



Oath of Protection (Blood Oath Bargains #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: Someone wants Nico Valente dead.

The snipers bullet missed by three inches. Next time, they wont.

As heir to a crime family empire, Nico has survived this long through paranoia, bulletproof glass, and the absolute certainty that trusting anyone is a luxury he cant afford. But when his father delivers an ultimatum—accept professional protection or be removed from operations—Nicos carefully controlled world implodes.

Enter Camden Rios. Ex-Army Ranger. Security specialist. Doesnt work for criminals.

Until now.

The moneys too good to refuse. The clients too stubborn to keep alive. And the attraction burning between them? Thats the kind of complication that gets people killed.

Cams job is simple: keep Nico breathing. But when youre protecting someone 24/7, professional distance becomes impossible. You learn how they take their coffee. You memorize the scar on their ribs. You start caring more about their safety than your own.

And when the next assassin comes—because theres always a next one—you realize youd take a bullet for them without thinking twice.

Some jobs are about money. Others are about survival. This one? This ones about discovering that love is the most dangerous protection of all.

First in the Blood Oath Bargains series. Complete story, but youll be addicted to this crime family by the final page.

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ONE

UNDER FIRE

The bullet shattered the floor-to-ceiling window three inches from Nico Valente's head.

He hit the marble floor hard, expensive Italian leather scraping against stone as glass exploded around him in glittering fragments.

His espresso cup bounced once and shattered, dark liquid spreading across financial reports that had been marked "confidential" five minutes ago and were now worthless paper scattered in a war zone.

A second shot punched through the reinforced glass, then a third. Professional spacing. Professional timing. Professional intent to kill.

"Marco!" Nico's voice cut through the sound of destruction, but his bodyguard was already moving. Had been moving since the first shot, throwing himself between Nico and the windows with the kind of reflexes that came from ten years of keeping dangerous men alive.

Marco Santangelo took the fourth bullet in the chest.

The impact spun him around, his weapon clattering across the floor as he fell. Blood bloomed across his white shirt like a dark flower, and his eyes—always alert, always scanning for threats—went wide with surprise before they went empty.

"No." The word tore from Nico's throat as he crawled toward Marco's still form, staying low as more bullets punched through what remained of the windows. "No, goddammit, no."

Marco had worked for the family for eight years. Had a wife named Teresa and twin daughters who'd just started high school. Had never missed a birthday, an anniversary, or a single day of work until a sniper's bullet found the gap in his vigilance.

Another shot whistled overhead, close enough that Nico felt the displacement of air against his scalp. Professional. Methodical. Patient enough to wait for a clear shot at the target.

Nico's phone was buzzing somewhere in the debris, probably his father calling to confirm he was still breathing.

The emergency protocols would have kicked in the moment the building's security detected gunfire.

Within minutes, this place would be swarming with soldiers, police, and federal agents all asking questions Nico couldn't answer.

Who wanted him dead this time? The list was longer than most people's grocery receipts.

He belly-crawled across the floor, glass cutting through his suit jacket and into his skin, toward the reinforced panic room hidden behind what looked like a bookshelf.

The mechanism required a fingerprint scan and a six-digit code that changed daily.

Paranoia had its privileges, even when it couldn't save the people trying to protect

you.

The steel door sealed with a whisper of hydraulics, and suddenly the world went quiet. Soundproofed walls blocked everything except the hammering of his pulse and the ragged sound of his breathing. Emergency lighting cast everything in clinical white, making the blood on his hands look black.

Marco's blood.

Nico slumped against the wall, fingers finding his phone with muscle memory. Three missed calls from his father, two from Matt Rossi, one from his sister Bianca. The family network mobilizing to assess damage and assign blame.

He dialed his father's private number.

"Nico." Sal Valente's voice carried relief and fury in equal measure. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Marco's dead."

Silence stretched across the connection, heavy with implications. Marco Santangelo had been one of the good ones—loyal, competent, dedicated. His death would ripple through the organization like a stone thrown into still water.

"The shooter?"

"Gone." Nico wiped blood from a cut on his cheek, watching the red smear across his fingers. "Professional work. Long range, probably from the construction site across the street. They'll find the nest, but they won't find the shooter."

"This is the second attempt in six months."

"I'm aware."

"The second time you've nearly died because you refuse to take adequate precautions."

Nico's jaw tightened. They'd had this conversation before—after the car bomb that had taken out his driver, after the poisoned drink that had almost killed him at Russo's restaurant, after every close call that reminded the family how easily their carefully built empire could crumble.

"I take precautions."

"Marco was a precaution. Marco is dead." Sal's voice carried the particular edge that meant a decision had been made, consequences be damned. "You will accept professional protection, or you will be removed from active operations."

"Pop—"

"This is not a negotiation."

The line went dead. Nico stared at his phone, seeing his reflection in the black screen—blood-streaked, glass-dusted, looking exactly like a man who'd just survived his second assassination attempt in six months.

The thing was, Sal was right. Marco had been good at his job, but he'd still died protecting someone who couldn't protect himself.

Nico ran family operations that generated millions in revenue and employed hundreds of people, but apparently he couldn't walk through his own home without someone trying to put him in the ground.

His phone buzzed with a text from Matt: Tony's bringing someone to the compound tomorrow. Professional security consultant. Father's orders.

Nico typed back: I don't need a babysitter.

Matt's response came immediately: You need to be alive. Everything else is negotiable.

The panic room felt smaller with each passing minute, its white walls pressing closer as sirens wailed in the distance.

Emergency responders, probably. Crime scene investigators.

Federal agents who'd ask probing questions and take careful notes that would somehow find their way into ongoing surveillance files.

Another text, this time from his sister: Thank God you're alive. Sofia's cooking dinner tomorrow. Family meeting afterward.

Family meeting. Which meant sitting around the massive dining room table while everyone discussed his life like he wasn't in the room.

His father would outline new security protocols with military precision.

His mother would worry visibly and vocally.

Tony would suggest solutions that involved significantly more violence than necessary.

And Nico would be expected to sit quietly and accept whatever cage they decided to build around him.

He'd been managing family business operations since he was twenty-five. Had survived attempts on his life through a combination of paranoia, preparation, and sheer stubborn refusal to die. But apparently none of that mattered if he couldn't keep his bodyguards alive.

The sirens were getting closer now, their wailing echoing off the buildings that surrounded his penthouse like a canyon of glass and steel.

Soon this place would be crawling with people taking photographs, measuring trajectories, asking questions about enemies and alibis and why someone might want Nico Valente dead.

The answer was obvious to anyone who'd spent five minutes researching his family name.

His phone rang. Unknown number, which immediately set every nerve on edge. Very few people had access to his personal line, and none of them were strangers.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Valente?" The voice was professional, controlled, with the particular cadence that suggested military training. "This is Camden Rios from Rios Security. I understand you might be in need of protection services."

Nico almost laughed. Less than thirty minutes since someone had tried to turn his head into abstract art, and already Tony was making arrangements. His brother's efficiency would be impressive if it weren't so goddamn presumptuous.

"Let me guess," Nico said. "Tony called you."

"Your brother was very persuasive about the urgency of the situation." There was

something in Rios's voice—amusement, maybe, or professional appreciation for a job well done. "I understand you've had some recent security challenges."

"You could say that."

"I'd like to discuss how we might address those challenges. At your convenience, of course."

At your convenience. As if Nico had any choices left, as if the walls weren't closing in with each passing day. He looked around the panic room—steel walls, filtered air, enough supplies to last three days if necessary. A cage built for his own protection, and he was already trapped inside it.

"Mr. Rios," Nico said carefully, "I appreciate the call, but I'm not sure we're a good fit. I have very specific requirements for personal security."

"Such as?"

"Competence. Discretion. The ability to do the job without treating me like an invalid." Nico's voice hardened. "And the understanding that I won't change my life to accommodate someone else's paranoia."

A pause. When Rios spoke again, his voice carried a different quality—less sales pitch, more honest assessment.

"Mr. Valente, I've been doing security for high-risk clients for eight years.

Three congressmen, two federal judges, one very paranoid pharma exec—all still breathing despite people wanting them dead.

" His tone was matter-of-fact, almost conversational.

"But I've never worked for a crime family, and I've never taken a client who thinks he knows better than the people trying to keep him breathing. "

Nico felt something shift in his chest—surprise, maybe, or the first stirring of actual interest. Most people trying to sell him something started with flattery and worked their way up to competence.

This man was starting with honesty, which was either refreshingly direct or professionally suicidal.

"And?"

"And I'm willing to make an exception, provided we understand each other from the beginning. Your brother described the threat level you're facing. If you hire me, you follow my recommendations. If you don't want to follow my recommendations, you find someone else to get shot at."

The emergency lighting flickered, reminding Nico that he was sitting in a reinforced box while crime scene techs processed evidence of his latest near-death experience.

Marco was dead. Someone had put three bullets through windows that were supposed to be bulletproof.

And his father was right—he couldn't keep living like this.

"When can you start?" Nico asked.

"I can be at your family's compound in two hours. Assuming you survive that long."

"I'll do my best."

"See that you do. Dead clients are terrible for business."

The line went dead, leaving Nico alone with the sound of his own breathing and the distant wail of sirens.

In two hours, he'd meet the man his brother had chosen to keep him alive.

Someone who talked to dangerous criminals like they were difficult children, who'd built a career protecting people others wanted to kill.

Someone who might be the only thing standing between Nico and a bullet with his name on it.

He closed his eyes, listening to the chaos beyond the steel walls of his sanctuary. By morning, this would be news—another attempt on the life of Nico Valente, another reminder that some people's enemies never stopped hunting.

But tonight, for the first time in months, Nico felt something other than resigned fatalism about his prospects for survival.

Tonight, he felt curious about the man who might be brave enough, or crazy enough, to stand between him and the dark.

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TWO

THE HEADHUNTER

Coffee had gone cold an hour ago, but Cam kept drinking it anyway.

Black, bitter, and strong enough to wake the dead—exactly how he'd learned to take it during eighteen months of dodging IEDs in Kandahar.

Some habits died hard, even when you traded desert fatigues for tailored suits and mortar fire for boardroom politics.

The monthly client review spread across his desk like a victory lap.

Congressman Bradley—still breathing despite three credible death threats from environmental extremists.

Judge Morrison—alive and sentencing drug dealers while cartel hitmen cooled their heels in federal lockup.

And Dr. Sarah Chen, the pharmaceutical executive who'd survived two poisoning attempts and a car bomb because Cam had taught her to vary her routines and trust her instincts.

All still breathing. All still paying their bills on time.

Cam leaned back in his chair, studying the view from his office windows.

Downtown stretched out below him, glass and steel towers reaching toward gray October sky.

Rios Security occupied the entire thirty-second floor, which wasn't bad for a company that had started in his garage eight years ago with a laptop, a concealed carry permit, and a burning need to keep busy after the Army decided his services were no longer required.

His assistant knocked once before entering—military precision, just like he'd trained her. "Your ten o'clock is here."

"Send him in."

Cam expected another pharmaceutical executive or maybe a federal judge who'd pissed off the wrong people. He got Antonio Valente instead.

Tony Valente walked into Cam's office like he owned it, which was probably how he walked everywhere.

Expensive suit, confident stride, a smile that suggested he knew secrets about you that you'd forgotten yourself.

Two men flanked him—bodyguards trying to look like businessmen, but Cam had spent too many years studying how dangerous men moved to be fooled by designer jackets.

"Mr. Rios." Tony settled into the chair across from Cam's desk without being invited. "I appreciate you taking the time."

"Mr. Valente." Cam kept his voice neutral, professional. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to hire your services for a family member. Someone who's been having some security challenges."

Cam's fingers found his coffee mug, using the movement to study Tony's face. The man had controlled calm that came from years of making life-and-death decisions, but there was tension around his eyes. Whatever security challenges he was talking about, they were serious.

"I see. What kind of challenges?"

"The kind that involve bullets and people trying to kill him."

Direct. Cam could respect that, even if everything else about this meeting was setting off alarm bells.

He'd done his research on potential clients before they walked through his door, but Tony Valente hadn't made an appointment.

Hadn't gone through the usual channels. Had just shown up with two armed men and expected to be seen.

"Mr. Valente, I appreciate your situation, but I don't work for crime families."

Tony's smile didn't change, but something shifted behind his eyes. "Crime family is such an ugly term."

"It's also an accurate one."

"My family runs legitimate businesses. Import, export, real estate development. We employ hundreds of people and contribute millions to the local economy."

Cam took another sip of cold coffee, using the silence to think. The Valente name carried weight in this city—weight that came with federal investigations, grand juries, and obituaries that never quite explained how successful businessmen ended up dead in warehouse districts.

"I'm sure you do. But I've built my reputation protecting people who operate within the law. Judges, politicians, business executives. People who can call the police when someone tries to kill them."

"And if someone in my family called the police?"

"They'd probably want to ask a lot of questions about your family's business practices."

Tony laughed, a sound that held no humor. "You're direct. I like that."

One of the bodyguards shifted slightly, and Cam's peripheral vision caught the movement.

Military training kicked in—exits mapped, distances calculated, threat assessment running in the background of his consciousness.

The man was armed, probably carrying under his left arm based on how his jacket hung.

"Direct saves time," Cam said. "Mine and yours."

"Fair enough." Tony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Let me be direct too. Someone's trying to kill my brother. Professional attempts, well-planned, well-funded. He's survived two attempts in six months through luck and paranoia, but luck runs out."

"Have you considered that your brother might be in the wrong line of work?"

"He's in the family business. That's not changing."

Cam studied Tony's face, looking for tells. The man was worried—genuinely worried—but there was something else there. Frustration, maybe. Or the particular kind of anger that came from feeling powerless.

"What makes you think I can help?"

"Your reputation. You've kept three congressmen alive despite serious threats. Judge Morrison credits you with saving her life twice. Dr. Chen's pharmaceutical company pays you a quarter million a year because you're the best at what you do."

The fact that Tony knew Dr. Chen's contract details was interesting. And concerning. That information wasn't public, which meant the Valente family had resources that extended into places they shouldn't.

"I appreciate the flattery, but the answer's still no."

Tony was quiet for a long moment, studying Cam with attention that made most people uncomfortable. His voice changed when he spoke again.

"Mr. Rios, you employ eighteen people. Your office lease runs another three years at forty-two thousand a month.

Your insurance premiums just went up because Judge Morrison's stalker got too close last month.

" Tony's smile returned, but it wasn't friendly anymore. "Business expenses add up quickly."

Cam set his coffee mug down carefully, keeping his movements slow and controlled.
"Are you threatening me, Mr. Valente?"

"I'm offering you a job. Very well-paying job. My family values loyalty and competence above everything else, and we reward both generously."

"And if I'm not interested in your family's version of loyalty?"

"Then I hope your current clients continue to need your services for a very long time."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. Cam had dealt with threats before—came with the territory when you spent your time protecting people others wanted dead. But most threats were direct, obvious. Tony was painting a picture instead, letting Cam fill in the details himself.

"How much?"

"Five hundred thousand. Six months minimum, probably longer. Plus expenses, plus a completion bonus if my brother survives the year."

Cam's coffee suddenly tasted like ash. Five hundred thousand would cover his overhead for eighteen months, pay his employees' salaries, and give him enough breathing room to be selective about future clients. It was also more money than anyone had ever offered him for a single job.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"My brother can be... difficult. He's used to being in control, doesn't like taking orders. He's survived this long through his own methods, and he's not going to appreciate being told to change them."

"Difficult clients aren't unusual in my line of work."

"Nico's different. He runs family operations that generate eight figures annually.

He's smart, paranoid, and completely convinced that accepting help is a sign of weakness.

" Tony's voice carried the particular exhaustion of someone who'd had this argument before.

"Oh, and someone put three bullets through his apartment windows last night. "

The room went quiet except for the distant hum of traffic thirty-two floors below. Three bullets through apartment windows meant professional work. Meant someone with resources, planning, and serious intent to kill.

"Is he hurt?"

"No. His bodyguard wasn't so lucky."

Cam felt something cold settle in his stomach. Bodyguards dying on the job was every protection specialist's nightmare—the reminder that no matter how good you were, how careful, how prepared, sometimes the best you could do was make sure it was you instead of the client.

"I'll need complete access to his security setup, his daily routines, his business operations. If someone's trying to kill him, I need to know everything about his life."

"That can be arranged."

"And I run security my way. No interference from family members who think they

know better. No exceptions, no compromises, no negotiations."

Tony's smile was sharp enough to cut glass. "I'll let you explain that to Nico yourself."

Cam reached for his phone, fingers already moving across the screen. "I'll need his contact information."

"Already handled. He's expecting your call."

The fact that Tony had been so confident about the outcome of this meeting should have been another red flag.

Instead, Cam found himself thinking about Judge Morrison's stalker, about Dr. Chen's poisoning attempts, about all the people he'd kept breathing who might not stay that way if his business dried up.

Sometimes the right choice and the smart choice weren't the same thing.

"Mr. Valente," Cam said, looking up from his phone. "I hope your brother understands that staying alive requires following instructions."

"He'll learn." Tony stood, straightening his jacket. "Or he'll die. Either way, you'll have done your job."

The bodyguards moved with Tony toward the door, their choreographed movement suggesting years of practice. At the threshold, Tony paused.

"Mr. Rios? My brother doesn't know I'm hiring you. He thinks this was his father's idea."

"Why?"

"Because Nico never accepts help from me. But he might accept it from Pop." Tony's expression was unreadable. "Family dynamics are complicated."

After they left, Cam sat alone in his office, staring at the contract Tony had left behind. Five hundred thousand dollars to keep one man alive. More money than he'd ever been offered, from a family that dealt in violence and called it business.

Cam pulled up his laptop and started researching Nico Valente.

The search results made his jaw tighten.

Financial operations that generated massive revenue through methods the FBI couldn't quite prove were illegal.

Articles about a man known for intelligence, ruthlessness, and an almost pathological need for control.

Two assassination attempts in six months, both professional-grade work that had come close to succeeding.

And a photograph from a charity event six months ago—Nico Valente in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, looking like he could buy the building they were standing in without checking his bank balance.

Dark hair, green eyes, confident posture of a man who'd never met a problem he couldn't solve through money, intimidation, or careful application of violence.

He was also, Cam realized with something approaching professional dread, exactly the kind of man who would hate everything about accepting protection.

Cam reached for his phone and dialed the number Tony had left. Time to find out just how much trouble he'd gotten himself into.

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THREE

FIRST CONTACT

The smell of garlic and rosemary hit Nico the moment he walked through the front door of the family compound. His mother was cooking—which meant she was worried, which meant the entire family was about to sit through three courses of guilt disguised as Sunday dinner.

"Nico!" Sofia's voice carried from the kitchen, relief and worry tangled together. "Come here. Let me look at you."

He found her at the massive stove, wooden spoon in one hand, the other reaching for his face before he could dodge. Her fingers traced the bandage on his cheek where flying glass had cut him, and her dark eyes filled with tears she'd never let fall.

"Ma, I'm fine."

"Fine." She said it like the word tasted bitter. "Marco is dead, and you tell me you're fine."

Nico caught her hand, stilling her touch. "I know."

"He had daughters, Nico. Twins."

"I know." The words came out rougher than he intended. Marco's daughters would be taken care of—college funds, trust accounts, whatever they needed. It wouldn't bring

their father back, but it was what the family did. What they owed.

Sofia studied his face for another moment, then nodded and turned back to her sauce. "Your father's in his office. Everyone else is in the dining room."

Nico kissed her cheek, tasting salt and the faint scent of her perfume. She'd raised four children in this house, buried one son in infancy, and watched the others grow into a business that could kill them any day. But she'd never asked any of them to walk away.

The dining room buzzed with conversation that stopped the moment he appeared in the doorway.

Tony sat at the far end of the table, scrolling through his phone with studied indifference.

Bianca looked up from the legal documents spread in front of her, her business expression melting into concern the moment she saw him.

"Jesus, Nico." She was on her feet and across the room before he could protest, her hands framing his face just like their mother's had. "Are you hurt?"

"Few cuts from the glass. Nothing serious."

"The windows were supposed to be bulletproof."

"They were bulletproof. Sniper rifle's a little different than a handgun."

Matt looked up from his espresso, his lawyer's mind already working through implications. "Professional work?"

"Very professional. They knew exactly what they were doing." Nico took his usual seat, accepting the glass of wine Bianca poured for him. "Three shots, perfect spacing, clear sight lines. They'd been watching, learning my routines."

Tony finally looked up from his phone. "Could be someone closer to home."

The room went quiet. Nico felt his jaw tighten, but he kept his voice level. "You have something to say, Tony?"

"Just thinking out loud. Funny how these attempts always seem to happen when you're alone."

"Everyone in this room knows my schedule."

"Exactly."

Bianca's voice cut through the tension like a blade. "Stop it. Both of you." She looked between her brothers with exhaustion from thirty years of mediating their fights. "Someone tried to kill Nico last night. Marco is dead. This isn't the time for paranoia and accusations."

"I don't need?—"

"You do." The voice came from the doorway, and everyone turned as Sal entered the room. At sixty-five, he still commanded attention without raising his voice, still moved like a man twenty years younger despite the silver in his hair and the lines around his eyes.

Nico stood out of respect, same as everyone else. "Pop."

"Sit." Sal took his place at the head of the table, and the room rearranged itself around

his presence. "We need to discuss your security arrangements."

"I've been thinking about that," Nico said carefully. "Maybe we upgrade the penthouse security, add another layer of surveillance?—"

"The penthouse security failed. Marco is dead because the penthouse security failed." Sal's voice carried no anger, just cold statement of fact. "You will accept professional protection."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"You need to be alive." Sal's eyes—still sharp, still missing nothing—fixed on Nico's face. "Dead martyrs don't run businesses."

"I've survived this long?—"

"Through luck." Tony's voice carried an edge that made everyone tense. "Luck and other people dying for you."

Nico was halfway out of his chair before Bianca's hand on his arm stopped him. "Careful, Tony."

"Am I wrong? Marco's dead. Before him, it was Vincent. Before Vincent?—"

"Enough." Sal's single word cut through the room like a gunshot. "Anthony, you will contact the security consultant and arrange a meeting. Nico, you will cooperate with whatever arrangements are made."

"What security consultant?"

Matt opened a folder and slid it across the table. "Rios Security. They specialize in

high-risk protection. Excellent reputation, very discreet."

Nico scanned the documents—client list, success rates, testimonials from federal judges and Fortune 500 executives. "I don't work with outsiders."

"You do now," Sal said.

"Pop, bringing in an outsider—someone who doesn't understand the family, doesn't understand how we operate—it's a security risk."

"Someone trying to kill you is a security risk. Someone succeeding would be catastrophic."

Bianca leaned forward, her voice gentle but firm. "Nico, you run operations that employ three hundred people and generate more revenue than some small countries. If something happens to you?—"

"Someone else takes over. Tony, you, Matt—the family survives."

"The family survives," Sal agreed. "But it doesn't thrive. You think like a businessman, not just a soldier. You understand that sometimes diplomacy works better than bullets." His gaze shifted to Tony, then back to Nico. "Not everyone has that balance."

Tony's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"This isn't about the family surviving," Sofia said from the doorway, where she'd been listening. "This is about my son not dying before I do."

The room went silent. Sofia rarely spoke during family business meetings, but when she did, everyone listened. She'd buried one child already—a son who'd lived only

three days. Nico remembered those dark months when grief had nearly broken her.

Nico felt the weight of their expectations pressing down on him. These people were asking him to trust his life to a stranger, to admit that he couldn't protect himself anymore.

"I don't like it," he said finally.

"You don't have to like it," Sal replied. "You just have to be alive."

"And if I don't like him?"

"You'll learn to like him. Or you'll learn to live with him anyway." Sal stood, and everyone else followed. "Anthony, make the arrangements. I want this handled immediately."

Tony nodded, already reaching for his phone. "I'll call him tonight."

As the family began to disperse, Nico caught Bianca's arm. "What do you really think about this?"

She studied his face, her expression soft with concern. "I think you're one of the smartest men I know, and you're too proud for your own good." Her hand squeezed his arm. "And I think Marco's daughters deserved to have their father come home last night."

That hit harder than any argument about business or survival. Marco had died because Nico had been too stubborn, too convinced of his own invincibility. How many more good men would die before he admitted he needed help?

"The consultant—Rios—what do you know about him?"

"Camden Rios. Former military, excellent reputation, very expensive." Bianca's smile held a hint of amusement. "Tony thinks he's perfect for you."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't work for crime families. Never has. Tony had to be very persuasive to get him to take the job."

Nico felt something cold settle in his stomach. "How persuasive?"

"The kind of persuasive that probably means you two are going to hate each other immediately."

Perfect. A bodyguard with a moral objection to everything Nico represented, forced into service through threats and money. This was going to be a disaster.

But Marco was still dead, and Nico was still breathing, and sometimes disaster was better than the alternative.

"When do I meet him?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. He's coming here to assess the compound's security." Bianca kissed his cheek. "Try to be nice, Nico. He's trying to keep you alive."

"I'm always nice."

Her laugh followed him out of the room. "Tell that to the last three men who tried to do business with you."

Nico walked through the house where he'd grown up, past family photographs and heirloom furniture, toward his childhood bedroom that Sofia still kept exactly the

way he'd left it.

Tomorrow, a stranger would walk through these same halls, would assess every weakness, every vulnerability.

Would judge whether the Valente family compound was secure enough to keep one stubborn man alive.

He paused at the window that looked out over the gardens where he'd played as a child, where his father had taught him to shoot, where Marco had died trying to protect him.

Tomorrow, everything would change. Tonight, he was going to enjoy what might be his last evening of illusion that he was still in control of his own life.

Outside, security lights swept across the grounds in preset patterns, and armed guards walked routes that hadn't changed in five years. Professional, predictable, and apparently not enough to keep him breathing.

His phone buzzed with a text from Tony: Rios will call you tonight. Try not to piss him off immediately.

Nico typed back: No promises.

But even as he sent the message, he was thinking about Marco's daughters, about Sofia's tears, about the family that needed him alive more than they needed him proud.

Maybe it was time to learn how to let someone else be in control for a while.

Maybe it was time to trust someone new.

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FOUR

ASSESSMENT

Security at the Valente compound made Fort Knox look like a convenience store.

Guards at the gate who actually checked IDs, cameras that tracked movement without being obvious about it, and enough armed men walking the grounds to staff a small army.

Cam had to admit he was impressed—until he got to the penthouse.

"This is where you live?" He stood in the middle of what had been a crime scene twelve hours ago, studying the plastic sheeting that covered where floor-to-ceiling windows used to be. "Jesus Christ."

"It has a nice view." The voice came from behind him, dry and controlled. "When there's glass in the windows."

Cam turned and got his first look at Nico Valente in person.

The photographs hadn't done him justice.

Six-two, lean build in an expensive suit tailored to fit perfectly.

Dark hair, green eyes that missed nothing, and a small scar through his left eyebrow that probably had an interesting story.

He moved like a man comfortable with violence but smart enough to avoid it when possible.

And he was studying Cam with the same intensity Cam was studying him.

"Mr. Valente." Cam kept his voice professional, ignoring the tension that shifted in his chest when their eyes met. "I'm Cam Rios."

"So I gathered." Nico's gaze swept over Cam with clinical assessment—shoulders, hands, the way he stood. Reading him like a threat profile. "Tony said you specialize in keeping people alive."

"I do. Though I have to say, this place makes my job significantly harder."

"How so?"

Cam gestured toward the plastic sheeting. "Floor-to-ceiling windows in a high-rise apartment. No cover, no concealment, clear sight lines from multiple buildings. A competent sniper could set up shop across the street and pick you off while you're drinking your morning coffee."

"Which is exactly what happened."

"Which is why we're having this conversation." Cam walked to where the windows used to be, studying the angles and distances. "Who designed your security setup?"

"Marco. My bodyguard."

"The one who died?"

"The one who died saving my life." There was steel in Nico's voice, warning Cam he

was walking on dangerous ground.

"I'm not criticizing his courage. I'm criticizing his strategy." Cam turned back to face Nico. "Good bodyguards think about prevention, not just reaction. This penthouse is a death trap."

"It's also my home."

"Homes can be changed. Dead clients can't."

Nico's eyes narrowed. "You're direct."

"Direct keeps people breathing. Dancing around problems gets them killed." Cam pulled out his phone and started taking pictures of the sight lines, the exposed positions, the vulnerabilities that any professional would spot immediately. "We need to talk about relocating you somewhere more secure."

"Not happening."

"Then we need to talk about extensive modifications. Bulletproof glass, reinforced walls, restricted access?—"

"I won't live in a cage."

Cam lowered his phone, studying Nico's face. There was something in his expression—not just stubbornness, but something deeper. Fear, maybe, though not of bullets or assassins. Fear of losing control.

"Mr. Valente, someone wants you dead badly enough to hire professionals. Last night was the second attempt in six months. They're not going to stop because you're inconvenienced by security measures."

"I'm aware of the situation."

"Are you? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're more worried about your comfort than your survival."

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

Nico took a step closer, and Cam could smell expensive cologne mixed with something else—coffee, maybe, or the particular scent that clung to men who spent their time in boardrooms and back rooms making dangerous decisions.

Close enough to see that Nico was exactly his height, close enough to notice the way his breathing had changed.

"Let me make something clear, Mr. Rios. I've been running family operations since I was twenty-five.

I've survived attempts on my life, federal investigations, and business rivals who would gut me for a nickel.

" Nico's voice was soft, controlled, and absolutely lethal.

"I don't need some ex-military consultant telling me how to live my life. "

"And I don't need some stubborn rich boy getting me killed because he's too proud to admit he needs help.

" Cam held Nico's stare without flinching, aware of how close they were standing, aware of the way Nico's pupils had dilated slightly.

"Your brother hired me to keep you alive.

I can't do that if you won't let me do my job. "

They stood there for a moment, close enough that Cam could see the intensity in those green eyes, could count the individual stitches in his suit jacket. Close enough to notice that Nico's breathing had changed slightly, that emotion other than anger was flickering across his face.

Attraction. Mutual, immediate, and completely inconvenient.

Cam stepped back first. "We need to establish some ground rules."

"Such as?"

"If you hire me, I make the security decisions. Where you go, when you go, how you get there. I assess the risks and you follow my recommendations." Cam watched Nico's face, looking for tells. "That means trusting me. Completely."

"And if I don't like your recommendations?"

"Then you find someone else to get shot at." Cam pocketed his phone. "But trust goes both ways, Mr. Valente. I need to know you won't get yourself killed trying to prove a point."

Something shifted in Nico's expression—surprise, maybe, at the implication. Most security consultants promised protection. Cam was demanding partnership.

"You're asking for a lot of trust from someone you just met."

"I'm asking for the trust your life depends on." Cam's voice was steady, matter-of-fact. "Question is whether you're smart enough to give it."

The challenge hung between them, loaded with implications that had nothing to do with security protocols. Nico was testing him, and Cam was pushing back. A dangerous game, but one they both seemed willing to play.

Nico was quiet for a long moment, studying Cam with an intensity that made his skin feel tight. "What would you recommend for this place?"

"Honestly? Burn it down and start over." Cam walked around the room, pointing out vulnerabilities. "These windows are a sniper's wet dream. No reinforced safe room, no secondary exit routes, security system that's probably twenty years old. And that's just what I can see in five minutes."

"The security system was updated last year."

"By who? Your cousin Tony's friend who knows about computers?" Cam shook his head. "Mr. Valente, someone tried to kill you with a high-powered rifle from eight hundred yards away. That's not amateur hour. That's someone with military training, professional equipment, and serious backing."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Complete overhaul. New glass, reinforced walls, updated security system, restricted access protocols. And that's just for starters."

"How long would that take?"

"Six weeks, minimum. Probably longer."

"And where exactly am I supposed to live while my home is being turned into a fortress?"

Cam had been dreading this part of the conversation. "Safe house. Secure location, controlled access, no predictable patterns."

"Absolutely not."

"Mr. Valente?—"

"I have business operations to run. Meetings to attend. I can't disappear into some government safe house while you play construction worker."

"Then we modify your current routine. Armored transportation, varied routes, advance security sweeps. But the penthouse stays off-limits until it's secure."

Nico walked to where his desk sat, running his fingers along the surface that was still dusted with broken glass. "This is where I work. Where I make decisions that affect hundreds of people and millions of dollars."

"And this is where you nearly died last night."

"Marco died here."

Cam studied Nico's profile, seeing vulnerability beneath the control and authority.

"Tell me about Marco."

"Eight years with the family. Good man, good father. He threw himself between me and those bullets without hesitation." Nico's voice was steady, but his hand clenched slightly against the desk. "He had daughters. Twins."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't bring him back. Sorry doesn't explain to his wife why he's not coming home." Nico turned to face Cam again. "That's why I won't hide in some safe house while other people clean up my problems. Good men die when I'm not careful enough."

Understanding hit Cam like a physical blow. This wasn't about pride or control. This was about responsibility, guilt, the weight of other people's lives on Nico's shoulders.

"Mr. Valente," Cam said carefully, "the best way to honor Marco's sacrifice is to make sure it wasn't for nothing. That means staying alive."

"I know that."

"Do you? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're planning to get yourself killed out of guilt."

Nico's eyes flashed. "You don't know anything about?—"

"I know about survivor's guilt. I know about good men dying while you walk away." Cam's voice was steady, matter-of-fact. "I also know that getting yourself killed doesn't honor their memory. It just adds your name to the list."

The fight went out of Nico suddenly, his shoulders sagging slightly. "What do you recommend?"

"Short term? We get you out of here tonight. Find somewhere secure where we can establish protocols and plan the modifications."

"And long term?"

"Long term, we make sure the next person who tries to kill you has to work a lot

harder for the privilege."

Nico almost smiled at that—just a quirk at the corner of his mouth, but it changed his entire face. Made him look younger, less controlled, more human.

"Mr. Rios," he said, "I think we might actually be able to work together."

"Call me Cam. And we better be able to work together, because your brother made it very clear that failure isn't an option."

"What did he tell you?"

"That you're difficult, stubborn, and completely convinced that accepting help is a sign of weakness." Cam's mouth quirked upward. "He might have undersold it."

"Tony's always been an optimist."

They stood there for another moment, the tension between them shifting from antagonistic to awareness that made Cam's skin feel tight. Awareness of how Nico's suit emphasized his shoulders, how his eyes seemed to catalog every detail of Cam's appearance.

Professional distance. That was what Cam needed to maintain. Professional distance and clear boundaries, because getting involved with a client was a guaranteed way to get them both killed.

"We should go," Cam said. "This place is compromised, and standing around talking about it doesn't make it any safer."

"Where?"

"Safe house. Clean location, secure communications, somewhere we can plan next steps without worrying about sniper fire."

Nico nodded, moving toward what looked like a hidden panel in the wall. "Give me five minutes to grab some things."

"Make it three. And nothing predictable—no personal items, no electronics they might be tracking."

"Understood."

As Nico disappeared into what was apparently a concealed closet, Cam found himself studying the apartment again.

Expensive furniture, original artwork, the kind of understated luxury that came from old money and careful taste.

It was also a tactician's nightmare—too many angles, too much exposure, too many ways for someone to get killed.

But it was Nico's home. The place where he felt safe, where he could drop his guard and just exist without constantly watching over his shoulder. And Cam was about to take that away from him.

Sometimes the job required sacrifices that had nothing to do with bullets or blood.

"Ready," Nico emerged from the closet with a small bag, having changed into dark jeans and a sweater that somehow made him look both more approachable and more dangerous.

"Let's go."

As they headed toward the elevator, Cam found himself thinking that this job was going to be more complicated than he'd anticipated. Not just because of the security challenges or the professional assassins.

Because keeping Nico Valente alive was going to require keeping his distance from him, and distance was the last thing Cam wanted to maintain.

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FIVE

NEW RULES

Coffee at seven-thirty had always been Nico's favorite part of the morning. Black espresso, yesterday's financial reports, and thirty minutes of silence before the phone started ringing. Today, he had company.

"You're exposed from three different angles." Cam stood by the safe house windows, scanning the street below with methodical attention that probably kept people alive. "And you've been sitting in the same spot for twenty minutes."

"It's called breakfast."

"It's called a pattern. Patterns get people killed."

Nico took another sip of espresso, savoring the bitter taste and the fact that he could still drink his coffee however he damn well pleased. "I've been having coffee at seven-thirty for fifteen years. No one's shot me yet."

"Yet being the operative word."

The safe house felt like a corporate apartment—beige furniture, generic artwork, a place that cost a fortune but had all the personality of a doctor's waiting room. Cam had chosen it because it was secure, anonymous, and completely forgettable. Nico already hated it.

"We need to discuss today's schedule," Cam said, settling into the chair across from him with a tablet and focused energy that suggested he'd been up since five.

"The schedule's simple. Shipping meeting at nine, lunch with the Harbor Commission at noon, contract review with legal at three."

"The shipping meeting—where?"

"Valente Import offices. Twenty-second floor, corner of Fifth and Market."

Cam's fingers moved across the tablet screen. "Security?"

"Building security, plus whatever you think we need."

"I think we need a different location."

Nico set his cup down carefully. "The meeting's been scheduled for two weeks. I'm not changing it because you don't like the feng shui."

"I don't like the fact that your office has floor-to-ceiling windows facing three different sniper positions." Cam's voice stayed level, professional. "Just like your penthouse."

"My office doesn't have—" Nico stopped. The bastard was right. The Valente Import offices had the same architectural weakness as his home—beautiful views that doubled as perfect kill zones.

"We can move the meeting to a conference room on a lower floor," Cam continued. "Interior space, no windows, controlled access."

"And look like I'm hiding from my own business partners?"

"You'll look like someone who learned from experience."

Nico studied Cam's face, looking for signs of smugness or condescension. Found neither. Just careful assessment and calm confidence that came from being right more often than not.

"Fine. But I'm not changing the other meetings."

"The Harbor Commission lunch?—"

"Is at Romano's. Fixed reservation, my usual table. Not negotiable."

"Romano's has outdoor seating."

"Yes, it does."

"Outdoor seating with clear sight lines from?—"

"Mr. Rios." Nico's voice stopped the analysis mid-sentence. "I understand your concerns. I also understand that I have a business to run and relationships to maintain. I'm not changing my entire life because you're paranoid."

"I'm not paranoid. I'm experienced. There's a difference."

"Then we'll have to agree to disagree."

They stared at each other across the bland corporate table, and Nico felt something familiar settle in his chest—the particular tension that came from dealing with someone who wouldn't back down. Most people bent when he pushed. Cam pushed back.

It should have been annoying. Instead, Nico found it almost refreshing.

"Compromise," Cam said finally. "Romano's lunch, but we arrive early, choose the table, and I get to position additional security."

"What kind of additional security?"

"The kind that looks like they're having lunch at nearby tables."

Nico considered this. It wasn't unreasonable, and it wouldn't interfere with his actual business. "Done. But they better know how to order properly. Romano makes the best osso buco in the city."

Something that might have been amusement flickered across Cam's face. "I'll brief them on the menu."

The drive to the Valente Import offices took forty minutes through downtown traffic that moved like cold honey. Cam had insisted on an armored sedan instead of Nico's usual car—bulletproof glass, reinforced panels, and enough technology to coordinate air strikes from the backseat.

"This is overkill," Nico said, watching pedestrians through windows thick enough to stop rifle rounds.

"This is Tuesday." Cam sat in the front passenger seat, constantly scanning intersections and rooftops with the kind of awareness that never seemed to turn off. "Yesterday someone tried to kill you with a sniper rifle. Today we assume they might try again."

"Yesterday was about timing and opportunity. They knew my routine, knew when I'd be vulnerable."

"What makes you think today's different?"

Nico didn't have a good answer for that, so he went back to reviewing the shipping contracts that would net the family eight figures over the next two years. Legitimate business, completely legal, the kind of diversification that would eventually let them operate entirely above board.

If he lived long enough to see it.

The meeting went smoothly—Harbor Authority permits approved, shipping schedules coordinated, profit margins that would make his father smile for the first time in months.

Cam stationed himself by the conference room door, close enough to intervene but far enough away to avoid overhearing confidential business details.

Discreet. Nico appreciated that.

"Mr. Valente?" Sarah Chen, his logistics coordinator, looked up from her tablet. "The Kozlov shipping group requested a meeting next week. Something about coordinating dock schedules."

Every person in the room went quiet. The Kozlov name carried weight in this city—the kind of weight that came with concrete shoes and harbor-bottom burials.

"Decline," Nico said. "Politely."

"Sir?"

"Tell them we're at capacity for new partnerships. Recommend they contact Morrison Shipping instead."

Sarah nodded, making notes. "Should I expect follow-up contact?"

"Probably. Route any calls to Matt Rossi." Nico closed his file. "Anything else?"

The meeting wrapped quickly after that. Kozlov interest in Valente operations meant territorial disputes, pressure tactics, and the kind of business negotiations that ended in obituaries. Exactly the kind of attention Nico didn't need while someone was already trying to kill him.

"Problem?" Cam asked as they headed toward the elevator.

"Potential problem. Nothing that can't be managed."

"The Kozlovs aren't known for taking no for an answer."

Nico glanced at him sharply. "You know about the Kozlovs?"

"I know about anyone who might want my client dead. It's called preparation."

The elevator descended in silence, giving Nico time to consider the implications. Cam had done his homework, understood the local players, recognized threats that most bodyguards would miss entirely. Competence was rarer than most people realized.

Romano's occupied a corner building in Little Italy, with red brick walls, window boxes full of herbs, and the kind of authentic atmosphere that couldn't be faked.

Nico had been eating here since he was twelve, back when his father brought him to business dinners and taught him how to read people over antipasto.

"Table's ready," Cam said, scanning the dining room with tactical precision. "Two of

my people are already seated—man in the blue suit, woman by the windows. They'll stay through your meal."

"And they know about the osso buco?"

"They know about everything on the menu. Including which wine pairings Mr. Romano recommends."

Nico found himself almost smiling. "Thorough."

"It's what you're paying for."

The Harbor Commission meeting was routine—permits, schedules, the usual municipal bureaucracy that kept legitimate shipping moving through the port. Commissioner Williams was old-school Italian, a man who appreciated good wine and better conversation.

"Nico, how's your father?"

"Strong as ever. Still working eighteen-hour days despite Ma's objections."

"Give him my regards. We go back forty years, you know. Back when this harbor was run by men who understood what a handshake meant."

They were halfway through the antipasto when Nico noticed the man at the bar.

Wrong build for the neighborhood. Expensive clothes that didn't fit the clientele. And he was watching their table too carefully, too systematically. His observation suggested business interest rather than casual curiosity.

Nico's hand found his water glass, taking a slow sip while tracking the man's position.

"Cam."

"Already saw him." Cam's voice was barely audible, his posture unchanged. "Table by the window, blue jacket, hasn't touched his drink."

"How long?"

"Since we sat down. He's been photographing our table with his phone."

Commissioner Williams continued talking about harbor regulations, completely oblivious to the fact that their lunch had developed an audience. Nico nodded and smiled, playing the part of an attentive businessman while his mind calculated angles and distances.

"Options?" he murmured.

"We leave. Now. Back exit through the kitchen."

"That'll look suspicious."

"Better suspicious than dead."

The man at the bar stood up, reaching for something inside his jacket. Nico tensed, ready to hit the floor, but Cam was already moving.

Two seconds. That's how long it took Cam to cross the dining room, disarm the man, and have him face-down on the floor with his arm twisted behind his back. So fast that most diners didn't even notice until it was over.

Nico watched the entire thing with a mixture of appreciation and something that felt uncomfortably like arousal. The fluid movement, the controlled violence, the way

Cam had assessed and neutralized a threat without hesitation. It was competence distilled into pure action.

"Press credentials," Cam said, examining the man's identification while keeping him pinned. "Freelance photographer. Says he's working on a story about waterfront development."

Nico felt his heart rate slow from combat-ready to merely annoyed. But underneath the irritation was something else—recognition that he and Cam had just worked together seamlessly. Nico had spotted the threat, Cam had neutralized it, and they'd communicated without words.

"Let him up."

"Sir?"

"He's not a threat. He's just a pain in the ass."

Cam released the photographer with obvious reluctance, his eyes never leaving the man's hands. Even now, he was ready for the situation to change, ready to move again if needed.

The whole thing had taken less than thirty seconds. Commissioner Williams hadn't even stopped eating.

After the photographer left—still muttering about lawsuits and assault charges—Williams raised his wine glass with obvious approval.

"Your friend has excellent reflexes."

"He's thorough," Nico agreed, watching Cam return to his position by the wall. The

man moved like a predator, all controlled power and restrained violence. It shouldn't have been attractive.

It was.

"In my experience, thorough is what keeps honest businessmen breathing in this city." Williams smiled. "Your father chose well."

The rest of lunch passed without incident. Business conversation, good wine, and municipal networking that kept legitimate businesses operating smoothly. Cam returned to his position by the wall, alert but unobtrusive.

Walking back to the car, Nico found himself reassessing his new bodyguard.

Fast reflexes, good judgment, and smart enough to distinguish between real threats and annoying ones.

Most security consultants would have treated the photographer like an assassin and created a scene that would've made tomorrow's newspapers.

"Good work back there," Nico said.

"Just doing my job."

"Part of your job is knowing when not to shoot first and ask questions later. Not everyone gets that right."

Cam opened the car door, scanning the street one more time before allowing Nico to get in. "Dead journalists create more problems than live ones."

"Exactly." Nico settled into the backseat, thinking about patterns and routines and the

way professional competence looked different than he'd expected. "Same time tomorrow?"

"We'll vary the timing. And the route." Cam closed the door, already planning modifications that would keep them both alive. "Patterns get people killed, remember?"

As they pulled into traffic, Nico realized something had shifted during lunch. He still didn't like having a babysitter, but Cam wasn't just muscle with good reflexes. He was smart, adaptable, and apparently capable of distinguishing between necessary caution and pointless paranoia.

Maybe this arrangement wouldn't be a complete disaster after all.

Maybe Camden Rios was exactly what Nico hadn't known he needed.

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SIX

brEAKING POINT

Rain drummed against the windows of St. Anthony's Church like bullets on glass.

Cam stood at the back of the sanctuary, scanning faces while organ music filled the space with what might have been peace if he didn't know better.

Marco Santangelo's funeral was standing room only—family, friends, and enough people in expensive suits to staff a small corporation.

Including several who shouldn't be here.

"Two o'clock," Cam murmured into his sleeve mic. "Gray suit, no tie. He's been watching the family section for ten minutes."

"Copy that," came the reply in his earpiece. "Visual confirmed. We're tracking."

Nico sat in the front pew between his father and Bianca, wearing the same black suit he'd had on when they first met. But he seemed different today. His posture was too rigid, hands motionless in his lap. Twenty minutes without moving except to breathe.

Grief, maybe. Or guilt.

The priest's voice echoed off stone walls, talking about sacrifice and service, about good men who died protecting others.

Pretty words that probably helped the living sleep at night.

They wouldn't help Marco's wife, who sobbed quietly into tissues while her daughters—teenagers who looked enough alike to be twins—sat beside her like statues.

Cam had been to too many funerals like this. Men in boxes who'd died doing jobs that other people couldn't or wouldn't do. The ritual was always the same—flowers, prayers, and promises that the sacrifice meant something.

"Movement, three o'clock," his earpiece crackled. "Black sedan, tinted windows. Been circling the block."

Cam's hand moved to his weapon automatically. "Plates?"

"Obscured. We're getting a closer look."

The service dragged on—eulogies from family members, stories about Marco's devotion to his daughters, his loyalty to the Valentines.

Sal spoke briefly, his voice carrying the weight of a man who'd buried too many soldiers.

Tony said nothing, his jaw tight and his eyes scanning the crowd like he was looking for enemies.

Smart man.

When the priest finished, the crowd began to move toward the exits in practiced choreography—people who knew they were being watched. Cam tracked the suspicious gray suit, noting how he stayed close to the family section, how his eyes

never left Nico.

"Gray suit's moving," Cam reported. "Heading for the side exit. Intercept?"

"Negative. Let him go. We follow."

The burial was private—family only, which made Cam's job easier. Fewer variables, controlled access, and enough armed men positioned around the cemetery to handle most problems. But easier didn't mean safe, especially when Nico decided to walk away from the graveside service.

"Where are you going?" Cam fell into step beside him, noting how Nico's breathing had changed, how his hands were clenched into fists.

"I need a minute."

"You need to stay with the group."

"I need—" Nico stopped walking and turned to face him. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face pale. "I need to not watch them put another good man in the ground because of me."

There it was. The guilt that had been eating at him since the shooting, the weight of responsibility that made men do dangerous things.

"Marco knew the risks," Cam said carefully.

"Did he? Did he really know that working for my family meant dying for my mistakes?"

"Nico's voice was rough, strained. "Eight years he kept me alive."

Eight years of watching my back, checking my food, sleeping with one eye open.

And for what? So some Russian asshole could put a bullet in his chest? "

"So you could live."

"For what? So I can make more money? So I can sit in more meetings and pretend I'm not a walking target?" Nico turned away, staring at the rows of headstones. "Maybe everyone would be better off if I just let them finish what they started. Maybe I'm the problem."

Every alarm bell in Cam's head started ringing. He'd heard that tone before, in voices of men who'd decided they were done fighting. Men who made choices that got everyone around them killed.

"That's enough."

"Is it? Because from where I'm standing?—"

"You're standing in a cemetery talking about giving up while Marco's daughters—Anna and Elena, sixteen years old, honor students who want to be doctors—are burying their father.

" Cam stepped closer, his voice low and fierce.

"You think they want to hear about how guilty you feel?

You think Sofia wants to bury another son because you decided you weren't worth saving? "

Nico's breath caught. "You don't understand?—"

"I understand that you're feeling sorry for yourself while good people who believe in you are fighting to keep you alive.

" Cam moved closer still, close enough that he could see the tears Nico was holding back.

"I've lost soldiers, Nico. Good men who died because I made the wrong call.

And you know what I learned? Getting yourself killed doesn't honor their sacrifice. It just makes it meaningless."

Emotion shifted in Nico's expression—surprise, maybe, or anger. Good. Anger was better than resignation.

"They deserve better than?—"

"They deserve the man their father died protecting. Not the coward who wants to quit because it's hard."

Nico took a step forward, close enough that Cam could see the intensity in his green eyes, could smell expensive cologne mixed with grief and rage. "Careful, Cam."

"Or what? You'll fire me? You'll walk away and let the next assassin finish the job?" Cam didn't back down. "Go ahead. Make Marco's death meaningless. I'm sure his wife will understand."

For a moment, Cam thought Nico might swing at him. His hands were shaking, his breathing ragged, and anger flickered across his face. Then something broke inside him, his shoulders sagging as he turned away.

"Everyone who gets close to me dies," Nico said quietly. "My bodyguards, my

drivers, anyone who?—"

"Stop." Cam caught his arm, turning him back around. The touch was gentle but firm, crossing every professional line he'd drawn. "That's not on you. That's on the people pulling triggers."

"Is it? Because I'm starting to think?—"

"You're not just a client anymore." The words came out before Cam could stop them, raw and honest. "You're not just some job I took for the money. And I'll be damned if I let you give up because some Russian bastards want you dead."

Nico stared at him, something shifting in his expression. "Cam..."

"I've been where you are. After Kandahar, after I lost my squad leader—Rodriguez, twenty-three, two kids, wanted to be a teacher when he got out.

I thought maybe the world would be better without me in it.

" Cam's voice was steady but his eyes were fierce.

"You know what stopped me? Realizing that killing myself wouldn't bring him back.

It would just waste everything he died trying to protect. "

"This is different."

"No, it's not. You think Marco died for nothing? You think he'd want you to quit?" Cam stepped closer, his hand still on Nico's arm. "Then I guess we're both taking that risk. Because I'm not walking away from this. Not from you."

The words hung between them in the cemetery air, heavy with implications that had nothing to do with professional protection. Nico's eyes searched his face, looking for something—reassurance, maybe, or permission to keep fighting.

"Why?" Nico asked quietly.

"Because you're worth it." Cam's voice was rough with honesty. "Because good men believe in you. Because giving up means they all died for nothing."

Nico's breath hitched, and for a moment Cam thought he might break down completely. Instead, he straightened his shoulders, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"The Kozlovs sent flowers," he said, his voice steady again.

"I saw. Classy."

"It's a message. They're not done with us."

"Then we better make sure we're ready for them."

Cam felt the shift in Nico—from despair to determination, from victim to fighter. It wasn't complete, and it wouldn't last without reinforcement. But it was enough. For now.

"Territory. Respect. A piece of everything we've built." Nico's voice was steady again, businesslike. "They think we're weak. Think losing Marco means we're vulnerable."

"Are we?"

"Depends how you define vulnerable." Nico turned to face him. "They're right about one thing—we can't keep bleeding good people. Every man who dies protecting me is a father, a son, a brother. How many families get destroyed before I admit I can't do this alone?"

It wasn't a question Cam could answer. He'd spent eight years keeping people alive, and he'd learned that sometimes the best you could do was make sure the right people survived. The math was brutal but simple—one life weighed against dozens, hundreds, thousands.

"We should head back," Cam said. "Your family's waiting."

The ride back to the compound was quiet except for the rain on the windows and the occasional check-in from security teams. Nico stared out at the city, his reflection ghostlike in the bulletproof glass.

"Marco's replacement starts tomorrow," he said without turning around.

"Good. What's his background?"

"Ex-police. Fifteen years on the force, five in narcotics. Tony vouched for him."

Cam felt unease settle in his stomach. "Tony chose him?"

"Tony handles personnel decisions for family security." Nico glanced at him. "Problem?"

"Just want to make sure we're all on the same page about protocols."

What Cam wanted to say was that Tony Valente gave him a bad feeling, that the man's ambition was visible from orbit, that putting him in charge of his brother's

security was like handing a loaded gun to someone who might have reasons to use it.

But client family dynamics weren't his job. Keeping Nico alive was.

"We'll need to coordinate," Cam said instead. "Make sure your new man understands how this works."

"His name's Vincent Torrino. He'll be briefed."

The name hit Cam like a physical blow. Vincent Torrino—dirty cop, suspected of taking money from the Kozlov organization, forced into early retirement when Internal Affairs started asking questions. The kind of man who'd sell information to the highest bidder.

"You know him?" Nico was watching him carefully.

"Know of him. His reputation's complicated."

"Complicated how?"

Cam weighed his options. Tell Nico the truth and risk appearing paranoid? Or stay quiet and hope Vincent Torrino had actually reformed? Neither choice felt safe.

"He took early retirement under questionable circumstances. Money problems, gambling debts. The kind of pressure that makes men flexible about their loyalties."

Nico was quiet for a long moment. "You think Tony made a mistake?"

"I think your brother might have different priorities than keeping you alive."

The words hung between them like smoke, heavy with implications neither man

wanted to examine too closely. Family loyalty was complicated enough without adding suspicion and paranoia to the mix.

"We're here," Cam said as they pulled through the compound gates.

The Valente house was ablaze with lights, every window glowing against the storm. Family members were arriving for the traditional post-funeral gathering—food, wine, and hushed conversations that happened when dangerous people took stock of their enemies.

"Cam." Nico's voice stopped him as they reached the front door. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not letting me give up back there. For reminding me what I owe to the people who believe in me." Nico's eyes were steady, clear. "I won't forget that."

As they walked into the house together, Cam realized the dynamic had changed. Not just between them, but in Nico himself. The guilt was still there, the fear, the weight of responsibility. But underneath it all was resolve, more determined.

What looked like the will to survive.

Now he just had to make sure Nico lived long enough to use it.

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SEVEN

NIGHT SHIFT

The safe house felt different at night. During the day, it was just another corporate apartment—beige walls, generic furniture, the kind of place you forgot the moment you left. But with the lights dimmed and city noise muffled by reinforced windows, it became smaller. More intimate.

Nico stood at the kitchen counter, watching Cam do a final security sweep through the living room. The man moved like he was mapping every angle, every potential threat, filing away details that might save their lives later. Watching him work shouldn't have been this distracting.

"Clear," Cam said, settling his weapon on the coffee table within easy reach. "Motion sensors are active, cameras are feeding to my phone. We're as secure as we're going to get."

"Good." Nico poured two glasses of whiskey, the good stuff he'd grabbed from his penthouse before they left. "Drink?"

Cam hesitated. "I'm on duty."

"You're also human. One drink won't compromise your reflexes."

"You don't know my reflexes."

Nico held out the glass anyway. "I know you took down a photographer in two seconds flat. I'm willing to risk it."

That earned him what might have been a smile. Cam accepted the whiskey, their fingers brushing for just a moment. Warm skin, callused hands that spoke of weapons training and careful discipline.

"Thanks."

They settled on opposite ends of the couch, maintaining distance that felt increasingly artificial.

Nico had spent the day watching Cam work—the careful assessment of every location, the way he positioned himself to protect without interfering, the quiet competence that made everything look effortless.

"How long were you in the Army?" Nico asked.

"Eight years. Three deployments to Afghanistan, one to Iraq." Cam took a sip of whiskey, his expression carefully neutral. "Left as a sergeant first class."

"Why'd you get out?"

"Injury. IED took out our convoy, and I took shrapnel in my leg. Doctors said I'd walk again, but running wasn't going to be the same." Cam's voice stayed matter-of-fact, like he was discussing the weather. "Army decided I was better suited for civilian life."

Nico studied his face, looking for signs of bitterness or regret. Found neither. "That when you started the security company?"

"Started in my garage with a laptop and too much time on my hands. Turned out keeping people alive was something I was good at." Cam glanced at him. "What about you? Always planning to join the family business?"

"Didn't have much choice. Sal made it clear early on that Valente men had responsibilities." Nico swirled his whiskey, watching the amber liquid catch the lamplight. "Sent me to business school to learn how to do it legally. Most of the time, anyway."

"Most of the time?"

"Some problems can't be solved with spreadsheets and market analysis."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the weight of shared understanding settling between them. Both men who'd learned that violence was sometimes necessary, that protecting what mattered meant making difficult choices.

"You ever think about walking away?" Cam asked quietly.

"Every day." The admission surprised Nico with its honesty.

"But then I think about the three hundred people who work for legitimate Valente businesses.

The families who depend on steady paychecks.

The suppliers who trust us to honor contracts.

"He took a long sip. "Hard to walk away from that much responsibility. "

"Even when it might get you killed?"

"Especially then. Dead martyrs might not run businesses, but live cowards don't inspire much loyalty either."

Cam turned to face him more fully, his expression serious. "Is that what you think? That accepting protection makes you a coward?"

"Doesn't it?" Nico met his eyes. "I've spent fifteen years building a reputation based on being untouchable. Unafraid. And now I need a babysitter to keep me breathing."

"You need a professional to handle professional threats. There's a difference."

"Is there? Because from where I'm sitting, it feels like admitting weakness."

"From where I'm sitting, it looks like acknowledging reality."

"Cam leaned forward slightly, his voice quiet but firm."

"You want to know what cowardice looks like?"

It's refusing help because you're too proud to admit you need it.

It's getting good people killed because you can't let go of your image. "

The words hit harder than they should have. Nico felt tension twist in his chest, a combination of anger and recognition that made him want to look away.

"Marco wasn't supposed to die."

"No. He wasn't." Cam's voice softened. "But he knew the risks when he took the job. Just like I know them now."

"And that doesn't bother you? Knowing someone wants to put a bullet in my head badly enough to hire professionals?"

"It bothers me that they think they can succeed." Cam's mouth quirked upward. "I take that kind of thing personally."

Despite everything—the stress, the guilt, the constant awareness of danger—Nico found himself almost smiling. "Professional pride?"

"Something like that."

The conversation was interrupted by Cam's phone buzzing. He glanced at the screen, his expression immediately shifting to alert.

"Motion sensor. Northwest corner of the building." Cam was already moving, weapon in hand, phone displaying camera feeds. "Stay here."

"What do you see?"

"Could be nothing. Could be someone checking our perimeter." Cam moved to the window, staying clear of direct sight lines while he scanned the street below. "False alarm. Homeless guy looking through the dumpster."

But he didn't relax immediately. Nico watched him maintain position for another full minute, studying the feeds, checking angles. Only when he was completely satisfied did Cam return to the couch.

"Sorry. Better paranoid than dead."

"Don't apologize. That's exactly the kind of paranoia I'm paying for."

Cam settled back into his seat, but something had changed. The easy conversation was gone, replaced by the awareness that they were here because people wanted Nico dead. That even in this secure apartment, surrounded by cameras and sensors, danger was always just a motion detector away.

"You ever get tired of it?" Nico asked. "Always watching, always waiting for the next threat? Never letting yourself just... exist?"

"You ever get tired of breathing?"

"That's not an answer."

Cam was quiet for a moment, rolling the whiskey glass between his palms. "Yeah. Sometimes. But then I remember what happens when I don't watch carefully enough."

"What happens?"

"Good people die." Cam's eyes met his. "Rodriguez, Martinez, Johnson—my whole squad. Good men with families, with futures. And I have to live with knowing I could have prevented it."

"How?"

"If I'd been faster. If I'd spotted the IED. If I'd made different calls." Cam's voice was matter-of-fact, but Nico could hear the pain underneath. "Three years of asking 'what if' and never getting an answer."

Nico felt recognition twist in his chest. "That's why you can't sleep."

"Part of it. The other part is..." Cam gestured toward the window, the sensors, the

careful security he'd built around them. "In my world, letting your guard down gets people killed. And I can't—I won't let that happen to you."

"What about letting your guard down with me?"

The question hung in the air between them, loaded with implications neither man was quite ready to face. Cam's eyes searched his face, looking for something—permission, maybe, or absolution.

"What if I told you I haven't slept well since the first attempt on my life?" Nico said quietly. "What if I told you that every sound in the night makes me reach for a gun? That I lie awake wondering if this is the night they finally get lucky?"

"I'd say that's normal. That's survival."

"What if I told you that the only time I feel safe is when you're in the room? That you watching over me is the only reason I can close my eyes at all?"

Cam's breathing changed, his control visibly fraying. "That's dangerous thinking."

"Why? Because it's unprofessional? Because it complicates things?" Nico moved closer, close enough that their knees brushed on the couch. "Or because you feel it too?"

Nico laughed despite himself—a short, sharp sound that held more exhaustion than humor. "Fair point."

The motion sensor chimed again, and this time Cam's response was immediate. No hesitation, no explanation, just fluid movement from relaxed to combat-ready in the space of a heartbeat.

"Same location?" Nico asked.

"Different. East side, near the parking garage." Cam's eyes never left his phone screen. "Two figures, moving with purpose."

"Homeless guys don't move with purpose."

"No. They don't." Cam was already reaching for his radio. "Charlie Team, I need eyes on the east parking structure. Two unknowns, approach from street level."

The response came immediately. "Copy that. Moving to intercept."

Nico found himself moving closer to Cam without thinking about it, drawn by the man's calm competence in the face of potential danger. Close enough to smell his aftershave, to see the concentration lines around his eyes as he tracked the threat.

"Charlie Team to Base. False alarm. Couple making out against the wall. They're moving along."

Cam's shoulders relaxed fractionally. "Copy. Maintain perimeter watch."

"Well," Nico said when the radio went quiet. "That was exciting."

"That was Tuesday night in a safe house. Welcome to my world."

They were standing closer than the job required, close enough that Nico could see the intensity in Cam's dark eyes, could count the small scars that marked his hands. Close enough to notice the way Cam's breathing had changed, the way his gaze seemed to catalog every detail of Nico's face.

Work boundaries. That's what they were supposed to maintain. Clear lines that

shouldn't be crossed.

But the line between them felt thin in the lamplight, sharing whiskey and the constant awareness of danger. When the man protecting your life was looking at you like you were more than just another client.

"We should—" Cam started.

"Yeah," Nico agreed, not moving away. "We should."

Neither of them moved.

The moment stretched between them, full of possibilities and complications that neither man was quite ready to acknowledge. Full of attraction that had nothing to do with protection details and everything to do with the way Cam's mouth looked in the lamplight.

Cam stepped back first, clearing his throat. "I should do another perimeter check."

"Right. Good idea."

As Cam moved away, checking locks and sensors with renewed focus, Nico remained by the couch, nursing his whiskey and trying to ignore the way his pulse had quickened.

Trying to ignore the fact that for a moment there, he'd wanted to close the distance between them and find out what it would feel like to kiss Camden Rios.

Work boundaries.

Right.

This was going to be more complicated than either of them had anticipated.

EIGHT

FAMILY DINNER

Sunday dinner at the Valente compound wasn't optional. Cam learned this when Nico mentioned it with the resignation of a man facing root canal surgery.

"It's a command performance," Nico said, adjusting his tie in the mirror of their latest safe house. "Sofia cooks, everyone comes, we pretend we're a normal family for three hours."

"And I need to be there because?"

"Because you're my shadow now, remember? Where I go, you go." Nico turned from the mirror, his expression apologetic. "Fair warning—my family's going to want to get to know you. They'll ask questions."

Cam had faced insurgents in Kandahar with less apprehension than he felt walking into that dining room.

The Valente compound at night was all warm light and expensive wine, a domestic scene that belonged in magazines rather than the home of a crime family.

Sofia had outdone herself—osso buco, fresh pasta, bread that smelled like heaven.

"Camden!" Sofia rose from her chair the moment they entered, her smile genuine and welcoming. "Finally, I get to meet the man keeping my son alive."

She was smaller than Cam had expected, elegant in the way of women who'd raised children and buried dreams but never lost their grace. Her handshake was firm, her eyes sharp as they assessed him.

"Mrs. Valente. Thank you for including me."

"Please, call me Sofia. And thank you for what you're doing for Nico." Her voice carried the warmth of a mother who'd spent too many nights worrying about empty chairs at her table.

Bianca appeared at his elbow with a glass of wine. "You clean up well," she said, studying his suit with approval. "Armani?"

"Off the rack," Cam replied, earning a laugh.

"Honest. I like that." She guided him toward the table. "Come on, let me introduce you to the extended family circus."

The dining room held more people than Cam had expected.

Not just the core family, but aunts, uncles, cousins—a sprawling network of blood and marriage that filled the massive table.

Conversation flowed in Italian and English, punctuated by laughter and gentle arguing that came with forty years of shared meals.

Matt Rossi sat at Sal's right hand, discussing harbor development with the focused intensity of a man who treated Sunday dinner like a board meeting. Tony held court at the far end, telling stories that made his cousins laugh while his eyes tracked every movement in the room.

Cam found himself seated between Bianca and an elderly aunt who immediately began interrogating him about his marital status, his mother's health, and whether he knew how to cook. Across the table, Nico looked caught between amusement and mortification.

"Aunt Lucia, leave the man alone," Nico said. "He's working."

"Working, nothing. He's family now." Lucia patted Cam's hand with the authority of someone who'd been feeding people for seven decades. "You eat, you're family. Simple."

The food was exceptional—rich, complex flavors that spoke of recipes passed down through generations. Cam found himself relaxing despite the circumstances, drawn into conversations about everything from the city's latest construction projects to Sofia's garden.

"So, Camden," Sal said during a lull in conversation. "Nico tells me you served in Afghanistan."

"Yes, sir. Three tours."

"My father fought in Italy during the war. Said the mountains there reminded him of the hills outside Palermo." Sal's eyes were thoughtful. "He always said the men who fought beside him became brothers, regardless of where they started."

There was weight behind the words, an acknowledgment that Cam wasn't just hired help. Around the table, conversation had quieted, family members listening to an exchange that clearly mattered.

"Your father sounds like a wise man," Cam said.

"He was. He also taught me that some bonds are stronger than blood." Sal raised his wine glass in a small salute. "To the men who stand between danger and the people we love."

The toast was echoed around the table, but Cam noticed Tony's glass remained on the table, his expression unreadable.

After dinner, the family dispersed into smaller groups. The older generation claimed the living room for espresso and grappa, while cousins gathered in the kitchen to argue over soccer scores. Cam found himself on the terrace with Bianca, looking out over gardens lit by strategically placed lights.

"They like you," she said, lighting a cigarette despite the disapproving look from Sofia through the window.

"They're being polite."

"Trust me, politeness and acceptance are two different things in this family. You passed some kind of test in there." She took a long drag, exhaling slowly. "Nico seems... different around you."

Cam kept his expression neutral. "How so?"

"Calmer. Like he's not carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for once." Bianca studied his face. "He's been alone too long, you know. Even when he's surrounded by people, he's alone."

"He has his family."

"Family's complicated when you're the heir apparent."

Everyone wants something from you—approval, money, protection.

Hard to know who you can trust." She flicked ash into the darkness.

"But you? You're not family, you're not looking for a handout, and you've got no reason to lie to him about anything important. "

"I'm just doing my job."

"Are you?" Bianca's smile was knowing. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you care about him. Really care, not just professionally."

Before Cam could respond, the terrace door opened and Tony stepped out, his presence immediately shifting the dynamic.

"Bianca, Ma wants you inside. About dessert."

Bianca stubbed out her cigarette, giving Cam a meaningful look. "Think about what I said."

After she left, Tony moved to stand beside Cam at the railing. For a moment, they stood in comfortable silence, two men watching security lights sweep across carefully maintained grounds.

"Nice evening," Tony said finally.

"It is. Your family's very welcoming."

"They are. Sometimes too welcoming." Tony's voice carried a casual note that didn't match the intensity in his eyes. "My mother, especially. She tends to adopt strays."

Cam felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. "Strays?"

"People who wander into our lives, make themselves useful. Sometimes they stick around longer than they should." Tony turned to face him directly. "Sometimes they forget that being welcomed doesn't mean being family."

The threat was politely delivered but unmistakable. Cam met Tony's gaze without flinching.

"I'm clear on my role here."

"Are you? Because it's easy to get confused, especially when you're spending so much time with my brother. Easy to think that proximity equals belonging."

"Mr. Valente, I'm here to keep Nico alive. Nothing more, nothing less."

Tony's smile was sharp, but his voice stayed casual. "Good. Because Nico's had protection before, and it didn't always end well for the people involved. Marco, for instance. Good man, devoted to the family. Right up until someone put a bullet in his chest."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with implication. Cam understood the message—loyalty to the Valente family was expected, but it came with a price that others had already paid.

"I appreciate the reminder," Cam said.

"I'm sure you do." Tony straightened his jacket. "Enjoy the rest of your evening. And remember—we take care of our own, but we also know how to handle problems when they arise."

After Tony left, Cam remained on the terrace, processing the conversation. The man had just delivered a threat wrapped in family politeness, a reminder that stepping out of line would have consequences. But there had been a warning there too—almost protective.

Marco... didn't always end well for the people involved.

Was Tony suggesting that Marco's death hadn't been entirely about external threats? That internal family dynamics played a role in who lived and who died?

"Everything okay out here?" Nico's voice came from behind him.

Cam turned to find Nico silhouetted in the doorway, concern evident in his posture.

"Fine. Just getting some air."

"Tony didn't say anything... problematic, did he?"

"Just family business. Nothing I can't handle."

Nico stepped onto the terrace, moving to stand beside him at the railing. "He can be protective of family interests. Sometimes that comes across as aggressive."

"I got that impression."

They stood in comfortable silence for a moment, the warmth from dinner beginning to fade in the cool night air. Around them, the compound hummed with relaxed energy from good food and wine.

"Thank you," Nico said quietly. "For tonight. I know family dinners aren't part of your usual job description."

"It was... illuminating."

"That's one word for it." Nico's mouth quirked upward. "What did you think of them? Honestly."

Cam considered the question, thinking about Sofia's genuine warmth, Sal's quiet authority, Bianca's sharp intelligence. "They love you. All of them, even when they're driving you crazy."

"Yeah. They do." Nico was quiet for a moment. "That's what makes this whole situation so complicated. Everything I do, every risk I take, it affects all of them. Sometimes I wonder if it would be easier if I didn't have so much to lose."

"Easier doesn't mean better."

"No. It doesn't." Nico glanced at him. "What about you? Family?"

"Parents died when I was twenty-two. Car accident. No siblings, no extended family to speak of." Cam's voice was matter-of-fact. "Just me."

"That's got to be lonely."

"Sometimes. But it also means fewer people to worry about, fewer people who can get hurt because of choices I make."

Nico was quiet, absorbing this. When he spoke again, his voice was thoughtful.

"I used to think that would be simpler. But watching you tonight, seeing how my family responded to you... I think maybe you've been missing out."

Before Cam could respond, Sofia's voice drifted from inside, calling them back for

dessert. As they walked toward the warm light of the house together, Cam found himself thinking about belonging, about the difference between protecting someone and caring about them.

And about Tony's warning that some people forgot the distinction between being welcomed and being family.

The line was becoming harder to see every day.

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NINE

HEAT

Three AM and the phone wouldn't stop ringing.

Nico surfaced from sleep in stages—first the sound cutting through dreams, then awareness of the safe house bedroom, then the cold realization that his secure line ringing at this hour meant trouble. Real trouble.

"Yeah?" His voice came out rough with sleep.

"We've got a problem." Matt's voice was tight with controlled urgency. "Someone leaked your current location. We intercepted chatter—they know where you are."

The words hit like cold water. Nico was already moving, rolling out of bed and reaching for clothes. "How long do we have?"

"Maybe twenty minutes. Cam's already coordinating extraction. You need to move. Now."

The line went dead. Nico grabbed essentials—phone, wallet, weapon—and headed for the living room. Cam was there, fully dressed, moving with military efficiency as he packed emergency gear.

"How bad?" Nico asked.

"Bad enough. We've got two vehicles inbound, probably a cleanup crew." Cam handed him a bulletproof vest. "Put this on. We're going out the back."

Nico strapped on the vest, his mind racing through possibilities. "Any idea who?—"

"Questions later. Moving now." Cam was already at the door, weapon drawn, scanning the hallway through the security monitor. "Stay close, do exactly what I say."

They moved through the building like ghosts, Cam leading with tactical awareness that came from dodging bullets in hostile territory. Emergency lighting cast everything in harsh shadows, and Nico found himself counting heartbeats as they navigated service corridors toward the parking garage.

The armored sedan was waiting, engine running. Cam got him into the backseat before sliding behind the wheel, and then they were moving through empty streets while sirens wailed in the distance behind them.

"Where are we going?" Nico asked.

"Backup location. Isolated, secure, off the books." Cam's eyes never stopped moving, checking mirrors, scanning intersections. "We'll be safe there."

The safe house turned out to be a cabin an hour outside the city, tucked into woods that felt like a different world from the urban battleground they'd left behind. No neighbors, no witnesses, just acres of forest and silence that made Nico's ears ring.

Cam did a full perimeter sweep before allowing him inside. The place was spartanly furnished but comfortable—a living room with a stone fireplace, a small kitchen, two bedrooms that looked like they'd been prepared for exactly this kind of emergency.

"How long do we stay here?" Nico asked, setting his bag down by the couch.

"Until we figure out who leaked the location and neutralize the threat." Cam was checking windows, testing locks, his movements precise and methodical. "Could be days."

Days. Alone with Cam in an isolated cabin, with nothing to do but wait and try not to think about how the distance between them had been shrinking every day.

"I should call my father," Nico said.

"Already handled. Matt's briefing the family." Cam finished his security check and turned to face him. "We're completely off-grid here. No electronic communication unless it's an emergency."

They stood there in the cabin's main room, the weight of isolation settling around them like a physical thing. Outside, wind moved through trees with a sound like whispered secrets. Inside, there was only the tick of an old clock and the awareness that they were utterly alone.

"You should get some sleep," Cam said. "It's been a long night."

"What about you?"

"I'll take first watch."

Nico studied his face, seeing the tension lines around his eyes, the way his shoulders stayed rigid even in relative safety. "When's the last time you actually slept? Really slept, not that light dozing you do?"

"I'm fine."

"That's not an answer."

Cam was quiet for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Sleep's a luxury in my line of work."

"We're secure here. You said so yourself."

"Secure is relative. There's always?—"

"Cam." Nico stepped closer, close enough to see exhaustion in the lines of his face. "When did you last sleep through the night?"

The question hung between them, more intimate than it should have been. They were standing close enough that Nico could smell Cam's aftershave, could see the way his breathing had changed.

"I don't remember," Cam said quietly.

The admission hit Nico like a physical blow. This man had been protecting him, staying alert, sacrificing his own rest and safety while Nico complained about security protocols and professional boundaries.

"That's not sustainable."

"Neither is getting you killed because I let my guard down."

"You won't. You're too good at what you do." Nico reached out without thinking, his hand settling on Cam's arm. "But you're also human. You need to sleep sometime."

The touch froze them both. Cam's eyes locked on his face, making it hard to breathe.

"Nico..."

"What?"

"This isn't..." Cam's voice broke as Nico's thumb traced his jawline. "We shouldn't..."

"I know." Nico's breath ghosted against his mouth. "But I also know I've been thinking about this every night since you walked into my life."

Cam's breathing shifted, his control visibly fraying. "Nico..."

"Tell me you haven't thought about it too."

Silence stretched between them, full of tension and want and the weight of a decision that would change everything.

"I have," Cam said finally. "God help me, I have."

Nico had spent weeks watching this man move through his life with deadly competence, never knowing that behind all that control was someone who looked at him like he was worth protecting not because of money or obligation, but because of something neither of them had dared to name.

His hand found Cam's face, fingers threading through his hair as their mouths crashed together. Cam tasted like coffee and something darker—want held back too long. The stubble on his jaw scraped against Nico's palm, real and rough and nothing like the careful distance they'd been maintaining.

"This is a mistake," Cam said.

"Probably."

"I'm supposed to protect you."

"You are protecting me."

And then Cam was kissing him, desperate and hungry, like he'd been holding back for so long that control had finally snapped. Nico responded immediately, his free hand fisting in Cam's shirt, pulling him closer until there was no space left between them.

It should have been awkward—weeks of tension suddenly shifting into something raw and physical. Instead, it felt inevitable, like they'd been moving toward this moment since the first time their eyes met.

Nico's shirt disappeared first, pulled over his head with urgent hands that shook slightly—the first crack in Cam's perfect control.

Then Cam's, and suddenly there was skin against skin, warm and real and electric.

Cam's mouth found the hollow of his throat, and Nico's head fell back with a gasp he couldn't suppress.

"Bedroom," Cam said against his mouth, voice rough with need.

"Which one?"

"Don't care."

They stumbled toward the nearest door, still kissing, still touching, boundaries dissolving completely in the heat of finally giving in to what had been building between them.

The bedroom was dark, anonymous, but it didn't matter. What mattered was the way Cam's hands felt on his skin, the way he responded to every touch like he'd been starving for contact.

"Look at me," Cam said, his voice rough. When Nico's eyes met his, something shifted in his expression. "I need you to know this isn't just adrenaline. This isn't just..."

"I know." Nico's hand found the back of his neck, fingers threading through his hair. "It's not just anything for me either."

When Cam's hands mapped the scar on his ribs—the one from the car bomb two years ago—Nico tensed instinctively.

But instead of questions or pity, Cam's mouth followed the path his fingers had traced, gentle and reverent, like he was memorizing every mark that proved Nico had survived long enough to be here with him.

Clothes disappeared with military efficiency. Cam's mouth found his throat, his collarbone, mapping sensitive spots with focused attention that made Nico's breath catch. When Cam's teeth grazed his shoulder, Nico arched against him with a sound that was half gasp, half plea.

"Is this... are you sure?" Cam's voice was rough with want but still careful, still protective even in the middle of losing control.

"Yes." Nico pulled him down for another kiss, deep and demanding. "Yes, I'm sure."

Cam's hands were everywhere—tracing the line of his ribs, finding the hollow of his hip, learning the places that made Nico gasp and arch beneath him. When Cam's mouth followed the path his hands had taken, Nico lost the ability to think coherently.

The first touch of skin against skin sent electricity through his entire body. Cam moved with the same focused intensity he brought to everything else, but here it was reverent, worshipful, like he was memorizing every inch of Nico's body.

"You're so..." Cam's voice broke off as Nico's hands found their target, drawing a sound from him that was pure need.

They moved together with desperate urgency, weeks of restraint finally breaking in a rush of heat and want. Cam's mouth found his again, swallowing his gasps as they discovered what they did to each other, how they fit together.

When it hit, Nico's vision went white at the edges, his body arching as if he could somehow get closer to the man holding him together while he fell apart.

Cam's name fell from his lips like a confession he'd been holding back for weeks.

Cam followed moments later, Nico's name falling from his lips like a prayer.

When it was over, they lay tangled together in the dark, breathing hard, the weight of what had just happened settling between them.

Cam's arm tightened around him, and Nico realized that for the first time in months, he felt completely safe. Not because of bulletproof glass or security protocols, but because of the man whose heartbeat he could feel against his ribs.

"We're going to have to talk about this," Cam said quietly.

"Later." Nico pressed his face against Cam's shoulder, breathing him in. "Right now, I just want to remember what it feels like to not be afraid."

Outside, wind moved through the trees with a sound like distant voices. Inside, two

men lay in the dark, trying to pretend that everything hadn't just changed between them.

But it was too late for pretending. Too late to go back to clear boundaries and careful distance.

They'd crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed, and both of them knew it.

TEN

COMPLICATIONS

Morning came with the smell of coffee and the sound of Cam moving through the cabin like he was preparing for war instead of breakfast.

Nico lay in bed listening to him check locks, test communications equipment, maintain the same professional routine that had kept them both alive for weeks.

As if they hadn't spent half the night discovering exactly how good they were together.

As if everything hadn't changed between them in the dark.

He rolled over, studying the indentation in the pillow where Cam's head had been. They'd fallen asleep tangled together, but he'd woken up alone. Professional distance reasserted with the sunrise, apparently.

Nico found Cam in the kitchen, fully dressed, focused on his laptop screen with the kind of intensity that suggested he'd been avoiding eye contact for the better part of an hour.

"Morning," Nico said, pouring himself coffee and trying to read the tension in those shoulders.

"Morning." Cam's voice was carefully neutral. He still didn't look up from the screen.

"Matt sent an encrypted update. The safe house was hit twenty minutes after we left. Professional work—they knew exactly what they were looking for."

Mr. Valente. After last night, after everything they'd shared, Cam was pulling back to formal distance like nothing had happened. Like they were back to being strangers with a business arrangement.

"Any casualties?" Nico kept his voice steady, but irritation was building in his chest.

"No. But they planted surveillance equipment. If we'd stayed..." Cam's fingers tightened on his coffee mug. "We'd be dead."

The words hung between them, loaded with implications. Someone had leaked their location with surgical precision, timing the attack for maximum effectiveness. This wasn't random violence—it was calculated elimination.

"Inside job," Nico said, settling into the chair across from him.

"Has to be. Too many people knew where you were." Finally, Cam looked at him, but his expression was carefully neutral, professionally distant. "Matt's running background checks on everyone with access."

Nico studied his face, looking for some sign of the man who'd whispered his name in the dark, who'd touched him like he was something precious. Found only careful walls rebuilt overnight.

"How long before it's safe to go back?"

"Could be days. Could be weeks." Cam closed the laptop, movements precise and controlled. "Depends on how quickly we can identify the leak."

They sat in the small kitchen, morning light streaming through windows that looked out on acres of forest. Isolated, secure, and utterly alone together. The silence stretched until it became uncomfortable, filled with everything they weren't saying.

"About last night—" Nico started.

"Last night was..." Cam paused, choosing words carefully. "A mistake. Understandable given the circumstances, but it can't happen again."

A mistake. The words stung more than they should have. Nico felt his jaw tighten, but kept his voice level. "A mistake."

"Yes."

"That's what you call it?"

Cam's expression flickered—something vulnerable and raw before the walls snapped back up. "What would you call it?"

Nico wanted to say it felt like finding something he hadn't known he was looking for.

Like discovering that professional competence and careful control could hide something warm and desperate and utterly human.

Like the first time in years he'd felt safe enough to be completely vulnerable with another person.

Instead, he said, "I'd call it complicated."

"Exactly. And complications get people killed."

"So we just pretend it never happened?"

"We acknowledge that it happened, learn from it, and maintain appropriate boundaries going forward." Cam's voice stayed level, professional. "I'm here to keep you alive, not to..."

"Not to what?"

"Not to get personally involved in ways that compromise my judgment."

Nico took a slow sip of coffee, using the time to study his face. The man looked like he hadn't slept at all—shadows under his eyes, tension in every line of his body. Fighting his own instincts as hard as he was fighting this conversation.

"Your judgment seemed pretty good last night," Nico said carefully.

"Last night I let emotion override training. That's exactly what gets clients killed."

"Is that what I am? Just a client?"

The question hung between them for a long moment. Cam's control visibly frayed around the edges before he managed to rebuild it, but not before Nico caught sight of something desperate in his eyes.

"Yes," he said finally. "That's exactly what you are."

Obviously a lie, but Nico decided not to call him on it. Yet. Instead, he tested the boundaries Cam was trying to rebuild, letting his hand brush against his as he reached for the sugar. Watching how his breathing changed at the simple contact.

"The family will want an update," Nico said. "About our status."

"Already arranged. Video conference in twenty minutes." Cam was already moving, gathering equipment with military efficiency. "Your father wants a full briefing."

Nico caught the flash of something in his expression—nervousness, maybe, or the particular tension that came from knowing you were about to be evaluated by dangerous men who noticed everything.

"They like you," Nico said quietly.

"They tolerate me because I keep you alive."

"They respect you because you're good at what you do. There's a difference." Nico stood, moving close enough that he could smell his aftershave mixed with tension and the lingering scent of what they'd shared. "My family doesn't give their trust easily."

His eyes locked on Nico's face, and for a moment the careful walls slipped. "Nico..."

"What?"

"This is exactly what I'm talking about. This... tension. It's affecting my judgment."

"How?"

"Because right now, instead of thinking about threat assessment and security protocols, I'm thinking about how you looked last night. How you felt." His voice was rough, unsteady. "That's dangerous thinking."

Nico stepped closer, close enough to see the way his pupils dilated slightly. "Maybe the dangerous thinking is pretending last night didn't matter."

"It can't matter. Not if I'm going to keep you alive."

"And if you're wrong? What if caring about me makes you better at protecting me, not worse?"

Before Cam could answer, his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, his expression immediately shifting to business mode.

"Time for the call."

The video conference connected on Cam's encrypted laptop, showing the familiar paneled walls of Sal's office. Sal sat behind his desk looking every one of his sixty-five years, while Tony paced behind him with barely controlled energy.

"Nico." Relief flickered across Sal's face. "You're unharmed?"

"I'm fine, Pop. Cam got us out before they hit the location."

Tony stopped pacing long enough to study both of them through the camera. "How'd they find you so fast?"

"Someone with access leaked the location," Cam said, his voice professionally neutral. "We're working to identify the source."

"Any suspects?" Sal's question was directed at Cam, but his eyes never left Nico's face.

"A few possibilities. Vincent Torrino had access to safe house locations. So did several of the security team members."

Tony's expression darkened. "Torrino's clean. I vouched for him personally."

"With respect, sir, personal vouching doesn't override security concerns." His tone

was respectful but firm. "The man has financial pressures and questionable connections."

"You questioning my judgment?"

Nico watched the exchange, noting how Cam held his ground despite Tony's obvious irritation. Professional competence in the face of family politics—exactly the kind of backbone that had impressed him from the beginning.

"I'm questioning the wisdom of trusting someone with that many vulnerabilities," Cam said calmly.

"What vulnerabilities?"

"Gambling debts, early retirement under suspicious circumstances, and known associates with ties to the Kozlov organization." His voice stayed level, but Nico could see tension in his shoulders. "Any one of those factors would be concerning. All three together..."

Sal leaned forward slightly. "You've done background work on our personnel?"

"I've done background work on everyone with access to information that could get your son killed." Cam met the old man's eyes without flinching. "That's my job."

"And what's your assessment of Vincent Torrino?"

"Liability. High risk for compromise, either through coercion or financial incentive." He glanced at Tony, then back to Sal. "I recommend immediate suspension pending thorough investigation."

Tony's face went red. "You're out of line. Torrino's been with us for three months, no

problems, exemplary service?—"

"Exemplary service that put my client in a killbox." Cam's voice sharpened. "Someone leaked that location within hours of establishment. Someone with access, someone with motive."

Nico watched his family react to his certainty, saw his father's thoughtful expression and Tony's barely controlled anger.

But what struck him was how completely Cam had taken ownership of the situation, how he'd positioned himself as shield between Nico and any threat—even potential threats from within the family.

"What do you recommend?" Sal asked.

"Complete security review. New protocols, new personnel screening, new safe house rotation." His eyes found the camera. "And I want full authority over all protective arrangements going forward."

"That's a lot of authority for an outsider," Tony said, his voice carrying warning.

"That's the authority needed to keep your brother breathing." Cam didn't back down. "If you want someone who'll compromise his safety for family politics, hire someone else."

The tension dropped ten degrees in both rooms. Nico felt pride swell in his chest, watching Cam face down his family's power structure without flinching. The man had principles and the spine to defend them.

Sal was quiet for a long moment, studying him through the camera. "You're asking for significant trust."

"I'm asking for the trust your son's life depends on."

"And Vincent Torrino?"

"Should be isolated immediately. Full financial and communications audit, polygraph, the works." His expression was granite. "If he's clean, we'll know. If he's not..."

The unfinished threat hung in the air. Tony looked like he wanted to reach through the camera and strangle Cam, but Sal nodded slowly.

"Handle it," Sal said to Tony. "Quietly."

After the call ended, the cabin felt smaller, charged with tension that had nothing to do with security concerns. Cam closed the laptop with unnecessary force, his jaw tight with stress.

"That went well," Nico said.

"Your brother wants to kill me."

"Tony wants to kill everyone who makes him look bad. You just made him look very bad."

He turned to face him, and Nico could see the conflict in his expression—professional satisfaction warring with personal cost. "I may have just made an enemy inside your family."

"You may have just saved my life. Again." Nico moved closer, ignoring the way he tensed. "That thing with Torrino—you were right to push. I should have listened when you first raised concerns."

"It's not about being right. It's about?—"

"It's about you seeing things clearly when I couldn't. When my family couldn't." Nico's hand found his arm, and he felt the tremor that ran through him at the contact. "That's what partnership is. Trusting someone else's judgment when yours is compromised."

"Partnership," he repeated, like the word tasted dangerous.

"Professional partnership." Nico's thumb was tracing circles on his forearm. They both knew professional partnerships didn't usually involve touching like this. "Complete trust in each other's expertise."

"Nico..." Cam's voice was strained.

"What?"

"You're making this very difficult."

"Making what difficult?"

"Maintaining boundaries. Professional distance." Cam's eyes locked on his face. "Acting like last night didn't change everything between us."

The admission hit like a physical blow. Nico felt his pulse quicken, saw answering heat flicker in Cam's eyes before he tried to bank it.

"What if it did change things?" Nico asked quietly. "What if pretending otherwise is what's really dangerous?"

"Then we're both in trouble."

"Maybe." Nico stepped closer, close enough to see the way Cam's breathing had changed. "But maybe we're stronger together than apart. Maybe caring about each other makes us better at this, not worse."

Cam's control was visibly fraying, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "I can't afford to care about you this much. Can't afford to have my judgment compromised by?—"

"By what? By wanting to keep me safe for reasons that have nothing to do with money?"

"Yes." The word came out rough, honest. "By knowing that losing you would destroy me."

The raw admission hung between them, dangerous and true. Nico felt something shift in his chest—not just attraction or professional respect, but something deeper. Recognition that this man would die for him not because it was his job, but because it was his choice.

"Then we'll have to make sure you don't lose me," Nico said quietly.

Before he could respond, his phone buzzed with an urgent tone. He glanced at the screen, his expression immediately shifting to alert.

"Matt," he answered. "What do you have?"

Nico watched his face change as he listened, saw professional concern shift to something darker.

"When?" he asked. "How long has he been missing?"

Missing. Nico felt ice settle in his stomach.

"Copy. We'll maintain position until you give the all-clear." He hung up, his expression grim.

"Torrino?"

"Gone. Disappeared sometime after our call. His apartment's been cleaned out, no forwarding address." Already moving, checking weapons and communications gear. "Which means whoever hired him knows we survived the safe house hit."

"And they'll try again."

"Count on it. But this time, we'll be ready."

As he prepared their defenses, Nico found himself thinking about trust, about professional boundaries, about the way some partnerships transcended job descriptions.

About how the man protecting his life had just risked his own position in the family to keep him safe. About how professional competence had somehow become personal devotion without either of them planning it.

About how they were probably both in trouble, and how that might be exactly where they needed to be.

Some complications couldn't be avoided.

And maybe the best ones shouldn't be.

ELEVEN

FAMILY BUSINESS

The compound's war room hadn't been used for actual war planning in five years. Nico stood at the head of the polished mahogany table, studying the faces of men who'd sworn loyalty to his family, trying to determine which ones he could still trust.

Sal sat at the far end, his silver hair catching the afternoon light streaming through bulletproof windows. Matt occupied his usual spot to the right, legal pads covered in notes and contingency plans. Tony paced behind them, his agitation filling the room like smoke.

And he stood by the door, alert and professional, like he belonged there.

"The Kozlovs made their intentions clear," Nico said, his voice carrying the weight of absolute authority. "Professional hit team, military-grade equipment, coordinated assault. This wasn't intimidation—it was an execution attempt."

"Which failed," Matt pointed out, his pen tapping against his notepad. "Thanks to excellent security protocols."

Tony stopped pacing long enough to shoot a glare at Cam. "Security protocols that nearly got my brother killed."

"Security protocols that kept him alive," he corrected, tone respectful but firm. "If we'd been in the penthouse or at Romano's like they expected, this would be a funeral

planning meeting."

The room went quiet. Tony's face darkened, but he didn't argue the point. Even his ambition wasn't stupid enough to contradict obvious facts.

"The question," Sal said slowly, "is what we do now. The Kozlovs have declared war whether we wanted one or not."

"We finish it." Nico's voice cut through the room like a blade. "Fast, clean, decisive. Send a message that attempting to kill a Valente has consequences."

"What kind of consequences?" Matt asked, already taking notes.

Nico glanced at him, who gave an almost imperceptible nod. They'd discussed this during the ride back from their extraction point, and his tactical insights had been invaluable.

"We hit their leadership structure," Nico said. "Not the foot soldiers—the men giving orders. Make it clear that if they want to play with professionals, they'll get professional responses."

Tony's expression shifted to something that might have been approval. "I like it. Quick and brutal."

"Surgical," he corrected. "Minimal collateral damage, maximum impact. Take out decision-makers and let the organization collapse from within."

"And you know how to do this?" Sal's question was directed at Cam, but his eyes never left Nico's face.

"He knows," Nico said before Cam could respond. "Military training, tactical

expertise. He's already identified target priorities and approach vectors."

The words meant more than strategy. He was bringing him into the inner circle, and everyone in the room knew it. Matt's pen stopped moving. Tony's jaw tightened with barely controlled anger.

"Since when," Tony said carefully, "do we involve outsiders in family business?"

"Since those outsiders save my life and earn the right to contribute." Nico's tone was calm, final. "He stays. Anyone who has a problem with that can leave."

The challenge hung in the air like a thrown gauntlet. Tony's face went through several expressions before settling on careful neutrality. Walking out now would be tantamount to admitting he cared more about ego than family loyalty.

"Fine," he said. "What's the plan?"

He moved to the table, spreading out photographs and building layouts with military precision. "Three primary targets. Alexei Kozlov, the operational commander. Viktor Petrov, their financial strategist. And Dmitri Volkov, who handles enforcement and recruitment."

"How do we get to them?" Matt asked.

"Simultaneously. Three teams, coordinated strikes, no advance warning." His finger traced routes on the photographs. "Kozlov operates out of a shipping warehouse on the east side. Petrov uses an accounting firm downtown as his front. Volkov runs a gym that's really a recruitment center."

"Manpower?" Sal's question was practical, businesslike.

"Fifteen men total. Five per target, plus coordination and backup." He glanced at Nico. "All volunteers. Nobody goes in who doesn't understand the risks."

Tony leaned forward, studying the tactical breakdown. "What about police response?"

"Timed for maximum delay. Hit all three locations within a ten-minute window, extract before first responders arrive. Clean, professional, no evidence linking back to family operations."

Nico found himself impressed despite having heard this plan before. Cam had outlined strategies that most military officers would struggle to coordinate, accounting for variables that experience had taught him to consider.

"Timeline?" Sal asked.

"Forty-eight hours," Nico said. "Gives us time to coordinate teams and equipment without losing momentum."

"And if they hit us first?"

"They won't. They're regrouping, trying to figure out how their professional hitters failed." His voice carried absolute certainty. "Military operations require planning time, especially after a failure. We have a window."

Sofia appeared in the doorway, her presence immediately shifting the room's energy. "Dinner in twenty minutes," she announced, her gaze sweeping over the tactical photographs with practiced indifference. "All of you."

It wasn't a request. Sofia Valente didn't make requests when it came to family meals.

"Ma," Nico started.

"Twenty minutes." Her eyes found him. "You too, young man. You've been shot at enough for one day."

She disappeared before anyone could argue, leaving behind the faint scent of garlic and rosemary that meant serious cooking was happening in the kitchen.

"You heard her," Sal said, standing slowly. "We continue this after dinner."

As the room emptied, Tony lingered behind, expression carefully neutral. "Nico. A word."

He started toward the door, but Nico caught his arm. "Stay."

"This is family business," Tony said, his voice carrying warning.

"So is he." Nico didn't release Cam's arm. "Anything you want to say to me, you can say in front of him."

Tony's control finally cracked. "What the hell is this, Nico? You're bringing outsiders into war planning? Making tactical decisions based on some hired gun's opinion?"

"I'm making tactical decisions based on expert advice from someone who's kept me alive while our security fell apart." Nico's voice stayed level, but steel ran underneath. "Someone who spotted Torino's problems before we did. Someone who saved both our lives yesterday."

"He's not family."

"Neither was Marco. Neither was Vincent. Neither are half the men we trust with our

lives every day." Nico stepped closer to his brother. "Family isn't just blood, Tony. It's loyalty. It's competence. It's being willing to die for something bigger than yourself."

"And you think he's willing to die for us?"

Nico glanced at Cam, seeing steady confidence in his expression. "I think he already has. Multiple times."

Tony's gaze shifted between them, politician's instincts recognizing currents he couldn't quite identify. "This isn't just about security, is it?"

The question hung between them, loaded with implications. Nico felt him tense beside him, preparing for whatever family drama was about to unfold.

"This is about keeping the family alive and strong," Nico said carefully. "Everything else is secondary."

"Is it?" Tony's voice carried doubt. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're more concerned with keeping him happy than keeping the family unified."

"The family is unified. You're the one creating divisions."

"I'm the one asking reasonable questions about operational security and family loyalty." Tony straightened, reasserting his authority as underboss. "Questions Pop would be asking if he wasn't blinded by relief that you're still breathing."

The words stung more than Nico expected. Sal had been unusually accommodating about his integration into family operations, accepting his presence with minimal resistance. But was that strategic thinking or emotional reaction?

"My job," Nico said slowly, "is to make sure this family survives and prospers. If that means bringing in outside expertise, then that's what I do. If you have a problem with my judgment, take it up with Pop."

Tony's expression shifted through several emotions before settling on resignation. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do."

"For all our sakes, I hope you're right."

He left without another word, footsteps echoing down the hallway toward the dining room. Nico stood in the sudden quiet, aware of his presence beside him, aware of the weight of decisions that would ripple through the family for years to come.

"He's not wrong," Cam said quietly.

"About what?"

"About the risks. About bringing outsiders into family operations." Cam turned to face him. "About me not being family."

"You're wrong about that last part."

"Am I? Because from where I'm standing, it feels like you're taking risks you shouldn't take. Making compromises that could get people hurt."

Nico studied his face, seeing conflict in his expression. "You having second thoughts about the plan?"

"I'm having second thoughts about my role in it. About whether I'm becoming a

liability instead of an asset."

The admission hit harder than it should have. Nico had been so focused on integrating him into family operations that he hadn't considered the pressure it would create, the way it would force him to choose between professional distance and personal loyalty.

"You're not a liability," Nico said. "You're the reason I'm alive to have this conversation."

"Today. What about tomorrow? What about when family politics start affecting tactical decisions?"

It was a fair question. One Nico didn't have a good answer for.

"We'll figure it out," he said finally.

"Will we? Because your brother's right about one thing—this isn't just about security anymore." Cam's voice was quiet, honest. "And I'm not sure I know how to navigate whatever this is becoming."

Before Nico could respond, Sofia's voice echoed down the hallway. "Dinner! Now!"

They walked toward the dining room together, but the conversation hung between them like unfinished business. Nico had gotten what he wanted—him integrated into family operations, accepted as more than just hired security. But acceptance came with complications he hadn't anticipated.

Family politics. Divided loyalties. The weight of decisions that affected more than just two people finding their way toward each other.

As they entered the dining room, where his family waited with wary acceptance and

barely concealed questions, Nico realized that bringing him into the inner circle might have been the easy part.

Keeping him there was going to be the real challenge.

TWELVE

THE HUNT

Two AM surveillance never got easier. Cam adjusted his position on the warehouse rooftop, night vision scope trained on the loading dock three blocks away where Viktor Petrov conducted business that definitely wasn't accounting.

"Movement, east entrance," he murmured into his throat mic. "Two vehicles, black sedans."

"Copy that." His voice came through the earpiece, calm and focused. "I've got eyes on the north side. Three men on foot patrol, armed."

They'd been watching the Kozlov operation for six hours, mapping security patterns and identifying weaknesses. What they'd discovered was troubling—this wasn't just a financial front. It was a weapons staging area.

"You seeing this?" he asked.

Cam shifted his scope to follow his line of sight. Through the loading dock's open bay doors, he could see wooden crates being unloaded from a shipping container. The kind of crates that held military-grade hardware.

"RPGs," Cam said quietly. "At least a dozen. Plus enough assault rifles to outfit a small army."

"They're not planning another assassination attempt."

"No. They're planning a war."

The implications hit both of them simultaneously. The Kozlovs weren't just trying to eliminate Nico—they were preparing to take over Valente territory by force. Complete decimation, not surgical strikes.

"We need to get closer," he said. "Document everything."

Cam studied the approach routes, calculating risks. The warehouse sat in an industrial district with minimal cover, surrounded by open ground that would expose them to observation. Getting close enough for detailed intelligence meant crossing fifty yards of empty space.

"Too exposed," he said. "If they spot us?—"

"They won't. Trust me."

Those two words hit harder than they should have. Trust me had stopped being professional confidence. It had become something deeper.

"What's your plan?"

"Shift change in twenty minutes. Night crew goes off duty, day crew comes on. Fifteen-minute gap while they transition." His voice carried the certainty of someone who'd studied patterns and found exploitable weaknesses. "We go in during the handoff."

"And if the timing's off?"

"Then we improvise."

Cam found himself almost smiling despite the circumstances. Three weeks ago, Nico had been a stubborn client who thought security protocols were suggestions. Now he was calculating tactical windows and planning infiltration operations.

"Your father know you're this good at fieldwork?"

"My father thinks I spend too much time in boardrooms." There was amusement in his voice. "He's probably right."

They moved during the shift change, using drainage ditches and abandoned equipment for cover. Cam led the approach, but he matched his pace perfectly, staying low, minimizing noise. No wasted movement, no amateur mistakes.

The warehouse's rear entrance was secured with a standard electronic lock—sophisticated enough to deter casual break-ins, simple enough for someone with military training to bypass. Cam had it open in under two minutes.

Inside, the warehouse buzzed with activity despite the late hour. Voices echoed off concrete walls, speaking rapid Russian mixed with English curse words. Loading equipment rumbled across the floor, moving inventory that would never appear on customs forms.

"This way," he whispered, gesturing toward a maintenance ladder that led to an overhead catwalk.

They climbed carefully, testing each rung before committing their weight. The catwalk provided perfect observation of the warehouse floor—rows of shipping containers, stacks of wooden crates, and enough weapons to level several city blocks.

Cam pulled out his camera, documenting everything. Serial numbers, shipping labels, inventory counts that would help federal prosecutors build cases against the entire Kozlov organization.

"There," he pointed to a cluster of men gathered around a table covered with maps and building blueprints. "Dmitri Volkov. The enforcement specialist."

Cam focused his camera on the planning session, capturing faces and documents. Through the telephoto lens, he could read some of the blueprints—Valente compound layouts, shipping facility diagrams, even floor plans of the family's legitimate businesses.

"They've been planning this for months," he said quietly.

"Years, probably. They know everything about our operations."

One of the blueprints caught Cam's attention—detailed schematics of the Valente family home, including security installations and emergency protocols. Someone had provided inside information, marked patrol routes and identified weaknesses.

"Nico. Look at this."

He focused on the blueprint Cam was photographing. His face went cold with recognition and fury.

"Those are current security layouts. Updated last month."

"Inside job?"

"Has to be. Only five people had access to those plans." His voice carried deadly promise. "When this is over, we're going to have a very serious conversation about

loyalty."

A door slammed somewhere below them, followed by rapid footsteps and urgent Russian voices. Cam tensed, hand moving instinctively toward his weapon.

"Problem?" he whispered.

"Maybe. They sound agitated."

The conversation below grew heated, multiple voices overlapping in what sounded like argument or crisis management. Cam couldn't understand the words, but the tone was universal—something had gone wrong.

"We should go," he said. "Now."

They started back along the catwalk, moving carefully to avoid noise. Halfway to the ladder, lights flooded the warehouse. Emergency lighting, bright enough to eliminate shadows and expose anyone who shouldn't be there.

"Shit," he breathed.

Below them, armed men spread out across the warehouse floor, searching systematically. Someone had triggered an alarm, or discovered their entry point, or simply gotten paranoid at the wrong moment.

"Options?" he asked.

Cam studied their position. The catwalk provided elevation but no cover. The ladder was exposed to observation from multiple angles. The emergency exit was fifty feet away across open space.

"We fight our way out, or we hide and hope they don't look up."

"I vote for not getting shot."

"Good choice."

They pressed themselves flat against the catwalk, using shadows cast by overhead beams for concealment. Below, the search continued with military precision—methodical, thorough, designed to find anything that didn't belong.

A flashlight beam swept across the catwalk three feet from Cam's position. He held his breath, aware of him doing the same beside him. The beam lingered, probing shadows, before moving on to other areas.

"Clear," someone called in English.

"Check again," Volkov's voice answered. "I don't like coincidences."

The search continued for another ten minutes—ten minutes that felt like hours while they lay motionless on steel grating, listening to armed men hunt for intruders. Finally, the emergency lights dimmed and normal operations resumed.

"That was close," he whispered.

"Too close. We're blown—they know someone was here."

"But they don't know who. Or what we learned."

They made it back to the roof and their observation position without further incident. But the warehouse below had changed—doubled security patrols, additional lookouts, the kind of alert status that meant their intelligence-gathering window was

closed.

"Did we get enough?" he asked.

Cam reviewed the photographs on his camera display. Weapons inventory, shipping manifests, operational blueprints, and faces of key personnel. Plus the damning evidence of inside information being shared with enemy forces.

"We got everything we needed." He met his eyes. "They're planning to hit the compound tomorrow night. Full assault, multiple teams, enough firepower to level the entire complex."

"Then we better make sure our people are ready."

As they prepared to extract from their observation position, Cam found himself thinking about the operation they'd just completed. Perfect coordination, seamless teamwork, instinctive trust that let them operate as a unit rather than two separate people trying to accomplish the same goal.

"You did good tonight," he said.

"So did you."

"I mean it. Most civilians would've panicked when those lights came on. You stayed calm, followed protocol, didn't do anything stupid."

"Most bodyguards would've tried to handle this alone. You trusted me to watch your back."

They were stating facts, but underneath the professional assessment was recognition of something deeper. They worked well together—not just as protector and client, but

as partners. Equal contributors to a mission that required both of their skills.

"We should head back," Cam said. "Your family needs to know what's coming."

"Agreed. But Cam?" Nico paused at the roof's edge. "Whatever happens tomorrow—I want you to know that I've never felt safer than I do when we're working together."

Something in his chest tightened at the admission. Professional partnerships were built on competence and reliability. Personal partnerships were built on trust and understanding. What they had was becoming both.

"Same here," Cam said quietly. "We make a good team."

"Yeah. We do."

Walking back through empty streets toward the compound, Cam felt something had changed during the operation. They'd stopped being bodyguard and client. They'd become something more effective and more dangerous.

They'd become partners in every sense that mattered.

And tomorrow night, when the Kozlovs came for the Valente family with military-grade weapons and inside information, they were going to discover that taking down Nico Valente meant going through both of them.

Some partnerships were worth fighting for.

This one was worth dying for.

THIRTEEN

REVELATION

The photographs spread across Matt's desk like evidence at a murder trial. Bank records, wire transfers, timestamped surveillance footage—all pointing to the same impossible conclusion that made Nico's chest feel tight with something between rage and grief.

"How long?" His voice came out steady despite the hurricane building inside him.

He adjusted his glasses, the gesture buying him time he didn't want to take. "Financial records go back six months. But the pattern suggests longer. Maybe a year."

A year. Twelve months of Tony feeding information to the Kozlovs while sitting at family dinners, while planning security protocols, while watching Nico nearly die twice and expressing nothing but concern.

"The security layouts from last night's intel?" Nico asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Tony's electronic signature on the access logs. Downloaded three days ago, uploaded to an encrypted server that traces back to Kozlov financial networks." His voice carried exhaustion, like a man watching everything he'd believed in fall apart. "He's been selling us out, Nico. Piece by piece."

He stood by the office windows, alert despite the compound's security, his presence a

steadying weight in a world suddenly tilted off its axis. He hadn't said much since the call had dragged them back from the surveillance operation, but Nico could feel his attention like a physical thing.

"Where is he?"

"Private dining room with your father. They're discussing operational security for tonight." His mouth twisted with bitter irony. "Tony suggested additional patrols around the compound perimeter."

"Jesus Christ." Nico pushed back from the desk, needing movement to process what felt like physical pain. His brother. His blood. The man who'd taught him to drive, who'd covered for him when teenage rebellion got out of hand, who'd stood beside him at Marco's funeral talking about family loyalty.

"There's more," he said quietly.

Nico's hands clenched into fists. "What else?"

"Vincent Torrino wasn't the original leak.

Tony recruited him as backup when he realized we were getting suspicious about security breaches.

" He slid another photograph across the desk—Tony and Vincent meeting in a parking garage, the timestamp showing two weeks before Marco's death. "Tony's been planning this for months."

The room went silent except for the tick of the grandfather clock and the distant sound of compound security making their rounds. Normal sounds in a world that had just revealed itself to be completely insane.

"Planning what, exactly?" Cam's voice cut through the quiet, professional and controlled.

"Succession." He pulled out another file, this one thicker. "Bank records show payments from offshore accounts tied to Kozlov operations. But there's money going the other way too —Tony's been investing in properties, businesses, establishing financial independence."

"He's positioning himself to take over when the Kozlovs eliminate me."

"That's my read, yes."

Nico felt something cold settle in his stomach, spreading outward until his whole body felt numb. This wasn't just betrayal. It was patricide by proxy, using Russian bullets to clear a path to the throne that Tony had always believed belonged to him.

"Does Pop know?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first."

"Loyal to the end." Nico's voice came out rougher than he intended. "Even when loyalty might get you killed."

His expression was grave. "Loyalty's all we have, Nico. Without it, we're just criminals."

Footsteps echoed in the hallway outside—confident, familiar, approaching with the easy stride of someone who belonged here. Tony, coming to check on their intelligence gathering, to offer strategic insights about defending against an attack he'd helped orchestrate.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

Nico looked at the photographs again, seeing a year of careful planning, systematic betrayal, family dinners seasoned with lies.

Tony laughing at Sofia's stories while counting Russian money.

Tony offering tactical advice while selling compound layouts.

Tony standing at Marco's grave talking about sacrifice while knowing exactly who'd pulled the trigger.

"I want to hear him say it."

The door opened without a knock—Tony's privilege as underboss, as family, as the brother who'd never learned to respect boundaries.

"How'd the surveillance go?" Tony asked, settling into the chair across from Matt's desk like he owned it. "Get anything useful?"

"Useful is one way to put it." Nico kept his voice level, watching Tony's face for tells. "We found Kozlov operational plans, weapons inventory, assault timelines."

"Good. That'll help us prepare defenses." Tony's expression showed nothing but professional interest. "What kind of timeline are we looking at?"

"Tonight. Full assault, multiple entry points, enough firepower to level the compound."

"Shit." Tony leaned forward, the picture of concerned family. "We need to get everyone to safe locations. Move the women, double the perimeter guards?—"

"We also found evidence of inside information being shared with Kozlov forces."

The words hung in the air like smoke from a gunshot. Tony's expression didn't change, but something shifted behind his eyes—calculation replacing concern, preparation replacing surprise.

"Inside information?"

"Current security layouts. Updated patrol schedules. Even architectural plans showing emergency exits and safe room locations." Nico watched his brother's face, looking for some sign of shame, regret, anything human. "The kind of information only family would have access to."

"That's..." Tony paused, choosing words carefully. "That's disturbing. We'll need to review everyone with security clearance, figure out how this happened."

"We already did."

Nico slid the bank records across the desk, watching Tony's face as recognition hit. For just a moment, the mask slipped—surprise, calculation, then resigned acceptance.

"Well," Tony said finally. "I guess we're having a different conversation than I expected."

"I guess we are."

Tony sat back in his chair, studying Nico with new assessment. The pretense was gone now, the careful performance of concerned brotherhood replaced by something colder and more honest.

"How long have you known?"

"About an hour. Matt's thorough when he wants to be."

"Matt always was too smart for his own good." Tony's voice carried no anger, just professional evaluation. "I told them you'd figure it out eventually. You're too careful, too paranoid. It's one of your better qualities."

The casual admission hit Nico like a physical blow. Not denial, not justification—just acknowledgment of facts that meant their relationship, their family, their entire world had been built on lies.

"Why?"

"Because you're not ready." Tony stood, pacing to the window where Cam watched with predatory stillness. "You think like a businessman instead of a boss. You negotiate when you should eliminate. You show mercy when strength is required."

"So you decided to eliminate me instead?"

"I decided to create an opportunity for better leadership." Tony turned back to face him, expression matter-of-fact. "The Kozlovs were always going to move against us eventually. Better to control the timing, minimize the damage."

"Minimize the damage." Nico's voice was deadly quiet. "Marco's dead. Vincent Torino nearly got me killed twice. How is that minimizing anything?"

"Growing pains. Necessary sacrifices to establish new management structure." Tony's tone suggested they were discussing quarterly projections instead of murder. "The family needs leadership that understands how power really works."

"And you think that's you?"

"I know it's me."

He shifted, barely noticeable unless you knew to watch for it. Nico had learned to read those signs. Preparation, assessment, the kind of focused attention that meant violence was seconds away.

"Here's what's going to happen," Tony continued, settling back into his chair like he was chairing a board meeting. "You're going to choose between the family and your pet bodyguard. Send him away, accept my leadership, and we can salvage this situation."

"And if I don't?"

"Then the Kozlov assault happens as planned. You die defending the compound like a hero, I assume leadership to avenge your death, and the family emerges stronger under more appropriate management."

Tony spoke about murder like a business transaction. Complete erasure disguised as heroic narrative.

"That's your offer? Submit or die?"

"That's reality." Tony's voice hardened. "You can choose the family, or you can choose him. But you can't choose both."

Nico looked at the photographs scattered across Matt's desk, then at Cam standing alert by the windows, then at his brother who'd just threatened to murder him for the crime of thinking like a human being instead of an animal.

"You're wrong," he said quietly.

"About what?"

"I can choose both. I choose loyalty that's earned instead of inherited.

I choose competence over birthright. I choose people who would die for me instead of people planning to kill me.

" Nico stood, feeling something settle in his chest that might have been relief.

"I choose both, Tony. And that's not negotiable. "

Tony's expression shifted through surprise, anger, and finally something that looked almost like respect.

"I was hoping you'd see reason."

"I am seeing reason. For the first time in a year, I'm seeing everything clearly."

"Then you're choosing war with your own blood."

"No. I'm choosing war with a traitor who happens to share my DNA." Nico walked to the door, then paused. "Matt, call security. I want Tony confined until this is over."

"Nico—"

"And Matt? When you make that call, tell them Cam's authorized to make security decisions in my absence. Full authority."

He nodded, already reaching for his phone. Tony watched the exchange with growing understanding, his politician's instincts recognizing the transfer of power happening in front of him.

"You're making a mistake," Tony said.

"The only mistake I made was trusting you." Nico opened the door, then looked back at his brother one last time. "The Kozlovs are going to be very disappointed when their inside information turns out to be useless."

As they walked away from the office, he kept pace beside him, silent support in a world suddenly rearranged around new loyalties and harder truths.

"You okay?" Cam asked quietly.

"No. But I will be." Nico felt the weight of leadership settling on his shoulders, heavier now but somehow cleaner. "We've got a war to win."

"Together?"

"Together."

Behind them, Tony's voice carried down the hallway, calm and controlled even in defeat. "You'll understand someday, Nico. When mercy gets you killed, you'll understand why strength matters more than sentiment."

But Nico was already walking away, choosing his own path forward with the one person who'd never asked him to choose at all.

FOURTEEN

WAR COUNCIL

Blueprints covered every surface in the secure conference room like battle plans for a siege.

Cam studied the compound layouts, marking sight lines and defensive positions while the Valente family's most trusted soldiers filed in one by one.

Men who'd sworn loyalty to Sal decades ago, who'd survived wars and investigations and the kind of violence that left scars visible and otherwise.

"Everyone's here," Matt said quietly, closing the door behind the last arrival. "These are the only people we're certain Tony didn't compromise."

Sal sat at the head of the table, looking every one of his sixty-five years but with steel in his eyes that hadn't dimmed.

To his right, Nico spread intelligence photographs from their warehouse surveillance.

To his left, Bianca reviewed legal contingencies with the focused intensity that had made her one of the city's most feared negotiators.

"Gentlemen," Sal's voice carried the weight of absolute authority. "We have a problem. My eldest son has been selling information to our enemies for the better part of a year."

The room went dead silent. These men had known Tony since he was a teenager, had watched him grow into the role of underboss. Learning he was a traitor hit like a physical blow.

"Jesus Christ," one of them muttered. "How bad?"

"Security layouts, patrol schedules, weapons inventory." Nico's voice stayed level, professional. "Plus financial records showing payments from Kozlov accounts. He's been positioning himself to take over after they eliminate me."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight they come with enough firepower to level this place." Cam stepped forward, indicating positions on the compound blueprint. "Three assault teams, military-grade weapons, complete intelligence about our defenses."

"Except their intelligence is wrong now," Sal said, his eyes finding Cam's face. "Because we're going to give them something they don't expect."

For the next hour, they rebuilt the compound's entire defensive strategy.

New patrol routes that avoided Tony's leaked schedules.

Relocated weapons caches that bypassed his known positions.

False intelligence planted where he could find it, designed to send the assault teams into carefully prepared kill zones.

"What about Tony himself?" Bianca asked. "He's still family."

"He stopped being family the moment he put a price on Nico's head." Sal's voice was

granite. "But he doesn't die unless there's no other choice. Exile is punishment enough."

The old man's restraint surprised Cam. Most people would have ordered Tony killed immediately. But Sal was still a father, even now.

"Timing?" Dante asked.

"Full dark. They'll hit us between midnight and two AM, when security shifts and visibility drops." Cam traced approach routes on the blueprints. "Three entry points—main gate, east fence line, and the service road. Standard military tactic, divide our attention."

"Countermeasures?"

"We let them in."

The room erupted in surprised voices until Sal raised one hand for silence.

"Explain," he said quietly.

"We can't stop them from getting inside the perimeter. Too much firepower, too much preparation." Cam's finger moved across the compound layout. "But we can control where they go once they're in. Channel them toward defensive positions, use the compound's architecture against them."

"It's risky," one of the soldiers said. "If the timing's off?—"

"If the timing's off, we're all dead anyway." Nico leaned forward, studying the plan. "But if it works, we end the Kozlov threat permanently."

"And Tony?" Bianca's question was soft, but everyone heard it.

"Tony gets a choice," Sal said finally. "Surrender and live in exile, or fight and face the consequences."

The meeting continued for another hour, working through contingencies and communication protocols.

Cam watched these men—killers and soldiers and criminals—plan strategy with the kind of methodical care that kept families alive for generations.

He'd worked with military units that showed less professionalism.

"One more thing," Sal said as the meeting wound down. "Cam."

He looked up, meeting the old man's eyes.

"You're not hired security anymore. As of tonight, you're family." Sal's voice carried the weight of formal declaration. "You protect my son, you protect us all. That makes you one of us."

Something shifted in Cam's chest at the words. He'd spent eight years building a business on professional distance, on being the expert outsider who solved problems and moved on. Being claimed by the Valente family meant something different. Something permanent.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you? Because once you're family, you're family forever. Good times and bad, prosperity and war. There's no walking away when things get difficult."

Cam glanced at Nico, seeing something shift in his expression. Recognition, maybe. Or relief that his father was offering what Tony had demanded Nico choose between.

"I wouldn't want to walk away," Cam said quietly.

Sal nodded, satisfaction flickering across his face. "Good. Because tonight's going to test everything we believe about loyalty and trust."

The others filed out to make preparations. Nico stayed behind. The conference room felt larger with just the two of them, blueprints and photographs scattered across the table like evidence of everything they were about to risk.

"You sure about this?" Nico asked. "About becoming part of all this?"

"Are you?"

"I've been part of this my whole life. I don't have a choice."

"Yes, you do." Cam moved to stand beside him, close enough to smell his cologne mixed with tension and determination. "You could walk away tomorrow. Disappear, start over somewhere else. Leave all of this behind."

"Could I? Could you?"

The question settled between them like a weight. Cam had built his life on being able to walk away, on maintaining the distance that kept him safe from exactly this kind of entanglement. But walking away from Nico felt impossible now.

"No," he said finally. "I don't think I could."

"Then we're both committed to seeing this through."

"Together."

"Together." Nico turned to face him fully. "Cam, what if we don't make it through tonight?"

"We will."

"But what if we don't?" He stepped closer, close enough to see the exhaustion lines around Cam's eyes, the weight of responsibility he carried like armor. "What if this is all we get?"

Cam's jaw tightened. "Don't talk like that. We plan for victory, not?—"

"I'm not talking tactics." Nico's hand found Cam's chest, fingers spreading over his heart. "I'm talking about this. About us. About all the things we haven't said because we thought we had time."

The words hung between them, dangerous and true. They'd been dancing around admissions for weeks, hiding behind professional boundaries and careful distance. But tonight, those walls felt impossibly thin.

"Nico..."

"I love..." Nico's voice caught. "Christ, I love how you see things I miss. How you make me feel like I can fall apart and you'll catch me. How you chose this—chose me—when you could've walked away a dozen times."

The words came out raw, unfinished. Cam felt his chest tighten with recognition and something deeper.

"I love that you trust me with decisions that could destroy your family," Cam said

against his mouth. "I love that you're strong enough to let me be strong for you. I love that choosing you was the first real choice I've made in eight years."

They stood there in the empty conference room, surrounded by the detritus of war planning, aware that in a few hours bullets would be flying and people would be dying. Aware that all their careful strategies might not be enough to keep them breathing until dawn.

"If something happens to me tonight," Nico said, his voice steady despite the words, "take care of my family. Not the business—Dante can handle that. But my mother, Bianca, the kids. Make sure they're safe."

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

"But if it does?—"

"If it does, I'll make sure they're protected. But it won't come to that." Cam's hands found his face, fingers gentle against stubble and worry lines. "We're walking out of this together."

"What if... what if I hesitate tomorrow because I can't lose you? What if loving you gets us both killed?"

"What if I freeze up because I care too much to think straight?" Cam's voice was equally rough. "What if all my training means nothing when it's you in the crosshairs?"

They stared at each other, both acknowledging the fears that had been lurking beneath the surface. The possibility that love might be a liability in a world where hesitation meant death.

"We're stronger together." Nico's voice was quiet, certain. "Every time it mattered, we didn't freeze up. We got better."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure that I'd rather face tonight with you than face tomorrow without you." Nico's mouth found his, desperate and sure. "I'm sure that whatever happens, we face it together."

"I should check the defensive positions," Cam said against his lips.

"I should brief the team leaders."

Neither of them moved.

"Not here," Cam said, glancing toward the door. "Somewhere... somewhere that's ours."

They made it to Nico's private office, barely, hands never quite letting go, mouths finding skin whenever they could. The door locked behind them with a click that sounded like finality.

"Look at me," Nico said, his voice rough with want and something deeper. When Cam's eyes met his, the careful control was gone completely. "I want to remember this. Remember you. Everything about this moment."

"We're going to have a thousand more moments," Cam said, but his hands were everywhere—threading through Nico's hair, tracing the line of his jaw, mapping the places that made him gasp.

"But what if we don't? What if tonight is all we get?"

His shirt disappeared, pulled away with reverent hands that shook slightly. Cam's mouth followed the path his fingers had traced—the hollow of his throat, the line of his collarbone, the scar over his ribs that told stories of other battles, other times he'd almost died.

"I used to think scars were ugly," Cam said against his skin. "Evidence of failure, of not being careful enough."

"And now?"

"Now I think they're proof." Cam's mouth found the scar from the car bomb, gentle and worshipful. "Proof that you're strong enough to survive anything. Proof that you kept fighting long enough for me to find you."

When Cam's shirt joined his on the floor, Nico's hands mapped muscle and old wounds with the same reverence.

A puckered mark on his shoulder from Kandahar.

The long line across his ribs from a knife that had come too close.

Stories written in flesh, proof of all the battles Cam had survived to be here.

"I want to memorize this," Nico said, his mouth finding the pulse point at Cam's throat. "Memorize you. The way you taste, the way you feel..."

They moved together with desperate tenderness, each touch a promise, each kiss a prayer.

This wasn't the desperate hunger of their first time or the comfortable intimacy of established lovers.

This was something else—two men making love like it might be their last chance, like they could somehow burn the memory deep enough to last forever.

When Cam's mouth found his again, Nico could taste salt—tears he hadn't realized were falling. "I'm scared," he admitted against Cam's lips.

"Of dying?"

"Of losing you. Of losing this." His hand found Cam's heart, feeling it hammer against his palm. "Of never getting the chance to tell you that you saved me long before tonight. Not from bullets or bombs, but from being alone."

Something broke in Cam then. He pulled Nico against him, skin to skin, breathing ragged with want and fear and love too big for words. "You're not alone. You'll never be alone again."

They made love like men possessed, like they could somehow press close enough to merge into one person who might survive what was coming. Every touch carried weight, every whispered word a vow. When it ended, they lay tangled together in the aftermath, breathing hard, hearts beating in sync.

"Whatever happens tomorrow," Cam said against his hair, "I want you to know—this is the best thing that ever happened to me. You. This. All of it."

"Even the part where people try to kill me on a regular basis?"

"Especially that part." Cam's mouth curved against his temple. "Keeps life interesting."

Outside, the compound hummed with final preparations. Men checking weapons, reviewing positions, preparing for war. But here, in the quiet space they'd carved out

from chaos, there was only truth.

"Promise me something," Nico said.

"Anything."

"Promise me we'll have this conversation again tomorrow night. When it's over."

Cam's arms tightened around him. "I promise."

Neither of them was sure they could keep that promise, but it was all they had. Some promises were made in public, witnessed by crowds. This one was whispered in darkness, sealed with desperate hope that love might be stronger than bullets.

"We should go," Cam said finally. "They'll be expecting us."

"I know." Neither of them moved, both reluctant to break the spell that had wrapped around them like armor.

When they finally dressed, preparing to face what was coming, the air between them felt different. The last walls had fallen. The final admissions had been made. Whatever happened in the hours ahead, they would face it as they'd faced everything else—together.

But as they left the office to make final preparations for a battle that would determine everything, Cam found himself thinking that some things couldn't wait. Some admissions needed to be made before bullets started flying, because there might not be another chance.

Tonight they'd find out if their partnership was strong enough to survive war.

And if they were both strong enough to survive the truth about what they'd become to each other.

Some battles were won with superior firepower. Others were won with superior reason to survive.

Tonight, they had both.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

FIFTEEN

ENDGAME

[NICO]

Midnight brought fog rolling in from the harbor, thick enough to muffle sound and blur the compound's security lights into halos of useless illumination.

Nico crouched behind the stone fountain in the main courtyard, radio earpiece crackling with updates from teams positioned throughout the grounds.

"Alpha Team in position," his voice steady despite the circumstances. "East perimeter clear."

"Bravo Team ready," came another voice. "Service road secured."

"Charlie Team standing by." That was him, somewhere in the darkness beyond the main house, leading the team that would intercept Tony if he tried to run. The plan required them to split up—Nico coordinating the compound's defense while he handled the family's internal threat.

Trusting each other from a distance. The hardest thing they'd ever done.

"Movement on the north approach," someone whispered through the comm. "Three vehicles, no lights."

"Copy that." Nico checked his weapon one more time, muscle memory from years of preparation he'd hoped never to use. "All teams, this is Control. They're coming. Execute on my signal."

The Kozlovs had taken the bait. False intelligence planted in Tony's cell had convinced them the family would be gathered in the main house's dining room for an emergency meeting. Instead, they'd find empty rooms and carefully positioned defenders who knew exactly where the attackers would go.

Engines cut out somewhere beyond the compound walls. Car doors slammed with muffled thuds that carried through the fog. Boots on gravel, moving with military precision toward entry points that had been left deliberately vulnerable.

"Contact, main gate," crackled through his earpiece. "Six hostiles, automatic weapons."

"Let them through," Nico ordered. "Funnel them toward the house."

His heart hammered against his ribs as armed figures materialized from the fog like ghosts.

They moved in formation, weapons ready, believing they had the element of surprise.

One team splitting off toward the east wing, another approaching the main entrance, a third circling toward the service areas where the family's business offices were located.

"Now," Nico whispered into his radio.

The compound erupted.

Muzzle flashes sparked from windows and doorways as Valente soldiers opened fire from concealed positions. The attackers found themselves caught in crossfire, their intelligence useless against defenses that had been completely reorganized.

"Alpha Team engaging," Matt reported. "Four hostiles down."

Nico moved through the chaos, leading his team toward the main house where the heaviest fighting had erupted. Through the fog and gunfire, he could see figures moving through the ground floor rooms, searching for targets that weren't there.

A burst of automatic fire shattered the fountain's marble edge, sending stone chips flying. Nico rolled left, coming up behind a pillar as bullets sparked off decorative ironwork.

"Control, this is Bravo," a voice shouted over the sound of combat. "We've got them pinned in the east wing. Need backup to finish this."

"On our way." Nico gestured to his team—three men who'd been with the family for over a decade, who knew these grounds like their own homes. "Move."

They advanced through the formal gardens, using hedges and sculptures for cover. The fog that had hidden the attackers now worked against them, limiting visibility to maybe twenty feet in any direction.

"Nico." His voice in his ear, tight with concern. "I've got visual on Tony. He's not in his cell."

Ice flooded Nico's veins. "What?"

"The guards are down. Cell's empty. He's loose somewhere in the compound."

[Cam]

The service tunnels beneath the compound were a maze of pipes and electrical conduits that most people forgot existed. Cam moved through them with night vision goggles, following the route Tony would have to take if he wanted to reach the family's emergency communications center.

Above him, the battle raged. Gunfire, shouting, the crash of breaking glass as windows were shot out. But down here, the only sounds were his breathing and the distant rumble of the compound's generators.

Tony had to be stopped before he could contact the Kozlovs with real-time intelligence about the family's defensive positions. Or worse—before he could activate the compound's security systems to trap everyone inside while the attackers finished them off.

"Charlie Team, report," Cam whispered into his throat mic.

"Perimeter's secure," came the reply. "No movement on the service road."

"Copy. Maintain positions."

A door slammed somewhere ahead of him, the sound carrying through the tunnel system. Cam picked up his pace, weapon ready, following the maintenance passages toward the communications center that Tony would need to reach.

Emergency lighting cast everything in red shadows, making the tunnels feel like the inside of a beating heart. His boots splashed through puddles of condensation as he navigated by memory and instinct.

Another sound—footsteps, moving fast, heading in the same direction he was.

Cam reached the access ladder that led up to the communications center just as the metal door above him swung open. Light spilled down the shaft, followed by Tony's voice.

"Dmitri, this is Raven. The defensive positions have been changed. I repeat, defensive positions have been changed."

He went up the ladder fast, taking the rungs three at a time. Tony was at the radio console, his back turned, completely focused on betraying his family one last time.

"Tony."

He spun around, his face cycling through surprise, calculation, and resignation. "I wondered when you'd show up."

"Step away from the radio."

"Or what? You'll shoot me?" Tony's smile was sharp, dangerous. "You won't. You're too much like Nico—too soft when it matters."

"You don't know me very well."

"I know you well enough." Tony moved away from the console, but his hand stayed near the pistol on his belt. "You think you're protecting him, but you're just enabling his weakness. When this is over?—"

"When this is over, you'll be gone."

"Will I?" Tony's hand moved toward his weapon. "Or will you?"

[Nico]

The east wing had turned into a war zone. Bullets punched through walls and shattered artwork that had hung in the Valente house for three generations. Nico low-crawled through the formal dining room, broken glass cutting through his jacket as he tried to reach the stairs.

"Bravo Team, status?"

"Two hostiles down, one barricaded in the library. He's got automatic weapons and a clear field of fire."

"Copy. We're moving to flank."

But as Nico reached the base of the main staircase, he heard something that made his blood freeze—Cam's voice over the radio, tight with controlled violence.

"Control, this is Charlie Lead. I have Tony. Situation contained."

Relief hit him, then vanished as a figure appeared at the top of the stairs—one of the Kozlov attackers, weapon raised, looking for targets.

Their eyes met across twenty feet of bullet-torn space.

The gunman's rifle swung toward him. Nico dove sideways, but he was caught in the open, nowhere to hide, nowhere to run.

The gunman's finger moved toward the trigger. Nico was trapped with nowhere to go.

Then the window behind the gunman exploded inward.

He crashed through the glass in an explosion of movement, tackling the shooter before he could fire. They hit the floor hard, wrestling for control of the weapon as

Nico scrambled for cover.

"How—" Nico started.

"Climbed the outside wall." His voice was strained as he fought for the rifle.
"Couldn't let him get a clear shot."

The gunman was bigger than him, with the desperate strength of someone who knew he was going to die. But he had training, technique, and the absolute certainty that failure meant losing the most important thing in his life.

The rifle went off, a burst of automatic fire that stitched holes across the ceiling. Plaster rained down as the two men rolled across the floor, neither giving ground.

Nico raised his weapon, trying to get a clear shot, but they were moving too fast, locked together in a fight that could only end one way.

He got his hands on the rifle's barrel, twisting it away from Nico's position just as the gunman's finger found the trigger again. The muzzle flash lit up the hallway as bullets punched through the opposite wall.

Then he had the weapon, rolling away and coming up with the rifle trained on the Kozlov soldier. The man reached for a sidearm, but his shot took him center mass before he could draw.

"You okay?" Cam asked, breathing hard.

"Yeah. Tony?"

"Contained. Permanently."

[Cam]

The battle was winding down. Scattered gunfire from the grounds, but the coordinated assault had been broken. The Kozlovs had lost their leadership, their inside intelligence, and most of their assault team to defenders who'd been ready for them.

He stood in the communications center, looking down at Tony's body. The man had drawn his weapon, forced the choice between killing and being killed. He had made the only decision possible.

"Charlie Lead, this is Control." Nico's voice in his earpiece. "All teams report status."

"Main house secured," came Matt's voice. "Four hostiles down, remainder in retreat."

"East perimeter clear."

"Service road secured."

"Charlie Lead," Nico said. "Status on our internal problem?"

He looked at Tony one more time—the man who'd been willing to destroy his own family for power, who'd nearly gotten Nico killed multiple times, who'd forced this final confrontation.

"Problem solved," he said. "Permanently."

Silence on the radio for a moment. Then Nico's voice, steady and controlled: "Copy that. All teams, begin cleanup. We've got work to do."

[Nico]

Dawn found them in the compound's main courtyard, surveying the damage. Bullet holes in marble facades, shattered windows, blood on stone that would need to be scrubbed away before Sofia saw it. The price of victory was always higher than anyone wanted to pay.

"Kozlov casualties?" Nico asked.

"Twelve KIA, three wounded and captured," Matt reported. "Their leadership is gone. Dmitri Volkov took two to the chest during the east wing engagement."

"Our people?"

"Three wounded, all stable. Could have been much worse."

It could have been much worse. Without Cam's planning, without the coordinated defense, without the intelligence that had let them turn the Kozlovs' own strategy against them, this could have been a massacre.

"What about the survivors?" Cam asked. "The wounded ones?"

"They'll recover. Then they'll disappear." Nico's voice was matter-of-fact. "After they've had time to spread the word about what happens when you come after the Valente family."

"And Tony?"

"Tony died defending the compound against foreign attackers." Nico looked at the blood-stained stones, the shattered fountain, the evidence of a battle that would become family legend. "That's the story. That's what goes in the records."

Cam studied his face. "You okay with that?"

"He was my brother. He was also a traitor." Nico met his eyes. "I'm okay with remembering the brother and burying the traitor. Some truths don't need to be spoken."

Dawn light crept across the compound, turning bloodstains on marble into dark shadows that would need scrubbing before Sofia saw them. Nico surveyed the damage—shattered fountain, bullet holes in the facade, windows that would need replacing. The price of victory always looked uglier in daylight.

"Christ," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Ma's going to lose her mind when she sees this mess."

Cam almost smiled. "We'll blame it on the landscaping crew."

"Right. Because landscaping crews use assault rifles."

They stood there as the compound slowly came back to life around them—soldiers securing weapons, medical teams treating the wounded, cleanup crews already mobilizing to erase the evidence. The machine of the Valente organization functioning exactly as it should.

Nico felt something ease in his chest that had been tight for months. Not relief, exactly. More like recognition that they were still here, still breathing, still figuring out how to do this impossible thing together.

"Next time the Kozlovs want to negotiate," he said, "we're charging them for window replacement."

"Next time," Cam agreed. "But there won't be a next time."

"No. There won't."

SIXTEEN

AFTERMATH

Three days after the battle, the compound still smelled like gunpowder and fresh paint.

Construction crews worked around the clock replacing windows and patching bullet holes, their hammering echoing through halls that had seen three generations of Valente family history.

Nico stood in his father's office, watching workers repair the fountain that had taken the worst of the damage.

"The Harbor Commission approved our expansion proposal," she said, setting a stack of legal documents on Sal's desk. "Full permits for the new shipping facility. After this week's... events... they seem more cooperative."

Word about the Kozlovs had spread fast through the city's power structure. Competitors, officials, and business partners all recalibrating their relationships with the Valente family now that the threat was gone.

"Good." He looked older in the afternoon light, but his voice carried the same authority it always had. "What about the federal investigation?"

"Agent Hayes called off the task force," she said. "Officially, they're reassigning resources to more pressing cases. Unofficially, they lost their primary informant and

most of their evidence when Vincent disappeared."

Three days of damage control. Making sure the story held together when people started asking questions.

Tony's death defending the compound against foreign attackers.

The Kozlov organization's elimination during their failed assault.

Vincent Torrino's mysterious disappearance, taking his knowledge of family operations with him.

"And Tony?" Nico asked.

"The funeral is tomorrow," he said quietly. "Full honors. He'll be buried in the family plot with proper ceremony."

The decision had been made during those first hours after the battle, while bodies were being counted and stories were being arranged. Tony would be remembered as a loyal son who died protecting his family, not as the traitor who'd nearly destroyed them. Some lies were kinder than truth.

"The men respect the choice," Matt said from his position by the windows. "They understand the difference between justice and vengeance."

Footsteps in the hallway announced Cam's arrival. He entered without knocking—family privilege now, earned through bullets and blood. His left arm was in a sling from the fight with the Kozlov gunman, but he moved with the same alert confidence that had kept them all alive.

"Security report," he said, settling into the chair beside Nico. "Perimeter's been

reinforced, new patrol schedules are in effect, and the weapons inventory has been restocked. We're ready for whatever comes next."

"What comes next," Sal said, his eyes moving between Nico and Cam, "is rebuilding. The Kozlov threat is gone, but nature abhors a vacuum. Other organizations will try to move into their territory."

"Let them try," Nico said. "We'll be ready."

Sal studied his face for a long moment, then nodded. "You sound like a boss."

"I am a boss."

"Yes. You are." Sal stood slowly, moving to the window that overlooked the compound's main courtyard.

"Sixty-five years I've been building this organization.

Started with nothing but ambition and the willingness to do what others wouldn't. Now it's time to hand it over to someone who can take it further. "

Succession had always been inevitable, but hearing it said out loud hit differently. Final.

"Pop—"

"The transition will be gradual," he continued. "Six months, maybe a year. Time for you to learn the parts of the business you haven't seen yet. Time for everyone to adjust to new leadership."

Bianca cleared her throat. "There's the matter of organizational structure. With Tony

gone, we need a new underboss."

"Matt stays as consigliere," Nico said without hesitation. "His counsel has been invaluable, and the transition will be smoother with experienced advisors."

"Agreed," he said. "And for underboss?"

Nico had been thinking about this decision since the battle ended. The underboss position required someone trustworthy, competent, and completely loyal to the new regime. Someone who understood both the legitimate and illegitimate sides of family operations.

"Dante Moretti," he said. "He's proven himself repeatedly, he's respected by the soldiers, and he has the tactical knowledge to handle security operations."

"Dante's young for the position," Matt pointed out.

"So was I when I started running operations. Age matters less than competence."

He nodded approvingly. "And what about him?" His gaze shifted to Cam. "What's his role in the new structure?"

The question hung in the air like smoke. Cam had been formally accepted as family, but his exact position in the organization's hierarchy remained undefined. He wasn't a soldier in the traditional sense, but he wasn't an outside contractor anymore either.

"Head of Security," Nico said. "Full authority over all protective operations, family safety protocols, and threat assessment. He reports directly to me."

"That's a significant position," Bianca said carefully. "A lot of responsibility."

"He's earned it."

Cam shifted slightly in his chair. "I appreciate the confidence, but I should point out that I'm not Valente by blood. Some of the older soldiers might have concerns about loyalty."

"Any man who questions your loyalty can discuss it with me personally," he said, his voice carrying steel. "You've bled for this family. You've killed for this family. Blood is what makes you family, not the name on your birth certificate."

The formal recognition settled something in Nico's chest that he hadn't realized was still unsettled. Cam belonged here now, completely and permanently. No more questions, no more tests, no more choosing between professional duty and personal commitment.

"There's one more thing," he said, returning to his desk. "The Kozlov organization left behind significant assets. Properties, businesses, accounts that need new management."

"We're taking over their operations?"

"We're integrating what's useful and eliminating what isn't. Their shipping contracts, their real estate holdings, their legitimate businesses—all of that becomes part of our portfolio.

" His mouth curved into something that might have been a smile.

"It's amazing how much a criminal organization can accomplish when it focuses on business instead of violence. "

It was almost funny, in a dark way. The Kozlovs' attempt to destroy the Valente

family had instead made them stronger, more diversified, more legitimate. Their failure had become the foundation for the family's next evolution.

"What about their soldiers?" Cam asked. "The ones who survived?"

"They have a choice," Nico said. "Swear loyalty to new management or find employment elsewhere. We're not in the revenge business—we're in the survival business."

"Spoken like a true don," Matt said with approval.

The meeting continued for another hour, working through details of territorial integration, personnel decisions, and the thousand small choices that came with absorbing a rival organization.

When it finally ended, family members dispersed to handle their various responsibilities, leaving Nico and Cam alone in the office.

"You sure about this?" Cam asked quietly. "About making me head of security?"

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Just want to make sure you understand what you're getting into. Making me family is one thing. Giving me authority over soldiers who've been with the organization for decades is another."

Nico turned to face him fully. "Those soldiers respect strength and competence. You've demonstrated both. If any of them have a problem with your appointment, they can take it up with the new don."

"The new don." Cam's mouth quirked upward. "Has a nice ring to it."

"Doesn't it?" Nico felt something settle in his chest—satisfaction, maybe, or simple recognition that this was where he belonged. "Think you can handle working for a boss who's younger than you?"

"I think I can manage."

They stood in the afternoon light streaming through windows that no longer showed bullet holes, surrounded by the quiet bustle of an organization rebuilding itself. The compound felt different now—less like a fortress under siege and more like the headquarters of a business empire.

"What happens now?" Cam asked.

"Now we get back to work. The shipping contracts won't negotiate themselves, and the Harbor Commission meeting is next week." Nico straightened his tie, preparing to return to the mundane business of running a criminal organization. "Think you can handle the excitement of legitimate commerce?"

"I'll do my best."

As they left Sal's office together, Nico caught sight of their reflection in the hallway mirror—two men in expensive suits, walking side by side with the confidence of people who belonged exactly where they were. The bodyguard and his client had become something else entirely.

They'd become partners in every sense that mattered.

Behind them, the sound of construction continued—hammers and saws rebuilding what had been damaged, making it stronger than before. The Valente compound would rise from the ashes of war, just as the family always had.

The Valente family had survived worse than this. They'd survive whatever came next.

SEVENTEEN

OATH RENEWED

Six months after the battle, spring sunshine streamed through bulletproof windows that no longer showed scars from gunfire.

Cam stood in the compound's main conference room, watching Nico review security reports with the focused intensity that had made him one of the city's most effective crime bosses.

The transition had been smoother than anyone expected. Sal's gradual handover of power, Dante's promotion to underboss, the integration of former Kozlov assets—all accomplished with the kind of methodical precision that kept families in power for generations.

"Harbor Commission meeting went well," Nico said without looking up from the financial projections spread across the mahogany table. "The new shipping contracts are worth twelve million annually."

"All legitimate?" Cam asked, settling into the chair beside him.

"Completely. We're almost respectable these days." His mouth quirked upward. "Don't tell anyone. It'll ruin our reputation."

They both knew what he meant. The Valente organization had evolved over the past six months, shifting focus from survival to growth, from violence to commerce.

They still operated in gray areas, still commanded respect through strength, but the daily business looked more like corporate strategy sessions than criminal conspiracies.

"Speaking of reputation," Cam said, sliding a surveillance report across the table. "Adrian Sterling's been asking pointed questions about our financial restructuring. He's got a federal contract now—looking into shipping industry money flows."

"Adrian Sterling." Nico set down his pen, expression shifting to business mode. "The forensic accountant who worked the Kozlov investigation?"

"Same one. Independent now, specializes in untangling financial crimes. Very good at what he does." Cam had been tracking Sterling's activities since the man left his previous firm under mysterious circumstances. "Good enough that he's already flagged three of our expansion deals."

"How immediate is this threat?"

"Very. He's got access to everything—federal databases, banking records, shipping manifests. If he connects the dots..." Cam pulled out his phone, showing intercepted communications. "And he's specifically targeting our harbor contracts."

Nico studied the intelligence, his jaw tightening. "Can we buy him off?"

"He's clean. Turned down a seven-figure offer from Meridian Industries last year because they had ethics violations.

" Cam met his eyes. "But there's something else.

I recognize his name from military circles.

He consulted on a financial investigation in Afghanistan—same operation where I

lost Rodriguez and Martinez. "

The weight of that connection settled between them. Personal history intersecting with current threats, the way it always did in their world.

"What do you recommend?"

"We need to clean up the financial structures completely. New holding companies, legitimate investment portfolios, distance ourselves from anything that looks questionable." Cam's voice was steady, professional. "It'll cost us millions in restructuring, but it's better than federal prosecution."

A knock at the door interrupted their discussion. Matt entered with the measured pace of a man who'd been advising crime families for two decades.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but Dante's here for the security briefing. And there's been an incident."

"What kind of incident?" Nico asked.

"One of the old-guard soldiers questioned Cam's authority during the perimeter check. Nothing serious, but..." Matt's expression was carefully neutral. "It might be worth addressing before tonight's ceremony."

Cam felt tension coil in his stomach. Six months in, and he was still proving himself to men who'd been with the family longer than he'd been alive.

"Who?" Nico's voice carried an edge.

"Torretti. Twenty-year veteran, good soldier, but he's having trouble adjusting to new leadership structures."

"I'll handle it," Cam said, already standing.

"We'll handle it," Nico corrected. "Together."

They found Dante in the security office, reviewing patrol schedules with focused attention. He looked up as they entered, his expression shifting to concern.

"The Torretti situation?" Nico asked without preamble.

"Handled. Had a conversation with him about chain of command and family loyalty." Dante's voice was diplomatically neutral. "He understands his position now."

"What exactly did he say?" Cam asked.

Dante hesitated, glancing between them. "Questioned whether someone who'd been family for six months should have the same authority as soldiers who'd bled for the organization for decades."

The words stung more than they should have. Cam had heard variations of this before, usually whispered behind his back.

"And your response?" Nico's voice was deadly quiet.

"Reminded him that family isn't about time served. It's about loyalty, competence, and willingness to die for what matters." Dante met Cam's eyes. "And that questioning your authority means questioning the Don's judgment."

Nico nodded approvingly, but Cam found himself wondering if Torretti was alone in his concerns. How many other soldiers smiled to his face while questioning his legitimacy behind closed doors?

"There's something else," Dante continued. "Sofia wants to see you both before the

ceremony. Something about family traditions."

They found Sofia in the kitchen, surrounded by the controlled chaos of preparing for a formal family gathering. Her silver hair was perfect despite the heat from multiple ovens, and she wore an elegant dress that made clear this was an important occasion.

"Nico, Cam." She wiped her hands on a towel, studying both of them with sharp eyes. "Come here. Let me look at you."

Cam submitted to her inspection, aware that Sofia's approval carried weight throughout the family. She'd raised four children in this house, buried one son, watched the others grow into a business that could kill them any day.

"You look tired," she said to Cam, her fingers tracing the tension lines around his eyes. "Are you sleeping?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Valente."

"Sofia. And you're not fine. You're carrying too much weight." Her gaze shifted between them. "Both of you. This ceremony tonight—it's not just about making things official. It's about you both accepting what you've become."

"What have we become?" Nico asked quietly.

"Partners. In every sense that matters." Sofia's voice carried the authority of someone who'd seen three generations of Valente men struggle with love and loyalty. "Question is whether you're both ready to admit it."

Before either of them could respond, she pressed a small wooden box into Cam's hands. "This belonged to my father. He wore it for fifty years of marriage, through war and peace, prosperity and loss."

Inside was a simple gold ring, worn smooth by decades of wear. Not expensive, but weighty with history.

"Sofia," Cam started, but she silenced him with a look.

"Tonight, you swear loyalty to this family. But family isn't just about blood oaths and business arrangements. It's about choosing each other, every day, even when it's difficult." Her eyes found Nico's. "Especially when it's difficult."

They made their way to the family chapel as evening fell, the small room filling with everyone who mattered to the Valente organization. Sal, Bianca with her daughters, Dante and the senior soldiers, even Matt with his ever-present legal documents.

But as Cam stood facing the assembled family, he found himself thinking about belonging versus independence, about what he'd given up to be here.

Six months ago, he'd owned his own business, made his own decisions, answered to no one.

Now he was part of something larger, bound by loyalties that transcended personal choice.

"This is unusual," Sal said from his position at the simple altar. "In sixty-five years, I've never formally inducted someone who wasn't born into the family or married into it. But these are unusual times."

The ceremony was briefer than Cam had expected—simple words about loyalty, protection, and family bonds. But when it came time for his own oath, he found himself thinking about the ring in his pocket, about Sofia's words, about the difference between belonging and being trapped.

"Do you swear to protect the Valente name and all who bear it?" Sal asked.

"I do."

"Do you swear to honor our traditions, respect our bonds, and place family loyalty above all other considerations?"

Cam's eyes found Nico's face in the small crowd. "I do."

"Do you swear to serve as shield and sword, to stand between danger and those you've sworn to protect?"

"I do."

Sal nodded, satisfaction flickering across his weathered features. "Then by blood spilled and trust earned, you are family. What binds us binds you."

After the ceremony, family members began to disperse to their various homes and responsibilities. Sofia kissed his cheek and told him to take care of her son, Dante offered grudging respect for the formal recognition, and even some of the older soldiers seemed to accept his new status.

But as Cam shook hands and accepted congratulations, he found himself wondering if this was what he really wanted—or if he'd simply been swept along by circumstances beyond his control.

"Second thoughts?" Nico asked quietly as they climbed the stairs to his private quarters.

"Just... processing." Cam paused at the window overlooking the compound grounds. "Six months ago, I was independent. My own boss, my own rules, my own choices."

"And now?"

"Now I'm part of something I don't fully understand. Bound by loyalties I never chose, responsible to people I barely know." Cam turned to face him. "Sometimes I wonder if I've lost myself in your world."

Nico was quiet for a moment, studying his face. "Do you want to leave?"

The question hung between them, honest and direct. Cam felt something twist in his chest—not at the thought of leaving, but at the realization that he couldn't imagine walking away anymore.

"No," he said finally. "But I need to know I'm here because I want to be, not because I'm trapped by family loyalty."

"You're here because I need you. Because we work better together than apart." Nico stepped closer, his hands settling on Cam's shoulders. "Because choosing you was the best decision I ever made."

"Even when it complicates everything?"

"Especially then." Nico's mouth found his, soft and sure. "Love isn't supposed to be simple."

They moved to the bedroom with less desperation than their first times, but with deeper certainty. Six months of learning each other's rhythms, of mapping every sensitive spot, of discovering what made the other gasp and arch and surrender completely.

"I love this," Nico said against his throat as they fell onto the bed together. "Having you in my space, in my life, in my bed every night."

"Sometimes I wonder if you're here because you want me," Cam admitted, his hands working the buttons of Nico's shirt, "or because you're trapped by what we've built."

"Both." Nico's honesty was stark, direct. "I'm trapped by how much I want you. By how empty everything feels when you're not here." His mouth found the scar on Cam's shoulder, gentle and reverent. "Are you here because you love me, or because leaving would mean starting over completely?"

"Both," Cam echoed, understanding the complexity in a way he hadn't six months ago. "I'm trapped by how much I need this. Need you."

They made love with the confidence of established lovers, but underneath the familiarity was something deeper—recognition that they'd chosen each other not despite the complications, but because of them. Because easy love wasn't worth having.

"What do we want?" Nico asked afterward, their bodies still tangled together in the lamplight. "Five years from now, ten years from now—what does this look like?"

"I don't know." Cam's fingers traced patterns on his chest, following old scars and new certainties. "I've never planned that far ahead."

"Neither have I. But I want to." Nico's voice was soft, thoughtful. "I want to build something that lasts beyond survival."

"Like what?"

"Like maybe getting married. Officially, legally, in front of everyone who matters." Nico's eyes met his. "Like maybe adopting kids who need families. Like maybe building something good out of all this darkness."

The words hung in the air. Marriage. Kids. A future that felt both impossible and inevitable.

"That's a lot of future to plan," he said carefully.

"Too much?"

"Not too much. Just... new." Cam shifted to face him fully. "I spent eight years keeping other people alive. Never thought about what I wanted to live for."

"And now?"

"Now I want to live for this. For us. For whatever we can build together." Cam's thumb traced Nico's lower lip. "For the family we choose and the legacy we leave behind."

Nico smiled, the expression lighting up his face. "So we're doing this? Really doing this?"

"We're doing this." Cam reached for the bedside drawer, pulling out the small wooden box Sofia had given him. "Starting with this."

The ring was simple, worn smooth by decades of love and commitment. When Cam slipped it onto Nico's finger, it felt like more than a ceremony—it felt like a choice they were making together.

"Some oaths are worth keeping forever," Nico said, echoing the inscription on the watch he'd given Cam months ago.

"This one especially."

Outside, spring rain began to fall against windows that would never again show bullet holes.

The compound settled into evening quiet, secure in ways that had nothing to do with weapons or walls and everything to do with the bonds between people who'd chosen each other over blood, over safety, over every rational consideration.

In the morning, there would be business to conduct, problems to solve, Adrian Sterling's investigation to navigate.

But tonight, there was only the quiet satisfaction of promises made and kept, of love that had survived war and family politics and the weight of building something permanent in a dangerous world.

"I have one more promise to make," Cam said, his voice steady in the lamplight.

"What's that?"

"That whatever comes next—Sterling's investigation, family politics, whatever crisis we haven't seen coming—we face it together. As partners in everything that matters."

"Partners," Nico agreed, the word carrying weight it hadn't held six months ago. "In everything."

Some partnerships were built on contracts. Others were built on trust so deep it became unbreakable.

This one was built on love, formally sworn and permanently sealed, strong enough to last beyond their lifetimes.

Some things were worth swearing your life to.

Some people were worth keeping forever.