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CHAPTER 1 - ETHAN

The sea breeze came in strongly. I propped my foot up on a log and yanked at my dress pants. I'd told the tailor he had made the damned thing a little too long. He had argued that he had been dressing me for over a year and knew what he was doing; said the fabric would shrink a bit during dry cleaning and that, with my height, the pants should not be any shorter. Turns out this was the one time he had been wrong. As I stood there tugging the material upwards, the bell in the tower tolled for the bride and groom. I bet he was standing at that pulpit thinking he was the luckiest man on earth. But if he was, he would be sadly mistaken. Cause I knew for a fact that he wasn't the luckiest man. I was! The past two years of my life had been filled with more happiness and meaning than this man would experience in his entire lifetime. And it was all because of a woman named Kimberly Holmes. Since we had officially become a couple, the both of us had been more blissful than we could stand. My love for her grew each day. Although I really didn't know how it was even possible, given the amount of love I already had for her in the beginning. A pair of hands wrapped around me from behind and took me away from my thoughts. I knew she'd have followed me out here. Can't spend even five minutes without her man? I think I've spoiled this woman.

“Always have to make an exit to somewhere huh?”

My lips transformed into a smile which she could not see. “Kim baby,” I took her hands from around my waist

and held them in mine. “Do you know how good you are for me?”

She rubbed her cheek into my back. “Yup. Cause you do the same thing for me.” She rubbed some more. I pulled her closer. A second later, our little moment was disrupted.

“Ethan, my patience has expired. You’d better come talk to him before my knife and I find a more practical solution.” Aldo’s tone was dripping with exasperation.

I sighed and turned around. “Coming Aldo.” I then looked at Kimberly who had a slightly sad smile on her face. Last week, I had alerted her to the possibility of this situation. Therefore, she was aware of what was now going on. She reached upwards and kissed me on the cheek. “I’ll see you two inside. The ceremony is about to start in a few minutes.”

I watched the source of my contentment head towards the church, then turned and went with Bordin towards the source of my present irritation. We quickly made it across the lawn, and through the back door which led to the confession room. I turned the knob and walked in. Bordin stayed at the door and I knew exactly why. It was the only way he could control himself. His earlier statement ran through my mind. Aldo’s ‘practical solutions’ had often made even a seasoned killer like myself cringe.

I eyed the source of my irritation. There he stood, face full of determination; the kind of determination which he didn’t need at this point in time, as far as I was concerned. Where the hell was that determination years

ago? Not that I was one who should be criticizing anybody for not taking action: After all, I had waited over a decade to claim my woman. But I certainly had not waited until she was close to walking down the aisle. I turned to Aldo who shook his head in understanding and walked away. Then I turned back to address Jake. The determination in his eyes had already given room to some fear.

“Jacob the woman is about to walk down the fucking aisle. You can’t do this.”

“She’s not down there yet.”

I saw the fear disappear and again all which was left was hardened determination: determination to ruin Maxine Pierce’s wedding day because he had finally realized what everyone had been telling him for years - that he was very much in love with her. I somewhat sympathized with the guy; he was one of my closest friends. But my heart held more sympathy for Max, who had had to push her feelings for him under the rug and find the strength to move on and seek new love. How would this impact upon her? Jacob must have read the thoughts in my mind because I saw his look soften a bit.

“Ethan man, I know I’m an idiot.”

“You’re damn right you are. Max chased you for over six years.”

“Yea. And now she’s marrying a guy who she’s known less than two years. Have you ever in your life seen Maxine do anything this quickly? For Christ’s sake Ethan,

she takes more time to dedicate herself to shoe purchases!
She doesn't love this guy!

I brought my voice up to his level. "What if you're wrong? Jake you could ruin the woman's life! With her family watching."

He rushed up to me, getting in my face. "And what if I'm right? What then? I know her E. Much better than you. She's only doing this to force me out of her heart; which means that I'm still in there. If I'm still in there, she should not be marrying another man. She should be with me. And she will be. I'll never give up. It's now my turn to fight."

My eyes focused on his with pure annoyance. "I hope you know what you're doing." I left him in the confession room and went to find my seat in the pews next to Kimberly and my other unit members. There wasn't much more of an argument I could make. The guy was already full of resolve. And he did know Maxine a bit better than me. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps.

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The ceremony began on time, due to the bride's penchant for punctuality. With every step which brought her closer down the aisle, I got a better look; she was radiant: all dressed up, dolled up and seemingly happy. I sighed, hoping that Jacob really did know what he was about to do. The bride finally reached the smiling groom.

She took the hand he offered and stood next to him. Minister Irwin looked at the couple, smiled and opened his bible.

I then wondered where Jake was and when he would make his disastrous entrance. Unfortunately or fortunately, my wait wasn't long. After the words "Dear friends, we have gathered here this afternoon to witness the joining together" everyone saw Jake bolt into the chapel from a side entrance. I swear, I'd never seen Jacob Grape move that fast in his life. And trust me, the man usually moved fast. In two seconds, he was at the pulpit behind the bride and groom. I closed my eyes, unable to look at the scene. I felt Kimy grip my hand. I squeezed hers as I heard Jacob utter the dreaded words.

"Stop. This ceremony can't continue."

I breathed hard as I heard Ronan, Jessup and Berny utter "Oh shit!" all at the same time. My eyes finally opened again to see a red faced, enraged Maxine looking directly at Jacob. Her husband to be was much too shocked to say anything but her voice came through. It was barely more than a squeak but was laced with embarrassment.

"Jacob, have you lost your mind? This is my wedding."

Jake stepped closer. "Max I...I have feelings for you. Please don't marry this guy. You don't really love him. I drove you to this. It was me. I'm sorry. I caused all of this. But I'll spent the rest of my life trying to fix it if that what is takes. Please Ma..."

My heart leaped as I saw Max use her already closed fist to sucker punch him and heard Aldo shout “Good for you girl.” Maxine broke down on her man’s shoulder while Jacob got up and attempted to speak again. His speech was cut off by Maxine’s fiancé though. At that point I felt more for the guy than for anyone else in the room. He was completely blindsided by Jacob’s stunt. I saw the fear in his eyes, fear which I guessed was related to Jacob’s words. My guesses were confirmed with his words to his bride to be.

“Maxine sweetheart. Talk to me. You know I’d do anything for you. Is it true? Do you...do you...?”

Maxine buried her head further into his tux and mumbled some words which I couldn’t hear as more tears came. Roger, her fiancé, lowered his head in sadness. Maxine suddenly lifted herself from his shoulder, kissed him gently on the cheek and quickly brushed past Jacob on her rush to the building’s front door. Ironically, it was the same one she had used to make her glorious entrance just minutes ago.

Kimberly and I looked at each other, knowing full well that I had to go after her. She couldn’t be alone in this state and seeing that I was the unit’s leader, I was the most likely candidate. I would have expected one or two of Max’s family members to beat me to the chase, but seeing me already heading for the door, they decided to turn their attention to Jacob who was watching helplessly as the last of Maxine’s wedding dress trail exited the building. I walked quickly but had a chance to turn back and catch a glimpse of Max’s family attacking Jacob altogether. I could

only imagine that Roger's family would join in quite soon. At the moment I couldn't bring myself to feel sorry for him, cause truly he deserved it. As I exited the building, I searched for white and saw it in the corner quite close to where I had been standing before the ceremony. She had just reached a coconut tree. I saw her hand press up against it for leverage- both emotional and physical, I would have imagined. I puffed out my chest and raced to her, ready to be the knight in shining armor or punching bag that she needed right now. I sincerely hoped it would be the first because taking punches for Jacob's dumb mistake would really piss me off. Pushing back the wind, I finally reached the spot and touched her shoulder. "Maxine," I uttered in the most tender voice I could find. Before I had the chance to say anything else, she rushed onto my chest. It was like she had just been broken into tiny pieces. This was not the Maxine I knew. She looked up at me and I was grateful to see some hint of strength still there in those eyes.

"Ethan, how much more of me is he going to take? How much more hurt am I going to suffer because of him? I'm tired."

I didn't know what the hell to say. Geez, where's a therapist when you need one? This was Kimberly's department, not mine. Her eyes were locked onto my eyes, obviously expecting an answer to her questions. I took a deep breath and said the very thing which was on my mind right now. "Do you still love him, Max?"

"I think so. Oh God, what's wrong with me?"

As she buried her face in my clothing again, I couldn't help being partly annoyed that the S.O.B had been right. He was the cause of all this pain and he had still been correct about the whole situation. But part of me was glad that Maxine had been stopped. After all, if she didn't really love Roger, they would be better off not getting married. At that moment, I dug the wound a bit deeper. "But Max, if you don't love Roger why were you marrying him?" I felt her fist thump onto my chest. There we go, hit number one. Jacob is so going to pay for this later on.

"I didn't say I don't love Roger. I do. It's just...It can't compare with what I feel for Jacob."

I rubbed her back like one would do to a toddler they were trying to calm. "I understand. Jacob has been in your heart for a long time. Do you think you could give him a second chance?" Well you all knew I had to ask, didn't you? I mean despite my anger towards him right now, Jake was still my friend and a good man; a stupid man sometimes, but also a good one.

Pierce brought the skirts of her dress upwards and blew her nose right into them. "I don't know. I don't think so. Let him suffer. Then he will know what it's like- what it was like for me all those years."

Her head landed on my chest again, this time with a soft thud. She was still holding on to me tightly. "Maxine, I can only imagine all the emotions which are going through you right now. What Jake did was horrible. But you have to know he would never intentionally hurt you. It's because he realized how much he loved you that he tried to stop this.

We had always known he was a moron when it came to you and thankfully, I guess he finally realized it too. Isn't better that he realized it before you got married as opposed to afterwards?" Jacob Grape owes me big time right now. Maxine's hands loosened round my body and I heard the words which I knew would have eventually come.

"Ethan, I need to go home to England. I'm going back with my family. I'm not sure about my life right now, whether I'll come back. Whether I'll be part of the team anymore. I hate to do this to you but I need to sort this all out in my head. And I can't do it here."

I kissed the top of her head and kept up with the back rubbing. "I know. Don't worry about a thing. You'll figure it out. The Maxine Pierce I know always does. I'll just miss you. We all will." And really, we would! Max had been the one touch of refinement and feminine love among us. We all cherished her company. I didn't know what the future held for her, or for the clown who had ruined her wedding. But I knew one thing: Love can find its way through anything. And if their love was strong enough, the universe could certainly afford them another chance.

CHAPTER 2 - JACOB

He cleared his throat just as I had poured my twentieth glass of wine. I reached for another small communion glass and poured some wine for him as well. It never ceased to amaze me how Ethan could so effectively infiltrate a room. To this day, I thank God that he's my friend and not my enemy. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough." His feet dragged over to the wooden bench. He took a seat. "How'd you know where to find it?"

"All priests keep their wine in the same place." I walked over with the two small glasses in one hand and the large bottle of wine in the other. I placed the bottle on the ground beside the bench as I sought a seat next to him and offered him a glass. He accepted it with a suspicious smile. "You know you're going have to replace it right away. They'll need that wine for tomorrow's mass."

I drank the glass's contents with ease then reached for the bottle. "Is that what you came in here for? To grill me about communion wine?" I poured some more and drank.

He glanced sideways at me with the smile still present. "You'd better be nice to me. I'm one of the few people who still likes you right now. And, as usual, Ronan's been aching for a target all day. Don't let that target have to be you." Ethan gulped the wine then directed

the glass sideways. “Hit me.” As the wine filled the glass, he continued. “What happened after I left?”

I sighed, shaking my head. He was taking way too much pleasure in this. “What do you think happened, E?”

He let out a heartfelt chuckle beside me before drinking. “Well at least they let you live.”

I spread my arms on the bench’s back rest and looked up at the ceiling. If God was in this place, he certainly hadn’t been with me today. Despite the pain all over my body, the only thing I could think of was Maxine’s look of horror and the subsequent pain in her eyes. I had really made a mess out of things. “How is she?”

His sarcastic tone was at the ready. “Oh, you care about how she is doing, do you?”

My patience reached its limit. “Ethan!”

He sighed. “Alright I’m sorry. She’s hurt, as anyone would expect. But she did manage to tell me she is still in love with you.”

I smiled up at the ceiling. Maybe God had been with me today after all. My arm made a side grab for my friend’s shoulders. Excitement rushed through my cranium. I’d made the right decision in stopping the wedding. “I knew it!” My other hand pounded on the bench before my feet sprang into action and began pacing. The blood was now rushing through my brain like an avalanche. “I knew there was still hope!” My feet switched in the opposite direction and picked up speed. “Gotta get to her. I gotta...”

My head looked upwards in confusion. “How do I get to her?” My mind suddenly re-acknowledged my buddy’s presence in the room. “Ethan how do I get to her?”

Ethan sprawled himself onto the bench. His look of amusement was clear. “Jake you gotta calm down.”

I rushed over to him, reached downwards and grabbed his collar with both hands. His amusement was something I normally could not stand. And today, understandably, my tolerance for it was even less. “I don’t have time for this right now, E. Come on. Are you with me or what?”

“Get off.” He broke free from my grip then yanked me back onto the bench with a grip of his own. “Sit your ass down and act like a man who has some sense. You need to think this through.”

I took a few calming breaths. He was right; irritating, but right. I had to get my head together; couldn’t risk hurting Maxine any more than I already had. I looked at him earnestly. “How much damage did I do? How long should I give her to calm down?”

“You didn’t do enough damage to make her hate you but she does need some space. I’d say give her a week. She’s going home though.”

His last sentence was no surprise. I’d already guessed she would have. “I’ll give her the week. But after that it’s on. I’m not stopping until I get her back. You guys will be OK without me for a while, right?”

Webster turned sideways. “Of course, no worries. Good luck Jacob. I know you love her. And if you can manage to fix this, I’d be happy for you both.”

I turned to face him, putting my arms around him with a brotherly hug. His arms reciprocated with the reassuring embrace that I needed at that moment.