



*Not My Brother's Keeper*

*By*

*Brandi Broughton*

## **Not My Brother's Keeper by Brandi Broughton**

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### **Not My Brother's Keeper**

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## **Dedication**

To my siblings, who were each hell-raisers in their own way, but never as naughty as my characters. :) I love you all ... and, Kyle, I miss you dearly.

## Chapter One

*La Palma Prison, near Mexico City*

"Wake up," a deep, rough voice said in Spanish.

*Bang. Bang.* Knocking on a steel door never sounded pleasant.

"Prisoner 4506..."

*Bang!*

"Yeah?" Alejo didn't even bother to look at the guard's face peeking through the small window in the door. With his head propped on his palm and lying flat on his back, he continued to stare at the chipped paint on the ceiling of his cell. Five years of living in this hellhole didn't exactly put one in a hospitable mood.

"You have visitors."

That was worthy of a reaction. He hadn't had a single visitor in the eighteen hundred and ninety-two days he'd been here. Well, except for his lawyer, once, who only came to tell him his appeal had been denied.

Alejo got up and stuck his hands through the slot in the door, then felt the cold clamp of handcuffs on his wrists. Metal ground with a screech, raking along his nerves, when the cell door opened. He preceded the guard who was dressed in a drab, shit-colored uniform and black, steel-toed boots, which hurt like hell when connecting with one's gut. Alejo's own worn flip-flops made a snapping sound as he walked the *gauntlet* and ignored the wolf calls, threats, and whistles from other inmates.

They paused at another heavy steel door until Big Brother in the monitoring station, which he'd dubbed the Cockpit, buzzed them through. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been out of his cellblock consisting of prison cells, showers, a main hall where prisoners gathered for meals and interaction, and a small exercise space surrounded on all sides by the building's high brick walls. The concreted courtyard was the only place open to the sun, and even its opening was covered by razor wire.

He'd seen other areas of the prison exposed to outside elements, open spaces surrounded by high fencing and guard towers, but that had been a long time ago. Prisoners weren't exactly allowed to roam freely, not since the military crackdown of the high-profile prisons because of corruption, smuggled weaponry, and vendetta killings that had made surviving damn near miraculous.

Alejo hid his surprise when the guard took him past the visitor room with its uncomfortable chairs, thick glass dividers, and black phone intercoms. His system went on alert.

*What the hell...?*

"*Aquí.*" The guard opened a door and gestured for him to step inside. When he didn't move fast enough, the guard shoved him hard enough to make him stumble. "We don't have all damn day."

"That'll be all," a deep male voice said to the guard in flawless Spanish. "*Gracias.*"

Alejo looked up to see two men seated across a table from where he stood. He heard the door shut behind him, the lock fall into place, but he didn't move. Didn't dare look away from the pair of men in suits. Despite the stranger's fluently spoken words, Alejo recognized the look of U.S. agents when he saw them.

*Feds.* No doubt about it. The short chain between his cuffs pulled taught. His hands balled into fists, and he had to force his fingers to relax.

"Alejo De la Cruz?" asked the same man who spoke before. He appeared one gray hair older than his silent partner. His deep-set eyes held a wealth of experience, and his thin lips and hard jaw testified to a personality that had little respect for felons or their bullshit problems.

"Who wants to know?" he asked in perfect, unaccented English, with a trace of blatant contempt.

"Sit down, Mr. De la Cruz." The order came from the partner who had an accent, which placed his birth somewhere in New England. Boston, maybe.

Alejo pulled the unoccupied chair away from the table and sat, his posture rigid. Suspicious and wary, he remained prepared for the unexpected. "What do the Feds want with me now? Having second thoughts about revoking my application to Quantico?" He didn't bother to hide his sarcasm.

"Who said we were federal agents?" the older man asked.

With a snort, Alejo leaned back in his seat and narrowed his gaze at them. "Don't play me. You reek of U.S. Government arrogance. I'd say you both went through training at the Academy...during Reagan's term in the White House. You look like second, maybe third generation cop. And Boston here is probably a college upstart who fell into law enforcement despite his patriarch's efforts to make him a doctor."

The older agent grinned. Boston didn't.

"I'm Special Agent Joseph Beck, DEA," the older man said, "and this is Special Agent Terry Floyd. You're very observant."

The compliment didn't faze him. What good did his powers of observation do him now? They hadn't helped keep his ass out of prison.

Beck lifted a leather briefcase onto the table and, after two abrupt clicks, he opened it. A manila folder appeared, which he flipped open then pretended to read. No way in hell did the man not already know everything written inside.

"It says here you were sentenced to twenty years to life for drug trafficking and, before your capture off the coast of Mexico, you'd been on a fast track to becoming a field agent for the FBI."

Alejo remained quiet, watchful. He would've graduated from the Academy, too, if not for... But that was a lifetime ago. It didn't matter to him now. He couldn't let it matter, or the anger inside would tear him to pieces.

"I suppose the drug lords were pissed to lose their poster boy,"

Floyd taunted. "But you screwed up their chance at having someone on the inside, didn't you? That's why they abandoned you to the wolves, isn't it?"

Alejo didn't bite. He'd heard worse accusations from his fellow inmates. Besides, it would do little good to profess his innocence. Every murderous asshole in the joint claimed he wasn't guilty.

He didn't give a shit about the drug cartels because, despite the prosecution's claims, he didn't know any of them. So they hadn't abandoned him. No, there was only one person who'd vanished at the first sign of trouble—only one woman's betrayal that hurt him.

Even Carlos had believed in him. His big brother had paid a lot of his own money for Alejo's legal team, for all the good it had done in the Mexican judicial system. Still, at least Carlos had been there to support him during the trial. He'd even appeared in court to testify that he had no knowledge the drugs were on the plane he'd purchased for use as a corporate jet. He'd tried to point the finger of suspicion on the seller rather than Alejo, who'd been piloting the plane when it went down. Too bad the courts hadn't bought it.

"We're here to offer you a chance, De la Cruz." Beck's words drew him from his musings. "A choice between freedom and languishing away here in this box for the next twenty years or more." He pulled a sheet of paper from the folder and slid it across the table.

"This here authorizes us to offer you immediate extradition to the United States where a full pardon awaits you...effective the moment you agree to assist us in capturing the head of a major drug-trafficking operation. When he's in custody, you'll be free to pursue life wherever you like. No parole. No strings. A clean slate. We'll even give you a new identity if it should become necessary."

"Still don't understand what you need me for. Don't you have agents capable of undercover work?"

"The last agent—" Floyd began.

Beck cut him off. "Sure, but as you proved yourself, agents can be easy to identify...in some cases. The main issue for us is our agents haven't been able to penetrate the organization to the extent we need. To even



attempt it with an *outsider* would take years. With your ties to the Las Cruces crime family, you're already in."

Alejo leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table, and glanced at the official-looking document. "Only one problem. You've got the wrong guy."

"You're Alejo De la Cruz, aren't you?" Floyd asked with a hint of acerbity. "Convicted for drug trafficking five *million* dollars worth of cocaine. And that's just what Mexican authorities were able to recover. Not bad for a first offense."

As much as he wanted out of this shithole, he couldn't help them, and he didn't have to listen to an asshole. He stood abruptly. "Fuck off."

"Sit down!" When Alejo ignored Beck's order, opting instead for a hard, challenging glare, the agent leaned forward, and said, "But for a few exceptions beyond your control, you've been a model prisoner. Don't blow it now by being stubborn."

Alejo took his seat slowly, but reiterated, "I can't help you, so this is pointless."

"You can—"

"I don't know anyone in the Las Cruces family. I don't belong to it. You're wasting your time." And this damn visit with U.S. agents no doubt put him in further danger of retaliation the moment he stepped out of the room. Secrets were impossible to keep in La Palma and, even if he didn't talk, his being in the same room with Feds could be misconstrued and earn him the deadly label of snitch.

The agents glanced at each other. Shared looks he couldn't quite decipher.

Then Beck gave him a hard stare that brooked no argument, and Floyd said, "You were born to the Las Cruces family, so you can drop the act."

When he made to deny such a ludicrous claim, Beck held up a hand. "If you'll hear me out, I'm sure you'll realize it's in your best interest to help us." He pulled out a device that looked like a small portable DVD player then met his gaze for a moment of silent regard. "The warden tells me you've had three altercations while here, twice

getting the better of your attackers, and once—”

“I survived. What’s the point?”

“The point is we don’t believe those attacks were spontaneous assaults on your person because of some perceived disagreement between inmates.”

Alejo blinked but refused to show any other reaction. Their conclusion didn’t come as a surprise. Although he had no solid proof, he’d felt like a target from the moment he entered the federal prison system, especially after he was transferred inexplicably from a minimum security prison to the country’s top, maximum security facility.

No, what surprised him was the DEA’s interest in his situation. What did it matter to them whether he lived or died behind bars?

He leaned back in his chair again in a casual sprawl. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes,” Beck answered, “and we have some evidence that indicates the person behind them is none other than the head of the Las Cruces family...your brother.”

He shot to his feet again, but so did Floyd. The sudden face-off—and two to one odds—didn’t scare him, but it did make him pause. He’d never been so close to becoming the criminal everyone claimed him to be; he wanted to tear the bastards apart for slandering Carlos. A week or more in solitary would be worth it. Instead, he pointed at them. “You have a lot of fucking nerve coming in here sayin’ that kind of shit and expecting me to help you.”

Beck eyed him warily as he pushed a photo across the table toward him. “Do you know this man?”

He did, since he’d been on the legal team his brother hired to represent him at trial, so he took the question as a rhetorical one and said nothing.

Beck said, “That man contacted each of the inmates with whom you had altercations a short time later.”

“That doesn’t prove a damn thing—”

“Jorge is your brother’s right-hand man,” Beck interrupted.

Alejo scoffed. “He’s an attorney. I’m sure he represents lots of people. That doesn’t make my brother a crime family kingpin. You’re

barking up the wrong tree."

Beck tossed out several more pictures, this time with his brother clearly visible. "This is your brother with one of our undercover agents." He tapped another photo more gruesome than the others. "That's the same agent...dead...only a few hours later."

Floyd added, "He was the last agent who tried to infiltrate Las Cruces, and he came back to us in a body bag."

Alejo frowned. "So, I'm expendable." No matter what they tried to pull, he would not believe his brother was a murderer.

"Not at all, but we do think you have the best chance of gathering the evidence we need to put a stop to the Las Cruces criminal operation."

He sat back down, his cuffed hands positioned in his lap. "If my brother is who you claim him to be, and I don't believe *that* for a minute, what makes you think I'd *want* to help you put him where I am now?"

Beck leaned forward, his deep-set eyes penetrating. "Because your brother set you up, took what you loved most, and has been behind the attempts on your life ever since you landed behind bars."

"Bullshit." He looked away, found a speck on the cinderblock wall behind the agents, and stared a hole through it. They couldn't possibly know what he had loved most in life. *Who* he'd loved.

They were playing him for a fool. Using circumstantial evidence to paint a picture that held half-truths and whole lies. He shored up his resolve to fight against their persuasion. He wasn't some uneducated hoodlum who could be easily manipulated with a dangling carrot of a promised pardon.

"Six...maybe seven years ago," Beck said, "Carlos and what is now known as the Las Cruces crime family were small-time fish in a sea of large Columbian-based sharks. Until an anonymous tip came in about a flight of drugs that was supposed to penetrate U.S. airspace from the west around the Florida Keys."

Alejo turned his gaze back to the agent and raised a brow.

"That's right," Floyd added. "We were tipped off to the flight you piloted and told it contained a large quantity of drugs. We had chase planes waiting for you and notified Mexican authorities, which took off in

pursuit; however, we weren't expecting you to turn kamikaze and try to ditch the evidence in the Gulf shortly after takeoff."

Alejo gritted his teeth. He hadn't ditched the damn plane, at least not on purpose.

"The tip may have accomplished what your brother had in mind, but your capture and the recovery of most of the drugs helped us as well; it shined a light on a previously unnoticed criminal operation. We've been keeping an eye on Carlos ever since."

"You expect me to believe you over my own flesh and blood. What reason could he possibly have had to betray me?"

"You don't have to take my word for it. Think about it yourself. When's the last time your 'flesh and blood' visited you here in the pen?"

So what if he hadn't come to visit. He had written; that was enough. Besides, Alejo would rather his big brother not see him now—not after he'd spent years locked up behind bars. The constant dangers of life on the inside of prison were a far cry from the life he'd once known. Carlos still had a life and responsibilities back in the states; he didn't need to travel all this way just to face the multiple, humiliating strip searches and other bullshit visitors had to go through to gain a few minutes with a loved one.

"And as for the reason... Think about it. *If* you were not involved in your brother's criminal activities, as you claim by your professed naiveté, then having a soon-to-be FBI agent in the family would be a threat, no?" When Alejo didn't respond, Beck turned the DVD player around to face him. "And then there's this reason, of course."

He pressed play. The sound of singing filled the room, the melody easily recognizable.

"Happy birthday to you..." he heard as he watched his beautiful fiancé position a cake in front of a dark-haired toddler. Her blonde hair, like rays of pure sunlight, hung in long waves over her shoulders, not unlike it had the last time he saw her. The singing continued as she took a lighter and lit the single candle centered on the cake.

That's when he saw it—the sparkle of a diamond wedding ring clearly visible on her left ring finger.

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Indescribable pain lanced his heart.

Then a man's hand entered the picture on screen, touching her shoulder in an obvious caress of affection, and the child called out with a joyful giggle.

"Papa!"

The air in Alejo's lungs crystallized, and his jaw ached as his teeth ground together to keep the cry of desolation at bay.

The camera operator pulled back on the zoom to reframe the scene.

The woman who'd once held his heart in the palm of her hand looked up with a smile, straightened, and kissed...his brother.

## Chapter Two

*Six years earlier, near Miami, Florida*

Crystal Stanton peered over her sunglasses when she heard the telltale splash. She watched the gem-like blue ripples, searching for any sign of her sexy boyfriend who'd just dove into the deep end opposite her location on the chaise lounge.

Seconds passed and then, as concern started to make its presence known in her heart, he surfaced like an Adonis from the deep. Alejo shook his head, sending a spray of liquid diamonds out in all directions. Tight, toned muscles moved with sleek precision beneath flawless, tanned skin.

His gaze collided with hers, and a smile played about his lips. An answering grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. He finger-combed his dark, damp hair out of his even darker eyes and then, still watching her, he slowly walked out of the water.

Breath rushed from her lungs, and her heart raced.

He was so gorgeous, but what meant the most to her was the love that shone in his eyes.

He bent forward, held himself above her with arms braced on either side of the chaise, and dripped water all over her.

She laughed and swatted him. "You're getting me all wet."

He flashed a bright grin and captured her mouth in a heated kiss.

"Mmm. You're forgiven," she murmured when he pulled back to place light kisses along her jaw and neck. She pulled his body against

hers, and he chuckled. She didn't care what he found funny. Having his hard, damp-cool body over hers and in her arms was heaven. "Make love to me."

He pressed his hips against hers, his arousal obvious, but he rose up to look down at her. "Carlos is going to be home any minute."

She grinned. "Scared?"

A mischievous glint sparkled in his eyes. "You're insatiable, love."

"Insatiable for you," she agreed.

He kissed her lips with gentle tenderness, but refused to let her deepen the exchange. "One of the many things I love about you," he said with a broad grin. "But first, I have another surprise for you."

She blinked as his expression turned serious.

"You know I graduate from the Academy soon."

"Yes." She caught her breath, her heart stammering. *Where's he going with this?*

"When I do, I'll be moving to the Miami office."

She squealed and hugged him close. "That's wonderful!"

Crystal had met Alejo when she first went to work for his brother as a clerk in the Miami office. He'd come home for the summer between semesters at college, but had plans to return in the fall then enter the FBI Academy in Virginia as soon as he graduated. Their long-distance relationship had been tough, but he'd won her heart that summer, and she couldn't imagine life without their late-night calls. They'd both racked up huge phone bills, but it had been worth every minute.

And Carlos had been gracious with most of her requests for time off whenever she and Alejo could arrange to be together.

"Does your brother know?"

He nodded. "I told him when I got confirmation of the assignment last week."

Her mouth hurt, she smiled so big. He would soon be living here. They could be together. Finally. She stared at his face, searching, wondering, trying to read more into the joy that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Um, have you found a place to live?"

He grinned. "I've been looking around at apartments, condos, and the like."

So he didn't plan to move in with her. "Oh."

"But I'm thinking of maybe buying a little house somewhere in the suburbs...if that's okay with you."

She tried to smile, found it too difficult, and nodded instead. "Sure. Fine. If that's what you want."

His smile faded, and he reared back a bit. "You don't understand, do you? Crystal, I want us to live together. The house, pets, kids, a white picket fence. I want the whole thing...with you. Honey, I'm asking you to marry me."

Her gaze, which had drifted to a cloud over his left shoulder, snapped back to his face. "Alejo?"

His grin lit up his face.

She yanked him down to her in a fierce hug that made him laugh. Her hands skimmed up over his back to sink into his thick, damp hair. She held him close while she planted kisses over his cheeks, jaw, and mouth. "God, I love you so much."

"Does that mean yes?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"Yes! Absolutely, yes."

He kissed her again, this time taking it slow and easy, letting the excitement simmer and build until passion ignited. Then he pulled back with a serious look.

"I'm sorry I haven't gotten you a ring yet, but I will."

She blew off the sudden ripple of concern in his voice. "I'm not worried about that."

His smile returned. "We can throw the biggest wedding this city has seen in ages...in a huge cathedral...if you like—"

"With dozens of yellow roses?" she asked, her tone teasing.

His grin widened, and he gave her a peck on the nose. "Your feet won't even touch the ground for all the yellow rose petals."

She stared at him for a long moment, letting the silence stretch, before she murmured once more, "Make love to me."

"Honey, I don't exactly have any protection in this swimsuit."



She giggled and slipped a hand between them to feel how hard he was. "But you do have what I want. I love you. We're getting married." She met his gaze with a warm smile. "I want this. I want you. Here. Now. Always."

He took her then, his kiss full of unleashed desire and untamed need. He made short work of his swim trunks and her two-piece bathing suit. But once he settled between her thighs, he didn't rush despite her encouraging sounds and demanding hands.

Instead, he took the time to pleasure her from head to toe. His talented fingers played with her while his mouth claimed her with nips and licks in the most erogenous areas of her body.

"Please..." she begged, arching her back as he suckled a nipple into his mouth. She clawed at his back in a failed attempt to speed him up. Still, he leisurely explored her to the point of insanity. Her climax neared, but she fought it.

Planting kisses along her collarbone, neck, and jaw, he left a trail of titillation that was almost her undoing. She panted for air that became utterly elusive when he took her mouth in a feverish kiss. Then he pressed forward, entering her in one smooth glide.

*Complete. One. Whole.* Those words filled her mind even as his flesh filled her with an alluring heat. His clean scent surrounded her. His arms wrapped around her in a warm embrace. He made her heart feel so alive, safe, and cherished.

"I love you," he murmured. His hot breath bathed her ear even as his words heated her to the core.

The pleasure built, simmered, as he stroked inside her, until it burst forth with untamed ecstasy. She cried out. She clung to him with trembling legs and arms, holding him close to her heart as he pumped deeper into her. Then with one last fierce lunge, he joined her in orgasmic rapture.

They lay together, both trying to regain their breath, when a noise from inside the house had them scrambling for beach towels like two kids caught skinny dipping after curfew. She'd just managed to tuck the corner in at her breast when her boss—and future brother-in-law—stepped out

onto the patio. A glance down at their strewn swimwear made a blush heat her cheeks, but Carlos eased her fears by not showing any sign he was aware of her near-nudity.

"Hello, Crystal...Alejo. Enjoying the pool, *hermano*?"

"Yes, thank you," Alejo answered as he pulled her to his side, his arm draped casually over her bare shoulder. "Crystal and I were just about to shower and get ready for dinner. Will you be free to join us tonight?"

Carlos' expression turned serious. "I would, but I'm afraid I have a favor to ask that might ruin your dinner plans. Will you join me for a drink in the study?"

"Certainly." Alejo turned to her and gave her hand a squeeze. "Go shower. I'll come for you in a little while."

After she nodded and walked inside, Alejo picked up his swim shorts, slipped them on underneath his towel and met his brother in the study. The plush carpet felt soft and cool under his bare feet. The deep mahogany paneling and the furniture upholstered in bold, masculine fabrics testified to wealth and sophistication.

His brother had always desired the finer things in life and wasn't afraid to work hard for them.

Although there was a good six years difference in their ages, Carlos had been a good big brother and, at times, more like a father figure to him as he grew up. Admittedly, their close ties weakened with distance when Alejo went away to college and from there into the Academy, but Alejo knew the bond of brotherhood was still as strong as ever. After their parents passed away, Carlos had sacrificed a lot to run the family business, which enabled Alejo to seek his own dreams. A small favor was the least he could do to repay his brother.

"What's this favor you mentioned?"

Carlos sat behind his desk, a lit Cuban cigar held in one hand. "In a minute. First, I see Crystal took your news of a return to Miami well."

He couldn't stop the grin—or embarrassed heat—that spread across his face. "You saw."

Carlos shrugged. "I thought a little noise was in order to announce

my arrival and avoid undue embarrassment. She does work for me, as you well know."

Alejo took a seat and nodded. "Thank you for your discretion. I've asked her to marry me. She accepted. We were...celebrating."

A puff of smoke filled the room with a rich tobacco flavor. "I see. Congratulations. That makes my request even more difficult to ask. I hate to break up the celebration."

"What is it?" he asked, sensing the seriousness of Carlos' tone.

"Your pilot license is still valid, is it not?"

"Yes, of course."

"I purchased a plane, a Learjet, which I intended to use on a business trip. I have some very important executives coming who are expecting rather fine accommodations while en route to Atlantic City."

"You need me to fly the plane to go pick them up?"

"Not exactly. The plane I purchased had to set down in Mexico. Some sort of minor technical difficulty that I'm assured has since been fixed. Unfortunately, my pilot has now become ill and can't complete the final leg of the trip to Florida."

"So, you need a pilot to transport the plane here?"

"Yes, within the next forty-eight hours. I want my crews here to have time to look over the repairs and ensure everything is in proper order for our guests' trip."

"I can do it. I'm not expected back in Virginia until Monday."

"You can't possibly know how much help this will be."

They stood, and Carlos smiled, obvious relief showing on his tanned features.

"What are brothers for?" Alejo asked before clapping Carlos on the back. "Just let me explain it to Crystal, and I'll be off."

"There's a commercial flight leaving Miami International within three hours. If you sleep on the way there, and take off shortly after arrival, the good weather should enable you to make it back in time to enjoy much of what's left of the weekend."

Alejo grinned. "I'll be back home before you know it."

### Chapter Three

*Present Day, outside Miami, Florida*

Alejo stared through the cab's window from across the street. His brother had moved up in the world since he'd last been home. The modest ranch in suburbia had been replaced with a more elegant mansion in a neighborhood exclusively for those with an annual income of seven digits or more. A high fence of black metal spikes and stone columns surrounded the property. Tall, elegant gates blocked the circular drive with a beautiful and effective network of wrought iron vines. The only thing that remained remotely similar was the presence of a swimming pool, although he knew the latest one was more elaborate than the old one.

"Your brother's out right now, but the missus is home," said the agent, who dressed and spoke like a cabbie from the pot-holed streets of the Bronx rather than the beaches of Florida.

Acid churned in Alejo's stomach.

He'd had weeks to come to grips with the idea of seeing her again, sleepless nights to ponder what he'd say and do. Time to let his anger and hurt boil. A dark part of him wanted to strangle her for her betrayal. Another part wanted to shake her until she explained why.

But none of that mattered now.

He schooled his features so none of the turmoil simmering inside his chest showed on his clean-shaven face.

No. She'd made her choice, and she'd have to live with it. The only thing that mattered to him now was to survive long enough to regain the freedom taken from him. To do that, he'd have to become the kind of man the Mexican courts claimed him to be—a criminal.

"You remember the details?" the cabbie asked, his rattlesnake tattoo visible on a bulked-up bicep as he reached up to adjust the rearview mirror.

"Yeah." It hadn't taken the Feds long to get him out of Mexico. He'd left the day of their first visit, which had probably saved his life. But it had taken some time—several weeks—to maneuver all of the pieces into place that were necessary for the undercover operation to begin.

During that time, he'd managed to clean up enough to feel human for the first time in a long while. Amazing what a haircut, shave, and hot shower could do for a man. A hearty appetite helped him regain much of his lost weight and achieve a much healthier color to his skin as well, although he remained paler than he had been years earlier.

Except for a hollow ache that simmered like acid inside his chest, he felt like his old self again.

"We can't send you in with a wire. That'll no doubt be the first thing they look for—"

"I know," he said, cutting off the agent's words, which he'd heard countless times before. He rubbed the smooth skin along his jaw. "Can we just get on with it so I can get back to my life?"

The disguised agent gave him a hard look in the rearview mirror. Then, tossing a glance over his shoulder, he shifted the unlit cigar in his mouth and muttered, "Sure thing, buddy."

"I'm not your buddy."

"You help get this guy who killed my partner off the streets, and you will be."

*Damn it.* "The guy in the photo..."

The cabbie nodded, his gaze hard. "You fuck up, and I'll be your worst enemy. Understood?"

Alejo nodded. "Got it."

A florist truck pulled up to the gate as the cab inched forward. A

few seconds later, the massive gates started to swing open, and the truck rolled forward.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mama, how's this?"

Crystal glanced away from the plant she was potting and focused on the unrecognizable artwork made from colorful crayons. A smile spread across her face. "It's beautiful, *mijo*." At the sound of the gate's buzzer, she stood, removed her gardening gloves, and dusted off her hands. "Why don't you find a spot for it on the refrigerator? You can show Papa when he gets home."

With a giggle, she stepped aside to let her son race for the kitchen with his masterpiece in hand, then made her way to the front door.

"I'll get it, Margarita," she said, trying to hold on to her pleasant smile despite the look of disapproval on the housekeeper's face. With a huff, the rotund woman planted herself in the doorway and watched as she wiped her hands off on her apron.

Swallowing a sigh, Crystal peeked through the etched glass to one side of the door. "It's just a delivery man," she said to Margarita by way of dismissal.

"Sí. I know, *señora*. I buzzed him in." The housekeeper remained at her post, staring as Crystal opened the door.

"Flowers for a Mrs. De la Cruz."

She smiled and tucked a stray lock of hair, which had escaped her ponytail, behind one ear. "That's me." Carlos hadn't sent her flowers in years, but her birthday was tomorrow. Maybe...

"Please sign here." The man held out a clipboard for her. When she finished, he handed her a long, slim box tied shut with a red ribbon, tipped his hat, and returned to his van. As the van's engine rumbled to life and the vehicle pulled away, she glanced down to see through a clear window on the top of the box.

A cold chill slithered down her spine. *Yellow roses*. They'd been her favorite. Once. Long ago when she still believed that her dreams could

come true.

A car door slamming shut made her look up to see a dark-haired man, who'd just gotten out of a cab, turn toward her. The box fell from her grasp. Her heart stopped. Stars spotted the periphery of a vision she was certain couldn't be true.

"Hello, Crystal."

"You're...dead," she said on a faint breath, the last puff expelled before darkness consumed her.

Alejo barely reached her in time to catch her fall, and he silently chastised himself for caring enough to try. Swinging her into his arms, he marched into the house and demanded to know, "Where's a couch?"

An old lady in an apron gaped until he repeated the question, prompting her to point.

He laid Crystal on the couch, straightened, and turned just in time to receive a hard kick to the shin by a furious, black-haired hellion with a high-pitched screech.

"What'd you do to my mama?"

He dodged another kick and held the boy off with a hand on his head. As angry as Alejo was at the boy's parents, the runt was his nephew—his flesh and blood. He couldn't punish the child for his father's sins.

"Whoa, *bribón*," he said, his plea doing little to curb the rascal's attack.

"Christopher Alejandro De la Cruz!" The stern words from the old lady brought the kid up short. Crying, he dropped to the floor beside his mother and wrapped tiny arms around her waist.

"*Lo siento, Señor De la Cruz*," the old lady said, twisting her apron with arthritic hands.

Alejo studied the woman. "You know me?"

"Sí, I know you. I see your picture before. You are Christopher's *tío*, brother to Carlos De la Cruz. We thought you were dead."

"Yes, well... Those rumors were exaggerated." The familiar bass of his brother's voice made Alejo turn toward the door. He struggled to guard his thoughts, block any sign of emotion, but still Carlos quirked a

brow at him as if he were privy to his deepest accusations.

"Papa—"

Carlos' raised hand cut off his son's words. He was impeccably dressed in solid, dark colors, his other hand holding a briefcase.

"Mmm..." The soft sigh drew his attention to the couch. Crystal was coming around. She looked so beautiful lying there, her pale skin sun-kissed at the cheeks and nose, her long hair pulled back in a ponytail of spun gold.

"Margarita, take care of Crystal and Christopher. *Mi hermano* and I have much to discuss."

With that, he gestured to the door and escorted Alejo out of the room.

Before the door to Carlos' office could close, Alejo accused, "You told her I was dead?"

"When you didn't return as planned, I went to Mexico to find out what happened. Initial news reports there were that you'd crashed shortly after takeoff somewhere over the Gulf, and that there were no survivors. It took some doing, but I eventually obtained a recording of your radio calls and brought it back. She heard your mayday...the sounds of the crash. We all thought you were gone. It was...an unpleasant time."

After setting aside his briefcase, Carlos approached a bar against one wall and poured two balloons of brandy. When he offered the glass, Alejo wanted to smash it against the wall, but took it instead to keep his hands occupied. Now was not the time to ring his brother's neck. No, he had to keep focused on the objective. His freedom...and vengeance.

"But you learned I'd survived. You knew that and came to the trial. How could you keep that from her?"

"You would rather she know you were in prison for life, unable to ever be with her, to provide for her? You'd rather she throw her life away than think you dead, mourn your passing, and be able to get on with her life?" His brother scoffed. "I never thought you so selfish before, Alejo."

Bile, bitter and venomous, burned the back of his throat. "Yes, well... Prison can change a man."

After the crash, he'd been hospitalized, unconscious or too drugged



to even realize she was nowhere around. When he'd finally recovered enough to try and reach her, his attempts had all failed. What few phone calls he'd been able to bribe his way into making went unanswered, and then the number changed to an unlisted number. He'd written her letters from jail during the early stages of his litigation; all had returned to him unopened. Now he knew why.

He'd assumed she'd heard of his arrest and turned on him. But in a way, maybe she'd been as much a victim of Carlos' machinations as he was.

Once in prison, where adequate nutrition was scarce at best and danger was abundant, he'd had to put thoughts of her aside and focus all his efforts on just staying alive.

Carlos sipped his drink and gazed at him over the rim.

Alejo knew he was being tested, measured, and kept his features neutral. Or tried.

"You seem caustic, *hermano*."

"Wouldn't you be after the country and government you'd trained so hard to serve abandoned you and tossed you away like yesterday's garbage?"

"Perhaps..." Carlos pointed at his shirt. "You'll forgive me if I ask you to lift your shirt. I, too, have had run-ins with the law as a result of your incarceration. Guilty by association, I'm afraid."

At that moment, Alejo dismissed the last of his doubts about his brother's duplicity. If he were truly innocent, he wouldn't fear being caught on tape. Alejo eyed his brother and lifted his shirt to expose a chest bare of wires and protection.

Would Carlos shoot him now? Unlikely, he decided. Carlos didn't seem to have the brass to do the job himself.

"Accept my belated welcome home, *mi hermano*. Sit. Tell me how you come to be out of prison. Certainly not by sliding out the garbage chute." He gestured to a seat before taking the one opposite.

"I'm a free man for the time being."

"Should I expect federal marshals on my doorstep soon?"

He shrugged and took a sip of his drink, using it to stall while he

gathered his thoughts. "Helps to have friends in *low* places. Ever heard of Juakin Felix Santiago?"

Carlos' eyes narrowed slightly. "The name rings a few bells. One of Mexico's more notorious and ruthless drug lords, I believe."

"Yes. He served time in prison for a vendetta killing of a rival gang leader. Before bribing his way out, he'd been the target of an attempted retaliation assassination. I thwarted the attack and damn near got killed in the process."

Carlos frowned.

"Let's just say my freedom today is payback for services rendered. His assistance in getting me through U.S. Customs undetected puts me in his debt."

The frown deepened. "You flew in?"

"Miami International. I left a duffle bag on the drive outside. Couldn't fly in without luggage; too suspicious."

"I'll have Margarita bring it in...." When he paused, Alejo held his gaze, showing no sign of concern. There was nothing in the bag for him to find, regardless of who Carlos had rummage through it.

After a moment, Carlos continued, "I won't lie. Your return poses a rather uncomfortable situation; however, I am pleased to see you well and...back home."

Unable to respond verbally, Alejo nodded.

"Still, you should've called me. I would've had a car pick you up."

*Uh huh, and the driver would've had orders to ensure I never made it to your doorstep.*

He shrugged. "I made it okay. Besides, I've taken enough of your money in legal fees for my trial. It must have been tough to afford while...raising a family."

"Ah, yes. Well, that was a mistake."

"Paying my legal fees? Or raising a family?" Alejo reclined while studying his brother's face. He'd always been hard to read. Now proved no different.

"My son." Carlos gave him a bemused smile. "Conceived in grief, that boy was....the both of us so caught up in our own sorrows, neither of

us realized the consequences of our foolish actions until it was too late."

Fresh anger ignited in the pit of Alejo's stomach. Victim or not, she certainly gave up on him quick enough, hadn't she?

"For what it's worth...I have tried to be a good husband and father. I do love her, *hermano*. She's been well taken care of, I assure you."

*I bet she has.*

"I suppose that's why you let me believe she'd abandoned me at the first sign of trouble?"

His brother showed the first crack in his enigmatic expression.

"I told you it was a mistake. I didn't mean for it to happen, but it did. I'm not proud of myself, but I took responsibility for my action. Would you have rather I told you the truth back then—added yet another burden on you during that horrific trial—when you already faced so much? You were in prison! Was I supposed to abandon her because she slept with you first? Allow my child to be born a bastard?"

"Carlos!" The door to the study slammed open as Crystal ran into the room, stopping abruptly at the sight of Alejo.

She was as gorgeous as the day he left her, but this time when he stood to face her, he ignored the concern in her sky blue eyes, the luscious curve of her rosy lips, the delicate hand held protectively over her chest. He hardened his heart and let his disappointment and disgust show.

"Alejo?" Her voice was little more than a timid whisper.

"In the flesh," he said with a healthy trace of sarcasm.

"Shall I leave the two of you alone?" Carlos queried before taking another sip of his brandy.

Alejo cast his brother a hard look. "That won't be necessary. We have nothing to say to each other."

"Very well then," Carlos said, rising to his feet and rounding the desk. He slipped a hand around Crystal's waist and tugged her to his side. "I'll have Margarita bring in your things and prepare you a room. You're welcome to stay here, of course. In fact, I insist upon it."

As Alejo followed his brother out of the room, he couldn't help but think, *keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.*

## Chapter Four

"I want answers, Carlos," Crystal demanded the moment they were in their master bedroom and the door closed.

He removed his tie with a nonchalant tug. "I would think seeing is answer enough, my dear. Alejo is a living, breathing felon. Sentenced to life in prison without parole for a crime he committed, he's out of jail on a *technicality*...a temporary reprieve." He tossed his tie over the back of the chair by her dresser as if the subject meant nothing to him.

"But he was killed in that plane crash, doing you a favor.... You confirmed it! You *told* me—"

"Keep your voice down. I will not have Chris disturbed by your hysterics."

She closed her eyes, fighting tears of frustration, and tried to get a grip on her emotions. Seeing Alejo alive and well brought back all of the grief she'd felt at the news of his untimely death. Learning that the unbearable pain she'd felt back then had been based on a lie ripped her up inside—like salt on a reopened wound.

In a lower, more controlled voice, she asked, "Why didn't you tell me he'd survived?"

Carlos unbuttoned his shirt, tugged the tails out of his pants, and toed off his leather dress shoes. "I didn't know at first. I'd been as devastated by the radio call as you, if you'll recall. When I finally learned the truth, I found him in jail, facing life in a Mexican prison. What would you do if your sibling didn't want his shame known? If he asked you for

help?"

A tear escaped when she blinked as her heart shrank inside. Alejo hadn't asked *her* for help.

"You already thought him gone." He cupped her cheek, his thumb wiping across the moist trail of her tears. "I couldn't see you hurt all over again...to learn he was a criminal. That he'd betrayed us all."

She closed her eyes, shook her head slightly. "I don't understand. How could—"

"He was approached by someone in Mexico who offered to pay him an obscene amount of money to turn a blind eye, to let them use *my* plane to transport some drugs into the country. A one-time deal he apparently thought he could get away with."

She jerked away from him. "I don't believe it."

His face hardened as he grabbed her by the arms. His fingers bit painfully into her flesh. "Well, believe it. He was caught with the damn evidence after he faked that mayday and chose to ditch my plane in the Gulf. I paid a fortune to attorneys to try to help him get out of the trouble he got himself into, and what did it get me? *Nothing*. My brother still went to prison, while I had to live with the lie and watch you grieve for him, when I knew he wasn't worthy of a single tear."

"You're hurting me."

He released her and spun away toward the window. "Now, through some stroke of luck that got him out *temporarily*, he selfishly decides to come back here, bringing all his baggage with him, uncaring of the pain he'd cause you, and I'm forced to face accusations from my own wife."

Guilt swamped her. Her legs gave way, and she sank into a seated position on the side of the bed.

Carlos had taken her in after Alejo's dea—betrayal. He'd supported her through the tough times while she grieved and, when she'd discovered she was pregnant, he hadn't hesitated to step in. He was a domineering man, aloof about many things, but he'd treated her well and been a good father to Christopher.

To think he'd had to deal with such knowledge... It couldn't have

been easy on him, knowing his brother had broken the law and left him to try and put the pieces of a shattered life back together.

She approached him, ran her hands over his bare back, and kissed the nape of his neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't know...."

He turned and pulled her into his arms. After a slight hesitation, she responded in kind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alejo didn't sneak down the hall. He walked down it with head up and eyes alert for anyone who might question him about his planned destination. Intending to use a trip to the pool as an excuse for going outside, he'd dressed in swim trunks and draped a towel he'd retrieved from the hall bathroom over one shoulder. It was a precaution that proved unnecessary, he realized, as he neared the stairs and heard the sounds of lovemaking, muffled but unmistakable.

After a brief pause, his steps quickened toward the exit. He couldn't listen, didn't want to hear more evidence of how easy it was for her to turn her back on him. On what might have been. Resentment gnawed at his gut.

The sooner he accomplished his mission, gained his revenge, the sooner he could put the painful past behind him and get on with his life. He headed to the pool with renewed purpose.

Agent Beck had told him they'd managed to replace the usual weekly pool service employee with another who'd stashed what he needed in the swimming pool skimmer. He was to use the same place to hide any messages he wanted relayed to the FBI as well. But he didn't head straight there.

In case anyone in the house watched, he dove into the heated water and worked off some of the tension tightening his body by doing laps. It had been years since he'd gone swimming. *Not since that day...* He shoved away from the wall and propelled himself through the water as if he could swim fast enough to outrun the memories.

It was no use. They plagued him.

A part of him wanted to barge into that bedroom upstairs and shake her until he shook free of the raw pain that battered him with each beat of his heart. But he couldn't dwell on the past. He wasn't the same naïve, idealistic young man who'd proposed. He had to look to the future—his *own* future—something he'd all but given up on having after the door had closed on that damn prison cell.

Crystal was part of his past, not his future.

He surfaced close to the skimmer's access hatch, tossed an arm over the side, and glanced toward the house. After checking every window, he lifted the lid and reached in to retrieve the waterproof bag, then shoved off to swim underwater to the opposite side of the pool.

A few seconds later, he resurfaced and came face-to-face with a frowning boy.

Alejo slipped a corner of the bag into the waistband of his trunks, pressed his body close to the wall, then folded his arms on the side of the pool. "*Hola, mi sobrino.*"

Christopher cast him a skeptical look. "Am I really your nephew?"

He nodded.

"What did you do to my mama?"

"Nothing. She fainted. I was trying to help her."

"You not gonna hurt her?"

Alejo bit back a curse and kept his features composed. Calm and friendly, he hoped. He didn't want to lie to the boy, but how could he *not* hurt Crystal by putting her husband behind bars? He eyed the boy. "Why would you think I'd want to hurt her?"

A tiny shoulder raised in a shrug. "You wanna see my picture?"

He smiled at the sudden change of subject, the logic of which only a child's mind could follow. "Sure. Where is it?"

"I'll get it!" With that, the kid darted off to the house, and Alejo used the opportunity to get out, wipe off, and hide the bag within the folds of his towel. He'd have to wait until another time to take care of business.

\* \* \* \* \*

The doorknob to the hall bathroom yanked from her hand the moment she reached for it. "Oh!" Crystal looked up to meet a dark gaze, familiar, yet coldly foreign.

Alejo blocked the doorway, a towel wrapped tight around his trim waist, his dark hair damp from a morning shower. A few gray strands played peek-a-boo at his temples, a testament to the years that had passed since the last time she'd looked upon his body, so wet and hard. She watched a water drop meander from shoulder to flat nipple—

"*Buenos días, tío,*" Christopher said, standing beside her and, for a brief moment, a small smile played at Alejo's mouth as he glanced at her son.

Uncomfortable, she closed her hand over Christopher's shoulder and nudged him behind her as she backed up a step. "I-I didn't realize you...that the bathroom was occupied."

His gaze bored into her, the smile gone, his features once more restored to a hard façade. "I'm sure you didn't," he said sarcastically. "You have an uncanny ability to forget my presence."

She scowled at him. How dare he speak to her like that...in her own home! She wasn't the one who had thrown their love away and landed in prison. She wasn't the criminal here who expected to live off the good graces of his brother.

Her chin lifted. "Get out of the way."

He raised an arrogant brow and stepped aside. Barely. She guided Christopher into the room. "Brush your teeth and get ready for your bath, honey. I'll be in to fill the tub in a moment." She closed the door, gave Alejo a hard look, and walked across the hall.

Spinning to face him once more, she all but snarled. "Don't you *ever* speak to me like that in front of my son again."

"Having trouble hearing the truth?" he taunted, drawing too close for comfort.

She pressed her back against the wall. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He propped a hand above her left shoulder, and she fought the



unwanted urge to let her gaze drop below his angry eyes. "Let me enlighten you—"

"Ha! You did that when you deserted me years ago, so save your excuses. Just get away from me...and stay away from my son."

"A son that should've been *mine*, but you jumped into my brother's bed the second I was out of sight, didn't you?" He leaned forward, and she put a hand up to stay him. His glance dropped to that hand, and then he met her gaze with a sneer. "Nice diamond. Is it big enough to soothe your greedy heart?"

She almost gasped, but let anger recover her voice. "How dare—*You* were the one caught with a plane full of drugs. I thought you were dead!"

"Well, it didn't take you long to forget me, did it?"

"I *never* forgot you." She bit her tongue, unable to believe she let the words out of her mouth.

His body crowded her against the wall. His face closed to mere inches from hers, and her breath caught in her lungs.

"Oh, yeah? Prove it," he murmured before his warm lips covered hers, his tongue teasing its way inside.

She closed her eyes and felt for one brief moment as if time spun backwards. Her heart sped. Dizziness overwhelmed her as she sank deeper into a kiss that was at once a welcomed memory and heart-wrenching impossibility. Her soul wept with desire for what might have been. Her hands rose to curl around his neck, to hold onto the dream a little longer.

Gently, he pulled away. His minty-fresh breaths warmed her skin.

She blinked, her gaze slowly focusing on the face she'd often kept close to her heart, if only in her dreams.

"You proved one thing. You're very good at forgetting the men you vow to love, aren't you...Mrs. *Carlos De la Cruz*?"

Her palm struck his face with a shocking sting before his insult fully registered on her dazed mind. To her horror, tears stung her eyes, threatening to fall. Refusing to humiliate herself further, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand and ran for her bedroom.

The pain in his cheek did little to alleviate the ache in his chest as Alejo watched Crystal race down the hall. The slam of her bedroom door sounded like a death knell, which was nothing more than he expected. Their dreams of happiness together had died years earlier.

Rubbing fingertips across his cheek, he turned and halted abruptly at the sight of his nephew standing in the bathroom's doorway. Accusation sparked in the boy's dark eyes, against which he had no defense.

"You said you wouldn't hurt Mama." His lip quivered. "Liar!" The boy ran after his mother.

Long after the child vanished through the doorway, Alejo remained frozen in the hallway, his hands fisted at his sides and his heart shattered.

## **Chapter Five**

Alejo was just sitting down for breakfast when Carlos came in from his habitual morning run.

He'd recovered from his encounter with Crystal enough to get dressed, but not quickly enough to complete his first mission while Carlos was out. He'd only managed to bring one bug with him, which he slipped under the rim of a potted plant in the corner near the head of the dining table. He'd have to await another opportunity to set the rest of them in key areas of the house.

The federal agents were counting on him to accomplish the first part of the operation within forty-eight hours. At least with one set, they should know he was making progress.

"Where's Crystal?" Carlos asked, wiping his brow with a hand towel.

Alejo stuffed a bite of scrambled eggs into his mouth and shrugged.

Carlos' lips thinned, but he didn't comment further. Instead, he filled his own plate and took a seat at the head of the table.

Alejo let a few minutes go by before broaching the subject weighing heavily on his mind. Maybe it was too soon, but he might as well dive in while the water was fresh. "So, are you ever gonna tell me how long you've been in the business?"

Carlos peered at him, his jaw pausing briefly before continuing in a slower manner as he chewed his bite of food. "You know I took over the business when our parents passed. Why do you ask such questions? Or

did you lose your memory in that Mexican prison, too?"

"I'm not speaking of the family company, Carlos."

As expected, his brother's gaze narrowed, became suspicious, but his voice remained as calm and casual as ever. "What other business would I be in?"

Alejo took a sip of his coffee and let a smirk show. "Don't play me. I've had a long time to think about my fateful flight. That...cargo...didn't get on the plane by itself, and I can't imagine you being unaware of it."

"So, now you accuse me, too, huh, Alejo?" He wiped his mouth then set the napkin aside. "Even if I were in such a trade, which I've denied for years, do you think I would be so foolish as to send my own brother, a federal agent in training, to fly the plane? That would be asking for trouble, no?"

"Cut the crap, Carlos." Alejo kept his tone serious but calm. "We both know I had no reason to inspect the cargo hold of the plane. I thought it was a new purchase, an empty plane whose pilot fell ill while en route. And what better way to break through U.S. Customs than with an FBI recruit at the controls? With my credentials at the time, who would suspect...?"

Carlos remained silent for a long moment before chuckling. "If you wish to delude yourself with such flights of fancy, *hermano*, be my guest."

Alejo stabbed a sausage link. "I'm not the only one entertaining such opinions, *mi hermano*. Remember Santiago?"

Carlos leaned back in his chair. "The notorious, murdering drug-smuggler who is your savior from the pits of hell? Of course."

"He tells me you've become quite the entrepreneur in recent years."

"Is that so? I was unaware my day-to-day business dealings garnered the attentions of such an infamous villain."

Uneasy, Alejo nodded. Had he overplayed his hand? Did Carlos believe him? He struggled with doubt even as he fought to keep a straight face and meet Carlos' searching gaze without giving himself away. "I doubt Santiago cares one whit about your day job; it's your *other* career that's peaked his interest."

"Other career... And you will accept that criminal's word over mine?"

Alejo savored another large forkful of his breakfast before answering. "When he's offering such high rewards for arranging a meeting between you and his *lieutenants* to negotiate a lucrative deal, yes, I guess you could say he captured my attention."

He gave a dramatic sigh. "All that money I spent on your boarding school and education...wasted. What happened to my jingoistic brother who was going to fight for truth, justice, and the American way?"

"Times change. People change. I want to pay off my debt," he said, speaking of his supposed debt owed to Santiago for his assistance in getting him out of the Mexican prison. "What better way to do that than to participate in the *family business*, hmm?"

Crystal chose that moment to come in. Apparently having caught only the last of his statement, she glanced at Carlos, who continued to study him, and said, "You can't seriously be considering his offer?"

Without looking at her, Carlos lifted his glass to his lips, sipped, and continued to stare at Alejo, as if he dared him to say anything condemning now. "You're late."

"I'm sorry." She hurriedly filled Christopher's plate and set it before the boy whose face had worn a frown from the moment he entered and spotted Alejo.

Her apology apparently enough to appease him, he returned to her original question and asked, "What offer did you refer to, my dear?"

"To go to work for you downtown."

Carlos' lips curved slightly while Alejo gritted his teeth. When she took a seat beside her husband, he took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Yes, but does not everyone, especially family, deserve a second chance? Besides..." He faced Alejo once more. "You can't resume your previous life, can you?"

He meant more than a career at the FBI, and Alejo knew it, accepted it, and nodded. "No. The past is just that...the past. It can remain buried."

As he spoke, Crystal's gaze dropped to her bowl, her spoon

whipping up the oatmeal. In his periphery, he could see her lift a spoonful to her mouth then continue stirring.

"I'm more interested in future lucrative endeavors," Alejo continued, "if you'll allow me to...work off my debt."

Carlos, who'd glanced at his wife, returned his attention to him. He could tell Carlos understood his message, was considering the offer. Would he take the bait?

"We'll see, *hermano*."

Alejo struggled to not show any disappointment in the uncommitted response. He shrugged and finished his own breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yeah?" Carlos sat behind his desk, the door closed, a phone to his ear.

"I've checked with every source I have in Mexico." Jorge's tone told him he wouldn't like what he'd hear. "I'm still waiting on a few to get back with me, but from what I've learned so far... Alejo is the inmate who saved Santiago. Rumor has it Santiago was very grateful. He took Alejo under his wing—"

A tentative knock sounded. "Hold on," he ordered Jorge before glancing up to see Margarita's head poke around the door.

"Excuse me, *señor*, I...I can wait. I didn't know you were on the phone."

He waved her in with a gesture toward a seat. He didn't want to wait to hear what occurred while he was *at work* today. Not yet prepared to trust that his brother's sudden reappearance stateside was all it seemed to be, he'd left Alejo home to stew. It was a risky decision, however, knowing Crystal would take Christopher to school and return home.

He hadn't let her return to the workforce since Christopher was born. At first it had been her idea because she wanted to remain home for the baby, something he'd encouraged at the time. Later, he'd pressed to keep her in the home where he was better able to control things—ensure his other, more clandestine, activities remained unnoticeable to his

family—especially since he'd ramped up his operations after Alejo's incarceration and often conducted business at his downtown office.

Now, however, with Alejo back, Carlos found himself less inclined to leave Crystal to her own devices. She'd always been under close watch, thanks to his housekeeper's penchant for nosiness—and the old bat's loyalty to her employer. So he'd ordered Margarita to keep Crystal occupied and an eye on his brother.

Still, suspicion and doubt forced Carlos to cut short his own work plans. He'd come home earlier than usual to check the situation for himself. He'd arrived to find Crystal yanking weeds from a flowerbed and Alejo knocking the hell out of a punching bag in the bedroom-turned-workout room.

"Let me call you back." He hung up on Jorge without another word and gave the housekeeper a steady look. She appeared worried.

"Yes?"

"*Lo siento, señor.* I've found nothing. His bag contained only clothes, some still with tags on them." She twisted her apron. "His wallet..." She shook her head.

"You were unable to gain access to it?"

"I was, *sí*. Last evening when he went for a swim, but there was little in it. Some money, an ID that did not have his real name, and a piece of paper that had old flight information, a phone number, and the letters JFS."

*Juaquin Felix Santiago.* Carlos nodded. "Did he speak with Crystal at all today?"

"No, *señor*. They seem quite angry toward each other though."

Carlos chuckled. "Thank you, Margarita. That will be all."

When his in-house spy left, Carlos pressed the redial button on his desk phone. Jorge picked up halfway through the first ring.

"Is that next shipment ready for delivery?" Carlos asked without greeting.

"Soon, *pero...*" Jorge's voice trailed off, which didn't bode well.

"But, what?"

"I did some checking up on that new *amigo* Marco introduced. I

know Marco backed him up, but he's a plant."

Carlos frowned. "Are you sure?"

"He's a badge. I'd stake my rep. on it. You know Marco got picked up in that traffic stop a few months back. I think he struck a deal to save his own hide."

He let out a sigh, reclined in his leather seat, and pondered his next step.



## Chapter Six

Still damp from yet another swim in the pool, Alejo returned to his bedroom and flopped onto the bed. He'd left his latest report, sealed in plastic, inside the swimming pool's skimmer and retrieved another bag with a note and...supplies.

Agent Beck warned the deal would be off if the other angles they were working panned out first. It was a chicken-shit threat, but not one Alejo was willing to press them on. He had to think of something, some way to win Carl's confidences, and get the evidence they needed. He'd told the agents in his last correspondence to them that he was having trouble with that.

Carlos was playing it cautiously. Convincing him that his law-abiding brother whom he'd framed had in fact become a criminal was proving more difficult than anyone had first thought. Alejo had told the agents it would take more time and possibly more drastic measures. What more could they expect? He was doing the best he could. But Carlos was stalling, uncommitted, probably just buying time to see if Alejo tripped up. The Feds admitted in their note that inquiries had been made to certain jail officials in Mexico, questioning his relationship with the drug kingpin. If word leaked about his last *visitors* before he left prison custody, things could get dicey real quick.

He reread the note. Apparently the bugs hadn't picked up anything of value yet, and the Feds were getting impatient.

*So the fuck what?* Did they not think Alejo shared that impatience?

Damn, he'd been in this house for a whole week already, listening to his brother's fucking sex life down the hall, with nothing but anger and frustration to show for it.

Since the day Crystal slapped him, she hadn't said two words directly to him. Not that he wanted to talk to her. He punched the pillows and stared at the ceiling. He didn't want to talk. But he couldn't get that damn kiss out of his mind either.

*Don't think about it.*

He needed to wrap up this situation and get the hell away from this house...and her. Hell, even his nephew gave him a wide berth. The only one under foot was the damn maid. He'd caught her with a hand in his dresser drawer two days ago. She'd said she was just straightening up, but she shut the drawer then piddled around the room, adjusting this, tugging on that, before she made an awkward exit.

It was a good thing he'd already planted the bugs so they weren't stockpiled in his room. He glanced at the small plastic bag he'd retrieved from the pool's skimmer, half hidden beneath his towel beside him. He couldn't see how the contents would help him, or how he could explain his sudden possession of a firearm, but maybe the Feds knew something he didn't.

With a sigh, he got up, locked the door, and looked around for the best place to stash his latest gift from the pool-cleaning fairy. He'd just settled on a place when he heard the door handle jiggle, followed by a knock.

Alejo quickly hid the baggie and answered the door to find Carlos in the hall.

"Yeah?" He ran fingers through his damp hair.

"May I come in?"

He let his brother enter and silently cursed himself for not planting a bug in his own bedroom. Carlos looked around the room as if he'd never been there before, until the door clicked shut.

"Have you enjoyed your rest this week, now that you're home?" The question was a hundred-percent casual charm, which only managed to sour Alejo's already dark mood.

"Yeah, sure. I'm enjoying having zip to do so much that I'm about to go postal."

Carlos chuckled. "You always were hard to keep entertained. How did you ever survive prison?"

*Good question*, he thought bitterly. He said nothing. Waited. Stared.

Carlos eyed him back, his expression turning serious. "You want me to agree to meet Santiago, set up a deal with a known criminal, to help repay a debt *you* owe to the man."

"Look. If you aren't interested, I'll come up with some other way to repay Juaquin." He hoped he'd delivered that statement with enough nonchalance.

"Very well, then. I'll do what I can to help you, if you first prove to me that you have indeed given up on your past dreams of law and order—that your loyalty is to your family...*a su hermano*."

Alejo hid his excitement by turning toward the bed where he took a seat and casually propped himself up with both hands.

"And how do I do that?"

"Commit a crime."

Alejo sat straight up when Carlos reached behind his back and pulled out a revolver. "What the—" His heart began to beat again when Carlos spun the handgun around, grip out, and handed it to him.

"I assume you were unable to come into the country armed."

He nodded as he took the weapon—a .357 Magnum he was relieved to notice—and checked the cylinder. *Loaded*. Then he glanced up. "You want me to rob a bank? Carjack some old lady?"

"Don't be an idiot. Santiago would be as unimpressed with such petty crimes as I am." Carlos leaned against the dresser and cross his arms. "Show me that you can handle a big drug deal, and I'll consider setting you up as liaison between Santiago and myself."

"But I don't have a stash of drugs to deal."

"That's been arranged."

Alejo blinked. *Damn it! Why hadn't he put a bug in this room?* Maybe he had enough time to replace his note in the pool. The pool man was scheduled to return in a couple of days. It might be enough time to warn

the Feds and give them time to set up a sting.

"When?"

Carlos glanced at his watch, shoved away from the dresser, and approached the door. "As soon as you can exchange those swim trunks for something more appropriate, we'll be leaving."

*Shit.* "Okay. I...I'll be right down."

Carlos nodded and walked out.

*Shit.* Alejo dressed quickly then dug out the gift bag from the Feds. They'd provided him with an easily concealable, snub-nosed .38 Special, but he ignored the pistol and instead noted the strange colored markings on the cartridges in the bag. After a quick check of the time, he sat on the bed again and released the cylinder from Carlos' gun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crystal carried a small stack of her son's clothes toward the stairs. Margarita wouldn't approve. The woman saw any housekeeping chore Crystal did as a slight against her, as if Crystal were trying to undermine her job. But Crystal preferred to do things for her son and husband. And it wasn't as if she had to work overtime at some office job and was too tired to put away a few clothes when she saw the need.

As she reached the staircase, she stopped when she saw Carlos descending.

"All set," he said into his cell phone. He spotted her and smiled.

"I'll call you later and let you know.... Yes. Goodbye."

"Are you going somewhere?"

He bent to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Just a boring business dinner at Marcello's, my dear. I promise not to be gone too long."

She forced a smile for his sake. If he was gone, that meant dinner with...Alejo. Maybe she should treat her son to a fun night out. Pizza sounded very good about now.

"Papa! Come see." Her son skidded to a stop and grabbed Carlos' hand.

"Christopher, what have I told you about running in the house?" she asked in her mother's-not-pleased tone.

The boy's gaze dropped to the floor as he muttered a quick, "I'm sorry." A tug on Carlos' fingers, and the youngster was all smiles again. "You gotta come see what I caught, Papa. It's the hugest lizard!"

Carlos winked at her and let Christopher drag him toward the door. "Okay, son, but only for a moment. I'm afraid I have to go back to work."

"Work...again?" The moan made Crystal grin.

Carlos lifted the boy into his arms and tickled him, making him erupt into giggles. "How else am I going to afford all of that candy you want me to buy without Mom knowing?"

"Papaaahhh."

Crystal chuckled as she continued up the stairs.

Despite the awkwardness of Alejo's return, his presence seemed to have had a positive effect on Carlos. Her husband was more amorous than usual and had spent much more time at home with Christopher in the past week than he had in a year.

She padded down the hall, headed for Christopher's room.

Maybe Carlos felt guilty over how Alejo had turned out. He had partially raised Alejo after their parents died unexpectedly in the car crash. It wasn't his fault, though. Carlos had been such a young man himself. She couldn't blame him for sending Alejo off to boarding school.

As she passed Alejo's bedroom, she glanced through the crack in the door. And stopped dead in her tracks.

There...in the mirror above the dresser was a reflection of Alejo busily fiddling with a handgun. As she watched, he lifted a piece of paper up, read it, then inserted some ammunition into the gun's cylinder. When he finished, he stood up and Crystal hastily backed up.

In a panic, she slipped behind the bathroom door just in time to hear Alejo exit his room and close the door. She held her breath as his footsteps carried him past her.

*Oh, God. Christopher!*

She dropped the clothes and bolted from the room. When she

reached the rail, Carlos came into view below, just as the housekeeper came through the front door.

"Your driver is here with the car, *señor*," Margarita told him before heading off toward the kitchen.

Carlos looked toward Alejo. "Ready to go?"

"All set," Alejo responded. He tugged the hem of his shirt into place and stepped off the last stair.

"Carlos, can I speak with you a moment?" she called out, drawing the attention of both men. *Thank God Christopher's outside*. If she could just get Carlos aside and warn him.

"It'll have to wait, my dear. We're going to be late as it is."

"But—" She cast Alejo a worried frown, which made him cock an eyebrow at her.

"Later," Carlos said in a brook-no-argument tone. "Stay here. Take care of Christopher. We'll be back soon." He slapped a hand on his brother's shoulder and walked out the door. "Come on." The last thing she saw was Alejo's hand reach back to check the bulge at the small of his back.

Crystal raced down the stairs, hollering for Margarita to watch Christopher. She nearly barreled into the housekeeper on her way through the kitchen to her car in the garage.

"*Dios mio!*"

"Watch Christopher," she shouted once more before jumping into her sedan and pulling out of the drive.

She didn't know what she could do, what she intended to do, once she caught up with them. Her emotions were so raw—in such a state of shock and upheaval—tears streamed down her cheeks. She blinked rapidly to clear her vision and keep the chauffeured Cadillac in sight.

A part of her couldn't believe what she'd seen. Had Alejo really changed so much? She didn't want to believe he could be a threat. But why the gun? Where had he gotten it? Surely he wouldn't do anything in the car with the driver there. Thank God Carlos liked to impress clients by showing up with chauffeured extravagance.

She swiped moisture from her cheeks, then... "What the hell?" She

let up on the gas pedal. The black car carrying her husband and Alejo went straight past the turn to Marcello's.

If they weren't going to the restaurant, where were they going? Was Alejo forcing them to go elsewhere?

Concern warred with curiosity, so she decided to trail the vehicle. She dared a glance to the passenger seat and realized she'd snatched up her keys and left her purse behind, along with any chance she had of using a cell phone to call police.

She couldn't turn back now though.

So as not to attract attention, she kept her distance but remained close enough to mirror the car's every move. Finally, after several miles, it pulled into what appeared to be an abandoned industrial warehouse.

Crystal slowed the car to a stop on the street. She watched until a rusty garage door opened and the Caddy eased forward into the shadowy recesses.

## **Chapter Seven**

Alejo's adrenaline had shifted into overdrive the moment he slid into the backseat of the Cadillac with his brother.

Crystal's strange behavior in the foyer disturbed him, but he couldn't waste time focusing on that. Not when he had bigger things to worry about, like surviving a drug deal with real criminals, convincing his brother he was trustworthy, and not inadvertently committing a crime the Feds couldn't forgive.

En route, Carlos explained the plan. "The briefcase in the front seat... Exchange it. Check theirs before you return to the car. If anything goes wrong..."

Alejo nodded. "I know. Handle it." He knew he was being tested. A small drug buy to prove he wasn't the same law-abiding baby brother he once was—to prove his loyalty to Carlos.

Like an accusing finger, the gun pressed against his back and weighed heavily on his mind. He struggled not to give in to the urge to wipe his damp palms on his pants. Had he done the right thing? Would this trip across the line between right and wrong hurt his chances for exoneration when all was said and done?

As the shadow of the building crept through the interior of the car, he glanced at Carlos. His profile was chiseled, his expression calm.

The car came to a halt, the high beams spotlighting two men.

"The one on the left is Marco; on the right, his contact, the moneyman."



Alejo couldn't make out their faces from where he sat as they held up hands to shield their eyes from the headlights. He reached for the door handle. "You're not getting out?"

Carlos eyed him and shook his head. "This is your show. Time for you to step up and prove yourself, *hermano*. Prove where your loyalty lies. I'll be watching."

He took a deep breath, got out, retrieved the briefcase, and approached the pair of men. Both were dressed in worn jeans, sneakers, and short-sleeved shirts. As he neared, the chauffeur dimmed the Cadillac's headlights.

"Who are you? Where's Carlos?" the man Carlos called Marco asked.

"I'm his brother. You Marco?" Damn, he hoped this one drug deal would be enough to win over his brother's trust, so he could get the evidence the Feds needed and end this charade.

"Yeah. You got the shit?" Marco appeared jittery. He kept glancing toward the car.

"Yeah," Alejo said with a lift of the briefcase. His gaze fixed on the moneyman. "Money first." A sick feeling churned in his gut. The hairs at his nape stood alert. If this went bust, he suddenly realized all of the evidence would point to him again. His prints were on the briefcase full of drugs. He was the only one to get out and make the deal, the only one armed as far as he knew. Carlos could claim he'd been forced to ride along with him. Unless he could coax him out of the car....

The moneyman lifted a cigar to his mouth and took a puff, then held out his own briefcase. That's when Alejo saw the rattlesnake tattoo on the agent's bicep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crystal ran across the lot to the warehouse. She tried one door, but it was locked, so she made her way around the side of the building, searching for a way in. She found it in the form of a grimy swivel window between two large crates.

Cautiously she wiggled through the opening and wrinkled her nose at the odors of grease and industrial machinery. The echo of male voices ricocheted off the metal walls and led her to a strange, alarming scene. She'd just hid behind some barrels to watch when the voices grew loud and angry and Alejo pulled out his gun, aiming it at a pair of men she'd never seen before.

*Where's Carlos?* Crystal glanced from the trio to the black Caddy and back again.

"What the fuck are you trying to pull?" Alejo shouted.

One of the men slowly placed a briefcase he held by his feet and dropped a cigar stub from his mouth as he tried to placate Alejo. "Take it easy." Both men held up their hands as if that alone could stop a bullet if Alejo pulled the trigger.

She saw Alejo stiffen, his fingers adjusting to a tighter hold on the gun's grip.

"You take it easy...*buddy*..." Alejo said, pointing the gun from the cigar smoker to the other guy who appeared scared to death. "...and listen carefully. I don't intend to go back to prison by fucking this up. You got that?"

The cigar-smoking man nodded, his hands still poised with palms out near his shoulders.

"And I'll be damned," Alejo continued, "if I'll take the fall because of some damn chicken-shit snitch."

"Whoa, look," the other man said, "I ain't no snitch."

"The hell you aren't," Alejo said. "Your partner here's a federal agent."

*Oh, God help us.* Crystal trembled but couldn't look away from the terrible scene before her.

Where was Carlos? Had Alejo already killed him, his body bloody and lifeless in the car?

*No!* her soul cried out.

She couldn't have been so wrong about him, didn't want to believe what her own eyes were telling her.

"Where are the others?" Alejo asked.

The men shook their heads. "We don't know what you're talking about," the more jittery one of the pair said. "There's n-no agents here, man."

"You think I'm playing fucking games, Marco?" Alejo pulled the gun's trigger, the explosion deafening inside the confines of the warehouse.

Crystal muffled her cry with the back of her hand. Neither of the men before Alejo fell, however. The bullet had struck a large wooden beam not two feet from the fidgety snitch Alejo had called Marco. The man ducked at the shot, but soon resumed his stance after a brief glance over his shoulder at the hole in the wood.

"Look, I swear, man—"

"I'm not gonna take the fall," Alejo said, cutting Marco off. He aimed the gun at the cigar-smoker and eyed him. "You are, *buddy*. Understand me?"

The man nodded slowly.

She had to do something, but what? Would Alejo kill her, too?

"Carlos!" Alejo called out.

She'd just decided to stand up when the car's door opened and Carlos' head came into view above the Caddy's roof. Relief swamped her system for the span of a split second. Then disbelief returned.

"I see you discovered Marco's secret, *hermano*."

Alejo didn't look back as Carlos approached. He kept his gaze and gun trained on the two other men, neither of which moved a muscle.

Carlos flipped his cell phone shut, pocketing it. "But I wonder... How did you know?"

Alejo replied, "I saw this guy at Quantico a time or two. The tattoo gave him away."

Carlos smiled. "And what do you intend to do about it now?"

"Whatever you say."

"It's your show, remember," Carlos said. "Do what's necessary."

Alejo pulled the trigger.

Crystal screamed, "No," and ran toward the agent, but it was already too late. He crumpled to the concrete floor. Her appearance was

enough of a shock to the brothers that she was able to make it to the fallen man's side. The snitch used the opportunity to scam.

"Hey," Alejo shouted, fired again, but missed.

Bending over the agent, she felt for a pulse and discovered it throbbed steady and strong, but the man still lay there lifeless. He didn't move a muscle or make a sound. *What the hell?* She turned confused, tear-blurred eyes toward Alejo, then Carlos. Alejo couldn't have missed, not as close as they stood, but she didn't have time to search for the wound that felled the man. If the man wasn't dead yet, they didn't have to know it, did they?

"You bastard! You killed him!" she accused and saw Alejo's dark eyes widen a bit before his lips thinned into a hard line. Carlos, on the other hand, looked more angry than surprised by her outburst—more furious than she'd ever seen him before. Although Alejo held the gun, she suddenly got the uncanny, illogical feeling that Carlos was the more dangerous of the two.

"Crystal, come here. Now." Carlos advanced on her.

Hesitantly, she started to climb to her feet. Maybe if she could convince them to leave, the agent would somehow survive his injury.

"You, my dear, are *not* supposed to be here."

"I-I saw him with a gun. I wanted to warn you." As she pointed at Alejo, he stashed his revolver, and she realized her attempt to warn her husband was pointless. A hollow sensation settled in the pit of her stomach.

"So you followed us," Carlos surmised. "Your concerned snooping poses a problem now, but it's one we'll address when I get you home." Carlos grabbed her arm and yanked her before him. After a hard look, he turned toward the car, dragging her behind him, but not before picking up the briefcase the agent had held.

She looked back at the fallen man then glanced at Alejo. "What about Alejo?"

Carlos stopped, studied her. His fingers bit into her upper arm as she tried to twist free of his grasp. "What about him?"

"He killed a man! You aren't going to leave him here, are you?" She

had to get them both away from here so the victim had a chance to seek help—*if* he was still alive.

"He has a mess to clean up." Carlos tossed the briefcase in the backseat, then frisked her, causing her to startle and grab at his wrist, but he'd found what he was after. He pulled out her car keys and threw them to Alejo. "Dispose of the body," he told his brother.

"No!"

Carlos ignored her protest. "Find her car and bring it home." He opened the door to the Caddy and forced her inside. "And, Alejo, welcome to the family business."

Chapter Eight

Alejo waited until the car had backed out and driven away before he went to check on the agent.

"You missed your calling," he said, extending his hand.

The agent peeked at him, grinned, then took his hand and climbed to his feet. "I'm not the only actor here deserving of an Oscar. After that first shot you fired into the beam, I wasn't entirely sure you'd gotten our little package or were onboard with us. Not until your speech...*buddy*."

"I was hopeful you'd catch my hint." Alejo glanced over his shoulder. "Do you have cops stationed close to the house?"

"Those monitoring the bugs. Yeah, why?"

He was worried about Crystal, but didn't want to admit that. He didn't think Carlos would kill her. He still believed his brother wasn't the type to pull the trigger himself, but having a contingency plan in place—officers who could move in beforehand, just in case—was a good thing. He sighed.

"I don't want the kid caught in the middle. If he—"

"They can be inside in a matter of minutes."

"Yeah..." The question was would that be fast enough? "Did you get everything here on video? Is it enough?"

"I'll check with the guys in the van, but whether it's enough..." He shook his head and frowned. "We have him telling you to dispose of a body. That's accessory after the fact, but I'm not really dead, and he didn't exactly tell you to shoot me."

"And he didn't pull the trigger," Alejo said, his tone filled with sarcasm.

The agent pointed to the briefcase still in Alejo's other hand. "What's in there might help."

"Right." He walked over to a nearby workbench and opened the case. Several neatly packed bags of cocaine lay inside. "We got 'im. He took the money case, and I can testify that he gave me this one."

"Hold it." The agent took out a pocketknife and poked a small hole in one of the bags, then tested the contents and concluded with a frown,

"Nope. It's fucking powdered sugar."

"You're shitting me!" He spun away in frustration. "The bastard sent me into a drug buy with fake-assed drugs? If you'd been for real, I could've been—"

"Killed?"

He shot a look at the agent, ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"But then if you'd exchanged cases with me, and the cops showed up..."

"He was in the clear, seated in the car. No real drugs, with only my prints on the case, anyway, and the testimony of a discredited snitch with a mile-long rap sheet."

"Not exactly what we're looking for, is it?"

He slammed his fist down. "Damn it! Just when I think we're making progress, he does something that keeps him one step ahead of me."

The agent slapped a hand on his shoulder. "Now you know what we've been dealing with for years. Your brother is a slippery guy, but to put him away, we need air-tight evidence."

And Alejo was more determined than ever to get it. Carlos had gotten away with destroying his life for far too long.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the setting of the sun, the evening sky shone with rich hues of orange, red, and indigo, a wealth of color and beauty that matched the well-tended floral garden surrounding the gazebo in the backyard of the De la Cruz estate. The light in the nearby pool held the night shadows at bay and gave the rippling water an ethereal appearance that testified to peace and tranquility.

None of it soothed the ache in Crystal's heart. She bent her legs and wrapped both arms around them as she sat in the darkest corner of the gazebo and let tears stream down her bruised cheek.

*Trapped.* The word echoed in her mind along with other haunting

images, angry orders, and shocking pain from the day's events that had ripped the blinders from her eyes and changed her world forever.

She'd married a chameleon—a two-faced monster who now kept her imprisoned within the walls of the estate. He'd never let her leave him. Not with Christopher. Not alive.

"You're *my* wife," he'd told her after backhanding her. "You'll do what I say, exactly as I say it, or pay for your disobedience."

He'd been furious with her for discovering his secret, for learning the truth of his illegal activities. When she'd started to speak in the car, he'd grabbed her by the throat and told her to shut up. She'd been too frightened then to say anything more while trapped inside the car.

Once at home, he'd all but dragged her upstairs to their bedroom where he tossed her against the bed. She'd tried to placate him, to calm his anger, which was more than evident by his fierce expression and agitated pacing.

"I'm sorry. I—" she began.

"You never fucking listen! Stay here, I said." His hands fisted at his sides before he reached up and yanked at his tie. "I've been too lax in my duties. Let you have too much free rein."

His jacket came off; he tossed it across a chair along with his tie.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Carlos, don't say—"

That's when he'd backhanded her.

"Don't tell me what to do! You're *my* wife. You'll do what I say, exactly as I say it, or pay for your disobedience." He'd nearly taken her by force tonight. Had it not been for a childish murmur from the doorway, he would have.

"Mama?" The question had come through the door along with a soft knocking sound.

"Just a minute, Christopher," she'd cried out, praying he wouldn't come in. She'd turned her face from her husband's kisses but, at the child's interruption, Carlos had stopped, raised himself above her, and stared.

"Please," she'd whispered. "Please, not in front of our son."

He'd frowned and rolled off her. "Get the fuck out. But if you even



think of leaving the grounds, Christopher will grow up without a mother."

His words plagued her now as she cried in the gazebo. Swiping at the tears, she tried to think of anyone who might help her and came up blank.

A distraught whimper escaped her throat. *Oh, God.* "It's hopeless."

\* \* \* \* \*

He noticed the two armed guards as soon as he entered the gate to the De la Cruz estate. It was kind of hard not to since they stopped him at the front door.

"What the fuck is this? Who're you?"

The taller of the two flipped through Alejo's wallet before nodding to his partner who released Alejo from his spread-eagle pose against the wall and returned his firearm. "The name's Gomez," the tall guard said, "and this is Sanchez, *Señor* Alejo De la Cruz. We work for your brother." Gomez looked over at Crystal's car and back at him. "Pardon the greeting. We had to be sure. Your ID doesn't say De la Cruz, but your brother said it wouldn't, and you fit the description he gave, right down to the type of firearm and the car."

Alejo straightened his shirt and eyed the two men. Both wore semi-automatic pistols on the right hip, very different from the make and model of the revolver Carlos had given him. "And while my brother was sharing my profile, did he by chance say why he wanted you two guard dogs to man the front door?"

Sanchez and Gomez exchanged glances before Sanchez replied, "You'll have to ask him, *señor.*"

Without another word, Alejo stalked upstairs, only to find the master bedroom door shut. He paused with his fist held up to strike. He wanted to ensure Crystal was okay, but what the hell could he say? He listened for several seconds.

*Quiet. Too quiet.*

He knocked.

"Oh, *señor*, you look for *su hermano*?"

Alejo turned at the question to see Margarita coming from the hall bathroom, rubber gloves and a bucket of cleaning supplies in hand.

"Yes, have you seen him?"

"He is not here. He went out again."

He frowned. "Went out? Where?"

She shook her head. "He did not say."

*Shit*. "Thank you, Margarita. That will be all."

He wanted to ask about Crystal, but feared the nosey housekeeper might find that too suspicious, so he headed toward his room, listening to her make her way downstairs. Then he veered toward a different bedroom and eased the door open on silent hinges.

There, in the muted glow of a nightlight, he made out the sleeping form of his nephew. He sighed. At least the boy remained unharmed, but concern for Christopher's mother plagued him. Where was she? More importantly, was she still alive?

Pulling the door closed once more, he went to his room, set his firearm on the dresser, and checked to ensure his secret stash remained undisturbed. He sat at the foot of the bed and rested his head in both hands.

"I never should've let him leave with her," he murmured to himself.

What had happened in this house after Carlos brought Crystal home?

*I need a fucking cell phone*. He wanted to talk with those agents monitoring the bugs to find out what they knew. But he didn't dare risk using the house phone, not when anyone could lift a receiver in another room and listen.

His only option was to send word via the usual slow-assed method and hope for the best. He got up and donned swim trunks.

When he reached the pool, however, he heard something that drew his attention toward the gazebo. He slung his towel over his shoulder and headed quietly in that direction.

There it was again. A soft whimper. A snuffle.

"Crystal?"

The shadows stirred and shuffled like a frightened, cornered animal.

Alejo walked the last few feet and stepped through the only opening to the octagonal gazebo. As his vision adjusted to the darker area, he saw her huddled against the far corner of the gazebo, the walls of latticework and floral vines preventing her escape.

"Crystal?" He took another step.

"Don't... Just leave me alone. *Please.*"

When he moved away from the opening, more light managed to seep through, which enabled him to see her better, to see her body tremble with fear...of him.

For years, he'd wanted her to feel the pain, the heartbreak he'd felt because of what he'd viewed as her betrayal—her abandonment. And then he'd wanted revenge against her, back when he thought she'd left him to his fate in Mexico, back when he thought she'd cast him aside for his brother.

But never this. He'd never wanted her to fear him.

"Crystal..." He moved again, his hand lifting toward her.

She startled and scrambled a few feet to the right along the built-in bench that lined the walls.

"Okay." He stopped and held up his hands. He dropped the towel on the bench several feet from her and sat, giving her a clear path to the opening, although he hoped she didn't bolt.

Dressed in a tiny tank top and a pair of Capri pants, she appeared different from when he'd seen her earlier at the warehouse. Her arms and feet were bare. Her golden hair hung in straight waves over her shoulders and partially hid her face until she fingered it behind one ear.

She eyed him for several seconds, the trails of tears from her recent crying jag evident on one side of her face, which was softly illuminated by the light filtering in from outside the gazebo. After a long moment, she wiped her cheek with the back of one hand and sniffled.

"Look. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk."

"What makes you think we have anything to talk about after what

you did today?"

One side of her face remained in deep shadow. Her gaze now avoided him, as if she suffered from a guilty conscience. That's when he realized...

"What did I do, Crystal?"

"You know exactly what you did. You shot a man in cold blood, Alejo, and for what? For money? A job in the *family business*? Well, congratulations. I hope you got what you wanted. I hope you've become the man you wanted to be, because I don't know you anymore."

"Why did you protest my being left behind at the warehouse?"

He heard the sudden catch in her breath. She blinked. "I don't know..." Her words said one thing, but her tone testified to the lie.

"Why, Crystal? You said I *shot* a man. You didn't say I killed him. That's because you know I didn't, isn't it?"

She started to shake her head. A new tear slid down her cheek.

"You know, don't you? You felt for his pulse, so you know he was alive when you left." He didn't move a muscle as he watched his words sink in. "You were trying to protect him, weren't you?"

"So what if I was? I couldn't help... It doesn't matter, because you —"

"It matters. You know I didn't kill that agent." He stood slowly. "Just like you know I would never harm one hair on that pretty little head of yours. Deep down you know...." He drew nearer, and she stiffened. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "That's not the kind of man I am. I'm not a cold-blooded murderer."

It was probably the stupidest thing he could do—admit the truth to her—but he'd seen her check the agent's pulse. He'd been surprised by her accusations at first. However, he was certain he'd reloaded the gun by alternating live rounds with blanks. And he damn sure knew now the agent was alive, so she had to have felt the man's pulse and known. He suspected she'd hoped to save the agent's life by ensuring he wasn't left behind to finish the job. Why else would she have been opposed?

Her actions and Carlos' reaction to her presence had to be proof she wasn't really on her husband's side. His heart urged him to believe she

wouldn't betray him. Though his mind warned against it, he chose to take the gamble.

"I don't believe you."

"Believe it. I swear I didn't kill..." When he tried to lift her chin with a finger, she pulled back and turned her face. He caught the first glimpse of a dark bruise on the cheek that had been previously shadowed. All thought of Carlos using her to get at his secrets fled from his mind.

"Son of a bitch." Alejo dropped to his knee in front of her, so he could look at her at eye-level. He took her chin again, and this time wouldn't allow her to pull away from him. "Carlos struck you." He held her hair out of the way so he could study the swelling and discoloration in the faint light. It wasn't a question, although he saw confirmation in her blue eyes.

"Why do you care?"

"I didn't want to, but I can't help it. I do." He brushed a thumb gently over the bruise. "I always have."

## Chapter Nine

Crystal wanted to believe him, his words, the caring sincerity of his eyes. But how could she? After what he'd said before, what he'd done? After learning tonight that the man she'd exchanged vows with, the man she'd slept with and called her husband for years was a Mr. Hide in a Dr. Jekyll lab coat. How could she trust her own judgment, especially in men? She'd failed miserably up to now.

*I've been such a fool.*

"You're a felon. You ditched a plane full of drugs and went to prison for trafficking—"

"I can explain." He reached for her hands, but she jerked away.

"I saw you *shoot* a man today...over drugs. And you tried to shoot that other guy."

"No. You saw me miss on purpose. I shot a blank at an agent I've been working with, and you saw him collapse on cue to fake his death. My firearm has alternating rounds of live and blank ammo."

She replayed the events at the warehouse in her mind. Could it be true? When he reached for her again, she let him hold her hands in his, his face turned toward hers as he continued to kneel on one knee in front of her. "Why?" she wanted to know.

"That's not important right now."

"It is to me. Tell me. Why?"

"So I could regain my brother's trust enough to help bring down his drug operation. So I can clear my name."

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head as her mind spun at his revelation.

"You have to believe me," he urged. "My brother framed me, took everything I ever held dear, and left me to rot in a Mexican prison, just so he could continue to make money off importing narcotics into this country. Think about it." He slid onto the bench beside her without releasing her hands. "I became a threat to him the moment I told him I was being assigned to the field office here as part of a new drug interdiction task force."

With every word he spoke, he chipped away another piece of her broken heart. All of these years... How could she have been so stupid? She'd believed Carlos, had trusted him. She'd turned a blind eye to his business and allowed him into her bed. Raised Christopher to think...

*Oh, God!*

The tears came once more as the thought of so many years wasted weighed on her psyche. He pulled her against his body, her head resting on his bare shoulder, his arms wrapped around her in a warm embrace of understanding and comfort. She clung to him, wishing she could turn back time and change the past, undo the web of deceit and lies that had torn them apart.

When she pulled back, their eyes met, and he cradled her face in his hands. After a suspended pause, he leaned forward to lightly brush his lips across hers. She closed her eyes and held her breath, afraid if she reopened them he'd be gone and everything she felt in this moment would vanish like a forgotten dream.

He tilted his head and pressed their lips together even while he pulled the rest of her body closer to his. His tongue teased her mouth until she opened for him. When he swept inside, when she drove her fingers through his hair, she was complete. *Free.*

But she wasn't. She was trapped in more ways than one. She could no more leave the estate grounds than she could escape the bonds of matrimony she'd taken years earlier.

She pushed against Alejo's chest until he met her gaze.

"I'm married."

He frowned. "And when you took those vows, did you know I was alive?"

"No, of course not."

A pause, then... "Do you love him?"

She averted her eyes. "I thought I did."

"And now?"

She rubbed the bruise on her cheek that was still sore from the earlier blow.

She'd cared for Carlos, appreciated what he'd done for her and Christopher, but that had all been based on falsehoods and manipulation. She let all of the lies Carlos had told her over the years tumble through her mind; none had greater impact than the one in which he let her believe the man she loved was dead. The one person she'd considered her hero, the friend she thought had stepped in to help her, had really been twisting the truth to get what he wanted all along.

Her feelings toward Carlos had never been as strong as what she'd once felt for Alejo. Still felt for Alejo?

She shook her head, not looking up from the ground.

Alejo kissed her forehead, and a whimper escaped her throat. His hands were so gentle as they slid over her shoulders and back. So loving. Her heart ached for what could never be.

Carlos would never let her go. Not now.

A tear trickled down one cheek as she murmured, "I'll never be free of him. He'll k-kill me before he ever lets me go."

"I won't let that happen."

She gave him a sad smile and wanted to believe him.

He kissed her then, a union filled with passion and urgency. "I won't lose you again," he said against her lips before continuing the kiss.

His hands slid beneath her shirt, a warm glide and exploratory caress that made her yank her shirt off. She might die tomorrow, but she wanted this. She wanted to feel once more the love and pleasure only Alejo could stir with a touch, a kiss. Her head fell back as he latched onto her neck, suckling and kissing a moist path downward.

A quick flick, a couple of tugs, and her bra soon traveled the same



path as her shirt.

Alejo caught one nipple in his mouth, sucked it hard and deep, and she clung to him, pressing his head to her.

A whisper of caution pricked her mind and warned her to keep quiet, though a soft moan managed to escape on the night's breeze.

"Please..." She wasn't sure whether she spoke to Alejo or prayed, but one thing was certain. She wanted nothing more than for time to cease, for him to continue what he was doing to her for all eternity.

When he pulled away suddenly, she blinked at him, a whimper of protest on her lips until she saw him take his beach towel and spread it out on the floor of the gazebo. With a glance back at her, he held out his hand. She placed her palm on his and stood. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her again, standing in the middle of the gazebo, swaying slightly in a dance to the nighttime melody of crickets.

His fingers fumbled with the fastener of her pants, but soon he had them undone. As the last of her clothing slid to the floor, she slipped her fingers inside the waistband of his swim trunks and squeezed his butt. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth when her actions made him groan.

"Take 'em off," he whispered against her mouth.

*With pleasure.*

Seconds later, his swimwear pooled around his ankles, so he kicked them aside and guided her to the floor. With his back on the towel, he pulled her body over his and hugged her close. She looked down at him and rested one hand on his chest, the beat of his heart a soft pulse beneath her palm.

Was that passion or shadows of the night darkening his gaze?

He raised his hand to cup her bruised face, and she closed her eyes, leaning in to the caress. His fingers inched around her nape and tugged her near. When his lips brushed across hers, she felt as if she'd finally come home. She opened to him and let him take her wherever he willed.

Each touch, each kiss, propelled her closer to paradise. Each nudge of his arousal against her skin was a tantalizing temptation that soon had her spreading her legs out and over his hips to straddle him.

He rubbed her thighs, her buttocks, and grabbed her hips. A brief

lift, a smooth decent, and he filled her body even as his murmured words filled her heart with hope.

"I love you, Crystal," he said on a sigh next to her ear. "I've loved you always."

Her heart burst with joy at hearing those words in a voice she never dared dream she'd ever hear again. With a smile, she pushed upright to sit astride him and took him deeper inside her body. She rejoiced in the feelings of love, both physical and emotional, that tingled through her system.

Surrounded by the fragrance of fresh flower blossoms, sheltered in the darkness of the night, she stared at the man who'd captured her heart years ago. His claim remained true even now. After all this time, in spite of all the lies, her soul recognized his. Her heart belonged to him.

Instead of responding to his declaration of love, however, she rotated her hips, a subtle prompt he responded to with a lift of his hips and a firm grip of her waist, his hard flesh stroking deep inside her.

"Yes..." he said, pumping harder, quickening the pace of her ride.

Flicking her long hair back over her shoulders, she braced herself with both hands on his pecs, but his constant movements beneath her made the strands slide forward again like a curtain around her face. Then, he suddenly sat up and rolled her beneath him. The wooden floor was hard, but she didn't care. His muscles were tense and strong—his skin smooth, warm, and oh so welcome as he powered into her.

He kissed her cheek, nipped her earlobe, and murmured, "I need..."

He didn't finish the breathy statement, but he didn't have to; she knew what he needed to hear. She arched her body toward him, opened her mouth to tell him...

He never ceased his movements to push her closer, so close to—

The climax struck with unabashed force. *Yes!* She wrapped her arms around him, clung to him, as her body trembled with the sweet release. Only when she could catch her breath did she finally whisper, "I love you."

## Chapter Ten

Alejo allowed himself a few final seconds to cuddle Crystal's body close to his before forcing his own muscles into motion.

He'd taken a foolish risk by making love to her, especially with Carlos' goons out front and with no idea when his brother would return home.

"We've got to get out of here," he said, picking up the towel and searching for his swim trunks.

Crystal moved, but her actions were more hesitant. "I can't leave. I won't, not without Christopher, and even if we got away, we'd never be free. He all but said he'd kill me tonight if I even tried."

Seated on the bench and with one leg in his swim trunks, he paused to look up at her. That explained the two goons at the front door; Carlos obviously wanted to ensure she stayed put while he was out. "That's not what I meant. We're not going anywhere. We just need to get back inside before we're discovered."

"Oh."

He couldn't see her frown, not with her back toward the gazebo's opening, but he certainly heard it in that clipped reply. He finished dressing and helped her gather her clothes.

After she was clothed, he said, "Let me explain."

"I understand. Really, I do."

The sadness in her voice told him otherwise, so he grabbed her by the upper arms. "I love you and want nothing more than to take you and

Christopher away from here but, like you said, it's suicide to do so right now. As long as Carlos is free, I can't leave. It's too dangerous, and I'm obligated to the Feds to see this thing through." He pulled her back into the shadows toward the bench. "I need you to do something for me, okay?"

She met his gaze and nodded.

"You have to continue to treat me as you have since I first arrived. We can't let on that anything has changed between us. Carlos is no fool, and that damn housekeeper is too nosey for her own good."

"Tell me about it," she said.

"So we're in agreement?" he asked, although sending her back into that house, back into the arms and bed of his brother, was the hardest thing he ever had to do. "Carlos must believe you're still his and nothing's changed, at least until we've gathered enough evidence to put him behind bars for a long time."

"Maybe I can help—"

"No. Listen, you keep going about your usual business. Stick close to Christopher and let me handle the rest." He squeezed her hand as he led her to the opening of the gazebo and looked out toward the pool. "Is there another way into the house besides walking past the pool?"

"Yes, around the side, there's a door that leads into the house through the utility room."

"Okay. You go back into the house that way, wait here for a few more minutes before you do. Give me time to jump in the pool. I can't go back inside dry and wearing swim trunks."

She nodded.

He gave her a brief kiss and squeezed her hand again. "Be careful."

"I love you."

He smiled. "Remember that when I have to act like an ass to keep up appearances."

She giggled, and he stepped through the opening, headed for the pool.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crystal fought a yawn as she prepared a bowl of cereal for Christopher. She heard someone come in but didn't risk a glance back as the scrape of a chair at the head of the table indicated Carlos' arrival to breakfast.

She quickly fixed him his plate with his usual favorites and set it in front of him before returning to the counter. Silence and an averted gaze seemed to please him this morning, and she gladly played the role of subdued wife to avoid the risk of him seeing her true feelings with one glance into her eyes. After spooning a little bit of sugar into Christopher's bowl, she gave in to the yawn, covering it with her other hand.

Sleep had proven elusive last night after she'd returned to the house, unfortunately bumping into Margarita downstairs. She'd had to explain away her bruise as an accidental fall on the steps, during which her cheek collided with the handrail, before the housekeeper would let her go. For a snooty busybody, the woman became inconveniently maternal at the first sign of injury. Crystal didn't spend too much time trying to determine whether the woman's concern was genuine, however. She'd had to rush through her shower to be in bed before Carlos arrived back home.

She'd feigned sleep when he came into the room and had been relieved when he went to bed without attempting to rouse her. Still, with him next to her, she found herself unable to sleep for hours. Too worried he'd somehow become privy to her thoughts, she tossed and turned all night. She felt as if she'd just drifted off when her alarm awakened her.

Fortunately, he'd been in the shower, so she was able to dress and slip out to get Christopher up without a confrontation.

"Mama, I'm hungry."

Crystal snatched the pitcher of milk and poured. "Patience, Christopher. I'm coming." She put in a spoon as she turned toward the table.

Her gaze collided with Alejo's just as he stepped in the doorway. For a fraction of a second, his expression held a warmth toward her, but in the blink of an eye, it was gone. He looked away first.

While he greeted his brother, Crystal hurried to set the cereal in front of Christopher and kept herself occupied by making her own plate. She prayed Carlos would assume her hesitation at Alejo's appearance was a nervous reaction to being around a suspected murderer and nothing else.

Her jitters had an altogether different cause. She struggled with a sudden urge to run into Alejo's arms. Her heart skipped a beat when he sidled up to the counter to dish himself some eggs and bacon.

He was doing a much better job than she was in playing his part. He didn't seem to be affected by her proximity, didn't look at her again, and spoke to her only when he excused himself to reach for a couple of buttermilk biscuits.

*Get a grip, Crystal.* She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and chastised herself for allowing his nearness to affect her so. It put all of them in danger. She had to remember that and work harder to hide her raw emotions.

She took her plate back to the table and sat next to her husband. After placing her napkin in her lap, she flinched when Carlos placed his hand over hers. When she looked up, he was frowning but didn't remark about her reaction.

"Margarita will take Christopher to school today," he told her without releasing her hand.

"But I always—"

"Do not argue with me. Today's his last day of school. Margarita can handle it and pick up the groceries afterwards." He squeezed her hand. "I want you to remain here. Rest today...and think on what I told you yesterday. Gomez and Sanchez will be here to assist you should you need anything. Understood?"

A cold chill slithered down her back as she realized he intended to force compliance. She belonged to him as far as he was concerned, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do to stop him.

"Yes, Carlos." She understood him perfectly. In that moment, with their gazes locked in silent regard, what little affection she once had for him dried up and died. Unwilling to let him see the change in her heart,

she looked away.

He patted her hand and returned to his meal.

She didn't dare look at Alejo. She feared she might lose it altogether if she did and saw pity or sympathy on his face. While she pushed her food around on her plate, an emotional firestorm raged in her gut.

"Can we go to the park after school, Papa?"

"Not today, son."

"But, Papa—"

"Christopher," she said. "Eat your cereal." Her nervousness had transformed into anxiety over hearing Chris call Carlos Papa. It had never bothered her before, but that was before she'd known her son's real father was still alive.

She sneaked a peak at Alejo through her eyelashes. He was looking down at his plate, his hand lifting a forkful to his mouth.

*He doesn't even know.* Oh, God, how was she ever going to tell him? How would she break the news to Christopher?

She stuffed a slice of orange into her mouth and hoped her stomach settled enough to keep down her meal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alejo walked down the hall toward Carlos' downtown office after parking his "new" car in the garage and taking a brief elevator ride. The car actually belonged to Crystal, but when he tried to return the keys to her during breakfast, Carlos had stopped him, telling him to keep the keys since he'd need "new wheels" to get around today. It was a shitty thing to do, but if Alejo had done anything other than accept the offer, he risked losing what ground he'd gained. And that would only prolong the problem.

He needed to infiltrate Carlos' drug operation enough to get the evidence needed to put his brother behind bars where he belonged. Only then would he and Crystal be free to be together again. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case just yet. Any display of sympathy, softness, or interest toward Crystal could give the game away, which could spell real trouble.

Now was not the time to challenge Carlos.

He just hoped like hell Crystal understood and didn't do anything that put herself in jeopardy. Not an easy task, he knew. It had been hard to look away from her when he walked into the dining room earlier, even tougher to stand near her while preparing his plate. He'd wanted nothing more than to touch her, hug her...kiss her. Her fresh, clean scent with a hint of floral fragrance had engulfed him as he'd reached for a biscuit.

*Focus!* With a shake of his head, he shoved through the glass-paneled door into what had once been his parent's ticket to the American Dream, a family-owned business that Carlos had taken over after their untimely deaths. Although the company appeared similar on the surface—albeit more successful than ever before—the dream was more like a nightmare now.

He'd been unable to discuss his newfound position in the family business at breakfast with the presence of his nephew at the table. And since Carlos provided him with a vehicle, he opted to meet his brother at the office as opposed to riding with him, which had also allowed him the chance to make a few other incidental stops along the way, such as stopping off to pick up a body wire. He just hoped his brother didn't ask him to raise his shirt again.

"How may I help you?" asked a buxom brunette secretary worthy of a centerfold spread. Her smile was pleasant enough, but the suggestive glint in her eye spoke volumes. He wondered how long it had taken Carlos to respond to such temptation. Knowing his brother's lust for young, attractive trophies, it hadn't been long.

"I see my brother's made some...changes...around here since I've been gone." *And not for the better*, he didn't add. He looked around the foyer as if he were interested in the tiled floors, cherry wood furnishings, and seashore landscapes on the wall.

"Brother?"

He leaned a hip on the desk's corner. "Yes, the last time I visited Carlos, he had a much older woman working for him as a receptionist, and a cute blonde clerk."

"Oh, Mrs. Dobson is retired now, has been for a few years. I'm



Marissa, Mr. De la Cruz's secretary." She gave him an odd look. "I'm afraid I don't know any blonde clerks...*unless*... Do you mean Mrs. De la Cruz? She used to work here."

He nodded. "That's the one. Pleasure to meet you, Marissa."

"Did you say you're Carlos' brother?"

"Yes, I did. I'm Alejo. Carlos is expecting me."

"He never men— Uh...I'm sorry. He didn't mention an appointment, but let me show you in." She jumped up and came around her desk, gesturing toward the door. How she managed to walk in those spiked heels and skin-tight pencil skirt was beyond him. "Alejo's here to see you, sir," she announced after pushing open the door.

The inner office had also experienced a facelift. Expensive statuary mingled with rich leather and plush carpeting. A large plasma screen hung on one wall, the centerpiece above a gas fireplace and between built-in bookcases. The large executive's desk held state-of-the-art computer equipment and a couple of ledgers, which Carlos was perusing.

He looked up as Alejo walked in. "Good. You're here." He waved away his secretary, his gaze following the sway of her backside, and waited for the door to close before he continued. "Why didn't you bring the briefcase I left with you? I do assume you haven't misplaced it."

He took a seat opposite Carlos and crossed his arms. "What do you need with a briefcase full of bagged sugar?"

Carlos smirked. "I see you tested the..."

*Come on. Say it.*

*"...merchandise."*

*Shit.* "You thought I wouldn't? Tell me. When did you plan to share that little tidbit of information with me? Before the drug dealers discovered I was pedaling placebo narcotics? Or after they killed me?"

Carlos frowned, and Alejo couldn't tell whether he was more disturbed about the mention of drug dealers or the challenge in his questions.

"Sounds like you doubt I had your back, *hermano*."

His teeth would crack if he ground them together any harder. "Not at all," he lied. "I just don't like being kept in the dark. I can't afford to

fuck up with Santiago, and something like that would not earn any laughs with his crew."

"Speaking of... How soon before you can introduce me to your friend from south of the border?"

"If I can get word to him today," he said with a shrug, "a week, maybe less. It depends on how easily he can arrange to slip into the country. He doesn't exactly have a face welcomed by U.S. Customs agents."

"But you can produce him?" a heavily accented voice said from the doorway.

Alejo turned to see Jorge walk in, a newspaper in one hand, so he stood. "Of course," he said, holding out a hand in greeting. "Been a long time since I last saw you. How have you been?"

He slid the folded paper under one arm before shaking hands. "Well. I see you're none the worse for wear after your uncomfortable ordeal."

Only an asinine attorney could call a lengthy stint in a Mexican prison for a crime he didn't knowingly commit an *uncomfortable ordeal*.

"I survived," he said.

"That's more than I can say for a certain federal agent, I hear." Jorge held the paper up and gave him a smirk. "Carlos told me what happened, but I don't see any news reports about a missing badge. What'd you do with the body?"

Alejo returned to his seat, waited for Jorge to join him, and looked the man in the eye. "He's crab bait by now. If he does turn up, good luck identifying him."

Suspended silence met that announcement. Then, Jorge chuckled. "The benefits of Florida environmental habitat preservation, no doubt."

Alejo allowed himself a lopsided smile, as if in agreement, then glanced at Carlos who'd risen from his own seat.

His brother stacked the set of matching ledgers and carried them across the room. En route, he asked Jorge, "What about Marco?"

Jorge scowled. "He's gone deep underground, but don't worry, he'll surface. And when he does, we'll have a heart-to-heart."

Alejo kept his expression neutral. The fidgety, quick-footed snitch was in protective custody, so finding Marco would prove more difficult than Jorge realized.

Carlos removed from the wall a Picasso—real or replica, Alejo didn't know. But underneath was a very real safe. A few turns of a dial and it opened. Not wanting to appear too interested, Alejo didn't watch Carlos place the books inside, but he suspected they might contain all of the evidence the Feds would need to bring down the Las Cruces crime organization.

Carlos would have to launder his millions in drug money somehow, and what better way to do so than to use his own legal assets as a front for his illegal activity? Maybe...all he had to do was find a way to get in that safe.

*But how?*

"Is everything else on schedule?"

At Carlos' question, Alejo blinked, uncertain.

Jorge replied, "Yes. Our next shipment should arrive as planned."

"Shipment?" Alejo asked.

Taking his seat once more, Carlos smiled. "Set up the meet, *hermano*. You have one week. If Santiago is as powerful as he appears, he should be able to be here in time to see how efficient and effective a little American ingenuity can be."

## Chapter Eleven

His time was almost up. *One more day.* "Just one more day," Alejo murmured as he ran an electric razor over his cheeks and chin and stared in the bathroom mirror at the lines etched into his face from the strain over the past week.

He'd spent most of the time shadowing Carlos during the day like a pup on a leash, while soaking up as much information as possible for his nightly visits to the pool skimmer where he left word for the Feds. Although Carlos shared some aspects of the operation with him, he hadn't garnered enough trust to gain an opportunity for a closer look at those ledgers. And every time he questioned the Feds about whether they had enough evidence from the taped conversations, the answer remained the same. They needed more. They needed the *drugs*. And more importantly, they needed an incontrovertible link between Carlos and those drugs.

Tomorrow, Carlos would meet with a man he believed to be Santiago. The Feds were banking on the fact that, since the two men hadn't ever met, Carlos wouldn't recognize an imposter. If all went well, they'd catch Carlos red-handed with a substantial shipment of illegal narcotics. If they were wrong, the whole plan would go to hell in an instant.

He set the shaver aside, next to his nephew's Spiderman toothbrush, and patted on some aftershave.

As hard as this week had been for him, he could only guess how tough it must've been for Crystal. She'd remained cooped up in the house

all week while Carlos' men rotated shifts in twos to ensure she stayed put. He had managed to catch her alone a couple of times and tried to lift her spirits, but he could do little more than steal a kiss or murmur a few words of encouragement for fear of getting caught. And each day she seemed to shrink further inside herself.

The days were tough, but the nights were the worst. Knowing she lay just down the hall and he was unable to go to her had pushed him to the edge of insanity. How much worse then must it be for her to have to lay with his brother each night?

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

He finished drying his hair, hung the towel on a hook, and put on his underwear and pants. When he stepped into the hall to retrieve the rest of his clothes from his room, he spotted Carlos coming from the master bedroom. He was fastening his watch to his left wrist.

"You're not dressed for a run?"

Carlos looked up. "No. Marissa called. Some trouble with a client. I need to go in early. Come by after you've had breakfast. I want to go over particulars for tomorrow's meeting."

"Sure thing."

Carlos left and, after Alejo finished dressing, he went down to the dining room to check on Crystal. He found her seated at the table alone, spooning a bite of oatmeal into her mouth. She appeared beautiful in a white tank top, blue jean cutoffs, and sandals. Her sunshine hair was pulled away from her face and up into a ponytail at the crown of her head. The bruise on her cheek had faded, now easily concealed beneath her natural-toned makeup.

"Mornin'."

She glanced up at him, started to smile, but stopped. The slight curve of her lips flattened as she looked around him then back toward the kitchen where he could hear Margarita humming an old Spanish ballad.

He missed her smile and hated to see it overshadowed by fear and uncertainty.

*One more day.* After tomorrow everything would be all right.

"Where's Chris?" he asked, filling his own bowl with oatmeal and

taking it to the table.

"In the summer, I let him stay up later, so he often sleeps later, too." Her gaze slid to the doorway again.

"If you're waiting for Carlos, he left early for the office. Something about a problem with a client." Although he said it, he didn't believe it. He suspected Carlos and Marissa had plans that didn't have anything to do with a client.

At his announcement, however, he saw Crystal's shoulders relax, watched her chest rise and fall with a deep breath and soft sigh.

"I'm to head there myself as soon as I finish up here."

Her gaze collided with his. Raw longing shone in those bright blue eyes of hers, and he knew his own were a mirror image. Although he sat across the table from her, in his usual seat, he wanted to be nearer. He wanted to hold her in his arms again, sink into her warm depths, feel her breath on his neck as she cried out his name.

"*Señora*, I'm afraid I don't have all of the ingredients I need for tonight's dinner." Margarita's announcement broke through his musings and made him as well as Crystal look toward the housekeeper who stood in the kitchen doorway, removing her apron. "I have to pick up some fresh avocado, and I just used the last of the dishwashing liquid."

Crystal stood. "Let me get my purse. Will twenty-five be enough for you to get all you need?"

"*Sí, señora.*"

Alejo returned to his oatmeal but strained to hear the ladies after they moved out of the room. A short time later, he heard a door open and close. He got up from his chair and moved to the large window that faced the front yard. He nudged the drape aside and peeked.

He'd just seen the taillights of the housekeeper's car disappear from sight when he sensed someone step into the room. Releasing the drape, he turned.

Crystal faced him from across the room, a hopeful expression in her eyes.

He wanted to tell her this wasn't a good idea, had opened his mouth to do just that, when he took the first step toward her. The space

between them disappeared in a flash. She was in his arms, and he couldn't remember a single reason why he shouldn't kiss her.

He claimed her with an urgent kiss, his tongue sweeping inside, while he spun her around until her back was against the wall. With one arm around her waist and a fist wrapped in her ponytail, he held her tight against him. She still wasn't close enough to suit his needs. He pulled the band, releasing her hair to cascade around her shoulders.

"Crystal," he said on a breath when he broke free of the kiss.

"Shh," she said. Her hands were everywhere, running over his chest and shoulders, fingering the buttons on his shirt. "We don't have much time. The grocery store isn't that far away." She pressed her lips to his once, then against his chin, his jaw, his neck.

*Oh, God.*

With both hands on her butt, he lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around him. He half-walked, half-stumbled his way into the living room where he collapsed to his knees on the plush burgundy carpet and laid her down, his body covering hers.

He gave her another hard kiss while his mind ticked off the many reasons why now was the perfect time to take advantage of their solitude. The guards were tasked to prevent Crystal from leaving, which meant they stayed outside watching the exits. They weren't responsible for keeping track of what went on inside the home. Carlos would be busy with Marissa regardless of whether there was real trouble with a client. The housekeeper was gone.

For all intents and purposes, they had the house to themselves, so long as his nephew remained asleep.

Breaking from another frantic kiss, he lifted himself with both arms and asked, "Christopher?"

She pulled him back down with a hand on his nape. "Don't worry. He sleeps like a log."

When she wrapped her arms around him, her hand collided with the handgun at the small of his back. He heard her suck in a breath, so he reached around back, removed it, and set it aside on the coffee table. Since he'd reloaded it with live rounds, it was safer on the table rather than

tucked in his waistband right now anyway. Giving her a smile to soothe the worry from her gaze, he slid the shirt off, dropped it aside, and leaned over her once more—waiting, watching.

There it was. Tentative, but nonetheless special, her smile emerged. She raised her hands to brush up his arms, over his shoulders, and around his neck.

He lowered his face toward hers. Her eyes drifted closed. When his lips touched hers, the kiss became the most poignant moment of his life. He held the woman of his heart in his arms. The pain of the past paled in comparison to the emotions that flooded his mind, body, and spirit. He lingered over the kiss, wanting time to stand still.

A scrape. A click.

A chill froze the blood in his veins.

He didn't have to look up to know his revolver wasn't where he left it and the firearm's hammer was cocked.

"Get off of my wife."



## Chapter Twelve

Terror streaked along every nerve in Crystal's body at the sound of Carlos' voice.

Breathing was a struggle, and her muscles were gelatin. How she managed to climb to her feet after Alejo rolled off of her, she didn't know. She heard more than saw Alejo join her. She couldn't look away from the black hole that was the muzzle of the handgun.

"The strangest thing happened on my way to the office," he said casually, as if he were speaking to close friends. As if his finger wasn't poised over the trigger of a gun. "Jorge called to tell me he'd just heard from a missing source in Mexico. Do you know what that source said?"

Alejo didn't respond.

"He told a rather interesting tale of a certain visit you had in prison with federal agents. That's when I knew...I *knew* you'd been fucking with me all along."

The muzzle's aim shifted back and forth between them.

"So I came back here only to discover you've been fucking up more than my plans."

"Carlos—" she tried.

"Don't! Don't say a goddamn word."

Crystal flinched, held up her hands, and finally managed to look at Carlos' face; his eyes were so cold, so hard.

"I had to fucking coax you forever to get you in my bed, but Lazarus here shows up on your doorstep and you spread your legs for

him in a matter of days." He turned the gun on Alejo once more. "Let's see you rise from the dead after—"

"You won't get away with it," Alejo said, interrupting him.

Carlos laughed. "You've been watching too much TV drama, *hermano*. This won't be the first murder I get away with. If you'd done me the favor and died in that damn plane crash I arranged, I wouldn't have to do this in front of my wife. This time I'll just have to ensure you can't come back and that no one ever finds your body." His smile turned into something that was pure evil. "Isn't it ironic that *you* told me how best to do it? I'm sure you'll make perfect crab bait."

"No! Please," she said, trying to step in front of Alejo, but he grabbed her arm and forced her to stand aside.

"They're listening," he told Carlos.

"What?"

"The Feds," Alejo said. "I bugged your house. They're recording every word you say, have been for days. You kill me, and they'll have it all on tape. You'll have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide that they won't find you."

Crystal dared a glance at Alejo. Was he telling the truth?

Carlos' eyes narrowed. "You're bluffing."

"Stuck to the mantle behind me. Right end, back corner. See for yourself."

Keeping the gun aimed at them, Carlos started to circle around them but, halfway there, he seemed to think better of moving farther from the doorway and stopped.

"Crystal, check it."

Slowly, she walked over to the fireplace and ran her hand along the underside of the mantle until she felt a small object. Using her nail, she pried it loose and held it up for him to see.

"You son of a bitch!" His arm extended as he took aim.

"Papa!"

"No!" Crystal threw out her hands to signal her son to stop, but it was no use. He ran through the doorway and straight to Carlos. The second he was within reach, Carlos grabbed the boy by the arm and

turned the gun on him.

Christopher's surprised cry of alarm chilled her to the bone.

"Oh, God, no. Please, Carlos. Don't do this," she pleaded to no avail. His focus was on Alejo who'd taken a step forward at Christopher's appearance, but now stood still in the middle of the room, his hands raised in surrender.

"You'd shoot your own son?" he asked.

Carlos' laugh held no humor and all menace. "Probably not, but I would shoot yours."

Alejo's normally bronzed skin paled, and she knew he realized what she'd failed to tell him. His gaze slid to her and, with tears streaming from her eyes, she nodded.

Christopher squirmed until Carlos shook him with a barked demand to, "Be still."

"Mama!" He was crying now as hard as she was, his thin arms held out toward her. She stood there, so close, unarmed and unable to do anything—a fact that ripped her heart in two.

"Please, Carlos," she begged. "He's just a child."

"Wrong! He's my ticket out of here."

A sudden flash. A loud bang. It came from the dining room and preceded a cacophony of chaos.

For Crystal, the next few seconds moved in slow motion.

There were sounds of a scuffle outside. The front door crashed open, and shouts of, "DEA," and, "FBI," echoed as agents poured into the foyer.

Carlos spun to face the new threat with Christopher held tight in front of him, the muzzle pressed against the boy's head.

So many agents. Black clothes. Black guns...sweeping toward them.

Alejo turned his back on Carlos, stepping between him and law enforcement. "No," he shouted. "Don't shoot—"

She saw the flash of Carlos' revolver before the rapport of gunfire registered on her mind—the muzzle aimed not at her son, but at Alejo's back.

"No!" She screamed and started to run forward only to be cut off by

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Christopher who'd broken free and run to her the moment Carlos raised his gun.

Alejo collapsed to his knees, the words, "my son," a mere whisper on his lips.

With a clear shot, the agents opened fire on Carlos as Crystal dove to cover her son. When the gunfire ceased, Carlos lay dead on the floor a few feet from the motionless body of his brother.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Six months later*

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!" The party guests continued to sing, many horribly off key, as Crystal set the homemade cake down in front of Christopher. After he blew out the candles, Crystal joined the others in applauding. Through the viewfinder of his video camera, he watched her cut the cake and dole out the portions to Christopher and the other kids. When all of them were served, she fingered a dollop of icing off the platter. Her gaze lifted and locked on him just as her fingertip dipped into her mouth.

Alejo licked his lips, knowing she could see it, which was confirmed when she grinned. Another swipe of her finger across the platter and she had a second dollop she brought to him.

He turned off the digital video camera, lowered it, and smiled.

Stopping in front of him, she held up her finger. "Want a taste?"

He opened his mouth, sucked the icing from her finger, and never looked away from her gorgeous blue eyes. When she pulled her finger out, he murmured, "Mmm. Delicious."

"I thought you'd like it. Vanilla frosting is your favorite."

"I wasn't talking about the icing." It did his heart good to see the blush that rose to her cheeks.

She gave him a playful nudge on the shoulder and murmured a sexy, "Behave."

He chuckled and raised the camera once more to keep taping the birthday party antics. While the kids dug in to the desserts and Crystal helped Christopher open his presents, Alejo marveled at how much had changed since the last time he watched a video of a birthday party.

"*Señor De la Cruz?*" Margarita asked from the open patio door, a refilled pitcher of fruit punch in her hand. No longer their housekeeper, the elderly woman had retired following Carlos' death, but Crystal had invited her to the party because, despite her faults, she was the closest thing to a grandmother that Christopher knew. "You have company."

Before she'd finished speaking, he caught sight of a familiar face. He set the camera down and met the man just inside the house.

"Special Agent Joseph Beck," Alejo said, holding out his hand to the new arrival. "What brings you to Florida?"

They shook hands, and the agent glanced out the window. "I didn't mean to interrupt, but I wanted to tell you in person the last of the red tape has been cut. You're officially free and clear of all former charges against you. The FBI Academy reinstated you, so you're welcome to graduate with the next class at their commencement ceremonies."

Yes, a lot had changed. His brother was dead and buried next to their parents. And although he'd personally suffered a collapsed lung and internal damage from the bullet that had required emergency surgery, hospitalization, and rehabilitation, Alejo's physical wounds had healed. As he looked out the window at his new bride and son, he realized the emotional wounds were healing, too, though they might take a little longer.

"Thanks, but I'm following a different career path now." One that enabled him to be home each night to tuck his son in bed and hold his wife close to his heart.

Carlos' illegal drug trafficking operations had been dismantled piece by piece, with multiple arrests and seizures in Florida and a couple of other Gulf Coast states, after he and Crystal gave complete access of company records and computer databases to the DEA. The legitimate business started by his parents had taken a blow, but their cooperation with law enforcement and news of the change in management had helped

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turn the tide.

Beck put a hand on his shoulder, his expression one of understanding. "You have a fine family. I wish you all the best."

"Thanks." The two men shook hands again, and Alejo invited him outside for some birthday cake.

"No. That's okay. I appreciate the offer, but I can't stay."

"Some other time then."

After showing Beck out, Alejo returned to the back patio. As he approached the table, Christopher looked up from the latest gift he had opened. A big smile lit his face, and he said, "Look, Daddy!"

So much had changed, the best of which... He was home.

The End

### **Author Bio**

Since she was a former award-winning crime reporter, Brandi's stories tend to involve edge-of-your-seat suspense. But, then again, maybe it's because she loves living a hectic life. Brandi does seek serenity in a log home with her own hero of a husband, a very precocious son, and the obligatory pets. She's an avid shooter, bowler, and reader of romance, when she's not writing, editing, designing Web pages, or being a wife and mother.

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