
A BOUNTY OF LOVE AND BETRAYAL

Billionaire Spies - Book Seven

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Scattered Seeds

Mariana enjoyed the little things: getting her babies' room ready, enjoying a light lunch while chatting with Morgan in the kitchen, teatime with Quincy and Pam. It wasn't so bad, having to stay home for a while. Mariana had traveled so much over the past ten years that a brief grounding before the big wedding was welcomed.

Her stomach was settling into pregnancy as the twins decided what they liked and didn't. An odd whiff of something in the air could still send her head spinning and rushing to vomit, but those incidents were rarer now and the crazy cravings had begun.

Mariana was trying to decide whether to stop by the Hot Plate on her way back from visiting Tracey and Jonathan at the Phoenix Lodge. She'd originally planned to go with William, but he wasn't back yet and these meetings were too important to miss. It had been a good meeting, though Tracey still felt heartbroken over her disconnect with the digital realm. Mariana decided to call Oliver about it after she got home, hoping he could get her a job in his organization, eventually. It seemed like a shame to lose someone who was so gifted in

code. She didn't tell Tracey because she didn't want to get the young woman's hopes up. Oliver had once considered Tracey like a sister, but during the years that Tracey was presumed dead, she'd been working for the enemy as a hacker. It might be hard for Oliver to rebuild trust, Mariana worried.

On the way back, the twins demanded a banana shake. No good reason for it. She'd had a healthy breakfast. But they were clawing at her stomach walls, refusing to accept any substitutes. They wanted a banana shake. Now.

"Roger," she asked their driver. "Could you please stop by Fairfarm before we go back to Manhattan?"

"The lake house is out of bounds, right now," he said.

"*What?*" Mariana asked. "Why?"

"I don't have the details," he said. "I'm sorry."

Mariana couldn't help being a bit put out by this news, even if she hadn't planned to go to Will's cabin in the woods. Again, her husband had forgotten to mention something that might be important. She really *was* going to have to straighten him out soon.

"Is the Hot Plate also out of bounds?" Mariana asked.

"The what?"

"It's the little coffee shop and diner, right next to Fare Farm Feed and Sundry," Mariana explained. "It's in the small shopping center on Main Street, across from the library and next to the old cemetery."

"That should be fine," Roger said.

"Good, I just need to have a shake, pretty much this minute. I'm sure Joe and Joe will make one for me."

"Yes, madam," Roger said. "I'll head there now."

Mariana asked Roger not to park in front of the diner. She felt odd being seen getting out of a fancy black sedan. Will maintained his humble Smith persona in town. While she could make any excuse for having a driver bringing her around, she wanted to avoid lying to the two old friends who

ran the diner. Roger parked in the old church lot instead, just a short walk past the cemetery to the Hot Plate.

As Mariana passed Fare Farm Feed and Sundry, she caught a whiff of something unpleasant, a heavy perfume, sweet, flowery, and nauseating. Before she could help it, Mariana had to turn towards an empty parking spot to vomit.

“He’s done it to you too, huh?” the woman wearing the heavy scent asked. Mariana wished the woman would just walk away and take that cloying, funereal smell with her.

“Excuse me?” Mariana asked, her eyes still blurry from being sick.

“He hasn’t even *told* you, has he?”

“Do I know you?”

“You’ve seen me. I was thinner, then.”

She stared at the woman’s face, trying to place it. Only a pickle came to mind. God, she wanted pickles, the good kind from the deli—dill, crunchy, refreshing. She had to have some right away.

“I’m sorry, you must have me confused with someone else,” Mariana said, reaching for a tissue and a mint in her purse.

“You’re William’s wife, aren’t you?”

“Smith? Yes.”

“Tell him he will not get away with it,” the woman threatened, straightening her back which stuck her prominent belly out further. She towered over Mariana, and her baby bump was more like a small house.

“Get away with what?” Mariana asked.

“Tell William that Sandra and the baby say hello.”

With that, Sandra Price, Will’s first love, his rival Robert Whitby’s ex-wife, and now the bane of Mariana’s existence, walked away, leaving a scented trail of rotting blooms in her wake.

Mariana vomited again, abandoned the idea of having a shake or any pickles, and ran back to Roger in the car.

“Is everything all right, Mrs. Wilson?” he asked, concerned, as he held the door open for her.

“No, Roger,” she said. “Everything is far from okay. Everything is seventy shades of fucked. Take me home, please.” She felt bad about using profanity in front of Roger, but the situation seemed to warrant it. “Damn him!” Mariana punched the back of the seat once she was inside. “Damn him! Damn him! Damn him!” Mariana had no cell phone to call Will. He never carried one. She needed answers, and only one other person might have them. “Roger, scratch that,” she said. “Stop by Smith’s first.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Roger asked.

“No,” Mariana said, “but it’s necessary.”

“I can call for backup if something is wrong,” Roger said. “You just have to tell me what happened.”

“William happened, Roger,” Mariana said. “What back up do you call for that?”

“I’ll try to get him on the car line,” Roger said.

“Good luck with that,” Mariana scoffed.

Roger was busy making calls as Mariana stepped out of the car again, walking into the tiny offices of Smith’s Arboriculture where Mrs. Jenkins sat alone on the phone, lordling over her domain. Her mother-of-pearl cat’s eye spectacles sat atop her graying hair like a funky retro diadem.

“Mariana?” Mrs. Jenkins put the phone down the minute she saw Mariana’s face. “What in heavens is wrong?”

“I need Will, now!” Mariana’s rage was getting the better of her, but she knew it wasn’t fair taking it out people who were only trying to help. She took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Is it the babies?” Mrs. Jenkins asked. “Sit down. Are you all right?”

“Please, get Will, please,” she begged. “I need to speak with him.”

Mrs. Jenkins got on the short-radio and tried to get Will to pick up. Mariana wasn’t sure how that worked, but after Mrs. Jenkins called out “code 10 and suspected code 10-91e” a few times, Will actually answered.

“What’s happening?” He sounded breathless and angry. “I’m in transit.”

“Are you in transit here now?”

“I’m four clicks out,” he said.

“Well, good,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “You can deal with this yourself. I’ll give your wife a tea while she’s waiting. She looks ready to faint.”

“What is she doing in the office?” Will asked.

“You can ask her all about it in fifteen minutes.”

Mrs. Jenkins offered Mariana coffee or tea while she waited, but she didn’t have any chamomile, which was the only thing that seemed to settle Mariana’s stomach when it roiled up like this. Instead, Mariana accepted some spring water from the large jug on the water cooler. She sipped on the pixie glass, small sips, while she stewed and raged.

“What were those codes all about Mrs. Jenkins?” Mariana asked.

“It just saves time,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “And keeps snooping types out of our conversations. I just told Will that a bomb went off and I suspect there’s an animal bite too. I’m guessing that somehow you bumped into Sandra Price while you were in town.”

“So you *know*?” Mariana practically screeched.

“I know what Sandra’s been saying,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “I

don't know that there's any truth to it at all, and I doubt there is."

Will ran in through the front door, pale as she must have been. He got paler when he saw her eyes.

"What happened, Mariana? What's wrong with the babies?"

"They are sick," she said, "because of the other one."

Will went completely ashen, silent as the grave, his eyes hard, his brown etched with pain.

"Let's get you home," he said, extending his hand to her.

"Where's home?" Mariana asked, digging the knife deeper.

"For me, it's wherever you are." Will took her hand gently and led her back to the car where Roger sat waiting.

They didn't argue in the car. Mariana knew Will valued his privacy, and she didn't want to have this argument where anyone could hear them. She was too tired anyway, from all the voices in her head, and the dizziness and the nausea. At some point, she fell asleep in his arms.

When they were back at the townhouse in Manhattan, Will woke her up and led her upstairs to their suite of rooms on the fifth floor. She followed quietly. As soon as they were in their sitting room, she sat on his lap and cried against his chest. He didn't let her go, comforting her, stroking her hair, rubbing her back. Then she felt the anger return, and she beat her fists against him. He let her do that too.

"How long have you known?" Mariana asked, finally.

"A few weeks, nearly three months now, I guess."

"Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"It wasn't the right time," Will said. "There were other, more important things to manage, if you remember."

"You're so sure of yourself! Of knowing what is important and what isn't! We've been here together for days now. You could have told me at any point!"

“I was lost in us, Mariana,” Will said, putting his hand on her womb. “You’re the only ones that matter.”

“Jesus, Will! This is a disaster!”

“It may not be true.”

“But you *fucked* her! You know you did! You told me so yourself!”

“That doesn’t mean it’s my child,” Will said. “It was only once, as I told you. To me, the dates don’t add up.”

“She *insists* that it’s yours!”

“She’s only being vicious, but that is what paternity tests are for.”

“Does she know everything about you, William?”

“No, she can’t,” Will said. “You remember what she said at our wedding. She has some bit of information based on what Robert Whitby would have told her. But even Robert is only scratching the surface of my organization. I’m sure of that.”

“Why are you so confident?” Mariana asked. “She has to know something. Why push, otherwise? I mean, it’s not like there’s a lot to grab onto with William Smith.”

“It’s still more than she has,” Will said. “Besides, there’s her ego, her pride, and whatever is wrong with her mind.”

“I need something to drink.”

Will stroked her back. “Tell me what you want and I’ll have Quincy bring it up. Anything.”

“I want proof that it’s not your baby! I want to know what you’ll do if it is. I want Sandra Price out of our lives! I want a whiskey.”

Will hugged her tight and kissed the top of her head.

“You can’t have a whiskey.”

“Fine! I want a banana shake.”

Will grinned, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ll get you a banana shake right this minute.”

“And pickles. Dill.”

“Okay. Dill pickles and a banana shake, then we’ll sit calmly and talk about the rest of it.”

It took Quincy no time at all to bring up Mariana’s shake and pickles along with a platter of finger sandwiches, just in case, and a bottle of sparkling water. Will served himself a whiskey from the bar in the sitting room. Privilege of being a father.

Mariana sucked the thick shake through a straw, enjoying the rich, earthy flavor of bananas, and felt restored. The kids were happy, anyway.

“You are the most important person in this universe to me, Mariana,” Will said, sitting next to her again on the couch. “The babies are second most important. Everyone else is a far third.”

“Which babies?” she asked, reaching for a cucumber sandwich. She wasn’t sure whether she had the stomach for it right now, but it gave her an excuse not to meet Will’s eyes.

“Mariana, please,” Will said, stroking her back. “I know you’re upset, but don’t be cruel.”

“This woman is trouble, Will.” Mariana put the finger sandwich back on the plate and turned to face him.

“Yes.” Will’s face was a dark blend of pain and anger. “I’m afraid she is.”

“No, Will, you didn’t see her eyes, her little smirk as she walked away,” Mariana said. “She is one vindictive, nasty piece of work. She will not make this easy.”

“I know.” Will sighed. He looked tired, right down to his marrow. She had to remind herself that she was angry with him. Still, she couldn’t stop herself from putting her hand on his thigh to soothe him.

“Why didn’t you warn me, Will? So she couldn’t take me by surprise?”

“It was a mistake. I had the foresight, before we married. I

told you then about what happened between us,” Will said. “But when I found out about her pregnancy, when she confronted me with it, it was while everything else was happening.” Will shook his head. “Then, you were pregnant, and I got shot, and we both had too much to cope with. I put my lawyers on it and waited for them to advise me. These past few days, you’re right, I should have said something. We’ve just been so happy, so perfectly happy, I got lost in it. I forgot myself.”

“I don’t want our babies hurt by this, Will.”

“Neither do I. I won’t let it happen.”

“You let it happen in the first place!”

“Mariana, be fair,” Will pleaded. “We’ve both had weak moments with lovers before we had each other. It’s all in the past now. It has long been in the past.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right, but the damage isn’t. The damage will be here with us in the future,” Mariana said.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them as the truth of Mariana’s words sank in. “You won’t be able to deny her, if it is your baby,” Mariana said. “I know you. And her child will be first born. Her child will be your heir. Have you considered what that means?”

“Mariana, I’ve considered that more times than I’d like to say,” Will said. “I’ve had my lawyers look into it. I’m trying to force a paternity test now—it’s possible through bloodwork or amniotic fluid—but she’s fighting both. If it turned out to be mine... I couldn’t leave any child of mine to be raised by her. She’s unwell.”

“So what? You’d fight for custody? You’d have *me* help raise *her* child?” Mariana asked.

“Only if it *is* my child,” Will said. “I realize that’s a lot to ask, but I would have to ask for your support, Mariana. It would in no way affect the legacy of the twins. They are my true heirs, the offspring of my wife—no matter who is born

first—but I couldn't leave the baby to be raised by a spiteful madwoman.”

“God help us,” Mariana said. “She’s not just going to give her child up, even if she’s only using it to have a hold over you, not when she can gain more from holding on. You’re up against a massive legal battle that will draw a lot of attention to what you do.”

“Yes,” Will said. “I know, Mariana, but I am going to make it right.”

“Easier said than done.”

Mariana couldn't help feeling bitter, though she knew Will had slept with Sandra before they got together. It bothered her, particularly because Will had known about Sandra's pregnancy back when they both thought Mariana couldn't conceive. A petty part of her thought Will hadn't told her about Sandra's pregnancy because it gave him a back-up plan for succession. But she knew he'd never get Sandra involved in his business. He had just been careless and let a moment of passion get the better of him. Mariana knew she had been careless too, with Martin Harper. Will had left her past in the past and she had to do the same for him.

“All right, darling,” Mariana said, taking his hand in both of hers. “We'll get through this together. It's the only thing we can do. It's either a trap or a challenge, but either way, we fight on the same side.”

Will cupped her face and kissed her gently, intensifying his kiss as she responded to him, until they were exchanging hot pants instead of breaths and casting their clothes on the carpet. Soon Mariana found herself pulled under Will on the couch, his knees between hers, his skin barely an inch away from hers, exchanging static which raised the hairs on her body. She was desperate with longing, eager for him to fill her, but he stopped, his forehead resting against hers.

“I never meant to hurt you,” he whispered.

“I know, Will,” Mariana said. “But could you hurt me a little now? I need you to claim me like you mean it. I need to work off some of this anger. Please.”

“Oh, Mariana,” he said, raising her legs over his shoulders. “You don’t need to beg, though it sure sounds beautiful coming from your lips.”

He stroked her with the tip of his erection before plunging himself into her depths, one hard thrust followed by another as he pinched and twisted her sensitive nipples. Mariana stretched her arms up over her head, and he grasped her wrists, binding them together in one hand as he continued to slam her core. “*Mi zorra arrecha. Hermosa. Divina. Toda mía.*”

She loved when he called her a horny vixen, the edge taken off any insult by the way he said it.

“*Pégame, Papi, que me he portado muy mal,*” she begged, needing to feel his hard hand on her, to help push her over the edge.

“You’ve been very good, baby,” he said, his lips brushing hers.

“You can’t read my mind, Will,” she said. “Slap my ass hard, please.”

He grinned. “As you wish.” He alternated between smacking her rump hard enough to leave a palm print and ramming her with his cock hard enough to bruise her cervix. Mariana delighted in the pain, erupting in a deep guttural moan as her body creamed for him and Will built up momentum, quickening his thrusts as his face grimaced with his own violent completion.

He collapsed over her on the couch, lowering her legs, which were pricking with tiny electric charges running through them. “You sure the peas are all right?” he asked, stroking damp hair away from her face and giving her a gentle kiss.

“Their mama is happy, so they should be happy too,” Mariana said.

“Good,” Will said. “Let’s keep it that way.”

A knock on the door reminded them both that they were not alone in the house, and whatever happiness they found could be short-lived.