

Chapter 45

Pinegrove

Jody sat alone on the stairwell just outside the operations room, her laptop closed beside her, her hands resting on her knees. The house was still humming with quiet energy—screens pinging, transmissions flying, the faint echo of Fred’s voice in the background issuing new instructions. But out here, it was just her and the sound of her own thoughts.

She stared at a loose thread on her sleeve, picking at it absentmindedly.

They had just broadcast a lie across the world, a lie designed to provoke violent men into motion. Men with reach. Men who wouldn’t think twice about blood.

And she was the one who made it all look real.

Again.

The thing was—she used to be proud of her work. She used to believe it was all in service of something larger. Smarter. Better.

Now it just felt like performance art for ghosts.

She exhaled slowly, rubbing her hands together.

Trapper in Fiji. Rafael watching. Nico frothing. Marla...

Marla Petrov.

There was something about that woman that made Jody’s stomach twist. Cold. Sharp. Strategic. Like a mirror she didn’t want to look into.

They were playing gods with deep fake masks and forged voices. Every illusion another trigger, every line of code a matchstick.

And Fred...

Jody leaned her head back against the wall.

He's changing. Or maybe he's always been this way.

There was a time she would have taken a bullet for him, without thinking. Now? She wasn't sure if she was covering his back—or just covering his mess.

She looked down at her hands again. So good at building things no one should ever see.

Jody stood up slowly, pushing the laptop under her arm, and headed back inside.

No one noticed she'd left.

* * *

Go -7

The air inside the Pinegrove safehouse had shifted. The quiet despondency of yesterday was gone—replaced by something sharper, colder.

Fred stood behind Jody's workstation, arms crossed, his voice low but unwavering. "It's time we taunt them. Personally."

Jody tilted her head. "Who?"

"Both of them. Nico and Rafael," Fred said. "I want them to feel like they're already beneath him."

"Him?" she asked, already guessing.

"Trapper."

Fred stepped closer, eyes locked on the screen. "You're going to send each of them a message. Individually. Make it look like a private, off-the-record video—BitLock encryption, full scramble, direct to their personal feeds."

Jody gave a small, grim nod. "What's the message?"

Fred's voice didn't waver. "Trapper tells them both he hasn't heard from them. He's still open to talking—but the deal he offered yesterday is gone. The new price is one billion per year. That's what it takes now to get his protection."

Jody raised an eyebrow. "You're doubling down."

Fred didn't smile. "No. I'm just being fair. He'll say that the cost reflects

what he's now going to have to pay the FBI and DEA to keep them off their backs."

Jody tapped a few keys, queuing up the deep fake interface. Trapper's voice and face were easy to reconstruct—she'd already built a clean data set from previous media interviews and intercepted security footage.

Two recordings. Same tone. Same words. One for Rafael Sandoval, the other for Nico Bartoli.

[Counterfeit BitLock Message – To Rafael Sandoval]

"Rafael. Surprised I haven't heard from you. Thought you'd be quicker to recognize an opportunity. That offer from yesterday? That was generous. Sweet, even. But that was yesterday. Today the price is different. One billion. Per year. That's what it's going to take to keep the FBI and DEA from breathing down your neck. It's only fair, considering what I'll be paying to hold them back."

[Counterfeit BitLock Message – To Nico Bartoli]

"Nico. Haven't heard from you, which surprises me. I figured you'd be smart enough to see the value of what I'm offering. But you didn't move. So, here's the update. That \$300 million offer? Gone. Today it's one billion. Per year. That's what it takes to protect you now. Think about it—before someone else does."

* * *

Jody watched the files render, encrypted, and disappear into the net like venomous darts.

"They'll see it within the hour," she said.

Fred gave a single nod. "Good. Let them chew on it."

Matt let out a low whistle across the room. "You really want them pissed, don't you?"

Fred didn't look up. "Pissed is good. Pissed people make mistakes."

Reese muttered, "So do people who push too far."

Fred didn't respond.

He didn't have to.

* * *

Agnes Residence – Georgetown

The Capitol skyline stretched beyond the glass like a painted lie—perfect, still, untouchable. But Agnes saw through it. She always had. She knew what was rotting beneath the surface.

And lately, it all led back to one name.

Fred Palmer. The infection behind the chaos.

She stood by the sideboard, pouring a precise measure of bourbon into a crystal tumbler, but her hand paused over the glass. She didn't drink. She didn't sit. She just stared—thinking.

Fred was no longer a variable. He was the variable. The tipping point. The glitch in the system that wouldn't stay erased.

And Agnes had tried everything. Pressure. Surveillance. Media takedowns. Political interference. All of it sharpened to pierce him, wound him, drive him into isolation.

But he just kept moving. Adapting. Outplaying everyone.

Except when it came to her.

Agnes walked back to her desk and picked up the file lying neatly at its center. It was thinner now than it had been a week ago. Just one name on the cover.

Kelly Savage.

The moment she met Kelly, Agnes knew. Fred's voice had never shaken in intercepted calls. He was never off-balance. Never disarmed.

Until Kelly.

Kelly Savage was Fred's soft spot—his kryptonite—and it wasn't just about love or regret. It was identity. Kelly reminded him of who he used to be. Who he still wished he was, in the quiet corners of his mind.

And Agnes had seen it in Kelly's eyes during their meeting. That flicker of conflicted loyalty. That unspoken question:

"What if I can still reach him?"

That was the moment Agnes knew she didn't have to force Kelly.

She just had to aim her.

Not through threats—though she kept those handy—but through guilt.