.

“To talk,” Mercer replies. “Face to face. Let’s call it… a negotiation.”

Max exchanges a glance with Rosalee, who raises an eyebrow but says nothing. “Where?” Max asks.

“The One World Observatory. You’ve got an hour. Don’t be late.”

The line goes dead before Max can respond. He lowers the phone, his jaw tightening as he processes the implications.

“What did he say?” Rosalee asks, her voice a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

Max looks at her, his expression hard. “Mercer wants to meet. One World Observatory. Now.”

Rosalee’s eyes widen. “That’s a trap.”

“Of course it’s a trap,” Max replies. “But it’s the only lead we’ve got.”

The elevator ride to the Observatory is a study in tension. Rosalee stands with her arms crossed, her eyes darting to Max every few seconds. He’s silent, his focus unshaken as the floors tick by on the digital display. The hum of the elevator is deafening in the absence of conversation.

When the doors slide open, they step into the breathtaking expanse of the Observatory. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the city, its lights sparkling like a sea of stars. The room is nearly empty, save for a solitary figure standing near the edge, his form enshrouded.

Mercer.

He turns as they approach, his smile as sharp and cold as a blade. “Max,” he says, spreading his arms in mock welcome. “And Rosalee. Always a pleasure.”

Max doesn’t respond, his eyes scanning the room for any sign of Mercer’s backup. Rosalee stays close to his side, her posture tense but composed.

“What do you want?” Max asks, his voice steady. “We’re a little busy.”

Mercer chuckles, a sound that feels out of place against the serene backdrop of the city. “Brass tacks. I like that.” He gestures to a nearby table, where a sleek black briefcase sits. “I’m offering you a deal. Take the money and walk away. Forget about me. Forget about any wayward politicians whose fates have been sealed.”

“Not gonna say her name?”

“Wouldn’t put it past you to be wired for sound. I’m serious, though. This isn’t your fight. Let it go.”

Max’s jaw tightens. “And if we don’t?”

Mercer’s smile doesn’t waver. “That’s not an ‘if’ you want to put into play.”

Max doesn’t move toward the briefcase. His eyes remain locked on Mercer, searching for tells, weaknesses, any sign of the inevitable trap waiting to spring. Rosalee stands beside him, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She doesn’t speak, but her presence anchors him, her silence a reminder that he’s not alone in this fight.

“You really think you can buy me off?” Max says finally, his voice low and steady. “You don’t know me as well as you think, Mercer.”

Mercer chuckles, a sound as hollow as the promises he undoubtedly makes to everyone in his orbit. “Oh, I know you, Max. I know that somewhere, buried under all that righteous indignation and misplaced heroism, there’s a man who’s tired. Tired of running, tired of fighting battles that aren’t his to fight.”

Max clenches his fists, his nails digging into his palms. “You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

“I know you’re smart enough to recognize a good deal when you see one,” Mercer counters, his tone smooth, coaxing. “This briefcase? It’s not just money. It’s freedom. No more shadows, no more enemies. You and Rosalee can walk away, disappear, and live out the rest of your lives in peace on some Greek island. My treat.”

Rosalee steps forward, her eyes blazing. “You think you can just throw money at us and make this all go away?”

Mercer shrugs, his nonchalance infuriating. “Everyone’s got a price, Ms. Turner. Some people just take a bit longer to find theirs—hopefully, not *too* long.”

“Threaten her again and I will pull your card, Jeffrey. Right here, right now.”

“Glad to see chivalry isn’t dead.”

Max takes a step closer, expression cold as ice. “What’s *your* price, Mercer? What made you sell out everything you ever stood for? I know you doesn’t join the Navy with plans to flame out and become a merc for hire.”

The smile finally falters, just for a second, but it’s enough to confirm what Max already knows—Mercer’s not invincible. “I’m not the topic of this discussion,” Mercer says, regaining his composure. “I’m here to give you a choice. Take the deal or face the consequences. It’s that simple. What do they say on *Narcos*? *‘Plato o ploma*,’ right?”

“And who are those fine citizens?” Max asks, voice sharp. “Another army of goons? A sniper waiting in the wings? Come on, Mercer, give me your best shot.”

Mercer’s smile twists into something darker, more dangerous. “You actually think you’re untouchable because you’ve survived a few days. Amazing. Let me remind you, Max, that the people I work with don’t leave loose ends. You walk out of here without that briefcase, and you won’t have to worry about saving anyone. You’ll be too busy trying to save yourselves.”

The weight of his words hangs in the air like a storm cloud, and for a moment, Max feels the familiar pull of doubt. But then he glances at Rosalee, at the determination in her eyes, and the doubt dissipates like smoke.

“You’ve made one mistake, Mercer,” Max says, his voice calm, measured. “You think fear and hate are true weapons. But hate has a way of backfiring like a jammed gun.”

Mercer’s smile doesn’t waver, but his eyes narrow, a flicker of frustration breaking through his polished facade. “It’s a free country,” he says, stepping back. “But don’t say I doesn’t warn you.”

The footsteps echo in the Observatory, and Max and Rosalee turn to see a group of men approaching from the elevator. They’re dressed in dark suits, their expressions hard and unyielding. Mercer gestures toward them with a casual wave. “Meet my associates. They’re here to ensure you make the right decision.”

Max’s hand moves instinctively to his holster, but he stops short, realizing the odds are stacked against them. Rosalee tenses beside him, her breath quickening, but she doesn’t panic. Instead, she steps closer to Max, her voice low and urgent. “Tell me there’s a plan.”

“There’s a plan.”

“What is it?”

“We wait.”

“*That* is the plan?!”

Max doesn’t answer right away. His mind races, calculating exits, angles, possibilities. Finally, he leans toward her, his voice barely audible. “We stall. Wait for an opening.”

Mercer watches them with a knowing smile, his confidence growing with each passing second. “I’ll give you one last chance,” he says, his tone almost bored. “Take the deal, and this all goes away. You could put your little slice of Hell on the market and move wherever you want.”

Max straightens, his expression unreadable. “You really think you can scare me into submission, don’t you? You’ve forgotten who you’re dealing with.”

Mercer’s smile fades, replaced by a flicker of irritation. “You’re not in control here, Max.”

“Maybe not,” Max admits, his voice calm. “But neither are you. Not really.”

Before Mercer can respond, Max moves. It’s a calculated risk, a gamble born of desperation, but it’s enough to throw the men off balance.

He lunges toward the nearest one, his movements quick and precise, disarming him before he can react. Rosalee follows his lead, grabbing a metal stool and swinging it with surprising force, sending another man sprawling.

The room erupts into chaos, shouts and scuffling echoing off the glass walls. Max and Rosalee fight with everything they have, their movements a symphony of survival. Mercer watches from the sidelines, his expression unreadable, until finally, he gestures to the remaining men. “Enough.”

The command halts the fight as quickly as it started, and Max and Rosalee find themselves surrounded once again. Max’s breath comes in sharp bursts, his body taut and his breaths raspy, but he doesn’t lower his guard.

Mercer steps forward, his expression cold. “You’ve made your choice,” he says, his voice like ice. “I hope you’re ready to live with the consequences.”

Max meets his gaze, unflinching. “I could say the same to you. Actually, I just did.”

# **Chapter 15: Revelations and Reflection**

The chill of the New York evening wraps around Max and Rosalee as they step out of the Observatory, Mercer’s parting words lingering like a bad aftertaste. The city sprawls beneath them, lights shimmering in an indifferent dance against the night sky. A taxi screeches by, a vendor hawks hot dogs, and somewhere in the distance, a saxophone wails—a symphony of distractions for a pair trying to process the magnitude of what just happened.

Max walks a few paces ahead, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets. His strides are purposeful but tense, like a man marching toward a war he doesn’t yet know how to fight. Rosalee trails behind, the staccato rhythm of her heels cutting through the din. She watches him carefully, searching for a crack in the armor he always wears so well.

“Say something,” she finally says, her voice cutting through the tension between them. “Anything.”

Max stops abruptly and turns to face her. “We’re not taking his deal.”

It’s not a question nor a suggestion. It’s a declaration, his voice steely with resolve. But Rosalee doesn’t answer right away. She crosses her arms, her breath visible in the cold night air, and tilts her head. “Max, I don’t think we planned on taking it. But… he isn’t bluffing. If we don’t outsmart him, we’re dead.”

Max exhales sharply, his breath misting in the air. “We’ve been dead to rights before, Rosalee. It’s just how long you can hold your breath.”

She shakes her head, her frustration evident. “This isn’t just about us anymore. If we screw this up, people will die—people like Isabella and maybe others we don’t even know about. Mercer isn’t some petty con artist. He’s connected, Max. To the art world, to politics, to—” She gestures wildly, her words failing her momentarily. “To everything.”

“I know,” Max says, his voice softer now. He steps closer, his tone losing some of its usual edge. “And that’s why we can’t back down. He’s counting on us to take the easy way out. That’s his leverage. But he doesn’t understand us, Rosalee. Not really.”

“And what if he’s right?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if we can’t win this?”

Max stares at her, the city lights reflecting in his eyes. “Then we make sure he doesn’t win either.”

The words hang between them, heavy and unyielding, until a car horn jolts them back to the present. Max starts walking again, and this time, Rosalee falls into step beside him. Their silence is no longer strained but companionable, like two soldiers walking toward a battlefield they don’t expect to leave.

Back at Rosalee’s loft, the room feels smaller than it did the night before, the walls closing in under the weight of the secrets they’ve uncovered. The watercolor painting still sits on the table, its cryptic symbols now fully decoded but no less ominous.

Max paces the room, his mind racing as he reviews the pieces of the puzzle they’ve assembled. “Mercer’s ties to the art world aren’t just a front,” he says finally, breaking the silence. “They’re a foundation. He’s using it to launder money, move assets, and control narratives. Everything he does ties back to it.”

Rosalee sits on the couch, a glass of wine in her hand. She swirls the liquid absently, her thoughts clearly elsewhere. “It’s not just about money,” she says after a moment. “Art isn’t just a commodity to people like Mercer. It’s power. Influence. It’s a way to shape how the world sees things.”

Max nods, his eyes narrowing as he processes her words. “And he’s been shaping it for years. That’s why he’s untouchable. His crimes are so deeply woven into the fabric of the system that pulling one thread could unravel everything.”

Rosalee sets her glass down and leans forward, her elbows resting on her knees. “But it’s not just his system, Max. It’s ours too. The galleries, the collectors, the critics—they’re all part of it. Even me.” She looks up at him, her expression pained. “My gallery’s name is on some of those paintings, Max. What if I’ve been helping him all along and doesn’t even know it?”

“You doesn’t know,” Max says firmly, his voice leaving no room for argument. “And now that you do, you’re fighting back. That’s the only thing that matters.”

She nods, but her expression remains troubled. “It just makes me wonder how much of what we’ve built—our careers, our reputations—is real. And how much of it is just another part of his game.”

Max stops pacing and looks at her, his gaze steady and unflinching. “Rosalee, if there’s one thing I’ve learned in all of this, it’s that the truth isn’t something you stumble onto. It’s something you make.”

The words seem to steady her, and she takes a deep breath. “So, what do we do next?” she asks.

“We hit him where it hurts,” Max replies. “We expose his network, piece by piece. If we can prove his ties to the art world, we force him into the open.”

“And how do we do that without getting ourselves killed?” Rosalee asks, her tone equal parts skepticism and hope.

Max’s lips curl into a faint smile. “With a little artistry.”

The rest of the night is spent poring over documents, making calls, and piecing together the fragments of Mercer’s empire. Max works methodically, his military training evident in every calculated move. Rosalee matches his focus, her knowledge of the art world filling in gaps he doesn’t even know existed.

By the time the first light of dawn filters through the windows, they have a plan. It’s risky, it’s convoluted, and it’s far from foolproof. But it’s a plan.

Max leans back in his chair, exhaustion evident on his face but determination burning in his eyes. “We start with the collectors,” he says. “They’re the ones with the most to lose if this all comes crashing down. If we can get one of them to talk, we can unravel the whole operation.”

Rosalee nods, her own exhaustion tempered by a spark of hope. “And if they won’t talk?”

“Then we make them,” Max says simply.

The sun rises higher, casting the room in a warm, golden glow. For the first time in days, the weight pressing down on them feels a little lighter. They’re still outnumbered, still outgunned, but they’re armed with something more potent than power or money.

They have the truth on their side.

The next phase of their plan takes Max and Rosalee deep into the labyrinthine web of New York’s art elite. By mid-morning, they’re seated in a café on Madison Avenue, surrounded by the soft murmur of high-society chatter. Rosalee’s contacts in the art world have proven useful, giving them a foothold in their hunt for Mercer’s enablers.

Their first target is Anton Cheval, a collector with an appetite for anything controversial and an ego large enough to make it public. Rosalee taps her manicured nails against the table as she reviews Anton’s latest acquisition on her phone—a series of sculptures tied to a shell company Mercer controls. “Anton’s the type who loves to brag about his deals,” she says, her voice sharp and deliberate. “If anyone knows where Mercer’s skeletons are buried, it’s him.”

Max sips his black coffee, his eyes scanning the café’s entrance. “And he just happens to have a weakness for beautiful women,” he replies, his tone wry. “Shouldn’t be hard for you to pry some answers out of him.”

Rosalee gives him a pointed look. “I’m not a show pony, Max.”

“You’re not,” Max agrees, setting his cup down. “But you’re smart, persuasive, and you know how to handle people like Anton.”

“Flattery will get you…well, maybe *somewhere*.”

“He won’t see you coming. That’s what makes you dangerous.”

The compliment catches her off guard, and for a moment, her irritation softens. “Fine,” she says, standing and smoothing her coat. “But don’t think I’m doing this alone. You’re coming with me.”

Max’s lips twitch into the faintest hint of a smile. “Wouldn’t dream of leaving you to deal with him solo.”

Anton’s penthouse is as ostentatious as its owner, an over-the-top display of wealth and questionable taste. The walls are lined with art that screams for attention—abstracts in garish colors, sculptures in impossible shapes, and a towering installation of neon tubing that hums faintly.

Anton greets them in a silk robe, his arms outstretches like he’s welcoming old friends. “Rosalee Turner!” he exclaims, his voice dripping with faux charm. “And who’s this rugged gentleman you’ve brought with you?”

“Max McCollum,” Max says, his tone even as he shakes Anton’s hand. “A pleasure.”

Anton’s eyes linger on Max for a beat too long before he turns back to Rosalee. “What brings you to my not-so-humble abode?”

“We were hoping to get your insight on something,” Rosalee says smoothly, gesturing toward the impressive art collection around them. “You’ve always had such a keen eye for…unique pieces.”

Anton’s chest puffs with pride, and he leads them toward a seating area near a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the city. “What can I say? I have a gift for spotting the extraordinary. What exactly are you looking for?”

Rosalee leans forward, her tone conspiratorial. “There’s been talk of a series of paintings—rare works with hidden layers. I thought of you immediately.”

Anton’s expression shifts slightly, his practiced nonchalance slipping for just a moment. “Hidden layers, you say? Are you sure you weren’t watching a spy movie on Ambien?”

“I’m positive. Rumor has it that these pieces are tied to someone…influential,” Rosalee continues, her voice careful but probing. “Someone with connections beyond the art world.”

Anton’s smile tightens, and he sips his champagne, clearly weighing his response. Max watches him closely, his instincts screaming that Anton knows more than he’s letting on.

“Such rumors are dangerous, my dear. And I *so* hate getting involved in other people’s messes.”

“But you love being ahead of the curve,” Rosalee counters, her smile sharp. “Imagine being the one to unveil the truth behind these pieces. You’d be the talk of the art world.”

Anton’s eyes gleam with interest, but he hesitates, his hand tapping a restless rhythm on the arm of his chair. “Unveiling the truth often comes at a cost. And I’m not sure I’m willing to pay it.”

Max decides to step in, his tone low and firm. “Sometimes not paying that cost comes at an even higher price.”

Anton glances at Max, clearly unnerved by his presence. “And what exactly do you mean by that, Mr. McCollum?”

“I mean, Mercer doesn’t leave loose ends,” Max says, leaning forward. “If you know something about his operation, you’re already a liability, which means I’m effectively talking to a corpse. Helping us might be the only way to keep yourself…well, alive.”

Anton’s face pales slightly, but he quickly masks his unease with a nervous laugh. “You’re quite dramatic, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but that isn’t one of them,” Max replies.

The tension hangs heavy in the room, and for a moment, it seems Anton will hold his ground. But then he sighs, his shoulders sagging in defeat. “Fine. I’ll tell you what I know—but only because I don’t want Mercer’s shadow looming over me any longer.”

Rosalee gives him an encouraging smile. “That’s all we need, Anton. Just the truth.”

Anton hesitates, then gestures toward a painting on the far wall. It’s an abstract piece, chaotic swirls of color that seem to pulse with hidden meaning. “That’s one of them,” he says quietly. “Mercer’s using these pieces to move information—coded messages, financial transactions, even orders for his…less-than-legal operations.”

Rosalee rises to examine the painting, her keen eye picking out faint inconsistencies in the brushstrokes. “And how many more of these are out there?”

“Dozens,” Anton admits, his voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe more. They’re scattered across private collections, galleries, and museums. Mercer’s network is insanely big, both in scope and price; these pieces are his lifeline.”

Max nods, his mind already racing with possibilities. “We need a list of every collector, gallery, and museum that has one of these pieces.”

Anton blinks, his face a mask of incredulity. “You’re quite the loony tune. Do you not get how powerful these people are? They’ll crush you before you can even make your case.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not afraid of powerful people,” Max says, his tone unyielding.

Anton looks between Max and Rosalee, his skepticism slowly giving way to reluctant admiration. “You’re either incredibly brave…or incredibly stupid,” he says finally. “Guess we’ll find out. I’ll help you. But don’t say I doesn’t warn you.”

Rosalee places a reassuring hand on Anton’s arm. “Thank you, Anton. You’re doing the right thing.”

As they leave the penthouse, the weight of what they’ve uncovered settles over them like a heavy cloak. Mercer’s empire is larger and more insidious than they’d imagined, but they have a clear path forward. It’s just a matter of staying the path and surviving along the way.

# **Chapter 16: The Unraveling**

The Brooklyn Museum looms ahead, its neoclassical facade illuminated by spotlights against the inky New York night. To most, it’s a temple of culture, a monument to humanity’s artistic achievements. To Max and Rosalee, it’s a battleground where truth and deception blur into a dangerous cocktail Mercer has been serving for years.

Max pulls the museum’s heavy doors open, stepping into the grand lobby with Rosalee close behind. The air inside is cooler and quieter, the faint hum of security monitors blending with the soft echo of their footsteps. A massive banner hangs overhead, advertising the latest exhibit: *Eternal Threads: Artifacts and Legacies.*

“So, what, you think we’re going to find the keys to Mercer’s kingdom buried in here somewhere?” Rosalee murmurs, her voice low but sharp.

“Sure do,” Max replies, his eyes scanning the room. “But they won’t be buried.”

They walk toward the information desk, where a tired-looking attendant barely glances up from her screen. Rosalee smiles, leaning on the counter with the practiced ease of someone used to navigating both charm and authority. “We’re here for a private consultation,” she says smoothly, sliding a forged visitor pass across the counter. “The director’s expecting us.”

The attendant glances at the pass, then at Rosalee. Her disinterest melts into recognition. “Oh, Rosalee Turner,” she says, her tone brightening. “I loved your gallery’s exhibit last year. That Icelandic fellow with the sculptures? It is positively stunning.”

Rosalee’s smile doesn’t waver. “That’s so nice of you to say. But tonight, I’m just a humble visitor.” She nods toward Max. “My colleague and I won’t take up much of your time.”

The attendant waves them through, her face glowing with admiration. Max leans toward Rosalee as they head deeper into the museum. “Humble visitor? Smooth.”

“Learned from the best.”

The maze of galleries and exhibition rooms feels endless, but Max isn’t looking at the art. His eyes are fixed on the small details—the cameras mounted discreetly in corners, the carefully locked cases, the guards stationed at key points. Mercer’s fingerprints are everywhere, even if no one else can see them.

“It’s brilliant, really,” Rosalee says as they pass a series of ancient sculptures. “Using a place like this as a front. The museum’s reputation shields him, just by reputation, and the sheer volume of pieces makes it easy to hide the forgeries.”

Max nods. “And it’s not just the forgeries. It’s the money. Every piece he moves through here is a cog in the machine—laundering funds, buying influence, keeping his empire running.”

They stop before a massive world map, its surface dotted with pins marking archaeological digs and artifact origins. Rosalee stares at it, her eyes narrowing as realization dawns. “These aren’t just artifacts. They’re connections. Every pin on this map is a thread in his web.”

Max steps closer, tracing a finger along the paths connecting the pins. “And the web? It’s global. This isn’t some local operation. It’s international—art dealers, collectors, private firms. Hell, some of these names are probably government.”

Rosalee crosses her arms, a flicker of unease crossing her face. “This is bigger than we thought.”

“It usually is,” Max says grimly.

They continue through the galleries, their movements careful but deliberate. In the distance, a security guard rounds a corner, his flashlight beam slicing through the darkness. Max signals for Rosalee to follow him into a side room, where they duck behind a display case. The guard passes without noticing them, his footsteps fading into silence.

“That’s the third guard we’ve seen,” Rosalee whispers. “This place is Fort Knox.”

“He knows we’re closing in.”

Their path eventually leads them to a restricted museum section, its door marked with a simple *Authorized Personnel Only* sign. Max pulls his small lock-picking kit from that inside jacket pocket, and within moments, the lock clicks open, and they slip inside.

The room is dimly lit, its shelves lined with crates and documents. Max flicks on a small flashlight, its beam cutting through the shadows. Rosalee joins him, her eyes scanning the shelves with practiced precision.

“This is it,” she says, pulling a folder from one of the shelves. “Financial records, shipping manifests…he’s being literal if he says he’s keeping receipts.”

Max joins her, flipping through the folder’s contents. The names and figures jump off the page, a dizzying array of transactions and connections. But one name catches his attention, its significance immediately apparent.

“EdRex,” he mutters. “It’s all over these documents.”

Rosalee frowns. “The private security firm?”

“One of the biggest in the world,” Max says, his voice tinged with suspicion. “They’ve got contracts with governments, corporations, you name it. But why the hell would they be backing Mercer?”

“Money?” Rosalee suggests. “Power?”

“Nah. They’ve already got more than enough of both. Whatever their angle is, it’s not just about profit.”

He continues scanning the documents, piecing together the scope of Mercer’s empire. The financial networks, the smuggling routes, the forged artifacts—it’s a tapestry of crime, woven with threads of greed and ambition. But EdRex’s involvement raises more questions than answers.

“This changes everything,” Max says, his voice low. “If EdRex is backing him, he’s got more resources than we imagined. This isn’t just about taking down Mercer. We’re up against a three-comma machine.”

“Three-comma machine?”

“A multi-billion dollar, multinational company.”

Rosalee sets the folder down, her expression unreadable. “Max…”

Max looks at her, his jaw tightening with resolve. “Don’t even say it. Because what I told Anton applies to us, too. We can’t stop now without becoming loose ends. No, we’re gonna find out how and why EdRex is involved and use it to bring him down. They have a board and shareholders; hell, they’re in the Fortune 100. He can’t make making them enough money that they’d have his back if push comes to shove.”

The determination in his voice steadies her, and she nods. Together, they gather as much evidence as possible, their movements swift but methodical. The pieces are falling into place, but the picture they’re forming is more dangerous than they’d ever imagined.

As they slip out of the restricted room and back into the labyrinth of galleries, Max’s mind races. Mercer’s empire isn’t just built on lies and deception—it’s fortified by power and influence, with EdRex as its shield. Taking it down won’t just be a fight.

It’ll be a war.

Max and Rosalee exit the restricted room and melt into the Brooklyn Museum’s vast galleries, their footsteps soundless against the polished floors. The weight of what they’ve uncovered presses down on them, heavy as the knowledge they’re up against more than just Mercer. EdRex isn’t a name you stumble across lightly; it’s a name whispered in high-stakes rooms where fortunes and lives are decided.

Rosalee keeps her voice low as they weave through the exhibits. “If EdRex is in bed with Mercer, it explains how he’s been able to operate on this scale without raising alarms. They’re more than just hired muscle—they’re facilitators, and they’ve got a cloak of legitimacy wrapped around them that no one would think to question.”

Max scans the room ahead, his sharp eyes picking out the subtle movements of another security guard making his rounds. He pulls Rosalee into an alcove, pressing close to the wall as the guard passes. “Facilitators with deep pockets and global reach,” he says. “The kind of partner who ensures Mercer’s loose ends stay tied.”

Rosalee’s gaze flickers toward him, her unease evident. “And if they’ve been backing him this whole time, they’ll come after us just as hard.”

“Let them,” Max replies, his voice cold. “They’ll learn the hard way that we don’t scare easy.”

“He was right. You’re either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid.”

“Heard that one before.”

They wait a few moments longer before slipping out of the alcove and heading toward the exit. The museum is quieter now, the hum of the HVAC system their only companion. The further they move from the restricted section, the more Max’s thoughts churn.

“They’re not just protecting Mercer,” Max says, his voice low but charged. “They’re protecting their investment. Whatever Mercer’s doing, it’s tied to something bigger.”

Rosalee’s brow furrows, her mind working through the implications. “You think EdRex is using Mercer as a front? A way to keep their hands clean while they expand their influence?”

Max tilts his head. “It’s possible. But even if he’s just a pawn in their game, he’s a dangerous one. And taking him out won’t be enough. We have to dismantle the whole operation.”

Back at Rosalee’s loft, the atmosphere is thick with tension. Max sits at the dining table, the filched documents spread out like a battlefield map. Rosalee stands by the window, staring out at the city lights, her arms wrapped around herself as if trying to ward off the chill of what they’ve uncovered.

“EdRex has contracts with governments and corporations,” Max says, flipping through the pages. “They provide security, logistics, even intelligence. But these documents show something else—unauthorized shipments, offshore accounts, deals that don’t add up.”

Rosalee turns to face him. “They’re using the art world to launder money. Hiding their dirty deals behind Mercer’s network of forgeries and stolen artifacts.”

Max nods. “It’s a perfect cover. The art world is full of cash deals, anonymous buyers, inflated valuations. No one questions it because it’s all part of the game.”

Rosalee moves to the table, her fingers trailing over the edges of the papers. “But why go to this extent? What’s the endgame?”

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Max says. “If we can tie EdRex directly to Mercer’s crimes, we can blow this whole thing wide open.”

“And paint a target on our backs the size of Montana,” Rosalee adds, her voice tinged with resignation.

Max looks at her, his expression softening. “We’ve been targets since the moment we stepped into this mess. But now we have a chance to hit back.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she nods. “So where do we start?”

The answer comes in the form of a name buried in the documents: Victor Lang, EdRex’s CFO. According to the records, Lang has been funneling funds through Mercer’s operation, using the museums as hubs for their transactions. Max studies the information carefully, his mind working through the angles.

“Lang’s the key,” Max says, tapping the name with his finger. “If we can connect him to the forgeries and the money laundering, we can unravel the whole operation.”

Rosalee boots up her laptop, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she searches for more information on Lang. “He’s based in New York,” she says after a moment. “EdRex has an office in Midtown. He won’t be hard to find.”

Max leans back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he considers their next move. “Finding him is one thing. Getting to him is another. We need to get him alone and get him talking. If we rattle him enough to think the operation’s falling apart, he might let something slip.”

Rosalee glances at him, her expression skeptical. “And how exactly do we do that? Lang’s not some small-timer we can corner in an alley.”

“That’s why we go for his weak spot,” Max replies. “His reputation. People like Lang fear public disgrace more than getting caught. If we make him believe his name is about to be smeared, he’ll crack.”

Rosalee nods slowly, her mind turning over the possibilities. “We’ll need leverage. Something concrete to use against him.”

Max gestures to the documents. “It’s all here. The financial records, the shipping manifests—they’re enough to make him sweat. We just need to package it the right way.”

The plan takes shape over the next few hours, their focus sharp despite the exhaustion gnawing at their edges. Max drafts an anonymous message to Lang, using the information from the documents to craft a believable threat. Meanwhile, Rosalee works on tracing the shipments tied to EdRex, looking for any discrepancies they can exploit.

As the first light of dawn creeps through the windows, Max leans back in his chair, his eyes heavy but determined. “It’s a long shot,” he admits. “But it’s our best chance.”

Rosalee sets her laptop aside, her gaze meeting his. “If Lang takes the bait, we’ll finally have a crack in their armor.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Max asks, his tone even but edged with unspoken concern.

“Then we improvise,” Rosalee says with a faint smile. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Max allows himself a small chuckle, the sound rare and fleeting. “You’re not half bad at this, Turner.”

“Neither are you, McCollum,” she replies, her voice light but tinged with warmth.

As the city begins to wake around them, they share a moment of quiet resolve. The road ahead is uncertain, fraught with danger and the weight of what they’ve uncovered. But for now, they have a plan, a direction. And sometimes, that’s enough.

# **Chapter 17: Race Against Time**

The glow of Max’s phone screen is the only light in the room as it buzzes to life on the table. The number is blocked, and though Max hesitates for a fraction of a second, he knows he has to answer. He presses the green icon and brings the phone to his ear.

“Speak,” he says.

The pause on the other end is long enough to make Rosalee glance up from the documents spread across the table. Her questioning eyes meet Max’s as a distorted voice finally comes through.

“Yankee Stadium. Suite 15-C. One hour.”

The call ends abruptly, leaving a hollow silence in its wake. Max lowers the phone, his jaw tightening as he processes the implications. Rosalee doesn’t wait for him to explain.

“Let me guess,” she says, her tone dry but edged with worry. “Another trap?”

Max nods, grabbing his jacket from the back of the chair. “Look who’s catching up!”

Rosalee rolls her eyes as she rises, crossing the room to block his path. “You’re not seriously thinking of walking into this blind, are you?”

“Nope,” Max replies. “I’m running into it headfirst.”

Rosalee groans, rubbing her temples in frustration. “You know, one of these days, your bravado is going to get you killed.”

“Probably. But not today. Come on. We’ll take an Uber.”

The car ride through the Bronx is a blur of neon signs and headlights, the city’s energy buzzing even in the late hour. Max sits with his arms crossed, staring out the window as the car weaves through traffic. Beside him, Rosalee fidgets with her phone, her unease palpable.

“You know,” she says after a moment, breaking the silence, “this whole ‘answer the anonymous call and rush to the rendezvous point’ thing feels a little too predictable.”

Max doesn’t turn away from the window, but his voice is sharp when he replies. “It’s not about predictability. It’s about control. If someone wants us there, they’ve got something to lose.”

“Or,” Rosalee counters, “they’re confident they can trap us.”

Max finally looks at her, his expression unreadable. “That’s what we’re betting on.”

The car pulls up near Yankee Stadium, its glowing marquee casting long shadows on the street below. Max and Rosalee step out, the chill of the night air biting at their skin. The driver doesn’t stick around, merging back into the flow of traffic as quickly as he arrived.

The stadium is mostly dark, its grand entrances closed for the night. Max leads Rosalee toward a side gate, where a security guard waits. He doesn’t say a word, simply gesturing for them to follow him through the empty concourse.

“It’s too quiet. I hate this.”

“Then stay close,” Max replies.

The guard stops before a door marked 15-C, swipes a keycard, and steps aside. Max pushes the door open, and they step into a luxurious corporate suite overlooking the stadium’s darkened field. Leather chairs, a fully stocked bar, and an enormous television make the room feel more like a penthouse than part of a ballpark.

But they aren’t alone.

A man stands by the window, silhouetted against the faint glow of the field lights. His tailored suit and perfectly polished shoes scream money, but his posture is casual, almost disarmingly so. He turns as they enter, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Max McCollum,” the man says, his voice smooth and confident. “And the lovely Rosalee Turner. A pleasure to finally meet you both.”

“Who are you?”

“Call me Simon,” the man says, spreading his arms in a mock gesture of welcome. “I’m here on behalf of Mr. Mercer.”

At the mention of Mercer’s name, Rosalee’s jaw tightens. “Let me guess: we’re playing *Simon Says*? Tell Mercer if he wants to talk, he can come talk.”

“Trust me,” Simon says, his smirk widening. “You’d prefer me to him. I’m here to make you an offer.”

Max crosses his arms, his stance unyielding. “We’re not interested.”

“You haven’t even heard it yet,” Simon says, feigning disappointment. He steps toward the bar, pouring himself a glass of whiskey. “Mr. Mercer is a practical man. He understands that everyone has their price, and maybe he underestimated yours.”

“Then he doesn’t know us very well,” Rosalee snaps.

Simon chuckles, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. “That’s what makes this so interesting. You see, Mercer doesn’t want to eliminate you—he wants to recruit you. Imagine it: every piece in your gallery bought at top dollar. No strings, no questions. Call it passive income.”

Max exchanges a glance with Rosalee, whose eyes burn with anger, then turns back to Simon. “You are living in a dream world if you still think we can be bought.”

“Everyone can be bought,” Simon replies, his confidence unshaken. “It’s just a matter of finding the right currency.”

Rosalee steps forward, her voice sharp. “Our gallery isn’t a business to be sold to the highest bidder. It’s a testament to—”

Simon raises a hand, cutting her off. “Spare me the art school nonsense, Ms. Turner. The art world is just as corrupt as the rest of us. The only difference is, we admit it.”

Before Rosalee can respond, Max steps between them, his gaze locked on Simon. “We’re not taking your deal or any deal, and you can take that to the bank.”

Simon’s smirk fades, replaced by a flicker of irritation. “Then you’re making a mistake.”

“If we were, you wouldn’t tell us,” Max says, calm but firm.

The tension in the room snaps. Simon reaches for something in his pocket, but Max is faster, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him against the wall. The glass of whiskey shatters on the floor, its contents pooling around their feet.

“Who’s pulling the strings?” Max growls, his voice low and dangerous. “Why is Mercer so desperate to keep us quiet?”

Simon’s confident facade cracks, his eyes darting toward the door. “You’re in so far over your head, you are going to drown.”

“Then start talking before I take you with me,” Max hisses, tightening his grip.

A sudden sound—footsteps, fast and heavy—echoes from the hallway. Max shoves Simon aside, spinning toward the door as it bursts open. A group of men in dark suits storms in, their faces cold and determined.

“Run,” Max orders Rosalee, his voice cutting through the chaos.

“But Max—”

“Now!” he barks, already moving toward the—

Max charges toward the first man through the door, using the momentum of his own body to slam the attacker into the nearest wall. The force rattles a framed photo of a Yankees legend, but Max doesn’t stop to admire his handiwork. He twists the man’s arm, forcing the gun from his grip, and shoves him into another attacker.

“Rosalee!” he shouts, not daring to look back. He hears her footsteps retreating, the rapid tap of her heels on the suite’s polished floor, but the men in suits aren’t all focused on him. One splits off, heading in her direction.

Max doesn’t think. He moves.

Ducking a wild punch from one of the remaining goons, Max grabs a metal serving tray from the bar and hurls it like a frisbee. It hits the man chasing Rosalee square in the back of the head, sending him stumbling. It buys her a few precious seconds, but Max knows it won’t be enough.

“Get to the stairs!” he yells, his voice hoarse with exertion. “Don’t stop!”

Rosalee doesn’t argue, her figure disappearing down the hallway. Max pivots back to his immediate threats, barely dodging another swing. He plants his shoulder into the nearest man’s gut, sending him sprawling to the ground, then spins to deliver a solid uppercut to the next attacker’s jaw.

The fight doesn’t last much longer. Max isn’t interested in sticking around for a fair fight—not with Rosalee’s life hanging in the balance. He snatches up the gun dropped by one of the fallen men and bolts after her, his breath ragged as he navigates the labyrinthine halls of Yankee Stadium.

He finds Rosalee near the lower concourse, her back pressed against the wall as she tries to catch her breath. Relief flashes in her eyes when she sees him, but it’s short-lived. The echo of pursuing footsteps reverberates through the stadium, closer now, angrier.

“What took you so long?” she asks, her voice shaky but sharp.

“Traffic was murder,” Max deadpans, pulling her by the arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

They dart through the empty halls, the faint glow of emergency lighting casting eerie shadows around them. Behind them, the pounding footsteps grow louder. Max knows they’re running out of time—and options.

The sound of a nearby door creaking open catches his attention. He veers toward it, pulling Rosalee through before slamming it shut behind them. They find themselves in the stands, the empty stadium stretching out before them like a massive concrete canyon. The stillness is deafening, but it’s shattered by the shouts of their pursuers.

“We can’t outrun them. Not here.”

Max’s mind races, his eyes scanning the stadium for an exit—or a trap they can set. He spots a stairwell leading down to the field and gestures toward it. “This way.”

They take the stairs two at a time, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. But just as they reach the bottom, Max’s foot catches on the edge of a stair, sending him tumbling forward. He crashes into the wall at the base of the steps with a bone-jarring thud, the impact knocking the wind out of him.

“Max!” Rosalee cries, rushing to his side.

“I’m fine,” he gasps, pushing himself upright. But as he moves, something small and metallic clatters to the ground. Max freezes, staring at the object now lying in the dirt at his feet.

It’s a microchip.

“What the hell…” Max mutters, picking it up. The chip is no bigger than a fingernail, its surface gleaming faintly in the dim light. Recognition dawns on his face, follows quickly by a cold, hard fury.

“Howie,” he says, his voice like ice.

Rosalee’s brow furrows. “What are you talking about?”

Max’s grip tightens around the chip. “It is in my shoe. Someone must have planted it. That’s how they’ve been tracking us.”

Rosalee’s eyes widen, horror and betrayal flickering across her face. “But why would—”

“I don’t know,” Max snaps, cutting her off. He rises to his feet, his movements stiff but purposeful. “But I’m going to find out.”

Their moment of reprieve is short-lived. The sound of their pursuers draws closer, the clatter of boots against concrete echoing through the stadium. Max tucks the chip into his pocket and grabs Rosalee’s hand.

“Let’s move.”

The chase resumes, but this time, Max is thinking three steps ahead. He leads Rosalee onto the field, weaving between the dugouts and outfield seating. The vast openness of the stadium works against them, leaving them exposed, but it also provides opportunities. Max grabs a stray baseball from the dugout and hurls it at a nearby light fixture. The resulting crash plunges part of the field into darkness, creating a moment of confusion for their pursuers.

“Nice throw,” Rosalee mutters, her breath coming in short gasps.

“Thanks,” Max replies, steering her toward the far exit. “Let’s hope it bought us enough time.”

They reach the service tunnel leading out of the stadium, its dimly lit corridor promising a potential escape. But as they round the final corner, they come face to face with Simon. His suit is rumpled now, his face bruised, but his smirk remains intact.

“Going somewhere?” he taunts, blocking their path.

Max doesn’t hesitate. He lunges at Simon, the two colliding in a flurry of fists and elbows. Rosalee steps back, her eyes darting between them and the approaching footsteps of Simon’s reinforcements.

“Max!” she shouts, her voice urgent.

“I’ve got this!” Max growls, shoving Simon into the wall with a grunt. “Get out of here!”

Rosalee hesitates for only a moment before turning and sprinting toward the exit. Max watches her go, his resolve hardening. He turns back to Simon, his fists clenched, ready to finish what they started.

“Let’s see how much you can smirk after this,” Max says, his voice low and dangerous.

Simon doesn’t reply. He just charges, and the fight begins anew.

It ends when Max turns his own Strider knife on him and stabs him through the ear.

Another battle won in a war that seems interminable.

# **Chapter 18: The Art of War**

The Lower East Side’s chaos hits Max and Rosalee like a wall. Even at this hour, the streets pulse with life—neon signs flicker, voices rise and fall in rapid bursts, and the smell of roasted nuts and gasoline mingles in the air. Rosalee wraps her coat tighter against the brisk wind, but Max strides forward, his sharp gaze scanning the crowd for anything out of place.

“We’re sitting ducks out here,” Rosalee mutters, keeping close to him.

“We’ve been sitting ducks since this started,” Max replies, his tone clipped. “But now that you’ve noticed? Keep your head up.”

They push through a crowd gathered outside a corner bodega, its fluorescent light casting a sickly glow over the sidewalk. As they pass, a figure steps into their path—a casual, almost careless movement that brings them both to a halt.

“Ty,” Max says, his voice dropping into a growl.

Ty raises his hands in mock surrender, with a lazy grin. “Easy, McCollum. I come in peace.”

Max’s jaw tightens, but Rosalee speaks before he can. “What do you want?”

“To help,” Ty says simply, his expression unreadable. “There’s a lot of chatter about you two, and not the good kind. You’re running out of time.”

Max narrows his eyes. “Why do I feel like you’re about to point us into another trap?”

Ty chuckles, a low, gravelly sound. “If I wanted to trap you, you’d already be caught. Look, you want answers, right? The Frick Collection. You’ll find what you’re looking for there.”

Rosalee’s skepticism is evident. “And what exactly are we supposed to find?”

Ty shrugs, stepping back into the crowd. “That’s for you to figure out. Just don’t take too long. The clock’s ticking.” He melts into the chaos of the street before they can press him further, leaving Max and Rosalee standing in uneasy silence.

Rosalee finally breaks it. “Do we trust him?”

“No,” Max says, already turning in the direction of the Frick. “But we don’t have a choice.”

The Frick Collection looms before them, its stately facade a stark contrast to the frantic energy of the city around it. The historic building radiates an eerie calm, its windows darkened, its imposing doors locked tight.

“This is it?” Rosalee asks, her breath visible in the cold night air.

“This is it,” Max confirms, producing the small lock-picking kit from his jacket. “Keep watch.”

Rosalee crosses her arms, glancing nervously over her shoulder as Max works the lock. The faint sound of a click breaks the silence, and Max pushes the door open, gesturing for her to follow.

The interior of the Frick is hauntingly still, the air heavy with the scent of aged wood and polished marble. The faint hum of the HVAC system provides the only sound as they move through the grand hallways, their footsteps muffled against the plush carpeting.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Rosalee whispers, her eyes darting to the shadows that stretch across the walls.

“People don’t break into places that feel inviting.”

They reach a side gallery, its walls lined with oil paintings and antique mirrors that seem to watch their every move. Max stops before a heavy wooden crate, its lid slightly ajar. He pulls it open, revealing a haphazard collection of paintings and artifacts, their origins impossible to determine.

“What is this?” Rosalee asks, peering over his shoulder.

“Evidence,” Max says grimly. He pulls out a painting, its vibrant colors clashing with the muted tones of the gallery. Turning it over, he reveals a faint symbol etched into the back—one they’ve seen before.

“This is Mercer’s,” Rosalee breathes, her voice tinged with both awe and disgust. “He’s been hiding stolen art here.”

“Not just hiding,” Max says, placing the painting back in the crate. “This is a staging ground. He’s moving pieces through here, laundering them, using them as currency. Ever since they started tracking Bitcoin transactions, people have been looking for new ways to privatize large transactions.”

Rosalee steps back, her mind racing. “And the Frick’s board? They’re either complicit or clueless.”

“Correct,” Max replies. “But it doesn’t matter; we’ve got proof.”

He pulls out his phone, snapping photos of the crate’s contents. But the sound of approaching footsteps freezes them both in place. Max pockets his phone, motioning for Rosalee to stay quiet as he moves toward the gallery’s entrance.

The first man appears in the doorway, his silhouette sharp against the faint glow of the hallway lights. Max doesn’t wait for an introduction. He lunges forward, driving his shoulder into the man’s chest and sending him crashing into the wall.

“Max!” Rosalee shouts as more figures appear, their heavy boots echoing ominously.

“Run!” Max barks, blocking the gallery’s entrance as the attackers converge on him. Rosalee hesitates, torn between fleeing and staying to fight, but the look in Max’s eyes leaves no room for debate.

She bolts, her footsteps fading as she disappears down the hallway. Max turns his attention back to the attackers, his fists clenched, his body coiled like a spring. The first punch lands hard, but Max absorbs it, countering with a brutal uppercut that sends the man sprawling.

The second attacker moves faster, swinging a baton that catches Max in the ribs. He grits his teeth against the pain, grabbing the weapon and using it to disarm his opponent. But the odds aren’t in his favor, and a third man slams into him from behind, driving him to the ground.

Max struggles, his vision swimming as the weight of his attackers presses down on him. He lands a few more punches, but it’s not enough. The last thing he sees before darkness takes him is Rosalee, peering around the corner, her face etched with horror as she watches him–

Rosalee’s breath catches in her throat as Max collapses under the weight of his attackers. Her instincts scream for her to run, to put as much distance between herself and this nightmare as possible. But something stronger—something rooted in the bond they’ve forged—keeps her rooted in place.

The men surrounding Max don’t notice her, too focused on dragging his limp body toward the center of the gallery. One of them mutters something about "sending a message," but Rosalee doesn’t care to parse their words. Her focus sharpens on the crate of stolen art, its damning evidence now a secondary thought to the man fighting for his life.

Her fingers tighten around the small canister of pepper spray in her pocket. It’s a pitiful weapon, but it’s all she has. Swallowing her fear, she steps out from the shadows.

“Hey!” she shouts, her voice trembling but loud enough to draw their attention.

The men turn, their expressions ranging from confusion to amusement. One of them, a burly figure with a scar running down his cheek, steps toward her. “This doesn’t concern you, sweetheart. Walk away.”

Rosalee raises the pepper spray, her hand trembling but steady enough to make him pause. “Let him go,” she demands, her voice firmer now. “Or I swear, you’ll regret it.”

The man laughs, a cruel sound that echoes through the gallery. “What are you gonna do? Blind me? Go ahead, see how far that gets you.”

Rosalee doesn’t hesitate. She presses the trigger, a burst of mist hitting him square in the eyes. The man screams, stumbling backward and clawing at his face. The distraction gives her the opening she needs.

“Max, get up!” she shouts, running toward him.

One of the other men lunges for her, but she ducks, grabbing a heavy candlestick from a nearby display and swinging it with all her might. The impact lands with a sickening thud, and the man crumples to the floor. Rosalee drops the candlestick, her hands shaking, and turns her attention to Max.

He stirs, groaning as he regains consciousness. “Rosalee?” he mumbles, his voice weak.

“It’s me,” she says, dropping to her knees beside him. “Come on, we have to move.”

Before she can help him up, the man with the scar recovers, his reddened eyes blazing with fury. “You’re dead,” he growls, pulling a knife from his belt and charging toward them.

Max reacts instinctively, his hand shooting out to grab the man’s wrist. With a surge of strength born from desperation, he twists, forcing the knife from his attacker’s grasp. The man howls in pain, but Max doesn’t let up, driving his fist into the man’s jaw and sending him sprawling.

“Nice timing,” Rosalee says, helping Max to his feet.

“Could’ve used five more minutes,” he replies, wincing as he straightens up. Blood drips from a cut on his temple, and his breathing is labored, but his eyes are sharp. “We need to get out of here.”

Together, they stagger toward the exit, their steps uneven but determined. The remaining attackers don’t pursue, likely too stunned by the unexpected resistance. Rosalee pushes the heavy door open, and the cold night air hits them like a slap. For a moment, they simply stand there, gulping in breaths of freedom.

“You okay?” Rosalee asks, her voice soft.

“My ego’s a little sore,” Max admits, leaning heavily against the wall. “I’ll live.”

Rosalee’s eyes dart around, looking for a port in the storm. “Let’s find somewhere to regroup.”

Max doesn’t argue. He follows her lead as they disappear into the shadows of the city, leaving the Frick behind, hopefully forever.

They find temporary refuge in a small coffee shop several blocks away, its dim lighting and soft music a stark contrast to the violence they’ve just escaped. Max slumps into a booth, his head resting against the cool glass of the window. Rosalee sits across from him, her hands wrapped around a steaming cup of tea she doesn’t drink.

“You saved my life,” Max says after a long silence, his voice quiet but sincere.

Rosalee looks up, her eyes meeting his. “You’ve saved mine more than once. Call us even.”

Max huffs a weak laugh, but the moment of levity is short-lived. His expression darkens as he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. The photos he took of the stolen art at the Frick are still there, a small victory in the face of everything they’ve lost.

“This is enough to blow the operation wide open,” he says, scrolling through the images. “If we can get these to the right people, Mercer’s network will crumble.”

Rosalee leans forward, her brow furrowing. “And what about EdRex? They’re not going to let this go quietly.”

“They’ll try to cover their tracks,” Max says. “But this is a start. It’s enough to make them sweat.”

Rosalee nods, but her concern doesn’t fade. “And what about us? Mercer’s not going to stop until we’re dead.”

Max looks at her, his gaze steady despite the weariness in his eyes. “We keep moving. We keep fighting. It’s the only way.”

Rosalee sighs, leaning back in her seat. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s not,” Max admits. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

The weight of his words settles over them, heavy and unyielding.

# **Chapter 19: Shadows of Truth**

Max wakes slowly, the dull throb in his ribs reminding him of last night’s chaos at the Frick Collection. For a moment, he lies still in the dim light of Rosalee’s apartment, letting the quiet hum of the city beyond the window lull him. The faint smell of coffee drifts in, and he pushes himself upright, groaning as his body protests.

Rosalee’s voice drifts in from the kitchen. “If you’re awake, there’s aspirin on the counter. Coffee’s almost ready.”

Max shuffles to the kitchen, shirtless and bruised, and grabs the pills. Rosalee hands him a steaming mug, her hair loosely tied back, her expression tired but resolute.

“You look like hell,” she says, leaning against the counter.

“I feel even worse,” Max mutters, swallowing the pills and chasing them with a gulp of coffee. “How about you? Any regrets about dragging me into this mess?”

She raises an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirking into a faint smile. “You dragged me into it, remember?”

“Details,” Max says, setting the mug down and pulling her closer. “Thank you—for last night.”

Rosalee tilts her head, her eyes softening. “Don’t get all sentimental on me now. We still have work to do.”

But Max doesn’t let her pull away. He brushes a strand of hair from her face, his hand lingering against her cheek. She doesn’t protest as he leans in, their lips meeting in a kiss that speaks to the unspoken fears and desires between them. It deepens quickly, their mutual exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

Later, the pair steps out onto the bustling streets of Midtown Manhattan, their renewed focus evident. Max walks with a subtle limp, but his eyes are sharp, scanning their surroundings as they make their way toward the Morgan Library and Museum.

“Are you sure about this?” Rosalee asks as they approach the historic landmark. The elegant facade of the library looms before them, its grandeur belying the danger they’re certain awaits inside.

“It’s the next piece of the puzzle,” Max replies, his tone firm. “If we’re right, Mercer’s fingerprints will be all over this place.”

Rosalee glances at him, her expression skeptical. “And if we’re wrong?”

Max smirks faintly. “We won’t be.”

The library is quieter than usual, the mid-morning crowd sparse. They slip through the main doors, their footsteps muffled against the polished marble floor. The scent of aged paper and varnished wood fills the air.

“This way,” Max says, nodding toward a side corridor. They move quickly, avoiding the main reading rooms and heading deeper into the museum. The ornate ceilings and gilded fixtures seem to press down on them, the weight of history and secrets palpable.

Finally, they reach a small, unassuming gallery at the end of the corridor. Max slows, his hand brushing against Rosalee’s arm to stop her. “This is it.”

The room is sparsely decorated, its walls lined with a few select paintings and artifacts. Max moves to the far wall, his eyes narrowing as he studies a large oil painting depicting a serene pastoral scene. At first glance, it seems unremarkable—but Max knows better.

“Here,” he says, pointing to the corner of the frame. “Same symbol as the one at the Frick.”

Rosalee leans in, her fingers tracing the faint mark etched into the wood. “It’s him,” she whispers. “Mercer’s personal artist.”

Max steps back, pulling out a small flashlight and a magnifying glass from his jacket. “Let’s see what else he left us.”

Carefully, he examines the painting’s surface, his trained eye picking out the subtle patterns hidden beneath the visible image. Rosalee watches in fascination as he works, her breath hitching when he finally steps back.

“It’s encrypted,” Max says, his voice laced with both frustration and determination. “Same style as before. He’s been using these paintings to hide records.”

Rosalee’s brow furrows. “Records of what?”

Max pulls out his phone, snapping a photo of the painting. “Everything Mercer needs to keep his operation running—including names. If we can crack this, we’ll be spoiled for choice.”

Rosalee nods, her mind already racing with possibilities. But before they can say more, the sound of footsteps interrupts them. Max’s head snaps toward the gallery entrance, his body tensing as he signals for Rosalee to stay quiet.

The footsteps grow louder, closer. Max slips the flashlight and magnifying glass back into his jacket, his hand moving instinctively toward the gun tucked at his side. He presses himself against the wall, Rosalee mirroring his movement on the opposite side of the door.

The first man steps into view, his face unfamiliar but his intent clear. He scans the room, his sharp eyes landing on the painting Max had been studying. A second man follows, his posture rigid, his hand resting on the weapon holstered at his hip.

“Mercer’s goons,” Max whispers, his voice barely audible.

Rosalee nods, her heart pounding. “It’s like Whac-a-Mole. What do we do now?”

Max’s lips press into a thin line. “Wait.”

“What happened to shark week?”

The men move further into the gallery, their focus on the painting. Max watches, his muscles coiled like a spring. When the second man turns his back to them, Max strikes.

He moves precisely, lethally, his arm locking around the man’s neck as he drags him backward. The man struggles, his movements frantic, but Max is relentless. Rosalee takes her cue, grabbing a nearby sculpture and slamming it into the first man’s side. He doubles over with a grunt but recovers quickly, his hand going for his gun.

“Rosalee, get the hell down!” Max shouts as he tackles the armed man before he can draw his weapon, sending them both crashing into a display case. Glass shatters around them, the sharp sound cutting through the stillness of the library.

The man swings wildly, but Max catches his wrist, slamming it against the marble floor until the gun clatters free.

“Rosalee, grab it!” Max barks, his voice sharp with urgency.

Rosalee scrambles to the fallen weapon, her hands shaking as she picks it up. She grips it tightly, the cold steel foreign in her grasp, but her eyes harden as she levels it at the remaining man. “Don’t move!” she orders, her voice trembling but firm.

The man freezes, his hands slowly rising. Max doesn’t hesitate. He drives his knee into the ribs of the man beneath him, silencing his protests before pulling a pair of zip ties from his jacket. Within moments, both attackers are restrained, their furious glares the only resistance they can muster.

“You’ve got ten seconds to tell us why you’re here,” Max growls, his tone leaving no room for negotiation. “Or I let her decide what happens next. And you’ve really pissed her off.”

Rosalee takes a step forward, the gun steady in her hands despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. “You heard him,” she says icily.

The larger of the two men sneers. “You think this ends here? Mercer knows everything. He’ll find you.”

Max delivers a sharp punch to the man’s solar plexus, cutting off his tirade. “Wrong answer,” he says. Turning to the second man, he leans in, his eyes narrowing. “Your turn, if you want to play.”

The man hesitates, his gaze darting to Rosalee and then back to Max. “We were sent to recover the painting,” he admits reluctantly.

“What’s in the painting?” Rosalee presses, her finger tightening on the trigger.

“Records,” the man says quickly, his voice panicked. “Bribes, deals, names—everything Mercer’s been using to keep people in his pocket. It’s all in there.”

Max exchanges a glance with Rosalee, their unspoken agreement clear. “Thanks for playing,” he says, rising to his feet. “Now sit tight. Someone will come collect you.”

Rosalee lowers the gun as Max grabs the painting, carefully tucking it into a protective case he’d brought along. “We need to move,” he says, already heading for the exit. “They’ll send more.”

The streets of Manhattan blur as Max and Rosalee weave through the crowd, their pace brisk but measured. Every step feels like a race against the clock, the weight of the encrypted painting pressing down on them both.

“We can’t keep running like this,” Rosalee says, her voice low but tense. “We need a plan.”

“We have one,” Max replies, his tone resolute. “We crack the encryption, expose Mercer’s network, and bring it all down.”

“And then what?” Rosalee asks, her frustration bubbling to the surface. “We go into hiding? Spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders?”

Max stops abruptly, turning to face her. “If we don’t do this, Mercer wins. People like Isabella stay unsafe, and his operation keeps growing. Is that what you want?”

Rosalee’s jaw tightens, her anger giving way to resignation. “No. But I don’t want to lose you, either.”

“You won’t,” Max says, his voice softening. “We’re in this together.”

Rosalee nods, her resolve hardening. “Then let’s finish it.”

They reach Rosalee’s apartment, the safety of its familiar walls offering a brief respite. Max sets the painting on the table, his hands already reaching for his tools. Rosalee watches as he works, his focus unshakable despite the chaos they’ve just escaped.

“What do you think we’ll find?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Enough to bring Mercer down,” Max replies without looking up. “If we’re lucky, it’ll be enough to warn Isabella, too.”

Minutes stretch into hours as Max decrypts the painting’s hidden message using an ancient cipher. Rosalee sits beside him, her fingers tracing the edge of her coffee cup as she waits. Finally, Max leans back, his expression a mix of triumph and unease.

“Got it,” he says, sliding the decoded document across the table. Rosalee leans in, her eyes scanning the list of names, dates, and transactions. Each entry is more damning than the last.

“This is it,” she says, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination.

Max nods, but his expression remains grim. “There’s more,” he says, pointing to a section at the bottom of the document. “Isabella’s name is here. Mercer’s been tracking her every move.”

Rosalee’s breath catches in her throat. “Why?”

Max hesitates before answering. “She’s planning to expose a double agent—someone working with Brazil to offer asylum to white-collar criminals. That’d mean Mercer loses his biggest clients.”

Rosalee’s eyes widen. “She has no idea, does she?”

“Not yet,” Max says, rising to his feet. “But we’re gonna fix that.”

As the night deepens, Max and Rosalee prepare for their next move. The decrypted painting sits securely in Max’s bag, its secrets poised to upend Mercer’s empire.

“We’re running out of time,” Max says, his voice steady despite the tension in his shoulders. “If we don’t act now, everything we’ve done will mean nothing.”

Rosalee steps closer, her hand resting lightly on his arm. “We’ll make it,” she says, her voice filled with quiet determination. “We have to.”

Max meets her gaze, the unspoken bond between them stronger than ever.

# **Chapter 20: The Exchange**

Max moves like a shadow through the New York Stock Exchange, his every step calculated and purposeful despite the ache in his side. The buzz of activity around him is deafening—breakers shouting, monitors flickering with dizzying streams of numbers, and the faint hum of a thousand conversations blending into a chaotic symphony.

It might seem like business as usual, but Max knows better. Somewhere in this building, Mercer is waiting.

Rosalee follows him, her heels clicking softly against the marmoreal floor. She’s traded her usual vibrant wardrobe for something more understated: a charcoal-gray blazer and slacks that help her blend into the sea of suits. She leans close enough for her words to reach his ear without carrying over the noise. “Are you sure this is the place?”

Max nods, his eyes scanning the crowd. “The cipher led us here, and Ty confirmed it. Mercer likes public spaces—makes it harder for people like us to pull anything…drastic.”

Rosalee frowns, her gaze darting nervously across the trading floor. “And what’s the plan if he tries to disappear into the crowd?”

“He won’t,” Max says, his voice low but confident. “Guys like him don’t do that. They think the crowd exists to surround them, a bunch of NPCs.”

“NPCs?”

“Non-player characters. Like in a video game? Nevermind.”

The two of them move toward a quieter corner of the building, away from the frantic energy of the traders. Max pauses at a polished brass directory mounted on the wall, pretending to study it as he pulls out his phone. The screen displays a scrambled message from Ty: *Suite 321. Be discreet.*

“Third floor,” Max murmurs, pocketing the phone. He gestures toward a nearby elevator. “Let’s go.”

As they ascend, the air between them grows heavy with unspoken tension. Rosalee crosses her arms, her fingers digging into her sleeves. “Max, I know you’re still recovering. Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Max glances at her, his expression unreadable. “I don’t have a choice.”

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open to reveal a quiet hallway lined with corporate suites. They step out, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Max leads the way, his movements deliberate and silent, until they reach a door marked *321*. He presses his ear against it, listening for any sound from within.

“Empty,” he whispers, pulling a lockpick set from his jacket.

Rosalee watches as he works, her anxiety mounting with every second. The lock clicks open, and Max eases the door inward. The suite is a stark contrast to the chaos below: sleek furniture, minimalist decor, and a large window overlooking the city. But it’s the man seated at the desk that captures their attention.

“Ty,” Max says, stepping inside.

The former mercenary looks up, his expression calm but guarded. “Took you long enough.”

“We had company,” Max replies, glancing around the room. “Is he here?”

Ty shakes his head. “Not yet. But he will be. He never misses an opportunity to gloat.”

Rosalee crosses her arms, her eyes narrowing. “You’re awfully calm for someone sitting in the middle of a war zone.”

Ty smirks, leaning back in his chair. “I’ve been in worse places. Besides, I’m not the one Mercer wants dead.”

“Lucky you,” Max mutters, moving to the window. He scans the street below, his sharp eyes searching for anything out of place. “How long do we have?”

“Not long,” Ty says, his tone serious now. “He knows you’re here. And he knows you’ve been unraveling his operation.”

“Good,” Max replies. “Let him come.”

The room falls silent, the weight of their situation pressing down on them. Rosalee shifts uncomfortably, her gaze flicking between Max and Ty. “If Mercer knows we’re here, why hasn’t he sent anyone?”

“He’s playing the long game,” Ty says. “Letting you sweat it out. It’s his way of asserting control.”

“Well, it’s not working,” Max says, turning back to face them. “We’re in control now.”

As if on cue, the sound of footsteps echoes down the hall. Max’s hand goes to the gun at his side, his body tensing. Ty rises from his chair, his expression hardening. Rosalee presses herself against the wall, her pulse quickening.

The door swings open, and Mercer steps inside, flanked by two men who could only be described as walls of muscle. He’s dressed sharply, his tailored suit a stark contrast to the menace in his eyes.

“Max,” Mercer says, his voice smooth and mocking. “You’ve been busy.”

“You have no idea,” Max replies, his tone cold.

Mercer chuckles, stepping further into the room. “I have to admit, I’m impressed. Most people wouldn’t have made it this far.”

“Most people don’t have as much to lose,” Max says, his hand tightening on his gun.

“Ah, yes,” Mercer says, his gaze shifting to Rosalee. “The lovely Ms. Turner. You’ve been quite the thorn in my side.”

Rosalee meets his gaze, her expression defiant. “And you’ve been quite the coward, hiding behind your money and your lackeys.”

Mercer’s smile falters, his eyes narrowing. “Careful, Ms. Turner. I’d hate for this to get...messy.”

“It’s already messy,” Max says, stepping between them. “But it doesn’t have to end with bloodshed.”

Mercer raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “And what do you propose?”

Max’s voice is steady, his words measured. “I let you walk out of here alive, and you tell me where the assassination is going down.”

Mercer’s laughter fills the room, cold and humorless. “You’re in no position to negotiate.”

“Maybe not,” Max says, his tone deadly calm. “But I’m willing to bet you value your life more than whatever you’re planning.”

Mercer’s expression darkens, the tension in the room thick enough to cut. He takes a step closer, his gaze boring into Max’s. “You don’t understand the game you’re playing.”

“Then explain it to me,” Max says, his voice like steel.

Mercer opens his mouth to respond, but a sudden sound from the hallway interrupts him—a muffled shout, follows by the unmistakable crack of gunfire.

Max’s instincts kick in immediately. “Rosalee, down!” he barks, drawing his gun as chaos erupts around them.

Gunfire ricochets down the hallway, the sharp cracks tearing through the room’s tense silence. Ty slams the door shut and bolts it, his face grim. “They’re here,” he growls, drawing his weapon from the back of his waistband.

Max pulls Rosalee behind the desk, positioning himself between her and the door. “Stay down,” he orders, his voice low and steady despite the chaos unfolding around them.

The thudding of heavy boots grows louder, closer. Mercer’s two guards flank the door, their massive frames coiled with tension. Mercer, for his part, seems unbothered, leaning casually against the window as though the bullets zipping through the air were part of some elaborate game.

“This is your doing, Max,” Mercer says, his tone almost conversational. “You couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

Max doesn’t respond. His focus is laser-sharp, his gaze fixed on the door as it rattles under the force of someone attempting to break in. Ty moves into position beside him, their unspoken coordination honed by years of experience.

“Three, maybe four,” Ty murmurs. “Heavy boots. Not amateurs.”

Max nods, his grip tightening on his pistol. “Let’s make it five seconds they regret.”

The door bursts inward, splinters flying as a squad of black-clad men storm the room. Everything happens at once: Max fires two quick shots, dropping the first man before he clears the threshold. Ty takes out another, his aim precise. The remaining intruders dive for cover, their return fire splattering the walls with holes.

“Stay down!” Max shouts to Rosalee, who ducks lower behind the desk, her hands over her ears.

Mercer watches the chaos with a faint smile, as if he’s enjoying the show. “Impressive,” he remarks. “But you can’t win this.”

Max doesn’t dignify him with a response. He leans out from behind a filing cabinet and fires again, grazing one of the attackers as they return fire. Ty moves with surgical precision, flanking their enemies and forcing them into a bottleneck by the doorway.

The fight is brutal and fast. In less than a minute, the room falls silent again, the last of the attackers slumped lifeless in the hallway. Max scans the carnage, his breathing heavy but controlled. Ty checks the bodies, kicking away their weapons as he goes.

“That all of them?” Max asks, his voice sharp.

“For now,” Ty replies, his tone grim. “But there’ll be more.”

Rosalee peeks out from behind the desk, her face pale but resolute. “What now?”

Max turns his gaze to Mercer, who hasn’t moved from his spot by the window. The man looks almost bored, his hands tucked into his pockets. “Your move, Max,” he says with a smirk.

Max strides across the room, grabbing Mercer by the lapels and slamming him against the glass. “Enough games,” he growls. “Where’s the hit going down?”

Mercer’s smirk widens. “You think you’ve won? Killing a few of my men doesn’t change anything.”

“Try me,” Max says, his voice low and dangerous. “You’ve seen what I can do.”

For the first time, Mercer’s confidence wavers. He glances at Ty, then at Rosalee, who’s now standing with her arms crossed, her expression icy. “Fine,” he mutters. “You want answers? I’ll give you answers.”

Max releases him, and Mercer straightens his suit with exaggerated care. “The hit’s scheduled for tomorrow morning,” he says. “At the United Nations. During Isabella’s speech.”

Rosalee’s breath catches. “The UN? How does he plan to pull that off?”

Mercer shrugs. “The same way I do everything—with money and leverage. There’s a mole on Isabella’s security detail, someone who’ll make sure the sniper gets a clean shot.”

Max steps closer, his eyes narrowing. “Who’s the mole?”

Mercer hesitates, then shakes his head. “I don’t know. That’s not my department.”

Max doesn’t trust a word Mercer says, but there’s no time to argue. He turns to Ty. “We have to get to the UN and alert Isabella’s team. Immediately.”

Ty nods, already moving toward the door. “I’ll make the call. But we’ll need more than a warning. They won’t take us seriously without proof.”

Max gestures to the painting still tucked into his bag. “We’ve got proof. Let’s move.”

As they head for the elevator, Mercer’s voice follows them. “You’ll never make it in time,” he calls out. “And even if you do, you won’t stop it.”

Max glances over his shoulder, his expression hard. “Watch me.”

The streets of Manhattan blur as Max, Rosalee, and Ty weave through the chaos of the city. The cab they’ve flagged down weaves recklessly through traffic, its horn blaring as they barrel toward the United Nations Headquarters.

Rosalee clutches the encrypted painting tightly, her mind racing. “What if they don’t believe us?” she asks, her voice tinged with panic. “What if—”

“They’ll believe us,” Max says firmly, though his own doubts linger in the back of his mind. “They have to.”

The cab screeches to a halt outside the UN, and the three of them leap out, sprinting toward the security checkpoint. The guards move to intercept them, but Ty flashes an ID badge that makes them hesitate.

“Isabella Tramiza’s security team—get them here now,” Max says, his tone sharp and unwavering.

The guards exchange uncertain glances, then one of them nods. “Follow me.”

They’re ushered into a secure conference room, where a team of stern-faced agents awaits. Isabella’s chief of security, a sharp-eyed woman with a no-nonsense demeanor, steps forward. “What’s this about?”

Max sets the painting on the table, his hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through him. “This is proof of a plot to assassinate Isabella Tramiza during her speech tomorrow.”

The woman’s eyes narrow as she examines the painting, then turns her gaze to Max. “And who are you?”

“Someone who’s seen what Mercer can do,” Max replies. “And someone who’s not going to let him get away with it.”

The room falls silent as the weight of his words sinks in. Finally, the woman nods. “We’ll take it from here.”

Max steps back, his muscles taut with tension. As the security team begins coordinating their response, he exchanges a glance with Rosalee. There’s still so much at stake, so much left to do—but for the first time, it feels like they might actually have a chance.

# **Chapter 21: Lifted Veil**

The opulent halls of the Metropolitan Opera House glimmer under the glow of hundreds of crystal chandeliers. The venue is abuzz with the chatter of Manhattan’s elite, their laughter and clinking champagne glasses echoing in the grand foyer.

It’s a picture of old-world charm and sophistication to the untrained eye. To Max and Rosalee, it’s the perfect masquerade for deceit.

Max adjusts the fit of his tailored suit, the sharp lines concealing the tension in his shoulders. His side still throbs from his earlier injuries, but the pain is a distant echo compared to the urgency thrumming through his veins. Beside him, Rosalee radiates an effortless elegance in her black evening gown, though her eyes dart nervously across the crowd.

“Think he’ll show?” she murmurs, her voice barely audible over the hum of the crowd.

Max’s lips press into a thin line. “He’ll show,” he replies, scanning the room. “Guys like him don’t miss an opportunity to flaunt his power.”

Rosalee’s hand brushes against his arm, grounding him. “Then we stick to the plan. No improvising.”

Max gives a tight nod, though his instincts scream that improvisation is all but inevitable. The Metropolitan Opera House, with its labyrinthine corridors and pockets of hidden spaces, is the kind of battlefield Mercer thrives in. Still, Max isn’t here to play Mercer’s game—he’s here to end it.

The lights flicker, signaling the audience to take their seats. Max and Rosalee exchange a glance before joining the throng funneling into the grand auditorium. Their tickets, courtesy of Ty’s impressive network of favors, place them in a private box overlooking the stage. From this vantage point, Max surveys the sea of patrons below, his gaze sweeping across the rows of gilded balconies.

“There,” Rosalee whispers, her fingers tightening around his arm. She nods toward a cluster of men seated near the orchestra pit. Among them, Jeffrey Mercer leans back in his chair, exuding an air of casual dominance. His sharp suit and easy smirk are a stark contrast to the tension rippling through the room.

Max’s jaw clenches. “He brought his entourage.”

“Do you recognize any of them?”

“Couple of EdRex heavies I saw on the company site,” Max says, his voice low. “The rest… probably old money types he’s roped into his schemes. Look at the way they fawn over him.”

Below, Mercer leans toward one of his companions, his expression animated as he gestures toward the stage. Whatever he’s saying draws polite chuckles and sycophantic smiles from the group.

“Doesn’t matter who they are,” Max says. “What matters is that they’re here and complicit.”

The lights dim, drawing a collective hush from the audience. The velvet curtain rises to reveal the opening act, a dazzling display of color and sound that floods the auditorium. But Max and Rosalee’s focus remains fixed on the man sitting below them, the architect of the chaos that has upended their lives.

As the performance unfolds, Max leans closer to Rosalee. “We need to get down there,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “Expose him in front of everyone.”

“And how do you propose we do that? March down there and start shouting accusations?”

“If it comes to that…yeah. But I’d prefer something more convincing.”

Rosalee’s eyes narrow as she considers their options. Her gaze flicks to the leather satchel tucked under Max’s chair, its contents their trump card. The encrypted painting they recovered from the Morgan Library holds enough damning evidence to bring Mercer’s empire crashing down—if they can present it to the right audience.

The act concludes with a flourish, and the audience erupts into applause. As the curtain falls, Max rises to his feet, his movements deliberate. “Stay close,” he tells Rosalee, his tone brooking no argument.

They slip out of their box and into the corridor, the muted lighting casting long shadows across the marble walls. Max leads the way, his steps measured as he navigates the maze of hallways. The buzz of conversation grows louder as they approach the VIP lounge, the epicenter of the evening’s power dynamics.

Rosalee’s breath hitches as they near the lounge’s entrance. A pair of EdRex guards stand sentinel, their burly frames blocking the doorway. Max’s stride doesn’t falter. “Let me handle this,” he murmurs.

As they approach, the guards straighten, their expressions hardening. “Private event,” one of them says gruffly, his tone leaving no room for negotiation.

Max offers a disarming smile. “We’re expected,” he says smoothly, pulling a sleek black card from his pocket. The forgery is flawless, courtesy of Ty’s connections, and it does the trick. The guard scrutinizes it for a moment before stepping aside.

Inside, the lounge is a study in decadence. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the room, illuminating the polished mahogany bar and plush leather armchairs. The scent of expensive cigars mingles with the faint tang of brandy, creating an atmosphere of opulence and privilege.

Mercer is seated at the center of it all, a king holding court among his loyal subjects. His gaze lifts as Max and Rosalee enter, and a slow smile spreads across his face. “Well, well,” he drawls. “Look who decided to join the party.”

Max’s expression is stone cold as he strides forward, the satchel clutched tightly in his hand. Rosalee follows closely, her eyes darting between Mercer and his lackeys.

“Jeffrey Mercer,” Max says, his voice slicing through the room like a blade. “It’s time we had a conversation.”

Mercer chuckles, his amusement genuine. “You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that,” he says. “But you’re out of your depth here, Max. This is my world.”

“Not for much longer,” Max replies, his tone icy. “We know what you’ve been doing. The forgeries, the bribes, the blackmail. We have the proof.”

Mercer’s smile falters, a flicker of unease crossing his face. But he recovers quickly, leaning back in his chair with feigned nonchalance. “Proof, you say?” he muses. “That’s a bold claim. Care to share?”

Max sets the satchel on the table, his movements deliberate. He unzips it to reveal the encrypted painting, its vibrant colors concealing a web of secrets. The room falls silent as Mercer’s companions lean in, their curiosity piqued.

“This,” Max says, tapping the canvas, “is the key to your undoing. And it’s high time someone lifted the veil.”

Mercer’s smirk is wiped clean. “You’ve always had a flair for theatrics, Max,” he says, his voice low, controlled. “But you’ve brought a knife to a gunfight.”

“I’m not the one who should be worried about weapons tonight,” Max replies sharply. His fingers graze the edges of the painting, deliberately holding the crowd’s attention. “This piece right here? It’s not just art—it’s evidence. And unless you want it displayed in a much less friendly venue, I suggest you start talking.”

Gasps ripple through the room. Mercer’s companions exchange uneasy glances, the cracks in their collective confidence starting to show. Rosalee steps forward, her presence commanding despite the tension.

“This painting contains encrypted records of every bribe, every forged deal, and every dirty secret that keeps your empire afloat,” she announces. Her voice carries like a seasoned orator, slicing through the room’s thickening tension. “When the opera is over, so is your illusion of control.”

Mercer rises from his seat, slow and deliberate. He adjusts the cuffs of his suit jacket, his movements calculated to project calm.

“You really think you can walk in here and dismantle everything I’ve built? Do you have any goddamn idea who you’re dealing with?”

“You,” Max answers without hesitation. “A washed-up soldier who traded honor for greed.”

Mercer’s eyes narrow. “Careful, Max. You don’t want to overplay your hand.”

The exchange is electric, the air charged with unspoken threats. But before Mercer can retort, the doors to the lounge swing open. A man in a tailored suit strides in, his demeanor as sharp as the creases in his attire. It’s Ty.

“Apologies for the interruption,” Ty says smoothly, his gaze darting between Max, Rosalee, and Mercer. “But I think the party’s about to get interesting.”

Behind him, two men in plain suits step into the room, their badges glinting under the chandelier light. Federal agents.

“Jeffrey Mercer,” one of the agents begins, his voice loud enough to command the attention of the entire room. “You’re under arrest for conspiracy, fraud, multiple counts of bribery and after they’ve had some time with you, I imagine they’ll think up some more charges.”

The room erupts in chaos. Mercer’s associates scatter, some bolting for the exits while others try to blend into the furniture. Max watches as Mercer’s carefully constructed facade crumbles. His once-dominant presence shrinks as the agents close in.

“I told you,” Max says quietly, locking eyes with Mercer one last time. “It’s over.”

But Mercer isn’t done. With a sudden, desperate burst of energy, he lunges toward the painting on the table. His hand shoots out, aiming to destroy the evidence. Max reacts instinctively, throwing his weight into a block that sends Mercer staggering back.

The momentum tips the table, and the painting tumbles to the floor. Rosalee dives for it, her fingers curling protectively around the canvas as chaos reigns. Mercer’s goons, realizing their boss is cornered, spring into action. One lunges at Max, but Ty intercepts with a sharp jab to the ribs.

“Always with the drama,” Ty mutters as he tosses the man aside.

Another goon barrels toward Rosalee, but she’s ready. With a well-aimed swing of her handbag—loaded with something heavy—she sends him crashing to the floor. Max snatches the painting from her hands and turns to the agents.

“Get this out of here,” he commands, thrusting the canvas toward the nearest one. “It’s the smoking gun.”

The agent nods, carefully taking the painting and securing it in a protective case. Mercer, still defiant, struggles against the agents who pin his arms behind his back.

“You don’t know what you’ve done,” Mercer growls, his voice venomous. “You think you’ve won, but this is bigger than you. Bigger than all of you.”

Max steps closer, his voice low enough that only Mercer can hear. “Maybe it is. But you? You’re small. And now, you’re done.”

The agents drag Mercer toward the door, his protests echoing through the lounge. The room is left in disarray, its once-opulent atmosphere marred by the confrontation. Max turns to Rosalee, his breath heavy but steady.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice softening.

“I am now. You?”

“I’ll live,” Max says with a wry smile. “Thanks to you.”

Ty joins them, his usual cocky grin firmly in place. “Well, that is fun,” he says, clapping Max on the shoulder. “But you two might want to make yourselves scarce. This place is about to be swarming with more windbreakers than Yankee Stadium during a rain delay.”

Max doesn’t need to be told twice. He and Rosalee slip out of the lounge, leaving the chaos behind. The show’s final act plays on, the soaring notes of the aria a stark contrast to the turmoil they’ve just escaped.

As they step into the cool night air, Rosalee looks up at Max. “Is it really over?” she asks, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

Max gazes into the distance, his expression unreadable. “For Mercer, maybe,” he says. “But for us? Not yet.”

Rosalee’s hand finds his, her grip firm. “Then we keep going,” she says simply. “Together.”

Max looks at her, the weight of the night etched into the lines of his face. He squeezes her hand, a silent promise passing between them. Together, they disappear into the city, the lights of the Metropolitan Opera House glowing behind them—a symbol of truth finally revealed.

# **Chapter 22: Those Who Don’t Learn History**

The air inside the Museum of Natural History buzzes with a low hum of distant voices and the occasional shuffle of footsteps against the polished floors. Max adjusts the strap of his messenger bag, the weight of Mercer’s documents pulling against his shoulder. Rosalee walks a step ahead, her heels clicking on the marble with a precision that mirrors her laser-focused expression. This isn’t an art gallery stroll; they’re on a mission.

They approach the dimly lit Hall of Biodiversity, the exhibits stretching out around them in curated displays of the natural world’s triumphs (and tragedies). But Max isn’t looking at the taxidermized lion or the wall of multicolored butterflies; his eyes scan the shadows for anyone lingering too long or watching too closely.

“Over there,” Rosalee says, her voice low but firm. She points to a bench near the diorama of a Serengeti watering hole. It is the kind of spot a tourist might choose to rest, blending seamlessly into the surroundings. Max nods and follows her lead, sitting with his back to the wall while Rosalee perches on the edge beside him.

He unzips the bag and pulls out the first of Mercer’s files. The papers are old, the edges yellowed and brittle in places, but the contents are far from irrelevant. Max spreads the documents across the bench between them, their makeshift workspace as inconspicuous as they could manage.

“Why here?” Rosalee asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Max doesn’t look up from the papers. “Because he knows it’s the last place anyone would think to search. A museum is all about preservation, history—things you don’t tamper with.”

Rosalee leaned closer, her perfume—a light, floral scent—momentarily distracting him. She taps a finger on one of the papers, her manicured nail landing on an intricate diagram that looks more like a blueprint than anything criminal. “This is a vault design. But why would—"

A voice behind them interrupts her question. “Excuse me, is everything all right here?”

Both Max and Rosalee freeze for a split second before Max turns, flashing the warm, disarming smile he’d mastered years ago. A security guard stands a few feet away, his expression a mix of suspicion and mild curiosity.

“We’re fine,” Max says smoothly, gathering the papers into a neat stack. “Just discussing an upcoming exhibit we’re curating. My colleague here is quite the expert.”

Rosalee tilts her head, slipping seamlessly into the role. “It’s a conceptual installation,” she added, her tone dripping with effortless charm. “A juxtaposition of nature and industry. Quite provocative.”

The guard blinks, his suspicion fading under his inability to parse a single thing she’d said. “All right, great. Well, let me know if you need anything,” he says.

Max exhaled slowly. “That was close.”

Rosalee offers a small shrug. “Please. That was nothing. Lest you forget, I’ve charmed entire *rooms* of art snobs who think they’re geniuses.”

Max smirks but doesn’t respond, focusing instead on the next document. This one is different: a list of names. Some he recognizes—politicians, corporate executives, even a couple of art world elites—but others are unfamiliar.

“This is it,” Max says, tapping the list. “This is Mercer’s network. Everyone who’s ever paid him off or owes him a favor. If we cross-reference these names with—”

“Wait,” Rosalee interrupts, her finger hovering over a name near the bottom of the page. Her face goes pale, her composure faltering.

Max follows her gaze to the name she’d singled out: Marianne Hartwell*.*

“Who is she?” Max asks, his voice cautious.

Rosalee swallows hard, her eyes not leaving the page. “A mentor in art school. She... she gave me my first grant to open the gallery.”

“And you’re just now telling me this?”

“I didn’t know,” Rosalee snaps, her voice rising slightly before she catches herself and lowers it to a hiss. “How would I know that she was involved in all…this?”

Max places a hand on hers, grounding her.

“Okay,” he says gently. “Tell me everything you remember about her.”

Rosalee nods, taking a shaky breath. “She is brilliant. Charismatic. She had connections everywhere. When I was fresh out of school, she saw something in me—at least, that’s what I thought. She helped me get the gallery off the ground; she introduced me to collectors, critics, everyone who I thought…mattered. But there were always rumors about where her money come from and the kinds of people she worked with.”

“And you never asked?” Max presses

“I was young and ambitious, Max. I didn’t want to ask; maybe I just didn’t want to know.”

Max leans back, piecing it together. “If she’s on this list, she’s not just a benefactor. She’s part of Mercer’s operation.”

Rosalee’s eyes dart to the papers spread out in front of them. “If that’s true, then she’s been involved in this from the beginning. My gallery, the connections she gave me...it’s all tied to this.”

Max can see the storm of emotions playing across her face—anger, betrayal, guilt. He wants to reassure her, but there’s no time for sentimentality.

“We’ll deal with her later,” Max says firmly. “Right now, we need to find out what Mercer left here for us.”

Rosalee nods and reaches for another file, flipping through its contents with renewed determination. As they work, Max’s mind drifts back to what Rosalee just revealed. If Marianne Hartwell is—or was—as deeply entrenched in Mercer’s network as it seems, then Rosalee’s entire career might be built on a foundation of lies and corruption. He can’t imagine what she’s going through.

They sift through the documents, piecing together fragments of a puzzle growing more complex by the second. Max’s instincts tell him they’re close—closer than they’ve ever been—to uncovering the full scope.

Rosalee gasps, holding up a torn piece of paper with a handwritten note scrawled across it.

“It’s a location,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “But it’s incomplete. It’s missing the—”

Her words are cut off by the sudden vibration of Max’s phone in his pocket. He pulls it out, his brow furrowing as he sees the caller ID: *Unknown Number.*

“Who is it?” Rosalee asks, her eyes wide with apprehension.

Max swipes to answer the call, pressing the phone to his ear. A deep, gravelly voice comes through the line, sending a chill down his spine.

“Your job, as I see it, is over, Max,” the voice says. “Turn back now, or there won’t be anything left to save.”

The call ends abruptly, leaving Max staring at the phone in silence. He looks up at Rosalee.

“We’re not stopping,” he says, his voice steely. “You think just because Mercer is off the board, everyone is safe? Not by a long shot.”

Rosalee nods, her fear replaced by determination. “Then let’s clear the board.”

Max opens his mouth to respond, but a sudden noise behind them—a faint rustling, too deliberate to be an accident—makes them both freeze. Slowly, Max turns toward the source of the sound, his hand instinctively moving toward the grip of the Sig Sauer on his hip. Rosalee’s breath hitches, her gaze locked on the dimly lit corridor where the sound came from.

The Museum of Natural History is vast, with endless corners and shadowed alcoves, but this sound isn’t random. Someone is here.

Max gestures for Rosalee to stay still, his movements slow and deliberate. He rises from the bench, his posture casual. His eyes, however, scan the shadows with the precision of someone trained to spot the subtle glint of metal or the faintest shift of weight.

“Keep looking through the papers,” he says to Rosalee in a low, calm voice, not taking his eyes off the corridor. “We can’t lose any time.”

Rosalee nods, her fingers trembling slightly as she picks up the torn paper again, her mind half on the note and half on whatever—or whoever—might be out there.

Max moves silently across the marble floor, his boots nearly inaudible. He reaches the corridor's corner, pressing his back against the cool stone wall. He takes a deep breath, then pivots quickly around the corner, his eyes darting to every possible hiding spot.

Nothing.

But his gut told him otherwise. Max turns back to Rosalee, who is staring at him, her wide eyes silently asking the question they both feared: *Is it safe?*

Max shook his head subtly, his instincts telling him they were still being watched. He returns to the bench, sitting back down as if nothing had happened. His hand casually brushed over Rosalee’s papers as he whispered, “Someone’s here, but they’re staying out of sight. Keep working but stay sharp.”

Rosalee swallows hard, but she nods. “Got it.”

She turns her attention back to the torn note in her hand. The partial location scrawled in Mercer’s handwriting is maddeningly incomplete, but a faint watermark catches her eye. Tilting the paper under the overhead light, she squints to make out the faint image embedded in the paper.

“It’s a map,” she whispers, her voice taut with urgency. “But it’s fragmented. This piece alone won’t tell us where to go.”

Max leans in, his eyes narrowing as he examines the faint outline of rivers and landmasses on the paper. “It’s part of a larger document. Mercer was playing one hell of a game—he knew we’d need more than just this.”

“More? He expected us to run all over this city piecing together breadcrumbs.”

Max smirks faintly, his humor dark. “That’s Mercer for you. But we’re not stopping now.”

Suddenly, the noise comes again, this time closer. A deliberate footstep. Rosalee stiffens, her hand tightening around the papers. Max rises fluidly.

“Stay here,” he tells her, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Rosalee opens her mouth to protest but thinks better of it. Instead, she clutches the papers tighter and focuses on scanning them, trying to quiet the pounding of her heart.

Max moves toward the noise, his body low and poised like a predator stalking its prey. His hand grips the gun now, though he keeps it hidden. He rounds another corner, his breath steady, his pulse thrumming in his ears.

This time, he isn’t alone.

A figure stands at the end of the corridor, half-shrouded in shadow. The dim light glints off the barrel of a suppressed nickel-plated pistol in the person’s hand.

“You’re making a habit of tailing me,” Max says. “That didn’t end so well for your boss.”

The figure steps forward, revealing a man in his mid-forties, dressed in an unremarkable suit designed for anonymity. His face is angular, with sharp cheekbones and eyes like ice.

“You’re getting too close, Maxwell,” the man says, his voice low and steady. “Turn around. Go home. Forget this.”

Max smirked, his grip tightening on his weapon. “Let me guess. Mercer’s still pulling strings?”

“Mercer’s not the only one who doesn’t want you digging. In fact, Mercer is at the mercy of people far more powerful than him. And they’re not merciful people.”

Max steps forward, closing the distance. “What I’m not ready for is another lackey trying to scare me off. So how about you put that toy away before threatening something you can’t handle?”

The man chuckles; a dry, humorless sound. “I’d tell you to go back where you came from, but we both know you’re too stubborn to listen, so I’ll bring a bottle of scotch to your grave when this is all over and whisper, ‘told ya so.’”

Before Max can respond to this asshole, a faint click echoes through the corridor—the unmistakable sound of a hammer being cocked. But it hadn’t come from the man. It had come from behind him.

“Drop it,” Rosalee’s voice rang out, clear and commanding.

Max risks a glance and sees Rosalee standing a few feet away, her hands steady as she holds a small revolver pointed directly at the man’s chest. Her face is set, her eyes blazing with a determination Max hadn’t seen before.

The man’s expression falters for the briefest moment before he recoveres. “The art dealer,” he says, his tone dripping with condescension. “How adorable.”

Rosalee’s jaw tightens. “Adorable? How about shooting you in the leg and leaving you to bleed out while we finish what we come here for. Is that adorable?”

Max suppresses a grin, keeping his own gun trained on the man. “I’d listen to her. She’s got a helluva temper.”

The man hesitates, his eyes flicking between the two of them. Finally, with a resigned sigh, he lowers his weapon, letting it drop to the floor.

“Smart choice,” Max says, stepping forward to kick the pistol out of reach. “Now start talking. Who sent you?”

The man’s lips curl into a defiant smirk. “You think I’m singing? Perish the thought, Max. And it’s such a pity that you just dragged her down with you.”

Max’s fist shoots out, connecting with the man’s jaw and sending him sprawling to the floor. He crouches down, his voice low and dangerous. “Try again.”

The man spat blood onto the polished floor but says nothing. Max’s jaw tightened, but before he could press further, Rosalee speaks up.

“Max,” she says, her voice sharp as she stares at the discarded pistol. “There’s something engraved on the barrel.”

Max follows her gaze, his heart sinking as he saw the faint etching near the muzzle. It is a symbol he recognized—a serpent coiled around a dagger. Mercer’s calling card.

“It’s a message,” Max mutters. “Mercer’s letting us know he’s still pulling the strings.”

Rosalee nods, her face grim. “Then we really are running out of time.”

Max looks down at the man, who is still lying on the floor, his smirk infuriatingly intact. “I would say to tell Mercer that his days are numbered,” Max says coldly. “But he already knows that.” And, without another word, he turns and walks back to Rosalee.

“We move now,” Max says, urgency sharpening his tone. “Whatever this clue points to, hesitation isn’t an option.”

Rosalee nods, stuffing the papers back into the bag. Together, they disappear into the labyrinthine corridors of the museum, leaving their shadowed adversary behind. Outside, the city lights beckon, a stark reminder that their hunt isn’t yet over.

# **Chapter 23: A Shot in the Dark**

The Plaza Hotel, in all its splendor, stands before them, its gold-trimmed windows glowing against the night sky. Rosalee’s heels click on the polished marble of the lobby floor as she follows Max’s lead.

They have no backup plan; this is their only move left. The Eisenhower Suite, high above their heads, is rumored to be where the power players connected to Mercer’s operation hold their clandestine gatherings. Tonight, they will uncover the whole truth—or be caught trying.

Max stops abruptly near the elevators, his eyes scanning the room. Wealthy guests move like currents around them, oblivious to the tension between the pair. He leans closer to Rosalee. “It’s all come to this. You ready?”

She nods, her resolve steely. “Let’s just hope the intel is solid. Because sooner or later, we’re going to walk into a trap that we can’t squirm out of.”

“Trust me,” Max replies, though his voice lacks its usual confidence. He adjusts the small earpiece connected to a disguised recorder. “Let’s see what these bastards are hiding.”

The elevator ride is suffocatingly silent. Rosalee keeps her gaze fixed on the changing numbers, her mind racing.

Eisenhower Suite. Thursday nights. It has to be real, yet Rosalee can’t dismiss the creeping dread that something darker awaits them.

When the elevator dings softly, they step into the dimly lit hallway. Max leads the way, his hand grazing the concealed holster beneath his jacket. Outside the suite’s double doors, they pause.

“Give me a second,” Max whispers. He pulls a small device from his pocket, holding it near the doorframe. A faint beep confirms no immediate surveillance equipment. “Looks clear. If anything goes sideways, get out fast and run until you’re surrounded by civilians.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Rosalee says, her voice low but firm.

Max meets her eyes briefly before focusing back on the door. He knocks twice in quick succession, a calculated rhythm based on patterns they’d pieced together from Mercer’s files. The seconds stretch. Then, a lock clicks, and the door opens a crack.

A man peers out, his expression briefly suspicious before softening. “You’re late,” he says.

The suite is as opulent as expected, but the atmosphere is stifling, charged with a sinister energy. Around a grand table sits a group of men and women, their conversations halting as Max and Rosalee enter. Rosalee instantly recognizes several faces from New York’s elite circles: gallery owners, hedge fund moguls—even a senator she’d once brushed shoulders with at a fundraiser. But one face freezes her in place—a woman at the far end of the table.

Her former mentor.

The shock nearly paralyzes her. Marianne Hartwell. The woman who had once guided her through the treacherous world of art and business, who had been a cornerstone of her early success. Hartwell’s startlingly blue eyes meet hers across the room, widening slightly in recognition before narrowing into a glare.

“Rosalee,” Hartwell says, her voice smooth but sharp. Then, with a smirk: “What an expected surprise.”

Rosalee’s heart hammers. “Marianne. I didn’t realize you were—”

“Part of this?” Hartwell finished, standing slowly. She gestures to the others at the table. “We’re all part of something larger than ourselves, dear. I guess I didn’t teach you *everything*, did I?”

Max steps closer to Rosalee, his presence grounding her. “We’re here for answers,” he says, his tone hard. “Not speeches.”

Several attendees shift uncomfortably while others sit back, their eyes glinting with curiosity, malice, or both.

Hartwell tilts her head. “Answers? About what, exactly?”

“Mercer,” Max says flatly. “And the empire you’re all trying so hard to keep afloat.”

Hartwell’s expression darkens. “You should’ve listened to one of the hundred warnings you got, Max. And bringing Rosalee into this?”

“*You* brought her into this!” Max would never kill a woman, but he wouldn’t mind seeing this Marianne gal meet a premature demise.

Rosalee clenches her fists, her voice breaking through the mounting tension. “Why, Marianne? Why are you involved in this? You taught me everything I know—”

“I taught you to survive,” Hartwell interrupts, her tone cutting. “And to thrive. The world is built on *power*, Rosalee. Not sentiment. And certainly not art.”

“Power?” You built your success on lies, on blood.”

Hartwell’s face twists into something almost pitying. “Naivety doesn’t suit you, my dear. You’ve always been clever. Surely you’ve realized by now—”

A sharp noise cuts her off. The suite door bursts open, and armed men flood in. Max reacts instantly, pulling Rosalee behind him as chaos erupts. Shots ring out, and the table overturns as people scramble for cover. Max fires back, hitting one of the attackers as he pushed Rosalee toward the corner of the room.

“Stay down!” he barkes, his voice barely audible over the gunfire.

Hartwell had vanished in the commotion, leaving Rosalee reeling. She clutches a piece of shattered table, her mind racing with questions she can’t afford to answer now. Max crouches beside her, reloading his weapon.

“We’re not walking out of here unless we move now,” he says. His shoulder is bleeding, but he doesn’t flinch. “You with me?”

Rosalee nods, her jaw set. “Let’s end this.”

They darted toward the suite’s secondary exit, dodging bullets and bodies. As they reach the door, Rosalee glances back, her eyes searching for Hartwell.

But the woman is gone, leaving only a chilling emptiness where she’d stood moments ago, a ghost of betrayal lingering in her wake. And a reminder that people are never quite who we think they are.

Max yanks the door open, motioning her through first. The hallway is eerily quiet compared to the chaos in the suite. He slams the door shut behind them and throws a nearby chair under the handle as a makeshift barricade. His breathing is heavy, but his eyes stay sharp.

“This way,” he whispers, gripping her hand and pulling her down the hallway toward the service elevators.

Rosalee hesitated. “Max, I need answers. Marianne—she—”

“We don’t have time! We’ll get to her, but if we don’t move, we are dead as disco.”

She clenches her jaw, biting back her frustration, and follows him. They round the corner, the polished floors gleaming under harsh fluorescent lights. The service elevator comes into view, but so do two more armed men who emerge from the opposite end of the hall.

Max raises his weapon and fires, dropping one instantly. The other ducks into a doorway, returning fire. Rosalee presses herself against the wall, her heart pounding as bullets whizz past her.

“Watch my six,” Max says, tossing her his backup handgun.

“What?”

“Cover me.”

Without hesitation, she takes the gun, the weight in her hands foreign but familiar enough to grip tightly.

“Go!” she says, leaning out to fire a shot that ricocheted off the doorframe near their attacker. It is enough to make him retreat momentarily, buying Max the seconds he needed to reach the elevator. He hits the call button repeatedly, muttering curses under his breath as the gunfire resumes.

Rosalee fired again, her aim steadier this time. The man goes down with a cry, clutching his leg. She freezes for a heartbeat, staring at him writhing on the floor.

“Rosalee!” Max shouts, jolting her back into the moment. The elevator doors ding open, and he shoves her inside, slamming the “close door” button as more voices echo down the hallway.

As the elevator descends, the adrenaline begins to fade, leaving a cold dread in its place. Rosalee leans against the wall, her hands trembling around the gun. Max rips a strip from his shirt and presses it against the wound on his shoulder, wincing but saying nothing.

“You’re hurt,” she says, her voice breaking slightly.

“I’ve been a whole lot worse,” he replies gruffly, though the blood soaking through the makeshift bandage told a different story.

She wants to say more, to push him to let her help, but her mind keeps circling back to Hartwell. The woman who had been her guiding star in the art world is now at the center of this nightmare. The betrayal cut more profound than she’d expected, a wound as fresh as Max’s shoulder.

“What’s the plan now?” she asks, forcing herself to focus.

Max keeps his focus on the scattered documents. “We regroup and analyze what we pulled from that room. If there’s anything connecting this cabal to Mercer, we leverage it.”

“And Hartwell?” Rosalee pressed. “

“We’ll find her. And if we don’t? Trust me, Rosalee; she isn’t getting away with anything.”

The elevator jolts to a stop, and the doors slide open to a basement loading dock. Max steps out first, gun raised. He motions for Rosalee to follow.

They move quickly, sticking to the edges of the loading bay. Max led them to an unmarked van parked near the exit. He checks the handle and finds it unlocked. Pulling the door open, he gestures for Rosalee to climb in.

“Not exactly subtle,” she mutters, climbing into the passenger seat.

“Subtlety’s overrated,” Max shoots back while hot-wiring the vehicle with practiced ease.

The engine roars to life, and they speed out of the loading dock, merging into the city's bustling streets. The city glitters around them, oblivious to what they just escaped. Max negotiates the grid, weaving through traffic and ignoring the blaring horns that follows them.

“Where are we going?” Rosalee asks, her voice tight.

“Safe house,” Max replies, keeping his eyes on the road. “It’s time to stay off the grid until this is over.”

After a tense drive, Max pulls into the underground parking garage of an unassuming building in the Lower East Side. They exit the van and made their way up a narrow staircase to a small, nondescript apartment. Inside, the space is sparsely furnished but functional, with heavy curtains drawn over the windows and a faint smell of bleach lingering in the air.

Max locks the door behind them and immediately inspects the items he’d grabbed from the Eisenhower Suite. Papers, flash drives, and a sleek black tablet are on the worn coffee table. Rosalee sits across from him, her hands still shaking as she reaches for one of the papers.

“Mercer’s network is bigger than I thought,” Max says grimly, scrolling through the contents of the tablet. “These people aren’t just funding him—they’re profiting from him. Art deals, tech acquisitions, even political campaigns. It’s all connected.”

Rosalee’s eyes skim the paper in her hands, her heart sinking as she recognizes familiar names. Gallery owners she’d worked with, patrons she’d admired, even friends who had supported her career. The betrayal isn’t just systemic—it’s personal.

“I can’t believe this,” she whispers. “They’ve been using me, my gallery, my work...”

Max looks up, his expression softening. “This isn’t on you, Rosalee. They manipulated you like they manipulate everyone else.”

“But Hartwell,” she says, her voice cracking. “She was supposed to protect me, to guide me.”

Max reaches across the table, his hand resting on hers. “She’ll go down, too. I promise. I have exactly the right person to take this stuff to, someone who can make sense of it.”

Before Rosalee can respond, a sharp knock echoes through the apartment. Both of them freeze, their eyes locking. Max’s hand goes straight to his gun, and he moves silently toward the door.

Rosalee’s pulse quickens as she stands, ready to grab the nearest weapon if needed. The knock comes again, louder this time. Max peers through the peephole, his jaw tightening.

“It’s her,” he says, his voice low and tense.

“Who?” Rosalee whispers, dread pooling in her stomach.

Max steps back, his expression unreadable. “Hartwell.”

Max opens the door and invites Marianne in. She’s straight business.

“Tell me what it’ll take for you to take my name off…all of that.” She points to the items on the counter.

“You’re all the same,” Rosalee says. “Thinking everyone has a price.”

“That’s because everyone *does* have a price, you little naif.”

Rosalee steels herself and gets in Marianne’s personal space.

“I’m not the little girl you once pretended to mentor. I’m an artist and a business owner, and I don’t have a price.”

Marianne looks over at Max, who shrugs, as if to say that it’s between the two of them.

“Listen, Rosalee, we can talk about this.”

“We just did. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.

# **Chapter 24: Garden of Sin**

The sprawling New York Botanical Gardens unfold before them like an enchanted sanctuary, its verdant paths glowing faintly under the moonlight. The gentle hum of the city seems worlds away, muted by the quiet majesty of blooming flowers and towering trees. Max tightens his grip on Rosalee’s hand as they walked past the Perennial Garden, its blossoms swaying lightly in the evening breeze.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Rosalee says. “Another place that’s so beautiful that was hosting something so evil.”

Max doesn’t answer immediately. His mind is locked onto the task at hand, the faint bruise on his temple throbbing—a souvenir from the chaos at The Plaza Hotel. His body is battered, but his resolve is sharp as ever.

“Not anymore. Not after we meet with her.”

“Do you mean *moi*, Mr. McCollum?”

Max and Rosalee turn to see, at last, a friendly and familiar (to Max, at least) face: Lilly Pullman, one of the few powerful journalists left in this city who won’t kill stories or bury leads. As tenacious as she is uncorruptable, Lilly has one of the most sterling reputations possible for a journalist these days.

When Max had pinged her on WhatsApp, he’d given her something of an aperitif; a dozen of the names they’d already uncovered, with the promise of many, many more to come.

The Botanical Gardens had come up a few times in the drives they’d decrypted, but nothing like that would transpire here ever again. Not once Lilly pieced through all the information with the help of her I.T. team—and a nudge from an old friend.

Max and the idea of trust had something of a complicated relationship. He’d settled on “trust-but-verify” as a matter of course for a long while; these days, it was “trust-until-absolutely-goddamn-positive,” and Lilly fit the bill. She’d been his go-to for taking down kingpins, mafiosos, and now, she’d be the key to bringing some of the wealthiest people in the world to their knees.

She gives Max a hug, proffers her hand to Rosalee, who shakes it.

“So, are we gonna talk business?”

Max nods towards the Haupt Conservatory, its iconic dome gleaming under the soft illumination of pathway lights.

He ascended the steps first, every muscle in his body coiled like a spring. Rosalee follows, her mind still racing. The faint smell of orchids and damp earth surround them as they enter the conservatory, the air warm and heavy with humidity.

Lilly pulls out a jamming device, ensuring that no one can see or hear them. Off Max’s look, she gives a coltish shrug accompanied by a knowing grin. “Still waters run deep, McCollum.”

Inside, the Palm Dome stretches upward like a cathedral of glass, the towering palms casting intricate shadows on the tiled floor.

“Let’s have it.”

Max and Rosalee take out the trove of tablets, USB ports—every single piece of damning evidence they pilfered, found, or otherwise obtained over the course of their investigation.

Lilly takes a tablet from her purse and, using some contraption that even Max had never seen before, connects one of the USBs to the tablet.

Her jaw capitulates to gravity as she scans the contents.

“Half the city’s elite is going to have a lot to answer for.”

“So you can use it?”

“Use it?! I’m going to up for an award, thanks to you two, and it rhymes with Schmulitzer.”

Max and Rosalee chuckle.

“What about Jeffrey Mercer?” Max asks. He turns to Rosalee, having gotten to know her well enough to know that the question had just been on her lips.

“Last I heard? He was a guest at the Island Hilton.”

Max looks at Rosalee. “That’s code for Riker’s Island.”

Rosalee rolls her eyes. “I went to Yale, you know. I have a brain.”

“One of the many things I so adore about you.”

“And I can all but guarantee that he’s going to get Epstein’ed; if not tonight, then definitely tomorrow.”

“Cold comfort, I guess,” Rosalee says, knowing that Mercer will “commit suicide” at the hands of bribed guards. “And Mercer?”

“Let’s just say he won’t be taking a breath of fresh air for the rest of his natural life, no matter how much he cooperates. He’s off the board forever. You guys did it; you won.”

Rosalee and Max take a moment to take that in, savor it, and then, without either of them intending to do so, they wrap themselves in one another’s arms and kiss.

“On *that* note, I will leave you two lovebirds in peace,” Lilly says with a departing bow. Before she exits, though, Rosalee calls to her.

“Wait. Can you…I don’t want to compromise your journalistic integrity or anything, but could you leave one name out?”

Max and Lilly exchange a glance; Max gives a nod so small it’s almost imperceptible.

“With what you guys have given me, it’s the least I can do. What name?”

“Marianne.”

“Consider her…not party to anything. Thanks again, guys. I’d say you found a good one here, Max, but I wouldn’t want her thinking she could do better.” Lilly winks at Rosalee and descends the steps.

Max turns to Rosalee. “Why’d you do that? Leave Marianne off the hook?”

Rosalee opens her mouth to reply, then closes it just as quick. “I’ll answer that one tomorrow. For now? Let’s actually enjoy some art without looking for hidden clues or ancient ciphers.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.”

“I was right, by the way,” Rosalee adds as she grabs Max’s hand.

“Which time?” Max smarmily replies.

“You were either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid.”

“Which one was it?”

“I’ll tell you at breakfast.”

“Your place or mine?”

“From what that one guy said about your place, I think maybe we’ll stick to mine until you hire an interior decorator.”

“A *what*? I happen to like my little slice of…maybe not Heaven, but close enough.”

Max chuckles as they walk, hand in hand, toward SoHo, where there’s a new exhibit that Rosalee had been dying to check out. Hopefully, there’d be no hidden symbols.

“What about my gallery? They’re going to link it to all of that.”

“You didn’t know.”

“How do *you* know they’ll believe me?”

“Because I do.”

Rosalee shakes her head and puts her head on Max’s shoulder.

“You’re either incredibly confident or incredibly naïve.”

“Here we go again…”

Another battle won in the eternal war for good. The victory feels good, but Max knows it’ll be short-lived. They always are.

For now, though, he’s going to enjoy some unencrypted art.