

Turning Point

It was just a game, of course. But it was more than that, and everyone knew it. They were from the upscale part of town, and we were from the wrong side of the tracks.

Literally.

South of the rail line.

"Simon," I hissed at his back as he scrambled over the fence. "Be careful."

"I'm fine," his voice echoed from the other side.

"I'm just saying..." I trailed off as I hightailed it over the iron bars. "If we get caught, he won't be pleased. This is my only shot here."

"I know, Max. I know." He crouched down in the shadow of the hedge and pulled out his tablet, the screen lighting up his pale face. I could see it reflected in his thick glasses, anxious that the glare would compromise us.

"Turn that down! Someone will see!"

"It's fine--you don't have to be so paranoid you know." He started up a couple of apps and left them running in the background before he pulled up the code key. "This is an easy one. Look."

He shoved the tablet towards me even though I didn't really know what I was looking at. He was the hacker for a reason. I just led point.

And stole a few things here or there.

"What exactly am I looking at?" Simon liked to show off, but all I needed was for him to get us in.

"See, it's an easy code. A bi-pin fiver. Nothing I haven't handled before."

I raised my eyebrows, but it was too dark for him to see. "Why don't you quit bragging and just shut down the system already?"

"Fine." He tapped in a couple of codes and before I knew it, the mansion in front of us had gone silent.

Black.

We were in.

Deep breath. Count to five.

Simon entered a few more codes and the lights came back up. He'd cut the power to everything, so the records could show a brief outage. What they wouldn't show was that he also shut down the video monitoring system and the alarms for the time being.

We shouldn't have any trouble slipping in.

Simon slid the screen brightness down, but just enough so he could still keep an eye on everything. He'd already set the system to loop while we still had access to the live feed in case someone showed up. But as far as we knew, the Marquettes were gone for the evening.

We had the mansion--and its jewels--to ourselves.

"So, if our stake-out was right, then it should be a quick in-and-out job. The jewels, or at least the diamond, will be in the safe behind the false door in the master bedroom. Ms. Marquette likes to keep it close, but she puts it away when she isn't wearing it."

"Which is hardly ever," Simon muttered.

"I know. This job would be a whole lot easier if we could do a Grab-and-Go, but instead, we're stuck with a Turning Point."

"We'll be fine."

Simon always said that. I couldn't remember the last time we'd been on a job and he hadn't reassured me. In addition to being the best hacker around, he was also the most sane of the group, which is why I pulled just him with me tonight. We'd been scoping the mansion and the diamond for awhile now, and this was an easy job. It was the score I needed to show the boss man I was good. That I could do this.

It didn't matter that the boss man was my father, and he wanted nothing more than to keep his sweet little daughter out of the family business for the rest of her life. But what he also didn't know was that I'd been stealing since I was two, and my own little offshore account proved it. But that's another story.

"You've run the scenario, right?"

I lover over at Simon who was immersed in his screen. "Yes. A million times. We go up through the back stairs, cut to the left for the bedroom, crack the safe, pocket the diamond, put everything as it was, then head out the back again. Alarms and codes set. We're good. We've had our eyes on this place for months now, and as of this morning, nothing has changed."

"Alright. We've got thirty minutes until the alarms are live again. Plenty of time." He slipped the tablet into his backpack, and pulled out his phone screen. *Easier to handle*, he usually said, but I knew it was because he couldn't go three minutes without texting Phoebe.

"Let's go." We headed towards the back of the mansion. I know it would have been better to get the whole team together for tonight, but for an easy job like this, the less people involved, the less case for slip ups. The Marquette's lived in a remote place outside town, so it wasn't like we had to worry about the neighbors. And thanks to a little Drop the Mic, we'd had bugs in the place for weeks. Simon also hacked into the cameras months ago which helped us

learn their movements, and gave me plenty of time to run the scenario and practice with the Casoro safe.

Just this morning I had the decoy purring like a kitten as I spun the wheels.

The backdoor jingle jarred me out of my safe-cracking daydream, as Simon and I slipped inside, heading for the back stairway.

“Did you know these are called the servants stairs?” Simon asked, thumbs hammering away as he walked ahead of me.

“Yeah, the Marquette’s still call it that. And stop texting until we’re out of here,” I hissed.

From the recon we’d gathered, they were quite a team. She was arrogant. A real New York business woman: the VP who wanted to be the next CEO. While he, with his silver fox hair, and always-unbuttoned-top-button shirts was the CEO. They weren’t married, the Marquettes. They were actually a brother and sister duo, and our recon told us they were partners in the firm. The mansion was the family place, a villa right off the heart of Manhattan.

It was part of the reason we were targeting them, beyond the two hundred carat Queen’s Diamond that lay nestled in the wall safe. They owned too much and cared too little. Flaunted their possessions at times, but never let the little guy have any. Someone needed to show them that complacency was dangerous.

That someone was us.

Simon made it to the bedroom and I could hear him starting to set up while I stood in the hall, staring at the pictures of the family, asking myself if I truly wanted to do this. From a first glance, the Marquettes seemed like a happy family. There were numerous photos of Mr. M with a little girl, and several photos of the larger family at different points in time: vacations, birthday

parties, holidays. As I moved through the hallway, the little girl grew up, going from rowdy toddler to what looked like a smart teenager, her acceptance photo into the most prestigious Art & STEM school in New York City taking the most prominent place on the wall.

It didn't matter. Anyone who left a 200 carat diamond lying in a safe didn't deserve it. Even if it was paying for some kid's tuition. I needed to do this.

"Everything look good in here Simon?" I asked as I stepped into the dark room.

"Depends on your definition of good."

My heart stopped and suddenly the room felt stuffy. "What do you mean? Everything was fine this morning."

Simon had unlatched the false door and set the lights I needed to monitor the dials. The first thing I noticed was that the safe wasn't green. Like it had been for weeks now.

"It's not the Casaro," he said.

"No," my voice wavered. "It's not."

"It's the Biometric."

"I can see that."

"We're fine Max. It's all fine. Really. You've got this."

"No, Simon. No, I don't. The Biometric is unbreakable without the owner's metrics or the one-time fail-safe passcode. It's BIO-metric for a reason. Let's abort. Let's just pack it up and get out of here as if we never even tried. I'm not about to make a fool of myself in front of him."

I turned around, ready to stalk out of the door when I heard it. Not an actual sound, but the thrum that's haunted me since I was two. I didn't always want to be a thief, and to be honest, my Dad tried really hard to steer me away from the family business. But he saw it in me too.

It's hard to explain if you aren't in the business like we are, but there's this thrumming that starts way down deep when I walk into a room that has safe or a lock or something that needs broken into. It sounds cliché, I know. The ole *it's calling me* ruse, but honest-to-God, I feel a pull in the pit of my stomach, daring me to break open the safe or pick the lock and discover what's inside.

I didn't start off taking things. It was mostly the challenge of *could I get in*. And then eventually, it became *could I get in faster...could I do it without getting caught*. And the next thing you know, dear father was shipping me off, away from the family so I wouldn't get wrapped up in the business.

I was only fifteen at the time, but I was out safe-cracking my dad's best men.

Tonight, the thrum felt deep: I *know* none of them have ever broken into a Biometric safe before.

But, when you're in our game, the impossible is the challenge we can't refuse. I stepped closer to safe, it's newness taunting me. I've never practiced on a Biometric before because the impossibility is a one-time chance. I know I could crack the dials easy, but without a fingerprint, we'd need a code, that if we input wrong, would essentially brick the safe. Then no one could get in.

Ever.

Which meant no one would see the Queen's Diamond again.

I felt Simon tap my shoulder, and when I turned around, he gave me the nod.

“We’ll do this together,” he said. “You break in, and I’ll override the metrics. We’ve got time.” He checked the screen. “Twenty minutes and counting.”

“Ok.”

The safe was a mix of old school and new. It still had dials, which I’d need to listen to to break the code, but it also had digital metrics for the fingerprint as the final passcode. Even though the dial system was in my wheelhouse, we didn’t have the right prints to get passed the last level of security, so Simon would have to hack the fail-safe code.

I pulled out my lockpick kit, and settled into the safe door to figure out if it’s a three-pin or a four-pin system. One was easy. The other, a bit harder.

A few turns.

Several clicks.

“It’s a four. It’ll take me a bit longer, so be ready with the code.” Simon didn’t answer so I know he’s already on it.

A four-pin lock system is hard, but not impossible. It’s been awhile since I’ve worked on one, and the Cashore I’d been practicing with was a three-pin. I had that one down flat.

But I could do this if I just remembered to breathe.

Everyone thinks breaking into a safe is like in the movies. That we pull out our stethoscope and take our slow, sweet moment listening for the clicks. In reality, my anxiety is through the roof because I’m working under a time constraint; I can barely turn the dial because my hands are sweating; and I’m doubting my talents every moment.

But I wouldn’t trade anything for that final click that gets me into the safe.

I found myself turning dials, and despite the sweaty hands and thumping heart, I made it through three of the digits. I took a moment, and stepped back to crack my neck and find a breath. I always pause before the final click, giving myself a moment. Sometimes I really need it. Other times it's just habit.

But the moment my hand was back on the dial, lights flashed across the window. I felt Simon step away from me, as he looked through the window to check.

"Max," his voice was behind me again. "I don't know what's up, but they're back. The Marquettes are here. We need to pack up."

He started taking down the lights, limiting my visuals, but I was almost in.

I was almost there. "Give me a second. I can do this."

"We. Have. To. Go." He grabbed my shoulder to pull me away when I heard it.

Click.

The dial gave, and I knew I had it.

"Input your code. Break through the metrics. It's ours."

"I can't Max. I've been trying. It's impenetrable. The hacker box has been running every code possible, but it's a 7 digit passcode to override the fingerprint. It would take me hours to break that, not minutes. There's no hints in here. There's no way we could get it on one try and I'm not about to brick this and lose the diamond for good."

I closed my eyes, thinking back to all the recon we'd been doing. I scanned the rooms in my head, the conversations we overheard. But then the back door opened, and I knew we were done for. Even if we could get in the safe, we'd never get out without them seeing us. *There's got to be something*, I thought as I recalled the photos on the wall.

And that's when I knew it.

"It's 6862371."

"How do--"

"Just key it Simon," I hissed.

He tapped in the code, and the lock beeped.

Click.

The safe door came open in my hands and there it was.

The Queen's Diamond, set in the most gorgeous necklace.

I grabbed it from the shelf and quietly shut the safe door, while Simon yanked the cord from his tablet off the safe. He scrapped the lights and packed up the tools while I moved the door back, but we were pushing it.

Someone was coming up the backstairs, and the drop from the second-floor window was just a bit too long. Simon was frantic. I could see it in his eyes. I gestured wildly for him to drop to the floor, and roll under the bed. It was obnoxious, and large, and I knew the underneath would be empty. They'd never check under the bed skirt, especially since everything in the room looked like it did when we walked in. I tiptoed towards the bed, but when I glanced back at the wall I saw Simon had left his phone on the end table. Whoever walked in was bound to notice it considering it was in a bright blue case. *Is there enough time?* I debated, listening for the footsteps. They still sounded as if they were down the hall so I knew I had to try.

I rushed over to the table, picked up the phone, and hopped back to the bed as lightly as I could, dropping out of sight, just as the room light flipped on. I looked at Simon, pleading with

him to wait it out. We'd get out of here. Even if we had to wait all night, and sneak out while they were sleeping.

"Who is it?" I mouthed to him as I slid his phone towards him. He tapped the screen and pulled up the live camera feed. We could see Ms. M down in the kitchen, making up some sort of drink which meant Mr. Marquette had to be the one in the room. Before he flipped the camera view, Simon looked at me with eyebrows raised. Word on the street was the Mr. M. wasn't the--let's say kindest--when it came to being crossed. If we were caught, there was no telling what would happen.

I shook my head at him, trying to convey I wasn't worried. We'd get out of there, I knew it.

"Maybe they forgot something?" I mouthed again. And that's when Simon pointed at the screen. Mr. M. was at the safe.

The Diamond.

They'd come back for the Diamond.

Of course. They'd been planning this for weeks after all. It was one of the most prestigious parties in the city, but originally Ms. M had been all "I don't want to wear it. I want to wear so-and-so instead." But something must have changed her mind on the way. Maybe they heard about the guest list, and she decided she wanted the Queen's Diamond after all.

Simon's eyes screamed at me. The minute Mr. M opened the safe, we were caught. If he didn't start looking everywhere for it, only to find us, he'd have the cops here in minutes and they were bound to sweep the place.

The feed showed him working the dials and within seconds I knew he'd be in.

We were done for.

I closed my eyes, but all I could see was the girl from the picture in the hallway. She seemed so happy there, as if she didn't have anything to prove to anyone.

Funny how life changes.

Click.

I heard the safe clunk open, but then nothing. No gasp. No sirens. No yell.

Just silence, which sometimes is the worst. I looked over at Simon, knowing we had no other option. He shook his head, knowing exactly what I was about to do, but if I didn't, I wasn't about to let him go down with me. Ignoring his silent pleas, I rolled out from under the bed, and slowly stood up.

Mr. Marquette stood there, staring at the safe, his back to me.

"You know," his voice was deep. Smooth, not angry. "I'm quite impressed. I don't think I've known *anyone* who broke into a Biometric before. And under so much pressure. How'd you'd do it?"

"Well, you don't call me your Number 1 without reason."

He turned around, and the smile on his face told me I'd played my cards right with the code. It's always personal. No matter how obnoxious it seems.

"Welcome to the family, Maxie. Looks like you're here to play"

"Does that mean I get to keep it?" I smirked, the diamond dangling from my hand as Simon rolled out from under the bed, Dad's laughter filling up the room.

