



Engaged In Espionage

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Category: Romance, Thriller, Suspense

Description: For my first official case as Amelia Quinn, Private Investigator, (title pending), I will find out what my boyfriend is hiding from me.

Luckily, I know just what his secret is.

Only it wasn't supposed to lead me right into the middle of his undercover operation. What can I say? Danger finds me.

Now hopefully I can find a way out of this mess, and that secret.

Engaged in Espionage is a fun and light-hearted short story, following Amelia and Caleb from Date with Danger on their next adventure.

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Chapter 1

Amelia

I drop the binoculars onto my lap. "I am going to murder my boyfriend."

I probably shouldn't say things like that out loud, seeing as how the last man who wronged me ended up dead. That sounds worse than it was.

No wait. It legitimately does not get worse than death.

Oh, I didn't kill him. ?I want to make that abundantly clear right off the bat.

But tonight is a different story. I may have to kill someone. Caleb. And the woman sitting across from him, leaning over the table to display a ridiculous amount of cleavage. I don't have half of what she does. Am I jealous? Yes, obviously.

"I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for this," Maddie says from the passenger seat, where she has her binoculars aimed right at my boyfriend, catching him in the act.

"I can't believe this is happening again," I groan.

"He's not Justin, he's not cheating on you, he's working. That's what he told you."

"Yes, yes, I know. My boyfriend is a government agent and incapable of being dishonest with me," I mutter in a monotone.

I know he's not cheating on me. Maybe. Then again...there may still be some lingering fears in the pit of my soul in a place only Taylor Swift could accurately describe through poetic song.

But this is more than that.

This is a missing persons case. Caleb told me he was going to be busy with work for a while. He didn't say he was going to disappear for an entire month. I hadn't seen my boyfriend for thirty-one days. I needed proof of life! So I enlisted Maddie's help to track him down.

And we caught him. In the act of enjoying steak with another woman. That is a food best savored beside me.

"Did he tell you what he was working on?" Maddie asks.

"Something top secret, yada yada."

I pull the binoculars back up to my eyes. Caleb touches the woman's hand, and I want nothing more than to chop off her fake nails.

Caleb picks up her hand and presses a kiss to the back, offering her a smile meant solely for me.

Red hot fury rages in my stomach.

"I'm killing him." I toss the binoculars in the back seat.

"Whoa, hey." Maddie yanks my arm off the door. "Let's just wait it out, and see what happens."

“You think I should wait until he kisses her?”

“Well...”

“I’m going in there.”

“And you’re going to what? Make a huge scene?”

I look over at her. “Yes.”

“What if he’s undercover?”

I already considered that. I take a deep breath. “Relax. I noticed approximately seven minutes ago that all the servers are wearing black. So am I. I’ll steal an apron and walk by. I won’t even engage.”

“That is a terrible idea.” Maddie shakes her head.

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“Probably. But it's also a fun one.” I shoot her a smile before hopping out. I dodge around the side of the building and locate the employee entrance. The door is cracked open, and a mouth-watering aroma filters into the alley.

I peek through the opening, feeling like a professional spy.

Everyone is busy. The chef tosses food in frying pans, the servers run around with plates. Not a single soul looks up from their task as I slip inside.

There is an apron on the back of a chair and I snatch it up, wrapping it around my waist.

This was significantly easier than I thought it would be.

I scoop two plates off the dessert counter and scurry out of the kitchen.

Once I hit the dining area, I slow my pace. It has been a while since I've been a server, but it all flies back to me in a flash. It's not that hard. All you have to do is be super kind, and a little flirtatious, and you'll get great tips. And of course, remember the correct orders, which was never my strong suit.

I'm ten steps from their table. Caleb hasn't seen me; he'd have to take his eyes off Miss America for that.

Caleb says something to the woman, and she purses her lips, leaning back in her seat with disinterest.

“Did I tell you how well you wear that color?” Caleb asks in his most sultry voice.

He’s got a point. Few people can pull off that shade of vibrant purple, but how dare he compliment her when I’m standing right here!

“Someone ordered dessert?” I drop the two plates on the table in between the home wrecker and the cheater.

The home wrecker glares at the piece of chocolate cake like it could kill her. The cheater looks like he just swallowed an olive. But I don’t feel like jumping in to give him the Heimlich.

“These aren’t ours.” The woman waves her hand at them, frantically trying to shoo them away like the calories will stick to her if she just looks at them.

“They are now.” I smile sweetly at her, then lower my voice. “There’s no need to worry about the carbs going to your waist. It’s just a myth.”

The woman gapes at me. Then I turn my attention to my boyfriend. “This looks like a man who would encourage a lady to eat what pleases her. Am I right?”

Caleb takes a breath, placing a smile on his face. But I know him well enough to read the emotion beneath. He’s fuming.

He’s so sexy when he’s mad.

“I believe a lady can make her own decisions.” He gazes adoringly at the woman, and then his tantalizing green eyes shift to me. “A lady should be confident enough with herself that she doesn’t do something she’d regret.”

He’s calling me out right now? He’s the one wearing his most expensive suit to

schmooze a woman who's at least ten years older than him.

Hmm. The binoculars didn't pick up on that one.

Crap. He's working. Well, good thing I didn't bring any unnecessary attention to myself.

I turn a fake smile back at the lady. "My mistake, ma'am. When they said to take this to the beautiful lady in the back, I just assumed that was you. Clearly, I was wrong."

That sounded nicer in my head.

The woman gasps and shoots to her feet.

She's a lot taller than the binoculars let on as well.

"I mean, you're not ugly or anything it's just—"

"There she is!" A high-pitched voice breaks through the dining room and everyone turns toward the sound of the young server. "That's the woman who snuck in the back!"

I swallow. She could be referring to anyone.

"And stole my apron."

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Two seconds later I'm tackled to the ground, handcuffs cinched around my wrists.

Unnecessary attention: check.

"Are the cuffs really necessary?" I ask Cruz.

A wicked gleam grows in her eyes. "Oh yeah."

She's having too much fun with this. My shoulder is still sore because she tackled me to the floor like a freaking lineman. She could have led me, with dignity, out the back. But instead, she announced to the whole restaurant that I'd escaped a mental facility, then marched me through the front, very slowly. Then she continued to haul me down the street to where the van was parked. I've been stuck in this uncomfortable chair for ten minutes now.

"Is this how you got Liam to fall in love with you? You know you don't have to handcuff people to get them to like you. You just have to be nice—"

"I'm nice." She cuts me off with a glare.

I tilt my head to the side. "Try saying it with a smile and I might believe you."

"Seriously, Amelia, you can't keep doing this. You can't keep showing up in the middle of missions. Caleb is undercover right now. I barely even know what he's doing. I'm just here in case things go south."

A pit forms in my stomach. I feel appropriately chastened. "I know, I just...I haven't

seen him in a month. I wanted to make sure he was okay.”

Her scowl softens incrementally. “If you’re not careful, next time you’ll end up in the middle of a gunfight.”

That would be less than ideal. “Can I get a gun on the off chance that happens?”

She rolls her eyes.

It was worth a shot.

One knock on the door is the only warning before Caleb enters the van. His face is a mask of frustration and...more frustration.

I screwed up. I realized that twenty minutes ago, but I feel roughly the size of a grain of dirt right now.

“Want me to stay?” Cruz asks.

Caleb just shakes his head. Cruz hops out of the van and Caleb leans against the closed back doors. “I just got off the phone with my boss.”

“Your new boss, right? Not the old one that turned on Cruz?” I could kill that guy, and I never even met him. “That guy made a real mess of things...”

And so did I. These handcuffs are probably on the right person.

I sink lower in my seat. “Caleb, I’m so sorry.”

“Myundercoverboss.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know how you did it. I’ve been trying to get in with that woman for months, I’ve been working for her organization

and everything, but when I defended her against the crazy lady—”

“Unnecessarily harsh.”

“She invited me to a private event,” he finishes.

On second thought, maybe the cuffs should be on her.

“Do I, uh,” I scrunch up my nose, “want to know what kind of event this is?”

“It’s illegal, and classified.” He pushes off the wall and stalks toward me. “What was going through your head tonight, sweetheart?” He kneels in front of me and brushes a strand of hair out of my face before releasing me from the cuffs.

“You’ve been MIA for a month! I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” A smile creases his cheeks. “How did you find me?” He mutters a curse through a clenched jaw. “You asked Liam for help, didn’t you?”

I squirm in my seat. “A good spy never reveals their secrets.”

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“You’re not a spy.”

“No. But I think I’ve found something better.”

His brows furrow, but he doesn’t speak, so I take that as my cue to start the conversation I’ve been waiting a month to have.

“So you know how I love being a hairdresser?”

He frowns while massaging my wrists. “You don’t love it. You enjoy it.”

“Right, I love you. Anyway, I figured out my passion.”

Caleb gives me his full, undivided attention, and I’m momentarily distracted by his beautiful lips. I could make a career out of kissing those.

I shake my head. “I’ve had a lot of alone time to think, and I’ve decided I’m going to be a private investigator.”

Caleb stares at me, dumbfounded. “What?”

“You know those people who don’t work for the government, but can still solve crimes and cases even faster because they’re not tied up by red tape?”

“You know the term red tape doesn’t mean actual tape, right?”

Hmm. Disappointing.

“Way to kill that one for me. Anyway, I’m already good at this. Remember, I solved the case of your missing T-shirt.”

He bites down on his bottom lip. “You mean the shirt you forgot you stole from me and found in your laundry pile two months later?”

“But I found it. And I figured out why Shawn was peeing in your shoe, remember?”

“Because he’s untrained?”

“Right.”

He sighs, but a smile teases his lips. He scrubs a hand down his face. “I’m going to regret this, but I have an idea.”

“I’m in.”

“You haven’t even heard what the idea is.”

“Does it matter?”

He shakes his head. “I’m hiding something right now. If you figure out what it is, I’ll support your dreams.”

“You’ll quit the FBI and work for me, and we’ll become the detective duo of my dreams?”

He raises a single brow. “That’s not what I said.”

“Oh, right, you’re hiding something from me. Are you on a dating app? Secretly undercover and have been the whole time we’ve been together, and tonight was your

real life. No wait, you have an identical twin, and I've been dating both of you, but one of you is a better kisser—"

"Amelia."

"Right, head in the game. You're hiding something?" I clench my fists, but my legs are bouncing like crazy. Focus.

"Figure it out and find it," he says, giving me a mission. I'm living for this. Mission accepted.

I tap my foot on the floor. "That's it?"

"That's it."

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“Any hints?”

“Just this one.” He leans across the distance between us and kisses me. His lips are soft and teasing, then rough and firm. And with this kiss, I know.

I know exactly what he’s hiding from me.

Chapter 2

Amelia

“It’s his dad!”

Maddie and Connor both stare at me, dumbfounded. I can almost hear the sound of their confused blinking like they are cartoon characters. They are sitting on the couch across from me while I’m flanked on each side by my dogs, who paw lazily at the rip in my jeans.

“His secret is...his dad? The criminal?” Maddie asks slowly.

“Yes.” Why aren’t they keeping up? This is a no-brainer. “Caleb clearly wants me to meet him and is just begging me to find him and fix their shattered relationship.” He’s never said as much out loud but that’s what makes it a secret. He’s made progress proving he’s not like his dad, but I think he needs to confront his past before he’s ready to face the future. Why else hasn’t he proposed? We’ve been together for six months already.

Maddie and Connor are silent as they share a look. Connor turns his attention back to me. “I really don’t think he wants a relationship with his dad.”

Connor and Caleb have become good friends—no, wait, that’s not strong enough. They are the classic Sean and Gus bromance, dancing down the beach with tacos. Except they don’t dance, but the taco thing I’ve seen myself and it’s irritating.

“No offense, but I think I know my boyfriend better than you do.” I scoff, sliding a hand up and down Shawn’s smooth fur coat. I’ve seen how torn up Caleb gets talking about his dad and I don’t want him to suffer anymore. I want everything good and wonderful for him.

“Really?” Connor asks. “Then how do you not know that—”

Maddie smacks Connor and his mouth snaps shut. “We can’t tell her.”

I turn on Maddie slowly. “Wait? You know?”

That changes things. A good P.I. is resourceful. It’s not cheating, it’s simply gathering theories.

“No.” Maddie holds up her hand. “But we have our own idea as to what it might be.”

My chest deflates. They don’t know either. “I’m right,” I say. At least the dogs are still on my side. If only literally. Something squeaks in the house, and both Shawn and Gus leap from my side, abandoning me like the helpless nuisances they are.

“Fine.” Connor shrugs. “How are you going to find his dad?”

I grin, still living on my high from last night. I went home and researched for hours. And when none of that panned out, I called in a favor from Liam. He found me

everything I needed to know.

Name: Thane Harris.

Age: fifty-five.

Current location: Las Vegas.

Allergies: human connection. I figured that one out myself.

“I already did.” I grin. “Who’s up for a road trip to Las Vegas?”

Maddie and Connor look at each other again. I wish they’d let me in on the secrets they are passing with their eyes. It’s rude to exclude people like this.

“You’re going to Vegas?” Connor finally speaks.

I frown at the two of them. I thought they’d be more excited for me. I finally found what I want to do with my life; why aren’t they supporting me? “Well, we could all go to Vegas if you would stop being weird and go with me.”

“You know we can’t. The volleyball team is headed to state next week, and I’ve got a huge trial coming up,” Connor says.

“What a bunch of party-poopers. Can you at least babysit my dogs?”

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Connor shakes his head. “I knew it would come back to bite me either way.”

“I take that as a yes.”

“Millie, do you really think this is a good idea?” Maddie asks.

Honestly? I don’t know. But Caleb has been gone for so long, I’m desperate to find a reason to bring him back to me. “Do you have a better one?”

They exchange another look. It lasts longer this time, but they seem to come to a conclusion with their eyes.

“Keep your phone on, and don’t gamble away all your money.” Connor sighs.

“I was hoping for a bit more positivity, but I’ll take it.”

“Just...be safe,” Connor says, coming to wrap me in a hug.

“That’s practically my middle name.”

Chapter 3

Caleb

Amelia’sgoingtokillme. That’s the only thought going through my mind as I spread sunscreen on Katerina’s nearly bare back. Is this cheating? It feels like cheating.

The minute I got back from talking to Amelia the other night, Katerina informed me the business event we would attend was in Las Vegas. We've been here ever since and let's just say, it has been two long days pretending to be someone I'm not while avoiding the advances of a woman who has paid a fortune for cosmetic surgery. According to our intel, she's well over forty. But I'd never know that by looking at her. And I've had to look at her for a very long time.

I miss Amelia's pure soul, her wild and witty mouth, especially her mouth. I just miss her. Hopefully, I can get the info we need at this meeting tonight because I'm dying without her. If there's one thing I've learned being away from her, it's that I don't want to live a life without other people. I want all the people. I want normalcy and friendship.

I also want to put bad guys away and take down this particular trafficking ring.

"A little lower." Katerina purrs.

I'm not getting paid enough for this.

I clench my jaw and do as I'm told, my sunscreen-soaked hands making their way lower down her tanned leathery skin.

Twelve hours. This could be over in twelve hours.

I finally finish and settle back in my beach chair, wiping off the remainder of the sunscreen on my towel, hoping to get rid of the feel of her skin as well.

"Don't you want me to put sunscreen on you?" Katerina asks, righting herself in her chair.

I'm so sick of playing the strong but flirtatious boy toy. I'm ready to be taken

seriously to gain the information I want.

“I was thinking of buying us a drink. I’d hate for you to get dehydrated.” Because then she would have to stop flirting for a full second, and what would that be like? “What would you like?”

“Gin and tonic,” she says, slipping her glasses into place and leaning back in the chair. Once her eyes are off me, I am free. I’m finding I don’t enjoy being undercover as much as I thought I would. It’s not exciting. It’s dangerous. That fact never used to scare me, but now I have Amelia. Should anything happen to her because of my undercover work, I’d never forgive myself. And I miss the people who have become my family.

I approach the bar situated in the middle of a small pool, raised on a platform.

There are only about fifteen people on this very exclusive fake beach, two of them standing as sentinels ready to serve Katerina anything she could want. Another two are bodyguards here to protect her.

The woman demands this kind of treatment everywhere we go. And everywhere we go, I dream of the way Amelia talks with strangers as if she’s known them her whole life. I love watching her play with kids and make a fool of herself to get a smile from them. She’s living. Katerina is...I don’t know what Katerina is doing.

“Gin and tonic, and a water with lime,” I tell the bartender, whose sole purpose is serving the elite rich on this fake beach.

He nods and gets to work. I lean back against the bar and take a full breath. If I were here with Amelia, things would be different. I would enjoy the calming sound of the wave pool and the solitude of the bungalows. I’d throw her in the pool, then apologize with kisses when she yelled at me.

I miss her so much I have been seeing her everywhere. As the hostess from check-in, the maid I passed in the hallway. And that girl halfway hidden behind the towel stand. She's everywhere.

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I have to get her out of my head for one more night. Finish the mission.

“Here you are, sir.”

I grab the drinks and return to work.

Chapter 4

Amelia

Why yes, those towels were very interesting. No, I didn't know I couldn't be in a private hotel admiring towels and pretending to be a hotel employee. Okay, I did. P.I. work is harder than I expected.

I wasn't looking at towels, though. I was looking for Caleb's dad. He supposedly works in the hotel, and now that I've been kicked out, I don't know how I'm going to find him.

A hotel employee steps through the exit behind me and instantly engages with something on her phone.

“Excuse me?” I approach the young woman. “I love those earrings. Did you make them?”

She stops, slowly lowering her phone. “Yeah.”

“You have such a talent. I tried to make resin jewelry once. It did not end well.”

She gives me a funny look. “It’s not that hard.”

I don’t know if that’s supposed to be an insult or not. “I’m not very crafty. So, um, have you worked here long?”

“Six months.” She starts walking again, and I’m forced to follow her if I want to keep up the conversation.

“You don’t happen to know a man named Thane Harris, do you? You see, he’s my boyfriend’s long-lost father, and I’m trying to find him so I can start my own detective business.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “But like, doesn’t he have a phone? Can’t you just message him?”

Is she treating me like I’m a seventy-year-old right now? Not cool.

“I don’t have his number,” I say with a tight smile.

“I don’t know him. But I know some of the older employees,”—she looks pointedly at my shoes as she says this, and my Converse takes immediate offense—“get together at the JEWEL. They’ll probably be there tonight. Thursdays are their usual hang-out night. They invited me once, but I was like, ‘No way am I going to hang out with a bunch of boomers.’” Her eyes go to my skinny jeans now. This girl is so judgmental.

“Good thing that’s right up my alley.” I grin and thank her before hurrying away. Time to go undercover.

I stop at a thrift store on the way back to my hotel and buy everything I could possibly need. Hats, wigs, masks, dresses, shoes, and some handcuffs. All the basics.

I've got a skip in my step back to my hotel room at the Paris. Where I find...
"Maddie? What are you doing here?"

She's sitting on her suitcase right outside my door, looking very regal in crisp khaki pants and a white button-up. Who travels in such uncomfortable clothes? She grins when she sees me. "Thought we were overdue for a little girls' trip. Plus, Connor and I decided someone needed to come and keep you out of trouble."

I run down the hall, my bags swinging wildly at my sides, and wrap her in a hug.
"This is going to be the best weekend ever!"

"I have to leave Saturday, though."

"Please, I'll have this thing wrapped up by tonight. We'll party the rest of the weekend like it's 2014."

She raises a brow. "That was an oddly specific and random year to choose."

"It was the best year and you know it."

"I don't even recall that year."

"How unfortunate you missed out, and now it's 2015."

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“You know it’s not 2015, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“Your lack of faith in me is beginning to show.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “So what’s the plan? How do we contact Caleb’s dad?”

“I’m so glad you asked...”

Chapter 5

Caleb

“Chad.” Katerina snaps her fingers to get my attention. I know this because she does it every five minutes. The woman is excessively needy. “Eyes on me, Chad.” “Watch closely, Chad.”

My eyes are ready to go on strike. I have to clench my fists to keep from strangling her. This undercover assignment is testing my limited patience.

And yes. My undercover name is Chad. The Bureau thought it fit me. Cruz thought it was hilarious. I think it’s ridiculous to use the same name Liam Hawthorne used when he first showed up in the States and tried to go out with my girlfriend. But it’s

worked so far. No one questions a punk Chad.

“I’m going to need you to leave your gun here.” She taps the hotel coffee table between us as if I’m going to drop it right there.

“Excuse me?” Is she on to me? Is my cover blown?

“Yes,” she says. “A man like you...” She stands and rounds the back of the couch. “Needs a bigger weapon.”

Should I take offense to that? “I—”

“Try this one.” She picks up a large gun from behind the couch and tosses it at me. I very nearly drop to the ground in case a rogue bullet goes into my head. But instead, I pull my shoulders back and catch the AR-15 pistol.

I glance down at the gun in my hands. “The safety wasn’t on.”

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Katerina walks over to me, running her fingers along the gun. “You already intrigue me. But they aren’t as easily impressed.” She still hasn’t told me who “they” are. But that doesn’t matter; whoever it is will be the key to helping this entire organization unravel.

“And this gun is all it will take?” I ask, a cautious flirtation in my voice.

“No. They’ll have suspicions about you. So you’re going to have to fight someone, in my honor, of course, to prove your loyalty.”

“I expect nothing less.” But I sure hoped for less.

Katerina saunters to the fridge, which is stocked with containers of pre-made meals.

She grabs two and brings them to the couch.

Raw sushi. I try not to shudder. I hate fish in all its forms, cooked or not cooked, alive or not alive. Maybe it's because taking me fishing was an activity my dad promised every time he came back around. "Something a father should teach a son," he would say. Instead, the only thing he taught me was how to run when things got hard.

I pick up a piece of sushi and put it in my mouth, pretending I love every single awful bite. I even manage to throw in a few love-struck, hopelessly devoted to you kind of vibes in Katerina's direction as I do so. It's too bad Amelia can't witness my expertise in such a way. I'll have to use my powers of seduction on her later.

"What's got you smiling?" Katerina purrs.

I check my face. My lips are barely tipped up in the corner. This woman is good. I have to be better.

"You, always," I whisper, snatching her hand and bringing it to my lips, pressing a kiss to it. I better get a raise.

"Save that energy for later." She wiggles her eyebrows, or tries to, but the Botox makes her look deranged. "We've got work to do." She stands up, leaving her mostly full dish there. "As long as you don't die tonight."

A clump of raw fish gets lodged in my throat and I cough. I won't be dying tonight. Not when I have so much to live for.

Chapter 6

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Amelia

I step out of the bathroom and find Maddie in a black dress and heels. “What are you wearing?” I gape at her.

“The better question is, what are you wearing?” She gapes right back at me.

I look down at my hot pink, glittering dress, the one I found for a steal at the thrift store. It has a corseted top and a loose skirt that hits my thighs, but the best part is the sheer shawl of bright pink tulle. I look back at Maddie. “I’m literally Margot Robbie on the Barbie red carpet.”

“I thought the point was to blend in.”

“Where on earth did you get that stupid idea?”

“I don’t know. Maybe when you said we needed to ‘go undercover,’” she says, complete with judgmental air quotes. “Not try to be on the cover of a magazine.”

“First of all, thank you. Second, well, I don’t really have a second because we need to go.” I took too long to make my face up to perfection. But I achieved it. I look completely different with smoky eyes, darker brows, big bold lips, and a contoured face. I almost look like Margot Robbie.

Hmm. I see how that might be a problem. I debate going back to wipe it off, but we are in Vegas. There will be plenty of other look-alikes out there. No one will pay me any mind.

The club is bouncing. Literally, the whole building feels like it's shaking. I pull up the latest photo Liam could find of Thane and study it again. It's grainy but the similarities to Caleb are obvious. Caleb is going to be quite the dashing silver fox. Lucky me.

"I thought you weren't supposed to text Liam anymore," Maddie says from over my shoulder.

"This was a matter of life and death," I mutter.

"Add a little more emotion. That was almost convincing."

"Caleb will thank me later."

She shakes her head. "Again, not convinced."

"Let's get a drink in you to liven you up," I say, pushing my way through the crowds. It's going to be nearly impossible to find anyone in here. It's so dark and crowded I can barely keep track of Maddie.

"Just water for me," Maddie says when we reach the counter.

I look over at her. "Is this because you're still a health nut, or are you finally pregnant with my niece or nephew?" She and Connor only got married four months ago, but I've been begging them nonstop to put their honeymoon phase to good use and get me a new best friend. Well, I've said it nicer than that.

Maddie just rolls her eyes and takes the offered cup.

A hand lands on my shoulder and I jump.

“Where have you been?”

I turn toward the voice. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not supposed to get drunk before the show. You can do that on your own time.” The middle-aged man grabs my arm and tries to pull me from my seat, but I pull back.

“I think there’s been some kind of misunderstanding.”

“Yeah. You’re supposed to be in the back with the rest of the dancers.” He rubs his hand over his sweaty forehead. “I do not get paid enough for this job.”

“I’m not a dancer.”

He scowls. “You’re not? Then why are you wearing our costume?”

Maddie snorts.

“I found it. I looked great in it. That was the entire thought process.”

“Well...” he seems conflicted. “You do look fabulous.” He studies me intently. “You even did the makeup right. Can you dance? We’re short a member.”

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“Can the pope sing?” I scoff.

He raises a brow. “I don’t think that’s the correct phrase.”

I wave my hand in the air. “Show me the choreography.”

The guy motions me to the back and I wait for Maddie to follow, but she holds up her phone. “Don’t worry, I’ll record the whole thing.”

I appreciate her sacrifice. Caleb is going to need evidence of this.

Five minutes later, I’ve determined he will never get to see this footage. They only let me watch a video of the dance twice. I needed at least fifty-two run-throughs.

“Wait!” I grab the nearest dancer’s arm as the group of them crowd around me, forcing me onto the darkened stage. “I don’t think I’ve got it.”

She just laughs. “This is Vegas, honey. All they want is a show.”

A show? Now that I can do.

Barbie Girl plays. A bit cliché, but I can dance to this song in my sleep. Usually, I’m not front and center on a stage in Vegas, but I think it’s safe to say I’ve found my purpose in life.

The lights beam down and I go blind. Then I remember the dance moves and start doing them to the best of my memory as the club slowly comes back into view. I

shimmy to the right and spi—I crash into another dancer, who thankfully takes it in stride. I can see now, but I’m also behind. Crap, what comes next?

A leap? I do it, and... kick the dancer in front of me in the head because she just went down in the splits. I guess I did the splits, just the aerial version. People hoot and laugh, but I don’t leave the stage. I continue to dance like no one is watching. Unfortunately, many people are watching, and my mind has gone blank on the rest of the routine.

Two men grab my arms and I startle before realizing they are lifting me. I hold my arms stiff, but the move tests my upper body strength. Are they trying to rip my arms off? This looks much easier on TV.

I bring my knee up like I’ve seen people on TV do.

But it connects with something—a face. A man below me glares at me before grabbing his now bloody nose and stomping off the stage.

It’s not my fault he was at my knee.

I spot Maddie in the front, phone held high. I won’t be posting this video online.

Another man grabs my waist and I yelp as he puts me on his shoulder. Gee, these guys sure are handsy.

The song ends and the audience applauds. Everyone in the front couple rows at least; the rest of the club hardly seems to care. Especially that guy on his phone who just...wait, did he just take that woman’s purse?

He did! And no one’s stopping him. Why isn’t anyone stopping him?

The thief's eyes connect with mine, and I gasp.

It's him! Thane!

"Stop that man!" I yell, but my words disappear in the noise.

The men holding me set me back down. The second my feet hit the stage, I run and jump off the edge.

No one catches me. That was overenthusiastic of me to assume that might happen twice in my lifetime.

My legs crumple beneath me and I crash to the floor. What a show.

Chapter 7

Caleb

This meeting is not going well.

"You lied to us, Katerina," one of the three men says as they walk around her with guns far bigger than mine. Big enough to make me nervous. She said this would be a simple meeting, an agreement between two parties.

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This meeting was supposed to give me the rest of the information I needed to lock Katerina up and convince her to turn on her own organization.

According to our intel, Katerina is a medium-sized fish in this industry. The kind with something to prove, but not enough power to prove it. The kind we like to flip or at least be satisfied in taking down.

But these men are acting as if she's nothing.

"You stole from Fox," the biggest man says.

Fox. My ears perk up at this. No one in the Bureau has been able to identify who "Fox" is, though they've been trying for years. If I could get to Fox, then Katerina, as well as the rest of the corporation in the southwestern U.S., would be as good as gone.

Katerina scoffs. "I stole nothing from that monster."

"Where's the money then?"

"I gave it to you."

"Not all of it," the smaller of the two says. "Three million was missing."

"You're crying over spilled milk." Katerina laughs.

"Before that, it was four, before that two."

Katerina just shakes her head. “Fox pays me pennies for all I do. A girl needs to live. So I gave myself a raise.”

She needs nine million to live? I despise this woman. But I don’t let it show on my face.

“Fox may not have noticed.” The big guy glares at her. “But you got greedy stealing the Framework.”

My shoulders tense. The Framework. We were under the impression Katerina didn’t have access to it. But if she does...that changes everything, the whole mission. Between the Framework and Katerina? It’s not even a choice. The Framework is a chip with access to every government agency system. Agent names and codenames, ongoing missions, top secret locations, you name it, it’s all there. Whoever has the Framework needs to be found and if Katerina does... I have to get it before these guys do.

“Where is it?” the big guy asks.

Katerina shrugs. “Nearby.”

The big guy cocks his gun, holding it up to her temple. “Take us there now.”

For the first time all night, Katerina looks almost frightened. “Calm down, it’s safe. But only I can get it. I’ll get it and bring it when I meet with Fox tomorrow.”

So that’s what she wanted. A meeting with the big dog. Risky.

“I don’t think so,” the man says, pressing the gun harder into her temple.

“You can keep my bodyguard to make sure I come back.”

I clench my fists at my side. I'm going to kill her. If these guys don't do it first.

The big guy laughs. "I don't want him. Nobody does."

That was a tad cruel.

"But let's see how useful he is." He turns, looking at me. "Go, retrieve the Framework. Bring it back tomorrow by eight a.m. or Katerina dies."

I pretend to look concerned. But I'm not. This is Katerina. A woman who sells and smuggles drugs and weapons for the Russia mafia. I don't want her back. But he just gave me exactly what I wanted.

"But he doesn't know where it is," Katerina grumbles. The fact that the man hasn't hit her yet, only threatened her life, is suspicious. Her stealing the Framework was personal. Maybe she stole it from him. No way Fox would be coming to Vegas to meet with a lowly smuggler. She's here for the chip. Which he was supposed to have. Until Katerina played him for it.

"Let's hope he figures it out," the man snaps at Katerina. "You and I have some unfinished business."

Katerina rolls her eyes, but I see beneath her razor sharp veneer. She's worried. That doesn't bode well.

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I have no idea how I'm supposed to find something Katerina hid in this city before these men hunt me down. But I'll have to try.

"Chad," Katerina warns. "Think about this. Don't pack up your luggage yet. We'll never get to Paris."

What on earth is she saying?

"Evan, go with him," the big guy says to a man in the back. "Make sure he gets it. If he runs, kill him."

So there goes kissing Amelia tomorrow.

We'll never get to Paris. That's the first clue that makes any sense. We are staying at the Bellagio, across from the Paris Las Vegas. She could have taken it there at some point. The Framework is small enough to fit in a padded envelope and be mailed over there. That's my first idea.

But I need to lose my tail. So instead of going straight to the Paris, I wander down the Strip, dodging in and out of clubs, the entire time aware of the hulking shadow behind me.

"Do you know where you're going?" Evan snarls after the fourth one.

"Honestly, no," I say casually. "She kept talking about this man named Billy she knew who ran the gondolas at the Venetian, but I can't remember where that is."

“Idiot,” Evan mutters and, as I hoped, stomps forward, in front of me, leading the way.

Looks like they sent the stupid one. I follow him dutifully for a block. And then, when a group of bushy-tailed dancers slips between us, I make my move, sprinting straight across the busy street. The Paris is in the opposite direction and while I run I snag items from vendors and people walking by. A brown hat, a red button-up, and sunglasses. I add them as I go, calculating the risks of my plan.

Do I go straight to the FBI with the Framework? Or try to catch Fox myself? I know what I should do. But I’m going to need backup.

Chapter 8

Amelia

Running down the street, chasing after a criminal is a lot more fun in the movies I’m sure. In real life, my heels are killing me, my dress is too tight and riding up, and there are too many people in the way. I’ve been in and out of and around buildings all down the Strip, and somehow I’m still on Thane’s tail.

When he stops to purchase something from a street vendor, I slow to a walk and kick off my heels, holding them by the straps, desperately trying to ignore the sticky grime beneath my feet and drag in some much needed air. If I’m going to be chasing people down on a regular basis, I’m going to need to add some protein and veggies to my diet.

It may not be worth it.

I sigh and continue on after my suspect.

Wait, where is Thane? I glance around, but...I've lost him.

No! How did I do that? He was right there, and then I got distracted.

Is that him turning down that alley?

I speed up, hoping to catch sight of him, but I don't spy him down that alley, or the next one.

I don't know where I am, and I'm tired. But I refuse to call it quits. I turn down the street in a direction I pray will take me back to the Strip. I reach for my phone to call Maddie, then remember I left my purse at the table when I took the stage.

What kind of P.I. leaves their phone behind? Clearly I've got a lot to learn, but I'm nothing if not teachable.

A loud slam echoes through the alley up ahead and I freeze. What was that? And why is it so dark? I thought I was heading toward the Strip, not away from it.

I scoot closer to the shadows on the opposite side of the alley and press on. I just need to get back to the Strip.

Another twenty steps, and I can make out a small shop. It looks like a tiny post office but with huge lockers instead of small ones. The person manning it has clearly gone home for the night. The station consists of a single door, and a shadow quickly moves behind it.

Someone's in there.

My body seizes, the thumping of my heart the only sound in my ears. I can't will myself to investigate, but I also can't walk away. I'm powerless. Which means

whenever that person comes out of there, I'm a sitting duck. I need to move. Now.

Glass breaks and a man darts out of the station.

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Alarms blare, and I run down the opposite side of the street. I'm not about to get caught for his crimes.

But it's not just any man; it's Caleb's dad. That criminal!

I race after him. But he doesn't slow. He must keep in shape for his nefarious purposes.

Only once we've turned down the next alley do I dare yell out to him.

"Hey, stop!"

Thane looks backward, startled. But he keeps running.

"I know who you are, Thane Harris."

At this, he comes to a complete stop. He turns, eyes narrowed in on me like Caleb does. But where there's love behind Caleb's eyes, there's none in his dad's. Only a dangerous curiosity.

"How do you know my name?"

"I'm Caleb's girlfriend. I came to find you." I slow my steps, my voice coming out embarrassingly breathless.

At the sound of his son's name, something shifts in Thane's eyes. "Caleb? As in my Caleb?"

“No offense, but he’s mine, not yours. You don’t deserve him.”

Amusement flicks across his eyes. “I won’t argue there.”

A cop car zooms by, the sirens wailing down the alley, and Thane turns to keep walking down the street, away from the place he just robbed.

“Don’t you want to know why I came to find you?”

“Not really.”

“Caleb wants to talk to you.”

He looks over at me but continues marching forward at an accelerated pace. “He said that?”

I glance both ways before crossing the street behind him. “Not in so many words.”

“Meaning he didn’t say that,” Thane scoffs.

“No, but I know he wants his father in his li—”

“No, he doesn’t.”

He has a point. But maybe this goes deeper. For me, at least. “Well, then maybe I want you to apologize. Maybe I want you to see the good man your son has become and feel bad about it. Maybe—”

He turns so abruptly I almost run into him. “Maybe I already do.”

I study his face. “Which one is it?”

Another cop car zooms by, and Thane mutters a curse. “It doesn’t matter right now. We need to get off the street. Where are you staying?”

I scoff. “Like I’d tell a criminal. I’ve already had one dead body in my tub. I don’t want to be the next one.”

He raises a brow. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to get you back safely before those cops come after us.” He taps on his phone and looks up at me two seconds later. “The Uber will be here in just a moment.”

“I’m not riding with you.”

“Okay, call yourself a car.”

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I pat my pocketless dress. Dang it.

“Fine.” I purse my lips. “But you’re paying too.” Now, that’s how you negotiate with criminals.

The car pulls up, and I tell the driver where to take me. The second the Uber drives into the street, Thane turns on me.

“You seem like a nice girl trying to do something sweet for your boyfriend. And honestly, I’m a little surprised you found me. Perhaps you’d like to tell me how you did it?”

“No comment.” I bite my bottom lip. That’s an Ace card I’m not about to lose.

“But you’re also extremely reckless. You shouldn’t be anywhere near me. Your boyfriend doesn’t want you anywhere near me.”

“I’m not reckless,” I retort.

“Where are your shoes?”

I glance at my bare feet and empty hands. I must have dropped them somewhere. “They were thrift store shoes,” I say as an explanation.

He just shakes his head like he can’t believe the child he got stuck with. I’m not too fond of the man I’m stuck with right now, either. It’s silent for a few moments, and I’m about to tell Thane off when he speaks.

“Do you love him?” he asks, so softly I think I must have misheard.

I study the gray sprinkled through his hair. He’s missed so much of his son’s life. Is it possible he truly regrets it?

“More than anything in the world,” I say firmly.

“Is he happy?” His eyes find mine, and they are so much like Caleb’s it catches me off guard.

“He is.”

“Good.” Thane nods as the car stops in front of the hotel.

I look over at him. “He’s the best thing that ever happened to me. And I wish you felt the same way.”

Thane looks away while I reach for the door, and I see him as the coward he is. If this is the last time I ever see this man, I’m going to make it count.

“You know, I came to see if you’d changed, if you could handle a genuine relationship with your son instead of taking from him again. But I see you haven’t. It’s sad. And pathetic.”

“Agreed. Get out.”

“Actually, I don’t think I’m done. You are—”

“You are done.” He opens his door and grabs my arm, dragging me out of the car behind him.

Chapter 9

Caleb

I've been all over the Paris. I even sent Cruz an encrypted message to locate places where Katerina may have hidden the Framework, but nothing has panned out yet.

I have to find it before they find me, or I'm a dead man. I have to keep moving. Or find a better place to hide. It won't be long before they piece together Katerina's useless clues and catch me here.

My burner rings with a familiar number. Cruz. I answer immediately.

"There are some luggage lockers a few blocks from the Paris called 'Paris Station'. Not associated with the hotel," she says.

I shake my head. "She wouldn't be stupid enough to hide it somewhere so public." She'd be able to grab it easily, but those are far from safe.

"Really?" Cruz continues, "Because it was just broken into two minutes ago."

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“What?” I freeze, my feet stuck to the casino carpet. That can’t be a coincidence. Was it Evan? Did he know where it was all along?

“Security footage is terrible, but I’m sending over the file now,” Cruz says. “Also, I’m on my way. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“No. I’ve got teams here. You stay there.”

“Like you stayed away when I was in trouble? Don’t think so. My plane leaves in five.”

It’s pointless to talk her out of it. So I don’t. I hang up and look at the picture. The man must have known where the cameras were because he kept his head down the whole time. He’s not overly tall, under six feet. Wearing all black and has no markings on his skin. He appears squat but nimble.

Nothing to narrow it down.

I mutter a curse and stomp through the casino, back toward the Strip. What am I going to do?

I’m twenty feet from the front door when it opens, and a woman comes walking through barefoot. I do a double-take. There’s a pound of makeup on her face, doing its best to mask her identity, but I’d know her anywhere. That’s my woman.

My stomach bottoms out.

No, no, no. This cannot be happening. Why is Amelia in Las Vegas?

That woman has an affinity for finding danger. And I have to keep her out of it. I can't let her see me and get dragged into this mess.

At least that's my plan. Until I register the man behind her.

My father.

The air evaporates from my lungs and I pull my hat further down, covering my face. I can't be seen talking to them here. But I will be talking to them.

When they head for the elevators, I do too, slipping sunglasses on as I go.

What on earth is happening? Did she come here to find my father because she still thinks I want a relationship with him? And now he's fed her some lie, telling her how he's broke, and she's going to hand over her wallet out of the goodness of her heart?

Things could not possibly get worse.

Amelia

"I can walk back to my room by myself," I say to Thane. He's giving off some super creepy vibes right now, and all I want to do is get away from him. What is he going to do? Rob me? I hope Maddie is already there, then it will be two against one and we can surely fight him off. Caleb and I have been practicing takedown maneuvers...or have we? Usually, we just end up kissing, and I don't feel like that's an appropriate surprise attack in this situation.

“Not if you’re drunk,” Thane mutters, glancing over his shoulder but pushing me forward toward the elevators.

“I’m not drunk!” I nearly stomp on his foot in retaliation.

Thane glances around pointedly. “Sure honey, no need to get upset.”

Ooh, this man is infuriating. “What did you steal from that place?”

“I didn’t take anything,” he mumbles, hitting the button for the elevator. No way am I getting in a metal box alone with him. What if he kills me? Where’s the pepper spray Caleb gave me? Probably lost in my car somewhere and totally useless to me right now.

“Um, forgive me for stating the obvious, but why are you still here?”

The elevator opens and he doesn’t answer, just walks right in, pulling me with him. “I want to talk about Caleb,” he says.

Four other people enter the elevator behind us. One guy looks familiar, but he keeps his head down, his hat and glasses hiding his features as he faces the closing doors.

“You haven’t wanted to know Caleb for years. Why now?” I ask, loud enough everyone in this elevator can hear me. That’s the plan. Maybe someone will realize I’m in danger and help me.

Thane grabs my arm, pinching it a little harder than necessary.

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“Ow.” I exaggerate my pain, causing two of the people to look over in alarm. Thane immediately drops my arm.

“He’s my son,” he hisses. “You’re the one who was looking for me, missy. Clearly you want to tell me what trouble he’s gotten into, besides dating you.”

“You think I’m trouble?” I scoff. That’s rich coming from the man I just witnessed stealing something.

He glances down at my dress, where a large purple stain covers the right hip from when I jumped off the stage and collided with someone’s wine.

“You’re a walking catastrophe. But that son of mine always did like to be the rescuer. You must make it incredibly easy for him.”

My jaw drops. But he’s not wholly inaccurate. I’m easily distracted and often spacy. I’m a mess from my apartment to my clothes. But Caleb loves me exactly as I am.

“Now, tell me why you’re really here,” Thane growls, inching closer.

My heart rate kicks up a notch and I take a step to the right but bump into one of the other people on the elevator. The woman gives me a wary look, but I turn my attention to Thane.

“That sonof yours is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. It’s a shame you didn’t stick around; he could have taught you how to be a better man. It’s no wonder he wants nothing to do with a criminal like you. Now get out of my face, Thane.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he snaps.

The ding of the elevator is a knife cutting through the silence. A beefy guy in front of us turns around. “I’d do what she says.”

Thane sputters. “She wanted to talk to me.”

“Clearly she’s done.” The guy pulls his jacket to the side, revealing a badge. The blood drains from Thane’s face. “Let’s go.”

“Wait!” Thane grabs the back of my dress.

“Let go of me!” I yell. The police officer yanks Thane off of me and hauls him out of the elevator. One after the other, the rest of the guests in the elevator pile out. Either this was the floor they needed, or they’re curious to see what happens next. Everyone leaves. Except for the man in the hat. He stays silent as the doors close again, and we continue our ascent.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I’m safe from a psycho man, at least for now. I’ll have to change hotels. And tell Caleb. He’s going to kill me.

The elevator stops, and then the man in the hat turns and rushes for me.

Chapter 10

Caleb

I greet Amelia with my lips. She greets me back with a slap to the face.

I step back, startled, yet impressed.

“Get away from me, you petrified perv—” She freezes, her eyes going wide and doe-like. “Caleb?”

My lips twitch. “Petrified perv?”

“I’m into alliteration right now, and you scared me!” She smacks my bicep, then plasters herself to my chest. “What are you doing here?”

I sigh, cradling her head against me, right where she belongs. “I can’t tell you. But then I saw you...andthat man.”

She pulls back. “Caleb, he’s awful. I don’t know why you’d want him back in your life.”

“I never said I did.”

Her nose scrunches, and it’s adorable and infuriating all at the same time. “Oh right, that was me...so that’snotyour secret?”

“Not even a little bit.” I drag her chin up, brushing my lips over hers. “Hearing you defend me though...” I shake my head.

“Was it sexy?” She pumps her brows, and I kiss each one.

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“Incredibly.” I don’t have much time, so I take advantage of the stolen moment. I devour her lips, trying to show her with my kiss, with every ounce of love in my body what secret is hiding in my soul. I press her against the elevator wall, desperate for her. It’s been too long since my lips touched hers. I don’t want to go a day without kissing her again. She’s everything to me. Which is why I have to pull back and allow her to walk away. But first.

“How did you find Thane?”

“Uhh...” She looks away from me and I groan.

“You texted Liam?”

“How mad will you be if I say yes?”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at him.” How could Liam be stupid enough to let her go after a criminal all by herself? He should have told me.

I hit the button to restart the elevator, and it takes two seconds for us to reach her floor.

I will personally escort Amelia to her room, and then I have to get back to work.

“Which room?” I ask.

“1143.”

“What were you doing with him?” I ask, failing to keep the frustration from my voice.

“Well, first, I have a story for you. I was mistaken as a dancer, and while rocking it on stage, I saw Thane stealing someone’s purse. So like a freaking ninja, I raced after him, and then I lost him, but then I found him again breaking out of this storage place and—”

“Wait.” I grab her arm, hauling her down the hall to her door and beckoning her to open it. Thankfully, she does so without protest. When we are safely inside, I pick up the conversation. “I need you to go back. Where did you see him breaking out from?”

She waves her hand in the air and kicks a stray shoe further into the room, where she will most likely trip over it later. “Oh, it was like this storage unit with lockers, but the lockers were really big.”

“Big enough to hold luggage?” I ask.

“I guess so, yeah. The alarm was going off, and then I saw him jumping out the window through the broken glass.”

I scrub a hand down my face. This can’t be happening. My father found the Framework.

“Amelia, listen.” I grab her cheeks, hoping to portray exactly how important this is. “I need you to leave. Get out of Vegas as fast as possible.”

“But Maddie isn’t back yet.”

Maddie is here too? Great. I drop my hands, falling back a step. Not only will I have Russian arms dealers after me, I’ll have Connor too. I’m not sure which will be

worse. “I’m going to request a cop to be stationed out here. You don’t open that door to anyone but Maddie and the cop, do you hear me?”

“Caleb, what’s going on? You’re scaring me.” A flash of fear crosses her face.

“I’m undercover with some bad people, and I think my father just found the drive I was supposed to find and bring back to them.” I scrape my fingernails over my scalp. How did everything get so out of hand? I don’t even want to know why my father wants it. Probably to sell to the highest bidder. Even though my name would be on there too, he would sell out his only son.

“Some bad people...like the lady you were with at the restaurant?” she asks, a hint of worry in her usually optimistic voice.

I nod. “If I don’t get that drive back, the entire country is in danger.”

She swallows. “No pressure there.”

“Did Thane tell you anything, where he was staying, what he was doing?”

She shakes her head. “I kind of did all the talking.”

Despite the situation, a smile finds me. “I’m going to have the cop escort you to your car, then you’re going to drive straight home. Promise me,” I plead, desperation in every inflection of my voice.

She nods so furiously that her short blonde hair bounces around her head. “I will, I promise.”

I press a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll come back to you.”

“You better.”

Chapter 11

Amelia

Not a minute later the door opens. Fear takes over, and I hit the floor behind the bed. Between my options of fight or flight, apparently I'm a hider.

“Millie?”

Maddie. “Thank goodness.” I pop up and rush over to her. “Where have you been?”

“Me?” She grabs me in a hug then pulls back to look at me, checking me from top to bottom. “I’ve been looking for you! You ran off the stage and never came back. I texted you a million times before I realized I had your purse. Here’s this, by the way.” She holds out the purse and I take it, tossing it onto the bed. “And then Caleb just called me and told me to get you out of town ASAP. Want to explain what’s happening?”

“Yes.” I pull my luggage onto the bed next to my bag and stuff my belongings back inside. “As soon as I understand it myself.”

“What do you mean?” Maddie picks up two things, puts them in her neatly packed bag, and is apparently ready to go.

“Caleb is here and undercover with some bad people.” I rush to the bathroom and

gather the fifty makeup products strewn about. I have to make two trips just to get them all in my bag.

“Are you serious? This is so dangerous. We can’t be here. That’s not why we came, is it?” She raises a brow at me.

“Of course not.”

“Then how did you know?”

“He found me,” I say, still stuffing the makeup back into the bag.

“How?”

“Well, when I ran from the bar, I was chasing his dad,” I say, slipping out of my dress and dropping it to the floor as I pull a t-shirt over my head.

“You found his dad?”

“Yes, terrible person, by the way. He was breaking into a storage unit.” The dress gets tangled around my ankles and I trip.

“Millie!” Maddie chides.

“I know, I know, clothes don’t belong on the floor.” I’m already scooping up my dress.

“So you’re saying you followed Thane to a storage place where he then committed a crime? Millie, that’s so bad. What if you got caught on camera and they think you’re an accomplice?”

“I stayed far enough away.” I hope. I drop the dress on the bed and pull out shorts from my luggage. “So now Caleb thinks his dad stole the thing he needs to deliver to the bad guys, even though it’s super dangerous.”

I consider leaving my dress here because the stain will probably never come out, but the memories are worth saving. I scoop up my dress to pack it inside when something slips from the folds.

I freeze, my hand hovering over a small metal cylinder. I turn it over. There’s a star on one end. I open it, expecting it to be emergency lipstick that was left by the previous owner, but it’s a drive of some kind.

“What’s that?” Maddie asks.

I turn it over in my hands. It’s not a USB, it’s too big. It looks powerful. Dangerous. “I think I just found what Caleb’s looking for?”

“What? How would you have it?”

I shake my head, trying to piece it together. “Thane. He must have tucked it in my dress when the cop hauled him out of the elevator.”

“We have to get it to Caleb,” Maddie says. She taps her phone and makes the call. But pulls the phone away from her ear two seconds later. “It didn’t go through.”

“He uses a burner when he’s undercover,” I say. I try Serena, but it goes straight to voicemail as well. She always answers.

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“What are we going to do?” Maddie asks, nervously smoothing back her ponytail.

The solution is simple. “We’re going to save our country.”

“Excuse me?” Her voice squeaks. “And how do you propose we do that?”

I shrug. “Some light espionage.”

“We aren’t agents!”

“We’re also notnotagents.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Someone’s gotta do it, Maddie.” I give her my best Superwoman pose. “And it’s going to be me.”

Chapter 12

Caleb

I can’t believe my dad is here, and he stole the freaking Framework.

I wish I had my badge right now to shove in front of a security guard and find out where my dad went. But I don’t. I don’t even have my personal phone. I called Maddie with the one in the lobby while the receptionist was busy. Serena is in the air, and I can’t risk communicating with her again until she reaches out to me with

another burner.

I have one option. And it physically pains me to do this, but there's literally no other choice.

I pull out my phone and dial the number of the person I despise most in this world.

It rings three times before he answers. "Hello?"

"Hawthorne," I grunt in greeting. "I need your help."

"Just to be clear, this is Agent Harris, the man that swore he'd kill me once upon a time, asking for my help?"

"I still want to kill you."

Liam chuckles and it's the most annoying, grating sound on the planet. "Well, well, well, what can I do for you, Harris? Unless you called to check in on my house arrest? In that case, I've got some complaints."

"I couldn't care less about you."

"It wouldn't hurt to play nice, since you clearly need something from me."

I grit my teeth. He's right. "I need you to locate someone you've found before."

"Well, that list is simply too long. I'm going to need a name, and some juicy gossip as payment. I'mso bored."

I'm not in the mood for his games. "Find my father," I grit out. There's a short silence before I fill it. "You know, the man you helped my girlfriend find behind my back."

Liam grunts. “Keep your guns holstered, Agent. I was helping her with the quest you set her on.”

“I didn’t want her to find my father!” I all but yell, then silence myself as guests around the lobby look curiously at me.

“Then you should have been more clear.” I growl and he continues. “Testy. Okay, where was he last seen?”

I rattle off the details and tap my hand on my thigh while I wait.

“He went to the parking garage.” The words are barely out of his mouth before I take off running.

“He got in a car?”

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“I don’t see any other footage of him. I’ll watch the cams at the exit to see if I can find what he’s driving. Give me a minute.” I don’t have a minute. The longer the Framework is in the wind, the more dangerous it becomes.

“Gray Toyota Tacoma,” Liam says. “Not my vehicle of choice but to each their own, I guess.”

“He’s in that truck?” I ask.

“The camera is crap, but I think so. The driver fit his description.”

“License plate?”

“I’ll do you one better. It’s a rental. Catch a cab, Harris. I’ll lead you right to him.”

Chapter 13

Amelia

“Walkfaster,” Maddiemuttersas we trek through the casino toward the parking garage on the heels of the police officer Caleb sent to protect us.

“You walk slower! Your legs are freakishly long,” I retort.

“I can’t help it if I have better genes than you.”

“You do realize your children might get these exact genes,” I mutter.

“What children? I’m never going to have children because we aren’t going to make it out of here!” She’s hyperventilating. I get it. This is her first brush with danger and it’s scary. I should be considerate.

I snatch her arm. “Pull it together, woman!” Or I can be rude as well. “I need your lawyer confidence to sell this!”

“I coach high school volleyball, Millie. I can’t pretend to be someone I’m not.”

“It’s a lot easier than you think.”

Maddie’s eyes dart around as if looking for hitmen to come after us. I’m sure they haven’t found us yet, but it’s really only a matter of time, which is why we will be safer on the move.

“Let’s just get out of here and then maybe I can breathe again,” Maddie says.

I nod, and we match each other’s pace to the garage. Once there, I realize I’ve forgotten where I parked my car, so I sound the alarm. Maddie nearly jumps through the roof when the car right next to us beeps.

She glares at me before opening the trunk and shoving her bag inside. “I need to call Connor.”

“Let’s not make any rash decisions!” I grab her hand after she shuts the trunk.

“We’re going to die!”

The police officer with us raises a brow but looks unconcerned. Everyone is so dramatic these days. What would happen if we were actually dying? No one would react. “You ladies good?” he asks.

I nod. “Thank you, officer. You can go rescue some other damsels in distress now.”

He chuckles and steps back and folds his arms, content to watch us drive away. I’m sure Caleb gave him strict instructions on that part.

“We are going to be fine,” I insist to Maddie, nudging her to the passenger side. She reluctantly gets inside, and I take a deep breath. It’s exhausting trying to convince someone they aren’t going to die.

“But what are we going to do?” Maddie asks as I put the car in reverse.

I check my blind spots and pull out slowly. “I’ll call Liam. He’ll know.” I put the car in drive and wave to the officer as we leave the parking garage.

“I have a better idea. How about he hops on a plane and fixes this mess for us?” Maddie says, an edge to her voice that makes her sound a bit psychotic.

I put on my blinker and take a right. “He’s under house arrest. Do you want the poor man to be stuck there forever?”

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She narrows her eyes at me. “I don’t even know the man, but I know he pulled a gun on you, so I say better him than me.”

“You’re so heartless,” I tsk, “Hand me my phone, I’ll call Liam.”

Maddie reaches into my bag and digs around.

“You don’t need him,” a deep voice grunts from the backseat.

The hair on my neck stands on end. Maddie screams, and I grip the steering wheel, barely avoiding a collision with pedestrians on the sidewalk.

I glance in the rearview mirror at the man who just sat up in my back seat. “Thane!”

“Hello again.” Thane grins.

“Thane?” Maddie screams again. “As in Caleb’s dad, the criminal?”

“One and the same,” he replies.

“Oh my gosh, he has to get out now.” Maddie covers her face with her hands. “If we knowingly transport him, it could be considered harboring a fugitive and we could go to jail. I’m going to lose my job again.”

“I’m not running from the law,” Thane says, “at least not right now.”

I study the road for a spot to pull off but we are in the thick of traffic. “What are you

doing in my car?”

“I needed a ride.”

“How did you know which car was mine?”

“I’m a people reader, I literally do this kind of thing for a living.”

“Squat in people’s cars?”

“Find a mark, and con them.” He leans over the seat, his warm breath hitting the top of my shoulders and making me shiver. How do I get rid of this man? “After our lively discussion, I determined that the vehicle with the bumper sticker blondes have more fun and the thrift store bags littering the back seat was yours. Most women have cars, and you have pink bedazzled dogs around your license plate. You strike me as a dog person. Wasn’t that hard.”

The fact that he was able to piece that together from our brief interaction frightens me.

“You need to get out!” Maddie yells at him.

“Can’t. You have something I need.” He grins eerily at me.

“Finders keepers.” I stick my tongue out at him. “You don’t need it. Caleb does, and I’m going to make sure he gets it.”

Thane laughs. “You stupid girl. You have no idea what you have, do you?”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, it does. Because it has every U.S. government agency listed on it. The names of every agent and every ongoing mission. If you’re found with it, you’re dead.”

He’s right. I had no idea what was on that tiny drive, and I’m sufficiently frightened. Because whoever has it knows about Caleb and Serena, two people I love. Which only makes me want to protect it more. “And what were you planning on doing with it?”

“Selling it and finally retiring.”

“How selfless of you,” I deadpan.

“I’ve been tracking this thing for months! It’s mine,” he yells, then seems to cool off and shoves a hand through his graying hair. “Look, this has been a riveting adventure with my son’s girlfriend. We’ll call it a family reunion no one wanted to attend and agree to never see each other again. But now I need you to turn it over. I have a flight out of here in one hour.”

“Don’t give it to him,” Maddie says.

“Not planning on it,” I say, especially since I don’t have it. She does. I saw her tuck it into her bra when she pretended to find chapstick in my purse.

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“You’ll give it to me.”

“You’ll get out of my car,” I retort, but my phone rings, the bell chiming through the speakers.

“Liam.” I breathe a sigh of relief and hit the answer button. “Just the person I wanted to talk to.”

“I wish I was always greeted so warmly,” Liam says. “Unfortunately, you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

Nerves creep up my spine.

“What?”

“Your boyfriend was just kidnapped by the Russian mafia.”

“Excuse me?” I slam on my brakes, and Thane smacks his head on my head rest. I must have heard Liam wrong. “What do you mean the Russian mafia kidnapped my boyfriend?” That’s who’s after this drive?

“Caleb called me thirty minutes ago looking for his dad, but I found the wrong guy exiting the parking lot. It looked like his dad, but it wasn’t...”

“I found his dad!” I yell. “He’s in the back of my car.” Maddie switches to FaceTime and aims the phone at Thane, who has the gall to wave.

Liam curses. “Awful cameras. It should be illegal to have such antiquated security features. I’m so sorry, Amelia. I think I know where they took him though.”

“How?”

“He was still on the phone with me when they found him. They didn’t find it until they stopped. I was able to track him there.”

“Good, because we are going to go get him,” I say as Maddie aims the phone back at me.

“Oh no, you’re not.” Liam looks right at me, but I ignore him because hello, driving. “Caleb will kill me if I let you walk into that building. Do you remember me saying Russian mafia? The person in charge goes by the name of Fox. No one knows who that is.”

“I might not know who that is, but I have what they want,” I say, firm in my resolution to save my boyfriend or die trying.

“Actually, you don’t. It’s mine,” Thane says.

I lay on my brakes and Thane flies forward, slamming his head on the back of my seat again. That’s what he gets for not wearing a seat belt. And for being a grade A jerk.

I maneuver off the road and turn around.

“You are a despicable human being. You have never once put your son’s life ahead of your own, because you are a narcissistic piece of trash. But that ends now. You’re going to help us get Caleb back, or I will sic this man on you.” I point at the camera. “He can drop you in the middle of the Sahara desert without ever laying a finger on

you. This is your chance to save your son, and you will do it. Got it?"

Thane raises a brow, looks from me to the camera, then back to me. "You know I could take you in a fight, right?"

I shake my head slowly. "Oh no. I have the adrenaline of a mom when a car is on top of her child, so I could destroy your pitiful butt and protect my boyfriend the way you should."

His eyes widen a touch and a thousand expressions try to manipulate his face, but in the end, his eyes fall and he sighs. "Alrighty then. Guess I'm helping."

"Good choice. Now sit back and shut up."

Chapter 14

Amelia

"Can you find the identity of Fox?" I ask Liam, maneuvering back onto the road.

"I'm trying. But traces are nearly non-existent. There are rumors Fox is a woman with dark hair."

I nod while I think. "I'm picturing a tall, beautiful Russian woman. Looks like you're up Maddie. You have a good Russian accent," I say to her.

"No way. I can't impersonate someone from the mafia," she whispers as if they have ears in the car. They might. And the last thing I want to do is put her in danger because of my stupid plan.

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I glance in the rearview mirror before switching lanes. “I got a wig in the thrift shop. I’ll be Fox.”

“We will all die,” Thane says, completely monotone.

“I hate to agree with the criminal,” Liam starts.

“Aren’t you a criminal?” Maddie cuts in.

“Reformed. But this is too dangerous. Serena’s flying in. Her ETA is thirty minutes. You need to wait.”

He's right. We can't do this without a team of agents by our side. We shouldn't do this period. But what if they get here too late? I was less scared when my life was on the line. Now that Caleb's is, I'm freaking out. The world seems to be closing in and the only solution is to get him out of danger. I can't live without that man.

“I’ll try,” I say, but my left leg bounces with impatience.

“I’m going to hack into the plane system and get a message to Serena; I’ll call you right back,” Liam says.

It must be so nice to have a boyfriend who can hack anything just to find you.

“We’re not waiting for the agent,” Thane says the second Liam hangs up.

“Sorry, you must have thought you had any control in this situation,” I snap at him.

He holds both hands in the air, palms up. "I'm not a good father. I'll own that. But if you go in there with an agent, Caleb is as good as dead."

I look at Thane, trying to find the lie, but it's the most genuine look I've seen on him so far. "What do you know?"

A slow, evil smile grows on his face. "I know who Fox is."

My jaw drops. "Why didn't you speak up ten minutes ago?"

"You told me to shut up."

I did do that. But in my defense, few people take it so literally.

"I also know where Fox is, and she's not there, yet." He raises his brows pointedly. "But she will be soon."

"That's incredibly suspicious." I watch him warily. I should have checked him for weapons and lies before he got in my car. Too bad I didn't have a choice. "Would you like to tell me how you know her?"

"Not at this moment." He looks out the window. "But I can tell you if we are going to do this, it's now or never."

"I choose never," Maddie says.

"You can stay in the car," Thane replies.

"Don't tell her what to do," I snap. But I look over at Maddie. "You can stay in the car."

“I can’t let you go in alone,” she protests.

“I won’t be alone. He’s coming with me.” I narrow my eyes at Thane.

“I never agreed to that—” he starts, but I cut him off.

“For once in your life, do something for your son.”

He rolls his eyes. “Fine. We better get moving.”

“But wait, won’t her goons know I’m not her?” I ask.

Thane shakes his head. “Most of her people have only seen her face behind big sunglasses through their phone screen.”

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I narrow my eyes at him. “Let me guess, you were one of her people?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “Not anymore.”

“Are you sure about this?” Maddie whispers.

“No,” I say honestly. I’ve never been more frightened. “Not at all.”

“What if he double-crosses you in there?” She flicks her head to the backseat where Thane can clearly hear everything she’s saying.

I flash her a grin. “I guess I’ll have to beat him to it.”

I put the car in drive. I’m coming for you, Caleb.

Chapter 15

Caleb

“Where is it?” the big dude, whose name I still don’t know, yells.

“I don’t know.” I groan, repeating the same words I have for the last hour. And just like he has after every response for the last hour, he punches me. In the gut, my face, ribs, shoulders, they’re all bruised. But there’s no way I’m going to tell them my dad has the Framework. Not because I want to protect him, but because I know that if they find him, he won’t hesitate to throw Amelia under the bus and send them after her. Which means I might die here.

“Let’s start over, shall we?” the man asks, stepping back and rubbing out his hands. He motions to one of the other two men in the room, and one flicks on a projector. A map of the Strip pops up. “Evan lost you right about here.” He points to the Mandalay Bay. “Then we found you here.” He points to the other end of the Strip. “What did you do in the meantime? How did you get from one end to the other?Whodid you spend your time with?”

I purposely avoid his last question. “I was looking for that stupid toy you all want so badly.” I throw some arrogance into my voice like I have no idea what the Framework is.

“And you found it?”

“If I found it, I would have given it to you an hour ago before you broke my nose.”

“Concerned with your looks?” He chuckles. “You’ve got much bigger worries.”

“No offense, but it seems like you’ll be in bigger trouble when your boss gets here and realizes you lost the stupid thing to Katerina.”

“I didn’t—” he yells, then tamps it back down. “That little witch seduced me,” he mutters.

Finally, something to work with. “She tends to do that.”

He looks at me, almost surp I’m still here. “She has this way about her.” His eyes glaze over, and I barely stop myself from groaning. “She gets in my mind. But Fox...Fox is going to lose it.”

“Talk to Katerina. Get her to admit where it is. Maybe Fox doesn’t have to know,” I say, one step closer to being able to play this man like a fiddle. But he only glares at

me.

“Fox knows everything.”

There goes that hope.

The door creaks open and a wide-eyed man peeks in. “Fox is here.”

Great. I’ll get to meet the Fox but not be able to do anything about it because I’m headed for six feet under.

“Get him up,” the big guy barks to the other two, who gruffly grab my arms and haul me up, dripping blood all over the penthouse. They shove me onto a couch just as the door opens. My vision blurs and my body screams in pain as I right myself.

The second the room is in view again, I wish it wasn’t.

The world stops spinning.

There’s my dad. And Amelia. In a black wig.

No. How did she find me? Why are they here? Did my father put her up to this? I’m going to kill him. But I have to get her to safety first.

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“What did you do to him?” Amelia screeches in some weird accent that is probably supposed to be Russian.

“N—” I try to get the words out, but Amelia snaps her fingers at the men by my side.

“You will pay for this. All of you.”

“Fox, I—” the big one starts, but Amelia silences him with another snap of her fingers.

“Release him, you fools. I sent him to look after you.”

There’s no way they are buying this. Her accent is terrible. But I’ll take any advantage I can get. If I can get these restraints off, I can take the big one. But that leaves the other two to hurt her. I have to remove her from the equation.

“I don’t understand,” the big one says, falling back a step.

“You wouldn’t because you’re an idiot. Don’t these two men look alike?” She points to my dad now. “Sergio is my right-hand man, and this is his son. The only two people in the world I trust because I knew my employees”—she narrows her eyes, glaring at each of them—“were getting greedy.”

“But he stole the Framework,” the big guy says, blaming me instead of Katerina.

Amelia snaps her fingers at my dad this time, and he pulls something out of his pocket. The Framework. Amelia dangles it in the air before tucking it in her shirt.

“Did he? Or did you lose it?”

“It was all Katerina—”

“That sounds like an excuse. I’ll decide what to do with you boys. As far as Katerina is concerned, I never want to see her again.”

Did my girlfriend just order a Russian smuggler to be killed? That’s a problem for later.

“Now cut him free while I think about what to do with you lousy bunch.”

The man behind me cuts my wrists free, and I walk hesitantly toward “Fox” and my dad. When I get closer I see Amelia’s bottom lip tremble, but she forces it into a straight line, doing an excellent job of remaining a tough mafia head.

And then she slaps me. It’s nothing compared to my latest hits, but it still stings. “That was for getting played by Katerina.” Tears spring to her eyes, but she keeps playing the part.

“My deepest apologies,” I grunt.

“You’ll be making up for it later.” She tsks, then turns back to the men. “Remain here. I’ll be in contact.”

Thane holds the door for her, and she walks out steadily. Only when it’s closed behind us does she let the first sign of fear show in her walk, but I don’t reach for her yet. There are cameras in this hall they have access to.

“You’re okay,” I whisper as we get into the elevator. “That was incredible.”

Her shoulders shake silently, and I long to touch her. To hold and comfort her for the agonizingly long trip to the bottom.

“I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to be a P.I.” Amelia finally manages.

I bite back a chuckle. “You did an excellent job,” I whisper.

“I think I’m having a heart attack.” Her hands shake at her sides, and it nearly does me in.

“Deep breaths, sweetheart, it’s over, you did it.”

We reach the bottom floor and step out of the elevator. We are almost home free. “I can’t believe that worked,” Amelia says.

“It didn’t.”

I freeze at the sound of a woman’s voice in the lobby.

Uh oh.

Chapter 16

Amelia

Let me guess, the woman in the expensive red dress, high heels, and black sunglasses is the real Fox. She looks to be in her late forties, though it appears Botox has done its best to prevent aging. She slips her glasses up onto her head, and it's the expression in her eyes that scares me the most. It's like she could eat me for dessert.

We're screwed.

The woman stomps over to me with a chilling laugh and is ringed with enough bodyguards to be considered a small army. "You were trying to beat me, girl?" Her voice is deep and thick, so unlike mine.

How on earth did they fall for my act? It's a miracle we made it out of there alive. If only we could have made it to the car. I hold my shoulders high, determined to get us out of this mess once and for all.

"This old get-up?" I gesture to my clothes. "Could be anyone."

She tugs on my wig, and it falls to the side.

"Hey, I didn't pull on your wig." I glare at her.

Fox laughs. "I like this one." Then her eyes slide to my side. "Thane?"

"Vivian, beautiful as always."

Hold up. Thane just called her Vivian, not Fox.

They were...together.

Caleb tenses beside me, clearly coming to the same conclusion.

“Here to steal from me again, Thane?” Fox sneers, stepping in front of him. She raises her hand to his chest, tip-toeing her manicured fingers up to settle them around his neck. There’s tension, and then there’s whatever is happening beside me. A bomb could go off between these two, but whether out of hatred or passion I’m not sure.

“This feels like a good time to sneak out,” I whisper to Caleb, inching closer to his safety.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Fox barks, looking at me, but clenching the hand around Thane’s neck. “You have my drive.”

I scrunch up my brows, playing my underdeveloped acting skills for all they are worth. “What drive?”

“We’ve got a live one, Frank.” She motions to one of her frighteningly large bodyguards.

“I have it,” Caleb says.

Fox’s eyes whip to him and light up a fraction. “Oh, I do love a devoted boy toy. Let’s have it then.”

“I have it,” Thane says. It surprises me that he’d enter himself into this dangerous game. Maybe he can change.

Fox's smile drops the tiniest bit. "Well, this game got old real quick. Hand over the Framework now before Frank puts a bullet in one of you. I don't care which."

A gun cocks and I stiffen. Caleb slips a hand around my back.

"Who has it?" Fox snarls.

I'm content to let Thane prove himself to his son, so I keep my mouth shut, but I'm overly aware of the small drive tucked in my bra, and I've never been a good liar, so I'm pretty sure my burning face is giving me away.

"You," Fox snaps at me.

I have only one chance to get this right. Maybe I can distract her, then throw my purse at her face, giving Caleb just enough time to take her down before we are murdered. If I could telepathically communicate this plan with Caleb, it would probably work better, but hopefully, he can fill in the blanks. I look at him, repeating the words in my head until I'm sure he understands. You go high, I go low.

He nods almost imperceptibly.

I drop my gaze to Fox's heels and furrow my brows. "Your sock is untied."

Her left eyebrow twitches, but her eyes don't move from my face. And then the gun is aimed at me.

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So much for catching her off guard.

“Stop. Playing. Games,” she hisses.

“But life really is too short and it’s a shame,” I say.

“Last chance.”

I purse my lips. “I feel like you’re serious.”

“Dead.”

“I could have it.” I lift a shoulder like I don’t care. “If I do, it’s because I was hired to retrieve it.”

Fox laughs, hysterically. It injures my pride a bit. “You really expect me to believe someone hired you to retrieve the Framework?”

I shrug again, but the effort is more forced this time. “You can ask him yourself if you’d like. He’s right behind you.”

Fox and her henchmen all look toward the door, and I sweep her leg.

Fox loses her balance, but is caught by one of her men.

"You were supposed to go high!" I yell at Caleb as men rush us from all sides.

"You never told me that." Caleb pushes me behind him, his fists up, ready for a fight.

"I was talking to you with my eyes!"

"I thought we were saying I love you!"

I guess I can forgive him for that one. Two men swing at Caleb but he dodges both, causing them to hit each other. Then he pops up, punching them both.

Something lands in the middle of the chaotic room with a 'tink' but no one notices. Until smoke encapsulates the lobby.

A gun goes off and Caleb shoves me to the ground, dropping his body over mine. More gunfire and a scream. The sound of footsteps and thuds.

For ten seconds I wait for my vision to clear, for things to make sense again. But the only thing I can successfully think of is the man on top of me, protecting me with his life.

"How dare you sacrifice yourself to protect me." My words come out strained with emotion.

"Always," he whispers, brushing stray hairs out of my face. There are tears in his eyes, and in mine too.

"In case I never get to say it again, I love you."

He grins. "Good thing it's over then, because I plan on hearing that forever." He hops up, pulling me with him. Somehow, in under fifteen seconds, Serena and the other FBI agents with her gained control of the situation.

Serena has Fox by the hair, which is surprisingly not a wig, and a knee in her back. The other agents have surrounded the bodyguards. Out of the elevator emerge more agents, along with the bad guys from upstairs and a spitting Katerina.

“You just can't stay out of trouble, can you?” Serena says to me.

“I think the words you are looking for are,thank you.”

She shakes her head, but despite how I annoy her, I can see the humor in her eyes.

“For what, exactly?”

“I took her off guard. I pretty much set the scene perfectly for you to barge in like that. Though if you'd given me a few more minutes I'm sure I could have done that as well." I bite back a smile.

“You're truly one of a kind." She chuckles and turns her attention back to getting Fox off the floor.

She's warming to me.

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I glance to the right, “Uh, Caleb. Where’s your dad?”

He glares at the empty space. “Doing what he does best, disappearing.”

“I’m sorry.” I shake my head.

He grabs both of my cheeks. “Don’t be. You just wanted me to have a family, but sweetheart, I already do. It’s you. Connor and Maddi—”

“Oh no, Maddie!” I break out of Caleb’s arms and sprint out of the building with him on my heels. I race around the back and find Maddie...and “Connor?” I breathe.

Connor lets go of the death grip he has on Maddie to pull me into the hug. “I can’t believe you got yourself in danger again,” he groans.

“Really? Because I don’t find it all that unlikely.”

“No more.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Connor’s eyes flick to Caleb over my shoulder. “Do we need to have another talk, man?”

Another talk? When did they have the first one?

“Believe me, I’m doing my best.” Caleb chuckles, pulling me into his arms. “But this

woman can hold her own. This time she saved me.”

“One more time for the people in the back.” I grin up at him.

But instead, he lowers his voice, dropping his mouth next to my ear. “You’ve saved my life. In every way.”

I grab his cheeks, squishing them because it’s fun, and he looks adorable. “Let’s not make a habit of it.”

Chapter 17

Caleb

“Are you sure Vegas is safe now?” Amelia asks as we ride the elevator to the top of the STRAT. “Did you get all the bad guys?”

I wish. “Not even close. But nothing will happen to you ever again because I’m never letting you out of my sight.”

“Even in the bathroom? Because that’s where I draw the line.”

I roll my eyes and approach the hostess, who directs us to our table next to the windows. The view is stunning. But I’m not looking out the windows. The woman in the bright pink dress has all my attention. She always has, since the moment I met her.

We order appetizers and a main course, then a dessert that makes Amelia do a happy dance in delight. The evening is calm and perfect.

I don’t want any more surprises after this day.

“So.” Amelia sits back, talking for the first time since she received her chocolate mousse cake. “I guess I don’t get to be a P.I.” She scrunches up her nose in a way that makes me think she’s not all that upset by it.

“You know I’d support you in anything,” I whisper, grabbing her hand across the table.

“Yeah, but...” She lifts a shoulder. “I was wrong. The secret wasn’t your dad. And I came all the way to Vegas, intruded into your case, and nearly got us all killed in the process.” She looks up at me with blue eyes that break my soul in two.

“It could have happened to anyone.” It wouldn’t because somehow these things only follow her around, but it could have. “You are brave and smart, and you got us out of that mess.”

Her lips tip up in the corner. “I did do that, didn’t I?”

I rub a small circle over the back of her hand. “You did.”

“I did something else too,” she says, her voice turning light and airy.

“Oh?”

Her eyes connect with mine and she grins. “I did figure out your secret, just way too late. And now I’m going to win.”

I frown. “What?”

“I kind of overheard Maddie and Connor talking on the way to the hotel, and decided to beat you at your own game.” She slides out of the table and onto her knees.

Wha—“Nope.” I slip onto my knee, and pick her up by the waist, helping her back into the chair. My bruised body rejects this position, but I’ve been dreaming about this moment for months. Not even a broken rib or two will stop me. “That’s my question to ask.”

Her laugh echoes through the restaurant and people look over, gasping and sighing, but nothing takes my attention off of this woman.

“This was my secret and I get to do it.” I raise her hand to my lips, kissing the back of it as I slip the box out of my pocket.

She squeals, her knees shaking and her eyes clouding over. She’s not going to let me get all the words out. That’s okay because I have the rest of my life to show her how much I love her.

“Amelia Quinn, you came into my world and tipped it upside down. And I had no idea that was exactly what I needed. You make me a better man—”

Her squeals get louder, and she covers her mouth with her hand. I shake my head. “I will spend every hour of every day showing you how much I love you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” Her voice is so loud and clear, the room erupts in applause. She flies out of her seat and straight at me. As it so often happens when I’m around Amelia Quinn, she knocks me off balance and takes me to the floor. Pain encapsulates every inch of my body, but it's worth it for this moment right here. I wheeze a laugh as she pops her head up above me, her wild curls framing her face. “Yes, I’ll marry you, Agent Sexy Pants.”

And then she kisses me. On the floor of the STRAT, with many onlookers, without a care in the world.

“I can’t wait to be Mrs. Sexy Pants.”

“Didn't I tell you? You always have been.”

Epilogue

Amelia

“Everything is ready.” Maddie rushes into the bridal room, rocking the heck out of her blue dress and her six-month baby bump. She gets to work fluffing my hair and checking my train.

“I wasn’t worried.” I smile reassuringly at her.

“Really? Because you invited Caleb’s dad, Liam, and a bunch of FBI agents. That’s just asking for trouble.”

I look at her now. “Did Thane come?”

“No,” Maddie says. “Thank goodness.”

I suppose that is for the best. Caleb will be happy since he didn’t want me to invite Thane in the first place.

“Are Sean and Gus ready to walk down the aisle?”

She raises a brow. “They are going to eat the flower petals and pee on the aisle.”

Probably. But I couldn’t imagine getting married without my favorite duo.

There’s a knock on the door and Connor pokes his head in. “Ready, sis?”

“I was born ready.”

“You were born premature, that’s why you’re so short.”

“Your jokes are getting worse. Maddie, how early can we check him into the retirement center?”

“Okay, come on. No time for sibling rivalry; we have a wedding to attend.” Maddie ushers us out of the bridal room and down the hall to where the ceremony is taking place.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:27 am

Sean and Gus bark when they see me and try to race for me, but Liam holds them back with a terrified expression. For a man in control of everything, it's absolutely hilarious how afraid he is of animals, which is why Caleb was happy to stick him with this job. Something about Liam putting glue on his office chair.

Their work partnership is going well. Sarcasm very much intended.

"Sit," Liam says so timidly the dogs don't obey. Though to his credit, they rarely do. I hide my laugh behind my bouquet.

The music begins playing, and I patiently wait with Connor while Maddie and Liam lead the way down the aisle.

"You sure you want to do this?" Connor asks, gently rubbing my hand that rests on his arm. "I'll be your getaway driver."

"The only place I'm running is into that man's arms." I grin, catching sight of Caleb at the front of the event center. My eyes find him and they never stray. He wipes a tear off his cheek and my heart beats in double time as Connor and I start down the aisle. I may not have my parents here, but I have everything else I've ever wanted.

I feel like I'm floating as I close the distance between us. Connor hands me off and Caleb takes both of my hands, kissing each of them. I'm ready to begin my life with him.

Riiiiipp.

I gasp, torn from the moment as Sean tears the sheer fabric from the wedding arch.

“Bad dog,” Liam hisses, but his attempts to grab Sean are unsuccessful, and he loses Gus, who jumps onto the officiant.

Two FBI agents rush forward to save my wedding, but one bonks heads with Liam, who falls backward into the arch. The whole thing comes down in shattered pieces of cheap plywood.

The last board hits the ground to shocked silence.

All eyes turn to me. Caleb looks absolutely tortured. I can’t help it, I laugh.

“Life is messy. But I choose messy. I choose real. I choose you.” I grab his face and kiss him.

He kisses me back like our wedding isn’t literally falling down around us.

“I guess we are going in reverse,” the officiant chuckles.

“Sounds like the way we live our lives.”

“As long as it’s together,” Caleb whispers.

“Always.”

The End