

Chapter 96

DAMIAN

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I slammed my hand aggressively on my steering wheel, my mind hazy with thoughts. How did I get myself into this mess? Monique was a psycho, and I just fell right into her clutches.

I drove like a madman all the way home. I could feel my heart racing as I clutched the steering wheel, trying to beat the traffic.

I jumped out of the car before it was barely parked and dashed inside. The moment I got in, I yelled for Molly. She came running from the kitchen.

"Call a technician," I barked. "Now!"

She nodded and hurried off. I began to walk around the house, looking out for cameras. I had to find out if Monique had also bugged my house. If she had, I had to get rid of the cameras before Amelia returned.

"The technician is on his way, sir," Molly returned. "Sir, is everything alright?"

"Tell me... and think carefully before you answer. Has any form of maintenance taken place here recently?"

She thought for a moment and nodded. "Yes. Three days before you and your wife left for Morocco, there was an electrical maintenance."

"I didn't call for a goddamn maintenance."

"They came to access the cameras you installed," Molly answered, shaking slightly. "We thought you paid them to do it."

Which meant the house might have been bugged. And that Monique had been watching us for a long time. Fuck!

For the longest twenty minutes of my life, I waited for the technicians to arrive while praying that Amelia would return home late. I could not face her if she learned Monique was spying on us.

Soon, the team of technicians arrived. Their job would be harder, considering the fact that I had already installed cameras to watch Amelia after Colin attempted to hurt her.

"I need your eyes to scout every single room in this house. Bring me every hidden camera besides the obvious ones." I instructed the technicians, and they started work immediately.

It took ten minutes to find a camera hidden in the smoke detector. And another five to find two more in the wall clocks. By the time the technicians had scoured the entire place for two hours, seventeen hidden cameras were found.

Monique had played me, and she had played me well.

Anton put up a hand, a gesture for me to stop.

"Wait. Wait. Back up a little and take it from when she took you out of the dining room."

Again, I told him about Monique's offer and her surveillance screens in a hidden room. Anton gaped at me, his mouth hanging slightly open.

"She's been bugging people's houses?" he yelled.

"Hey! Keep your voice down." I glanced at my office door to make sure it was firmly closed. "And yes, she has been. I found seventeen cameras at mine."

"Damian!"

"I know," I shook my head. "She's worse than you described."

"But that's some creepy shit!" Anton tugged at a strand of his hair. "My mind is literally blown away. How did she even manage to get those cameras in people's homes? There has to be like a hundred different charges that can be slammed against her; breaking and entering, invasion of privacy... A whole lot!"

"Tell me about it!" I sighed. "Apparently, she had scheduled maintenance at home and installed them. She's smart and dangerous."

"That means the rumour I heard was right. She is as dangerous as I thought, even more dangerous than I realized. She has been keeping an eye on everyone all this time. She has probably been doing that before she came into the city." He sat up straighter as a thought occurred to him. "The elaborate parties she throws must be covers to find out dirty secrets about wealthy and influential men."

"Yeah. I figured that out already. The woman is a sneak for want of a better word."

Anton sighed and slumped back in his chair. "I'm just happy she wasn't able to get her hooks into you."

But Anton spoke a little too soon. The words were barely out of his mouth before my phone rang.

"Monique," I breathed, pointing at the phone.

"Monique," Anton repeated. "What does she want?"

"Search me." My finger hovered over the screen. "There is only one way to find out."

I took the call, thinking she was calling to ask me to reconsider her offer, which I had no bloody intention of doing.

Monique's voice came over the line, clear and cold the moment I said hello.

"Damian, no one, and I repeat, no one can see my surveillance room and not accept my proposal."

"Then maybe you should have spelt it out before taking me to your room of horrors," I retorted.

"I mean what I just said. You know my secret now. That means we must work together because I can't risk letting you expose me."

"Well, I meant all I said, Monique. It will be a cold day in hell before I decide to work with the likes of you. I have gone far in business without resorting to your underhand methods. The thought of what you do literally makes my skin crawl."

She waited a beat before saying, "I think I've been persuasive enough. You have exactly 15 seconds from the time I drop this call to think about my offer. If you refuse me, I will release files to the general public, files that will damage your reputation forever."

"I said no, and my no means NO."

"Very well. Your time starts now."

The line immediately went dead.

"Dramatic," I scoffed.

Anton leaned forward eagerly. "What? What did she say? What did she want?" Anton's expression quickly became one of alarm when I told him what Monique had said.

"That woman is dangerous," he said worriedly. "What can she have on you?"

"Absolutely nothing," I replied promptly. "She is a sour loser. She's just bluffing, trying to scare me. I'm sure as I am of my name that she has nothing on me that can tarnish my reputation."

"You-"

"Enough of that woman. Don't worry about her. She's angry she didn't get what she wanted. Nothing more."

Anton didn't still look convinced by the time he left, but I felt easy in my mind for the rest of the day. A few minutes after I was done with work for the day, I was in the parking lot when I received a phone call from Anton.

I was about to tell him I hoped he wasn't calling to talk about Monique's stupid threats when he said, "Have you seen the news yet?"

"Er- no. I have been busy and... Why? What's so special about today's news?"

Anton sighed deeply. "It-it's not something I can say. Just google..." He swallowed. "Google Damian Donovan with the tag, child trafficker."

I spluttered and ended the call immediately. With dread in my heart, I did a quick Google search of the terms Anton had given me. The search results made my blood run cold. On the internet were articles, lots of them, that gave 'evidence' that I was a child trafficker. For about twenty minutes, I stood beside my car, clicking on article after article, and then I just stood there, staring into space, wondering what the hell was happening.

And then I remembered Monique. Her threats. She had done this!

Already beginning to panic, I rapped sharply on the window of my car as I got in.

"Quickly," I said to my driver. "Take me home now!"

In no time at all, I was home. I was out of the car before it fully came to a stop. From the front door, I could hear the sound of the television turned all the way up.

"Damian," Amelia cried, coming around the sofa to clutch at my sleeve. "What is going on?"

The voice from the television rose and swelled. Amelia and I both turned to it.

"...tycoon Damian Donovan is allegedly involved in child trafficking." The talking reporter's face was replaced with several of my pictures and then pictures of dirty-looking, half-starved children. "Reports have it that his trafficking ring focuses in countries like Morocco and Rwanda."

The children's faces changed to pictures of the Moroccan dishes Amelia had taken and posted on Instagram during our short vacation. I couldn't believe the fools were actually using that as proof that I had visited Morocco recently.

I grabbed the remote, turned down the volume of the television and faced Amelia.

"Explain to me. What's happening?" she said in a tiny voice.

"Monique," I said, and I went on to tell her about everything, about my dinner with her, her surveillance room and her threats. "I was so sure she had nothing on me. I didn't think for one moment that she would go as far as framing me."

"Oh, Damian. I'm so sorry." Her eyes grew shiny and wet. "It's all my fault. I'm the one who pushed you into accepting her proposal."

"No. Don't blame yourself. Don't apologize. I'm a grown man, responsible for my own decisions. The mistake was mine."

"But how are you going to get out of this? Do you have a plan?"

"No... And Amelia, I don't mean to spell doom, but I have to let you know that this will be a difficult case for me to win, especially since the media are not basing their speculations on hearsay. There are files backing up these false claims."

"But Damian, they are just pictures and mere speculations," she argued. "Once they probe the so-called evidence, they'll discover it's all fake."

"Monique would have thought of that part," I pointed out. "That woman is dangerous. She's not who she says she is." I sighed deeply. "Amelia, we are about to enter a difficult phase of our marriage. I'm going to lose a lot. I've seen something like this happen to others. Most of the shareholders in my company will pull out. My company will suffer. As you see, no one wants to remain in a sinking ship. And as for you... people will believe that, as my wife, you are in on this. They will bully you. They will call your names. Your business could also be affected." I watched her eyes widen with fright at every word out of my mouth. "I don't mean to frighten you, but I don't want to keep you in the dark about anything."

Her face suddenly tightened in resolve. "Whatever happens, know that I am with you in this."

Just as I was about to thank her, my phone rang.

"The mayor," I said to her. "Keep your fingers crossed. This could turn out to be what I just told you about."

Sure enough, it was.

"Damian," the mayor said. "I'm sorry to bring this up, but I'm sure you've heard the rumours flying around about you."

"Yes, I have. Needless to say, they are all lies. Every one of them. You know I'm not, and can't ever be that kind of person. Someone is trying hard to frame me. I will clear my name soon enough, so I have no worries there."

His tone turned apologetic. "I'm afraid what I know or don't know about you doesn't count, especially with people higher up than me." He paused for breath. "I'm sorry, but until your name is cleared, the railway project must be put on hold."