

A TIME FOR HEISTS: THE GREATEST TREASURE

By Mayumi Cruz

CHAPTER 1

Hong Kong: June 17, Sunday

The deafening explosion which rocked the tranquil atmosphere at the Gold Coast Yacht and Country Club was heard at exactly six fifteen in the evening, just when the sun was setting in its home in the west, that exact moment when its red orange hue was about to darken into purple blue. It was followed by chaos and upheaval such as never before seen in the usually quiet and uneventful marina.

Seconds after the explosion, frantic people rushed along the floating dock, shouting, "Fire! Fire!" Running feet, panicked shouts, splashes of water followed. Everyone's focus was on the burning super yacht which was no doubt on its way to sink into the depths of the South China Sea.

Which was why they barely noticed a lone man walking gingerly away from the fire scene, instead of toward it. Tall, broad-shouldered and donned in a blue thermoprene shorty wetsuit which molded his hard, muscled body perfectly, he strode barefoot, noiselessly on the dock. In his left hand, he gripped a 133 cubic foot steel air tank. His right hand clutched a large, gray duffel bag.

If anyone took a closer look at him and wondered why he was oblivious to the ruckus, they'd notice the earphones clamped to his ears, and they'd come to the conclusion that he was listening to songs at full blast, rendering him almost deaf from all

the noise. Amid the commotion and as far as everyone was concerned, he was insignificant.

Of course, they wouldn't know that his 'earphones' were connected to a thin, iPod-like device inside his suit, taped to his bare chest. Or that his wetsuit wasn't wet, especially his naturally thick, wavy hair with sides cut short. Or that he was now in possession of a very valuable object—which he effortlessly took under a framed poster of Michael Jackson from the now burning yacht—and for which he would be paid a hefty sum of money.

“Joseph, you didn't have to do that,” an irate male voice spoke from the 'earphone' in the man's ear.

“What? What did I do?” Joseph asked, feigning ignorance. He tightly grasped the handle of the duffel bag, moving it out of harm's way when a group of burly firemen marched toward him, bumping into him in their haste to do their job.

“You could've walked out of there and no one will be any the wiser. Instead, you caused the yacht's kitchen to explode.”

“Relax, my friend, no one's there. The overindulgent teens are in another yacht far from there, partying to their hearts' content.”

“Someday, I fear you'll hurt someone. May that someone be not *yourself*. If it comes to that, I'll laugh at your grave.”

“Herman, I always go out with a bang, you know that,” Joseph chuckled.

“Never mind.” Herman knew his concerns fell into deaf ears. “Do you have it?”

“Of course. Same, not?”

“Same, not,” Herman agreed. It was their code for a drop-off point. “Is it authentic?”

“Yeah, 100%. Our client will be pleased.”

“Ecstatic, you mean. They’ve been searching for that for a long time.”

“I told them we can get it for them. They should’ve believed me. If they did, they wouldn’t be paying us double the original contract price.”

“Serves them right. They doubted us.”

“It’s their prerogative.”

“Yes. And it’s our extreme pleasure to witness the look on their faces when they receive the package tonight.”

Joseph smirked. “When will these people learn never to underestimate us?” Reaching the end of the dock, he stopped. A small diving support vessel was berthed there. A short, brown boy of about fourteen years old with freckled cheeks and a crop of black, wavy hair sat on the deck, reading a book. Upon seeing Joseph, he stood up and grinned, showing several misaligned but spotless white teeth.

“Hello, sir!” the boy greeted Joseph cheerfully, waving his hands. “Had a good dive?”

“The best, Basil,” came Joseph’s reply, followed by a thumbs-up sign. Crossing over the deck through the ramp, he placed the air tank beside several others. “How much do I owe you for the tank rental?”

“Just 250 dollars, sir.”

Joseph’s brows curled. “You’re not overpricing me, are you?”

“No, sir. I wouldn’t dream of that,” Basil retorted, straight-faced.

Shaking his head, Joseph grinned. “Make it 500 and put it on my tab, okay?”

The boy literally jumped on his feet, letting out a whooping, “Yes!” Then, remembering his job, he handed Joseph’s clothes to him. “Thank you, sir. You’re very generous.”

Pulling a white shirt over his head, Joseph winked at him. “And you are very helpful.” He proceeded to put on his jeans over his wetsuit and slipped on his sneakers. Ruffling the boy’s hair, he bid him goodbye with a smile. “Be good, Basil.”

“Yes, sir!” The boy gave him a salute.

Joseph walked away, strolling down the road leading to the Gold Coast Hotel. By now, darkness had crept in over the horizon. The streetlights turned on, illuminating the place like stars lined up in a galaxy. He removed the earphones, pocketing them. In their place, he put on a miniature wireless earpiece in his right ear.

Instantly, Herman’s voice came up. “Don’t you think five hundred dollars is a bit too much for that kid? You know he overpriced, don’t you?”

“Relax, Herman, you’re being stingy again like your good ol’ ancestor,” he soothed his friend even as he opened the glass doors of the patisserie located at the ground floor of his hotel. “It’s a good day. Let’s celebrate. All that hard work deserve a cup of delicious peppermint tea and delectable French macarons, don’t you think? After all, by tonight, we will be five hundred thousand dollars richer.”

“I’d rather spend the money on books, rather than food,” Herman grumbled.

Joseph teased him further. “Killjoy! Again, like your inimitable grandpa,” to which Herman lamented, “Yeah, yeah, genes and all.”

Chuckling, Joseph’s mood lifted a notch higher as the smell of sweet, freshly-baked goods welcomed him, wafting to his nose. The spacious white interior of the minimally designed bakeshop with its sophisticated lighting somehow calmed his frayed nerves. Contrary to his outward cool appearance, the tightness in his gut never once left him before, during, and after every job. Until the payment for his services was safely deposited in their Swedish bank account, he didn’t regard a job as completely done.

The patisserie almost smelled and felt like home. Home was back in the Philippines, when his mother would bake her special *ensaymada* recipe for *merienda* with matching hot chocolate drink. A pang of loneliness crept into him. He wished he was back home instead of here.

A giggling Chinese girl, who didn't bother to hide her admiration for the newly-arrived handsome, confident guy wearing a three-day stubble beard, approached. She took his order and fussed over him, offering him the patisserie's other specialty treats which he politely declined. After the waitress had left, Joseph again heard his friend's voice.

"Don't tell me, that girl came on to you."

"Nope. She was just offering me their other products." He spoke it without malice, not realizing how dashing he looked with his slightly tilted but hooded brown eyes, thick lashes and black brows. Not to mention his straight-edged nose and full-bottom lip set on a strong, manly chin that not even a beard can hide.

"Huh. It sounded very much like she was offering *herself* to you as a product. Careful, Joseph. Andie's a jealous girl, you know."

Upon hearing his girlfriend's name, Joseph was about to retort when his eyes caught something. Curtly, he said, "We have a problem."

"What? No one followed you. You're clear."

"That's because they're *already* waiting for me here."

Herman gasped at the other end of the line, but Joseph didn't hear him anymore, his attention already somewhere—or at someone—else.

The most beautiful and desirable woman Joseph has ever laid his eyes on was walking toward him. She literally took his breath away. She was wearing a body-hugging

periwinkle blue tailored pant suit, her high heels clicking on the shiny ceramic floor, tall enough to be eye level with his own six-foot frame. Straight, shoulder-length auburn hair parted at the center framed her heart-shaped face and stubborn chin, conveying a rare kind of strength in a woman that was captivating. Dreamy, deep-set eyes surrounded by long lashes under well-defined brows, celestial nose, chiseled cheekbones, plump pink lips—he was liking what he’s seeing.

And from the way the woman was smiling sweetly at him, her cheeks blushing pink at the sight of him, the attraction was mutual.

Which cannot be said for the Caucasian male that was openly gawking at her from behind, whom Joseph saw out of the corner of his eye. Almost imperceptibly, he tilted his head slightly to the right, quickly taking in the pervert’s dirty blonde, gelled hair, pointed nose and thin lips set on a weak chin and albino skin. Dressed immaculately in a suit and looking like he owned the world, Joseph disliked the man at first sight. He thought of a hundred different ways to pluck out the American’s eyes which followed every sway of the girl’s hips. But his day will come. Patience, after all, was his virtue. He’d been patient for three years now, hadn’t he?

He switched his full, undivided attention to the woman getting nearer and nearer to him, until she stood before him, looking down on his amused face.

“Mr. Lejano, I’m Amanda Perkins. May I sit down?” she asked softly, gesturing at the chair opposite him.

“By all means,” he stood up, remembering his manners, his keen eyes taking in the almost invisible earpiece in her right ear.

Herman had wisely turned off his own microphone and contented himself with listening in. By now, Joseph knew he would be tracking his movements via the GPS on the covert communications device taped on his chest.

At that moment, his order arrived. The waitress took her time placing the cup of tea and macarons on the table, throwing appreciative glances at him and making sure her hands touch his arm at every opportune moment.

After enduring her irritating presence for a few minutes, Amanda grasped the waitress' wrist and pulled her down, her eyes narrowed at her. "Leave us," she snarled in a most unlady-like way. The poor girl scampered away as if being chased by a monster. Joseph stifled a smile.

Amanda then turned on her full charm on Joseph. "Now that that's been taken care of, let's talk, shall we? May I call you Joseph?"

He grinned from ear to ear. "Sure. Better yet, call me 'yours,' seeing how jealous you are of that girl."

Her eyes widened in alarm, lifting her chin even as Joseph noticed the Caucasian man stiffen. "I don't know what you mean. And for your information, I'm kind of spoken for."

He lifted his brow. "To whom? That pervert back there, who's been ogling your behind when you were walking toward me?"

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes squinting angrily at the American who immediately ducked his head in shame, before turning back to Joseph. She smiled without humor. "No. And now, *you're* the one sounding jealous."

"Touché." He winked, his lips twitching in amusement. "Tell me, do you like being 'kind of spoken for'?"

“I’m not going to answer that,” she snapped, but quickly reverted to a more cordial tone as her forefinger touched the earpiece in her ear. It was an obvious reminder that someone was listening in on them. “I’d like to get on with the purpose of my visit, Joseph. My employer wants to hire your services.”

He stiffened. “Who is your employer? That pervert back there? I wouldn’t want to work for him, so it’s a ‘no.’”

“That *pervert back there...*,” she thumbed at the direction of the American, “is my employer’s head of security. His name is Mason Smith.”

From his spot, Joseph saw Mason’s cheeks burned. It was obvious he was not liking their mutual description of him.

Well, Joseph didn’t care less. “Okay. If that *pervert back there* is not your employer, then I’m all ears,” chuckling as the American’s face turned livid.

“Right, then. My employer is Alexa Alvidrez.”

“Spanish?”

“Italian. With Filipino blood.”

“Like you and me?”

She lifted a well-defined brow. “How did you know I have Filipino blood?”

He shrugged. “Call it intuition. Let me guess: you’re half-British.”

“And you’re half-American, aren’t you, Joseph?” Her eyes were sparkling with humor, loving their playful—and, unknown to Mason, necessary—exchange of banter.

“I see you’ve done your research, too.”

“I have to in this job. Anyway, my employer wants to meet you.”

“Gee, and here I am, enjoying my chat with the most beautiful girl on the planet. Can’t it wait until I’ve made you fall in love with me?”

She blushed. She was thankful her back was to Mason. Anyone can easily see how susceptible she was to Joseph's jests. Quickly recovering, she shook her head, another subtle warning. "I'm afraid not, Joseph. Time is of the essence in this particular job. She wants to meet you now."

"Say the magic word first."

"What?"

"Say 'please, Joseph,'" he teased.

"Mr. Lejano." She spat out, now truly irked at him. "This is not a joke."

"Who's joking?" Ignoring her question, he leaned back on his chair, still smiling infuriatingly. It was fun teasing her, watching her rosy cheeks turn a shade darker. He hadn't had this much fun in a long time. "As I understand it, your employer desperately needs my services ASAP. A simple, harmless word from you can make me come see her. Or not."

The Caucasian male appeared suddenly at his side. He opened his coat to reveal a gun tucked in his belt. "Mr. Lejano. Do as you're told before things become ugly."

Amanda glared at him, obviously annoyed at his intrusion.

"Who are you and why are you barging in on our conversation?" Joseph flicked a spiteful glance at him.

"I'm Mason Smith, as we both know you *already* knew. She's with me."

Hearing the last three words sparked up fire to Joseph's possessive vein. He stood up to his full height as he sharply met Mason's eyes, his jaw and fists clenched. "I don't think so."

Amanda stood up, too, snapping at the American. “Mason, I’ve told you many times I can take care of myself.” Laying her hand gently on Joseph’s arm, her tone changed abruptly. “Mr. Lejano. *Joseph*. You don’t have to create a scene. *Please*, come with me.”

Mason’s brow crinkled. She never used that tone with him. It was smooth, affectionate, dripping with familiarity, almost as if they’ve known each other for years. Which was absurd, because his investigation on Amanda’s background yielded no romantic relationship with any man for the last five years, and certainly not with *this* man, Joseph Lejano, whom he’d also checked out.

He turned to her, only to encounter her fiery eyes. “Mason, I’m only concerned on getting what Alexa wants. And she wants *this* man,” she gritted. Rebuked, he nodded, shoving aside his dark thoughts. She was right. They were there for a job.

Still, a few uncomfortable seconds of staring session passed before Joseph broke into a grin and shifted his attention to Amanda, his eyes lingering on her hand that was still touching his arm.

“I never can refuse a woman who says ‘please’, and in a most alluring sort of way at that,” winking at her. Amanda visibly relaxed. After grabbing his duffel bag, he bowed, his other hand gesturing outside. “Lead the way, A...,” he cleared his throat, “Amanda.”

He purposely ignored Mason, who followed on his heels. They went inside the hotel and into the elevator. Before the doors closed, a huge hunk of a man, dressed in a black suit and wearing dark glasses, went in and positioned himself in front of Joseph like a sturdy pillar. From the top of his crew cut hair to his clean shaven stoic face and his bulging muscles, he screamed of military. Or at the very least, a former one. German, most probably. Mixed blood, surely.

Face to face with him, Joseph smirked. “How’re you doing, Goliath?”

The giant didn't reply. It was Mason, standing on Joseph's right, who answered scathingly. "His name is not Goliath. His name is Gregory. I'd be careful if I were you, Joseph. He can beat you to a pulp in ten seconds."

Shrugging as if he didn't care, Joseph mumbled, "I like Goliath more. It suits him. Gregory sounds wimpy."

Gregory growled ominously. Mason chuckled. "Go on, Gregory. Don't resist your urges. I'd be happy to cheer you on."

Amanda spoke firmly from behind Joseph. "But Alexa won't be. Why don't you chill, Mason, and focus on the job?"

The Caucasian man's cheeks burned red again.

Before a chuckling Joseph can retort, Amanda beat him to it. "That goes for you, too, Joseph. Really, you boys should behave like the men you claim to be."

Mason and Joseph both looked properly chastised, eliciting a booming laughter from Gregory which filled the cramped space. When the elevator opened at the twentieth floor, he instantly clamped his mouth shut and resumed his soldier-like stance as he let them all out. Mason marched in front, with Joseph and Amanda side-by-side behind him. Gregory followed them.

Casting a sideways glance, Joseph whispered to Amanda, "So, how do you like the view? Don't think for a moment that I didn't notice you admiring my big, broad, toned back."

Rolling her eyes, she whispered back. "Wow. You're really a cocky bastard, aren't you?"

"Yes." He looked proud. "So, did I pass your scrutiny?"

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “A lady never tells.” Joseph’s shoulders shook as he struggled to chuckle silently. It was *really* fun teasing her, and now, they’re *both* having fun at it.

They reached a door marked 2019. Mason opened it and Joseph was ushered into the lounge of one of the hotel’s Marina suites, exactly like his own at the other end of the hall of the same floor. It confirmed his suspicion that his every move has been monitored since the day he arrived in Hong Kong. A closed door a few feet opposite from him separated the lounge from the bedroom.

The door opened. An old lady in a wheelchair came out. With her winter hair styled in a French twist, wrinkled yet elegant face, and expensive clothes, she had a distinctive aura that demanded respect. Joseph calculated her age to be in her eighties.

“Please, sit down, Joseph.” Contrary to her austere demeanor, her voice was warm and gentle. She amiably smiled up at him as she parked her chair beside him. “I’m sorry if you were inconvenienced. I desperately wanted to talk to you before you leave Hong Kong.”

She was sincerely apologetic, her kind eyes begging for understanding. If only for that, Joseph yielded to the old lady’s request to sit down.

“Thank you,” she visibly sighed a breath of relief. Without much ado, she said, “I need you to steal from Sebastian Bene.”

Startled, Joseph blurted out, “The Colombian billionaire?” He recalled to mind what he’d read about him. Sebastian was revered in his country as a self-made billionaire, even as rumors of drug dealings and human trafficking clouded his seemingly perfect reputation. “The one who keeps his most prized possessions in his super yacht?”

“The one and only. I need you to retrieve a rare and never before discovered Rizal bust that he now keeps in there,” the old lady continued.

Without batting an eyelash, he asked, “Is it yours?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me, ma’am. I only steal what’s been taken from rightful owners.” He made to leave.

Her bony hand clasped his wrist in a surprisingly tight grip. “Joseph.” He was surprised to find her eyes were teary. “What if the rightful owner...is the *entire Filipino nation?*”

Joseph stilled. Suddenly, he was at a loss for words.

She released his wrist with an enigmatic smile. “I knew I could appeal to your nationalistic streak. Strange, isn’t it? Loyalty to our Filipino blood runs deep even when it’s mixed with the blood of other races. You see, Joseph, my great grandmother, an unwed mother, was a Filipina.”

His eyes squinted suspiciously. “Who are you? What is this bust you’re talking about? And what do you mean when you said it belongs to the Filipino nation?”

“Please, call me Alexa. I will answer all your questions.” She heaved a deep breath. “The bust depicts our national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, holding his newborn son, Francisco.”

He scoffed in disbelief. “Is this a joke? There is no such thing.”

“I assure you there is. My ancestor was the only one who knew about the bust because she was in Dapitan with him. She watched Rizal carve it himself out of a piece of acacia wood, then place his handwritten letters inside its hollow interior, sealing it shut.”

“Letters?”

She wistfully nodded. “Letters about the underground cave containing the richest gold deposit in the Philippines, which Rizal discovered and subsequently concealed, that could have funded the Katipunan arsenal and would have won them the revolution.”

Joseph’s heart thudded with excitement against his chest at the revelation. While Amanda’s face was unreadable, Mason’s head, on the other hand, snapped in attention. Intuitively, Joseph knew this was the first time he had learned about the contents of the bust.

“The Philippines’ greatest treasure,” he mused as he absent-mindedly ran his fingers over the handle of the duffel bag. “How did you come to know about this?”

“It has been handed down to us, generation after generation, by our ancestor. Verbally, I’m afraid. We were told she avoided putting it into writing, scared that the treasure may fall into the wrong hands. Nevertheless, she vowed she spoke the truth, and we believed her.”

“But I don’t understand. How did Sebastian Bene end up with that bust?”

The old woman sadly exhaled. “After Rizal lost his child in March 1896, he gave the bust to Parto Urbano, a farmer he trusted in managing his coffee farm in Dapitan. He then sent him to Manila, with the strict instruction not to divulge its contents to anyone until he says so. We believed Rizal originally wanted to give the treasure to the Katipunan but only when they are ready.”

Joseph nodded. He knew from history books that the hero did not approve of a revolution, especially one that was unprepared and whose leaders were bitterly divided.

Alexa continued. “In 1902, said friend and his family perished in Manila, victims of the cholera outbreak. The bust must have passed hands since then. My sources told me it was given to Bene as payment in one of his drug dealings in Mexico last month.

Recognizing its worth and authenticity as Rizal's handiwork, he organized a private auction aboard his yacht which will be attended by some of the world's richest people. The auction is set for the day after tomorrow, June 19, Rizal's birth date."

There was a long silence. Tongue in cheek, Joseph mulled over what he just heard. Alexa waited patiently for his reaction.

"I need proof," he said at last, his eyes squinting fixedly at her. "I'm not about to risk my life for a tale spun by an ancestor who claimed to have seen things that no history book has ever recorded. I need you to be completely honest with me if you want me to get this thing for you."

Mason growled at him. "She already said it was passed on to them verbally. Quit wasting our time. If you don't want to do it, then say it."

"Mason, obviously, being a lowly employee, you don't have the right to demand that from me, do you?" Joseph sneered.

"Lowly?" Mason huffed. "Careful with your words, Joseph. With a single call, I can have you arrested for blowing up the super yacht down at the marina. Incidentally, the owner might find that a prized possession of his isn't in its usual place anymore, but inside the duffel bag you're presently clutching as though your life depended on it. Why don't you hand over the Vermeer to me and I'll see to it that the owner gets it back?"

Joseph's jaw clenched as he spat out through gritted teeth, "You just proved how lowly you are, Mason."

The American's face reddened with fury. He flicked his hand. This time, Gregory grabbed the bag. Joseph's hands pulled at it, but to no avail. Gregory's hulk-like grip won over, snatching the bag from him. The big guy handed it over to Mason, who greedily opened the zipper with wide, eager eyes.

Which turned murderous as he took out the contents of the bag: three scuba diving magazines.

Sputtering with rage, Mason realized, “The air tank. It was in the air tank!”

Joseph flashed him his second sweetest smile—reserved for idiots like Mason—which was really an ugly sneer. Yes, *the air tank*—inside which Vermeer’s *The Concert* painting was carefully rolled in layers of bubblewrap and acid-free archival paper, encased in a sealed tube, and which, by now was being carried by a small diving vessel across the sea, bound for Hong Kong International Airport, where it will be flown and returned to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston after 28 years of being stolen by unknown thieves.

Angrily, Mason hastily stood up, knocking over the useless bag and magazines. He made to lunge at Joseph, who was looking smug. “You prick...!”

“Mason! Stop this at once!” Alexa howled and put up her hand, effectively stopping Mason. “That’s Joseph’s business, not yours.”

For a few seconds, the two furious men clashed fiery eyes. Amanda rolled her eyes. “You *girls* should really take a bottle of chill pills,” she said. “Alexa is not finished.”

“Joseph,” the old woman sighed. “I understand. Of course, you’d need proof.” She carefully, reverently fished out a three-ring binder from a black leather bag from her side and handed it to him.

He opened it to reveal a single content inside an acid-free pocket: a half piece of old, brownish paper, its edges burnt, frayed and brittle.

The paper had signs of being folded and re-folded. On it, a fading pencil sketch of Rizal’s face in profile, facing left, was drawn. In his hands, he held a newborn baby. It was

signed with the hero's familiar handwriting, "Rizal, Marzo 1896." The upper half of the paper was missing.

The old woman clasped her hands as if in prayer, murmuring, "My ancestor was able to rescue that from the fire Rizal himself created before he departed from Dapitan in July 1896."

"It's been torn," Joseph observed. "Where's the missing part?"

"The *other* half of the paper, my ancestor said, contained Rizal's sketch of his newborn son, which, as you know from history books, had never been found. It was in the bust he gave to Parto. In June 1896, he sent a coded letter to Parto instructing him to dispose of the bust. But that letter was intercepted and destroyed by the Spaniards. In July, before he left Dapitan, Rizal burned down his gazebo there. We believe that in a fit of despair over his impending trial and possible death, he destroyed everything associated with the contents of the bust."

"But that would mean..."

Alexa's eyes were brimming with tears when she said, "Rizal no longer wanted to hand over the treasure to the Katipunan. In effect, *he doomed the Philippine revolution to fail.*"

The shocking revelation rendered everyone of them speechless.

Tiredly, the old woman's bony shoulders drooped. "You understand now, don't you, Joseph? Thankfully, I think Bene doesn't know yet how utterly precious that piece of wood really is. We must retrieve that bust before he, or anyone else, discovers what's inside. If we get it first, no one will ever know what Rizal did. His perfect image will be preserved."

“What about the treasure, Alexa?” Amanda quietly asked. There was no trace of greed in her tone. It was an honest inquiry into what will be done about the greatest treasure of the country—should it be found.

“I am hoping the treasure is still intact, dear,” the old woman replied. “If it is, I will turn it over to the Philippine government, of course. It belongs to the Filipino nation.”

She passed on to Joseph a check for one million pesos. “This is an advance payment for your services. I know this isn’t much. I bet your fee is much, much higher than this. But in addition to this, you’ll get my share of finder’s fee before I turn it over to the government. That means ten percent of the treasure’s worth.”

Mason stiffened upon hearing this.

Alexa grasped Joseph’s hands eagerly. “I’m hoping you’d give an old woman, whose days are numbered, your time and skills for this job. You may be a newbie, being in the industry for less than three years, but I picked you because not once have you failed any of your clients. I trust you, Joseph. I know you’re the only man for the job.”

“You’re making it hard for me to refuse you, ma’am.”

“Then say yes. *Please*, Joseph.”

He dipped his head. “I can never refuse a woman who says ‘please’.”

“Excellent!” Relieved, the old woman clapped once. “I have one request, though.”

“What is it?”

“I want one of my people to come with you.”

Joseph glanced sardonically at Mason. “No, thanks. I work alone.”

“You and I know you don’t work alone, Joseph,” smirked Mason. “You have your invisible, nameless, faceless friend who’s been listening in.” Still smarting and frustrated

that no amount of investigation on his part yielded anything about the person behind Joseph's earpiece, he leaned forward and spoke louder. "Hello there, whoever you are."

Herman cursed in Joseph's ears.

With pursed lips, Joseph retaliated. "He only does research for me whenever I need it. The keyword is *invisible*. He prefers to be incognito. And I still *won't* work with you, Mason."

"But, Joseph," Alexa frowned, interrupting their verbal skirmish once again. "It's not Mason who'll assist you. You need someone with knowledge and expertise in computers and gadgets." She gestured to the smiling woman beside her. "Amanda has been with me for a year, and I trust her with my life. I know she'll be a big help to you."

Joseph grinned, feeling like he won one million dollars in the lottery. "Why didn't you say so? When are we leaving?"