

*Maxime*

The last time I visited Dr. Delphine Bisset was before my trip to South Africa. She's a good shrink. I'm not the self-searching or inwardly reflecting kind, but she helped me understand shitloads about myself, which, believe it or not, is imperative in my business. You can't know your enemies if you don't know yourself. Delphine is the only one with the balls to be honest with me. The psychiatrist I tried before her told me whatever I wanted to hear. I guess he was worried I'd shoot him.

Pushing the door to her uptown consultation room open, I walk to the receptionist's desk. I'm alone. My guards don't tag along for this. My visits to the shrink are something I prefer to keep private. My enemies may take it for a weakness.

The girl looks up. Her easy smile vanishes. "Good morning, sir." Her hand is already on the phone. "Dr. Bisset is with a patient, but I'll let her know you're here."

I give her a polite nod and take a seat among the other waiting patients. Five minutes later, the door to the office opens and a young man exits in front of Delphine.

"Max." She offers me a warm smile and beckons me with a wave.

The other patients glare at me when I stand. I don't have an appointment.

Ignoring their nasty looks, Delphine shuts the door and shakes my hand. "It's been a while."

"I've been busy."

"Naturally," she says with wit. "Crime will do that to you." Walking to the informal sitting area, she motions for me to take a seat. "What brings you today?"

I sit down in one of the armchairs and adjust my jacket. "A woman."

"Ah." She takes the seat opposite me and crosses her legs. "You mean one you've seen more than twice?"

"Six months, actually."

She tilts her head. "Very out of character for you. What makes this one different?"

"She's innocent. Pure. I suppose you could say she's naïve."

Folding her hands, she studies me. "You're attracted to these *innocent* traits?"

"Naturally," I say, quoting her earlier remark. "Opposites attract and all that."

Her smile is eloquent. “Why?”

“She’s everything I’m not. I’d say that’s obvious.”

“How is this a problem for you?” she asks in her smooth voice.

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees and tip my fingers together. I give her a long look as I weigh my words. Their heaviness bears down right in the center of my chest. “Am I capable of love, Doctor?”

“Max.” She blows out a short sigh. It’s a soft sound laced with compassion. “In order to love, you need to have empathy.”

“Whenever I’m the cause of her pain, I hurt myself worse than what she’s hurting.”

“You’re inflicting pain on yourself?”

“Yes.”

“As punishment?”

“As a reminder.”

“To have empathy?”

“Yes.”

“Physical pain doesn’t replace compassion, Max. Compassion comes from the heart.”

“That’s the thing. She makes me feel.” I press a palm over my chest where the dead skin crawls from the mere thought of her. “She makes me feel *things*.”

“Define things.”

“Fear. Fucking loads of it. Weakness. She makes me care.”

“Can you put her first, above your own needs?”

I consider that. Putting Zoe first will mean doing what’s best for her and what she wants—to let her go. Only, I can’t do that, and it has nothing to do with her brother’s diamonds. I’ll never set her free. She’s mine. *Mine*. I fucking claimed her. I took her virginity. I came inside her. No, I’m afraid letting her go has and will never be an option. Tilting my head back, I scrub a hand over my face.

“Do you manipulate her, Max?”

I look back at the doctor. “For her own good.”

“Do you lie to her?”

“When I must.”

“Do you feel shame or remorse for your lies and manipulations?”

“No.”

Her small smile is sad, conveying a wordless message.

“Yeah, yeah.” I rake my fingers through my hair. “I’m still the pathologically lying, manipulative, coldhearted prick with the versatile criminal behavior and lack of moral judgment.”

“And high intelligence,” she adds, “not to mention ruthlessness.”

“That’s supposed to help me?”

She leans her arms on her knees. “You’re the most ruthless person I know, meaning you’re willing to take risks. Are you willing to take a risk for her and step out of your comfort zone? You’re also a clever man, a man who knows how his behavior impacts others, even if you don’t feel guilty about it. You want to do better. That’s why you sought me out for starters.”

“Even if I do better, I’ll still be the fucking psychopath incapable of love.”

“You suffer from emotional detachment, but feeling something is a beginning. We can work with that.”

Frustration mounts. “I’m pretty much agitated right now. That counts for an emotion.”

“Your frustration and anger are manifestations of your selfish impatience. We’ve already covered this.”

“Isn’t caring for someone love in its own kind of way?”

“It depends on the root of the caring. Is this about her or you?”

I shift in my seat. “What do you mean?”

“Do you care because of how being with her makes *you* feel, or do you care about how she feels, regardless of yourself?”

“I don’t want her to be sad or unhappy.”

“How do you feel when she’s unhappy?”

“Frightened.”

“Why?”

“That it’ll slip away.”

“That what will slip away?”

“Her. This. What I’m feeling when she’s around.”

“Right.” She raises a brow. “So, this is about you.”

“I love my family, don’t I?”

“You hate your father, and your brother is your biggest enemy. You have a sense of responsibility toward your mother, and you experience feelings of injustice for your father’s behavior, but you lack the empathy that forms unconditional relationships with your family.”

“This woman—*my* woman—grew up in dysfunctional family in a poor neighborhood. She’s been exposed to every circumstance you quoted for making a psychopath, yet she’s not like me. How come?”

“Max.” She sighs again. “It’s not a secret you can steal. Every person’s internal and external factors are unique. As I’ve told you before, I suspect in your case it’s a combination of your violent circumstances and genetic inheritance.”

“So,” I say with a wry smile, “you’re telling me I’ll never be able to love.”

“I think you do love in your own way, and I do believe you’ll be able to build a trusting and sharing relationship if you can manage to see things from your partner’s perspective.”

“But?”

“But in this case, your care is selfish. You said it yourself. She gives you what you don’t have. You’re opposites. You’re using her to balance yourself.”

Great. This helps a fucking lot, and it changes nothing.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Always a pleasure, Max.” Despite her strict no touching policy, she leans over and squeezes my hand. “I’m here when you need me.”

I stand. “I appreciate your time.”

“No, you don’t.” Her intelligent eyes meet mine. “You expect it. In fact, you insist.” Not unkindly, she adds, “Next time, try to be considerate to everyone else and make an appointment.”

She’s right, as always.

I’d give my life to give Zoe the love she deserves, but I am what I am.

I leave Dr. Bisset’s office still the same man, a man unable to reciprocate love.