



CONSEQUENCES

Nadine Dandorf

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Nadine Dandorf

*You may think it's arrogant to believe that you can be an agent of
miracles in another person's life.
Actually, it's arrogant to believe you can't.*

—Martha Beck

A NOTE FROM NADINE

Thanks so much for sharing a few precious minutes with me. As an active member of the Romance Writers of America, the New Jersey Romance Writers Chapter and the Kiss of Death Chapter, I write contemporary stories of suspense with a touch of romance where hope and heart prove stronger than any weapon and where happily ever after occurs, even if it takes a bloody route to get there.

Strong men and even stronger women are the stars of tales themed around hope and courage after being betrayed by those tasked with keeping the rules. These brave men and women love and laugh and fight to the death like a mother fights for her child, all while trying to balance the professional with the personal. My stories are born on that balance and I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have had giving voice to them. All of this set the stage in my debut novel, [Contingencies](#).

This novella, *Consequences*, continues where *Contingencies* ended and before the next chapter in Reilly's and Dani's life begins. An excerpt from the next in the series has been added to the end of this short piece.

Let me know what you think and don't forget to post a review. Stay up-to-date with new releases, freebies, and bonus chapters via my website at www.nadinedandorfauthor.com. You'll receive a prologue to *Contingencies* by signing up for my free monthly newsletter. Follow me at www.twitter.com/dandorf_8 and www.facebook.com/nadinedandorfauthor.

Chapter 1

Reilly

October, Amalfi, Italy

I'm questioning my role again as I watch the woman I love take careful steps toward her new future.

Our future.

I pray it's all she's dreamed and I'm not a praying man. Not after seeing the depths men will go to destroy each other in the name of their so-called god. Or their own god-like complexes.

God has nothing to do with any of them.

Nor me, if I'm honest and take the Commandments pushed down my throat as a child literally. Broke number five too many times to count. Or maybe it's number six. Whichever. I have no remorse. They were vile men who I hope are rotting in some version of the hell they created on Earth.

I say nothing as the soles of our shoes crush new dirt against ancient stone but wonder what she's thinking. I know it's not about how we got here. To this place in our lives. Tied, unknowingly, to a force of evil only our love could destroy. To a wicked man who manipulated everyone and thing that crossed his path. Some paid the ultimate price. Their lives forfeited for his sick, personal goals, not the country he promised to protect and defend. He took my brothers and my friends. He took Dani's parents. My fist automatically clenches.

He almost took us.

Without Daniella St. Sauveur Tyler, I'd be dead. I'd have given in to the torture. I almost

did until the psycho who had me threatened her safety. My hand relaxes with my inhale. I need to stop dwelling.

She's safe. Mission accomplished. I'm done.

I'm no longer in charge of chasing evil. Honorable men are now erasing the fallout and sanitizing the consequences bestowed on a world that can't know the truth. Dani believes me honorable, too, for the part I played.

I'm not.

My mission focus came from a place of selfishness, not nobility. As team leader, it's my mission, my goal, my success or failure. For so long, it was only me on this last one. I only succeeded when Dani arrived.

But I'm selfish as ever.

I want what comes next to include me.

I'm almost a foot taller than Dani and at least twice her weight. Muscle and bone mean nothing. I was an Army Ranger, a skilled Special Operations soldier. Trained to fight, to survive, to endure. Was. Now, I'm a simple foot soldier to this tiny queen. The only woman who found a way to bind the broken pieces of my heart with hers. She holds all the power in this relationship in her delicate hands. I bend to her rule though she asks for nothing.

I had to give her something.

Not just my love and protection. That part's easy. She'll have that for the rest of my days. She deserved more. Needed more. A family. A real one. Made from blood, not water. I dug and called in favors. And did it.

I found her grandmother.

Dani was excited. I think she still is. Meeting the last of her family had been a hidden

wish she trusted with me at a time when all seemed lost. Her reaction this morning when I revealed this gift was pure joy. It transcended her gait but her pace is slower now, more intentional, as if she's trying to convince herself that this is real. I squeeze her hand and she returns the smile I give her with a slight one of her own.

Normally, she's like a kid hopped up on soda and candy when it comes to exploring places she's never been. We pass the vendors and shops, the infamous Amalfi Cathedral, in silence. She doesn't pull on my hand.

Brightly painted buildings and animated tourists give way to subdued locals and simpler structures connected by ancient arches. We head higher along the cobblestone streets and through narrow alleys. Flowering vines perfume the air and cling to crumbling stone walls and old metal window boxes. It all pales to Dani's beauty and my love for her.

Love that's as foreign to me as this country and its people. Love that will endure longer than the stones beneath my feet.

No matter who or what gets in the way.

I swear this to the god I don't know or believe in.

Chapter 2

Dani

Ancient stones beneath my sandals give me the courage to move my feet. They are sturdy and support my trembling legs. I remind myself that I'm no different than the millions of people who for thousands of years have trod these same avenues on their way to market or work. Or on their way home, like me. It's like dozens of wings have taken flight in my stomach.

Today, I'm headed home. To a new family. One that I pray is welcoming.

I reach for my medallion to rub between my fingers and ignore the heart that pounds against my ribs looking to escape. Beside me, Adrian Reilly watches me carefully and reaches for my hand. I'm convinced his superb warrior skills include mind reading. He grips it and smiles. The one I return is feeble at best.

I love his smile. I love his deep blue eyes that, like the cobalt ocean surrounding Amalfi, encase me like a ship in a bottle. I belong to him. He to me. Whether I belong here is the question but I keep moving.

I need to know for sure.

I've dreamed about this for years but that's all it ever was. A lonely child's dream. Something that, I couldn't admit as a grown woman, was doubtful at best. How do you find a woman whose name you don't know, in a country half-way around the world, who gave birth to a boy sixty-one years ago, and left him in an orphanage that no longer exists?

Reilly knew how.

I'll be forever grateful for this gift, for my life, and his love. Even if this doesn't work the way the child inside me wants it to.

The alley widens as we approach a courtyard at the top of the turn and I embrace the glory of the sun's lemony breath. Reilly tightens his hand around mine and we cross the quad to the door that holds our future.

I knock with respect and hope.

It's opened by an elderly man with questioning eyes and a tight mouth that looks like it was drawn with a pink marker. His eyes are dark and his thick, bushy brows are furrowed. I swear he hears me swallow.

"Ciao. Sono..."

"I know who you are," he declares in English. I flinch at his boldness. "Come in. Giovanna is expecting you."

I nod and glance at Reilly when he releases my hand. His head moves to indicate that it's okay so I enter with him close behind. We follow the wobbling man through a short, dark hall into a lush living room with plump, inviting sofas and beautiful vistas but keep walking.

I push down the anxiety stabbing my brain that I've annoyed him with my presence and wonder if he knows that I speak his language. My father was raised in Northern Italy until he was eighteen. He taught me an obscure dialect but I know many. My mother taught me her French. I speak other languages, too, but the man seems determined to speak English. To prove something? I can't be sure.

He moves to the left when we enter a small, square kitchen where the sweet smell of basil and brilliant sunshine bombard my senses. I hear the rise and fall of operatic voices coming from another room. Aida.

I take it all in like a spinning drone until I realize I'm the center of attraction.

At the table, are three more elderly men who eye me with suspicion, kindness, and

outright glee, respectively. On a wood chair beside the back door sits my grandmother. I know her from the picture Reilly showed me hours ago. She strikes a contrasting image as either a queen on a throne or an outcast. My racing mind can't decide.

I suck in my breath and hold it.

Giovanna Lucia Serrano wears a plain cotton dress that matches her grey hair. Small curls frame an oval face with the rest brushed back into a thick, single braid that hangs over her shoulder, well below her collarbone. Heavy-heeled black shoes anchor bowed legs that mimic the legs of the chair. She's traditional and practical. She's short, like me, and slightly round but in a healthy way. Her olive skin is lightly creased for her advanced age and she wears no makeup. She's gorgeous.

She rises without effort when our escort takes a seat beside the others. She approaches as my stomach lurches and emotion spills from my eyes.

My father's mother. The mother he never knew.

I want to honor him with words he might say. My mouth opens but I choke.

Giovanna extends wrinkled hands toward me and I burst into tears at her chosen greeting. A special word, spoken to me by my father, from the day I was born until the day he died.

"Bella."

Chapter 3

Reilly

The men at the table remind me of jurors in a courtroom. Watching and considering the scene playing out in front of them. Three question. One is stupidly joyful.

They introduce themselves when Dani and Giovanna pull apart. They are Giovanna's brothers, Giuseppe, our escort, Giancarlo, Giuliano, and Giorgio. Another brother, Gianluca, is missing as is Giovanna's husband Rainero. Both have passed.

I hang back and dissect the situation like always. It's inbred. Postures, movements, whispers, exits. I see it all from my guarded position behind Dani.

Dani is a mixture of joy and relief. I can't ask for more. Her grandmother is cautious but welcoming like most Italians. The Brothers Grim at the table may be the exception.

I spoke to Giovanna by phone but this is also our first meeting. She shakes my hand quickly, then tells us to sit. She pulls food from the refrigerator and the smiling brother, Giorgio, opens a bottle of wine. Dani rises to help but is admonished back to the table. I laugh internally and wonder how Giovanna will react when she discovers that her granddaughter can only boil water.

Dani asks a bevy of questions of the men. They answer, in order of age, giving her brief information about their families. Only Giorgio rambles on, making Dani laugh and allowing her to continue her unending inquiries. She soaks it all in her perfect memory as I sit in anticipation of anything that might bring her harm or sadness. It's what foot soldiers do.

Giovanna mirrors my silence under the glare of her older brothers. I do not miss their

periodic glances. They are like daggers of shame. It occurs to me then that they would have been part of her secret. Pregnant at sixteen by a boy who was not her betrothed, Giovanna had been sent north to a convent to have Dani's father only to return and marry a man chosen by her father. Arrangements made without her consent.

At ten years Giovanna's junior, Giorgio would not have known.

He thinks Dani's existence is wonderful.

Because it is.

Chapter 4

Dani

Food and family. Nothing could be better. Especially with Reilly beside me. My great uncles are curmudgeons except for Giorgio. At sixty-seven years old, he's the baby of the bunch and certifiably the craziest. My dad would be only six years younger if he were still alive. I'll bet they'd have been double trouble together.

I look for my father in each of them but don't see him. Nature versus nurture is certainly on display. Dad had my grandmother's eyes, their shape and soft brown color. He had their dedication to work and family. It was just the three of us but my mother and I were his foundation and refuge. To this day, I wonder why he never tried to find them. My Pollyanna thinking, I suppose.

My uncles were joined by their wives and children shortly after our arrival that first day and I felt like a guppy in a school of fish. I retreated to Reilly's side when it got overwhelming. He was as steady as any lifeline could be.

Each aunt invited us to join them for either lunch or dinner in the days that had followed much to the obvious distain of their husbands. Uncle Gio is the constant exception and our ceaseless entertainment. He brightens every room he enters.

In response, I keep a respectful distance. I don't want them to think I want anything other than to be part of their family. I can't put my finger on what they are thinking. Especially about me. Even my grandmother is detached at times. I'm sure she's soaking this in as much as I am. I let her ask as many questions about my father as she wants and she returns the favor with

answers about this family. To a point. And only when we are alone.

She knows that Dad spent his entire childhood in that orphanage. That at eighteen, he emigrated to the United States, took the name Tyler after a town in Texas, and wound up in California. He worked hard, graduated college with a degree in criminal justice, and applied at the CIA. Reilly had told Giovanna that Dad was like an international policeman. I like that. It's easier than saying he was a spy.

She asks questions about my mother and my life, too. Her questions are pointed but she lets me explain fully.

She will not discuss my father's father with anyone.

She speaks in courteous tones about her deceased husband but there is no love in her words.

I can't change that.

Rainero has been dead for ten years but Giovanna's resentment simmers beneath the surface. I see it when she looks at her brothers and their children. I see it when she looks at Reilly. Her revenge was not giving Rainero a child of his own.

Only Uncle Gio is spared from her wrath.

I try to understand and put myself in her place. Times are different now and it's hard to imagine. We're a fluid generation, not a restrictive one and I think on a certain level, we're happier for it. Babies arrive on their own time and people adjust. Singularly, or as a couple, or as a family. Arranged marriages are history, for the most part. I'm still surprised at hers. It wasn't that long ago.

And while I can easily summon pain caused by people I had trusted, I can't imagine the depth of having a child ripped from my arms, or forced to be with a man I did not love.

Instead, I try to convey the love my father found in my mother. The joy in the life he was given through Giovanna's sacrifice. The honor of working for his adopted country. The reminder he carried with him all his days in the form of the gold medallion I wear daily. A religious medal of the Blessed Mother. To protect Giovanna's only child.

She listens without interruption. Her face is stoic. Her clasped hands lie still in her lap.

I add specific detail of adventures and celebrations until reality strikes me like a fist to my mouth.

I've made her pain worse.

Chapter 5

Reilly

Dani is swarmed by family. Constantly. I'm relegated to observer at the fringes where I'm offered drink by the men, food by the women. I'm not forgotten. Just not included. Dani pulls me in only to have others join who demand only her attention. Their questions are ceaseless.

I hate questions. Always have.

Unless I'm asking them.

I've been called aloof, arrogant, antagonistic because of it. I don't care. I am. Arrogant to the core. Being a secret soldier solidified that character fault. Among others.

Dani offers answers easily and honestly. She trusts them as I probably should. Yet, I continue to look for motives even when there aren't any.

I've lead teams of soldiers, units of fighting men, directed the might of multiple squadrons to achieve success on the battlefield. I can't navigate this horde. Today is another family gathering.

The large yard at Gio's home is filled with brothers and wives, children and their spouses and more children. And this is only one side of the family. I'm out of my element. It's only ever been me.

An only child and parentless, like Dani, but fatherless even while mine was alive. He didn't want me. Only my mother. When she died, he wanted me even less.

I consider my role again. My mission. To bring Dani and her family together.

Maybe my part is done.

I don't belong to this family. I didn't belong in my own. I pushed them all away. My

father. His parents and brothers. His friends. By being born to his girlfriend. They married, sure. They were in love, but only my mother mattered to him.

She was the only one who mattered to both of us.

Voices don't speak, they shout. Food and wine, like bodies, are abundant. Children and animals run in circles and weave between the legs of parents and grandparents. Their friends stop by for more introductions. It's loud and out of control. An exploding grenade of love and devotion.

I'm used to being in charge but there's no battle here. Only attention.

Another thing I hate.

The only attention I want and need is Dani's. It's mine when we're alone. There's no hesitation and I selfishly feed on it. Her love is pure, her body mine. The way she loves me should be against the law. The uninhibited desire. The unquenchable passion. The complete immersion. I would gladly drown in her seas. She's all I need.

But she needs more.

A different glow fills her heart she is with them. One I can't match. I see it in her face. Her eyes dance with each of them. Her touch is warm and her words are attentive. Her dual kisses, enchanting. She holds the hands of old men and babies and all fall under her spell.

Except Giovanna. She quietly watches it all like a hawk on a perch. Waiting.

We're more alike than I want to admit.

Maybe she's looking for motives like me.

I pull back and watch Dani balance and navigate the swarm like a soldier crashing through bullets and coming through unharmed. I push her forward and she soars.

Without me.

I maneuver the insanity as if I'm avoiding buried improvised devices. Small feet with bobbing heads run around crawling toddlers. Voices rise and fall like the opera that continuously plays in Giovanna's home. I pick up pieces of conversation as I find a place to sit. Dani is reading a story to a circle of children who gaze at her like a magical fairy. I gaze, too, until a whispered conversation behind me causes my heart to constrict.

They want her stay. Her. Not me. I don't belong here, she does.

They all ask. Ask is really insist. No is not an option in this family.

With every kiss and touch, she slips through my fingers. I'm sure of her love for me. Just not of her answer to them. I down my wine but there's a desert in my throat. My chest aches.

She has nothing at home in the U.S. Only remnants of a life that wasn't hers. She has a small home in Nîmes, France but what of me?

I have an apartment in Maryland. A truck that's seen better days. No job. No future. I have money but she's not impressed. She has her own.

I want to give her everything but have nothing to offer.

I'm used to giving orders to subordinates. Taking orders from superiors. I fight evil and wrong. I don't know how to fight love.

And if I can't stay for her, how can I ask her to leave for me? To pick me over them?

I can't do either.

I've known her for only a few months. Been her lover for two of them. I'd marry her tomorrow if she would have a forty-year-old, washed up soldier.

I've lost my mind.

Dani sits on the ground beneath a large tree reading to half a dozen kids. A one-year old nestled in her lap pounds the book with his tiny fists. There's serenity in her eyes. She's a

natural. She has their complete attention with the story she's telling. She's weaving magic with the graceful Italian that falls from her lips. I'm as enchanted as the preschoolers at her knees. She catches me watching, winks, then doesn't let me go.

The knot in my chest tightens.

I don't want this. I want only her.

The knot constricts. A truth tied with a lie I can no longer tell myself.

I am just like my father.

Chapter 6

Dani

The children at my knees scatter like sparrows when someone yells “gelato.” I hand the baby off to his mother and brush the grass stuck to my sundress and take it all in. The noise is deafening. The smiles and laughter, soul filling. This is what I’ve wanted for more than five years, since losing my parents. It doesn’t sound like a long time but agony has filled every minute and compounded every hour. I have a family again.

I grab a bowl of velvety sweetness from Aunt Giulia – what’s with the G names already – and head toward Reilly. His eyes have darkened these last few days. It’s his only tell. I know what he’s thinking. We’re surrounded and he’s suffocating.

It’s been almost two weeks since we arrived and our time alone isn’t enough. When Giovanna refused to let us sleep in the same room under her roof because we’re not married, I cringed. That’s jumping the gun a bit though it’s a wish I’ll share with no one unless he asks. When he’s ready. If he’s ready.

Thankfully, Giorgio insisted we stay with him then unabashedly told his sister and old-fashioned brothers to get with the current century. They did not find him amusing.

Except for Gio and Aunt Angelina, they all keep Reilly at arm’s length. Their home is small but the yard is large enough to hold all of us today. There are seventeen children among all my uncles. Most are older than Reilly – in their forties and fifties. Uncle Gio’s are the youngest in their mid-to-late thirties. Giovanna had no children other than my father but there are thirty-six grandchildren among her brothers. They are their own village.

Uncle Giuseppe's ten grandchildren are in their mid-to-late twenties and only a few years behind me. Three have already made him a great-grandpa. We are celebrating the eldest's second birthday today.

But we are guests in a place that's not ours and that's the problem I know Reilly is hashing out in his head. Like a battle plan where facts are laid out and contingencies are drawn, he's considering this mission and his options. I don't doubt he is aware that they want me to stay. They've said so, boldly. Some have even taken it upon themselves to start looking for a place for me to live.

Me.

I know they mean well but they don't know what I've been through. How my trust was used like a puppet whose strings were pulled by a master manipulator. I'm not looking to have my life controlled again by anyone. Family or not. Blood or water.

I'm not looking to stay. I miss my cottage in France and I miss having Reilly to myself.

I want to believe my family is our family but it's not. I need to see the truth.

It's mine. Me.

I miss us.

Where we go will be our decision, not one forced or suggested or pushed on us. It's our choice where we go and what we'll do and we'll let the consequences fall where they may. We'll figure it out and make the decisions.

Together.

Chapter 7

Reilly

The coffee in my ceramic cup is warm and strong but not as strong as Dani. Even Giancarlo's espresso doesn't compare. Nothing does. Not even me. She's endured these last few weeks with astounding grace. I'm awestruck.

I lean against the kitchen counter and watch her through the open door. The Mediterranean breeze fills the house with a lemony perfume as Aida plays on a continuous loop as it has every day we've been here. The tragic tale is fitting in a way. Secret desires. Love denied. Families destroyed. Hearts broken.

Dani sits on a weathered bench beneath jade-colored leaves as morning light dances over the stone terrace. Giovanna is beside her. I don't regret my role in uniting them but something is off. As if the old woman has deemed me unworthy. Maybe I am.

I rub my right thigh to loosen the muscles and tendons that are taking too long to heal. Walking everywhere is perfect therapy but I need to stop complaining. I'd have chopped it off to save Dani's life.

I refocus to ignore the constant pain with an unanswered question as to how Giovanna can't feel Dani's exploding love. Wrinkled hands mirror deep furrowed lines and her cotton dress is drab and lifeless like her overall demeanor. She's neither warm nor loving but cordial. Like someone forced to perform.

I finish the coffee but the taste vanishes with Dani's ever-changing expressions. A white camisole hugs her petite body and beautifully bronzed shoulders that drop with each word

spoken by the old woman. Tiny feet fidget beneath a long silk skirt that matches the bright pink color on her toenails. Around her neck hangs the gold medallion given long ago to Giovanna's abandoned child.

Dani's curly dark-brown hair is pulled up in a ponytail so that she looks like a child herself, patiently waiting for her turn to speak. I can't hear them but my chest rumbles with a low growl. The smile that encompassed my love's face only moments ago has been replaced with deep concern.

I'm a retired U.S. Army Ranger, expertly trained by Veteran warriors to protect and defend. To be prepared for anything. No one could have prepared me for Dani. I restrain myself from running to her side – to shield her from this new hurt. After coming through the other side of hell together, her happiness is my only mission.

We saved the world from a madman. In return, she saved me. From death, twice, but not only. She saved me from a lifetime of running. Of ambivalence. Of ignoring what I've always wanted.

A home. With only her.

Maybe I'm not good enough for Giovanna's granddaughter but I will love and protect her for as long as she'll have me.

I focus on Dani's lips as they move in reply to the old woman's words. Her dark eyes dart between their clenched hands and her grandmother's face. I know every expression, wrinkle of her nose, purse of her lips.

She is trying to prove a point.

And losing.

Chapter 8

Dani

Giovanna's accusation lacerates my heart and forces pain to my deepest core. She's been strangely quiet the last two days, as if she's decided something that she alone has authority. About my relationship with Reilly. She has no right to assume and condemn the man I love. She's wrong and I tell her so but she continues despite my plea.

"They are all alike, Bambina," Giovanna warns. "He will leave you behind, like all men do."

I may speak and fully understand Italian but I'm not getting through. I release her hand when I realize I've tightened my grip with each offensive word. "You don't understand what we have, what we've been through. He was there for me when no one else was. He's made me stronger than I could ever be on my own. He even found you for me. We made promises."

Giovanna eyes my gold medallion. She reaches for it then drops her hand and huffs. "Men will promise anything to get what they want. You see how the girls here look at him. They fall at his feet. With that smile and those eyes, they want more than his attention. Eventually he will tire and he will stray. You will be left with nothing but a broken heart."

I don't have the strength to tell her how my heart has already been shattered by men who said they loved me. Men who had promised to protect me and who had done no such thing. Men who used me to get what they wanted so yes, I understand her warning. But she's wrong about Reilly. Only with him will my heart remain whole as if it is cradled in those large hands and shielded with all he has.

My grandmother's wounded heart has apparently dulled her other senses because she

isn't listening. "Nona, then it will be my heart, not yours. I waited a long time for someone like him." My eyes fill with tears despite my resolve.

Giovanna pulls back her hands and stands. "I may have been younger than you at the time, but you are just as foolish to believe in such things as true love and happiness."

"Nona, stay, please. I need you to understand."

"It is you who does not understand. *Solo aspettare*, just wait, *si vedrà* you will see. When you need him most, he will not be there."

With his hands in the pockets of his loose blue jeans, Reilly limps onto the terrace to the full force of Giovanna's stone-cold glare. She tromps to the house and he sits beside me. He gently kisses my head. "What happened?"

I close my eyes at his kiss and lean into him. His brushed cotton shirt is soft against my cheek. I wrap my hands around his and inhale to push back my disappointment. "She is wonderful but she carries a lot of pain."

I turn up my chin and carefully study the cobalt blue eyes that are latched to my heart. Like the Italian seas that surround us, I succumb to their depth. His short brown hair sports strands of blonde highlights from the late summer sun. He is healthy and here and it's all that matters. "She doesn't understand what we have. Even if I could fully explain it, I don't think she would believe me."

He rubs the back of my hand with his thumb. "What did she say?"

His touch drives the same powerful thump deep in my chest like it had the very first time. It had been a different disappointment then, but the honesty in that simple stroke is like a magnet to steel. I only want to be with him.

We had promised each other no secrets but Giovanna's warning is insulting and wrong.

After all he's done for me, I won't do that to him. "Doesn't matter."

He gently caresses my cheek and brushes his lips against mine. They are sweet and tender and I know he tastes my sadness. He doesn't push. "Okay," he says.

I let the warmth of the breeze and this beautiful man surround my soul. This trip was a dream come true, made possible by the only man I trust with my life and my heart. The people I've met and the bonds I've made will stay with me forever and while the days were filled with smiling faces and wonderful food, each one ended where I truly belong.

I study Reilly, get lost in his eyes, and draw his face towards mine. Because of Giovanna, I know where I come from. Because of Reilly, I know where I'm going.

I'm complete and for as much as I love my new family, I need more.

"Time for us go home," I say before pressing my lips to his. I want to live on those lips every day.

"Us?"

My face scrunches with disbelief. "Of course, us." Then it hits me. His withdrawal these last few days. His short answers. His hesitation and distance. "Oh my God. You thought this was an either-or proposition? You or them? Why?"

He bores a hole to the back of my head with his stare but there is fear in his whisper. "I can't give you this."

My head tilts and my shoulders drop as I study the abandoned child hiding behind dark blue eyes and a warrior's heart. A child who was not worthy of a family's love but of only his mother's for the fourteen years he had her. A brave but invisible soldier ready to lay down a life he deemed not worthy of remembrance. A man who avoided relationships so he wouldn't be cast aside or left behind.

My heart explodes and I caress his brow with my fingertips. This imperfect man with his hidden wounds and visible scars is all I need to heal my own but he's forgotten what I told him.

A truth that fills every cell in me. That he is my partner and the only person who has found a way to add to my life. I want no one else by my side.

"You don't see it, do you?" I ask. Reilly doesn't answer so I pull him closer and tell him what he needs to finally believe. "You already have."

CORRECTIVE MEASURES



Nadine Dandorf

Chapter 1

Washington, DC

The eager young man pounced on the phone at the blazing red indicator on his desk monitor. He looked around for listening ears or wandering eyes before speaking. “There’s activity.”

“Perfect,” said FBI Special Agent in Charge David Delaney. “What does it say?”

“She arrives this evening.”

“Good. We’ll be there to greet her. Make sure you eliminate the trace.”

“Already done,” said the technician.

Delaney hung up the phone. He didn’t need a new assistant but would find a place for the subordinate who had been willing to do what his superior needed without asking questions. All he had to do was watch the unauthorized wiretap on the email account. It was worth twice the price.

Protocol mandated that Delaney follow procedure by continually checking in with the systems control officer assigned to the case at Treasury. Its Enforcement Communication System is specifically designed to communicate between its office and the FBI, as well as state and local governments. It also permits access and message transmittal between Immigration and Customs, ATF, IRS-Criminal Investigation, and the FAA. But while the system is useful across all lines of defense when it comes to upholding tax and federal laws, there can be lag time in notification.

Delaney wanted to run point.

He smirked to no one then opened the manila file detailing the case that was officially open. In a few hours, Daniella St. Sauveur would finally realize who was smarter, why he was in

charge, and why she should have never crossed him. He would see to it that those choices would have only the ugliest of consequences.

Chapter 2

Oakton, Virginia

The sun had set hours before Dani and Reilly landed at the private airport. A black Lincoln Navigator awaited their arrival and delivered them shortly to the security gates at the O'Donnell estate. Dani stepped from the car, entered the access code, then returned to her place beside Reilly. The iron bars inched open to the massive home she had called hers for the last five years.

The nineteenth century Colonial held no beauty now. Dani viewed it through sackcloth, its white exterior, cobblestone drive and expansive gardens darkened by the ugly lies and manipulations orchestrated by a contemptuous and vile man. She had lived with a monster and unknowingly fed it and helped it grow. She swallowed the bile that rose from her empty stomach and focused on Marcus, the only good memory she'd take with her. She missed him already.

She would meet Marcus' attorney in the morning to claim his ashes and settle his affairs. Then she would make plans to place O'Donnell's estate on the market and close out his public accounts. To appease the misplaced guilt that would not leave her, every dime would be donated to charity.

The private accounts were another matter.

They would remain secret until Shaun McNeal, the CIA's Deputy Director for Operations, determined their disposal. That was the deal for bringing McNeal the proof that Charlie O'Donnell was the traitor within. Four years earlier, those accusations had cost Reilly a life of dedication to his country and the skill and time spent in Special Forces. It paled to the lives lost because of O'Donnell's depravity.

The traitor got what all evil and vicious men deserve. Murdered by Trent Mariner, an assassin on O'Donnell's payroll, Mariner found death at Reilly's hands but not before Mariner took his own pound of flesh and bone from Reilly. The knife wounds delivered after days of torture were slow to heal. Less pronounced after months of physical therapy, Reilly's limp remained and anything more than the slight brush of his loose jeans against his right thigh met with severe protest.

It was all behind them.

Dani exhaled as she placed her key in the front door then shrieked when it was jerked open and someone forcibly grabbed her arm. Instinct kicked in when her bag was ripped from her hand. Struggling was useless against the much larger police officer.

Reilly went for the gun tucked in his waistband but stopped as a half-dozen men with FBI emblazoned on their dark blue jackets pulled their weapons in unison.

"Daniella St. Sauveur," said the officer, "you are under arrest for tax evasion, money laundering, and conspiracy to commit crimes against the United States."

Officers and agents ransacking each room attacked Dani's vision. The officer's accusation rang in her ears. She jumped as he tightened the handcuffs then patted her down.

"What's going on here?" Reilly roared.

Special Agent in Charge Dave Delaney stepped forward. "Who are you?"

Reilly kept his hands raised. "ID's in my jacket."

"Slowly," Delaney responded.

Reilly pulled his credentials and flipped open the wallet. The gold CIA badge made the agents lower their weapons but only added to Dani's distress. Everything they had done was

supposedly covert and unofficial. A badge gave him, and only him, protections and immunity. Her throat tightened and her heart pounded. This couldn't be happening.

“No,” she pleaded.

“Let her go,” Reilly ordered. “Ms. St. Sauveur is with me.”

“Sorry, can't do that,” Delaney said thoroughly scanning Reilly's ID and tossing it back. He turned to the officer. “Take her down to booking. The IRS will have their shot first, then she's ours.” He addressed another agent. “Call Deputy Wakeford at Internal Revenue. At this late hour, she can come to us.”

Dani's glare at Delaney turned to panic when the police officer pushed her toward the door. Like the unearthly screams of a wild banshee, questions pounded her skull. “Reilly?”

“It'll be okay,” Reilly said as Dani resisted and agents blocked his way. He straightened his shoulders, ready to fight. “I'll be right there with you. I'll contact Director McNeal tonight and get you released immediately.”

Delaney chuckled with his sneer. “You can do what you want after you're done answering my questions.” He pointed Reilly toward the living room. “That may take some time.”

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