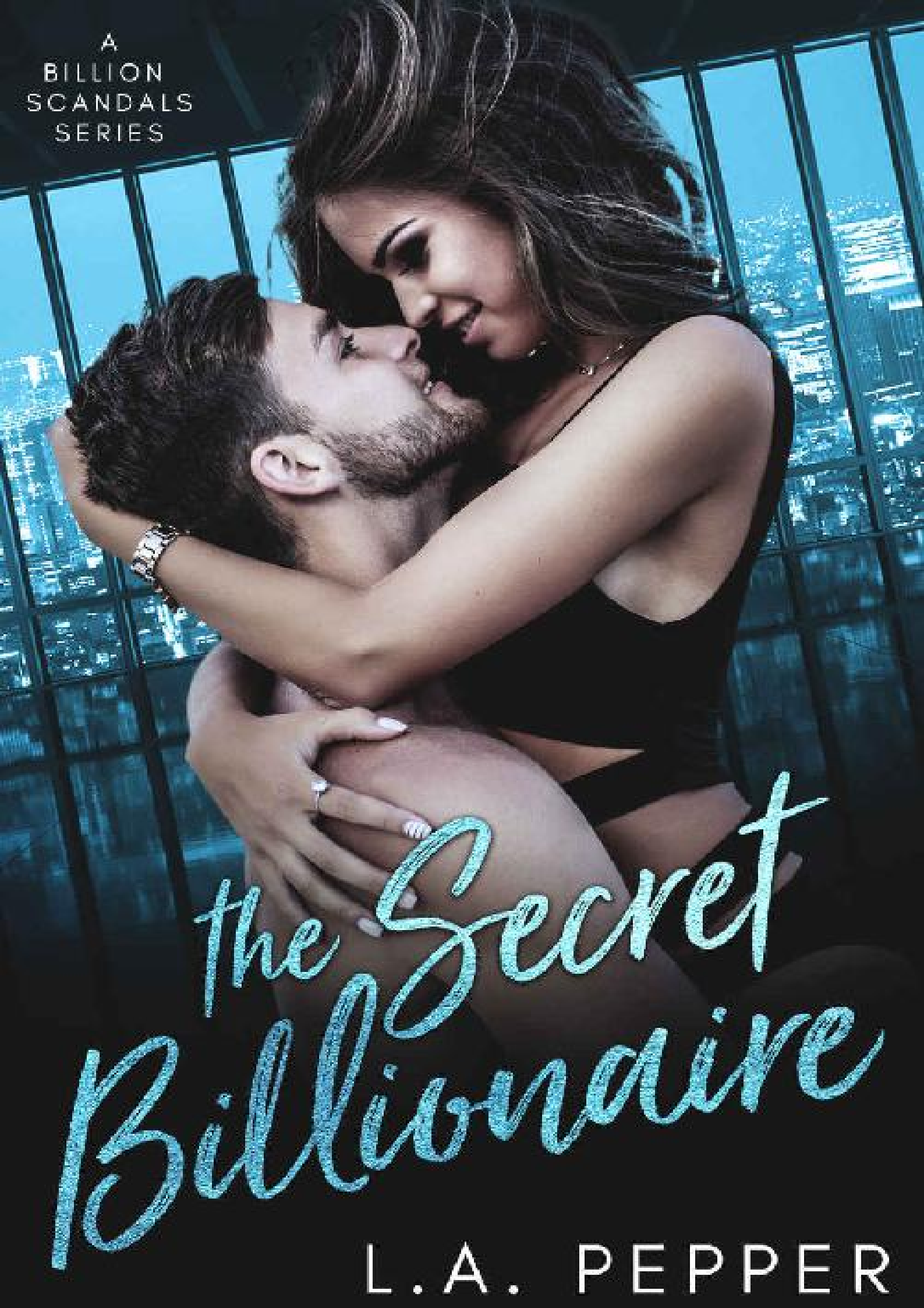


A
BILLION
SCANDALS
SERIES

A romantic couple embracing on a balcony at night. The man is on the left, looking towards the woman on the right. They are both smiling and appear to be about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a black, low-cut top. The man has short dark hair and a beard. They are standing in front of a large window with a grid pattern, looking out at a city skyline at night. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

*The Secret
Billionnaire*

L.A. PEPPER

THE SECRET
BILLIONAIRE

A BILLION SCANDALS

L.A. PEPPER

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ABOUT L.A. PEPPER

Like you, LA loves contemporary romance stories and is an avid reader.

She's had her heart broken by her true love, yet is still addicted to happily ever after endings!

When LA is not writing about the next bad boy billionaire, contemporary romance novel, she enjoys a glass of Chianti, raclette with her girlfriends, spin classes, and watching the sunrise every morning!

She is a self-proclaimed desperate housewife and lives in a cul-de-sac of excitement, drama, and love stories. Many of her outlines are inspired here.

LA was given her nickname by one of her teenage daughters, and it stuck with friends and family!

Leanne lives in Canada with her husband, and 4 children!

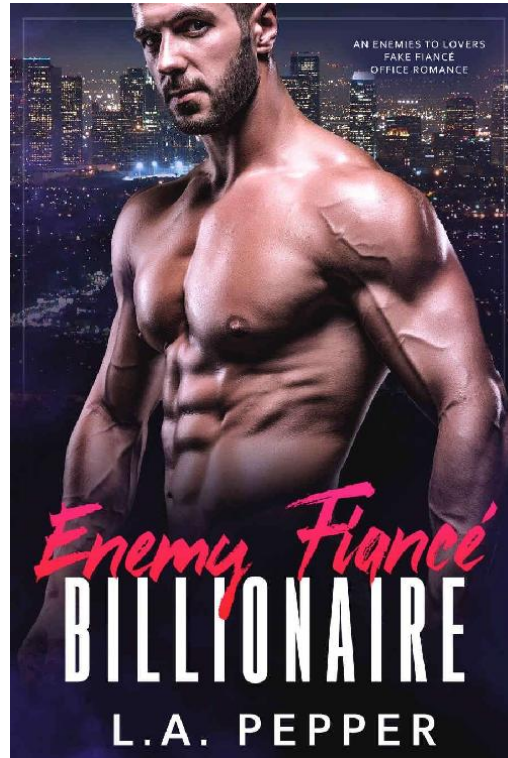
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Connect with The Author

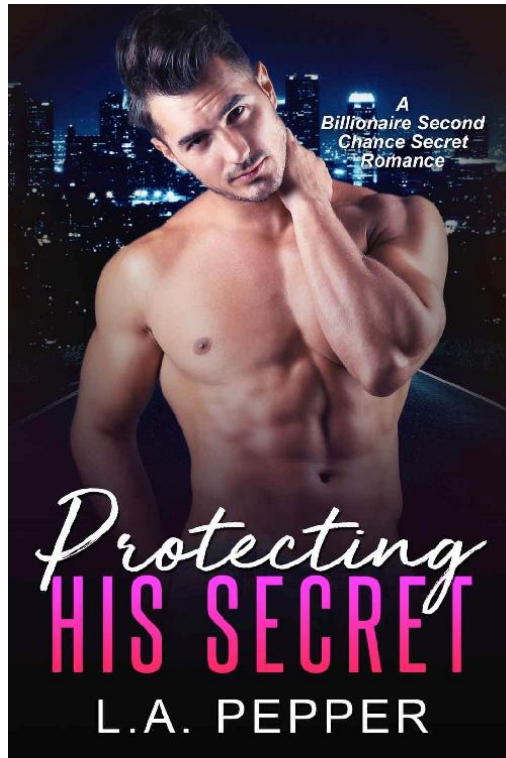
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CHAPTER ONE: CAM

DJing was easy. Nothing to it. Set up songs that brides and grooms and guests of a certain age like to hear to make them feel young and hopeful again. And then, intersperse with cool, but not too cool, songs that made their twenty-something children feel like dancing. I told The Agency I could do it. I was a literal genius. It's not like I couldn't press play.

I caught Dave Jeffries's eye across the dance floor where he was getting his groove thing on with his cousin. He winked at me, and I nearly blew my cover by laughing out loud. But no. Being a DJ was serious business. All music. All the time. Make sure they're happy. Their happiness was your business.

Dave exaggerated his dancing, even more, shaking that tailfeather. He wouldn't make me break. I announced the next song and encouraged the mother of the bride to dance with her new son-in-law. Minerva Carleton was her name, grandmother to Dave and a host of other cousins, a dignified woman with silver hair curled in the style of days gone by, not that you'd notice, because it was a classic. It was impeccable. She was formidable.

She looked like the kind of dragon who'd never stepped one foot out of line, ever in her life. Perfect in every way for this powerful, wealthy family, but I didn't believe it. There was a twinkle in her eye that said she'd broken a few rules in her life and enjoyed doing so, no matter what kind of piper she'd have to pay later.

In fact, I knew she'd broken some rules and she'd paid. But no one could tell now. Now, they all treated her like porcelain, protected her, and coddled her. I considered myself a good judge of character, and I knew Minerva Carleton was made of steel.

Dave sauntered by, interrupting the dance between his grandmother and his new uncle-in-law so that he could take Minerva and twirl her about the dance floor — much to the dismay of his mother, the matron of honor, and his aunt, the bride.

“Dave!” Donna Jeffries scolded. “You stop that. You’ll hurt your grandmother.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Dave said. “Grandmother and I are fine, aren’t we grandmother?”

Minerva was too busy laughing, a fine, crystalline laugh like a girl, despite her never-spoken-of years that numbered into the seventies. The song finished and he spun her back into her chair where she laughed and fanned herself. Her two daughters clustered around her, making sure she was not exhausted by the exuberant dancing.

Dave’s twin brother came up to him with a glass of something brown. Glenlivet, if I knew Dave, which I did. They clinked glasses and Dave downed it in one swallow, dropping the empty glass on the tray of a passing waitress, a sweet girl with huge blue eyes and a curly pixie cut. She looked a little overwhelmed. Poor thing.

Dave was being scolded by his mother while his twin, Will, snickered behind her back.

“Fine. I’ll tell the DJ to play something from the dark ages, nice and soft and slow.” He stumbled over his feet as he turned around to head to the DJ booth, and I looked away so no one would catch my glare.

He practically knocked over the table when he finally got to me. I pasted on a fake smile that no one could ever see through. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Play my grandmother something comforting and soothing; who was that guy? With the bubbles? The champagne king? I know it sounds unlikely, but I’m sure that’s a thing.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t have any Lawrence Welk, but I think we can find something for her. I think Lawrence Welk is a bit before her time, anyway. How about something from Motown?”

I turned my screen toward him so he could lean across the table to see and we could talk without anyone hearing. “That one,” he said pointing at a title. “The Supremes. *Love Child*. Play that one.”

I gave him a dirty look. “You’re not supposed to get drunk. You’re working.”

“I’m not working, yet. I’m at my aunt’s wedding hanging out with my family.”

“You know as well as I do that we’re just waiting for Esposito to tell us that the ambassador is at the party. And as soon as he does, we’ll be heading out. How are you going to go on the job drunk?”

He smiled crookedly at her and leaned both elbows on the table. “It wasn’t Glenlivet in my glass. I told Duke the bartender to only pour my drinks from the bottle I brought him. It’s iced tea with a touch of whiskey for the scent. Not enough to get drunk on. I’m stone-cold sober, just putting on a show, which is my job.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “It’s hard to tell normal idiot you from undercover idiot you.”

He stood. “That’s because I’m so good at my job.”

He was right and I hated to admit it. So I wouldn’t. Not right now. When the job was done I would. “I’m putting this one on.” I pointed to a better, less passive-aggressive song. He knew I wouldn’t play that one and set it to playing. The

beginning notes of “You Can’t Hurry Love” by the Supremes started playing, and a big smile spread across Minerva’s face.

He shrugged. “Eh. Good choice. I knew you wouldn’t play the song about the illegitimate child. Speaking of, has the old man shown up yet?”

“He hates it when you call him that.”

“I know — that’s why I do.” He glanced casually at the small wedding party. “Start playing quiet songs now. Mellow, sleepy. My mom and her sister and grandmother aren’t going to last much longer. They’re not exactly party animals. We can wrap this event up and get to work. I’ll prime my brother for the after-party. You get two distractions for the price of one tonight. If I tell him the hot DJ told me about a party, you know he’s going to want to show. He loves the ladies more than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Did you just call me hot?”

“Don’t let it get to your head. I didn’t call you hot, but you’re playing the role of hot DJ. So, I hope you’ll be dressed for it.” He shot a disparaging look at my tuxedo which I’d thought was sophisticated and sexy. I glared at him, but he just winked at me and sauntered off a little unsteady on his feet — back to acting drunk — and threw his arm around his brother’s neck.

It was remarkable, really, how such a handsome man could leave me absolutely cold. I was not at all attracted to him. It was for the best since I was his handler, and he was my agent. I was essentially his superior, and sexual attraction and agent and handler was a bad mix.

How well I knew that.

A shiver went up and down my back. I was covered, wearing a slim fit tuxedo, but I felt like someone had run a finger all the way down my naked spine. I was being watched.

I set up five songs, progressively slower and more sleepy, then slowly sauntered back to the side of the house where my van waited.

And so did he.

He leaned up against the side of the van, out of sight of the rest of the party in the shadows of the manicured foliage.

He was dressed in the same suit and tie as Dave; his eyes had that same slight slant and thick dark lashes as Dave's. His beard was trimmed neat and close, just like Dave's, but this one hid a slightly different shaped jaw and cleft in his chin. His dark hair was cut just as short as Dave's, but to hide the curl that he had and Dave did not.

He looked almost entirely like Dave, a doppelganger. In reality, he was a cousin who'd fallen off the family tree two generations ago. The son that Minerva Carleton had illegitimately when she was a teenager had produced a son who had left his family, joined the military, and turned out to be very, very good at things wise people didn't do.

He stared at me without moving, waiting for me to make the first move, say the first thing. Probably in case a civilian was in sight, but my body didn't care for the reasons why. My body tingled and pulled and tightened and heated up at the very sight of him.

How could two men who looked so alike create such different responses in me? I didn't know. And it was unwelcome. I was their handler. I was responsible for them. And he was my agent. This was not professional at all.

"Esposito," I said finally, my tone intentionally colder than my heated emotions that had roiled up uncontrollably when I first saw him lurking in the shadows, somehow more dangerous than Dave, more intense, more beautiful. "I take it we're on." The words ricocheted through my head, setting off the wrong sorts of thoughts. Oh, I was on all right. "I mean, the mission is on?"

He nodded slowly and stepped even more slowly back into the shadows. I followed him as if drawn. There wasn't much room out here. We were pressed up against the side of the van. He took my elbows to hold me, if not as close as I'd like, then probably closer than was wise.

"It's confirmed. The target is on his way to the house. The party has already started but isn't at its expected capacity yet.

If we get there soon, we can slip into the house and upstairs, while Dave the billionaire distracts downstairs.”

“Dave the billionaire and his twin brother tonight. He promises double the distraction, free of charge.” I tried to make it a joke. He didn’t laugh. I could feel the tension thrumming through him.

I found myself pulling closer. “Are you okay?”

He snorted and stepped back. “Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“All those people there, they’re your family too. Billionaires. You didn’t get that. You didn’t get family. You didn’t get to be a part of it.”

“Oh, I got that. The family, the power, the pressure. La Famiglia. I didn’t want them. I don’t want these either.”

I peered at him in the shifting shadows the leaves made. The moon was bright tonight, and for some reason, he looked like a dream you weren’t sure you wanted, something magic, something mythical. He came from the Esposito crime family — he’d been raised to always be at war. That was why espionage and intrigue came so naturally to him. “But, Gio, does it bother you? That your grandmother is here? The one who abandoned your father without a thought?” I shouldn’t have used his first name. I should have kept it professional.

His lips in his neat beard curved up in an unamused smile. “Ask me if I care.”

He had a chip on his shoulder about it, too. Angry. He was angry. Maybe that was the difference between him and Dave. Dave yearned to be a part of something bigger than him. Gio had been, and what that meant hadn’t been pleasant.

He’d seen a lot, and he wasn’t going to tell her if he was bothered because he had to be the tough guy.

But this was her job. She took that step toward him that he’d taken away, and then, she took another and brought herself even closer, taking hold of his navy blue lapels.

“Agent, I need to know if you are compromised by the understandable emotional weight of working with the family that rejected you.”

He snorted again but he looked her in the eyes this time. Gio had golden glints in his eyes that Dave did not.

“I am not compromised by Minerva Carleton’s presence here. Nor by her offspring.”

“You’re her offspring.”

He shrugged with one shoulder and didn’t look away. “My father is bothered that she abandoned him. I am not. She didn’t know me. She doesn’t know I exist. I have more than enough family of my own to deal with. I don’t need to add this wacko bunch to the mix. You’re lucky you’re an orphan. Family is more trouble than it’s worth.”

I looked away.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that. You’re right. I’m on edge. It’s a whole family I want nothing to do with.”

“If I had any family, I wouldn’t be doing this. Living undercover. Disappearing from everyone I ever knew. But I don’t, so I’m here, wrangling you two idiots.”

“I resent the implication.”

“Too bad,” I said, too pissed off to be polite. But pissed off was better than turned on.

“You’re not wrangling two idiots — you’re wrangling one idiot and one asshole.”

I barked out a short laugh. “Well. Is this family going to be a problem or not? Your effectiveness as a cover for Dave will be reduced if you turn into a delicate flower every time a twin or a cousin shows up. Sometimes, you’ll have to play him in his life.”

“Yes, I’m aware of my duties, thanks.”

His eyes were dark, and his voice was deadly sarcastic. But there was the slightest smile on his lips. I wanted to kiss him.

Dammit.

I was accusing him of not being in control of his emotions and look at me. I was like a cat in heat. It was ridiculous. For sure, I would never let him know. He wouldn't let me forget it.

“Good,” I said. Refusing to let it be awkward.

“You’ve made it clear what my worth is as a special operative who can jump out of planes and shoot a hole through a dime at three hundred meters and has been in combat and undercover for almost a decade when put up against the billionaire from military intelligence.” He leaned in closer. Gosh, he smelled good. “Is he really that much smarter than me?”

I lifted my chin. “No, but I am. That’s why I’m the boss. Now, you hide out in the van and wait for me to tell Dave and wrap this up. This party’s almost over.”

Just like that, he dropped the edge he’d been carrying in his shoulders and smiled broadly. He winked, just like Dave had, only this one hit me all the way to my toes, making me weak in the knees. For a moment, I wondered why anyone thought they looked alike at all.

“The next party is about to start,” he said and opened the driver’s side door, sliding into the seat and closing the door behind him. It was like he’d never been there, except for my weak knees and the vague scent of his cologne, the same as Dave wore but somehow deeper and more compelling on him.

I shook my head, trying to free my brain from the fog he’d put me into, then went back to the DJ booth to close this part of the night.

CHAPTER TWO: GIO

I watched Cameron go back to the party through the rearview mirror. Her black tuxedo was far sexier than a tuxedo had any right to be, and along with her black hair, helped her almost disappear into the deep shadows on the side of the house before she came back into view, highlighted against the lights strung about the wedding celebration.

It was my aunt's wedding, a thought that kind of kicked me in the gut. My father's half-sister. He had no idea she even existed, and that was probably a good thing. He hated his mother, my grandmother, the old, fragile-looking lady I'd seen dancing with Dave before I made my presence known to Cameron. Agent Villegas.

My father wouldn't have approved of Agent Villegas, either. He believed that women should limit themselves to the province of home and family and never want anything else. Cameron's genius mind would have meant nothing to him. He thought that the role of a beautiful woman was to be a bed warmer. He would have made a mistress out of her. My father was very old fashioned. And I made sure to be nothing like him.

That's why I reminded myself to call her Agent Villegas and not get too familiar. Why I focused on her intelligence and abilities, not her fucking gorgeous body. My father would love her — well, her looks. He'd be offended by her mouth, or the way she managed men, or how she was a billion times smarter than him.

When I was feeling generous, I'd say that my father was scarred by his mother's early abandonment and developed some terrible mommy issues. When I wasn't, I'd drop the armchair psychology and just say it like it was. He was a dick. He hated women, but he pretty much hated everyone and treated everyone like they were the dirt he walked upon. And I didn't forgive him.

I was his favorite son. I knew that. I could get away with a lot because I think he imagined that I was just like him, his heir, the one who would follow after him and make him proud. But he'd treated my little brother like shit. I fought back against him whenever I could, but that always made it worse. In the end, I did the only thing I could without turning into him. I left. I joined the military and discovered a talent for ... well ... keeping my cool in dangerous and sometimes violent situations, a life I'd been trained for by my father. Somewhere along the way, my military skills were noticed by the higher-ups, and I agreed to officially *die*. I needed to cut ties from my family and be able to become an operative to the core. I missed my little brother but was glad to leave the Esposito name behind.

Oh, who was I kidding? What they noticed was my startling similarity to my long lost cousin who was a rising star in military intelligence. Slap a beard on us and cut our hair short and we were virtual mirror images of each other. And I liked him. Dave was a likable guy, although "good time dude" was one of his favorite acts to put on, he was a lot more serious than his reputation let on. We worked well together, and I was glad to get to know him after losing my own family.

This wasn't our first mission together, but it was our first mission anywhere near Dave's family. My family. Damn Cameron — she was right. Knowing my grandmother was here, the grandmother my father had hated, was getting into my head. My aunts. My cousins. I had to push them all out of my awareness. That wasn't why I was here. They weren't the mission. This party was just a convenient excuse with impeccable timing. Two parties among the high rollers of the incredibly wealthy Hamptons summer folk. One of which gave an agent and his doppelganger a reason to be here.

The passenger side door of the van opened. “You ready?” Cameron asked.

I’d gotten lost in my thoughts of family and bastards, both literal and personality-wise, and hadn’t noticed time passing. Damn. It was getting to me. I wasn’t going to admit it. The mission came first, and I wasn’t a delicate flower, all torn up by family secrets and scandals.

“Ready.”

She slid into the passenger seat without looking at me.

“Where’s Jeffries?”

“He’ll meet us there; coming in the front door with his twin who is certain to make himself the center of attention while we sneak in the back and avoid all attention if at all possible. Drive.”

I followed directions. She unwound the band from the bottom of her braid and raked her fingers through her hair to loosen it. I caught a glimpse at a stoplight. It was always thick and black as night, but now it rippled and gleamed as if it caught stars in the waves of it. I kept driving. The mission came first.

She chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s just that between you, Mr. Shadow; Dave, the good time guy; and his twin Will who is already two sheets to the wind and really in the mood to get laid, anyone looking for Dave will start thinking they are going crazy, seeing in triplicate.”

“Too bad you can’t recruit him to The Agency, too.”

“No way. Do you think we didn’t look at him first? Completely the wrong personality and skill set. I don’t think he has a deceptive bone in his body.”

“And I do?”

She cast a look down his body and sent heat swirling where it was not supposed to swirl. “Yes.” She started

unbuttoning her white shirt, which was already unbuttoned down low between her breasts, not that he was looking.

“What are you doing?”

“Changing. I can’t go to a billionaire’s Hampton’s bash looking like the caterers.”

I thought she was hot. I’d always liked a woman in a suit. “You’re going into the party? I thought you were the office squint. You’re not a field agent. It could be dangerous.”

She tilted her head once. “I got a message. The ambassador may be passing more than secrets to the Russians, but to know, we need someone who speaks Russian in that office with eyes on those documents. The two of you are quite useful, but neither of you knows seven languages, one of which is Russian. Therefore, I’m coming in. I’m your hookup for tonight. Red hot bimbo coming up.”

With that, she stripped out of her white shirt, leaving only a lacy black bra. I tried not to look, but I’d already gotten an eyeful. She turned around in her seat and leaned past me, rummaging in the back of the van, and for a moment, I thought her tits would pop right out of her bra. “Sit down! Put your seatbelt on.”

She did sit down, her hair falling over her eye as she grinned at me. “Got it,” she said and held up a black napkin or something. But then, she pulled it down over her and it was a shirt. No, not a shirt. It had tiny spaghetti straps that looked like they would snap at any moment.

“Seat belt,” I snapped.

“Oh shush. I’m the handler. You’re not supposed to be protective of me. I’ll buckle up when I’m ready.” Her hands went to her waist, and she unbuttoned her pants. I stared as she shimmied out of them.

The van swerved and I looked away, remembering that I was supposed to be driving not ogling my supervisor. Damn it. I had to get it together. It was all the emotions of the family — not family. I was off my game. I was riled up. I had to focus on

driving, on the mission, on maybe getting laid by anyone but Agent Cameron Villegas.

I left the town behind and turned onto a quiet road surrounded by tall grass. This mansion we were heading to was isolated. That was good for us.

Cameron had finished wriggling out of her pants and did not replace them with another pair. It turned out that the shirt that barely counted as a shirt was actually a dress that barely counted as a dress. It was black and slinky and reached only the tops of her thighs. She twisted and reached behind her and unsnapped her bra, slipping it off from beneath the dress, leaving her rounded breasts barely held back by the dress. They were curved and soft looking. Fuck.

She was paying no attention to me, good thing. She turned around again to fish behind her and came up with a pair of strappy heels. One foot on the dash, she slipped it on, and the length of her bare, smooth leg nearly made me lose my breath.

I had to focus on the road, it was dark out here.

“Pull off at the drive before the main house. We’ll park the van and head through the dunes to the back of the house.”

“Right,” I said, all business. Business came first. And I focused on that. She strapped on the last shoe, and I did *not* look. See? I was in control of myself.

We pulled up to a quiet, dark house. Small. Probably the caretaker’s house. A few hundred yards to the east, the dull thud of a bass line filled the night. A glow in the sky told us which way to head. We would not get lost as we traipsed through the dunes. “How are you going to hike in those shoes?”

She grinned at me. “I am a woman of many talents. Hold this.” She gave me a flashlight and pulled out lipstick and a mirror from her bag. With a couple of swipes, her naturally soft pink lips turned into a dark blood red mouth that made you think of where that color could rub off. She delicately swiped the corner with a finger and then, drew black around her eyes, smudging it until it was sultry. She fluttered her

naturally long eyelashes, fluffed her hair up so it fell over one eye, and looked at me. My heart raced. “How do I look?”

“You’re really getting into this role, aren’t you?”

“The role of red hot bimbo?” She chuckled and for a brief second, Agent Villegas was back. She was young. A lot younger than you’d expect for the level of her responsibilities. And so bloody optimistic. She believed in something. She believed in what she was doing. “It’s my first time in the field. I’m kind of excited.”

I swore under my breath. First time in the field? “You stick to me like glue. No running off to follow hunches or go after clues. We work together, got it?”

She breathed out and dropped her makeup in the bag, tucking it under the seat of the van. “Relax. It’s a party in the Hamptons. It’s not like we’re in enemy territory.”

I grabbed her and whirled her around, pressing her up against my chest. “That is exactly where we are. This may be the Hamptons, but there’s an ambassador in there selling secrets to the Russians. We are getting into things that they don’t want us to get into. This is not a party. This is dangerous.”

In the dark of the night, I couldn’t see the blush, but I could almost feel the heat coming off of her. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Let’s go. You’re the field agent. I follow you until we get to the documents. Then, I do my work.”

I nodded and we traipsed through the grass. She was remarkably steady on those stilts she called shoes. We were almost to the house when a deep voice growled at us to freeze.

“Here we go, showtime.” I didn’t give her time to react, just wrapped one arm around her hips and pulled them tight to me and hooked my hand around the back of her head so I could take her mouth with mine.

She didn’t need to be told what to do. She slid fingers into my hair to muss it and kissed me back.

And oh, did she kiss me back. For one second, everything stopped, and all there was in existence was her warm, curvy

body pressed up against mine. Her lips, her tongue.

“Ahem.”

I snapped out of it. Fool. But I could work with it at least. “Oh!” I wasn’t even faking surprise. “Pardon me. I didn’t see you there. I was occupied with more pressing matters. Can I help you?”

“No guests off the deck. The boss doesn’t want to be sued if you fall off a cliff or something.”

I put on Dave’s smooth cadence and billionaire’s confidence. “I don’t need your boss’s money. I was just looking for a bit of privacy with my lady friend here.”

She was clinging to me, looking suitably kissed.

The guard did not look amused. “There are rooms upstairs.” He stood there at the edge of the deck, waiting for us to follow him back into the populated regions of the property.

“What do you say, Jenny? A room upstairs?”

She blinked up at me and then brought up her finger to run it along my lower lip. Her touch sent electricity straight to my groin. “My lipstick,” she said, almost like an apology. Then, she nodded.

Yes? The things she could be saying yes to filled my head for a nanosecond until I remembered the room upstairs. Yes. The papers. The mission.

“Perfect. Point us in the proper direction.” He waved us off and pointed us which way to go, which was the wrong staircase for our purposes, but that was fine. We made our way into the party, which was packed with people dressed in skimpy clothes and dripping in privilege. I had Cameron’s hand firm in mine as I pulled her through the crowd. A waiter passed with champagne on a high tray. Cam grabbed two and shoved one into my free hand.

My phone chimed. I pulled her off to the side so I could check.

Dave: The ambassador is going for a walk in the dunes. I’m on him. You switch the papers.

I held the phone up for Cameron to see. She nodded. All was going as planned. A walk in the dunes, huh?

Cameron leaned in to me and nibbled on my ear, then whispered. "I bet that's why the guards wanted us back on the property. A rendezvous."

I nodded. "Let's find a room upstairs." Not *a* room. *The* room. The office shown on the blueprints I'd memorized where the ambassador kept his important work in a secret drawer that was no secret to us.

She nibbled my ear again. Pleasure went down my spine. "Let's go. Get in. Get out." She was good at this playing the bimbo thing. Driving me nuts, but she was perfectly composed.

"Perfect," I said and kissed her again. It was for the cover. I didn't get carried away. We went back to winding through the crowded room when a hand gripped my shoulder. I turned, restraining myself from removing the hand physically.

"Will." It was the other Jeffries, Dave's twin brother. My cousin.

"Who's the pretty, bro?" He didn't look at me at all. That was good, right? If anyone were to recognize that someone wasn't his brother it would be his twin. He smiled at Cameron. That charming smile; the same one that Dave had. Maybe even better than Dave's. I kind of wished I could knock it off of him.

"Ooh," Cameron twittered. "You didn't tell me there were two of you." She leaned in to Dave and put a hand on his chest. I nearly choked.

I grasped her around the waist and pulled her back into me. "We don't share."

She pouted. "Pity." Now, I was holding back laughter. She was enjoying this. She curled herself into me and started nuzzling at my neck.

Will did laugh. "Seems the pretty is impatient. It's okay, I've got a couple of my own pretties. They went in search of a

bottle of champagne. It seems they want me to drink it out of their belly buttons. What was I to do but oblige?"

We laughed heartily together the way brothers who had everything they ever wanted at the snap of a finger would.

"Off to find the mythical private rooms I hear about."

Will winked. "First staircase on the right."

"Cover for me, bro," I said.

"I hear they've got a fine stash of Glenlivet up the first staircase on the right. You should go in search. Bring the pretty."

Glenlivet. That was Dave's favorite drink. I found the stuff foul, but I nodded and took Cam, now wrapped around me, practically, to head for the stairs.

The hall was a lot quieter than the main room. Someone walked through, and I pressed Cameron up against the wall, nuzzling her neck until they passed.

"I make a handy cover, don't I?" She held onto my hair as she whispered into my ear and desire shot through me like electricity at the sharp pull on my scalp. I took a step away from her.

"Something like that."

"Did I hear your twin say the rooms are up the first staircase on the left? I really want to get you alone." Her voice purred through me, even though I knew she was just saying it for the benefit of anyone who might hear us.

"Yeah. Definitely need to get you alone. First staircase on the left. Let's go."

I took her hand, and we ran lightly up the stairs, checking at the top to make sure the corridor, long and carpeted with modern art lining all the walls, was empty. It was.

We raced to the door we needed, and I fished in my jacket pocket for my lock pick tools. "Keep an eye," I said, needlessly.

The lock was the work of only a few moments. I didn't think the ambassador ever really thought that anyone would ever dare to violate his privacy. The door clicked open and I stood. "Child's play. That lock would only ever keep out an innocent man."

"And that's not us, huh?"

"Innocent? You look rather debauched."

She raked a hand through her hair and arched her back. "That's what I'm going for."

I looked away from her for my own mental health and opened the door. We slipped inside, going immediately for the secret drawer in the large imposing desk. The latch for it was inside the first drawer on the left side. I tripped that and the hidden drawer slipped out of its hiding place deep behind the real drawer. I pulled it forward on its track.

"That's them." I filtered through the documents. "The names of operatives all throughout Russia and Eastern Europe." I pulled the false documents out of the secret pocket in my jacket and switched them with the real ones. "Mission accomplished."

"Good, now move aside." She'd seen the small leatherbound red book, and her eyes glinted with purpose. "Go to the door and listen for anyone coming."

She opened the book and scanned it. Her eyes closed momentarily.

"What is it?"

"The loads they're delivering are people. Women mostly. Some boys. Damn. Watch the hall." She paid me no mind then, taking out her camera and snapping photos of the pages.

Voices sounded at the end of the hall.

"Someone's coming," I whispered, crossing back to her. "Put it away."

"Not yet." She was flipping pages, snapping pictures, and flipping pages, snapping more.

I pressed my body up against hers, urging her to go faster. “Now, Cam. They’re at the door!”

She put the book back in the secret drawer and slid it back into place while I pressed the latch again. The drawer snicked back into place while a key turned the lock and rattled.

I lifted Cam onto the desktop and rucked her dress up so I could grab her ass. She yanked down her top and put my hand on her naked breast, full and round and soft. I obliged her by pinching her nipple, while I took her lips in a fierce kiss that would look like the end of foreplay.

She was working at my belt buckle, and as the door opened, slid her hand down my pants. It was hard work not to gasp at the feel of her fingers there.

“What the hell are you doing in my office?”

We jerked apart. I held her against me to hide her bareness from the men who had arrived. It was the ambassador and another man with squinty eyes and a sneer. The Russian? “Do you mind? I think it’s quite obvious what we’re doing. I believe we found this room first. You can look for another one.” I was Dave Jeffries, playboy billionaire real estate developer who believed he was entitled to anything, even another man’s office in his own home. “But I’m not sure I think much of your date. You could do better; you’re a distinguished man.” The Russian’s squint turned into a glare.

Cam giggled —she was not a giggler — and pulled up her dress. She hid her face in my neck as if she were embarrassed. Maybe she was, first field mission and all. She’d never played the hot babe before, not on stage like this.

“How did you get in here? This door was locked.”

“If it was locked, then how did we get in?” I looked down my nose at him, like Dave when he was being superior. “Anyway, I heard there’s some good Glenlivet up here. Why are you only serving champagne? How is a man supposed to get properly drunk on champagne?” I glanced around. There was indeed a bottle of Glenlivet sitting on a sideboard. “Oh, there it is.” I looked down at Cam — she looked thoroughly

debauched now. Her lipstick was worn clean off except for some smudging under her bottom lip. I wiped it clean with my thumb. “How about it, Jenny? Want some Glenlivet?”

“Yuck.” Her tone shifted into a spoiled whine. “You promised we’d be alone and you’d show me that thing you do with your tongue.” A grin twitched at the corners of her mouth. I fought my own.

“That definitely sounds like something we should do,” I said, and then bent to kiss her again.

“Get out!” the ambassador roared. Cam jumped under me, startled. She scrambled down off the desk that I had never bothered getting her down from. Since I was David Jeffries, who doesn’t scramble for any man, even an ambassador selling secrets to the Russians and buying women from them also, it seemed.

“Don’t worry, Jenny. I have a hotel room. Would you like to come to my hotel room instead of this place which is not private after all?”

She nodded and pulled at my hand. What could I do but follow her?

On my way out the door, I scowled at the ambassador. “I was told this would be a great party.” I shook my head in disappointment. “This is not even an okay party.”

Cam yanked on my hand, and we left, practically running, and got the hell out of there.

CHAPTER THREE: CAM

EIGHT YEARS, FIFTEEN DAYS, AND ELEVEN HOURS
LATER

It was a perfect September afternoon in Brooklyn, with the hint of cooler October air coming, but still bright and sunny and warm. It was a week past the grand opening of my boutique, Ave, Portuguese for bird and pronounced Ah-ve, not *Av* or *Ay-ve*, as I'd told almost every single one of my new customers. Oh, I knew what I was getting into.

I propped the glass door open so the early fall air could come in. The store was filled with everything lovely, all the beautiful things I'd seen and loved on my travels around the world. I portrayed myself as a world traveler and well, wasn't it the truth? I had traveled the world. Did anyone need to know that I'd done my traveling as an operative for The Agency? No, they did not. Not when I was doing it, and certainly not now that I'd retired. I took my retirement fund and bought my store. Scarves, jewelry, art, pretty glass sculptures, natural lotions, and oils with beguiling scents. I wanted my boutique to be a feast for the senses, to really take advantage of living.

Sadly, the truth was most people did not pay attention to living while they were living, and then, it became too late and they died.

"Hmmp." I got up from behind the counter and walked over to the hanging rack of silk scarves in all the brilliant colors of the rainbow when the sun came after rain, but also of the night, made of shadows and darkness. It turned out that life was both. Shadows and light. And I was not going to be afraid of that light anymore.

I took a tiny box of incense and opened it up, lighting the little cone and setting it on a shelf behind the counter. It was Dave's favorite scent. Pine. And I was lighting it for him because he was the one I thought of when I thought of people who didn't get to live their lives in the light.

He'd died. A year ago while he was on a mission in Bolivia and Gio had been acting as him here, he'd been captured. I was negotiating with his captors when the prison he'd been kept in exploded. All were lost. They told us it was an accident when dangerous chemicals exploded, but it was pretty much an acknowledged fact that it was no accident but rather a covert operation undertaken by an entirely different organization. Who it was exactly no one quite knew. They had evidence that it was — but no.

I was no longer working with The Agency. I didn't need to know. I didn't need to think about it. It was over. Dave was gone. My best friend was dead when I should have been protecting him and taking care of him and on top of everything — I should have gotten him out. Hell, he never would have been captured in the first place if I'd been doing my job. But I didn't, and he was, and now, he was gone.

His death broke my heart, proving to me that I did indeed still have one after turning it off and burying it under layers of duty and responsibility for years. I was an agent, and the mission came first, always.

Past tense. I had been an agent.

Now I wasn't, and I was still unused to feeling things. I had spent about a month in my tiny studio apartment down the street crying inconsolably every night while painting and building and getting my store stocked. I hadn't known what exactly I was crying about. I thought maybe everything in my whole life: being an orphan, not having any friends or connections anymore, sacrificing over a decade of my life to a career that ultimately had made me empty inside, losing Dave, being responsible, missing Gio so much it was like I had an open sore in my chest, pounding with loss and longing for a thing I could never have.

I shook my head and pulled myself out of my gloom. This was the beginning of a new life. An authentic life with no lies. I turned my back to the door to put on a CD of some music, native Bolivian music ... still remembering my friend.

A shiver went up and down my back, like a finger coasting along my naked spine, despite being fully clothed. The breath left my body, and I closed my eyes to steady myself. Only one person's presence affected me that way.

"Gio," I said and turned around.

He was leaning up against the open door jamb of my store, his hair cropped as short as ever, his beard going a little shaggy. His shoulders were broad and his forearms, crossed against his chest, were bare. The veins stood out, strong. I wanted him to hold me. To hug me like friends who hadn't seen each other in almost a year. He didn't. He didn't even make a move towards me.

"Don't call me that," he said. "My name is Dave."

Dave? Why was he still calling himself Dave? I thought he'd told the family that Dave had died and who he really was.

But he hadn't. I felt a flash of guilt. I shouldn't have just turned in my badge when Dave had died. I hadn't been able to get over it. I failed. I was compromised. I blamed myself. I couldn't keep working. But if I had, if I had continued my job and made sure Gio was okay, I would have known what he was planning to do — continue pretending to be Dave. I would have talked him out of it. I glared at him. He was still taking Dave's place, even though he was dead.

He watched me stalk towards him with his blank face — he was very good at making his face blank so that you could think he was thinking whatever you wanted him to be thinking. I knew it was an act. He and Dave had practiced it together — but he didn't move. I grabbed him by one of those muscled arms and hauled him away from the door.

I closed it, locked it, and flipped the sign to closed.

"That's not good business, closing up so early when you just opened."

“Shut up, Gio. Are you still pretending to be Dave? I thought you would have told them all he was dead by now.”

“If you were still my handler, you’d know what I was up to, wouldn’t you?”

There was a tiny flash in his eyes. The golden lights he couldn’t hide. He wasn’t empty of feeling in there at all. Did he feel abandoned when I retired and left The Agency? I dropped his arm and stepped back. I tingled from where I had touched him and wiped my hands on my skirt. He was right to feel angry at me for leaving him. But I couldn’t do it anymore. I had been compromised by my feelings for my agents. I’d loved Dave like a brother; he was my best friend. We could always laugh together. And I longed for Gio with an intensity I couldn’t deal with. I could only bury it down deep and pretend it wasn’t there. Hide it behind the job and the missions and our roles as agent and handler. I was in love with him, and I had been for eight years, fifteen days, and eleven hours, since that night when we’d kissed, all for the job.

I had been a terrible handler. I’d let Dave get killed. I couldn’t risk Gio like that. I couldn’t work with him anymore. I couldn’t work with anyone. I had failed, and I wouldn’t let myself fail again, the consequences were too steep. That was why I had left.

“I wouldn’t be your handler. You left The Agency, too. We both did.”

A small muscle in his jaw ticked. “I thought you were a lifer, Villegas. I never thought you’d leave it,” he said, but I heard, as if the words were said behind glass, the accusation. *I never thought you’d leave me.* He didn’t say it. I knew he didn’t say it, but I heard it all the same. His face was still empty, but I could see something, some thought or emotion too big to name roiling under the smooth emptiness he presented. “The Agency was your life.”

“Well, it isn’t.” My heart was beating wildly, but I kept my breath steady and slow, as if his nearness wasn’t affecting me. “And I’m rather enjoying having a life of my own outside of The Agency.” I raised my hands and indicated my beautiful

little shop. Full of riches and treasures that ordinary people could buy and hold and adore. No secrets, no missions, no deaths — just pleasures.

His eyes cast a look around the place, but his body was tense, feet planted shoulder-width apart, his arms crossed again in front of him. So defensive. As if he was expecting to be attacked here. As if he was expecting me to attack. “It looks like you.”

I blinked. “Looks like me?” I had no idea what he meant.

He nodded uncomfortably, once. “Full of life and color. So many different things that you can’t rest on just one. It’s full of brilliant little jewels. You could spend forever in here and still find something new.”

I had no more breath. No more breath at all. I suddenly realized that neither of us were working for The Agency anymore. Oh, I’d clearly known it before, and I even knew what it meant to me. But for the first time, he was here in front of me, his physicality like a sun in my shop, casting everything into a new light, setting me and my heart into rotation about him. Oh, I didn’t know if this was good or if it was bad. His presence in my shop, seeing him again, without the defenses I once had against him.

He was not my agent. I was not his supervisor anymore. We weren’t even colleagues. We were just two people meeting in a shop on a September afternoon in Brooklyn.

“If you had a store like mine, what would it look like? What would you sell?”

I knew I’d shocked him with that question; he had not thought I’d ask it, so he didn’t come up with a calculated answer to hide his real self behind. “Books. I’d open a bookstore.”

My lips fell open in surprise and delight. “A bookstore?”

“With only mystery books. Or spy books.” His eyes twinkled with humor. “Crime, good old whodunits, and psychological thrillers.”

“You’d give up being a spy to sell spy books?”

He grinned. The smile that showed his true self cut right through all the time we'd been apart, all the boundaries I'd put up between us — and he'd put up too — if I had to be honest, when we were handler and operative, off limits.

I still remembered those hot kisses on my first field mission. I remembered the way he tasted of fire and sugar and champagne, how those arms, so strong and hard, felt around me, the velvet of his skin, the heat surging up to press against my most sensitive parts.

We did not need to pretend we weren't longing for each other anymore, and I was about to tell him so, when his smile dimmed.

"It doesn't matter anyway. I'm Dave. Dave is a real estate developer. Like Glenlivet, "my" favorite drink. Real estate development sucks."

I stared at him, and he gave me that blank look back. "You don't want to be Dave. You left The Agency. You can be Gio again. Or you can take up another identity entirely."

"Gio's dead, as far as anyone knows. It's better that way. That family is a viper pit. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to rile up crap that has been quiet for years. Dave's family loves him. They're not perfect, but they love him and they need him."

"So, you're just going to pretend to be someone you're not for the rest of your life? What about your brother?"

"Will? He's fine. He's married to a beautiful woman who loves him. He wants to be president someday. I think he can be."

"Not Will. Duke. Your brother. The one who thinks you're dead."

His eyes glazed over, and he stared off into my shop without seeing anything. "Either way, one of them loses a brother. Why not let it stay the one who won't feel new grief. I died for him long ago, Cameron. I still get to know him as Dave. He owns the bar down the block, which I'm sure you know."

“But he won’t know you.”

He shrugged.

This man exasperated me. “So, you’ll just hang out with him as some distant cousin, not even blood related, only the step-cousin of his wife?”

His face was blank again. “At least I get him.”

“But he doesn’t get you!”

He shrugged like he didn’t care.

“You idiot,” I swore under my breath.

“Nuh-uh.” He curled his lip at the corner. “I’m the asshole.”

He didn’t finish the phrase. He was the asshole. Dave was the idiot. That had been our thing. “Well, if you’re taking over his identity, you can be both.”

He knew I wasn’t happy with him. He sighed heavily. “I figure I’ll take off at some point when I’m ready. Maybe move to London or I don’t know. Sydney, Australia. That’s far enough away that even billionaires will think twice before taking random jaunts to the other side of the globe to visit their oh so distant relation. I’ll start up a new life as a billionaire real estate developer out there. I won’t have to play the Dave role anymore. I can stop drinking Glenlivet.” He shuddered dramatically as if it were all a joke.

“Oh, but you’ll be a billionaire with all his money.”

The blank look was gone. His nostrils flared. “You know I don’t care about the money. It’s all bullshit anyway. I left my inheritance behind when I joined the military the first time, and when I agreed to die to go undercover. Dave’s money is ... nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. And it’s a hell of a motivation.”

He was angry now. He took a step forward, threateningly, but I wasn’t afraid of him. Could he hurt me? I knew he could. But I also knew he’d never hurt me, not in a million years. So I raised my chin, daring him without words. He knew I was

daring him. His breath came out in short puffs as he tried to control his temper. I wanted to know what he would be like when he lost control.

He shook his head at me. Control regained. “You know that I —”

The front door rattled. “Hey! Why’s the door locked?”

We both looked up to see my shop assistant, curly afro bouncing as she tried to shove the door, tall iced latte in her hand, and a puzzled look on her face.

Instantly Gio’s face went back to empty. Not one leak of emotion came out. I put on my smile. I wouldn’t let anyone see what I was feeling either. My face wasn’t blank — it was pleasant. A different kind of empty; they liked seeing pretty women be pleasant, everyone did. It gave them what they expected. They saw what they wanted to. Gio and I both wore masks against the world, just different kinds of masks. I wanted to put mine aside and really live. I wanted him to, also.

I unlocked the door and opened it up, propping it so it would stay. “Sorry, Anissa. We were just having a conversation.”

She looked at me, then at him, and let her eyes run up and down his form returning to me. “I can see that.”

Gio stepped forward, hand outstretched, that charming smile that wasn’t *Gio’d*. I hated to see it because of what it meant. “Hi, Anissa. I’m Dave Jeffries.”

Anissa’s eyebrows rose halfway up her forehead. “David Jeffries. The billionaire? The one who just bought that empty sugar plant out on the river and is turning it into deluxe condos? I read an article on it. That place is hot. I can’t wait to see it.”

The charming smile was still in place. It wasn’t real at all. I could see the facade it was. Underneath the Dave act, Gio was drowning.

I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it at all. I came up to him and tucked my arm through his. “Dave is my best friend. We’ve known each other for ten years.”

“Don’t listen to her; she’s lying.”

I gasped, completely shocked, and turned to him. “Excuse me?” We would never ruin each other’s cover. What was his game?

“We’ve known each other for nine years.” He wore a little smirk on his face. He’d gotten me.

I rolled my eyes. “Nine years, seven months, twelve days, and twenty hours.” I remembered the very day I’d been introduced to Dave and Gio, my new agents. I remembered everything about it. “Normal people round up, Dave.”

“True, but you’re not normal, are you?” His brown eyes searched mine for a moment and stripped me of all my masks. He meant it for real. He knew me, despite the masks and the boundaries and the professional roles. I wasn’t normal and I never had been. I was strange and brilliant and too sharp. I never forgot a thing, even the things I didn’t want to remember, they were all there pressing up against my skull, and I just wanted to live and forget everything. The golden glints pulled me right in. I wanted him to drop the mask, drop the game, and just talk to me for real. I wanted him.

Anissa laughed. “Well, you certainly know our girl, for sure. She’s the least normal woman I’ve ever met. She’s unstoppable and brilliant and utterly mad.”

He laughed with her. “Yes, that’s my girl.”

He was teasing me. Gio was teasing me. He’d never teased me like that. He’d never let his guard down and implied that there was something between us that was more than just handler and operative, not since that night when we’d kissed for the job and almost been honest about how we felt about each other. Ever since then, he’d been unfailingly professional, and so had I.

Dave and I had grown closer. Dave and he had grown closer, but Gio and I? we kept our distance, a safe distance, knowing that if we breached that boundary, there would be no going back.

And I was ready to finally breach that boundary ... before he could take this Dave act and run off to the other side of the world to hide in isolation from anyone who mattered to him. From me.

Oh no.

No.

I wouldn't let that happen. Gio was my responsibility. I wouldn't let him disappear into this Dave act. I wouldn't let him accept a half life as a dead man. No matter how much I missed Dave, Gio would never be a substitute because Gio was his own person, just as important and in some ways, more so.

I might not be his handler anymore, but I wasn't done managing Gio. He was taking the wrong path, and I was going to set him back onto his right path. It was for his own good. It was for him.

And then, then, I'd be able to let him go, let him live his own life. Even if it was on the other side of the world.

“Are you hungry, Dave? Do you want to go for lunch? My treat.” This would have to be done delicately. I couldn't let him know my plan before I'd been able to work on him some more. “Like old times.”

Old times when I was his handler and paid for everything.

“I'm the billionaire, Cam. If we go out, it'll be my treat.” For the barest second, I thought I saw a flare of heat in his eyes, as if he'd thought about taking me out for real and getting me alone, but then, Dave was back. “But I can't. I have a meeting with my personal assistant.”

“You have a personal assistant?” I almost laughed. That was so not Gio. Dave yes. Gio, no. And he knew it.

“I'm a busy man. He's very helpful. And as I am a busy man, I will bid you adieu.”

“Adieu?” Gio using French? I didn't think so.

“It means goodbye.”

I spoke seven languages fluently, among them French. And he knew it. He was teasing me again. It sent a thrill through me.

“Adieu, Anissa. It was a pleasure meeting you.” He nodded his head and went to the door, stopping momentarily to wink at me.

It was that wink that made me furious. That was Dave’s wink. Gio had no need or desire to wink at everyone. And I felt like throwing something on the floor and stomping like a child. He was not going to be easy to manage.

CHAPTER FOUR: GIO

(DAVE)

*M*y mind was spinning around in circles as I opened the door to Dave's loft.

My loft. *My* loft, dammit.

This was what Cam had done to me. She had no right to show up in my life, reminding me of who I was, reminding me that I didn't fit in this lie. What kind of spy hates to lie?

I stepped into the loft — my loft, because I was Dave — and tried to see it as my home, the place I belonged. But I couldn't. I couldn't settle myself into Dave's identity, his life, not even his damn loft, and it was a great loft. The ceilings were high, like some sort of church, but rough-hewn and industrial, never letting me forget that this building used to be a factory, no matter how many millions of dollars this loft cost. The windows were huge, and the sun streamed in from a view of the Hudson River. It was a different view than the ones the rest of Dave's family — my family — had because we'd wanted to be close to them, but not too close, all the better to maintain our distance and facade as playboys. We were a couple of neighborhoods to the north of them, in Williamsburg. It was better for the party boy image, anyway, being full of young, cool people with terrible reputations rather than the fussy, old money of Brooklyn Heights. Lofts, not brownstones. Docks, not promenades. Clubs, not healthy, vegan, bohemian emporiums.

There I was getting into the Dave mindset. I was starting to settle into his sarcasm and idiocy.

Ugh.

I took a nice cold beer out of the fridge. It was microbrewery instead of the Heineken I'd prefer, but I had to maintain the Dave style, and it was far, far better than the damn Glenlivet I was forced to drink whenever I was out in public. Nasty stuff.

Cameron reminded me of Gio.

She reminded me I was Gio, that I liked Gio. She reminded me that Gio's life didn't look anything like Dave's life. Best friend? What kind of bullshit was that? Best friends with Cameron Villegas? I shook my head and took a long swallow of the beer.

Cameron made me want to be Gio again, and wasn't that the damndest thing. She reminded me that I didn't want to be Dave.

A pang of grief struck me through the heart.

Everywhere I looked in this damn luxury loft, I saw Dave. His stupid designer furniture and his minimalist kitchen. Why the heck did a kitchen need to be minimalist? It should be warm and busy and the heart of the home, not some ice cube with mirrored surfaces. I needed to get away from reminders of Dave, so I went into the library.

This was the one room in the loft that Dave and Gio could both feel at home. This room didn't have the expansive windows or the high ceilings. It was wall-to-wall books. We compromised on comfortable furniture that looked space-age but was ergonomically designed. The bookshelves were full of history, politics, science, classics, business, and real estate, but there was also one wall where I had my mystery and suspense books, horror, and even some science fiction. I damn well felt like I was living in some body snatcher story sometimes. And I was the bodysnatcher.

Instead of taking down one of the old favorite books and immersing myself in it, I went to one particular shelf and lifted a hidden panel. I pressed my hand against the sensor and a hidden door next to me slid open.

Three people had access to this door. Me, Cameron, and Dave.

Two people.

I shut the panel and went through the secret door, closing it behind me. I didn't lock it. I wasn't using it as the safe room it was meant to be, I just wanted to get in touch with myself.

I climbed the narrow spiral staircase out of the stygian dark and unlocked the door at the top. Light flooded the room from a frosted skylight, and I blinked to accustom my eyes. It wasn't anything fancy. An efficiency apartment that matched the layout of the library below it, with a table and sofa that was also a murphy bed if I needed to sleep over here. There was a kitchenette and a small bathroom with a shower. The one bookshelf was full of my favorite books, and the safe was full of guns.

The desk in the corner had a computer and surveillance equipment. The viewscreens for the rest of the loft and the exterior of the building, including roof access, came on by themselves, activated by my handprint when I keyed the lock. The screen blinked — HELLO GIO.

It was very gratifying to be named by the damn computer. I laughed out loud.

This was where we could retreat if we were ever in dire circumstances, Dave and I, although we had never needed to use it as such since Dave's cover had never been broken, thus neither had mine. Instead, it was my home to use every time Dave and I had to be in New York City at the same time. We were roomies, of a sort. Had been.

Gio was here, in this room. As basic as it was. The fridge had Heineken. There was non-fancy shelf-stable food in the cupboards, none of that fancy modern gourmet shit that Dave liked. Aerosol appetizers and architectural towers of kobe beef and lotus root or whatever impressed him. I never figured out if he actually liked that stuff or if it was just part of his act of brainless billionaire playboy. Or maybe it had started out being an act and turned into a genuine preference. I'd find a way to end it sooner or later, maybe transition into some nice homey

exotic food from, I didn't know, the Andes or Thailand or Morocco. That was exotic enough to fit his cool persona, right? I could do with a nice gyro, right now. Maybe I could start a new trend as Dave that didn't taste so bloody awful.

I flopped down on the sofa, which though simple was comfortable, thanks Dave, and leaned back with my arm over my eyes when the computer dinged.

The front door of the loft was opening. Damn it. I'd forgotten. I had a meeting with my personal assistant.

I hated having a personal assistant. I could do all that shit myself. But then, he was also my Dave secret weapon. He was the one that took care of all the business stuff that I didn't have to be there in person for. He was a genius with real estate and could predict pretty well what the next hot property would be.

"I'm here, Dave!" he called. The camera showed him carrying a load of dry cleaning. My business suits. Dave's business suits. If I had a choice, I'd never wear a damn tie again.

I reversed my path, leaving the safe room, locking the door, twirling silently down the spiral staircase and levering the secret door closed. It locked without my hand print. When I came out of the library, I had a book called "Farm to Table Revolution." I'd just grabbed the first thing I'd seen so I was just pretending to be interested, but perhaps I could turn my Doppelganger's terrible taste around and start some luxury trend that I could actually stomach.

"Oh good, Ryan, you're here." I handed him the book. "Look into this. Let's find someone to open one of these farm to table restaurants here... but make it exclusive. All organic. Gourmet recipes. Grass fed, farm raised animals. I think this could be a new trend. No more of the nouvelle cuisine. I'm over it."

"Like your cousin?"

"My cousin?" For a heart stopping moment I thought he was talking about Dave.

"Yes, you know. Lissie."

Ah. Actually my sister in law. Gio's sister in law. "She's not my cousin. She's my step cousin. And no, not like her. With meat. None of that vegan nonsense. Cute little farm raised animals that are tasty. But something that's more humane, she'll like that. Such as it is." And I wouldn't have to eat any more of those essences of food or foam appetizers. Really, Dave, did you have to be SUCH a pretentious idiot?

"Yes, okay. I'll look into it. I take it you're looking to develop the farm, too?"

"A farmer? Me?" That was not Dave's persona. But remarkably, I didn't find it that objectionable. "Can we hire farmers instead? Can we buy a farm? Wait. Can we buy a town? Create a kind of retreat maybe, say, an hour or two outside of town. A little boutique village? It could have a cluster of farms, greenhouses, maybe some educational centers. Luxury hotels but for "the simple life." Aren't we all tired of always being on the go?" Ryan looked at him as if he didn't know what he was talking about. Ah no, Ryan wasn't tired of being on the go. Not yet anyway. "We could open a restaurant there, too. That could be where we test things out. Oh, let's open a theater up there. Find someone who is looking for investors." I thought about Cam's boutique, Ave. That meant bird in Portuguese and it was as lovely as she was. "And some boutiques. And galleries. Maybe host some arts festivals, a couple of them over the year."

Ryan was writing swiftly on the little notebook he always carried with him. He had a smile spreading on his face.

"I don't know where you come up with these ideas. You want to start your own town. The media will be all over this idea."

I hadn't thought about that. But if I had to have all these billions of dollars, why shouldn't I do something good with it. I didn't know if Dave would appreciate it. But he liked developing real estate. He'd said it was like a hobby for him. Something he did on his downtime.

Not for me. I liked being the idea man and letting Ryan do all the work. Dave had an office in downtown manhattan but I

tried to avoid it unless Ryan told me I had to go. He was a good guy to have around, to do all the work of being a businessman. I appreciated him. I would give him a raise. A nice one.

“Find a town that is going through hard times. We’ll give the population jobs and create an economy. Work on the schools. In fact, donate to the public schools. And library.”

“I’m on it. I’ll take care of it. Don’t you worry.”

I didn’t. Maybe being a billionaire wasn’t all that bad.

He tucked away his notepad and pointed to the dry cleaning. “Which suit do you want to wear tonight, the royal blue or the black.”

“Suit?”

“You forgot about the reunion at Duke’s? I’m surprised. The eighth anniversary of your aunt’s wedding. All the cousins get together every year. This year all the new additions will be there.”

“Oh hell, the bar’s not going to be full of children is it?” His cousins were starting to reproduce. He had been looking forward to going to Duke’s, he actually loved the family, he cared for them. They were the reason he was still playing Dave, but he’d gotten distracted with Cam’s reappearance and he’d forgotten. He could use a good adult night where they all drank and laughed and didn’t think about deaths and lies and grief. Or beautiful women who shook the world up.

“No, no kids. But Minnie and Eli will be at your cousin’s brownstone.” He grinned. “You won’t have to worry about them. And if you want to you can go visit them, beforehand, before their bedtime.”

Dammit. They were adorable kids. Eli was just a baby, Maya and Matthew’s baby, and Minnie was the greatest kid he’d ever met. She called him Uncka Dude. It was ridiculous. Sometimes he liked hanging out with her best of all, because she had no preconceived notions of who Dave— and therefore he— was. “Tell me to shut up. The kids are great.”

“Shut up, Dave. You love them. I saw you with the baby after he was born. You wouldn’t let anyone take him.”

Eli’s christening had been right after I’d found out Dave had died. I had rocked that baby and told him his uncle had died. No one else knew, just me and Eli. And I couldn’t tell them. Eli had been the only thing that had made any of that better.

But Ryan was still grinning. “You know, you’re the last of the cousins to be single. I expect you’re next, so you can have your own baby soon, all you have to do is find a woman you want for more than a fling.”

Without my conscious control, a woman who I could imagine for something serious filtered through into my mind. Brown eyes, full lips and an exquisite curved cheek. Long waving black hair that would feel like silk under my fingers. A slender neck for kissing and graceful shoulders and sensual curves.

Cameron Villegas. Damn.

“I’ll wear the black suit. No tie. I’m sick of ties.” The blue was too flamboyant. Dave was a much flashier dresser than I was. If I had to be him for the rest of my life, we were going to have to compromise. If I had to wear a suit to social occasions, I didn’t want to stand out. And I wasn’t wearing a tie.

He nodded as if he understood. “Black button down, too? The silk?”

Silk. What else could it be. I nodded.

Ryan set out the outfit in Dave’s dressing room and went back to the library to work on the farm to table project which, while had just been the idea of a moment for me, had caught his attention. He promised to make it happen.

I got showered and trimmed the beard and dressed to the nines because Dave wasn’t the kind to go halfway on anything. Ungroomed would not do for him. But at least I got to go to a place with people I liked, instead of the silly fools Dave had as “friends.” Playboy life was boring as hell. I was going to ditch Dave’s playboy friends as soon as I could.

People grew up all the time, they stopped sowing wild oats and got old and settled down.

I'd have to face a bit of ribbing from Dave's family about getting domestic, but I could handle that if it meant I was no longer expected to go clubbing.

I shuddered and thought longingly of an early bedtime.

Then an image like a dream flashed through my brain. Cameron Villegas in my bed, naked and thoroughly satisfied and wrapped up in my sheets.

Ah, hell. This was going to get complicated.

CHAPTER FIVE: CAM

I was already at Duke's with my new friend, April Hamilton Beaumont, cousin to both Gio and Dave, when Gio walked in, wearing a slim black suit and a black button-down with the top two buttons undone. I'd been expecting him, but my knees went weak at the sight of him anyway.

I'd known he would be here, when April, who wandered into my boutique this afternoon and got to chatting, invited me out tonight. She'd said it was a weekly family gathering, and Gio was family. I knew about these gatherings. They'd been part of Gio's cover for quite some time. I knew everything about everyone in his family, sometimes more than they knew themselves. I had the files. And I liked them. I was actually excited to go and meet all these people I had only read and gotten reports about.

I dressed up because she told me they all were today, a special occasion of some sort, and I took advantage of the chance to wear one of my favorite outfits, a black wrap dress that clung to my body and was low cut enough to draw attention. The rest of the dress was relatively modest, but my strappy sandals had a high spike heel. I let my hair out loose and wavy, and wore dark purple eyeshadow and sharp black eyeliner. I wasn't in hot babe mode, but I wanted him to notice me. I wanted him to see me as a woman. I'd made my choice about what I wanted, and I wasn't one to leave things to chance.

Maybe he'd remember eight years and fifteen days ago, that party where I'd gone undercover as his date, and he'd felt the same passion I had. I know he did. I trusted myself enough to know that what we had that night was real. We'd pushed it away until it was a habit to repress our attraction. We ignored it, but it never went away.

All the reasons to repress our attraction were gone. I wanted him to want me now. I wanted it to be real. There was no one on this earth who I felt more connected with, and I had missed him so, so much in the months we hadn't been working together.

I didn't want to just be coworkers. I didn't want to just be his handler. I'd worn the black dress to remind him of the other black dress, even though they were nothing alike. This one was me, Cam, not Jenny the hot babe.

I waited for him to see me, to notice me. But he greeted Will and his new wife first. I tried to keep my attention on April, who was telling me all about her friends and family. I knew all about them, though, so I was only listening with half an ear, my eyes darting over to Gio.

His eyes met mine. He froze in mid sentence and then, picked up as if I hadn't shocked him. No one else would have noticed the moment when the world had spun around him — even his twin didn't seem to notice, his arm around his lovely redheaded wife, who I hadn't known about. He'd married her after I'd left The Agency, after Dave had died.

Dave would never know his sister-in-law.

Suddenly, tears filled my eyes, and I ducked my head, hiding my face behind the fall of my hair. I was blinking to clear my vision when two shiny black shoes stepped into my view. I wiped the tears away surreptitiously and lifted my head, flipping my hair so that it would wave over one eye. "Hello Dave, fancy seeing you here."

"Y-you two know each other?" April stared at me then at Gio, then back again.

"For nine years."

I glared at him. It wasn't nine years. We'd just had that conversation. He grinned. He was messing with me again.

"He's one of my best friends."

"Oh, only one of?" The smile on his face now wasn't his. It was his charming Dave smile. He winked. "Have I been demoted?"

"Yes," I growled out.

"I had no idea you guys knew each other. Dave, why did I not know of your best friend for nine years? Why do you always have to be so mysterious? Here I was thinking I could bring someone new into the group, and you had to be best friends with her?" She harrumphed and it was adorable. I tucked my hand into her arm.

"Well, I'm new to you, and I think you're awesome. My best friend has been demoted. Maybe you could take his place since he likes his secrets so much."

This time he glared at me. And it was the real him. Gio. I felt a relieved smile stretch across my face.

April laughed. "Oh, Mona and Lissie are going to love you."

"Too late!" Lissie, Gio's sister-in-law who didn't know she had a brother-in-law, turned around. "I already love her." She let go of her husband, Duke, to wrap her arm around my shoulders. "You've been demoted, Dave. She's ours now."

Gio let out an exasperated breath.

"That's it!" Duke had been watching us, considering. "I know where I recognize you from. It was driving me nuts." He elbowed Lissie. "She was the DJ at your parents' wedding."

April and Lissie both turned to me with mouths open.

Mona butted in. "No way!" She dragged Jack over, her husband, Gio and Dave's cousin. She smacked at him. "The DJ! Remember? What Marissa said?"

Jack, who wasn't a twin to the boys but looked enough like them to be confusing, laughed. "What a coincidence. Isn't it,

Duke?”

Duke raised his hands and smirked, smugly.

“What the hell are you lot going on about? What’s the big deal? She’s my friend; did you ever think that was how she got the job DJing? I was just helping her out? Is that such a state secret? Ask my mom; she’ll tell you. I told her I could get a DJ, and I did. It’s not like Jack didn’t get Duke the bartending job.”

Mona narrowed her eyes. “But we all knew about Duke. We didn’t know a thing about Cam. Why are you always so sneaky, Dave? We’re your family, you can tell us things.”

I didn’t like the way they were closing in on Gio, as if they were all against him. I’d be on his side. I stepped over in front of him as if I could block their mockery with my body, and I opened my mouth to say something. But they weren’t done.

“One thing he doesn’t know,” Jack said, “is how the prophecy is being fulfilled.”

That stopped me. Prophecy? Things were getting weird.

“What the hell are you talking about, now? Prophecy?”

Duke nodded, grinning. “Jack’s ex-fiance had everyone at that wedding matched up, two by two like we were marching onto Noah’s Ark. She predicted everyone. Me and Lissie, Mona and Jack, Will and Birdie, she even got your mom and Birdie’s mom and none of us even knew she was gay.”

Oh, so that secret was out now? We, of course, had known that Barbara and Donna had been together for years, that was part of Dave’s background check, but it was one of the secrets that we kept. I took a sip of my beer. Good for them.

But Duke wasn’t done. “And do you know who the only people at the wedding who were paired up and didn’t end up together were?”

Gio grimaced. “Dave and The DJ.”

“Dave and the DJ!” Jack laughed. They all laughed. “And here she is. Does anyone want to start taking bets on when they get together? What is it? Dating? Marriage? Pregnancy?”

“Why not all of the above?” Mona asked. They were all grinning. All of them. They were horrible. I loved them. I grinned too.

Gio was not grinning. “May I speak to you?” He hissed it into my ear as he took my elbow and led me out to the sidewalk. He didn’t let me answer, not that I would have said no.

“Don’t get scared off, Cam,” Jack called. I remembered that they used to call him the jackass. I could see it now. “We need you to fulfill our prophecy.” More laughter.

There was actually nothing I wanted more than to talk with him alone, and I let him drag me out. The rest of his family watched us go. The air was beginning to chill down from the summer-like heat, and I wasn’t wearing a jacket.

“What the hell are you doing here? Are you trying to ruin my cover?”

I had to laugh. “Not at all. April came into my store and we started talking. That’s all. I made a friend. She showed me some of her jewelry and it’s beautiful. I offered to sell it in my store. Then, we started talking, and I like her, Gio. I like all of them. I feel like I know them through you and Dave, but while you got to spend time with them, I only ever got reports.” I laughed again but none of it felt funny. “She invited me along to what I knew were your weekly family get-togethers, and I wanted to come. I wanted to meet them. I was surprised that she asked me to dress up.”

“It’s a special get-together. Eight years after the wedding where everyone came back together.”

“But it’s been eight years, fifteen days and fifteen hours. You missed the anniversary by more than two weeks.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Always so precise.” He shook his head. “Maya couldn’t get out of work, and Will and Birdie were out of town. We waited for the celebration until everyone could make it.”

“Hmm. Now, it’s the complete set.” I didn’t say that I completed the set, but his brows lowered over his eyes and the

golden glints flashed.

He exhaled deeply. “Why did you come here, though, Cam? I’m happy you retired and got out of the business. Without me and Dave to take care of you, The Agency would have eaten you up. You’re too soft-hearted.”

I was insulted. “Up yours, Gio. I’m the one who took care of you. I was the handler. And I’m still taking care of you. Stop being Dave. Be yourself. Dave wouldn’t want this and you know it. Let his family grieve him, and let them know you.” I put a hand on his chest, above his heart.

I could feel his heartbeat warm through my palm. His chest was hard and muscled, and suddenly, I realized that we were standing very close, that no one else was out here in the early evening dark. It was just us, and he smelled so good.

A shiver went down my spine. He saw. He thought I was cold and took off his jacket to drape around my shoulders. I was now enveloped in his scent and warmth, and that made it so much worse. It hurt to breathe, to have him so close and not be mine.

His hands were firm on my shoulders as he made me face him and stared into my eyes. “No. Why are you here, in Brooklyn, where you knew I’d be, with Dave’s family?”

“Your family. They’re your family, too, Gio.”

“Stop avoiding the question. Why did you move here to my neighborhood?”

Had I been avoiding the question? I supposed I had. He still held my shoulders, but I turned my face from him. My hair hid my face. It was better that way. “I’m utterly alone, Gio. The Agency was my life. The only people that mattered to me were you and Dave. Dave died and you left—”

“You left first.”

I’d left because I couldn’t see him get killed too.

“I had nowhere else to go. The two of you have been my life for so long, I went to where that life was still going on. To Brooklyn Heights.”

“You want this family?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I just needed to be near the memory of him, even if no one knows he’s just a memory.”

His shoulders grew tight, then, and the muscle in his jaw leaped. “Were you in love with Dave?”

I had honestly never been so shocked. I let out a guffaw and broke his hold on me. I turned around, giving him my back, not knowing how I could possibly answer that question without crying. Then, I realized. That wasn’t the real question.

I turned back around and forced myself to meet his eyes. “I lied.”

His mouth compressed.

“I didn’t come here to be around the memory of Dave. I came here to be with you.”

“Then why didn’t you text me sometime in the last six months if you missed me so much.”

I let out a soft voice of disbelief. It was time to put it all on the line. “I came here to be *with* you, Gio. I’m in love with you. I have been for eight years, fifteen days, and fourteen hours. I came for you. I want ...” How did I explain the entirety of everything I wanted from him, for him, with him? “You. I love you, and I wanted to see if we could have ... anything.”

I didn’t know what I expected, but I didn’t expect him to stumble away from me as if I were toxic.

CHAPTER SIX: GIO

Cameron Villegas was in love with me? I'd never even considered such a possibility. Cameron Villegas as a girlfriend? Or a lover? More?

This was a disaster. One of us would get killed over this, and knowing my luck, it would be her. And I'd be left alive without her for the rest of my life.

She watched me, horrified. And then let out a sob that she tried to disguise as a laugh. "Never mind; forget I said it." She took off my jacket and shoved it at me and then, turned on her heel and started walking very fast down the dark street. Running, one might even say.

She was running away from me.

She was leaving me, and a pain shot right through my heart. Cameron was leaving. I'd never see her again if I let her go, and I could not have that. I'd just got her back.

I went after her and caught up to her in a few long strides. I caught her arm. "Wait."

She spun around, her face red, tears in her eyes. "What is it, Gio? Clearly, you had no such feelings for me. I said to forget it, okay? I was fooling myself."

"For ten years?" I couldn't believe it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted it to be true.

"No not for ten years you asshole. For eight years —"

"Fifteen days and fourteen hours, I know."

“Eight hours, if you must know. It was when you kissed me. Clearly, you were just putting on an act. A very good one. You convinced me you loved me.” She smiled as if it were all great fun, but tears still filled her eyes. “And I must be a great undercover operative, too, because you never had any idea that my heart was yours from that moment on. But don’t worry, I know how to shove my feelings d —”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I needed to feel her lips on mine. I took her face in my hands and kissed her.

She made a muffled sound of surprise and then, slid her hands around my waist to my back and leaned her hips into mine.

Yes.

Yes, I had wanted this. I had wanted this as long as she had. Longer, if I were to be honest. I’d been pretending we were all business all this time, when really, I’d wanted her in my bed, in my life.

When I lifted my lips from hers we were both breathless. Her eyes fluttered open, and she took time focusing on mine. We searched each other’s faces. This wasn’t a casual thing. This was ten years of friendship, understanding, respect, care, and yes ... love.

“Come home with me.” Her voice was barely audible.

“No,” I said and her face crumpled. Words wouldn’t work right now. I didn’t have the right ones. I shook my head tightly and ran my hand down her arm until I reached hers. I held on and tugged her along down the street until I got to my car. Dave’s car.

A fancy little midnight blue classic Jaguar Roadster, just about the only flashy thing of Dave’s I liked.

I walked her around to the passenger side and held the door open for her. “You’re coming home with me.”

She looked up at me through her eyelashes, looking so uncertain and lush I had to kiss her again.

“Should we talk about this?” Her eyes were full of questions.

I shook my head again. “Words just end up being lies. I don’t want to talk, Cameron, I just want to make love to you.”

She drew her breath in, and her lower lip fell open.

“Get in.”

She bit her lip and nodded, obeying me for once. As she slid into the seat, her skirt fell open to reveal a long line of bare leg. I ran my hand slowly up her thigh and watched her melt. I wanted her to melt. I wanted her to be brainless and muscleless. I wanted her to stop thinking and running.

We drove fifteen minutes to Dave’s loft. It was a billionaire’s home with all the luxury that he could have, and I wanted that for her. I didn’t want to be the only one to receive this bounty. She deserved it more than I, if any of us did. I felt certain Dave would want me to bring her to his place. He’d often pushed me about Cam, asked me if I liked her as more than just our handler.

I had never been able to say yes, though I couldn’t deny it. I couldn’t even think about it. But he seemed to know.

I didn’t look at her on the drive, but I could feel her looking at me. I parked in the garage under the building and skipped the elevator. I didn’t want to wait for it. I grasped her hand again, still without speaking, and drew her up the six long flights of stairs at a rapid pace.

It was a bit of a hike, but she could do it. I knew she was stronger and more fit than she looked. And when we got to the top and I let her in Dave’s apartment, she was just a tiny bit breathless, and for some reason, I liked that.

I pushed her up against the closed door to the loft and kissed her as if my life depended upon it. I felt like it did. If I didn’t kiss her now, I would dissolve into the universe and be no more. She was the key to me, to Gio. She would hold on to me and keep me from disappearing.

She pushed at my shoulders, and I drew away, thinking for a moment that she didn’t want this. But she just flipped her

hair over her shoulder and got busy unbuttoning my shirt, pulling it out of my waistband and then, flinging it onto the floor.

“Gio,” she whispered, as she pulled me around so she was the one pressing me to the door, running her hands up and down my naked chest. “I’ve wanted this —”

“Shh. No talking.” Words would ruin it. Words were lies and promises destined to be broken. Her lips, her hands, her skin. Those were real. The heat between us. Her scent of night gardens and incense. The silk of her hair tangled around my fingers.

I pulled at the tie of her dress sitting right at her hip, and it unraveled, falling open so she was exposed, bare skin and scraps of lace. I didn’t tell her she was beautiful; no words would have been enough. I showed her. Whisking the dress off her shoulders to let it puddle around her feet, I swept her into my arms and strode through the spacious apartment, conscious of the way the New York City skyline glittered through the huge windows. In the darkness, it felt like we were close to the stars, as if we could touch them if we just reached out.

But I was not interested in stars right now. Cameron took all my attention, all my thoughts, my entire breath was her. I closed the door of the bedroom with my foot and let her down to the ground, slowly until her feet were under her, then I sunk to my knees, my hands sliding down her back to rest on her perfect firm ass. I kissed her belly, soft and gently rounded but with an underlying steel. Muscles and force of will.

I looked up her sleek body to see her watching me. Her hands came to rest on my shoulders, and her breasts rose and fell in the black lace bra as she tried to get enough air in. I hooked my thumbs in the sides of her panties and peeled them down her legs, all the way to her feet. As she stepped out of them, I put her leg over my shoulder and kissed her, there, where she wanted me.

Her fingers clenched into my skin and she shuddered. “Oh Gio,” she moaned. I liked that. I kissed her until she broke apart and leaned heavily on me, unable to support her own

weight with the force of her orgasm. I stood and picked her up. She collapsed around me, her head falling to rest against my neck as the aftershocks went through her. She wrapped her legs around my waist and locked her ankles together at my back.

“Gio ... Gio ... Gio ...” If those were the only words she could speak, that would be fine. With her, I was Gio. With her, I was myself.

I carried her over to the bed, crossing the velvety soft antique carpet and whipped the silky bedspread off, leaving an expanse of fine white linen to lay her on.

She released her hold on me and collapsed into the softness of the mattress, looking up at me through those sultry black eyelashes glinting with violet shadow. She reached for my belt buckle. “Off. I want you naked.”

I smiled. “You can have me any way you want me.” I stripped out of my pants and boxer briefs and climbed into bed with her while she smiled.

“Good.” She sighed and slid her hands up my chest, over my shoulders, and down my sides, possessively. She urged me toward her and raised her lips for my kiss, which I was more than willing to give her. I moaned. She tasted like starlight, just as unreachable, but mine.

I finally got rid of her bra, and she was completely naked in my arms. “Gio ...” she said. I liked the sound of my name on her tongue. I’d make her scream it. I put my lips over her nipple and nibbled, bit, and sucked until she was squirming. Her other breast was soft and pliant in my hand. I plucked at the tip until it peaked and she moaned. “Gio ... Gio, I want to touch you.”

“So touch me.” I broke off what I was doing for a minute to tell her so but went back to work. This was the kind of job I could do forever.

“Gio ...” The moan was less. She sounded more frustrated. That was okay, frustrated I could do. But, apparently, she

couldn't. She hauled me up to kiss her and reached down with a sure hand to grasp my cock.

Lightning shot up my spine. I laughed against her lips. "Oh, you meant touch that."

"Yes, I meant that." She showed me what she meant, and I groaned, letting my forehead fall against hers.

"Oh, Cam ... that's perfect. You're perfect."

"That's only the beginning, Gio. Only the start between us."

I nodded. Words gone again. The white frisson filling me took them all away. She led me to her center, where we both wanted me, and I sank into her heat. We gasped in unison and started moving, fast and vigorous.

Unsurprisingly, there was never any of that awkwardness there is sometimes with new partners. It was like we could read each other's minds, knew what the other wanted or would do next. She flipped me over onto my back to ride me at the exact moment I wanted to see her breasts bare and swinging with her motion. She reared back and presented herself to me so I could rub her and drive her crazy, but that wasn't enough. More was never enough. She was right, this was only the beginning for us. I didn't know how it would work out, but I wanted her in my bed every night.

I flipped her over again and took her from behind, and she rode the crest with me as we pounded forward. She twisted her head around to kiss me, and her cries took on a higher-pitched tone. "Gio..." she cried, begged, moaned. I slid my hand around her to touch her. "Oh ..." the one low tone escaped her as I reached deeper, as she took me farther. She was moaning rhythmically. "I want to see you," she gasped. "I want to see your face, Gio, please."

I turned her around, and she was reaching for me, sliding me back in urging me on to go faster, harder again. But I refused. Instead, I slowed down. I held her close and moved soft and deep. She twined one leg around mine, her other propped on the bed to push up into me, but I wouldn't let her

take control. This was us. Me, Gio and her, Cam. We didn't need athletic fucking. That wasn't us. We were beyond that. Her whimpering took on a desperate tone, and I kissed her, slow and deep, trying to put everything I didn't have words for into the kiss.

“Shh ...” I brushed her hair back and kissed her again. “Breathe.” She let her breath out in a broken stream and relaxed into me. We moved against each other, with each other, losing the separation between us, breath, skin, heartbeat; we were one. Time meant nothing. Then, Cam broke, shuddering around me, and I followed her into the most unbelievable orgasm of my life.

The shadows turned into stars. She clung to me, and I held her as we convulsed with the power of whatever it was that had been with us tonight.

Tonight?

I was fooling myself. It was the same thing that had tied us together for years, that we'd refused to face. She was right. I had known. I had felt it. It was why I always had to be distant with her, but now, those reasons were gone. I just wanted her.

Tomorrow would take care of itself.

I brushed her damp hair back from her face. Her eyes were dark and deep in the shadows. “Are you okay?”

She laughed quietly. “Am I okay? Gio ... I am utterly shattered. I've never ...” she ran out of words this time. “Gio,” she said and pressed her lips to mine tenderly. “I love you.”

I put my hand on her chest between her breasts. She was wet with sweat, her heart was fluttering like a hummingbird. “My heart is yours, Cam.”

I deliberately didn't think about what that truth meant.

“Can I stay the night? Can I sleep with you? I don't want to leave you right now. I don't want to be apart from you.”

I reached off the edge of the bed and grabbed the cover from where I'd flung it. I tucked us in and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into my chest in answer. I kissed her

forehead, and I held her against my body. I let the darkness take us down into sleep, a sweeter darkness, a sweeter sleep than had been there before she arrived.



I WOKE UP TO THE FRONT DOOR SENSOR GOING OFF.

It woke Cam up, too. She was immediately alert. “What is it?”

I turned to look at my phone. “Nothing.” It was a relief. I didn’t want a stranger breaking into my apartment, but I was left frustrated. I looked at Cam, naked except for a sheet covering her to her breasts, and thought I would have liked to be alone with her again, but I couldn’t be. “It’s my personal assistant. Ryan.”

“You mean Dave’s personal assistant Ryan.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Yes, of course. But as I’m Dave, that means he’s mine.”

“You’re not Dave. You don’t want to be Dave. You’re Gio. I love Gio. Dave was an idiot; although, he was my best friend. I wish you wouldn’t be an idiot.”

“I can’t talk about this now. I have a meeting with Ryan.”

“He’s your assistant. Send him away. Come back to bed.”

“Can’t. I set him a task yesterday. I need to talk to him.” I looked around to find her dress, and it was nowhere to be seen. I opened up a drawer and handed her a t-shirt and some sweats. “Here. Go to the safe room. I’ll be done with him in twenty, thirty minutes, tops. I’ll send him on an errand, and then you can make your escape.”

“Escape?” she sat up, holding the sheet to her breasts. “Safe room? Gio, I’m not a secret. I won’t blow your cover, even if I don’t think you should be undercover. I’m your old friend, remember? We left your family’s gathering together last night. You don’t need to hide me.”

I couldn’t explain it. I was the silent one. The one who was good with the guns and with action. I did what needed to be done. Dave was the silver-tongued one, and Cam was the

genius. Now, what needed to be done was a retreat. I'd keep her safe and hidden and out of the mess of my life, and then, we'd talk. "Please, Cam. Just go up. I'm not ready for the questions Ryan would ask, and he always asks questions." I held out the sweats. She grabbed them from me and glared as she shoved her legs into the sweatpants.

I would have preferred to have all day with her. But Dave was intruding. "Thank you." I opened the panel in the far wall that opened up the access to the spiral stair in the bedroom. It needed her hand to open it, though, so I waited for her.

"This is stupid," she said, fastening her bra that was incredibly sexy. I'd been too focused on taking it off of her to notice. But I noticed it now, as it got covered by my old t-shirt. It was Gio's old t-shirt. It had "Brooklyn" curved across it and was one of the things I had carried with me from my old life before I'd died.

I hadn't given her a shirt of Dave's, despite the drawers full of them. But one of mine. I couldn't have handled seeing her in Dave's clothes. Because she was mine.

"We will talk about this." She pointed a finger at me and then pressed the same hand to the panel. The door slid open, and she stalked up the stairs. I waited until it was closed to get dressed and meet Ryan.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CAM

HELLO CAMERON.

The computer on the desk blinked a greeting to me. “Shut up, you stupid computer. Show me the living room.”

I hadn’t been in the safe room since it had been set up five years and eleven months and two days ago when we were infiltrating a global drug ring doing business out of the most exclusive clubs in New York City. Dave had been the perfect agent for that case, and we had met up here, as our home base while undercover. All I had to do was be one of Dave’s bimbos. Or play one for anyone who might be watching. No one had been watching, but I was a convincing bimbo when I had to be.

I was not a bimbo now, though. I sat at the computer. There was a lot of computer power in this room. We’d needed access. I liked computers. The boys were capable with them, but I was great.

With a few flicks of my fingers, I had a view of the library and, thus, Gio along with clear audio. Ryan, a lanky young man with impeccably trimmed blond hair and a very fashion-forward suit was holding up a black cloth.

“Do you have a woman here, Dave?” It was my dress in his hand.

“She didn’t want to walk home in a cocktail dress. I let her borrow some of my clothes. She’s gone.”

“That’s very interesting, Dave. What’s her name?”

“That’s none of your business. It’s not like I’ve never had women stay over before.”

Jealousy shot through me. He’d had a girl here. He’d slept with other girls, and I hated them all. It was completely irrational. We’d been nothing but colleagues until last night and I had no claim on him.

But I did. He was mine. He’d never told me about his women when we worked together, but I hated seeing him play Dave and be the womanizer. I hated seeing him come on to women, even if I knew it was an act. But to know that Gio had slept with women here? Maybe in the same bed that we’d been together in?

I released the tight grip I had on the office chair armrests. I had the urge to open up the gun safe and arm myself. I didn’t know who I’d arm myself against, but I felt the need to have cold, hard steel in my hands.

“No ...” Ryan said slowly, his voice saying something other than no, something that told me he knew more details about this issue. I listened intently. “But it’s been quite a while since you brought a woman home. Months. Many, many months. Nearly a year.”

I felt like an eavesdropper. Spying was all well and good, but I was spying on Gio. I didn’t like that feeling. But he had to know that I’d be watching. I stifled my guilt. This was good info. Gio had only started acting as cover for Dave this time around eight months, thirteen days, eight hours ago. It was Dave who brought women here, not Gio at all. If Ryan thought Dave hadn’t been bringing women home that meant it was Gio who wasn’t doing it.

I felt like a fool. But I couldn’t help being glad.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s nobody. What did you find out about the development plan?”

Real estate development? He left me behind in his bed, a nobody, to talk about real estate development?

Oh no. That was terrible. He was not a real estate developer. He was so much more than that, not that there was anything wrong with it, but it wasn't him. It was Dave.

He had lost himself. That grand loft on the other side of that secret door was taking over. The fancy life and the fancy job and the womanizing and all that money. All Gio had was this efficiency apartment that masqueraded as a safe room. A bare white room with nothing but minimal functionality. He was being erased, locked up inside the Dave mask. I hated it.

Gio and Ryan had moved on to talking about buying up properties somewhere up the Hudson Valley, and I thought briefly that that was outside of Dave's usual range of acquisitions. Gio would know that, so he must have some plan.

I'd go ask him about it.

Nobody was I?

I knotted the t-shirt around my waist and rolled up the legs of the sweatpants, stuffing my feet into his slippers and went down the spiral staircase. For a minute, I thought about busting out into the library, but even when I was mad at Gio, I wasn't going to blow his cover or let his assistant in on the existence of his safe room.

I went out through the bedroom, making sure the door was latched behind me, and then, went to the library.

"Knock knock," I said, outside of the open library door.

They both turned to me, Ryan surprised and Gio surprisingly unsurprised.

I smiled at them and then, headed over to Ryan. "You must be Ryan Murphy. I've heard so many amazing things about you. You are the best personal assistant in the world. You deserve a raise."

"Cameron."

I smiled brightly at the dark tone in Gio's voice, then turned back to Ryan, now with a delighted smile. "Cameron?"

he asked and held out his hand to shake.

“Cameron Villegas.”

“Villegas ...”

“I’ve known her for a long time. She’s in my contacts. Cam.”

“Oh! Cam is a girl. For some reason, I thought she was a man. But, obviously, she’s not.”

“My dress!” I cried, completely innocent. “I was wondering where it had gotten to. I had to throw on whatever was in reach.”

“Well you look beautiful anyway. I’m glad to finally meet you.” Ryan was trying to repress his grin, but having a hard time of it. He liked catching his boss in a fib. Liked that I had caught him flat-footed.

“I’m glad to meet you, too. It should have been sooner.”

Ryan raised his eyebrows, as if something had just fallen into place.

Gio’s smile was tight. Oh, it was charming as it always was when he played Dave, but there was an edge to it. He was trying to control things, and that wasn’t the way this was going to go. I could tell he was about to try something that I wouldn’t like. “Cameron is my —”

I beat him to it. “— Girlfriend.”

Of course, I was his girlfriend. There was nothing else I could be. I was innocent, completely innocent.

“Girlfriend?” Ryan asked. The first he’d heard of it, clearly.

“Girlfriend,” Gio confirmed. He was rolling with the story, the way we worked in the field, trusting that we had a reason for saying what we said. I did. I wasn’t letting him go. I wasn’t letting him disappear into Dave. “It’s a recent thing.”

I smiled at Ryan again, smug. I’d won. “But it was a long time coming.”

“Huh, that’s great. You deserve a girlfriend. You need one.”

“Not just any one,” Gio said, back on his game after my ambush. “This one.” He put an arm around me and nuzzled my ear. “Girlfriend?” he whispered quietly.

I nuzzled him back. “You called me a nobody.”

The tension in his body disappeared. He held tight to my hand as I stepped away. He tried to catch my eye, but I didn’t let him.

Ryan was speaking. “Are you guys hungry? I make a mean omelet, but Dave is always too busy to let me cook.”

“I thought you were his business assistant. I mean... I guess I didn’t really know what personal assistants do? You make breakfast?”

“Not usually. Dave is always too busy to let me cook breakfast for him. But I’ll often make some dinner for him to eat whenever he gets around to it. I usually am working out of the library, since he hasn’t wanted to go into the office lately...”

“You’re not eating?” I turned on him. Now, my hand was holding his, I pulled him back toward me.

We locked eyes. *We’re going to talk. Now,* his said. “Ryan, we’d love a couple of omelets. She doesn’t eat mushrooms.”

He put the files down on the library desk. “Got it. Omelets, no mushrooms. Hmm. Mushroom omelets are my specialty, but I want ... I got it, how about brie and blackberry? Yes, we have that. It’s delicious. Try it.”

I had to laugh. I liked him. I was glad Gio had him. “I can’t wait to try it.”

Gio didn’t watch him go; he watched me. The door closed behind Ryan and I whirled. “You’re not eating? I thought you looked thinner. Why aren’t you eating?”

He didn’t answer. He engulfed me in his arms and held me tight. “I didn’t mean it, Cam,” he said, his voice low, just for my ears, but resonant, and sending a shiver down my spine.

“You know you aren’t nobody. I was just trying to throw him off the track. I wanted you safe.”

“Safe? From what, Gio. What is Ryan going to do to me? I’m not a secret. I’m not going to ruin your cover or your mission. The missions are over. You’re not an Agency operative anymore.”

He jerked like I had shocked him.

I stroked his back, running a gentle palm up and down his spine. “Let it go, Gio. It’s over.”

“I let Dave die.” His breath was ragged, and I clung to him.

“No. That was my fault. I was his handler. I should have gotten him out. I should have known before they captured him. You were his cover here in New York; you weren’t even on the same continent as we were. If I can accept it and move on, why do you think you had something to do with it?”

“Because I should have been there. I should have been the one on that mission. I’m the one with the active military background. He was the smart guy. The one with the connections.”

“He was an adult and he was capable. It was his choice and I approved it. He wasn’t a baby.”

“But, if I could keep him safe, if I could have died in his place then —”

“Holy hell, Gio,” I gripped his biceps and looked him in the face. “Is that what you’re trying to do? Die in place of him? No. I won’t let you. You can’t give yourself up for him.”

“But —”

“No, Gio!” my whisper was harsh. I didn’t want Ryan to hear us. I just wanted Gio to listen. “You can’t do it. You have to live; if you don’t live, if you aren’t you, what will I do? What will I have?”

He shook his head like it was impossible. I put my hands up to his face and held on.

“I need you, Gio. I love you. I don’t want to do without you anymore. Ever.”

“I can’t pretend to be your boyfriend as Dave.”

“Do you think I want you to? Dave is an idiot. It would be like dating my brother, if I had one.”

“I can’t fake with you.”

“No faking. Is taking on Dave as cover turning you into an idiot too? Gio. I mean for real. I want to be your girlfriend.”

He licked his lips and looked at mine. My heart thrilled.

“I won’t break your cover, but I also don’t think you should be pretending to be Dave. And I won’t call you Dave.”

“You have to. I can’t break their hearts. To learn that Dave was dead and I was fake? They’d hate me.”

Now it was my turn to shake my head. But I didn’t know. Maybe they would. Compromise. “I’ll call you honey. Because you’re sweet as honey.”

He snorted. “You know I’m not.”

I knew no such thing. He was sweet as honey, surrounded by a thousand stinging bees maybe, but just as sweet. I kissed him behind his ear. “I’ll drink your scotch so you don’t have to and give you my beer.”

“You will?” His hands slid down my back and settled on my waist. They were so large, they nearly spanned my whole waist. I liked the way they felt.

“Yes.”

“That sounds like the kind of relationship I want. Can I be your boyfriend, Cameron?”

“Yes, honey,” I said and kissed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT: GIO

ONE MONTH LATER

It had been a month that Cam and I had been dating, and I'd never been happier in my life. Dave's family — my family I was starting to accept — loved her. She never called me Gio around them, only *honey*, sometimes *asshole*, at which all my cousins and other relations would laugh and laugh. They loved it. They liked seeing me with Cam. They liked seeing me back to my old self. My *old self*. If they only knew.

I just smiled and nodded. It was odd, the happiness. I knew it was fake because this was a fake life. It couldn't last, I knew. Something would ruin everything, but not yet. I wouldn't let it be ruined just yet. And I was going to love her until it happened.

Because I loved her, I did. I hadn't told her I loved her yet, hadn't said the words ... something about feeling the need to hold some secret back, but I knew she knew I loved her, that it was just words. And I knew she also knew it was probably some sort of holdover from years of being in combat and then with The Agency. Everything was secrets.

If she was my handler still, she would have sent me to psych to get my head shrunk, but she wasn't, so she could just try to analyze me herself. I'd grab her and throw her onto her bed and roll her over, touching her with my mouth and hands and body until she shuddered with anticipation and was wordless with desire.

That was the kind of relationship we had. We just understood each other without words. Words were somehow

unnecessary. Even though she wanted to keep stringing them out of me.

She'd gotten up from our love-making when I pulled on my jeans. She took my t-shirt and threw it over her naked body and went over to the kitchenette to fix us some lunch.

I liked her little studio apartment three floors above the busy Brooklyn Heights street where she had her store. It was bright and full of colors, like her. It was her safe place, her sanctuary. It was so small there wasn't room for a couch, but she didn't need one. It had a big bed and a couple of old armchairs and a tv and stereo, the old fashioned kind, and stacks of records and DVDs. She had art all over the walls from all the places she'd been in her travels in her career with the agency. It was like seeing her life to sit in her apartment with her. It was like seeing who she was inside of her shields.

I knew she didn't let a lot of people up here. She lived mostly at her shop and on the city streets of Brooklyn, in the parks, at Duke's, and at Dave's loft. That was the outside world. This was the inside world where we could be ourselves without the act, always the act.

I stretched out in her bed, propping myself up with her many pillows, the October sun lazily slanting in the window and watched her put together one of her famous charcuterie boards for our lunch. She loved charcuterie boards. It reminded her a little bit of her childhood when she'd visited her grandmother in Brazil before she'd died, before all of her family had died, leaving Cam alone. Now, she made me charcuterie boards and filled them with whatever she found at the gourmet shop down the street. Honestly, not a place I would have gone, regular old salami and provolone was good enough for me, but not for her. It was like a gift of love, the way she made me lunch in little bites on those honed slabs of wood.

A plate could have done just fine. But not for her. Charcuterie board it was.

I don't think she even knew that she was doing a little dance as she cut the dried meats and cheeses and set out little

bowls of olives and fruit. She added a fresh piece or two of parsley that she cut from one of her little pots of herbs in the window. It was like a little plate of magic.

She turned around with the board in one hand and two beers in the other, her hair waved over one eye ending in curls on her shoulder. “Do you want to come sit at the table?” There was a little cafe table by the other window surrounded by hanging plants where she liked to eat. There were also hanging crystals which scattered rainbows around the room. Magic.

“No,” I said. I stretched out on her bed with the white and blue striped cotton sheets. Her eyes ran over my chest and my legs, encased in denim, all the way down to my toes. “Let’s eat in bed.” I grinned at her. I would tell her I loved her soon. Maybe today.

“In bed?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Mmhm.” I crossed my ankles and put my hands behind my head and nodded slowly. Those eyes raked me head to toe again. I knew what she was thinking. I was thinking the same thing.

And I was thinking that even though I loved when she wore my t-shirt and nothing else, I liked it better on the floor.

I patted the bed next to me and sat up. “Join me, Cameron.”

“If we make a mess on my bed, I’ll kill you. And I know how to do it.”

She sat. I took the heavy wooden board and put it on the bed. “You like the messes I make.” I cupped the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. She sank down next to me, giving me that kiss that felt like a continuation of a conversation that we were always having.

“I like you like this,” she said when she broke the kiss. “You’re more relaxed at my place.”

“That’s because you don’t live in a billionaire’s loft, and I don’t feel like I’m faking with you.” I shouldn’t have said that. I knew she wanted me to tell the truth, but I couldn’t do it as long as the family would be destroyed by Dave’s death. And

they'd always be destroyed. It didn't hurt me that much to pretend. They gained something and I didn't lose anything. I didn't have anything better to live for.

Other than Cameron, anyway. A little bit of hope, a little bit of yearning rose in me. A life with just her, where I could be me with all the cousins and they wouldn't hate me for not being Dave, for being alive while he was dead. But it couldn't happen.

I ducked my head. I didn't want her to see my face. She would know what I was thinking and try to convince me to tell them the truth.

"Eat," she said and plucked a grape from the charcuterie board, popping it in my mouth.

The sweetness burst against my tongue like the feelings inside me, feelings for her. Soon would become now.

She sat cross-legged on the bed next to me as I leaned back on my hands and watched her sort through the board and make two tiny sandwiches with crackers and "a nice manchego" as she called it and some abruzzese salami with a tiny bit of pepper jam dabbed on top. "Open up," she said with the cracker at my lips.

I obeyed. She liked to manage me. I found I often didn't mind. And she looked so pleased when I ate her offering. She nibbled at her own, and I wanted her always.

"I love you, you know," I said. And there it was. I said the words. Finally. I'd been thinking them for so long, ten years – or however long it actually was which she would tell me if I said ten years. I think I'd been so used to not telling her that I loved her that I just couldn't get the words out, they were stuck in habitual secrets. But now, I had. It felt momentous.

Her expression didn't change. She continued nibbling at her cracker, finally popping the last crumb into her mouth and chewing it. She smiled at me.

"Well?" I sat up. "Aren't you going to say something?"

She smiled at me beatifically and opened her mouth to speak. "Your feet are so beautiful. I love your feet."

I blinked at her before sputtering. “What?”

She pointed at my feet. “They’re very shapely.”

I just stared at her, bewildered.

She threw her head back and laughed. Her body shook with it. The bed shook with it. I waited for her madness to stop. She was laughing at me.

She finally did stop, or tried to stop, but the corners of her lips kept curling up. “Oh, come on, Gio – you know I love you. Just as I knew you loved me before you told me. I can read you. I can always read you. That’s how we are. You don’t need to tell me. You didn’t need to be scared.”

“I wasn’t scared ...” I was kind of pissed off, now, if I must be honest.

She narrowed her eyes and her muscles tensed. She was right. We could read each other. And I knew precisely what she intended. She threw herself at me, intending to tackle me flat on my back. If I hadn’t seen her body shift telling me she was about to attack, I might have been knocked off balance, but as it was, I was prepared. I held her off with two hands on her shoulders. She always forgot that she was just a tiny little thing and I was not.

“Gio ...” she whined, “let me hold you.”

“You, miss, will have to be patient. I have it on good authority that if our charcuterie board makes a mess, I will be in a whole heap of trouble.” I set her next to me on the bed while I gathered up our little picnic and set it over on the cafe table by the window.

I walked back to the bed and stood there looking down at her. She had removed the t-shirt leaving herself gorgeously, amazingly naked. “Well?” she said impatiently. “What are you waiting for?”

Careful not to telegraph my next move, I swept down over top of her, pressing my body over hers. “Tell me again about my feet.”

She giggled. I loved the sound of her giggle. She'd always been so serious, always trying to maintain her authority as our handler. I never used to get to see her this way, playful.

“Oh, Gio. It's not your feet, although they are very lovely and masculine.” She hooked her fingers in my belt loops and pulled my hips towards her. “It's you. It's always been you. I love you. You know I love you.”

“You ruined my romantic moment.” I glared and growled, although I did not feel at all angry.

She raised her chin. “You deserve it for making me think you didn't love me back a month ago. I've been waiting all this time.”

“Are you really that devious?”

“I am a head spy after all, Gio. What did you expect?”

“I expected you to be breathless with love and devotion.” I brushed her hair back from her face. One lock had fallen over her eye, and I wanted to see her, all of her.

“I am,” she said, and she did sound a bit breathless. I eased up on her, lifting my body off of hers and shifted my weight onto my elbows. “That's my natural state around you, breathless with love and devotion. I hide it well.”

“Don't hide it with me. Don't hide anything with me.” I bracketed her beloved face in my hands.

“I love you, Gio Esposito. I don't want to hide it. Take your romantic moment back. Or make another one. I promise, I won't ruin it again. Take it all. Everything you do, every moment I have with you is full of romance, love, desire.” She arched her back up so she could kiss me, but I wouldn't let her. “Take me, my love.”

I kissed her, nibbling at her lips. She opened them for me but I refused the invitation. She wanted to play games, so that's what we'd do. She rose up to capture my lips, but I avoided her and slid across her cheekbone to her ear. “Are you laughing now?”

“Gio ...” she whined, wrapping her strong legs around my hips.

I bit her ear and nibbled down the column of her neck to her pulse, biting there. She clawed at my back, the whimper settling in the back of her throat. I bit and then sucked, drawing her skin into my mouth as she writhed under me.

No mercy. Her fingers scrambled around to the button of my jeans and opened it, trying to slip inside and take hold of me, trying to drive me out of my mind so I couldn't hold back and torture her. But oh, no.

I caught both of her hands and pinned them to the bed above her head.

“What’s your plan now, agent?”

She panted and her eyes slid closed. When she opened them again, they were glazed, her lips were soft and open. Her body had gone boneless under mine. “Whatever you want, my love. I have no plans. I’m at your mercy.”

I felt myself grow harder at her words and nudged her with my hips.

Her head lolled back. “Whatever. I’m yours.”

“Keep your hands up there,” I said, pressing on her wrists one last time. She nodded weakly, her eyelashes fluttering as I let go and began to slide down her body, tasting and touching as I went.

It didn't take long before she was writhing. But she did not move her hands from above her head. In fact, she hung on to the pillow, wringing it in her fingers.

I liked to see her helpless under me, I liked knowing that she willingly gave herself to me, that she trusted me to please her. Trusted me not to harm her. I'd never harm her. She was half my soul. With her, anything could be made right.

Little licks, light flicks of my tongue tortured her breasts. I skimmed my hands over her body, down her ribs where I knew she was exquisitely sensitive. Chills broke out on her skin. I

spread her legs and tasted her there, refusing her the pleasure that she was craving.

She'd stopped complaining, stopped demanding, stopped managing me. She whimpered and squirmed, but I didn't relent. Soft, gentle fingers, lips, tongue. Driving her mad until she went silent and rigid, arching her back off the mattress as she came with a keening cry, again and again.

Then, without a word, I could wait no longer. I slid into her, fast and hard. She groaned and clutched at my arms, holding onto me as I pumped into her. I didn't take her to task for letting go of the pillow, for touching me. We both knew it had been a game, and the goal the entire time had been this. Love. Wild passionate love. The love that had lain buried between us for so many long years but was finally out in the open, and the most soul stirring thing either of us had ever experienced.

We belonged together.

After, when we'd regained our breath and our muscles and she had tired of nuzzling me with her lips and brushing her fingers lightly through my short trimmed hair, I'd brought back the charcuterie and the beer bottles that were now slightly less than cold. We drank and we ate and we celebrated our love, wordlessly.

She'd turned on a movie. *Casablanca*. I knew it was her way of giving me back my romance, but it didn't matter. What mattered was that she lay in my arms as it played, and we were together.

My cell phone rang halfway through the movie. It was on Cam's side of the bed, and I told her to leave it. No one ever called me. Anyone I wanted to hear from would text first. It was probably a sales call, but Cam, always the responsible one, rolled over so I could see her delicious ass and picked up the phone looking at the screen.

She harrumphed. "It's William."

"Will? He always texts." A chill went through me. I took the phone that she handed to me. "What's wrong?" I asked.

“It’s grandmother. She’s been in an accident.”

I found myself standing without remembering getting up. Cam was on her knees on the bed, watching me. “Is ... is grandmother okay?”

Cam’s eyes widened.

“Yes. She’s okay. A broken shoulder from the car seat. It’s Whittaker who was hurt. He crashed headfirst into a building while he was driving grandmother home from East Hampton.”

“Whitaker? He’s a superb driver. He crashed her car?” Cam and I met eyes. That didn’t make sense. There had to be some reason for it. “Is he okay?”

“No, actually.” Will sighed. “He’s in the hospital, unconscious.”

I swore. “Is grandmother okay with that?”

“We have her at home now resting. Once she is over the shock, she’ll be calmer.”

“Let me guess. She wouldn’t leave Whitaker at the hospital, so you gave her a sedative and took her home anyway.”

“Of course she wouldn’t!” Cam hissed. “They’ve been together for thirty years.” She swore her own curse. “Your family is so clueless. Just because he’s the help they can’t even see the grand love affair that they’re having.”

I put my finger to her lips. Of course, she was right. But we were the operatives. It wasn’t our place to blow up family secrets if the family didn’t want to know them.

“How did you know? Never mind. You always know everything. I won’t ask how you know it. I know you won’t answer. Anyway, you need to get over here to grandmother’s. We need you. Mom needs you.”

That was ominous. Either being needed by my aunt who was my false mother for emotional reasons, or perhaps, slightly more worrying because Will suspected foul play. And when there was foul play, he came to me, knowing that I would be the best to handle it.

I looked at Cameron. She was naked, kneeling on the rumpled sheets where we'd made love all day long, but she was dead serious. She already was in agent mode.

I was needed. "I'll be there," I said.

I turned off the phone and handed it back to her. "We're going to grandma's house."

CHAPTER NINE: CAM

I was nervous. Much more nervous than I usually was before starting a mission. Probably because this wasn't a mission. This was life. I was meeting Gio's family.

He was driving his pretty midnight blue Jaguar, and I couldn't say it was the most luxurious car I'd ever been in. It was very old, but it was nice, with its buttery camel leather seats. And I could tell Gio liked it. He sped through the city streets, over the bridge, and uptown easily. Confidently.

Gio glanced over at me. "You know you didn't have to do that."

"Do what?"

"Get all dressed up."

I looked down at my black and white print dress and heels and wine velvet blazer. "No, I really did. This is the first time meeting your grandma and mom and aunt. I need to make a good impression." I had put my hair into a chignon.

"They're not my... she's not my mom."

"I know she's Dave's mom, but she thinks she's your mom. And she is your aunt. And I'm your girlfriend. I'm nervous."

He slanted a look over at her, grinning, then took her hand, kissing the knuckles. "That's cute."

I made a face at him. "Don't make fun of me."

“I mean, I’m pretty sure you can take the little old ladies, tough guy.” He was smirking.

“Ugh,” I said and thought about pulling my hand from his, but I didn’t really want to.

We pulled up in front of Gio’s grandmother’s mansion on the Upper East Side, not far from the Metropolitan Museum and Central Park, and I was glad I’d dressed up. The house was intimidating.

I tended to forget that Dave and his family were all billionaires, that they had the kind of money that could support a small country. They seemed so normal, just with nicer homes. But it was rather a slap in the face to witness their grandmother’s luxurious, old money wealth.

The mansion was six stories tall, with an imposing granite facade and ranks of large windows. The driver that Gio’s aunts had hired for his grandmother while Whittaker was out of commission took the keys of the Jaguar to park, and Gio led me through the wrought iron gates of the residence.

He took my hand and leaned in to me. “Breathe,” he whispered. “You know how to do this. It’s just like any undercover mission.”

“Yeah, for you,” I scoffed. “You’ve got your fake identity. I want to ...” *marry you*. I stopped myself short before I spoke out loud the desire I hadn’t even known I had. “... make them like me,” I substituted, not calming myself the least little bit.

“Why wouldn’t they like you? They’d despaired of Dave ever bringing home a decent woman. And the kids have already vouched for you. Don’t worry. Donna is the one you have to impress, Dave’s mother. She’s much nicer than her sister, Barbara, who, everyone agrees, is a bit of a bitch.”

He made me laugh. “There’s nothing wrong with a strong-willed woman,” I said.

“You’ve got that right.” He kissed my hand again, and I had a hard time not clinging to him and kissing him forever and never letting him go. But then, the glass and iron door was

opened to find a gray-haired woman in somber black waiting for them.

“Marta,” Gio said.

“Mr. David, it’s good you’re here. You’re the last, and your grandmother has been asking for you.”

“I thought she’d been given a sedative. I expected her to be asleep.”

“Oh, no. Your grandmother barely sleeps at all. She was awake by the time they got her home, and cranky! Well, let’s just say she’s kept me busy. Everyone else is in the parlor, but you should go up.”

He led me into the large foyer. The floor was marble. The ceiling was high. There were paintings on the wall that, if I recalled correctly, and I was pretty sure I did recall correctly, were museum-quality Klimts and Manets and the like. I thought I saw a Rembrandt. I started for the stairs, which were a work of art in themselves, a curlicued iron balustrade, like a seashell heading up, but he held me back and went for a small door.

“It’s on the top floor — let’s take the elevator.”

“I thought you didn’t like elevators.” He always wanted to take the stairs if he could.

“Only when I want to get somewhere fast. We should take the slow elevator. I am dreading this.”

“Well then,” I said and we stood while the gears of the elevator ground loudly in the shaft. I could hear it making its way down to us on the first floor. “Are you sure this is safe?”

“Perfectly. My grandmother likes things a little bit old-fashioned. She doesn’t like the newfangled renovations. It’s been checked. I made sure.”

The elevator finally came, and Gio opened the door by hand, gesturing for me to go first. It was a small elevator. He closed the door behind us and pressed the fifth floor.

As soon as the elevator started moving, he pushed me up against the wall and kissed me.

I did not resist. Why would I? It was what I wanted. I threaded my fingers through his hair, which was starting to get a little long, curling just a bit in a way that Dave's hair had not. I didn't mention it, just enjoyed the length and let him run his hands wherever on my body he wanted, even as he hiked my skirt up and began to tease me over my panties. I gasped with his touch.

The elevator ground to a halt.

He groaned and stepped back from me, smoothing my skirt back down. "That elevator seemed a lot slower when we were waiting for it to come down and get us."

I chuckled and straightened his hair with my hands, wiping a bit of my neutral lipstick off of his lips. Red lipstick was not appropriate for meeting the grandmother. Red lipstick was for *hot babe*, But I was going for *good girlfriend* today.

He reached out and, with his thumb, returned the favor. "You're beautiful. She'll love you. I do."

My heart was beating so hard and it wasn't over meeting Minerva Carleton. I took his hand. He was all I ever wanted. "Okay, let's get this over with. It should all be easy after this."

He laughed and opened the elevator door, escorting me down the oak panel hall, with more paintings ... this time landscapes by Monet and Fragonard. I shook my head after seeing the lovely paintings. "This house is ..."

"Impressive. I know."

"I was thinking 'intimidating.'"

He squeezed my hand and we stopped at the large wooden door at the end. Gio knocked lightly. "Grandmother?" he whispered, hoping, I knew, that she had fallen asleep.

"David?" The voice came loud and querulous. "David, is it you? Come in, come in. Where have you been, boy? I've been waiting for you."

He cracked the door slowly. "I've brought someone with me, Grandmother."

“Have you? Is it that girl I keep hearing about?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. I suspect she already knew and had her own spy system in place to tell her what was happening in her house. I suspected the housekeeper. “It’s about time you brought her around. Well bring her in. I’m not getting any younger.”

The door swung open silently onto a sunny, formal bedroom in shades of sky blue and cream. Box pleated full-length curtains in a pattern that was reminiscent of the Monet in the hall were pulled back so the light came in. There was a sitting area by the window with two high-backed armchairs, and the bed was large. Not a four-poster, like I had almost expected, but king-sized bed. She was sitting back in it like a queen, her arm in a sling propped up with multiple pillows with a lap table off to the side and a pot of tea.

Her cell phone blinked blue before going dark again. Her spy answering her questions, no doubt. She turned it over so the face was down, and then, looked at us, back and forth before settling on Gio.

“This is Cameron Villegas. Cam, this is my grandmother. Minerva Carleton.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Terrorized the grandchildren, have I?”

I had to smile. “Not quite. They adore you. They think the terror is wonderful.”

“Well, aren’t you a pretty thing.” She nodded happily. “Call me grandmother, everyone does. And maybe someday ...” she raised an eyebrow at Gio.

“Grandmother ...” he warned. “Hasn’t anyone told you not to meddle?”

“As if they’d dare. You’re the last of my grandchildren to settle down. But you’re special. You’re my first grandchild, David.”

Gio didn’t answer. He stood still, his head down. He was her first grandchild, Gio was, but she didn’t know it. He was the son of her first son who she had given up to his father as a

teenage mother. It was a scandal that had never gotten out. A dark secret at the heart of this family. Dave was the first legitimate grandson, and that was who she thought she was talking to now. My heart went out to Gio.

He finally lifted his head, sat down on the side of the bed, and took the old woman's hand in his. "I know that, grandmother." He smiled at her with a tenderness he had not often let himself show.

I realized, suddenly, that Gio loved his grandmother. His own family life had been difficult and contentious with his father and his controlling ways that made him want to leave young, too young. But here, as Dave, he'd found a family. A real family, even if the relations were sometimes a step removed, they were his family. He even got his little brother, Duke back, the one person he'd regretted leaving behind.

He wasn't just pretending to be Dave for Dave's sake, or Dave's family's sake. He was doing it for his own sake. He wanted to be a part of this family, he wanted to be accepted and loved, and he didn't believe that he would be as Gio, as the old, dark secret from over half a century ago.

"You're a special boy," she said, gripping his hand with her good one.

I was suddenly standing there, holding back tears. This was the family he deserved, the family that was *his* and had been denied due to circumstances beyond his control and it wasn't fair.

I quickly wiped my eyes before either of them saw me.

Then, Minerva's hand pulled him closer. "I need you, Dave. I need your help. You're the only one who can do it."

Gio wasn't even surprised. He just settled closer. "What do you need?" he asked darkly. Not even pretending that he wouldn't do it if it was dangerous or illegal. He would do anything for his grandmother. He would do anything for the people he loved, and they didn't even know who he was.

"It wasn't an accident," she hissed. "I don't know how it happened, but Whittaker was driving as usual — he is an

excellent driver. I trust him implicitly. The brakes just went out.” Her eyes were piercing. “He checks that engine every week. He checked it before we went out to the Hamptons. That car is like his child. It couldn’t have been poor maintenance or an aging engine. He would never let me ride in a car that wasn’t safe. Why, he complains all the time about your Jaguar. He says those cars are undependable.”

“Grandmother, I’m sure —” Gio was getting ready to tell her something to brush her off.

“No! You aren’t sure. I’m sure. There was nothing wrong with that car yesterday. He checked it. Someone tampered with the brakes. He had enough time to warn me so I could put on my seat belt, and then, he drove the car into a barn instead of mowing down innocent people as we had nearly reached a busy town. He saved me, and he saved an untold number of innocents and sacrificed himself.” Her eyes were bright with passion. “Whittaker is a hero! And I might lose him!” She sobbed then.

Gio sat there and let her lean on him while he gingerly put his arms around her, careful not to hurt her shoulder. The tears lasted a few moments at best. Pulling herself together, she sat up.

“Your grandfather was a bastard.”

Gio choked.

“Oh, don’t be like that. I could use a lot worse language in describing him. I married him. I have a right to tell the truth about him. He was a horrible man, and I was glad when he died. But I have been with Whittaker for thirty-two years, and my life has been filled with happiness every day because of him. If it weren’t for the scandal, I would have married him years ago. I am tired of pretending that he isn’t the love of my life. I suppose it will be all out in the open now. You can judge me if you will.” She glared at him like it was his fault. He shook his head. Of course, he wouldn’t judge her, and he wasn’t shocked either — he’d known. She swallowed back her emotions. “But that’s for the best, David.” She turned to him.

“I need to know what happened. I need to tell him that it wasn’t his fault.”

“Okay, I’ll do what I can. Let me talk to everyone downstairs to see if they have any more information.”

“Oh!” She waved in disgust. “Don’t ask them. They think I’m overwrought. I am never overwrought. They said I’m in shock and I don’t know what I know. As if I became a fool just because we were in an accident.”

“I will look into it. I promise, Grandmother.”

“You had better. You think I don’t know your secret?”

Gio froze. So did I. I counted three heartbeats before he spoke again. “My secret?”

Minerva sighed and pursed her lips. “That you’re a spy.”

His body relaxed minutely but I saw it. “I retired. This year, actually.” He didn’t even try to pretend about that. “It’s called covert operative, though.”

“Hmmp.” The noise was a satisfied sound. “Yes, well. I knew it. You were always so mysterious, but I figured it out. It’s good to have you in the family. You know things. And you know how to keep secrets.”

“That I do.”

“You shouldn’t be taking the risks with yourself, though. We need you here. You could die.”

“I know, Grandmother.” He swallowed heavily. “That’s why I left.”

She harrumphed again. “I suppose that’s also why you let yourself get serious about a nice girl like Cameron.”

She turned her eyes to me, finally.

“It is actually.”

“I approve.”

“I live for your approval.” He stood up. “Should I go talk to everyone then? I want to get as much information as I can. They might know something.”

“As long as you promise that you’ll look into it even if they tell you I’m a silly old woman who is seeing conspiracies in accidents. You of all people should understand that nothing is as simple as it seems, and we all have enemies, especially us. This family is an old one, and anyone with the wealth and power we have has enemies. And I want you to be discreet about it. Don’t let any scandal get out.”

“Do you think I would do anything but?”

“No, I don’t.” She was satisfied. “Oh, wait. I wanted to make sure you’ll be coming to my Halloween costume gala tomorrow night.”

“You can’t possibly be thinking to still hold that Halloween ball. You almost died.”

“I did not, and how dare you think I would forego my traditional Halloween gala when I have held it for forty years. I couldn’t possibly face the ridicule if Minerva Carleton failed to give the party that everyone waits for every year. Why, do you know what the ladies at my club would say? My social status would plummet. Of course, the gala will continue. And I will go. And I expect you there, too. Bring Cameron.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was planning to, Grandmother.”

“Go now.” He bent to kiss her cheek. “But leave Cameron with me.”

He froze again. “Leave Cam?”

“Yes. Leave her. I need some help getting my medicine. I’m starting to ache again.”

“I can —” he started.

She held up a hand. “No, Cameron.” She patted the bed and looked at me expectantly. “We’re going to have a little girl talk.”

I straightened my spine. Now it was showtime. I crossed to the bed, and he put a hand on my arm, looking at me as if he was about to send me into my first field mission. I remembered that day. I grinned at him and kissed his cheek.

“We’ll be okay, honey. Go on, talk to your family about the accident. I’ll meet you in the parlor.”

“You’ll get lost. This house is huge.”

“Please!” Minerva snorted. “I’ll call Marta up, and she’ll show her the way. You act like I haven’t had guests in this house before.” She shooed Gio away. He looked doubtful but I smiled at him and nodded my head.

He reluctantly backed out. “Don’t hurt her,” he said at the door.

“I would never hurt your grandmother,” I said, nearly offended.

“I was talking to her.”

Minerva laughed. “I make no promises, but I suspect any woman you find yourself with can take it.”

He harrumphed a sound that didn’t sound that different from his grandmother’s but left without complaint.

“Good,” she said. “Go check the door. I don’t trust him not to stand there eavesdropping, and I want to talk to you in private. I’m glad you came. I’ve been trying to find a way to get to you without showing up at your little shop unannounced.”

It was an odd question, but I couldn’t say it wasn’t wise. He might very likely be listening at the door. I put my ear against it and heard his footsteps on the parquet floor. The elevator must have stayed where it was on the top floor because it opened without him having to wait for it and then closed. I heard the creaking of the gears from inside her room. “That elevator is very loud. I’m surprised you haven’t gotten it fixed. It sounds like he’s gone downstairs though.”

“And that’s why I like it loud. This house is so big. I like to know who is moving around and where they are going.” She fixed me with a straight look. “So, I’ve heard a lot about you. You’re good for him.”

“Am I?”

“Sit down.” I walked back over to her and perched on the edge of the bed where she could see me and talk to me. “Yes. That is what I’ve heard. Everyone was worried about him ... he seemed to withdraw from everyone; he seemed darker, somehow. Until you. You changed him.”

I shook my head, feeling a pressure in my throat and not knowing the words to say. “He’s been through a lot. Don’t judge him.”

“My dear.” She put her uninjured hand on mine. “That is not at all what we’re doing. We were worried about him. He seemed, well, sad. And that was not at all like David. He’s always been mysterious, sometimes distant, but never sad.”

I didn’t know how to explain the circumstances without doing what I really wanted to do, which was tell her who Gio was, and how he was the best, most honorable man I knew and how he was willing to sacrifice his entire identity to keep them from grief. He was wrong-headed and stubborn, but I knew his heart was in the right place and I wanted ... oh I wanted him to have this family. I wanted them to know him because I knew that if they knew him, they would love him just as much as they loved Dave. I did. Or more. I loved him more. And it wasn’t that Dave wasn’t amazing. I missed him every day. It was because I loved Gio with every molecule of my being, and I wished his family could know him as I did.

Minerva was watching my face very closely. I hadn’t done at all well with hiding my emotions, I knew that. I never would have been a good field agent, just the way Dave used to tease me. I was too open.

“He’s not,” I said slowly, “the same man he used to be.” I cleared my throat. “You’re right. He was a secret operative, and that is not an easy life.”

“You knew.”

“I did. I knew him while he was with The Agency.”

“You’re an operative too.”

“Was.” It was close enough. She didn’t need to know the details. “I retired too.”

“You left when David did.”

That was exactly right. David left everyone, and I left the Agency. I tried to smile, but it felt wrong on my face. I didn't trust myself with words. I nodded.

“Something happened to make you both leave.” I nodded twice. Three times. I stopped before I started bobbling my head like a souvenir toy. “And you love him, and being together is allowing you to heal.”

I tried a smile again and this one stuck. “He'll be okay, eventually, but yes. He's changed.” A deep shuddering breath escaped from me. “He's not the man he used to be. But he's a good man, he's a deserving man, and I hope someday, you'll love this man the way you loved the old man because he loves you. He'd do anything for you, all of you.”

Minerva's brow was creased, as if she was trying to put together the pieces of what I was saying, as if she was just on the edge of figuring it out. She might, I thought. She really might.

“You, of all people, understand how much weight the dark secrets of our past can have.”

Minerva looked surprised, a little bit afraid, even as if she was remembering her own dark secret from far in the past.

“Your family is old. You understand the secrets and scandals that must be handled. Things happened while we were working in The Agency that changed him, especially, but me as well.”

“And these are secrets and scandals?”

I had to smile. “A bit of one, a bit of the other.” Dave was dead; that was the secret. Gio was the son of the son she had abandoned as a child. That was the scandal. And it was hers.

Her smile was gone. Her brown eyes were sharp.

“Just love him. Just love him as much as I love him. That's all I want.”

Minerva pressed her lips together and picked up the phone. She spoke into it. “Marta.” Then, she put it down. “I find that I

am tired after all. From the shock, you see. And the sedatives they forced on me. I must rest. Wait for Marta outside in the hall.”

I stood. “Did I say something wrong?” She sounded ... strange.

Her chin rose. “Not at all. You’ve given me some things to think about, and I really have been through quite the trying day. With my age comes the prerogative to demand time to rest.” A brief smile came to her lips. “But I meant what I said. You’re good for him. And that means I like you. But still ... I need to rest.”

I nodded and left the room.

When Marta took me down to the parlor and I reunited with Gio, we focused on the mission. Trying to find out the particulars of the case. Oh, it wasn’t a mission, not officially, but my suspicions had already been raised.

We didn’t stay much longer, wanting to drive out to the accident and check out the car and the site. He questioned me about my meeting with his grandmother on the way out, and I gave him a vague report, feeling somehow uneasy with the way she’d looked at me when I told her about what Gio had been through. I didn’t want him to know about that. But that conversation ended when we got out to the car, which had indeed had its brakes cut. It was not an accident at all.

On the way back to Brooklyn, I made some calls to get some information from my contacts in The Agency to see if my suspicions might carry water.

It didn’t take long to get confirmation.

“We should stop,” I told him. “I need to talk to you, and I don’t think you should be driving when I tell you what I found out.”

His jaw tensed and his knuckles turned white. I knew then that it hadn’t only been my suspicions. He’d shared them. “Was it my father?”

I sighed. “Yes. Pull over. We can talk. I know you’re upset.”

“We’re almost home. I’ll be upset there.”

But by the time we got back to his place, the giant, expansive loft with the brilliant views of the city, he had turned to ice. Black ice. Dark and cold and distant and I knew that was what Minerva had been describing. That was how he was when Dave died, when he couldn’t bear it any longer. When he was shattered inside.

His father. The man who had traumatized his life and forced him to join the army at eighteen just to be free from his malignant presence was back to ruin his life again.

I couldn’t let Gio disappear into that darkness.

When he dropped his files and phone on the coffee table and stalked into the bedroom, I followed him, putting myself in his path. “Cam,” he protested.

I stood on my toes and cupped my fingers around his neck, making him look at me. “I love you.”

He blinked slowly and tried to look away. I wouldn’t let him. “Gio,” I said. “I’m with you.”

He shook his head.

“I’m here for you.”

Suddenly his breath was short. His eyes no longer icy, but burning with a golden fire. He grabbed me and kissed me as if he would die if he didn’t. I felt the same, clinging to him because I needed him.

He plucked at the buttons on my dress and then gave up, ripping it down the front. I didn’t care. I shrugged out of it and went for the buttons on his shirt while he picked me up and carried me to the bed. He tossed me down before I’d finished with his shirt; he didn’t waste time, popping the last buttons on his shirt to get rid of it, too. I removed my bra while he stripped out of his pants, and then, we were both naked and panting for each other. He thrust into me without preamble. I wanted to take him as deep as I could, deeper than ever before. He was in every part of me and I was his.

His lovemaking was ferocious. He was like a wild man, until somewhere, somehow, the anger transmuted into something just as powerful but no longer painful, just painfully sweet and tender. Melancholy. Real.

Our mutual sweat slicked between us, and the measured panting of our breath created a world that was just our own, just him and I, connected in a way no one else had ever connected with me. "Gio," I said, just his name, his real name. "Gio." As he pushed into me slow and sweet. "Gio." As I strained into him. "Gio." As stars cascaded through my head. "Gio." As he collapsed on top of me and I never wanted him to leave. He was my Gio.

CHAPTER TEN: GIO

She was still sleeping in the large bed when I woke up the next morning. I twitched the curtains closed over the windows so she would be able to rest more. She didn't have to get up just because the sun was up. Or I was.

I had some things to think about and some plans to be made. I would be visiting my father's house, and it was not something I wanted to do. I was dead to him, and I wanted to stay dead. But I needed to know why, and I needed to stop him. My life was teetering on the edge, and I could keep on hiding. But it seemed something beyond my own comfort was at stake now.

The only thing that I felt good about in my life right now was Cameron. Letting myself love her was the only thing that made it better. I could trust her with my life and happiness because I knew her inside and out.

I put aside thoughts of my father. I needed some sustenance before I tackled that issue. I set up the espresso machine and pulled out the chocolate croissants that Ryan always made sure to keep my refrigerator stocked with.

It wasn't that they were my favorite, it was that he ate them when he was here, so today, Ryan's pastries would be going to feed the woman I loved. He would just have to stock more.

I laughed at the thought as the espresso poured into two separate tiny cups and I steamed the milk. Cameron liked to start the day with a sweet milky coffee. She said it was

because of her South American parents, and I was sure that was true. But I preferred just dark, unsweetened espresso. And that was due to my Italian parents. I remembered how my mother, before she died, would herself drink a latte in the morning. But my father would have a large doppio espresso with a twist of lemon rind. How odd that I didn't realize until just now that I drank the same coffee that my father did. I didn't like it. I tossed the lemon twist and added a froth of foam instead. Espresso macchiato, just as tasty, just as much caffeine, but no memories of my father.

Damn. It was hard to keep my thoughts off of my father.

Cam was better to think about. I warmed the croissants in the oven. Not too much; just a bit. She would appreciate it. Cam had been wonderful yesterday with my family. Not only had my grandmother loved her, but so had my two aunts, one of whom thought I was her son. The cousins, of course, had always adored her. She fit right into my family. She also fit right by my side when I was trying to figure out the truth about what happened to my grandmother's car.

I wanted to keep her forever. No one else could understand the whole of me. No one else could know all my secrets and still be trusted. My heart gave a twist. I wanted her forever. I wanted to marry her ...

But I didn't want to marry her as David Jeffries. Damn. I couldn't stop being Dave. It was too late. It would hurt them too much. It still hurt me that he was gone. He was my best friend. Had been. He had made up for everything I'd lost from my family.

Maybe I was clinging on to his identity to keep from losing him, totally. I grunted. Maybe I was. I couldn't let Cam in on that little revelation; it would give her more motivation to get me to tell the truth. I wasn't ready yet.

There was too much to do. Besides, they all still needed Dave. Grandmother wouldn't have come to some stranger named Gio to help her out.

That was when I remembered that I had left some messages with some contacts about my father, and I was

waiting for their response. I patted about my pockets looking for my phone, but it wasn't there.

I'd left it on the coffee table, and I went to get it now.

The minute I turned it on, I knew something had happened. Heart beating, I checked the first message.

Will: *Good news! Whittaker is awake and seems to be okay. They're keeping him for observations.*

Phew. That was good news. He was a good guy and had been there for my grandmother for years. I liked him and I was glad my father's machinations hadn't hurt him too badly.

Will: *You should be here. Dinner is a riot. Grandmother is high on her meds I think. We keep trying to make her go back to bed, but she's saying some crazy stuff.*

Will: *No really. Did you know she once had a child when she was a teenager and let the father keep him because she was too young?*

I was shocked. She had spoken of it out loud? It had been over sixty years, and she'd never said a thing. When she spoke of enemies, did she realize that her enemy was the son she left behind? Was she figuring it out?

Will: *We should give her drugs more often. These are some major family secrets. I'll keep you in the loop while you're doing your secret agent stuff.*

Will: *She says you're a covert operative. Is it true? We were right? You confirmed? Why the hell didn't you ever tell me? You secretive bastard.*

Will: *What does grandmother mean you're not the same man? WTH is going on?*

There were no more texts from Dave's twin brother. Shit. What the hell happened after we left there?

Mom: *Call me, please. Mother has said some things that have me concerned for you.*

Oh no. Dave's mother was worried. I hated playing Dave for her. The guilt wouldn't let me rest. I wanted her to be okay,

and I always had in my mind that her son was dead. Even though the twin was the most likely to figure out something was wrong, I could never get over feeling like I was cheating Dave's mother.

April: *Are you okay? What happened to you six months ago? We didn't want to pry, but if you need someone to talk to, I'm here.*

That was my cousin April. Always the sensitive one.

Jack: *Was it bad? I know they're all freaking out and probably bugging you, but I understand man. I've gone through grief, too. I got your back.*

Jack was April's brother. His fiance had died. Why was he sympathizing with me? Did they know about Dave's death? No, they couldn't; if they did, they wouldn't be treating me like Dave.

But there were so many; it didn't stop.

Lissie: *Listen, Mysterio, I don't know what game you're pulling with Grandmother but I won't stand for it. She is flipping out right now, telling us about her lost baby and all her guilt and secrets and she thinks the car wreck was because of her enemies. What did you say to her?*

Lissie wasn't a cousin, although she'd been practically adopted by grandmother. She was however married to my brother. To Gio's brother.

Lissie: *Why does Grandmother think you're a totally different person?*

Lissie: *Why does she think the accident was attempted murder?*

Lissie: *Who ARE you?*

Mom: *Call me, David. Call me right away.*

My head was spinning. I went back over the conversation I'd had with her and couldn't think of what I had said. I had admitted to being a covert operative. I hadn't been surprised by her revelation about her relationship with Whittaker. She'd spoken of scandals. Not enough to give away my cover.

But then I'd left her with Cameron.

What had Cam said? A totally different person? Something that happened six months ago? That was when Dave had died. Did Cam tell Grandmother that Dave had died? No. It couldn't be. But she'd told her something. Something that made her suspicious, something that made her put two and two together to start figuring some things out.

Did grandmother know that I wasn't Dave? Did she know whose son I was?

No. She didn't know or I would have heard about it. And I would have heard from my brother, my real brother, Duke, who thought I was dead.

Dammit. Dammit!

What had Cam said? Did she tell my grandmother outright that I was someone else? Or did she just leak little hints so grandmother would put two and two together?

Yes. That was Cameron.

Always trying to manage us, to make us think that what she wanted us to do was our own decision.

She hated that I was still undercover as Dave; she hated it. She'd been trying to get me to confess my sins for a month now, thinking she knew better than I did about what was best for my family.

And she'd gone and snuck all the hints that a paranoid, overwrought, drugged, ninety-year-old woman would need to put together the true conspiracy theory that her past had led to her accident and I was not Dave. Did she just make the leap that I was connected to her past or did Cam tell her?

Dammit!

I picked up Cam's latte and threw it into the sink, making an echoing crash.

The door to the apartment opened at that moment and Ryan walked in it. "Oh good, you're here, Dave. I got your tuxedo and Cam's evening dress for the party tonight. I am so glad you have her because there's no way you would have let

me dress you in those amazing roman masks without her by your side. You'd probably refuse to dress at all and have to take one of those deadly plain black masks that everyone who is no fun at the costume party has to wear." He was laughing. "Let me show you these masks; even you would love them."

"That won't be necessary." I was steaming inside. I wanted to break things. To yell. I felt betrayed.

I heard a movement from the bedroom. Oh, she was awake now, was she? Maybe we'd end this the way she'd started it. Without permission, in conversation with my assistant.

"Cam and I are no longer together."

"What? But just yesterday ..."

"We've broken up."

"Are you sure? I thought —"

"I don't care what you thought. I need you to go to the office and pick up some papers for a project."

"Uh ..." He hung the costumes in their dry cleaning bags from the metal stairs leading up to the roof deck. "Okay. If you say so."

I felt like I was about to break. "I do." I made up some paperwork that was probably there, but maybe not. It didn't matter. I just needed Ryan gone. And I needed to face Cam, silent on the other side of the door. Listening quietly, like the good spy she was.

Ryan left and she didn't come out of the bedroom until he'd gone. She was wearing her own clothes that she'd left here. Jeans and a t-shirt. Her hair was loose and shining black.

"What's wrong?" Her face was serious, wary.

"We're done." I was furious. She was damn lucky that I had complete self-control because I could feel myself wanting to go crazy, throw things, hit things, and somewhere inside of me, fall to my knees and sob.

She swallowed and came out into the living area, walking slowly towards me. She saw the mess of broken crockery in

the sink, could smell the coffee.

“What happened, Gio?”

I slammed my hand down on the kitchen counter. “That is a very good question. What exactly happened when you were up there all alone with my grandmother?”

She wrinkled her brows and looked confused. “I don’t know...” she said cautiously.

“Oh, the hell you don’t! You remember everything. My grandmother is apparently of the opinion that I am an entirely different person than her grandson, and she told everyone in my family that she gave up a baby when she was a teenager. Did you tell her?”

“No! I didn’t tell her. I wouldn’t blow your cover like that, Gio. You asked me not to. I didn’t.”

“Oh, but you wanted me to drop the cover. You wanted me to tell them who I was.”

“Yes. I do. They should know you for who you are. They should have the opportunity to mourn Dave. He deserves it. You deserve it.”

“You don’t get to say what we deserve, Villegas.”

She blinked. “Gio...”

“You’re not my handler anymore. You don’t get to manage me.”

“Gio, that’s not what I was doing. I told her you’d changed, you’d been through something hard, as had I, and you weren’t the same man ...” her words faded off as if she were realizing what she’d said. “I said you were a good man, a deserving man, and I said you’d changed, yes ... because she was worried about you ... but I’d hoped she would love the new man as much as the old man.” She stood silent and bit her lip.

“You put the hint into her head. She’d already been revealing scandals. You knew where her mind was going. She doesn’t know who I am, but she suspects it. You did that. Because you want me to tell them that Dave is dead.”

She inhaled and let the breath out shakily. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You’re always thinking fifteen steps ahead of everyone. You wanna try again?”

“I love you. Gio. Not Dave. They love Dave. I want them to love you. I don’t want you living this half life. You deserve better.” She bowed her head. “I didn’t mean to blow your cover. But I meant to sow the seeds so when the time came, they would love you, too.”

“You betrayed me.”

“I didn’t think she’d figure it out.”

“Bullshit. You have all their case files. You know how smart she is, how wiley, how sneaky. Where do you think Dave and I got it from?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll fix this.”

“You can’t put it back in the box, Villegas. I have to answer it all now.” He opened the door for her. “We’re done.”

“Gio ...”

Nothing she could say would make it better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CAM

Gio was right. It was my fault. I'd gotten careless because his family was just civilians, and I had underestimated how quick Minerva Carleton was. Or maybe, I overestimated how clever I was. I'd thought I'd have time to slip in suggestions here and there and somehow lead them to it themselves. It wasn't supposed to happen while the woman was hopped up on painkillers.

I went home and changed into appropriate attire and supplies and got in my car. I was a professional. I would fix this. I would clean up the mess I'd made in his life.

The first step would be to figure out what his father Giovanni was up to. And to do that, I'd go straight to the source. I talked my way into an interview by flattering his secretary ruthlessly. It wasn't hard. She was easily flattered. And I was good at manipulating people without letting them know I was manipulating them. I felt guilty. That's what I'd done to Minerva. I hadn't even consciously decided to do it. I just wanted things to go my way so badly. For Gio, not for myself. And that had not changed. I was certain I could fix this, and he would accept my apology because what we had was not something that came along every day. We'd waited years to be able to be with each other. I knew it would be okay in the end because Gio and I belonged together. We understood each other. And I understood his anger at me just as he understood my managing tendencies. He would understand this, too. That seeing his father was something I had to do.

Gio would probably yell at me for going alone, but I certainly couldn't take him. He had to keep his cover. Gio Esposito had died almost twenty years ago after running away to join the military. He'd willingly died so he could become an operative.

He was dead in his father's world. He'd wanted to leave it, leave the brutality of the mob, and a path set by his father that he did not want for himself. I would go in there, get a sense of Giovanni Esposito, and leave a listening device. I didn't need Gio for that. It was a simple mission. I would get in and then get out. Gio would stay out of it. After destroying his cover for one family, I couldn't do that again with the other.

I would go undercover, as a reporter for *Italian Life*, a magazine that was a real magazine. If he called the number on my card, he would find a secretary answering questions for Giuliana Camareri — that would be me. The cover was that I would be writing a story on Italians living around the world, the nature of family, and how they retained their roots to the home country. It would be a nice fluff piece that flattered his idea of himself as a patriarch.

Italian was an easy cover for me with my black hair and dark eyes and golden tinted skin that came from South America but was easily confused with the Mediterranean. Not to mention, Italian was one of the seven languages I was fluent in. I spoke with a native Milanese accent. I liked Milan. I'd spent quite some time there on more than one mission. Gio usually took the lead on those missions, as he was also fluent in Italian. Those times had been good, even if they were full of yearning for him and the belief that I could never be with him. Things changed.

It would work out again. I'd do this and he'd realize how much he meant to me and how sorry I was.

I drove up the drive to Giovanni Esposito's house, and I was ... impressed. Intimidated.

It was, again, a large mansion. Two days, two impressive mansions belonging to Gio's family. Whereas Minerva Carleton's was tall and imposing and made of granite in the

heart of New York City, her illegitimate son, Giovanni Esposito's mansion was sprawling and painted a sunny yellow, stretching over expansive gardens out in Long Island, an easy drive from Brooklyn. It wasn't as classic, but it was larger than Minerva's.

There was a fountain in front of the house on the round drive, and it splashed and sang as I refused my nerves. I got out of my little Honda, determined not to let myself be intimidated. I shook myself out of it. So, Gio came from extreme wealth on both sides of his family, and I had two parents who were academics and lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment in Hell's Kitchen in NYC until their deaths a year apart had left me alone in the world. It wasn't about money. It wasn't about his powerful familial roots. But now, I understood why Gio seemed to take Dave's wealth for granted. It wasn't anything new to him. He came from similar, and he'd rejected it a long time ago.

A man at the door let me into the house after I gave him my card and told him I had an appointment in my fluent Italian. Was he a butler? Did people nowadays have butlers? He was wearing a simple business suit, and his hair was slicked back. I detected the bulge of a gun in the back of his jacket when he turned to close the door behind me.

Ahh. So not a butler. I'd forgotten. Giovanni Esposito wasn't just Gio's father, he was a dangerous man with many illegal connections. He was the mob.

Of course, I'd never forgotten that, but Gio had become so important in my thoughts that I brushed aside real concerns. I followed the *not butler* to a dark, wood paneled library where a distinguished older man sat behind a large desk.

"Grazie per avermi visto con un preavviso così breve, signor Esposito." The Italian rolled off my tongue as I walked in, smiling in my best charming, feminine lady smile. I was no hot babe today, nor was I the good girlfriend. I was *bella signora*, today. Pretty lady.

I'd dressed the way a man of his era and background would like. A slim pencil skirt and a slinky rose-colored silk

shirt, the buttons left open enough to give a glimpse of my cleavage but not too much. He musn't think I was offering something I wasn't. I was a pretty girl that he would want to please. The three-inch pumps made a nice, brisk clicking on the marble floor. I made sure to put a little wiggle in my walk. My hair was loose, except for a youthful spotted scarf worn like Brigitte Bardot, and was slightly curled. My makeup was subtle. I wore pearls. Proper, but womanly.

“In English, please bella. I find it makes things more business-like.”

Ah, he was not interested in flirting. That was fine. I didn't want to flirt with him either. “Of course, Mr Esposito, whatever would make you comfortable.” I maintained my Italian accent when I spoke English. “Thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice. You understand that we are writing a story about Italian families around the world and how they maintain family and traditions. So I was wondering if you —”

“No.”

“*Mi scusi?*” My confusion was real, though my Italian accent was fake.

“No.” He was smiling but it was sharp and oily. I would have taken a step back from him if I weren't trying to maintain an innocent Italian journalist facade. “We will not be playing this game. Did my son send you?”

I blinked. “I don't know ...” I started, my mind whirling to find some sort of excuse, stalling until I could straighten out the plan that was rapidly going wonky.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a gun. “Of course you do.” He aimed it at me. “What does Duke want? Why did he send you?”

His son Duke. Of course. The one who was still alive according to what he believed. Not the one back from the dead. I felt a waft of relief. He didn't know about Gio. However, he was pointing a gun at me. It wasn't the first time that had happened, but I didn't particularly like it when it had

happened. And before, I'd had backup. This time I was on my own.

“Do not blink at me like a rabbit. I know you are not a fool, and pretending to be won't help your case. Sit down.” He pointed with this free hand at a heavy wooden chair with an embroidered seat and back. He would shoot me.

“Mr. Esposito,” I said, nervously. I wanted him to think I was nervous. “You don't need to point a gun at me.” I made myself pretty and harmless. “I just wanted to see you.”

Gio looked a lot like him, but younger. Shave his beard and give him a few years and years of rich food, and this man would be him. But he was cold, emotionless. His eyes were black like a shark. He thought I was the girlfriend of his enemy. I was in quite a lot of danger.

I sat, my hands fumbling at the chair with my nervousness, placing the bug where it wouldn't be seen with frightened flutters of my fingers. It was best that I followed his instructions. I would find a way out of this. That was my job. Figuring things out. Straightening them out. “Duke didn't send me. Please don't point a gun at me. I'm not a threat to you.”

He scoffed. “I know you are no threat to me, but I want answers. And I want the truth. Do you think I don't know everyone who features in my son's life? How do you think I discovered that his new wife was intimate with my bitch of a mother and all her spawn.”

He sneered then scoffed. “He married her so she could open her restaurant in my territory without showing honor to me. My own son, betraying me and disrespecting me. Leaving me with no one to carry on my name but an idiot nephew.”

“Mr. Esposito, I don't know what you think —”

“Silence!”

I went silent. My wide eyes staring at him. My fingers in my pocket texting blind ... who else? Gio. He'd be mad at me when he learned I came here without telling him, with no backup. He'd be madder if I got myself shot dead. So would I,

as a matter of fact. I wanted him to keep his eyes on my face, but there was no reason. He'd begun pacing, agitated.

“The only one of my family who was worthy died before he could stand by my side and learn from me, be my heir.” He cast his eyes upward to the ceiling. “Ah, Gio, my son, if only you were here with me.”

I shared his sentiment. But he was not done.

“Instead, I get a father who distrusts me even as he weakens in his bed, an idiot nephew, a son who chooses my bitch mother's family instead of his own father. What evil eye am I under to be so burdened with this disrespect? Oh, he thought he was so clever ...”

I didn't know who he meant; his words were wandering. His mind was wandering. Paranoid and angry. “He thought he'd gained control of me. So, I set my boys to watching him. His bar his wife, her friends.” He laughed, and it was a grating sound. “And what did I find? Minerva Carleton's chosen brood. Two ridiculous daughters and their useless, spoiled, soft children. I followed them all.”

It wasn't just about Minerva. He whirled on me. I stopped texting from my pocket. Holding still.

“Do you think I don't know about your boyfriend?”

I swallowed. Could he possibly know that my boyfriend was the son who had died? It didn't sound like it.

“The sneaky one who disappears for months at a time doing who knows what? I know he works for some government agency, undercover. A spy?” He scoffed again. “And my mother thought I was worthless. Just like all of them. My son is a fool for letting them lure him away. I will bring him back to the fold when I've taken apart these worthless spoiled children.”

I had made a miscalculation. He wasn't just after his mother. This was a control thing, about Duke. I had gotten too close to Gio, and it had compromised my ability to think with my damn head. I should never have come out here by myself, even to make things right with Gio.

“You are Cameron Villegas. A shopkeeper from New York City who used to work for a paper company. And I’ll start with you because you foolishly walked into my web.”

Well, then. He’d made some miscalculations, too. He hadn’t looked into my story nearly as much as he’d looked into Dave’s. He’d seen through Dave’s real estate development story but my cover story held. Perhaps because I’d only been a part of Duke’s circle for the last month or so. Perhaps because he didn’t care as much about the people who weren’t related to his mother. Perhaps because I was just a girl. Perhaps I could work with that.

“All right, it’s true. I came here because Dave knew about you. Knew where you came from, knew you were his uncle.”

“Uncle! Pah. They are not my kin.”

Hmm. He didn’t like that. If I could get him off-balance, maybe I could gain the advantage. “Mr. Esposito, he told me you tried to kill his grandmother, your own mother, and I had to see you. I had to talk to you. Please, Mr. Esposito, don’t hurt Dave. I love him so much. I don’t want him to have to go through what I went through when my parents died. I couldn’t bear it to see him hurt.” I began crying, large liquid tears rolling down my cheeks.

He smirked at me. “That’s an admirable ambition, Ms. Villegas, but I am not moved by your maudlin tale, nor by your concern for a man who was never cast off from the bosom of his family by his bitch of a mother. All those children living with the lap of luxury while I suffered.”

I tried not to look around the luxurious and elegant mansion library. He wasn’t precisely sane, I thought. “But I love him. He completes me.” I tried to play the role of a girl hopelessly, irrevocably in love. I failed, only because I wasn’t playing a role. It was true. “Our love is unconditional.” I said and felt a tear roll down my cheek. “I will do anything for him. What can I do to get you to stop this vendetta against his family?”

“Kill Minerva Carleton.”

“Wh-what?” I couldn’t hide my shock.

He laughed. Like it was a joke. I didn’t think it was a joke. He sat on the edge of the desk and chuckled, pressing a button. Maybe it would open a panel in the floor and he would send me through and feed me to the alligators like some sort of ridiculous action movie. That made about as much sense as he made. But no, it was a call button. The door opened and the *not-butler* came in.

“Handcuff her to the chair. She’s a lovely little liar and is telling me the most ridiculous stories as if I were a woman who would feel sorry for her because she cries a few tears.”

“You don’t have to handcuff me, Mr. Esposito. I’ll leave and never come back again. I’m sorry I came. I shouldn’t have bothered you. You’re right. I was silly and ridiculous to think you would —”

“Silence. Put a gag on her.”

The man handcuffed me. “Please, no,” I begged him. I wasn’t feeling desperate yet, but I was getting there. “What do you want? Please.”

“I want you to sit in that chair silently and listen to what you are going to do tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“At the ball she’s hosting.”

Oh, the Halloween gala. “You don’t have to —”

“Gag her, Marcello.”

Marcello the henchman-butler stuffed a cloth into my mouth, then tied another one over it, efficiently and quickly. He had done this before.

“Now, you will listen to my instructions and be glad that I do not shoot your pretty little head.”

I nodded. It was no act for me to act frightened.

I listened to Giovanni Esposito, my boyfriend’s father, tell me how I was going to help him murder his mother and her family tonight at her yearly society ball.

This was quite the pickle.

CHAPTER TWELVE: GIO

I was in the car, not the hot little Jaguar but Dave's far more functional Land Rover, driving out to the Island, to a house I knew well but hadn't seen in almost twenty years. Every mile settled a certainty into me: I knew that this business with my father would be done for good tonight. It was over.

If I had to come back from the dead to end my father's malignant presence in my life and the lives of those I loved, then I would come back from the dead. I was committed to this. I was no longer the young impressionable boy that I once was, struggling against my father's authority. I was a man with a man's understanding of the world and a man's understanding of what was right and what was wrong.

The calls and texts from Dave's family had not stopped; they needed to know what was wrong with Dave, but they would have to wait. They really didn't want to know yet, although they didn't know why. This was not the time. Because of my father, because of grandmother's gala, and because I personally wasn't ready to deal with it yet. There was also Cameron. The pain I felt at her betrayal was like an open wound in my chest. And I needed some time to make peace with whatever new shape our relationship took. Maybe it was all in the past. Maybe it was over. I knew she was trying to manage me for my own good, but while she was allowed to do that when she was my handler, this was not about a mission or The Agency but rather about myself, my life, my feelings, my free choice. She was unable to separate those things from

her business. I was so angry at her, and the longer I could put facing that anger off, the better it would be.

I sent a group text message to the family and a personal phone call to grandmother saying I would explain it tomorrow. I'd made plans to meet them all at grandmother's house. Just tomorrow, that was as long as I was putting it off. I had the feeling that was as long as I was going to get without the rest of the family getting as nosy and managing as Cameron. They were all busybodies when it came down to it.

I wasn't going to attend grandmother's Halloween gala, I told them without preamble, and that Cameron and I had broken up. I told them that they could ask questions tomorrow, and tomorrow, I would lay it all out on the line. All of it. I didn't want to think about what that would mean, but it was time.

Why should I be honest now about everything after lying for so many months and years? Well, that was part of the story, wasn't it? Before it had been my job, but now it was personal. Before it had been temporary, only a cover for our Agency jobs, but now? It seemed worse to keep telling the lies in the face of the secrets cracking open, some of them not mine. And those secrets were part of why I hadn't come out with my identity in the first place? Was it my place to tell everyone about Grandmothers' secret shame? I knew I'd deceived everyone, but the deceptions had seemed to keep the status quo, keep everyone calm, and attempt to lessen the harm. But now, because of Cameron's meddling, however well-intentioned, Minerva Carleton had let her own secrets go. Secrets that had begun this entire mess, secrets that had started my father's dark path. They weren't my secrets, but they had tainted my life, and now, they were coming home to roost at grandmothers' door.

Now that they were asking the questions, I couldn't just lie about it. I couldn't do that to them. And I didn't want to anymore.

But I had another thing I had to do before finally telling the truth. The past had risen from the grave, and long gone

secrets were being spoken. My father had found his hated mother at last, and he wanted to take vengeance upon her.

But knowing both people, and all the people affected, I couldn't let that happen. I had to stop it. My father had spent decades steeped in his bitterness and irrational hate, and it had twisted him into a person who felt the need to dominate and abuse everyone around him.

When I was a boy growing into a man, I knew that I wouldn't bend to him, and if I had kept throwing myself up against him, one of us, sooner or later, would have died. This was long before I knew the reason why he was so angry. I knew it was wrong, though, and I'd took off before I killed him or was killed by him.

My only regret was leaving Duke behind, my little brother. But he'd always been a calmer sort, one to slide out of the way of harm, rather than crash up against it again and again, and he had indeed managed to get away from our father all on our own. If I had stayed, he would have been drawn into our battle, because he was the loyal sort. He would have fought our father for my sake, putting himself at risk.

It was best for all of us that I had left them all behind. I'd made peace with that a long time ago. And seeing him now, happy and away from our father's business and violence, with his own restaurant and his wife and his dog, I realized he was probably much stronger than I was. He was braver. He'd figured out the answer. It wasn't fighting the man, it wasn't running away from the man either. It was standing his own ground and creating what he wanted for himself. I was in awe of Duke, and I wanted to make sure he would stay out of it until I had finished it.

I was my father's first son. He'd always said I was the heir, that I was his best son. And it was still true. I was his heir. I'd taken the lessons from the military and The Agency instead of Giovanni Esposito, but I was still his heir, and it was my responsibility to end this monstrosity.

The drive was too long and my thoughts wandered over my worries and regrets, fears, and anger. Mostly anger. For

some reason, I kept coming back to Cam.

I didn't know how she could have betrayed me like that and told my secret to the people who should never have known. I knew she didn't have anything to do with what my father had done, but for some reason, the two were connected in my mind.

The worst part of it was how much it hurt.

I thought she understood me. We thought with the same brain sometimes. And yet she exposed my secrets to the very people who would be most hurt by it.

As soon as all this was over, I was going to demand that she make it right. My thoughts skittered over what she might do to make it right, and I flashed on her naked and moving over me in bed, gleaming with sweat, her hair down and entangled in my fingers, her lips lush and giving.

I shook myself out of the fantasy.

That wasn't going to make anything right, but I wouldn't mind it. I snorted in the car. It's not like she would decide some hot sex would fix blowing my cover, anyway. She wasn't that kind of woman. There was no fix, anyway. The secret was out, now, and this was the path we were all taking, whether we wanted to or not ...

I suppose I knew that the secret was going to come out sooner or later, I wasn't going to be able to play Dave forever. I had just wanted more time, maybe to make peace with his death, maybe to get to know them better, to get to have the family I'd been denied in my real life. I didn't even know.

Sometimes, I thought Cam did know though. She knew me and she knew I didn't want to be Dave for the rest of my life. She also was a genius who tended to know and understand more than most people around her. Sometimes, this made her think she knew absolutely everything and was always right. It wasn't true, but maybe if I was as smart as her I'd think I was always right, too.

She was right about one thing, though. That while I was pretending to be Dave, Dave Jeffries would never be mourned,

he would never be known, he would never be grieved, and his loss was a terrible thing. He deserved to be grieved, to be acknowledged for the great man he was. Instead, I was just playing a pale facsimile. She was right. He deserved to be mourned. And I deserved to live. I wished he hadn't died.

I wished I could talk to Cam right now.

I sighed heavily. Maybe I would let her make it up to me with hot sex. I'd suggest it, even if she didn't come up with it on her own ... and that said to me that I had already gotten over the betrayal, if it was a betrayal. I knew she did it because she loved me. I knew she wanted the best for me. And I knew she saw that taking on Dave's identity was hurting me.

I was angry, but the truth was that I loved her. I still loved her. Possibly, I always would love her, and I didn't want to break up with her. I wanted to be mad at her. Telling her we were over was probably a petty thing. I didn't even tell her, I told Ryan, as if her opinion wasn't needed. Well, that was essentially how we started dating ... so that *definitely* meant it was petty. And revenge to boot.

She'd betrayed me, and then, I'd been a jerk. I knew she didn't mean to hurt me. She said she wanted them to love me like she did.

What a mess. What an utter mess. I could only solve things one at a time though, so now, it was heading out to Long Island to confront my father. I wished I had Cam at my side. She would yell at me for going out there without backup. I'd say she was managing, but she would be right.

Knowing Cam, she'd probably come out with me as her way of making up for blowing my cover. She'd be my support, emotional and backup. Because that was the way she was. At least I knew she'd never go out there all by herself, thinking that somehow she could fix our mess by confronting my father so I didn't have to.

She was way too smart to do something like that. Smarter than me.

My phone chimed.

I glanced over quickly to where it was fastened to the dash.
It was Cam. A quick, short message.

Cam: *T Giovanni hiyae*

What? Was she drunk? And since when did she call me by my full name. I absolutely had never used my full name if I could help it. It was my father's name. I was Giovanni III and I hated it. I was always Gio. Maybe now that we were broken up, she was getting formal, but she'd always called me Esposito when she was formal, not Giovanni. And if she were being formal why would she text me like this?

"What the hell is going on with you, Cam? Hiya yourself." I was driving, I couldn't text back, but I could yell at the phone.

Cam: *Blowgun*

"Blowgun? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Cam: *Thinks ur dang*

Was she speaking in code? Was she somewhere she couldn't look at her phone and was sending messages blind?

Cam: *Help*

Shit. I drove onto the verge and stopped, grabbing the phone.

Me: *What is it? What's wrong?*

Me: *Where are you*

There wasn't an answer. My heart started beating faster than it ever did when I was in the middle of a dangerous mission. My life I could risk. I couldn't risk Cam's.

But she would feel the opposite, putting herself at risk for me.

I looked at my screen trying to see what she might have been meaning to say, which letters might be adjacent. "T Giovanni hiyae." If her fingers had slid over just a bit "hiyae" would be "\house."

No.

“No!” I slammed my hand on the steering wheel and then, wasted no more time. Cam was at my father’s house. No formal Gio. She wasn’t being weird about me. Giovanni was my father. He’d found her out somehow, and she was trying to send me a message with where she was.

She damn well *had* gone to fix the mess with him. *And* without backup. What was she thinking? How could she put herself at risk?

It was Dave all over again. I should be the one on the mission, but they just had to go and play James Bond, thinking they were the only ones who could do the job.

She did not realize that my father was not just my evil dad. He was dangerous. And she should know it. She had his files as well as any of us. “Damn it, Cam; if you die, I’ll kill you.” Without realizing I had done it, I was already speeding my way down the highway, heading for my father’s house, no longer worried about our confrontation after being dead for twenty years. It was now all about Cam.

She was mine. If he did anything to her, I’d kill him myself.

By the time I drove into the pretentious circular driveway with the ridiculous fountain — I noticed he’d added colored lights to the thing —and pounded up to the door, leaving my car there, not even bothering to ask permission, I had calmed myself.

I was cold as ice. Not one emotion would break the iron shield of my will. I stormed to the front door and pounded, hard.

It opened in a rather short time. “Mr. Jeffries,” the goon at the door said. “Mr. Esposito has been expecting you.”

“I rather think not, Marcello. So, you’re still alive? I’d have thought someone would have bashed in your skull by now. Good job on not getting iced.”

Marcello stared at him as if nothing he said made any sense.

I cocked my head and smirked. “Whatsa matter? You don’t recognize the brat you got stuck babysitting?” My father had set me to stick with the young twenty-something Marcello when I was about thirteen. It was a shit job for Marcello, and he treated me like crap. It had been Giovanni’s way of teaching me the business. All I had learned was that I didn’t want to be a brutal enforcer like Marcello. And I didn’t want to be the one sending the goons either.

Marcello’s face went white.

He’d recognized me. Ahh. Good. “He in his study?” I nodded my head to the left of the grand foyer with the fake roman statues and. .. was it? Yes, he’d added an indoor fountain, too.

My father had no taste. Or rather, his taste was excessive. I brushed by Marcello and stalked to the large heavy doors, throwing them open.

There was my father, leaning against his giant desk that had no reason to be that big. He left all the paperwork to his accountants in the small, utilitarian offices back in town.

He didn’t look surprised to see me. Cam was handcuffed by one wrist to an Italianate chair that was the same one he used to sit me in when he scolded me for being such a disappointment before he beat me with a belt so I’d “understand,” what I’d done wrong. I never had. I only understood that I wanted to be nothing like him.

“What the hell do you think you’re up to, you bastard?” I snarled.

She had a gag in her mouth, and I didn’t like that at all. She looked terrified and very delicate and girly. An act of course. He was treating her like a helpless woman because he was an old-world misogynist and couldn’t conceive of a woman being as capable as Cameron Villegas was.

“We’ve been expecting you.” My father was smirking and holding a gun on me. If he thought that would intimidate me, he was wrong.

I knelt next to Cam and removed the gag. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dave.” She said, her eyes direct, on mine.

Yeah, I got it. He didn’t know who I was. I could keep pretending I was Dave, but I didn’t think that would help us right now; it might even put us in more danger, and Dave wouldn’t be able to stop whatever plot Giovanni had against Grandmother.

I touched her wrist in the metal cuff. She hadn’t been struggling. It wasn’t even red. She would know not to struggle against a thing she couldn’t change. She probably had another plan in mind for her escape.

Well. So did I.

I stood up and faced the man. He looked older. Still strong. But I could see the edges of him softening. He was diminishing. Something about him lacked the vitality and energy he used to have. The gun in his hand was trained on me now, not Cam; that was good.

“I don’t think you’ve been expecting me.”

“Nonsense. You sent your little girlfriend here to pry into my business. Coward, sending a woman to do a man’s work. Were you afraid to face me?”

I didn’t let him bait me. “Unhandcuff her. I’m here now. You don’t need her at all.”

“Marcello!” he called, sharply. His goon came in right away, as if he’d been at the door listening. “Check him for weapons.”

I held out my arms, willingly. Marcello divested me of my pistol and a knife. He gave them to my father. “Now let her go.”

My father nodded and Marcello unlocked the cuff. She stood as soon as she was released and came running into my arms. Marcello was sent out of the room to guard the hall.

She kissed me in a way that was not wise in our situation. It was distracting. She slipped something heavy into my jacket pocket. A knife. He hadn’t checked her for weapons. Foolish. She might look helpless, but she certainly was not.

“Thank god you’re here, Dave,” she said. She hated saying Dave’s name when she was talking to me and avoided it whenever possible.

It was remarkable how I hated hearing her call me by his name. It made my skin crawl. I was beginning to understand why she hated saying it. I shook my head.

“The game is over,” I told her. Her black eyebrows shot up, then came down. A brief nod in a barely tangible shake of her head. “Yes,” I said. I put her behind me. He was still pointing that gun, and I’d prefer if she were not in the line of fire. I turned to him, to face him. I looked him in his eyes. He always said a liar wouldn’t look you in the face. It wasn’t true, but he believed it. “Long time no see, Dad.”

“What?” he said. It was as if my words didn’t make sense the way they were strung together, and I supposed that was fair.

“I’m not Dave. I’m Gio. I didn’t die in the military. I went undercover. I wanted a way out of the family, and I wanted to let myself be angry at the world. I wanted something to do that made sense. I learned self-control. I learned that some things were bigger than myself.”

“What? Gio? No.”

“Yes. The Agency had a new agent, a highly educated man with a genius IQ. Wealthy. He had talents they needed, and when they did his background check, they found a dark secret in the past of his family. His grandmother had a baby when she was a teenager and gave her son away to the father. That was you. And you then had a son who liked to jump out of perfectly good planes into enemy territory and was an expert marksman who wanted to escape from his sordid family past. He also just happened to be nearly a dead ringer for the rich genius. We grew beards to hide my cleft chin and his lack of one. I cut my hair so the curl didn’t show. Voila. Doppelgangers. One dead” I made air quotes, “mob son and one live billionaire boy meant that we could be anywhere while perfectly alibied by the whole world. It’s quite a system. But no, I’m not dead at all. I never was. And I came back to

tell you that you are done with this vendetta against Minerva Carleton.”

“Impossible. My son is dead.”

“Alive. And I won’t let you kill my grandmother.”

Giovanni recoiled as if he’d been slapped. “Gio is alive? All this time?”

I raised my hands to the sides. Here I was.

“Working with that family. Lying. Plotting. You protect that whore woman? You defend her? That bitch who ruined my life? You reject me? Your own father?” I saw his eyes grow full of rage. I knew this face. I knew this man. He’d terrorized me my entire childhood. He’d terrorized my mother until she died, and I had my suspicions about how she’d died, although I had no proof. He’d terrorized my little brother Duke until he left too. Everyone had left him. Starting with his own mother. And he had never gotten over that betrayal. His eyes grew wide, a tic started jumping in his cheek.

I knew before he possibly knew himself what he was going to do, that he was about to pull the trigger.

I threw Cam to the ground and ducked as the gun went off, then threw out a roundhouse kick that connected with his wrist. The bullet missed. The gun went flying.

He wasn’t shocked or dismayed. He didn’t let the loss of his weapon stop him. He came charging at me. We were the same height, but he was heavier. He threw that weight at me, bearing me down to the ground as we rolled and punched and kicked. We would have bitten and gouged eyes if given the chance, and it was so damned satisfying to connect my fist to his jaw.

I managed to get my feet under me and got Cam’s knife out of my pocket. It was a nice six-inch piece of work. She usually kept it in a spine sheath that went down her waistband.

“Now what, Dad?”

He swooped up a poker from the fireplace. He swung it at me, and it whistled through the air. He would beat my brains

in if I let him. I saw it in his eyes. They were utterly and completely mad.

Suddenly, Cam leaped onto his back, wrapping her spotted hair scarf around his neck and tightening. His eyes bulged and he tried to swing the poker at her, but could only fling it around wildly. His face grew red. He dropped the poker and managed to pluck her from his back, throwing her bodily across the room. She crashed into the shelf and fell in a shower of books.

He staggered about the room, heading towards the door.

I could stop him, or I could go to Cam to see that she was okay. I, surprisingly, did not feel vengeful about my father, not even about him attacking us. He had no hold over me.

But Cam did. I knelt at her side and brushed her hair back from her forehead. “Cam? Cam? Are you okay?”

“You are no son of mine,” the old man sneered at the door, his fingers working on a panel I hadn’t noticed. “You can die with the rest of them.” His smile was like the grin of death itself. “It’s too late for you to stop my final revenge anyway. And they’re too stupid to not be in the same place at the same time where I can finish them all at once.”

“Gio,” Cam said, a little shakily. “Stop him.”

But I couldn’t. He was right. It was too late. The door closed, and then a metal door came down from the ceiling over that, sliding into place and thunking to a close.

All around us in this library, windows slid closed, metal shutters clanging shut on us.

Whether it was a safe house or a prison, it served the same purpose. We were trapped.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: CAM

“Gio,” I said, while he worked on picking the lock. He’d been working on that lock for a long time. He didn’t turn around. “Gio!”

“Not now, Cam. I have to open this door, or he’s going to kill my grandmother. When he’s done, he’ll come back and kill us.”

“Yes, now.” He ignored me.

“Damn!” Another tool that he’d salvaged from the library broke, and he tossed it aside, searching through the random assortment he’d found.

“Gio, it’s not going to work.” I wrapped my hand around his bicep and turned him to face me.

He could have resisted. I wasn’t even using much force, but he was certainly strong enough to withstand me. He knew what I was going to say. “You can’t pick this lock, at least not with the tools we have here. And I’ve been searching this room from top to bottom, and I can’t find access to the system.” He sat down on the floor, his back against the thick metal door, his legs out in front of him.

“This wasn’t here last time I was in this house. There was no safe room, no high tech metal door system.”

“Yeah, well. Your father changed while you were away. First of all, he got way more paranoid if he went this overboard on a safe room.” I handed him a cold bottle of water from the supplies that I had found. There was food in there for a month. “Or prison. I think it’s a prison, a luxurious prison.” I

waved my bottle of water at the books and leather chairs and art and state of the art entertainment system. “Or at least some sort of trap.”

He sighed and drank half the bottle.

“You have to be paranoid to create something like this.”

“No. He’s not paranoid. People actually want to kill him. He’s lived a very revenge worthy life. I’d like to kill him myself.”

”No you don’t, Gio. You’re a good person. You don’t like murder. You’re willing to kill for a good reason, you understand protecting people, but you’re not full of vengeance. That’s why you joined the army instead of staying with your father. You wanted a reason.” I sat down next to him, ripping the seam of my pencil skirt as I sat. There was no point in keeping the skirt nice now, besides it was confining. I took a hold of the seam in both hands and ripped it all the way up the thigh.

He watched me.

I reached into the slit and removed my Smith and Wesson from the inner thigh holster. I handed it to Gio.

“That was hot,” he said.

He was stupid and completely inappropriate and my heart skipped a beat. “There’s nothing hot about chafing. That little skirt did not allow for a better holster. He didn’t even pat me down. I could have worn a better holster.”

“If you hadn’t worn such a little, skin-tight skirt that clearly had nothing under it, he might have patted you down, and then he’d have found the gun and the knife and known you weren’t the harmless little girl you were playing. And he might have killed you, Cam.” He hissed a breath and pulled me into his lap. “I couldn’t have handled that; if you had ...” He pressed his forehead to mine. “Cam. Dammit. Why would you come here? Why would you risk yourself like that?”

“You don’t hate me? I thought you hated me.”

“I couldn’t ever hate you. I love you, and it’s not something I have a choice in.” His voice was shaky and full of tension, the tension I’d seen in his shoulders the entire time we’d been trying to find a way out of this damn safe room. “I wish we’d never opened this door between us. I wish we’d gone on pretending and never —” he broke off, catching my lips in a desperate kiss. “Damn you.” His heart was beating so fast against my hand.

That he wanted a choice in loving me twisted me up inside. “I’m so sorry I betrayed you. I meant to do something good for you, to give you something you deserve, and I wasn’t thinking about the repercussions. I know I hurt you, Gio. It’s just when it’s about you, I kind of lose my head. My brain never stops thinking, but when I’m around you, it goes quiet; there’s just one thing. You. You make me single-minded. You’re all I care about, and I forget everything else.”

“Something like that could get you killed in our business.”

“Maybe that’s why we didn’t ever let anything happen when we were still with The Agency. Our business isn’t spying anymore.” He curled a lock of my hair that had gone kind of wild since I’d used my headscarf as a garrote on his father. He tucked the lock behind my ear. “I’ve got a cute little boutique, and you’re a real estate developer. It’s okay if a shopkeeper and a billionaire get stupid over each other. No one has to die.”

“I wish that could be us, but look where we are, trapped in a mobster’s trap, waiting for him to kill everyone we love, and then, come back and finish us off.”

I scoffed. “He’s not going to do that. We can stop him. I was trying to fix things, to find out what he was up to so we could end this and live that life just being the shopkeeper and the billionaire. I wasn’t going to do anything to him. It was an information-gathering mission. I swear, I wasn’t playing 007.”

“You strolled in here to plant a bug in Giovanni Esposito’s house? Do you know how many people he’s killed for less?”

“Well, we’re not going to let him kill us, are we? So, we have to get out of here. Besides, I know what he’s going to do.

I know when and I know where. I don't know how, but we can figure that out. As long as we get out of here."

"He told you his plans?"

"I think he's gone over the edge. It's your grandmother's party."

"The Halloween Gala. Of course. And I may have just pushed him over the edge showing up alive this way and on his mother's side. Damn."

I nodded. "We have to get out of here." I stood up from his lap and held my hand to him. His eyes gleamed with love when he looked at me. "Help me figure this out." His lips tilted into a crooked smile, and he put his hand in mine. He didn't need my help to stand up, but he took my hand anyway.

"Okay, boss, what's the plan?"

I wrinkled my nose at him but got to it. "I'm missing something. There can't be no way out. He could get locked in here without a key himself. There'd have to be a password system set up. But the access isn't readily visible, and it doesn't seem to be linked to his computer system."

"He's hidden it. Of course, he would hide it. But someplace he'd think was clever. He thinks he's better than everyone else, and no one would be able to top him."

I nodded and began turning in a slow circle, trying to see the room from Giovanni Esposito's point of view. The high cove ceilings were painted with a mural of angels in the clouds, and between the wooden bookshelves, the walls were painted a deep oxblood, with gilt molding. Niches were set into the walls, and each niche held a white marble classic roman bust. The carpet was also red, with medallions, and one wall was set up as a media center. The enormous desk took pride of place by the windows which were now shuttered tight behind the velvet curtains draped floor to ceiling, but the leather couch made a comfortable retreat on the other side.

"He's a showy man, my father. He likes grandeur. That's why all the fancy architecture in this house. He built it that

way to show his might.” His fingers ran along the wall where gilt curlicues edged a niche.

“Yes, I see that. We could explore all this molding for a hidden panel, but that seems rather subtle.”

“He doesn’t do subtle.”

“No, he doesn’t, so I don’t think his hiding place would be subtle. Tell me about your dad. What does he love?”

“He loves power. He loves Italy. He loves really gaudy showy things ... he thinks it’s evidence of his success. He loves to control others. He loves vengeance.”

My eyes lit upon one of the busts staring blindly out from a niche behind Giovanni’s desk. “Julius Caesar.”

Gio started laughing. “It has to be. It fits with his delusions of grandeur.”

But I was already running my fingers over the statue, looking for a hidden catch or lever. “Ahh,” I said as my fingertips tripped over the catch on the back of the statue near the base.

The base opened up to reveal a keyboard and a small screen.

“Password,” Gio read and looked at me. “That’s a job for the team genius. We don’t have time for me to fumble around with it.” He was grinning, but I could see the tension in his face. We had to get out of here, and we had to get out of here fast. It had already taken too long and the Gala —and Giovanni’s mysterious plot — would be starting soon.

I nodded and focused down on the problem. What was the password? We didn’t have time to just go through all the usual passwords and options. Gio was right. “It would be something meaningful to him. Everything he does is meaningful. It’s all about his power and image.”

“And lineage. You’re right. Just take a look at this house. Large, impressive, Italianate. He was very proud of his father’s heritage, and he despised his mother’s blood. He thought she was weak for giving up her son; it made him despise her, so he

clung to his image of his father. And he tried to shape me into his own image. I was supposed to be how he carried on, his heir, his legacy.” He said it with disgust. “I never wanted to be his legacy. I wanted to be my own man, not just his son.”

His son. It was all about the son. Giovanni was the abandoned son. Minerva had betrayed her son. Giovanni was the heir and son of Giovanni Sr. And then, there was Gio, his own heir and son, the one who was supposed to prove to the world his greatness, and he left him and then died. “The son” was the center of his world. Everything revolved around this notion.

“That’s it. I got it.” I grabbed his arm.

Gio didn’t look surprised. He had believed I would figure it out.

“The son. That’s what he cares about. That’s why seeing you again made him lose it. And his mother abandoned the son, him. And his other son, Duke, rejected him. The son in the father’s image. Immortality of a sort. What he wanted — what he could not have.”

“The son. Just like the sun, everything in his universe revolved around being the son. I think you’re right. Yes. That would be it.”

I reached out to tap in the code. Gio grabbed my wrist to stop me.

“The son, but not in English, Cam. In Italian. He believes the truth comes in Italian. English is for liars and betrayals. Make it *il figlio*.”

Ah, that’s why he didn’t want me to speak in Italian. “Good point.” I smiled up at him. He said I was the genius who could figure it out, but he diminished his own contributions. He had always done that. It was probably because of his life as “the son.”

“Put it in,” he told me.

I typed in “ilfiglio.” It flashed and went red. The wrong password.

“*Il figlio one*,” Gio said. “He’s the first son of his father, and I’m his first son. The primacy of the son is important. He dropped the “junior” from his name. He should traditionally be Giovanni Esposito Jr. Or just Junior. He loves tradition, but not being a junior, which implies ‘the second.’”

I typed “ilfiglio1” and the system opened up.

“Ah,” Gio said, looking at the new screen. “As simple as it can be. Everything labeled so clear a child could use it.” He snorted. “My father is not good with computers. It would have to be.”

Before we opened the doors, we made a plan to handle any guards who had been left to deal with us. He gave me my gun and stood by the barricaded door with the fireplace poker.

He nodded at me to release the locks, so I did. The doors and windows slid open smoothly, without warning. The guard on the other side, Marcello, was taken completely by surprise.

Gio knocked him over the head before he could even open his mouth to shout a warning to anyone else, then we handcuffed him, passed out, to the chair with the very handcuffs he had used on me. Gio searched him and found his own gun and knife, which he put back into his holster and sheath. He also took Marcello’s gun.

Then, we slipped out of the office, closing the doors behind us so it wouldn’t be immediately obvious that the other side no longer had a metal barrier, and snuck out of the house.

Both of our cars were still sitting in the drive. There were guards, we could see them, but they were far away. We went for Gio’s car, it was faster and hefty enough that we could charge through the gate at the front of the drive. It was also bulletproof.

We got into the car and started it before Giovanni’s henchmen even realized we had escaped. Gio floored it and we zoomed down the drive. They shot at us, but the bullets pinged off the armor harmlessly.

Then, we were away and speeding down the highway faster and with less trouble than we could have hoped.

“I think your father uses his money and image to intimidate people, rather than pay competent people,” I said as we left them behind.

“For sure he does. He’s not as superior as he thinks he is. Partly because he doesn’t trust anyone who could challenge him. He wants to remain the best, so the people he hires, his goons, are all followers, bullyboys. They listen to directions and don’t push him. But when he isn’t there, none of them can function on their own. All you have to do is do the unexpected and they’re at a loss. They can’t think for themselves.”

“No wonder you didn’t get along.”

He nodded, but his thoughts were already on the next step. “We’re not going to make the gala before him. He’ll have plenty of time to do whatever it is he’s planned.” He was worried. “It’s still a two hour drive away, and the highways are full of traffic.”

“The heliport,” I told him. “It’s only ten minutes from here. I can commandeer a helicopter and fly to Manhattan in fifteen minutes. I’ll call The Agency for support while you get us to the helicopter, and you call the family to warn them while we’re in the air. We’ll get to the gala right around when it starts.”

He glanced at me, his aviators only showing my face in their mirrors, but the look still made something inside me turn over. “I missed you so much those six months we were separated. I love the way your mind works. I love the way we work together.”

“We do work together well, don’t we.”

“I think we belong together, Cameron.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “I do, too. I swear, I won’t try to manage you again like that.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.” His focus was back on the road, and he wove swiftly in and out of traffic to get us where we needed to go. Even the backs of his hands, with the muscles and tendons and bones made me want to be with him always. It was ridiculous but I couldn’t shake the

feeling. “We’ll get through this. We always do. We’ll figure out a new way to be together, without secrets.”

“We will.”

“I think, somehow, that if I had told them from the beginning that Dave was dead and that I was Gio, that maybe none of this would have happened with my father.”

“No, Gio. No. You had nothing to do with Giovanni’s vengeance. He found Duke and put a watch on his friends. It was Duke and Jack and Lissie and all of the cousins. You were a coincidence.”

“Not really. I’ve been in deep cover in their family for ten years.”

We both went quiet at that. It was true. And it was deception.

“Call grandmother for me. Tell her who I am. And warn her who’s coming for her.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded and gave me his phone. But she didn’t pick up. I called every member of his family, but none of them picked up.

“Dammit,” he said. “They’re already there. Grandmother requires we all turn our phones off for the first two hours at least. And that we get there early.”

We peeled into the heliport, and I bullied my way through the air traffic controllers and into a helicopter.

The sun was slipping over the western horizon, and I squinted as I settled myself behind the controls. “Fifteen minutes,” I promised.

“Here,” he said, “take these.” He handed me his mirrored aviator shades.

“Ah, much better. Let’s go save your family.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: GIO

Cam piloted the helicopter over Long Island, and the New York City skyline stretched ahead of us, famous and beautiful. The East River ribboned under us, silver and alive, but nothing was as stunning as her. There was nothing I wanted to do but watch her. The Agency had been mobilized and would meet us there. I'd called Ryan and told him to jump into the Jaguar with our costumes and be at the heliport before we arrived, so we didn't have to make any stops. And yet, despite the coming mission, with stakes as high as it had ever been for me personally, my whole family at risk. All I could do for the next few minutes was watch her. It was all I wanted to do. She gave me a thrill. She made me feel complete. I couldn't lose her again. I'd take being angry at her over whatever managing she was doing to not having her at all in my life.

The thought that my father had almost killed her, could have killed her, was settling into my bones. I had her back now, and I wasn't going to lose her.

The sun was just hitting the horizon, and it colored her in a golden light that flashed off the aviators she was wearing. Mine, since hers were in her car, still sitting in my father's pretentious circular drive. I'd probably have to buy her a new car because I didn't think we were getting that car back. I didn't mind at all. I'd buy her anything she wanted at all, especially since it was Dave's money, not mine.

Huh. It wouldn't be my money anymore. Not when I came out with my real identity. I'd have nothing to my name, not

even a place to live. Oh well. I suppose I had my salary and years of savings from when I'd been with The Agency. Dave had made me invest everything in the things I didn't quite understand. It was part of his complicated understanding of finance that I never really found important enough to notice.

Maybe I'd get a little apartment near Cam's shop, and I'd help her run it. She could move in with me. We could get married.

The thought settled into my bones. It was right. I wanted a little apartment with Cam and to help her run her little shop. No more danger. No more missions. No more crazy family with revenge schemes.

I watched her.

She flew the helicopter with a calm self-assurance; there really was nothing she couldn't do. Her hair was tied up in a knot on the top of her head, and her skirt was still ripped, showing a great deal of her leg. She caught me watching her but completely ignored me since she was so competent and busy. She'd given me her gun to hold. I knew we might need it, but right now, Cam and the sky and the sun was my happiness ... who knew what we'd find when we got to the gala. This was life in The Agency — we lived for the moment, except for those moments when our lives were teetering on the edge of being extinguished. It had always been a gamble — these missions we went on. Dave had lost the gamble and paid the price, and we had, too. It was time to settle up.

She brought us into the heliport and, as always, Ryan, dependable Ryan, was there. The Jaguar was on the curb, shiny and fast looking and midnight blue, and he stood there waiting as Cam and I walked out of the heliport.

"I knew it," he said, first thing.

"Did you bring the costumes?" I asked.

"I knew you didn't break up with her." He grinned at me. Cocky bastard.

"But did you bring the costumes?"

“Of course I brought the costumes; what kind of question is that?”

“None at all.” I put my hand on Cam’s lower back to guide her to the car and put my hand out for the keys.

Ryan wrapped his fingers around the keys. “Are you going to the gala now? Straight from here?”

“Yes, and it’s already started so we need to get going. Now.”

He shook his head. “You can’t go like *that*.”

I looked down. I hadn’t dressed up to meet my father — it was a deliberate disrespect. I wore jeans and a t-shirt and a bomber jacket. Cam, of course, was stunning, but I supposed that a skirt ripped to the thigh and tangled hair and aviators were not appropriate for a gala.

“Nope. You have to change. Do it quickly. Go back into the airport and change. I brought everything. Trim your beard. You’re scraggly. You need to make an entrance. It’s at the Metropolitan Club, and your grandmother would never forgive you if you ruined it. That means that you have to be dressed ahead of time. Go get dressed.”

“I’m sorry, what? Did you just tell me to go get dressed?”

“Yes, I did. That’s what you need to do.”

“Honey, he’s right,” Cam said quietly. “We’ll get dressed here and be masked. When we go in, he won’t see us, and we’ll be able to stop him from hurting anyone. No one will know. We can avoid the scandal.”

Ryan watched us with avid eyes.

I bit my lip and nodded. She was right. Ryan was right. “Okay, give us the outfits.” I sighed heavily.

“Do you need help getting dressed?” he asked me.

“No, I don’t need help. Give me the damn tux.”

“Don’t forget the grooming. It’s a high society gala. You can *not* go in there scruffy.”

“Fine,” I agreed then muttered under my breath, “I hate getting dressed up.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I got it all ready for you.”

“You heard that, huh?” I caught Cam’s eye.

She nodded her head slightly towards Ryan. “I’m going to take this to the ladies’ room and be back.”

“I put a makeup kit in there, too.”

Cam took the garment bag and the rolling suitcase that looked like a lot more than just a makeup kit, then she leaned up and kissed him on the shoulder. “How do you do it all? You always know what we need.”

Ryan blushed, his fair skin giving him away. He shrugged. “I was hired to know what needs to be done. That’s what I do. What needs to be done.”

“Well, thank you. I appreciate it. I’m going to go get dressed now; we don’t have time.” Then she was off, swift and to the purpose. He watched her go.

“Don’t get any funny ideas, Ryan. She’s mine.”

He shook his head as if clearing it. “I hope you know what you’ve got and don’t mess it up.”

“I won’t, believe me. But I’m pretty sure you work for me and shouldn’t be telling me what to do.”

“When you know what you’re doing, I won’t. When you need my help, I will. I didn’t think you needed my help with Cameron, but then, you broke up with her.”

“It was a momentary lapse.” I was nearly growling now. “If this all works out tonight, I intend to marry her.”

He took a satisfied breath. “Good. Now, let’s get you dressed so you can make the gala. She’ll take longer; there’s just more for women to do, but you should get going anyway.” He paused. “*Do* you need my help?” he asked.

I didn’t. I knew how to put on a tux. I could even tie a bow tie, not that I liked bow ties. But I stopped, and I stepped close to Ryan. I felt guilty. He’d been helping me all these months,

thinking I was Dave. “Ryan, I have to tell you something. It’s about to blow up, so you should know first.”

He narrowed his eyes and peered at me. Taking a deep breath then nodding, ready for whatever it was I told him.

I was surprised at how afraid I was to tell someone, anyone. Not even one of my family members, but just an employee. Not *just* an employee — that was unfair to Ryan. He was my friend and I’d been lying. “Ryan. I’m not Dave. My name is Gio, and I’m his doppelganger. We have worked undercover together for ten years, now. Sometimes it’s been me, and sometimes it’s been Dave. The entire time you’ve worked for us. And for the last eight months or so, it’s been me.”

“Oh,” he said, without any visible response on his face.

“What’s going to come out tonight is that Minerva Carleton had an illegitimate baby when she was a teenager and gave him to the father. That’s my father. He is Giovanni Esposito, the mob boss. I’m Dave’s secret cousin. The Agency took advantage of our similarity in appearance and our interlocking skill sets.”

“Well. That makes sense. I always figured there was a missing triplet that had been stolen from the hospital and raised by a secret society to be a super spy or something.”

I blinked. “That — that is ridiculous. Secret society?!”

“It made sense at the time.”

I huffed a laugh. “You knew. You knew I wasn’t Dave all this time?”

“Dave would never give up going to the office. He loved real estate. It was like a game to him. Fun. And your personalities are really quite different in private. Although, in public, you’ve got the same glowering, dangerous thing going on, in private, you’re much friendlier than Dave. I knew the whole time. But that meant you guys needed me. I could maintain the business and apartment and calendar smoothly. I knew that when you forgot something, it was the switch over.”

“You knew.” A weight lifted from my shoulders. And he didn’t hate me.

“But I have to ask ... Dave? Is he dead?”

I nodded. I didn’t want to say the words.

“I knew something was wrong. And then, he never came back. And you stopped going away. And you looked like you were grieving.”

“He was my best friend.”

“And cousin.”

“I miss him.”

“I do, too.” Ryan’s eyes filled up with tears, and it nearly broke me.

I cleared my throat. I had no time for this. “My father, the abandoned baby now mob boss, is all grown up and full of vengeance. He’s after Minerva Carleton for discarding him and as many of the family as he can get. I have to stop him.”

“And Cameron? She knows?”

“Cameron was our handler. She worked with us. She retired when Dave died. We both did. But we’re still capable.”

“Okay,” he said. “That all makes sense. You get dressed. What else do I need to do?”

“Get my car from the Long Island heliport. And see if you can get Cam’s car from Giovanni Esposito’s. That might be trickier. But we’re going to need it when my identity comes out. I’ll be starting over from scratch, but I won’t have the Jaguar, or the Range Rover. I’ll be glad to have a Honda, actually.”

“And that is not Dave.” He gave me a sad smile and took out his phone. “I’ve got the car situation. You do the tux. Another way I knew it wasn’t Dave. That man was a fashion plate. I never helped him with his outfits.”

I took my suit and the case Ryan handed me and went into the restroom to change.

It was time for all the secrets to come out. Ryan had added an electric razor to the bag, so I shaved my beard. It was a quick job, but nobody had seen my clean-shaven chin in ten years, so it would help with getting into the gala without being noticed by my father or any other goons he might have gotten into the party, let alone the cousins or aunts or grandmother.

When I got out, Ryan had already handled the car problem. The Land Rover was already on its way back, and he had someone going to pick up Cam's car, too. No problem. I needed to pay Ryan more than I did. He was worth any price.

He looked at me. "Ah, I see. No, you are not Dave after all. Hm. You're the handsome cousin. Not that you aren't all handsome." Ryan blinked and shook his head as if he were dazzled. "I hope Cam knows what she's got, and she doesn't mess it up, either."

I had to laugh. Ryan was equal opportunity flirting. Then, Cam came out onto the street in a gust of October wind.

My breath faltered.

She was like an angel made of starlight and fog. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, in loose curls that caressed her face in the breeze. Her eyes were shadowed in smoky black. Her lips were glossed with mauve, and she had sparkling earrings brushing her shoulders from which floated a cape, sheer as the mist and sparkling. It made her look like she had wings. She was an angel or a fairy, or my Cameron.

The dress covered her from neck to toe and was that same ambiguous color, not taupe, not gray, not lavender, but some shadowy combination of all three. It was near the tone of her own skin and encrusted with metallic beads in the same color, all the way to the floor, and it somehow floated around her as if weightless. The wind stopped and the cape settled around her. She looked like she was made of light and shadow.

"Now is not the time, but you are the most stunning thing I've ever seen."

She smiled and walked up to me, lifting one finger to run it along my jaw. "I like it."

“Call me Gio.” My voice was gruff.

She gasped lightly and then laughed. “Ok, Gio. Hand me my gun.” Her smile was gentle and tender as she raised the skirt of her gown and placed the little Smith and Wesson into the inner thigh holster. She let the skirts down and shook them, and she was a misty, fairy princess again. “Ready?”

I nodded.

“All right then.” She picked up her skirts in one hand, and I opened the door for her.

“Wait!” Ryan cried. “He came over with two masks in his hands. They matched and were a similar misty color to Cam’s dress, but they had a darker, warmer tinge to them. Bronze. Now I could identify the color of her dress. A pale bronze. “You can’t go without these masks. You’ll have to wear those horrible boring black masks they hand out for the losers who don’t dress up. A Jeffries cannot wear one of those.”

“I’m not a Jeffries.”

He made a sound like “pff” and waved me away. “You’re Minerva Carleton’s grandson, and you don’t wear a loser’s mask to Minerva’s gala. Put it on to make sure it fits and you can see out of it.”

“We have to go.”

“Do it right, or spend more time later fixing what you got wrong.”

That sounded suspiciously like some sort of mantra.

“Fine.” We did have to make sure we’d be able to see out of them. I took my mask and looked at it for the first time. Why did I not check what he’d picked before? Oh right, because I didn’t care about style and galas and dressing up; that’s why I had Ryan, to make me into a billionaire. “Is this a roman style mask?”

“Yes. They’re Roman gods.”

I groaned. Not more classical Roman stuff. I’d had enough of that my whole life and in my dad’s library office where we’d been trapped for hours.

Cam turned around with hers on. “How do I look?”

“Like Aphrodite.” She looked regal — she looked like a goddess.

“And you are definitely an Apollo. Let’s go.”



“YOU’RE OKAY,” CAM WHISPERED IN MY EAR AS SHE TOOK MY arm, and we headed into the Metropolitan Club for grandmother’s gala.

I hated this. I would much rather face a criminal with a gun than I would this gauntlet of paparazzi and high society personages. I would even rather face my father with a gun. Or Minerva Carleton with that steely-eyed glare whenever I showed up late to our regular family dinners. “I’m fine.” I even wished that I could be back in my grandmother’s house yesterday, ready to tell everyone who I was.

That almost stopped me. I would rather tell them all that I was Gio and Dave was dead than I would go to a stupid fancy ball. Something had shifted. I was ready for the secrets to come out. I was eager for it, even. And all I had to do was get through this gala and take down my dad quietly so the scandal didn’t rock all of New York City. Taking down my dad I was looking forward to. But the gala?

The iron gates of the private club, attended by all the most elite of New York Society, seemed to me like the gates of doom.

“You clearly are not fine.” Her fingers squeezed my arm soothingly. “Look at it this way, once this is done, you’ll never have to attend another one of these fancy parties dressed as Dave. No worries about doing it wrong or insulting some random socialite or showing yourself as the soldier, not the suave real estate developer when you couldn’t care less about real estate and don’t want to be dragged into that conversation.”

“You knew why I was upset. It’s a stupid reason. There’s so much danger, but this is what bothers me.”

She shrugged and the crystals on her dress shifted in the light and set her to glowing. “You’re a hero. You can handle dangers and bad guys. You can face down your father; you’ve faced that pain already. You can even rise to the challenge of confessing your identity. But play Dave in his arena? I never put you in the high society missions. You hate the falsity of it, the superficial egos. Dave played the game. You saw underneath it and never liked what was there.”

We walked through the gates into the garden behind the other arriving guests, eyes alert. The gala had just started; we were on time. Not early, but we’d made it.

I grunted. “I know the darkness under the facade, Cam. That’s not the problem. I’m from the darkness. I lived there, grew up there. It’s how I was raised. That’s why I wish I’d gone on Dave’s last mission instead of him. I could have found my way through the darkness in a way that Dave couldn’t. And he’d be here to negotiate this pretty nest of vipers.”

“Well, that’s what I mean. It is the facade you hate. The pretty politeness that means they stab you in the back while they smile at your face. You want the bad guys to be honest about being bad guys, like your dad. He never put on a pretense. But here? That’s not what happened. Your honesty always made you uncomfortable here, in Dave’s world. Dave was a scammer at heart. He liked the game. The masks everyone wore.”

I cocked my head and touched her mask. “Yours still makes you look like the goddess you are. Your mask is the real you.”

She clutched at my arm and almost whimpered. “A shame you won’t be doing the charming rogue act anymore because you are really learning how to charm.”

“I only want to charm you ...”

She leaned in to me. I touched my lips to her ear. “Pay attention, now. It’s go time.”

Tension sprang through her body. She’d gotten distracted. I was glad I was in the field with her. I didn’t like her doing

fieldwork, especially not without me.

“Do you remember the first time we worked a party together?”

“How could I forget?”

“The way you made me feel, I almost forgot that we were on a mission.”

“Me too.”

“But now, I have more self-control because I know you’ll come home with me.”

“I’ll come home with you forever, Cam. Don’t you worry. Also, eyes sharp. We’re at the doors.”

We left the garden with its red carpet and paparazzi and the slow stroll, as the cameras flashed and snapped. The inside of the ballroom was stunning.

We entered at the top of the ballroom, with a tall, two-story set of stairs lined in black wrought iron of the most intricate design, leading down into the huge room, filled with the elite of New York City dancing and talking and mingling and sipping champagne. The masks and costumes lent an air of danger and a feeling that anything could happen this night. They were right. They didn’t know how right they were.

The ceiling was painted and gilded and didn’t look unlike my father’s front hall, but the ballroom of this height and magnitude could carry it off. The marble steps led down into the colonnaded hall, with pillars and arches holding up the second story walk. Many people strolled there. Cam and I perused them all, taking the slow stroll down the wide stairs, watching them, and being seen by all. Was my father there? Were his goons? Was death strolling among the revelers?

A man in a waiter’s uniform came up to us. He wore the pin on his collar that told us he was with The Agency. Holding a tray out, we each took a slender flute of champagne. Crystal.

“Has he been spotted?” I asked.

The man shook his head.

Cam smiled and took a sip. “He is to be apprehended and removed. There is to be no upset. No scandal, if you can help it.” She was the ranking officer, even retired. The man listened to her and nodded his acknowledgment.

With a napkin, he slid us each an earpiece and a mic and then, moved on.

“Allow me,” I said, deftly taking the device from her hand and brushing the alluring lock of hair that had escaped her hairdo and tucking it behind her ear. Device in place, I dropped my hand and winked at her.

“That is Dave’s wink, you charmer.”

“That’s my wink for you.”

“And you think you’re not good at that.” She cupped my jaw with her hand and kissed me. When the kiss was over, I too could hear the team through the earpiece.

“Aren’t we clever,” I said against her lips before breaking the kiss. Mics attaching to collars was even easier. “Let’s not get cocky, now. We have work to do. Eyes sharp.”

“Eyes sharp yourself,” she said and straightened up. “Incoming.”

“Dave!” Will Jeffries, Dave’s twin brother, and my cousin, was smiling broadly, Birdie, his wife’s, arm tucked in his, as he came up to them. “I wasn’t sure it was you until the two of you started canoodling in public. What the hell has been going on?” He was too loud. He’d probably been drinking steadily since Grandmother had dragged them all here early. He was drinking scotch.

I had to get him quiet. I didn’t want anyone to recognize me. I knew there were goons somewhere. “Quiet.”

I ushered him into an alcove, off to the side of the main ballroom.

“You’re late,” he was saying, even as he walked with us. Cam kept her eyes darting about the room. “Grandmother is furious. She thought you weren’t going to come and had gone off on one of your mysterious disappearances where you take

off, and we don't hear from you for weeks at a time." He stopped. "Hey. You've shaved." He laughed once and peered at me under the mask. "I haven't seen your naked chin since we were kids. You said because you didn't want to be confused with me ... but I don't remember you having a dimple in your chin. I feel sure I would have mocked you for that."

"Shit." Cam caught my gaze and she bit her lip. I was going to have to take care of this. The secrets were coming, and Will deserved to know. "I have to tell you something. It's big."

"Oh, good. Are you finally telling me that you're a secret agent like 007? Because I knew already. I'm not dumb, you know. Besides, Grandmother already told us."

"Yes. I am. But it's worse than that. Right now I'm trying to stop my father from coming to kill Grandmother and probably all of you, if he can get away with it."

He blinked. "What? Our father's dead."

"Grandmother told you she had a baby when she was a teenager. Well, he was raised with the Esposito crime family."

"Duke?"

I nodded. "Now Giovanni, her son is coming for revenge. And I have to keep them safe. But the only way I can do that is by being me." I swallowed and barreled on. "I'm not Dave, Will. My name is Gio. I'm your cousin. Giovanni Esposito is my father. I look just like you and Dave, except for the chin dimple. We've been working undercover as a team for ten years."

"Ahh," He seemed to have lost his buzz. "I just thought you were moody and mysterious. But you weren't. You were actually two separate people."

"Yeah." It was hard to say it. I couldn't tell him. "Listen I need you to get everyone into the green parlor. It's safe. There's protection there. I don't want my father finding any of you alone. Who knows what he might do. Can you do that for me?"

“After what you did for me and Birdie a few months ago, of course I’ll do anything for you.” He started to move off but stopped. “Was that you when Birdie got kidnapped?”

I nodded, but there must have been some reluctance on my face.

“Where’s Dave?”

I looked down, unable to get it out. I met his eyes and shook my head. “He’s dead. He died on a mission while I was his cover here.” There was more I wanted to say, but I couldn’t now. “I’ll explain as much as I can later — there’s no way to keep this a secret now.”

He was stunned. He couldn’t move. Birdie, his efficient redhead wife, put an arm around him. “Don’t worry. I got it. We’ll collect the family and get them in the green room. I know where it is. Grandmother ran her staging out of there. You can trust us.”

There was a buzz on the earpiece.

“They got six of Esposito’s associates. All of them armed. No sign of Esposito, himself.” Cam said.

Will’s glazed eyes looked at her. “You too? You worked with them?”

Her eyes went wet behind the mask. “I was his handler when he went missing in Bolivia.”

“Missing?” Will perked up. “He’s missing, not dead.”

“No. I’m afraid he’s dead.” Cam leaned forward and took his arm. “The investigation was thorough. He was captured and being held in captivity when the prison blew up. All lives were lost. Did everything I could to see if I could save him, but there was no way. There was nothing left of the place.”

“But you didn’t see his body.”

“There were no bodies, Will. They were vaporized. I’m sorry. I know it’s hard to believe —”

“It’s not hard to believe. Dave is not dead. I’d know if he were dead. He’s alive. You didn’t see his body, so he’s alive.”

“Will ...” I started. It wasn’t any good to hold out hope for the hopeless.

“No ... Gio.” Will used my name for the first time in my acquaintance with him, and I couldn’t believe the rush of pleasure it gave me. Like I was being seen for the first time. Like I was real. “You go and find this father of yours ... this uncle of mine. Save grandmother, be the hero like you are. I’ll gather all the little lambs like it’s a family reunion and keep them safe. I’m going to tell them what you told me.”

It felt like a reprieve, not having to be the one to reveal my lies and secrets and Dave’s death. “I can tell them. It’s my responsibility.”

Will cocked his eyebrow. “Your responsibility is stopping a mad man. I’ll deal with the family.”

He was right that I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted. I agreed.

He and Birdie walked away, talking quietly together.

“I can’t let him think that Dave isn’t really dead. That’s going to make it worse.” I felt guilty. Especially because I felt relieved that he didn’t hate me, was taking care of telling everyone, and on top of it, wasn’t grieving Dave’s death. It would be easier, at least for tonight if he didn’t believe.

“It won’t. It’s part of the process of grieving. But we have work to do anyway. Your father is still out there, armed and dangerous.”

We didn’t argue, just went back to search the crowd. The earpieces told us that all the family members had been collected and were in the green room, as safe as they could be until we brought in my father. I took Cam in my arms to dance with her, a calculated choreography so that we could sweep the room and see all the corners without giving away our intent. And yet, my father was still unseen, invisible, and on the way to wreak havoc on the family I had fought tooth and nail to keep safe.

“This isn’t easy searching, you know,” I said, frustrated. “Everyone is in masks. Great plan actually. How do we find

one man in a mask and tuxedo in a throng of other men in masks and tuxedos?”

“Without having our own cover blown and having him come after you. You’re as at risk as Minerva is. I would have preferred you to wear a bulletproof vest under your suit. I don’t like it at all.” She was still watching the crowd, but her words were soft, murmured against my ear.

“Are you getting soft on me, Agent Villegas?” I chuckled.

She squeezed my hand, and not softly; her voice had an edge. “Yes, damn you. I won’t lose you. Not on my watch. Not like Dave. Not you.” I could feel the tension in her muscles.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I was just trying to ease the tension; sorry, I didn’t mean ...” I rubbed my hand up and down her back soothingly, searching the crowd. “We’d better find him and disarm him and take him before he can hurt anyone.” It was best not to think about death while on a mission, despite the thoughts being ever-present.

Cam and I could not do this anymore. We had gone soft. Life mattered too much. She mattered too much. I was going to get through this last mission, and I was going to keep her safe. I wished she had a bulletproof vest, too, and that definitely wouldn’t have worked under her sleek gown that seemed practically painted on. It seemed we were heading towards an ordinary life, and I found myself glad. As long as I could survive my father, I was going to make sure she and I had that ordinary life together, forever. I kissed her forehead. “So. How do we find one masked man in the middle of a hundred other masked men?”

Cam also searched the crowd. As we swept along the dance floor, waltzing like I’d been trained at The Agency, I felt her strong, curvy body against mine, working in tandem with mine. We were a team. We belonged together. I trusted her to watch my back, and she trusted me to watch hers. “He’s your height, dark hair going gray at the temples.”

“Which may not be visible.” Many of the masks the revelers wore covered their entire heads.

“True. So, your height, but more heavysset than you. Solid build, but not fat.”

I spun her again, slowly. My eyes roved over the crowd. “Still too many to sort through. We need more identifying details.”

I could feel Cam’s smile against my neck. “So, what do we know about him? What kind of mask or costume would he wear?”

It was back to this game. This puzzle. Figuring out our suspect according to his psychological profile. And I had spent years thinking about my father’s psychological profile, trying to understand him, and myself, and how things had ended like they did. “He would wear a tuxedo because he considers himself dignified, but he would never wear one of those generic black masks they give people without costumes. It would be beneath his dignity.”

“Besides, they wouldn’t hide his identity enough. He would be wearing a more substantial mask. Something flamboyant. Like his house.”

“Yes. But not too flamboyant. He’d say he’s not a showgirl. He likes showgirls, but not that way. To use and fondle and then discard. No, the showgirl was a reward for being powerful.”

“It’s all about his power and prestige and appearance.”

I nodded.

“Roman emperor,” we said at the same time. Our eyes lit upon a man, about my height — you couldn’t really tell his build because he had put a scarlet and gold cloak over his tuxedo, draping it over one shoulder. He wore a gilded helmet covering his head and face, with a tall, sweeping crest in black.

His hand sat underneath the cloak. I was sure there was a gun under there, loaded and ready to get rid of the mother who had haunted him his whole life, whose abandonment had never been forgiven.

“That’s him.” Cam headed right for him.

I stopped her with a hand on her wrist. “He’s always paranoid. He’ll see us if we just go straight for him. We need to come at him indirectly. Let’s close in on him from opposite directions. You come at him from those archways — you can arm yourself,” I eyed her gown where I knew her thigh holster held her gun, “in the shadows. No one’s paying attention to what happens there.”

She nodded. “I would be rather obvious if I hiked my gown up in the middle of this crowd, but once I get it out, it will be much easier with this sparkly cape. I could hide a bazooka under here.” Her eyes behind the mask hole glittered.

“So could he.” I nodded towards my father and his holy Roman cloak. He had something under there. “Target spotted,” I told the mic and gave the rest of the team the information; then, it was time to make our move.

“Meet you at the bad guy.” Before she could go, I grabbed her and pulled her toward me, giving her a swift, thorough kiss.

“Was that for cover?” Her fingers were grasping my lapels. She’d kissed me back. I loved her so much.

“No. I just wanted to kiss you.” I didn’t say the part that if I died tonight, I wanted one last kiss. But she knew it. It was almost as if she could hear my thoughts, or as if she were thinking the same thing.

We both knew how anything could happen. All it took was one unlucky move. One unlucky encounter. One unlucky bullet.

Cam let go of my jacket and smoothed the fabric over my chest, then I let go of her. The last things that touched were our fingertips. We parted ways. She melted into the crowd, but I was already moving, turning to business, making my way to my father, the roman emperor, in a roundabout way, so he wouldn’t know I’d spotted him.

I was almost to him, my gun cocked and ready but still hidden in my pocket — I would shoot through the jacket if I

needed to. Then, he must have spotted what he was looking for.

He placed his glass of champagne on the tray of a passing waiter, and turned, going in the other direction in a straight line, single-minded.

He was making a beeline for Grandmother. Standing in the far alcove, not too distant from the green room where she was supposed to be staying safe. She wore a heavily encrusted black gown and a black sling to match for her broken shoulder. Her hair was piled up on her head in a silver updo, with stars arching out. Her mask was black velvet and crystal. Or maybe diamond — it was hard to tell with her. My grandmother was a forceful woman, and tonight, she was dressed as the universe.

And as if she were a black hole, my father was drawn to her, irresistibly. He had her in his reach. He would not be satisfied until this was done, her whole past that he believed proved her unworthy of what she had was out and exposed to everyone, and she was dead.

I sped up. I didn't think I'd make it on time. He was reaching beneath his cloak for what I was sure was a gun. I took mine out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: CAM

Back in the shadows, I hauled the long hem of my gown up and drew my gun. It was a lot of skin, and a lot of leg revealed, but in the shadows, it wasn't as obvious. The crowd still milled and laughed and partied on the other side of the arches. I reached into my glittering purse and took out a silencer, screwing it onto the muzzle of my gun. If the goal was to keep it quiet, then I'd keep it quiet.

I cut around the waiters and the drink table, a cluster of laughing debutantes and a score of tuxedoed men wearing the plain black masks you were forced to wear if you didn't bother to dress in costume.

Ryan would have been scandalized.

I would tell him about it when we were all done here and everyone was safe and Giovanni Esposito was neutralized. If we could arrest him quietly, that would be great, but I had the feeling that he would push the issue until either he died or one of us did, preferably, in his mind, Minerva. But I was sure he'd be satisfied with any of us, including his own son.

And that was not going to happen on my watch.

Nor was Gio going to be the one to kill him if it came down to that. I would spare him the pain of killing his own father. Even if he did it to save his family, he would never forgive himself for it. It was my job to take care of him, and that didn't just mean his body. Once upon a time, I was just his handler, but now he was mine, body and soul. And I wasn't going to let his soul be damaged either.

I was ten yards away when Giovanni Esposito started cutting through the crowd like a shark.

Immediately, I knew that he had found his prey, and that could only be Minerva. She stood outside of the green room, her good hand braced on the column of the archway peering through the crowd. What was she doing outside of the safety of the room we'd prepared for her? "I've got him, Roman emperor helmet with a red and gold cloak. Out in front of the green room," I spoke into the listening device.

I swerved to reach Minerva before he did. Luckily, I was closer.

"Mrs. Carleton!" I cried, stepping in front of her, arms open wide, the cape spread to hide Minerva from Giovanni's view. I could feel his gaze burning a hole in my back for interfering. I pulled her back farther into the shadows of the alcove. He'd have to do a lot more than just glare at me before I'd let him have her. I knew he could. I knew he was armed. I ignored him, foiling his efforts to get to Minerva.

"Oh dear," she said, her voice slightly shaky. "Who could you be?"

"It's me, Cameron. We met yesterday."

"Ahh, Cameron. You do look lovely. Like a goddess. I suppose this means that my reprobate of a grandson is here, too, I hope?" She had no idea that Giovanni Esposito, her long lost son had a gun trained on us.

"He is, but we need to find someplace protected —"

"I refused to be coddled. This is my life, and I will face my mistakes."

"You'll face your mistakes is right." The voice was cold, dark, and echoed within the Roman helmet. "Mother."

I felt Minerva's slender and fragile body stiffen in my arms as I tried to hide her.

"Get out of the way, or I will go through you, Miss Villegas."

"No. I won't let you hurt her."

“Do as he says, Cameron. This is not your problem.” Minerva’s spine was like steel. She tried to get me to lower my arms.

“Mrs. Carleton ...”

“I told you to call me grandmother, now. Let me see my son.”

“I won’t let you do it, Dad.” Gio had finally made it to them. “Give up this insane revenge plan. It was all more than sixty years ago.”

“I was sixteen, Giovanni. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to leave you, but it was either give you to your father or have you taken to an orphanage. I did what I thought was best.” Minerva said. Her voice was infinitely sad. “Perhaps I did the wrong thing. It was a different time back then. Teenage unwed mothers were not allowed, especially not in my social circle. My parents wouldn’t have allowed me to keep you, and your father wouldn’t marry me. I would have kept you. I wanted to be a family, but it wasn’t up to me.”

“You lie. You are the abandoning harlot who tossed me over as if I were refuse. You must pay for that.”

“I didn’t want to, I swear, Giovanni. Oh, my son, if you only knew how I longed for you.”

“Lies!” He raised his hand, and there was the gun, gleaming and black. “You will die for your lies.”

Minerva nodded and closed her eyes, waiting for the bullet. But that wasn’t going to happen.

“Drop it,” Gio said, his voice low and menacing. “Drop it, Dad, damn you.”

“I am damned. I have always been damned. I was born into damnation, and I will take this whore with me to hell.”

I shot first. My little Smith and Wesson with the silencer I’d stuck in my purse like a lipstick was hardly even noticed in the buzz of the gala, as the rich and fabulous enjoyed their chance to wear a mask and let their inner selves out for the night.

Giovanni dropped his gun, and it went skittering across the floor. His hand spattered blood throughout the alcove. I kicked the gun away. “Bitch!” He clutched his hand to his chest. “I should have shot you when I had the chance, another lying whore.”

He abandoned his attack on Minerva and instead charged me. It was unexpected and I was far too close. I got off another shot, and then, he was on me. His one good hand went right for my throat, and his forearm pressed at my chest. His heavy bulky body bore me to the ground. I felt the impact as we fell, as my windpipe was nearly crushed. His cloak fluttered around us, hiding the rest of the alcove from sight and covering us completely. His large, strong hand squeezed and squeezed.

I did not know if he would strangle me or break my neck first. All of his anger was in that hand. All of his madness. I did not know if the red I saw was the light filtered through the cloak or was the blood vessels in my eyes popping. I did not know if the ringing in my ears was inside my head or the sound of a gala, high times, and people enjoying their night while I died.

“The hell!” Gio roared, and Giovanni’s weight was lifted from me.

I gasped for air as Gio threw his father to the other side of the alcove. He made a heavy thump against the wall.

Gio knelt by me as I lay prone on the floor. “Don’t let him get away,” I gasped. “It will never be over if he gets away.”

“The team is here now.” I glanced over and saw a couple of waiters handling Giovanni. A screen had been placed in front of this alcove, as if there were catering or house cleaning happening in here. The party continued on the other side.

A group of people laughed at something, and the sound tinkled over to me. No one out there had noticed a thing. How quickly had it all happened? It felt like years since I had warned the team where Giovanni was.

“They’ll deal with him. Are you okay?” His fingers palpitated my neck gently. Checking me. It was sore, but

working. It was a good thing he'd only had one hand and not both. I thought he might have killed me with two. And if I hadn't shot him in the chest before he got his fingers around my windpipe.

"I —" the words didn't come. I coughed, feeling the rasping pain in my throat, then tried again. "I'm still breathing. So, that's good." I laughed. It was hoarse and ripped through my throat. I coughed weakly again.

Gio brushed my hair back from my face. I had not put it up well enough to keep it from falling apart at the least little provocation, like being strangled by a mob boss dressed as a Roman emperor.

"I'm afraid that's more than we can say for Giovanni," Minerva said, her face pale and stricken. Her sigh was long and tragic.

I tried to sit up, my adrenaline still pumping like mad. I would feel this later but right now I couldn't lay there anymore. Gio helped me to sit and sheltered me in his arms. I clung to him.

"I shot him." I didn't know why I was surprised since I'd been the one to pull the trigger. I'd wanted to spare him, for Gio's sake, for Minerva's. But he'd charged me.

"It was self-defense," Gio said. His face was made of stone. No emotions leaked.

The waiters who were not waiters carried Giovanni out. They would take him to a quiet place where he would be found later and the authorities called. The gala went on as if nothing had happened. Other *not-waiters* had already begun to clean up the blood splatters. I was struck again by the efficiency and sometimes brutal ruthlessness of The Agency. For some reason, it seemed more ruthless now that I was on the outside of it. Only flirting with the edges. They'd have me back, they'd told me so. But I thought of what they were hiding from the rest of the world. The secrets and the lies and the deception, all while the rest of the world went on.

It surprised me to think that the attack had come and gone, and no one else noticed. Well, we'd done what we meant to do. End this, without any scandals coming to light. For now.

“Come,” Minerva said. She was trembling slightly. “We must go to the green room where we can discuss this with our family, out of view of the guests. I must make an appearance, but not yet.”

Gio laughed once; it was not a happy laugh. “It seems like we could drive a herd of elephants through here and no one would notice anything but the costumes and the drinks and the laughter and the music.”

Minerva let her lips quirk up into a mirthless smile. “Yes, well, it is the preeminent party of the social year. Please,” she said and gestured to us to go through the door that she'd been standing outside of the whole time. I was still unsteady on my feet. Gio put an arm around me and helped me.

“Grandmother!” Will cried. “Where did you go? You were supposed to stay here.”

“I wasn't going to let anyone else deal with my son,” she said. “I had to do it myself. It was my responsibility.”

Gio and I came through, and the rest of them went silent. April gasped. “You're covered in blood.”

“We've dealt with him, now.” My voice was harsh and ripped through my throat.

“I know first aid,” Maya said, her curly brown hair held back with a mask that looked like the sun.

“The blood is not mine.” I coughed.

“Stop trying to talk,” Gio said, and led me to a seat, where I, rather gratefully, collapsed. My legs were a little weak. Almost dying did that to you. “You are covered in blood.” He swallowed twice, hard, then with a hard yank ripped the cape from my shoulder. “Sorry.” He ripped the rest of it and flung it away. “The blood was mostly on the cape. Are you okay?”

“Ryan is going to be so mad that you ripped my dress. Do you know how long we shopped for that?”

He cupped my chin in his fingers and tilted my head to look at me like I was crazy. Then, he laughed.

“What happened?” Lissie asked. The girls were standing around Cam the way the men were caring for grandmother.

“My son tried to kill me,” Minerva said. She dropped her head, and a tear leaked from her lids.

“He tried to shoot Grandmother and Cam stopped him.” Gio’s words were emotionless and flat. “Then, he tried to strangle Cam. She shot him again. Now, he’s not a problem.” A muscle leaped in his jaw.

Everyone looked around at each other, at a loss for words.

“I’ll get some ice for her neck,” Maya said and went to the small bar area, filling a napkin with ice.

“Your father is dead,” Will said.

Gio nodded. I reached out to him and slid my hand into his. I clung to it

“I told everyone what was going on. I hope you don’t mind.”

Gio shrugged. “There was no keeping it a secret now. I’m sorry it happened the way it did.”

“Grandmother’s illegitimate son is dead. And it’s a good thing. Sorry, Grandmother.”

She shrugged. “The secret’s out now. We might as well call him what he is. Was.” She drank deeply of the glass of brandy someone had given her. “And we’re all alive. His life was a tragedy.”

“Don’t feel too badly about his life, Grandmother,” Gio said. “He was immeasurably wealthy, entirely spoiled by everyone as a child. He did whatever he wanted and got whatever he craved. He didn’t suffer. He caused suffering.”

Minerva closed her eyes. “Tragic.”

“You’re really not Dave.” Jack stood there next to Grandmother on the other side of Will. Mona went to stand by him and hung onto him. Everyone had someone, here. They all

had someone for support. It was better that way. This was going to be a hard night for everyone.

Gio shook his head.

“And Dave really was a spy. That wasn’t just a joke we made? You too? You were both spies?”

“Yeah. We were secret operatives. We have been for about ten years. Cameron was our handler. We ... We both left The Agency when Dave died on a mission. I kept Dave’s identity because, well, I haven’t made peace with him being dead. And I didn’t want to break everyone’s hearts.”

“Dave’s not dead.” Will was smiling.

“Will, he’s dead,” Gio said.

“I’m sorry,” I grated out. April gave me a warm cup of tea with honey. I took a sip and started again. “I’m sorry. I have his effects. There weren’t many since he was a captive at the time. I’ll return them to you.”

“You have his effects but never saw his body?” Will shrugged. “He’s alive. I feel it. I would know if he’s dead, but he’s still there.” He pressed his fist to his chest.

“I believe Will.” Donna had been sitting quietly since we’d come in. Dave’s mother. “Will has always known how Dave was, and Dave has always known how Will was. If one had a nightmare, the other woke up. If one needed help, the other would come. It’s that twin thing. Which means Dave’s alive. He’ll come back to us when he’s ready.”

The rest of the cousins looked doubtful, but no one was going to challenge. Gio looked at me and shrugged. They’d deal with Dave’s death in their own manner, in their own time.

“Were you ever going to tell us you weren’t Dave?” Will pressed.

“Yes, he would have,” I croaked.

“Stop trying to talk,” Gio told me. “Eventually. I ... I don’t think I have quite processed his death yet.”

Will laughed. “You don’t think he’s dead, either.”

“What? No, I accept he’s dead.”

“You’ve been holding his place for him, waiting for him to come back. Be honest. Somewhere deep inside of you, you think he got away. You think he’s alive.”

Gio didn’t answer.

“Do you?” My words were barely audible.

Gio shrugged. He didn’t think Dave was dead. “There’s still a possibility he made it out. If it were me, I would have set the explosion. That would have been how I escaped.”

I gaped at him. I couldn’t believe he believed Dave was alive, and yet, also, something within me glimmered. It was hope. There was the tiniest possibility, if Gio thought so, that Dave really was alive.

“That’s settled. Dave’s alive and Gio’s our cousin. And all of us are alive.” Will raised a glass. “All in all, I’m feeling rather positive about this year’s gala. It’s certainly never been so exciting.”

A low voice spoke from the back of the room. “You bastard.”

Everyone turned to look. Duke Esposito, the easy-going, motorcycle riding bar owner glared at Gio from where he was slumped in a chair.

“You goddamn bastard.” He stood, holding onto the table. “Gio.” It was like he didn’t have the breath to continue on.

“Hello, Duke.” Gio’s face was full of pain. Dread maybe. Sadness.

“You’re not dead, you son of a bitch.”

“No, I’m not dead. They asked me to join The Agency and let my old identity die. I thought it was the best way to escape dad. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you. It seemed the only way. You got away on your own. I was proud of you.”

I could feel the tension in Gio’s body, afraid that Duke would hate him for playing dead all these long years. Instead,

Duke gave a sob and stalked across the room to sweep Gio into a powerful hug. “You’re alive.”

Gio nodded, at a loss for words, and hugged him back.

“You’re Gio.” Lissie seemed to have figured it out. “You’re Duke’s Gio. That mobster is your dad. And he’s Minerva’s son. Oh my God, Duke. You’re Minerva’s grandson. You both are.”

Minerva looked up at that. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she looked exhausted. Her long lost son had just come back, tried to kill her, and then, died in front of her.

“I’ve lost a son — who I never really had anyway — but I’ve gained two new grandsons.” Her smile was bittersweet. Then, she held out her hands, and they came to stand by her, each taking one hand. The tears leaked from her eyes. “I’m glad to have you both. My boys. You’re mine now. No getting rid of me now.”

“You don’t hate me?” Gio asked, his brows drawn low over his eyes. “For lying about who I am? About Dave?”

“I must admit that I’m still processing your secrets, tied in as they were to my own, but there’s no doubt that you’re my grandson. And there’s nothing more important than family. I’m glad we can have you back, now, even if we missed decades with you. And when Dave comes back, we’ll have him, too.”

I saw Gio take a breath to correct Minerva about her wishful thinking over Dave; instead, he nodded and bowed his head and accepted it.

I couldn’t help but entertain the thought that maybe Will was right. We’d had enough evidence that Dave was in the prison and some of his scattered effects afterward, but we never had recovered the body. What if Dave was alive?

The family began to talk in small groups, everyone quiet. There was so much to think about, so much to discuss. I didn’t feel much in the mood for a gala. I was exhausted, my throat hurt, and the bruises on my neck were starting to hurt. Gio

caught me touching them and squatted down next to me to check on them.

His touch was tender and gentle. “You’re my hero,” he said.

“You’re the one who saved me. You tossed your own father against a wall.”

“And I’d do so a million times again. I’d do everything for you. Anything. I want to. Forever.” He took my fingers and kissed the knuckles. “Will you marry me, Cameron Villegas?” His voice was low. He didn’t want the rest of the family to hear. They didn’t need any other surprises to deal with. “You’re my hero. You are the other half of me. I love you. Even when I’m angry at you, that’s not going to change. Marry me, Cam.”

“Yes, I will, Gio Esposito. I love you too, and I don’t ever want to be apart again.” My voice was barely more than a whisper.

He brushed his knuckles against my cheek, and then, ran his fingers over my bruised neck again. “I want to take you home. You shouldn’t be here anymore.”

“My home,” I insisted. “Not Dave’s. You and me, Gio.”

He closed his eyes as if enjoying how the words sounded. “Yes. From here on out.”

He made his excuses and said he needed to take me home, and I was glad I didn’t need to say anything because I could hardly speak without pain right now. The bloodied cape was left behind, and he draped his jacket over my shoulders to hide the rest of the bloodstains. We went through the grand ballroom, really not as impressive after you’d thwarted a murder and killed the murderer — nothing was really impressive after that.

As we climbed the top of elaborate stairs, we almost walked into a man in a tuxedo and one of those generic black masks.

“Excuse me,” Gio said, not really paying attention, instead worrying about me, making sure I didn’t trip or his jacket

stayed on my shoulders. But something about the masked man caught my attention. He had one of those long beards that the young men liked to sport sometimes, but it wasn't well kept. I was surprised he'd come to a high society gala like that. I looked away as we passed him, but something about him made me check again. He was still staring at us. Me. Us. I checked the coat to see if any of the blood was showing, if somehow he'd figured out what had just happened. What if he was one of Giovanni's associates?

But when I looked back, he was gone, and Gio was shuffling me out the door. I forgot about the strange watcher. Gio and I got into Dave's Jaguar. He wanted to take me to the doctor right away to check on my throat, but I convinced him to put it off until morning. I needed to go home.

We drove out to Brooklyn, and Gio put me into the shower to wash off. Then, he joined me there. I was too tired and in pain to get amorous, but that's not what he wanted.

He lathered and rinsed my hair and washed my skin lovingly, rinsing me off and patting me dry with one of my fluffy towels. He slid his favorite t-shirt over my head and led me to bed by the hand as if I were a little child who had stayed up too late past my bedtime.

Then, he crawled in behind me and tucked me into the curve of his body, safe, protected, loved. I felt his warm breath against my ear. "I love you with my heart, mind, body, and soul." His soft words were gentle, and yet, they shook me to the core of my being. He was my other half. I was his. I brought his hand to my lips and kissed it, too tired and sore to do or say anything else, but it was okay. He understood. He held me and whispered endearments into my ear until I fell asleep.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH, SIX DAYS, AND TWENTY HOURS
LATER

The door over the bell to the shop jingled, but I was busy with some orders. So, I didn't look up.

"Your lover boy's here," Anissa, my shop assistant said, her voice full of laughter. She mocked me ruthlessly for how deliriously in love with him I was. I didn't mind. It was true.

"I came to pick up my fiance for our weekly family night at Duke's."

"Oh!" I came around the counter. "Is it that late already? I totally lost track of time."

"Don't worry. I'm here to remind you." I leaned in to him for a kiss that I intended to be short and sweet, but he had different intentions. Holding me firm to his hips, with an arm around my waist and bending me back, to overwhelm me with his kiss.

It didn't take long to make me drown in his love. It never did.

When he let me up, Anissa was staring. "Hot," she said. "You guys are so gorgeous together." She sighed. "I wish I had someone like that."

Gio winked at her. It wasn't Dave's wink, it was his own, and I wasn't sure how he managed to make a wink have a different personality but he did. "You'll have your own turn, Nissy." He gathered up my purse and my coat and helped me shrug into it. "But we have to go. We don't want to be late or we have to buy pizza tonight."

“Why do you have to pay for pizza when all your cousins are billionaires, and you guys just have this little shop again?” Anissa asked.

“It’s just the way it is. You play with billionaires, sometimes you get stuck with the check.”

She rolled her eyes. She didn’t understand it. But that’s because she didn’t understand our family. Oh, I wasn’t technically part of the family yet, but I understood.

Gio took my hand and led me out of the shop while Anissa promised to close up. The Christmas lights were strung up and down the street, and there was a scent of snow in the air. I shivered in the chill and Gio wrapped an arm around me, cuddling me as we walked down the street to Dukes.

“Are you sorry you’re not a billionaire anymore?”

He shook his head, smiling. “Not at all. I never needed any of that stuff. I never wanted it. It was a pain in the ass; although, I was kind of getting into the idea of buying a town and turning it around.”

“But here we are, living in my little studio with just my little car, and I know that’s not what you’re used to.”

“I like your studio. And your car.” He nuzzled his cold nose into my neck and made me yip. “And I love you. Are you sorry you aren’t marrying a billionaire?”

“I never wanted a billionaire, you know that. I’m happy with my little shop. And you.”

“Well, you certainly have me.” We stopped at a streetlight, waiting for it to turn green. He grabbed me and captured my lips with his cold lips as they were in the early winter air. By the time the other pedestrians were shoving past us to cross the street, our lips were warm. The rest of me was, too.

He wasn’t embarrassed about the public display of affection. I gave him a little slap on the chest, through his coat; he couldn’t even feel it. “You have absolutely no manners.” And I didn’t mean it either. I loved his kisses, embarrassment or no.

“No, I really don’t. It’s one of the reasons I hated being a billionaire. So many rules and expectations and ugh, I had to be polite all the time.”

“The horrors.” I rolled my eyes and tucked my arm into his.

He opened the door to Duke’s, and everyone turned to us.

“Last,” Will said.

“Dammit,” Gio said. And everyone laughed. Gio did too. He didn’t really mind buying pizza. He’d made quite a bit of money while he was in The Agency, and Dave had advised him on where to invest it. He actually didn’t need to work again for the rest of his life. “It’s the principal of the thing,” he complained, and they all groaned and refused to give him sympathy.

Duke slid a Heineken across the bar to him, and he clinked bottles with his brother. He slid me my favorite red wine. We were just settling in when the door opened in a bluster of wintry wind.

A man came in, dressed formally in a three-piece suit and wire-rimmed glasses. His long coat was heavy and wool, and he wore shoes polished to a high shine. He was old. His white hair was thinning, and he carried a bulky briefcase. He did not look like the usual clientele of Duke’s.

“Can I help you, sir?” Duke asked.

“Are you the proprietor of this establishment? Duke Esposito?”

Duke smiled at the stiff formality of his words. “I am, sir.”

He nodded. “I need to have a discussion with you and your brother, Giovanni Esposito III.”

Gio jumped like he’d been shocked. “That’s me ...” he peered at the old man. “Mr. Cardalucci?”

The old man blinked. “You remember me.”

“You’re my grandfather’s lawyer. Is everything all right?”

“I regret to inform you that your grandfather has passed.”

I hugged Gio around the waist, although he didn't really react much.

"Oh, that's terrible. I spoke with him on the phone, not long ago. Would you like to sit?" Gio pointed to a table where they could talk.

"No. No, thank you. I will be quick. I just wanted to tell you the news in person. Your grandfather, Giovanni Esposito Sr., took his last breaths in Italy, peacefully, but he was happy to hear from you before he died. It made things right, as he said." He continued. "As you know, your cousin Mario died three weeks ago."

"No, I'm sorry. I did not know. He was much younger than me. I didn't know him well."

"I knew him. It's not actually a loss," Duke said, grim.

"He was, as they say, not up to the challenges of stepping into your father's footsteps. His end was quick and brutal."

"As he lived," Duke said.

"Which left the Esposito fortune unclaimed. Due to the particular constraints of your father's will, his fortune reverted back to your grandfather when Mario died. And now it goes to the two of you."

"What?" Duke said.

"What?" Gio said.

"It is a significant fortune. You are now both billionaires in your own right."

Gio sat down. "Aw, hell."

I hugged him around the neck. His eyes looked a little unfocused. "My poor baby. Or rather, my definitely not poor baby. Will you be okay?"

He sighed, "How would you like it if I bought you a town?"

I chuckled. "As long as you're with me, it doesn't matter what you buy."

I kissed him. I would be kissing him for the rest of my life, and he would be kissing me for his; it was a conversation that would never end.

ABOUT L.A. PEPPER

Like you, LA loves contemporary romance stories and is an avid reader.

She's had her heart broken by her true love, yet is still addicted to happily ever after endings!

When LA is not writing about the next bad boy billionaire, contemporary romance novel, she enjoys a glass of Chianti, raclette with her girlfriends, spin classes, and watching the sunrise every morning!

She is a self-proclaimed desperate housewife and lives in a cul-de-sac of excitement, drama, and love stories. Many of her outlines are inspired here.

LA was given her nickname by one of her teenage daughters, and it stuck with friends and family!

Leanne lives in Canada with her husband, and 4 children!

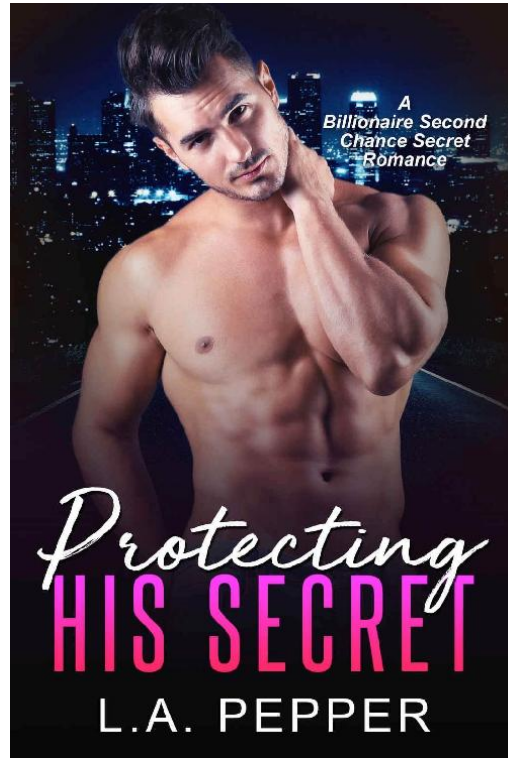
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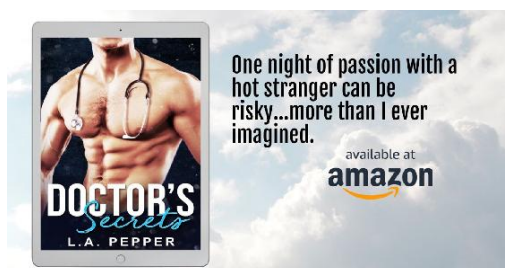
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