

TREVOR REESE 2

UNDERCOVER LOVE

Bestselling Author MALLORY MONROE

**TREVOR REESE 2:
UNDERCOVER LOVE
BY
MALLORY MONROE**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

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PROLOGUE

Gaborone, Botswana

Present Day

“Have you decided to make post-graduate application?”

“Not yet. You?”

“But of course! I am to need post-graduate work if I am to get a proper position.”

“I don’t know if I can stomach more school. I need a break. I need a gap year.”

Ojiambo smiled. “A gap year? What is that?”

Amari smiled a bright white smile too. “Time off. A year off! Then I’ll decide.”

“Ojiambo shook his head. “You have it very good, Amari. Very good indeed. You want to see the world. I just want to help my people.”

“*Our* people,” Amari corrected him. “But I just see it differently. You cannot help others if you cannot help yourself.” He grinned. “I just need a little time off to help myself.”

Ojiambo laughed. Amari was such a card! “Good day, Amari!”

Amari threw up his hand and the two friends, who had just come out of the engineering lab on the campus of the University of Botswana, went their separate ways. Ojiambo: to his family hut down in the village. Amari: to his family estate in the Botswanan suburb of Phakalane. Ojiambo traveled by foot. Amari dashed off in his high-revved BMW so fast that he kicked up dirt as he sped away. His classmates across the campus looked at him smiling, and shook their heads. Amari was a flashy one, they already knew. But they had no condemnation in their hearts. Everybody liked Amari!

That was why, when he pulled into the slanted driveway of his mother’s contemporary home, he was surprised to see that the men had arrived already. They liked him, too, and had promised to give him more time. They knew he was good for it. He was always good for it! Why were they there already?

Furious, he hurried into the house through the side entrance. He hurried through the kitchen and made his way around the breakfast nook into the living room. "Did I not tell you---" he began to say. Until he saw his American mother, Jessica Lutalo, sitting in a chair with a gun to her head. He dropped his engineering book, and stopped where he stood.

The visitor was not the local loan shark, nor any of his goons. In his mother's home were men, white men in suits, he had never seen before. And there were five of them.

The leader, Leo Deitric, looked at the tall, strapping young man who had just entered the room. "Hello, Amari," he said in a decidedly American accent.

"Put that gun away," Amari ordered in his precise African accent. "What are you doing? I owe the money. I always pay my gambling debts. She knows nothing of it!"

"How much do you owe?"

Amari stared at him. He should know that himself. Why would he ask him such a question?

"How much do you owe, kid, I'm not fucking with you! How much?"

Amari gave in. "Thirty thousand."

"Dollars?"

"Pula."

Leo smiled. "Shit!" His men smiled too. Thirty-thousand pula was only a few thousand in American dollars. "You think we came all this way to collect a little chump change from your chump ass? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Who are you? What do you want?" Amari asked.

Leo looked at Jessica. "Ask your mama," he said.

But Amari frowned. "My mother? What would she know of men like you?"

Leo smiled again. "Tell him, Jess. Tell this fine, upstanding boy of yours, this *half-breed*, what you know of men like us. Tell him about his old man. Tell him that his old man is a man like us. Only worst. The government sanctions his shit."

His old man? Did he say his old man? Amari looked at his mother. "Of what does he speak, Mother?"

“Nothing, baby,” Jessica said. “Don’t you worry about what they say. He’s just trying to play the big man!”

Leo, no longer smiling, took the back of his hand and slapped Jessica across her pretty brown face. “Watch your tongue, bitch!” he yelled as she felt the sting of his slap.

But as soon as Amari saw that he had touched his mother, he leaped over the table so quickly, and with such power, that the other men could not stop him in time. He jumped onto Leo and knocked him to the floor.

Jessica, mortified that the men would kill her son outright, cried. “*No, Amari, no! Amari, no!*”

But Amari wasn’t listening. He had blinding rage as he punched Leo repeatedly across the jaw with roundhouse right after roundhouse right, snapping Leo’s head sideways so violently that blood was oozing from Leo’s mouth. “No man will touch my mother,” he yelled as he beat down the leader, “and live to tell about it!”

But he was badly outnumbered as Leo’s men grabbed Amari and pulled him up and away from their boss. It took several of them to pull up the young buck, but they managed to do so.

When Leo was free, he touched the side of his mouth. When he saw blood on his fingers, he jumped up even angrier. “You fucking prick!” he yelled, and hurried to settle the score.

“No, wait!” Jessica cried. She jumped up, too, but the gunman pushed her back down. “Don’t harm him,” she cried. “Please, don’t harm my child!”

But Leo, with two of his men holding onto Amari and constraining him, punched him and punched him until his fist began hurting. He punched him in his handsome face. And then moved to his flat stomach. And then back into that face again. Amari wasn’t unconscious, but he was staggeringly close.

Leo spat out blood. “Fuck with me again, motherfucker! Fuck with me again!” Then he straightened his suit coat, and touched his bloody lip again.

“We need to make a start, Boss,” one of his men, the one with the gun to Jessica’s head, said to him. “We have to make a start.”

“Then start,” Leo said.

Amari, worried sick that they would harm his mother, looked up.

Leo smiled. “Don’t worry, hot shot. If I wanted to kill your ass you’d be dead already. We just need to send a message to your old man. A very clear message. And there’s only one way to get his attention.” He looked at the gunman, gave the order with a nod of his head, and then left the house altogether.

The gunman looked at Jessica, and grinned. “Say goodnight, Irene,” he said in a heavy Brooklyn accent, and pulled the trigger.

Amari’s heart fell through his shoe as he fought with all he had to break away from his captors, to go to his mother, to help her! And despite the pain of Leo’s beatdown, he was able to break away. His brute strength won out. His muscular arms lifted up, and he broke free of the men who sought to hold him back, and he hurried toward his mother.

But the gunman, panicking, quickly turned the gun on the advancing Amari, who was coming at him like a raging bull. And he pulled that trigger again.

Amari stopped in his tracks, and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER ONE

The Next Day

Carly Sinatra was out of the shower and had dried off when she thought she heard a noise downstairs. She remained where she stood and listened carefully. At first nothing. Pure silence. Had she imagined it? But then, as soon as she was ready to declare that she had, in fact, imagined it, she heard another sound. And this one was clear. Somebody was in her home.

She quickly put on her bathrobe. Then she hurried to the back of the nightstand where Trevor installed a metal box that contained what he called her *emergency piece*. A loaded gun, in other words.

She pressed the button beneath the box that opened it, grabbed her piece, and hurried out of her bedroom. She walked gingerly across the landing and down the stairs. Any normal woman would have locked themselves upstairs and phoned the cops. But she was Trevor's woman. There was nothing normal about her way of life. She had to handle this herself.

Besides, she had a sneaking suspicion it could be Trevor himself. Or her father. Or her Uncle Mick. They all had keys to her brand-new home and they all were sneaky as hell when they wanted to be. But just in case, she thought, as she kept that loaded gun to her side, she was prepared.

What gave it away for Carly, as soon as she made it downstairs, were the smells. And as she followed the trail of those smells, into her kitchen, she realized her suspicion was right. It was Trevor. Standing at the stove built into her center island, flipping flapjacks.

She smiled and leaned against the side wall. "What do you think you're doing, buster?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He placed the last flapjack on a plate that already had a pile of them, and then turned off the burner. "I'm preparing breakfast."

"I know that silly. But why didn't you bother to walk your slick ass upstairs and tell me

that's what you were doing?"

"I did walk my slick ass upstairs," he said with what Carly called *that endearing smile*, as he tossed the mitten he had on his hand onto the countertop. "But your slick ass was in the shower. What was a boy to do?" he added, with a different smile this time, his charming, half-cocked, mischievous smile. Then he began walking toward her.

Carly braced herself as he approached her. It was something about Trevor that exuded so much charm, and swag, and so much animal sensuality that just his presence always made her feel as if she was putty in his hands. She didn't like that she was so solicitous to him, and she wouldn't allow that feeling to enter any part of her sphere of existence with anybody else. But with Trevor, she didn't know what it was about him, but she just couldn't seem to help herself!

When he was upon her, looking so fine, she thought, in his sleek Amosu suit, he removed the gun from her hand, placed it on a side table, and then placed both of his big, rough hands on the sides of her face. A soft, sweet, gorgeous face, he thought.

"You could have knocked on my shower door," Carly said when he touched her. But they both knew it was her defense mechanism. They both knew she was feeling the heat, too, and wanted to avoid it.

But there was no avoiding the closeness of a man like Trevor. And he seemed to know it, she felt, because he kissed her, gently, on her lips. "Had I knocked on that shower door," he said as he continued to give her sweet kisses, "then my reason for coming over this morning would have been abandoned."

"Your reason?" she asked. She was already breathless.

"I did have a reason to come."

"And what reason was that?" She smiled. "To feed me?"

His look turned serious. "Yes," he said.

"May I ask why?" And it wasn't why did he have this sudden need to come over and feed her that had her most curious, but why his looked changed when she suggested it.

"Because," he said as he opened her bathrobe and placed his hands around her bare body,

“when I pulled you into my office on yesterday and held you, before I had to go across town for those meetings, I felt what I’m feeling now.”

Carly stared at him. She was confused. “You felt what you’re feeling now? What does that mean?”

He rubbed her hips and ass, and pinched them. “Less flesh,” he said. “You’re losing weight again. You aren’t eating properly again.”

“Oh, that!” Carly smiled a smile of relief. “I thought it was something serious.”

Trevor’s look turned angry. “You see that attitude? That’s the problem, Carly. No matter how many times I tell you to take better care of yourself, you aren’t taking what I’m saying seriously!”

“I’m just working hard right now, Trevor,” she said as she placed her own hands on the sides of his face. “I haven’t had time to eat like I should, that’s all. But I’ll get it back together.” He worried himself over the littlest things about her, she thought. Like how much she was eating. Like if she was taking her vitamins every day the way she should.

On one level it was cute. And appreciated. Everybody wanted somebody to care about them that way. But on another level, a deeper level, it was just more evidence she was compiling that was beginning to point to his complete and utter domination in her life. In every aspect of her life!

With any other man, such a capitulation would be scary as hell. She couldn’t see herself giving up that much power to anybody. And even with Trevor it was a little alarming, too. But with Trevor, she knew it wasn’t about him exerting power over her for power sake. With Trevor, it came from a place of love.

“You’re right,” she said, and kissed him. “I’ll eat whatever you prepared for me this morning, and I’ll also eat lunch, dinner, and two snacks in between. But when I’m ballooned up to seven-hundred pounds, it’ll be your fault.”

Trevor smiled again. That was more like it, he thought. “And I’ll love every inch of your fat ass,” he said, grabbing and squeezing her ass, causing her to lift up. Then he kissed her, this

time passionately, on the lips.

It was only after the kiss ended, did she see what was in his eyes all along, but everything else had distracted her. She knew that look like she knew the back of her hand.

She stared into his gorgeous, violet-blue eyes. "You have to go on assignment," she said. "Don't you?"

Trevor let out a harsh exhale. He continued to rub her, but the intensity was gone. "Yes," he said.

"Oh, Trev, you just got back!"

"I know."

"When do you have to leave?"

He looked at her. She knew that look too!

"It's a CSN, babe." CSN, in CIA-speak, meant *Can't Say No*. "It can't be helped."

Carly knew it was useless getting upset about it. He was an agency man when she first met him, and would be an agency man until the day he died. He made that clear to her from jump. When she accepted him, she accepted that reality about him too. "When will you return?" she asked.

"A week tops. I promise you that. I may even make it home as early as tomorrow."

"If you weren't going on these assignments to save the country from the bad guys," she said with a smile as she straightened his tie, "then I would leave your little always-gone ass in the dust. But because you're saving the world, I guess I can give you a little break."

Trevor smiled, and then laughed. He loved this girl! "Come here, you!" he said forcefully, pulled her even tighter into his arms, and then kissed her with a kiss that left no need for interpretation. It was a possessive kiss. It was an *I'm going away and I want you to remember my sexiness* kiss.

But when he slid one of his hands downward, between her legs, and began rubbing her there, she also knew he was going to give her far more than just a possessive, goodbye kiss. And when she heard him unbuckling his belt and then unzipping his pants as he kissed and

rubbed her, her suspicion was confirmed.

He lifted her up, causing her to wrap her legs around his waist, and he carried her to the living room sofa. And laid her down.

He stood up, removed his shoes, stepped out of and completely removed his pants and briefs, and took off his suit coat. Then he entered her as he got on top of her, and began kissing her with his lips and gyrating her with his dick in slow, long, loving strokes that made her feel more alive than any human being could ever make her feel.

For the longest time they made love on her sofa in the brand-new house he had purchased for her. A gorgeous home she still couldn't believe he actually bought for her. But her condo, he and her father got together and decided, had security challenges that they weren't comfortable with. Until they were married, Trevor told her, she had to either move in with him, or move to her own place. Her plan was to rent a place until they eventually set a date and got married. But he nixed that idea too, and bought her a place instead. A place, he said, that he could secure to his highest level of satisfaction. Which required tearing down walls and other structural things he couldn't do in a rental place.

It was such a drastic move to Carly, and a concerning one too. If he planned to marry her, and he did since they were engaged to be married, why would he buy her a home right now? It wasn't the way it was normally done. But she already knew the answer: there was nothing normal about being Trevor's woman.

And there was nothing normal about Carly, Trevor thought, as his penis long-stroked her with that slow, steady pace of a man who didn't want it to end. He laid down on her, holding either side of her face, as his strokes intensified. They both were moaning so aggressively that Trevor kissed her, and their moans became harder and harder kisses, desperate, passionate kisses, until they couldn't stop kissing either.

They held onto each other that morning, as they were kissing and making love and forgetting the world outside of their passion. They couldn't stop. They didn't want to stop. They could have gone on for days with no stoppage. But Trevor's precum began stirring up too

much heat within Carly's vaginal juices to a point where both of them broke down. And they came together with a hard, wrenching, wonderful release. And Trevor's ass kept pumping and pumping to make that last too.

When he couldn't pump anymore, and when Carly couldn't take anymore, they finally stopped all movement. And Trevor, his energy completely spent, collapsed on top of her.

Despite his exhaustion, he leaned back up and stared at Carly. And Carly stared at him. In a moment, he would mount his private plane and leave for DC, where he had to meet with certain operatives, and then off to Mississippi, to his assignment. And she would mount her SUV and leave for the office. They would not be together again for upwards of another week. But he needed her to understand something.

"If I could say no to my brother and his shit," he said to her with what she saw as the sincerest of looks, "I would. You know that, don't you?"

Carly nodded her head. "I know, Trevor," she said. "I know that."

He rubbed the side of her face, staring at her. She was so understanding! "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

But to Carly, that feeling was mutual. "What did I ever do to deserve you?" she asked.

Trevor lifted up on one elbow. "Oh, my baby," he said with a mischievous smile, "you must have committed the crime of the ages to get saddled with a joker like me." Carly laughed.

Then his looked turned serious again. "And I mean that."

Carly's smile slowly dissipated as she stared at him. "The way I see it," she said, rubbing his muscular chest, "is that I must have done something very right, not very wrong, to end up with a joker like you."

Trevor smiled, and kissed her on the nose.

They remained where they were for a few moments longer. Savoring their union.

Then Trevor, the man who sought to prolong their coupling, knew he could prolong it no longer. "Now that you've had a healthy dose of me inside of you," he said, slowly and sweetly pulling out of her, "let's get some food inside of you too."

Carly laughed again. "Yes, sir," she said, getting up. He truly made her laugh!

But when they both began getting up and he began telling her that she should wear her overcoat to work rather than a light jacket because it was colder than she might think outside, she could only shake her head. He worried about her in every way. Every way! But she liked that he did.

Life was looking sunny side up. For both of them.

CHAPTER TWO

Three days later and an old Buick sat motionless under the damp, sewage-filled viaduct on the outskirts of Pascagoula, Mississippi. Trevor sat in the Buick cold and waiting. For nearly an hour he sat in that shithole car in that shithole place and watched as raindrops fell from a crack in the bridge in a drip-drip-drip that felt like water torture. Like he was a sitting duck.

He looked at his watch again. Nearly four am. Where the fuck was he? And why the fuck did he choose Mississippi anyway? Of all the places Mascone could have chosen for the meet-up, he chose Missis *fucking* sippi?

Trevor leaned his head back. His tired ass was in *goddamn* Mississippi, waiting under some bridge, when he could have been back in Boston, in a warm bed, with Carly.

Carly , he thought.

What was he going to do about Carly?

They got engaged in a hurry, and then it all slowed down. They hadn't set a date yet. He hadn't even discussed it with her to any definitive degree yet. And he knew he ran the show. He knew it was all on him to get the ball rolling. Some of his friends even suggested he was stringing her along: unsure if he wanted to marry her, but certain he didn't want to lose her. But he wasn't stringing anybody along. Especially not Carly. It scared him how much he loved that girl. But to Carly, to his friends, his actions spoke volumes.

But Trevor knew the real deal. He knew what the problem really was. He knew he was dragging his feet, not because he was scared of marriage itself, but because he was terrified that if that marriage didn't work out, Carly would no longer be his. He could lose her forever. And he wasn't about to allow that to happen.

Then he let out a harsh exhale. Always away on these fucking assignments, and when he was at home he was working his ass off at his firm. And he was worrying about losing her after marriage? It was a miracle he hadn't lost her already.

But then he saw headlights, and he sat up. He knew he had to fuck everything else going on

in his life and focus. A lack of focus, in his line of work, was deadly.

A Lincoln Town Car pulled under the viaduct, splashing through water puddles as it drove, and stopped some fifteen feet away. The headlights died when the ignition turned off. Trevor exhaled. It was showtime. It was get-your-shit-together time or you just might not get out of this alive time. He grabbed the briefcase from off of the passenger seat, and got out of the Buick.

Two men got out of the Town Car. One of them, Leddy Mascone, took the briefcase from the second guy, his bodyguard/driver, and began walking toward Trevor. The bodyguard remained at the Town Car. Trevor, standing cold and tired in jeans, a bomber jacket, and a skull cap, kept his eyes on both.

“Got my money?” Mascone asked as he approached.

“Got my product?” Trevor responded.

“What kind of question is that to ask?” Mascone smiled. “You think I’d come all this way to Mississippi to stiff your ass? Do I look like that kind of individual?”

Trevor smiled too. Two could play that game. “Depends on what’s in that briefcase.”

Mascone gave a nod to Trevor. “Fair enough,” he said, sat his briefcase on the trunk of Trevor’s car, and then opened it. Bags of cocaine lined the case.

Trevor reached in, not to the center but to the back-left, opened a bag and tasted the product. It was legit.

“Now show your wares,” said Mascone. “I don’t work for free.”

Trevor placed his case on the trunk of the car, opened it, and revealed piles and piles, neatly lined, of cash.

Mascone rubbed his hands together. “That’s what I’m talking about,” he said with a smile, and the two men exchanged briefcases.

Trevor pulled out a small detector that would let him know if any bag in the case was counterfeit, and Mascone went deep down into the money briefcase to make sure he wasn’t dealing with marked bills or counterfeit himself.

When both men were satisfied, they closed the cases. Mascone extended his hand. "Good doing business with you, Mr. Reese," he said. "I know all those movie stars and millionaires you represent at Reese Marketing prefer the best product on the market. That's what I sling. Nothing but the best. Ask your brother's old lady. Ask Amelia Sinatra. She'll tell you. I used to be one of her suppliers when she was still in the game. But come back any time. My store is always open!"

Trevor shook his hand but wasn't about to exchange pleasantries with a lowlife like Leddy Mascone. "See your ass in my nightmares," he said instead.

Mascone laughed, and began walking back to his car.

But Trevor wasn't there to buy dope from Mascone. He was there to kill Mascone. That was his mission. That was the edict the agency laid down: Pretend to want to buy drugs from him to service your clients. Then take his ass out. Leddy Mascone must be taken out.

But before he could even begin that mission, two things happened at once. A car suddenly began driving beneath the viaduct, causing Trevor to look quickly in that direction, and then Mascone suddenly hit the ground as his bodyguard began pulling out a big-ass gun ready to aim and fire.

Trevor knew exactly what was happening. Their backup had arrived, and they were ready to take him out, get back their product, and keep his money. It was a bait-and-switch he didn't see coming. Mascone didn't have that kind of reputation!

But Trevor wasn't just a killer like that bodyguard. He was a trained assassin. Government-trained. Change in plans were the norm for him.

He pulled out his gun far faster than the bodyguard could pull out his, and shot that bodyguard between the eyes.

Mascone was stunned when he saw his guard go down. *What the fuck*, he thought as he rose from his ducked position and turned toward Trevor. They had it all planned. What the fuck happened!

The car, Mascone's backup brigade, suddenly accelerated when they saw Mascone's guard

go down. They began heading straight for Trevor and his Buick.

Trevor shot Mascone twice, hoping that he killed that motherfucker, but he couldn't confirm because he knew he was within inches of getting killed himself. Not by any bullet. No man out there was going to be a faster draw or better shot than he was. But by that backup car that was speeding so fast it was swerving toward him.

It was so out-of-control that Trevor didn't even have time to turn his gun away from Mascone and toward that oncoming car. He had no choice but to jump onto the hood of his Buick to save himself.

But it might have been the exact wrong move because the driver of the speeding car didn't let off of the gas. He, instead, accelerated even faster and hit the Buick with a head-on collision that was so violent that it lifted the Buick up on two wheels. Trevor went flying off of the hood and fell, with a devastating slam, onto the ground. He could feel the pain in every part of his muscular frame.

But he knew he had to keep moving. What went up had to come down. He rolled away just fast enough as the Buick flipped over and crashed down onto its roof, smashing metal and shattering glass and flattening as if it was in a junkyard crusher just out of the reach of where Trevor had rolled.

The backup car slid to a screeching stop when that Buick slammed down. But Trevor knew they weren't about to call it quits without seeing him in a body bag. And when one of the henchmen leaned out of their badly wrecked vehicle to see if he was still alive, he also knew he couldn't play dead and they would leave him alone. They came to kill his ass and keep his money. They weren't going to stop until they were certain.

He didn't hesitate. Despite the pain, Trevor got off of that ground and took off running. Nobody was putting his ass in any body bags. He ran for his life!

But the car was faster than his feet, as it backed up, drove around the mangled mess that was once a Buick, and began to give chase. The henchman on the passenger side leaned out of the window and began firing bullets as Trevor ran.

The layout wasn't favorable for Trevor in any way, and he knew it. They were in a long stretch that used to be a long, winding parking garage beneath an overpass, but the building was gone and only one side of the concrete wall remained standing. If he was going to survive he had to get radical. Because he knew, like that Buick knew, he had to take it head-on.

He stopped running, turned around, aimed his gun, and tried to fire. But that car came upon him faster than he thought its wrecked condition was still capable of, and he was unable to fire off even one round.

He, instead, had to jump onto what was left of the hood of the speeding car itself to avoid the incoming bullets. Then he had to hold on as the driver began swerving to knock him off, and as the gunman inside the car was trying to position himself to take potshots at Trevor.

Trevor held on for dear life as his body nearly slid off of the car repeatedly. But as the bullets kept coming, he managed to move his body to the side of the car, holding on, and then he lifted himself, with all the strength he had, onto the roof of the car.

The gunman and his driver began looking around, to see where their target had disappeared, which was the break Trevor needed. He began firing inside the car from the roof of the car. He fired first in the direction of where the gunman was seated, and then at the driver. He wasn't sure if he had hit either one of them until the car began zigzagging out of control, and began heading straight for the side of the wall.

As it approached that wall, Trevor's heart dropped. He was in deep shit now. But not just him. The two men inside, both wounded but still breathing, covered their faces with screams of horror as the car crashed into that wall, at full speed, with an abrupt and thunderous slam. A crash so sudden, and so violent, that it could not possibly be survivable in any way, shape, or form.

And to add insult to injury, the car burst into flames too.

CHAPTER THREE

Carly parked her SUV at the curb, grabbed her briefcase and lid-covered coffee, and got out and hurried toward the hotel's service entrance. It was only minutes before the statement was to be read, and their client was having cold feet. Bridgette Collier, Carly's assistant and point-person to handle the logistics, met her at the door.

"How bad?" Carly asked as she hurried inside.

"It's bad," Bridgette responded as they walked briskly along the narrow corridor. "That girl is frightened out of her mind. She still doesn't want to do it, Car."

"She has to do it if she wants a career."

"But why does she have to be the one to come forward?" Bridgette asked. "She's just a twenty-three-year-old kid."

Carly looked at her assistant as they walked. Like most of her colleagues, Bridgett forgot that Carly was less than five years removed from twenty-three herself, and would understand better than most what the young lady was going through. "She's a twenty-three-year-old kid," she responded, "who slept with one of the most bankable stars in America. Not the first time a starlet falls for a married actor. Won't be the last time. I would guess a third of our clients have this very issue. But she can't sweep it under a rug and think it's going to go away. She's got to clean this shit up."

"I know what you're saying," Bridgette said as she pulled open a door and they headed down a second corridor. "But I still say it's not right. She's a kid who's being vilified in the press while Hank Pressley's old, married ass gets a pass. This is so not fair!"

"We're in the public relations business, Bridge," Carly said as they turned another corner. "Fuck fair."

Bridgette slowed her walk and looked at her much younger boss. Life at the top of the corporate world, and the pressures Trevor had her constantly under, had changed Carly. Bridgette remembered when Carly first came to Reese Marketing. She was this bright-eyed,

idealistic kid ready to take the world by storm. Now she was a bitch on two legs and the world was trying to take her by storm. Because Carly was the truth, and everybody at RM understood that. There was no minimizing her the way they all tried when she first came onboard, or bullying her, and they all knew it. Her uncle, business giant Mick Sinatra, who wanted Carly to go work for him, knew it too.

But Bridgette knew Trevor Reese. And the idea of a domineering man like Trevor allowing anybody to take his precious Carly away from RM, and that included her powerful uncle, was a joke. Not going to happen in this life, Bridgette was certain, as she pulled open another door, and then they entered the small waiting room.

Addison Weld, the twenty-three-year-old, sat on a bench against the wall in that room, while her mother/manager, Pamela Weld, paced the floor. As soon as Carly and Bridgette walked in, the mother unfolded her arms and hurried to them. "She can't do this," she said.

"She has to do it," said Carly, walking further into the room. "If she wants to continue her career, she has to do it."

"But why can't she just wait it out and let it all die down? Why does she have to admit it?"

"Because the country has already declared her guilty," Carly said. "When that declaration comes, they aren't taking it back. And besides, she *is* guilty. She did it."

"He did it too!" Addison cried out and they all looked at her. "It wasn't just me. He did it too!"

Carly, with Bridgette and Pamela following her, went over to the actress. "You're right," said Carly. "You're absolutely right, Addison. Hank did it too. But he's beloved. You're just well-known. There's a difference."

"But why is everybody acting like I did this all on my own? He seduced me! He came on to me!"

"And he's way older than she is," her mother added. "Why are you behaving like you don't understand what that means? You're dating the owner of the company you work for; you're dating Trevor Reese. He's much older than you are. The older man always has the upper hand

in these relationships and you should know that.”

Carly was a little mortified that the mother would bring up her personal life, especially when she and Trevor had always tried so hard to keep their relationship under wraps. Very few people even knew about their engagement! And it was that very relationship that had her entertaining the idea of going to work for her Uncle Mick rather than remaining at Reese Marketing as it was.

“Yes, Hank Pressley is older,” Carly said, deciding to ignore the comment about her own situation, “and he probably did have the upper hand in their relationship. But nobody’s giving him a pass here.”

Then Carly looked at Addison. “Your admission will not exonerate him. Because what you’re going to do today isn’t about him. This is about the daily press reports about the affair. The drip, drip, drip that is quickly becoming a downpour. We’ve got to put a plug in this leak, Addison, or your career is over. Admit your part in it, lay low for a little while, the country will move on to the next big thing, and then you come back stronger.”

“I say she should lay low now,” her mother said, “and come back stronger. I don’t agree with her admitting it happened. I don’t agree with this strategy at all!”

“I can only give you my best advice,” Carly said to the mother. “My advice is that she has to put this behind her. It’s not just going to go away.”

But the mother was unimpressed. “That’s your advice,” she said. “You, a black girl not even thirty yet. What does Trevor Reese say about this? He’s the head honcho at Reese Marketing. It’s his company! Why isn’t he here? We hired him to represent us, we didn’t hire you! Where is he? My daughter’s not big enough for him so he sends his side piece?”

Addison was shocked. “*Mother!*” she decried.

Carly was shocked too. People rarely confused her, a successful businesswoman who didn’t live that kind of life, as anybody’s *side* piece. But she let that slide.

Bridgette didn’t. “That was out of line, Miss Weld,” she said. “Carly Sinatra is senior Vice-President at RM, and you’re going to have to respect her. Or we can leave.”

But Carly wasn't giving that mother a second thought. It was Addison that concerned her. Trevor always told her to focus on the client. When all else was getting away from her, make certain that the client stayed with her. Make certain, Trevor had said, that she gave the client her absolute best advice.

She gave Bridgette her coffee and briefcase, and sat beside a distressed Addison. She took one of her small hands and held it. "I know this is difficult for you, Addie," she said to her. "But we're out of options here. I'm sorry, but we are. If you want the paparazzi at your door every day; if you want negative story after negative story about that affair every day, then you should do nothing. The press will keep making you the bad guy and will continue to make Hank the victim."

"But he's not the victim," Addison said.

"I know he's not," said Carly. "But if you're silent, some narrative has to fill that void. Hank's people are filling it with *Hank's the victim* stories."

"Why can't we plant stories about him?" Addison asked.

Carly shook her head. "That's not how we operate. Not at RM."

"What if he raped her?" the mother suddenly asked.

Carly and Bridgette both looked at Pamela. "Raped her?" Carly asked. That allegation had never come up before. Not once! "Are you saying he raped her?"

"He could have," Pamela said. "Hell, *me too* is the movement now, isn't it? We can piggyback on that."

Bridgette couldn't believe this woman! She sure hoped Carly wasn't buying it.

Carly, known throughout the corporate world for her seriousness despite her youth, but also for her unyielding integrity, stood up. "Look, Miss Weld," she said, "let me make myself perfectly clear. We aren't piggybacking on anything, especially when it's a baldface lie. Hank Pressley did not rape Addison."

"Were you there?" the mother asked. "How do you know that? That's the only way she can salvage her career. He raped her," Pamela said firmly, "and I'm not taking it back!"

Carly looked at Addison. Would she go along with this blatant falsehood too? “Addie, did Hank Pressley rape you, or was your relationship with him consensual?”

Addison wiped away a tear. Then she frowned as if she wished she could answer it differently. “Consensual,” she said.

Carly sighed relief. The client she liked. The mother? “Do not repeat that lie about that man ever again,” Carly said to Pamela Weld, “or your daughter will never work another day in her beloved profession. The public will see to that. Reese Marketing will help them see to that.”

The mother folded her arms.

“You want this story to end quickly?” Carly asked. “Tell that lie. It’ll end real quick. It’ll end with Hank Pressley and his people filing defamation charges against your daughter!”

“You don’t know that!” Pamela decried.

“I do know it!” Carly fired back. Then she looked at Addison. “You have to stop playing the victim, Addie. You’re not a victim. You did this to yourself. Nobody did this to you. You and Hank made this mess. He’s got to clean up his end. But you’ve got to clean up yours. Are you ready?” she asked her. “Are you ready to go out there, face the press, and show this country what you’re made of?”

Addison hesitated for far longer than Carly would have preferred, but then she nodded. And rose, wobbly, to her feet.

“I still don’t agree with this,” Pamela Weld said as she fluffed up Addison’s blonde hair and smoothed down Addison’s short skirt, “but it’s apparently out of my control now that you’ve decided to listen to this child here instead of me.”

“Mother stop,” Addison said. “She’s not a child and you know it.”

“Be that as it may,” Pamela said, and then didn’t continue. Then she stopped fussing with her daughter’s appearance and looked her in the eyes. And she was no longer speaking as Addison’s mother. She spoke as her manager. “Be convincing, darling. Show the Academy why you will win that Oscar one day. Act the shit out of this performance, you hear me, Addie? Or

it will all be for naught.”

Addison gave her mother a courageous smile, although Carly could tell she wasn't feeling brave at all. She was scared to death! But Addie knew Carly was right: she either had to save her career by admitting her part in the scandal, or kiss her career goodbye. There was no third option.

“Ready?” Carly asked as she stood at the waiting room door.

Addison was nowhere near ready, but she nodded her head.

“Stick to the script,” Carly urged her. “Remain calm. But speak clearly. Every word on that paper matters. Got it?”

“Got it,” Addison said and she, Carly, and Bridgette headed for the ballroom.

Inside the Jalliot Hotel ballroom it was standing-room-only for members of the press as Addison's slender frame made its way behind the podium. Carly entered, too, and stood at the podium by her side. Bridgette stood by Carly's side.

Carly was as nervous as she'd ever been at a press conference. Because she knew, deep down, that this was not going to be an easy sell. The press was either going to get what the starlet was trying to say and change the narrative the public was being fed, or they were going to continue to vilify her. It all depended on how they chose to spin it. It all depended on how hard Addie sold it. Which was a lot to ask of any young lady.

But Carly knew something had to be done. A statement had to be made and the girl had to take her share of the blame. What else was there to do? Trevor wasn't there to advise Carly on any other option, and he never answered phone calls when he was out on “assignment.” Nobody at the firm was willing to stick their necks out with Carly as the lead. This girl's future was all on Carly's shoulders.

But her Uncle Mick didn't offer her a job as Regional VP in his Boston office for nothing. He said, just as her father often said, that despite her youth she was a decisive, serious person who could shoulder a lot. And this, to Carly, was the very definition of a *lot*.

But she took the responsibility and made the decision. Another day of bad press for young Addison could mark the end of her young career. Carly had been in the public relations business long enough to know that most starlets, once ruined, never recovered. This was do-or-die time for Addie.

Although Pamela Weld was champing at the bit to get onstage with her daughter, Carly urged Addison to not allow it. They didn't need that drama to play out on live TV. That was why the mother remained in the waiting room watching the press conference via live feed. The reason was simple: Carly wanted no distractions or frivolous claims the mother might throw out last second the way she brought up that untrue rape claim earlier. She wanted this press conference to go smoothly, on-script, and without a hitch. Carly had prepared the speech herself.

And as Addison began to speak, she did as she was told and stuck to the script: without deviation.

And it worked initially. Addison spoke with conviction and proved why she was considered one of the most promising of the young actresses. "I want to say, right off, that Hank Pressley and I were both involved in an affair that lasted several months. That is not a rumor. That is a fact. I thought I was in love. I thought he was in love. I thought wrong."

It started out great. Addison looked strong and spoke in a clear, no-nonsense voice. It was all good initially. But then, just as it looked like smooth sailing ahead, Bridgette leaned over to Carly.

"She's here," Bridgette said with panic in her voice.

Carly couldn't believe it. Was Pamela Weld going to ruin this day for her daughter? "Where?" she asked.

"Over there," Bridgette said, "by the water cooler."

Carly anxiously looked over at the water cooler at the very back of the room. And it was only then did she realize that Bridgette did not mean that Pamela was in the room, but that Mrs. Pressley, Hank's wife, was in the room. If there was anything worse than Pamela showing

up, it was Mrs. Pressley showing up! Carly's heart dropped through her shoe.

"Maybe we should call it off, Car," Bridgette said nervously. "I think Trevor would call it off."

But there was no going back. Carly knew that. "We can't," she whispered to Bridgette. "She already confessed. She has to explain that confession!"

But then, as Addison talked about how Hank showered her with gifts and trips and wined and dined her, the wife, to Carly's ever-loving relief, left the room. She was angry; even from a distance Carly could see the anger in that woman's eyes. But at least she had enough dignity about herself to not make a scene. She just left. Maybe she thought Addie would deny it, by which she would call her a liar to her face and call her a homewrecker. But when Addie admitted it, there apparently was nothing more the woman could say.

Carly was grateful either way.

And Addison stayed on-script. Pamela stayed in the waiting room. That press conference was going on without any further hiccups.

Until something happened so fast that even Bridgette didn't have time to whisper any warnings. Another Pressley, Hank's grown son, entered the ballroom and began running toward the stage. Carly saw him, and Bridgette saw him, too, but it happened too fast! It was as if, as soon as they saw him, the danger was already there.

Then it all seemed like slow motion danger.

He was pulling out the gun as he ran. Carly was turning toward Addison as the gun appeared.

He was aiming the gun as he ran. The reporters were backing up in panic when they saw that gun.

He was firing the gun before Security could tackle him. Before Carly could reach out and grab Addison. And the room went wild!

He got off four rounds as Security jumped on top of him and took him down.

Three bullets were errant and hit no-one.

One bullet landed.

One bullet hit its target.

As that final bullet was on its way, Carly had already grabbed Addie and was trying to pull her down, out of harm's way. But that fourth bullet tore through the starlet and exited through the back of her throat. She grabbed her neck in shock as the blood began to pour.

Carly fell to the floor with Addie, and still held her in her grasp. She could hear Bridgette screaming, even above the screams from the fleeing members of the press, and she could see the blood draining between Addie's fingers pressed against her neck. But it still didn't seem real to Carly. This couldn't be real!

Until Addison's shaking body suddenly stopped shaking. Her kicking feet suddenly stopped kicking. Her youthful eyes remained open, but nothing was there. Just a blank stare. That one bullet was all that was needed. That final bullet did the trick.

If the trick was to kill Addison Weld.

Pamela Weld, who had the misfortune of seeing it all unfold through her live feed, ran out of the waiting room, into the ballroom, and up on the stage. She was beyond hysterical as she ran to her child.

But when she saw that Addison was in the arms of the woman she now considered as much her murderer as the Pressley boy, she angrily pushed Carly away from her daughter and cradled Addison herself.

Carly, on her knees, could do nothing but stare at Addison. Even Bridgette was looking angrily at Carly too.

"I told you no," the mother was yelling at Carly as she rocked her daughter and cried. "I told you not to let her do this. I told you! But you insisted. You insisted she come out here when nobody wanted it but you. Now my baby is dead. She's dead! What have you done?"

And those words, *what have you done*, kept ringing in Carly's ear like a mantra.

What have you done?

What have you done?

What have you done?

But as Carly stayed on her knees on that stage, and looked at Addison's body, and at the Pressley boy being led away in handcuffs, she realized what she had done. The media began flooding back into the ballroom like wild savages, clicking photographs with visions of Pulitzers in their heads, and some were even asking for comments. For comments! As if there were words to explain what Carly felt.

Because she knew what she had done. And they, wildly snapping photos and shoving microphones in her face, knew too.

CHAPTER FOUR

Damn it was painful! All he could think about was the pain. He swiped his key, entered his hotel room, and hurried to the bathroom. He lifted his sweatshirt over his head, tossing it aside, and then checked out the bruising on his shoulder. He didn't know if the first fall did it, or the second, and he didn't give a fuck. There was a big, red mark across the top of his shoulder. A serious bruise. He grimaced at the pain.

He went into the bedroom and grabbed his suitcase, threw it onto the bed with one hand, and pulled out the first aid kit he carried with him for times like these. He grabbed the pouch, went back into the bathroom, and pulled out antiseptic to clean the bruise and a bandage pad to cover it so he would not continue to irritate it.

He poured antiseptic on the bruise and tore open the bandage pad with his teeth. But as he pressed the bandage in place, he caught a glimpse of himself in the vanity mirror. It was a startling enough sight that he found himself staring at that image. He wasn't getting any younger, he knew that, but he looked older than he should have looked and the strain around his eyes was like a man in crisis.

Not that he didn't know why. He knew why. All of those death-defying assignments were beginning to wear on him. Too many close calls. Too many high-wire acts. Too many!

And Carly, he thought, as he stared in that mirror.

What kind of life would this be for her?

Not that she was some novice. She had a taste of the life. Her cousins were the Gabrinis: the mob was their middle name. Her uncle was the notorious Mick Sinatra, the most feared crime boss in America, although he would declare he was just a successful businessman. But Trevor knew better. He was both.

Her adopted father was Big Daddy Charles Sinatra, Mick's brother. He was the most legitimate of businessmen compared to the rest of that family, but Big Daddy was still a dangerous sonafabitch if Trevor ever met one. Carly was no novice to the dark side of life.

But Trevor's danger was different. She came from a family of *made* men. Trevor was a *marked* man forever because he was an agency man: a trained assassin for the CIA. And that was a club with a lifetime membership. She was a novice to his kind of life!

He went over to the wet bar, grabbed a bottle of beer out of the miniature fridge, and sat on the edge of the bed drinking it. He wished to God he could hop his plane and get the hell out of Mississippi at that very moment, but he knew he couldn't leave the area until Mascone's death was confirmed. He wasn't able to confirm it himself after that car engulfed in flames, because somebody, no matter how far away, would inevitably see the flames and call authorities. He couldn't hang around or circle back. His mission was always to get in and get out and stay out. Unless the death wasn't confirmed, and he would have to, when the heat cooled, go back in.

He sat the beer bottle on the night stand and laid back on the bed. He grimaced again as the pain of that bruise captured his attention. His body was buff, with a hard, rigid six-pack, but every bone in his body ached. He was getting too old for this shit.

But if he thought he would fall asleep, to help ease the pain, it didn't work. Because Carly was etched on his brain, and that car fire was still etched in his memory, and he couldn't stop thinking about either one.

He remembered jumping from that car in the nick of time. One second later, and he would have been roadkill like those two men trapped inside.

But he did get off, and rolled uncontrollably onto the ground. He remembered looking up, after his roll, at the fire. He couldn't take his eyes off of that fire! Because the whole scene was crazy. Him on the ground. Mascone and his bodyguard shot down. That crashed car bursting into flames and burning two men alive.

It was all so violent, but it all seemed to personify his life perfectly. And he wanted Carly to be a part of that? How could he have even conceived of asking a wonderful, caring woman like Carly to marry a man like him and trap her into a world like that? A motherfucker in his line of work was condemned to a life alone forever, and he knew it. And he had been resigned to that

fate.

But then he met Carly. He'd never known anybody like her. All of his previous women were sophisticated socialites who ran in the same jet-setting circles he ran in. But Carly was powerful in her simplicity. And smart. And filled with the kind of goodness and decency he rarely saw, given his line of work. And in a moment of selfish weakness, he decided to propose to her and snatch some of that goodness and decency for himself. And it was a theft. He wanted her innocence to rub off on him.

And it was great for him. It was a win-win for his ass. But how in the world could this kind of close-call-after-close-call life be good for her? She would eventually realize, he was certain, that being with him was a lose-lose proposition all around for her.

And that was the problem, he thought, as he kept drifting into dreams about that burning car. It was like the metaphor of his life. It was as if he wasn't just watching that burning car, but he was also watching that one shot at happiness he thought he had snatched for himself, go up in flames too.

He eventually fell asleep dreaming about Carly and how close he came to never seeing her again.

Dreaming about that burning car and those two men screaming inside.

Dreaming.

Then he eventually woke up, around eleven that morning, only to see another fixture in his life: the former director of the CIA, and his big brother: Hamilton "Hammer" Reese.

He closed his eyes again. Was this shit for real too? And then he opened them back up. And frowned. He was real. "What are you doing here?"

"Making sure you were still here," Hammer said. He sat in a chair beside the bed and crossed his legs. "On earth, that is. Alive."

Trevor sat up on his elbows, but the pain was too great. He sat all the way up. "Why wouldn't I be alive? This was supposed to be a piece of cake, remember your words? Take him out, confirm death. Easy-peasy, right?"

"It was out of character for Mascone. That's a fact."

"Then why are you here if you expected no problems? Mississippi your hang out now?"

"I'm here because I got a late word that Mascone might have something up his sleeve."

"Yeah, my death," Trevor said.

"That's what I heard."

Trevor looked at his older brother. "It would have been nice if you let me in on what you'd heard."

"I didn't find out until you were already at the scene. You can't allow phone calls in the field. You know that."

Trevor exhaled with a grimace and drank some of his remaining beer.

"How rough was it?" Hammer asked.

"Rough," Trevor said, trying not to remember that horrific scene. "They came for me before I could do my thing, but I managed to improvise."

"Was Mascone hit?" Hammer asked.

"Yep."

"Dead?"

"I couldn't stick around to take his vitals, if that's what you mean. But I don't shoot to wound. I shoot to kill. He should be."

"We have to confirm death before we can pop out the champagne," Hammer said, "but good. The Bureau will be very pleased."

That was what Trevor didn't get. "Why did the FBI need me to take out some drug dealer? Why couldn't they just use one of their guys? And why would they ask you, the former head of the CIA, to get it done?"

"It's a complicated answer, Trev."

That was usually Hammer's response, but it annoyed the shit out of Trevor this time. "Here's a clean, uncomplicated answer for you: this is my last hit. I'm done. Every job keeps getting me closer and closer to my own end of life and I'm tired of this shit, Hammer! I'm

done.”

A look of regret appeared in Hammer’s eyes. “If only it was that simple. You know it’s not. Once in, there’s no getting out. Why the fuck you think I’m still handling contracts? Why the fuck you think I’m still in this shit?”

Trevor shook his head. And drank the last of his beer.

Hammer rose to his feet. “Just wanted to eyeball you,” he said. “But get some rest. The scene is hot right now. They aren’t used to this level of violence in Pascagoula or whatever the fuck this town is called. The press here is playing it up. But I should have a confirmation, one way or the other, within the next several hours. If you don’t have to finish the job, then you can go home and check on Carly. How is she anyway?”

“She’s fine,” Trevor said. “Why wouldn’t she be?” He knew he sounded defensive, but he was tired of people assuming Carly wasn’t fine just because she was with him.

But Hammer had a different reason to be concerned. He stared at his brother. “You don’t know. Do you?”

Trevor looked at his brother. “Know what?” When he saw that look on his brother’s face, he jumped to his feet. “What happened?”

Hammer exhaled.

“Something happened? What happened, Ham?”

“Hank Pressley’s son killed Addie Weld this morning.”

Trevor’s heart dropped. “He *what?*”

“The girl died in Carly’s arms. At a press conference of all things. And the mother’s blaming Carly. It’s all over the news.”

Trevor’s face was frowned with worry as he quickly reached into the nightstand drawer, pulled out his cell phone, and turned it on. He had over ten missed calls. All from Carly! He quickly called her. The call went straight to Voice Mail. “Damn!” he said, and tried again. When that still didn’t work, he reached into his suitcase and began putting on a shirt.

“What are you doing?” Hammer asked him.

"I'm taking my ass back to Boston."

"Now?"

Trevor looked at him. "My lady's in trouble. When the fuck you think, Ham? Yes, now!"

"But what about the death confirmation?" Hammer asked.

"You stick around and confirm it." He headed into the bathroom to grab what he had in there.

"And if he's not dead?"

"You handle it. Or your people," Trevor said as he returned from the bathroom with items to throw in the suitcase. "I don't see what's the big damn deal anyway. Who the fuck is Mascone that it's this important to confirm?"

"I got you to handle the job," Hammer said. "You're the best the agency has. That should have told you how important it was. It's damned important."

"Why?" Trevor looked at his brother.

Hammer hesitated. "You don't need to know that," he said.

Trevor gave his brother a hard glare. "I leave my business, and my lady, and my life, to do this shit for you and the agency time and time again. And I can't know why? I don't *need* to know? Fuck you!"

"I need you to stick around and confirm death, Trev," Hammer said. "If he's not dead, you have to go back in."

But Trevor was already grabbing his suitcase and heading for the exit. "You go back in. I'm out," he said.

"Trevor!"

But Trevor, to prove to his brother just how out he was, slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

She grabbed the two glasses of wine she'd just poured and made her way into her living room. Her father, Big Daddy Charles Sinatra, the man who adopted her after both her parents were killed, was sitting slouched on the sofa as she handed him one of the drinks. She'd just gotten out of the shower, and had put on one of Trevor's big dress shirts, when he showed up. He lived in Jericho, Maine, a two-hour drive to Boston, but he made the journey anyway.

"Ma told you what happened?" she asked as she sat beside him.

"Didn't have to," Big Daddy said. "It's all over the news."

Carly nodded. "Yeah, Ma told me when she called me. Then Ashley and Donnie called. And Brent. And Tony. And Bobby. And the Gabrinis. And Amelia. And Jimmy and Teddy and everybody in the family I think!"

"What about my brother?" Big Daddy asked.

Carly was a little disappointed that she hadn't heard from her Uncle Mick. "His wife called. Aunt Roz called. But no. Not him. But Reno's son Dommi called to make sure I was okay."

Big Daddy laughed. "That sounds like Dommi."

"They all said they could come," Carly continued, "but I told them that wasn't necessary. I told them I was fine. You, on the other hand," she said with a smile and looked at him, "didn't ask to come." Then her look turned serious and was filled with gratitude. "You just came."

"To make sure you were okay? Damn right I just came! Jenay wanted to come too, but somebody had to hold down the fort." Then he looked at Carly. "But really, how are you, Car? That child's mother is blaming you in the clips they're showing on the news. As if Pressley's ass didn't create that shit hill. How are you really?"

Carly frowned. Big Daddy could see the stress all over her pretty face. "It's difficult," she admitted. "I'm not going to lie. It's been really hard. She died in my arms, Daddy. That's not something I can just forget, you know? And she died because I asked her to be brave and do something she wasn't comfortable doing. It's tough."

“Can I ask you a question?”

Carly looked at him. He knew he could.

Big Daddy frowned. “Where the hell is Trevor?”

Carly let out a harsh exhale. She knew what he meant.

“Why isn’t he here comforting you?” Big Daddy continued. “I didn’t expect to find my baby girl alone when I got here. I expected to find his ass here with you!”

“He’s out of town on business,” Carly said. “He’s been out of town. I don’t even know if he knows yet.”

“Is he out of town on Reese Marketing business,” Big Daddy asked, “or just Reese business?”

Carly knew what he meant about that too. The Sinatras had mafia deep in their family. They were bad asses from way back. And although Trevor wasn’t a gangster but was CIA, Big Daddy and Carly believed there was little difference. “Reese business,” she responded.

“Has he phoned you?”

“No.”

“Have you phoned him?”

“Only about ten times,” Carly said with a joyless smile. Then she looked at Big Daddy. When she saw the compassion in his soft green eyes, she could feel those emotions she had been trying to repress return, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

Big Daddy saw such pain in her eyes, and such distress all over her face, that he pulled her onto his lap and held her tighter.

And Carly fought back tears. “*That poor girl,*” she said heartfelt. “She was really sweet, Daddy. And she didn’t want to do it. She all but begged me not to ask her to do it! But I didn’t listen.”

Big Daddy wasn’t about to tell her that she was only doing her job, or that she made the right decision, because the outcome didn’t support that it was the right decision. That child died. It was the wrong decision. But he was going to stand by Carly. He’d never admit it to any

human being alive, but she was his favorite of all of his children. Bar none.

“You have a lot on your shoulders,” Big Daddy said, “to be so young. Trevor gives you too much responsibility, in my opinion. And now Mick wants you too.”

Mick Sinatra’s legitimate business, Sinatra Industries, was opening a headquarters in the Boston area that he asked Carly to run. Carly knew it would be a great honor: a young black woman as the head of New England operations for a Fortune 500 company like S.I. But at the same time, she wasn’t sure if she could leave Trevor’s employ. Trevor needed her too. And how rough would it be to work for a tough man like her Uncle Mick?

“I meet with him tomorrow,” she said. “He wants a decision.”

Big Daddy pulled her closer. “And?” he asked.

“And I still don’t know what I’m going to tell him. Things aren’t exactly settled with Trevor right now.”

“Not settled?” Big Daddy asked. “What do you mean?”

“We got engaged,” Carly said, “and then everything just seemed to remain in neutral. We haven’t discussed any dates or any venues or anything. Every time I talk to Ma and Ashley, they’re asking ‘when’s the big day,’ and every time I have to tell them the truth. I don’t know. *We don’t know.*”

Big Daddy’s jaw tightened. Did Trevor propose to his daughter just to keep other men from claiming her, to keep her under his thumb, but with no real intentions of marrying her? Was that the plan? Big Daddy never wanted her to fall in love with a man of danger like Trevor Reese to begin with, but she did fall for him. Now his ass had better make it right! He wasn’t allowing any man, no matter who he was, to break Carly’s heart.

“Whatever you decide,” he said, “do it for you. Not for my brother. Not for Trevor. For you.”

Carly smiled. She loved her father.

But then she thought about Addison, and the sound of those gunshots, and the dread returned.

Leo Deitric sat in his car and waited for the boss to answer his call.

When he finally answered the phone, he was already in a bad mood. "Where are you?" he asked Leo.

"I'm here in Mississippi."

"How did it go?"

"As terrible as it could possibly go. All are dead."

"All of them? Mascone too?"

"Reese killed them all, or at least caused all of them to be killed. It was a scene out of a horror movie by the time I arrived."

"And the money?"

"Up in smoke too," Leo said. "Nothing was preserved at the scene."

"That was our opening blow. It was supposed to be the easy part. Grab the money and run. And it failed."

Leo rubbed his forehead. "Reese got lucky, that's all."

"Will he be lucky when he finds out about his son? His luck will be our misfortune if that happens."

"That won't happen," Leo said. "We'll stick with the plan."

"It better not happen, or you had better devise another plan and right quick."

"He didn't want Reese dead anyway. He still needs Reese alive. How were we going to solve that little problem if Reese had croaked?"

"I don't care what he needs! We need that money! Our cash flow is next to nothing at this point."

"They're going to pay up for the monuments," Leo said. "That'll start pumping it in big time."

“Only if it works. Every one of them must be destroyed. What is the chance of that succeeding after something this minor failed miserably? No more screw-ups. None!” And then his boss ended the call.

Leo looked at his phone. All these black motherfuckers twisting him around. Telling him what to do and how to do it. He hated his job!

He tossed the phone aside, cranked up, and took off.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as Carly was in bed, after falling asleep, on the sofa, in Big Daddy's arms, she woke right back up. He grinned. She always did that to him! But she told him she was fine, and that he could get back to his hectic business in Maine. She was going to try and go back to sleep because she needed the rest, and he'd just be staring at the back of her eyelids anyway. She was good.

But after he left, she couldn't sleep a wink. She ended up sitting in bed, her knees up, her arms around her knees, watching press accounts all day. Had to turn off her phone completely to avoid all of the death threats and crank calls she was getting from Addie's legion of fans. They were all blaming her. They were all putting it at her feet just like Addie's mother was telling them to.

But mostly, Carly just couldn't stop thinking about Addison.

What if were two powerful words. What if she had not asked that girl to confess? What if she had listened to the mother and advised her to wait and see too? What if, what if, what if! She had a headache thinking about what if.

Then she heard a car pull onto her driveway. She got out of bed and went to the window. Trevor was jumping out of a cab, with luggage, and hurrying to her front door. She always found it strange to see him dressed so casually, especially with that skullcap on, but she knew he wasn't wearing business suits on field assignments.

But her heart soared when she saw him. Nobody comforted her like Trevor. Nobody understood her the way he did. And nobody, outside of her family, told her the truth the way he did. And right now, she didn't need anybody's bullshit about how bad it wasn't. Because it was bad. She needed to hear that truth.

Usually she ran to him whenever he returned from trips. She said, every time, that she wasn't going to be so out there with her feelings for him. But she failed every time.

Yet this time, after the day she'd had, she actually kept her word. She didn't run downstairs

to greet Trevor. She didn't have the energy. She got back on the bed.

The only reason the press wasn't hounding her at home was because the home Trevor bought for her was in one of the wealthiest, most secure, gated communities in Boston. Her neighbors weren't about to give any press person any code. And with her phone turned off, she at least had peace at home.

But Trevor's eyes looked anything but peaceful when he entered her bedroom. She was glad he had come, but upset, too, that he had been away when it all went down. That was the worse time for her: when it first happened. Now she felt numb to the pain. But that didn't mean the pain wasn't there.

When Trevor saw Carly with his own two eyes, he wasn't as relieved as he thought he would be. Because he saw the terror, the loneliness, the pain still in her big, beautiful eyes, and his heart melted. She didn't deserve this shit. She didn't deserve *his* shit. She didn't deserve any of it.

And because of his dangerous ass out on yet another dangerous assignment, she had to bear what happened alone. He was so angry with that fucking agency he could hardly see straight.

But mostly he was angry with himself.

He went to her and sat on the edge of her bed. She slung her curly hair back, out of her pretty face, and looked at him. When their eyes met, Trevor's heart began to hammer. He wasn't protecting her. That was supposed to be his number one job, and he was fucking it up!

He kissed her, gently, on her lips. When he tasted her, he had to kiss her again.

But, as usual, when their lips parted, she was more worried about *him*. "How was it?" she asked him. "And please don't tell me it was fine because I can see on your face it wasn't. How was it?"

Trevor let out an exhausted exhale. "How it always is, Carly," he responded. "It was a job. A tough job." He never told her more than that.

Then he took his hand and moved a curl of her hair back in place. "I'm not going to ask if

you're okay," he said as he looked at her hair, "because I know you aren't." Then he looked at her. "How was it for you?" he asked her.

Carly removed the skull cap from Trevor's head, and looked at it in her hands. "It was devastating," she said. "I can't even lie. But Daddy came and stayed with me. That helped. A lot."

Trevor gave a joyless smile. "I'll bet he wasn't happy with my ass for not being here," he said.

Carly nodded. "That would be an accurate statement, Mr. Reese," she said, smiling too.

Soon, both of their smiles disappeared as Carly thought about Addison and fought back tears.

But Trevor could see that fight all over her face. He opened his big arms wide.

Carly felt that surge of emotion she'd been trying to repress all day, and fell into his arms. And she threw hers around him too.

He grimaced from the pain of his badly bruised shoulder when she threw her arm around that shoulder, but he wasn't about to let her worry about that too. He put too much on her as it was. The least he could do was suffer in silence.

He got on her bed with her, laid on his back, and pulled her on top of him. And held her, and rubbed and caressed her bare ass, all night long.

It was that kind of comfort, the kind only Trevor could give to her, that Carly had been waiting for since that first gunshot pierced through that ballroom, and silenced her joy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That next morning, Trevor woke up, alone, to the sound of water blasting in the shower. At first, he remained in bed. Life seemed like it could get back to normal again. Besides, he thought with a smile, his ass was still too tired to move anyway.

But then he thought about why he had come back to Boston before confirmation to begin with. Was Carly alright? Was she in that shower, alone again, crying her eyes out?

He got off of the bed with a quickness, and hurried to the adjacent bathroom. When he saw the faint outline of her body through the frosted glass of the shower stall door, and saw that she was bathing rather than slumped to the floor sobbing as he had feared, he relaxed again. And then he peed, removed all of his clothing, and looked in the vanity mirror. He removed the bandage he had over his bruise. It was healing nicely and he was pleased that it didn't hurt nowhere near as badly as it had last night: the edge was off. He tossed the bandage in the waste basket, went over to the shower, and opened the door.

Carly, with a big shower cap covering her hair, was just about to lather up her body for a second round of bathing when Trevor opened the door. The first thing she saw, after her eyes moved downward from his eyes, were those hard six-pack abs that gave his tanned body such a chiseled look. The second thing she saw was his big, hard dick. A dick, she noticed, that was getting bigger and harder the longer he stared at her.

And she had noticed right. Trevor's eyes first went to Carly's eyes when he opened that door, mainly to make sure there were no tears there, or sadness, but then they quickly moved, as if by reflex, to her body.

She was small, but curvaceous enough that she turned Trevor on in ways all of those socialites and high-society models he used to fool around with could never touch. He didn't know why this one particular lady did to him what all of those other ladies couldn't. He had no clue why. It wasn't that she was the prettiest or the finest woman he'd ever been with. She wasn't on either front. But she was the best.

Hands down the best, Trevor thought, as he placed his hand around his dick, began massaging it, and stepped into that shower with her.

Carly knew her bathing was over for a while as Trevor placed his hands around her waist and pulled her against his penis. And kissed her.

She initially tasted like toothpaste when he kissed her. But as he moved further in, kissing her deeper and deeper, she tasted like his sweet Carly. And Trevor tasted, to Carly, like all man.

He kissed her long and hard and then moved to her neck kissing her. But when he moved further down, to her breasts, and began kissing them with that same searing passion, she leaned her head back and thrust her breasts to him. He sucked her nipples and kissed her mounds until she was swollen. And then, he was about to move down further.

But she stopped him. Knelt down herself. And took him in.

Trevor stretched the palm of his hands against the shower stall wall as Carly went down on him. His stomach moved in and out and he released ragged breaths as his entire body felt her soft lips and her sweet tongue and her sleek hands caress him in a mouth-fuck that made him on a constant verge of ejaculation.

He closed his eyes for several minutes and enjoyed every second of her special treatment. He'd paid high-class hookers in his day to mouth-fuck him this way, but even they didn't come close to Carly's touch. And he needed that touch. He needed exactly what she was giving to him. He needed Carly's passion like he needed air to breathe!

She was so good, and he was feeling her, and getting more and more excited by her so completely, that he had to pull out before he came in her mouth. Which he wasn't about to let happen. He was going to cum, alright, but deep inside of her.

He lifted her up. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. He was so big it was like lifting a feather. And he entered her with such a slow entry that Carly laid her head on his shoulder and experienced every inch of him with an anticipation that had her vagina pulsating.

He slid his tip just at her entry over and over, enjoying the feeling, until it became too much

for him to tease. And then he looked at her, clenched his teeth, and thrust inside of her with such force that she cried out in joy as the sudden rush of fullness and hardness overwhelmed her.

And he fucked her like he'd never felt that way before. He fucked her like he couldn't believe how great it felt to be inside of her. To be in love with her. To be with her!

They fucked that way for a long, wonderful time. They looked at each other, because it felt so good, as he continued to pound into her with a rhythm that was taking her there. Her ass was in his hands and she was riding his dick with a tightness that almost made it difficult to move up and down. All that could be heard were the slapping sounds of their fuck.

And he loved that feeling. He kissed her as he fucked her, because of that feeling. He fucked her so hard and for so long that she came with sensations she felt, not just in her vagina, but all over her body. Trevor, the man she loved with all her heart, was taking her to that place where nothing else mattered. Where nobody else mattered. Where she couldn't think about the pain of yesterday, but focused on nothing else but her man, inside of her, fucking her ferociously.

And when she came, her orgasm was so intense she wanted him to pull out. She couldn't bear it!

But Trevor didn't pull out. He wasn't pulling out of shit. Especially when it was Carly and the way she made him feel. He couldn't pull out! Because he also came. And it felt like electricity ripping through his entire body, making him fuck her more, not less. His cum had reached its breaking point, and was pouring into her as if his dick was a busted dam.

And then finally, he pushed in and couldn't move as he poured.

She could feel him throbbing as he poured.

He could feel her tightening as he poured.

He slammed her back against the stall wall and kissed her desperately hard, as he poured.

Fuck Hammer. Fuck the agency. Fuck every motherfucker who would think about tearing them apart. Carly was his. This beautiful, sensual creature belonged to him! And he was going

to fight to keep her. Because he knew the alternative. He knew that his life without Carly and the warmth that personified her very being, would be cold as ice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After showering together, they sat at the small breakfast table drinking coffee and reviewing their individual messages on their cell phones. Carly was dressed for work. Trevor was still in his bathrobe. His plan was to go in later, much later, if at all. He was still tired and knew, eventually, he had to get some long, uninterrupted rest.

He took another sip of his coffee and looked at her. She wore a red business suit beneath her overcoat. All prim and proper at work: that was Carly. But behind that professional exterior, he knew, was still a shattered young lady. “Think it’s a good idea to go in today?” he asked her.

She nodded. “I have to.”

He looked at her, which she knew meant he expected an explanation.

“I made a decision yesterday,” she said, “and I have to live with that decision. If I try to hide from it, or deny I made it, that would send the wrong message to our employees. They have to know that sometimes our decisions can alter people’s lives forever. And we have to own that.” Then she frowned. “I have to own it.”

Trevor wasn’t about to tell her that she wasn’t alone in that ownership, because she was. He left her in charge, and she made the call.

She looked at him. “I’m not going to ask you if I made the right decision,” she said, “because it was my decision to make at that time. But was it a bad decision?” she asked. “Would you have made the same decision I made?”

Trevor leaned back and crossed his legs. What Carly loved most about him was the fact that he, like her father, always told it to her straight. She steeled herself for his answer.

“It turned out bad, but it wasn’t a bad decision. It was a good decision.”

Carly felt a sense of relief. But she knew Trevor wasn’t through with her yet.

“But we’re in public relations, Carly,” he continued. “And outcomes are all that matters in the PR game. The outcome was horrific yesterday. No sugar coat. You should have seen that

coming a mile away.”

Carly’s heart dropped. Because that was what was driving her pain. She should have seen it coming. She should have! “What I haven’t yet figured out,” she said, “is why didn’t I see it? Her mother saw it. Even Bridgette saw it. But I didn’t.” Tears were in her pretty eyes. “Why didn’t I, Trev? Why did everybody see that Hank Pressley’s family wasn’t going to take her confession lying down? Why didn’t I see it?”

“Because you weren’t looking for it,” Trevor said. “You were looking for a win. You thought handling a major case like Addie Weld, and handling it all by yourself, would give you that victory. You thought it would make all of my employees stop seeing your youth, and see your brilliance. They already do, but you still feel some insecurity about that.” He looked her dead in the eyes. “That’s what that decision was all about for you.”

It was a reality Carly wasn’t ready to face. “I’m not that shallow,” she said.

Trevor stared at her.

“But I know what you’re saying is the truth,” she continued. “I didn’t want to admit that I would place my need for acceptance above Addie’s needs. How could I admit that? I didn’t think I had that in me.”

“We all have it in us, Carly,” Trevor said. “It’s called ambition. You want to get ahead. You want to be recognized.”

“But . . .,” she began, and he could see the distress all over her.

“But what?”

“But I didn’t think . . . I never dreamed it would turn out like that. Even when Hank’s wife showed up,” she said, “I thought--”

But Trevor interrupted her. “What do you mean? His wife was at that press conference?”

Carly nodded. “She showed up briefly, yes. Bridge said you would have ended it right then and there when she showed up.”

“I would have.” Then he frowned. This went beyond ambition. This went to poor judgment, something she rarely exhibited. “Why the fuck didn’t you, Carly?” he asked her

angrily.

“Because Addie had already confessed. If I stopped it then, she would not have had a chance to explain that he was the driving force behind that relationship. She would have still been ostracized.”

Trevor nodded. He was relieved. “Then that was the right call to continue,” he said. “Once she confessed that those rumors were true, she had to tell her side of the story. You were right about that.”

“And the mother left right away, after Addie confessed, so I felt we had dodged a bullet.”

Trevor’s jaw tightened and he folded his arms to keep his emotions in check when he heard her say that pun. It wasn’t an intentional pun, but it got to the heart of the matter for him. Because the one thing that had him crazy last night as he flew back to Boston on his private plane, was watching the video of that presser and seeing how close to death Carly herself had come! That Pressley kid was a horrible shot. Three of his four bullets missed his target badly. One of those four bullets could have easily hit Carly too.

“The son came in the room just after she left,” she continued, “but I didn’t recognize him until he began to run toward the stage. Not even the reporters recognized him at first.”

“Maybe that was his mother’s role,” Trevor said.

Carly looked at him. And nodded. “I thought about that too. Maybe she wanted us to feel as if we had dodged a bullet. To stop us from seeing anything else. That was why, after I recognized her, she immediately left. Maybe she and the son were working in tandem.”

“Good thinking, Carly. But when the cops questioned you, did you tell them your theory?”

She nodded. “I told them, yeah. But they weren’t sympathetic. They treated me like I was the one in cahoots with Hank Pressley’s son.”

“Pricks,” Trevor said. “Fucking assholes! But, don’t worry. I’ll contact the police commissioner. He’ll get his men to look into it.”

Carly nodded. But he could tell she had more on her mind. “What is it?” he asked her.

She took a sip of her coffee. And hesitated. Then she looked at him. “I go see my uncle

later today.”

Trevor stared at her.

“About the job offer,” she said.

“That’s a no, Carly,” he said firmly.

Carly hated defying Trevor. She hated it! But her parents taught her to stand her ground against her man, or all she’d ever do was cede more and more ground to him. “It has to be my decision,” she said.

“I want you to stay where you are. With me.”

“Maybe I’m not cut out for public relations work, Trevor.”

“Bullshit!”

“It’s not bullshit and you know it. I’ve had more failures than successes since you hired me. Let’s just be real about that. I’m a better manager. That’s the real reason you promoted me. And that’s the reason Uncle Mick wants to hire me.”

“And you think he’s going to go easy on you because you’re his brother’s daughter?”

Carly frowned. “No, I don’t think that. I don’t want anybody to go easy on me. Why would you even say that?”

“That man is going to give you hell, Carly. Ask Teddy how he works him like a Hebrew slave. Hell, ask Gloria! She felt she was entitled to that promotion, according to Joey, and he didn’t give it to her.”

“First off,” Carly said, “Joey is the biggest exaggerator in my family. He always put people in the worst light possible. And second of all, my uncle would have given her the job if she was ready to receive it. That’s how he is. He feels I’m ready.”

“But what do you feel, Carly?”

“I know I’m ready. That’s not the issue for me. I’m an excellent manager. But . . .”

“But what?”

“I’m not sure if leaving you to go work for Uncle Mick is like going from fire to fire.” She exhaled. “I’m not sure if I want that kind of heat.”

She said this and looked at Trevor. And he felt what she meant.

“That’s why I haven’t made up my mind,” she said and drank the last of her coffee. “I’m going to meet with him. See what he has to say. And then I’ll make my decision. Although,” she said as she stood up, “after what happened with Addie Weld, he might be the one with the change of heart.”

“Mick Sinatra?” Trevor asked. “Not a chance! He probably figured she had it coming to her for fooling around with a married man.”

Carly was mortified. “He’s not like that!” she said.

Trevor nodded. “That’s what you think.”

Carly stared at him. “He’s not, Trevor.”

“Okay.”

“But you don’t believe me.”

“I’ve had experiences with your uncle on a different level than you have, babe. He’s out of my league, too, but at least I’m in the majors with him. And he’s a ruthless sonafabitch. He wanted me to go work for him, too, once upon a time, as an underboss alongside Teddy. But he only wanted me because of my government connections. At least he wants you because of your skill.”

“Or the fact that I’m his brother’s daughter, as you think I believe.”

Trevor smiled. “I was just fucking with you. I know you know he don’t give a shit about shit like that. He hires the best people.”

Carly smiled too. “On that, we can agree.” She went over to him, and kissed him on the lips. He grabbed her when she moved away, and kissed her harder.

They looked into each other’s eyes. “If it gets too tough today,” he said, “call me. I’ll come and get you.”

Carly smiled. She could easily drive herself back home, but she understood what he meant. “Thanks, Trev,” she said, as she grabbed her briefcase and phone. “But I want you to stay here today, and get some rest.”

"I'm not allowed to go to my own home?" he asked.

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "Rest while you're here. You look completely drained out."

He gave a crooked smile. "You weren't worried about how drained I was when I went into that shower this morning."

She laughed. "I didn't invite you in. Your ass barged in."

"Your ass didn't barge mine back out!"

Carly laughed and gave him the finger. Then she kissed him again and left the house.

Trevor leaned back after she left, and stared at his cup of coffee. Why, he wondered, did Sinatra offer her that job in the first place? Was it to slow down their relationship since he knew how dangerous his lifestyle was, and he didn't want his niece caught up in that? Or did Big Daddy put him up to it?

Trevor had a great respect and admiration for both Mick and Big Daddy Sinatra. But he didn't completely trust them yet. Because he knew how they truly felt about Carly. He knew Big Daddy would tear down a mountain, brick by brick, for Carly. And he would prefer she marry a man without baggage.

But what they had to understand, Trevor thought, was that he would move that mountain, and then tear it down brick by brick, for Carly.

His cell phone rang. When he looked at the Caller ID, and saw that it was private, he leaned his head back. And then answered. "I'm not going back in," he said.

"You don't have to," Hammer said. "He's been confirmed dead."

"Then what do you want?" He and his brother, unfortunately, only had a working relationship.

"I have good news and bad news. The bad news: I need you to do a job."

Trevor frowned. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"It's a CSN, Trevor." CSN: a *Can't Say No* assignment.

"No," Trevor said. "I'm saying no!"

"It's a terrorist cell planning to strike tonight if we don't stop the mastermind."

"Then stop him! Alert the FBI and let them get agents in the field to haul his ass in."

"We can't alert the FBI," Hammer said.

"Why the fuck not?" Trevor asked.

"The mastermind is the FBI. The deputy director of the FBI."

Trevor was stopped cold. "What?"

"That's why we can't use anybody from the bureau. We don't know if it goes only as far as the deputy, or if it goes all the way to the director's office. We don't know. That's why we can't use them."

Trevor couldn't believe it.

Hammer continued. "They plan to strike tonight, on his order alone. If no order comes, we believe no strike will take place. The problem is: we have no idea how many people are in his terrorist cell. We have to stop him before that order comes down. You have to take him out today, Trev."

Trevor let out a harsh exhale. This was truly a CSN. "What's the good news?" he asked.

"The where. He's going to be in Cambridge today, to participate in a panel discussion. That will be your only window of opportunity. I'll send you the scheme to review. It's got to be precise, Trevor."

Trevor exhaled.

"I hate that it came to this. But we have to put the best on the best."

Trevor said he was out. He said he was done with that shit. And now, less than twenty-four hours later, he was right back in again?

But it wasn't as if he could turn the assignment down.

Not something like this.

He had to go back in.

But Carly, he thought. She'd be rightly angry if she knew, the day after all of her own trauma, he was leaving again.

There was only one answer for it. At least it was in Cambridge, less than half an hour away.
He had to get in and get out fast, before she even knew he had gone.

Preferably while she was meeting with her uncle.

That was his only saving grace.

CHAPTER NINE

“Sixty-nine dollars,” the desk clerk said.

“I thought it was fifty-nine. The sign out front says fifty-nine a night.”

“You asked for a room with a view. For the street view rather than the alley, it’s an extra ten. Your choice.”

Trevor shook his head as he paid for the room “with the view.” Everybody had a scam, he thought, as he took the room key and then headed upstairs. He was in Cambridge, Mass, dressed purposely inconspicuously in jeans, jersey, a Red Sox baseball cap, with the cap pulled down to conceal as much of his face as he could, and Nikes. He also wore gloves.

Once upstairs, in his room, he sat the suitcase on the bed and went to the window. It had the right view. It had the right angle. Only one camera was in the entire area of the building across the street, further away from the action, but his advance team had already disabled it. He was ready.

He went to the room door, and, without removing the shell of the lock, placed an inner lock inside of it. No one would be able to get in that room except they had a key, and he had the only key.

Then he opened the suitcase, pulled out and began assembling the scope-field rifle. He placed the stand at the window, and placed the rifle on the stand. He positioned it just right, checking carefully, and left it where it stood. Then he opened the window three inches high.

All of that accomplished, he left the room, locking it behind him, and headed, through the backstairs, out of doors.

CHAPTER TEN

The SUV stopped in the parking lot of the all-new Sinatra Industries Boston Regional Headquarters building, and Carly Sinatra looked over her steering wheel at the enormous structure of granite and glass. She wasn't sure if she was ready for this today, of all days. But her uncle had ordered her to meet him there days before the drama of yesterday, and no was never the answer to a request from him. He undoubtedly wanted to know, once and for all, if she was going to take the job or not. The new location was slated to open for business soon. But she still wasn't certain.

She entered the building as workers were still putting boxes away and plugging up computers and doing all the work of a not-yet-open-for-business facility. She took the elevator up to the top floor, where her uncle's office was located whenever he would be in town, and where the office of the Vice President, *her office* should she accept, was located. Although given what went down yesterday, she thought as she stepped off of the elevator, she wasn't even certain if the offer was still on the table.

Her uncle's office was on one end of the long corridor, and she could tell just from where she stood how enormously massive it was. The office of the Vice President was on the other end of the corridor. Not as big, but still big. The reception area was in the middle, where the receptionist, an older white woman, was unpacking boxes. Carly walked up to the elongated desk.

"Wrong floor," the receptionist said before Carly could say a word. "HR is two floors down. I don't know who's downstairs telling people to come to the top floor, but they gave you wrong information."

"I'm not . . ." Carly waited for the woman to look at her. But the woman continued to unpack boxes. So Carly continued to speak. "I'm not looking for the Human Resources department."

"Then what are you looking for?" the receptionist asked as she tossed an empty box in a pile

of other empty boxes and put another full box up on her desk. "There are no departments on the top floor. I'm sure you have the wrong floor."

"I'm sure I don't," Carly said firmly.

The receptionist finally looked at her over the rim of her moon-shaped reading glasses.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Sinatra," Carly said.

The receptionist did not hide her doubtfulness. "You have an appointment? And you are?"

"I'm Carly Sinatra."

The woman was stunned. "*Carly Sinatra?* But Carly Sinatra is Mr. Sinatra's niece."

Carly smiled. "That's right."

"But you're black. . ." The woman caught herself. "I mean, you're very young."

"That may be accurate," Carly said, "but it does not negate the fact that I am his niece, and that I have an appointment to see him."

"Yes, of course," the woman said apologetically. "I do apologize, ma'am. Mr. Sinatra did phone. He stated that he's running a little late but is expected to be here momentarily. I'm to show you to your office, ma'am."

My office, Carly thought. Was that her words or Uncle Mick's? "Thank you," she said to the receptionist.

"Right this way, please," the woman said and began walking Carly to the office.

Carly felt some kind of way as she followed the woman. If Mick had said those words, he was speaking as if she'd already made up her mind. And it was in the affirmative. But yesterday didn't make it easier for her to decide. In a lot of ways, it made it more difficult.

But when she arrived in the office, and the receptionist left, closing the door behind her, Carly felt a tremendous amount of responsibility too. She stood at the window of the large space, a window that had a sweeping view of the Boston Harbor, and she knew it was going to be a tough call. The job was that of a manager. And that, she now knew, was her real strength. She could manage people quite well. But when it came to crisis management for PR effect, where instincts mattered more than the reality of the situation, she was lost. Some

people, like Trevor, were instinctive by nature and could wing-it all day long. People like Carly, a Harvard grad with a very structured mind, could not.

She removed the scarf from around her neck and sat her briefcase and phone on top of the big desk. She removed her overcoat, placed it on the back of the chair, and then she sat in the chair.

The room itself was ginormous, but was bereft of any real furnishings beyond the desk, the chair, and a chair in front of the desk. Her uncle, she suspected, was leaving the right to furnish the office up to the person who would assume that office. She just wasn't sure if she would be that person.

Bridgette, her assistant, phoned her twice while she waited for her uncle to arrive, and both times Carly asked if Trevor had made it to work yet. When the second time was a no as well, Carly decided to give him a call. It was now six pm. He should have gotten enough sleep by now!

But when she phoned him, his cell phone went straight to Voice Mail. Which meant it had been turned off. Which could only mean one of two things: he turned it off to get uninterrupted sleep, and was still sleeping. Or, he had been called out on yet another "assignment."

The first seemed more plausible, although it wouldn't be the first time he returned from an assignment only to be called right back out on another one. But after what happened on yesterday, and the fact that the office was fielding call after call from every major news outlet in America asking for a comment from Trevor himself, they all needed him in town and in place more than ever.

She'd been trying to manage it all day long on her own, but she couldn't do what Trevor could do. She didn't have the gravitas he had. And although the office respected her, she'd be deluding herself if she thought they were giving her the same level of respect they gave to Trevor. She understood why. He was a man with twenty years of experience in public relations (and nearly that same amount of experience as a CIA operative). While she, on the other hand,

had far less than half of his experience. RM needed their leader right now. She needed her man right now!

But when she called her home phone, and it rang and rang and then went to Voice Mail, too, she realized the less-likely scenario might very well be playing out. Trevor just might be on yet another assignment!

Still refusing to believe it, she tried her home number one more time, just in case he was sleeping just that hard. But it rang and rang again. She even left a message, urging him to pick up the phone. Still no response.

He was gone. There was no doubt in Carly's mind. And he didn't even let her know he was leaving!

She tossed her phone onto the desk and leaned her head back. When was it going to end? She thought she knew what she was getting into when she agreed to marry Trevor. She knew he lived life dangerously and she would not have an easy road. She thought she was used to it. Heck, the man she was considering going to work for was reportedly the most vicious mob boss in America, although to the general public he was just a legitimate business tycoon. Her deceased biological father was gangster, too, and her deceased biological mother wasn't much better. She had danger in her pedigree.

But what she wasn't used to was knowing the man she loved was constantly forced into dangerous situation after dangerous situation almost on a monthly basis. And lately, for some unknown reason, his brother's phone calls had been increasing. What had once been monthly assignments were becoming weekly almost. That she wasn't used to by a mile.

After nearly thirty minutes of sitting in that chair, twirling in that chair, and thinking about Trevor in that chair, Carly closed her eyes and dozed off. Knocks on the door woke her back up. And before she could even steel herself, or say come in, her uncle, Mick Sinatra, a man she was still extremely uncomfortable around, walked in.

Carly stood to her feet. Had that been Big Daddy, she would have raced around that desk

and given him a great big hug. But Mick “the Tick” Sinatra was as unlike Big Daddy as two brothers could be. Warmth was what Carly felt whenever she was in Big Daddy’s presence. Coldness like a winter storm was what she felt around her Uncle Mick.

Even calling him *uncle* to his face was tough for her. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t happy to see him. She was. “Hi,” she said with a smile.

He didn’t say anything as he made his way toward the desk. And as usual when he came around her, he was staring at her as if he was staring through her. She’d learned how to ignore it, but it still made her feel damn awkward.

What always surprised Carly about Mick, the rare times she got to see him at all, were two things: how remarkably handsome a man he was, and how big he was. Trevor and Big Daddy were big, too. She was used to big men. But Mick seemed to grow in stature every time she saw him. It was as if he was becoming mythical in their family. Which was crazy, she knew, but true. And it didn’t help her comfort level at all.

Most young ladies in Carly’s position would have immediately walked from behind the desk and ceded the seat of honor in that office to the boss. But Carly didn’t make that move. Not because she didn’t respect him. Beyond Big Daddy and Trevor, there was no man she respected more. But she also felt that Mick didn’t ask her to run his New England operation because she was meek and mild. He asked her because he felt she was tough enough. He would not want his Regional Vice President ceding ground to anybody.

She was right. Mick sat in front of the desk, and then she sat back down behind it. He fully expected her to remain where she was.

He unbuttoned his suitcoat, crossed his long legs, and continued to stare at her. She expected him to ask her a question, but he said nothing. He just sat there staring at her. Carly’s heart was hammering.

But she knew she had to get on with it. “I haven’t made a decision yet,” she said.

She could tell he didn’t like that answer. “Why?” he asked.

“As you know, on yesterday I was involved in a very tragic situation.”

“A very tragic situation,” Mick said, “that has nothing to do with your decision to work for me or to not work for me. Don’t do that.”

Carly frowned. “Don’t do what?” Then she realized what. “I’m not using that as an excuse,” she said, although she knew she was.

Then Mick exhaled. “You want my take?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure if she did or not, but she suspected he would give his take anyway. “Yes,” she said.

“You made a decision before yesterday,” he said. “But yesterday, after what you went through, I think you realized a truth you’ve been having difficulty overcoming.”

“Really? And what truth is that?”

“That you can’t leave Reese Marketing.”

Carly stared at him. Was this man going to go that deep? “Why can’t I?”

“Because Trevor needs you. You’re a gorgeous girl. Any man on this planet would want you. But you believe Trevor needs you.”

Carly knew he spoke the truth. “That’s right,” she admitted. “But I know another truth as well,” she added.

“What’s that?”

“What will happen when he doesn’t?”

Mick was pleased to hear her speak that way. That was the person he knew could handle this gig. That was the Carly he was waiting to show up! “You mean what if you and he break up?”

“Yes. It’s been known to happen.” She frowned. “More times than not.”

“What are you saying, Carly?” Mick asked her.

“I can’t base my life decisions on somebody else. I have to base my decisions on me. And I’ve decided I have to protect myself.”

Mick was impressed. That was why he wanted her. That was exactly why! At the end of the day, Carly had guts.

She went on. "I love Trevor, and will always be there for him. I'll always have his back. But I can't let him consume my whole life. I can't let the man I love be the source of everything in my life, including my livelihood, or I'll lose my own sense of self. And that truth became scarier to me than any other truth. I'm a Sinatra, and I have to hitch my wagon with the Sinatras."

"And if you become a Reese?"

Carly thought about that. "I'll still be a Sinatra."

Mick smiled. "Now that's the fucking truth," he said, and Carly laughed.

Then his face turned stone cold again, and he quickly rose to his feet.

Carly suddenly realized who she was dealing with, and cut the laughter too. And stood up as well.

"I'll notify HR of your decision," Mick said. "Take some time to get your affairs in order at RM, and then I'll expect you onboard here. But make no mistake, Carly Sinatra, I will not take any shit from you."

Carly's heart dropped. That wasn't exactly the welcome on board she was expecting!

"If you can't do the job, beloved niece or not, I won't hesitate to fire your ass. I didn't take the decision to hire you lightly, so I suspect that won't happen. But if you do fuck up, you're out. Just as you would be anywhere else. But because you're my beloved niece, you'll be out faster here. Because you should work harder to make sure your uncle's business is as successful as it can possibly be. As I know you will do. As I know you can do."

But then he offered what he thought was a smile, but what Carly only saw as a serious grimace. "Congratulations," he said. "Just like yesterday, you made the only decision that made sense."

Carly smiled. He understood what she was going through!

"But unlike yesterday, where the success or failure of that decision wasn't up to you," he continued, "the success or failure of coming to work for S.I. is up to you. Totally up to you. So get your shit together and come here ready to make New England S.I. the best it can be."

Carly nodded her head. "Yes, sir," she said.

She could use a hug in the meantime, but she knew he was not that kind of uncle. She had also hoped he would give her at least a softer look on departing, just to show her that he was pleased with her decision to work for him, but he didn't do that either. His look remained as hard as steel. "I'll leave you to it," was all he said, and left her office.

Carly sat back down. Those tough words he'd said to her wasn't a surprise. She'd already told herself most of it. But he called her his *beloved* niece. That was a surprise! And that nugget, small though it might have been, brought a smile to her face and, at least momentarily, put her a little more at ease.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The crowd of protestors that stood outside the venue were real. Everywhere the FBI's deputy director went, there was always a crowd of people, protesting one injustice or another, waiting on him. The agency didn't have to manufacture the protestors, as it had in the past. Trevor blended in with the crowd. He even had a *Free Jamal* sign, about an unjustly imprisoned man some in the group wanted freed, as he made his way to the front of the pack.

And when the car drove up, with two police officers on motorcycles as escorts, Trevor had to use his brute strength to maintain his position near the front. Because he had to do two things, one behind the other. First, he had to make sure he was concealing the small pocket pistol he held in his hand, even as he lifted the sign, with one hand, to get the director's attention.

But he knew he could not waste time. He knew, as soon as the director got out of the car, his position up front was going to be challenged by everybody else behind him and his window of opportunity, where no innocent bystander was harmed, was going to be nil. He could not hesitate.

And he didn't. As soon as the bodyguard got out and opened the back-passenger door, and Sam Norvale, the Deputy Director of the FBI, stepped out, he moved slightly to the right, where he had his best angle, and fired three consecutive shots.

The crowd began screaming and dispersing as soon as they heard the sound of the gunshots. But Trevor dropped his sign like they had, and was running away too.

But his job wasn't complete. He turned the specially-made gun over and pressed the remote control attached to it. Then he looked up at the window of the hotel room he had rented. The rifle with the scope he had set up, suddenly appeared out of the open window by the action of his remote control. As soon as it appeared, Trevor began pointing to it.

"Up there," he began yelling. "Look up there!"

His action caused, as he had hoped, a chain reaction and many in the crowd were looking up

and pointing up at the hotel's window as they ran. Their reaction prompted the police and bodyguards to look up too. When they saw the rifle, they all began running toward the hotel. Trevor, and many others in the crowd, were already running in the opposite direction.

But by the time they had run nearly three blocks away, Trevor peeled off from the crowd and made his way through an alley that led to a backside street, where his unmarked car was parked and waiting for him. It seemed as if he was home free!

But as soon as he made it to the car, and was about to open the driver side door and jump in, he noticed a problem in his peripheral vision.

He turned quickly and saw a car waiting. And it was unmarked too. Which meant, he knew, that it was government-issue too. Probably, if he had to guess, FBI. They had undoubtedly canvassed the area even before the director showed up, and discovered that car. Unmarked like theirs. Government-issue like theirs. Could be anybody on any assignment that had nothing to do with the director's nearby appearance, or with the FBI.

But they waited for the occupant to arrive just in case.

Trevor did all he could to maintain his cool as he continued to conceal his face as he got into the car slowly, and began driving away slowly. They would not have heard the gunshots that far away. Unless they were plugged in at the scene. Then, he knew, they would have heard it all.

He realized they had heard it all when, as soon as he pulled off, their car pulled off too. He drove to the end of the street and turned a corner. They turned that corner too. Another corner turned. They turned too.

But it was still too early to panic. He had to do what he called a *tail check*, where he would pull into a business, any business, and see what happened.

He pulled into an unlikely one: a coming-soon strip club that wasn't even open for business yet. When the car pulled in too, but farther away in the same parking lot, Trevor knew he had a live one.

He backed out, swerved around, and his cautiousness was over. He took off.

The second car, the car tailing him, did the exact same thing. And the chase was on.

Trevor pulled out the throwaway phone provided in the car. It was time to call the “hello” number. Whenever that number was called, it was a direct line to the agency, and it meant he was in trouble and needed backup.

But in case there was a trace device somewhere in the area, the call still had to be clandestine.

When the woman answered the call (it was always a woman’s voice), and said *hello*, Trevor spoke easily. “It’s hot as hell out here,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “It’s nicer in Bermuda.”

Trevor ended the call.

Bermuda, for that particular job, had been predetermined to be the airfield. Get to the airfield, and help would be waiting. Trevor took off in that direction.

But he also dialed another number. His men in Boston. And there was no ambiguity in that call. “My cover’s been blown,” he made clear. “Do it now until I can neutralize the threat. Do it now!” And then he threw the phone onto the passenger seat, put both hands on the steering wheel, and flew toward that private airfield on the outskirts of Cambridge as if he was airborne himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Carly pulled into the gas station and sat for a moment in her SUV. It had already been an exhausting day. She grabbed her cell phone, just in case Trevor called, and her credit card. She got out and was about to swipe her card at the pump, when a car drove up beside her car and two men got out. The largest one went beside her, covered her mouth with tape that looked invisible from any distance, and hugged her as if they were old friends.

But it was not a hug. It was a death grip that paralyzed Carly's every movement. That same big man walked her to his car, put her in the backseat with him, and the car drove away. The second man got behind the wheel of her SUV, and drove off too.

It was so smooth, nobody seemed to notice. *A rolling pickup* was the term at the agency.

But in case somebody did notice, another car drove up. The driver got out and went inside the gas station. His sole purpose was to retrieve, by any means necessary, any CCTV footage the store might have recorded.

Carly didn't know what hit her. One moment she was about to swipe her card at the pump, the next moment she was being snatched and taken away by two men: one driving, the other man, the large one, in the backseat with her.

When he removed the tape from her mouth, she was ready to fume. But the man beside her, Gates, spoke before she could. "Mr. Reese sent us," he said quickly.

Carly looked at him. "What do you mean he sent you?"

"He ordered us to bring you in," said the driver.

"Bring me in? What are you talking . . ." Then her heart dropped. "Where is he? Where's Trevor? Is he alright?"

"He's okay," said Gates. "At least, we hope so. He said his cover was blown and he wants us to get you to a safe house until he can neutralize the threat."

Carly didn't have to ask what threat, because she knew they weren't going to tell her.

“I’m sorry about the cloak and dagger,” Gates said, “but we couldn’t allow any resistance from you in that public place. We had to roll in and grab.”

“Prove to me you work for Trevor,” she said. “Prove it!”

The driver looked at Gates through the rearview. Gates reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and opened it. Inside was his face on an employee identification card. The employer? Reese Marketing. His job title: Security Chief. “That enough proof?” he asked.

Carly knew the card was legit. There was a watermark RM used that let her know it was legit. But the way they did it! “Why didn’t you just show me that?” she asked.

“I told you we couldn’t risk any resistance.”

“Why would I resist if you would have shown me that? Or told me something? You almost gave me a heart attack! You think Trevor is going to let you get away with that?”

“If I keep you safe, which I absolutely intend to do,” Gates said, “then yes. He’s the one who taught us everything we do.”

Carly stared at Gates, but then leaned back in her seat. She was still upset. She was still angry as hell. But she wasn’t about to argue with men who were just doing their jobs. She hated the way they did it, but she knew there was nothing she could do about that. At least not now. Besides, she knew Trevor sometimes had men following her. Especially when he went out on dangerous assignments. She knew it, but just didn’t see them doing it. They stayed in the shadows. The fact that they came out at all had to have an underlying reason beyond just picking her up. A very crucial underlying reason: Trevor was in trouble.

That was why, instead of arguing any points, or questioning their methods, she tuned out the anger. And prayed, instead, for Trevor.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trevor sped through the streets of Cambridge until he had arrived at the private airfield. He saw a car waiting, near the backside of the airfield, but he saw something else too. Another car, further away, as if it was at the site on an entirely different mission. But something felt wrong. Something felt off. Both cars were together. He had to assume they were together. But neither one of them were out of sight. And that was how they did it at the agency. The backup was always concealed to surprise any followers. But those fuckers were out in plain sight!

It was a set up.

And they were waiting on his ass.

Trevor continued to drive toward the first car, as if he suspected nothing. But three cars of gunmen against his one gun was not going to work. He had to improvise.

His only chance, as he saw it, was to make it all the way across the field to the building at the far end. He knew it was abandoned, as he checked it out during his personal pre-check before he headed to his job. It was to be his backup should something go wrong.

Something was going terribly wrong already. Because there were two cars of men waiting on his ass. He could outshoot anybody. He knew that with great confidence. But he couldn't outshoot everybody. Unless, he thought, he had room to maneuver.

He decided to go for that room.

As soon as it looked as if he was heading straight for the first car, he made a drastic change in direction, spinning his tires and kicking up the dust of the field, and sped toward that far-side building.

As he suspected, the car tailing him began shooting at him, and the first car waiting at the airfield began following him too. The second car waiting at the airfield began following as well. It was a fucking convoy! It was three against one: he was right. His *hello* call had been intercepted. And somebody at the agency had already told them where Bermuda was going to

be.

He knew nobody was coming to help him. But fortunately for him, he thought, he was used to that too.

When he made it to the building, he grabbed the workbag waiting beneath the seat and jumped out and ran into the building. He had to dodge bullets, but nothing came close enough to spook him.

The three cars tailing him drove up and stopped behind his car. And the men inside, four to each car, jumped out and ran into the building too.

It was just as he had hoped. Because Trevor wasn't inside that building. As fast as he had run in, he dropped his workbag filled with explosives and ran out on the other side. He knew he had to act before they followed. And he did. He pressed the remote control he had in his hand, and dived as the entire building blew. It was an old trick. But it worked because those men weren't agency men. Or they would have known it too.

Trevor turned and looked, as the building went up in flames, and all twelve men chasing him went up too.

All four cars on the opposite side of the building had been hit by the shrapnel, and were all a mangled mess too.

But when a fourth car suddenly appeared, a car Trevor had not seen previously at all, he knew he had to get up and make a run for it.

But just as he got up, he recognized the car. It was government-issue. And the driver was his brother.

Hammer Reese sped up where his brother stood, Trevor got into the car, and they sped away.

Trevor was relieved that he didn't have another battle on his hand, but he was pissed too. "What the fuck happened, Ham?" he asked angrily.

"Sam Norvale had shadow guards we didn't know about. They weren't from the agency, but they were leaked intel about this job from somebody in the agency."

“A fucking breach?”

“A big one,” Hammer said.

“Fuck!” said Trevor. Then he shook his head. “I can’t keep putting myself in these fucking situations. It’s not fair to Carly!”

Hammer looked at his brother. “The deputy director had to be taken out,” he said. “I couldn’t risk it with anybody else. There just was no other way around it.”

Trevor understood the stakes. That wasn’t his problem. “Do I need to be worried about blowback?”

“Maybe. That’s why we have to stay in the area to get that confirmation.”

“I killed his ass. I’m certain of that.”

“But if we see movement by any of his operatives, any of the ones we know of, you and I both may need to help take them out.”

Trevor frowned. “I thought they weren’t going to make a move unless he gave them the order.”

“That’s our best intel, yes.” Then Hammer glanced at his brother with a world-weary look. “But our intel didn’t know about his shadow guards. And our intel didn’t know about those men lying in wait at the airfield. We have to stay in the area until we’re sure we have no movement from any members of that terrorist cell.”

Trevor exhaled. The deputy director of the FBI running a terror cell. “They were expected to hit tonight,” he said.

“That’s right,” said Hammer.

“Where?” Trevor asked. “What was their target?”

Hammer didn’t respond, as Trevor already knew he wouldn’t. He risked his life time and time again for his country, and they never told him shit. But he knew, if he didn’t follow their orders, he’d be dead anyway. Hammer was his brother, and he wielded major power, but even he didn’t pull those strings. Because Trevor knew, if the agency took him out, they were going to have to take Hammer out too. And, Trevor also knew, if the agency took his brother out,

they would have to take him out too. They knew, beyond any doubt, that the two brothers had each other's back.

"I need a phone," Trevor said. He needed to phone Carly.

But Hammer shook his head. "Not here. This area is too hot. They've got intercepts here. There's a SCIF nearby. You can call her from there."

A SCIF was the acronym for *Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility*, and it was generally located on government property. But Trevor knew, even when he called Carly, he wasn't going to be able to give her the info she was going to want. He could only tell her he was okay for now, but that he had to remain in the field a bit longer. She wasn't going to like it.

He leaned his head back as Hammer drove. This day was not shaping up as he had hoped it would. If all had gone according to plan, he figured he could have been home before dinner. And Carly, he also figured, would not have known a thing.

But lately, he realized, nothing was going according to plan.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A long tub bath did give Carly some relief, but when she stepped out and dried off, she still felt uneasy. She had to spend hours at that safe house, and was only released after Trevor phoned in and ordered her release. She understood why she had to be detained. That wasn't what was bothering her. She already knew that being with Trevor meant that there would be days like that.

But when he told her he was *still* on assignment, and would see her later tonight *if all went well*, she could hardly celebrate her freedom. Because the truth of the matter was, whenever he was out there somewhere, risking his life for an agency that probably didn't even give a damn, she was always worried sick about him.

She stood in her large master bedroom and put on a pair of blue Puma shorts. But as she was putting on her tank top, she heard the sound of a car on her driveway. Her heart was ready to soar as she hurried to the window. If that was him she was going to hardly be able to contain her joy!

But when she looked out and saw her father stepping out of his big, familiar Jaguar, and her Uncle Mick stepping out on the passenger side with him, her heart fell through her shoes. They both had major businesses to run. They both were extremely busy men. They wouldn't be at her house, this time of night, unless something major had happened.

She ran out of her bedroom and ran down those stairs so fast she nearly tripped. She was asking the Lord to let him be alright. Then she was asking the Lord to let him still be alive. Even if he was cripple or blind or anything else, just let him be alive!

She flung open her front door just as the two big men were coming up on her porch. "What happened?" she asked as soon as she opened the door.

Big Daddy knew his youngest of his grown children well, and he immediately took his hands and made a pumping down motion. "It's okay, Carly."

"Trevor's alive?"

Mick shook his head and Big Daddy's jaw tightened. Neither one of them wanted a life like this for her. Trevor didn't run a mob syndicate like Mick, or had to sometimes handle mob-style business like Big Daddy. But in many ways, what he did was far more dangerous. They dealt with their own sworn enemies. Trevor had to deal with enemies of the state. That was a fucking universe of bad guys!

"We don't know if he's okay," Big Daddy said. "You haven't heard from him?"

"Just to tell me that I was free to leave that safe house, and that he would be home later."

"But he's still on assignment?" Mick asked.

Carly nodded. "Yes, sir."

Big Daddy ran his hand through his hair. This shit was distressing him! But he knew he had to be there for Carly. He placed his arm around her, and they all went inside.

It was Mick's first time in her new home and although it was a step above her old home, he wasn't so sure if it was up to his security standards. While Big Daddy and Carly made their way to the sofa, he walked throughout the house. He took a full tour of every room in her home, upstairs and down.

Big Daddy and Carly sat side by side, and he kept his arm around her. "You haven't heard anything?" Carly asked him.

"No. I tried to phone Trevor myself, but there was no answer."

"He can't when he's in the field."

"I understand that. I didn't know he was in the field at the time."

Carly was confused. "Then why did you guys come tonight, if it's not about . . ." Then her eyes grew bigger. "Nothing's happened to anybody in the family. Has it?"

"No," Big Daddy said quickly. "Nothing's happened."

"Then why are you here?"

"Mick found out that you were in a safe house."

Carly frowned. "He found out? How did he find out?"

"You have to ask him that," Big Daddy responded. "I've been asking him for years how he

manages to find out everything that goes on in this family, including my own family, before I do. You ask him. Good luck getting any answer.”

“I just wish Trevor would call me. I just wish he’d let me know he’s okay,” Carly said.

“How long has he been gone?”

“He left today, but I couldn’t tell you when. I thought he was at home getting some rest from his last assignment. He just got back home from that assignment. Then the next thing I know I’m in a safe house.”

Mick returned to the living room and sat in the nearby chair. He crossed his legs and stared at Carly.

“But what I don’t understand,” she said, “is why are you guys here?”

“I told you why. Mick found out you were in a safe house,” Big Daddy said.

That wasn’t exactly a clarifying answer to Carly. “But why would you need to come to Boston just because of that?”

Big Daddy looked at her as if she had just grown an extra eye. Mick continued to stare at her.

And Carly didn’t understand their reaction. “What?” she asked.

“Honey,” Big Daddy said, “no child of mine is placed in a safe house, without my knowledge, unless something’s going on. Trevor knows that.”

“He said it was just cautionary,” Carly said.

“Because something’s going on,” said Big Daddy. “And whenever something happens, and you need protection, Trevor knew better than to place you in some safe house with strangers guarding you. He was to call me, or if he couldn’t reach me, he was to call your Uncle Mick. He knew that.”

Carly shook her head. “I don’t understand. What’s the difference?”

“I have safe houses in this area,” Mick said, and Carly looked at him. “I have men in this area,” he continued. “If you need to be placed under protection, you get placed under my protection. With my men. Or they take you to your father and you get under his protection.

We weren't even notified. That is unacceptable."

Carly could see the anger in her uncle's eyes. They were mad as hell at Trevor. She knew she was beloved by the Sinatra family almost immediately after Big Daddy and Jenay adopted her and her sister Ashley and welcomed them into the family. But they needed to understand something.

"I know you and Dad look out for my best interests," she said. "But so does Trevor. He would never place me in any dangerous situation. He had his men pick me up for precautionary reasons only."

"Don't you mean he had his men kidnap you at a gas station for precautionary reasons only?" Mick asked.

Big Daddy shook his head. "When Mick told me how they picked you up, how they did that shit, I was so angry with that motherfucker I could have killed his ass. Trevor knows his men has no business pulling that kind of shit with my daughter! That had to be traumatic, Carly."

Carly couldn't lie. It was traumatic! But still! "They said they didn't want to make a scene," she said. "But you're right. It was very traumatic. It was awful."

"Trevor has to do better by you," Big Daddy said, pulling her closer against him. "He has to. And don't you dare make excuses for him!"

And then silence ensued for several minutes until they all could hear that another car had pulled onto Carly's driveway. Carly was about to get up, but Big Daddy pulled her back.

Mick got up and looked out of the window in that clandestine way he did without being seen at all. Carly waited for him to tell her who it was, but he didn't say a word.

When her front door was unlocked, and Trevor walked in, Mick didn't have to say anything. Carly's heart leaped with joy. He was alive. *And* he looked to be okay!

She jumped up from her father's grasp and ran to Trevor. She knew it made her look weak in Big Daddy and Mick's eyes. She knew it made her look submissive as hell to her man. But she didn't care how it looked. She was too happy to have Trevor back home!

When Trevor entered Carly's house, he was the one happy to see that Carly was okay.

When he arrived and saw her father's Jag on her driveway, his heart dropped. Did something else happen between her release from the safe house to now?

And when she jumped from that sofa and began running to him, it was his heart that was soaring. He hurried to her, too, and grabbed her, and lifted her off her feet into his arms. They held onto each other tightly. Trevor's eyes were squeezed shut as he held her.

Big Daddy appreciated their affection. He knew Trevor loved her. But he also knew he had to do better by her.

When he placed her back on her feet, they kissed, and then, with Trevor's hand on the small of Carly's back, they walked back to the sofa and sat down beside Big Daddy.

"How's everybody?" he asked as he sat down.

"How are you?" Carly asked.

Mick and Big Daddy looked at him. He nodded his head. "I'm good."

"No problems in the field?" Big Daddy asked him.

"None I couldn't handle," Trevor said.

"Then why did you place my daughter in a safe house?"

"I was being cautious."

"No, you weren't," Mick said.

Trevor was surprised. Him, of all people, should have understood why he did it. "Excuse me?" he asked.

"If you wanted to be cautious, you would have phoned me, or her father, and we would have placed her under our protection. What you would not have done was what you did."

"Why would you traumatize her that way?" Big Daddy asked with a fixed frown on his face.

Carly felt bad for Trevor that they were grilling him that way, but they were asking legitimate questions. Especially about the way they picked her up. It was traumatic!

As Trevor moved his arm tighter around Carly's waist, he realized Big Daddy had his arm around her too. Was this what he could expect when they were married too? A pull and tug with Big Daddy? He knew Carly was the man's favorite, and that was saying something because

he also knew just how much Big Daddy loved all of his children. And up until his arrival on the scene, Big Daddy had always been the main man in Carly's life. Was he ever going to let her go?

Trevor crossed his legs. "It was not meant to be traumatic," he said. "But they couldn't leave the decision as to whether she would go or not go up to her. If she argued with them, or chose not to go with them, it would have created an even bigger scene. I ordered them to do it exactly the way they did it. They could not have any resistance. Not at that moment."

"What was happening at that moment?" Big Daddy asked.

"I wasn't sure if there was blowback."

"What were you doing that would create blowback?" Big Daddy asked.

Carly knew he wasn't going to get an answer. Trevor never went into details about any aspect of his field work, not even with her. And she was right. Trevor did not answer the question.

"No answer?" Big Daddy asked him.

"You know I can't answer that."

"Okay, then, answer this. Why didn't you phone me? Or have your men bring her to me?"

But Trevor was shaking his head. "That would have taken too long," Trevor said. "I wanted her out of sight immediately."

"Then why didn't you phone my brother? You know he has men in this town. You know he has safe houses in this town. Hell, he was in town!"

"It was my call," Trevor said. "It was my responsibility."

Big Daddy and Mick both looked at Trevor. "*Your* responsibility?" Big Daddy asked. "So she's your responsibility now, fuck us?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what the fuck do you mean?" Mick asked.

"She's my woman," Trevor said. "That's what I mean."

"She's a Sinatra," Big Daddy said. "Until she becomes a Reese, she's a Sinatra. She's my responsibility."

“Okay, stop!” Carly said. “I’m a grown-ass woman, I’m nobody’s responsibility but my own! Stop treating me like some kid, Dad. And stop treating me like some possession, Trevor! Everything worked out, and that’s all that matters.”

Then she looked at her father. “Did it ever occur to you, or Uncle Mick, that I could have phoned both of you while I was at that safe house, but I didn’t?”

It had occurred to Mick. “Why didn’t you?” he asked.

“Because I trust Trevor,” Carly said, “and I knew he was looking out for my best interests.”

“Better than we can?” Big Daddy asked her.

Carly loved her father dearly, and never wanted to hurt him, but he had to understand the changing dynamic. “Yes,” she said. “Nobody can look out for my best interests better than Trevor can.”

Trevor’s heart soared. He knew Big Daddy and Mick Sinatra were two of the toughest men he’d ever known. He knew what kind of courage it took for Carly to say those words to them.

Inwardly, Mick was impressed with Carly. She stood up for her man.

Big Daddy was impressed, too. But only to a point. “I know you hope to marry him someday. It’s good to know that you have complete trust in him. But *until* you marry him, you’re on my watch. That doesn’t mean I’m treating you like a kid, it means I’m treating you like my child. Because that’s what you are and will always be. And you are under my protection. I don’t give a fuck what either one of you think. Do I make myself clear?”

Carly nor Trevor were going to defy Big Daddy Charles Sinatra, although neither one of them were going to take back what they said too. But respect was respect, and Big Daddy, they both knew, had earned theirs.

“Yes, sir,” Trevor said.

“Yes, sir,” said Carly.

Big Daddy stood up, and so did Mick. “We’d better get going,” Big Daddy said.

Trevor and Carly rose to their feet too.

Carly went over to Big Daddy and gave him a hug. “Bye, Daddy,” she said. As they hugged,

they kissed, and then she looked into his eyes. "I appreciate everything you do for me. You know I do. But I just wish you would appreciate what Trevor does for me, too."

"He can do better by you," Big Daddy said. "I'm not going to sugar coat that shit." He looked at Trevor with a harsh glare. "He knows he can do better."

Carly wasn't going to argue with her father. When Big Daddy had his mind made up, it was made up. They released from each other's grasp.

"Thanks for checking on her," Trevor said.

Big Daddy smiled a smile at Trevor that Trevor and Carly both knew wasn't meant to be joyful. "May I have a moment with you outside?" he asked Trevor.

Carly's heart dropped. She looked at Trevor. He knew he had to reassure her. "I'll be right back," he said with a smile of his own, and followed Big Daddy and Mick out of the house. Carly held his shirt, to hold him back, but he removed her hands and smiled again. He was nervous as hell, she could tell. But he also had the look of a man who could handle his own even against men like her father and uncle. She let him go.

"I'll see you in a couple weeks," Mick said to her, she said yes, sir to him, as he began leaving.

Trevor glanced back at her. That couple of weeks reference wasn't lost on him. But he had bigger fish to fry right at that moment. He kept his focus on the two powerful men who were leading him outside as if they were leading him to his execution.

When they walked outside, she hurried to the window. She saw all three men walk to the Jag. Mick got in behind the wheel of the car, and Big Daddy and Trevor got in the backseat. Big Daddy turned to Trevor when their doors closed.

Trevor looked at him. "I know how much you love your daughter," he said, "but I also know how busy both of you are. You didn't come all this way to Boston just because of that safe house incident. Am I right?"

Big Daddy reached into his suit coat pocket, pulled out a photograph, and tossed it on Trevor's lap. "Who the fuck is that?" he asked.

It was a picture of Jessica Lutalo, known back then as Jessica Duncan. It was a recent picture of Jess. His heart dropped through his shoe. "Where did you get this photo?" he asked. Even Mick looked at him through the rearview. Who the fuck did he think he was talking to?

"You don't ask me questions," Big Daddy said. "I'm asking you. Who is she?"

Trevor exhaled. "Somebody I used to know," he said.

"Is it somebody Carly knows?" Big Daddy asked him.

Trevor hesitated. "No," he said, and his eyes met Big Daddy's harsh gaze.

"So it's true?"

"It depends on what you're talking about."

"You know what the fuck I'm talking about!" Big Daddy shot back. "Is it true?"

Trevor's silence answered his question. Big Daddy let out a disappointed exhaled. "Clean that shit up, Trevor," he said. "You break Carly's heart, I'll break you. And I am not exaggerating."

But Trevor was still stunned by it all. "Did you have me investigated?" he asked. "Is that how you found out?"

"I had you investigated many times since you've been with my daughter," Big Daddy admitted. "This woman never registered, just like most of what happened during your college years. I assumed the CIA saw to that. They didn't hear a thing about her. But for some reason, they're hearing about her now. She's showing up now."

Trevor stared at Big Daddy. Jess was showing up? What did he mean by that? "How much do you know?" he asked him.

Mick looked at him again through the rearview. He knew Trevor was on a higher level than most men would ever attain in any life time. Mick admired him for that very reason. He was a go-getter and tough as they came. He was on a high level, no question about it. But he wasn't on Mick's level. Or Big Daddy's level. Again, Mick thought, who the fuck did he think he was?

"I know enough," Big Daddy responded to Trevor's question, "to come to Boston. That's how much I know." He snatched the picture from Trevor. "Clean that shit up," he said firmly.

“Or I will.”

“Have a nice night,” Mick said. Which, Trevor knew, meant the meeting was adjourned.

When he got out of the car, they drove away. And Trevor stood there, in the night air, with a sense of dread. It was a warning. Big Daddy and Mick had come to Boston to warn him. And that warning was as clear as the chill in the air. His shit was catching up with him, and if he wasn't careful he was going to lose Carly in the aftermath. They were going to see to it.

Big Daddy was right.

He had to clean his shit up.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When she woke up the next morning, she was pleased that Trevor had stayed the night. They were in a spoon position in bed. He was behind her with his arm around her waist. And he was fast asleep.

She turned her phone over on the nightstand and looked at the time. It was seven twenty-seven. Later than she normally got up, but not so late that she would have to rush to get to work. Trevor owned the company. He could go in and often did go in any time he pleased. Even his A-list clients had to work around *his* schedule. But she was no Trevor Reese. She didn't own shit. She was a true working stiff!

But when she moved to ease out of bed without waking him, he reached out and grabbed her by her nightgown. And pulled her back against him.

She smiled. "I thought you were asleep."

"I thought so too," Trevor said, "until you moved your warm body away from me."

"It's almost seven thirty. I need to get ready for work."

"No need for that," he said.

No need? "What do you mean?" she asked him.

"I'm giving you, and myself, the day off."

That made no sense to Carly when they had so much going on. "Why?" she asked him.

Trevor lifted her gown up above her bare ass, and pulled her closer against his naked body. "We're spending the day together," he said and then, without any foreplay, entered her.

She was already wet. Extra wet, she realized, which she knew meant that he had been inside of her earlier. Now he wanted to go another round with her. But still! "We have a lot of cases that need our attention, Trev," she said.

"That's why we have staff," he said. "Mine earn their fat paychecks all the time. It's high time your staff earn theirs." He closed his eyes as he began fucking her. "You need a day off," he said.

Carly's look became hooded too as he stroked her in that gentle way she was growing especially fond of. And the idea of, not just a day off, but a day off with Trevor, excited her even more. Until he reached under her gown and began squeezing her breasts and rubbing her nipples as he fucked her, and her excitement escalated.

She groaned with joy as his fullness and his strokes made her feel as if she was in a perpetual stretch. Because every fiber of her vagina was being rubbed and caressed and loved by his engorged dick. And when he removed her gown altogether, turned her onto her stomach, and got on top of her from behind, fucking her even harder, the excitement of a day off paled by comparison.

She knew her father and uncle's visit had something to do with Trevor's change in plans. Neither one of them ever took days off. If Trevor wasn't on assignment for his brother, he was on assignment for himself. And Carly was always at the office running the day-to-day.

But that visit, especially the one they had out in the car, seemed to have spooked him into action. And as his moans and her groans intensified, and with his big body on top of her, and his big dick inside of her, and her ass smothered by him, she basked in the romance of it all. Their day off, she thought with a smile, was getting off to a bang-up start.

And it only went uphill from there.

First, he took her to breakfast at the Waffle House. The idea of Trevor in such a place seemed implausible. He frequented restaurants with Michelin-star standards, not restaurants with Mom and Pop standards. He took her there, she was convinced, to fill her up with carbs and calories on purpose. But she had no qualms at all. She ate as heartily as he ate. She enjoyed the meal.

Then he took her for a boat ride in the Harbor. It was so relaxing that she almost fell asleep in his arms. But when a nearby boat came too close to theirs and skied water onto their deck, wetting her, that woke her up. It also sent Trevor into hysterical belly-laughter.

That afternoon, they toured a couple museums, had lunch at McDonald's, and rode bumper

cars.

But that night, it was all Trevor style. They dressed up beautifully and took in the music of Puccini and Debussy, as performed by the Boston Symphony orchestra, and then they took a private carriage ride along Copley Square that had Carly and Trevor snuggled and totally relaxed with one another.

And it was at that moment, as Carly laid against him, that he knew it was time.

“You told him yes,” he said to her. He looked down at her. “Didn’t you?”

Carly’s eyes opened. She knew he would eventually ask, or she would eventually have to tell. She could only hope it didn’t ruin what had been a remarkable, romantic day. “Yes,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s a perfect fit for my skillset.”

“And Reese Marketing isn’t? I hired you because of your PR expertise out in California, Carly. PR has always been your skillset. What changed?”

“Nobody’s great at everything, Trevor. Except maybe you and my dad.” She smiled. Trevor didn’t. She exhaled. “I’m ready for something different.”

“And if I make you CEO at RM?” Trevor asked. “Would that be different enough?”

Carly turned and looked at him. “CEO?”

“That’s right.”

“But you’re CEO, Trevor, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about what do I need to do to keep you with me?”

“I am with you. After work.”

“I’m talking about during work. What can I do to keep you on my team?”

Carly continued to stare at him. “If I wasn’t your girlfriend and you didn’t love me,” she asked, “would you still want me working for you this badly? Based on my work product alone?”

He stared at her. He wasn’t going to lie to her. “Yes,” he said.

She didn’t expect to hear that.

“You know how to hold it down when I’m not around, Carly. Nobody at RM can do it better than you can.”

She stared at him.

“I’ll move you from client-centered to day-to-day operations, since you’re doing both right now anyway. I’ll make you Chief Operating Officer if that’s more to your liking. Or I’ll even step down as CEO and turn it over to you. Whatever it takes. Just tell me what I need to do to keep you with me.”

The sincerity and hurt in Trevor’s eyes surprised Carly. Was her decision to go to work for her uncle affecting him that much?

But it was done now regardless. “I’ve already told my Uncle Mick yes,” she said.

“I’ll tell him no,” said Trevor. “I can handle his rage.”

Carly continued to stare at him. She didn’t know what to make of this. There had to be something else. Something he was keeping from her. “What’s going on, Trev?” she asked. “What is it?”

Trevor had a look in his eyes that made Carly unable to take her eyes off of him. And then he spoke. “Two months enough time?” he asked her.

Wait, what? Two months for what? Giving her uncle notice that she wasn’t going to take the job? Giving Trevor notice that she was going to take the job? “Is it enough time for what?” she asked him.

“Is it enough time,” Trevor said, “to plan our wedding.”

Carly sat up. Was he saying what she thought he was saying? “You mean . . . You’re ready to set a date? You’re ready to start inviting people? To get a venue? To actually get married?”

It was as foreign a concept to Trevor as Mandarin Chinese. But his mind was made up. “Yes,” he said. And then he smiled. “To all of those questions.”

Carly smiled too. It was all she was hoping for! She truly wanted to be with Trevor. If he would have only given her a week, she was going to make it work. “Then yes,” she said, “two months will be adequate time.”

“Then plan it,” he said. “I’d help, but forget it. I don’t know shit about no weddings!”

Carly laughed, and wrapped her arm around his, snuggling closer. “Well I know plenty,” she said. “I’ve been a bridesmaid at too many of my friends’ weddings to know more than enough.”

“Good,” Trevor said. He loved how excited she seemed. It made him all the more certain of his decision to get off of the marriage bench, and get in the marriage game.

“And you know how big my family is. Between my mom and Ashley and Roz and Trina and Grace and Gemma and Gloria and Tony, I’ll have all hands on deck.”

Trevor frowned. “Tony?” he asked. “What the fuck Tony knows about wedding planning?”

“Tony knows something about everything,” Carly said. “I’m just assuming he knows how to plan a wedding too.”

Trevor laughed. “I’ll bet he won’t think so!”

But Tony wasn’t on Carly’s mind. Trevor was. And the fact that, in just two short months, she might very well be Mrs. Trevor Reese.

But then she thought about something else. She looked at Trevor. “You aren’t moving this forward,” she asked, “because of my decision to go to work for Uncle Mick, are you?”

Trevor shook his head. If only it was that simple! “No,” he said. “This was a long time coming. I realized last night, when your father made it clear that you didn’t belong to me until I got off of that bench, just how overdue this decision was.”

Carly smiled. She liked that answer!

“But speaking of your uncle Mick,” he said and looked at her. “I’ll tell him no,” he said firmly. “I need you, Carly,” he added, and it was difficult for him to say it. “I need you in every aspect of my life.”

Carly’s heart soared.

“Together we can soar. We can grow Reese Marketing together. I’ll make you a partner. Just stay with me.”

Tears appeared in Carly’s big eyes. A partner in RM? “You’d do that for me?” she asked him.

"I'd give you majority shares, if I have to."

Carly extended her hand. "You have a deal," she said.

"Wait a minute, what?"

"I'll take majority shares, thank you."

"In business that's called puffing, Carly," Trevor said, and she laughed.

"But we'll be partners," he said. "That I can guarantee."

Carly nodded. She knew that was huge for Trevor. "Okay," she said.

Trevor's heart soared. "It's a yes then?"

Carly smiled. "It's a yes."

"But why the sudden change in heart? Because I agreed to make you my partner?"

"Because you're finally committing totally to our relationship," Carly said. "That's why I was going to leave and go work for Uncle Mick. You weren't committing to anything. But now we have a timeframe for our wedding. You're granting me partnership in your business. You're committing. That's all I wanted, Trevor. I had to know that you were in this for the long haul, not just for the moment."

"Oh, Carly," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I might not have verbalized it, but I was already there before you were even considering it."

Carly smiled. And snuggled against him.

"And I know, because I know you," Trevor added, "you don't want me to tell your uncle Mick that you won't be joining him. You want to tell him yourself. Don't you?"

"Oh, hell no," Carly said. "You're telling him, Mister *I-Can-Handle-His-Rage* Reese. You're handling that!"

Trevor looked at Carly with concern in his eyes. And then he laughed. "Okay, hot stuff," he said, gathering her closer. "You want ownership of my company, and you want me dead. But that's cool. I'll do whatever it takes. And if that man kills me, you have my permission to blame yourself."

Carly laughed too. Yup, she thought as their horse-drawn carriage turned a corner, a

perfect day!

And that night, when she got on Skype with her family in Maine, and told them that a date had finally been set, they all shouted for joy. Trevor smiled. He was sitting in bed with her, but was on his laptop computer, with his reading glasses on, handling a case. But he was enjoying their joy too.

“Oh, baby, it’s going to be so wonderful,” Jenay, Big Daddy’s African-American wife, and her adopted mother, said. She, along with Ashley, Donald, and Tony were on the conference call. Big Daddy, reclined in the background, was too. But Carly could see the joy on his face as well.

“We have all been waiting patiently for you guys to finally make the decision,” Jenay added. “Haven’t we, honey?” She said this as she turned to look at Big Daddy.

“Absolutely,” Big Daddy said. “I was beginning to think it wasn’t going to happen.”

“So was I,” said Donald. “I figured Trevor wised up and ran.”

Trevor laughed.

“Oh, forget you, Donnie!” Carly said. “You’re mistaking me with yourself and all those women who ran away from you!”

It was Ashley’s time to laugh.

“Very funny,” Donald said.

“I’ll send *Save the Date* notices tonight,” said Ashley.

“Tonight?” Carly grinned. “I think tomorrow will be sufficient, sis.”

Ashley smiled too. “I guess you’re right. I’ll get them ready tonight and send them tomorrow. Better?”

“Better,” said Carly.

“Congrats, Carly,” said Tony. “If you need an extra hand, rely on mine,” he said.

“You’ll help plan my wedding?” Carly asked him.

Trevor looked at Tony over the rim of his reading glasses as Tony continued talking. “I’ve planned a wedding or three or four for friends of mine in my day,” Tony said. “I’ll be happy to

offer my expertise!”

Carly looked at Trevor. “Told you so!” she said with a grin.

Trevor shook his head. He didn’t see that one coming!

And later, after Skype, and after he had shut down his computer too, they were in bed, in each other’s arms, making slow, sweet love.

It was the peace they had been hoping for.

But it felt like a shaky peace, Trevor thought, as he held Carly’s hips and his cock slowly slid deeper into her. Because he knew what hung over his head. Because he knew telling Carly might just be one of the hardest things he’d ever have to do.

Time was not on Trevor’s side.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What Trevor liked most about driving up to Reese Marketing after a couple weeks away was getting to see, as if he was seeing it for the first time all over again, how beautiful it was. Tall and narrow with dark window tint, it seemed to touch the sky. And at the very top of its sky reach was his name. REESE. With *Marketing* in smaller letters just beneath it. Reese Marketing. It used to be his baby, his everything. But now, to his own amazement, Carly held that role.

He got out of his sports car, buttoned the coat of his Italian silk suit, and made his way across the parking lot and into the building. He could have parked in the garage, in the choice spot reserved for CEO, but he didn't want to. He liked experiencing RM the way his clients experienced it when they first walked in: impressed by its contemporary chic.

Last night, after Carly had fallen asleep, Trevor went home. He hadn't been to his own place in nearly two weeks and wanted to make sure it was still in one piece. But mostly, he needed some time alone.

He and Carly had set a date and, in two months-time, he was going to be a married man. No more excuses. No more *what if it doesn't work and he lose Carly forever* rationalizations. He was going to be married! And that reality was still a little terrifying to him. But then he fell asleep in his own bed and overslept. Now it was after eleven, and he was just getting to work.

"Good morning, sir." It was Renita Miles, his African-American executive assistant, who stood at the elevator on the top floor of RM when Trevor stepped off. "Welcome back, sir."

"Thank you," Trevor replied. But as Renita knew would happen, he didn't break his stride and began walking swiftly along the winding corridor that led to his office. "What have I missed?"

"Ross Henley wants a press availability on Wednesday to answer questions about his

arrest.”

“Change it to Friday,” Trevor replied. “Late afternoon.”

“Friday, sir?”

“Yes. The public will be distracted.”

“Distracted, sir?”

“They won’t give a shit. Ross may think being arrested for domestic violence is no big deal, but I guarantee you his female fans don’t agree. And a fair amount of his male fans doesn’t either.”

“Friday afternoon, yes, sir. He also requests that you attend the presser, sir.”

“No fucking way,” Trevor replied. “The story will be more about what happened with Addie Weld than what’s happening with him.” Then Trevor stopped walking. “On second thought, that could be a distraction too. Maybe I will attend,” he said and they began walking again. “I’ll let you know. What else?”

“Tandy Leach wants us to rep for him when he files his lawsuit against Sony.”

“Tandy Leach? Who’s that?”

Renita smiled. “Only one of the most successful rap producers in the world, sir. He’s considered the Dr. Dre of his generation. You’ve never heard of him?”

“What the fuck I know about rap? When does he want to meet?”

“This afternoon.”

“That’s not going to happen. I’ve got too much on my desk right now. Tell him tomorrow morning. Tell him to have his people send over the specs. We’ll be happy to rep for him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and Nita,” he added, as it suddenly occurred to him. “Get me Addie Weld’s file.”

Renita nodded. “Right away, sir,” she said, and then veered off for the file room as Trevor pulled the door marked *OFFICE OF THE CEO*, and went inside.

Before he sat down, he stood at the window and looked out at the sweeping view of Boston. He opened his suit coat and placed his hands in his pants pockets and smiled. He was

literally on top of the world. And, thinking about Carly, he felt that way too.

He still could see that smile on her face and that glow in her eyes when he told her they would be married in two months. She couldn't wait to tell her family. She couldn't wait to begin planning, not with some distant future date in mind, but with a specific date in mind. He felt as if he was the luckiest man on the face of the planet to have somebody like her excited about him.

But he had work to do. He stopped all of that reminiscing and got down to business.

Less than two hours later, as he sat behind his desk fielding phone call after phone call from his top line clients, and after scheduling trips from Broadway to Hollywood to meet with them, his luck ran out.

Renita Miles entered the office and waited for him to end his latest call with the head of a major record label. As soon as he hung up, Trevor leaned his head back. "What now?" he asked. His two-week absence backed him up so considerably that he could barely see what was in front of him. But he did see his assistant.

"What is it?" he asked her again.

"Pamela Weld and her attorneys are here to see you, sir," she said.

Trevor looked at her.

"I put them in the boardroom," Renita added.

Trevor knew this meeting was inevitable. He rose to his feet. "I'm on my way."

"I'll notify Legal to get downstairs too."

"No," Trevor said. "That won't be necessary."

Renita was surprised, but she was in no position to object. Mr. Reese, she knew, did not allow insubordination of any kind. "Yes, sir," she said, and turned to leave.

"One other thing," he said, and Renita turned back to him.

"Sir?"

"Is Miss Sinatra in the building?"

"Yes, sir. I believe she's in her office."

“Tell her to meet me in the boardroom.”

Renita nodded her head. “Right away, sir,” she said, and left the office.

Trevor let out a harsh exhale. This shit didn’t get any easier, he thought, as he grabbed Addie Weld’s case file, and headed for the boardroom too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hammer Reese, alongside his body man, former Green Beret Ozzie Jones, sat at the bar counter in his Boston nightclub reviewing his liquor logs. This was not his home base. Canada was. And JazzLight Boston was not his main spot. JazzLight Quebec was. But there was a delicate situation in the States he had to resolve. Super-delicate. So he remained stateside. But that didn't mean he liked it.

"Heard from Amelia?" Ozzie asked as he took a swig from his bottle of beer.

"Not lately," Hammer said.

"She called me last night ragging on your ass. She said she hasn't seen you in a month of Sundays."

Hammer laughed and took a hard puff on his cigar. "I doubt seriously if she used that terminology."

Ozzie smiled too, and took another swig of beer. "You know what I mean."

Hammer glanced at Ozzie. He was a big black man, almost as big as Hammer, and he wasn't just his body man. He was Hammer's best friend. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he said. "But damn if that woman doesn't drive me nuts sometimes."

"What you expect? She's an Italian black lady. You've got it coming and going, brother, with that kind of mix."

Hammer grinned. But when he saw Jacob walk into the club, Hammer's smile left. Jacob was one of his Black Ops agents assigned as point man on that delicate situation case, and he had no business at the club. He knew he had a big-ass problem or Jacob wouldn't be there. Ozzie knew it too, and cut the jokes himself.

"We aren't open yet," Hammer said as Jacob sat at the counter beside him.

"Good," said Jacob, a short, slender white man. "I wouldn't be caught dead in this bitch anyway."

"Then what the fuck are you doing here?" Ozzie asked him.

"I love you too, Oz."

"What is it?" Hammer asked Jacob.

Jacob exhaled. "I just got a call from our guys. It's bad, Boss."

Hammer picked up his cigar from the ashtray again. "How bad?" he asked.

"She got away from us. That's how bad."

Hammer was about to take another drag on his cigar, but he stopped before it reached his lips. Astounded, he sat it back down.

Even Ozzie was floored. "She got away?" he asked Jacob.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Hammer asked Jacob.

"I couldn't believe it either! But that's what they're telling me. She got away from us. Her ass gone. She took off, Boss."

"Shit!" Hammer said angrily as he doused-out his cigar and rose quickly from his seat. Ozzie rose quickly too.

"Any leads?" Ozzie asked Jacob as Hammer grabbed his suit coat from the back of his chair and they began all hurrying out of the club.

"None so far," Jacob replied.

"They're looking at the obvious spot first?" Hammer asked.

"They're on it. But no sightings yet."

"Motherfuck!" Hammer yelled as they ran for the car. "How the fuck did they lose her?"

"She was in the business before, Boss," Jacob reminded him. "That shit don't leave her just because she tried to retire."

Hammer knew he was right. But because being right meant this whole shit blowing up in his face, he wished he was wrong this time.

"Heads will roll on this one," Ozzie said.

That was right too. Everybody who worked for Hammer already knew nobody was going to make that big of a mistake and live to talk about it. But Hammer didn't give a shit about rolling heads right now. He had to get to Trevor first. He had to get to his brother before that damned

woman did!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pamela Weld and her three attorneys sat on one side of the elongated table in the boardroom, and Trevor and Carly sat on the other side. Carly still felt awful about what happened to Addie, and the last person she wanted to face was Addie's still-grieving mother. But she knew she had to. Trevor knew she had to. At work, he didn't go easy on Carly no matter how small the problem. He wasn't about to go easy on her on a big problem.

It took all she had, but she was determined to maintain her composure.

"Before my lawyers speak, Mr. Reese," Pamela said, "I want to tell you how truly disappointed I am in you."

Carly knew that tactic. Blame the big boss directly. That was where the money was. And make no mistake about it, Carly thought as she stared at Pamela, that woman might have been grieving, but she was vengeful too. Her child was gone. Her financial future was gone. Somebody was going to pay.

"You should have made all the decisions concerning my daughter's situation," Pamela continued. "But instead, you put this rookie in charge. You put this child here in charge of ruining my daughter's life! Now I don't have a daughter. Now my baby's gone!" She broke down in sobs. Her lawyers comforted her.

Carly leaned forward. "Look, Miss Weld," Carly started to say, but Trevor touched her hand. When she looked at him, he didn't look at her, but he shook his head.

When Carly still looked perplexed as to why he would call her in a meeting and not allow her to speak, he leaned toward her to explain why. She leaned toward him. They were shoulder to shoulder. "Shut the fuck up," he whispered to her. "This is not the time nor the place."

Carly was a little stunned by his harshness, but that was Trevor at work. He truly treated everybody the same. He was harsh to them all.

When Pamela composed herself again, with handkerchief in hand to blow her reddening nose, she continued. "Addie was a good girl. She was no slut the way social media is making

her out to be. She was a good girl! But they're treating my child like the bad person and that boy who killed her like the victim. He's no victim!"

"No, he's not," Trevor said. "And for Gary to come out and call his son a victim was wrong. My office has already sent out a statement condemning what he said."

"But that's because you understand," Pamela said. "You get it! That's why I wanted you to be in charge of my daughter's case. That's why we hired your firm. But this girl here insisted my baby take all the blame for what happened with Gary Pressley. This child here insisted she admit that she seduced him!"

"That's not true, Miss Weld," Carly said, despite Trevor's warning. "That's not true and you know it's not." She could see, in her peripheral vision, Trevor's body tighten when she spoke. But that was too bad. She wasn't about to sit there and listen to that woman's lies another second. It was terrible what happened to her daughter, and Carly was truly sorry, but she wasn't going to let this woman behave as if she was the one who pulled that trigger. "I did not advise her to admit seducing Gary Pressley. I advised her to admit her part in the affair. And that was all I advised her to do."

"Yeah, she admitted it alright," Pamela said. "And then she was gunned down like a dog! I told you to let her lay low until it blew over. I told you that! But you wouldn't do it."

Then Pamela exhaled, and Carly understood why. Pamela had been concentrating too much on her, the employee, and not enough on the man who could become her real meal ticket: Trevor, the boss. Her daughter was an up-and-coming star. She had a lot of fame already, but she didn't have a lot of money yet.

"It would have never happened if you would have been there, Mr. Reese," Pamela continued. "It would have never happened because you would have never placed my child in that situation to begin with. You're a trained professional. The best in the business. That's why we hired you. You didn't have to sleep your way to the top!"

"Neither did Miss Sinatra," Trevor said before Carly could say it herself. "Now move on."

"She's not your girlfriend, then? Are the rumors wrong? Is that what you're telling me?"

She's not your side piece?"

"Look lady," Trevor said, his anger and impatience with Pamela Weld beginning to show, "what you are not going to do is sit up here and defame my employee. I know you're grieving. I know you're hurting. But cut that shit out. Miss Sinatra didn't kill your daughter. Gary Pressley's son did, with an assist from Pressley's wife. Defame them. Blame them."

"Oh, don't worry," Pamela said. "They'll be sued next. For wrongful death. But you're first."

One of Pamela's lawyers touched her hand. *TMI*, Carly saw him mouth to his client. But it didn't matter. Pamela Weld was all about two things as she sat at that table: hurting Carly and fleecing Trevor. She succeeded in the former. Carly was certain she wouldn't succeed in the latter. Trevor played hardball better than anybody she'd ever seen in action.

"What do you want?" Trevor asked Pamela.

"An apology," Pamela's lead attorney said. "You admit your firm gave bad advice that at least contributed to what happened to Addison."

"Not going to happen," Trevor said. "Next."

"It's the truth!" Pamela cried. "You can't admit the truth?"

"Next," said Trevor.

"Dirty dog," Pamela said under her breath, although everybody in the room heard it.

"Next," Trevor said again.

"We want a monetary settlement," said the attorney. "Or we will take it to court, and to the court of public opinion."

There it was, Carly thought. Not that she blamed Pamela. She didn't. She was a dreadful bitch, but that didn't negate the fact that she loved her daughter and was grieving her departure. But Reese Marketing did nothing wrong. She was a headhunter going after the wrong scalp.

But, to Carly's surprise, Trevor didn't tell them to go pound sand. He actually seemed to be entertaining the idea. "How much?" he asked.

Carly looked at him.

The lawyers, thrilled that he didn't dismiss them out of hand the way they, like Carly, assumed he might, was quick with a figure. "Ten million," the lead attorney said.

But Trevor said nothing. He just stared at the lawyer. There was a long, awkward pause.

Then: "Eight million," the lawyer said.

Still nothing from Trevor but that same hard stare.

Even Pamela looked at her attorney. What did that stare mean? No to everything they were putting before him? Was he waiting for them to say, okay, give us a dollar and call it a day?

"Five million," the attorney finally said. "And that's our final offer."

"Done," Trevor said, and rose to his feet.

Everybody seemed shocked, as they scrambled to their feet too. Pamela, Carly could tell, could hardly contain her joy. Five million dollars? Carly would jump for joy at that amount too. But Pamela maintained her cool.

"My legal department will draw up the paperwork," Trevor said. "They'll be in touch. But remember: nondisclosure will be a part of the deal. This shit leaks to the media, the deal is off."

"Without question," said the satisfied attorney.

"And the apology?" Pamela asked.

"We're sorry for your loss," Trevor said, "but there will be no apology for the advice we gave."

"Don't you mean the advice *she* gave?" Pamela asked, looking past him to Carly.

"We will not apologize," Trevor said again, "for the advice we gave. And that fact will also be in the agreement."

Pamela gave him a sidelong look, but then her attorneys, over-the-moon with happiness that they actually got substantially what they had been hoping for, steered her away from Trevor and out of the room.

When the door closed behind them, Carly looked at her boss, her lover, amazed. "How

could you give that woman a dime, Trevor? We did nothing wrong! How could you settle the case?"

"Because she lost her daughter," he said. "That's why I settled. Her daughter died while she was under my watch. Under my supervision."

"She died under my supervision."

"Which is the same thing," Trevor said. "There was a death. I doubt seriously if she'll get a dime from Pressley. Somebody has to pay."

"Why wouldn't Gary Pressley have to pay her?" Carly asked. "Or at least his son for wrongful death?"

"Because any lawyer worth their salt will know that no court will honor her request. Gary's son was acting out of grief and in the heat of passion. That woman stole his father away, would be the argument. That woman broke up their happy family. That woman's actions drove him to kill her."

Carly frowned. "That's a bunch of bullshit," she said.

"Yes, it is. But bullshit's selling these days. It'll sell. My money is all the money Pamela Weld is ever going to get for the death of her daughter. Mark my word on that. There was the death of an innocent young lady, and she died on my watch. That's why I settled."

Carly exhaled. As soon as she thought she knew the PR business inside and out, she learned something new.

"And Carly?" Trevor said.

"Yes?" Carly responded.

"You're my woman away from this job. But on this job my authority is absolute. If your ass ever speaks out of turn again, when I told you to button it, it'll be your ass."

Carly stared at him. She wanted to argue her point. Shouldn't she have a right to defend herself against that woman's scurrilous accusations? But Trevor was her boss. And he didn't allow any backtalk from anybody on his staff. Including her. Maybe even especially her. But that was exactly why she considered going to work for her uncle. "Will that rule still apply," she

asked, “when we become partners?”

Trevor stared at her. Somebody had to be in charge, and it wasn't going to be her. “Yes,” he said.

Carly stared at him. He could have lied to her. He could have appeased her. But he told her the truth. A man like him was not going to take a backseat to anybody. Least of which her.

“We'll be partners,” he said, “but the buck will stop with me.”

Carly still didn't know what to say to that. She didn't want to make the wrong decision and regret not taking her uncle's offer. But she wanted to be with Trevor, to grow with him, to build up Reese Marketing to even higher heights together! “Okay,” she managed to say.

“Now get back to work,” he said, which didn't help at all!

But as they were both about to turn to leave, the door opened again, and Bridgette walked in.

“What's up, Bridge?” Carly asked her assistant.

But Bridgette was looking at Trevor. “Jessica Duncan is downstairs to see you, sir.”

Trevor frowned. “Why are you bringing that to me?” he snapped. “You know I don't take walk-ins!”

But then he realized the name Bridgette had said. And his heart dropped. “Are you saying . . .?”

Bridgette nodded her head. “Yes, sir. *That* Jessica Duncan. She's downstairs.”

Carly looked at Trevor. He looked ghostly, and it mortified her. Trevor didn't scare easily. “What's wrong, Trevor?” she asked him.

Trevor ran his hand through his hair. *Good Lord*, he thought. Then he looked at Bridgette. “Put her in the first-floor conference room. I'll be down.”

“Yes, sir,” Bridgette said, and left the room.

But Carly was still looking at Trevor. “Who is she?” she asked.

He looked at Carly. It was the moment of truth. She was going to either hear him out and understand, or cuss him out and leave. For good. “Sit down, Carly,” he said, and pulled out a

chair for her.

Carly's heart was hammering. What was it? What in the world could it be! But she knew Trevor. He was going to do it his way.

She reluctantly, nervously, sat down.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Trevor was in high school when he first met her. It was never love, but it was always lust. They hit it, constantly, through high school. They occasionally got together in college. Trevor attended MIT. Jessica was a student at Smith.

But neither were just students. Both were also operatives for the CIA. Trevor was expected to follow in his brother's footsteps and was recruited as early as high school. His brother, who killed a man in front of him when Trevor was a kid, trained him early and hard. He was tasked with recruiting college students, the kind of people who could spy for their country and nobody would be the wiser. Jessica was one of those students.

But she hated that life. The assignments were getting more and more dangerous and more than once her cover was nearly blown. By that time Trevor was already a trained assassin, and had to save her from three or four close calls.

But when she realized she was pregnant when they both fucked up and had unprotected sex, she knew she had to get out while she could.

He suspected she was going to leave without saying a word to him or anybody else. But when he got wind of the pregnancy through one of her friends, he hurried to her apartment. And made it in the nick of time.

It was night time. It was raining. And Jessica was hurrying down the stairs of her apartment to get in her car and go.

"Are you or are you not pregnant?" he asked her again.

She kept moving faster and faster, down flight after flight. "Leave me alone, Trevor."

"Just answer my question."

"Stop interrogating me!"

"Are you or are you not pregnant?"

She kept moving. He kept up with her.

"Answer me, Jess! Are you?"

“Yes!” she shouted. “Okay? Yes.”

Trevor slowed his walk. Jessica stopped, too, and looked at him. Although she loved him, she knew it wasn't mutual. His next question proved it all the more for her.

“Am I the father?” he asked her.

She couldn't believe him! “Fuck you!” she said, and hurried down another flight.

Trevor, realizing his error, hurried down behind her. “Jess, wait. Wait!” He caught up with her, grabbed her by the arm, and turned her to him. “Can you just wait for two minutes?”

Jessica did stop walking. “What is it, Trevor? I've got to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“Away from here!”

“Here? You mean Boston? Or the agency?”

“Both,” she said. “All of it! I'm leaving.”

“But where are you going, Jess? You can't tell me I'm going to be a father, and then check out?”

“That's exactly what I'm going to do. And you nor your brother will ever find me or my child.”

Trevor frowned. Was she insane? “What are you talking about? I'll never find you or your child? But it's my child too!”

“I don't care,” Jessica said. She looked distressed beyond words. “I won't allow my child to live like this. In constant danger. Never knowing what's going to happen next. Never able to be happy because his stupid parents gave their allegiance to a murder network! And that's all that place is.”

“They have to take care of enemies of the United States, Jess. You know that!”

“I don't care! I'm getting out, and I'm taking my unborn child with me. So that when she or he is born, they'll have a real shot at a life. At happiness. At peace! Think about what your brother did to you, Trev. How he recruited you and trained you and never gave you a chance to follow your own dreams.

“I’m doing both,” Trevor said. And back then he believed that to be true. He was going to open his own PR firm after college.

“But I don’t want to do both!” Jessica decried. “He recruited you before you had a choice, Trevor. Face the truth! He said you were a natural. Said that to me, too. But I defy that crazy, twisted shit! There’s nothing natural about killing people, I don’t care how important it is for the country!”

And then she was off again, hurrying down yet another flight of stairs. Trevor hurried behind her.

When they got to the door that would lead out into the parking garage, Jessica stopped, and looked at Trevor.

“Please don’t follow me. If you have any shred of decency left, please give our child a chance. I won’t allow my child to live this kind of life, Trevor. All that constant danger and pain and killings! I nearly got killed last week on one of Hammer’s assignments, and that meant my child would have gotten killed too.”

Tears were in her eyes. Trevor felt her pain to the marrow of his bones. “I can’t live like this, and my child won’t live like this. I’ll kill it before I allow it to live like this!”

Trevor stood in shock.

“I mean it, Trevor! Don’t look for us. Don’t ask around. If you have any humanity left, think about this baby and let us go. I can give this child a real life. A good life. A normal life! But I have to get away. Between the agency and your brother, you’ll never have that. You’ll never have a normal life. Never! Don’t condemn our child to that same fate.”

Trevor’s heart dropped. Because he knew, in that instant, that she was telling the gospel truth. He would never live a normal life. He would never know what that even felt like. And it ate him up inside.

And the danger. She wasn’t exaggerating about the danger, and he knew that too. He was an assassin already. He knew it better than she did. His life wasn’t normal, and fraught with danger around every corner. Jess was right.

What father, Trevor thought, would place his own child in that kind of craziness when there was a better way? Jessica wanted to take that path. She wanted to give their kid a chance! But he knew, and she knew, she had to take it alone. If Trevor went with her, the enemies of the United States of America would follow him. And, by extension, their child.

“Then go,” he said to her. “I won’t try to find you.”

Jessica stared at Trevor, as tears fell down her face. She mouthed the word *thank you* heartfelt, because she knew Trevor was a man of his word. If he said he wasn’t going to track her down, he meant it. And would stop that brother of his from tracking her too.

She opened the stairwell door, and ran out.

It would be the last time, before this time, that Trevor would see her again.

When he had finished telling Carly what happened that night, Carly just sat at that boardroom table. She didn’t know what to think. What to do. What to say! She just sat there. Trevor had a child. A child in this world. And he never even mentioned it to her.

She looked at him. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked him.

Trevor started to say he was going to. And he was. After her father mentioned that he knew about her, he was going to. But somehow that didn’t capture how he felt.

“Why didn’t you just tell me, Trevor?” Carly asked again.

“Why does a dying man confess, Car?” he asked her. “Because he has nothing to lose. I didn’t confess, because I felt I would lose you. I had everything to lose.”

Carly was as perplexed as he’d ever seen her. “Why would you think you would lose me?” she asked him.

“I left my child and my child’s mother to fend for themselves in this world,” he said. “Because I kept my word, I didn’t track her down, and I didn’t allow Hammer to track her down.”

“You should have told me,” she said. “Make no mistake about it. But you gave your child a shot, Trevor. You did the right thing. Make no mistake about that either.”

Trevor looked at her. She understood?

“You didn’t leave them to fend for themselves. You gave the mother a chance to live life on their own terms. I know what that’s like. My biological parents didn’t give me that shot. They were too selfish and greedy and self-centered. But my adopted parents gave me the world. It wasn’t how it was supposed to be. My parents were supposed to still be alive and they were supposed to take care of me. But they didn’t. And I’m so glad they didn’t.”

Trevor couldn’t take his eyes off of her.

“You were young and already doing dangerous work,” she said. “How could you have raised a child too? You gave your child a shot. That night was the most selfless act you could have ever done. How could I ever blame you for that?”

Trevor’s heart was filled with gratitude. He inwardly thanked God Almighty for giving Carly to him! She didn’t blame him. She didn’t curse him and leave. She listened to what he had to say. And understood. Immediately, she understood.

He reached out his hand. “Let’s go see what she has to say,” he said.

Carly placed her hand in his hand and stood to her feet. And hand in hand they walked out of the boardroom, got onto the elevator and went downstairs, to meet Trevor’s baby mama, and maybe even their own fate.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jessica Lutalo was pacing the floor in the downstairs conference room when Trevor and Carly walked inside. When she saw Trevor, she stopped in her tracks. The first thing she couldn't help but notice about him was how sexy he still was, and how fine he looked in his expensive Amosu suit, a suit that highlighted his bulging biceps. He was always big, even in college. But boy-big. Now, she thought, he was all man.

The first thing she noticed about the woman he was with, his undercover girlfriend by all accounts, was how young and physically stunning she was. But proud, and her own woman. She saw that too.

Carly had a similar reaction to the woman before her. She was surprised that she, like Carly, was a black woman. She was not surprised that she was beautiful.

Trevor, on the other hand, didn't see Jessica's beauty or her race. All he saw was the terror in her eyes. And he was certain it had everything to do with their child or she wouldn't be there. "What's happened?" he asked her.

"I need your help, Trevor. That's the only reason I'm here."

"What is it?"

"Our son," she said, and frowned. It was the first time she had ever said those two words together since the birth of Amari. "Our son is in trouble."

Trevor's heart dropped. It was a boy. He had a son. And he was in trouble. "What kind of trouble?" Trevor asked his ex.

"I don't know. They snatched him from my home. I can't tell you where they took him to, I can't tell you the names of the people that took him. But he's gone, and I need you to find him."

Trevor's heart was pounding. Kidnapping were always the messiest of cases. And his own child had been snatched? He motioned for Jessica to have a seat.

But that offended her. "I can't sit down, are you kidding me?" she said angrily. "I tell you

our son is missing, our child has been taken, and you offer me a *chair*?"

"Settle down, Jess, alright? I'm just trying to get information and you look like you're going to drop where you stand. But fuck it! Where was he taken from?"

"From my home! I told you that already! Are you listening to me?"

"Where is your home?" Trevor fired back. "How the fuck am I supposed to know where your home is?"

Carly saw what was happening even if Trevor and Jessica didn't. They were two scared parents lashing out at each other, not because of fear, but because of guilt.

"Africa," Jessica said. "My home is in Africa."

Trevor was shocked. So that was where she was all these years?

"We live in Gaborone," Jessica said. "In Botswana. These white men, four or five of them I think, broke into our home almost a week ago. I was home alone, but then Amari came home from school. They shot me with a tranquilizer gun, and put me to sleep. I don't know what happened after that. But they said they were waiting on our son. They were waiting on Amari. I do know that."

Trevor found himself sounding out that name in his head. *Ah-Mar-Ree*. His son was named Amari. It was remarkable to hear.

But Amari, he also thought in that same thread of remarkableness, was missing?

"How did you find out they brought him to America?" Carly asked Jessica. Trevor looked from her to Jess. It was the very question he was about to ask.

But Jessica looked at Carly curiously. She looked at her with that *and you are* look on her face.

"This is my fiancée," Trevor said. "Carly Sinatra."

"You're going to marry her?" Jessica asked him. "That's news. Confirmed bachelor Trevor Reese marrying somebody? I heard you were keeping her undercover."

How did she hear that? He never heard shit about her. "I was," he said.

"She won't be undercover when you marry her."

Trevor's jaw tightened. It was the hardest part of it. "I know," he said.

"How did you find out that your son is in America?" Carly asked. They were both behaving almost oddly in the face of their son's danger, she thought.

"I don't know where he is," Jessica said. "Like I said, it's been a week. They could have him anywhere!"

"He could still be in Africa," Carly said.

Jessica nodded. "Yes."

Trevor frowned. That made no sense to him. "Then why would you leave Africa knowing he might still be there? You could have phoned me. I'm not difficult to find. And I could have come to you!"

"I told you they put me to sleep," Jessica explained. "When I woke up, I was already in America! They brought me here! When I woke up, I was in a safe house. But nobody would tell me anything. Nothing! So I knew I had to get away from them, and get to you."

"You were in a safe house?" Trevor asked. "Do you know who the people were that housed you?"

She nodded. "I know those bastards," she said.

Carly looked at Trevor. She knew them?

"Who are they?" Trevor asked.

Jessica, at first, shook her head, as if she was about to give the worse news of all. Even worse than the fact that her child was missing.

"Who, Jess?" Trevor asked again.

Jessica looked Trevor dead in his eyes. "His handlers," she said.

Trevor frowned. He knew what that meant. "Whose handlers?" he asked.

When she wouldn't answer, but she folded her arms and wiped the tears that reappeared, Trevor's heart dropped again. "Are you telling me . . . Are you saying that our son, that Amari, is an agency man?"

Carly's eyes stretched in disbelief too. She looked at Jessica. That couldn't be. That just

couldn't be!

But it was. Because Jessica, with tears dropping freely now, was nodding her head.

Trevor was shaking his head. "Jess, no." His entire face was a mask of distress. "How could you? I gave up my rights to be his father to keep him out of danger! And you let him walk right in it?"

"They came for him," she cried. "It wasn't what I wanted. You know it wasn't what I wanted! But they recruited him so hard!"

"Who recruited him?" Trevor asked.

Jessica just stared at Trevor, her head appearing to shake but Carly saw that she was trembling.

Trevor frowned. "Who?" he asked again.

But Jessica continued to stare and shake. And in her stare, Trevor knew exactly who. "My brother?" he asked.

"Yes," Jessica responded.

And it was a stunning response. A response Trevor could hardly accept. "It can't be," he said.

"But it is," said Jessica. "It is! Just like they did us, they did him, too. And they did it with Hammer's approval. He was an ordinary college kid. And they recruited him right there on campus. And then he began recruiting even more young people for them, just like we had to do. And Amari is a magnet. Men and women alike love him. He was their best recruit."

"Did he have to go on assignments, too, like we did?" Trevor asked.

Carly could see that Trevor's question touched a nerve in Jessica. She covered her mouth, and the tears poured. When she nodded her head, Trevor was mortified. He opened his suit coat, placed his hands on his hips, and walked away from the ladies.

Carly wanted to run to him, and hold him, but she knew he had to bear this burden alone. He stood in front of the wall, with his back to them, and with his head lifted up as if he was praying to God that it wasn't so. But it was. Jessica had already confirmed that it was.

And suddenly, as if he was the master of timing, the conference room door flung open, and Hammer Reese, suddenly the devil himself in Trevor's eyes, walked in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Trevor's heart began to palpitate when he saw his brother. He had promised he wouldn't search out Amari. He promised him! Was that why Big Daddy and Mick said Jessica was suddenly on the radar? Had Hammer put her on blast too?

And something broke within Trevor when he saw his brother. And he didn't hesitate. He ran to Hammer and swung on him with a swing that was meant to injure. But Hammer wasn't the infamous Hammer Reese for nothing. He saw it coming and grabbed Trevor before the punch could cleanly land. He pulled his brother against his body and the two men tussled.

Carly hurried to the conference room door, a room just off from their busy lobby, and closed and locked the door. Trevor was angry as hell. She knew that look when he was angry.

As Trevor scuffled with his brother, he was also screaming at his brother. "You recruited him?" he was screaming from the top of his lungs. "You recruited my son? How could you betray me like that, Ham? How could you do that shit to me?!"

Carly wanted to run to Trevor and comfort him. She had tears in her eyes too. Because she felt the same way he felt. The one thing he was willing to give up his own son to protect him from, was the very thing his own brother thrust his son into? Carly could hardly believe it!

But Hammer didn't need her to believe it. He needed his brother, the only family he claimed, to hear him out.

Trevor tried to break free from Hammer, but he was bigger and wouldn't let him go. "Listen to me," he was saying to his younger brother. "Trevor, listen to me!"

"Fuck you!" Trevor yelled. "Fuck you! I told you not to search for Jess. I told you not to go after them, and you promise me you wouldn't. You promised me! How could you betray me like that?"

"I didn't!" Hammer said. "That's what I'm trying to tell your ass. It wasn't me. I didn't do it!"

Trevor stopped all movement. Carly was floored too. Hammer was a lot of things. A lot of nasty, insensitive things. But he was no liar.

Trevor stared at his brother. "You didn't?" he asked doubtfully. "Then who the fuck did?"

Hammer let out a harsh exhale. And then he looked at Jessica.

Trevor, at first, looked at Carly. Was this shit for real? Then he and Carly both looked at his ex. When she didn't scream from the rafters that Hammer was lying, or explain that he was mistaken, they knew, immediately, that Hammer wasn't lying. Jessica was.

Trevor stared at her. That speech she gave about protecting their son from danger. That sacrificed he made to stay out of his son's life was for nothing? Nothing! "Jess," Trevor said, attempting to understand this shit before he lashed out, "what's Ham talking about?"

She was full-blown crying now, and shaking her head.

"Jess?" Trevor said, moving toward her. "You tell me something and you tell me something now or I'm gonna kill your ass with my two bare hands!"

"They wouldn't let me go!" she cried, the snot running from her nose. "They said I knew too much and they wouldn't let me out. I didn't know shit, what were they talking about? But they said I knew too many sources and methods and they couldn't let me leave the agency. When I told them they had it all wrong. What sources and methods did I know? I just got in and got out. I just did assignments. What sources, what methods were they talking about?"

She wiped her running nose with the back of her hand. "Then they said I knew you," she said to Trevor. "And Hammer. And they made me stay in. They gave me a choice, the way they always did. I could stay in, or I could die. And like they always told us, there was no third option."

Carly's heart dropped. Trevor continued to stare at Jessica.

Jessica looked at him. "They sacrificed me to protect what they considered to be their two most valuable assets," she said bitterly. "They sacrificed me for the two men who they always call to handle the messiest jobs: the Reese brothers."

But Trevor was shaking his head. She wasn't making sense! "If they kept you in," he said,

“why did you turn around and recruit Amari? Why did you recruit our son?”

“They said I could leave,” Jessica said, “if I brought him in.”

Trevor couldn't believe it. Carly couldn't either. Hammer already knew the story.

Jessica covered her mouth in shame. “It was a deal they put on the table. A deal I had been waiting nearly twenty years for. And I took it, Trevor. I took it! I took it! I took it! Now my child is in danger. And it's all my fault. It's all my fault!”

Trevor was floored. This wasn't Jessica, the woman who was willing to give up everything to protect her unborn baby. This was a shell of that woman! “What happened to you?” he asked her. He didn't know this woman in front of him. He didn't know this selfish bitch at all! “What happened to you?” he asked her again.

“Everything,” she said to him. “And everything else. I couldn't hide from the agency. Amari wasn't a year old when they tracked me down. And I was right back in. But I so wanted out. I wanted out so badly! But I had to stay in or die. So, I stayed in. Until the next best option opened.”

Trevor couldn't deal with this shit. He couldn't deal with this! She could have phoned him when they wouldn't let her out. She could have brought that child to him. She could have told him something!

And now Amari's missing. This was like a nightmare on top of a nightmare. They had to find his son and they had to find him alive. That would be the only relief. Because Jessica was wrong. It was his fault too.

He turned to his brother. “What do you know?” he asked him. “Do our people have him?”

Hammer shook his head. “No.”

“Then who?”

“A group in Africa.”

“So he's still in Africa?”

“Yes.”

“Who is this group?” Jessica asked. It was her first time hearing this.

"Is it a terrorist group?" Trevor asked his brother. "Is it Boko Haram?"

"It's a terrorist group, alright," said Hammer.

"God, no!" cried Jessica. Even Carly prayed it wasn't true too. She'd read about that group on the internet. She'd heard about the brutality!

"But it's not Boko Haram," Hammer said, quickly, and both ladies inwardly sighed relief.

"Then who?" Trevor asked.

"A group calling themselves America's Shame. The A.S. The shame being that America raided Africa and kidnapped many of their best and brightest warriors and turned them into lowly slaves. That's the group that has him."

Trevor had never heard of such a group. "Why would they want my son?"

"We don't know that yet. But I've been tracking them for months now," Hammer said. "Even before the kidnapping. This was a turn I didn't see coming."

"But what is the point of this group?" Trevor asked.

"We had been intercepting a lot of chatter about a terrorist cell in Africa seeking to infiltrate, on a grander scale, the United States," Hammer said. "We knew we had to stop it in its infancy or it may get away from us, branch out, and then we would have too many moving parts to keep a lid on it. That's how Al-Qaeda got away from us. That's why I asked you to go to Mississippi and handle Leddy Mascone."

Trevor frowned. "The drug dealer? What did he have to do with A.S.?"

"He was one of their financial foot soldiers."

Trevor frowned. "A fucking drug dealer? Why would he care about helping some African terrorist group?"

"Oh, he cared." Hammer looked at Trevor. "So did Sam Norvale."

It was Jessica's time to be surprised. "Sam Norvale?" she asked. "Sam Norvale is the deputy director of the FBI."

"He was their stateside mastermind," Hammer said. "And he and Mascone and everybody on the US end cared deeply. Not about what A.S. cared about. But because they knew, at the

end of the day, they were going to be positioned to become very rich men. If all went according to plan, they would be billionaires each and every one of them. But money was their oxygen and they were running out of it fast.”

But Trevor still didn’t understand. “What was the plan?”

“The A.S. planned to destroy all confederate monuments and the leaders who supported them.”

“Confederate monuments?” Trevor asked. “I risked my life to protect fucking confederate monuments?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Carly said.

“Not the monuments,” Hammer quickly pointed out. “They were also willing to kill anybody, including innocent people, to make it happen. But it wasn’t about the monuments. It was about the money. Their main goal was to topple financial institutions in the U.S., but first they had to get paid.”

“But how would they get paid by destroying confederate monuments?” Carly asked.

“Most of those monuments were in museums,” Hammer said. “Museums that housed very expensive artwork. It was the artwork they were after. The destruction of the monuments would be the distraction. That’s what they wanted all intel agencies to focus on: the floors where the confederate monuments were displayed. But while museums were taking resources from other floors and putting them in protection of those monuments, A.S. would be on those other floors robbing them blind. And with Sam Norvale as the point person overseeing the agents in charge of assisting the museums, he had his men advising the museums to do just that: move personnel and resources from the other floors, and put them on those monuments. They had the perfect inside man.”

“But why did they kidnap Amari?” Carly asked.

“Money, babe,” Trevor said. “They wanted a ransom.”

“They drugged Jess and flew her ass all the way to America,” Hammer said, “to make sure she personally relayed that message.”

“But they didn’t tell me to relay any message,” Jessica said.

“Oh, they didn’t have to yet. They, instead, plopped you right here in Boston. And then they told my office where I could find you. You would tell us about Amari’s disappearance, and the fact that you were in the town where his father lived, his rich father, would answer any questions.”

“And my son?” Trevor asked.

“They still have him,” Hammer said. “He’s on the continent of Africa, most likely still in Botswana. The men I have on the ground there believe he might still be in Gaborone where he was snatched, but it’s an educated guess only. That’s all I know.”

“You’ve got to go to Africa to find him. Because I don’t think, if money is what they’re after, they’re not going to give up their money cow that easily. They haven’t in the past.”

Carly looked at Trevor. Trevor already knew he was going to Africa. His son had been snatched there and was believed to still be there. Nobody was keeping him away from Africa. But something still wasn’t adding up!

Not to Carly either. She looked at Hammer. “There’s rich men in Africa, and all over the world. Why would they pick Amari?”

“Because it was a two-fer,” Hammer said. “They knew Trevor was rich, but there’s something else at work here too.”

“What?” Carly asked.

“What it is? We don’t know yet. But when they snatched his son, and they knew it was his son based on what Jess said the ringleader was saying when they were in her house, it became all about Trevor.”

He looked at Trevor. “Remember that list of names I sent you yesterday and asked if you knew anybody on the list?”

Trevor nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t know any of them. Why?”

“Those were the A.S. members we know about. Whoever is behind this shit wasn’t on that list. Because make no mistake about it, Trevor: this is personal. They took your son; they

dropped Jess off in Boston; and they contacted me, to make it clear that it was personal. We are assuming they want money. We expect a ransom because that's what they do. But it may be more to it than that. In fact, count on it," Hammer said.

Everybody looked at Trevor. He opened the coat of his elegant suit, placed his hands on his hips again, and exhaled. Now that he knew it was one of his enemies who very well might have his son, his anxiety, on a scale from one-to-ten, just went through the roof.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Less than an hour later, the SUV pulled from the curb in front of Reese Marketing Corporate Headquarters building and headed for the airstrip.

Hammer and Jessica sat in the seats just behind the driver and Ozzie Jones. Trevor and Carly sat in the long, singular backseat, side-by-side. Trevor was slouched down reviewing a file Hammer had given him with all the intel they had on A.S. But he was leaned against Carly.

Carly was seated straight up, as she usually was, but her nerves weren't as prim and proper as she appeared. Trevor was going on a mission so unknown in scope that it felt almost surreal to her. He was going to find a son he'd never even seen before because Jessica had been dropped off without her phone or anything else. And his Facebook page had been wiped clean. Trevor didn't know his own child from Adam!

Until now.

Carly felt Trevor's body suddenly tense. When she looked over at him, she realized he was staring at the file in front of him. He had just turned a page and saw a photograph. When she looked down at the photo, too, she didn't have to ask him who it was. She knew by sight alone.

And she was floored. "He looks just like you, Trevor," she said.

Trevor could only nod his head. This was his son. His flesh and blood! That tall, handsome black man staring back at him in a polaroid shot, had so much Reese in him that he looked exactly how Trevor looked when he was that age. Except Trevor was a trained assassin by then, thanks to his brother who believed he had the knack for it, and was a lonely, angry basket case of a young man. This kid still had a spark in his big, hazel eyes.

"He's a college kid at the University of Botswana," Trevor said. "Smart as a whip, too, according to his file. He entered the school at seventeen and was about to graduate at twenty. About to graduate with an engineering degree." Trevor smiled and looked at Carly. "Imagine that. I went to MIT. He's graduating with an engineering degree."

Carly smiled too.

But then Trevor's smile left. "This was taken when he was still in high school. Before he was recruited. Before his life was ruined forever. I wonder if he still has that spark."

"Don't say that," Carly said. "You were recruited even earlier than he was. You still have a spark. Your life wasn't ruined."

"That's what you think," Trevor said and couldn't bear it anymore. He flipped the page.

Carly continued to stare at him as he continued to read the file. She looked at the back of Hammer, who sat in the seats in front of them. What kind of man would pull his kid brother into that kind of life? Was it to take pressure off of Hammer himself, like Jessica said was her reason? Carly doubted it. Hammer was as CIA as James Bond was MI-6. He loved pressure.

Carly thought often about that decision Hammer made, and she decided Hammer was a transactional man. That was how she always viewed him. He recruited Trevor because he had exposed him to so much violence early on, that Hammer probably concluded that Trevor was either going to be a killer for himself, or a killer for his country. Hammer made him the latter.

When Trevor closed the folder, he exhaled and remained slouched against Carly. Then he glanced over at her. He couldn't even imagine what all of this new information was doing to her. "You okay?" he asked her.

What he loved about her was her honesty. She never lied to him. "It's happening so fast," she said.

"I know it is, baby," he replied. "But I've got to go and find him. I've got to find out what they want in exchange for him."

"What do you think it is? Money like Hammer's assuming?"

"Probably, since that's what I have plenty of. And according to these papers I just read, that's exactly what they may want. They've kidnapped other rich men's kids before. It's the major organ of their funding."

"And they call themselves America's Shame. More like their the ones who should be ashamed." She looked at him. "But you think there's more to it?"

Trevor nodded. "I think so. I think Ham's right. I think there's a personal element

attached. Why else would they go for my kid when they had to know I knew nothing about him. Why would they assume I would pay?"

"Because, whoever's behind this, knows the kind of man you are. They know without question that you're a good, honorable man who will absolutely pay to free his child."

Trevor smiled. "My enemies don't know me as that man, Carly. Only you know me as that man."

Carly looked at him. "What do they know you as?"

"A stone-cold killer. Which, when I'm in that field fighting for my life and my country, that's exactly what I am."

A chill ran down Carly's spine. The idea that Trevor could be that person was foreign to her. But she knew, in the field as he called it, he was that person. He had to be that person!

But that was why she wanted to be with him. It was going to be very traumatic and emotional for him. Especially if things didn't work out for his son. She needed to be there with him, to comfort him. "Take me with you, Trevor," she said to him.

But he was already shaking his head. "No."

"Trevor, please!"

"No. You're safer here. If I didn't think so, I would take you with me."

"But you may need me."

"There's no may in it," he said. "I definitely need you. But it's not about my needs. It's about yours. You're staying here."

She studied him. "You called my father already. Even before we left RM. Didn't you?"

"I couldn't reach him. He's here in Boston, but he's in some high-level meetings. But I did reach your mother in Maine. She'll let him know. I also called Mick."

He looked at her. "I thought I told you I was going to let him know you were staying with RM."

"I had to handle that myself, Trevor," she said. "He didn't go to you to ask me, he came directly to me. I felt I needed to go directly to him. I was going to tell you early this morning,

but your ass was still asleep.”

He smiled.

“And then between Pamela Weld’s shakedown and this news about your son . . .”

“I know,” he said. “No time.”

“Right.” Then she looked at Trevor. “What about her?” she asked as she motioned toward Jessica. “Do you think she’s involved?”

“I asked Hammer that before we left RM. She’s been vetted. A serious vet. She’s not involved. Everything she says checks out.”

“She’s going to Africa with you?”

“She may be going to Africa, since she lives there,” Trevor said. “But her ass won’t be going with me.”

Carly understood his anger. She was angry with the woman too. But still! “That’s her child missing, too, Trev,” she said.

“She sold that boy up the creek because her ass was scared, when all she had to do was call me. Fuck her! I would have handled it. I would have protected him. Her too, if I had to. She didn’t give my ass a chance!”

Carly understood his rage. In some ways, she felt it too. She placed his hand between both of hers, and squeezed it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They arrived at the airstrip where Trevor's big, private plane was prepping, and he finally leaned up from his slouched position. This was always the hard part for him: leaving Carly. He looked at her. "Walk me to my door," he said.

He tried to smile, since his door was the door of his airplane, but it failed. Because he saw the sadness in her eyes. This was the hard part for Carly too.

They got out of the SUV along with Hammer and Jessica. The two ladies walked in front, while Trevor and his brother walked a few feet behind them, talking.

"I didn't know they had recruited him," Hammer said. "Until long after the fact."

"But you knew they wouldn't let Jess out," Trevor said. "You knew that. Right?"

"They don't let anybody out, Trevor. You and she should have known that before you made that deal with her."

"We were young kids. What the fuck we knew? I thought she was going to make it. It never occurred to me that she wouldn't make it."

Hammer nodded. "I didn't know she was forced back in. She wasn't in my sector. Or I would have told you."

"Her ass tried to put the blame on you," Trevor said.

"She needed an out. Like she said, she took it. That's Jessica Lutalo."

"What's this Lutalo shit?" Trevor asked. He only knew her as Jessica Duncan. "She's married?"

"She was once, but he left her ass. Her profession didn't agree with him. they barely lasted six months. But she kept his name. Gave it to Amari also."

Trevor looked at him. "That's his last name? Amari Lutalo?"

Hammer nodded. "That's his name."

Trevor ran the back of his hand over his eyes. Giving him up was the single worse decision of his life. But he wanted him to live undercover. He loved his unborn child enough to give him

that chance. It didn't turn out as he thought it would by any standard!

"She's under the impression she's going back to Africa with you," Hammer said as they walked.

"I don't give a fuck what impression she's under," said Trevor. "She destroyed Amari's life. I would have never let your people recruit him and she had to know that. She knew how it happened to me. She knew I would never have done to my own child what my own brother did to me."

Hammer's heart sank. It was the shame of his life. But if he had to do it all over again, given Trevor's skills? He would have. "You were uniquely qualified, Trev," he said as they continued to walk toward the plane. "You saw me in action too many times."

"I know that," Trevor said. "But it still hurts like a motherfuck."

Hammer slowed his walk. He had a lot of sins to answer for. Trevor might just be his greatest one.

But Trevor wasn't thinking about his brother's sins when his eyes did their routine survey of the area. He saw a private plane cleared for takeoff and taking off much further away. He saw mechanics working on another private plane closer. He saw a third plane taxiing for takeoff even closer. But as that plane took off, he looked back at those mechanics. And he realized it was all wrong. They called themselves working on a plane, but nothing was open to work on, and they kept looking toward Trevor's plane.

And when they reached under their tool kits, and suddenly pulled out guns, he knew it was all wrong!

"*Incoming!*" he yelled, which alerted his brother, and he ran toward Carly.

Hammer saw what Trevor had seen and began pulling out his own gun.

Trevor jumped onto Carly and knocked her down as the mechanics, all three of them, began firing away. Jessica's CIA training kicked in, and she rolled to the ground too.

Hammer began firing back at the mechanics, hitting one of them, while Trevor, on the ground shielding Carly's body with his own, got off a round that killed the second mechanic.

As soon as the second mechanic dropped, the third gunman took off running. Trevor knew, if he ever was going to get intel, he had to run that motherfucker down.

“Put her inside!” Trevor ordered his brother and took off running that motherfucker down. Hammer ran to Carly.

The SUV pulled up and Ozzie, his own gun drawn, jumped out.

“Get her,” Hammer ordered Ozzie, pointing at Jessica, as he helped Carly to her feet and ran with her onto the plane.

Ozzie grabbed Jessica and put her in the SUV. She might have thought her original escape from their grasp was over, but she was mistaken. Until they found out what was really going on, she still was a ward of the state.

Trevor chased the third gunman across the airstrip and through the gate that led to the parking lot. The third gunman was a fast runner, and so was Trevor, but he wasn't gaining ground. It wasn't until the gunman made it to his car, and had to stop to open the car door, did Trevor make up ground and was able to reach the car as the gunman pressed Start and was trying to close the car door.

When Trevor grabbed the door and was fighting to get to the gunman, the gunman threw the gearshift in Drive and put his feet on the gas. He sped off, with Trevor still holding onto the door.

Trevor was holding on for dear life and reaching for the gunman as the gunman hit parked car after parked car trying to fight back Trevor and steer too. But Trevor managed to grab the gunman's shirt and sling him out of the car, with both of them falling and rolling onto the turf, as the car kept going and only stopped when it ran into yet another parked car.

After the roll, the gunman tried to get up and run, but Trevor grabbed him by his shoe and pulled his weight on him until he was on top of him.

He put his gun to that so-called mechanic's head. “Who are you?” he asked him.

“Jim Peters.”

“Who are you?” Trevor asked again.

“They ordered us to hit and run.”

“To hit who?” Trevor asked. “Me?”

“The lady. Jessica Lutalo.”

This surprised Trevor.

“They said your plane was getting prepared for takeoff and they ordered us to get here. They said you were going to try and take her back to Africa, but that we had to take her out before she could board your plane.”

“Why would they want to take her out?”

“They don’t tell me why. You know that!”

Why would he know it? Unless . . . “Who ordered you?” Trevor asked.

“Fifth Command.”

Trevor was stunned. Fifth Command was a squad of double agents. “You’re CIA?”

Jim Peters looked Trevor in the eyes. “I can’t confirm or deny, sir,” he said, which was standard operating CIA jargon.

Trevor placed that gun closer to Peters head.

“Yes!” he quickly confirmed.

“A double agent?”

“Yes!”

“Double where?”

“Africa.”

“Where in Africa, motherfucker?”

“Botswana,” he said.

Trevor stared at the man. Then he got up. “Come on!” he said, grabbed Jim Peters up by the catch of his shirt, and walked with him to his plane.

The police had already arrived, and Hammer was standing outside of the plane, providing them with indisputable documentation, and explaining they were on assignment. Ozzie, with

Jessica, Trevor noticed, had already left the scene. And when Trevor arrived at his plane, the police remained outside.

"That's the operative?" the officer asked Hammer, looking at Jim Peters.

"Yes," said Trevor.

"We'll take care of the two mechanics," the officer said. "But you can't leave this area, sir," he added, to Hammer, "until we get the word straight from the agency."

"Understood," said Hammer, and the police headed over to the dead gunmen.

Trevor put Jim onto the plane. Hammer got on too. Carly, relieved and already on the plane, hurried to Trevor. "You're okay?"

"I'm okay. You?"

"Yes. Thanks to you!"

"Who is he?" Hammer asked. "I assumed an operative. Am I right?"

Trevor nodded. "You're right."

"FBI?"

"CIA," said Trevor.

Although Hammer was the master at concealment, he was caught off guard Trevor could tell.

Hammer looked at Jim. "Which division?" he asked.

"Fifth Command," Jim said.

"Why would Fifth Command give an order involving my brother?" he asked angrily.

"They don't tell us why, sir. You know that."

Hammer looked at Trevor.

"Jess was the target, according to him."

Hammer nodded. "I'll find out what the fuck is going on," he said. "You go find your son. I'll drop Carly off."

"Negative," said Trevor. "She's going with me."

This surprised Carly. Hammer too. "I thought it was decided that she would remain

stateside, Trev.”

“She’s going with me,” he said again. “I don’t know what these people are after, or who’s involved. Until I find out, she stays with me. Nobody will protect her better than I will.”

“Nobody?” Hammer asked. “Not Big Daddy Sinatra? Not Mick the Tick? Come on, Trev!”

“Nobody,” Trevor said firmly. He wasn’t taking it back.

And Hammer saw the fire in his eyes. He knew his brother. He made close calls for any other man seem routine. He believed him. “Okay,” he said, squeezing his brother’s broad shoulder. “My men will meet you at the airfield in Lobatse.”

Trevor nodded, they said their goodbyes, and Hammer was about to deplane. But turned back. “You’ve got company,” he said.

Trevor and Carly looked past Hammer as Big Daddy Sinatra’s Jaguar sped onto the tarmac as if it personified the rage the driver was feeling. And Big Daddy got out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As soon as Big Daddy stepped onto the plane, he directed his entire rage at Trevor. “I thought the child had died. All information we received said that she lost that baby. Even Mick couldn’t find out differently. But now Jenay’s telling me the child lived? And you knew, all along, he was alive? I can’t believe this shit!”

“He can explain, Daddy,” Carly said. “You have every right to be angry,” she had to confess, “but he can explain.”

But Big Daddy kept his eyes on Trevor. “When Jenay told me you’re on your way to Africa to get your son, I said what son? Trevor doesn’t have a son! He got a girl pregnant when he was in college, but she lost that child. That was my information. That was what I wanted you to clean up. That was what I wanted you to tell Carly. Now you’re telling me that child didn’t die? That you have a son?”

Trevor exhaled. “Yes,” he said.

Big Daddy couldn’t believe it. “Jenay said you wanted me to give you a call. A phone call after news like that? Fuck a phone call! And now I see you were taking Carly with you too?”

“That’s right.”

“Like hell you are! What the fuck is wrong with you, Trevor? You have a son?”

Trevor nodded his head. “Yes, sir, I have a son.”

“From that woman? That Jessica woman? The one my investigators thought had lost the child?”

“That’s right.”

“And he’s in Africa?”

“That’s where he and his mother lives. Something’s happened to him and I’m going to take care of it.”

Big Daddy shook his head. He couldn’t believe it. “And look at this scene,” he said, looking outside of the plane’s windows at the police activity. “The cops are out here. Hammer’s out

here. Bodies on the tarmac. I knew as soon as I saw the scene you had something to do with it. That's why I didn't want her to marry a man like you. Because of crazy shit like this! But at least you were a man of integrity and strong enough to handle Carly. So I figured she could do a whole lot worse. But now this?" He looked at his daughter. "Did you know he had a child?" he asked her. "Did he tell you beforehand?"

Carly wasn't going to sugar coat it. Not even for Trevor. "No, sir," she said. "And yes, he should have told me all about it before he asked me to marry him, and certainly before we set the date. I made it clear to him he should have. But you haven't heard the whole story. There's more to the story."

"What more does there need to be? You're marrying a man in two-months-time who didn't bother to tell you he has a child in this world! A child he wasn't taking care of!" He angrily looked at Trevor. "What's wrong with you, motherfucker? What if she doesn't want to be a mother straight out the gate? You allowed her to fall in love with your ass and accept your proposal and set a date without telling her shit about it. Nobody treats my daughter this way!"

Carly understood her father's rage. She was stunned, too, when she got the news. "There's more to it, Daddy," she said. "Just hear him out. Please!"

But Big Daddy was still staring at Trevor. Still seething at Trevor. "You know why they call me Big Daddy?"

"Sir, look," Trevor started.

But Big Daddy wanted his question answered. "Do you know why they call me Big Daddy Sinatra?"

Trevor might have known once upon a time, but he couldn't even begin to remember why right then. "Because of their great affection for you?" he guessed.

"No. There's nothing affectionate about it. It's because I don't take shit from anybody. And especially from a man taking my child through shit! Now you tell me why it is that a man would have a child in this world and not bother to tell the woman who has agreed to share her life with him? You've got to tell me something that would make me understand that shit. Because

I don't understand it!"

Trevor motioned for Big Daddy to have a seat. They still had not been cleared for takeoff: he had a little time still. Big Daddy didn't want to sit down. He was too amped-up. But he did sit. And Trevor sat across from him. Carly, feeling his pain, sat beside her father.

Trevor calmly explained what happened to Jessica, how they were young then, and why he allowed her to leave with his unborn child.

But Carly could tell her father still found it hard to understand. "You knew you had a child somewhere in this world, and you didn't bother to find him?"

"She wanted to give him a shot at a normal life," Trevor said. "That's what she told me. It didn't mean I wanted to do it. I didn't want to do it! Almost every day I wanted to find them. And be a part of my child's life. But that would have been for me. Not for my child. My child was better off without me."

"No child is better off without his father," Big Daddy said.

"I was better off without mine," Carly shot back.

Big Daddy and Trevor looked at her.

"I know you would have never done anything like what Trevor did," Carly said.

Trevor's heart dropped. He thought she had understood. She didn't understand? But he knew Carly. Carly wouldn't throw him under the bus. She wouldn't! He decided to listen rather than lash out.

"You would have never left your child that way," Carly continued. "You would have moved the earth, if you had to, to find him. I know you would have. But you aren't Trevor, Daddy. You weren't a trained assassin for the government. You have your share of enemies, yes, you do. You're a Sinatra. You have enemies. But you never had a world of enemies like Trevor has."

Big Daddy still couldn't understand it. Trevor saw the doubt all over his face.

"And you aren't anything like my biological father," Carly continued. "When my father was still alive, he was abusive and bitter and put me through a living hell. He pimped me out to

men. It was awful! I wasn't better off with that man. Of course you would have found your child. And he absolutely would have been better off with you. But Trevor wanted to save his child from danger. He wanted to give him a shot at normalcy. Please don't judge him. That's why I couldn't. Because I know he did the right thing. He didn't want any of his enemies to know he has a son in this world. He was protecting his child. Don't you dare judge him for that."

Big Daddy ran both hands over his face. He had been in meetings all morning and was bone tired. "You say he was selfless when he gave his child that shot at a normal life. Okay. I just wish he would have given you that consideration, too, before you fell in love with his ass."

Trevor's heart dropped. He knew exactly what Big Daddy meant. Carly knew too. Trevor leaned forward, to explain himself. But it wasn't quite the explanation they were expecting. "You're right," Trevor said. "Being with Carly is the single most selfish act I have ever committed."

Big Daddy stared at him. Carly did too.

"Truth is, I didn't intend to fall in love with anybody. Especially not a sweet girl like your daughter. But I did fall in love with her. Harder than I thought was possible for me. And yes, I did blow it big time. I did decide to snatch that happiness for myself. I shouldn't have. I should have resigned myself to my lonely existence and leave her alone. But I didn't. I couldn't. Because I needed her," he said in a cracked voice, but then regained his composure. "That's the naked truth, sir. I *needed* her."

Carly felt a surge of emotion deep inside when Trevor spoke those words. She wanted to jump from that table and go to him at that very moment. But she held on. Her father was outraged. His feelings had to be respected too.

Big Daddy was struck by Trevor's sincerity. Trevor loved Carly deeply, and that was major. He exhaled. "Where does he live?"

"Botswana," Trevor said.

"How long have you known?"

"I just found out today. His mother came and told me."

"What's happened to him?" Big Daddy asked.

"Kidnapped."

"Shit. For ransom?"

"I can only assume. But I'll find out."

"Need me to go with you? Or my brother?"

Trevor was shaking his head. They still didn't seem to understand the depth of what he could do. But he understood where it was coming from. "Thank you for asking," he said, "but no. I can handle it."

Then Big Daddy looked him dead in the eyes. "I'm sorry about what's happened to your son," he said. "And I know you need Carly. But she's not going with you."

"Dad," Carly started to say, but Big Daddy cut her off.

"She's staying here with me," he said to Trevor. "She'll be under my protection."

"I want her under mine," Trevor replied.

Big Daddy stared at him. And suddenly it felt like *mano-a-mano*. But Trevor held his ground. "Nobody will protect her better than I will," he said. "She's my responsibility now, Big Daddy. She's the most important person in this world to me. Nothing's happening to her on my watch. I guarantee you that."

Big Daddy stared at Trevor. And for some strange reason, he believed him. He believed him! But that didn't lessen his concern. He looked at Carly.

"You've always told me that I was never an impulsive person," she said. "You told me I was practical and sensible and wrapped tight. Maybe too tight, you once said to me. And you were right. Falling for Trevor was the most impractical, insensible, craziest thing I've ever done. It unwound me. But it's made me the happiest I've ever been. I'm going with Trevor. There's no other place I'd rather be."

Big Daddy felt her sincerity too. It wasn't what he wanted. But she was a grown woman, and she was Trevor's now. He no longer had a vote.

He rose to his feet. Trevor stood too, and they shook hands. "Bring her back the way she's leaving," he said, "or forget about it."

That was an odd threat to Trevor. "Is that an Italian threat?" he asked him. When Big Daddy didn't respond, he nodded. "Yes, sir," he said.

Then Big Daddy looked at Carly. "And snap at me again, little girl, about not judging your man, and I'll beat your ass. Don't forget who I am."

Although they all smiled, Carly could see a sadness in her father's eyes. He was losing her, and it hurt him.

She got up, and they embraced. Big Daddy held on tightly.

Trevor watched Big Daddy as his eyes closed in agony that he no longer had the last word in his daughter's life. Trevor now had that word. He knew Big Daddy was praying he was up to the job, but he probably figured nobody was more up to it than he was. And Trevor knew those were mighty shoes to fill as he watched Big Daddy Sinatra. Because her father's love was the starkest reminder to Trevor of the awesome responsibility beside him. And the one to come in front of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When the plane touched down at Lobatse airfield, some forty miles south of Gaborone, Botswana, two agents were waiting with a Jeep transport. Both men were white men and were known around the countryside as American bodyguards. And they were. But they were also operatives on payroll with the CIA. And they were handpicked by Hammer Reese.

Trevor kept his hand on the small of Carly's back as soon as they walked off of the plane and made their way to their escorts. The men, Ben Riley and Phil Kurbain, stood erect as the couple headed their way. They were both surprised to see a woman with Trevor.

"Who's she?" Kurbain asked.

"I have no idea," said Riley. "Director Reese said to expect his brother. He never mentioned any female."

"Good looking, though, ain't she?" said Kurbain. "I'll bet he's hitting that every chance he gets."

"I never knew who his old lady was. I heard rumors about this chick and that chick, but never about some young black chick. Unless she's one of us."

"That kid?" Kurbain asked. "No bloody way!"

They smiled when Trevor and Carly arrived. "Welcome to Botswana," Riley said. "I'm Ben Riley. This is my partner, Phil Kurbain."

Trevor shook their hands. Then there was an awkward pause, as they expected him to introduce the young lady to them. But as far as Trevor was concerned, all they needed to know was that she was with him. Period.

And they didn't question it. Trevor was elite at CIA. He outranked them in every way. He was the boss.

Riley opened the passenger door and Trevor and Carly got inside.

With Kurbain behind the wheel, and Riley on the front passenger seat, they took off. The road was treacherous and dusty, but they held on.

“What do we know so far?” Trevor asked Riley.

“We know where they have him.”

Trevor’s heart soared. “Where?”

“In a village called Okonjo, some thirty kilometers east of Gaborone.”

“That’s where we’re going now?”

“We can’t go there now,” Riley said. “Not during the daylight hours. It will be a suicide mission.” Kurbain looked at Trevor through the rearview mirror as if he should have known that himself.

“What makes you so certain he’s in this village?” Trevor asked Riley.

“The villagers. They saw him behind the marketplace. There’s a row of sheds behind the marketplace.”

“And you think my son is holed up in one of them?” Trevor asked.

“We can’t be sure about any of it. It could be total misdirection by A.S. But that’s the best intel we have right now, yes sir.”

“And they saw him alive?”

“They saw him alive, yes, sir,” Riley said.

Trevor looked at Carly. And they both smiled. It was the best news yet!

“Where are we headed now?” Trevor asked Riley.

“To the hotel. It’s early morning here now and we cannot, under any circumstances, go in except under cover of darkness. A.S. runs the entire village. And they’re a brutal bunch. Any stranger seen will be attacked. And we know. Your brother sent five men into that area already. All five were ambushed.”

Carly’s body tensed. Trevor felt her sudden tenseness against him and placed his arm around her waist.

“And that was before we had any intel that they were actually there,” said Riley. “I guess Director Reese wanted to save you from having to go in yourself. That village is A.S. headquarters and they wanted to see what they could see. It didn’t end well. We have to go in

under cover of darkness no matter what.”

“Speaking of seeing what we can see,” Kurbain said as he looked out of the Jeep’s side window. “We have followers.”

Carly was about to look back, but Trevor stopped her. “Don’t,” he said. “We don’t want to tip them off yet.”

“I’ll turn a few corners,” Kurbain said. “If they’re still with us,” he added, “hold on.”

Trevor placed one hand completely around Carly and pulled out his gun with his other hand.

When Kurbain turned one corner and confirmed the car turned that corner, too, Carly looked at Trevor. “Do you have another one?” she asked.

He looked at her as Kurbain turned yet another corner. “Another what?” he asked her.

“Gun,” she said.

Trevor stared at her curiously. “Yes,” he said.

“Remove your arm of protection,” she said to him, “and give me protection.” She looked at him.

Trevor felt his heart sank. But this was going to be her life. And he knew he had better get used to it.

He reached into his suitcoat, and handed her his backup pistol. He knew she knew how to use it: Big Daddy had taught her well. “Shoot to kill,” he told her. “Not to wound. Or they’ll kill you.”

Although her heart was hammering, she nodded. Keep it together, Carly, she thought. Keep it together!

But when Kurbain saw that the car behind them turned the same second corner he had turned, leaving no doubt that they were being tailed, he then began picking up the kind of speed that was as dangerous in its velocity as it was because of the narrow, winding roads they were speeding upon. It was a harrowing ride.

So harrowing that Trevor knew they couldn’t keep this up much longer. Kurbain might lose control and could get them all killed. Something had to give.

“The next turn you get to, where you can turn and turn again, you let me off on the second leg.”

As agents, they knew what he meant. A rolling drop-off. “That will require me to go even faster,” Kurbain said, “to get the distance we’ll need for the slowdown.”

“Do it,” Trevor ordered, and Kurbain began to pick up even more speed.

Carly could feel her heart swimming in anxiousness when he picked up more speed. Every turn seemed treacherous. She looked at Trevor. “What are you going to do?”

“Force the issue,” Trevor said. “You just remember what I said. Shoot to kill.”

She nodded. “I will. You do the same.”

He would have smiled. But he respected her too much to dismiss anything she said. “I will,” he said.

Kurbain drove it hard, Trevor thought, as they kicked up so much dust they could barely see if the car was even still behind them along those winding roads. But Kurbain could see, through the thinner layers of dust, that there was a little more separation between his vehicle and the vehicle following them. And that was when he made a turn, saw that there was a second road, and then swung an immediate second turn. He stopped the car quickly, causing all of them to lean forward from the abruptness, and Trevor jumped out. Kurbain sped off again.

It happened so fast that Carly barely realized they had stopped at all. She turned around, to see what was going to happen, when the car that was tailing them suddenly turned down the same road. But as soon as they did, Trevor placed both hands on his gun, went into the middle of the road, and aimed it directly at the driver and passenger.

The driver, spooked by the sudden appearance of a man with a gun, swerved away from Trevor and the barrel of that gun, and then tried to overcorrect. They ended up on two wheels and then flipped over repeatedly.

Carly’s heart dropped. But Kurbain suddenly slammed on brakes, and then began turning around. What happened to that second car was exactly what they were hoping would happen.

Trevor ran to the overturned vehicle as the passenger was squeezing his way out of the

window. Trevor dragged him out and slammed him against the car. Then he looked back inside. The driver was dead.

Then he turned his attention back to the passenger, a young African male, as the Jeep carrying Carly drove back toward them. But before Trevor could get a word out of his mouth, the African spoke. "I am come to bargain with you," he said.

Trevor stared at him. "Who sent you?" he asked.

"No one. I send myself. I am come to bargain with you."

Trevor looked at the young man doubtfully. "What's the bargain?" he asked him.

"Money for your son."

Trevor stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"America's Shame has your son. A. S. has your son. I will take you to him for money."

"You know where he is?"

"Yes. I will take you there for money."

"How much?"

The man seemed thrown by the question, which only made Trevor doubt him more. "How much, motherfucker, how much!" he yelled, shaking the man.

"You set the price," the African said quickly. "How much for your son's safe return?"

"Where is he?" Trevor asked.

"He's in my village. He's being held hostage there."

"What village is yours, motherfucker, stop playing dumb with me! Where's your village?"

"Outside of Gaborone. In Okonjo."

Trevor stared hard at him. Was this a trap, or the truth? "When can you take me there?"

"Now."

It was a trap.

"If you go alone," the African said, "you will not survive. Other men have tried, and they did not survive. But I know a way into the village that A.S. does not know. You will be undetected. You will be able to free your son. And you will pay me what is right. You are a rich man, I

heard them saying so one time. You will look after me in a fair manner if you retrieve your son.”

Trevor wanted to believe it. For his child’s sake, he wanted to believe every word. But could he?

As the Jeep approached, he grabbed the young man by the catch of his collar. “Let’s go,” he said, and pulled him to the Jeep.

Trevor got into the backseat of the Jeep first, to sit between the young man and Carly, and then slung the young man in the Jeep beside him.

“What’s his story?” Kurbain asked.

“He’s from Okonjo,” Trevor said. “We’re taking him home.”

Riley turned around quickly. “Sir, we can’t! Not in the daylight. It’ll be a suicide mission.”

“This asshole is going to show us a way into that village,” Trevor said, “where we can go in undetected.”

“Sir, I understand you want your son. But there’s no such way!”

“There is a way,” their prisoner said. “I am from Okonjo. I know how to get in and out undetected. And I know exactly where his son is.”

“Where?” Riley asked.

“Behind the marketplace. In one of the sheds.”

That was their intel too. “Which shed?” Trevor asked.

“One of them. They move him from one to the other. I cannot say which at this moment.”

Riley and Carly looked at Trevor. Kurbain looked at him, too, through the rearview.

“It’s a major risk, boss,” Riley said.

Trevor knew it was. And he had Carly with him! But he was not about to leave her alone anywhere in this country. She was staying beside him. “Go to Okonjo,” he ordered Kurbain.

Kurbain looked at Riley, but began pulling off. “Yes, sir,” he said as they drove away.

But as they drove swiftly to Okonjo, Trevor noticed something. It was a tight fit in the backseat, as three people were thrust into seats designed for two. And Trevor was the biggest

one back there. But he could feel their prisoner tensing up the closer they drove to Okonjo. If it was as easy as he had said, why the sudden anxiousness? This was his village, after all. He knew a way in that would be completely undetected, he declared. And he would collect all that money. Why was he so scared?

But as Trevor was contemplating next moves, the African made a move himself. He opened the passenger side door he was sitting against and threw himself out of the speeding car.

“Motherfuck!” Riley yelled and Kurbain slammed on brakes.

Trevor and Riley jumped out of the car in horror as the young man slammed his head against a railing, splitting it open. And it didn’t stop there. His momentum caused him to flip over the railing and down a steep cliff. Hitting big boulder rock after boulder rock and eventually falling to his certain death. Trevor couldn’t believe it. What had spooked him? Why would he do anything that fucking crazy?

But Riley was looking around. “We’ve got to go, sir,” he said. “This isn’t a good area. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Trevor hesitated. He had so many questions, and that young man had given him at least a shred of hope. But he heeded Riley’s warning, and they got back into the Jeep and Kurbain sped off.

Carly looked at Trevor. She was as stunned as he was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They were showered and in their hotel room in Gaborone, naked and in bed. It had been a harrowing morning, and the night only promised more anxiety. Trevor was lying on his back, while Carly was lying on top of him with her head lifted up looking at him. His arms were around her and they both were under the covers.

And they both were still filled with more questions than answers.

“Why would he jump?” Trevor asked. “That’s what I can’t get out of my mind. He saw that cliff below. He saw the terrain we were traveling. He had to know he was jumping to his death. He had to know it! Which makes no sense.”

Carly was rubbing his thick chest. “Unless what he told you as to why they were following us wasn’t true,” she said.

Trevor nodded. “I thought about that, too. But then why would he say it?”

“Because you caught him. And he had to say something. Maybe he wasn’t trying to take you to your son at all. Maybe he was supposed to follow us, to see where we were going. When that failed, and he knew you were taking him back to A.S. territory, he knew he was a dead man anyway.”

“That’s where I come down at, too. Damn shame. What kind of fuckers are we dealing with? But he said Amari was in one of those sheds behind the markets.”

“Which is the same thing Riley and Kurbain said was the intel they had too.”

“Right.”

“Could they be in on it, Trev?”

“Who? Riley and Kurbain? No,” he said firmly. “They were handpicked by Hammer. They’re straight.”

“Then that must mean that guy told you the truth, at least about where Amari might be.”

“I’ll find out tonight. That’s for damn sure.”

“We’ll find out tonight,” Carly said.

Trevor placed his hands on the side of her neck, rubbing her. "I know you can handle it," he said. "I just don't want you to. Much as I hate to do it, I have to do it. My pilot is going to fly you out of here, and keep you airborne, until I return with my son."

Carly stared at him. "In the air the whole time?"

Trevor nodded. "That's right. I can't trust it any other way. I won't trust you with anybody else. He will not land until I have my son and he's landing to pick us up."

Carly knew going with him was impractical. And his plan was so out there it was either genius, or completely bonkers. She smiled and cupped his strong chin. "That was your plan all along, wasn't it? When you decided to take me? I was never going to see the real action."

"We'll be separated only for a little while. I'll get on my plane before it takes off to make sure my crew is my crew and nobody else is aboard, and I know you'll be safe. And, in no time, I'll be boarding it again and we'll be together."

"With Amari," Carly said.

Trevor nodded. "Yes. With him." Then he studied her. "Your father made a good point. You didn't plan on being a stepmother out of the gate."

Carly smiled. "A stepmother! That boy is almost as old as I am!"

Trevor smiled.

"But I'll be whatever I have to be if it means I'll be with you," Carly said. "You're the point. Not anything or anybody else. I'll love your son as if he was my own child, if he allows me to."

Trevor smiled a smile filled with so much emotion that he had to pull Carly down and kissed her just to release some of it.

But his kiss released too much of it, because it changed on him. As he was kissing her, emotions of gratitude became emotions of passion. And he couldn't stop kissing her. He wrapped his big arms around her tighter, and kissed her harder, as passion for her overtook his emotional state. And it became full blown, desperate, and urgent.

Trevor rolled Carly onto her back and was on top of her. He began kissing her neck. He sucked her breasts. He moved down her body and stopped between her legs, eating her.

Carly lifted up on elbows when she felt his tongue inside of her. Between his fingers inside of her, and his tongue licking and sucking her, she was lifting and moving all over the bed until they were nearly sideways.

And then he moved up and entered her. And as soon as he did, he felt her heat. And he nearly lost it. He thought he could go slow, but he couldn't!

He pounded into her. The feel of her, the tightness of her, unleashed a passion inside of him that he could not contain.

They made love at that heightened state for nearly a quarter of an hour. The bed was banging down on the carpeted floor. The bedsprings were singing as he fucked her so hard neither one of them could handle it.

And when they came it was such a hard cum that he wrapped her in his arms, and she wrapped him into hers, and they came together. He French-kissed her as they came. He felt every inch of her. He tasted every taste of her. He pushed so deep inside of her that his balls were pounding her.

And then he was pouring into her. And he kept fucking her until he was poured out.

He remained on top of her, lying there, and they thought it was over.

But when he lifted his head up, and looked into her eyes, something broke inside of him again. And his dick reacted to what he saw: that gleam in her eyes. And her vagina reacted to that sincerity in his eyes. And he was fucking her again.

Carly's mouth was wide open, her legs were wide open, as Trevor laid on top of her and fucked her senseless. He couldn't stop pounding into her, and she couldn't stop enjoying every second of his pound.

And they came again, he poured into her again, together. It was like a second bite of that apple. But when he poured this time, his strokes stopped. His cock was pulsating too hard for him to move. And it felt too good to risk it.

After they both were out of the range of their orgasms and the sensations had waned, they

remained where they were for several more minutes. Neither one of them could make any moves.

And then the room's telephone rang.

Carly looked at Trevor. Riley and Kurbain were staying in the room next door to theirs, and Trevor assumed it had to be one of them.

He was right. It was Riley. "You have guests downstairs, sir," he said after Trevor answered the call.

"Guests?" he asked. "Who?"

"The kidnappers, sir," Riley said.

Trevor nearly dropped the phone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

They stopped to purchase clothing on their way to the hotel, and both were dressed casually as they stepped off of the elevator: Trevor in jeans and a tucked-in white dress shirt, and Carly in a pair of slacks and a pullover sweater. Riley and Kurbain led them across the lobby to a set of chairs sitting in the round. A black man and a white man, both wearing suits, stood up when they arrived. The white man had what appeared to be an iPad in his hand.

Trevor kept his eyes on the white man. When he debriefed Jessica before they left his office for the airstrip, she described the leader of the goons who had kidnapped Amari. The white man fit her description to a T.

Everybody sat back down. Riley and Kurbain took seats on either side of Trevor and Carly. The two men appeared to have no bodyguards with them.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Reese,” the white guy said. “My name is Leo Deitric. This gentleman beside me, is Marcel LeKirk, my assistant. And who, may I ask, is this beauty beside you?”

“What do you want?” Trevor asked him.

“What do I want?” Leo responded to Trevor. “I want a vacation in the Bahamas. What A.S. wants is money.”

Trevor studied him. “How much?” he asked.

“Three hundred million for your son. I would say for his life, but that would be redundant. You know his life is at stake if you don’t produce the money.”

“I have to have proof of life first,” Trevor said.

Leo smiled. “Why am I not surprised?” Then he opened his iPad, pressed the requisite buttons, and then smiled again. And he turned the screen toward Trevor and Carly.

And suddenly, incredibly, Amari Lutalo, Trevor’s son, appeared live on screen. Trevor’s heart began to pound even harder, even more intensely, when he saw him. He couldn’t believe it. It was his son, alive, on that screen. He sat in a windowless, filthy room. Chained to a chair. He was slouched down and appeared dazed, as if a blindfold had just been removed from his

eyes. But he looked good.

“Amari,” Leo said with a stupid grin on his face, “meet your father.”

Trevor nearly jumped out of his skin. He didn’t want his son to meet him like this! He could have killed Leo with his bare hands.

But then he looked at Amari again. How was he responding to the news?

But Amari said nothing. He just squinted his eyes and stared at the computer screen in front of him: at the man and woman in front of him.

Carly wanted to get out of the frame. She had no right witnessing this! But it was too late. They all were all-in, whether they wanted to be or not.

“Hello, Amari,” Trevor said. “My name is Trevor Reese.” He wanted to say, *I’m your father*, but he couldn’t. He hadn’t earned that title. “I need you to tell me if you’re hurt anywhere. Do you need medical attention?”

But Amari still appeared stunned. It was as if he was staring at himself on that screen: an older, white version of himself. Who was this person?

“Amari, I know this is shocking to you,” Trevor said. “But I need to know if you’re hurt in any way.”

“No,” he suddenly said, although the shock was still there. “They have not hurt me.”

He spoke in perfect English with a very concise, very clear African accent. “But my mother,” he said, “they harmed her. Where is my mother? Do you know where is my mother?”

“Your mother is fine,” Trevor said. “She’s under our protection,” he said to ease the boy’s fears. “She’s fine.”

Trevor could see him sigh relief. He apparently was more concerned about his mother than he was about himself.

“I’m going to get you out of there,” Trevor said.

A look came across Amari’s gorgeous face. “You are?” he asked Trevor as if he was amazed that he still stood a chance at rescue.

Trevor’s heart dropped. “Yes, son,” he said heartfelt. “I am.”

But then, cruelly, Leo pulled the plug. He turned off the chat and closed his iPad.

Then he stood up. Everybody else stood too. "You have twenty-four hours to secure the funds," Leo said.

"Where's the drop-off?"

"I'll let you know in twenty-four hours."

"Digital?" Trevor asked for a very specific reason.

Leo nodded. "Of course. All digital."

"I will not release a dime until my son is in my possession," Trevor said. "Understand that."

"You are not running this," Leo said. "But I understand."

And then he and his assistant left the hotel.

Carly could tell Trevor was traumatized. She placed her arm in his arm as they all began heading toward the elevators. "Get somebody to follow them," Trevor said as they walked.

"We're already on it," said Kurbain.

"Will you be able to secure three-hundred-million dollars in that small amount of time, sir?" Riley asked him.

"Yes," he said firmly as they made their way toward the elevators. "But I won't have to."

Carly, Riley, and Kurbain looked at him. "What do you mean?" Carly asked.

"They don't want money," Trevor said.

"How do you know that?" Riley asked.

"Instincts, for one," Trevor said. "And the fact that he agreed to a digital transfer. Any terrorist group worth their salt, and A.S. is from what I've read, knows how easily digital transfers of money can be manipulated. They wouldn't go for digital in a million years. It's not money they're after."

"Then what, Trevor?" Carly asked.

"Me," Trevor said and they all got onto the elevator.

Carly stared at him. But Trevor had process on his mind. "Did you get it?" he asked Kurbain.

"I got it," Kurbain said.

“Did he get what?” Carly asked.

“A picture of the leader,” Trevor said. “Send it to my brother’s office and have them show it to Jessica,” he ordered Kurbain. “I want to make sure he’s the man she said was at her house.”

“Yes, sir,” Kurbain said as he opened his phone and began sending the photo.

“That Leo guy fit the description she had given to me,” Trevor said, “but I need to be certain if I’m dealing with a leader of the group.”

“He’s not the leader,” Carly said.

All three men looked at her.

“He might have been the leader of the goons who kidnapped Amari at Jessica’s house,” she said, “but he wasn’t the head man in that lobby. The African, Marcel LeKirk, was the boss,” Carly said.

Riley and Kurbain smiled. “What does this school girl know?” Riley actually said.

But Trevor respected Carly’s intellect above all others, and when he gave Riley a harsh look, Riley’s smile evaporated.

Trevor looked at Carly. “Why would you peg him as the boss?” he asked her. “Leo said he was his assistant. Leo Deitric was the boss. I saw that myself.”

“You saw a white man talking and automatically assumed he was the boss. I just saw a white man running his mouth. But what I know of Africans is that the leader tends to let the lesser man do all of the talking. The leader does all of the observing.”

“And you observed him?” Trevor asked.

“I observed Marcel, yes.”

To Riley’s surprise, Trevor was interested in what the chick had to say. “And what was your takeaway?” Trevor asked her.

“Little things and big things.”

“Give me a little thing.”

“Marcel’s clothing was far superior to Leo’s, in taste and expense.”

Trevor nodded. “I saw that too,” he said. “But that means nothing. Give me a big thing.”

“Marcel wasn’t paying attention to a word Leo was speaking. And he wasn’t paying attention to what you were saying either. Which surprised me. That was the main reason I paid attention to him and saw that he was too busy observing two men who had come into the lobby. When I observed them, too, they were motioning like this.” Carly did a motion where she stretched her arm out in front of her and closed her hand, as if she was gripping something, and then pulled it back toward herself. “And then the African gave them a nod of approval, and the two men left.”

The elevator doors opened, and the foursome stepped off of the elevator onto the seventeenth floor, and all four began walking toward their hotel room that faced them at the end of the corridor. The two agents, however, hurried well in front of the couple. It was their job to open the room door and go inside before Trevor and Carly arrived at the room. They had to make sure no bad guys had gotten inside while they were downstairs, and was lying in wait.

“These two men,” Trevor asked, “had just come into the hotel when they made that motion?” Trevor wondered if there was some firepower outside, and they were letting him know all was set up.

“No, they weren’t outside,” Carly said. “They were already in the hotel. They were coming from the direction of the elevators, as if they had just gotten off of the elevator, when I saw them.”

“And they made a motion as if they were, what?” Trevor asked. “Opening a door?”

Carly nodded. “Yeah. That’s what I assumed they were demonstrating.”

Trevor looked down the hall, at the room door they were slowly approaching, at the room door the two agents had already approached and were swiping the keycard to enter. And then Trevor and Carly both stopped in their tracks. Because they both reached the same conclusion. The doors in the hotel they were staying in had to be pulled out to open, rather than the normal push-in-to-open doors. Which was the same motion Carly had seen the two men exhibit.

Could there be an assassin on the other side of that door lying in wait for them to open it,

was what Carly was thinking.

Could there be a bomb on the other side of the door that would be triggered as soon as they opened the door, was what Trevor thought.

Either way, it was bad, and the agent had his hand on the door's knob and was just about to pull it open. When they realized what was happening, they both screamed *Nooo!* to the agents at their room door, and waved them off frantically.

One agent looked back, ready to pull his weapon as if the danger was behind them rather than right in front of them, but the other agent had already opened the door. And Trevor was right. It was a bomb! And the bomb detonated as soon as that door opened.

It exploded with such force that the door and both agents went airborne on an invisible carpet of smoke and fire whose heat obliterated them instantaneously.

Trevor had grabbed for Carly, and was going to throw his body on top of hers, but there was no time. The force of the blast had lifted them both off of their feet and flung them backwards as if they were being snatched backwards through the air. When they landed they rolled and rolled. Only the wall all the way on the opposite end of the long corridor stopped their roll. And they slammed violently against it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The airstrip employees had never seen anything like it. Private plane after private plane were landing. One behind the other. As soon as they could take a break, another one was being cleared to land. It was unbelievable!

And they weren't the single-engine sorts they were used to seeing either. They were big 747s and airbus planes and turbo jets skirting along their runway! When they saw the first one, and then the second one, they knew right away whomever was on those planes weren't any run-of-the-mill wealthy business people traveling to their nation's capital for a conference on wheat or an audience with President Masisi. These were super-rich Americans coming because of that devastating hotel explosion in the heart of Gaborone. Rumor had it, although none of the airstrip employees could confirm it themselves, that the girl in that explosion was the niece and cousin of Italian mobsters.

Mick Sinatra's plane was the first to land. Along with Carly's parents, Big Daddy Charles Sinatra and his wife Jenay, he hurried down the steps of his plane and they all jumped into one of the waiting SUVs in the convoy of waiting SUVs, and took off.

The plane owned by Hammer Reese had to circle briefly, as air traffic control gave Mick's plane the go-ahead first, but once it landed, Hammer, along with his girlfriend and Carly's aunt, Amelia Sinatra, hurried off and jumped into one of the SUVs as well.

The Gabrinis came separately, one plane after the other one, as they were all in different parts of the states handling their own personal business affairs when Big Daddy called. All they knew was that there had been a horrific bombing of a hotel room in Africa where his daughter and Trevor Reese were staying, and he wanted their muscle there, too. They dropped everything and flew out. When the Sinatras called, be it Big Daddy or Mick, the Gabrinis didn't hesitate.

They all converged at the hospital in Gaborone.

“Geez,” Sal Gabrini said as they all got out of their SUVs. The hospital looked like a war zone. There had been so many injured and killed in the bombing that the hospital had run out of beds. Makeshift tents outside were triaging the walking wounded, while the interior of the hospital was standing room only. Packed with injured people. The only reason the Sinatras and Gabrinis were able to get upstairs at all was because the president of the Republic of Botswana had sent an envoy to personally steer his country’s rich visitors through the maze of the place.

Upstairs, in the hospital room he shared with Carly, Trevor had fallen asleep again. He had been in-and-out of consciousness all through the night and most of the day. This time, though, as he drifted off again, he was remembering what happened. The flying door. Riley and Kurbain. The fire. The screams. The people in the stairwell. The collapse. And Carly. Lying there. He remembered Carly.

“Carly,” he was saying, his head was turning from side to side as if he was delirious. “Carly. Carly.”

“Trevor!”

It was a strong voice. A familiar voice. And somebody was shaking his body. When he finally opened his eyes, he realized it was his brother shaking him. And then he saw Carly’s father, and her uncle, and Reno and Sal Gabrini, and he lifted up with a fast jerk up.

“Easy, Trev,” Hammer said, and Trevor, already exhausted, laid back down. But he remained slightly upright, resting on his elbows. He was sweating as if he had run a marathon. “What’s happening?” he asked. “Why’s everybody here?”

Then he realized why. He realized he was missing his rib. His woman. His life! “Where’s Carly?” he asked hysterically. “Is Carly alright? Tell me she’s alright!”

“She’s okay, Trev,” Big Daddy quickly reassured him. “They took her down for tests. She’s okay. Jenay and Amelia’s with her. And Tommy Gabrini’s watching over all of them. She’s going to be just fine.”

“She wasn’t injured?”

“She had some serious scrapes and bruises, and according to the doctors she had been

unconscious when she arrived at the hospital, but she's fine," said Big Daddy. "I insisted on more tests, just to be certain everything's good. But she's okay."

Trevor let out a great sigh of relief. And he laid all the way back down. He also only then realized that he had gotten out of his own hospital bed, and was lying in Carly's bed.

"You okay, Sport?" Sal Gabrini asked him.

Trevor nodded. "I'm good."

"You don't look so good," Reno said. Trevor had bruises on his face, his arms.

But Trevor wasn't giving his injuries a second thought.

"What happened, Trevor?" Mick asked.

"Mick," Big Daddy said like a warning. *Don't you see he's injured*, he wanted to ask his all-business all the time brother.

But Mick didn't give a fuck. Somebody had to get to the bottom of this. He was already angry that Trevor had brought Carly with him to begin with. When Big Daddy told him about that bombing in Africa, and that Carly had gone with Trevor to find his kidnapped son, Mick hit the roof.

"We need to know what happened," Mick said to his brother, and then looked at Trevor. "Who the fuck would bomb an entire hotel just to get to your ass?"

Big Daddy couldn't believe it. Even Sal Gabrini, a mob boss in his own right, felt his uncle had crossed a line. He knew how precious Carly was to Mick and Big Daddy, but he also knew Trevor Reese. And Trevor was nobody's fuck-up. "Uncle Mick, come on," he said. "Give the man a break."

"It's okay," Trevor said, his face distressed, not from Mick's prodding, but from reliving, over and over, that horrible scene.

And he told them exactly what happened.

He remembered the blast itself. And after the room exploded and the door flew off its hinges, plunging Riley and Kurbain into oblivion with it, he remembered that he tried to reach

for Carly. But just as he reached out his hand, they both were thrown too, all the way back away to the other end of the hall. Trevor was knocked unconscious, although he couldn't say for how long, but when he woke back up he remembered seeing that the entire floor was engulfed in flames and those flames were traveling toward where he and Carly were lying. And Carly was still unconscious!

Trevor tried to get up, but the pain was excruciating. Every limb in his body was in pain. But that fire wasn't waiting for him to get his act together. It was coming whether he did or not. And when he finally came back to himself, and realized Carly was lying there, still unconscious, in danger, he fucked his pain and got to his feet.

How he lifted Carly, given his own condition, was still a mystery to him. But coughing and fearful that he would be overcome with smoke and be unable to help her at all, he lifted her over his injured shoulder and ran for the only way out: the side door that led to the stairwell.

He was on the seventeenth floor, but he knew the elevator was out of the question. He wasn't about to risk being trapped in an elevator with a fire spreading the way it was spreading. And there were no sprinklers on, or anything to help tamp down that fire. It was going to spread. No way was it going to be contained on the seventeenth floor.

And as he carried Carly and ran down, stair after stair after stair, the other guests in the hotel were joining them. They heard that explosion, too, and was clogging up the stairwell running for their lives.

Some people, mostly Americans and Europeans, Trevor remembered, were knocking people over the railings to their deaths, as panic set in and it was each man for himself. One such man nearly knocked Carly out of Trevor's arms and to her own death, with the American man yelling, *"fuck that nigger"* as he bullied his way past Trevor.

But even in the midst of the storm, nobody was disrespecting Carly. Trevor hurried up behind the man, tripped him in an agency-trained maneuver that caused the man to fall in hard thumps down the stairs face first. The other selfish Westerners, afraid he would cause them to lose their own balance and fall, knocked him over the railing too. It was that kind of craziness!

But when they made it to the fourth floor, after running breathlessly down thirteen flights of stairs with Carly in his arms, everybody suddenly could hear the building on the upper levels beginning to cave.

“It’s gonna fall!” one man in the stairwell yelled. “It’s coming down! We’re all gonna die! We’re all gonna die! We’re all gonna die!”

And the panic took on an even heightened state of desperation, and it was each man for himself on steroids.

They shoved and bullied and screamed their way down the remaining flights. Trevor knew it was fight or die, and he was fighting for Carly’s life.

But the entire building gave way just as they were at the lobby door, and the top crashed down on the bottom and pancaked it.

Trevor’s training kicked in and he slammed himself against the side wall, holding onto Carly with all the force he had, as the other people attempted to do what their instincts were telling them, and make a run for it.

They all failed. The pancake pancaked them.

Their screams still echoed in Trevor’s head.

When the collapse was over, what Trevor had hoped would happen, did happen. He found a hole, an air pocket, and crawled himself, with Carly, outside.

What happened after that, he couldn’t say. He remembered his legs buckling, and all went black. He woke up in the hospital.

Silence was in that hospital room after Trevor stopped talking. You could hear a pin drop. All of them, Big Daddy and Mick, Reno and Sal, and Hammer were opening their suit coats and putting their hands on their hips in exasperation. They all realized just how close a call it was. They realized just how heroic Trevor had been to save Carly’s life.

It was Trevor, getting up and sitting on the edge of the bed, who broke the silence. “I’ve got to see Carly for myself, and then I’ve got to go get my son,” he said.

“You aren’t in any condition to go and get anybody,” Reno said. They all had been briefed on why Trevor and Carly were in Botswana to begin with. And to a man they all understood why Trevor tried to give his child a chance at normalcy. If they could have given that chance to their children, given the dangers that always followed them, they would have taken it too.

“You know where he is?” Sal asked him.

Trevor was nodding his head. “Yes. I know where he is.”

“They moved him after that explosion,” Hammer said.

Trevor looked at him. “You know that for a fact?” he asked him.

When Hammer hesitated, Trevor knew he was just guessing. “I’ve got to see Carly and go get my son,” he said, rising to his feet. But the pain caused him to sit back down.

And then hospital personnel, along with Jenay and Amelia Sinatra, and Tommy Gabrini, came back into the room, with Carly being rolled in in a wheelchair.

She smiled when she saw him up. He sighed relief when he saw her. Then he realized she was in a wheelchair. “Why are you in that?” he asked her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Carly said, rolling herself over to him. “This chair is just hospital protocol. I’m fine. Thanks to you. They told me how you saved my life.”

“Good job, Trevor,” said Carly’s adopted mother Jenay, as she moved over to him and gave him a hug. “We are all in your debt.”

“Yes, we are,” echoed Amelia Sinatra, as she hugged him too.

“Now tell us who do you think is responsible?” asked Mick. “This terrorist group still? This America’s Shame group?”

Trevor was shaking his head. “No,” he said. “It doesn’t feel like them anymore.”

“It doesn’t?” Carly asked.

“It’s not them,” said Hammer.

“Then who?” Mick asked.

“My guys sent that photo to me of Leo Deitric,” Hammer said. “That’s the name he’s using, and he claims to work for A.S., and he does. But he also has another employer.”

“Who?” Amelia asked.

“Furaha Madaki,” said Hammer.

Trevor frowned. “Who the fuck is that?”

But Carly wasn't frowning. She looked at Hammer. “Mr. Madaki? Are you sure?”

They all looked at Carly. “You know him?” Trevor asked her.

She was nodding. “Yes.”

They all were astounded. “Who is he?” Big Daddy asked.

“He's my ex-boyfriend's father,” she said. “He's Yazi's father, Daddy.”

As soon as she said the name of her ex, Big Daddy remembered him.

“Why would your ex-boyfriend's father pull this kind of apocalypse shit?” Sal asked.

“I don't know,” said Carly.

Amelia was looking at Hammer. She had flown over with him, although their relationship was badly strained. “But I'll bet you Hammer knows,” she said.

Trevor looked at his brother. “Do you?” he asked.

“It's all speculation at this point,” Hammer said, “but his son, the ex-boyfriend, died in some freak accident a little over three weeks ago.”

“He died?” Carly asked. That was news to her.

“Had you been in touch with him?” asked Trevor. Was she still in love with this joker, was his real question and they all knew it.

“I haven't heard from him at all. Not since I got that restraining order against him and he was deported.”

Jenay and Trevor were both surprised. “What restraining order?” Jenay asked her.

“After we broke up, he was stalking me. I got a restraining order against him.”

“A restraining order?” Sal asked. “Why the fuck didn't you just tell your peeps? They would have handled his ass. Or me. I certainly would have handled his ass.”

“I did tell them, when the restraining order didn't help. And Uncle Mick did handle him. I went the restraining order route because I didn't want to get him in trouble.”

“If Uncle Mick handled him,” Sal said, “getting in trouble probably ended up being the least of his worries.”

“It was,” said Hammer. “He, like Carly, was a student at Harvard while they were dating, and he was expelled. He was also deported, thanks to Big Daddy’s connections. And he came back here, to Africa.”

“He lived in Botswana too?” Tommy asked.

“Nigeria,” Hammer said. “He was a Nigerian student.”

But Jenay was looking at Big Daddy. “Why wasn’t I told of any of this?” she asked him.

“We didn’t want to worry you,” Carly said.

Jenay wasn’t surprised, although it was a little exasperating. Jenay was the one, after all, who was once married to Carly’s biological father and was Carly’s stepmother for all those years. She was the one, when both of Carly’s parents were killed, who talked Big Daddy into adopting her and her sister Ashley. But yet, whenever Carly was in any kind of difficulty, she ran straight to Big Daddy. And Big Daddy ran straight to her. Jenay thought she and Carly would be closest of all, the way they had been when she was her stepmother. But for some reason Big Daddy took to Carly as if he had fathered her himself, and they became tighter than tight. Jenay was far closer to Ashley and Big Daddy’s grown biological sons than she was to Carly.

But Trevor was still perplexed. “I still don’t understand,” he said to his brother. “Are you saying his father planted the bomb?”

“That’s what we believe, yes,” said Hammer.

“Just because Carly broke up with his son?”

“Oh, it was more than that,” said Hammer. “Way more. That breakup changed his life forever. He stalked her, she was right. But between that restraining order and his unexplained paralysis,” Hammer added, and everybody looked at Mick, “he was never the same again. Expelled from school, deported from America, and wheelchair-bound, he became an alcoholic, and suicidal. Although his death was ruled an accident because he was drunk and rolled his

wheelchair in front of an oncoming bus, many believe it wasn't an accident at all, but intentional. He wanted out. We don't know if his father blamed Carly, but that's the best intel we have. The man calling himself Leo Deitric is a long-time operative of Madaki, his rich, corrupt father."

Trevor could see the distress all over Carly's face. So many people died in that hotel blast. So many! When the target might have just been her all along.

He reached out his hand to her. She rose out of the wheelchair and sat on the bed beside him. "Don't blame yourself," he said to her, as he placed his arm around her.

"I don't," she replied. "Yazi brought this on himself. His actions caused us to break up, and his refusal to leave me alone forced me to get that restraining order."

"Why did you break up with him?" Jenay asked her.

"He became too domineering," Carly said.

Jenay smiled at the irony. So did the Gabrinis. But it was Sal who voiced it. "He was too domineering?" he asked. "But you now plan to marry *this guy*? Mister Domineering? Are you kidding me?" he added, and everybody laughed.

Even Carly smiled. "It's different, Uncle Sal," she said. Sal was her cousin, not her uncle, but uncle was a title of respect they used in the families.

But Trevor had his son on his mind. He looked at Hammer. "Why would he kidnap my son if it was all about Carly?"

"I think it was about both," said Hammer. "A.S. gets the money. Madaki gets Carly."

"Why would he wait until I was in Africa?" Carly asked. "Why didn't he try in America?"

"Or did he?" Big Daddy asked.

"No," said Hammer. "From what we have gathered, he wanted Carly to die on African soil, just like his son had died. That was why there was a shootout in Boston, just before you guys took off," Hammer said. "Those double agents didn't work for our African sector, as they were hired, they worked for Madaki. He was willing to kill Jessica to spook you enough into taking Carly to Africa with you. It worked."

Trevor frowned. He served her right up to them. "Where can I find this motherfucker?" he asked.

"That's what I'm talking about," said Sal.

"He's still in Nigeria?" Trevor asked.

"No," said Hammer. "He's here. In Botswana. In the village of Okonjo. Under A.S. protection. The agency picked up movement and chatter just after the explosion, and we tracked him there."

"Then why did you think they would have moved Amari," Trevor asked his brother, "if the Nigerian was there too?"

"You know why," Amelia said. "He didn't want you involved. He figures his guys in the field can handle it. They can't, but Hammer always thinks the government can do it better."

"Fuck that," said Sal. "I wouldn't trust the government as far as I could throw them. The government are among my least favorite people."

Tommy smiled. "I wonder why," he said, and they laughed.

Trevor rose to his feet. "I'm going to find my son," he said.

"Not like that you aren't," said Reno. "Your ass is showing."

But Trevor, in hospital gown that opened up in the back, didn't even bother to close it. "Come hell or high water," he said to Hammer, "I'm going to find my son. I'm going to get my son before that bastard kills him."

But Hammer dropped on his brother a hard, realistic truth. "If he hasn't already," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The van stopped in the woods outside of the village of Okonjo. Hammer sat at the controls. He would be the spot man. Trevor, Mick, along with Reno, Sal, and Tommy Gabrini, were fully armed with weapons and a battering ram each, ready to go. Big Daddy stayed back with the ladies. Trevor was in tremendous pain. Hammer could see it all over his brother's face. But Trevor could not be stopped once his mind was made up. Hammer knew that too.

"You'll have ten minutes tops," Hammer told the men. "If you don't get out in time, you may not be able to get out yourselves. Once we start flying, we won't be able to pull back. Everybody understands that?"

"We understand," said Mick. "Just make sure their asses understand we've got ten minutes."

"Oh, I have. Don't worry. I have," said Hammer. "But wait until the signal," he said. "If you move before then, you will be detected. Everything falls on the success of our pilots. Everything. If they don't distract enough, you're screwed. But the alarm on those wristwatches I gave each one of you will sound at the two-minute warning. That means it's time to get the hell out. If you don't leave as soon as you hear that warning, you will be killed. There's no ands, ifs, or buts about that," Hammer said, looking specifically at his brother. "And there's still a possibility that Amari isn't even there. We have not confirmed if he was ever there at all. We've been told he was. Villagers on our payroll has said they've seen him. But we haven't seen him ourselves."

Trevor nodded. He understood the risk he was taking. They all did. But Trevor's mind was made up.

"See you on the other side," Trevor said to his brother, a phrase he used to use when he was just starting out in the game. Hammer's heart dropped when he said those words. But Trevor didn't break his stride. He, Mick, and the Gabrinis, climbed out of the van.

As they made their way through the woods that led into the backside of the village, Sal

smiled. "Not suited-up, Uncle Mick?" he asked. "This shit too unimportant for us to see you in your sweeping wardrobe?"

"Yeah, that's it," Mick said in a voice that made clear it wasn't. "Or maybe I just didn't plan to be this heavily involved in this shit."

They all looked at him. What did that mean, they wondered? Amari wasn't his kid, so why should he care? Trevor, especially, wondered that very thing.

But then Mick spoke again and eased their fears. "But family is family," he said, refusing to look at any of them when he said it because words like those weren't normally anywhere near his lips. But it was enough. They all relaxed after that. Because as far as the Gabrinis were concerned, Trevor was already a member of the family. Which meant, by extension, that his son had to be too.

But as they walked deeper into the woods and drew closer to the village, all conversation ceased. And when they made it to the edge of that village, and triple-checked their weaponry and battering rams, they all looked determined. It was life or death time now.

Trevor looked at all of them. "If anybody wants to back out," he said, "I'll understand."

"No your ass won't," Reno said. "Quit lying," he added, and they all managed to laugh.

But then Trevor's wristwatch beeped. That was Hammer letting them know that the show was about to begin. Everybody steeled themselves, but waited for the first sound of entry.

That sound came within a minute of the beep. It was the sound of military-style jets, buzzing the village.

As soon as they heard those engines, they all gathered up their gear and took off running into the village. The sheds were to the right of them. According to Hammer, there were six rows of them, and his count was accurate. Each man would take a row, and Trevor would take the last two.

And as the jets began dropping bombs on strategic targets, mainly A.S.'s arsenal depots, forcing them to defend their weaponry and their lives, Trevor, Mick, and the Gabrinis ran to the sheds and got busy.

Reno took the first row of sheds, and with his battering ram he broke down door after door in search of Amari. But with each shed he opened, he didn't find Amari.

Tommy and Sal and Mick were doing the same thing. Door after door they broke down, with some older and therefore easier than others, but they, like Reno, found no one inside. It wasn't looking good.

As the terrorist group began firing back at the jets that buzzed above them, Trevor was especially disheartened. He was knocking down door after door, too, faster than any of them, but he, like them, was turning up blanks too.

And time was fast running out.

And when one jet was hit by A.S., and came crashing down just behind the sheds, barely missing them, the heat was on. They had to move faster. Their backs were on the grill!

But none of them had a chance to finish. The two-minute warning beeped just as Mick and the Gabrinis were busting open their fourth shed, with three more to go. And Trevor had an entire row of sheds to go!

But nobody stopped working. Nobody dreamed of stopping. Hammer had warned them. When they heard that alarm on their watches, get the hell out or they would be killed. But getting out wasn't in their DNA. If it was their child they wouldn't leave until every shed had been penetrated. It was Trevor's child. They weren't leaving him.

But a bomb exploded too close to Sal's row of sheds. So close it rocked him sideways and forced him to dive for cover. But then he still got up and broke open the final shed on his row.

When they all had finished their rows, Trevor fully expected them to take off. He would not have wanted them to risk their lives any more than they already had.

But Mick and the Gabrinis didn't leave. They, instead, to a man and without consultation, ran to the last row where Trevor was just beginning to break open sheds, and helped to break open the rest.

"You don't have to do this!" Trevor yelled over the noise of the jets and the bombs and the screaming villagers and the gunfire from A.S.

“Yes, we do!” Tommy yelled back.

“Just hurry up so we can get the fuck out of here!” said Reno.

And they hurried. Opening shed after shed after shed.

And then.

Trevor was breaking open another shed, his heart devastated from the lack of any progress, when he heard his son’s voice. Why in the world would he have known it was his son’s voice when he had only heard that voice once in his life, and that was on Skype just yesterday.

But he knew that voice. And he knew he heard it.

“Wait!” he yelled.

“What?” asked Reno.

“Stop!”

They all looked at each other. What difference would the little noise they were making compared to the war around them make, their looks suggested.

“I heard something,” Trevor explained, and their noise was closest to where he thought he heard it.

It still made no sense to them, but they all stopped battering the shed doors.

And Trevor listened. His face was a mask of concentration as he listened intensely. They all listened to. But they heard nothing.

Trevor heard it, though. He heard the word *Help*, and he heard it, not in front of him, or behind him, but just beneath his feet.

He looked down. All he saw was dirt. But then he stomped down. When they all heard the sound of a metal door, they pounced.

Every one of them ran to Trevor and, with Trevor, began shoving dirt with their bare hands. The bombs were getting closer and closer. The sound of gunfire was coming closer and closer. But they were on their knees shoving dirt off of the door as if their lives depended on it.

When they succeeded, and saw the door itself, Trevor grabbed the handle and with his own brute strength forced it open.

And there he was, Amari Lutalo, Trevor's flesh-and-blood, tied to that same chair, the chair chained to the floor of that shed, looking up into the face of his old man.

Trevor was so relieved he could hardly contain his joy. But he didn't hesitate. He came prepared to cut chains, they all did, and he jumped down in the hole to release his son. But just as he did, they heard one man yell to A.S. that they had intruder. "They found him!" they heard the man yell. And then gunfire erupted.

And Mick and the Gabrinis, still above ground with Trevor and his son beneath it, found themselves in an old-fashioned gunfight.

Each one of them jumped into one of the open sheds, and fired away. Their job was to protect their own lives, and the lives of Trevor and Amari. And they were smiling as they picked off A.S. member after A.S. member. They were enjoying that shit!

Trevor's heart was racing, though, as he broke the chains and released his son.

"Who are you?" Amari was asking him. "You're the man from Skype."

Trevor smiled. "That," he said, as he cut the chains, "and your father." He looked at Amari as he cut the final chain. "Hello."

"Hello," Amari said. And when he realized he was free, he smiled a high wattage, charming smile. "I do not know if you realize it or not," he said, "but we are under assault."

"Are you good with a gun?" Trevor asked.

"Am I your son?" Amari asked.

Trevor looked at him. Was his ass trying to be smart with him at a time like this?

"My father was an assassin for the United States government," Amari said. "That much I was told."

Trevor smiled. "Yes, you're my son," he answered Amari's question.

"Then yes, I'm great with a gun," said Amari.

Trevor handed him a loaded Magnum and together they climbed out of that bolt-hole and joined the gunfight.

But it was practically over. Tommy took the final shot that killed the final gunman. The

others had taken off running. The others knew, between a gun battle on the ground, bombs dropping up above, they didn't stand a chance. They ran.

But just in case they decided to double back, Trevor, his son, and Mick and the Gabrinis ran too. They weren't taking any chances either.

Trevor held his hand on the small of his son's back as they ran through the high weeds of the woods. This was the first time he had touched his child and smelled his child and was side-by-side with his own child. And it was a wonderful feeling.

Tears were in Trevor's eyes as they ran through those pitch-black woods of Africa. And he was crying both ways. Because he had found his son, he cried tears of joy. Because he had allowed his son to be lost in his life in the first place, he cried tears of shame.

But when his son placed his arm around Trevor, too, as they ran further and further away from danger, the definite edge went to his tears of joy.

EPILOGUE

The dressing room was filled with men. Mick and Big Daddy. Hammer and Amari. And, of course, Trevor. He was the man of the hour. He sat in the middle of the room, his legs crossed, while Mick and Big Daddy sat in front of him. Hammer stood at the window, and Amari stood against the wall.

As he had from the moment he first saw him, Amari was staring at Trevor. He couldn't take his eyes off of him. His mother told him his father had been a trained assassin for the U.S. government, and was killed in the line of duty. To know that she knew he was alive all that time still stuck in his craw. He hadn't spoken to her since the day he met Trevor!

And Carly's family. Goodness, he thought. From Mick Sinatra, a reputed mob boss, to her mob-connected cousins, they were almost as fascinating as his father. And Carly's father, he thought with a smile. He was a trip!

"When I give her away to you today," Big Daddy was saying to Trevor, "she has no black eye. No red ass. No broke leg."

Amari grinned. Everybody else were dead serious.

"And whenever I see her from this day on," Big Daddy continued, "she'd better not have any of those things either. Because if she does --"

"His ass is grass," Amari said, "and you're the lawnmower?"

Trevor smiled.

Big Daddy wasn't smiling. "No."

"Because you're the bulldozer and he's going to be the bull?" Amari was enjoying this.

Big Daddy wasn't. "No," he said.

"Because --"

"No!" Big Daddy said.

Mick turned to Amari. "Shut the fuck up!" he ordered, and Amari's smile quickly left. Hammer, however, smiled.

But Amari kept his eyes on Mick the Tick. Of all of the Sinatras and Gabrinis, and he liked them all, Mick was the one that scared him the most. Mick was the one he just wasn't jelling with.

Big Daddy continued. "I will fuck you up," he said to Trevor, "because I love my daughter. And you'd better too."

Trevor nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "And I do love her. With everything within me."

Big Daddy seemed pleased. He and Mick stood up. Big Daddy patted him on the back. "Then welcome to the family, Trevor," he said.

Trevor smiled, and he and Big Daddy shook hands.

Then all eyes turned to Mick. What pearl of wisdom did he have to give?

"Unlike my big brother," Mick said, "I am that lawnmower and that bulldozer and everything else the kid said, and I'll kill your ass if you mistreat Carly. But you already know that."

Trevor smiled, but Amari didn't. He frowned. What kind of family was his father getting himself mixed up with? All of these violent references. He was just joking when he was mentioning them. They weren't.

But Trevor shook Mick's hand. "Yes," he said. "I already know it."

Mick nodded, and then he and Big Daddy left.

Hammer pushed his shoulder from the wall near the window he stood beside and walked over to his younger brother. They stood toe-to-toe. Trevor decided to make Amari his best man. He said it was because he owed him a lot. But Hammer knew that decision started years ago, when Hammer decided Trevor's path in life before Trevor had a chance to.

And like always, their conversation shifted from anything remotely personal, to work. "Any word on Yazi's father?"

Hammer nodded. "He's presumed dead. He had been spotted in one of the buildings our men bombed. Nobody got out of that particular building alive."

"And Madaki was after Carly."

"Yes. And A.S. was after a king's ransom. They both had their own interests. Carly had to

die on African soil," Hammer said. "Just like his son did. He had to lure her over there."

Trevor exhaled. "And I gave him exactly what he wanted. I hand-delivered Carly right where he wanted her."

"Unwittingly," Hammer said. "But yes. That car that had followed you from the airstrip in Lobatse, were going to attempt to assassinate her too. But like always, you foiled that plan. That's why the young man killed himself. He would die anyway if he came back without success."

"And Leo Deitric, Marcel LeKirk, and the two men at the hotel who planted the bomb in our room?" Trevor asked. "Any read on their whereabouts?"

"Leo and those two characters are official fugitives from justice. We have no read on any of them."

"No chance they died at Okonjo?" Amari asked.

"Yes. But we haven't verified it."

Trevor nodded.

"Anyway," Hammer said, "I'd better get going."

Hammer looked at his brother. And they shook hands. "I'm certain she's going to make you a very happy man," he said. "Congratulations."

Trevor stared at his brother. It was a classic love-hate relationship, and they both knew it always would be. "See you on the other side," Trevor said.

That phrase again. It always reminded Hammer of the choice he made for Trevor's life. And Hammer swallowed hard. He deserved it. "Sure thing," he said, and left the room.

Trevor then looked at Amari when it was the two of them. "Your mother called me," he said.

"Did she now?" Amari made his way toward his father.

"Call her, Amari. She was wrong telling you I was dead. She was wrong allowing the agency to recruit you. She did some bad things. But she's still your mother. She raised you alone, and protected you. She did the best she could."

“If I overlook the fact that she lied about my father, and gave me to the agency, then yes, she did the best she could.”

Trevor studied his son. “I knew you existed and didn’t look for you. But you’ve accepted me with open arms. Where’s my chastisement?”

Amari didn’t answer that. He, instead, straightened Trevor’s tie. Trevor wore a tuxedo. Even Amari was proud of how wonderful he looked.

“Why are you so nervous?” he asked Trevor. “Carly is a good person. She is young, but she is an old soul. She is not going to break your heart, Father. You can do much worse.”

Trevor looked at his son. “I can’t do better,” he corrected him. “But she can. That’s why I’m so nervous.”

“You will be okay.” Then he patted Trevor on the back, and all smiles were gone. And he finally answered Trevor’s question, the one about where was his chastisement, the same way Trevor answered Hammer’s. “See you on the other side,” Amari said to his father, with eyes sad with understanding. And then he, too, walked out of the room.

Trevor, stunned by the pain he saw in his son’s eyes, closed his own eyes and plopped back down in his seat.

And then it was time.

Instead of the standard wedding song, Carly entered the cathedral to the wedding singer, backed by a live band, singing Dionne Warwick’s version of Jennings/Kerr’s *I Know I’ll Never Love This Way Again*.

Trevor stood at the end of the long aisle, with Amari at his side and his groomsmen, including Mick Sinatra, Reno, Sal, and Tommy Gabrini, and a slew of other men the Sinatras nor Gabrinis knew. And when Big Daddy took Carly’s hand and began escorting her down that aisle, Trevor’s heart stopped beating. Carly looked striking in her white trumpet dress with gold beadings, and with her hair in a gorgeous up-do. And although Amari was more interested in eyeing the bridesmaids, specifically Big Daddy’s daughter and Carly’s sister, Ashley Sinatra, and

Mick's daughter Gloria, he, too, was taken by how beautiful Carly looked.

But it was Trevor that Carly only had eyes for. He was the most beautiful man in the world to her, and she still couldn't believe she was going to be his wife. She tried to walk steadily, and thanks to Big Daddy she was succeeding, without tripping over her own gown and falling at Trevor's feet.

And the music played and the singer sung, both Trevor and Carly had to fight back tears. They picked it out. It was their song now.

*"You looked inside my fantasies
And made each one come true.
Something no one else
had ever found a way to do.
I've kept the memories
Since you took me in
I know I'll never love this way again.*

*I know I'll never
love this way again.
So I keep holding on
Before the good is gone.
I know I'll never
love this way again.
Hold on.
Hold on.
Hold on!"*

When Carly made it to the front and looked over at Jenay, the mother of the bride, and saw her crying, she nearly lost it. When Big Daddy saw Jenay, he nearly lost it too. But crying would ruin Carly's look, and he knew it. That was why he whispered to her: "You can do it, baby. Hold on. Trevor will hold you up. I promise you that."

And that was enough for Carly. She redoubled her efforts and kept it together.

When they made it to the front of the cathedral, and Big Daddy placed Carly's hand in Trevor's hand, he looked him dead in the eye. "Give her space. Don't smother her," he said to him, "but take care of her."

Trevor looked Big Daddy in the eye too. “The job you did makes that easy,” Trevor said to him in a way so sincere and filled with love that Big Daddy smiled. He was still heartbroken, but he was certain there was no better man in this world for Carly.

And then he backed away and to his seat beside Jenay, whom he pulled into his arms.

And they stood side by side. Every family member was in attendance: all of the Gabrinis and all of the Sinatras. And so many other people, friends of Trevor and Carly, that it was practically standing room only.

And then the pastor began.

“Dearly beloved,” he began, and Carly and Trevor did not remove their eyes from one another as they listened and recited their vows. It was a long road to get where they stood today, but they both believed it was well worth every curve.

And when the pastor said those words, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Trevor was so happy that he began kissing his bride before the pastor could tell him to do so. The entire church erupted in laughter and applause.

Amari was laughing too. He actually liked his father, which surprised him. Maybe because his mother led him to think he was dead all this time, lowered his expectations. Or maybe just because Trevor Reese was a very likeable guy. He wasn’t sure. But time would tell, he knew.

Trevor knew it too, as he kissed Carly Sinatra Reese. He wasn’t just marrying a woman. He was marrying a whole family. The Sinatras and the Gabrinis. But Trevor was determined, when it was all said and done, that every one of his in-laws were going to respect him enough to recognize Carly as a Reese first. Trevor’s Reese.

And when they finally stopped kissing, he whispered in her ear too. But he didn’t tell her to hold on, or reassured her that their way was going to be easy. He whispered, “I love you, Carly,” and those three simple words did it.

She broke down and cried her own tears of joy.

Her mother and sister joined her, and then the rest of their massive family, crying too.

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