

GOOD SAMARITAN. HACKER. VICTIM.

THE CODE

A FIREWALL SERIES NOVEL

**BROOKE
SIVENDRA**

THE CODE

FIREWALL SERIES



BROOKE SIVENDRA

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PRAISE FOR THE CODE

‘What can I say.... You never ever disappoint. I had to put the book down to get some sleep. The suspense and intrigue abound.’ ★★★★★

‘Brooke! Wow oh wow oh wow! You have done it again! I absolutely love this book!’ ★★★★★

‘I finished reading “The Code” and wow! Again, a fast paced, “can’t-wait-to-turn-the-next-page” thriller with twists and turns that made it difficult to put down.’ ★★★★★

For Kim M

This book is dedicated to you.

*I'm honored you trusted to share your pain and struggles with
me.*

*I pray The Code provides an escape from your grief,
even if just for a few minutes.*

Bx

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Plot-twist writer, voracious reader, and true-crime fanatic.

Brooke Sivendra is a best-selling author of more than twenty romantic suspense novels. She wrote her debut novel in 2015, after walking away from a career in Nuclear Medicine.

Instead of spending her days working in hospitals, Brooke spends them creating heart-racing stories of bad boys with good intentions. Readers say her books are like, ‘Jason Bourne for women.’

Brooke Sivendra lives in Adelaide, Australia.

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Thank you for reading!

Hungry for more?

CHAPTER 1



NINA

*N*ina Walker should've looked over her shoulder as she walked through the front door. If she had, she would've seen a pair of eyes watching her from the black SUV parked on the street.

Nina dropped her bag and keys on the dining table as she laid her eyes on her disabled grandmother in her reclining chair. Every cell in Nina's body was tired, but she didn't have the luxuries other twenty-five-year-olds had. Nina refrained from sighing. The days were long, but she wouldn't change a thing. Her grandmother had raised her, and she would forever be grateful that the woman had fought for her—for a better life for Nina.

Nina's parents were alive, but they were alcoholic hippies who lived in a van, spent their days drinking, and hadn't believed in education or a stable home for a young girl. When Nina was five, her grandmother, Lena, had put her foot down and insisted that Nina stay with her. Nina wasn't sure her parents had put up much of a fight, but if they'd had, they'd lost, and Lena had cared for and protected Nina since that day. That was true, at least until three years ago, when Lena had

had a stroke and Nina became her primary caregiver. Between work, college, and caregiving, every minute of Nina's day was taken up. But she wouldn't change it, not for the world. She was going to be by Lena's side until she took her last breath.

"Hello," Nina said as she walked toward her grandmother, kissing the soft, thinning hair on the crown of her head.

"Hello, Ninny," she said slowly, still calling her by the nickname she'd had as a child.

Lena slurred her words and it took her longer to communicate than it once had. She'd mostly lost the use of the right side of her body and needed help to do most daily activities, but she could move around a little with the help of a walker. Her mind, however, was as sharp as a tack.

"How was your afternoon?" Nina asked as she sat on the edge of the recliner, draping an arm around Lena's shoulders.

"Good. Thank you for the new books, I read two of them today," Lena said with a lopsided smile.

"Two!" Nina said with a chuckle. "The library is running out of books for you."

Lena chuckled. "You'll find more, I have faith in you. You've always been resourceful."

Nina grinned, kissing the crown of Lena's head once more. She looked to the living room windows, but the night had settled in and all she could see was her reflection in the glass. She got up and closed the drapes, turning on the electric fireplace. It was proving to be a cold fall in Denver, and Nina wasn't looking forward to the winter. "I'm going to get dinner started."

In the kitchen, she boiled water and added some pasta. Then grabbed a jar of sauce she'd bought at the grocery store.

She was not a good cook, and she did not pretend to be one. Her only goal in the kitchen was to make something edible.

Her gaze darted to her backpack that held her laptop. She had a project she needed to finish and it was going to be a late night.

Nina shook her head, returning her attention to dinner. She drained the pasta, added the sauce, and fried some meat to stir in. She quickly cleaned the dishes, put a bowl of pasta on Lena's little table on wheels and moved it into position so she could eat from the recliner chair. Once Lena was eating, Nina ate hers beside her on the couch as they watched the evening news.

Nina hated watching the news—the world seemed to be self-sabotaging more and more each day, human beings doing an increasingly good job of destroying the planet and killing each other, the latest war being no different—but when the finance section came on, Nina paid attention. Markets were down, recession was expected. She noted the stock market gains and losses, paying close attention to one particular sector.

When the news was over and her bowl was empty, Nina picked up Lena's bowl, rinsed them, and put them in the dishwasher.

"I'm going to do some studying. Do you need anything?" Nina asked, slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

"No thank you, Ninny. I might close my eyes and have a little rest before bed," she said and a smile spread across Nina's lips. Her grandmother routinely fell asleep in the recliner before bed. Sometimes she slept right through the night in the chair.

“Okay. Just call out if you need anything,” Nina said, looking upon her yawning grandmother.

“Don’t worry about me,” Lena said, playfully shooing her away.

Nina smiled, but she knew she would worry about Lena until the day she died. She didn’t linger on those worries, because she had a project to finish—a project that was consuming her every thought. She’d moved the money out of the offshore account one month ago, and the fact that the share price hadn’t fallen was interesting. Either they thought they could get it back and avoid a media disaster, or they were going to avoid a media disaster by saying nothing to the public. But they would have to reveal the loss of millions of dollars to their shareholders, and Braith Insurance deserved every minute of pain that was coming to them.

Nina was no modern-day Robin Hood, well at least not on an ongoing basis. But she was tired of insurance companies taking money from vulnerable people like Lena and not paying when they needed care. Almost all of Lena’s claims had been denied, or severely underpaid, for various reasons. If not for Nina’s late-night escapades, she and Lena would be living on the streets, bankrupted by medical bills. But Lena was right—Nina had always been resourceful, and this time the insurance company had paid their dues. Nina had stolen their data, demanded a ransom, and upon payment had transferred the funds into an offshore account before it had been distributed to every customer who had a rejected claim in the past twelve months. But Nina had to be careful, because if she was caught, a judge probably wouldn’t think she was a modern-day Robin Hood. She’d broken the law, and she’d stolen millions of dollars, but Nina didn’t care. Too much was wrong with this world and this was one thing she could fix.

Nina stopped at the bottom of the stairs, the icy-cold draft capturing her attention. She looked down the hallway, noting the backdoor was slightly ajar.

She shook her head. Lena needed to stop leaving that open.

Nina walked to the door and closed it, double-checking it was locked, and then took the stairs to her bedroom.

She flicked on the lights, dumped her backpack on her bed, and pulled out her laptop, putting it on her desk. She left her door ajar so she'd hear Lena if she called out, but then turned her attention to the laptop. She logged on and checked messages from her online friends. As she'd suspected, the group chat was rife with talk about the hack. So the online world knew, but the media didn't. Everyone was speculating who had pulled off the hack, but only Lena and Ed knew the truth—because she hadn't worked alone.

She looked for any messages from Ed, but the last one had been five hours ago. She raised an eyebrow, not sure if that was weird or not. He'd been actively involved in the chat and then had gone cold.

Nina shrugged, returning her attention to the messages in the group chat.

The stairs creaked and Nina paused. Her head snapped to her open door and she leaned back, listening again but she heard nothing.

She told herself to ignore it—it was an old house and sometimes it creaked. But as she turned her attention to the computer, the stairs creaked again and a shiver ran through her veins. Lena couldn't get up the stairs anymore.

Nina got up and walked toward the door, peering out at an empty staircase. She heard the television downstairs, and the

house seemed quiet. Normal.

Nina saw nothing to concern her but she flicked on the lights for the staircase and hallway—as if that would somehow get rid of the unease that seemed to linger behind her like a phantom—then returned to her computer.

She leaned forward, squinting, her focus entirely on the computer, and read a comment about the FBI getting a lead on the hackers. Nina was so engrossed in the messages that she didn't hear the footsteps on the carpet behind her.

She didn't hear his calm, steady breath as he approached.

But she felt his hand across her mouth and the cold press of metal on the back of her head.

“If you scream, I'll kill your grandmother on the way out,” he said, his voice threatening yet eerily calm.

Nina couldn't breathe.

“Do we have an understanding, Nina Martin?” he asked.

CHAPTER 2



NINA

Nina nodded stiffly, her heart in her throat, her eyes on the messages in front of her.

She had been so careful, or at least she thought she had been. But somewhere, somehow, she'd made a mistake.

“Pick up your laptop, put it in your backpack, and leave the bag on the bed. Do not speak a word,” he warned, his words slow and menacing.

Nina's heart raced so fast she thought she was going to have a heart attack. She picked up the laptop and slowly turned until she faced the bed.

The gun pressed to the back of her head nudged her forward as he released his hand from her mouth.

Nina gulped in a shaky, silent breath. She didn't dare utter a word, not a whisper.

“Put it in the backpack,” he said, his voice eerily calm—void of all emotion, but not robotic.

She nodded, tucking the laptop into her bag. Nina needed to get this man out of the house and away from her

grandmother.

“Face the door,” he said and she swallowed the lump in her throat.

Nina turned, not daring to look at him.

She heard him grab the bag and sling it over his shoulder.

“Go down the stairs and out the back door,” he said, nudging her with his pistol once more.

Nina felt like her legs might buckle beneath her, but she moved forward, summoning every ounce of strength her soul had. She walked down the stairs quietly. Her eyes were on the hallway that led to the kitchen, but she wasn't expecting to see her grandmother walking about. Hopefully she was asleep, provided the man behind her hadn't already killed Lena. The thought made her stomach roll.

“I need to see her, to make sure she's okay,” Nina said, her voice lacking the confidence she needed right now.

“No. Back door, now!” he hissed in her ear as he grabbed her arm like he thought she was going to run.

Nina squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Who was going to care for her grandmother? She couldn't be left alone, not even for a day. The thought of that happening was more terrifying to Nina than the pistol pressed against the back of her head.

She should never have gotten involved in this, she thought, her mouth so dry it was hard to swallow. The little saliva in her mouth tasted like poison. She supposed that's what fear tasted like.

Nina hadn't expected this. She'd expected the FBI to come if she'd gotten caught, but she hadn't expected the insurance

agency to send men with pistols to sneak into her house and kidnap her. Of all the ways she'd imagined this could end, this wasn't one.

“Open the door,” he commanded as she approached it. She turned it, cursing herself for dismissing the open door minutes ago.

How long had he been in her house?

How long had he been watching her?

Nina strained to listen for her grandmother's voice, but the house was quiet save for the television in the living room. Nina hoped she would sleep peacefully through the night. She tried to convince herself she'd have heard him if he'd killed her grandmother already.

Nina stepped into the icy cold night. She shivered violently but didn't think it had anything to do with the temperature.

The sound of a rumbling engine in the driveway stole her attention and she realized they weren't alone. The door of the black SUV opened, and another man sat inside, his face stern, his eyes locked on Nina.

She tried to swallow but her throat felt like it was stuffed with cotton balls.

“Get in the car,” he commanded from behind her.

Nina looked to the street. It was dark and the car was at the end of the driveway. No one would see them, no one would raise an alarm. And she was not about to risk her grandmother's life more than she already had, so Nina moved toward the car, every step filling her with dread.

She climbed into the back seat, her stomach churning as she sat beside the man already in the car. She looked to the

rearview mirror, her eyes on the driver. He had white skin and the shadow on his jaw indicated he hadn't shaved for a few days. His blue eyes locked on hers and she quickly looked away.

The man who had taken her from the house slid in beside her. "Go," he said as he closed the door.

The car doors locked as the driver began to reverse out of the driveway. Nina peered into the living room, regretting that she'd drawn the curtains earlier. The light was still on, but she knew that didn't mean anything.

"What do you want?" Nina asked, even though she knew exactly what they wanted.

"The money you stole from us," he said from beside her.

She frowned, summoning the courage to look at him.

She turned her head slowly, waiting for him to order her to keep her eyes ahead, but he didn't.

The first thing she noticed was his eyes. Sky blue eyes, eyes that looked like the pair she'd seen in the rearview mirror moments ago.

His jawline was much sharper than the driver's, but he didn't have two-day old growth softening it. Nina wasn't sure, but she suspected they were brothers.

None of this made sense.

"Why do you think I stole from you?" she asked, her eyebrows weaving together. She wanted to look away, but his gaze was piercing, holding her in place.

He looked at her for a long moment. "You're going to return the money. If you don't, Lena Walker dies. Do you understand?"

He'd made a point to use both her full name, and her grandmother's. This was no mistake—he knew exactly who she was.

Had the insurance company contracted him to kidnap her and force her to return the money? Why not just send the police? For all the snooping Nina had done on their company server, they hadn't broken any laws—they'd just used every loophole possible. Braith Insurance was morally corrupt, but not legally corrupt. So why not call law enforcement and tell them she'd stolen the money?

“This is a misunderstanding,” she said quickly, shaking her head. “I didn't steal anything from you.” The words fell out of her mouth, a desperate plea.

“We're done talking. Face the front; we'll be there soon,” he said, dismissing her.

But Nina wasn't ready to be dismissed. She had too many questions, but she didn't dare open her mouth because his gun was still pointed at her, and the mouth of the driver was firmly set.

“Put the blindfold on,” he said from beside her.

“No, no!” Nina said, but the man sitting to her left deflected her flailing arms without much effort and the world went black as she was blindfolded.

Nina's heart whooshed in her ears and she felt sick from the motion of the car. She tried to memorize the turns they were taking, but concentrating on the movement only made her feel nauseous and that was the last thing she needed right now.

Eventually, when Nina was certain she was going to be sick, the car came to a stop and the blindfold was removed.

Nina blinked, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the light. She quickly realized they were in a warehouse of some description.

Her captive opened the door and got out. He held it open for her, his pistol pointed at her chest. “You’re going to undo everything you’ve done,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

Nina’s hands began to sweat because she knew something they didn’t yet know: she couldn’t undo what was done. It was too late, the money had been transferred to hundreds of individual accounts. She’d never be able to get it all back.

She swallowed hard. She needed to buy some time until she came up with a plan.

“Get out,” he commanded, his eyes hard.

Awkwardly, Nina slid across the back seat and got out of the car, quickly realizing they weren’t alone.

She almost ran for him and screamed out his name, but the white pallor of his skin and the terrified look in his eyes stopped her.

“You two know each other, I believe,” he said.

Ed’s face remained impassive.

She looked back to the man who’d taken her from her house. There was no doubt this was related to the insurance hack, because she’d been working on it with Ed.

“Sit,” he said, motioning toward the table beside Ed.

Nina had to force herself to move. His footsteps followed her, echoing like a warning sign. She needed to think fast if she was going to save them both, and her grandmother.

CHAPTER 3



NINA

“Sit,” he commanded again when she didn’t move.

Nina grabbed the chair with shaky hands and pulled it out, the legs screeching on the concrete as she dragged it back. The screech seemed amplified, but she was sure that was more of a reflection of her rattled mind.

She sat and he put the laptop in front of her.

“Undo everything you two did,” he said, his voice a warning.

Nina’s eyes darted to Ed’s. Beads of sweat lined his forehead and his eyes darted around nervously. He didn’t look at her—he looked everywhere but at her.

Did he blame her for the situation they were in?

She’d hardly coaxed Ed into this. He’d been a willing participant, always keen for a new challenge.

Nina didn’t realize she hadn’t moved until he pressed his gun into the back of her head once more.

She lifted her hands, hovering them above the keyboard.

She didn't know how to reverse the hack, but she could buy them time.

Her eyes darted to Ed again, his eyes straight ahead as he tapped on the keyboard. She wondered what he was typing, what he was working on.

Nina cleared her throat. "I can't do this alone. Let me work with him."

"No," came the response. It was a complete sentence, not up for negotiation.

She briefly squeezed her eyes shut.

Survive this.

She opened her eyes, resolved to return the money one way or another.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans, then went back to work, leaning in to study the screen.

When the code lines doubled, she realized she wasn't working alone. Ed had accessed her computer.

She'd given him access the day before so they could share screens and work on the code to distribute the funds together and she hadn't yet disabled it. She heard the brothers talking behind her and she dared a look over her shoulder, seeing their backs.

It's impossible to reverse the transfers. There are too many different banks.

The letters were embedded between lines of code, that rolled up, disappearing from the screen the more lines of code that were typed.

She typed six more lines of code, embedding her response into it.

I know.

Nina continued typing, loading lines of code into the box, pushing the message higher on the screen until it was no longer visible.

They're going to kill us.

Nina squashed the urge to shake her head.

No, she was not dying. Not today, not tomorrow. Not until she knew Lena was safe and had someone to care for her. Until then, Nina had to survive—whatever it took.

No. We can't reverse it, but we can steal the same amount from another organization and give it to them to settle the debt.

It wasn't a great option, but it was the only one Nina could come up with right now.

Until they come for us.

That was a risk, for sure. But this time they would choose the target more carefully.

“Stop!” The yell came from behind her.

“Scroll back up,” he commanded.

Nina sucked in a ragged breath, fear choking her lungs. She stopped breathing. Her hands trembled, but she couldn't move.

He leaned forward, the woody scent of his cologne like a warning.

“Scroll. Back. Up,” he repeated slowly, each word clipped.

Nina's breath caught in her throat as she realized their mistake. She'd assumed they were playing it safe, because unless someone understood coding, the letters would've looked like part of the code.

But it was clear the man behind her knew at least a little about computers.

Her head snapped to him, their eyes locking.

He knew, Nina realized with dread.

Fear snaked up the back of her neck and she stopped breathing.

"Who are you?" she asked, the words out of her mouth before she could stop them. She immediately cursed herself, she wasn't thinking straight, her mind was reeling.

"Who I am doesn't matter to you. I don't care how you get the money, but get it if you want to stay alive," he said under his breath, audible only to her.

She swallowed hard.

"Close that box. Now," he said.

Nina sucked in a breath and clicked on the corner of the box, closing the message.

"What's the problem, Carter?" a man asked from behind her, but she kept her eyes forward.

Nina's heart pounded against her chest while she stayed silent. She was not going to speak unless spoken to.

"Nothing," the man behind her responded.

Now she knew her kidnapper's name: *Carter*.

"What is she doing?" he asked.

“Working on retrieving our money. She’s using code that won’t work—code that I’ve already tried. I suggested she think outside the box and use another method,” Carter said, surprising Nina.

He’d just covered for her—lied for her. Why?

None of this made any sense and the longer she was in their company, the more confusing it was.

A pregnant pause followed.

“Get back to work,” he said. “You have twenty-four hours.”

Nina began typing, writing the lines of code she’d used previously while silently brainstorming how to steal that much money from another company. The hack had been months in the making. They couldn’t do it within twenty-four hours. It wasn’t possible.

“That’s not long enough. Give us a week,” Ed said from beside her.

Nina squeezed her eyes shut, willing him to stop talking. These weren’t men they could negotiate with. They needed to play their cards carefully—they needed to make enough progress to justify keeping them alive.

“Are you telling me it can’t be done?” Carter asked.

“It can be done, we just need more time,” Ed said.

“We don’t have time. You took money from a company that has a large debt to be paid to a private investor. He wants his money, hence why we’re all here. You didn’t steal from Braith Insurance, you stole from Dante—a man you don’t want to mess with. In twenty-four hours, we’re all dead if you don’t have that money. So, let’s make it happen,” he said.

Nina stole a sideways glance at Carter, who was still at her side. He surprised her yet again by giving her a reassuring nod.

“Target another insurance company,” Carter said quietly, calmly. “They might use a similar system—it might be easier to breach than starting all over again.”

Nina chewed her cheek, thinking that over. Braith was the largest and could afford the loss without going bankrupt—though not if they had to liquidate assets to pay the debt. But she didn’t know if that held true for other companies. If she bankrupted them, more vulnerable people like Lena would be hurt in the process. She needed more time to analyze each insurance company before she targeted one.

Carter’s eyes hardened. “You don’t have a choice. Fix the wrong later, but trust me—if you want to go home to your grandmother, get the money. Now!”

“Give me one phone call, please. I need to call someone to look after her until I can go home. She can’t even feed herself. Please . . . I’ll think better if I know she’s okay,” she pleaded but his stony expression didn’t change.

“You know, good deeds get you nowhere in life,” he eventually said.

Nina would’ve pitied him if he hadn’t taken her captive. “That’s a remarkably sad way of looking at the world.”

She regretted her words immediately when his eyes darkened.

Nina turned her attention back to the computer. She needed to find a target, then she’d worry about the hack. If she could show them there was enough money in their accounts, it could keep her alive. By the way she was looking at their situation, their boss might expend Carter and his friend as useless, but

she was one of the few people in this room who had a chance of getting the money.

He stepped back and she followed the echo of his footsteps out of the makeshift room in the warehouse, but she didn't look over her shoulder.

Focus, Nina.

Her stomach churned violently when she thought of her grandmother, alone, worried, hungry, and cold. Her mind leapt to worst case scenarios.

What if the power went out and the heating turned off? How long did it take for a human to freeze to death?

Endless, traumatizing scenarios ran through her mind, but Nina knew the best way to help her was to get the money and get home to her.

Nina shook her head, shaking the scattered thoughts from her mind.

She opened the browser, startled when it didn't load.

But of course it didn't—these men weren't going to give her and Ed free rein of the internet to alert anyone to their location and situation. No, the computers had been enabled with only the programs they'd need to use to hack—which told Nina that at least someone knew enough about what they did to set that up. Her suspicions were on Carter.

Lines of code appeared on her computer again and it took all her restraint to keep her eyes forward.

What are you doing, Ed?

She hadn't heard Carter return, but Nina shut it down immediately. She was not taking any more risks—she was returning home to Lena.

Another box opened on her computer and Nina made a show of typing more code so anyone watching her screen would think she was doing the typing. Ed was not giving up, and until she could stop him, she had to stop them both from getting killed.

It's two against one. This is our best chance, he wrote, letters embedded within the text.

Nina frowned. Best chance for what? To escape? She had no idea where they were, nor what awaited them outside. But what she did know—or at least thought she knew—was that they would kill her if she tried to run. And then who would look after Lena?

No, Nina wasn't going to run.

She was going to fix this mess.

And then she was going to go home and hug her grandmother tight.

No, we need to fix this, was all Nina wrote.

It can't be done, Nina. This is our best chance. You owe me this.

Nina bit down on her lip to stop from looking at Ed and cursing him out.

She *owed* him?

She'd told him what she wanted to do, and he'd gone right in. She hadn't twisted his arm, she hadn't—

Footsteps behind her jerked her back to the situation. She knew it was Carter from the smell of his cologne, and she'd expected him to stop behind her, forcing her to reveal the hidden messages in the code. But fierce footsteps continued past her, striding toward Ed.

Nina's eyes darted in his direction as Carter pressed his gun to Ed's temple and Ed's face drained of color.

"Show me your screen," Carter commanded.

Nina froze, her body tingling as her lungs began to scream for oxygen. She sucked in tiny, short breaths but she couldn't move, her eyes were transfixed on the scene in front of her.

Ed's eyes darted to Nina, but Nina knew he had no choice. Carter already knew; she could see it in his locked jaw.

Nina looked behind them, seeing—too late—the cameras on the ceiling.

Carter had set them up. He'd left the room intentionally to see what they would do. And they'd failed.

Nina squeezed her eyes shut.

"Show. Me. Your. Screen," Carter said, his voice as sharp as a knife.

Ed squeezed his eyes shut, and finally surrendered. He scrolled up.

Nina eyes were on Carter now, his sharp jawline grinding, highlighting his cheekbones.

Nina stopped breathing as he read the messages between them.

Carter shook his head tightly, chewing on his cheek.

Nina's heart pounded so loudly against her chest that she didn't hear the footsteps behind her, or maybe her mind had shut down. Either way, she definitely wasn't prepared for what happened next.

Nina jolted, screaming and ducking as a bullet fired.

Blood sprayed from Ed's head and Nina stared, mouth agape, her chest wheezing.

Carter swung around, his jaw open, eyes wide.

His eyes darted to Nina, but she didn't notice. She shut down, her heart in her throat, the sight in front of her stealing the oxygen from her lungs.

She needed to look away, but she couldn't take her eyes off of her friend, collapsed on the table in a way that was so unnatural she knew she would never forget the sight.

"He was dead weight. She's the talent," a man said from behind her, but he sounded a million miles away.

Blood dripped from the desk to the floor, creating a puddle by Ed's feet.

No, Ed, no, Nina thought, tears pricking her eyes.

A moment passed, and then another.

Eventually, she heard her name being said.

She blinked, looking at Carter, who was now standing right in front of her, blocking the sight of Ed's slain body on the desk, but he couldn't erase the metallic scent of blood that infiltrated the room, sickening her soul.

"Nina, focus on the hack," Carter said, his words a plea but she just stared at him, mouth agape.

"Nina, focus," he warned under his breath.

She turned back to her computer, numb, her brain refusing to focus—unable to draw her eyes away from the pieces of Ed's splattered brain.

CHAPTER 4



CARTER

*H*is head snapped to Jedd, his eyes glaring.

What were you thinking? He silently screamed.

Carter's blood boiled because this mess had just gotten more complicated.

His eyes dropped to his watch. Dante was arriving in two hours and they were one hacker short with a bloody mess to clean up. That wasn't the plan, no one was supposed to die.

Jedd stared back at him, shrugging his shoulders.

Carter bit his tongue, because nothing he said now was going to be helpful. Jedd was out of control, he'd known that for a while, but impulsively shooting people—people they needed—was a huge mistake.

He needed to pace, to move, but he didn't dare leave this room again. He couldn't risk coming back to find Jedd had killed Nina too. She was literally their last hope now, but Carter could only assume Jedd was high on something, and he wasn't sure his brother really understood the consequences of what he'd just done. They were up to their necks in shit.

Carter nodded toward the door. Jedd threw a look that told Carter he didn't appreciate the lecture but he moved toward the door. Carter followed behind, stealing a look over his shoulder at Nina. She stared at the screen, unmoving.

He shook his head. If they were going to have any chance of getting her to think, they needed to move her out of this room—away from the still-warm dead body no more than a few steps from her. Ed's blood was likely splattered on her clothes, Carter thought with disgust.

"I know, I know," Jedd said as Carter closed the door, locking Nina inside. There were no windows in the room and the door was the only exit. He didn't like that he had to lock her in the room with her dead friend, but he could not risk her escaping, and right now he didn't know what she'd do.

"No, you don't know!" Carter hissed under his breath. "You just shot our hacker!"

"He was planning to escape; he said it can't be done. He was only going to cause issues," Jedd said, his eyes widening as he stuck his head out, like Carter had no idea what he was saying.

"So, you motivate people, not kill them," Carter all but screamed as he shoved a finger into his brother's chest. "There were two people in that room who were involved in the hack, and now there's one and she's so shell-shocked she can't think straight. So, who is going to get us our money now?"

Jedd smacked his hand away and cursed under his breath. "So better to let them escape and call the police?"

"No, Jedd," Carter said through gritted teeth. "Better to lock them in a room, give them food, water, an incentive, and make them work!"

Jedd rolled his eyes aggressively. “There’s still two hackers. You work with her to make this happen.”

Carter’s jaw dropped open. “I understand computers but I’m not a hacker, Jedd. If I could’ve stolen the money back, don’t you think that would’ve been easier than kidnapping two people and forcing them to do it? What are you on, seriously? You’re not thinking—”

“Save your damn lectures, Carter!” Jedd’s voice boomed.

Carter ran a hand through his short hair, blowing out a frustrated breath. He needed to stay calm. He had to manage this, because Jedd was going to be of no help.

“Get out of here, go and get something to eat, have a cigarette. Don’t come back until you’re calm,” Carter warned.

Jedd muttered under his breath, then turned away from him.

Carter looked around the warehouse. There was another room—it was smaller, and dustier, but it didn’t have a dead body in it.

He inhaled a steadying breath, went back to the room, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Nina looked like she hadn’t moved an inch.

“Nina,” he said calmly. Gently.

She didn’t respond.

He said her name again, but she still didn’t respond.

Gently, Carter put a hand on her shoulder and she jumped, spinning around, standing up and almost tripping over Ed’s legs that were stretched out at a weird angle.

He held his hand up like he was stopping traffic. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” he said, meaning every word. He knew that meant nothing to her, but he would keep his word. Carter was not a man of many morals, but he was a man of his word.

Nina paused, looked down at Ed’s legs, then leaned over, retching.

Yet another reason to get out of this room.

Carter reached out his hand to her but stopped himself. She didn’t want his comfort, and it would likely only make the situation worse.

“Nina,” he said gently when her body stopped convulsing and she’d inhaled a few shallow breaths.

She squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to lift her eyes to look at him. Carter didn’t blame her.

“I’m sorry, I know that means nothing to you, but I’m sorry. Jedd . . . he made a mistake—” Carter regretted his choice of words as soon as they came out of his mouth.

Her eyes snapped to his, two balls of fury. “A mistake?” she hissed under her breath before she caught herself.

“I want this over too. The fastest way for this to end is to come up with the money,” Carter said, feeling like all he’d been doing all morning was repeating various versions of that sentence but so far no progress had been made.

“You can use my phone to make a phone call for your grandmother,” he said. “Come out of this room.”

She looked to her feet and he shook his head. “Don’t look, just follow me.”

Nina raised her eyes to him once more, her expression a little softer—a little less hatred in her eyes.

He moved toward the door, looking over his shoulder to make sure she was following behind. He opened the door, motioning her through, but stayed close enough behind that he could grab her if she decided to run. She seemed too shell-shocked to run, but fear made people unpredictable. The phone call was a lure, though. He knew how much she cared for her grandmother—he'd spent the past three days watching her, monitoring her every move. Maybe it was because their stories were similar, but his compassion for Nina had been an unwelcome surprise.

“This way,” he said, walking toward the makeshift lounge room they'd set up in a hurry two days ago.

The couch was comfortable enough to sleep on—Carter knew from the few short naps he'd taken on it while on break from surveillance—but it didn't look like much. It was hardly a warm and inviting room, but it didn't have a dead body in it.

He closed the door behind them and pulled out his phone. “You give me the number, I'll dial it, and the call will be on speaker. If you say anything I don't like, there will be consequences. Understood?”

She looked at him with a level of disgust that made him internally cringe, but he didn't blame her—he understood it perfectly.

When she eventually nodded, he asked, “What's the number?”

Nina cleared her throat and then spoke the numbers. He entered them on his phone and put the call on speaker.

It rang a few times before a female answered. “Hello, Annie speaking.”

“Annie, it’s Nina,” she said, her words rushed.

“Nina? Whose number is this?” Annie repeated.

Carter’s eyes locked on Nina’s. He prayed she didn’t try anything, because he didn’t want to hurt her.

“A friend’s phone,” Nina said, she squeezed her eyes shut ever so briefly, like the lie had caused her physical pain. “Look, I can’t explain right now. But I need you to do something. I need you to go and stay with Lena for a few days,” she said, looking at Carter like she’d asked him a question.

He nodded. He had no idea whether a few days was long enough, but it was a start.

“What?” Annie asked, a pitch of alarm in her words. “Nina, where are you? What is going on?”

Carter shook his head, a warning.

“Annie, please,” Nina begged. “Please take care of her until I get home. My friend had an accident and he needs my help—I’m at the hospital with him now and I don’t have time to explain, but everything will be fine,” she said, her voice breaking, betraying her. “Please I’m begging you, she needs someone to look after her and I can’t do it right now. You know I’d never leave her like this,” Nina said as her eyes became pools of tears. “Please, Annie. Go over there right now, make sure she’s okay.” Nina wiped away a tear that ran down her cheek.

“Of course, but I want you to call me later when you can talk. Promise me,” Annie said, concern lacing her words.

Nina closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. “I promise,” she said so convincingly that Carter learned something new about her. Nina was a good liar.

“Okay,” Annie said. “Everything will be okay, Nina. I’ll take care of her.”

Nina nodded but didn’t respond.

“Call me when you can. I’ll go and see Lenma now.”

“Thank you,” Nina said, exhaling like it was the first time she’d been able to breathe since Carter had kidnapped her.

He ended the call. “Lenma?” he asked.

“Grandma Lena . . . all her grandchildren call her Lenma. Annie is my cousin, if you haven’t figured that out—but I suspect you already knew that before the conversation. How much research do you do on your targets, Carter?” she asked, her eyes narrowing on him.

A smart response was on the tip of his tongue, but her fury was deserved so he said nothing. Despite what she obviously thought, just like she hadn’t been chosen to be kidnapped, he hadn’t chosen this life either. But loyalty makes decisions for you, and he’d decided to pay Jedd’s debts rather than Dante killing his brother, so unwillingly he’d found himself dragged into this life.

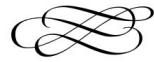
Carter was not delusional, though he’d never been an upstanding citizen. He’d always walked the line, causing enough trouble to get what he wanted, but he’d never been in this deep. And certainly not with someone like Dante. But one night had changed everything, and now—like Nina—Carter didn’t have a choice.

Nina could be his ticket out of this, though. Because Carter didn’t only want to get Dante’s money back for him, he

wanted to destroy him in the process and free himself and Jedd from the man who had caused them so much pain.

It had never just been about the money.

CHAPTER 5



NINA

Nina's hands trembled so she tucked them into her pockets. This situation wasn't any better, and she was unlikely to walk away from this, but at least Annie would take care of Lena. The main problem had been taken care of, now she could focus on the task ahead. She thought of Ed and she shuddered.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I need a computer to work."

He nodded. "Wait here," he said, like she had the option of leaving. Her eyes followed him as he left the makeshift room, locking the door behind him. His footsteps echoed through the warehouse, growing distant, then louder again a moment later.

Nina's gaze swept over the room. It had a couch and a blanket folded neatly on the corner. The folded blanket looked out of place, like someone with house pride had folded it, taking care of their surroundings. Nina raised an eyebrow, shaking her head.

She didn't know what to make of this mess—what to make of Carter.

In moments of brevity, he seemed like a nice, genuine guy. But he was also the same guy who had kidnapped her at gunpoint and was working for a criminal.

Nina almost laughed at herself. Carter was not a nice guy, but she was not an innocent civilian either. She too was a criminal.

The door opened and he returned with her computer. He motioned toward the sofa and she sat.

“Let’s make a plan,” he said, sitting beside her as he passed her the laptop.

Nina raised an eyebrow but said nothing. His blue eyes swirled but Nina couldn’t read him.

“We both need this to work so we have a shared goal—to walk away from this alive. I will help you in whatever way I can. No one was supposed to die.”

Nina searched his eyes. “Why wouldn’t you kill me once Dante has the money back? Eliminate a liability?”

Carter chewed on his cheek. “Because, we’re both going to do things that would ordinarily land us in prison. I’ll hang that over your head to keep you in line, and you’ll do the same. So, there’s no reason for anyone to die as long as we’re playing by the same rules. As for Dante, he won’t kill someone who is valuable—but being valuable to him means that he won’t let you go.”

“So this never ends? I’ll have to watch over my shoulder for the rest of my life, worried that if Dante needs anything, he knows where to find me?” Nina asked, her pulse racing a little faster.

Carter seemed to choose his words carefully. He lowered his voice when he spoke, as if he was worried someone might

overhear them. “Men like Dante have short lifespans, Nina. Play the long game.”

Nina frowned, the puzzle that was Carter was becoming more complicated by the minute.

He continued. “Let’s focus on finding a target. You’ve done this once before, so do it again. We’ll figure out what to do after that.”

Fury burned in her chest. He was talking about *we*, like they were on the same team. He was not on her team, he would turn that gun on her if he had to—if it meant his survival. Nina was many things, but stupid she was not. She would not be sweet talked by *we*—there was no *we* in this situation.

Nina inhaled deeply, returning her attention to the computer. Her first priority was to find a target, then she’d figure out the best way to sabotage both Dante and Carter and ensure her freedom.

She focused on the task at hand, barely lifting her eyes for the next hour. Carter sat beside her, not saying a word, but she felt his eyes on her the entire time.

When the sound of a roller door opening captured her attention, she lifted her eyes to Carter, but he was looking at the door, frowning. His eyes dropped to his watch, then he looked back to the door.

“Stay here, don’t say a word,” he said under his breath as he stood, moving toward the door. Judging by the confusion on his face, Nina knew he hadn’t been expecting this visit.

She stared after him, listening for the lock of the door, but it didn’t come.

Car doors slammed, followed by footsteps echoing through the warehouse. Nina instinctively leaned forward, straining to hear the muffled voices, but she couldn't make out what was being said, let alone how many people were talking.

“She’s safe.”

Nina’s pulse accelerated. That was Carter’s voice, she was sure of it. Was he talking about her? Or did he have someone else held hostage in another warehouse?

“He’s dead!” someone yelled.

She stopped breathing as she listened but the voices were muffled. Nina put her laptop on the sofa and rushed to the door, pressing her ear against it.

“Start talking, Carter!” a man yelled.

Nina waited for his response, but it didn’t come. She frowned.

“Last chance.”

Nina held her breath, clutching her stomach as a sickening thud followed. She grimaced as her mind reeled, trying to piece together the scene unfolding outside the door.

Her eyes dropped to the door handle. He hadn’t locked it behind him. Was it a trap of some kind? Or had he simply been distracted?

Nina put her hand on the handle, slowly, gently pushing down on it. It moved without making a sound and she exhaled the breath she’d been holding. Her hand trembled as she opened the door ever so slightly, praying it didn’t creak. She hadn’t noticed it creaking when Carter had opened it before, but perhaps she hadn’t been paying enough attention.

She inched it open, ever so slightly—just enough to get a sneak peek of what was unfolding in the warehouse.

Nina squinted, her stomach rolling when she saw the sight in front of her. Six men stood in a half circle with their backs to Nina, all eyes focused on Carter. One man stood behind Carter, seemingly securing his arms behind his back. Nina wondered if Carter was cuffed, but she couldn't see from where she stood.

“Where is Jedd?” the man closest to Carter asked slowly, his voice low and threatening.

Carter's hard eyes said everything that his mouth did not. He refused to speak, and Nina quickly realized what the thud had been. Carter doubled-over as the man swung his fist into Carter's stomach yet again. He gasped in short breaths, like he couldn't breathe.

Nina's hand went to her mouth, quieting the gasp that slipped from her lips.

“If you're not going to talk, we'll do this the hard way.” The man turned around, looking at his army of men behind him. “Search the warehouse and find him. This situation is clearly out of control.”

Nina closed the door as the men began to move. Her eyes darted around the room, but there were no windows, no other exits. She ran to the sofa, grabbing her laptop, unzipping the sofa cushion cover and slipping it underneath, between the cover and cushion. She zipped it closed and pushed it back into place as the door swung open.

Narrowed eyes landed on her and she knew there was nowhere to run, but she hoped she'd have a chance to come

back for that laptop because that laptop might be the only thing to save her life.

“Put your hands up,” he said.

Nina raised her hands like she was surrendering. She was physically surrendering, but she was not mentally ready to give up yet. While she was breathing, she had a chance. She didn't like her odds, but she still had a chance.

He walked toward her like a man stalking his prey. Rough hands yanked her arms, forcing them behind her back. She hissed in a breath as a cable tie bit into the flesh of her wrists.

“Move!” he said, pushing her forward.

Nina tripped on her feet but he grabbed her sweater, keeping her upright. Hastily, he urged her from the room into the main part of the warehouse.

Carter's eyes locked on hers, his expression unreadable.

The man still standing in front of Carter raised an eyebrow. “Well, well, well, if it isn't the woman that stole my money,” he drooled, his words laced with anger.

Nina tilted her chin up, refusing to back down to his glaring stare.

Hello, Dante.

“Perhaps you'll talk,” he said, taking a step toward her as a smile curved his thin lips.

She guessed he was in his forties, based on the shallow lines around his eyes and across his forehead. His skin was tanned, like he'd spent a lot of time in the sun.

“You should make sure I stay alive and unharmed if you want your money back,” she said, knowing she was only an

asset while he believed she could return his money.

He raised an eyebrow, his eyes darting between Carter and Nina.

“You’re right, I do think it’s in my best interest to keep you alive,” he said with a chilling smile. “Put her in the car, and kill him,” he said, looking at Carter. “I don’t tolerate mistakes.”

Nina’s heart lurched, her eyes widening as Carter returned Dante’s stony glare.

No! she silently screamed.

Carter was no savior, but right now he was the lesser evil.

Better the devil you know.

CHAPTER 6



CARTER

*H*is blood boiled as he watched Dante's men roughly handle Nina, shoving her into the car.

Carter's teeth ground together. He was not going to let this happen.

He looked to Dante, his arrogance like a flame in his eyes. But Carter had nothing to lose now, and that made him dangerous. Dante should've cuffed his hands when he'd had the chance. He had no idea how dangerous Carter was—but he was about to learn.

The men beside Carter stood with their eyes on Nina, and he knew he wasn't going to get a better opportunity.

He spun around, kicking the man behind him with enough force to knock him backward, catching him by surprise. Carter darted for the man who had been standing on his right side, accurately predicting Dante's next move.

Bullets fired, but Carter managed to dodge them, using Dante's man as a shield.

Carter reached for the man's pistol at the same time he did, but Carter was faster. He grabbed the pistol from its holster

and jammed it against the man's back.

Fury burned in Dante's eyes and he fired, straight at his man.

His legs buckled and Carter knew he was going to fall.

Carter raised his weapon and Dante's eyes widened. His finger was on the trigger but he didn't have a chance to pull it.

Bullets rained from the car and Carter ducked behind the man he was now holding up with every ounce of strength he had. The man's body jerked and convulsed as the bullets landed in his chest, but by some miracle Carter kept him upright and shielding his own body. Carter fired at the car, and the bullets stopped. He didn't have a clear view of the car from behind the man's body, but he assumed he'd at least hit one of the shooters. He prayed he hadn't killed Nina in the process.

A rush of footsteps sounded and Carter peered around to see Dante running toward the car, shielded by his men. Carter raised his arm to fire, but shots came at him and the man he was holding fell to his knees. Carter dropped, holding on to the man's shirt, keeping him upright. Right now, he was the only protection Carter had. The car tires squealed and Carter's heart sank.

Nina! He silently screamed as the car sped away.

He fired at the car, aiming for the wheels as he scrambled to his feet, running toward the car racing out of the warehouse. Desperation barreled through his mind as he continued firing, but the car didn't stop.

He aimed for the windows, determined to stop the car when the back passenger door opened and a body dropped to the ground.

Carter's breath hitched in his throat when he realized it was Nina. Her red sweater visible through the dust.

He knew they wouldn't have let her go, so she must've opened the door amidst the chaos.

Carter unloaded now, firing endless rounds into the back window as it sped away.

He sprinted for Nina, finding her gasping on the ground, the impact of the fall knocking the breath from her lungs. He pulled a knife from his back pocket and slit the zip-tie around her wrists then pulled her up.

Dante would return as soon as he had more men to expend so Carter needed to come up with a plan, and fast—because now that Carter had taken aim at Dante, all bets were off. Dante would care more about teaching him a lesson than getting his money.

“Are you okay?” Carter asked quickly, his eyes sweeping from her head to her toes.

She nodded, her eyes wide, blood trickling down her cheek from her temple. She cradled her arm against her waist and Carter wondered if it was broken, but they didn't have time to think about that right now. He would get her the medical help she needed, but first he had to take her somewhere safe. And find his brother.

Where the hell was Jedd?

“We need to get out of here,” Carter said, but he was hesitant to leave without Jedd.

“I need my laptop,” she said, like her voice was faraway. She was in shock, he knew.

“Okay,” he said, leading her inside, striding toward the room she’d been locked in. He looked over his shoulder twice, expecting to see Dante’s car returning, but so far he hadn’t returned.

Carter stood at the door, intermittently looking over his shoulder and watching Nina. He saw her pick up the sofa cushion and remove her laptop from the cover.

Good hiding spot, Nina.

“We need to go,” he said and she nodded, still looking startled. He patted his pocket, finding his keys still tucked into place. His eyes darted to his car, it had somehow escaped the storm of bullets and was decent to drive without attracting attention. “Get in the car, I need to grab a few things.”

She took two steps forward then stopped, turning back to him. “What about Ed? We can’t leave him here to rot. He needs to be returned to his family.”

Carter couldn’t deal with this right now. Ed’s dead body was the least of his concerns.

“I’ll figure it out once we’re somewhere safe,” he said. “But if we don’t move now, and Dante comes back with freshly loaded guns, we won’t survive again. My gun is empty.”

She ran her hand through her hair, exhaling a long breath. “Okay,” she said, her voice breaking. She turned away from him and got into the car.

Carter pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head.

He looked over the warehouse, wondering what else he needed to take.

Where is Jedd?

Carter strode toward the car and climbed into the driver's seat. Nina's eyes were forward and she didn't say a word as he drove out of the warehouse, lowering the automatic roller door behind him.

Carter looked down the street, searching for Jedd. But he was nowhere to be seen.

He knows how to reach you, Carter reminded himself. But it didn't eliminate the fear that Jedd might return at the same time Dante did.

Carter tried calling him, but it rang out. He tried again, but still no answer.

"Where is he?" Nina asked, finally looking at him.

"I don't know," Carter said, his eyes flickering to the rearview mirror.

"It's convenient Dante arrived while he was gone," Nina said with narrowed eyes.

Carter raised an eyebrow. "I told him to leave. I told him not to come back until his head was clear. It's my fault he wasn't there . . . we could've used an extra set of hands."

Nina clenched her jaw and looked away. "There's no *we*, Carter. You and Jedd are going to do whatever you want, and I'm the pawn in this game until I'm no longer of use to anyone."

Carter opened his mouth to speak, but he had nothing to say. She was right—about part of it. He could swear to her he had every intention of letting her go when this was said and done, but he knew she wouldn't believe that. His word meant nothing to her, and he understood that, but it still stung.

“You’re right, there’s no *we*,” he said, leaving it at that. It was better she hated him, it would make this less complicated because, right now, he was surprised at how far he’d gone to protect her from Dante’s men.

She nodded bitterly.

Carter turned his eyes forward, focusing on the street, searching for Jedd.

Carter slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a stop.

He jumped out and grabbed a cap.

He knew it was Jedd’s even before he picked it up and saw the signature inside. Jedd had bought the cap at a baseball game they’d gone to last year, and he’d been saying how great it would’ve been if he could get a signature on it. Jedd hadn’t managed to get it signed by one of the players, so Carter had signed it and thrown it back at him, telling him the most famous person in the world had just signed it. Jedd had been high and thought it was the funniest thing he’d seen, and Carter had ended up laughing with him. That was before shit had gotten complicated, before Jedd had gone to prison for a crime Carter committed.

Carter looked at the cap in his hands.

Had Jedd thrown it away in anger?

Or had he lost it as he’d been dragged into a car by Dante’s men?

Carter looked to the dirt at his feet. He saw no scuff marks, no sign of a struggle.

Carter squeezed his eyes shut.

Where are you, Jedd?

CHAPTER 7



NINA

*H*er arm throbbed and her vision blurred as she looked out the window to where Carter stood, staring at the cap in his hands.

It looked like the cap Jedd had been wearing earlier. And judging by Carter's pained eyes, Nina thought he'd come to the same conclusion she had—Dante's men had found Jedd.

Good, Nina thought bitterly. They can kill him, just like he killed Ed.

Carter looked back to the car, his eyes locking on Nina's and she quickly looked away, confused by her emotions. He had kidnapped her, and she expected him to be a cold, ruthless person. But he was more compassionate than a calculated killer. He didn't have to move her from the room with Ed's dead body. He didn't have to let her make a phone call.

Don't be a fool, she silently chided. He's playing the game he needs to play to get what he wants, then I'll be useless to him. He won't be compassionate then.

He opened the door, slid into the driver's seat, and started the engine.

Nina said nothing, keeping her eyes ahead. It felt like hours passed until he spoke again.

“I know somewhere safe we can stay for the night. We need to take things one day at a time. We need the money, Nina—then we have a bargaining tool,” he said.

We. She wished he would stop saying that because she wanted to believe him, believe she would survive this too. But she was not stupid, the moment she had the money she was no longer useful. Nina looked to the door handle, tempted to jump out of the car and run, but Lena’s face flashed in her mind. Nina would never be able to go home while Dante was looking for her because even if Dante got the money back using another hacker, Nina picked him for the type of person who would come after her just for vengeance—to make an example of her. Nina couldn’t risk finding out the hard way that her assumption was true, and she could never leave Lena, so she needed a plan of her own—one that would ensure her survival.

He slowed to a stop at a set of traffic lights that seemed out of place for the empty lots of undeveloped land. Nina had no idea where they were—she certainly had never been to this part of town before.

Carter turned to her. “I know this means nothing to you, but I will do everything I can to make sure you walk out of this alive and return home to Lena.”

The sound of her name made Nina’s chest constrict. Maybe it should’ve unsettled her that Carter used her name, but it humanized him—made him less of a cold monster. That didn’t make her feelings less complicated, though—rather the opposite.

“You’re right, it means nothing to me. You kidnapped me, Jedd killed my friend, and I’m still being held hostage.

Forgive me for not thinking of you as a hero,” she said.

He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it, looking away from her, his eyes on the street as the lights turned green. He nodded but said nothing as he lowered his foot on the accelerator and drove.

Nina noted he hadn’t turned on the navigation system in the car, nor was he looking at his phone. He knew this area, she noted, filing it away for future reference.

“Where are we?” Nina asked, taking in the street names and landmarks as he drove toward the sun.

“We’re on the north side of town, about an hour from the downtown,” Carter said, surprising her. She hadn’t expected him to answer.

“What is Jedd to you?” Nina asked, watching him carefully.

His forehead creased, his eyebrows weaving together. “What do you mean?”

“Is he your brother? A cousin? A friend?” she asked, because this information was important to her. The more she knew about him, the easier it would be to make a plan.

Carter chewed on his cheek as he drove. “He’s my younger brother,” he eventually said.

Nina’s eyebrows lifted. Jedd looked older than Carter, by a few years at least. Upon reflection, she thought, it wasn’t that he looked older but Carter was more polished, more professional.

“How many siblings do you have?” she asked.

He rolled his lips over one another as he stared ahead. The traffic was light, and Carter easily weaved through it. When

Nina saw the sign ahead for downtown, she wondered where they were going.

“Two,” Carter said after such a pregnant pause that Nina had almost forgotten she’d asked him a question. “I have an older sister,” he continued.

Nina mulled that over, wondering what the sister did—what kind of life she lived.

“She’s dead,” Carter said, and Nina’s eyes snapped to his.

His face was impassive, but his voice broke ever so slightly, telling her his sister’s death impacted him more than he was letting on.

“Who taught you about computers?” Nina asked, changing the subject.

“I’m done talking,” he said sharply.

Nina blew out a breath, looking away. Interestingly, he’d opened up about his family but balked when she’d brought up computers. She couldn’t make sense of him.

Nina rested her elbow on the car door, resting her cheek in her hand. The warm sun filtered through the window and for the first time since she’d been taken from her house, she felt like sleeping.

She closed her eyes, not feeling Carter’s eyes on her.

* * *

“NINA, WAKE UP,” Carter said, and she jumped, moving away from the sound of his voice. She was surprised she’d fallen asleep, but after more than twenty-four hours of sleep

deprivation her body had gone into survival mode and forced her mind to switch off and drift to sleep.

Nina's eyes darted around, quickly realizing they were in a parking garage. Almost all of the parking spaces were full, which provided a slither of relief, but she had no idea where she was, nor could she tell if it was daytime or night.

She cleared her throat. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere safe," Carter answered, reaching for the door handle. He looked back to her. "We'll stay here a few nights while we make a plan. Dante doesn't know about this apartment—he won't find us here." He paused, searching her eyes. "I'll make sure you walk away from this, but to do that I need you to work with me, not against me."

Nina searched his eyes, but she wasn't sure what she was looking for other than the truth. But how could she trust the man who had kidnapped her?

She couldn't, she knew. But she could use him to her advantage, because if she ran now, he would find her. Or Dante's men would, and Nina's gut feeling was that her odds of surviving were better with Carter.

"You say it like I have a choice," she said, raising an eyebrow. He wasn't holding her at gunpoint, but she hardly had a buffet of options at her disposal. "Let's get this over with." Nina looked away, but not before she saw a flicker of something in his eyes. But she ignored it, deciding that trying to understand Carter was a waste of her time. She would learn what motivated him, but beyond that it was irrelevant. Nina needed to focus on her own plan because she was going to do more than dangle money in front of Dante.

Nina got out of the car and walked beside Carter toward the elevators.

“Who owns this place?” she asked quietly, her eyes scanning the shadows for Dante’s men. This could be a trap, though she didn’t think so.

“I do,” he said and her eyes snapped toward his.

“What? Why would you bring me here? Do you really think Dante doesn’t know what properties you own?” she asked quickly in a high-pitched voice wrought with panic.

She stopped walking, spinning in a circle like she expected Dante to be behind her.

“It’s not in my name. Dante wants to kill me too—I’m no safer than you are,” he reminded her.

“Whose name is it in?” she asked.

He hesitated before he answered. “An alias.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. Every time he revealed something, she felt like he was giving her another piece of a puzzle, but none of the pieces connected.

“Is Carter your name, or an alias?” she asked.

His eyes stayed ahead. She thought he was choosing his next words carefully, but eventually the pause was so long she realized he wasn’t going to answer.

“Good conversation,” she whispered under her breath. Nina thought she saw a hint of a smile on his lips, but it was gone before she could be sure.

Nina looked over her shoulder yet again as they waited for the elevator. She couldn’t shake the feeling they were being

watched. She suppressed a shiver, grateful when the elevator doors opened and they stepped inside.

The walls were lined with mirrors and Nina suddenly wondered how much money Carter had, because this was not a standard apartment elevator—this looked like it belonged to a fancy building where a month of rent was more than most people earned in one year.

She looked to him again, studying him while he ignored her inquisitive gaze and kept his eyes forward. Nina wondered what he'd done to earn this kind of money . . . she wasn't sure how old he was, but she guessed he was in his mid-thirties. He certainly didn't have a lifetime of savings to purchase such an apartment.

What have you done, Carter?

Nina was still thinking about that when the elevator doors opened on the twentieth floor to a private lobby with a marble floor. A black pendant light hung from the ceiling; otherwise the space was unfurnished.

Nina said nothing as they got out of the elevator and Carter placed his thumb on the door lock. It beeped then opened.

Nina followed him inside, relieved to find it was in fact furnished and she wouldn't be sleeping on the floor. Furnished it was, decorated it was not.

Either Carter took minimalism to the next level, or he'd recently acquired this apartment.

“The fridge should be fully stocked. Help yourself to whatever you want,” he said. She realized she hadn't eaten since she'd been kidnapped, but the churning deep in the pit of her stomach ruined any appetite she would've otherwise had.

Curiosity got the better of her, though, so she opened the fridge. Juice, water, cheese, bread, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables.

Either Carter had been here before he'd kidnapped her, or he'd fully stocked this place knowing he might end up here. "Interesting," she said, closing the door.

She turned to see him leaning against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms over his chest. "What's interesting?"

"That your fridge is fully stocked," Nina said simply.

He shrugged casually. "Not really. My fridge is always fully stocked."

She frowned. "You live here?" she asked, her eyes sweeping over the immaculate, sparse apartment.

"No," he said before turning away, leaving her more confused than ever.

He disappeared down the hallway and Nina took the opportunity to open the blinds, pressing the button to raise them. Her breath caught in her throat—it was spectacular, a floor-to-ceiling corner view of downtown. At least she knew where she was now.

"Please keep the blinds down," he said from behind her, and she almost jumped. He pressed the button to lower the blinds then passed her a set of towels.

She took them, craving a searing hot shower.

"This way," he said, and she followed him down the hallway.

He opened the door to the nicest bathroom she'd ever stepped foot inside. Carter closed the door and Nina locked it, grateful for the privacy and a few minutes alone to collect her thoughts. She turned to look at herself in the mirror, internally

recoiling when she saw her reflection. She didn't recognize the woman staring back at her. Blood was caked to her temple and splattered over her clothing. She frowned, then realized it was most likely Ed's blood. His death flashed in her mind, fast and violent. Nina heaved, darting for the toilet. She fell on her knees as her body convulsed and tears ran down her cheeks. She dry-heaved until her back ached and she couldn't see through her tears.

Eventually Nina sank to the floor, the tiles cool on her heated skin. She shivered, though she couldn't tell if she was hot or cold. Her mouth tasted foul and her eyes were still wet. She curled into the fetal position and closed her eyes, willing herself to wake up from this nightmare.

But the nightmare was just beginning.

CHAPTER 8



CARTER

Carter pressed his ear to the door, straining to listen but it was finally quiet. He resisted the urge to unlock the door and check on her, but he didn't know if Nina was dressed. She was safe, and she couldn't get out. The windows were bulletproof—like the rest of the apartment—so there wasn't a chance she could break a window and climb out onto the balcony. There was no way out of the bathroom except through the door. Carter turned and went to the bedroom, pulling his phone out of his pocket as it vibrated.

J: The plan stays the same.

Carter didn't know if he should be concerned or relieved. The only thing he knew was he was exhausted. He locked the bedroom door behind him and stripped, climbing under the covers. He was almost certain Nina was asleep, but even if she wasn't, this apartment was impenetrable—in or out. Nina was locked inside until he decided otherwise.

Carter had a plan, but first he needed a few hours of sleep. He couldn't run on fumes, not when he was responsible for both their lives. It was hard enough to look out for himself and Jedd, but now Nina had been thrown in the mix and the responsibility weighed on him.

C: Understood.

Carter stared at the phone, waiting for a response but it didn't immediately come. He locked his phone and closed his eyes, grateful for a moment of peace.

* * *

CARTER OPENED one eye and then the other, unsure what had woken him. He sat up, listening, then opened the surveillance app on his phone. He watched Nina as she searched every cupboard in the kitchen, then moved to the living room. He wasn't sure what she was searching for, and assumed she didn't know either. The search didn't take her long because other than standard items one needed in a safe house, there was nothing else in this house. He watched her a minute longer until his stomach rumbled.

Carter pushed back the covers, dressed in the clothes he picked up from the floor, and walked toward the living room.

Nina looked over her shoulder, looking him up and down, then went back to searching the apartment.

"What are you looking for?" he asked as he opened the refrigerator.

"Secrets," she answered, and the corner of his lips turned up.

"Did you find any?" he asked as he gathered some items in his arms, glad to see his favorites were stocked.

"No. But if you don't live here, who stocks the fridge and how do they know when you'll be arriving?" she asked.

"Housekeeping, and I message them to let them know," he said. "Do you like noodles?"

She looked at him like he'd grown horns. "I don't care about noodles. I don't actually care about your housekeeping system. What I do care about is that you kidnapped me and forced me into this mess—"

"You're here because you stole millions of dollars, don't forget that. If I didn't come for you, Dante would've sent someone else," he said. "They wouldn't have stopped Dante from taking you." His eyes met hers.

She raised an eyebrow. "So I should thank you?"

He ignored the bitterness in her tone. "No, although we should work together and sort out this mess. But I need to eat first. I can't think properly when I'm hungry."

"Unbelievable," she said under her breath as she walked away. His gaze followed her, lingering on the hallway until she returned with her laptop tucked under her arm.

She sat on a barstool at the kitchen island.

"So, my savior," she said, all but rolling her eyes, "how do we get out of this mess?"

Carter appreciated her sass, even if she was ridiculing him. "We need to return the money, first and foremost. Then we need to access Dante's emails. He's been talking about a project named Onyxa. We need to know what it is and use it against him—that's the only way we'll stay safe," Carter said.

"What kind of a project?" Nina asked with narrowed eyes.

"I don't know. I'm assuming it's a drug-trafficking ring, but I don't know for sure."

Nina chewed on her cheek, looking to the ceiling before turning her attention back to him again. "You're going to blackmail him with it?"

“Maybe, depends on what it is. It might be better to hand the information directly to the police and let them handle it—but only if we are confident he’ll go to prison for life. If he doesn’t, and he knows we supplied the information, he’ll never stop hunting us.”

“Why not just kill Dante?” Nina asked.

Carter shook his head. “That’s not a good option. His entire organization would have to be dismantled to provide our safety. Killing one man isn’t enough—they’re loyal to Dante and they’ll come after us. We either kill them all—that would be extremely difficult—or we orchestrate their demise, which I think is a much better option.”

“Why do you think the information is in his emails?” she asked.

“I don’t. But he uses burner phones that he changes weekly, so I think it’s harder to intercept his calls than access his emails. It’s unlikely hacking his email will give us the proof we need, but it might reveal enough to lead us in the right direction,” he said as he continued chopping the vegetables while the water boiled.

Nina looked thoughtful for a moment. “Does he buy the burner phones himself?” she asked.

“I doubt it, why?” Carter asked.

Nina shrugged. “If we knew the SIM, we could intercept the calls. How loyal are his men?”

“Loyal,” Carter responded without hesitation. “They won’t give you a SIM number.”

Nina pressed her lips together like she didn’t believe that. “How did you find me? If you’re not a hacker, how did you

know I stole the money? Someone who knows more than you claim to had to be involved.”

“Dante received a tip-off. I don’t know where it came from—that’s not a question I could’ve asked him,” Carter said, hoping this line of questioning would end soon.

“But he sent you because you have somewhat of an understanding about how the money was stolen, right?” Nina pressed.

“He sent me because I offered. I thought the job would get me away from Dante for a few days,” Carter lied.

“You offered to kidnap me . . . this keeps getting better and better,” she said. If not for his training, he might’ve looked away.

“I offered to do a job, nothing more, nothing less. The world you live in is very different from the world I live in, Nina. I understand you’re angry—don’t worry, I hate me too—but the old saying that we always have a choice is a lie. Sometimes we don’t have a choice at all. Sometimes, it’s the lesser of two evils. I thought at least if I went on this job, I could control it somewhat. I thought I could protect you and Ed and keep you both alive. I’m sorry I couldn’t do that. Ed was never . . .” Carter looked away. No one was supposed to die, but Carter hadn’t counted on Jedd going rogue.

She stared at him a long moment, but he had no idea what she was thinking.

“Do you know where he buys the SIM from?” Nina asked.

Carter frowned, surprised by the line of questioning. “No, but I think I know who buys it. You could look at his bank transactions . . . although he likely uses cash. Dante rarely uses a card for anything.”

“Do you know where Dante would be now?” Nina asked.

“Yes,” Carter said, wary.

“Good. We’ll do surveillance, paying particular attention to his men. We’ll follow them until we find out who is buying them for him. Then, you’ll break into the store overnight, photograph all the SIM cards, then the following night after his man has purchased the SIM, you’ll break in again and note which one is missing. That’ll give us the SIM number,” she said thoughtfully.

“I have a few concerns with this plan,” Carter said, adding the noodles to the boiling water. “First and foremost, following Dante is risky. We’re both targets now so—”

“We’ll disguise our appearance,” Nina said without hesitation.

Carter didn’t like the idea, but it could work. Most of Dante’s men had been recruited for their brute strength and lack of remorse or conscience when inflicting brutal torture on Dante’s victims, not for their brain power.

“Okay, depending on the location and the business, breaking in without getting caught might not be that easy,” he said.

She gave him a smile that made him pause. “That would be true if I didn’t know how to hack a security system. But luckily for you, I do.”

Carter grinned, pleased she hadn’t proposed she break in herself. He’d never have let her, he’d take that risk himself, but was pleased he didn’t have to have that conversation. He didn’t want to treat Nina like a child, but he had a skillset he’d carefully crafted over the years—one that made him dangerous to a man like Dante, and one he couldn’t explain to Nina.

“I guess my luck is turning,” he said with a smile.

Nina rolled her eyes. “Alright. Now that that’s sorted, I need to think about how to steal one hundred million dollars.”

He grinned as he went back to cooking the noodles, and it felt good to be doing something normal. In a life where the stakes are always high, he’d forgotten the pleasures of a simple life. His eyes darted toward Nina as she worked, vowing yet again he’d make sure she walked away alive.

Her long fingers tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, capturing his attention but he quickly looked away. Their situation was complicated enough already, the last thing he needed was to bring emotion into it. Carter had learned the hard way that nothing good came from emotions, from feeling joy and pain. It was better for a man like him not to dance with the pleasures of life. It was safer, easier to concentrate.

Carter finished cooking and served the noodles into two bowls. He pushed one toward Nina, who muttered, “Thanks,” but didn’t look up from her computer.

Carter took a seat beside her, making a conscious effort not to inhale his food as he watched her work.

She typed lines of code that meant nothing to him.

“Now we wait,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

“For what, exactly?” he asked.

“To see if I can access their system. Once inside, I need to steal the data. Then I can create a ransom. Rinse and repeat,” she said, sounding tired.

“How long do we need to wait?” he asked.

She closed her laptop, picked up her bowl of noodles and turned to him. “That’s the million-dollar question, Carter.”

CHAPTER 9



NINA

*W*hat aren't you telling me, Carter?

The more time she spent with him, the more confused she was. She hadn't met a lot of gangsters, but he didn't seem to fit the stereotype.

Nina thought of Jedd. He fit the stereotype and there was something shady about Jedd—besides the fact that he'd killed Ed—Nina couldn't put her finger on. Nina didn't trust him, nor did she care that he was Carter's brother. Jedd would betray them if it meant his own survival, Nina thought.

"We should start surveillance tonight," Nina said.

Carter raised an eyebrow, seemed to think it through, then nodded slowly. "He'll be at his poker game tonight."

"Perfect, I'm good at poker," she said.

Carter's eyes widened. "No! You're not going anywhere near that game. It's a boy's club for starters, and regardless, we're doing surveillance from a distance until it's necessary to get closer. All we need to do tonight is watch who is coming and going."

Nina thought it over. “Fine. Can we go now that you’re fed?”

Carter gave a small smile. “We can go now.”

Nina stood, putting her bowl in the dishwasher then picked up her computer, sliding it into her backpack. She ignored the flutters in her stomach as Carter locked the door behind them. Nina was desperate to get home to Lena, but she couldn’t until it was safe. Nina was thankful Carter hadn’t killed Lena, but she couldn’t be sure that one of Dante’s men wouldn’t.

They drove in silence, the flutters in Nina’s stomach intensifying as they got closer to the destination on Carter’s navigation system.

“What do you expect to see tonight?” Nina asked, realizing she had no idea what was normal and what wasn’t—or who should be coming and going. She didn’t have a list of people of interest. She didn’t even know Carter’s full name, although she might soon if he was in the system.

“It should be a quiet night,” he said, his eyes darting to the clock on the center console. “By the time we arrive, most of the members should already be inside. One or two might come and go, but I don’t expect any surprises tonight. Poker night is usually predictable.”

Nina hoped that wasn’t the case. She needed information, and she needed it fast. Nina wanted surprises—the kind that were advantageous to her.

Eventually Carter came to a stop in front of a house with a leaning fence and windows that looked in need of repair. Nina wondered if the house was haunted. It certainly looked that way.

He reached for the door handle and Nina's eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"We'll have a better view from the balcony," he said, nodding toward the haunted house.

Nina looked between him and the house, suddenly unsure.

"No one is home," he said.

"How do you know that?" she asked in a hushed whisper, like they might wake the sleeping occupants.

"I've used this house before," he said vaguely, getting out of the car before she could ask another question.

Nina swore under her breath, the house sending a shiver up her spine. But, she needed answers so she forced herself out of the car.

Carter was waiting for her and led the way up the stone path to the front door. He pulled something from his back pocket, stuck it in the lock and had it open seconds later.

Nina didn't know if the lock was useless, or he was an expert at picking locks, but she mentally filed the information away for a later time.

Inside, the dust made her nose tingle and Nina found it a little harder to breathe, though she doubted it had anything to do with the dust. Carter used a dim flashlight to see ahead of them. Nina felt like it only cast more shadows but perhaps that was all in her imagination. The stairs creaked as Carter stepped onto them and Nina looked over her shoulder, waiting for someone to appear behind her. Something about this house didn't feel right but she forced herself to focus on the task ahead.

They crept up the stairs and Carter turned to the right, opening a door to reveal a faded, floral bedspread that looked like it belonged to someone of Lena's generation.

A wooden dresser sat against one wall, the top bare save for a layer of dust that Nina couldn't see but was certain was there. Carter opened the window and it squealed as he slid it up. Nina ducked, like someone would see them then silently reprimanded herself.

"Please tell me how we're going to do surveillance from here?" Nina asked.

A slow grin spread over Carter's lips. He motioned her forward then passed her a pair of binoculars. He stood behind her as she looked out of the window.

"See the building with the red roof," he whispered in her ear and Nina's breath caught in her throat. "That's where they are."

They had the perfect view and yet she knew that they were invisible to any of Dante's men, unless they happened to look at this window with a pair of binoculars.

"Tell me again how you knew about this place," she said.

"I've been watching Dante for years, ever since Jedd got mixed up with his men. I wanted to protect him, and to do that I needed to know Dante's weaknesses."

"Can you protect him, though? It seems like Jedd does whatever Jedd wants," Nina said gently as not to offend him.

"Jedd is lost, but I won't give up on him," Carter said.

Nina wondered what had transpired over the years between the brothers that had made Carter feel so responsible for his brother.

Nina said nothing as she watched. Carter's assumptions had been correct. Six cars were already at the building, and no one was coming or leaving. Nina thought this night was going to be a waste of time when a pickup pulled up at the property and a tall figure climbed out.

Nina's jaw fell open and she looked to Carter. His rigid body told her everything she needed to know.

Jedd had arrived, and Carter hadn't expected to see him.

"What is he doing?" Nina asked, keeping the accusation from her voice.

"I don't know," Carter said. "But he knows what he's doing."

Nina prayed that was true, but she had none of the faith in Jedd that Carter had.

Nina was still silently brainstorming all of the reasons Jedd might be paying a visit to Dante when two popping echoes made her heart skip a beat.

Her eyes snapped to Carter.

Someone had been shot.

CHAPTER 10



CARTER

“*W*hat do we do?” Nina asked quickly.

“Nothing,” Carter said, although it pained him to say it. The urge to run down the stairs and toward the house was almost too much, but he knew it was suicide to go running into Dante’s headquarters. Somehow, he kept his feet planted on the ground but every muscle in his body was coiled. His eyes stayed on the building, waiting for something to happen—for a sign that Jedd was okay.

Carter’s breathing felt labored even though he wasn’t moving. Invisible chains were wrapped around his neck as he stared, willing his brother to walk out.

Every minute that passed was torture. No one entered, no one exited. The building was dark and no light was shining through the windows, which meant they were in the basement. Carter felt sick, his stomach churning.

Why had Jedd gone back?

Nina was silent beside him, which he was grateful for because the less he said right now the better.

Carter’s eyes dropped to his watch, noting the time, then returned to the house. The silence seemed to have a heartbeat

of its own, torturing him as he continued to stare at the building. His soul willed Jedd to walk out, or for a sign he was alive, but nothing came.

He looked to his watch again. Thirty minutes had passed.

“What do you think is happening?” Nina asked quietly.

He felt her eyes on him, and he looked at her. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “But I don’t think it’s good.”

She visibly swallowed then nodded tightly before returning her attention to the building.

Carter’s heart skipped a beat as the door flung open and two men walked out, striding at a pace that indicated they were in a hurry. Carter recognized them immediately—Dante’s thugs. He subconsciously held his breath as more men exited but the nervous energy in his veins grew like a virus, threatening to take control when Jedd didn’t emerge.

Eventually Dante walked out, got in his car and drove away.

Carter exhaled a long breath. Jedd hadn’t emerged, but he also knew how Dante worked. He didn’t kill his victims fast, he let them suffer—which meant there was a strong chance Jedd had been shot and was lying on the floor, bleeding out. Carter could still save him.

But where had Dante’s men gone? Would they come back? Was it a trap?

Carter didn’t know, but he wasn’t going to let his brother bleed out on Dante’s floor.

He looked to Nina, hoping his assumptions were correct. She was smart enough not to run, because if she went home Dante would come for her. Lena would be the easiest way to

draw Nina out, but Dante didn't know about Lena—at least not yet. Carter didn't know how long that would hold true, though.

His heart raced and his fingers began to tremble as he looked back to the clubhouse.

“I need to get inside that building,” Carter said quickly, and Nina's eyes widened.

“Are you crazy? They could come back any second! There might still be men inside,” she said in a hushed voice.

“My brother is in there and I know how Dante operates. He wounds his victims and lets them die slowly, suffering until their last breaths. If Jedd was shot, he'll still be alive. I have to know—I have to try,” Carter said, his voice sounding pained even to his own ears.

Nina shook her head. “Jedd got himself in this mess, and you're going to die for him?”

Carter ignored the judgement in her voice. She didn't understand, she would never understand. Carter owed Jedd a debt he could never repay, but this he could do. “I need to go now. Please wait for me here. Don't run, Nina. Don't go home. Dante doesn't know about Lena, but if you go home they'll find you both, and I won't be able to protect you.”

Her jaw clenched and she looked away before turning back to him with blazing eyes. “Fine, Carter, do whatever you need to. But tell me this, what do I do if you don't walk out of that building?”

“I'll walk out of that building,” he said, his words a promise. “But if there ever comes a time when you need something and I'm not here, you call this number,” he said,

reaching into his jacket pocket and passing her a white card with a phone number but no name.

She frowned, looking at the number. “Who is this?” she asked.

“It’s best you don’t know for now,” he said. “But, if you have no other option, call him. He’ll help you.”

She shook her head, but he couldn’t tell if it was with disappointment, disgust, or disbelief.

Carter pulled an earpiece from his jacket and held it up for her. “We’ll keep in contact. Let me know if anyone approaches the building, and I’ll keep you updated on what I see inside,” he said, making a deal that seemed to acquiesce a slither of her contempt for this plan.

She nodded and mumbled, “Fine.”

Carter swept her hair behind her ear, his heart thumping in his chest as he realized he’d all but fantasized about this moment hours ago and now it was happening, albeit not in the way he’d wanted it to. She stilled at his touch, but he didn’t know what to make of that. He inserted the earpiece into her ear and waited for the confirmation beep in his.

Satisfied, he took a step back. “You’re safe here. Wait for me, please,” he said.

He waited until she nodded. It was a reluctant nod, he knew, but he took it.

Carter turned and walked away, hoping like hell it was the right decision. He took the stairs two at a time, locked the front door beside him and unlocked the car. He grabbed another pistol from the case in the trunk, then ran around the block, his breath creating puffs of smoke in the cold air.

He slowed as the building came into view. It would be an advantage to have Nina doing surveillance for him—provided she didn't run and disappear—but the risks were still high. Carter focused on his breath, keeping his heart rate steady and his mind calm.

He knew this building; he'd spent hours inside of it watching Dante, learning everything about him. Carter had spent five years playing the long game, ready for an opportunity to destroy Dante. But Jedd had never been in the plan, neither had Nina.

Carter crept along the fence, using the shadows for cover. He could feel his heart pulse in his ears, his adrenaline running high. He stopped, listening for voices, for any sign of life inside the building—but he heard nothing. Weighing his options, he decided on the side door. It wasn't visible from the street, and it was rarely used by Dante's men. Carter figured if they heard any noise, they'd run for the back or front doors, buying him some time.

His eyes swept over the building, one last look to make sure he hadn't missed anything—or anyone. The element of surprise might be the very thing that would keep him alive.

Satisfied no one was watching this side of the building, he crept forward. "Going in," Carter said under his breath.

"Be careful," Nina responded, her voice a calm whisper.

"Will do," he said as he moved quickly, his feet light on the gravel but it still crunched beneath them. To his ears it sounded like he was announcing his arrival on a megaphone, but he knew that wasn't true. Carter knew how to move like a ghost—he'd spent years practicing.

He reached the door and turned the knob. As predicted, it didn't budge. Carter pulled a lock pick from his pocket and felt the satisfying click of the lock as it opened. Many years ago, he'd been a professional safe-cracker. Life could change in the blink of an eye, but he still loved the satisfaction of hearing and feeling that mechanical click—of breaking a system he wasn't supposed to be able to break.

Carter turned the knob slowly and inched the door open. It creaked and he paused, internally cringing. He waited for the echo of footsteps but the building was eerily silent. Carter's heart raced a little faster but once again he focused on his breath, calming his mind.

He slowly pushed the door a little wider until he could slip through. He didn't close it behind him in the event he had to silently exit in a hurry. But he hadn't taken more than a few steps forward before the smell hit him like a wall. Carter knew that smell—the pungent, bitter smell of rotting flesh. He pulled his sweater over his nose to stop himself from gagging as he wondered which poor soul had been one of Dante's victims.

Carter shone the dim flashlight over the store room, quickly finding the source of the smell. She sat bound to a chair, flesh missing from her arms. Carter's breath caught in his throat when he realized he knew her: it was Dante's girlfriend.

His jaw fell open. Last he'd seen, Dante was in love with her. Carter wondered what had happened in the few weeks that had caused him to do this.

Carter shook his head, continuing to creep toward the door. He pressed his ear against it, listening once again but the only sound he heard was his own breath.

It was too quiet.

It was like no one was here at all.

CHAPTER 11



NINA

*N*ina looked over her shoulder for the twentieth time since Carter had left. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, and she didn't think it was a human form watching her. She shook her head, silently reprimanding herself for acting like a child. It was an abandoned house, nothing more.

Ghosts aren't real, Nina.

"Inside," Carter said, his voice barely a whisper.

"All looks clear from here," Nina said, her gaze sweeping up and down the street.

The temptation to run was almost too much to resist. But where would she run to? And if Carter found her again, she didn't think he'd be so nice the next time around. Regardless, the only place she wanted to run was home to Lena. Her heart ached when she thought of her grandmother. Was she worried about Nina? Was she being cared for by Annie? But how long could Annie stay? Nina drew a long, calming breath. No, she couldn't run. As much as she hated to admit it, Carter was her best option.

Her eyes stayed trained on the building, from Nina's vantage point it seemed vacant. But Jedd never left the building, so where was he? Nina wished she'd known how many others were already inside. Had everyone been accounted for? It was impossible to know.

She looked up and down the street, but she didn't see any movement.

Nina couldn't run, but she did have a few moments alone. She pulled her laptop from her bag, her eyes darting between her bag and the street, not wanting to miss anything.

Her heart skipped a beat as she saw movement in the shadows, but it was so quick she wasn't sure if she'd seen it. Nina stared into the darkness, but she didn't see anything. Large trees from the neighboring property hung over the fence, creating shadows that moved in the breeze. It must've been that, Nina thought, certain that was what had captured her attention.

She turned on her laptop without looking, her eyes still on the shadows. The shadows continued to shift in the breeze, but Nina saw nothing of concern.

She quickly dropped her eyes to her laptop, which she kept below the window so the light wouldn't be visible to anyone on the street. She opened her identity program and her jaw dropped open when she saw it had found a match.

While Carter had been busy cooking, she'd used her laptop to take various photos of him and load them into a program that ironically Ed had developed, which matched photos to various databases—much like the police and government agencies used.

She stared at the photo on her screen, certain the eyes looking back at her were Carter's. She looked back to the building, determined to not to miss anything she should alert Carter to. Her eyes continually bounced between the two as she read the report in fragmented glimpses.

Nathan Walls

Thirty-two years old

Resident of New York City

Professional safe-cracker.

Deceased. Killed by inmate at Rikers Island.

Nina frowned, suddenly feeling cold.

"Nina, is the street clear?" Carter asked.

Nina swallowed, her eyes sweeping the street frantically like she'd missed something.

"Yes, why?" she asked.

"Keep me updated if you see anything at all," he said vaguely.

"Like what? What is going on?" she asked.

"I'll explain but first I need to concentrate for a minute. Just tell me if you see anything," he said like he was expecting company. But why?

Nina picked up a noise in the background but it was too faint and she couldn't be sure what he was doing but it sounded like he was typing.

Her curiosity was piqued. *What are you doing, Carter?*

Nina closed her laptop, not sure what to make of that report. Maybe it wasn't him. His face, although very attractive,

had no identifying marks. No moles nor scars that she could use to absolutely guarantee that the match was him. And if he'd been in Rikers, and supposedly killed, how would he be out and on the street? Nina blew out a frustrated breath, the balloon of hope she'd felt when she'd received the match quickly deflating until it ceased to exist.

Instead, she focused on the house, wondering if she should go inside and see what he was doing. She knew that was dangerous and a terrible idea, but she also knew that Carter was holding all the cards and she was being left in the dark. She didn't believe he knew nothing about computers and her suspicion was that he was on a computer right now, getting information he needed. What if the plan had been to kill Ed all along? What if Jedd hadn't gone rogue?

Nina suddenly wondered if she was more of a pawn in this game than she'd realized. And now he was inside Dante's headquarters while she was stuck in a haunted house on her own. He had access to the information she needed and Nina was sitting around idly, waiting for him.

Or, maybe he was telling the truth and he really thought Jedd was injured and bleeding out on the floor. He hadn't exited the building, not that Nina had seen—so it wasn't a farfetched idea.

“Are you typing?” Nina asked, no longer willing to be left in the dark, regardless of the consequences.

“What? No,” he asked. “Please, Nina, just give me two minutes and I'll explain.”

It was petty, but Nina looked to her watch. She would give him two minutes of silence but that was it.

One minute passed.

Two minutes passed.

“Time is up,” she said.

She waited for his response, but her words were like an echo in her mind, repeating over and over without a response.

“Carter?” she answered.

She subconsciously held her breath as she waited for a response that didn’t come.

Nina looked back to the building, suddenly feeling like a target in this house. She didn’t know what was going on, but she was not going to sit here and find out.

Nina grabbed her backpack, slung it over her shoulder and took one last look at the seemingly empty building before she ran toward the stairs, her feet light as she ran down them. She felt instant relief once she was out of the house and on the street.

Nina ran around the block, sticking to the shadows. She’d watched Carter enter, and now she was going to do the same.

Her heart whooshed in her ears and she crept along the fence, the overhanging trees flapping around above her. She eyed the door she’d watched Carter enter through. She had no idea how she was going to get inside—Nina didn’t know how to pick a lock—but she was going to give it her best shot.

She sprinted toward the door, moving as fast as she could on the gravel. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise when she saw the door was not only unlocked, but ajar.

Thank you, Carter.

Nina slid through the open door and her hand went to her mouth as she heaved, the smell stinging her eyes and burning her throat. The room was dark, barely lit by the light coming

from the next room, but she saw enough to see the woman in the corner, brutalized and hauntingly dead. Nina began to shake, and her eyes darted around frantically. She took a step backward and hit something. She spun around, only to realize she'd backed into a bookcase. She gasped in a breath, but it just made her stomach roll violently. She felt like she was breathing in death. Nina's vision swayed and she knew she needed to get away from the corpse. She looked at the door, but an image flashed before her—her face on the woman's body.

Nina needed answers, and Carter had some of them—that much she knew. Nina ran a shaky hand over her face, trying to compose herself but the stench was too violent. She moved toward the door, which was open only a fraction. She peered through while simultaneously trying not to vomit on her feet. It looked like a clubroom of some sort. Dart boards hung on the walls. Poker tables in the center. Worn leather couches to one side and what looked like a makeshift bed. No people, no Carter.

Nina slipped through the door, suddenly feeling exposed in the bright light. She saw a door and was certain it was the front entrance door to the building. Then she saw a staircase that led to a basement. Fear snaked up her neck like icy tentacles. She didn't know what she was going to find, and she was worried that if Dante's men came back, she was going to end up trapped downstairs. But Carter must be down there, she realized, and that urged her feet forward. She slipped off her shoes, creeping on the tiled floor in her socks. It wouldn't help if she had to run—but she figured she had nowhere to run to right now and the quieter she could be the better. She carried her sneakers in one hand and tested the first step, keeping to the sides of the steps. She'd learned as a child trying to sneak

downstairs at Lena's house for a midnight snack that the middle of the stairs was more prone to creaking.

Nina waited for the stair to groan, but it didn't. She exhaled a shaky breath of relief. She tested the next step, then another. She figured she was much lighter than the staircase's usual crowd, but she didn't know if that scientifically made any difference.

From the stairs, Nina peered through the balustrade, her heart lurching into her throat as she saw Carter.

His back was toward her as he sat in front of an open safe, holding papers in his hands.

Suddenly Nina wasn't so certain that the identity report had been wrong.

Who are you Carter?

And what are you doing?

CHAPTER 12



CARTER

A tingling in his spine caused him to look up. He knew that feeling—the sense of being watched. He reached for his weapon and spun around, staring into Nina’s startled eyes.

“What are you doing?!” he asked as he gasped, leaning over like the sight of her had knocked the breath from his lungs. “What are you doing here?” he asked again, somewhat calmer as not to scare her, but the fact that she was standing in front of him made him incredibly nervous—no one was watching the house.

The pair of shoes in her hand explained how she’d managed to sneak up on him, but still he’d let his guard down. He’d been so absorbed in the documents he’d found that he’d made a mistake, one that could’ve had grave consequences.

“You didn’t respond,” Nina said.

Carter frowned. “Put your shoes back on. Running in bare feet is painful, and we might need to run at any time,” he said, his eyes darting toward the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking past him toward the open safe.

His eyebrows weaved together. “Looking for anything we can use against Dante. What did you think I was doing?”

Untrusting eyes stared back at him. “Why did you stop answering me?”

His eyes met hers and gut instincts told him not to lie—because Nina was no fool and breaking her trust was going to get them both killed. But he was a trained liar and it came naturally to him, so he settled on a half-truth. “Because I told you I needed a few minutes of peace. I was trying to quickly scan through everything in the safe to see what we needed.”

“How did you open the safe?” she asked, her face impassive.

“It was unlocked,” he said without hesitation. “Dante made a mistake. But given the hurry they left in, I’d say he’d gotten distracted.”

“*Big* mistake to leave a safe open, wouldn’t you say?” she asked, searching his eyes.

“Huge mistake,” Carter responded. “Huge.”

“I want to look at the papers,” she said, holding out her hand.

Carter raised one eyebrow. He looked to the staircase again, but so far Dante’s men hadn’t returned. He thrust the papers toward Nina. “Go for it,” he said. “I need to quickly finish looking through this safe before Dante’s men return.”

She took the papers and he returned to searching through the safe. He found a stack of SIM cards and he grinned. This made Nina’s job of hacking the line much easier. He passed them to her, slightly less annoyed she’d ignored his request for her to stay safe in the house and had wandered into Dante’s

den. “Photograph the numbers and we’ll put them back. We won’t need to visit the store tonight.”

“Nice,” she said as she greedily grabbed them from his hand.

The corner of his lips turned up despite the fact he felt like time was running out. Carter moved quickly, but the rest of the safe was mainly loaded with ammunition, cash and some drugs. He didn’t have time to read through the documents, but he’d photographed them all.

The sound of a door opening and slamming shut upstairs made his blood run cold. His eyes snapped to Nina’s and he saw fear take over. He held out his hand. “Give me the SIM cards!” he whispered urgently and she thrust them toward him along with the documents. Carter stacked them in the safe, his heart racing as he worked quickly but carefully to make sure it looked untouched. He closed it and locked it and then looked around. They had only one option. He brought his finger to his lips then took her hand, leading her to the cavity underneath the staircase.

Carter prayed that someone was just coming to pick something up and then would leave again, but he doubted they were that lucky.

They crept toward the stairs, Carter listening to everything happening above them. Three people, he guessed based on the echo of the footsteps. Three was manageable, but if any more came he didn’t like his odds.

Carter crouched underneath the stairs, Nina beside him.

“Do you know how to shoot?” he asked in a barely audible whisper.

She shook her head quickly.

“Use the sights, hold with two hands and pull the trigger,” he said, quickly demonstrating before passing her his second pistol. They had enough ammunition for three men. But if the clubhouse suddenly filled up they were as good as dead. Nina should never have come in, it had been his risk to take—he’d come for Jedd, the safe had been a bonus. However, there had been no sign of his brother, but there was a trail of blood out the back door. Had Carter just missed him? Had it even been Jedd’s blood?

Carter’s prayers that Dante’s men would stay upstairs went unanswered. His pulse spiked when he heard the thud of a footstep on the first stair. Nina looked up, her lips parting as she sucked in a breath.

It’s going to be okay, Carter mouthed, as much to reassure himself as Nina.

She looked back to him and nodded. Nina may not trust him, but she trusted him to protect her. And Carter was going to make sure she walked out alive.

The footsteps continued, thudding down the stairs until feet hit the floor. Carter passed his pistol to Nina—he needed to do this quietly.

Her eyes questioned him but she said nothing, taking the gun from him.

Carter turned his attention to the man, grateful only one had come down at a time—that gave them a fighting chance. He knew he’d only have one opportunity to do this right and he drew a steadying breath as the man came into view. He walked toward the center of the room, not looking behind him, not looking under the stairs. That told Carter the man had no idea they were in the building. They didn’t come back because someone had seen them enter.

When the man was no more than a few steps away from the staircase, Carter lunged for him from behind. His hand went to the man's mouth, muffling his surprised yelp. Carter grunted under his breath as he brought up his knee, ploughing it into the man's lower back, causing him to lose his balance. Carter kicked him in the back of his knees, throwing him off balance and then he slipped his arm around his neck, putting him in a chokehold. The man fought back viciously. Carter was breathless and almost lost his grip but as the man's lungs used up the remaining oxygen, his body gave up the fight. Carter felt the moment he slipped into unconsciousness then let the man slowly drop to the floor before he dragged him under the stairs. Carter looked toward the stairs to a wide-eyed Nina beside them. He ignored her questioning gaze as he looked around the room for what he needed. He saw it across the room and weighed his options. He looked back to Dante's man on the floor and made his decision. He couldn't risk the alternative.

"Pistol," Carter said, holding out his hand.

Nina quickly passed it to him, like she couldn't wait to get rid of it.

He looked up, then darted across the room, moving as silently as he could. He found the duct tape and rope and grabbed it. Carter turned to run back to Nina but he heard footsteps then saw a pair of black shoes. His breath caught in his throat. He wouldn't make it back to the stairs. He darted behind the sofa, crouching on his tiptoes, alert and ready for whatever came next. Carter listened, using the echoes to guide him. The man continued down the stairs at a leisurely pace. "Two minutes," the man said.

Carter prayed he'd keep talking but silence followed.

What was happening in two minutes?

The footsteps grew heavier as the man walked toward the sofa Carter was crouched behind. He put the duct tape down but held on to the rope.

Carter heard the falter in his footsteps when the man realized something was wrong. Carter whipped the rope, aiming it at the man's shins. He hissed—way too loudly—and it was followed by yelling upstairs. Carter knew the element of surprise was gone, so he aimed his pistol and fired. The man's body jerked then fell to the floor. Carter moved to the stairs, firing as he saw the shadow of a silhouette before the man stepped onto the landing. Carter shot him twice and he fell.

“Come on!” he said to Nina, holding out his hand for her. She looked at him a moment before she ran toward him. She'd just seen him kill someone, so he understood the hesitation. But he'd killed to protect her, and himself. He'd never hurt her.

“Stay close behind me,” he said as he stepped onto the first stair. Carter's pistol was ready for the third man but he didn't rush to meet them at the stairs. Carter listened to Nina's labored breath, knowing fear raced through her veins. He didn't have any reassuring words for her, nor would he have time to deliver them. Carter focused his mind on what he needed to do next. At the top of the stairs, he paused.

“Don't look at him,” he whispered under his breath as a gunshot rang through the air and the plaster exploded on the wall adjacent to them.

Carter pressed his back against the closest wall, tugging Nina in the same direction. Carter knew the plan now. This man would keep them gridlocked in the basement until

Dante's men arrived. Carter had an awful feeling they'd be arriving in less than two minutes.

He looked up, but the ceiling was high with no hatch. They had to get out through the clubhouse. Carter grabbed a mirror from his back pocket—he never went anywhere without one for this very reason. He kneeled down, sitting back on his heels, to slide the mirror along the ground when the drywall exploded above his head. He grabbed Nina's hand, pulling her to the floor. They were shooting through the walls and he needed to move faster.

Using the mirror, he located the shooter. It was a hard angle, but not impossible, and regardless, they were out of options.

He looked to Nina, doing his best to reassure her. "Hold your pistol ready," he said calmly. "I'm going to take a shot at the shooter. If I miss, he'll be watching and aiming for me. Take your shot—make it count," he said.

CHAPTER 13



CARTER

“*W*hat? No!” she said in a hushed, frantic voice. “I won’t get out of here, they’re going to—”

“Look at me,” he said, placing a hand on hers. “It’s going to be okay.” He hoped he wouldn’t burn in hell for those words. Carter was going to do everything he could to make sure she was okay, but he couldn’t promise her anything.

He didn’t give her more time to think about it. Instead, his eyes dropped to the mirror, focusing on his target. Carter then picked up the mirror, drew a calming breath and threw the mirror into the hallway. Dante’s man reacted, his gaze on the mirror as Carter lunged into the hallway, shooting the man twice before he could redirect his gun from the mirror to Carter. Carter hit the floor with a thud. Lying on his side, he fired a third bullet to be sure Dante’s man wasn’t getting up.

“Nina, come on!” he said, getting to his feet.

She was at his side in seconds and they ran for the storeroom that led to the side exit.

They were at the door to the storeroom when Carter heard the front door open behind them.

“Go, go, go!” he said, pushing Nina in front of him as he turned, firing as he ran forward. A bullet hissed past him and Carter didn’t stop to check if he’d been hit. He slammed the door behind them and locked it but Carter knew that wouldn’t buy them much time. He frantically searched for anything to drag in front of the door and resorted to grabbing a ladder and jamming it on an angle between the door and the shelving unit adjacent to it. Carter didn’t think it would hold but rather fall over with enough force, but it might buy them a minute and right now a minute mattered.

He looked up as Nina grabbed the keys off the wall and his lips turned up despite the adrenaline racing through his veins.

“Go!” Carter said as bullets showered the door he’d just blocked.

Nina stopped at the side door and peered out. “Looks clear,” she said.

“Range Rover,” she said, passing him the key.

He shook his head. “You drive, I’ll shoot.”

They sprinted forward, across the parking lot. Nina unlocked the car as bullets hit the ground around them.

“Go!” he said, reaching the door and yanking it open as he jumped inside.

Nina was a second behind him and drew a ragged breath as she turned on the ignition, planted her foot on the accelerator, and reversed out of the parking space. She spun the car around and for a fleeting moment Carter marveled at her driving skills. The back window shattered and he knelt on the seat, firing behind them. He hit one of his targets, but more bullets followed and he couldn’t see the shooters.

“They’ll track the car but the more space we put between us and them the better. I’ll do what I can, just get on a highway and drive fast, don’t worry about where you’re going,” he said, thinking the highways wouldn’t be too crowded at this time of night and he’d be able to spot a tail better on the highway.

Nina didn’t respond but she drove fast and that was all Carter needed her to do right now.

Two pickups followed them and Carter knew Dante would be in one of them. If only he knew which one.

“Faster, Nina,” he said.

“I’m trying!” she said, exasperated.

“You’re doing good, just keep—” The windshield shattered and Nina screamed, taking her foot off the accelerator.

His head snapped in her direction, checking she was okay. Relief coursed through him when he saw she was still breathing and the bullets fired from behind them hadn’t hit her. “Keep driving!”

Carter’s blood boiled as an image of Nina with a gunshot wound to the back of her head flashed in his mind. He returned his attention to the cars following them and narrowed his eyes. *Big mistake, Dante*, Carter thought as he fired relentlessly until his weapon was out of bullets.

He grabbed more ammunition from his pocket and refilled his weapon, aiming again. He knew he’d hit the driver when the car swerved and veered off the road.

One down.

Carter focused on the second vehicle.

“Carter!” Nina yelled, alarmed.

His head snapped to the front as a car swerved, cutting in front of them. Carter looked at the barrel pointed at them as one of Dante's men leaned out the window, facing them.

Nina yanked the wheel left and they swerved into the next lane, metal screeching as they hit another car but Nina managed to keep control while keeping her foot on the accelerator.

His heart pounded in his chest as his eyes darted between the cars, searching for anyone pointing pistols at them.

"Nina, get on the highway!" he said.

Nina lowered her foot on the accelerator, swerving between cars. They were parallel with the SUV, with a car between them. Carter's chest tightened. He hoped they weren't so stupid as to shoot out the middle car's windows, but he didn't put anything past them at this point. He looked to the dashboard, his eyes on the speedometer needle.

Carter saw the sign ahead, observing the lanes for the highway. He looked over his shoulder and back to the road. It would be tight, but it was doable.

"Change of plans," he said quickly. "Speed up, indicate left, and then veer right into the lane beside the ramp. If we do it right they won't have time to react and the SUV will have to go onto the highway."

Nina looked in the mirrors. "There's no gap!"

"You can make it. It'll be tight, but you can squeeze in," he said. Better to bump a car from behind than be side-by-side with the SUV.

In the rearview mirror, he eyed the pickup two cars behind them, in the same lane. They would have time to react, but one against one was much better odds.

“I can’t do it! This is crazy!” Nina said as the ramp fast approached.

“Three, two, one!” Carter yelled ready to grab the wheel but Nina squealed and crouched like she was bracing for impact as she swerved into the lane. They missed the car in front of them by a hair, but they made it.

“That’s it!” he said, as he saw the SUV ramp. He exhaled a breath of relief, giving the truck behind them his full attention.

Carter turned, kneeling on his seat, pointing his weapon at the pickup weaving through the traffic, suddenly right behind them.

Carter blinked as he looked into the driver’s eyes.

Dante.

CHAPTER 14



NINA

Nina's hands were aching from gripping the steering wheel. She exhaled a shaky breath as she accelerated again, but then suddenly remembered she had no idea where she was going. She didn't know this area of town—she could drive straight into a dead-end street.

“Carter, where do I go?” Nina asked.

“Just drive straight, don't change lanes,” he said, his voice distant.

Her eyes flickered to him and saw he was looking down the barrel of his gun. Why wasn't he shooting?

Nina's heart raced. “Why aren't you shooting?”

“It's not needed,” he said.

“What?” Nina exclaimed, her eyes darting between Carter and the road ahead.

When he relaxed his posture, she looked to the rearview mirror and saw the car had changed lanes and slowed down. She watched it turn off at the next street.

“What is going on?” she exclaimed.

Carter turned around to face the front, placing his weapon in his lap as he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “Dante was driving. He knows defeat when he sees it. He retreated, opting to spare his life. But he’ll be back.”

“He retreated, just like that?” Nina asked. She had the same feeling that she was missing something very important.

“I had a clear shot of him and I didn’t take it. He knew it. He’ll retreat for now, but he’ll come back better prepared,” Carter said.

Nina eyed him, easing her foot off the accelerator. She didn’t believe him. Her gut instinct screamed he was lying. But why? He’d protected her in the clubhouse. Granted, he’d wanted to get out of there alive too. But he’d shielded her and protected her. So why would he lie to her now?

Her mind reeled and she stretched out her cramped fingers. Abiding by the speed limit felt like crawling, but she didn’t know how much more adrenaline her heart could take before she had a heart attack. She had a lot of questions for Carter, but they had to wait until they were somewhere safe so she could voice them and watch him closely while he answered. She didn’t know if or why he was lying, but she knew something was amiss.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, and her suspicions flip-flopped.

“No, not really,” she said, meeting his gaze before returning her attention to the road.

Nina knew what he was thinking, he had told her to stay at the house, and she couldn’t argue the fact that if she had, the night might’ve ended differently. She could’ve warned Carter

that Dante's men were coming back, however, she wasn't sure how much time that would've bought him.

"We need to get out of this car," Carter said.

Nina frowned. "You just said he retreated. Why do we suddenly need to get out of the car?"

"Because Dante might just be playing. For all we know he's taking a side street and will come out in front of us," Carter said, and Nina clutched the steering wheel once more.

Carter pointed. "There, pull over."

Nina raised an eyebrow as she looked where he indicated, glad she could reverse parallel park. She maneuvered into the spot, barely putting the car in park before Carter's hand was on the door handle.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing her backpack.

Questions burned on Nina's tongue yet again, but she jumped out of the car, taking the key with her.

She looked to Carter as they walked, his eyes sweeping the street, checking over his shoulder every now and then.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Anywhere that puts distance between us and Dante," he said as he gestured toward the steps to the subway.

They all but ran down the steps. "Buy two tickets," Carter said as his eyes continued watching everyone around them.

Nina stared at the screen but suddenly she couldn't think. The adrenaline was wearing off and shock was setting in. But she couldn't afford to lose focus—they weren't safe yet. She shook her head, clearing her mind. Pressing the buttons, she

focused on what should've been a simple task and purchased two tickets.

“Let's keep moving,” Carter said with a nod. Nina appreciated his calm, methodical attitude. While it might come across as cold, it was what she needed right now.

She passed him his ticket. He took it then said, “If something happens and we get separated, call that number, Nina.”

Her eyes snapped to his and she quickly looked over her shoulder.

“Just in case,” he said, reading her perfectly.

She nodded tightly, almost tripping over the step. Carter reached out and grabbed her arm, steadying her. They didn't miss a beat and arrived at the platform as the train pulled up. She followed Carter's lead and stood beside him on the train, despite there being plenty of spare seats. When the doors closed, Nina didn't know whether to feel relieved or anxious.

The train picked up its pace and the familiar rattle of its carriage did nothing to ease her rising anxiety. The doors opened and three men entered. They didn't look like Dante's normal recruits—they had an air of sophistication about them that was more like Carter than Dante. They took seats behind them and Nina looked to Carter, but his shoulders sat low and relaxed, his eyes showing no familiarity of the men.

Nina strained to listen to their conversation. They were talking about a meeting that had run over schedule, and Nina assumed the men worked together although they weren't wearing uniforms nor were they in corporate attire.

Carter looked up to the subway map near the ceiling of the carriage. “We'll get off at the next stop,” he said quietly, for

her ears only.

She looked past him to see if any of the men were listening, but they were carrying on their own conversation.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Somewhere safe,” he all but whispered.

She raised an eyebrow. “The last safe place you took me to was haunted. Please tell me it’s not an abandoned house again.”

The corner of his lips turned up and his cheeky smile gave her butterflies. She silently chided herself; she could not afford any distractions right now—her life was in her hands as was Lena’s. Nor should she be romanticizing about Carter, a man who had kidnapped her and was beginning to show her how dangerous he could be.

“It’s not haunted,” he said.

“How would you know, unless you’ve been there on multiple occasions?” she asked, questioning him.

His grin didn’t falter. “I’ve spent hours in that house and I didn’t see one ghost, nor did I hear any voices whispering to me. I didn’t imagine you being scared of an abandoned house,” he said, still smiling.

“How many hours?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He looked thoughtful a moment, then shrugged. “If I added up all the hours . . . a few months of my life, probably.”

Nina’s jaw dropped open as the train came to a stop. Carter nodded toward the doors. “Come on,” he said, and Nina rushed to catch up to him.

How long had Carter been watching Dante? And why?

“A few months?” she asked as they walked up the steps, Carter moving at a fast pace. Nina looked over her shoulder, seeing the men exit the train too, but turn left. She exhaled a breath.

“I needed to know Dante’s weaknesses,” Carter said, his eyes sweeping the street as they emerged from the underground.

“Why?” Nina asked again, frustrated by the bite-sized pieces of information he was giving her.

“Because he killed my sister,” Carter said, his eyes ahead, and Nina stopped walking, her mouth gaping. It took Carter a second to realize she wasn’t beside him and he turned back to her, gently grabbed her arm and tugged on it. “Please keep walking.”

Nina obeyed but now she had even more questions. “What happened?” Nina asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Carter said as they walked.

Nina struggled to keep up with Carter, his relaxed posture gone since they’d left the train. Did he really expect Dante’s men to step out in front of them now?

Nina hoped not, because she’d had enough excitement for the day. She was suddenly exhausted, her bones achingly tired. She stuck her hand in her pocket, forgetting she’d tucked the key for the Range Rover in it. She pulled it out. “Are we going to need this again?”

Carter shook his head. “No.”

Nina shrugged, a small smile tugging at her lips as she dropped the keys into the nearest garbage bin. It was petty, but it felt like a small win. Dante likely had a spare set, but losing the key would at least irritate him.

They walked a few more blocks before Carter finally said, “Here.”

Nina looked up, almost tripping on her feet. This is not where she’d expected them to end up, but then again everything was a surprise with Carter.

Nina stayed close to his side as he walked up to the check-in desk of the Tivoli Hotel and asked for a room with twin beds then slid his credit card across the desk. Nina was quick to take a peek at the name on the card: Carter Hamilton. Nina looked to him, wondering if that was really his name. Or was he Nathan Walls?

She made a note to go back to Nathan’s profile and see if there was any mention of his siblings—alive or deceased—in his profile.

They waited at the elevators and Nina looked over her shoulder, expecting Dante’s men to be right behind them. Maybe it was because they were so close to safety, but something didn’t feel right.

CHAPTER 15



CARTER

*H*e felt the moment that Nina tensed beside him, looking over her shoulder. Carter used the mirrored wall to survey their backs, but he saw no immediate danger.

The elevator opened and he guided Nina inside. Two women also walked in, but Carter didn't recognize them. His eyes lingered on them, though, watching what they were doing with their hands. Hands were often a giveaway. Nervous minds made for nervous fingers that fidgeted constantly, but more than that, he needed to see if they reached for a weapon so he and Nina weren't blindsided. Carter didn't actually suspect them, but he'd learned to never rule someone out. Dante's men were stupid, but Dante was not, and Carter didn't know what lengths he would go to now to get what he wanted. By taking Nina, Carter had made her more valuable. And that's the problem: when something becomes too valuable, others would rather destroy it than let someone else have it.

J: He's hiring another hacker. If Nina doesn't move fast and get the money, she's of no value to him.

Carter exhaled with relief at the communication, even though it wasn't the news he wanted. While Dante wanted

Nina alive, the odds were in her favor. She still had time, but it was running out.

C: Working on it.

The elevator beeped, signaling their arrival on the tenth floor. Carter wished the women had gotten out before them, but just to be on the safe side, he turned left and they walked out of view of the elevator. When he heard the doors close again, he turned around. “Wrong way,” he said.

Nina screwed up her face, like she was surprised he’d make the wrong turn to the room. But everything Carter did was intentional, and Nina would soon understand the game they were all playing.

Carter’s gaze swept the empty hallway before he stopped at the door, swiping the electronic key against the door lock. He pushed it open, holding the door ajar for Nina, took one last look over his shoulder, then closed the door, deadlocking it.

He went straight to the refrigerator and grabbed two bottles of water, passing one to her. “This is nice, Mr. Hamilton . . . do you stay here often?”

He grinned. “You need to put your skills to work. If Dante finds another way to get his money, we lose our bargaining power.”

She raised an eyebrow. “He has other hackers?” she asked, seemingly alarmed, as though she hadn’t considered the possibility.

“He can find them. So let’s make this happen,” he said, pulling out two chairs at the dining table.

“I had an idea, actually, as we were driving. Or more correctly, as we were being shot at. Better than health

insurance, I'll look at car insurance companies. If anyone has gotten wind of this within the industry, they'll all be madly upgrading their cyber security to make it harder to penetrate. Not good for me," she said, matter-of-factly. "But, insurance companies as a whole need a percentage of funds available to pay out to customers, so they're still the best bet. At least it would be another option if I can't get inside the system I've already targeted."

Nina paused, thoughtful for a moment. "If they incrementally increase their customer identification numbers, that makes stealing the data much easier—but I won't know if they do that until I get inside the system. That's the tricky part. Once I'm inside I'll write the code, steal the data, and demand a ransom," she said, placing her laptop on the dining table.

"What can I do to help?" Carter asked.

"If you truly know nothing about computers, the best way to help me is to be quiet," she said, placing her laptop on the table.

A smile tugged at his lips. He wondered if he'd ever so politely been told to shut up.

Carter set about making two hot chocolates—a weakness from his childhood he'd never been able to give up. Every night, when his father had gotten home from work, he'd make sure all three of his children were bathed and ready for bed. Then they drank hot chocolate around the dining table while Carter's mother disappeared for a few minutes—likely to take a break. Carter wondered now that he thought about it, if feeding a kid sugar before bed had been a great idea, but as far as he could recall, he'd never had issues sleeping as a child.

The nightmares started later.

The night Evie died.

Carter placed two mugs on the kitchen counter and walked around to the other side, taking a seat beside Nina. She didn't look at him, nor did she seem to notice he was there. She was typing code onto a black screen, but other than that, he had no idea what she was doing. Nina could be trying to rob him, for all he knew—but if that were the case, he'd know soon enough. In Carter's line of work, it was always a matter of focusing on one task at a time. While it was good to think ahead, with so much uncertainty, it could be paralyzing so he'd always been taught to focus on the present moment and deal with whatever happens next when it happens.

Nina sat back. "Everything is in place, now we wait."

"Wait for what, exactly?" he asked.

She looked at him like he was an idiot. "To see if I cracked the system."

Carter nodded slowly, but he had no idea what that meant and he didn't care to know—he just needed the money to ensure her safety.

"While we wait," she said, crossing her arms over her chest as she angled toward him. "I need more information from you. I can't do this if I don't know whether I can trust you."

"What do you want to know?" Carter asked casually, but what he really wanted to say was the conversation was over.

"Where do you think Jedd is?" she asked.

Carter exhaled a long breath. "If I knew where he was, I wouldn't be sitting here right now."

“I understand he’s your brother, but I’m not sure he deserves your loyalty. Why are you willing to die for him?” she asked, searching his eyes.

His heart raced and he felt like, for the first time in a long time, someone saw right through him. Past the façade. Past the carefully created man he looked at in the mirror every day. It was unnerving and yet he wanted her to see him.

“Because he’s family, and I will do anything to protect him,” he answered, every word the truth. Jedd was the only one he had left. His parents had passed away six months before Evie’s death, which Carter was grateful for. It would’ve killed them to know what had happened to her—to have had to bury her.

She pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing. “Why?”

“Because he’s family. In my family, we protect each other at all costs,” Carter said.

“Does he protect you at all costs?” she asked gently.

“Yes,” Carter answered without hesitation. Jedd was still paying the price for Carter’s mistake. He could never repay him, so the least he could do was keep him alive and get him away from Dante.

But it would never give Jedd back the years he’d lost, the years he’d spent in prison for a crime Carter committed.

Time was the one thing there was never enough of, yet more time was wasted than anything else. Time worrying, time giving attention to the wrong people, time spent mindlessly wandering through life.

Carter couldn’t give Jedd back the years he’d lost—the years Dante had robbed from him. But he could make sure that

Dante paid a price for those years because it was Dante who had set Carter up.

“It’s complicated, but Jedd wasn’t always like this. He was actually training to be a pilot before I derailed his life and he ended up in Dante’s hands. If I thought it was safe to tell you, Nina, I would—but the less you know the better. The issue I have with Dante is a decade-old feud that has nothing to do with the reason you’re here now. I wish there were an easier way out of this for both of us, but there’s not. We take down Dante, dismantle his organization, then we go back to living our lives,” he said.

She looked at him a long moment. “What were *you* training to do before you ended up in Dante’s hands?”

“I worked in hostage retrieval,” he said.

She blinked. “For whom?”

“The government,” he said.

She chewed on her cheek, seeming to mull that over. “So you went from hostage retrieval to taking hostages?” she asked, salty.

“Like I said, Dante changed everything. Jedd and I were forced into this life—we didn’t choose it. I understand, Nina, and I know all too well that no amount of remorse or apologizing can bring someone back. But the Jedd you saw . . . that’s not who he is.”

“He’s not an impulsive killer, you mean?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,” Carter said, his tone steady. Nina’s pain and anger were valid, but she didn’t know the full story.

Nina wrapped her arms around her like she was cold.
“What’s going to happen to Ed’s body?”

“He’s with his family. I called someone . . . they dealt with it. Ed’s family has his body and they will have closure. Dante’s men will be framed for the death,” Carter said.

“But Dante’s men didn’t kill him, Carter,” Nina said, her words short.

“Jedd fired the bullet, but Dante was behind it. You can hate me, you can hate Jedd, but it doesn’t change anything,” Carter said calmly.

“Who did you call and how did they return Ed’s body to his family?”

“I called a friend . . . They moved him closer to his family’s house and then tipped off the police. They made sure the police will look at Dante. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Interesting friends you keep,” she said.

Carter couldn’t tell if she was grateful or disgusted with him.

His phone vibrated and he couldn’t answer it fast enough when he saw who was calling him. But why was Jedd calling on his number? He knew to turn off his phone and use a burner.

Carter answered the phone and brought it to his ear.

CHAPTER 16



NINA

“*H*ello,” he said casually.

Nina eyed in on him, watching everything he did, but his face was impassive.

“Good, thanks,” he said, his tone giving away nothing. He could’ve been talking to his gardener for all Nina knew.

“Next week works,” he continued. “Okay, bye.”

Carter hung up the phone and got a drink from the fridge. She wondered if he’d needed a drink, or if he’d gotten up so there was no chance she’d overhear the conversation.

Or perhaps Nina was losing her mind altogether.

He grabbed two cans of soda and placed one in front of her, but instead she picked up the mug of hot chocolate. Some of her favorite memories with Lena were the simple ones—hot chocolate by the fire while Lena told stories of her childhood.

History had always fascinated Nina. She loved to know other people’s stories, often wondering what kind of legacy she would leave behind.

Her eyes dropped to her computer.

If she didn't get herself out of this mess, there would be no time left for her to build her legacy.

"Everything okay?" she asked, typing on her laptop.

"Yes, just arranging for a delivery next week," he said.

Nina looked to him, searching his eyes. Was he lying to her? She couldn't tell. The man was impossible to read.

"You never told me how you found me," she said.

"Dante gave me the information," he said.

"Yes, but how did Dante get it?" she pressed. When he didn't respond, she leaned against the backrest of the bar stool and crossed her arms over her chest. If he wanted her to work, he needed to start answering her questions.

Something like remorse flickered in Carter's eyes, but it didn't make sense.

He hesitated.

"Tell me," she said firmly.

Carter inhaled deeply, rolling his lips over one another.

"I assume you haven't gone back into the system since you demanded, and were paid, the ransom, correct?" he asked, surprising her.

"Of course not, the risk of being detected was too high," she said, frowning.

He nodded. "Ed didn't think the risks were too high . . . The insurance company left the backdoor open after the ransom because greed makes people do stupid things. Ed was using a private network, but the insurance company's cyber team was watching him. He got greedy and stole more data, transferring it to an online storage facility—we think he was

planning a second ransom. The cyber team was able to hack the storage facility and trace it back to him. I took him first, Nina. We thought he was acting alone . . . until he gave your name in exchange for staying alive.”

Nina felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach but she kept her face neutral—at least she tried to, but she had no idea what was written over her face as she fought to keep her emotions in check. “How long were you watching me before you took me?” she asked, swallowing the lump in her throat. That was a tough pill to swallow. Nina had known Ed since they were kids. She would never have given his name, it did not even occur to her at any time when she was kidnapped. But maybe Carter was lying to her and Ed had never given her name.

“Three days,” he said, looking uncomfortable for the first time.

It didn't surprise Nina he'd been watching her for three days. What surprised her was she hadn't noticed. She should've seen something. She should've been more alert, considering she'd just executed a ransom.

“I'm trained to be invisible, Nina,” he said, correctly reading her mind. “Hostage retrieval specialists aren't very successful if people know they're coming.”

She nodded slowly. She'd never in her life had to look at someone and have no idea if they were telling the truth, or uttering absolute lies. It was confusing and unsettling.

“I guess not, *Nathan*,” she said, throwing out the name to surprise him.

He frowned. “Why are you calling me Nathan?”

Nina stared at him a long moment, but he showed no response to the name and then she was more confused than ever. She'd checked the profile again and Nathan didn't have any siblings. Maybe Nathan and Carter weren't the same person. With almost eight billion people roaming the planet, it was entirely possible two of them looked a lot alike.

She shook her head. "Never mind," she said vaguely, returning her attention to her laptop. She needed to spend less time thinking about Carter and more time solving her own problems. Nina wasn't going to rely on anyone to save her. She had to save herself.

She continued working on the code sequences, creating backdoors and scripts to steal the data, then another code sequence to transfer the data. Ed might have given her name—she certainly couldn't rule it out—but she would not assume that was the truth. Though she wasn't sure, Nina felt like Carter was still playing a game. Perhaps it was a game with good intentions, but he was not telling her the whole truth.

So Nina was going to play a game of her own; she was setting the stage, putting the pieces of a chess set on the board.

She looked to Carter.

I hope you're ready to play.

He looked back at her, his face impassive. Always impassive.

"I have a code script to hack the system that transfers calls and messages between service providers," she said, looking at her phone. She clicked on her photos, bringing up the photos she took earlier.

She passed her phone to Carter. "Call out the numbers to me. I'll run them all. As soon as one of them is used, I'll get

an alert.”

“How did you learn to do this?” he asked as he picked up her phone.

“Trial and error,” she said. “Read me the first number.”

As Carter read out the numbers, Nina typed them into the code sequences. When he was done, with a straight face she asked, “What’s your number?”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I don’t think you’re asking me because you’re trying to pick me up, so I’m not giving you my number.”

Blush crept into Nina’s cheeks. If they’d met at a bar and she’d tried to pick him up, would he have given her his number?

She was saved by the doorbell, but then quickly realized no one should be visiting them.

Carter’s eyes snapped to the door and he reached for his gun.

Another knock followed and he looked to Nina. “Go into the kitchen and stay out of view of the door.”

She grabbed her laptop and rushed into the kitchen but stayed close enough to the corner that she could peer around it.

Her eyes were on Carter as he strode toward the door, looking through the peep hole.

He opened the door just enough to peer through, his body blocking the view of the hotel room.

“Uh . . .” a woman’s voice echoed. “Are you staying in this room?”

“Can I help you?” Carter answered, neither confirming nor denying.

“Sorry, I’m here with a friend and I just went out to grab some food. I thought we were staying in this room,” she said, sounding genuinely confused.

“You’re not staying in this room. I met someone staying two doors down, though. She was about your age. What’s your friend’s name?” he asked.

Nina frowned.

“Sammy,” the woman said.

“Mm,” Carter mused. “Sammy who?”

“Wills,” she said without a pause.

“No, sorry that’s not her. She was Ms. Lyons,” Carter said, quickly coming up with a name.

“Okay, sorry to bother you. Have a good night,” she said.

“Night,” Carter said before closing the door, locking it. He peered through the peephole for a moment longer before striding back toward the kitchen. He picked up the phone and called the concierge. “Hi. This is Mr. Hamilton. I met a Ms. Wills—she’s staying on the same floor as me. She gave me her number earlier to contact her about a property, but I’ve lost her number. If I give you a message for her, are you able to pass it on to her?”

The lies fell so easily from his lips—so convincing—that Nina would’ve believed it had she been on the other end.

“That’s great, I appreciate it. Please tell her I tried to reach her. This is my number,” he said before giving a phone number that Nina knew was fake.

“Can you please let me know if you’re unable to reach her? I’ll try to contact her via her business if you can’t reach her . . . Excellent, I appreciate your help. Thank you.”

Carter hung up and looked to Nina.

“Do you think Dante sent her?” Nina asked, the thought giving her chills. If they’d followed them here, where would they be safe?

The hotel phone rang and Carter and Nina’s eyes locked.

Carter grabbed the phone. “Hello . . . Okay, I appreciate you trying. I must’ve misheard her. Thanks anyway.”

He hung up the phone and looked to Nina. “There’s no Wills on this floor.”

CHAPTER 17



CARTER

“*W*hy would he send her?” Nina asked quickly, her eyes darting back to the door.

“To spook us,” Carter said. “He knows we’re here and he wants us to flee the hotel, running straight into his hands. So we’re going to stay exactly where we are,” he said, keeping his voice calm and steady despite his elevated heart rate.

This wasn’t good. It wasn’t good at all.

“Wait here,” Carter said as he strode toward the bedroom. He grabbed his bag and pulled the items he needed, placing them in his hands and curling his fingers around them.

He felt Nina’s eyes on him as he walked past her. He swore he could hear her unspoken questions but he ignored them for now. He looked through the peephole, checking if the hallway was clear. Then he opened the door, keeping his body behind it, shielded from a bullet that may be waiting for him. When nothing happened, he peered around the door.

The hallway appeared deserted but Carter knew better than to assume that was correct.

He moved fast, pressing the button on the back of the tiny camera before placing it in position. He moved down the hallway, carefully choosing the locations of the cameras so they were effective but hidden from the unsuspecting eye.

At the end of the hallway, a glimmer on the floor made him pause. He bent down to pick up a black rhinestone hairclip. He recognized that hair clip, he'd seen it on the woman who had come to the room. Carter noticed things like that, he paid attention to detail.

Had she dropped it?

He hadn't heard anything outside the room. In fact, he'd watched her walk away and she hadn't been touching her hair.

Carter chewed on his cheek, thinking it over but he didn't come up with a plausible explanation. But one thing that had been installed in Carter during this training was if it looked like a coincidence, it was a red flag.

Carter tucked the hair clip into his back pocket then opened the app on his phone, checking that the cameras were working. He nodded when he saw clear views of the hallway. It wouldn't buy them much time, but when someone was hunting you, seconds mattered.

Carter returned to the room, almost stumbling over his feet at the sound of Jedd's voice.

Carter's eyes snapped to Nina's, but she didn't look at him. Her eyes were narrowed, her body stilled as she listened to the conversation.

Jedd laughed. *"I told you, I don't know where he is. But if you say he's at the Tivoli Hotel, I'd believe it. Carter is fancy like that."*

Carter resisted the urge to run toward Nina and take the laptop from her. Jedd shouldn't be on the call, that was never part of the plan.

“Contact your brother and tell him he has twenty-four hours to hand her over to me—with the money, otherwise I’ll kill you. Understood?” Dante said.

Fear snaked up the back of Carter's neck. Dante's words weren't a surprise, but hearing them aloud was chilling, nonetheless.

Nina's eyes locked on Carter's and the last of the air in his lungs evaporated. He hated the look he saw, the look like she understood what he was going to do next.

“No,” Carter said, walking toward her. “No. I won't hand you over. There's always another way.”

“Understood,” Jedd said, followed by a beeping tone that indicated the call had ended.

Carter exhaled with relief. He didn't want to hear any more of that, he didn't want Nina to hear any more of that. He looked to his watch. Twenty-four hours. The clock was ticking.

“How fast can you get the money?” Carter asked.

Nina's eyes widened and she shook her head. “I don't know. It depends on how quickly I can get inside the system. Then I have to send the ransom and they have to pay it. It's not a twenty-four-hour thing, Carter . . . I can't make any promises,” she said, sounding breathless.

“It's okay,” he said calmly. “We don't need the money, but we need to make him believe we have it—or that we'll get it.” A plan began formulating in his mind.

“Keep working,” Carter said, nodding toward her laptop before excusing himself. He went to the bathroom and locked the door behind him, exhaling a shuddered breath. He placed both hands on the cool stone vanity and looked at his tired reflection in the mirror.

Too much was at stake. He needed to remain calm.

He inhaled and exhaled deeply, giving him a few minutes away from Nina’s inquisitive eyes. It was harder to keep the truth from her than he’d thought it would be. He’d thought it would be easy, but every lie that fell from his lips made him hate himself more. His intentions toward her were good—he was going to do everything he could to protect her—but the lies were still cutting. However he couldn’t tell her the truth. The less she knew, the safer she would be.

Carter squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to think about having to make a choice between Nina and Jedd. He shook his head slowly. He wasn’t prepared to make that choice, so he had to find another way.

The same plan kept coming back to him, but it was risky. Very risky.

An invisible clock continued ticking. He inhaled another deep breath. He had to stop playing defense and start playing offense. It was time to turn the game on Dante.

Carter jumped when a knock at the door startled him. He opened it, looking into Nina’s wary eyes.

“Sorry for interrupting,” she said, looking past him like she expected someone else to be in the bathroom. Carter wondered how long he’d been in there . . . long enough that she’d thought it strange, obviously. “But I just intercepted a message I think could be helpful.”

Carter's eyebrows lifted. "What did it say?" he asked quickly.

Nina held up her phone to show him the text on the screen and his blood froze—he knew that address.

3405 S Birch St, Denver, 1710

"What's at this address?" Nina asked.

Carter shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure."

"Yes, you are," she pressed with hard eyes. "My life is at stake too. Tell me what you know."

I can't, Nina.

He sighed. "Ella White. She lived at 3405 S Birch St. The last four digits is the code for her security alarm.

"Who is Ella White?" Nina asked.

"She was Dante's accountant. Ella has been missing for ten years," Carter said.

Nina opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. She looked thoughtful a moment. "Why would you know her address?"

"I was looking for her . . . I thought I might be able to use her disappearance," he corrected himself, "against Dante."

She eyed him and Carter knew what she was thinking: it makes sense, but something still didn't feel right.

"We should go to her house," Nina said.

Carter balked. "No," he said without hesitation. The last thing either of them should be doing is leaving the hotel. "Is there any way Dante could know we're monitoring these calls?"

Nina shook her head. “No, because I’m intercepting the communication. I haven’t tapped his device. There is no way he’d know.”

Carter thought that through. If Dante didn’t know, that message wasn’t meant as a lure for them. And Carter really wanted to know why Dante would send someone to Ella’s house after all these years.

“I’ll go to her house. You should stay here and keep working. There will be nothing at Ella’s house that’s more important than getting Dante’s money.”

Nina pulled her lips to one side. “The problem is, I don’t think you’re telling me the entire truth. And it’s very convenient for you to go about your business without me watching. I think that’s the truth.”

She wasn’t wrong, but she wasn’t right either. “Look what happened at Dante’s club house,” Carter said. “I’m prepared to take the risk with my life, but not yours.”

“You kidnapped me, remember? This seems to be a fact you keep forgetting,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned against the doorjamb.

“And you keep forgetting that you stole millions of dollars,” he said. “Look, I’m not saying they’re equal crimes, nor are we going to stand here and argue this. I would say that you could come and stay at a safe distance, but you’ve already proved you won’t stay where I ask you to, so it’s better that you’re here.”

“What if they come here for me and you aren’t here? Isn’t it better that we’re together?” she asked with a hint of vulnerability that made Carter pause.

He'd thought that it was purely her lack of trust that motivated her to come with him. He hadn't considered she would be afraid to stay here alone.

Carter pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay, we'll go together. But you do exactly as I say. If you deviate from the plan, I can't protect you."

Nina nodded. "I promise."

Their eyes locked and Carter found himself unable to look away.

He prayed he wouldn't regret this decision.

CHAPTER 18



NINA

*I*t was a promise Nina wanted to keep, but Carter was still hiding things and while her life was at stake, she had every intention of finding out his secrets.

Why was he so loyal to Jedd? As far as Nina was concerned, Jedd was a sly, manipulative liability. Maybe she was wrong—she hoped for Carter’s sake she was wrong—but all signs suggested otherwise.

“So how are we going to get out of the hotel unseen?” Nina asked.

“I have an idea,” Carter said. He looked to his phone, nodded, then grabbed his gun and tucked it into the back of his jeans. “Come on.”

Nina strode into action as Carter headed for the door. She had no confidence in this plan—she didn’t even know what the plan was—but she was not going to be left in the dark.

“Stay close,” Carter said before he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Nina followed his orders, no more than a step behind Carter. They waited at the elevator, Nina’s eyes catching Carter’s in the mirror. He gave a small nod and

she exhaled a shaky breath. The dynamic between them was confusing.

Nina wiped the thoughts from her mind, focusing on her surroundings. She listened for any noise behind them, but the entire floor was silent. She wondered if it was too silent.

The elevator chimed before the doors opened and they stepped in. The doors closed, trapping them alone inside. Neither said a word as the elevator descended to the lobby.

The doors opened to a symphony of chatter and faces impatiently waiting for the elevator. Nina's eyes swept over them, but no one looked familiar.

Carter's gun stayed tucked in his jeans, so she took that as a good sign.

"This way," he said under his breath. She walked beside him, envious of the way he moved so casually, like he wasn't expecting one of Dante's men to walk around the corner any minute.

Nina, however, felt like her chest was constricting with every passing minute. *Calm down*, she reprimanded herself.

She followed Carter's lead and soon they were walking through a door Nina was sure guests were not supposed to be walking through. She wondered how Carter knew this hotel so well.

"You seem to know your way around here," she said.

"I used to live here," he said and she almost tripped on her feet.

"What? You lived at the Tivoli Hotel?"

"For a short period," he said vaguely, which only left her with more questions.

“Jedd was right, you are fancy,” Nina said, earning her a hint of a smile.

Carter didn't respond but stopped at a door, pulled out a lock pick, cracking the lock faster than Nina could blink. She stepped through, into darkness.

It took Nina a moment to work out where they were but the smell of fresh linen tickled her nose, telling her what her eyes couldn't.

Carter locked the door behind them and they walked through the storeroom. She heard voices ahead and looked to Carter. He brought his finger to his lips, but he didn't say a word, nor did he slow down. Nina concentrated on walking as quietly as possible—something Carter didn't seem like he had to think about. He moved like a ghost.

They ducked behind the laundry shelves, using them for cover as they walked by two unsuspecting employees standing around talking. Nina kept waiting for one of them to yell out and ask them what they were doing, but the conversation didn't miss a beat.

It was only when they got to the door that Nina worked out Carter's plan. There were two white vans parked outside, no doubt used for the laundry service.

“I'll go first. As soon as the engine starts, run for the van. We'll need to leave quickly,” Carter said.

Nina nodded, still wary of the employees close behind them.

Carter kept low as he ran toward the van. It didn't take him long to get the door open, and not much longer to get the engine running.

Nina looked over her shoulder to see if the sound of the engine had captured the employee's attention, but she didn't see anyone behind her.

Nina ran for the van, keeping low like Carter had. He opened the door from inside and pushed it open as she ran toward it. Nina jumped inside and Carter had the van in reverse before she'd closed the door.

Nina exhaled the breath she'd been holding but her relief was short-lived when she saw a security gate ahead and a man sitting in the booth.

She looked to Carter, but his face was the standard picture of calm she'd come to envy.

"Let me talk," he said as they approached the booth.

The van slowed to a stop, but Nina's heart raced faster.

The man in the booth leaned forward, his eyes darting between Nina and Carter.

"Laundry service complete," Carter said. "I've dropped my badge somewhere, but my number is 26882."

Nina had to concentrate to keep her face neutral. She would've believed Carter, if she'd been the man in the booth. And that was the problem—Carter was a brilliant liar.

The man looked at Carter a moment and then got out of the booth and asked Carter to unlock the back doors. The van was full of dirty laundry, and as far as Nina could see, that was all the van contained.

She kept her eyes forward as the man opened the doors, closing them a moment later. He returned to the booth and nodded to Carter. "Have a good day," he said as the boom gate opened.

Nina didn't speak until they'd veered onto the street and she'd checked over her shoulder to make sure no one had followed them.

"How did you know the identification number of the driver?" Nina asked, watching him carefully.

"I didn't. I was relying on him not needing nor wanting to check," he said.

"It was a convincing lie," Nina said, not hiding the accusation from her tone.

Carter looked to her. "Would you rather I'd have told him the truth?"

She shook her head. "No, obviously not. But I can't tell if you lie to me or tell me the truth."

Carter stopped at the traffic lights and turned to face her, giving her his full attention. "The biggest lesson life has taught me is that words mean nothing. Empty promises are exactly that. I've learned not to read people based on what they tell me, but on their actions. You can take that advice for what it's worth, I just hope you don't make my mistakes."

"What's the biggest mistake of your life, Carter?" Nina asked, expecting him to deflect or shut down the conversation but instead he answered.

"I killed my sister," he said and Nina's jaw dropped open. "I didn't pull the trigger, but I'm the reason she's dead. I did a job for someone and he wasn't happy with the outcome. He took my sister to motivate me, however it was an impossible job—it couldn't be done—but he didn't care so we both paid the price—her with her life, me with a lifetime sentence of guilt. I've destroyed the lives of both my siblings."

“What was the job?” Nina asked with butterflies in her stomach.

Carter inhaled deeply. “It’s best you don’t know, Nina,” he said.

“Of course,” Nina said. “God forbid you give me the full truth.”

CHAPTER 19



CARTER

*H*e hated the look in her eyes. Bitter disappointment.

I'll tell you everything, Nina, but not yet. Not until Dante is dead.

Carter focused on the traffic, checking the mirrors for tails. He blocked Nina's disappointment from his mind. He shouldn't care if he disappointed her—he should be focused on the task.

His eyes bounced between the mirrors as he drove. Nina didn't say a word, for which he was grateful, but he was aware of every movement she made and he continuously found himself wondering what she was thinking. More than once he had to remind himself it was not his concern.

Carter slowed the car as he drove past Ella's street, his eyes sweeping the parked cars. A red hatchback and a silver sedan. Both were older models, both were slower cars and not something he'd expect from Dante or any of his men or associates. It didn't mean Carter could rule them out completely, but it was unlikely. What was more likely, though,

was that Dante's men could've come on foot from a nearby drop off, so Carter's guard needed to be high.

There was a chance no one was here. The code could mean anything, but the fact that Ella had sent that code to Carter the day before she disappeared raised the hair on the back of his neck.

It had been ten years since Carter been inside Ella's house, but it should be the same. He hadn't cleared out Ella's belongings—and as far as he knew, no one else had known where she'd lived.

Carter pulled the car over one block from Ella's and drew a deep breath. Walking into Ella's house was going to bring back the memories he'd fought so hard to bury in the depths of his soul, but it needed to be done. He couldn't imagine what Dante's men would be looking for, but the code wasn't a coincidence. Carter didn't believe in coincidences.

"We're stopping here?" Nina asked, looking out the window.

"We'll go through the side gate here and jump over the front fence. Going in via the street is too risky," he said, his eyes dropping to his watch. "We need to move quickly. I want to be in and out before the first rays of sunlight streak across the sky. We're safer in the dark."

Nina nodded quickly then reached for the door handle, pausing to look at Carter. He checked the mirrors one last time and then nodded, opening the door.

Carter led the way across Mrs. Lang's grass and through her side gate. He'd entered this way last time he'd been here and hoped it would provide a safe passage once more. The house was dark, not a single light on—which was what he

expected. Mrs. Lang should be tucked up in bed, dreaming peacefully, Carter hoped.

“Leave the gate slightly ajar,” Carter whispered, turning back to Nina.

“Done,” she whispered.

They crept along the side of the house, mindful of the garden hose and outdoor broom leaning against the wall. They made it to the back fence without a hitch and but they still had to get over the fence without waking up the neighborhood.

“Run along the fence,” Carter whispered then sprinted forward. He crouched low, his shoulder brushing the fence, and Nina did the same. Carter listened for any noise coming from Ella’s backyard, but the night was silent.

“Stay low,” Carter said under his breath as he stood, peering over the fence. The lights were off but other than that, Carter couldn’t see much in the dark. He weighed his options and shone a flashlight across the backyard, checking for obstacles in their path. Satisfied there was nothing but overgrown weeds, Carter ducked behind the fence once more. He waited, but silence was the only response. No one had seen his light, or perhaps they had and they were waiting for him.

He looked to Nina but before he had a chance to open his mouth, she said, “I’m coming in.”

“It’s not safe, Nina,” Carter said in a hushed whisper.

“I don’t care. I’m not safe anywhere,” she said.

Carter couldn’t argue with that, but she was less safe here.

Or maybe the house would be empty and there was nothing to worry about.

A clock seemed to tick in Carter's mind and he couldn't shake the feeling that they were on borrowed time. There was no time to argue.

"I'll give you a boost over. Land lightly on bent knees and stay low in the weeds. I'll be right behind you," he said as their eyes locked.

Nina nodded.

"Put your hands on the top of the fence and step onto my hand," he said and Nina responded. He pushed her foot up and she swung her legs over the fence. He heard her land softly then he jumped up, scaling over the fence, landing beside her.

"Wait," he said, listening for a response. When it didn't come, he said, "Let's go."

They walked through the overgrown garden, weeds as high as Carter's waist. It made moving quickly and silently hard, but it would also provide some cover for them should they need it. As they approached the house, Carter led the way up the back porch. He paused at the door, listening once more but the only thing he heard was his own breath.

He eyed the lock, but it looked untouched. Carter turned the doorknob, but it didn't budge. He pulled a pin from his pocket and opened the door. His heart was pounding against his chest as he stepped inside, Nina right behind him.

Carter locked the door behind them, hoping the noise would give them some notice if someone tried to enter while they were in the house.

His chest tightened as he walked through the house that was all too familiar.

"What are we looking for?" Nina asked under her breath.

“I don’t know . . . anything that doesn’t look right,” he said vaguely. He himself didn’t know what he was looking for but he trusted his intuition.

Everything looked like it had last time Carter had been in the house. Even the same mug was in the sink. It was haunting, really—like time hadn’t passed at all. But ten years had, and Ella had never been found. Guilt wrapped its hands around his throat as it tried once again to suffocate him.

“It’s dusty,” Nina noted.

“She’s been missing for ten years,” he said as they reached the staircase of seemingly floating wooden steps, which suffered silently under their weight—they didn’t creak, they didn’t moan.

At the top of the stairs, Carter paused, sweeping his flashlight over the landing. Again, time seemed to be dancing in his mind like a silent siren.

He went to her office first, the memories assaulting him as he opened the door.

Everything appeared untouched, exactly as she’d left it. He pulled out the drawers, searching for anything he might’ve missed—anything that might be valuable to Dante. He’d done this before and found nothing, and again tonight he wondered if they were just wasting time.

“What did you say Ella did?” Nina asked as she stood at a bulletin board of photographs.

“She was an accountant,” Carter answered.

Nina shook her head. “No, she wasn’t—or at least she had another skillset.”

Carter's eyebrows lifted and he strode toward Nina, his eyes following her gaze. She was looking at a photograph of a room—one that Carter had never been able to place.

“Why do you say that?” Carter asked.

Nina tapped the photograph.

“Because I've been in that room. Ella was a hacker.”

CHAPTER 20



NINA

*N*ina stared at the photograph, her heart fluttering with memories of the day she'd been in that room.

Carter pulled out the pin holding the photograph to the board and grabbed the photograph. “Do you see anything else you recognize?”

Nina shook her head as her eyes swept over the images once again. “There’s no photos of her,” she said. “These all look like places she’s been to, but she’s not in any of them. Do you have a photo of her?”

“I might have something better than that,” Carter said, his eyes darting to the door. “But first, let’s get out of here.”

Nina nodded. She looked around the room, but it looked more like a show home than someone’s house.

Carter walked to the corner of the room and pulled something from his back pocket. He pressed it onto the bookshelf. It took Nina a moment to realize it was a camera.

“What are you doing?” Nina asked.

“If someone comes here, I want to see who it is and what they’re looking for—what piques their interest,” he said.

“Who knows about this place?” he asked, holding up the photograph.

Nina shook her head. “Only hackers that are part of an exclusive organization. I was allowed in once with another hacker because I worked as his unofficial intern. Entry is almost impossible.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Yet you got inside,” he said, more of a statement than a question. “Let’s go,” he said as he walked toward the door.

Carter placed four more cameras as they went down the stairs and out the back door. They were waist-high in the weeds when Nina heard the rumble of a car engine.

Carter grabbed her hand and pulled her to the ground. The back fence was no more than a few steps away, but right now that seemed like a mile.

Nina kneeled, crouched low in the weeds. The echo of heavy boots on the concrete path grew louder and her heart raced faster.

“Breathe,” Carter whispered beside her.

Nina inhaled but the air felt devoid of oxygen and she was scared to gasp in a breath in case she was heard.

Nina heard boots on the stairs and then the door opened and closed.

Carter shifted beside her and her first thought was to ask him not to go inside, not to leave her alone out here. But she would do no such thing, she was not going to be reliant on Carter—nor anyone else. Nina would survive on her own.

But Carter didn’t leave her. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand once more and Nina hated to admit his touch felt good—

reassuring.

They walked through the weeds, crouching low, but Nina wasn't sure if her head was visible or not. They stopped at the fence.

“Go over first. Same as last time,” Carter said.

Nina's eyes darted to the house. She saw a flash of light through the upstairs window and assumed whoever was inside was using a flashlight, just as Carter had done.

“Now,” Carter said, bringing her focus back.

She nodded, lifted her foot, and placed her hands on the top of the fence. She swung her legs over but her heel hit the top of the fence. The entire fence seemed to screech in response. Nina landed on the ground, cringing. Carter was over the fence and beside her in seconds.

“Stay down,” Carter said as he crouched low.

Nina couldn't breathe as her heart pounded in her chest. She swore she heard the upstairs window open, but she didn't dare look up—she didn't dare breathe.

Carter put his phone underneath his sweater and looked through the neck hole, concealing the light of the phone from anyone who might be looking out over the backyard.

The moments passed like hours and Nina had to force herself to breathe.

“They've gone back to searching,” Carter whispered, locking his phone. He nodded toward the side path. “Move as quietly and as quickly as you can. If anything happens, get to the van. Don't stop.”

Nina gulped a breath and swallowed her fear. She tipped her head back but she couldn't see the upstairs window from

her crouched position.

“Go!” Carter urged in a hushed whisper.

Hunched over, Nina ran down the side path, glad she’d left the side gate open as Carter had suggested. Her eyes swept over the front yard and the street as they emerged. It looked quiet, but Nina knew that meant nothing.

When she had no cover from the fence or the house, she sprinted forward—glad the van was close by. She hadn’t slept in days and the adrenaline of their nightly adventures had left her body weaker than she’d have liked. Her legs ached running the short distance, and she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep this up but she told herself not to focus on that right now—they needed to survive the night.

Nina was breathing hard as she jumped into the passenger seat. Carter closed the driver’s door at the same time and started the van, veering onto the street in a calm manner that seemed the opposite of Nina’s racing heart.

Nina checked the mirrors, but she didn’t see any cars behind them—nor men running out onto the street chasing them.

Her relief was short-lived when Carter stopped at the intersection and a black SUV stopped, facing them on the opposite side of the road. Nina looked to Carter; his body tensed and he picked up the pistol from his lap.

Nina’s heart leaped out of her chest.

Her eyes snapped to the red traffic lights, wondering if Carter was going to wait for them to change or put his foot on the gas and floor it.

It seemed like it was going to stay red forever, but eventually the light turned green and the car drove past them.

Carter lowered his foot, audibly exhaling.

Nina doubted the laundry van would provide a quick getaway, but it had provided good cover for them.

“Where are we going to go now?” Nina asked, breathless and aching tired. She wanted this to end, to go back to her simple life with Lena.

“We’re going to my place—the place I actually live in,” Carter said.

CHAPTER 21



CARTER

*H*is chest felt tight, but he wasn't entirely sure why. He checked the mirrors again and couldn't see a tail. His heart had been pumping as they'd faced the SUV with a registration plate Carter had memorized. It was the car Dante used himself. Combined with the inky blue sky and the dark tint on the windows, it had been impossible to see the driver. But Carter was sure it had been Dante.

He exhaled a long breath, calming his reeling mind, focusing on the drive, checking the mirrors once more.

No tail.

They were five minutes from his house and he was still surprised he was taking Nina there. No one knew about this house except Jedd—not even Ella. But Carter had something that Nina needed to see, and they needed a safe space, so he'd made the decision without hesitation—although he was second-guessing himself now.

“Is it safe to go to your place?” Nina asked, her eyes lifting to the rearview mirror.

“It's safe. No one knows about this place,” he said, omitting that Jedd did. He understood Nina's concerns—Jedd

had irrationally killed her hacker friend in front of her—but Jedd would die for Carter. He'd never given up this address, even when Dante had tortured him several years ago. Jedd wouldn't betray him—it was one of the only things Carter knew for sure.

“Does Jedd know?” Nina asked and Carter cringed internally.

He didn't have the energy to defend Jedd yet again, so he lied. “No, he doesn't.”

Nina nodded but he couldn't tell if she believed him or not. Nina would soon have a reason to trust him, though.

Carter circled the block around his apartment, his eyes scanning the shadows for anything that looked suspicious. When he saw nothing, he turned into the underground parking garage and parked in a visitor space.

He turned off the van and waited, using the mirrors to look into the other parked cars. They appeared empty—no one waiting for Carter and Nina to get out. Confident they weren't going to be assaulted, Carter opened the door. He motioned for Nina to walk in front of him, and Carter used his body to shield her as they walked toward the elevator.

He pressed the arrow button and they waited. Carter's anxiety grew as the elevator seemed to take forever to come down to the basement. He looked over his shoulder, feeling like he was being watched. His eyes swept over the dark corners of the garage, but he saw nothing move—nothing breathe.

The elevator chimed and the doors opened. Nina all but ran in and Carter was only a step behind. When the doors closed, he felt the tension melt from his body. He entered his code and

the elevator ascended to the top floor. Nina raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

On the twenty-sixth floor, they got out and Carter unlocked the door to his apartment.

Nina whistled. “Jedd was right, you are fancy.”

Carter smiled before he could stop himself. He scoffed, “Jedd is a smartass.”

“I don’t know,” Nina said, walking inside and looking around, “I think Jedd is on point with this one.”

Carter felt like he could breathe for the first time since he’d kidnapped Nina. This apartment had always been his refuge. He didn’t spend nearly enough time in it, but every time he came here he felt like he could escape from the world.

Carter turned on the television, flipping straight to the sports channel.

“Hmm, I wouldn’t have picked you for a soccer fan,” Nina said with a shrug.

“I need something to make me feel normal for a few minutes. And, for your information, I’m a big soccer fan,” he said with a smile that she returned. It pleased him more than it should’ve. “Take a seat,” he said, gesturing toward the dining table.

Carter went to his bedroom, opened the concealed compartment at the bottom of his wardrobe and opened the safe. He laid his eyes on a laptop he’d never been able to crack, but he hoped Nina could. He didn’t know what she’d find on it, but he knew there would be no more secrets after this.

He second-guessed himself for the second time in the last hour, but Nina's life was already at stake and if they could work together, their chances of surviving this were better.

He put the laptop aside, his eyes landing on the stack of passports that were bundled together by a rubber band. That had been a different life. One that had changed the minute Ella had gone missing. It had been a job at first, then it became personal.

It became revenge.

Carter returned to the living area and took a seat beside Nina. She frowned when she saw the laptop in his hands.

"This belonged to Ella. I wasn't able to open it, but I took it from her house when she went missing because I didn't want Dante to get his hands on it," he said.

He put it on the table in front of her, his hand lingering on it, unease creeping up the back of his neck.

"I don't know what you'll find on it, Nina," he said, keeping his tone even, portraying none of the cocktail of emotions he felt right then. "But promise me one thing . . . promise me you'll ask me before you assume the worst."

Nina's eyebrows weaved together. She searched his eyes as she inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling. "I promise," she said, and Carter lifted his hand.

Tentatively, Nina opened the laptop then pulled what looked like a USB stick from her pocket.

"When did you get that?" Carter asked.

Nina looked to him. "I took it from Ed's laptop after Jedd shot him," she said sheepishly. "For some reason I saw it, and I knew it was the only chance I was going to get, so I grabbed

it and wiped his blood off of it.” Nina visibly swallowed and shook her head as if shaking the memories from her mind.

Guilt stabbed Carter’s chest but self-loathing wasn’t going to help them.

“What are you doing with it? Carter asked as she stuck it in the side of the laptop.

“It’ll help crack the password,” she said as a box popped up and she began typing.

Lines of code flashed on the screen, one after the other, like a never-ending cryptic poem.

Then the screen changed and Carter realized he was looking at the desktop.

He was impressed but Nina didn’t seem to be. She typed more code into the box.

“I’m running a program that will look at the last opened files, regardless of which program they were in,” she said. “But while that runs, let’s have a look at some files.”

Nina selected a file and Carter’s heart raced a little faster, unsure what Nina was going to find on this computer.

Nina clicked on a file and an image flashed on the screen. It was like a knife in his heart.

His eyes darted to Nina, her lips parted and her eyes widened as she looked at the photo of Ella with her arms around Carter’s neck. They were both laughing, though Carter couldn’t remember when the photo was taken—or where. He wasn’t looking at the camera, and he wondered now if he’d been aware a photo was being taken.

“Ella was your girlfriend,” Nina said, her voice soft.

“Yes, we were dating,” he said as Nina nodded.

She flicked through more images, each one stealing a little of the air left in his lungs. He had no idea Ella had so many photos of them together. Carter didn’t have a single photo.

Nina clicked through the rest of the images in the file, but they meant nothing to Carter. Faces he didn’t recognize, beaches he’d never been to. “Are these files dated?” he asked.

Nina nodded. “These files were created about fifteen years ago. The more recent ones—about ten years ago—are of the two of you.”

“That makes sense, because nothing in those photos looks familiar to me,” he said.

Nina flicked back to the box she’d been typing in and frowned.

She opened a spreadsheet and Carter’s heart stopped—it was a spreadsheet of bank accounts, including Carter’s, Jedd’s, and Dante’s.

Nina looked to him, but he didn’t have any answers.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice a harsh whisper.

What were you doing, Ella?

CHAPTER 22



NINA

*I*t was the first time she'd fully believed the words that had come from his lips. Carter looked shocked—utterly shocked.

Nina couldn't think of a reason Ella had this information, unless she was planning to use it in some way.

What were you doing, Ella?

Nina opened the next recently used document, feeling like she was tracing the last steps of a ghost.

The next spreadsheet was columns of numbers, but none of the columns had a heading or title. Nina stared at the numbers, willing them to organize themselves into a pattern she could understand, but the longer she looked at the numbers the less sense they made.

She shook her head. "I don't know," Nina said, answering Carter's unspoken question.

He nodded.

Nina opened file after file of invoices and financial documents, all related to Dante's businesses. It made sense she would have these if she'd been his accountant, but nothing else about Ella made sense.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Carter said, sounding tired. Nina lifted her eyes to his. She didn’t know whether his guard was down, or if the invisible wall between them had been taken down when Carter had given her the laptop and finally stopped hiding things from her, but Nina felt like she was seeing him for the first time. And he looked exhausted. They were both running on fumes. Nina couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept and her body had been assaulted with alternating periods of adrenaline and fear.

“I’ll keep looking at this,” she said, returning her attention to the laptop, but as Carter got up and walked away her eyes followed him.

Carter looked different in the photos. Physically, he’d appeared much the same—just younger—but his eyes were different. They were lighter, happier. Nina found herself envious. She wanted to know that Carter because she sensed she’d like him a lot.

The photo had hit her like a freight train. She supposed she should’ve considered the possibility that they were a couple, but she hadn’t—the thought had never crossed her mind. Not until it was flashed in her face, and if Nina was being completely honest, it was a slap that stung a little. It wasn’t jealousy as such, but she was envious that someone knew Carter and his secrets. Someone else had been able to crack him open.

She shook her head, annoyed at herself. She had no business having feelings for Carter. Yet, when she heard the water running, she opened the photos again, her chest squeezing the oxygen from her lungs as she looked at them together. Ella’s arm was draped around Carter’s, their heads tilted back, smiles beaming on their faces.

Nina wondered if she'd ever feel like that. She bit her lip, *not if you don't figure a way out of this mess*, she reminded herself.

But she wasn't done torturing herself. She clicked through the images, one by one, unable to stop. She studied the background of them, seeing if any were taken in this apartment. Unless Carter had recently redecorated, she assumed they hadn't been. But her finger paused midair when she looked at the reflection in the mirror in the background of one of the images.

Nina had wondered who had taken the photographs, considering no one else was in any of the photographs. And then she saw it, the fraction of a laptop reflected in a wall-hung mirror. It made sense—the images had been taken using the laptop—but that wasn't what piqued Nina's interest, it was the blue logo displayed on the screen. Nina zoomed in on the image, her heart racing with anticipation. She knew that logo, she was sure of it—and now she knew what the numbers were in the spreadsheet.

They were offshore bank accounts.

Nina squinted at the laptop, frowning.

Were the offshore accounts for Dante's business? That made the most sense, but she still couldn't understand why Ella would have Carter's and Jedd's bank accounts. Dante didn't pay them like employees. A man in Dante's business paid in cash, not electronic transfers that could be traced and used to incriminate him.

Nina's fingers mindlessly tapped on the keyboard but she didn't press any of the buttons. She needed to learn more about Ella—she needed to get inside her head because the

more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that Ella had been planning something.

Where was Ella now? Carter had said she'd disappeared, but what did that mean? Had her body never been found?

Nina opened the only photo taken of Ella on her own, seemingly by accident. She was looking away from the camera, her blonde hair swooped up into a messy bun, a slouchy knit sweater draped over one shoulder, revealing tanned skin that looked like she'd been holidaying in Europe for the summer.

Maybe Ella wasn't dead at all, but had staged her own disappearance, Nina thought.

Nina's eyes darted to the bedroom as she heard a cabinet door close.

If Ella was alive, and she came back, what would Carter do? Had he loved Ella?

Nina chewed on her cheek, quickly closing the image when Carter emerged from the bedroom, walking toward her in gray sweatpants and a black sweater. Their eyes locked and something flickered in his, but it was gone in a second.

Nina quietly cleared her throat and closed the image.

"Find anything interesting?" Carter asked.

Nina's first instinct was to lie, but Carter had given her the laptop and she wanted to build trust between them. And Carter might also have the answer to her question—whether he knew it or not.

"I think the numbers in the spreadsheet are offshore bank accounts. I'll need to work on it more in the morning," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t rule it out,” he said. “She was always moving money for Dante, trying to find ways to hide it.”

Nina stifled a yawn.

“Have a shower and get some sleep. Let’s start fresh later this morning,” he said as Nina looked at the sunlight streaming in from behind the drapes.

“I’ll get you a towel,” he said, turning and walking back to the bedroom.

Nina closed the laptop and followed him into an oversized master bedroom with a sleek beige fabric headboard, hanging pendant lights, and sheer drapes. It looked like something out of a magazine.

Carter disappeared into the closet and came back with a folded towel in his arms. “I’ll put some clothes on the bed. They’ll be too big, obviously, but they’re clean and they’ll do until we can buy some in your size,” he said.

Nina nodded, giving him a smile. “Thank you.”

Their eyes locked yet again but this time Nina was the first to look away. She took the towel from him and walked toward the bathroom. It was like walking into Carter’s arms. The smell of his cologne hung in the lingering mist that slightly fogged the mirrors. She closed the door behind her, locking it—not because she was scared of Carter but if Dante did come for them while she was in the shower, she at least wanted a moment to get dressed before his men walked in.

Nina shivered, pushing those thoughts from her mind.

We’re safe. She hoped that was true.

Nina turned on the water, adjusting the temperature so it was hotter than the setting Carter had left it on. Lena had always told her scalding hot water was bad for her, but Nina had always loved a shower so hot the water stung her skin. She looked over Carter's products in the shower, pleased he seemed to like the good stuff. Organic body wash, and expensive shampoo and conditioner. She picked up the shampoo and squeezed a decent amount into her hand, lathering it through her hair. She wished she could wash away the lingering unease that seemed to follow her like a shadow, but right now she had to settle for only clean hair.

Nina stood under the hot water a moment longer while she thought, trying to piece together everything she knew. But the more she learned, the less things made sense.

Nina inhaled deeply, exhaled, then turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, draping herself in the large bath towel. When she was dry enough to step out of the bathroom, she unlocked the door and peered into the bedroom. The door to the living area was closed, and clothes were laid out on the bed. She slipped the T-shirt over her head, followed by the sweater and then slipped into Carter's sweatpants. She rolled up the bottoms and hung her towel in the bathroom. She found a brush in the cabinet, wondering for a second if it had been Ella's but dismissed the idea. Ella had been gone a long time, and regardless, there was no blonde hair in the brush head.

Nina grabbed the toothpaste and found a spare, unopened brush in the cabinet that she helped herself to. While brushing her teeth, she looked through the cabinets. It felt like an invasion of Carter's privacy, but she did it anyway. There was enough in the cabinets and the products were partly used, convincing her that he lived here—at least some of the time.

She found nothing of interest, not a single prescription medication.

Clean and utterly exhausted, Nina emerged from the bedroom and found Carter lying on the couch.

He lazily opened his eyes. “Feel better?”

Nina nodded. “Much,” she said with a smile.

His lips turned up and his eyes seemed to sparkle. It was an ordinary moment, but Nina did not miss how strange it was, given their circumstances.

“Take the bed, I’ll sleep here for a few hours then we’ll figure out what to do next,” Carter said, stretching out as he yawned.

Nina shook her head. “I’ll sleep on the couch. I’m smaller and it’s your bed,” she said.

He shook his head. “Nina, take the bed,” he said, then closed his eyes, ending the conversation.

Nina’s eyes lingered a moment. She turned to leave but his voice stopped her.

“Nina,” he said gently, and she looked into his eyes. He looked nothing like a deadly killer in that moment, he looked more like he had in the photos with Ella.

“What happened before Ella disappeared?” Nina asked.

Carter looked at her a long moment, seemingly deciding whether he should answer that question or not.

“Dante found out about our relationship—to this day I have no idea how he found out. He wanted a job done, but I said it was too risky and it couldn’t be done. He used Ella as

motivation and I did the job. Dante got everything he wanted,” Carter said, sounding far away.

Nina frowned, the story sounding all too familiar. “It was him—Dante—who killed your sister when you couldn’t do the job, wasn’t it?” Nina asked, only now fully understanding how much Carter must hate Dante, how far he would go to see his demise.

Carter pressed his lips together, nodding slowly.

Nina inhaled a tight breath. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

He gave her a sad smile and, although Nina had so many more questions, she knew she’d gotten all she would from him. “Goodnight, Carter.”

His eyes locked on hers. “Goodnight, Nina.”

Nina turned to leave, feeling his eyes following her. She closed the door to the bedroom and climbed under the covers, the scent of fresh linen enveloping her. Had he changed the sheets while she’d been in the shower?

Nina could barely answer the question before she felt herself falling asleep, exhaustion taking her mind and body captive.

She didn’t hear Carter’s footsteps.

She didn’t hear him pick up the laptop and click through the images.

CHAPTER 23



CARTER

Carter was so tired his eyes burned, but he couldn't stop looking at the pictures. Who had taken them? They were taken in his house—his other house, the one Dante knew about—but he couldn't remember a time when someone else was in the house with them. Their relationship had always been a secret, until it hadn't.

Ella's and Carter's paths had crossed when Dante had sent her to recruit him for a job. He'd fallen for her fast and hard. And before he knew it, he was doing small jobs for Dante, using Evie as his assistant. But Dante didn't like Carter's relationship with Ella—he'd always kept Ella at an arm's-length from everyone, because Ella had known Dante's secrets—all of them. Evie's death had been Dante's way of punishing Carter for keeping his relationship with Ella a secret, he was sure of it. Dante had known the job was impossible, but he hadn't cared because it had never been about the job—he'd been teaching Carter a lesson.

But the lesson hadn't worked and Carter had continued his relationship with Ella, so Dante had to go one step further.

Clicking through the images now was like looking at someone else's life. It felt like a lifetime ago, and he barely recognized the person looking back at him. A man who was inexperienced—a man who had no idea how dangerous Dante was. Dante was a master manipulator; he pulled the strings and maneuvered people into position without the targets realizing they were even playing a game.

Carter should've realized trouble was brewing back then. He should've realized how far Dante would go. But he'd been ignorant and since then, neither Carter nor Jedd had been able to escape Dante's clutches.

Ignorance was the mistake Carter had made the first time around, but he was a different man now—mentally at least. He was nothing like the man Dante had hired to pull off the biggest heist that was still one of the best kept secrets within the underground world. But it was what happened after the heist that had derailed his plans—Carter's plans, not Dante's. Because as Carter later learned, it had been Dante's plan all along.

Dante's men stormed the estate of Dante's rival, setting it ablaze and forcing everyone to run from the property. But as they were running out, Carter and Jedd were running into the blaze. The smoke had been thick and made Carter's chest wheeze now as the memory flashed in his mind. The fire had been strategic, started in the corners of the house away from the safe, but they had all known that once the house was ablaze, it was only a matter of time until it consumed the house. It was Carter's job to get inside, crack the safe, and get the cash and gold before the house burned down and they perished with it. It had been risky, so Carter had taken the only person he trusted with his life: Jedd.

Carter remembered the night so clearly. Flames licked the west wing and the staff started running from the house; that had been their cue to run inside. Amidst the chaos, no one had seen them running through the shadows, slipping through a door that had been left open by staff exiting in haste. But the fire had spread faster than they'd thought and when Carter had entered, he walked into clouds of thick smoke. But there was no turning back, not when Dante had given orders.

Carter had never wanted to do the job. He'd told Dante it was too risky from the outset, that the fire would burn too quickly. But Dante hadn't cared, he wanted it done and he'd known how to make sure Carter did what he wanted. Despite how careful they'd been, Dante had found out he'd continued his relationship with Ella and he'd used it to his advantage.

The morning of the heist, Ella had been dragged into Dante's living room, her hands tied behind her back, a pistol at her head, her eyes locked on Carter's as Dante's lips curled up in a snarl.

"Ella will be in the house. If you don't crack that safe and get me what I want, I'll make sure she burns alive," Dante had said.

So as flames licked at his heels that night, Carter did what he did best. He cracked the safe and Dante's men loaded the goods.

As Carter had been running out of the house, he'd heard Ella screaming his name.

Carter inhaled a deep breath, the memories like a whip to his chest. He willed himself to stop, but the memories kept coming and his mind he went back to that night, reliving it like he was there, living the nightmare that had haunted him since that night.

Ella had screamed his name, over and over. Carter looked behind him to the roaring flames. He could still get through the hallway. He'd failed to save Evie, but there was still time to save Ella.

"No, Carter," Jedd had said as he'd grabbed Carter's arm.

"I can't leave her!" Carter had screamed above the crackling, popping noise of the roaring fire.

"You're going to die! Dante won't kill her—he needs her! This is a setup!" Jedd had screamed. If only Carter had listened, but Dante knew the strings to pull and Carter hadn't yet processed Evie's death.

"Go! Get out! I'm going back for her!" Carter had said, running toward the flames. He'd raised his weapon as two men had come running toward him, firing on both of them. He didn't care who they were, even if they were Dante's men—he'd just wanted to get to Ella.

But they hadn't been Dante's men. They'd been FBI.

Carter had leapt over their dead bodies, following the sound of Ella's tortured cries. Flames licked one side of the hallway and Carter skirted past them, the heat so intense it had felt like it was melting his skin. But Ella's voice kept calling him forward, growing louder the closer he got to her.

He'd coughed, pulling his sweater over his nose as he came to a halt. He turned the doorknob, but it didn't budge. Carter couldn't see a lock, so he knew it was locked from the inside. He could hear Ella screaming.

Carter coughed, wheezing hard. He mustered all his strength to slam his boot into the door. It splintered and he kicked it again.

The door gave way and he saw Ella being dragged out of the room via the back door. Carter raised his weapon but shouting behind him stole his attention before he could shoot.

“FBI! FBI! Lower your weapon!”

In a split-second Carter made the decision not to fire at the men dragging Ella away because if he did, and he missed, they’d kill her and then the men behind Carter would shoot him. Ella had been used as a pawn, but Jedd had been right—she was too valuable to Dante to kill. Carter had let his emotions get the best of him, and he realized that had been Dante’s plan all along.

Carter lowered his weapon, threw it on the ground, and raised his hands, turning around.

He saw two agents in full SWAT gear, their weapons pointed at his chest.

Carter knew defeat when he saw it, and his future flashed in his mind—a future in a six by eight feet cell.

Carter squeezed his eyes shut, silently praying for a blazing beam to fall on him and kill him then.

But suddenly the men behind him dropped and Jedd’s face became visible through the smoke.

Carter opened his mouth to speak but Jedd shook his head.
“We need to get out of here! Now!”

Carter nodded, running toward his brother. He led the way out of the house, now completely enveloped in thick smoke. Carter coughed and his lungs burned, and he could hear Jedd doing the same behind him. He ran out into the fresh air, suddenly realizing Jedd wasn’t behind him.

He spun around, running back inside as he saw Jedd being dragged away by two men in FBI vests.

Carter raised his weapon but rough hands grabbed him from behind. He was cuffed and dragged from the house. He didn't see Jedd again that night, and he never saw Ella again.

Carter pulled his attention back to the present moment, rubbing his burning eyes—eyes that felt like they were filled with smoke.

He shook his head; he could not go back to that night. He needed to focus—he didn't save Ella, but he could save Nina.

Carter continued clicking through the photos on the laptop, pausing on the photo of a holiday home on an ocean cliff. There was nothing familiar about the house, but it piqued his interest. He went back and looked at the other beach images again, noting the sand color. It looked like they were all taken from the same place, or at least the same area.

Carter zoomed in on the photo of the boardwalk, concentrating on the storefronts in the background. *Lolita's Italian*.

Carter chewed on his cheek, opening the web browser. He typed in *Lolita's Italian by the beach*. His eyebrows lifted when he saw it was situated on the west coast of California.

He wondered when Ella had gone there. She'd always loved the beach, Carter remembered.

Carter sighed as a wave of tiredness seized his body but he picked up his phone and reviewed the video recording of Ella's house. One man entered via the backdoor—Carter recognized him as Dante's hitman, Greg. Greg went straight upstairs, not checking the ground level. He paused at the bulletin board, his eyes on the gap that had been left from the

photo Carter had taken. Greg tilted his head, staring at the board like he knew something was missing but didn't know what.

Carter watched on, curious, as Greg walked toward the closet and kneeled beside the rug. He lifted the corner, peeling it back and opened the hatch door in the floor. Greg took out the passports, opening each one, nodded then put them down. Then he pulled out three stacks of cash. Carter frowned as he watched Greg count the cash and then put it back into three stacks, put everything back in and close the hatch door, putting the rug back into position.

What are you doing, Greg?

Carter could think of only one reason why Greg would've counted the cash then put it back. He was checking to make sure the same amount of cash was still in the floor safe.

But who would know it was there except Ella and Dante?

Carter turned that over in his mind. He'd known the safe was hidden in the floor because he'd painstakingly searched Ella's house, looking for anything that might help his case against Dante. But no one else should know it was there.

And if no one knew it was there, why would any cash have been taken?

If Dante thought the cash had been taken—enough to bother sending someone to her house to count it—Dante had good reason to believe someone besides Ella knew about the cash.

It was plausible.

Carter paused. There was another option he didn't want to believe, because if it turned out to be true, it would break his heart all over again.

But he couldn't rule it out.

Dante thought Ella had come back for the cash.

CHAPTER 24



NINA

Sunlight streamed in from behind the curtains and Nina rolled over, stretching and yawning softly. For a moment she'd forgotten where she was, but reality quickly sank in and she sat up, looking around the room.

It had been daylight when she'd gone to bed, and it was daylight now. She had no idea if she'd slept for a few hours, or an entire day.

Nina pushed back the duvet and went to the bathroom, splashing some water on her face and brushing her teeth. She stared at her reflection, feeling like the woman staring back at her was unrecognizable. So much had changed in a few days, but she was still fighting for the same thing—to go home to Lena.

That thought moved her feet. She walked into the living room and saw Carter sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee while he read the paper. It seemed like such a normal thing to be doing, and for a fleeting moment she wondered what that would be like—for this to be a normal weekend day where they could sleep in and ease into the day. But Nina shut

down that idea quickly. That was not her reality, and not her focus. Lena was her focus.

“I need to make another call, I have to check that Annie can stay with Lena,” she said.

Carter looked to her and nodded without hesitation. She walked toward him, expecting him to make the call like he had last time. Instead, he said, “Use the burner phone I gave you.”

Nina refrained from raising an eyebrow. Something was different about Carter today—or maybe it had been since he’d given her the laptop. A barrier had been broken down between them. Somehow, trust had been developed despite their rough start.

“Thanks,” Nina muttered, though she wasn’t sure why she was thanking him.

Nina went to her backpack, turned on the burner phone, almost waiting for it to beep with messages like she’d just turned it back on after a long-haul flight. But no one had this number. No one would be messaging her to check in.

Nina typed in Annie’s number, subconsciously holding her breath as she waited for an answer.

“Annie speaking.”

“Annie, it’s Nina,” she said quickly.

“Nina! What is going on? Are you okay? Lena is beside herself with worry,” Annie said, and Nina squeezed her eyes shut as guilt riddled her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Please tell her I’m sorry, that I love her, and I’ll be home soon,” Nina said, her voice breaking.

“Where are you?” Annie said.

“Denver Hospital,” Nina lied. “My friend had an accident,” she repeated, continuing the same lie. “I should be home soon.”

“Why aren’t you answering your phone? And why are you calling on different numbers?” Annie asked, clearly not buying Nina’s story.

“My phone died and I have to keep borrowing a phone to call you. I’m so sorry about this, Annie. Can you please stay a few more days?” Nina asked, terrified a few more days wasn’t going to be long enough.

“Nina I’m worried about you. You sound . . . on edge. You can talk to me, you know that,” she said but her words only made the lies harder.

“I’m okay, I promise,” Nina said, her chest tightening.

A long pause followed. “Okay,” she said unconvinced, “but call me if you need anything. I can stay a few more days, Nina, but I have to be home by Sunday. I have an exam on Monday.”

Nina wanted to sit on the floor and cry. She had no one else she could call to look after Lena, yet Annie was in med school and missing an exam wasn’t an option. Neither was Nina going home.

Nina shook her head. She had two days to figure it out.

“Thank you for staying, Annie. I’ll be home by Sunday,” Nina said, her eyes locking on Carter’s.

“Can I call you on this number?” Annie asked.

“Yeah,” Nina said. “I might not be able to answer if I’m in the hospital, but I’ll call you back.”

“Okay. Take care, Nina. I’ll see you Sunday,” she said and Nina ended the conversation so she didn’t have to utter another lie.

She looked to Carter. “I have to be home by Sunday night. I have no one to look after Lena.”

Carter looked apologetic. “Let’s deal with today and go from there.”

Nina wanted to argue with him. She needed a guarantee, but she knew Carter couldn’t give her one.

“We need the money, Nina,” he said.

Nina nodded, sitting at the computer.

Thankfully, she’d had an epiphany last night—she’d woken briefly and realized she already had the money.

“I’ll make you a coffee,” Carter said as she opened Ella’s spreadsheets.

Nina studied the columns again, certain she was correct. She would have a few attempts before the account was blocked.

She loaded the internet banking site for Dante’s offshore accounts. She tried the first combination on Ella’s spreadsheet. She bit her lip when the red text flashed up on the screen advising the login details were incorrect.

She looked back to the spreadsheet, trying to get inside Ella’s head. The first column was the bank account numbers, of that Nina was sure. She thought the second was the username, and the third passwords, but she’d tried the first line of each and it wasn’t correct. But maybe Ella had jumbled them in case the spreadsheet had ended up in the wrong hands.

She had two attempts left.

Carter placed a coffee in front of her but Nina didn't look up.

She typed the username again, and then the second password. She was about to hit enter when she paused, noting the last digits of all of the passwords. Her eyes scanned the list, stopping on a password that ended in one to match the row of the username. It was a long shot, but every option was a stab in the dark.

She hit enter and groaned as the same red text came up, this time advising her she had one more attempt before the account was locked.

Nina placed her hands in her lap, studying the passwords, looking for a pattern.

She'd almost given up when it hit her: Ella had been to Cipher's house—that's the only way she would've gotten that photograph. Cipher loved to create cipher codes, hence the nickname. He'd sent Nina a cipher code once and she'd memorized it. She wondered if he'd also sent Ella the same code.

Nina got to work, applying the cipher codes to the passwords. She worked on the first row, writing the ciphered-code into the fourth column. The ciphered password meant nothing to her, but it didn't need to.

Nina blew out a breath. If she locked this account, it was going to make accessing Dante's funds a lot harder. But her fingers tingled with a nervous energy—the good kind. Her gut told her she was on the right track.

Nina typed in the ciphered password, triple checking it was correct before she hit enter. She held her breath as the screen flashed and then she was looking at the internet banking portal

for Dante's offshore accounts. And the accounts were flush! Nina opened the accounts, looking at the transaction history. As she suspected, no withdrawals or deposits had been made for the past ten years, which told her Dante didn't know how to access this money. Most likely, he didn't even know about these accounts. The spreadsheet might have been coded specifically to ensure Dante couldn't get his hands on it.

"Carter . . . I have the money . . ." Nina said, breathless.

"What?" He rushed over to look at the screen. He leaned over her shoulder, his cheek almost brushing hers.

"Wait, are these Dante's accounts?" he asked.

"Yes," Nina said. "I'm going to transfer the funds from this account to a domestic account. We'll then use it to repay his debt."

"Won't you need to put in a two-factor authentication code?" he asked.

"Yes," Nina said, "but I suspect . . . Was this Ella's number?" Nina asked, pointing to the screen.

"Yes," Carter replied without hesitation.

"As I thought, Ella set this up and she controlled it. No transactions have occurred on these accounts since she disappeared. I don't think Dante knows where this money is, or if he does, how to access it. I can change the number using the account password. I'll set it to send the code to your phone. Once the funds are in a domestic account we can use it to make a deal with Dante. It's risky because he might have a way of watching these funds, but he already wants to kill us so I think it's worth the risk."

Carter turned to look at her, the corner of his lips turning up. "Good job, Nina," he said.

Heat crept up her cheeks but she turned her attention back to the screen. First she had to update the mobile number. She hit save, entered the password and exhaled in relief when it updated. Then she sent the funds to Carter's bank account. The transfer might get flagged by the government, but Nina would soon make the money disappear and she could make it look like a glitch.

Nina entered the details for the transfer, holding her breath as she submitted the payment.

The screen changed and the new balance on Dante's account was zero.

She looked to Carter.

“You're a rich man, Carter Hamilton.”

CHAPTER 25



CARTER

*H*ope bloomed in his chest for the first time in days.

Bravo, Nina, Bravo.

Stealing it from Dante's offshore accounts wasn't the way he'd thought this would pan out, but it would work.

"And now for part two," Nina said as she opened a black box filled with code.

Carter watched with interest as she typed several lines of code she'd seemingly memorized.

"What are you doing?" Carter asked.

"Setting up a program that will distribute the funds, but move them again if we enter a code." She looked up at him. "I got the idea from Ella," she said, and Carter's heart skipped a beat. "I think she was working on this, maybe to buy her own safety, but it wasn't finished. She either got stuck and couldn't work out how to code the rest of the sequence, or she'd been interrupted and never had time to finish it. I'm assuming it was the latter," Nina said.

“You have a brilliant mind, Nina,” Carter said, meaning every word.

He’d lost count of how many times he’d been amazed by her since he’d kidnapped her.

“So what do we do now?” Nina asked.

His eyes locked on hers. “We call Dante and tell him we have his money. He needs to let Jedd go at a secure location then the money will hit his account. Same tactic as a hostage ransom,” Carter said.

Nina nodded. “And let him know if he comes for us, the transaction will be reversed.”

Carter picked up his phone to make the call when he received an audio message. He pressed play and Carter recognized Dante’s voice immediately:

“Greg, go to 14393 East 47th Drive. I’m going to teach them both a lesson.”

Carter’s blood froze like he’d dived into the Antarctic.

He looked to Nina, who was as white as a sheet.

“Breathe,” Carter instructed, and Nina gulped in a breath.

Carter dialed Dante’s number but it rang out. He dialed it again, but it kept on ringing.

“That’s my address. Lena and Annie are both there,” Nina said, a pained whisper.

“We’re not going to let anything happen to them,” Carter said as confidently as he could manage. “Look at me,” he said, gently cupping Nina’s face. “We’ll make sure they’re okay. Get your shoes, we need to go.”

Carter strode toward the closet in the bedroom, grabbing a bag he'd always kept packed for an occasion like this. He slung it over his shoulder and walked back to Nina. He grabbed his gun and the van keys from the table.

“Let’s go,” he said, trying to call Dante again but either Dante was screening his call or he was busy. Carter feared both scenarios. Carter tried Greg’s number, but he didn’t answer either.

Nina looked ill by the time Carter pulled out onto the street. They were a twenty-minute drive from Nina’s house. Carter prayed they were closer than Greg was.

Carter passed his phone to Nina. “Keep trying to call Dante and Greg, their numbers are the last two dialed.”

Nina grabbed the phone, putting the call on speaker. It rang out.

Carter swore silently. He needed to be a calm, reassuring voice of reason for Nina, but truthfully Carter felt sick to his stomach.

“What will they do to them?” Nina asked with a shaky voice.

“I don’t know,” Carter lied, but this time he didn’t feel an ounce of guilt. There was no point telling her that Greg would walk into the house and shoot them both point-blank. He wouldn’t torture them because this wasn’t about anything other than teaching Nina and Carter a lesson. Their deaths would be quick, but that would provide no comfort to Nina.

“I’m going to be sick,” Nina said, leaning forward, running her hand through her hair.

“Call Annie,” Carter said, knowing this was going to raise a lot of questions, but it might save their lives. “Tell her to take

Lena into the basement and to stay there.”

“I don’t know if she can get Lena down to the basement,” Nina said, shaking her head, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Tell her she needs to find a way, even if she has to drag her,” Carter said. It was a horrifying thought, but so was walking into the house and finding them both dead.

Nina exhaled a long breath, her fingers shaking as she dialed Annie’s number.

“Annie, it’s Nina. Are you okay?” she asked quickly. “Good. Okay listen to me really carefully. I need you to do something, you can’t ask me why but I will explain later. I need you to take Lena down to the basement and stay there until I come to the house—”

Carter looked to Nina when she stopped talking, presumably to listen to Annie’s reply, but she quickly cut her off.

“Annie, stop!” Nina said, her voice breaking. “Please listen to me. A man is coming to the house. I stole money from him, and now he’s going to kill you and Lena if you don’t hide. I’m coming with the police, but I don’t know how far away the man is. Just do it, now. Please!”

Carter stole another glance at her, nodding his approval.

“You’ll have to carry her down the stairs,” Nina said, closing her eyes, tipping her head back. “Now, Annie, now!”

Carter wove through the traffic, driving as fast as he could, sliding between cars and breaking every speed limit.

“I have to go, I have to make another call. Please, Annie, get Lena into the basement and hide, don’t say a word!” Nina

said before she hung up then went back to calling Dante. But Dante never answered. Nor did Greg.

With every mile closer to Lena's house, Carter's anxiety climbed higher in his throat. He was driving as fast as he could, but there was too much traffic. Eventually they made it but when they drove onto Nina's street, Carter's fears were realized. A black SUV was parked at the front of Nina's house.

"Oh God," Nina said.

"It's okay," Carter said, hoping that was true. He pulled the van to a stop and passed her a gun.

"I'm coming with you," Nina said.

Carter didn't argue—he didn't have time. But he also didn't think it was his place to force her to stay in the van. Was it safer for her there? Probably, but Carter couldn't guarantee that either. Dante's men could be waiting in the bushes to ambush her once he went inside. His gut told him it was better they stayed together.

"Let's go," he said, climbing out of the van, his eyes sweeping the gardens of the neighboring yard. He considered a sniper, but Dante's men favored brute strength and attacking from close range.

"Are the curtains normally drawn at this time of day?" Carter asked as they crossed the street.

"No," Nina replied.

"Let's go around the back," Carter said, knowing the backyard and the back door well. It was how he'd taken Nina, after all.

Carter kept his weapon raised, ready for whatever came next.

The back door was unlocked and Carter could see where it had been jimmed.

He paused, listening, before he gently pushed the door open. He heard footsteps—the sound of boots on the stairs.

Carter looked to Nina and nodded.

He crept forward, his finger on the trigger, ready. The staircase was not far from the backdoor. The echo of the footsteps told Carter the man was creeping up the staircase, treading carefully. He peered around the doorjamb, seeing a boot on the top stair before it disappeared from view.

Carter needed to do this quietly to avoid attention. He didn't want the neighbors calling the police, nor did he want more of Dante's men rushing in.

Carter motioned toward the stairs leading to the basement.

Make sure they're okay, Carter mouthed. When he nodded, Nina crept forward while Carter covered her. He was confident they'd arrived in time, because Dante's man was still creeping around the house like he was looking for someone. If he'd killed Lena and Annie, he'd be gone by now.

When Nina was out of sight, Carter climbed the stairs. He knew from experience which ones creaked and which didn't.

He was at the top of the stairs when Dante's man walked out, his jaw dropping open in surprise.

CHAPTER 26



NINA

“*A*nnie!” Nina called out in a hushed whisper, her eyes sweeping over the basement.

When no response came, Nina’s stomach churned as she feared the worst. Visions of Annie and Lena with bullet wounds to their heads flashed in her mind but she shut them down. She saw no blood on the floors, nor did she smell the metallic scent she’d felt like she’d been able to taste when Ed had been killed.

“Annie!” Nina said again then saw a box move.

Nina rushed toward it, exhaling with relief as she saw Annie’s dark hair.

Wide eyes looked to her.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Nina said, quietly moving the box out of the way and kneeling beside Annie and Lena.

“What is going on, Ninny?” Lena asked, her eyes wide.

Hot tears stung Nina’s eyes. Her heart ached for her grandmother. She’d never been away from her for this long, and certainly not under these circumstances.

“A big misunderstanding,” Nina said apologetically. “I caused some trouble online and now the man wants his money back. I have it for him, and I’m going to give it to him, I just needed to know you’re safe—”

A thud sounded above them and three pairs of eyes snapped up to the ceiling.

Nina almost screamed out to Carter, but she stopped herself in time.

“I promise, I’ll explain everything soon, but I need you to stay here a little longer,” Nina said as Annie threw her a look that added another layer onto Nina’s guilt.

Nina stood, sliding the box back into place and moved toward the stairs. She crept up them slowly, quietly, pausing near the top.

Where was Carter? And what had that noise been?

Nina stood still, barely daring to breathe as she listened to footsteps on the second floor. Nina pulled the gun from the holster on her waist and quietly began climbing the stairs. If Carter was down, it was up to her to protect Lena and Annie. She would not leave them there to die.

Nina was almost at the top of the stairs when Carter stepped around the corner, his weapon raised at her.

He gulped in a breath, his eyes widening when he realized it was her.

“Nina! I could’ve shot you!” he hissed under his breath.

“What was that noise?” she asked.

“Dante’s man, he’s down for the count,” Carter said as the sound of car tires screeching caused their heads to snap toward the window.

“Dante’s here,” Carter said and Nina’s heart pounded in her chest.

Carter grabbed her hand and they ran down the stairs, toward the back door, but they didn’t see one of Dante’s men hiding underneath the staircase.

Carter yelped before he fell to the ground and Nina screamed. It took her a moment to realize what had happened, and by the time she realized Carter had been knocked unconscious a rough hand covered her mouth, muffling another scream.

“Hello, Nina,” he whispered, his nauseating hot breath on her neck.

Two men appeared at the back door and looked to the man holding Nina.

“Put him in the van. I’ll take Nina with me,” he said and they grabbed Carter’s wrists and dragged him toward the door before they picked him up, his body limp as they half carried him, half dragged him out the door.

Nina was spun around and her heart stopped beating when she looked into Dante’s eyes.

“Now who’s going to protect you?” he asked, his eyes dancing.

“I have your money,” Nina said quickly but metal pressed into her stomach with such force she doubled over.

“Don’t say it to me like you’re giving me a gift,” Dante said. “Walk outside, get in the car, and I’ll follow you. If you don’t, the last thing you’ll see is your grandmother’s brains splattered over the kitchen floor. Understood?” Dante growled.

Nina nodded and Dante spun her around, pressing his pistol to her lower back. “Walk,” he said and she did, down the back stairs and around the side of the house, just in time to see Dante’s thugs load Carter’s slumped body into the back of the van.

Carter! Nina silently screamed, willing him to wake up. With Dante at her back, she felt powerless, but at least they were out of the house.

Nina was pushed into the back of the black SUV as the two men who had been carrying Carter climbed into the passenger and driver seats.

Nina frowned. Were they leaving Carter in the van? Why?

Nina saw it, the moment he clicked the button, but it was the eruption of the blast that took her breath away.

“No!” Nina screamed as she twisted, looking over her shoulder at the van engulfed in flames. “No!” Nina wailed, tears filling her eyes.

Dante grabbed her chin. “Let that be a lesson to those who betray me,” he said before he pushed her chin away in disgust.

Nina looked back to the van as they drove away, her heart breaking into pieces.

He didn’t deserve that.

Tears ran down her cheek, dripping off her chin.

Nina looked to Dante, hatred flaring in her eyes. But she had no fight left in her, the hatred had paralyzed her.

Nina was numb as they drove away from the house. She didn’t feel anything at all. She didn’t care where they were going, she didn’t care whether she lived.

She told herself to think of Annie and Lena, but she was too numb to feel anything.

When they pulled up at a warehouse, Nina had no idea how long they'd been driving but the sun had set and a cold chill swept through the air.

Dante grabbed her elbow, dragging her from the car.

Nina's shoulder screamed in protest but not a sound left her lips.

"Put her in there," Dante said, pointing toward a closed door.

Nina had a sense of déjà vu, but this wasn't the warehouse where Ed had been killed.

This warehouse would become a new nightmare for Nina.

CHAPTER 27



NINA

*N*ina's head hung forward as she fought through the chloroform they'd tried to sedate her with. She'd closed her eyes, letting her head roll back and they'd taken away the cloth. Nina had barely been conscious—just awake enough to let them believe they'd succeeded in sedating her—when they'd left the room.

Her head bobbed now as she fought to lift it up. Everything seemed hazy and she struggled to remember where she was. But even through the drug, Nina couldn't completely forget.

Carter.

Her eyes welled as the image of the van bursting into flames stole the breath from her lungs. Nina had never felt more alone. Dante hadn't even looked over his shoulder. Carter's life had been extinguished, not even worthy of a confirmation look from Dante. For a moment Nina had wondered if Carter had somehow gotten out of the van—that maybe he wasn't really dead—but Dante's confidence in Carter's death had been so assured that he hadn't even looked over his shoulder to confirm.

A sob slipped from her lips and she felt like her heart was crumbling in her chest. Tears ran down her face but she couldn't even wipe them away because her hands were tied, so she let them run, dripping from her chin.

The dimly lit room mirrored her heart and her mind. Hope seemed lost, escape unfeasible. Nina lifted her heavy eyes to the door but like the impossible jobs Carter had been sent on, this too seemed impossible.

Nina didn't have the strength to hold her head up, so it fell forward. She was so tired; she felt like her body was going to stop breathing, unable to perform even the most automatic functions.

Nina closed her eyes, slipping back into the darkness, hope a distant dream.

* * *

NINA STARTLED, opening her eyes. She blinked, clearing her blurred vision. She looked at the door and the man sitting opposite her and quickly remembered where she was and what had happened.

Carter.

“Good afternoon,” Dante's man said with an arrogant smirk.

Nina looked at him, but she had no response. She felt numb. Cold, yet numb.

“Dante wants to speak to you. You said you have his money, but it's not in his account,” he said.

Nina stared at him, but she could barely understand what he was saying. Grief had a way of swallowing you whole,

gripping you in its numbing arms. Nina felt like she was watching a movie, one she didn't want to see the end of.

She closed her eyes, too tired and drained to respond. When Dante wanted to talk, he knew where to find her.

* * *

HER CHEEK STUNG and her eyes flung open. Dante's face was inches from hers. Instinctively Nina jolted back but her back was already pressed against the chair.

"Enough sleeping, Nina. I want my money," he growled.

Nina tried to look dazed to buy some time to think through her plan. She didn't think she'd need to try that hard. She raised her eyes, spotting a clock on the wall behind Dante. Had the clock always been there? She couldn't be sure.

"The money was in your account. Check your transactions," she said with a croaky voice.

Dante frowned, narrowing his eyes. Then he looked at his phone, tapped the screen a few times. His jaw hardened as his eyes widened simultaneously.

"What the fuck?" he growled. "How did you do that? You've been asleep the entire time you've been here!"

The corner of her lips curled up. "Don't you want to ask me where the money is?"

His jaw set. "I don't care where it is. I want it back in my account. Now!" He raised his gun, pressing it against her temple.

Nina swallowed hard. She forced her mind to focus, to think clearly, even though she pretended to be dazed and

confused because the last thing she wanted Dante to realize was she was playing a new game and this time she would be the puppeteer.

“I used a code to set up an automatic deposit and subsequent withdrawal from your account. If you want me to reverse the withdrawal, I’m going to need my laptop,” Nina said.

He stared at her a long moment then looked over his shoulder and said, “Get her laptop.” Dante’s man hurried off, but Dante’s eyes never left Nina. “How did you suddenly get my money, Nina?”

“I had it all along,” she lied, meeting his gaze. “It was never transferred to the customers.”

Dante glared at her. “If that’s the case, why not just return the money?”

“Because I hadn’t finished my second act. Here’s the thing, Dante. I need to enter a password into my system, and the password will be different every time. Every single month, month after month. So if you kill me, you’re going to have a big problem because the code sequence I used won’t take the money I sent to you, the code will drain your account to zero.”

Dante called her bluff. “Not if I move it to another account,” he said.

Nina shook her head. “That’s the thing with this code, it traces the money. It’s the most brilliant piece of code I’ve ever seen.”

He scoffed. “You’re not very modest,” he said.

Nina scoffed. “I didn’t design it. *Ella* did,” she said, and Dante’s jaw dropped open and his eyes hardened.

A grin spread across Nina's lips. "Well, Ella did most of the work, I simply modified the code. She was planning to use it to send money into your account. I reversed it so that it sends the money out. Much better that way."

"I'll withdraw the cash," Dante said, recovering his arrogant tone.

Nina raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of cash to withdraw in a very short period of time, don't you think?" she asked, but continued before he had a chance to respond. "It won't help you anyway, because I was able to intercept your phone conversations. How did you think we knew to go to my house at the exact same time Greg was there?" She let that sink in a moment.

"That's right, we intercepted your message to Greg, and we recorded every voice call you made. These recordings are going to cause trouble for you, Dante. The CIA, the FBI . . . they'll all be interested in hearing them. And if you kill me, they'll get released to the world and there's nowhere you'll be able to hide. It's a dead man's switch and it's already in play; there's nothing you can do to stop it. Let me walk out of here, and I'll enter the password every month like clockwork and we'll forget we ever met."

His jaw clenched and Nina could see his mind spinning, trying to think of everything she could've overheard, trying to work out whether she was calling his bluff or not.

A smug smile threatened to turn up the corner of her lips but her glee was short-lived as a blood-curdling scream cut through the walls.

"Where is Carter, Jedd?"

Nina frowned and Dante's eyes snapped to the wall.

Nina's mind reeled. Why were they asking Jedd where Carter was? They'd put him in the van and blown it up.

"Go to hell!" Jedd yelled back before he screamed so violently it made Nina's head rattle.

Dante frowned and fled the room, leaving Nina bound to the chair, her mouth agape.

Muffled voices penetrated the wall but Nina couldn't hear what they were saying. She looked to the clock, noting the time. Dante didn't return, but Jedd's screams did.

A clear voice came through the wall and Nina recognized it immediately. *Dante. "I will kill you, then I'll find him and kill you both, so you might as well tell me where he is,"* Dante said.

"Fuck you," Jedd spat.

Nina stopped breathing. Something had happened to make Dante believe Carter was alive. At first she thought his body hadn't been found, but given the intensity of the explosion, she couldn't imagine there would be a body to be found.

So maybe someone had seen him get out? Maybe he hadn't been unconscious at all, but faking it like she had done.

Hope flickered in her chest.

"This is your last chance," Dante said.

"Kill me," Jedd responded, fiercely as though he had no concern about dying.

Nina realized she'd been wrong all along. Jedd was loyal to Carter and was willing to die for him.

Hope surged through her veins. She fought against the restraints but it only caused them to cut into the soft flesh on

her wrists and ankles.

The door opened and she froze. Dante looked at her.

“Okay, Nina, you’re free to go,” he said with a cocky smile as he stalked toward her, backed up by three of his men.

She was no fool, he was not letting her go that easy. He had a plan, and she would figure it out. But first she had to do something else, for someone without the leverage she had.

“Let Jedd go. Now,” Nina said sternly. “Release him and move me so that I can watch him walk out of the door. If anything happens to him, I’ll refuse to enter the password.”

Dante tilted his head. “Why do you care about Jedd?”

Because Carter cares about him. “He’s no help to you,” Nina said. “Let him live his life. You don’t need him, and he’ll never give you Carter.”

“I can see why he likes you,” Dante said with a sly grin that made her stomach roll. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll let Jedd go, but you’re staying with me until I can be sure you’ll enter the password.”

Nina nodded. She knew it wasn’t about the password. Nina would be used to draw Carter out. She was another pawn in the deadly dance Dante and Carter had been playing for more than a decade.

But it was time for the dance to end.

For now, Jedd could go and she would do whatever Dante needed until she found a way to get herself out of this mess. And then she would take Lena somewhere safe—somewhere Dante would never find them even if he came looking for them. Perhaps a little beach house on a cliff.

He disappeared from the room and came back with her laptop. “Put the money back in my account then we’ll talk.” He cut the rope binding her hands, throwing her a warning glance.

Nina inhaled deeply, focusing on the task at hand. She used Ella’s code sequence to move the money so it would be withdrawn if she didn’t enter the password.

Dante checked his account and nodded. “Let Jedd go.”

Three men walked out of the room and Nina expected Dante to follow them but he walked around the chair Nina was tied to and lifted it up.

Nina squealed as she felt like she was going to fall off, but the ropes kept her secured to the chair.

Dante carried the chair to the window and opened the blind.

Nina blinked, recognizing the view—or lack thereof. If they weren’t in the same warehouse Carter had initially taken Nina to, they were in the one next door.

Nina heard faint voices through the walls and then she held her breath as Jedd walked into view. He limped on his right leg and his left arm hung at an unnatural angle. Nina was glad she couldn’t see his face, but she knew it was him by the star tattoo on the base of his neck. Even from where Nina sat, it appeared to take a monumental amount of effort to walk, but walk he did. He climbed into a black truck that became invisible through the dust cloud when Jedd spun the tires as he drove away.

For you, Carter, Nina thought as hot tears stung her eyes.
Your brother is safe.

Dante swore under his breath and spun Nina's chair around so violently that it almost gave her whiplash.

"Where did my money just go?" Dante growled.

Nina stopped breathing, fear snaking up the back of her neck like icy tentacles. The money shouldn't have gone anywhere.

Nina tried to swallow but the lump in her throat was growing larger by the second.

"Give me my laptop," she said quickly, fighting to remain calm. She needed Dante to believe she was in control of this.

Her fingers fluttered over the keyboard but she couldn't find the mistake—the error in the code. She'd tested it on her own bank account and Carter's. It had worked perfectly, moving money in and out only when the password had been entered.

But something had changed. The code was malfunctioning and Nina didn't know how to fix it.

"Go after him. Find him and bring him back," Dante said.

"No!" Nina said, her eyes looking to the clock. Jedd hadn't been gone more than five minutes. He wouldn't be far enough away. "I'll get you your money."

"Go after him!" Dante said, ignoring Nina's plea. "Concentrate on what you're doing. If that money is not back in my account within the next fifteen minutes, I'll shoot Jedd the second my men bring him back to me."

Nina inhaled deeply, blocking Dante's threats from her mind.

She studied the code sequence, double-checking the times. But she didn't understand what had gone wrong.

Beads of sweat lined her forehead.

Think, Nina, think.

Her eyes darted to the clock again.

Almost ten minutes had passed and Dante's men weren't back with Jedd. Maybe he had gotten away.

Nina separated the code into multiple sections, breaking down each one, but there was nothing in the code that should've activated the transfer. And worse than that, she had no idea where the money had gone or how to get it back.

Nina kept trying, but it felt like a lost cause. She wanted to sit in the corner of the room, bury her head in her hands and cry. She was tired of this, tired of it all.

She stared at the laptop, unable to think—her head was too foggy.

"I need a glass of water," Nina said without looking up.

In her peripheral, she saw Dante nod but his eyes never left Nina. Someone left the room and came back a moment later, passing her a glass of water. Her hands shook as she took the glass, spilling some water onto the laptop.

She quickly swiped her arm across the keyboard, letting her sweater soak up the water. She put the glass down beside her ankle—which was tied to the chair. She used the moment to look around the room. Six men, their eyes trained on Nina.

She shook her head, forcing herself to focus.

She looked back to the code, her breath catching in her throat as she saw the error. Two commands were out of sequence. It had been in front of her the entire time. She couldn't fathom how she'd made such a mistake, but in her haste to copy over the code she must've made the error.

Nina looked to the clock once more. Dante's men had been gone for over half an hour and they hadn't returned with Jedd.

Was he safe?

She pushed the questions from her mind as she focused on the task. She fixed the code and the transfer reversed.

Dante gave a chilling grin. "Very good, Nina." He took her laptop from her, and secured her hands behind the back of the chair once more before he turned and walked out of the door, locking it behind her.

Nina looked over her shoulder to the window but she couldn't see anything from where she sat, bound to the chair.

Nina inhaled a deep breath. If Carter was alive, why hadn't he come for them?

She tried to rationalize that he hadn't known where to find them, but she was sure this warehouse was next to, or very close to, the warehouse Carter had first taken her to.

Maybe he was badly injured and couldn't physically come. Or maybe he wasn't alive at all. That was the most plausible explanation because Nina knew that even if he didn't come for Nina, he would've come for Jedd. Every cell in her body knew that.

Nina bit her lip, the hope that had flickered in her chest had burned to ash. Her head fell forward, exhaustion creeping through her veins like a deadly gas.

She was tired of this, tired of it all.

Dante would wake her again when he needed something. Until then, she wanted to sleep—to escape this nightmare—and awake with a fresh mind that could come up with a new game plan because she was playing against the grandmaster.

Nina closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 28



JEDD

*H*is vision blurred and he fought through the cocktail of exhaustion and pain riddling his body as he drove past Nina's house, looking for any sign of Carter. The burned-out van was gone and the drapes were drawn. Jedd pulled the car to a stop, idling for a few minutes, lowering the window so his face was visible. If Carter was somehow watching the house, he would see Jedd.

He checked the mirrors again, but he'd been careful. No one had followed him. They had Nina, which meant Dante was confident he could use her to draw Carter out. It was a good strategy and one that made Jedd's stomach churn because if Carter was alive, Jedd knew he would stop at nothing to find her.

Jedd waited and waited. He searched every shadow but Carter wasn't here.

If he wasn't protecting Nina's family, Jedd could only think of one other place he would be.

He put the car in drive and headed for Carter's apartment, the one only Carter, Jedd, and Nina knew about. The fact that Carter had taken Nina there told Jedd everything he needed to know. Carter would protect her at any cost.

His stomach churned all the way to the apartment. If Carter wasn't here, the emptiness was going to kill him all over again.

He wasn't sure if Carter was alive. He hadn't seen him get out of the van. But Dante was convinced, and that gave Jedd hope.

Jedd drove past the apartment, his heart skipping a beat when he saw the penthouse lights were on. Maybe Carter had left them on when they'd rushed to Nina's house—it was very possible—but he couldn't stop the feeling of hope blossoming in his chest.

He pulled the car into the first space he saw, not caring which resident it was allocated to.

Jedd moved as quickly as he could, in his state it was more like a hobble than a run, toward the elevator. He pressed the button and entered the code. The elevator ascended and Jedd realized he was holding his breath.

When the doors opened, he stepped out and looked up at the concealed camera. He waited a moment and then another. When he heard the door click, he almost fell to his knees.

Carter appeared at the door, rushed toward him and pulled him into a hug.

"You're alive!" Jedd said, the chains around his chest loosening. "What happened to you?"

"What happened to you? Where is Nina? I looked everywhere but I couldn't find you. I just walked in a few minutes ago." Carter talked so quickly that his words rushed into each other.

Jedd shook his head. "Dante acquired some new warehouses. I'd never been there before. In fact, I thought I

was in the warehouse we'd first taken Nina to. It looks the same from the windows, but it's about a mile from there."

"Where is Nina?" Carter asked again, his eyes begging for an answer that Jedd couldn't give—for Jedd to say they'd both escaped Dante.

"Dante has her," Jedd said and Carter's face fell. "She's safe, she bartered some kind of deal to let me go. I don't know what she did, but she's the reason I walked free. To make that kind of deal means she's holding something over Dante. Dante won't kill her—he needs her," he said, repeating the words he'd once said about Ella. Jedd prayed his brother listened this time.

Carter looked like he was going to run to the door but he stopped himself. "For now, he won't kill her, but Dante will use her to draw me out. I won't abandon her, Jedd."

Jedd nodded. "I know. But we need a plan—a damn good one—before we go charging in and get ourselves and Nina killed."

Carter looked behind Jedd at the elevator, then gave a resigned nod. "Let's make a plan," Carter said, tilting his head toward the door.

Jedd followed him inside and took a seat at the counter.

Carter looked over him, shaking his head. "One second," he said before disappearing from the room, returning a moment later with a large box. He began pulling out medical supplies, putting them on the table in front of Jedd.

"Tell me how you survived that explosion," Jedd said, looking his brother over like he still couldn't quite believe it was true.

Carter frowned. "Weren't you there, on the grass?"

Jedd's eyebrows weaved together, wondering if Carter had a concussion. "I was in the car with Dante's men. Why did you think I was on the grass?"

Carter blinked, looking dazed. "Because someone shot the man who came to check on me."

Jedd's mouth dropped open. "Carter, I wish that had been me, but I couldn't get out of the car—I had a pistol pointed at me and regardless, I thought you were dead."

Carter's eyes looked far away for a moment. "I was barely conscious when they put me in the van but I had enough awareness to know I needed to get out—I didn't know it was loaded with explosives, I was just thinking of Nina and getting to her. They didn't lock the van after they put me in. I had just crawled out when it exploded and was thrown onto the grass. One of Dante's men came to check on me, but my vision was so blurred I couldn't even see his face. All of a sudden, he fell. I thought you had shot him."

Jedd studied his brother, unsure what to make of that. He must've hallucinated, he concluded, because he didn't see anyone leave the cars to check on Carter, though Dante could've had men surrounding the house. But even if one of Dante's men had been there, who had shot him?

Carter examined Jedd's bloody hand, focusing on the three fingernails he was missing from his right hand.

"They did this to get to me," he said.

It was a rhetorical question, so Jedd didn't answer. Carter already knew the truth. Dante would never let either of them go because he knew they wouldn't walk away, they both wanted revenge. For his time served, for Ella, and for Evie's

death. Dante had to be destroyed, it was the only way they could move on and live without looking over their shoulders.

Jedd hissed as Carter cleaned his hand and bandaged the fingers.

“Good thing you’re a lefty . . .” Carter said.

Jedd grunted. “I kept reaching for things with my right hand so they wouldn’t suspect otherwise. Dante doesn’t focus on intelligence when he’s recruiting, that has always been his biggest weakness.”

Jedd watched as Carter did his best to patch him up but he was sure he had at least a few broken ribs and his arm was hanging at an unusual angle. He needed more medical help than Carter could give him, but he could not go to a hospital. He didn’t have answers for the questions he would be asked, and he didn’t have the time to spare. Carter would go back for Nina, and Jedd would be right beside him.

“How many men are in the warehouse?” Carter asked, his mind back on Nina. It was one of the things Jedd admired most about his brother, he had a laser-like focus when it mattered.

“Twelve that I saw,” Jedd said, then added, “There could be more, but I don’t think so.”

“How many are watching Nina?”

Jedd shook his hand. “I don’t know, I didn’t actually see her. But she’s there, I’m sure of it. Dante wouldn’t be so stupid as to let her out of his sight and every time he came back into the room to see me, he looked a little tenser.”

Carter finished with his hand and looked him over again. “Are you going to be able to fight?”

Jedd looked him in the eyes. “Yes. We go in together, I’m not letting you do this on your own. It will be suicide.”

Carter swallowed, no doubt thinking the same thing Jedd was. It might be suicide regardless.

“Get me a pen and paper,” Jedd said.

Carter rummaged through one of the drawers and placed a lined notebook and pen in front of him.

Jedd drew up the warehouse, of what he’d been able to see—and he had paid particular attention when he’d walked out because he’d known he’d be going back. He’d gone back to Dante’s headquarters the night of the poker game because he’d played Dante’s bluff—he told him he was done taking the fall for Carter and he was ready to work with him to turn him over. That had never been Jedd’s plan, but being with Dante meant he’d been able to watch him, and listen to him. He’d gone into the lion’s den because it was the only way he’d been able to help Carter. Dante had always thought Carter had been the brains behind their partnership, and that was mostly true, but not completely. It was Jedd who had sent the message to Carter with the audio recording. He’d been listening to Dante from another room, and managed to get close enough to record him without being seen. He’d been recording, thinking he might be able to use it against Dante in the future. But when he’d heard Nina’s address, he’d known he had to act fast. He’d cut the clip and sent it to Carter. Dante’s plan had always been to blow up the van, but Lena should’ve been inside, not Carter.

Jedd shook his head. It had been a close call and he’d been sitting in the car, unable to do a thing as Dante’s men watched him while they watched the house. He remembered how he felt when that van had blown up, and used it now to motivate him—to push him through the pain and exhaustion he felt. He

focused on creating a new plan, one Dante knew nothing about.

“There are four doors,” he said, drawing Xs on the map of the warehouse. “This is our best chance. We enter through here because we can use the cars and these walls for cover. She’ll be in one of these rooms.” He tapped the squares he’d drawn on the paper. “We’ll have to search them one by one, and stay alive long enough to find her. I don’t think he’ll move her. He wants me to lead you back to the warehouse because you’re a loose end he needs to tie up.”

Carter inhaled, nodding. “He’ll be relying on you taking some time to find me. The faster we move, the greater the element of surprise.”

CHAPTER 29



NINA

Nina stilled, straining to hear the conversation on the other side of the door.

“Make no mistake, Carter will come for her,” Dante said. Nina would recognize his voice anywhere. She suspected his voice was going to haunt her nightmares for years to come—provided she survived this.

“I’ve called in twenty additional men. We’ll be prepared,” a man responded.

“How long until they arrive?” Dante asked.

“Thirty minutes, give or take a few.”

“Tell them to be here in twenty minutes,” Dante growled. *“I have a job for them to do before Carter arrives.”*

“Understood.”

Nina felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. On one hand, she held out hope that Carter would come for her. But part of her knew it was selfish because soon there would be more than thirty men here. What hope did Carter have?

Nina shook her head. She couldn’t wait for that to happen. She needed to escape and find Carter before he came for her—

before he ended up dead.

“Is the hacker here yet?” Dante asked.

Nina’s eyes snapped back to the door. She wondered if Dante was having this conversation right outside her door to torture her. She concluded that was the likely reason.

“He’s been picked up and he’s en route.”

“Good. He is going to undo everything she’s done. I will not be held hostage by anyone. When I no longer need Nina, she will be used to motivate Carter. I have one last job for him to do before I kill him. Tell the hacker he has twenty minutes to figure out how to override Nina’s—Ella’s—code,” he said bitterly. *“Incentivize him.”*

A good hacker would be able to figure out the code eventually. A chill crept up the back of her neck.

She hadn’t bought herself safety at all. She was no safer than Carter she realized with a sickening clarity. Dante had outplayed her, and he was going to outplay Carter if she didn’t do something because she didn’t really have any recording she could use against him and he must’ve figured that out.

Dante was still pulling the strings.

“Did you find the grandmother?”

Nina stopped breathing.

“No, we think Carter had someone helping him, that’s the only explanation. The grandmother is gone and Smith is dead. Carter couldn’t have pulled that off in the state he would’ve been in. He was too close to that bomb.”

Nina closed her eyes for a moment and said a quick prayer to anyone who was listening. Carter didn’t have anyone helping him, of that much she was sure. She hoped that Lena

and Annie had found somewhere safe to hide until she could get to them.

Nina looked at her restraints, feeling helpless.

She needed to turn the tables on Dante. She needed to start pulling the strings.

Trying to physically get out of this warehouse was going to be impossible. Nina needed to play it smarter than that and she still had one more card up her sleeve.

“Dante!” Nina called out.

The door opened and Dante looked at her with raised eyebrows.

“I need to enter the password,” Nina said.

“Now?” he asked, irritated.

Nina shrugged. “Unless you’d like the money to disappear, then, yes.”

He eyed her and she saw the moment he made the decision. “Sure,” he said mockingly and looked over his shoulder. “Bring me Nina’s laptop.”

Dante was confident because he had another hacker on the way, but if Nina was right about this, it didn’t matter what the hacker did, Nina would ensure her safety for a little longer.

Dante grabbed the laptop and then stalked toward her. He placed it on her lap, cut her restraints once more, then moved to stand beside her. He pressed a knife to her throat.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Nina fought the urge to swallow the lump in her throat because the more she moved, the more the knife would cut

into her skin—she knew this from the wounds the restraints had left on her wrists. Her skin looked raw, mangled.

She would need to talk, though, if this plan was going to succeed.

“You never asked me how I knew about Ella’s code,” Nina said calmly as she began to type code onto the screen.

“Carter,” Dante said.

“Wrong,” Nina said.

Dante was quiet a moment but she knew he was intrigued. “Enter the password, Nina.”

“I’m working on it,” she lied as she typed more useless code. “I had access to Ella’s laptop, Dante,” she said as she typed a line of code so that an image flashed on the screen.

Dante didn’t say a word but she felt the energy shift in the room.

“It seems Ella had an insurance plan of her own,” Nina said.

“Get rid of that photo,” Dante said quickly.

“Isn’t that Johnson’s wife?” Nina asked. “Imagine that, you had an affair with your most loyal man’s wife. How do you think he’ll take that? Now, I’ve already sent this to three other hackers who will forward it on if anything should happen to me. It doesn’t matter if I tell them not to send it, they still will—because they were friends with Ed, and they’ll want revenge,” she lied. “So, your hacker can do whatever he wants, but he can’t undo this. It’s too late, Dante. The trap has been set,” she said, using his words against her.

He leaned forward. “I’m going to *fucking* kill you,” he said slowly in a deep voice, his breath on her neck.

Nina closed her eyes for a moment. “At least I’ll die knowing Johnson will kill *you*,” she whispered, her throat tight.

“What do you want?” Dante asked.

“Tell your men—the additional ones you’re sending here—to turn around. Take me somewhere Carter can’t find me,” she said.

“You can’t save him, Nina. He will keep coming for you, and when he does I will be ready,” Dante said.

“I can save him for tonight. Make the call, Dante, because God forbid I should get caught in a crossfire . . . you’d have a new enemy and a team of men who know exactly who you are. You have as much loyalty as the devil.”

“You’re going to pay for this,” he said as he withdrew the knife from her neck, slicing it backward. She hissed in a breath as hot pain shot to her toes and she felt warm liquid run down her neck. Nina knew, though, he hadn’t cut a main vein—there wasn’t enough blood for that to be true. He wasn’t trying to kill her—he still needed her—he was just going to inflict as much pain on her as possible until he worked out what to do.

“Call your man, tell him to tell the men to turn around. Now! I want them to go to Botanic Gardens. We’re meeting them there!” Dante said and Nina exhaled a breath of relief.

“I don’t care if they’re a few minutes away. Call them now!” Dante screamed, cursing under his breath as he spun her chair around.

“This was a stupid move,” Dante said as he crouched in front of her, his eyes burning with fury. “You’re going to pay for this.”

CHAPTER 30



CARTER

Carter turned into the parking lot of a warehouse five up from Dante's. He looked to Jedd. "You don't have to do this," Carter said.

Jedd reached for the door handle. "I want to do this, and I'm going to."

Jedd's answer relieved him, but that only worsened his guilt.

"You need to stop protecting me," Jedd said, "and you need to stop blaming yourself for the past. The past is done, I put it to rest a long time ago. It is you who carries the weight of it every day like a punishment. So do me a favor, when this is done, promise me you'll start living your life."

Carter opened his mouth to argue but everything Jedd said was true. Carter had never forgiven himself. "Let's get Nina and get the hell out of here," Carter said, and Jedd rewarded him with a grin.

"Let's do it, brother," he said, opening the door.

The sun had not yet set, and wouldn't for another hour at least, so the shadows wouldn't provide much protection. Carter felt exposed, vulnerable.

Carter laid eyes on Dante's warehouse. An image flashed in his mind: Dante looking down the barrel of Carter's gun before he pulled the trigger. He held that image as he made a plan.

Carter drew a steadying breath as he looked at the vehicles parked outside.

"We need the keys to one of those cars in case we need to make a hasty exit," he said under his breath. "Cover me."

Carter's eyes swept over the vehicles. He drew a steady breath and then sprinted across the gap between the warehouses, coming to a halt as his shoulder pressed against Dante's warehouse. He crept forward, keeping low, his shoulder against the wall. He stopped at the window, using a mirror to look inside. The lights were on, but there was no one in the room—someone had been recently, though, because blood splattered the floor and judging by the color of it, Carter knew it was fresh blood.

Carter shook his head. He would not go there, not now. It didn't mean it was Nina's blood, it could've been Jedd's or any other poor soul Dante had decided to torture.

He would know soon enough.

Carter checked the mirror once more and saw the room was still empty. He used the window of opportunity to run to the cars without being seen. He crouched low, keeping his head below the car windows until he had to peer into the car. He avoided touching any in case they had an alarm, but instead peered in, his eyes searching for keys left in the car.

He got lucky on the third vehicle and slowly inched open the door as not to attract any attention from anyone looking through the other windows.

Carter's pulse raced as he reached into the car, grabbing the keys and tucking them into his pocket.

No bullets fired, no men came running.

So far so good.

He looked to where Jedd was standing and pointed toward the door they'd planned to enter through.

Carter drew a deep breath, crept to the front of the car while staying low, then stood up and sprinted at full pace toward the door.

Jedd arrived at the door at the same time, as the door flung open from the inside.

Carter raised his weapon and fired the second he saw it wasn't Nina being shoved through the door.

One man fell, and then another as Carter unleashed his weapon on them.

The element of surprise was gone. Now they had to make it count.

Carter ran forward, determined to protect Jedd as much as he could. He fired at another man running toward him, but among the chaos, he didn't hear the footsteps of the man running in from the side.

A fist came at his jaw fast. Carter raised his arm, blocking the blow. Grunting, he brought his knee up, hitting his target. The man doubled over, clutching his stomach as the wind was knocked from his lungs. But Carter didn't give him a minute to breathe, because he could hear men behind him and he wasn't sure how long Jedd was going to hold up.

"One down," Jedd said, breathless, his back against Carter's.

“Two down,” Carter said as he laid another knee into the man and he fell to the floor.

Carter looked behind him, confirming his worst fears as three men walked toward them, weapons raised. Carter shoved Jedd behind him and grabbed the dead man from the ground, heaving him up as bullets came his way.

Jedd fired from behind him and Carter was grateful his brother’s left hand was in good working order. The two men running toward Carter jerked and fell to the floor, blood spraying the metal walls of the warehouse.

A palpable silence filled the warehouse as Carter and Jedd waited for more men to follow. But no one came.

Something wasn’t right.

Where were the other men?

“They’ve taken her,” Carter said, his head snapping side to side, searching for any sight of her.

It would be easier if they split up, but Carter knew there could be more men here than Jedd had seen, and if they were ambushed, their chances were better if they were together.

“That way!” Jedd said, pointing to the hallway. “She should’ve been in one of these rooms.”

Carter rushed forward, his weapon raised. Jedd was slower behind him but he somehow managed to keep pace.

The pit of Carter’s stomach churned as he opened one door after another. Each room was empty. No sign of Nina or Dante.

Carter rushed to the last door and kicked it open as he pointed his weapon, but the room was empty save for a blood stain by the window.

“She’s not here!” he said, as car tires churned up the gravel outside the window and a cloud of dust swirled, covering the car.

“No!” Carter screamed, firing through the window but the car was moving too quickly.

He looked to the end of the hallway and sprinted for the door. He heard Jedd’s footsteps behind him, but he didn’t have time to stop.

Carter ran outside, jumped into the truck he’d stolen the keys for and floored his foot on the accelerator. He drove to the side of the warehouse as Jedd ran out. Carter slammed on the brakes and the truck skidded to a stop. Jedd jumped in then Carter lowered his foot.

Breathe, he told himself. He could see the car ahead but it was a long way off and with a few careful maneuvers Dante could easily lose him.

He shook his head, he was not going to let that happen.

Carter saw double and blinked, clearing his vision. His head was still pounding, like a sledgehammer was slamming into his skull with the steady rhythm of a metronome, and his ears rang. He likely had a concussion from the explosion—if it had been a few seconds earlier before he’d climbed out of the back door, he wouldn’t be alive right now, so he told himself not to complain. There would be time to rest once Nina was safe.

“Do you want me to drive?” Jedd asked and Carter realized he was swerving over the road.

“There’s no time to stop,” he said, lowering his foot on the accelerator. They were gaining on the car but they were still too far away.

“He won’t take the highway,” Jedd said.

Carter frowned, concentrating on the road. “How do you know that?”

“Dante never takes the highway unless he has no choice, he’s paranoid and likes to take backstreets. Trust me, he’d only go up the ramp if he was the one doing the chasing and you were ahead,” Jedd said, so Carter turned the wheel sharply, veering into the parallel lane that was much less crowded because it didn’t ramp to the highway.

He prayed Jedd was right because Carter knew that if Dante ramped, he wouldn’t get back into the lane in time. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Go straight, Dante,” he willed as Dante’s car approached the exit. “Go straight,” he urged under his breath.

Carter’s eyes snapped to the mirrors but the lanes were jammed, there was no way to change lanes now.

His heart was in his throat as Dante looked like he was about to ramp.

When he swerved at the last second and went straight, Carter gulped in a breath.

“I told you!” Jedd said. “Catch him!”

The accelerator was already flat and Carter couldn’t make the truck go any faster, but he weaved through the traffic, closing the gap as much as possible.

The traffic cleared a little past the highway and with eyes on the back of Dante’s car, Carter knew this was the best chance they were going to get.

“Hit the trunk of the car and rattle the driver—make him slow down—but stay away from the windows,” Carter said as

Jedd leaned out the window, raised his weapon and fired.

In a second everything changed. Cars slowed down, swerving out of the way as the gunshots rang through the air. But Carter kept his foot pressed on the gas.

“Again!” Carter said, and Jedd fired, causing the car to swerve.

Carter zipped between lanes, making it harder for the men in Dante’s car to fire back at them.

They had the road to themselves now; everyone else, fearing for their lives, had pulled back and gotten out of the way.

The windshield shattered and Carter ducked, but there was nowhere to hide.

Jedd unloaded at the car, aiming for the tires because Nina was in that car—Carter was sure of it.

Dante’s men had the same idea, though, and Carter felt it pull as a tire popped. He gripped the steering wheel tight, fighting to keep the truck on the road but Carter knew the moment he’d lost the fight; his heart was in his throat as he felt the truck lift and begin to turn.

Jedd unloaded his weapon as they flipped midair. Carter’s head hit the side of the truck before metal screeched as the top of the truck slid along the road’s shoulder. His vision blurred and for a moment he couldn’t tell if he was upside down or right way up.

The screeching stopped and Carter felt cold.

Carter scrunched his face, blinking, finally clearing his vision.

The truck was upside down and Jedd was strapped in by his seatbelt, his head floppy, blood trailing down the side of his face.

“Jedd! Jedd!” he screamed.

Carter reached across, grabbing Jedd’s wrist. He felt a small, weak pulse.

“Hang in there, don’t you dare die on me!” he screamed as he tried to open the door. He pressed against the roof of the truck, which was now on the road, steadying himself as he released his seat belt. Carter’s vision swayed, but he managed to kick the door open. He all but fell out, crawling on the street.

He looked up as Dante walked toward him, his weapon aimed at Carter’s head.

CHAPTER 31



NINA

Nina pushed the dead man's head off her lap, shuddering as warm, thick liquid coated her fingers. Her breath was quick and sharp, and her entire body shook as she fought to stabilize the emotions that assaulted her like she was in the middle of the tornado. All she knew was Dante had gotten out of the car and this was her chance to escape.

The front seat was occupied by another of Dante's men. Slumped forward, he didn't appear to be breathing but Nina couldn't be sure. And she didn't wait to find out. Despite her reeling mind, she had the sense to look for a weapon. She saw a gun in a holster strapped on the dead man next to her. She tried to pull it free but it was stuck.

"No," she whispered under her breath, cringing but she already knew what she was going to do. She inhaled deeply, holding her breath to block the metallic scent of blood, then exhaled and pushed the dead man over toward the door, stretching out his torso. Nina grabbed the gun. She had no idea how to use it but she remembered Carter's instructions: *use the sights, hold with two hands, and pull the trigger.*

Her eyes snapped to the rearview mirror and she saw Dante walking away from the car. His back was toward her and she knew this was the best chance she was going to get. Nina held the gun in one hand as she quietly opened the door. Her feet crunched the gravel as she slid out of the car, her twisted ankle screaming in protest.

Nina looked at Dante once more, realizing a man was on the ground beside the truck. She looked at his feet—his black sneakers. They didn't belong to Jedd—he'd been wearing red Nike's, she'd noted for some strange reason. He appeared unmoving, his body still. Nina wondered if he was alive, but decided she'd done enough good deeds for one day. She'd saved Jedd, now she had to save herself.

Trees lined the side of the road and Nina darted toward them but she couldn't help herself—she took one last look at the man on the ground.

Her heart stopped beating. Her body froze mid-stride. She must be seeing things, she must've hit her head.

Carter.

She stood frozen in time.

He was alive.

She couldn't comprehend it but reality hit her fast as Dante raised his weapon. Nina's blood ran cold. She couldn't watch him die again.

“No!” Nina screamed as she raised the gun and pointed it at Dante's back and fired. But the gun didn't unload. It was empty, Nina realized with chilling clarity.

Then she heard the gunshot and she silently screamed. Time seemed to move slowly, but it was Dante who fell to the ground and Carter's unfocused eyes met hers.

“Carter!” Nina screamed as she ran toward him.

She was a few feet from him when she realized he was bleeding—from the head, and from the shoulder.

She dropped to her knees, cupping his face in her hand. “Carter! Carter, look at me, it’s Nina!”

Carter opened his eyes. He blinked, seeming dazed and confused but when he murmured her name her heart sang with relief.

“Hang on! I’ll get help. Stay awake, Carter. Please!” Nina begged, looking around helplessly. She had no phone and no idea where they were.

Carter dropped the weapon in his hand, and it was only then she realized he’d fired the bullet that had killed Dante. He reached for her hand and she grabbed it, folding his in hers. “Are you okay?” he asked, fighting to keep his eyes open.

Tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheek, dripping onto his hand. “Yes, but I need you. Stay awake, I’m going to get help.”

Sirens wailed in the distance and Nina said a quiet thank you. She didn’t care what happened next, she just wanted Carter to survive.

Suddenly medics and police surrounded them. They rushed in and she was forced to drop Carter’s hand and step back as the paramedics surrounded him.

“Can you tell me what happened here?” a young police officer asked quickly.

Nina looked at the carnage around her for the first time. “Where will they take him?” she asked as Carter was lifted onto a gurney.

“Can you give me his name?” the officer asked.

Nina opened her mouth and then closed it. She didn’t know, not for sure, what his real name was.

“Carter Hamilton,” she said.

“And your name?”

“Nina Martin,” she responded.

“And him?” he asked, nodding to another stretcher.

“That’s Jedd Hamilton,” Nina said with relief. She wondered how Jedd and Carter had ended up in the same vehicle, but she was glad they had.

“Nina, we’re going to need you to answer some questions,” the officer said.

She nodded. “I want a lawyer.”

The police officer nodded. “Please hold out your hands,” he said, looking at Dante, face-first on the ground by Nina’s feet.

Nina extended her hands, letting the officer cuff her. She winced as the metal brushed the wounds the rope had left on her wrist. She saw the questions in his eyes but he said nothing—not yet at least.

The ambulance carrying Carter drove away and Nina got into the police car without any persuasion—she had no fight left in her. She replayed the moment she’d pulled the trigger, wondering at what point she’d become someone who had so easily pulled the trigger. But maybe she’d been that person all along—she’d always protected those she loved. That’s who she was and she would not apologize for it.

The police car comforted her in a way she hadn't felt comforted in a long time. She had no idea what was going to unfold next, and she supposed she should be worried, but she was too tired to care. When they reached the station, Nina had to pry her eyes open.

The officer opened the back door and she nodded, calmly climbing out of the car—which was surprisingly hard to do with her hands cuffed behind her back. Her arms were aching and her wrists stung every time the metal touched her wounds, so she tried to keep her arms as still as possible, although that only intensified the throbbing ache in her shoulders.

Nina was walked through the station and placed in a holding cell. “Turn around,” he said and she did, extending her arms. The moment the cuffs were released she exhaled in relief. “I’ll be back in a moment,” the officer said kindly, like he didn’t think she was supposed to be involved in this. She wondered what he was thinking—that she’d had a horrible childhood and somehow got mixed up with Dante’s gang? But that was far from the truth.

An image of Lena and Annie huddled behind the boxes sent a cold chill up her spine. She assumed they were okay given Dante hadn’t found them, but she didn’t know for sure.

She squeezed her eyes shut, wishing the mental torture would stop for a moment.

Nina sat on the hard bed, staring at the wall that formed one side of the cell but she couldn’t switch her mind off.

How was Carter?

Was he alive?

What about Jedd?

She had so many questions for Carter, but sitting in the cell now, she wondered if she'd ever get the chance to ask him. What would happen to him? The bullet that had killed Dante had come from Carter's gun. As for the men in Dante's car, she didn't know if the bullets lodged in their bodies had come from Carter's or Jedd's gun. Nina's vision swayed and she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, letting her head hang. She'd been on a rollercoaster of emotions and now that it had slowed down, she didn't know which way was up.

Nina squeezed the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes.

What would happen to them now?

A clang of metal pulled her from her thoughts and she looked up to see an officer walking in with a paper cup. "Water?" he asked and Nina nodded.

"Thank you," she said as she took the cup from his hands, noting hers were shaking. She focused on not spilling it as she gulped it down. "What will happen now?"

"I'm not sure, it's very unusual . . ." The officer eyed her. "We received a call from the director of the CIA. He wants to speak to you directly."

Nina swallowed the lump in her throat. It must be about the hacking, she thought, feeling she might be sick. She forced herself to nod but the rising nausea almost had her keeling over.

"When will he be here?" Nina asked, pushing the words from her mouth.

The officer shrugged. "He didn't say and I didn't ask."

Nina nodded. "Thank you," she said.

“Get some rest,” he said kindly before he turned to leave, locking the cell behind him.

Nina all but collapsed onto the hard bed. She dragged her palms down her thighs as she tried to talk herself off the ledge. She’d expected trouble, she’d expected the police, but the director of the CIA . . . She shook her head—she had not seen that coming.

“Oh God,” Nina said under her breath as she stood and began to pace the small cell. She couldn’t sit still as fear began to wrap itself around her neck like an invisible chain.

Nina walked for hours, or so it felt. No one came to check on her and although she heard muffled voices from a cell at the end, no one spoke to her. With no window, Nina had no idea how much time had passed.

How was Carter? Did the CIA want to talk to him too?

Nina couldn’t get rid of the lump in her throat no matter how many times she swallowed. Every time she stopped pacing, her anxiety bloomed like hot air escaping an opened oven, so Nina kept treading a square around the cell until her legs ached and exhaustion finally overtook her.

Nina laid on the hard bed and stared at the ceiling.

What was going to become of her life now?

CHAPTER 32



CARTER

Carter heard voices outside the hospital room. His eyes snapped to the door as a tall man with a shaved head and dark eyes, carrying a black bag slung over his shoulders walked toward him. Wary, Carter wondered what this man wanted. Maybe he was a detective, he certainly moved with a confidence that Carter envied as he lay cuffed to the hospital bed.

“Nathan Walls, it’s nice to finally meet you,” he said with a knowing smile.

Carter’s fingertips tingled with nervous energy. He couldn’t imagine anything good was going to come from this. He opened his mouth to deny his identity, but something told him this man was no fool.

“*Finally* meet?” Carter asked, raising an eyebrow.

The man dragged a chair from the corner and sat beside Carter’s bed. “I’ve been watching what you’ve been doing for the past few weeks. My name is James Thomas, I’m the owner of Thomas Security.”

Carter frowned. “You’ve been watching me? How did you get in here?” he asked, suddenly suspicious of how this man managed to bypass the police Carter knew were stationed outside.

James sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. He seemed unhurried, like he had all the time in the world to sit and chat. He didn’t seem concerned about a nervous police officer coming in to check on him. Or that the strings he’d pulled to get into Carter’s room might be cut without warning.

“I’ve been watching you since I got wind of Nina’s hacking escapade. Dante led you to her, and she led me to you. Thomas Security has an advanced surveillance arm, and we used that to track you and Nina. I wanted to see what she would do next, and equally, I wanted to see what you would do.”

Carter raised an eyebrow, wondering if he was hallucinating.

“Who do you think shot Dante’s man when you were on the grass?” James asked and Carter paused. There was no way he could’ve known about that unless he’d been watching.

“You can thank Cami for that,” James said with a knowing grin. He had Carter’s full attention now.

“As to how I got inside this room, I have two titles . . .” James continued. “I’m Director of Thomas Security alongside my brother, Deacon, and I’m head of the CIA—and that title comes in quite handy at times,” he said, his lips tugging at a smile. “So, I told them who I was and they stepped aside.”

Carter looked to the door and back to him. “Why were you watching me? Nina I understand, but why me?”

“Because in my line of work, for the business I have, I don’t place job advertisements to find talent. I watch people then I ask them to join me,” James said. “I want you to join Thomas Security as an agent. You have a unique skillset that is perfect for a job I have coming up, and I like the way you operate. You’re calm yet strategic . . . and you’re loyal—my number one requirement for my employees.”

Carter almost laughed. “You want to employ me? I hardly succeeded on the last job,” he said.

“Define success,” James said, watching him carefully. “You kept Nina alive, and Dante is dead—which is very good for the world. It was a little messy, but that’s because you were operating on your own. If I give you a dedicated team, I think you can be unstoppable. Regardless, Nina is alive and well, and to me, that’s success.”

The thought of Nina made his heart race. Where was she now? How was she being treated? He needed to find her—to talk to her.

“Nina is next on my visitation list,” James said like he could read Carter’s mind. “I’m going to offer her a role too and get her out of the cell she’s sitting in. She also has a unique skillset—albeit a different one than you, but one I’m recruiting heavily for right now. The two of you would be able to work on the same missions but in different roles. You’re a good operator, Nathan, you just need some support.”

Carter stared at him. It seemed too good to be true.

James continued, “The choice is yours. And you will always have a choice because I don’t lock my staff in. Whether you choose to come and work for me or not, I’ll still get you out of here because who knows when our paths might cross again? But if you want to do what you’re best at, but do

it with a team that would fully support you—die for you—then join Thomas Security.”

Carter inhaled deeply, needing a second to think. This conversation had just blown his mind. “I want to see Nina.”

James nodded. “I was hoping you would say that. I have a feeling she’ll be more receptive to my visit if you’re with me. Wait one moment.”

James stood and went to the door, opened it and leaned out, talking quietly. “Thanks,” he said before he walked back toward Carter with an officer right behind him.

The officer removed Carter’s cuffs and he rolled his wrists before shaking them. His shoulder was sore, but it was no more than a flesh wound. Most of the blood on him had been Dante’s.

Carter looked at his hospital gown.

“I brought you a change of clothes,” James said, opening the black bag beside his feet. He pulled out jeans and a sweater and passed them to Carter, then placed a pair of sneakers on the ground beside the chair. “They should fit. I’ll give you a minute to change.” He eyed Carter’s shoulder. “Do you need a nurse to help?”

“No,” Carter said and James nodded.

Carter watched as he walked away, closing the door behind him. Carter’s head was spinning but the taste of freedom, and a job, was too good to resist.

Carter changed, wincing as he lifted his arm to push it through the sweater. It was a flesh wound, but it still needed stitches and it hurt.

Dressed, he kneeled down, looking through the bag, but there was nothing else inside.

Carter went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He looked the same, but different. He felt like he was outside his body, watching this unfold. He just hoped he was going to like the ending. He might've thought this was a play by Dante, but none of Dante's men were like James Thomas—none of them had the air of confident sophistication that James seemed to wield like a weapon.

Whatever happened next, Carter would deal with. But the sooner he was out of this hospital the better.

He walked to the door and knocked on it, praying he wasn't making a mistake.

James opened the door, looked him over then gestured for Carter to follow him.

“What name do you want to be called?” James asked, surprising him.

“Carter,” he answered without hesitation.

James nodded. “Noted.”

Carter caught his reflection in the mirror and noticed two figures behind him. He looked over his shoulder.

“They're with us,” James said.

Carter took another look, a pang of familiarity hitting him. “They were on the train, they were following us.”

James nodded. “Yes, we were following you but we couldn't step in—other than the grass incident—because we needed to know what you were capable of.”

Carter pressed his lips together but said nothing further.

“Where is Nina?” he asked.

“At the local station. I’ve called ahead and told them I’m coming, but that was a few hours ago. I wanted to see you first,” James said.

They walked through the front door and a black sedan pulled up like they’d been waiting for them to exit that very moment. James opened the door, holding it for Carter. “Climb in,” he said.

Carter looked at the car, wondered if he was climbing into his death, but did it anyway. He’d always trusted his instincts, and he liked what he saw—however unusual it was.

“Carter, this is Deacon,” James said as he slid into the backseat beside Carter. “And this is Cami.”

“Hi,” Cami said brightly as she looked over her shoulder. She looked him up and down. “You look better than I thought you were going to. You were covered in blood when they took you in.”

Carter kept his face impassive but he was floored. How closely had James Thomas been watching him?

“Thankfully not my blood. I hear I owe you for saving my life,” Carter said, raising an eyebrow.

Cami flashed him another smile and winked. “You’re very welcome.”

“I’m Deacon,” the driver said and Carter’s eyes met his in the rearview mirror. “We’ll be at the station in a few minutes. Nina is fine, albeit pacing like a caged animal. She’ll be glad to see you,” he said with a genuine smile.

Carter didn’t know why he was surprised at this point, but he was.

How had he not seen them following him?

Carter didn't have the answer to that question, but he wanted to know.

He knew then he'd already made his decision about joining Thomas Security but he said nothing.

Carter had to see Nina first.

CHAPTER 33



NINA

*N*ina ran a hand through her hair. How long was this going to take? She tipped her head back, sighing, squeezing her eyes shut. Being on the run from Dante was hard, but being locked in a cage like an animal with the threat of the CIA hanging over her was worse. At least before there had been a chance of escape. Nina looked to the locked door, defeat blooming in her chest like black mold.

Nina shook her head. She needed to do something—play some kind of game with her mind to keep herself sane. Maybe this was their strategy—to wait until she was beside herself with worry then lure her to some kind of admission. She still hadn't seen a lawyer, or been given her phone call. She didn't know if that was legal or not. Thankfully this was her first rodeo with law enforcement, however, some past experience might've been helpful about now.

The sound of a door opening and closing echoed down the hall and Nina stilled as multiple sets of footsteps grew louder. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, but now she felt as cold as ice.

She stepped back, leaning against the wall, folding her arms into one another—not only because she was nervous but

rather to fend off the chill sweeping through her body. Her skin tingled, but not in a good way. Suddenly Nina thought she might be sick.

Her breath caught in her throat when her eyes locked on Carter's. "Carter," she said, rushing forward then stopped herself. She'd only seen him, but now she realized he wasn't alone. Her eyes snapped to the man with eyes so dark they were almost black.

"It's okay," Carter said, stepping toward the bars, wrapping his hands around them.

"I'm going to open the cell so we can come inside, but you must stay inside—for now," the man said.

Nina nodded stiffly. Where did he think she was going to run to? Nina hadn't slept or eaten in what felt like days. She hardly thought she'd win a sprint through a police station right now.

The man unlocked the cell and motioned for Carter to enter first. He walked straight up to Nina and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest. "Everything is going to be okay, I promise," he whispered, kissing the crown of her head.

Nina shuddered, hugging him tight. She hadn't realized how much she'd needed that hug until she was in his arms.

Eventually, Carter let her go and stepped back. Nina's attention was on the man standing in the corner of the cell. He walked toward her, gesturing for her to take a seat on the hard bed.

"Nina, I'm James Thomas," he said, extending his hand.

She shook it, his handshake firm but not intimidating.

“I’m sorry it took me a while to get here, but I wanted to meet with Carter first,” James said, looking to Carter as if asking for confirmation.

Nina looked to Carter as he nodded.

“I own a private security company called Thomas Security. I’m also the head of the CIA. At both organizations, but particularly at Thomas Security, we’re placing an emphasis on recruiting hackers to our team,” he said and Nina almost fell over. That was not what she was expecting to hear.

“Cyber security is one of the most dangerous threats the world is going to face in the coming years, and in our opinion, most organizations are extremely underprepared to defend against these attacks. So, we’re building our team with ethical hackers. As you might’ve already guessed, we don’t place job advertisements online—we use our team of existing hackers to watch what people are doing online. We follow those people, learn everything we can about them, then decide if they have the integrity and skills to join our team. Your ransom caught the attention of our team,” he said with a smirk.

“We were watching to see what you’d do with the money, and then how you managed to deal with the fallout. We were impressed—by both you and Carter,” he continued. “I’ve already offered Carter a role to become a field agent for Thomas Security. Your role would be different, obviously, but you could still work within the same teams. You could both join Thomas Security in positions where you would excel in your skills but have the support of a team to back you up. What we do is dangerous and requires nerves of steel at times, but you’ve shown you don’t crack under pressure. You also didn’t take a cut of any of the money you stole, which tells us

a lot about the kind of person you are,” he said with a small smile.

Nina looked to Carter, who gave her a relaxed smile.

“You don’t need to make any decisions right now,” James said. “Think about it, and the head of our cyber team, Samuel, will be in contact soon.”

Nina nodded slowly. “What about everything that’s happened with Dante?”

James gave a small smile. “As a gesture of goodwill, because you’ve also solved some problems for local police enforcement by sorting Dante out, I’m going to make sure this all goes away. There are no strings attached, it doesn’t mean you have to come and work with me. Good deeds deserve rewards, it’s as simple as that.”

Nina didn’t know what to say. She wondered how he could make it all go away, but she supposed that being the Director of CIA meant he could do almost anything as long as the public didn’t know too much about it. Nonetheless, she spat out, rather inelegantly, “How?”

James smiled. “Let me worry about that. It’s best you don’t know.”

Nina looked to Carter, who shrugged like he didn’t care as long as they didn’t end up in prison. Nina couldn’t agree more and the idea of working for Thomas Security became even more appealing.

“I have one more surprise for you,” he said, turning to look at Carter. “But we need to go outside.” He looked back to Nina. “Ready?”

Nina scoffed. “Yes, I’m ready.” She’d been about to joke he’d taken his time, but she didn’t know if James Thomas was

one for jokes so she kept her mouth shut.

James tilted his head toward the cell door and Nina walked free, just like that. She walked past the officers who had brought her food and water, and they watched on, intrigue flickering in their eyes.

She kept waiting for someone to call out and stop them, but no one did.

James looked over his shoulder and said, “Thank you,” as they walked past a man sitting at his desk.

Carter opened the door and Nina blinked as she stared into the sun.

She stopped, unable to see for a moment, but Carter took her hand, weaving his fingers through hers. She looked up at him and his eyes seemed lighter than she’d ever seen them.

“How is Jedd?” she asked.

He nodded. “Alive, thanks to you.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “He’ll be in the hospital for a few weeks, but he’ll make a full recovery.”

James walked past them toward two black sedans. He opened the back passenger door and a woman stepped out. Nina faltered, recognizing her immediately. Carter stopped in his tracks.

“Hi,” Ella said, looking directly at Carter.

Nina’s heart lurched in her throat as Carter’s jaw fell open.

“Hi,” Carter said, his voice a whisper.

Ella gave a soft laugh. “You’re not seeing things, Carter.”

“I can’t . . .” He walked forward and hugged Ella as she laughed.

A pang of envy stabbed at Nina's heart but she forced herself to calm down. Ella was alive and Carter could stop punishing himself. That was a good thing.

"What? How?" Carter asked, stepping back, his hands still on her shoulders like he was scared to let go of her in case she disappeared again.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you but I had to disappear. I thought if you knew where I was, you'd find me then Dante might too. I had to become a ghost," she said, apologetic.

Carter shook his head. "I'm so happy you're alive," he said, his words choked with emotion.

A tear ran down Ella's cheek. "I've been living in a small cottage by the ocean. I left this world behind, Carter. I started over. I married, I have two children, I work in a boring office doing IT but it gives me peace," she said.

Nina watched Carter carefully. But she didn't see any despair at Ella's confession.

Carter grinned wider. "I'm just . . ." He pulled her back into a hug. "I'm damn glad to see you breathing! The number of times I thought of what might've happened . . . I wish I'd known, but I understand why you did what you did. And I'm glad you're happy," he said, sounding like he meant every word of it and Nina felt stupid for the jealousy she'd felt moments ago.

Ella looked past Carter for the first time, her eyes settling on Nina.

Ella smiled. "You must be Nina. I could never get that code to work properly . . . but you turned my dream into a reality," she said with a soft laugh. "It's nice to meet you, Nina," Ella said, walking toward her and giving her a small

hug. “Take care of him, he’s a good guy,” she whispered in Nina’s ear.

Nina’s head was spinning. The last hour had thrown her for loop, again and again.

But Carter had been right.

Everything was going to be okay.

CHAPTER 34



NINA

Six months later

Nina sat at her desk, on the edge of her seat. She watched Carter walk through the office building via the monitor on her desk.

“Take the next right,” Nina instructed, checking the floor plan on her second monitor.

She inhaled deeply, the rush of adrenaline was familiar now, but it still gave her a high every time. Her eyes flickered to Samuel, who gave her a reassuring nod. This was her first time taking the lead on a mission. She was responsible for providing the intel to the agents on the ground, and the responsibility weighed on her—even more so because James and Carter were on the team.

Nina had three screens in front of her. She’d hacked into the security system and duplicated the feed, providing a window for Carter and James to penetrate Timex Security’s system.

Timex Security was their main competitor, but recent intel had suggested they had taken the business in a new direction

—becoming the middleman for criminals to bribe politicians and judges. The intel had been suggestive only, though, and James needed hard proof before he could have charges brought against them.

They'd tried everything online, but James thought Timex was hiding the information in a safe that had been delivered one year prior. The safe was thought to be impenetrable, but Carter had disagreed and now James and Carter were in Timex's headquarters and Nina, supervised by Samuel, was responsible for guiding them through the mission.

“Carter, pause!” Nina said quickly. “Two men are coming toward you. Unhurried, they don't look like they're expecting you.”

“*Copy,*” Carter said and he moved toward the wall, holding still at the corner.

The two men approached the corner, talking between themselves. Carter lunged around the corner, delivering quick blows to the unsuspecting staff and they quickly dropped to the ground. James ran into the view and along with Carter, they had them rendered unconscious in minutes and dragged their bodies into the nearest room, closing the door so they were out of view.

With weapons raised, they crept farther down the hallway and Nina exhaled a breath of relief. By his own admission, James rarely went in the field, but he'd deemed this too important not to go. Nina understood the importance, but given what she now knew about James, she also thought he missed the adrenaline of being in the field.

“Nina, activate the fire alarm and detonate the bomb,” James said once they were in position.

Nina inhaled deeply and then pressed the button, activating the code to detonate the bomb and activate the fire alarm. Chaos ensued, exactly as they had planned. People ran from the building, while James and Carter ran deeper inside. Nina watched the heat alarms via the security system to monitor how fast the fire was spreading.

This plan had been Carter's idea and Nina wondered how he felt now . . . if it was bringing back memories of the night Ella had disappeared and Jedd had been taken by the FBI.

Nina inhaled a steadying breath, calming her own nerves.

"We're in the vault," Carter said, and Nina's eyes locked on Samuel's. Nina started the countdown. They were on borrowed time and Carter had to open the safe, take what they needed, and then get out before the fire consumed the building.

Nina's heel bounced on the ground as she waited for Carter's command. The numbers on the digital clock on her screen kept ticking over, but Carter said nothing. Nor did James.

She blew out a long breath as she waited.

The heat sensor closest to them activated and Nina gave them the command.

"You need to leave," she said. "The first heat sensor has activated."

"*Keep going,*" James said calmly, ignoring Nina's command. She looked to Samuel, but he shook his head indicating she should say nothing further.

Nina rocked in her chair, willing them to get out of there.

"Second sensor," she said as it activated.

There was only one more sensor to activate and if it did, they'd calculated that there would be no way out for James and Carter.

"They can do this," Samuel said calmly, and she realized he'd muted his microphone so he was only talking to her.

Nina nodded, but she wasn't as confident.

"Got it!" Carter said and Nina blew out a breath, but they still had to get out of the building.

Nina's eyes were fixed on the screen and she didn't breathe until they ran out of the room. James had something tucked under his arm, but Nina couldn't see what it was.

"*Nina, guide us out,*" James said as they were running. She marveled at his calm tone.

Nina cleared her throat. "Right, then left, down the stairs. Deacon is waiting at the car. Hallways are safe for the moment," she said.

"*Copy,*" James said as he sprinted through the hallways, Carter right beside him.

The building had been vacated but the fire was burning above them. If they didn't move quickly, the ceiling might fall in.

Nina's heart was in her throat the entire time. When the ceiling collapsed, and she could no longer see them for the smoke, she stopped breathing.

"Keep moving," she heard James urge and Nina gulped in a breath.

"In position," Deacon said calmly, and Nina wondered if that came down to experience or if like James, he was hard to rattle.

Carter and James emerged from the smoke and ran down the stairwell so fast it looked like they were flying.

Deacon pulled up as they burst through the door, and they lunged into the car before the wheels squealed and drove away.

Nina placed her palms on the desk and exhaled a long breath.

She looked to Samuel. “It always feels good when they make it out alive,” he said with a lopsided grin.

Nina gave a choked laugh. Samuel was an odd character, but he had the most brilliant mind she’d ever known.

“I’m going to age prematurely in this role,” she said.

Samuel barked out a laugh. “Why do you think I look like I do?” he asked and Nina laughed as she looked at the man who looked no more than twenty-five with tortoiseshell glasses that sat atop his nose and perfectly styled hair even though he rarely left the building.

“Well done, Nina,” he said proudly.

“You’re a good teacher,” she said.

“Now we wait,” he said.

Nina beamed a grin. “Now we wait,” she said as she tidied her desk.

Her computer chimed and James’s face appeared on the screen.

“Well, well, well,” James said. “We were right.” He held the ledger journal up to the screen. Nina’s eyes scanned over the list of names, dates, and bribes as James turned page after page.

James lowered the journal and looked at the camera. “Well done, team,” he said then looked to Nina. “Especially you, Nina, and I hear you have a birthday celebration tonight so get out of here and go enjoy your family. We’ll see you tomorrow,” James said.

“Well done you two,” Nina said before taking off her headset. She nodded to Samuel as she stood to leave. James and Carter would fly back to NYC tomorrow, but she couldn’t wait to hold him and tell him how proud of him she was.

Nina all but skipped out of the building. Nina and Lena had relocated to New York with James’s help, and they had been set up in a beautiful apartment adjacent to Thomas Security. Lena had a full-time nurse fully paid for by Thomas Security, allowing Nina to live her life knowing Lena was taken care of.

Her heart bloomed every time she walked into the beautiful apartment—it was beyond anything they’d ever been able to afford before.

Nina heard Lena’s laugh as she opened the door.

“Hi, Grace,” Nina said as Lena’s nurse peered around the corner.

“Hello, Ninny,” she said, using Lena’s nickname for her.

Nina rushed over to Lena and wrapped her arms around her grandmother. “Happy Birthday, Lenma,” Nina said. Lena had been asleep when Nina had gone to work, so she hadn’t yet been able to hug her and wish her a happy birthday.

Lena’s eyes sparkled as she smiled.

Nina looked to the table, immediately noticing an additional place had been set. “Who else is coming to dinner?” she asked, turning to Grace.

Grace shrugged. “I think Annie is bringing someone.”

Nina nodded. “I’m going to take a quick shower and then we’ll get dinner ready.”

“Sounds good,” Grace said as Nina turned away.

She went to her bedroom, the view of Manhattan taking her breath away as she walked into the room. She always kept the blinds up—she didn’t want to miss even a second of this view.

Nina showered, changed, and went back to the kitchen to help Grace prepare dinner. When the doorbell rang, Nina welcomed Annie inside. She hugged her tight.

Nina looked behind Annie. “Aren’t you bringing someone?”

Annie smiled. “He’s finishing work, he’ll be here soon.”

Nina nodded, closing the door, checking it was locked. They went to the table and Nina poured drinks and put on Lena’s favorite music while they cooked.

Life had never been so good.

They were ready to sit down and eat when the doorbell rang. She looked to Annie. “That will be your friend.”

“Can you get it?” Annie asked, and Nina frowned, almost telling her to get up and open the door herself but she saw the look Lena threw in her direction so Nina rolled her eyes playfully. “Sure, Annie, not a problem.”

Nina was smiling as she walked to the door but her jaw fell open as she opened it.

Carter stood with flowers cradled in one arm. “Hello, Nina.”

“You’re back!” she said as she threw her arms around him.

He drew her in and she hugged him tight. She’d never been happier to see him, alive and well.

“Did you really think I’d miss your birthday?” he asked.

Nina smiled into his chest. Lena and Nina shared the same birthday, but Nina always loved to celebrate Lena on their day—after all, she wasn’t sure how many more birthdays she would get with her grandmother.

Carter kissed the crown of her head. “Today was a good day,” he said.

Nina tilted her head back, looking into his eyes.

“I’m proud of you. We’re partners in crime, you and me,” she joked, and Carter tipped his head back, laughing.

“Who would’ve thought,” Carter said, still chuckling.

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THANK YOU FOR READING!

Dear Reader,

I hope you have enjoyed *The Code*. My secret dream is to be a computer hacker, so I'm living vicariously through the characters in the Firewall Series.

I want to make sure I'm writing stories that YOU love, so please tell me what you liked, what you loved, even what you hated about *The Code*. I'd love to hear from you. You can write me at brooke@brookesivendra.com and visit me on the web at www.brookesivendra.com.

Finally, I need to ask a favour. If you're so inclined, I'd love it if you would post a review of *The Code*. Loved it, hated it—I'd just like to hear your feedback. Reviews can be hard to come by these days, and you, the reader, have the power to make or break a book. If you have the time, please leave a review wherever you bought this book.

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