

Cerrídwen Press

Lise Fuller



Intimate
Deceptions

A Cerridwen Press Publication



www.cerridwenpress.com

Intimate Deceptions

ISBN #1-4199-0787-5

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Intimate Deceptions Copyright© 2006 Lise Fuller

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

Cover art by Elphaba.

Electronic book Publication: November 2006

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing Inc., 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Cerridwen Press is an imprint of Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.®

INTIMATE DECEPTIONS

Lise Fuller

Dedication

*For Tom
To the families of all those who have served*

Trademark Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

AR-15: Colt Defense LLC

Bic: Bic Corporation

Baby Glock: Glock, Inc.

Glock 9mm: Glock, Inc.

Leatherman: Leatherman Tool Group, Inc.

M-4: New Colt Holding Corp.

Plymouth: Chrysler Corporation

Remington 308: Remington Arms Company, Inc.

T-R-O-U-B-L-E: Travis Tritt, Inc.

Veuve Clicquot 1995 La Grande Dame Rosé: The House of Veuve Clicquot

Chapter One

Dark, familiar eyes stared at Brodie Crawford with contempt, their allure strong as ever. Then the jukebox in the rowdy cowboy bar clicked, changing the song, causing the crowd to shift in the smoky haze. The gap between Brodie and the petite woman closed. Elena ducked in the throng on the dance floor and he lost sight of her – thank God.

An old tune about women and heartache blared as if warning him. Like the song, Elena Alvarez Ramirez spelled trouble with a capital T – the kind he didn't need, but Brodie could never stop looking at the woman once her gaze caught his eye.

He stopped searching for her, afraid she would return. Relaxing in his chair, he fingered the deep scratches in the old wooden table. He could still get lost in Elena's enigmatic brown eyes. Tiger eyes he'd called them once, a combination of browns and yellows that changed with her moods. She'd laughed. But Brodie knew. Drowning in their depths, he'd give her anything.

He couldn't afford to do that again.

"Shit." He slammed back a swig of warm beer. Eight years. Eight damn years had passed since he'd seen her. One would think between the God-knows-how-many affairs and the risky missions he'd been on with the elite Army Special Forces teams, he would be cured of Elena by now. Fucking damn if they didn't do squat. If anything, seeing her made him more vulnerable.

"Elena's here." Jake Sorensen, a cowhand on his father's ranch, frowned as he sauntered up and sat down to nurse a third bottle of beer.

Brodie shifted in the seat, trying to ease the tightening in his pants he got just thinking about the raven-haired beauty. "Yeah." He'd seen her, wearing tight jeans and kick-ass boots, drunk on some lanky cowpoke's arm.

"You two was friends once. Just thought –"

"Don't," Brodie interrupted, his red-headed temper rising. "I sure as hell won't think about her."

"Sure thing, boss." He rubbed the gray in his sandy-brown temples.

"Jake, I ain't your boss. My father is. Besides, I'm only back in Laredo for two weeks 'cause the old man insisted. He still hasn't told me why. And since you can't tell me a damn thing, I'll just bide my time. Trust me. I'll be gone soon enough." Brodie hiked his cowboy boots on another chair and rubbed the pocket of his worn jeans where he'd shoved his return flight tickets to North Carolina and Fort Bragg. Looking at Elena, he couldn't wait to leave.

The older man slumped against the back of the seat and reset his hat on his head. "Someday the ranch will be yours. You might wanna come home, Sergeant, when you're finished risking your neck protecting the world."

Brodie winced. "You make what I do sound heroic."

Jake snorted. "I know better. It's shit work."

Brodie took a swig. "I like it." Fifteen years his senior, Jake had been part of an SF team once but he'd been burned by the political machinations of the Army. Brodie understood Jake's reservation. He'd seen too many guys get eaten up by rear-echelon screwups. "REMF's" they'd call the guys who worked the staff jobs. A derogatory term for the paper-pushers saying they did the dirty with their mothers. Brodie thought the tag appropriate. A screwup by an REMF caused the permanent limp Jake had. The injury often pained him and Jake drank a bit more than he should to ease the torture.

Brodie listened to the music. "T-R-O-U-B-L-E," crooned Travis Tritt from the speakers. Just then he caught a glimpse of Elena. His one-time lover leaned over the arm of the cowboy she stood with, giving him an eyeful of her perky cleavage through the deep-cut bodice of the red blouse.

"Fuck." He gritted his teeth. "What does she do these days?"

Jake stared at him from the corner of his eye. "I thought you didn't care?"

Brodie cut his look toward his friend. Elena was none of his business—but he couldn't help his curiosity.

Jake shrugged. "Picks up men." The corners of his mouth twitched as he gulped some brew.

"I can see what she does for pleasure, dammit. What does she do for a job? She wanted to be a social worker."

"Oh." Jake nodded. This time he didn't bother to hide his grin. "She does social work, all right, but what she does is risky business, if'n you ask me."

"Which is?" Jake's humor wore on Brodie.

Jake's smile vanished and the cowboy eyed Brodie dead-on. "Like I said, she picks up men. Bad ones."

Brodie studied the cowpoke and swallowed hard. "You mean to tell me she makes a living on drunken shithheads?"

Jake snorted, leaning back and balancing the chair on its rear legs. "That's a polite way of putting it."

Something snapped inside Brodie. Every time he'd lain with a woman, the only face he saw was the heart-shaped innocence of Elena. How could the prim, pretty woman have sunk so low? Anger boiled to the surface. Brodie worked his jaw back and forth, glaring at the couple. He wanted to grab Elena and take her someplace. Put some sense in her head. Tell her father what she'd been up to. Make sure her evening activities came to a screeching halt. "What does Sheriff Alvarez say about this?"

"Her dad?" Jake scratched his chin. "Luke knows. He don't like it none."

Brodie jumped forward in the chair. "And he hasn't stopped her?" It took all his learned reserve to stay in the seat. "You ever lay with her?"

Jake lifted his legs and the front of Jake's seat thudded on the planked floor. "Hell, no. What do you take me for?"

"She have a pimp or she free-balling it?"

"Boy, that's not what I—"

The crash of breaking glass arrested Brodie's attention. The drunken squeeze Elena targeted knocked over several bottles trying to keep himself from falling. Elena swung one of the man's arms over her small shoulders to steady him.

Rising, Brodie breathed through his clenched jaw, seething.

"Easy, son." Jake stood and put a hand on his arm. "You're not listening right."

Brodie yanked Jake's fingers away. "I heard you only too well. I ain't the naïve boy that left here eight years ago."

Elena walked out the door with the creep. Brodie couldn't let this happen. Maybe he couldn't change the past but he could do something about her future. His promise to never be involved with her shattered. He made for the exit. The clip-clop of boots behind him let him know Jake followed.

Reaching the exit, Brodie shoved the door open, banging the wooden panels against the outside wall. The hot August air hit him in the face. Across the lot, the roughneck hovered over Elena. The man pushed her against a ragtag old pickup parked near the dumpster, smearing kisses over her face and down her neck. Then the bastard reached for her breasts.

"Brodie, ease back, boy. She's on a job." Jake grabbed his arm.

If anything, Jake's words only inflamed him. This couldn't happen. Not to his beautiful Elena. Brodie broke away. Whether he ran or walked, he wasn't sure. Brodie only knew when he reached the bastard he jerked him up and off Elena. Slamming his fist in the cowboy's face, Brodie put the man flat on his back, sliding toward the broken bottles near the rest of the trash.

"Brodie!" Elena protested and grabbed for him. He blocked her arms and tossed her over his shoulder, turning to walk off—until he caught a glimpse of a two-by-four arcing toward him from somewhere behind. Brodie ducked just in time to avoid the strike and kicked his attacker in the gut. In seconds, Jake stood by him, unarming then grappling with the shadowed stranger who had come from nowhere.

The cowboy he'd thrown still lay on the pavement groaning.

"Put me down, you dumb jackass." Elena pounded on his back. "You're screwing everything up."

"I'm trying to. Hell if I'll have you getting screwed any ways else."

"Look, you arrogant prick. Don't even try to run my life." She squirmed in his grasp but Brodie had a death grip on her.

Jake and the attacker were about the same size and more evenly matched than Brodie would have expected. Jake, after all, had been a large man. Brodie wanted to put Elena down and help but he grew afraid she'd take off with her trick. Then he noticed a pair of handcuffs in her back pocket. Had she'd gotten into the kinky too? Without questioning her, Brodie grabbed the cuffs. Lowering Elena near the truck, he hooked a shackle around her wrist.

"Dammit, Brodie, what are you doing?" Elena pulled against him.

Brodie circled the chain a few times around the post to the driver's side mirror, tightening the length so she couldn't get loose, and cuffed her other hand. "This should hold you a minute."

"Damn you," she yelled and tugged against the chain.

Her john stood by the time Brodie finished. The eyes of her intended trick widened. The man took off before Brodie could stop him.

Thinking the jerk wouldn't be back, Brodie crossed his arms and leaned against the truck. Jake pressed the attacker into a grappling hold, though the man still struggled. "You need help?" Brodie asked.

Panting, Jake grinned. "Naw. Still got the touch. Feels good."

Brodie chuckled. "For an old man with a limp, you move pretty fast."

"Yuh never forget the training." Jake grunted as an elbow flew into his gut.

"Larry, stop." Elena ceased her struggles. "You're not helping."

"You know him?" Brodie asked.

"Yes, you stupid lummo." She tugged twice against the cuffs, the metal shackle clanging against the rod of the mirror.

"He your owner?"

"Owner?" She looked confused.

"Pimp, manager. Whatever you call the job these days." If he was, Brodie stood ready to murder the guy.

"Pimp?" She gave him that pissed-off look again, the one that said she would unleash her fury.

Thing was, he always thought she looked cute when she did that.

"Ooooooh, *umph*." She snapped her arms back, causing the links of the cuffs to tighten even more. "Get—the—key—out—of—my—pants—pocket."

"Sure thing, sugar." Brodie sauntered around back of her and let his hands slide from her ribs to her narrow waist and sensuous hips. "I didn't know you've been exploring the more perverse aspects of sex."

"Perverse? Errrr," she growled and let her head fall against his chest.

Brodie wrapped his arms around Elena and pulled her to him. "How much do you charge?" he whispered in her ear. "I'll pay for your time. We need to talk."

"Talk?" She glanced at him over her shoulder and arched a brow. "We needed to do that years ago but you wouldn't listen."

"I'm listening now." Brodie tried to ignore how warm, how right, she felt against him. His body didn't care what she'd been up to. He still wanted her.

"I charge two hundred and fifty an hour."

"Two fifty? Since when did streetwalkers start charging by the hour?"

She turned up her nose. Contempt riddled her voice. "I break the time up in ten-minute increments." She presented him a fake smile and batted her lashes. "Men don't last that long. The price is affordable and I can turn a lot of tricks."

Brodie held her tight to prevent himself from losing control. He wanted to cry, except men didn't do that. What had happened to cause Elena to lose her dreams? To become...

He couldn't think about her fall. He had to do something to bring her back. Fingering her pockets, he found the key and released the cuffs, letting them hang on the mirror.

She turned around and stepped away, massaging her wrists. "Brodie, you just cost me."

Pulling out his wallet, he shoved five hundred in her palm and closed her fingers around the money. "This will last us two hours, enough time to get me to a cash machine for more."

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't want your damn money."

He closed the gap between them and hovered over her. "I didn't think prostitutes were picky about who paid them as long as they got paid."

She dropped her arms. "Fine. But you're about to see how wrong you are. And for that you *will* pay." She took the cuffs off the mirror and shoved them into her back pocket, along with the money. "That man—" she pointed into the darkness where her squeeze had run, "was my score."

"Yeah," Brodie belted out. "Guess now you'll have to spend the night with me."

"I don't think so." She ignored him and walked toward Jake. "Let him go."

Jake eased his hold on the man but Brodie was too distracted to care.

"Why didn't you tell him?" Elena glared at Jake with her pissed-off look.

"I tried, but..." Jake shrugged.

"Yeah? Figures. He never did listen." She sauntered toward Brodie. "I'm going home. I suggest you do the same. Give that bastard father of yours my regards."

Brodie grabbed her arm. "You took my money, dammit. You'll provide a service for that."

Her partner jumped. Jake grabbed him back. "It's okay, Larry. They's old friends."

Irritated, Elena swerved on Brodie. "Look, you dumb idiot, you just cost me ten thousand. The five hundred will be compensation for that."

"What? How the hell did you think you'd make ten thousand on that john?" With growing irritation, Brodie listened to Jake chuckle and wondered what his friend thought so funny. None of this was a laughing matter.

"Because he wasn't a john." Elena tugged her arm free. Hands on hips, she stepped next to Brodie so their bodies touched. Livid, she looked up at him from his chest. "I was bringing him in. He's got a ten-thousand-dollar price on his head from the bank. I could've used that money."

Brodie felt the blood drain from his face. "You're a bounty hunter."

"Bingo." She cocked her head and backed up. "Glad your genius is finally showing. Always were brilliant in the book-smart department but never in common sense." She turned away.

Brodie swung her around and pulled her against him. "That's dangerous work for a little girl like you."

The anger in her eyes abated, replaced by a look of sorrow. "Not as dangerous as other things I've done in my life. Now leave me alone." She jerked away. Keys in hand, she unlocked the pickup then jumped in and started the engine. Freed, her partner ran around the truck and hopped in the other side.

When Elena took off, she didn't look back.

Brodie took a deep breath.

"I tried to tell yuh." Jake stood alongside him.

"Yeah." Brodie shook his head.

"I know." Jake's rough voice grew quiet. His friend put a hand on Brodie's shoulder and squeezed. "You wanna go home?"

Brodie huffed. "And deal with my piss-and-vinegar father? No. I'd rather get drunk."

Jake sniggered. "You got it." Slapping him on the back, the cowhand walked toward the door of the honky-tonk.

Before Brodie turned to follow, he glanced down the road. A drop of moisture etched a path along his cheek as he watched Elena's taillights disappear. Brodie chalked his reaction up to the heat and exertion. Wiping his face, he took a deep breath. Elena snubbed him tonight just as hard as she'd slammed the door on him eight years ago. He'd be damned if he'd open up his heart again.

Rigid, he marched to the saloon. When Jake held the door for him, Brodie smirked. Stopping just inside, he returned a gaze from a pretty blonde. Yeah, a good drunk was exactly what he needed. That and some companionship would go a long way to erase any thoughts of Elena.

At least, for the time being.

* * * * *

Larry Murphy stared at her. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Okay, be obtuse." He massaged then rolled his shoulder.

Elena knew Larry wouldn't take long to get to the point.

"Who was that guy?"

"Nobody." She didn't want to talk about Brodie.

Larry ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "A nobody who just cost us big-time."

He studied her. His piercing gaze demanded an answer but Elena only sealed her lips.

"Fine." Larry's voice broke the silence. "You know if Jake hadn't been on the other end of my beating, I would have worked harder."

"Seemed like you two were having fun." She stopped at the end of the lot, catching a glance of Brodie from her side mirror.

"Humph. I wasn't worried about getting killed this time. Jake only worked to hold me back. If you hadn't asked me to stop, I would've had him." Larry shrugged, peering at her. "So, your friend. He's what, six-three? About two-hundred-and-thirty pounds?"

"Sounds right." She really wanted the ex-cop in her partner to drop the subject.

"The color of his eyes?"

Elena frowned. "You're taking vitals?"

"Maybe," Larry said. "Like to have 'em, just in case. Never know when I'll need to call some friends in the department for help. I wouldn't want to meet this guy in a dark alley."

Elena looked upward and said a small prayer. "Ice-coldhearted blue. Now let the subject drop."

"Then tell me who he is. I don't like people threatening my partner."

"It's personal and won't be an issue. Not anymore. Trust me, okay?"

Larry jerked his chin in a nod. "Have it your way."

Elena sighed, grateful her partner let his questioning go. Staring in the rearview mirror, she watched Brodie walk into the saloon. If possible, his shoulders had broadened. He had a harder look about him, more muscular than when they were kids. And, God, his strength. Nothing she tried had worked to loosen his hold. She couldn't even budge him. And there was something else she couldn't finger. He had a sharper edge, menacing somehow, more smooth. A guy who took what he wanted, when he wanted. If he wanted it. She knew he didn't desire her but some struggling passion lurked below his surface. Her gut warned her to be careful.

Elena stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red from the smoke, her makeup smeared in the struggle. She looked terrible. Not an image she sought when she ran into Brodie for the first time in years. How many times had she imagined their

meeting again? She had wanted to look devastating, show him how well she'd been doing on her own, especially without him—or any man for that matter. Throw her success in his face.

Instead, he caught her on a job looking like a whore, driving this piece of crap truck she used as a cover for her business. What Elena couldn't understand was why he even bothered to interfere.

Probably his ego. It'd always been easily bruised. To see a girl whose virtue he'd taken in a profession that had no innocence must have galled him. That had to be why.

Huffing, she ran a hand through her straight hair. It had been longer when Brodie left for the Army, down to her waist. He'd liked it long. He used to run his fingers through her loose tresses. Now the length fell just below her shoulders. Elena wondered what he thought of her newer look.

"Dammit," she mumbled, shaking off the growing warmth in her belly. He didn't want her. And why would he? From all accounts, he still had plenty of women throwing themselves at him. Why should she worry about what he thought? "You idiot..." Her voice trailed off.

"Huh?" Confusion echoed in Larry's voice. "Idiot is not a name I recognize."

"Not you."

He frowned. "I wasn't thinking about me. I thought you were talking about the he-who-won't-be-named."

She rubbed the smooth surface of the steering wheel. Giving up, she glanced at Larry. "Brodie Crawford."

"The Triple J heir?"

"Yeah." She grimaced. Part of the problem with her and Brodie's relationship had been his family's money. "He was a friend once, is all."

"Friend?"

The derision in Larry's voice grew evident. He suspected more, Elena was sure. Fourteen years her senior and a former detective with the Dallas P.D., her partner was no dummy, which was why she didn't want to talk about Brodie. Larry would never let something he thought important go until he knew everything, especially when it came to her love life. Elena thought his concern funny. As a hard-driving investigator, why should he care? Yet his concern was one of Larry's quirks, one that made him human. He and his wife constantly worked to set her up with one guy after another. Usually she thought their efforts cute.

But not tonight. Unfortunately keeping her past with Brodie a secret had come too late. Larry saw too much. "Okay, lover then. My first." She threw him some bait, hoping to keep his curiosity at bay.

"Did you ever have more than one real lover?"

Elena didn't have to see Larry to know he'd cocked one of his black brows in question. They'd been partners for three years. He knew her background and she knew

his. Those details had been part of their initial agreement. No secrets between them that could come and bite the other in the ass. "Very funny. I'm selective, is all."

"Shit, when's the last time you got any? You're more celibate than a Jesuit priest. Besides, from the sound of your former marriage, you never made love."

She shrugged. "Mannie Ramirez loved me, even if he is a drug-dealing jerk."

"But you never loved him back."

"Yeah." Elena's voice cracked.

"But you loved this guy." There was no question in Larry's voice.

"Yeah." Elena grew weary thinking about the brief relationship Brodie and she'd had together.

"You still do."

"Huh?" The blunt comment caught her off guard. "Hell, no. I hate the bastard and he hates me." His statement jarred her, made her defensive before she caught on to what Larry did. He'd been a great interrogator. It still showed. "Damn." She hit the steering wheel with her palm.

"That's what I thought." Larry relaxed against the hard seat. "A man doesn't try to save a woman he hates."

"Brodie would."

"Not like that. He felt something."

"Bullshit." Her blood ran cold thinking about how Brodie shut her out so many years ago before she'd had the chance to explain.

"I think you two are cute together, both hardheaded and stubborn. Feisty. Could work, you know."

She choked on her laughter. "He isn't interested, trust me. Even though my mother is blonde and blue-eyed, I'm part Hispanic, remember? His old man hates spics."

Larry frowned. "Don't talk about yourself like that. You're a good woman. Maybe someday you'll give a guy a chance to get close. Until then—" he closed his eyes, "Gloria and I will keep an eye on you."

"This time I want you and your wife to forget the matchmaking. I can already tell you anything with Brodie is a no-go. Besides, I don't want to get tied down. I already made that mistake once."

"You're lonely. Having someone to warm the bed sheets at night is a bonus."

"Psss." Elena pursed her lips. "Look, just because you found the perfect spouse and your first child is on the way doesn't mean I have to get hitched."

Larry shrugged. "Like I said. Have it your way. Just glad I'm aware of your predicament. Domestic disturbance cases are the most dangerous you know."

"Funny. But this is one situation you can steer clear of." She prayed he'd let the subject drop.

"Why?" He popped a lid open, his eagle eye peering into her.

"Because there isn't a relationship between Crawford and me, domestic or otherwise." She winced inside from the small lie but this time she'd remembered to conceal her pain so Larry wouldn't suspect. Her partner didn't need to know that part of her past. "There never will be, either. What we once had is gone." And that was the truth.

"Have things your way, *señorita*. Just remember Gloria and I will be there for you if you need us."

"Thanks." She let herself smile. In the short time Larry and she had been partners, he and his wife had become her closest friends. They had walked into her life when many of her old buddies walked out. That meant the world to her.

Larry leaned his head against the rear windowpane and relaxed. His snoring soon let her know he slept. Her partner had been up the last twenty-four hours watching their latest target. The authorities suspected Doug Moyer had connections to a money-laundering scam, one that impacted Fidelity General, the local bank. They wanted him for questioning except they couldn't find him. He kept skipping over the Mexican border to Nuevo Laredo. Because of Brodie's interference, the man would be almost impossible to find.

Headlights flashed in her eyes and the lull in the conversation let her think. Brodie still had that cocky sway when he stood. Even now, his haughty look did things inside her. Maybe because she knew something deeper always stood behind his façade.

But Brodie didn't care about her. It showed. Years ago, he'd accused her of betraying him. She'd wounded his pride but her fear of being ostracized by her family prevented her from telling him the truth. Before she could gather the courage to explain, he'd left without saying goodbye. He never looked back. Through the years, she'd heard the stories of his exploits—his heroics in the Middle East, the Army special teams and with women. Early on his father made sure of the latter, letting Elena know how unwanted she was by her ex-lover. Brodie led his carefree life without any concern for what he'd left behind along the border of Texas.

She blinked away her tears. She didn't need another shattered heart. She'd come too far. Yet the concern in his eyes when he looked at her...

It's not as dangerous as other things I've already done in my life.

Her comment to him echoed in her head like a mantra, a reminder to be careful. Elena wondered if the steel-hearted man Brodie had become had a clue why she'd said that.

But he couldn't have. He didn't know why. His ego wouldn't let him see anything beyond himself. Sure as hell, Brodie didn't understand the greatest pain she'd ever felt was when he walked out her door for good.

"You gonna get that?"

Her ringing cell phone woke Larry and broke her dark musings.

"Yeah." She grabbed the phone from her rear pocket. "Hello."

"Elena?" her sister sobbed.

"Theresa? What's wrong?" Elena inhaled slowly to build some patience so she could deal with her elder sibling. She loved Theresa. Her sister had been there for Elena when she needed her most but "emotional" could have been Theresa's middle name. "That cowboy you married giving you problems?" Elena knew better. Joe Salvino loved her sister like crazy but Elena always tried to use some tact to get Theresa to loosen up, not look at things so seriously.

"Joseph? No, he's..." Her sister broke into sobs again. "He's in the hospital."

"Calm down." Elena cursed under her breath. Didn't she have enough problems tonight? "What happened? Is Joe okay?"

"Yes. A mild concussion. He'll be in overnight is all but..." Her sister broke into another crying jag. "He tried to stop him, I promise, Elena, but he couldn't."

Unease grabbed Elena's gut. "Tried to stop who?"

Her sister's voice hitched. "Mannie. He came for her."

Elena swallowed hard, reigning in her fear until she could speak. "And?"

Silence. Nothing.

"Theresa?" Elena's voice cracked, echoing over the receiver.

"Janelle's gone," her sister's soft voice answered. "Your beautiful little girl."

Elena's breath caught as the realization slammed into her. Brodie's departure eight years ago paled against this terror. The worst pain she could feel wasn't Brodie's abandonment.

It was the abduction of her only child.

Chapter Two

The phone slipped from Elena's grasp and thudded on the car seat.

"Pull over." Larry's deep voice came to her through the haze. Elena only half-heard him. Inside dread seized her. Somehow, the truck glided to the curb. She listened as Larry picked up the phone and talked to her sister, getting the rest of the details. Theresa had called the police. Mannie already had an APB out on him for murder. He'd fled to Mexico.

This couldn't be. Mannie? A murderer? Drug peddler, yes, but...

She shook her head. Mannie didn't even show up half the time on the days he was supposed to visit their daughter. His business got in the way, so why would he take her?

Larry closed her phone. "Your sister called the police. They think your ex is already over the border. The police want to know if you want to start the Hague Convention procedures for international child extradition."

"I heard. Theresa talked loud enough."

"We'll get Janelle back." Larry put a hand on her shoulder. "You can prosecute. All we need to do is find him."

"All? Larry, if he stayed in Nuevo Laredo, he's probably underground. And even if I do find him, going through the Hague procedures will take months if not years and you know it. We've run enough of those cases for clients ourselves. Besides, you know the local Mexican court will make that decision. By the time the case comes up for trial, *if it does*, Mannie will have paid off all those who count." Elena bit back her tears. "No. I need to go and face Mannie myself."

Larry nodded. "Then I'll go with you."

"No. There won't be any 'we' this time." She looked at him. "You know what we do is illegal in Mexico. Get caught and the prison doors will swing. You won't be going."

Larry shook his head. "I'm your partner, remember? We work together."

"I appreciate the offer but you have a budding family to look after. In another month, you'll be a father. I can't do that to you or Gloria. Besides, I'll need someone here to run things. Get info and send money if I need cash."

"Your dad can do that."

"I don't want him to know."

"And how are you going to prevent him from finding out?"

She inhaled a ragged breath. "I can't. But I can delay things. At least until I'm in Nuevo Laredo. When I'm over the border, he won't be able to locate me."

"He'll still try."

"Put him off, okay? There's no reason to bring him into this. My mother will be upset enough as it is. Besides, I need you here."

Larry slumped in the seat and ran his fingers over his face.

Elena grabbed his hand and held it. "You know I'm right. Mannie won't hurt me. He wants me back too bad. I just need to figure out how to get Janie home without trouble. This is something I need to do alone."

Larry glared at her. "Not alone. Mannie might not want to hurt you but you don't know about his friends. With the drug trade and what's left of those bloody turf wars, Mexico's too dangerous right now. We need to find you some help."

"And money." Elena squeezed her eyes shut. "We're a cash flow business. That ten thousand would've helped."

"Yeah. I've got a little saved up. Just over three grand."

"No. You need that for the baby." She took the phone and shoved the instrument in her back pocket. As she moved, the cuffs in the other pocket jabbed her backside. *The five hundred.* She remembered.

Just then, she knew where she could get more.

* * * * *

The liquor had been good, the blonde even better. But Brodie couldn't focus on the woman or her burgeoning assets when she sat cross-legged on the barstool and leaned into him. When he asked Jake about Elena again, Crystal or Christie, whatever her name was, slapped him in the face.

Brodie had been rude, something he never did to a beautiful woman. When the blonde moved on to someone else, Brodie ordered something stronger. By the time the saloon rolled up for the evening, he sported a good drunk. Jake poured him into the company pickup and they headed for the ranch, still some miles outside of town.

On the way, Jake talked about the herd, the price of beef. Brodie half listened, commenting every once in a while. The ranch was his father's only love. Had been since his mother bled to death from a miscarriage. Brodie had turned twelve that year. Elena's uncle had been the emergency room physician. He'd said there'd been complications. When Nessie died, his father turned bitter. The day they buried his mother, Brodie lost his father's love for good.

As Jake pulled into the long drive to the ranch house, Brodie wondered why his dad had called him home. He could only guess the reason had something to do with the land. Nothing else really concerned his father.

Brodie scanned the stark countryside basking in the moonlight. This was Crawford territory. Had been for years. Generation after generation had settled here and worked the property to its current wealth. Cattle and oil. The land had been good to them.

Small hills along the range moved from shadow to light, seeming to waver as the truck traveled along the gravel road. How many times had he and Mannie gone riding over the ridge? They'd been old friends, childhood playmates. Even when Elena tagged along. A few years younger, she'd been like a little sister to them.

Until the one night Brodie took her virginity.

"Fuck." The place held too many memories.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Jake drove into the line of trees that surrounded the house, obscuring the hills and the once good times Brodie sought. In seconds he pulled in front of the main door to the Crawford family's sprawling ranch house.

Brodie glanced around to see what Jake talked about. Elena's pickup sat backed into a dark corner of the wide driveway under a patch of trees by the four-door garage, no doubt readied for a quick getaway.

Brodie stumbled from the running board. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"Only one way to find out." Jake met him on the other side of the truck and resettled the Stetson on his head.

Muffled voices came from inside, the sounds heated.

"Dammit." Sobering, Brodie stomped to the pair of large wooden doors, resting his hand on the curved knob, listening to his father and Elena banter.

"Girl, I ain't going to give you a damn thing." His dad's voice sounded strong as ever.

"Chet, no one else will know. You owe me this much." Elena's voice rose higher. "I need the money now. I've got to take off tonight before his tracks grow cold."

"You can't have it. You're not big enough to handle this."

"Like hell. You'd better hire me for this."

During the *tête-à-tête*, Brodie eased inside unnoticed, Jake behind him.

"Why?" Chet Crawford asked.

Brodie knew the tone. The firmness and consternation in his father's voice meant the old man had made up his mind — on whatever the issue was.

Brodie peered around the open door to the den.

Elena had placed her whitened knuckles on the old man's large burlled oak desk, her lips set, her eyes burning. "Because if you don't, I'll tell Brodie the truth about you. I swear I will."

Brodie always thought his father exuded the confidence and swagger of John Wayne. But in this moment, the man's aged face paled, his large frame slumped. The old man rubbed a wrinkled hand across his brow. For once his father looked all of the sixty-six years he'd lived on this Earth.

Brodie stepped into the room. "And what truth is that?"

Elena jumped.

Chet coughed. Regaining a bit of his bluster, his father smirked. "That she's trying to git herself killed and I ain't gonna let her."

"I am not." Elena straightened. "I'm only doing what I need to do."

"Which is?" Brodie crossed the room and hovered over her, planting his hands on his hips, his actions threatening, hoping she'd understand he wouldn't let her pressure his father. The man might be a bastard but he was Brodie's bastard to deal with, not hers.

She took one step back and folded her arms across her chest, glaring. "Blackmailing your father, what else?"

Brodie let his hands drop along his sides. "Get out."

"No." A small shiver took Elena but she got control of the reaction quick enough. Brodie knew he'd put the fear of God in her but she wouldn't budge.

Heat built in the air. The silent tension in the room threatened to crash down on them.

His father cleared his throat. "Son, it's all right."

The tiredness in his dad's voice grabbed Brodie. Caught off guard by the response, Brodie's anger fled. He stared at the old man.

Chet squinted at Elena, the sun-browned wrinkles deepening the corners around his eyes. A sign that said he meant business. "Okay, I'll give you the money —"

"What?" Brodie said, pissed. "She already conned me out of five hundred tonight. You don't need to give her a damn thing."

"—on one condition." Chet held up a finger.

Elena glanced from his father to Brodie then back at his dad, her eyes wary. "What's that?"

Chet rubbed his chin, standing in his John Wayne pose again. "Take Brodie with you, if you can convince him."

Elena's eyes widened. She looked at Brodie as if he had six eyes stamped on his forehead. "You've got to be kidding."

"Nope." His father crossed his arms over his barrel chest.

"You would purposefully put your only child in jeopardy? Why?" Elena squeaked.

"I have my reasons." His dad glanced at the picture of Brodie's mother over the large fireplace. His look transformed into one Brodie had to think back on to recognize. It wasn't one of anger. It wasn't one of heady, fierce competition. It wasn't one of deep thought or the wild joy of finding a new oil load.

It was one of sadness, as if some dreary notion possessed the man.

Brodie hadn't seen that face since his mother died. A strange worry gripped Brodie. What had happened to his father? Never before would Chet have let someone buffalo him or push him around. Never before would his dad have been so soft. His father had changed. And this new Chet Crawford bothered Brodie.

Coming out of the trance, his father glared at Brodie's one-time lover. "That's the deal." The old man leaned on his desk. "You have no choice."

The familiar steel-eyed glare his father gave Elena relieved Brodie to some degree. At least the look let him know Chet hadn't changed too much. Brodie wasn't sure he could handle a gentler, kinder dad.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" Brodie said.

Elena pressed her lips together and swallowed.

His dad looked at Elena. "Tell him."

After glancing at the floor, she looked at Brodie and cleared her throat. "Capture Mannie."

"Mannie? What the hell did he do? Break your heart?" Brodie snorted at his own sarcasm.

"Not hardly." Elena's tiger eyes leapt on him again. "He murdered Ty Baker, the head of the cattle association. Your father and his buddies have put a forty-thousand-dollar price on his head."

Brodie winced with confusion. Mannie had become a killer? "Why aren't the police handling this?"

Chet picked up a paper from his desk and handed the piece to Brodie. "Because he's across the border."

Brodie took the page and glanced over the report. The hot fierceness he coddled inside turned to cold anger. Notes in his father's hand were scribbled over the printed sheet, telling of Brodie's childhood friend's activities. "Mannie's a drug dealer?"

Elena nodded. "Major player now, at least around here."

Chet agreed. "The Laredo police think he's still in Nuevo Laredo, for now. The border town is his base of operation. And you know how bad it is working with the authorities there. Most of them are on the drug lords' payroll, especially those in that secret Mexicano force who've gone rogue. It'll be tough finding him."

"Christ." Brodie knew he shouldn't have had that last shot of tequila. He wanted to vomit.

Jake stepped up and grabbed the paper from him. "Chet, you know the boy can't go. He'd be locked up if his command ever found out he went over the border without permission. You want me to find him?"

"No." Brodie answered before Chet could, giving his dad a look that told the old man to back off. He didn't want his friend in jeopardy. With the limp, Jake would be more of a liability. "You're needed here."

"But, boy, you can't go," Jake insisted.

"I'm not." Brodie took the paper and tossed it on the desk. "Don't hire her."

Elena pressed her full lips together. "Brodie, I'm running out of time. I need some help. I really can't do this alone." Her bottom lip trembled.

"Then don't. Let the Feds handle Mannie. That's what they're for."

The almost imperceptible movement of her soft mouth tempted him. "I can't," she pleaded. "I have to go."

"Like hell you do. Leave it be. Besides, I thought Mannie was history to you."

She grabbed his sleeve, her voice desperate. "Brodie, if I have to I'll do this alone. But I need an advance to get started. I'll have informants to pay and I need money to buy my way into things."

He sneered. "So now you want the cash from me?"

"No." She released him and lifted her chin. "I want to earn the money, which is why I'm here to convince your father to hire me."

"I thought bounty hunters got paid after they brought the bad guys in."

"True, but this isn't your usual. I'm asking your dad to pay me to track him."

"And you'll go regardless of your safety."

She crossed her arms. "That's about it."

"God damn stubborn woman." Brodie worried about her. If this had been a hundred years ago, he'd lock her up for her own good. "I have a job. Why the hell should I help you?"

She took a deep breath, her generous cleavage peeking. "Because you owe me," she whispered. The tiger in her turned to quivering kitten. If Brodie didn't know better, he'd think she was about to cry.

But he knew what she meant. She thought their one night of lovemaking had ruined her life, made her a fallen angel, not the good, clean Catholic girl she was supposed to be before she married Mannie. But, hell, how could Brodie have known the one girl he'd loved had been engaged to his best friend? That they were keeping their engagement a secret even from him until she graduated from high school? "I don't owe you a damn thing." He turned to leave.

His father cleared his throat. "Son."

Brodie stopped and looked at Chet.

His father's usually gruff voice turned somber. "Tell him why you need to go, Elena."

Brodie studied the petite woman. Her stare seemed to peer into his gut. A large tear swelled in the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek. "Mannie took our little girl with him." Her voice broke.

Brodie bit his tongue before he cussed a blue streak. "You have a little girl? And you do this kind of work? What the hell is wrong with you? You should have been at home with her."

"And what would that have accomplished, you chauvinistic moron? You think I could have stopped Mannie if he really wanted to take her? *He's* her father." She bit her

lip then lowered her voice. "He's got rights to see her. He could have taken off with her at any time."

"Rights? How could he when he's into this shit?"

She frowned. "Because the police could never get anything to stick before."

Brodie cursed. "Then why would he take her now?"

"Because he won't be coming back." She stepped closer. "Brodie, you don't know the kind of activities he's gotten into." Her voice cracked.

"I have an idea," Brodie growled, thinking of all the shit he'd seen on his missions in the Middle East then South America.

She pressed her tender lips together. "His friends have expanded their business. They've even financed some child porno rings over the border. I...I'm afraid somehow Janelle might get sucked into..." She shrugged.

A weeping woman and a child in jeopardy were two things Brodie had a hard time turning down. He blew a breath through his clenched teeth, wondering how a crazy stunt like this would go down at headquarters if anything went wrong. "Fuck." He ran a hand over his face.

"You'll help me then? We can pretend to be tourists. Act like man and wife as our cover. My partner will help on this end."

"Why isn't that jerk going with you?"

"I'm not letting him."

"Why?"

She bit her lip. "He's about to be a father."

Brodie scowled. "If I remember right, I liked the conjugal part of acting like man and wife with you."

She slapped him. "You'll be keeping your hands to yourself and sleeping on the floor."

Brodie rubbed his burning cheek, thinking he should be too drunk to feel the sting. Or maybe he wasn't drunk enough. "You sure have a way of convincing a guy."

Elena backed off, a combination of worry and seduction showing in her look. "You will help me, won't you?"

Brodie frowned. He'd seen that look before, the night she told him she loved him, the disastrous time she convinced him to lay with her. His brain was too fuzzy to think clearly but warning bells clanged in his head. "Hell, no."

"But..." She grabbed his western shirt.

"No." He pulled her hands off his pockets. "I doubt the man has changed that much. Mannie would protect his own daughter." He unbalanced Elena as he pulled her into him. "I won't be lied to or used by you again." He pushed her away and set her on her feet. "Besides, I don't care what you've been up to. You're not equipped to do something this big. The money will only get you in trouble."

"You bastard." She straightened. "Fine." Elbowing Brodie aside, she stepped by him. "I'll do this myself."

"Elena." Chet tried to stop her but her boots echoed hard and alone on the planked floor. Chet sighed and squeezed his eyes closed as the door slammed, rubbing a hand over his face. "I'm worried about that little girl."

"Which one?" Right now, Brodie had a hard time understanding his father.

Chet stared at him, his eyes red. "Both of 'em. You don't know how determined that gal's gotten. She'll go alone if someone doesn't stop her."

"And why do you care?"

Chet's gray-eyed stare drilled Brodie. "It's my business, for now."

"Fine. But I'm leaving in the morning." Brodie turned to walk out.

"You can't leave yet."

Brodie stopped at the entrance, ready to pull his last trump on this game of secrets and manipulation with his father. "Why not?"

"Someone has to find Mannie and that little girl."

Brodie rambled back to the desk. "And you want me to do it. Why?"

Chet nodded. "Like I said. I have my reasons. Trust me just this once, son. I'll tell you everything in time." He reached over the desk and put a comforting hand on Brodie's arm. "You'll regret leaving if you don't."

Brodie stared at him, the warm, unfamiliar gesture from his father unnerving him. "Is that a threat?"

Chet shook his head. "No, boy. I just know enough, is all. What do you say? You and Jake could make the border. I've got friends over there that could help."

Brodie wondered what crap he'd stepped into. His father acted weird, Elena was determined. "What is it you're not telling me?" His father had never lied to him.

"I'll let you know when you git back. Promise."

Brodie's jaw tightened. His father had never kept anything secret from him either — even when Brodie wished he had, especially the night he came home from Basic training and found out Elena and Mannie had married.

He eyed his dad. "I'd planned on going anyway. That's part of my job in the Army, finding assholes." Elena's story almost ripped the heart from his chest. Somehow he'd figure out how to do this without getting into trouble. But he wouldn't go with Elena. The job was too dangerous. Besides, being around her would kill him. Brodie shrugged. "It's where I was leaving to go to but I'm going alone." A quick glance at Jake let Brodie know his friend had understood but wasn't happy about the decision. Brodie studied his dad, wondering what possessed the old man to set this up. "Why didn't you tell me she had a kid?"

Chet shrugged. "We don't talk much. You haven't been back since you joined the Army. Not really. That one time you took after Basic, all we did was fight. Didn't think you cared."

"Yeah." Brodie scowled, remembering. He'd argued with his father, he'd quarreled with Elena, he'd punched Mannie out. He'd left all of them. He wouldn't have come back had his father not insisted. He stared at the old man. "What's in this for you?"

Chet put on his poker face. "Not much, probably."

"Then for God's sake tell me why in hell do you want me to do this?" Brodie took the direct attack. He was out of aces. He needed to know.

His father stared at the picture of his mother again. When Chet looked back at Brodie, his dad's weary gaze shook Brodie's confidence in his father's steely heart.

"Trust me, son. Just a little longer. You'll be glad you did. Besides, you're not the kind of man who would let a little gal do this by herself, especially one who..." Chet cleared his throat. "Well, you know. You liked her once."

"Yeah." His dad had known about Brodie and Elena's one-nighter, tossed a fit when he found out. Confused, Brodie scratched his head, too drunk to argue with his father tonight. "I'm just wondering why the hell you care."

Chet glared at him. "Told you. I have my reasons. And I knew you wouldn't want her to do this on her own."

His father was right. Brodie couldn't let Elena go by herself. If she got hurt, Brodie would never forgive himself. "So, why *did* you want me home?"

Chet grimaced. "Like I said, I'll tell you when you get back." The man faltered a minute behind his desk and cursed.

"Dad?" Brodie didn't like the conversation, didn't like being kept in the dark. Something deeper happened here he knew nothing about. Brodie especially didn't like the way his dad acted. Chet had always been a no-holds-barred straight shooter. But now he kept a secret. The conversation between Chet and Elena told Brodie that much. What the hell was up?

Straightening, Chet eyed him. "Just busted my shin is all. Stop looking at me like that."

"Fine," Brodie spat. Chet's gruff voice put Brodie off once again. "I need to get ready." Brodie strode toward the door, turning before he hit the entrance. "But when you finally tell me the reason I'm here and why you want me to do this, it better be damn good."

His old man nodded, his eyes watering. "Be careful, son. I want you and Elena's daughter home safe." Chet huffed. "Maybe even that spitfire gal of yours."

Brodie grimaced, more confused by his father's behavior than ever. "Elena isn't mine."

Chet scratched his head. "If'n you say so." His eyes sobered. "Take what you need. Call me if you need to. I'll give you whatever you want."

Brodie studied his father. "You getting a guilty conscience in your old age over treating Elena and her family like shit all these years?"

"Maybe." Chet eyed him dead-on.

Brodie eased off. "You know Mom's death wasn't her uncle's fault."

Chet's steel armor grew back. "You best get going."

Brodie nodded. Walking out, he flew up the steps to the room he'd used as a kid, wondering what his father was up to, thinking the night would only get worse, knowing his head would probably ache like a bitch come morning.

Chet watched his only child go. "He's a good boy."

Jake nodded. "Yep."

"You find out anything?"

Jake glanced at Chet. "He's still in love with her if that's what you mean."

Relief filled Chet. He sat in the old leather chair, fingering the intricate carvings on the armrests. The thing had gotten old, like him. This seat and him had some good years together. Here he'd sat as he built more of the Crawford Empire. Here he'd sat as the value of his assets soared.

But Chet had come to realize, as hard as he'd worked, he'd let his most precious asset flounder. "Thanks, Jake. You think the boy will be all right?"

Jake removed his hat. "He's a man now, Chet. Trained and deadly. He'll be fine. And he needs to know." Jake shrugged. "You might be right. Maybe this is the best way. If something happened to Elena and the little girl then Brodie found out the truth, he'd hate himself *and* you. You don't want that."

Chet nodded. "I half hoped Elena would tell him. Git all this mess in the open. Then I wouldn't have to sneak around the problem anymore."

Jake shook his head. "It's a little late for that. She's as hotheaded and stubborn as Brodie is. 'Sides, Elena don't have a clue that you know. I doubt she thinks anyone knows her secret. Even her mom and dad still think..." He shrugged. "Well, you know. Janie looks a lot like her mom too. Nessie and Susan Alvarez always did look a lot alike, the colorin' and all. After so many years, with no one questionin', I'm sure Elena thinks she's gotten away with her plan." Jake grimaced. "Cain't blame her, yuh know. She didn't have much choice, not with her family hating you for all the roadblocks you've put in their way. The smear on her uncle's medical practice, the time you almost lost Luke his sheriff's job. You almost bankrupt the whole extended family."

"I know." A shudder grabbed Chet's insides. He rubbed the lines in his forehead, the guilt grabbing at him again for all the crappy things he'd done. He'd almost ruined that family's lives. He closed his eyes a moment, hoping that what he did now would help fix the mistakes of his past. "There are so many times I wanted to tell her I knew Janie was Brodie's. Apologize. Make things right."

Jake took an audible breath then spoke, his voice low. "Stop torturing yourself, boss. Ain't no good. You're doing the right thing now. Neither of them would tolerate your interference, not anymore. Not after what you did to them years ago." He sighed. "Anyways, if her secret got out, her pride would never let her accept your charity. You know it too. At least the money you gave Mannie got you some time with the little girl."

Chet winced. "He already knew Janie wasn't his. But when Elena left him after Brodie came back from Basic, Mannie wanted Elena to believe it to try and keep them together. That's what he said anyways." Chet shrugged. "After I found out about Janie, I paid him to get rights to see her. Do you think Elena ever suspected?"

Jake shrugged. "Don't know. Don't think so otherwise she'd act differently. And Mannie ne'er said anything about it. Her parents certainly don't know. The sheriff's always bragging about how smart Janie is. How she looks like his wife 'cause of the blue eyes." He shook his head. "Just don't understand why that boy took her, especially since he knows she ain't his."

An eerie coldness welled up in Chet. "Probably to get Elena back. At least, I hope that's all it is. His ego never took well to losing his 'wife'." Bitterness enveloped Chet, the fact that he'd manipulated events that led to the marriage. He took a deep breath to cleanse the sour taste from his tongue. "If it's money he wants, I'll give him anything." He rubbed a weary hand over his face. "I already lost my wife and son. I don't want to lose Janelle too."

Jake pressed his lips together and nodded. "I just hope Brodie don't git in trouble." He turned to leave. "I know what it's like to get screwed by the Army when yuh thought you were doing the right thing."

"I know you do, old friend. Jake..."

The cowhand stopped at the doorway and looked at Chet.

"Thanks."

Jake grinned. "Welcome. Sure *you* don't want to say somethin' to 'em before he leaves?"

Chet shook his head. "The boy hates me enough already. When he discovers the truth, he'll probably never speak to me again."

"I doubt that, boss."

Chet sighed. "I hope you're right. Besides, once he knows..." Chet scratched his forehead. "I don't want him to lose his objectivity. He needs his wits about him. If he knew that Janie is his, too many emotions may cloud his head, making getting her back more dangerous."

Jake nodded once and eyed him. "Yer right 'bout that. Want me to follow him? Just to be sure? I'm not as lame as I seem."

Chet huffed. "I know it." He glanced out the door. "No. I just pray he'll find Janelle safe and hightail it back home. But do me a favor. Be ready, just in case."

"Yes, sir." Jake jerked a nod and left.

Alone with his memories, Chet stared at his wife's picture. Her red hair shimmered. Chet could almost feel the softness of her strands. He peered into her clear, crystal blue eyes, remembering how they used to smile at him. Loneliness gripped Chet, the emotion his best friend since her death.

A pain from the disease eating his body surged in him again. He thought about getting the pills he kept in the small locked center drawer. Instead he reached for the bottle of whiskey on his shelf and poured himself a shot. Chet lifted the glass toward Vanessa's picture. "Keep them safe, darlin'. They deserve better than what I gave 'em."

Gulping the fiery liquid, he let the alcohol burn all the way down, hoping like hell his gamble would work—for his family's sakes.

And to cleanse his soul.

Chapter Three

Brodie had done this a thousand times as the weapon's sergeant for his SF A-team. *ODA 755, 7th Special Forces Group*. A group of men he respected and admired. It didn't take long to get ready. The old shotgun he held clicked as he checked the action of the firing pin. The pump-fired weapon was a little worn, but usable. He rubbed the smoothed wood, thinking how his father had taught him to shoot the firearm years ago. Sighing, he shrugged off the thought, not wanting to get maudlin. There were too many other things to think about. He had to retain his focus.

Studying the small cache of weapons he'd taken from the den, he laid the twelve-gauge down on the old bunk bed. Next to it, he'd put a newer Remington 308 hunting rifle, a Glock 9mm and a Leatherman. He fingered the sheath of the Leatherman. The multiuse knife was an old soldier's friend. Shifting his gaze, he glanced at the Remington. It would be high-powered enough for sniper work, if need be. He'd been a sniper. He sighed, knowing the arms were about as good as he could get on such short notice.

Pressing his lips together, he took stock of the rest of his supplies. Jake had given him some old desert camouflage from his time in service, two pairs of pants and a blouse. He'd look like a hunter heading to Mexico for game. Even with the tightened border controls, the Mexican government allowed folks to carry arms over the border for the express purpose of hunting. And his father had the connections to get him a quick permit to make this viable. The ruse should work, at least at first. The cover wouldn't fool anyone who counted. But by then he hoped to be in Mexico, deep in shit.

Brodie intended on finding Mannie and talking to him, hoping to put some sense in his ex-friend's head about the little girl. He needed the insurance the weapons would bring. Mannie had become a dangerous thug.

Brodie fingered the list of contacts from his father he had in his shirt pocket and scanned the bed. If things went bad, what weaponry he had might not be enough. But he could secure more firepower in Mexico. His father had given him the names of a few cattlemen he could trust. They might be some help in finding such weapons, and to use in case he needed a safe haven, but Brodie still wasn't sure. The effects of the alcohol were wearing off and the stupidity of what he was about to do kicked him.

Brodie had worked hard in the Army to get to where he was, an accomplishment he did without his father's influence. Sergeant First Class with a Special Forces team was an elite position, one he relished. He found pride in the job, trying to help others even if he couldn't help himself. The aggression gave him an outlet for his pain, over Elena, over the fact his father never cared about him. Besides, after Elena's betrayal, he decided there was no room in his life for love. Her using Brodie for a small fling before

she settled down finally clued Brodie in that even though he might love, there was no one to love him back.

Still, he knew Elena. She would leave, with or without him. Deep inside, he couldn't let her go after Mannie. And with what Mannie did, what if the bastard got killed? Brodie couldn't let the little girl fall into dangerous hands. He needed to get the kid back. Then maybe Elena would let go of this need to track Mannie.

Brodie pulled out his wallet, double-checking his IDs. Sliding his fingers into the pouch where he stored his driver's license, he pulled out the ragged-edged picture he often looked at. Elena, Mannie and a younger version of himself smiled back. Innocents. They were friends then, and happy. Now they were enemies to each other.

He touched Elena's face, wanting to hold her again, yet knowing he could never enjoy her embrace. Moving to Mannie, he wondered why his childhood buddy had gotten into crime, how much Mannie had changed—and how much danger stood around the corner.

He shoved the picture back, disgusted with the wrong turn he'd taken in his life so many years ago. If he hadn't fallen in love with Elena, maybe things would have been different. He found thrills with the Army but the consolation was small compared to the friendships he'd lost, the heartbreak he still suffered.

His emotions dead, he stared at the phone near his bed. Army regs said he needed to call someone on the team. Let them know he'd gone over the border. Brodie didn't relish his command finding out, especially this late at night. Bracing himself, he picked up the receiver and dialed.

* * * * *

"Bad move to go to Chet's. I should have known better than to call the old man. What a stupid idea." Elena paced.

"Whose?" Larry stopped studying the paperwork and dropped the detail on her coffee table. "Yours to ask for money or Crawford's brain trust for you to take the younger."

"Both," she spat. "Damn that man. Brodie is such an ass. I could never work with him. Ever. He'd try to run everything, have his way as usual, and then I'd have to shoot him." Elena rubbed her forehead as she paced the living room of her small ranch, a purchase she'd made only a year ago for Janie and herself, a sign, a hope that her life had gotten better.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you, however—" He cleared his throat. "Chet's idea does have merit. I don't like the thought of you traipsing off alone. You sure you want to fly solo?"

Elena stopped. "Yes. This is my problem, not yours."

"I know you don't want to but I think you should inform your dad of this little excursion."

"Hell, no." Her father had called earlier, swearing he'd work with the Laredo police to find Janie. She knew her dad meant well but the act would gain too little too late. She shook her head. "Besides, I'm not a child anymore. I don't need his permission."

"Yeah, but you might need him later."

She hoped not. "Then you can call him when the time comes."

"If you're not dead first."

She scowled. "I won't be."

Larry rubbed his chin. "Thanks. Just what I want. Getting cussed out by your father, the sheriff, for you going off on your own over this, even if you come back in one piece. I hope I don't lose my license." Larry shuffled through another set of papers lying on the coffee table, eyeing her over his glasses. "You think Daddy Crawford would say something to Luke?"

Elena shrugged. "I asked Chet to keep my plan quiet. He agreed. Besides, I don't think he's had a civil word to say to my dad since I graduated from high school. There's no love lost there."

"What happened?"

She blew the breath she held through her parted lips, knowing she'd have to come clean with Larry. He wouldn't stop the inquisition otherwise. She shrugged, accepting the inevitable. "Chet's been an ass to my family for years. But the night Brodie and I...well, you know. Mannie found us. Ran to my father about us being naked in the moonlight. My father confronted Chet, tried to accuse Brodie of statutory rape. I was eighteen. It wasn't an issue and Dad didn't have a leg to stand on. Dad knew it but he couldn't deal with the embarrassment of his youngest daughter getting loose with the rich man's son. The only thing the confrontation served was to cement the hatred between two hotheads."

She plopped on the couch by Larry. "Chet had a fit. I think that's why Brodie dropped out of college and ran off to join the Army. His father scared him. Brodie had told me at the time he'd be back. After several weeks of not hearing from him, I started to believe Chet's lies as well as Mannie's deceit. Apparently, after the blowup, Chet hired Mannie to keep me away from Brodie but I didn't find that out until a few years later. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd ordered Mannie to entice me with marriage, make me acceptable within the family again, and with the Church. It certainly got me out of Brodie's life. Who knows? I was too young and inexperienced to know better."

"I see." Larry whistled. "Well, that explains a lot."

She huffed with frustration. "Don't get any ideas. I hate Brodie. He's a bastard."

"If you say so."

"I do. Now, let the inquiry go. It's history. And you know everything you need to." Except one, she mused. No one, not even Mannie, knew Janie wasn't Mannie's daughter. "I need to go."

Larry handed her the paperwork, plans they'd made together to retrieve Janie. An envelope slipped from between the sheets. "What's this?" She held it out to him.

"Part of the backup plan." Larry grimaced.

Shoving the other papers under her arm, she opened the package and counted out thirty one-hundred-dollar bills. "Part of the backup plan? I'm not taking this from you."

He curled his fingers over hers. "You'd better. You need the money now that the Crawford angle didn't work." He stepped closer. "Don't be stupid, Elena. You're smarter than that. I don't want to have to come after you but I will if you need me. The money will make sure you don't need me too soon."

She swallowed, knowing he was right. She didn't know how many people she would need to bribe. Didn't know how hard Mannie would make this.

Larry let her go and backed away. "I don't like the idea of you going alone but if I don't let you, I know you're stubborn enough to figure out a way to leave me, which might cause you more grief. Call if you need to. I mean it. Gloria and I will be praying for you."

"Thanks, Larry." She shoved the money in her purse, knowing she owed him big-time. Giving him a quick hug, she left the house and headed for the border.

* * * * *

Brodie called again. The twenty times before he'd gotten an answering machine.

Finally, a groggy voice came on the line. "This better be good," Sergeant Rick Hansen, a peer and the Intel personnel on his team, answered.

If anyone could cover his back, it would be Rick. "It's Brodie."

His best buddy coughed.

Brodie smiled as he listened to a woman moan in the background. "Am I interrupting?"

"Hell, no. What's wrong?" Rick's voice grew crisp.

Brodie sighed. "Nothing yet. Wanted you to know I'm going to Mexico in an hour or so."

"That's out of country, bud. Could be a problem."

"I know. See what you can do to smooth things over if something goes wrong."

Rick cursed. "The spook in me says this isn't good."

"It isn't."

"Then why are you going?"

"You know why I joined the Army?"

"Yeah, rebounding from some chick. What about it?"

"She's got a problem. Her ex took their little girl over the border."

"The guy you grew up with?"

"Yeah. Mannie Ramirez. He's a drug dealer now. Wanted for murder. I'm going to try and talk some sense into him, at least to get the little girl back."

His friend paused. "Something tells me this trip won't be that simple."

"Probably not."

"And if you can't get her back?"

Brodie knew what he'd do but he didn't want to admit the truth even to himself. "Then I'll take her."

"Shit." Rick whistled. "You need help?"

"Not yet. Maybe. Don't know. Don't want anyone else getting their ass ringed-out about this."

"If something goes wrong, you know you'll get screwed. Look at the international incident those damn Brits caused a few years ago when they got stuck in that cave in Mexico on an unauthorized training mission. The captain won't like this and I don't want to be the one to tell him if you get shot up. Besides, Chief MacCallum will be pissed. You know he just got engaged. He wants us there for some big shindig in a few weeks. He's nervous as hell about meeting all these rich people in Rorie's family, which is why he wants us there, especially you, Mister Oilman. With as many firefights the Chief's been in, I've never seen him so edgy. It's funny."

Brodie rubbed his aching head, knowing he had things to come back to. He and Rick were the two guys in the unit who'd grown up privileged. And the Chief was a good friend. Tom MacCallum had fought through the Panamanian jungle to find Rorie Lindsey, his fiancée, a woman who'd been kidnapped by a new revolutionary group who didn't care if they coupled with some Asian terrorists. Rick was right. The Chief would be impossible to live with until his wedding day. Still, Captain Garcia was stable and a good egg. Mark Garcia wouldn't like this trip but he'd understand as long as Brodie didn't get himself killed or seriously injured. As far as the Chief...

"Just keep things to yourself. Right now, the Chief's got enough on his mind. Hopefully it'll only take a few days. Maybe this will be easy."

Brodie listened as Rick released a long breath. "Call me if you need help. Don't wait. And call before you do any 'forced' negotiations. I wouldn't want to miss the fun."

"Sure." Brodie paused, knowing he wouldn't ask his friend. This was his fight. He wouldn't bring anyone else into it. "Thanks, Rick." He swallowed. "You're the best."

"Shit, what is it they say in the movies? We're a team of brothers. I'll be there for you."

Brodie heard the doorbell echo downstairs. Someone answered and a woman's voice rose, one that he hadn't heard in some time. "I'd better go."

"Be careful, you dumb bastard."

"I won't take any unnecessary chances," Brodie grimaced.

"Yeah, sure." Rick snorted. "Lie to me again, you whore."

Brodie chuckled. "If I get desperate I'll be in touch. Have fun with whatever her name is."

"Already in progress." Rick paused. "Keep me updated."

"Will do. Out here." Brodie hung up.

Rick stared at the phone. His loyalty to his friend and his dedication to the team warred within him. Brodie was in trouble. If not now, he soon would be. A guy didn't go running after a drug dealer without taking a big risk, especially in Mexico. The border was off-limits to military personnel on a normal basis. Now what had Brodie fallen into?

Rick ran a hand through his recently cut blond hair. The brown-haired woman he'd picked up that evening had fallen into a beer-induced sleep and snored lightly next to him. Silently, Rick slid from beneath the covers. Picking up a pair of boxers he'd dropped on the floor, he put them on and eased into the living room of his apartment. Rick knew Brodie wasn't thinking straight. He never did when he talked about Elena but Rick had a hard time getting Brodie to see that. Rick didn't want his buddy going alone.

Plopping on his couch, he picked up the phone and dialed. Like he'd told Brodie, they were a team of brothers. His friend might not want the command to know, but there were others on this team who might want a part of this. Besides, tracking to Mexico on an unauthorized mission to save a child sounded like the kind of over-the-top, break-the-rules fun he enjoyed.

* * * * *

The noise downstairs grew louder. His father's voice grumbled something. Brodie walked down the stairs and saw his dad still behind the desk in the den. Although he couldn't see the woman, the hint of a Hispanic accent came to him through the open doorway.

"It's your fault. If you had never paid him, he wouldn't have thought like this."

The familiar voice chilled Brodie as he rounded the entrance. Inside near the fireplace stood Carla Ramirez, Mannie's mother. "Missus Ramirez?"

The older woman looked at him. Tears tracked down her face from the crow's feet around her eyes. "And you," she cried, pointing to him, "you are as much to blame. I raised you as my own when your mother died." Her voice broke. "How could you turn on my son, who was like a brother to you?"

"Missus Ramirez, I don't know what you're talking about."

She sniffed. "Mannie was a good boy until he met you. You and your father gave him these crazy ideas. God condemn you both." Shaking, she marched passed Brodie and out of the room, slamming the front door.

Brodie glared at his father. "What the hell was that about?"

Chet shrugged. "The police came by her place. Guess she blames me for the coward that boy's become."

Anger boiled in Brodie. At one time, Mannie had been the most honest kid Brodie knew. But something had happened to his friend over the years. Brodie just failed to realize it. Had his father played a part? "What did you pay Mannie for?"

Chet glanced at Nessie's picture then back at Brodie. "She means I paid attention to him is all. You know how I used to help with you kids. She's just excited and got mixed up."

Brodie scoffed. "Carla Ramirez was never mixed up in her life."

Chet paused, his cold stare chilled Brodie. "I'm going to bed." His father marched around the desk, pausing next to him. "I phoned Elena. No one answered at her place so I called her partner. Just got off the line before Carla showed up." His father swallowed hard. "Son, Elena's already gone. You'll need to be quick to catch her. There's a company truck out front waiting for you. Tank's full. Some money's on the desk. Left her partner's number and address with the money. Start with him. He might be able to tell you where she went." The old man took a deep breath. "Take care. Mannie's no friend 'a yours anymore." He patted Brodie on the shoulder.

His father's boots echoed on the wood planks as he walked away.

Brodie chilled as he checked the money on the desk. *Ten thousand*. He studied his mother's picture. She'd been a beautiful woman. High cheekbones, creamy skin. More than that, she'd had a loving heart. He missed her. Yet parts of her were still with him. He'd gotten his blue eyes and red hair from her. Walking to the painting, he fingered the frame and whispered, "Mom, what the hell is going on?"

As usual, he got no answer. His mother's comforting voice had been gone to him a long time.

Brodie glanced around. The quietness of the room brought reality back, snapping him out of his stupor. He needed to move if he was going to catch Elena. Racing up the stairs, he knew he needed to make tracks.

* * * * *

He treasured her beauty, her final innocence. And it was up to him to save Rosita from herself.

Carlos Huérfanos gazed at the nude woman he'd tied to the bed in the back of the abandoned shack in the barrio. In this slum, no one would bother them. He ran his fingertips against her soft, wicked skin. She oohed from pleasure.

"What are you going to do?" She smiled at him, her even upper teeth biting her rouged lower lip.

He knew what she wanted. She'd been a prostitute a long time, had indulged in too many immoral passions of the flesh.

He sprinkled the blessed water he'd stolen from the church on her breasts and down her stomach to her crotch. He needed to cleanse her.

Her hips bucked into the air in anticipation. He knew her skin tingled.

"Here, drink some more." He held the flask to her lips, the water mixed with his special cocktail, a mix of roofies and damiana, his favorite aphrodisiac. He needed to purify her both inside and out.

"Carlos, please..." she muttered, her eyelids heavy with want and seduction.

She was ready. He let the corners of his mouth turn upward, satisfied he would achieve his aim. His dick throbbed, hard as iron from the view of this now pure woman. Dropping the flask, he unzipped his pants and plunged his cock into her.

She screamed with pleasure.

He thrust again, hard this time, balancing his otherwise clothed body over her. "After we are done, you will go back to your old life?" he whispered in her ear.

"Ssssiiii," she moaned with his thrusts. "Need money. Must eat, live."

He laid his body on top of her. "As I thought." Reaching into his back pocket, he grabbed his switchblade. He did not want her to be afraid. Popping the knife open, he thrust into her with his cock once more. Her groan let him know she peaked.

In a flash, he split the skin of her throat. She stared at him wide-eyed, realizing what he had done.

He hammered his penis into her hard and fast.

Then the cell phone in his other pocket buzzed. The tone told him who it was. *Manuel Ramirez*. His boss would have his head if he knew he'd left the hideout. *El Jefe* had put him there to keep him out of the way until the hackles over killing Ty Baker had calmed.

Dropping the knife, he cursed and exited the woman then raised himself on his knees, grabbing the phone and hitting the answer button in the process. "*Jefe*, how may I assist you?" He worked to steady his breath.

"My sources tell me Elena just crossed the border. Follow her and don't let her catch you. Keep her safe."

"*Si, Jefe.*"

The phone went dead. "Damn." He shut the phone off and stared with thinned lips at the woman.

"Carlos..." She tugged against her restraints and began to cry. "Please don't kill me."

"Oh," he bent over and brushed her cheek, "no, *querida*, I will not. It is only a little blood. This is to purify you."

She choked on her tears. Then his damn phone rang again. He growled, pissed with the continued interruption and glanced at the receiver. Not a number he recognized but who could it be? No one had this number except Mannie.

Arching his brows, he hit the answer button. "Hello?"

"Carlos, my friend."

The Mouthpiece. Manuel's boss. Carlos stiffened, his body erect, more so with fear than with respect. His dick went flaccid. "*Si, Jefe.*"

"Manuel has called you?"

"*Si, Jefe.*"

"Good. Then you will find his wife and here's what you will do."

"*Si, Jefe.*" Carlos listened as he watched the woman before him pass out from lack of blood. He regretted that. His cock sprang, knowing he would have wanted to enjoy Rosita more. But now she would be at peace.

And he had a much more important mission to do.

* * * * *

Love, fear, hate. Each emotion warred in Elena as she stared at a picture of the Madonna behind the front desk of the cheap motel. Love and fear for her little girl, fear and hate for Mannie and what might happen to Janelle, hate and love for Brodie—the fact the bastard wouldn't help her, the truth that she still loved him. The struggle distracted Elena and that she couldn't afford. Mexico was more dangerous than most people realized, especially where she was going.

She picked up the scratched wooden nameplate sitting on the desk. *Pedro Lopez – Owner* had been etched deeply on it. Probably from a child. She slapped the wooden slab down and wondered where the hell this man was. Impatient, she hit the bell for the fourth time.

Soft cursing sounded inside the open door to the back office. The desk clerk rounded the entrance, squinting. The dark circles surrounding his eyes drooped underneath from lack of sleep and, she suspected, a drug-induced hangover. Still, El Ultimo Chance was the only place to stay in the small villa outside of Nuevo Laredo. All her sources told her the place was relatively safe.

"What do you want?" the paunchy, disheveled man asked in Spanish. Elena guessed he was in his early thirties but hard living made him look older.

"A room for a few nights," she answered in kind.

"A few? *Mi Díos.* Fine. Here, fill this out." He handed her a pad of stained paper. "You pay cash in advance."

"How much?" She slid the form to her and reached for a pen in her purse.

The desk clerk's eyes widened when he caught sight of the pistol she packed. He grabbed the pad of paper away from her. "I want no trouble here. I'm tired enough tonight."

"Look at this place," she pleaded. "It's only for my protection so no one bothers me." She smiled coyly and slid a crisp one hundred dollar bill toward him. "I'll give you more before I leave if you can keep my stay to yourself."

The man licked his lips and eyed her with a look that aged him twenty more years. "How much?"

"More than this. Trust me."

He snatched the bill. "I'll do what I can." He ripped up her registration and fumbled with his set of keys to unlock a cabinet, the keys jingling in his hand.

She breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't matter if she'd registered or not. She wouldn't use her real name. Still, showing her gun had been a big mistake. The man could have refused her accommodations, then what would she have done? The plan with Larry had been quick but the setup would work. She needed the remote place as a base of operations, at least until she infiltrated Mannie's stronghold and took Janie back. *Damn distractions.* She'd kick herself if she could. If she hadn't been so pissed at Brodie and his refusal to help, she wouldn't have messed up.

That's it, Elena, blame him for your stupidity. She knew her mistake wasn't his fault. Not this time. She couldn't blame him for the hatred he felt for her and for his refusal to go along with her plan. She'd lied to him big-time a long ago although Brodie had the facts wrong. She *had* loved him. She had never promised to marry Mannie. But now the truth didn't matter. Brodie never forgave her for what he thought happened. *Nor would he forgive you if he ever found out about his daughter.*

She steeled her resolve. There was a reason she hadn't told Brodie about Janelle. When he came home from Basic and accused her of deceiving him, her hurt ego and fiery temper prevented her from telling him the truth. Besides, she had believed he wouldn't have listened. Then he'd left for good. She'd thought there was no turning back. She was afraid. And she needed her family more than ever. She didn't think she could face her fears of having a child alone.

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. Now wasn't the time to debate her logic over what she'd done eight years ago.

The clerk finally opened the cabinet and tossed her a key. "The room's in the back, out of the way. I'll take you at your word there will be no trouble."

"*Gracias.*" She nodded and grabbed the key, noting the room number. Pumped on adrenalin she knew sleep would be hard to find. But she had to try. Mannie would expect her to follow. She knew that. Tomorrow, her wits needed to be razor-sharp.

Walking out, Elena parked the ratty truck she used for these operations under the one working light in the motel's lot, pointing the front bumper toward to road in case she needed to make a quick getaway, scanning the area as she got out.

Headlights appeared on the otherwise vacant road. The soft whirr of the engine came closer. A ratty car slowed as it passed the motel. The driver glanced her way, a dark man with a line of white teeth gleaming under his full mustache from the motel light. For a moment, she chilled with fear, wondering if Mannie had already found her.

But then the driver looked away and continued down the dusty lane. Elena released a breath and placed her hand over her heart to steady its rapid beating. She let herself get spooked for nothing.

Fortifying her professional demeanor, she looked around the rest of the lot. Letting her reason take control, she saw that the place seemed clear of anything that might threaten her.

Closing her door, she checked the lock then made her way through the dark recess of the open corridor of the L-shaped motel. A warm breeze blew the strands of hair around her face. The strong smell of urine accosted her as she neared the end of the first row of rooms.

The corner opened onto a small covered walkway. Before she entered, Elena studied the passage. A flat, narrow roof attached the two separate wings. Most of the rooms in the next building spread to the right but the entrance to two of them stood under the musty plaster ceiling of the adjoining roof. She walked down the open hall and found her room tucked in the back corner. She frowned. The small outlet would have to serve as her escape route if the need arose.

She looked around a second time to imprint the ins and outs of the place in her mind. Bougainvillea grew over a broken trellis by the parking lot, covering the opening to the short hallway. The murky blinking light from the post in the lot and a sliver of the moon highlighted the fuchsia blooms with silver rays. The climbing vine helped to hide the passage and her room door. That may or may not be good.

Sighing, she decided the setup was the best she would get under the circumstances. She walked to her room. When she opened the door, weariness hit her like a drug. She had a few hours until daybreak. She needed sleep. Dragging her feet, she entered the room, checked the cheap lock in the handle and slid a chair under the doorknob. Her sleep would be light tonight.

* * * * *

Carlos had turned around so he could pull into the darkened end of the lot. From the shadowed interior of a pieced-together blue Plymouth, he watched the woman duck behind the trellis. Parking, he killed the engine and cursed again at having to follow his boss's ex-bitch, in effect canceling his much needed release with Rosita. Carlos sneered. Because Mannie blamed him for the screwed-up drug shipment, he had made him do this as part of his punishment. But the glitch hadn't been his fault. Something else had happened. Somehow, the local yokels had found out about their well-protected deal.

Still, the error had made their contact nervous—and arrogant. Carlos sneered, glorying in his victory. He'd gunned down the holier-than-thou bastard, no problem. Shit, what did the fuckin' rich man think? He was old. Carlos was a known killer, a punisher of those that did wrong, the one to cleanse the guilty. *Fuckin' braggard got his.*

Carlos chuckled, pleased with himself then frowned, remembering the police somehow blamed Mannie for the kill. That fact pissed Carlos to no end. He wondered

how the police ID'd his boss with the hit. He sighed, thinking it was for the best. He was already too well-known to the authorities. He would have to change that to get the richer jobs. Perhaps take on a tag like others higher up in the organization, maybe a name like The Punisher.

He shrugged, thinking about it and watched the woman's corridor again. No matter. His status was growing. The Mouthpiece had called him personally. How much proof did he need? Soon he would be in great demand.

But not if his name was smeared from a screwup. The Mouthpiece had told him that. He scowled again. He'd be damned if he would take the fall for the botched deal. Yet he had set the meeting. Mannie blamed him.

Anger rose and he growled from the mar to his reputation. Still, before Mannie could discipline him, Carlos took things into his own hands, shifting the blame to another who'd been involved, eliminating the "problem" before Mannie could kill him. He closed his eyes and savored his solution, one that kept his protégé from spilling the truth of his own innocence.

Carlos smirked, thinking his actions clever under the circumstances, a thought that rarely occurred to him, at least in regard to himself. However, in a way his action had been a fitting tribute to where he'd been, where he intended to go. Nothing would stop his increasing fame as a hit man. And with the name, the money and power he wanted would come. The Mouthpiece had guaranteed it.

Carlos closed his eyes and licked his fingers in remembrance. He'd used a clean stiletto, barely splitting the skin of the boy's brown neck. But he'd cut deep enough to nick the artery, a technique Mannie had taught him but one he perfected, an act that gave him pleasure. Blood had spurted from the wound in rhythm to Anton's slowing pulse. He'd touched the rich color, tasted the coppery brackish flavor, fascinated with the tempo of the river of life. As with Rosita, Carlos figured he should feel some remorse. But he didn't. The sight of the boy's fading innocence rang too pure.

He shook his head. Poor dumb kid. Anton wanted to be like him. Better the boy die in the sanctity of his youth.

Carlos fingered the steering wheel, trying to hush this odd elation that overcame him when he thought about the hit. But his mind only wandered, his pulse raced. He pressed his lips together. The border patrol would find the body eventually. He'd left the stiff at the river, covered Anton with some brush in respect to the service his protégé had given him. Carlos assured himself the gringos would chalk the casualty up to another dead *mojado*, a wetback trying to get over the border, one who had gotten caught in something too big for him to handle. No one would know.

Carlos pulled out a drag from his pocket and lit the cigarette, pondering this weird sense of completeness the murder of a boy so like his son gave him.

The one light in the parking lot blinked. The beacon brought him back to the present and reminded him he couldn't afford to sleep. Mannie had given him strict orders. Follow Elena, watch her. Let Mannie know when she moves. Carlos Huérfanos

always obeyed orders. Between the cig and the meth he'd already shot, he should be good.

Puffing a circle of smoke, Carlos watched a black widow tiptoe in silence across the dashboard. He shivered and brushed the bug off with the back of his gloved hand, not needing the *aide-mémoire*. Although Mannie gave the orders, Carlos knew there was someone else. A higher authority pulled Mannie's strings. Yet, the only thing Carlos knew about The Spider was his street name. The actual orders always came through Hector Castellanos, the secretive leader's voice, a man they called The Mouthpiece. And no one, not even The Mouthpiece, knew what The Spider looked like.

Cold dread speared Carlos when he thought about the ice-hearted leader. The Spider was not a man to be played with. Which was why Carlos would do as he was told. Through Hector, the covert leader had given Carlos additional orders in regards to Mannie's old squeeze, commands that might upset his direct boss. But Carlos didn't care. The Spider's wishes came first. Carlos couldn't protect himself from someone he didn't know, and many times The Spider took out those he grew displeased with himself with no warning.

No, whatever The Spider wanted, he would get.

Nervous, Carlos sucked a drag so deep the ash fell off the end and burnt a hole in his pants. "Shit." He brushed away the cinder, more confused than worried about the orders. Their leader didn't want Mannie's *chica* around. Her presence would only stir up trouble. Still The Spider had a lock on the drug trade in the area. Many of the *policía* were in his pocket. What trouble could one pretty woman cause? He could think of better things to do with her.

He pondered the thought and asked himself if he could cash in on what that information would be.

Still, if he read this job wrong there would be no tomorrow. The Spider tolerated no blunders. Carlos knew, if he screwed up this time, the master of the clan through his mouthpiece would ensure the mistake would be his last.

* * * * *

A thin ribbon of light edged over the eastern horizon of the Chihuahua desert, bathing the adobe buildings in a rose glow. In minutes dawn would break. Brodie parked the air-conditioned truck on a hilltop and glanced at the stark, dusty landscape of the Mexican town. Stepping out, he felt the heat on his forehead. He shrugged out of the desert camo top he wore over his white button-down and tossed it on the seat. The damn place already baked and the sun still hadn't come up.

Hot wind stung his face as he studied the small village. Brodie had to wonder why Elena picked this hellhole west of town to hang out in. Ragged houses stood scattered across the main dirt road, dust flying in clouds around the small homes.

A cock crowed with the crowning light, the rays of the sun the only gem of beauty in the ugly town. Here lived the poor. Dirt was all they knew. The dusty piss-hole had never seen better days since there were no better days for the place to see.

He studied the few cobbled roads and any means of escape. Given his druthers, Brodie wouldn't have come. But per Elena's partner, she was here. Wanting to find some peasant named Sanchez. Some contact of hers whose tongue apparently loosened with the promise of cash, the green American kind. Brodie hoped the man talked. Perhaps this mission would be quick.

Content he had the lay of the land, Brodie started the car and meandered into the mire of adobe homes, chickens and the few folks who were up and about this early. He scanned the street. The vehicles in the area were nothing like what he had. They were pieced-together piles of shit. His truck would stick out big-time. He hadn't thought of that when he took the gas-guzzler.

But he should have. He didn't want any attention drawn to him or Elena. Driving slowly so as not to make much noise, he headed for the small inn on the far edge of town where Elena stayed. He found the dive off the main drag. No problem.

Brodie scowled when he saw the name. *The Last Chance Inn*. He'd had his last chance a long time ago. At least with Elena. And his father. Maybe now with his career.

God, he hoped not. Frowning, he pulled into the lot. No people were about. The few lights working in the neon sign fluttered. He noted the mostly empty parking lot. Elena had parked her beat-up pickup under a scrawny lamp hanging off a wooden pole. Satisfied he wouldn't be bothered, Brodie parked next to Elena's junker and sauntered into the office. Snoring came from the open doorway to the back. He went around the desk and peeked inside then pounded on the door as loud as he could.

The ragged man jumped.

"Where's Elena Ramirez?"

The man lifted his hands in the air in surprise. "*¡No se, caramba! No hablo Ingles.*"

Brodie dragged the man up by the front of his shirt. "Don't screw with me. I know you understand me well enough. Where's the girl who came in two hours ago?"

The heavysset man shook. "I want no trouble."

"You'll get none if you tell me where she is."

Heavy jowls swallowed as the *señor* fumbled with some paper in his shirt pocket.

Brodie reached in and grabbed the bill—a picture of Benjamin Franklin. "From her?"

The dark head nodded.

"There'll be more than what she can give you if you tell me where she is." Brodie shoved the bill back and released the man. "And there'll be no trouble."

The innkeeper's body fell into the chair. "*Dios mío...* Is she wanted?"

Brodie sneered. "Only by me. And with me, she's safe. I won't ask again. Which room?"

"Sesenta-y-ocho."

Brodie snorted. Sixty-eight. Not quite a sixty-nine, one of the last positions he'd held with her. But close enough. "Gracias." He pulled out a wad of money and tossed two hundred at the man. "Keep your mouth shut. If anyone asks for either of us, you let me know first, *comprende?*"

"Si." The *señor's* eyes bulged at the wad of cash. His head bobbed in short strokes.

Brodie strode out thinking he and Elena would need to split this place soon. Too easy for someone to identify them here. His long strides took him to the corner of the motel. Sunlight spilled into the dirty passageway, highlighting the number on Elena's room. He could only guess what her reaction would be to his presence. Would she bolt or fight him? Elena didn't want him there. Her partner had made that clear. Thank God the man saw things the same way Brodie did. He was sure Larry wouldn't have tipped Elena off. Larry Murphy might be a shit but at least he was a caring one. Elena needed help and Brodie was the only one right now who could provide what she needed.

Keeping his steps light he went to the door, deciding the element of surprise would give him his best edge. Brodie put his ear against the splintered, rough wood. Water ran. Pulling out a credit card, he jimmied the crappy lock and eased the door open. Elena had blocked the entrance with a chair. He heard her in the shower crying.

"Dammit," he grumbled under his breath. Stepping back, he kicked the door open, cracking the wood down the middle.

Elena dove out of the bathroom and crouched in front of him, naked except for the baby Glock she aimed at his chest. Her body gleamed, the beaded water on her skin sparkled from the sunlight pouring in through the busted doorway.

Brodie couldn't help himself. He kicked the remains of the chair aside and stepped in. Sticking his hands into his front pockets, he eyed every inch of her naked beauty. "Hi, honey. I'm home."

Chapter Four

"You stupid bastard, I could have killed you." Elena eased her finger off the trigger and lowered the gun.

"You didn't." Brodie simply stood there, his whiskered face haggard, his sharp blue eyes studying her from under his Stetson in a way only he could. She hated the smug, knowing look. "What the hell are you doing here?" Her body temperature skyrocketed. She covered herself with her arms as best she could with a loaded handgun. She wanted to negate the effect his look had on her. "I thought you weren't coming on this insane assignment?"

"As usual, you were wrong." He eyed the length of her, taking in every inch. "All I said was I wasn't going with you."

"Could have fooled me." She swallowed and looked at him, entranced by the fact he remained in front of her, still ruggedly handsome in his worn jeans and button-down shirt, looking so much like the last time he'd seen her in this intimate position. "What changed your mind?" Inexplicably her voice became a soft whisper. Her body shivered in the heat.

"You, of course. And your damn stubbornness." He stepped to her. Easing the pistol from her, he dropped the weapon on the bed and wrapped his large arms around her in comfort. With a crook of his finger, he lifted her chin. "I haven't changed that much, Elena. Do you really think I'd leave your daughter in danger?"

Raw masculinity permeated the air. Nervous tension grabbed her gut. Elena swallowed, thinking how tenuous this situation was and whether or not she could go through with spending so much time close to Brodie. The shower had helped clear her mind. When she walked out of Chet's last night, she wasn't thinking straight. She never worked without a partner. Too dangerous. But Brodie?

She shook off the foreboding in her gut. There was no one else. Brodie was her only choice. She had to work with him. For Janie. She backed away.

"Get dressed." His deep rough voice stirred her. "We need to find better accommodations."

"Huh?" What he said broke the trance she'd gone under. "What do you mean 'better' accommodations? Larry expects me to be here. This is our contact point."

"We'll call him and tell him otherwise." Brodie walked to her one piece of luggage. Putting the workout bag on the bed, he opened the zipper. After glancing inside, he threw her a few garments. "We're too obvious here."

She caught the jeans and shirt he'd tossed. "Obvious? To whom? I fit in fine. Now you..." A breeze blew through, chilling her and the realization hit. Here she stood stark

naked in front of him, her mind focused only on the fact he'd come. "I'm sure you stand out like crazy." Left with no recourse, she used her bluster as a shield, hoping to keep her exposed ego from being bruised. She grasped the clothes and covered some portion of herself, knowing full well there was nothing left to see.

"Exactly," he said. "Which is why we go with the original plan. We'll be husband and wife." He leered at her. "And we need a better place to stay. You don't really think I'd bring my spouse to a hellhole like this?"

She steamed from his ability to trounce in and think he'd take control. "Larry doesn't even like you and no one else knew where I was. How did you convince him to tell you?"

Brodie smirked. "I told him I was concerned for your safety. The bastard agreed with me."

Something about the confession unnerved her. "You could have knocked." She swerved and went into the too-small bathroom, hoping to break the sexual tension heating the room.

"Let me know when you're ready," he called back to her. "I'll go make things right with the innkeeper."

She heard Brodie shut what remained of the shattered door. Elena relaxed her guard, her nerve endings tingling. She took a deep breath then the vague thought she tried for years to bury crystallized in her head—she could never get over the ecstasy and anguish of being in Brodie Crawford's arms.

* * * * *

Brodie picked up his pace as he headed for the office. Holding Elena nude, well...

"Jesus, God," he sputtered and stopped to rub a hand over his tired face. He tried to ignore the effect her raw body had on him. She was beautiful.

Frustrated with himself and his inability to let her go, he glanced over the half-tar, half-dirt lot, trying to pull himself together. He needed a clear mind to finish the mission. A warm wind blew in his face, the dust stinging his cheeks, reminding him to be careful. He studied the inn and the surrounding area. Nothing around except shoddy houses. A broken vehicle stood on blocks next to the office. Elena had parked her pickup under the one pole light. Brodie had pulled in next to her. The only other transport on the motel grounds was on the far end, a tattered blue clunker with reinforced bumpers. Some tough-looking guy snoozed inside, probably sleeping off a hangover. Why hadn't Brodie seen him before?

He cursed himself. The town looked bad and he stuck out like crazy. He should have figured Elena would come to a place like this but in his angst to find her, he hadn't thought about anything else. Thank God, their surroundings were clear. Still, he grew edgy. Something clawed at his gut.

Shaking his head, he guessed his unease came from seeing Elena naked. He'd have to take care not to do that again. The pain had dimmed over the years but the memory of her soft body entangled with his had never paled. Brodie bit his lip until it hurt, hoping to keep the ache in his heart from tearing him apart.

He looked in the direction of the office. With a calm he didn't feel, he walked on, hoping he hadn't fucked his career and the rest of his life by coming here.

* * * * *

Elena punched Larry's number on her cell as she hastened to dress, juggling the phone between her ear and shoulder as she slid on her jeans. "C'mon," she mumbled. She needed to tell him they were leaving.

"Hello?" Larry answered on the second ring.

"Dammit, you could have warned me. What the hell kind of partner are you?"

Larry cleared his throat. "The younger seemed to think it best. I agreed. You need help, Elena, and he's experienced enough in what matters. I didn't want you turning him down."

"The son of a bitch broke the door down to get in here. I told you I wouldn't work with him." Elena stopped short from telling her partner she'd been wet and naked at the time. She exhaled a jagged breath. "The man's a shithead."

"Yeah. A shithead who's going to help you for no good reason."

"There *is* a reason. I'm just not sure what it is." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to clear her mind. Brodie already wanted to take command. "Fine. I'll figure out how to control him. At least he brought money. I hope lots." She'd find a way to make this work. She had to. "Anyway, we're changing locations. I'm not sure where we'll be but he's squaring things with the innkeeper."

"Elena." Larry cleared his throat. "I really think he wants to help. Let him. My gut tells me he'll be an asset when you're in a pinch."

Elena sighed. "You always trust your instincts, don't you?"

"You bet." He paused. "So should you, especially now."

She swallowed, knowing Larry meant something more from the comment than what he'd said. She breathed deep again, this time with a steady intake. "He didn't say why he'd help, did he?"

"Nope. Just that he intended to make sure you and Janie got home safe. Besides, if I didn't tell him, I'm sure the guy would have beat my ass. The man cares about you. I told you that."

She huffed. "Right." Before she could slip on her top, a shadow darkened the battered doorway. Brodie's frame filled the space. The sight of him took her breath away. For a moment, a softness shone in his blue eyes that she hadn't seen since the night they made love. She swallowed, yearning to have him in her arms again. Then his gaze hardened.

"I've got to go," she said to her partner.

"Call me when you settle in," Larry said.

"Will do." She hung up. After throwing her blouse on and tucking the ends in, she stared at Brodie. "Well?"

He stepped inside and got her bag. "After you, Missus Crawford." He swept his hand toward the door but the sneer on his face belied his sincerity.

Elena brushed passed him. "Just don't get the idea you're running this job."

Brodie matched her pace and put a possessive hand on her waist. "It isn't an idea, sweetheart. It's a fact. You want my help, I lead."

"Bull." They reached her pickup. Brodie had parked the passenger's side of the Triple J truck along the driver's side of hers. He used the remote to unlock the door and tossed Elena's bag inside. "What about my pickup?" she complained.

"You really don't expect me to leave my truck, do you? The only reason my ride hasn't been stripped is because the sun's barely up. Everyone's still asleep."

"I don't give a damn about your truck. You can afford to buy another one. I can't."

"What's that piece of crap worth? Five hundred? A thousand?"

"Fuck you. I need this piece of crap for my business. And I don't need to take your shit." Pissed, she turned and unlocked her vehicle. "Get lost. I'll do this myself."

"Like hell." He grabbed her arm and leaned into her. "Be smart, Elena. For once, don't let your temper get the better of you. You need me and you know it." He huffed. "Look, being married and showing up in different cars would look weird. We don't need anyone getting suspicious. I'll get you a new ride, okay?"

"No." Her body shook. She wished her jitters would go away but too much had happened in the short space of time.

Brodie took her in his arms and held her. "We'll get her back, Elena. I promise."

If he'd been an ass she could have handled him, but his tender caress broke her. She couldn't tough out the jumble of emotions anymore. Her guard down, she let the floodgates open. She pressed her head against Brodie's broad chest and let her tears wet his shirt. "You don't understand. I can't lose her. She's all I have."

"You won't. For once, trust me."

She looked up. If she didn't know any better she would have thought the old Brodie had come back, the one who cared, the one who always protected them. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because." He dropped his forehead against hers. "I just am, okay?"

His lips were so close. She wanted to touch them. But she knew better. Sniffling, she reminded herself he didn't love her. If he had, he wouldn't have left her eight years ago—even with her quick temper. Gently, she pushed him from her. "Then I'll chalk the reason up to you having an overdeveloped sense of chivalry. Take me where you want. I'll want a fair price for my pickup if we can't get it back but know one thing—" She

pressed her finger into his chest for emphasis. "When it comes to the street, I'm in charge."

Brodie frowned. "We'll see. For now, let's get settled. We need to come up with a plan. And I need to know what you know."

"I already have a plan."

"Fine. Then you can tell me what our next move is on the way."

She nodded, realizing that arguing further would get her nowhere. "You have a place in mind?"

He shot her half a smirk. "Yeah. Even over the border, the Crawford name still holds some respect. I got a lead from a friend of my dad's. Respectable place."

She snorted. "Then let's go—husband."

He held the door open for her. "After you—wife."

Anxious about their deal, Elena got in and said a small prayer. This had to work.

* * * * *

Keeping his distance, Carlos watched the slick black truck take off. A headache formed beneath his brow, a product of the drugs and the new wrinkle in things. The woman he could've handled. He already had a plan in place. But this new guy? Who the hell was he?

Slowly Carlos pulled out of the lot, taking a quick glance at Elena's pickup as he left. Frowning over the fact his other plan wouldn't work, he followed as close as he could to the faster-moving vehicle, sensing a noose tightening around his neck, wondering what he could do to halt the mess this had become.

* * * * *

"So this Sanchez guy, who is he?" Brodie wanted to find him fast.

"A ticked-off small-time dealer. When this new drug baron came in, The Spider they call him, Sanchez got stomped along with some of the other smaller cartels. Either the drug lords went with The Spider or died. Sanchez was small enough though that they passed him over. But now, his old network reports to The Spider and Sanchez is on the streets, literally. From what I surmise, Mannie helped this Spider guy get in. For a reward, he got propelled into higher management. Still, Mannie promised me he'd keep Janie safe, away from any of his nasty business."

"And you believed him? For Christ's sake..." Brodie ran a hand through his hair.

His outrage pissed her off. "Look, what did you expect me to do? Violate a court order? I did everything I could."

Brodie looked away. "Sorry. You're right. It's none of my business."

"Yeah, but you're making my business yours."

He glanced at her and lifted a brow. "Do you really want me to leave?"

Her knee-jerk reaction was to say yes but she knew as well as he did that she couldn't afford to lose his help. "I didn't want you here."

"No, you didn't. But I'm here. You want me gone bad enough to risk losing your daughter?"

The anxious look in his blue eyes pierced her. She'd let her temper get the best of her again. "No."

"Then get off my back. Things have changed since I left. What you said took me by surprise is all. It isn't like you to roll over without a fight."

Her ire steamed. "I *did* fight. What do you think I did? But I don't have the money *some* people do."

"You mean me."

"Yeah. *And* Mannie. He's loaded now." She puffed her cheeks, willing herself to calm. The turmoil within her threatened to tear her apart. She peered out the window, not wanting to argue.

The city loomed ahead. Elena noted the arid landscape had drifted into scrub brush as they approached. As they crossed into town, larger houses seemed to fly by. Black iron bars covered the windows of the small estates.

She took a deep breath as her temper waned. But her confusion remained. And her logical mind came full circle. Why *did* Brodie come?

She tried to shrug the thought off. Did it matter? Bottom line, he came to help. She would need backup if they had to snatch Janie. And getting her daughter home safe was the only thing that mattered.

But not knowing Brodie's motivation kept her on her guard. He wouldn't get anything out of this, so why had he come? Larry's words bugged her again. *The man cares about you.*

She shook her head. Not likely. Perhaps Brodie's father promised him something? But then, why would he?

Unless Chet was that anxious to get his good friend's killer.

Elena ran through all the scenarios again. Chet was a vengeful man. Look at the trouble he'd caused her family all these years just because he thought her uncle had let Vanessa Crawford die.

She stared out the window. No, revenge was the only reason that made sense. Which means her daughter would stand last in the order of things with Brodie.

Biting her lip, she realized she had to stay in control, make sure Janie was safe before Brodie exacted his father's wishes. Glancing at Brodie, she wondered how to get reassurance her ex-lover wouldn't go off on some tangent just because he had different orders.

Or worse, take a revenge of his own by playing up his part with her.

Finding an inner calm, she made her move. "Brodie?" she asked softly.

"What?" he snapped.

She took another calming breath to make sure she didn't blow this. "You're right. I can't do this alone. Just remember to do what I tell you and we'll get along. And I meant what I said at the ranch. You'll sleep on the floor."

Brodie scoffed. "Thanks, sweetheart. Great honeymoon."

She ground her teeth as she worked to control her annoyance. "We'll pretend we've been married a while. That way no one will expect the lovey-dovey crap."

He snorted. "Nice to know you want me." When he peered at her, some deep emotion clouded his eyes. "I remember once when that was true."

She swallowed, put off guard by the sudden change in his demeanor. "That was a long time ago."

Brodie huffed and seemed to study the increased traffic. "Guess Mannie was better than me in what counted. Glad he floated your boat." He pulled into a drive leading to the entrance of a small well-kept hotel.

"Go to hell." She crossed her arms, not able to hold back her frustration.

Brodie stopped at the entrance and jammed the gear into park. Leaning into her, he murmured. "I'm already there."

His dark enigmatic gaze held her. Then he scoffed and jumped out.

When he went inside, Elena let her head fall against the back of the seat, releasing the pent-up breath she had inadvertently taken. "Brodie." Her breath feathered the words on her lips. "You don't know what hell is." She closed her eyes, steeling herself against the pain.

* * * * *

Across the street, a beat-up sedan pulled into the shaded alley. The suited man inside pressed his thinned lips together, wondering what his targets' next move would be.

Chapter Five

"They went into town. I eased back around Trujillo Street but couldn't get close enough to see them go inside. But I'm sure it's the Plaza Hotel. Besides, if I follow any longer he's gonna suspect me."

The cell phone's reception was poor. Still, Mannie heard the whine in Carlos' voice. "What did you say he looked like?"

"Big. Very big. Solid. About six-two, six-three. Short hair. Black truck. Had a walk that said he meant business. The symbol on the car door had three J's, the Triple J Ranch brand."

"What color hair did he have?"

"Light, I'd guess by his coloring. Don't know for sure. It was hard to tell with the hat. Ne'er saw him before."

"Hell." Mannie rubbed his face.

"I don't like this, man. If you want him out of the picture, there's only one way."

"Fuck." Mannie had the feeling Carlos enjoyed killing way too much. The guy was sick about the task. Creative, but sick.

Mannie went to the balcony of the large, airy hacienda he'd borrowed from his cohort, Hector, on the southern outskirts of town and scanned the perimeter. Guards stood vigilant at the gates—security he had hired himself, thank God. He had hired all his staff. He couldn't trust anyone else, especially with what he knew and what he was into. With the job gone wrong, he needed all the protection he could get for himself and his family.

In the yard, Janie played with her new *niñera* under the morning cool of the shade trees. The dark-haired woman ran around his daughter in a game of tag. He'd been lucky to find the thirty-something caretaker on such short notice. The woman caught Janie. His daughter's laughter floated to him. The tinkling of her sweet, little voice warmed Mannie, reminded him why he went into the business he did.

Still, things had taken a turn toward the dangerous. He wouldn't risk protecting Janie any other way. Mannie expected Elena to follow. Then he could protect her too. Thought when she got here she could see how good they had life. He could convince her for once to stay, now that he had their little girl. Mannie had money, power. And the murder charge would be dropped once he got the information he had to the right people. Then things would calm down and he and his would be safe again.

Still, this was his last job. His government contacts had promised him. Elena, Janie and he could be a family again. They could stay in Mexico. Or go back to the US if Elena

really wanted. Wherever, for once he could take care of his wife and child in a proper fashion.

That is, if Brodie would stay away. "So the prodigal son has returned, huh?" He spoke more to himself, wondering why his old friend had chosen this point in time to ruin his life again.

"You want me to erase him?"

Carlos' scratchy voice got Mannie's full attention. "Don't touch him, stupid. We already have enough heat because of your screwup. Besides, eliminating the son of the Crawford Empire doesn't strike me as a good idea."

"That's him?"

Mannie heard the surprise in Carlos' voice. "Yeah, what did you think?"

"I thought that guy was in a war somewhere, is all. Didn't think he'd be back."

Mannie snorted. "I wish. I just wonder why he got into this." He ran a hand through his black hair. Brodie was a crinkle Mannie didn't want or expect. His one-time best friend loathed him. And when a Crawford hated you, you knew it. Mannie didn't want to deal with that. Not now.

Still, after Brodie had lost Elena's affection, Mannie thought for sure the man would stay away. He had for eight years. So why had he come back? Mannie wondered if his wife had brought him into it, and if so, why? Could she have finally admitted the truth?

Janie glanced at him from the yard. She waved, her big blue eyes shining bright against her tawny skin. Mannie smiled and waved back. Turning, he scowled. What game did his old friend play?

A thought hit him that made him shiver. "Stay with them, Carlos, and don't touch either of them. I want Elena. And I want to know what Crawford's about. But first I have another assignment for you, one that you will enjoy." He related the details then hung up and glanced over at his daughter and the *niñera* at play.

He scowled. There could be a number of reasons why Brodie came back but Mannie hoped it was only this one. That faking scum Ty Baker acted as if he could do no wrong. He had been a good friend to Chet Crawford. And for the Crawford family, revenge was legendary.

* * * * *

Elena counted to ten. Then twenty. She had to get over the myriad emotions she felt when Brodie was near. Too much was at stake.

Yet when Brodie stood in the entrance to the coral-colored hotel and studied her, she knew the task almost impossible.

Janie. She told herself. *Your daughter is the only thing that matters.*

Mentally, she got a hold of herself. She had to focus. Keep her mind clear. Yet Brodie watched her with some unexplained emotion. Inside, her feelings churned.

Brodie couldn't know that Janie was his daughter. No one did except her sister. Still, the way he looked at her. What did it mean?

Finally, Brodie strolled over and hopped in. "You know that guy?" He nodded toward the alley across the way.

Elena glanced over her shoulder, the tension inside easing as she realized he looked at someone else. A dark-haired, classy-looking man with a mustache in a gray suit seemed to be studying something in the beat-up white sedan. The man and his car were definitely at odds with each other. "No, I've never seen him."

"I hope we didn't pick up a tail."

She looked again. The man waved to a woman walking by. "I think he's okay. He's not on Mannie's payroll anyway."

Brodie arched his brow. "You know all his men?"

"Most."

Brodie shot her a look that questioned her integrity.

She wanted to spit, the condemnation pissing her off. "Janie's my daughter. Don't you think I'd want to know who Mannie worked with?"

He paused a moment, eyeing her. "Sure," he finally said but the look he gave her reflected his lack of faith. Brodie handed Elena a key. "We've got a room on the second floor. Two-oh-nine." Then he ignored her as he drove through a tall open gate.

Elena frowned, preferring the heated exchange, not the silent strain growing between them. "Guess they lock up at night."

"Yeah but we can still get in or out at any hour by going through the front."

"What did you tell them?"

He smirked and cut a side-glance at her. "That we're celebrating our anniversary and wanted to come here, away from everything we know, to put our marriage back together. A friend recommended the place. Sound okay to you?"

Seemed perfect. But for some reason she didn't like it. It sounded...cold. "Fine. Good idea. That way if we argue, they won't suspect anything."

"Yep, that's my thinking anyway. And it's why we got one of their out-of-the-way rooms. Up there in the corner." He slid into a space and nodded to the upper floor. "Thought that would be best." He parked and shut off the engine.

"It should work." Elena didn't want to fight with Brodie. As complacent as he now acted, she wondered if he felt the same. Swallowing to negate her confusion over her emotions, she got out and studied the grounds. The hotel seemed much larger from the back. A small garden with a gazebo bordered the thirty or so feet between the first floor and the parking area. Off to the left, an open patio stood in front of what Elena guessed to be the restaurant. In the middle, a black wrought iron staircase rose to the next level. Flowering vines from the garden intertwined through the openings in the iron latticework along the stairs and around the lower part of the upper floor. The idyllic scene would have been perfect for a reconciling couple.

But that wasn't what they were. They were enemies. Enemies who now worked for the same goal.

She sighed and studied the well-kept garden. Vibrant-colored flowers bordered the walks, accenting the pastel color of the building. The place spoke the universal language—money. Something she didn't have. Something she could never give her daughter.

Something her real father could.

Elena felt a pang of guilt over not being able to give Janie these things.

Then a larger shadow covered hers on the walk. "You ready?"

Brodie stood close enough to whisper in her ear. She could feel the warmth of his body near hers. Her fragile reins on her feelings threatened to disappear. She nodded and wished things had been different between them. After all, she needed to trust him too.

But they weren't. "Brodie, why did you come?"

Elena's question rattled him. Why had he? "You needed help. Besides, my dad wanted me to."

She turned into him. "Then it's only because your father asked. You're still taking orders from him?"

"No."

The Stetson shaded Brodie's face. With the sun in her eyes, she couldn't read him the way she wanted. "Then why did you say no when I asked you?"

"At first I didn't know you had a daughter. It made no sense you going after Mannie then." He shrugged. "When you told me the truth, I didn't want you coming. I'd rather deal with Mannie myself." He stepped closer. "I still do."

Elena hitched her breath. "Are you threatening or warning me?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Only letting you know. I don't like working with people I can't trust." He grabbed the bags from the back, and without looking at her walked to the stairs.

Someone he couldn't trust. He meant her and how she'd lied to him so long ago. Elena logged the comment in the back of her mind. Little did he know how true that message was.

* * * * *

Across the street from the Plaza Hotel, Mauricio Gutiérrez studied the couple before they drove onto the grounds. From a tip, he had picked up Carlos' tail in a seedier part of town then followed the town butcher to his next drop.

But Carlos had followed these two then eased away. Why?

Mauricio made a mental note of the people and the truck the man drove. From the fancy vehicle and the license plate, he guessed they were Americans. "Triple J" had

been emblazoned on the side. Not very smart to Mauricio's thinking, not if they were trying to avoid Carlos. But then again, maybe they didn't know Carlos looked for them. Question was, how did these two fit into the cartel's operation?

He activated his electronic notepad, a toy his mother had given him for his work, and jotted the few details. The man had almost pegged him. Thank God that woman came by. It gave him an excuse to be there.

Inexperience, he told himself. *His own*. He'd only been a detective for three years, a police officer for five, but as the son of the police chief and a member of a prominent family, he'd garnered a better position than others more quickly. Still, his father would be furious if he screwed this assignment up. The job was a political move for the Police Chief, as most things were, and his dad wouldn't like his ambitions spoiled.

Yet, Mauricio had pushed to get the post. A special task where he worked with an *Americano*, Federal man. Mauricio loved danger. Loved the thrill of the hunt. And no more now than with the bastard Carlos Huérfanos. Somehow, he would make his father proud and make the murderer of his cousin so many years ago pay.

Slowly, Mauricio backed the car into the alley then pulled out his cell phone and dialed the CIA contact he worked with.

* * * * *

Brodie dropped the luggage on the bed, being careful with the long gym bag he'd put the firearms in. He scanned the room. The place was small but clean. Elena stood in the doorway biting her lip. He studied her, noting her temerity. "Come in. I won't bite."

She straightened and stepped across the threshold. "There's only one bed. This hotel's big enough. Why didn't we get two?"

Brodie rolled his tongue against the inside of his cheek and eyed the covers. "Imagine that. One bed. Guess the innkeeper thought a couple making amends needs to be close."

"Funny." She brushed past him to stand by a small table near the sliding glass door to the deck that lined the back. "Just remember what I said. You sleep on the floor."

"Like hell. If you want, we can take turns. I've been up all night. Right now, I could use some shuteye. It'll leave you time to locate Sanchez and setup a meeting. I just hope to God he knows where Mannie's at. I want to get this over with." He grabbed the covers and threw them open.

"Dammit, Brodie, before we start we need to get some things straight. One of them is you take orders from me. I'll decide when to contact Sanchez and I *don't* want to share a bed with you."

"Why? What are you afraid of?" He neared, a roguish gleam in his eyes, one that intimated so much more.

She stuttered, sensing her libido jump. "Nothing."

"Yeah?" He stood before her and strummed his thumb down her cheek, smoldering passion burning in his look. Just as quickly, he broke the touch but the fire in his eyes remained. "You're being unreasonable. With my experience, why should I let you make the decisions?"

She backed away before the warmth growing in her belly reached a full-blown flame. "Because I know this territory better than you." Bringing her priorities into focus, she calmed, her voice now in control. "I've been doing this awhile. And I know Mannie better. At least now I do."

He stared at her with undisguised need and something else. Pain? She crossed her arms, hoping to squash the conflicting emotions his reaction swirled within her.

Brodie backed off. She was right, he realized, relegating the carnal hunger he sensed in her to the background, the thought squashing any notion of sex. At one time, that wouldn't have been true. But this was no longer those times. She'd slept with the man, lived with him as his wife. Chet had told the truth. Mannie wasn't a friend of his anymore. He knew he shouldn't say it but jealousy drove him to perversity. "You mean in a biblical way?"

"Go to hell." She stepped nearer to him and poked his chest. "This is *my* daughter we're talking about. You *will* do what I tell you, dammit."

He smirked. "Have it your way. But the first time you screw up, I'm taking over. You understand?"

She fumed. "I hear you. But don't expect me to agree."

"You won't have a choice. And while we're at it, there are a few conditions of my own. First, no matter what, I have to be back at Ft. Bragg in two weeks. That's all the time I'll give you." He paced away from her. "If we can't get your daughter back in that time then you'll need something a hell of a lot stronger than what we have. Second, since you're so insistent, I'll let you take point with this op, with a few caveats."

"Which are?"

He stepped closer. "We discuss and agree on everything before we take action. If something looks fishy, we pull out. And that's on my say-so. I can't afford to get caught in some fucked-up scheme of yours. I have my own responsibilities to deal with and the Army doesn't take lightly to their soldiers getting killed on unsanctioned missions."

Elena paused before she nodded. "Fine."

He hovered over her. "And third, no secrets. Like I said, trust is a big thing in the people I work with. You screwed me once. It better not happen again."

She bit her lip, fear tinged Elena's eyes. He knew she'd gotten his drift. He wouldn't be used.

"I won't hold anything back about the job," she said.

He nodded, not sure at all that he could rely on her, not sure he could rely on himself when he was around her. He knew she suspected there was a bigger reason why he came. He didn't want her to know it dealt with his heart. He added the last

zinger to put her off guard. "Last, when we get the reward my father and his friends offered, I get half the take, no matter what."

"Half?" she squeaked.

"You heard me. I should be paid something for my time and experience. Half sounds right to me. Especially to get your little girl back." He paused, softening a bit. "We'll make that our priority."

"Is that why you came? The money? What, did your father cut you off?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Of course. After what I did with you, what did you think? It's why I ran off to join the Army. I needed the income." His gaze narrowed. "Thought I'd have a family to take care of."

She ignored the dig. "Finally, something that makes sense. So, now you're a mercenary." Her breasts rose as she inhaled, relieved that she thought she knew his real reason. "Okay, deal. Just don't forget our number one priority is Janie. If an emergency arises, what I say goes." She swerved to go around Brodie but worried he wouldn't take her seriously, she stopped by his side. "I mean it."

He shot her a lopsided grin. "I know you do."

His cavalier attitude peeved her. Yet standing this close she could smell the lingering trace of his evening activities mixed with Brodie's own rough and rugged scent. Her mind shifted to the passion of the night of Janie's conception.

Then she kicked herself and cussed under her breath. What a stupid thought. "Why don't you take a bath before you crash?" she said, getting her hormones under control. "You stink like the honky-tonk. I don't want the sheets smelling like a brewery."

Brodie perked a brow. "Since when have you gotten so picky?"

"Funny. Maybe all the women you bed don't mind but I do."

"With the creeps you pick up? Yeah, right."

She planted her fists on her hips. "Damn you. Some of us have to work for a living."

He stepped so close to her their bodies touched. "Look, sweetheart, being in the Iraqi desert is no picnic. Neither is a jungle filled with subversives. I work like hell. Don't think I don't. I earn my paycheck. It certainly keeps your ass safe as well as others back home so don't give me any grief about what I do."

Brodie's jaw set. He put a grip on his famous temper. When he'd talked to their current innkeeper, he'd sworn to himself he wouldn't get hooked into another argument. He took a deep breath. When he looked at her again, his anger abated. "Look, I'm trying to help. But if you don't want me, maybe there's someone else you'd rather have? Your father, perhaps?"

Elena abhorred the thought. Working with her father was even more unthinkable than working with Brodie. Her dad was a lawman. And even though Brodie didn't understand why, there was more at stake for her ex-lover.

She worked to still her angst. Elena had sworn one day Janie would know who her real father was but Elena wasn't ready for that, not yet, maybe never. The rift she had

with her family was still too great. Her father knowing Janie was the daughter of the rich man's son would cause more pain for her and Janie than the effort was worth. Elena couldn't help her despair. Moisture welled in her eyes. "I can't ask him. He'd be dead within hours with the number of people across the border he's put away. There is no one else," she whispered.

Brodie looked away and rubbed a hand over his face. "Look, we're supposed to be a team. Let's try to get along, okay? No more bullshit remarks, at least not intentional ones."

She blinked, hoping to stop the tears threatening to spill. "Then stop condemning me. I didn't mean for you to get hurt all those years ago."

"Yeah?" His voice grew hoarse. "Fine. Just remember us being naked together was your idea."

She crossed her arms. "You didn't seem to mind at the time."

He snorted. "Why would I? A cute girl. Sex. I had a hard-on. What did you expect?" His cruel gaze drilled her. "Keep in mind I've done my penance. For whatever you think I did to you. I have a life now. One without you and Mannie. You're right. What you do is your business. Don't worry. I won't forget again."

Elena gripped her chest. His coarse brush-off hurt more than if he'd thrust a real dagger in her. *Dammit.*

Pressing her palms to her eyes to push back the tears, she wrapped a steel net around her heart. Brodie was right. He wasn't a part of her life. Not anymore. She was a professional. She could rein in her emotions. She wouldn't let him get to her again. He was here to help her get Janie back. That was all that mattered.

Elena watched as he turned his back and kicked his boots off. Before he lay down, she grabbed the phone and took a deep breath. For some reason, Larry's comment about Brodie came to her. *The man cares about you.* She stared at Brodie's back. He couldn't. Not with the betrayal and the lies still between them. Yet the thought plagued her.

Refusing to dwell on the obtrusive idea, she punched in Sanchez's number.

* * * * *

Listening through his earpiece, Chris Ferguson eyed the *niñera* from under his straw sombrero, part of the disguise he used for his cover as the gardener, Kris Keifer, an American ex-patriot with a shady past. Victoria Serrano was pretty in an exotic way. Her olive-colored skin was typical for someone with her Hispanic heritage. Her delicate face had the strong nose and slanted eyes similar to those that marked the descendants of native peoples. She was a *mestiza*, a mixture of native and European descent, yet something different stood out about her. He found her...interesting, for lack of a better word. The new nanny ran with the child, playing hide-and-seek. As if she knew he watched, the woman looked his way. Her brows furrowed. Chris lowered his head and

concentrated on the conversation coming through the headphones of his CD player, a connection to the bug set inside Manuel Ramirez's office. Chris had gone deep undercover this time, working as the drug lord's new hired help. He couldn't afford to blow his ruse. Not because of a pretty face. He worked the flowerbed with a rake. From the corner of his eye, he noted the nanny's shy smile, an effort that reminded him of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The nanny's look reminded him of the woman in the painting. He wondered what the upturned lips meant.

Behind her, Manuel stepped onto the balcony. The movement caught Chris' attention, ending his desire to focus on the beauty. Manuel frowned as he hung up and stared at his daughter in play. Chris sneered. So the big man didn't like the conversation with his killer. Good. Ducking lower, the CIA operative hid the depraved grin he'd let grow across his face.

Then the CD player buzzed in the earpiece. He glanced at the LED readout. He'd sent Mauricio after Carlos. Chris was almost sure Carlos had direct ties to The Spider, a powerful *Al-Quaida*-connected radical who had partially financed a drug-dealing paramilitary group in Columbia then infiltrated the Mexican drug network around the two Laredos. Chris knew the man meant to use the network to smuggle arms and religious fanatics into the United States.

He gritted his teeth. He and Mike Harrison, his former partner, had worked together for years, running undercover as a scientific reporting team. His friend died only a few months ago trying to retrieve the information needed to stop the spread of what Chris likened to a disease, the disease of death. Chris promised then he would find The Spider and kill him. Every clue put him one step closer to his goal.

Now somehow the heir to the Crawford clan was involved. An American. Chris wondered who the contact was. And who the woman was with him. He would have Mauricio find out. But after months of patient waiting, perhaps now they were getting somewhere.

* * * * *

The red hue of sunset lit the sky as Pedro Lopez looked over his almost empty lot and said the small prayer he made every night for more work. But again, he could tell this night he would have no business. Once, when times were better, he thought they could sustain the motel his father-in-law had given them. But after the major drug wars, the years had been hard, for everyone. New environmental rules for keeping the sky and land clean had shut down many businesses, ones he depended on for his trade. And then any jobs that had remained had been shipped outside of Mexico to places he'd never heard of, much less seen.

A moist spot formed in the corner of his eye but he did not weep. He had no more tears left for this arid land.

Rubbing his pocket, he felt for the money the gringo had left him. To care for the woman's truck. Another two hundred of American money would take him a long way.

Standing near the rundown vehicle, he caressed the worn carriage. The American had cursed the ride as a piece of shit. But Pedro didn't see it that way. To him, the truck looked like freedom.

A freedom from care he would never have.

His rough, dark hand stood out against the light color, highlighting the wrinkles that crisscrossed the back. This harsh life had aged him. He'd been a good man, had lived most of his life as well as he could, but he could have made better decisions with his early years, not wasted his youth on the drugs and sex that prevailed within the big city nearby. He rubbed his fingers over his face, knowing that even the American money would only lengthen the time they had, not save them. But his regrets had come too late.

Walking into the office, he searched each drawer looking for the glue he often sniffed to ease his pain. He cursed, wondering where his wife had put the bottle this time.

Finding the jar behind some old papers, he pulled the thick paste out and removed the top then took a deep breath.

Relaxing, he went into the back office and kicked back in his chair, rubbing a little on his mustache. If his wife walked in, he didn't want her to notice. If she caught him again, he knew the bottle would disappear until he could afford to buy another one.

Taking one more hit, he closed the lid and stuffed the jar into a different drawer.

The drug made his head lighten. He smiled and settled his chin into his palm.

Outside, some voices grew louder. A glass broke. He blinked his eyes and glanced up. What could that be?

Yanking open the center drawer of his desk, he grabbed his empty pistol. He opened the chamber and grimaced, knowing he couldn't afford bullets. Sighing, he managed to stumble through the office to the outside.

Four or five young troublemakers stood around the vehicle he was to protect, trying to jumpstart it. The American had promised him more cash. He couldn't lose the additional money he would get. "Get away, you boys." He recognized them. The youngest was no more than eight. "You are too little to be such reprobates. Get away." He flashed the pistol at them.

The leader's eyes shot wide open. "*No problema, Señor López.* We will go. We will go." Hands up, they backed away.

Pedro came closer, standing between them and the door they'd jimmied open to the truck. "Leave now and I won't hurt you." He closed one eye and glared at them, giving them his most evil look. "And I will not tell your parents, either. This car is mine for now. You stay away."

"*Si, Señor,*" the leader responded. Turning, he fled and yelled, "Let's go."

The others didn't need the prompt. They ran ahead.

Pedro shook his head, worried at what the children had become. He brushed the broken glass off the seat and studied the inside. The ignition wires stuck out. The boys had already bared the metal. All they needed to do was connect them to start the truck. What would the American think? Tomorrow he would need to get his cousin over here to fix the window. But for now?

Shaking his head, he crawled inside to fix the mess. He popped open the glove compartment, hoping the lady kept a tool inside. Papers fell from the opened door. He picked them up and looked at them in the small light of the cab. The letters were in English but to him they looked like ownership papers.

He wondered.

Looking up, he noted the purple sky in the west. Evening lights shone in the distance from the north.

America.

He'd never thought about leaving. But had this been an answer to his prayers? He spoke enough English. He could say he forgot his papers if he got caught. He could cross and hide. Then send for his family.

But he'd never stolen anything in his life. Still, his evening prayer...

What if he borrowed the vehicle?

Swallowing, he touched the bare wires together. A spark lit but not enough. He did the move again and the truck roared to life.

Shifting the vehicle into gear, he stepped on the gas.

A low roar sounded then a boom broke his ears. The last he remembered was the feeling of his body tearing apart, the burn from the fire that ripped through the cab.

From a distance, the boys looked on, startled by the explosion. Choking clouds of smoke rose and blanketed the starlit night.

"Mother of God." The leader coughed from the acrid scent filling his nostrils and crossed his heart, looking upon the pyre the truck had become. "That could have been us."

Another pulled on his arm. "Come, Alejandro, we need to go before someone sees us. They might think we did this."

"Si," Alejandro replied and waved them on, staring at the licking flames. Pedro had always been good to them. Now...

Alejandro shut his eyes and let a tear fall, swearing he would change his ways.

Chapter Six

As Brodie had expected from an older hotel, the too-small bathroom was down the hall. He didn't let Elena know but he'd taken the precaution to purchase every room on the floor to ensure their privacy and, more importantly, their security. If anyone but the staff came up, Brodie would know the person was an interloper.

Standing near the shower, he looked out the open door. He'd left it that way just in case someone uninvited appeared. Sighing, he twisted the faucet and stepped into the stall, letting the cool water drip over him, hoping the act would ease some of his weariness. When the water turned ice-cold, he got out and wrapped a towel around his middle, shaking the liquid from his hair.

Staring at his face in the small mirror, Brodie thought he looked a bit more refreshed. Late in the morning, he'd traded places with Elena, letting her get some needed sleep. She was tired too. He could tell. And her nerves were raw. He should have recognized that before he blew up at her. He regretted that. But not as much as he should have. Some selfish part of him wanted her to know how hurt he'd been so many years ago.

But this wasn't about him. It was about saving a little girl.

He peered out the bathroom toward their bedroom door. He'd left that open too, just in case he needed to move in a hurry. Some of the scum now knew they were here. Elena had contacted Fuego Sanchez. They were to meet tonight, although Elena had wanted to meet much sooner. That frustrated her until Sanchez assured her Janie and Mannie were still in town. Sanchez had picked an alley in the locals' section of Boys Town, a block-wall-enclosed area of the city setup for the pleasure of men. Every pore of the place oozed with decadence and debauchery. The dive was filled with some of the worst hedonistic activities one could imagine. Brodie had taken the time he had this afternoon to study the information he had on the area as best he could. There was only one way into the few square blocks that made up the raunchy place and that passed the front of the local police station. Brodie didn't like the setup. He'd rather go someplace with alternative avenues of escape, some area that would be more discreet but Elena wouldn't listen.

Hell, she'd insisted on going. He'd already argued with her about that too. And about the time. Midnight? Why the hell midnight? The place would be crowded with drunken men who had one thing on their minds—to get laid. But just like coming to Mexico in the first place, Elena would go whether he wanted her to or not. Her daughter's safety was on the line. He pressed his lips together, preparing himself mentally for the task ahead. Elena'd be hit on like crazy. But she didn't care. She had to go. She knew what Sanchez looked like. Brodie didn't.

He hated the fact she was right. Brodie would have to watch himself. He knew that even now, if some bastard put his hands on Elena, he'd beat them to a pulp. That would only land him in a Mexicano jail. Not good.

Grabbing his dirty clothes, he walked to the room, not wanting to leave her alone for long. He dropped his dirty bundle in his bag and pulled out clean clothes. Before he left though, he studied Elena in sleep. She'd been his angel at one time, an innocent he looked after until that one wonderful and horrible night.

If he'd admit the fact to himself, part of their tryst was his fault. They'd gone in the barn and had a bit too much to drink to celebrate her pending high school graduation. Mannie hadn't showed at the time when they'd planned to meet. It started with an innocent graduation kiss then her moves sought a higher education. He should have never let her eagerness get so far. She'd been so naïve. Probably didn't even understand the depth of emotion he had for her. Yet when her soft voice whispered that she wanted him—all of him—the last shred of his resistance fell.

Brodie stared at her, remembering the warmth of her body in his arms, the look of desire in her tiger eyes. His memories were part of what confused him about her. Even now he'd caught glimpses of that look, when she didn't know he watched her, the one that said she wanted him. What the hell did that mean? *Did* she want something more? Or did old memories haunt her too?

Then the way she'd opened up to him in that ratty hellhole of a motel room and cried in his arms about Janie, holding on to him like she used to. Would a woman do that if she didn't want the man she was with? He wondered. Had she thought about him over the years? He grew sure some part of her remembered their relationship, even if it was a part she denied.

He leaned against the doorjamb and watched her. In rest, the lines of worry on her face relaxed. He noticed a few creases around her eyes and her breasts seemed fuller. All in all, Brodie thought she looked even more beautiful than he remembered. But what they'd had was in the past. She didn't want any interference in her life and to be honest, neither did he. He knew what he wanted. His military career. There they recognized and rewarded his accomplishments, something his father had never done. His work had given him the most satisfaction he'd ever felt. It'd be better if he remembered that.

Brodie closed his eyes, straining to make sense of what he saw. She hated him. She wanted him. Or did his breaking heart make that up? Swallowing, he ran his hand through his wet hair, determined to find an answer.

But not now. Now they had a little girl to find.

Feeling empty once again, he locked away his emotions. Before he could dress, the phone rang. He rushed to get the receiver before the sound woke Elena. "Hello?" he murmured, pulling the phone as far away from the sleeping beauty as he could.

"Who is this?" the man said in a thick accent.

"Why don't you tell me your name first?"

The caller paused. "Is Elena Ramirez present?"

"Yeah. I'm her partner. Who's this?"

"Sanchez. She didn't tell me she had a partner."

Brodie lowered his voice. "You don't think she'd be stupid enough to meet you without someone covering her back, did you?"

"No." Sanchez paused, his voice became a whisper. "I changed the time."

"How 'bout the place?" Brodie didn't hide the derision in his voice.

"No. The place is safer. The *policía* are around the corner. They watch over everything. No funny business. Go to the alley. No one will see you. I will light a *cigarrote* so you know it is me, okay? We talk."

"Fine." Brodie still didn't like this. "What time?"

"*Nueve y media*. Tonight."

"Nine-thirty. Got it."

"Don't be late. Things are not what they seem."

"We'll be there."

Brodie heard the click of the phone as the man hung up. Then the bed creaked. Brodie glanced at Elena.

"Who was it?" She stretched like a cat, a sultry rasp in her sleep-ridden voice.

Brodie swallowed, willing himself not to react to the sensual picture in front of him. "Sanchez. He wants to meet at nine-thirty instead."

She grabbed the clock by the bed and stared at the numbers. "It's almost six now."

He nodded. "I'll call a cab. I don't want to risk someone ID'ing my truck."

"Okay." Relaxing on her elbows, a glimmer shone in her eyes. Elena eyed Brodie up and down, her view lingering on his bare chest. "I must say, that is an improvement. At least you look human."

He smirked. "Glad you approve. I'm naked underneath. You want to take a peek? It's clean too." He was only joking, letting his sense of humor come out to ease the uncomfortable situation.

She frowned and Brodie realized he'd gone too far. "Dream on, playboy. Don't think I haven't heard about your many girlfriends. Even if I was interested, I'd be worried about what I'd catch."

"Hey, I'm healthy as a horse," he said, glad she didn't get upset. "And you can't catch anything from just looking. Of course, should you decide otherwise, I'm game." He wiggled his brows.

She sat up. "Yeah? Well, no thanks. I don't want to be ridden by a stallion." She swung her legs over and rose, her clothes rumpled.

Brodie stood close enough to whisper in her ear. He knew he shouldn't ask but some perverse part of him wanted to know. "And just who is it you want to be rode by?"

She pushed him away. "Keep your distance, Brodie. I told you before this is business, not pleasure."

He studied her, swearing some devil rode his shoulder. "When's the last time you got any?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You're the last person in this world who should ask me that."

"Yeah? Well what makes you think I've been playing around?"

She grunted. "The first few years you were gone, you're father couldn't stop bragging about your dates. He liked rubbing your many women in my face."

Brodie eyed the ceiling. "Thanks, Dad."

"Besides, you left me, remember? I've developed a life of my own. Why would I want you back?"

"Yeah." Brodie's gut felt like it had been punched. "Why would you?" He pulled off the towel as he strode out the door to the bathroom to change, not caring what Elena saw. When he heard the deep intake of her breath, he knew his naked body affected her more than she'd admit.

* * * * *

Sanchez opened the door to the back of the saloon, spilling the light from inside against the darkened alleyway. Tobacco smoke rolled out behind him and curled skyward. He fingered his empty pants pockets and hoped the American *chica* would be on time. Normally, he wouldn't bother with a woman and her troubles but he'd fallen on hard times and she had money. He needed a hit. Besides, he would help get her *niña* back, no? What the hell? That backstabbing bastard Manuel shouldn't have the child. Not with the shit he was into. By the Holy Mother, he did a good deed here, even with the risk. Still, if the big man found out, he'd be toast. He snorted and shook his head. *No*. No one knew. He'd made sure of that. He'd be fine.

Seeing the alley was clear, Fuego closed the door and fumbled for the pack of cigarettes he kept in his rolled-up shirtsleeve. Struggling to keep his eyes open, he let them adjust to the dimmer light. Shadows flicked against the brick of the building across from him, the images of people passing in front of the streetlight along the road. Muted sounds from the cantina he'd left came through the closed door. Some woman's laughter swelled from the building across the way.

A warm breeze wafted through the narrow passage, stirring the rancid smells of trash and stale beer, a scent he'd grown used to. The draft shifted, sending a can skipping along the pavement, the metal tinkling against the hard surface, taking his attention away from the sounds inside.

The shadows shifted again. From the corner of his eye, Fuego thought he'd seen something move. He shoved the pack in his sleeve and casually crossed to the other wall, fingering the hilt of the knife he kept at his belt, his senses alert.

A feral snarl made his breath hitch. A cat jumped out of an open trash can near the back corner of the cantina. The tom landed on its feet and snarled at a dog that had come sniffing at the container. After a small scuffle, the cat ran off and the dog feasted on a joint bone that had rolled out from the fallen can.

Fuego sniggered and relaxed against the cool brick. Tugging the pack from his shirtsleeve again, he pulled out a stub and lit the end, inhaling deeply, relishing the bitter taste. He needed to relax. One hit. One hit would make him better. He puckered his lips in an oval and exhaled the smoke, making a perfect ring. The breeze kicked up again and vanquished his work. "Damn." He checked his watch. *Almost time.*

He took another puff to steady his nerves, determined to make another halo of smoke that would float free. A warm gust brushed his face but this time he was ready for its destructive force. He waited for the breeze to pass then exhaled more slowly this round. The ring formed. He nodded and grinned. *Success.*

Shouting and laughter erupted from the street. Fuego knew some of the voices. A patron to the cantina was not a welcomed guest.

He chuckled. Then a hot wind blew at the back of his neck, different this time, carrying the smell of fetid breath. A cold shiver shimmied down his spine.

"Hello, Fuego. It's been some time, my friend."

Sanchez could hardly hear the soft raspy voice over the ruckus at the cantina. But what he heard was enough. He whirled, the streetlight flashing against his blade as he slashed out at a voice he remembered only with fear.

The dark man in front of him locked Fuego's arm before he could do any damage and twisted the blade to Fuego's throat. A small pain cut along the side of his neck. Sanchez's hand became sticky with the mark of blood. He glared at his attacker. "What do you want?"

The hired assassin smiled. "Nothing, my friend. I have all I need. Everything I desire." His voice grew sickly sweet.

Sanchez swallowed and looked in the face of his executioner. He'd never forget the pearl white teeth that leered at him, at least in the few remaining minutes where he could still remember.

His head felt light. "Sweet Mother, have mercy," he mumbled then a strange calmness took him, a peace he hadn't felt since he was a boy. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned..."

Silence, blackness overtook Fuego as Carlos the killer eased his body to the ground. "Sleep well, my friend," the disjointed voice murmured from somewhere above.

Fuego's last thought was of his mother.

* * * * *

"Hey, woman..." A man sitting on the street grabbed Elena's leg.

Brodie broke his hold and Elena ran ahead. "In here, I think," she said and pointed down a dark lane.

"You *think*?" Brodie rolled his eyes. "I thought you knew where we were going?"

A man busted through the cantina door, landing near the drunk they'd just passed. Looking at the bouncer who filled the doorway, Brodie figured the ex-patron had tumbled out with a lot of help. Noise from the inside spilled onto the street. Ignoring the bluster, Brodie glanced down the alley. One couldn't see much from where they stood. "I don't see a lit cigarette."

Elena huffed. "Well maybe he's already finished. We're two minutes late, dammit." She took a step forward.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her back. "If you're sure this is the one, I go first."

"Fine. Then lead on. We don't have all night."

"Shut up and stay behind me." He pushed her aside and eased along the cantina wall. Ahead Brodie saw someone rush around the corner. He let go of Elena and hurried after him until he about tripped on what felt like a sack of flour.

Unfortunately, the sack moaned.

Brodie bent over and grabbed the man by his shirt, seating him against the building as Elena rushed over. "You Sanchez?"

"Yeess..." Sanchez answered with a breathy voice.

Elena tilted up his chin. Gray light spilled over the small dark pulse of blood oozing from the artery in his neck. Elena gasped.

Sanchez looked up. "Blessed Mother, you sent an angel," he said in Spanish. "*Gracias*." His head dropped against the brick as the pulse slowed. His mouth gaped open.

"Jesus God," Elena whispered. "He's dead."

Brodie took off around the corner. The end of the alley led into a more boisterous part of Boys Town. Whoever had killed this man was gone.

Brodie rushed back and grabbed Elena's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"But?" She pointed to Sanchez.

"He's dead and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. Let's split before we're found and the locals get too curious. We end up in jail and you'll never find your daughter."

"Point taken."

They ran for the street. When they reached the front of the cantina, Brodie noticed some of Sanchez's blood had spilled on his shirt.

"Hey, *Americano*, give me a drag." The one who'd been tossed from the bar grabbed Brodie's arm where the blood soaked him. "Jesus, man, you hurt?"

"No." Brodie broke the hold and rushed Elena along.

"Okay," Brodie heard the guy say. "Fine. Then go take a flying piss." The man laughed. "Hey, I take a piss too."

Brodie heard him meander down the alley. "Let's go." He hurried Elena on. Seconds later, he heard the man yell.

Minutes after that, the police whistles blew.

* * * * *

Mauricio had pegged the couple for him and Chris took up the tail, watching the alley from across the way and sending his Mexican partner to circle around the other end, just in case. Chris had recognized one of them, a Special Forces operative he worked with in Columbia. *Sergeant First Class Brodie Crawford*. He remembered the cocky redhead. So this was the ranch king's heir, the one with ties to The Spider? How did the system work?

It pissed Chris off. Disloyal son of a bitch. But it wouldn't be the first time an Army operative turned bad. The cash rewards were too big. Still, this guy had his family's money. Didn't make sense. Unless...

Ty Baker had been a friend of Daddy Crawford. Baker had been taking money on the sly for some years. Could Crawford have been the behind the money laundering and the shuttling of illegals into the country? The rancher probably used the emigrants. A lot of folks did. Was there a connection?

Chris had to find out. Terrorist money stood behind The Spider and the bastard now ruled the traditional smuggling routes. When The Spider took over the drug channels, the world became much more dangerous. It wasn't just drugs anymore. Men, weapons, fanatics not afraid to blow themselves to kingdom come filtered through the portals.

Chris' job was to break the connection. Find The Spider. Seek out the Asian connection he had or destroy the bastard if that couldn't be done.

Suddenly, the couple darted out of the alley. Chris watched them run. "What the..." He followed, taking advantage of their panicked state. Something had gone wrong. That was obvious. He radioed Mauricio as he went. "They're on the move. Check the alley."

"Si," the response came into his headset.

Chris followed the pigeons to a corner. Sirens wailed. "Locals coming," he reported to Mauricio.

"I hear them."

"You have three minutes to clear out."

"Si."

After confirming Sanchez was dead, Mauricio had radioed Chris and exited the scene. Chris closed in on the sergeant and his girl. As he neared the couple, they hurried through the crowd, heading toward the visitors' side of the complex. Before Chris could

reach them, they switched directions and ran down an alley, disappearing through the open doorway in the rear of a battered building. The CIA man looked at the small sign above the door. *The Donkey*.

He rubbed his face. "Ah, hell. Please tell me they didn't go in there."

* * * * *

Brodie had grabbed a serape from some passed-out drunk as they ran and threw the cloth over Elena's hair. "Cover up," he ordered as he dragged her into the first open door he saw in the alley, hoping whatever show the crowd watched would prevent anyone from pegging them. Hopefully they could run through, slip out the front and be a step closer to the exit of this hellhole.

He skirted the rear of the crowd but the place was jam-packed.

"Where's the *señorita*?" somebody yelled.

Brodie heard a donkey bray. "Oh, shit. Let's go." If he'd known where he was, he wouldn't have come through here.

He cinched Elena next to him as he barreled his way through.

"What's going on?" Elena asked. "I can't see over these men."

"You don't want to know. Just stay hidden and keep quiet."

"Brodie..."

Some guy he'd circled around grabbed Elena's arm and pulled the serape off her head. "Hey, here she is."

Everyone near them turned.

Brodie had to think fast. "The hell she is." He kicked the interloper in the gut. "She's my sister. Now get out of the way." Elena yelped as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. Several of the boys objected and grabbed his shirt.

"Brodie, what the —" Elena said.

"Hold on," he yelled. Securing her with one arm, he lifted the other in front of him and proceeded to stiff-arm the men as he made for the front door.

"What an interesting place you brought me in," Elena said to his rear. He could tell she fought them off from behind him but there were too many of them.

The crowd shoved him against the wall and grabbed his arms, reaching for Elena. "I tell you, she isn't here to perform," he yelled. "We just got in the wrong place."

"Perform what?" She lifted her body up and kicked backwards and hit an attacker in the face. The shorter man fell back and Brodie was able to break through.

Suddenly, the crowd in the center area began to cheer. The other men turned to look.

"Oh, God, Brodie. There's a donkey tied in the middle of the room. And a naked women heading for the animal."

The room now focused on the center stage. Brodie put Elena down. "I think I mentioned you didn't want to know."

"Disgusting," she spat.

"Yeah, now let's get out of here." He pulled her as hard as he could. In seconds, they stood under the streetlight.

"I can't believe you hauled me in there," she fumed.

"Sorry." But he wasn't, not really. The exit out of the complex put them half a block down from their way to freedom. So far, no one leaving seemed to be hassled by the cops. Now if they could just make the few hundred yards undetected. He put his arm around her. "Walk casually. We're lovers, okay?"

She glared at him. "This better work."

"It will." He studied the concrete brick wall and the crushed glass glued on top of it. "It has to."

Fear flashed in her eyes then she nodded. "Okay, lover." She put her arm around him. "Let's go."

Together they loped to the exit.

As they strolled closer, Brodie saw the beads of sweat rising on Elena's forehead. "Smile."

She looked at him and tried.

Brodie scanned the ground. A few policemen stood in front of the station. Another few feet and he and Elena would be at the exit and in the open. He bent over and kissed her.

"Brodie," she murmured, her eyes glistening.

"Just play along. Try to act like we don't know they're there."

She put her hand around his neck and kissed him back.

From behind, Brodie heard the whoosh of a police cruiser arrive and glanced through the corner of his eye. Some men got out, one of them the drunk from the bar.

"That's him." The guy yelled as the plastered man identified him.

"Shit. Let's go." Getting past the station would take too long. He ran with Elena into the Boys Town crowd again, making his way into a dark titty bar. He knew he only had moments. Pulling her into the bathroom, he locked the door and turned off the light. "Take this. All the money's inside." He shoved his wallet into her hands.

"Brodie, they have us. Running is only going to make this look worse. We need to tell them the truth."

"No, and don't argue. No time. Remember I told you I'd take over if things went south. Well, they're south."

"Dammit, Brodie, don't get all he-man on me now."

He grasped her arms. "Forget it, Elena. I don't want you hurt." He brushed her cheek with his thumb. "When I leave, lock the door again. Wait 'til they take me away

and crawl out the window." He nodded at the small, open window over the toilet. "Give things time to settle down then hightail it out of here. If I make the slip, then I'll meet you at the hotel. If not..." He shrugged.

"But they'll massacre you. Beat you until you tell them something." She grabbed his arm. Fear flashed in her eyes. For him?

He wondered. He held her in his arms. "I won't tell them anything I don't want them to know. I've been trained in this. Trust me. Besides, they'll have too much fun at my expense first. Elena..." He lifted her chin and peered into her golden brown eyes. "Promise me you'll stay low. You're a smart woman. Use your brain and your instincts. For God's sake, I don't want you caught."

Her eyes glistened. "I promise."

"Good." He brushed his lips over hers, tasted them. When she kissed him back, he let her go. He swallowed. "We need to talk, Elena. Honestly with each other. When we find your daughter, I intend to do that. Get things straight between us."

"Brodie..." Her husky voice called to him. She fingered his cheek. Voices rose from the small alley outside.

Brodie nudged Elena in a dark corner and moved to the door. "Call my dad when you get clear. He'll know what to do." He put his ear to the door.

"Brodie, I..." she whispered and reached to put her hand on his chest.

He smirked. "You're welcome." He kissed her fingertips and rubbed them briefly then slipped out the door.

The short hallway to the john was dark. He could see the bar to his left. Colored lights blared on the dancers at the stage across from him. Brodie leaned against the pitted wooden wall in the shadows and watched. A few patrons whistled and yelled encouragement to the girls over the blaring music. The bartender served another drink, nodding his head to the person ordering it. No one seemed to care the police had run through and were hanging somewhere in the alley. They were too interested in the nude women on the counter or in getting drunk. Good for him.

But the cops were still near. Brodie could hear the shouting in the distance. Thinking this would be his best chance, Brodie pulled the brim of his Stetson down and made his way to the entrance. He looked out the doorway. The few *policía* left in front ran up and down the road of the station. Their movements reminded Brodie of the old Keystone Kops movies his father used to watch. Most everyone else meandered along the street or hung out some door or window. A few locals stood on the wooden porch smoking. Thinking the slip easy, Brodie eased through and took a step away from the men.

The click of a round loading in the chamber of a weapon caught Brodie's attention.

"*Buenas noches, señor,*" a gruff voice said.

Through his peripheral vision, Brodie saw one of the locals turn and point a pistol in his face.

"I think as you say in English, you are under arrest."

Raising his hands, Brodie turned to face the man. He should have known it wouldn't be this easy. He just prayed Elena would get away.

* * * * *

The quiet of the alley scared Elena almost as much as being chased. A stream of light came through the window from the street. She glanced at her watch again. She'd let the minutes pass. Ten, fifteen. The angry voices she'd heard came and went. She wondered if Brodie got away.

Then someone spoke near the window. She peered through the screen. Two policemen strode through. She ducked beside the toilet. One of the men laughed, saying something about what they'd do to the gringo.

"Oh, God..." She leaned against the locked door and let her tears fall. They'd caught him.

A mix of emotions swelled in her. He'd kissed her. Wanted to talk to her. Now, he'd been jailed. She hadn't meant for this to happen. Her old friend only came to help. God only knew when he'd see the light of day.

And it was her fault. If she'd listened to him, they wouldn't have come here. But how could she have known someone was out to kill Sanchez?

"His dad..." she mumbled, remembering her cell phone. Quickly she put in a call to her partner. The phone rang and rang again. "Dammit, Larry, where are you?"

His voice mail came on. "Larry," she said, "Brodie's been arrested for murder. He didn't do it. I'm hiding. Contact Chet. I'm putting my phone on vibrate so the sound won't compromise my position. I'll call you when I can."

She shoved the phone in her purse and glanced out the window. The police were still in the alley. Leaving by that way was a no-go. Elena put her ear to the door, hoping no one would need to use the facilities soon, hoping she could stay hidden.

The noise outside seemed to settle. She cracked the window open a bit more and scanned the small space between the buildings. The police were gone. Her heart thrummed and her breathing raced. Inhaling slowly to calm her fears, she tried to blot out the rowdy bar noise and listen for footsteps in the alley. Voices still carried from the front of the cantina.

Someone knocked on the door. "Donnie, you in there?"

It was an American.

"Donnie?" He knocked again.

Damn. She didn't want to leave yet. She wasn't sure the way was clear. Then a thought occurred to her. Everyone had gone to the front. She was near the back. Maybe she could get this guy's attention, use him as a cover to take her out of the complex?

She cleared her throat and undid a few buttons to expose her cleavage.

"Hey, Don. Enough's enough, man. Let's get some chicks already."

Stalling, she flushed the toilet then fluffed her hair. If he wanted a chick, she'd give him one. She'd played this game before. Reaching in her purse, she fingered her Glock then unlocked the knob with her free hand. Easing the door open, she weaved like a drunk. "Sorry," she muttered, leaning against the molding and pushing her breasts up, "think I had too much." She shot him her most seductive smile.

In the dim light, the tanned, lean man looked about thirty-five, his hair the color of wheat. The wicked twist of his lips mocked her. He ogled her breasts and stepped closer. "I bet." Grabbing the hand she had in her purse, he twisted her palm upward and pushed her back into the john before she could react. Her pistol and serape dropped to the floor as he held her in a wristlock and nudged the door closed with his foot, setting the lock with his free hand. "Now," he growled in a low voice, releasing her only long enough to grab her forearms and shove them upward behind her back, "you can either come with me quietly or I can have you join your friend in police custody. Which will it be?"

Chapter Seven

Shocked, Elena stood gaping at the tall stranger. He'd tricked her, that's for sure. And how did this man know about Brodie? "Who are you?" Her voice trembled.

The disgust in his steel-colored eyes faded. "None of your business." He pressed her arms higher until she winced. "Give me an answer."

"You have a unique way of convincing a woman." She gritted her teeth, working to delay him so she could think.

No such luck. He snatched her to him so hard the breath whooshed from her lungs. "Don't fuck with me, lady. I'll turn you out in a heartbeat. And trust me—" His eyes narrowed. "It doesn't matter to me. One way or another, I'll find out what I need to know."

Pain shot through her shoulders from the pressure. She mewed and tried to reason a way out.

"Well?" He shook her.

"Where will you take me?" she whispered. A cord of terror twisted in her.

For a brief moment, the hardness in his eyes abated. "I won't kill you, if that's what you're thinking. Unless you do something stupid."

She swallowed. "That's good to know."

He lowered his voice. "Your cooperation will save me time." He pulled her from him and let his gaze linger over her breasts. "And you some inconvenience, I imagine. But if I have to fight to get you out of here then it'll only get the police involved. You really want to hassle with them and what they might do to you?"

No, she didn't. Rape wasn't unheard of in a Mexican cell. Besides, she had to find Janie and now get Brodie out of jail. But would she be any better off with this man? "What do you want to know?"

He smirked. "Your name, for a start. And what connection you have to Crawford and Mannie Ramirez."

She saw no option except to tell the truth. "Elena Ramirez. Mannie's my ex-husband. He took my daughter over the border. Brodie came with me to convince him to give her back. Thing is, we don't know where Mannie is. We came here to find out."

His lifted one brow. "What about the dead guy in the alley?"

She looked him in the eyes. "He had a lead on Mannie. Someone slit his throat before he could tell us. We have no idea who or why."

Footsteps sounded outside the door.

His eyes narrowed. "That's it?"

She bobbed her head. "Yes. I swear."

"Yeah." He huffed. "It's who you're sworn to that I worry about."

The knob jiggled. "Anyone in there?"

"Right now you're coming with me," he whispered. He twisted her around and shackled her in plastic cuffs. Picking up her pistol, he pocketed it then retrieved the serape and threw the cloth around her shoulders to cover her hands. "I'm keeping you under wraps until I check your story. Until I know I can trust you, you and I are going to be good friends." He turned her around and held her close, his eyes glinting with undisguised malice. "And don't give me any trouble. Be nice and maybe I'll untie you for good behavior. Understand?"

"Yes." She nodded and noted that this was the second time that day someone had questioned her integrity.

The man on the other side banged on the wood. "Hey, man, you dead? I need the john."

Her new "friend" put his arm around her and opened the door. "Sorry, guy. Just trying to get a bit of privacy. Didn't take long. You know how it is." He winked at the freckle-faced kid.

"Well, if I'd known..." The boy gulped while he stared at Elena's pushed-up bosom. "Hey, I'll take her if you're done. I can pay." He fumbled with some money he drew from his pocket.

"Nope." The stranger patted the boy on the shoulder. "I'm not finished with this one." Holding Elena tight against him, he walked her out of the cantina.

Outside he strolled with her to the gate of the complex. A few police were still wandering about. The stranger nodded to a darker man at the far end of the corridor in front of the station. Then he looked down on her. "Okay, sweetheart, you and me will pretend we like each other and walk out. The police have hauled Crawford off so don't expect any help from him. My partner will have the car waiting on the other side. I warn you, don't screw with me. I'm in no mood for heroics." He moved her along.

"Look, I told you what I know. What else could you want?" Her pulse raced with the fear of the unknown.

He hissed at her. "Let's leave that a surprise. Now shut up and smile. I noticed you do that very well."

"But my daughter..."

He squeezed her arm so hard it hurt. "No talking," he growled then let up as she winced with pain. "Tell me later. Right now I want to leave. Got it?"

She nodded. She understood only too clearly.

* * * * *

Brodie leaned against the iron bars of the gang cell. The dim lights in the room didn't help him rest. He sat on a corner of a hard bench near the entrance, wincing again when his battered head touched the cool metal. He'd given Elena his wallet. No money made at least one of the law enforcers upset. The damage resulted from the lawman's severe disappointment. The beating could have been worse but some guy in a suit came by and stopped him. Brodie wondered who his savior had been and why. For certain, the guy was a superior. The plainclothes officer had given him a once-over before the uniforms threw Brodie in a vehicle and took him to another station some distance away.

Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep lungful of air to center himself. As soon as the *policía* shoved him behind bars, he could feel the angry tension of the locals, the eyes of those who occupied the gang cell studying him. He breathed deeper. Smells came to him. The huge cell stank with stale liquor, sweat and piss.

Better than blood, he figured.

Peering through slit lids, he studied the rough-looking group in the corner. The men were younger, some probably in their late teens. One in black leather lay on a bench flipping a lighter on and off. A few more were sprawled on the floor trying to sleep. Occasionally, a floor dweller would snore. The guy holding the lighter would nod to a minion and the tattered gang member would walk over and kick the guy. Then the sleeper would roll over, gawk, and fall back into dreamland. Brodie figured most of the ones asleep were too stoned to care. But no matter what happened, constantly the leader would stare at Brodie.

"So, *Americano*," the Bic-flicker's voice finally rasped in Spanish. "How did you get so lucky as to grace our presence, huh?"

Brodie stared at him a moment then looked away through the front of the bars, deciding to play ignorant. The less anyone knew the better. And these boys? They'd use whatever information they could to get out. Even something made up against him.

The leader spoke again. "The gringo must be stupid. To be in here." The rest laughed then Bic Boy mumbled something unintelligible.

From the corner of his eye, Brodie watched two of the brood saunter over. The largest stood almost as tall as Brodie, bald except for the triangle shaved in front of his head. He flexed his tattooed biceps and crossed his arms over his chest as he planted his feet to stare down at him.

The other looked like a scarecrow, scrawny and lean with gaunt cheeks. He tapped Brodie on the shoulder, snapping the gum in his mouth when he spoke. "*El jefe* wants to know who you are."

The American accent was pretty good. Brodie had to give the punk that much. He turned his head slowly and eyed both of them up and down, buying time, letting them know he wouldn't be intimidated. "Why does he want to know?"

The scarecrow shrugged. "He does. Not for me to ask. So, what do you want me to say?"

Brodie cut his look to the leader and back at the interpreter. "You the only one that speaks English?"

He lifted his palms with the shrug this time. "Eh, yeah? Pretty much."

The leader snapped a few curse words at the speaker. The scarecrow frowned. "You better say something. Juan doesn't like to be forgotten."

Brodie smirked. "Yeah. I know what he means. Tell him I'm here from a misunderstanding."

Turning his head, the boy spouted what he said to the leader.

Bic Boy snorted. "What misunderstanding?" he said in Spanish. "He bang an officer's wife or something?"

The others laughed.

Scarecrow pursed his lips in a smile. "Juan wants to know what the misunderstanding is? Asks if you slept with some official's wife."

Brodie smirked. "No. Nothing that imaginative."

The scarecrow relayed his meaning.

Bic Boy laughed then snapped at the skinny man again.

"Oh, yes. He says you have money. Where's your money, gringo? You should be gone from here."

Brodie pressed his lips together. "Someone stole it."

When scarecrow told Bic Boy, the leader laughed so hard he almost fell off the bench. "What a stupid gringo," he spat out the Spanish words. "Tell him to get us out of here. We will get his money back." He snapped his fingers at the scarecrow. "Now!"

"Eh, the man, he says to get us out of here and we will get your money back. Otherwise..." He shrugged and looked at the gang member next to him whom Brodie dubbed the "intimidator". "My other friend will rearrange your face." The scarecrow nodded, parting his mouth until the corners of his smile reached his cheeks.

"I'll see what I can do," Brodie scowled.

The skinny one turned and told his boss.

The leader yelled at him in Spanish. "Stupid, get him moving now. I don't want to be in here all night. We have business to take care of."

The muscleman grabbed Brodie's shirt and pulled the fabric taut. The thin one pressed his lips together. "He wants to be out now. You will fix this?"

Brodie narrowed his eyes. "I think not." Before the gang's muscle could react, Brodie broke his hold by twisting his wrist then turning him and banging his head into the bars. Blood spouted from the man's broken nose.

All hell broke loose. The others trampled the ones on the floor as they piled on. Expecting the rush, Brodie pulled the scarecrow in front of him to take most of the pounding, throwing punches around him until the younger started puking. A makeshift knife from what looked like a metal utensil flashed in front of him and Brodie

took the opportunity to free the weapon from its user, slicing the man's wrist. The man yelped and pulled back, giving Brodie access to the leader, who had come in from behind the others.

Brodie took the advantage. Locking Bic Boy in a hold, Brodie held the knife to his neck. "You wanna back off now, punk?" he said in perfect Spanish to him.

"You understood me?" he replied in kind.

This close Brodie saw the needle tracks on his neck that his tattoos covered. "Yeah, I understood. And I don't want to be messed with, got it?"

The boy nodded.

"Now tell your friends to back off."

Bic Boy hastily shouted the order just as the door to the holding area opened, lighting the area. Brodie swallowed and turned the boy toward the entrance, hiding the knife and hoping the jailers hadn't seen the weapon. He really didn't want another beating.

Two of them came through and sauntered to the cell. "You causing trouble again, Juan?" the more stout one asked in Spanish then switched to English when he nodded to Brodie. "Good evening, *Señor*."

"Evenin'." Brodie nodded back.

"Gringo..." the big one pointed to him, "let Juan go to his piss hole. You come with me."

The other jailer pulled his pistol and waved the weapon toward the bars, telling the others to move away.

Grumbling, they retreated to the rear. Brodie released Bic Boy, who sneered with yellowed teeth at Brodie and nodded as if in approval. "You come and get me, amigo, *si*?" he said to Brodie in perfect English as he walked away. "We finish this then."

"Anytime," Brodie scoffed.

The boy laughed as he sat in the same place and pulled out the lighter, flicking the flame again.

When the others stood far enough in back, the older man unlocked the cell. The hinges squeaked when he pulled the bars open and waved Brodie out.

Had Elena been able to reach his father? Had he been able to pull strings already? Brodie wondered. Unsure what the jailers wanted, he followed them, the unknown making him nervous. It was too soon for Chet to have made the right bribes, if they'd let him. But from what he knew, Sanchez wasn't endeared to any of these people. He'd been a dealer who'd ended up on the short end of things. How much did they care that a washed-up thug got wasted? With the rampant border crime, probably not much, unless they wanted to use Brodie for some publicity, showing how macho their force was by toppling a simple gringo. But if not that, what? Other than to beat him lifeless for sport?

After the senior man locked up, Brodie followed him through the door, the other keeping the pistol trained on him.

The brighter light glared in the station and made Brodie squint.

"Buenos noches, Señor Crawford."

Brodie turned and watched the suit rise.

"I think you have me at a disadvantage," he said, hoping to get more information from this new person.

The shorter man huffed. "I hope so. If you will come with me, perhaps we can straighten this out." He nodded to a uniformed policeman who turned Brodie around and cuffed him. "For security reasons." He shot Brodie a lopsided smirk. "I'm sure you understand." The older jailer relieved him of the knife he'd put in his pocket.

"Yeah," Brodie grumbled as they led him outside to a dark alley and shoved him into the back of a rundown sedan.

The suit got behind the wheel and drove several feet down the back road then stopped.

From the dark, another stepped from a hidden nook and got in front. "Hello, Crawford."

Brodie recognized the haggard voice.

The man turned and studied him. "Interesting I should meet you in this part of the world."

Chris Ferguson leered at him. Brodie's skin crawled.

Now he knew what Sanchez meant when he'd said things weren't as they seemed.

* * * * *

"You're a pretty woman. Why would you marry such scum?" Officer Gutiérrez smiled at Elena as she sat still cuffed on the bed of a sleazy motel room. He'd introduced himself, although the other, the American, hadn't said a word.

Except to say he would be back and this might work out after all. That statement worried her and she wondered what it meant.

In the meantime, the young lieutenant entertained her by throwing different questions at her, ones she refused to answer until she got some answers of her own. So instead of pressing her, he opted to talk about the obvious.

"He wasn't a scum when I married him. That happened later." The explanation was true and nothing he could use against her.

The Mexican officer pursed his full lips. "I see."

Outside, the sound of tires crushing the gravel let her know someone had arrived.

Gutiérrez lifted the shabby curtain and peered out. "Our friend is back." He smiled at her. "Now we'll see what we can do."

In moments, the door opened. Brodie walked through. "Thank God," she muttered, falling over on the covers when she tried to rise.

"Don't bother to get up." He sat next to her. "They tell you anything?"

She straightened herself and shook her head.

"Figures." The corner of his mouth drew tight.

"You?" she asked as the American man came through the door.

Brodie huffed. "I think we're about to find out."

The American closed the door and rubbed his jaw. "She give you anything else?" he asked his partner.

Gutiérrez shook his dark head. "No, she's had too much time to think. Figures until we tell her something she has nothing to say."

"That right?" The American pulled a chair near the bed. Sitting with his elbows on his knees, he stared at Brodie. "I want an answer, Sergeant. What are you two doing here?"

A muscle in Brodie's jaw ticked. "We came to get Elena's little girl back."

"And her full name?"

"Elena Alvarez Ramirez."

"How do you know her?"

"We grew up together."

"What does she do?"

"She's a bounty hunter. Her father's the local sheriff."

"What about Manuel Ramirez?"

"He's her ex."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes. We grew up with him as well."

"Your command know you're here?"

"I left a message with someone on the team."

The American clasped his hands together. "Not proper channels then."

Brodie grimaced. "No. No time. This was supposed to be easy."

The American arched a brow. "You're taking a kidnapped child from a drug lord. Try again."

Brodie sighed. "Fine. We didn't think it'd be easy but we didn't think anyone would get killed either, at least not this guy."

"Why was he killed?"

"I don't know."

"Don't bullshit me, Crawford. I'm not in the mood."

"I'm not. Sanchez was supposed to tell us where Ramirez was. Somebody slit his throat before we got there."

"Why Sanchez?"

"He was my contact," Elena countered before Brodie could say anything. This was her mess. He shouldn't take the hit for it.

The American sniggered. "So you're speaking to me now."

She glared at him. "Brodie is only here to help me. You don't need to screw with him."

The American lifted the edge of one thinned lip, his eyes filled with malevolence. "Thought you'd realize by now I like to screw with people. Why Sanchez?"

She swallowed. Her arms still hurt. "If I tell you, will you let us go?"

"No." A storm brewed in his gray eyes. "Lady, I'm only giving you this one warning. And I'm not above violence. Not right now." He leaned closer to her.

Until Brodie pushed his upper body between them. "Back off, Ferguson." His deep growl even startled Elena.

The man Brodie called Ferguson leaned back with a devilish grin. "Only trying to get some cooperation. Your girlfriend needs to know I mean business." He rested against the back of the chair. "So you tell me." His eyelids narrowed. "Why Sanchez?"

Brodie shifted against her. Elena knew he would try to make something up. She already had enough on her conscience. She didn't need his lies too.

She interrupted before he covered for her. "My partner, Larry Murphy, contacted him. He's an ex-Dallas policeman who knew of Sanchez before he fell out of power. He'd found out Sanchez needed money. We were going to pay him well for the information."

Ferguson nodded. "I see. Is that who you called before I found you?" He held up her cell phone.

She swallowed. "Yes. He wasn't there. I left a message for him and told him Brodie was in jail for murder."

Ferguson huffed. "Great. More trouble."

He looked at Gutiérrez. "I'll see if I can't stem that part. You check out the rest of her story." He eyed her up and down. "But from what we've verified so far, I think they're all right. I'll vouch for Crawford, anyway."

"Si." The Mexican nodded.

Brodie snorted. "Your confidence overwhelms me."

Ferguson smirked. "It should. For a while I thought your father was involved. I found out otherwise. And you know I don't trust everyone. Don't let me think this is a mistake."

Elena made note of the American's movements as he crossed his arms and studied Brodie. These two knew each other. But how? The guy acted like a federal agent. Brodie was in the Army.

Ferguson eyed Brodie from under his arched brows. "Your family know you're here?"

"It's only my father and he knows I went with her."

"He's a rancher, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"He know Ramirez well?"

"Mannie had been my friend growing up." Brodie shrugged. "As well as a parent could of a boy's friend, I guess."

"He's not your friend anymore?"

Brodie paused. Elena admired his cool demeanor. If she hadn't been this close, she wouldn't have noticed the slight clench he had in his jaw.

"No. Hasn't been since I left for my first assignment with the Army."

"Why not?"

"We had a disagreement."

"Over what?"

"It's personal."

"How personal."

"It doesn't have anything to do with why we're here."

"Let me decide that. Why the fight?"

Brodie paused, a small muscle in his jaw jerked. "Over him marrying Elena."

"Her?" He nodded in her direction. "Why did you care?"

Brodie didn't answer.

The man leaned into Brodie's face. "You'd better tell me. I already have enough shit on you to have you put away."

Brodie huffed. "I thought you trusted me."

"Within reason." He eyed Brodie. "Leavenworth isn't a fun place and you know I can do it. How does treason sound to you?" He paused. "Or better yet, I can give you back to the Mexicanos. What do you think? Either way will destroy your career."

Brodie sucked in a breath. "That's bullshit and you know it."

He came nose to nose with Brodie. "Try me."

Elena's one-time lover grimaced. "Tell me why you need to know." Brodie's voice sounded soft but Elena knew that tone. An ancestral trait, the message was laced with steel.

The man sat straighter. "This is a tricky mission. I want to know what I'm dealing with. The rest is classified. Now, why?"

Brodie clenched his jaw then glanced heatedly at Elena. "Because I came back to get her."

"Get her for what?"

Brodie winced. "We were supposed to get married."

"You wanted her for yourself?" The man's harsh tone condemned Elena. "But she'd already married your best friend. Nice."

"Yeah." Brodie flinched, his voice suddenly tired.

"You in love with her?"

Brodie's eyes narrowed and he refused to look at Elena. "I was."

The American shot a glance at her and leaned an elbow on his knee. "Not now?"

Brodie paused. "It's been a long time."

When Brodie came back from Basic, he had fought with Mannie. Had it really been over her? A glimmer of what was, rose and deflated with the confession. The memory was too long ago and the sudden reaction unnerved her.

"I see." The American gave her a quick look that said he'd be watching her, then stood. "Well, you two are going to get your chance to try this again. You armed?"

"We have weapons back at the hotel."

"The Plaza?"

"Yeah. Other than Elena's small handgun, we didn't think we needed anything else. Not in Boys Town. Too much trouble if we got caught."

Ferguson nodded. "Good. You'll need them."

"What do you mean?" Brodie asked.

Elena didn't like the way the corners of the stranger's mouth rose as he nodded. "Buddy, you and your girlfriend just bought yourselves a chance to help your government."

Brodie leered at him. "She isn't my girlfriend."

The man actually laughed in an eerie, quiet way. "Fine, but I need you as operatives and you two have yourselves registered as a married couple. Just keep to the mission I give you. Whatever else you do, or don't do, I could care less. Cooperate and I'll clear everything with your higher-ups."

Brodie squinted. "I don't want her involved. Send her home."

"I am not going home," Elena insisted through clenched teeth. "Not until I get Janie."

"Dammit, Elena, you don't know what we've fallen into."

"I don't care," she said. "Not until I get Janie to safety."

"She's right, Crawford." Ferguson's gaze steeled. "Don't ask me again. This is too important. You already have the cover set up. Use it."

"Chris, this is deeper than what we anticipated. How the hell could we know you were involved?"

"You wouldn't." He nodded. "She want her little girl back?"

Brodie hesitated. "Of course." He gritted his teeth, his voice wary.

"Then I can help."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't." The other man smirked. "But I know where Ramirez is."

Elena let out a small gasp. "You know?"

A serious gleam came into the man's eyes she didn't comprehend. "Yeah. I know. And I've seen your little girl."

"Janie?" she breathed. "Is she...?"

He put his hands in his pockets. "She's fine. He's paying someone to watch her. What I want to know is am I going to have to keep fighting you for your cooperation?" He crossed his arms. "As you've discovered, I'm short on patience and time."

She swallowed. "If this will lead to getting Janie back safely then I'll do whatever you ask."

The gray in his eyes softened. "We have a deal then." He turned to his partner. "Keep an eye on them. I need to get the pieces in place." Turning, the man walked outside. Within moments, a car started and she heard the vehicle drive away.

Relieved and hopeful by the information, Elena whispered in Brodie's ear. "You'll have to tell me what you know about that man. He's a bastard."

Brodie grimaced as he gazed at her, the blue in his eyes deepening with concern. "Most CIA men are."

Elena only gasped.

Chapter Eight

Brodie scanned the street as Gutiérrez pulled in front of the hotel, working to squash the nagging urge in back of his brain to find out what Elena thought of his confession. That he had loved her. The hour was late, the streets dark except for the iron lampposts along the road. All seemed quiet. Inside the hotel, the lights burned warm and inviting, a stark contrast to the night they'd had so far.

Brodie watched Elena rub her chafed wrists. Gutiérrez had removed their cuffs after Ferguson left. Now, having put Elena's pistol in her purse, the plainclothes officer turned in the front seat and handed the pocketbook to her. "Remember, no calls. We've got the hotel phone tapped and we're keeping your cell phones to ensure you don't contact anyone. No one must know of this. And no leaving the room unless you've heard from Ferguson. He will have your new instructions soon, I'm sure."

"What if we decide to pee? The bathroom's down the hall." Brodie bit the inside of his lip to keep from scoffing. He didn't think the man would appreciate his humor but he couldn't resist the dig.

Gutiérrez put his arm across the back of his seat. "Don't be a smartass. You know what I mean. Leave the floor then expect to see the inside of a prison." He glanced at Elena. "Both of you. We'll be watching."

Brodie snorted. "Just making sure."

The officer eyed them with practiced intimidation, one that irritated Brodie more than threatened. "Don't forget what I said. This is Mexico. I'm working with your friend but this is still my jurisdiction. We've had too many drug wars over the last few years, too many deaths. We're finally getting a handle on the situation, without the help of the *federales*. We deal with murderers harshly. I really don't relish letting any go," Gutiérrez jeered.

"But..." Elena protested until Brodie placed a hand on her arm.

"He's only trying to bait you. You ready?" he whispered to her, stopping Elena before she could argue with the prick.

Her features were partially lit by the chandelier lighting in the overhang of the drive to the hotel. Brodie noted the anxiety in the lines around her mouth. "Yes." She pulled the stolen serape around her.

Brodie knew she still worried about her daughter. "Then let's go." He took her hand and opened the door, drawing her out with him.

"*Adiós*, my friends." Gutiérrez pasted on a fake smile, calling to them from the open window and giving them a two-fingered salute. "Enjoy yourselves. We'll be in touch."

Brodie shut the car door and pulled Elena close. "Talk to you soon." He kept up the friendly pretence but he felt Elena shiver next to him. As Gutiérrez drove off, Brodie bent over to study her. "You okay?"

Her golden brown eyes grew clouded with trepidation. "I will be. What do you think they want from us?"

With Ferguson it was hard to tell, although from experience, he could probably guess. "Don't know. Let's get inside. We can talk."

Dona Catarina, the owner's wife, stood behind the desk when they walked in. "Oh, there is my loving couple. I stayed up because something special came for you," she said, her accent heavy. She pulled out a bottle of champagne and a card then handed them to Brodie. "The delivery man was very insistent that you get this tonight."

Brodie put the champagne on the counter and flipped open the note with his free hand. *Enjoy—while you can, it read. Will be in touch.*

"What does it say?" Elena asked.

He handed her the note. "Our new *compadre* has a wicked sense of humor." He dropped his voice so the other woman wouldn't hear. "I suspect we won't be busy until tomorrow. Might as well do as he says."

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. Her hand felt weak. "But Janie..." She fingered the note.

"Come on." He pulled her next to him and took the paper from her. "Let's go to bed."

Dona Catarina giggled and took the bottle. "I will have this chilled and some glasses sent to you." She winked. "After all, the night, she is young, no?"

"Thank you." Brodie smiled and shoved the note in his pocket, amused by the honest determination in the older woman to see that this "dysfunctional couple" made amends. Then he swept Elena up in his arms and carried her to the open elevator, hoping she wouldn't collapse on him.

"I don't need your help," she said when he pressed the button and the doors closed.

He set her down, seeing her stronger than what he'd thought. "Sorry, just trying to keep up the pretense. The *señora* wants us to reconcile. She's very romantic about it." He hovered over her, her lips near his.

"Yeah." Elena rubbed her arms, her prickly armor covering her emotions again.

Brodie backed away but when the doors opened again, she gazed at him with those smoky topaz eyes. "Did you really argue with Mannie about me?"

He shrugged and walked out, remembering the sore jaw he'd had the next morning from the fist Mannie had planted on his chin. Still, his ex-friend had gotten the worst of it. "No. I only said that to get Ferguson off my back."

Her narrowed gaze followed him to the door. "I don't believe you. When you came back from Basic, after we argued that night, Mannie came home with bruises on his body and a cut lip but he insisted he hadn't seen you. He lied, didn't he?"

"Imagine that." Brodie worked to keep the venom out of his voice but to him his tone sounded rough and terse just the same. He put the key in the lock and clenched his teeth trying to maintain his nonchalant veneer. "Believe what you want. It doesn't matter anymore."

As he turned the knob, she pushed against the wood panel in the door and stepped in front of him to block his way. She studied his face in detail.

He worked to remain impassive, not wanting her to know what he thought, but seeing Elena like this made him want to hold her, tell her how much her rejection still hurt. He hoped she couldn't tell.

"It may matter more than you think," she muttered and walked into the room.

A sick feeling bedded in Brodie's gut. "What's that supposed to mean?" He closed the door.

She swerved and looked at him, pain and something else in her tiger gaze. "Why did you just leave me?" Her voice softened then choked. "Why didn't you talk to me when you first came home? Me," she pointed to her chest, "instead of Chet."

"I tried." He ran a hand through his hair. "But my father got to me first." He hardened his heart. He couldn't go through this again. "What the hell did you expect? Do you really think things would have turned out differently?"

She swallowed. "I don't know."

"You could have at least sent me a Dear John letter."

"But I..."

The knock on the door interrupted them.

"I did mail." Her voice grew to barely a whisper. Brodie hadn't heard her as he answered the door. "I mailed a letter almost every day. You see, I loved you too." Suddenly she felt sick, realizing the one person in the world she had trusted with her secret had betrayed her.

* * * * *

Chris changed into his disguise and switched cars before he headed back to Ramirez's new digs, bringing two bottles of cheap Jose Cuervo tequila with him to compliment his cover. With a casual air he didn't feel, he strolled past the guard who'd opened the gated servants' entrance for him, giving him one of the bottles. Next, he strode into the gardens to the small stone shack where he currently resided.

As he passed a newly clipped bush, he saw a figure round the one-room cottage. A woman. He watched the *niñera's* fluid movements, her black hair almost blue in the moonlight. The tight dark pants and shirt she wore accented her trim figure. With stealth, she slid across the small patch of grass in front of the shack and sidled near a dirt-crusted paned window, peering in. He inched closer, wondering what she looked for.

She bent over, her cute *derriere* exposed in the tight gear. Without letting on, he came up from behind. "You looking for me?" he whispered in Spanish, taking in as much of her backside as he could without touching her.

She jumped. Her breath caught in her throat with her gasp. Turning, she pushed her ample breasts up, exposing her cleavage and leaned against the wall, looking sheepish with her petite, painted features, ones tinged with panic.

Then her eyes mellowed into a look that cried seduction. She licked her lips, making the color on them wet. "It's you. I..." she pointed to the window, "wanted to make sure you were there." Her firm breasts heaved and he watched with admiration through the deep slit in the bodice of her blouse.

He placed his hands on the stone behind her, caging her between his arms but keeping his distance just the same. The spicy thickness of her perfume wafted to him, the scent made of cinnamon and something else. "Why were you looking for me?" He spoke softly, not wanting the fear in her eyes, wanting to know what brought her out here.

She laced her sultry look with mocked indecision. "I thought perhaps we could talk. We are both so new." Her soft mouth angled in a slight pout, inviting his lips to touch hers.

His member stirred. It'd been a long time since he'd had a woman. He'd be willing to bet Ramirez put her up to this, to keep tabs on his new gardener. But he didn't need this distraction. Still, perhaps she could keep him company during the hours when he waited, the times when patience became a virtue. "What did you wish to talk about?" He leaned a bit closer.

She smiled primly, a stark contrast to the picture her heady stance painted.

He took his time to gaze down her body, wanting her to know he wasn't interested in verbal banter.

Desire and uncertainty gleamed in her eyes when he looked into her face. Yeah, she'd been sent, he was sure. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage. She stayed in the house. That could be useful. And, perhaps, the widowed woman actually needed a man to warm her bed.

God knows, he could use the release. He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "My dear *señora*, what should I call you?"

"Victoria," she whispered, her voice husky, her accent more the Castellan-type Spanish than Mexican. Her breasts rose and fell with her labored breathing. She smiled seductively at him.

He studied her moonlit face. Heavy kohl accented her deep brown, almond-shaped eyes, emphasizing the sexual desire reflected in them. She wanted him. Perhaps she thought a tryst with him would be an advantage too.

He needed to find out. After all, to get the little girl, he would have to go through her. "Victoria," he rasped then bent over and placed a lingering kiss on her lips.

She arched into him.

He eased his arm around her to pull her close as he deepened the embrace, savoring the touch of her body against his.

After a moment, he pulled away. "Let's go inside. We can talk there."

"Si." She took his hand, leading him to the old wooden door.

Chris' pulse raced at the risk of being with her, knowing anything he said or did would be known by Ramirez. But this woman would be a swinging door of information. He'd make sure of it. As he well knew, two could play this game. And he was good at it. Glancing at her derriere again, he knew he'd be on the most advantageous end of the chase.

She reached for the handle. He put his hand on hers and turned. He didn't keep the place locked. He wouldn't dare leave something there that would be indicative of his true purpose, and a man of his pretend stature wouldn't have anything to steal.

Victoria smiled, perhaps in triumph. In doing so, she became his personal Mona Lisa again, the gesture not really revealing a damn thing about what she thought. *Good*. A woman with secrets. He liked a mystery, as long as it didn't interfere with his mission.

She pushed the door open and pulled him into the dark after her, her mouth the last thing he saw before the door closed. When blackness enveloped them, he smirked, wondering what her upturned lips meant.

* * * * *

Elena undid another button on her blouse and rubbed her aching neck. The unusually muggy air made the room even warmer. The remains of the food Dona Catarina brought sat on the small table near the open door to the balcony, where she sat trying to catch a cooling breeze. She sweltered in the heat, her skin dewy from perspiration, but now and then, a mild wind would wander in, giving her some much-needed relief.

Fingering the wineglass, Elena watched the bubbles of champagne rise within. Brodie insisted she drink the exquisite rose-colored nectar, at least some of it. A Veuve Clicquot 1995 La Grande Dame Rosé, at four-hundred-and-something a pop, the pricey brand tasted too good to waste. He'd figured if Ferguson sent the gift then the agent wasn't expecting them to do anything too soon. Besides, Brodie thought a little alcohol might relax her, take some of the pain away from her sore wrists.

Little did he know. It wasn't the pain she worried about. It was being so close to him in this intimate setting.

The bubbles tickled her nose but she sipped on the beverage anyway. Elena had made sure she kept her glass at least half charged so Brodie wouldn't try to refill it. The angle worked to some degree. That left Brodie to drink the rest. The bottle was now half gone. She hoped his buzzed state would help her get some answers to the questions he

guarded so far, especially those about their new “friend”. “I’m surprised the CIA would spend so much.”

Brodie sat against the headboard, his shirt partly undone, his bare feet propped up on the bed. He savored another sip before he swallowed. “Ferguson has the budget. No one will ever know.”

“Humph. Nice to know how the government spends our money.”

“Yeah.” He jerked a lopsided grin.

Elena thought his goofy smile a good sign that the alcohol was kicking in. “You know Larry and your father will try to find us.”

Brodie nodded. “I’m sure Ferguson will ensure they don’t. And he’ll need tonight to stop them. The man’s a pro, trust me.”

Trust me. She’d heard that a lot tonight, an act no one, even Brodie, wanted to do for her. And yet she wouldn’t easily trust Brodie, either. With Janie’s life involved, she couldn’t afford to. She needed more answers. “How do you know Ferguson?”

The laughter in his eyes faded. “First Afghanistan, then South America.” He squinted one eye and looked at her. “That’s all you need to know. Anything else is classified.”

She smiled, hoping to put him at ease. “I thought you were going to tell me about him?”

He hoisted his glass in the air saluting her. “No, you asked me to tell you about him. I didn’t say I would.”

“Mmmm.” She got up, feeling a little dizzy. Worry and tiredness dragged down on her. She needed rest and she didn’t like this waiting. She rubbed her aching temple with her free hand. She wanted Janie back and her world returned to normal.

“You okay?” Brodie asked.

“Yeah.” Mellowed, she walked to the other side of the bed, trying to stay on task. Brodie wasn’t cooperating the way she wanted. She took a smoother approach. She didn’t want to push. To date, arguing had gotten them nowhere. How did that old saying go about vinegar? Maybe honey would work better.

Inwardly, she grimaced. She didn’t like manipulating people but in this situation, she had no choice. “Look, you’re my partner, at least for this. I thought we weren’t going to hold anything back from each other? You could at least tell me what kind of man he is.” She sat and leaned against the pillows on her side, fluffing the front of her shirt to air her body, her skin dampening in the stifling room.

He eyed her suspiciously. “I won’t hold anything back. Not when it’s about saving your daughter, which, in case you haven’t noticed, all our plans are shot to hell. Right now, we’re doing the only thing we can, waiting and trusting Ferguson will put Janie’s interest at heart. Problem is we don’t even know why he’s here or what he’s involved in. All we really know is that it involves Mannie.”

"Yeah." The angst of the day weighed on her. "But I still don't like the man. I certainly don't trust him." She sipped her drink.

"Why not?" Brodie seemed closer.

She frowned, not wanting him to know how rough Ferguson had been with her. "He seems like a one-track-mind kind of guy. Janie isn't at the top of his list. Rescuing her is secondary. And bringing Mannie back will be impossible."

Brodie studied her over his glass. "You didn't really mean to bring your ex back, did you?" He'd stated the question without derision, without judgment, but Elena noted how Brodie referred to Mannie as her ex.

She eyed him, wanting to know if he cared whether they brought their old friend to justice. "Not really," she admitted. "I would if I could. But I admit Janie is the first and last thing on my mind."

He nodded. "That's what I thought."

She studied him, taking in every detail of his face. The white line of a scar over his cheek was new, at least to her. The small lines around his eyes when he squinted. The hard set of his mouth that said he'd seen too much. "Is that why your father sent you? To make sure we bring Mannie back?"

He brushed her face with the back of his knuckles and ran his finger along her chin. "Honestly? I don't know for sure. Probably. Ty Baker was a good friend of his."

Her breath hitched at the familiar gesture, his touch sending warning tremors down her neck. "Brodie, why did you really come?" Her voice grew husky and she prayed her question didn't sound too hopeful.

"You know my father." His lips quirked upward. "Orders, I guess. I told you that already."

She frowned, hiding her disappointment. "You're your own man now. Seems to me you'd do what you want." She stopped short of saying that he did with everyone and everything else. Why not his father?

"Yeah." He slid his arm behind her and rested his elbow on the headboard. "Well, maybe I wanted to come. For old times' sake."

"Is that the only reason?" She swallowed, wondering if she really wanted to know the answer.

"Maybe."

She knit her brow. It wasn't the answer she wanted, then again, what did she expect? She gazed at Brodie. His lips seemed closer. How often had she dreamed of being in his arms again?

Too often.

She leaned against his chest and rested her hand on the warm skin that showed between the open buttons, knowing the temptation of getting too close, yet unable to stop. "I don't trust Ferguson to keep Janie safe or to get her home," she voiced against his body.

Brodie nodded. "You might be right but there isn't anything we can do about it tonight."

A problem that vexed her interminably.

Brodie rubbed the back of her neck. "I want you to relax. You're as uptight as a loaded spring." His masculine musky scent filled her. "You'll need your wits about you when we get our orders, which means you need to rest. Being this wound up won't let you do that without some help."

"I know." She purred like a helpless kitten, his touch erupting sensations, memories, in her she'd rather not deal with at the moment.

"Like that, huh?"

"Yes." His fingers eased the tension in her mind, but his touch, his closeness, fired the nervousness in other parts of her. She thought to push him away but she knew the attempt would be too little too late. She wanted him.

"Headache better?"

"Yes. Thank you." She pressed her hand against his solid chest, fingering the curling red hairs sprinkled over his hard pecs.

"Tired?" His voice grew husky. He looped his arm around her shoulders and held her.

"Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "Because I care."

"Why?" She bit her lip, knowing she shouldn't ask, afraid the question would start something she couldn't handle right now.

"I just do."

The warmth in his voice tingled her senses, made her yearn in places she thought were dead. She slid her knee up his leg to rest more closely against his side and relished the gentle strength he used to cradle her against him. Being with him, touching his powerful body, comforted her. "No, I'm not tired." She gazed at his face. Under her touch, his torso moved with even breaths yet his eyes told the truth. He wanted her too. She shook her head. She shouldn't do this again. It would be wrong.

Gaining some control over her emotions, she looked away and stared at her empty glass on the nightstand, feeling a bit lightheaded. Perhaps she'd had more to drink than she'd thought?

"You should be," Brodie continued. His fingers kneaded her skin, leaving molten circles through the thin cloth on her back. "You've had a lot going on. And you've done much of it with little downtime. You need rest."

Then again, Brodie could be right. Sleep depravation and worry had worn on her. She still had questions that begged for answers. Except right now, her body hummed and tightened as if a violin string vibrating with desire.

Brodie pressed his thumb in the skin along her spine, easing the tension in her back, his touch causing havoc on her passion-deprived body. A soft moan escaped her lips,

her body molded into him and turned to putty beneath his strokes. More memories flashed within her. No other man she'd been with had been able to enflame her like Brodie. Unfortunately, his touch still sweetly tortured her.

She needed him. The thought slammed into her and accepting the realization, she laid back into his touch. The alcohol made her reckless. She knew it. But right now she didn't care. She yearned for him, could even pretend he still wanted her.

And maybe in a way he did. Larry's words came unbidden into her mind. *He cares for you.* Yet how could she believe that after all that had happened?

Brodie's fingers worked their way to her lower back. The effect made other parts of her acutely aware of him, his scent, the strength in his virile body. She leaned her cheek against his shoulder, taking in the comfort, however false it might be. Right now, she wanted this. And for once, she would indulge her desires.

She fingered his nipple. Other images from years before came to her. Brodie's smile, the touch of his lips, his hard body enveloping hers while making love, his promise to come back for her. She simpered, as if in a daze, as much from his touch as from the sweet memories. "Brodie, did you really love me?"

She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips. Her illusion shattered. She didn't want to talk about the forbidden subject so why had she brought the topic up?

His fingers stalled but only for a moment. Then they again took up the rhythm that had put her in this amorphous state.

"Of course I did." His words were warm against her skin. "I thought you felt the same."

She blinked back tears. "It's too late now."

"Is it?" His lips grazed her ear. Her body shivered with sensual anticipation.

"Yes." She looked in his face. Potent desire lingered in his darkened blue eyes. In that moment, she knew she needed him to assuage her worry, her grief, to hold him one more time as lovers. She brushed a kiss across his lips.

He groaned.

Brodie knew she'd had too much to drink but suspected she needed the release as much as he did. He could tell as she relaxed into his touch, as he listened to her soft moans, as he felt her pulse beat faster under his ministrations. She had let her guard down. The alcohol had made sure of that.

Yet was that what he wanted? He tried to keep what they were about to do in perspective but when she reached for him to pull him close, nipping his neck, the touch drove him onto a keen sexual edge.

"Elena," he whispered. God, he wanted her. Had always wanted her. But he didn't want to take advantage of the situation. He'd spent the better part of the night topping off her drink in a way she wouldn't notice, hoping she would relax enough to sleep. In turn, he'd barely drunk a thing but acted otherwise so she wouldn't catch on, enjoying

her efforts to quiz him. Still, they needed to work together tomorrow and he didn't want her upset at him because of something they did tonight.

"Elena," he whispered again. "What is it you want?"

She gazed at him. Her irises widened with desire, the gold flecks in her hypnotic brown eyes seemed to swirl, mesmerizing him, joining the two of them, drawing him into the maelstrom of carnal needs and desperate wants between them, trapping him in a whirlwind of his own sensual desire and the endless depth of the passion he held for her.

He sucked in a breath and held it, hopeful, eager for her answer.

"You." The breathy word rippled over his skin, his need for her flared unabated. The air left his lungs in a sudden ragged burst. His last shred of control submerged into the whirling depths, leaving only a thin string of sanity between him and the satiation of his desires. He grasped her tighter, shuddering with the need to possess her once more.

She must have felt the same. Her hand slipped against his shirt to stroke the front of his jeans. *Jesus God*. His cock grew rock-hard. He bit back his groan.

"I've always remembered the way you felt against my skin," she uttered.

Her breath caressed the underside of his ear, causing the final thread of his resolve to waver. "Yeah, but..."

"Only you."

The drink. Her touch. Too much suddenly reminded him of the errors of his hard-to-forget past. "You married Mannie." Something in him snapped. He pushed her away, his body still shaking with need for her. "If you don't mind, I won't be repeating the mistake we made eight years ago."

"But?" She sat up. Suddenly her eyes came into focus and she ran a hand through her hair. Bolting from the bed, she walked over to the sliding glass door of the balcony and looked out. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Old times, I suspect."

"Yeah." She glanced back at him, gracing him with a weak smile, her gaze filled with regret. "I'm sorry, Brodie."

"About?"

Her face reflected her sorrow. "About everything. Past and present." She closed and locked the sliding door then sauntered over to the bed and pulled down the sheets to her side, crawling in. "I didn't mean to get you into this kind of trouble but I'm glad you're here," she mumbled and closed her eyes. "I always felt safe with you." She scooted next to him and looped her arm over his lap. After a few moments, she fell asleep.

Confusion crept into Brodie's consciousness as he watched her slumber. Did she want him? Did she think about that night, about them, about their lost future?

Lightly he brushed the hair from her face and scowled, wondering as well what she meant about feeling safe. How much danger had she faced so far? With a drug-dealer for a husband, he could only guess at the things she and Janie had been subjected to. He hadn't even thought about that, what her life had been like after he left.

The nagging guilt of selfishness overtook him, helping him to squash the need for her body raging within. She'd suffered too. They all had. Because of errors in judgment so many years ago.

Brodie's heart ached, remembering. He had planned to graduate college and take over the ranch from his dad. Mannie had wanted to be his accountant, take care of the business books. Elena just wanted to help people. They all had their dreams and each one of theirs included staying together.

Until that fateful night.

Brodie rubbed a hand over his weary face. Before the incident, Mannie and he had been like brothers. They would talk about everything, except loving Elena. Neither of them admitted their feelings for her, swearing she was only like a kid sister. But when he came home from Basic and found out from his father his best friend and Elena had married, Brodie confronted Mannie. His ex-friend admitted he'd duped Brodie big-time, raging that Brodie had cheated him, finally confessing that he loved the one woman Brodie wanted. Mannie had said then that he had planned to marry her way before the night of their indiscretion. That she'd agreed. But that he'd had to prove himself first, make sure he could support a family.

It's what his father had told him. Mannie had only confirmed it.

Brodie grimaced as he recalled how incensed Mannie had become the night they fought, how he threw one absurd barb after another, accusing him of getting Elena drunk and forcing himself on her. *You prick. You're a rich white boy. You have everything. What did you promise her to get her virginity? Your money? A place in society? She's a poor woman. What did you think she would say to your pretend offer of marriage, you lying bastard. She took you over me because you offered her more. Damn you! You only wanted the one thing you couldn't have and she was mine!*

Mannie had never lied to him. Neither had his father. Brodie had believed them at the time. But now he wondered, had Elena really wanted him instead?

Brodie pressed his lips together to hold on to his sanity, reliving the torment, the day he'd found Elena was no longer his.

He gazed down on her, swallowing the lump that seemed to form in his throat. He'd gone to her house. He needed to see her but he was too hurt to think clearly and ranted at her. She'd asked him to listen, to believe what she wanted to say. All he'd done was accuse her.

Had she wanted him?

Dammit, perhaps he shouldn't have believed Mannie, shouldn't have let his father goad him. Mannie had deceived him at a time when he'd trusted him the most. Before Brodie had left for Basic, he'd forgiven Mannie for running to Elena's father in shock

and spilling the news. Even *asked* Mannie to take care of Elena for him while Brodie was gone. Mannie hadn't said a word then about his supposed engagement with her, only nodded and looked at him in shock. Brodie had even sent his letters to the backstabber to deliver to Elena. But later, Brodie found that instead he'd taken the mail to Chet.

Brodie cursed inside, gritting his teeth to ease his tortured soul. *Had* Elena agreed to marry Mannie before she and Brodie had made love? And if she had, why did she really sleep with him? He rubbed his temple, his head aching with the unanswered thoughts. One fact remained. She had married Mannie. What was he to think?

Inhaling deeply, he gazed at her and combed his fingers lightly through her dark hair. It was shorter now but still long enough for him to enjoy the task. His throat tightened as he reminisced over their brief affair. Perhaps she had loved him—once. Perhaps there was more that he should have known about her life. And with so many years behind them, could he blame her for what she'd done? He didn't know what she'd faced after he left. He scowled, berating himself not finding out. He would never know the answers. As Elena had said, he had walked out on her before she'd had the chance to explain. As proud as she was, he doubted she'd ever feel compelled to do so again.

Inside, the pain swelled unabated in his chest. He stroked her soft face. She was right. Too much time had passed. And now they had a child to find.

Looking away, he took a deep breath to settle his mind. He focused on his training. They had a job to do. Tormenting himself now would only interfere with getting that done. He didn't want to fail Elena again.

Brodie mentally took stock of what they had and where they were at. He knew Ferguson. His involvement could only mean that Mannie had gotten into some terrorist activity, maybe smuggling weapons across the border, a well-honed task for the drug lords. But Brodie wouldn't share the information with Elena. She didn't need the worry and knowing wouldn't help her in what she had to do. Besides, they already had one dead body to deal with. Brodie wondered how many more there would be. One thing he knew, though. This time he would only trust himself. Elena depended on him. He wouldn't let her down.

He intertwined his fingers loosely in her soft hair and stared at his sleeping angel. Regret welled within him as he thought more about what she had had to deal with, remorse at having left her behind to suffer the shame of their union alone. Her father had known. Mannie had told him. The sheriff almost had Brodie thrown in jail. Had he threatened to disown her? Brodie shook his head, scolding himself for not knowing. Family was *el primo* in a Hispanic family. She had been caught naked with the enemy's son. The pressure she must have faced from her father was probably more than she could endure. Is that why she married Mannie?

He swallowed, seeing things in a clearer picture. She hated him now. And he understood.

He had abandoned her. Had failed her by not giving her a chance to explain and by misplacing his trust in a friend.

He wouldn't do so again. When she awoke, Brodie swore things would be different between them.

When he shut off the lamp, moonlight bathed her face. And just then, he knew he would protect her and her daughter, even if he died trying. Which, with Ferguson and a drug king involved, he just might.

He savored the last sip in his glass of champagne, knowing that overnight the known danger in this mission had shot up several notches.

Chapter Nine

Chris awoke to an empty bed, the sunlight blaring in his face. Sometime in the early morning hours, Victoria had returned to the house. He'd felt the coolness as her warm body rose although he doubted she knew she'd woken him.

He stretched, his muscles now relaxed after the tension from the chase of the night before. Rolling over, he smelled Victoria's heady perfume on the pillow, a topping to the success he'd had last night.

The plan churned in his mind. The Laredo police would pick up Elena's partner and question him about Elena to verify a few more details. The task would keep the partner occupied and out of his hair until he could safely implant his new operatives. By then any interference on Mr. Murphy's part would be moot. He wouldn't be able to find them.

Chris rubbed his face, a bit tired from his midnight activities, an engagement he'd enjoyed very much with the skilled nanny. Better than he'd had in a long time. He relished the coming alliance with her, an investment that would pay in more ways than one.

As to his new operatives, he'd have them working soon enough. Chris intended to use Brodie and the woman as a buffer to his cover, letting him implement his plan to coax The Spider out of his lair. From necessity, their actions had to stay fluid, readily adaptable on a moment's notice. There were too many unknowns and that could screw things up. Still, the key was to manipulate Mannie's environment without raising the man's suspicions and keep him on task to locate The Spider. Mannie knew his ex and old friend were here. He'd had his killer following them. But with Elena in Chris' pocket, he could discreetly offer the one thing the drug lord wanted more than anything else—his ex-wife back. That and the kid were what drove Ramirez. He'd have Elena approach him, dangle a potential relationship like a carrot, use the threat of a dalliance with Brodie to force Mannie for more.

But he'd have to keep any others from interfering. Chris frowned. Mannie had used Carlos to track Elena. Question was, why the killer and not someone else?

The answer probably lay in the trust Mannie put in the man. Chris wondered how well placed that was. From what he'd gleaned, Carlos Huérfanos was a wild card, a man looking to build his reputation. But where Carlos wasn't Chris' concern, Mannie was. Mannie was the crux to finding The Spider and he'd use the drug lord any way he could. So far, Mannie had led Chris to Hector Castellanos, otherwise known as The Mouthpiece. The Mouthpiece would lead Chris to The Spider. That was what counted.

That and his revenge.

Chris grimaced at the pain, the memory of his partner's tortured body dying in his arms. He would never forget. Chris' lips thinned from repressed anger. Yeah, he would see that Mannie got Elena, at least for a while. He'd have the woman approach him, play to his ego and sense of overdeveloped pride. Elena could work on Mannie, let Mannie have the relationship he wanted. That would keep Mannie on his toes and let Elena in the house as another spy for him. Maybe he could even get her into Hector's place. Use her to poke around there without suspicion.

He shook his head. Yeah, there were too many variables. Too many unknowns. Those factors increased the risk of the operation, exposed the other players more than he would like, especially Elena. But to get The Spider, the risk would be worth it. He knew how deadly the terrorist could be. Besides, he could really use Brodie as muscle when the time came. The man was good. He'd seen him in action. And Chris stood sure the time would come soon.

Firming his resolve to use the civilians, Chris took another whiff of the pillow the *niñera* had laid on and smiled. The Spider wouldn't get away this time. He'd see to it. Meanwhile, Chris would work on Victoria and enjoy every decadent moment. The job held too few rewards. He'd be damned if he wouldn't take advantage of this one.

* * * * *

Sunrise had broken. The rays flittered into the small room through the loose-woven curtains like glittering fireflies. A groan escaped Elena's lips. She rolled her shoulders. They still ached from the agent's rough treatment. Trying to rise, she realized her body throbbed all over, her head fuzzy as if she'd had too much to drink the night before.

Maybe she did. What could have possessed her to come on to Brodie like that? She lifted the half-empty bottle on the nightstand next to her and blinked at the level of the warmed liquid. Brodie had wanted her to relax. Somehow he'd accomplished more than that. She'd let her deepest desires show.

Not what she'd wanted.

But he stopped her — cold. What would she say to him when he woke up?

She put the bottle down and studied Brodie's face. Fully clothed except for the deep vee in his shirt, Brodie had fallen asleep on top of the covers. She studied his profile. Small creases etched his mouth and the corners of his eyes, the sun seeming to have kissed his freckled, tanned skin. He had matured into a handsome man, one who had an assurance about him that went deeper than she remembered. She wondered more about the violence he'd seen, the jobs he'd done, how much of his change had been from the work he did. She yearned to caress the hard lines around his lips, wanting to know more about this new aspect of her friend.

And he was a friend, she realized. He came because of her, she was sure, though she didn't think he'd ever admit the fact. But having thought further about their situation, she realized the truth. He'd come when no one else could. He hadn't wanted her to go. He'd decoyed the Mexican police to let her get away. He'd buffered her from

the CIA agent's inquiries and tried to send her home. He'd taken care of her, trying to get her to rest.

Perhaps Larry had been right. Maybe Brodie did care more than he'd let on. He wouldn't have done what he did just because he wanted to catch Mannie. She just wondered how deep his concern went.

And whether he'd forgive her for her continued deceit.

Before she realized what she did, Elena followed her instincts, touching Brodie's mouth. He didn't move. She traced the lines around his lips with the tip of her finger.

He stirred but before she could jerk away, he grasped her fingers and lingered a kiss on the tips.

Her hormones fired, believing he thought she was someone else, wishing he knew she lay beside him.

He pulled her into his embrace and held her close, nipping her earlobe then settled back against the pillow with her atop him.

"Brodie?" she whispered against his whiskered chin, her body humming, her conscience wanting him to know whom he embraced.

"Mmmm." He inhaled against the top of her head then settled into the position, still asleep.

"Hey, hero," she said softly, wanting to smile, savoring the comfort she felt lying against his hard body. She didn't want to leave his warmth, didn't want to change how he held her.

But they needed to talk.

He didn't move.

"Brodie?" she muttered and spread her hand over his rock-solid pec.

"Yeah?" he groaned against her.

"I, ah..." She didn't want to lose this closeness. She wanted to hold him, savor the touch of him against her.

But in all fairness, she couldn't. It wouldn't be right, not if he still hated her for what had happened in the past.

Not if he would hate her when he discovered the truth.

She lifted her head and looked at him. His blue eyes cracked open and the crystal clarity of them examined her, questioning.

She licked her lips. "I didn't know if you knew who you were lying with."

With the crook of his finger, he lifted her chin, pulling her mouth close to his. "I know," his coarse voice rumbled. "Trust me. You never felt like any other woman I've been with."

He captured her mouth with his. When he pressed the tip of his tongue against the softness of her lips, she let him enter her mouth, his tongue dancing with hers, the need and tension building within them both.

"Elena," he mumbled as he pulled away, inhaling heavily against her cheek, "we may be enemies, we may not care for or trust each other, but I know there's still this between us."

She moved to study his face. "I know. There was always the passion. But I don't hate you, Brodie. I never have."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "You know my temper. I was mad, hurt that you left me. But I could never hate you."

"Why's that?" he asked, the blue in his eyes darkening, piercing her.

"I loved you too much." She could hardly breathe with the admission, afraid he would reject her again.

His eyes grew hooded. "Bullshit."

Pain seared her and she gripped the emotion before it could tear her heart into pieces. "I know you don't believe me," she choked.

"How can I after what you did?"

"I know but you don't understand. We need to talk about why I married Mannie, before anything else happens."

His lids narrowed. "I thought you'd had it planned. Mannie said you'd been engaged."

"That's not true," she protested. "He'd asked me but I told him no."

Brodie shook his head as his jaw set. His eyes narrowed, piercing her, a window to the hurt, anger and sadness within him. "I should have known," he uttered, his voice cracking with emotion. He rubbed her back then held her to him. "I'm sorry, Elena. That I didn't listen to you." The muscle to his chin jumped. "And I have an idea why you married Mannie later. You were soiled, an outcast to your holier-than-thou family. Your father and mine hated each other, still do. You were scared and alone. Mannie offered you a way to redeem yourself. You took it." He pulled back and slipped higher on the pillow but kept his arm around her. "I don't blame you." He pulled her up to him. "And you're right. For some things, it's too late. But after last night, I realized we still have this heat between us. The passion. I want it. All of it. I want to make love to you again. But if you don't, I'll understand."

"Is that all you think of me? A woman to have sex with?"

"No." His gaze grew to a sharp razor blue. "But right now, there's just you and me. This is a dangerous mission, more than you know. We could be killed trying to save Janie and we might never get the chance to resolve the issues between us. To me, nothing else matters except these moments. I want a taste of what I lost." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "If you want sex, I'll give it to you. If you don't, I'll leave you alone." He bent over and captured her lips, kissing her longingly. "What do you say?" he whispered against her mouth, desperation laced in his voice.

She wanted love. But before she could answer, the phone rang. She reached for the receiver, anxious over what might come next. "Hello?"

"Put Crawford on the line."

She recognized Ferguson's voice. Perhaps they were out of time after all. She swallowed and handed the phone to Brodie.

"Yeah?" he answered, glancing at her a moment.

"Get packed." Elena sat close enough to the receiver to hear the order. "I've got a new place for you and your girlfriend."

"Fuck you, Ferguson."

"No thanks," the agent said. "I've had mine this morning. You have about fifteen minutes to get yours if you haven't already. Be waiting out front."

The line went dead.

A lock of hair flipped over his brow as he stared at Elena with worry.

"I heard," her voice cracked.

"I'd rather send you home."

"I know." Her voice sounded small.

He dropped the receiver. Putting his hand behind her neck, he guided her to his lips. His passionate touch made her want, yearn for the time when they were more than friends.

He broke the kiss and laid his forehead against hers. "Don't worry. I swear to God, I'll protect you and Janie or I'll die trying."

"Why?" she asked, looking at him, knowing he told the truth, the seriousness of their precarious situation enveloping her.

He swallowed, stared at her a moment with those dark pools of blue. "Because I still love you too." Then rolled off the bed and turned his back to her. She heard him pad to the bathroom as he walked out the door.

"Oh," she murmured and pressed her lips together, hoping her heart wouldn't rip apart. She'd planned to tell him about Janie, about that night. But how could she now? He may think he loved her but you don't love a woman and not trust her. And Brodie certainly didn't trust Elena. *That* he had made perfectly clear. How much more would he hate her when he found out how deeply she'd deceived him?

A rattling at the locked sliding door broke into her maudlin thoughts. She glanced through the gauzy curtains to the outside. Nothing. Probably a gust of wind. Still...

Always careful, she pulled her Glock and went to the door to check the noise out. Surely neither Ferguson nor his cronies would come up the back. One of the employees from the hotel could see them.

Pulling the locking bar up, she cracked open the door. A slight breeze blew in. She savored the spicy smells of breakfast from the restaurant below.

Seeing to the right of her was clear, she edged the door farther open, nudging her head to her left to check the area.

In an instant, a body dropped from the struts to the patio above, knocking the weapon from her hand. Before she could yell for Brodie, a fist cracked across her cheek and temple. Smells of meth and cigarettes assailed her.

Her world went dark.

Chapter Ten

What had he done? Brodie ran his hand through his too-long hair as he stared with disgust in the small bathroom mirror. He'd admitted his inner most secret to the one who'd betrayed him. It would have been better if he'd just handed her a knife and let her filet his heart.

Too late to change that now. He'd done it. Told her he still wanted her even though he wasn't sure if he could trust her again. The pain from the last time had almost been too much to bear.

Inhaling, he studied himself in the mirror and blinked back the moisture beading in his eyes. He'd weathered the storm of his decision long ago and he'd become a better man because of it. Besides, what he said didn't matter to Elena. She had her own life. She'd been more than happy to emphasize that point, numerous times.

He leaned against the counter and studied his stubbled face. For some reason, he felt more at peace. In a strange way, the admission purged part of his pain, healing a piece of the wound. Brodie had lived with this secret for eight years. About time he let the healing begin.

Determined to make the best of his confession, he turned on the faucet and splashed some cold water on his face. They had a girl to rescue and an unknown mission to complete. God only knew where this would lead. He didn't need the old baggage of guilt and regret closing in on him. Perhaps, in a small way, his declaration had been a good thing.

After using the facilities, Brodie stared at his image again. The guy in the mirror was the one he'd have to live with. He'd made up his mind about the two of them and he'd come clean. He'd be ready to face whatever came. For once, Brodie knew exactly where he stood with his life, and with his heart.

Determined to make things work, he strode to the room and tapped on the door. "You decent?" He put his ear against the wood and listened. Not a sound came from inside. "Elena?"

He turned the knob and eased the door open. The room was empty. Across the mussed bed, the sliding door stood open, the white curtains flapping in the breeze. He ran to the balcony. A beat-up blue vehicle raced through the entrance. He recognized the car from the Last Chance Inn. "Elena," he whispered in desperation.

She was gone.

Brodie sprinted across the porch to the stairwell and slid down the wrought iron railing. Hitting bottom, he grabbed the keys from his pocket as he ran, pulling them out when he reached the company truck. In seconds, he revved the engine and tore through

the entrance but a black sedan with tinted windows screeched and veered to a halt in front of the driveway, stopping him.

Brodie jumped out of the truck. "Get out of the way, dammit." He repeated himself in Spanish but the driver only stared at him from behind his sunglasses.

"Shit." Brodie's nerves went on edge. He didn't recognize the driver and Brodie hadn't brought a weapon. Did the man and those inside the sedan work for Mannie?

The back door swung open. Chris Ferguson's head bowed as he slipped out of the vehicle, talking on his headset.

The agent shot Brodie a jaundiced glare then finished his conversation and looked him over. "We're following her," he said, tense, giving Brodie a look that said Brodie had rushed out unprepared.

The man would have been right to chastise him. Brodie suspected the agent anticipated a fight. He wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction. "Just tell me this is part of the plan and she's okay."

"Actually I'm not sure. Carlos Huérfanos is Mannie's man but he's aggressive. He might have another agenda."

Brodie glared at the agent. "You should have told me Mannie knew where we were."

Ferguson snorted. "How did you think I found you? We were following Huérfanos to begin with. He ended up following Elena. Then you showed up."

"Dammit." Brodie ran a hand through his hair and a thought hit him. "Did you send the champagne last night?"

Ferguson snorted. "Hell, no. Corporate cutbacks. Besides, I already had you in my pocket. Why would I?"

"Damn." Brodie wondered what message Mannie had sent them. Was he jealous to know that Brodie had spent the night with Elena?

"You thought the gift was from me?" The agent took a step forward. "How did you get it?"

"The bottle and a note were here waiting for us when we returned. Said to enjoy ourselves while we could. That's why I thought the stuff came from you."

Ferguson shook his head. "No." He scanned Brodie's face, studying him. "You think she went willingly?"

Brodie growled. "Why the hell would she? She wants her daughter back. She expected you to do that for her."

Chris shrugged. "Maybe Mannie got a hold of her and gave her a better deal. Takes nerve and confidence to leave that kind of message."

Brodie paused a moment then shook his head. "No. If he had, why would he have sent the champagne? It was damned expensive."

The corner of the agent's mouth quirked. "Maybe he was trying to convince her how good he had it here?"

"I don't think so." Brodie gritted his teeth. "But the note should have been a clue. His patsy must have been watching us a long time." He made the statement with conviction, snapping at the agent, although he wasn't really sure if Mannie had contacted Elena or not. This was her daughter. He knew she would do anything to get her back but he didn't want Ferguson to suspect her. Brodie already had enough to deal with without the agent getting suspicious. "We were together the whole time. How could he have reached her?"

Chris eyed him with deadly accuracy. "I'll know soon enough." He came closer, enough so that his voice wouldn't carry. "You sure you don't have feelings for this woman?"

Brodie glared back at him. "What if I do," he whispered between clenched teeth.

For a second the agent flaunted an insolent grin. "Just making sure I was right the first time."

Brodie met him eye to eye. "Keep her safe or all bets are off."

Ferguson nodded. "Will do, Sergeant. You see..." his eyes narrowed and a sadistic grin spread over his deeply tanned face, "I can't afford to lose her. She's the main player in my plan." The agent turned and sauntered to the car. "In the meantime, get your gear." Ferguson stopped by the open door and turned to look at him. "Elena's too. Clear the place out. Mauricio here will help you." He pointed to the Mexican cop who'd exited the car on the other side. "I want you resettled asap. You two can use your truck to get to the contact point. And don't worry about your bill. I already settled the room. Discreetly, of course."

"What about Elena?" Brodie wasn't about to go anywhere without her.

"I'll get her." He nodded, the wariness leaving his face. "Don't worry."

"Why should I believe you?"

A gleam of hate returned, emphasizing the bitterness in Ferguson's face. "You'll have to take my word. I won't lie to you, Brodie, if I can prevent it. Know right now, I can't afford to lose her although, because of Carlos, the plan will change a bit. We have to be careful. I can't let Mannie's killer know we're following him."

"Killer?" Cold dread grabbed Brodie's insides. "You mean you're letting her go with his hit man? What if—"

Chris waved him off. "The guy isn't stupid. Like I said, he's motivated to get ahead. Mannie's his boss. *El jefe* doesn't want her dead. I know that much. If Carlos captured her for Mannie then there's no worry. If he's working for someone else..." Ferguson shrugged. "Then I don't know. We'll keep an eye on her. I'll manage it. Just don't do anything unless I tell you or she'll be killed for sure, got it?"

Brodie wanted to be the one to take action, but he understood only too well what Ferguson meant. A wrong move and Elena could be terminated. He'd seen it happen

one time too many. He nodded to the agent and marched to his truck. Chris knew more about the situation. He'd know what action to take – Brodie hoped.

Still...

He remembered his vow. Brodie wouldn't easily trust another "friend", especially not a CIA agent with a different agenda. And this new wrinkle smacked of too much gone wrong.

Brodie glanced down the street. Too late to follow at this rate. He had to trust Ferguson this once. Besides, as the agent said, his mission needed Elena. The fact she was indispensable gave Brodie some comfort.

Backing the ranch vehicle into the parking lot, Brodie grimaced. He didn't like the situation. He didn't like it at all. He knew, the sooner he learned exactly what Ferguson was after, the better off Elena and her little girl would be.

Chris watched the truck pull away. "Keep an eye on him," he said to Lieutenant Gutiérrez.

Mauricio eyed him. "I thought you trusted him."

Chris scoffed. "To a certain extent. He's in love with that woman." He chided the cop. "A good agent never falls in love or trusts a man who has."

"I'll remember that." Mauricio stared at the place where the truck had been and turned to enter the hotel, wondering if trust was a word he could attach to Ferguson. The man grew obsessed with his mission. The agent's dogma smacked of a deeper agenda. Ferguson didn't want The Spider captured and interrogated. He wanted the terrorist dead. Mauricio could only wonder why. Still, Mauricio had to ask himself, if a choice came between his own life and capturing The Spider, would Ferguson be there to back him up?

Mauricio didn't know and didn't like the lack of confidence. He preferred to work with people he could count on. He gritted his teeth, unsure how he fit into the new plan and how risky his part would be. Soon though, Ferguson's plan would be unveiled and he would know for sure.

* * * * *

Mannie approved the deal to send more drugs over his new channel through the border. The Spider should be pleased. His reclusive boss could add his "special" packages if he wanted. It didn't matter to him. Not anymore.

He tapped his pen on the desk thinking about how he'd positioned himself in the business even while he moonlighted with his own brand of "special interest" activities, dealings that, if The Spider got wind of, could get him killed. He kept the covert attachment as his proverbial escape tunnel. In an operation like this, a man needed that. But the effort also took its toll. For 24/7, he and those he trusted stood in a state of alertness, scanning the surroundings for any hint of danger, any sign of something out of place. A status like that drained his energy.

He stopped toying with the pen and dropped it on the desk. At one time, Mannie had enjoyed the intrigue, the power and money that playing both sides brought him, but now he'd grown tired. Soon, his man Carlos would deliver and he would have Elena. His family could be together. He had his breakaway money secure in an offshore account. Mannie would change all their names, move his family somewhere safe.

And get away from the Crawfords for good.

But in trying to extract himself from the web he'd designed, Mannie played a dangerous game. He'd been a mole for years. Before, this secret didn't matter. There was no way anyone would find out. But now?

This farce about him killing Ty Baker threatened to blow his carefully balanced world apart. Someone had leaked the secret. He wanted to know who.

He picked up the small oval portrait of Elena and him on their wedding day. He kept the trinket on his desk to remind him of better days, of why he did what he did. He couldn't wait for the day he could hold her in his arms again.

And for the time when she would want him in return, love him more than his childhood best friend.

He winced. Elena's heart had never been with him, not in the way he wanted. He had made her his wife through trickery, even taking the bribe Chet Crawford offered to keep Brodie away. There had been collusion between Brodie's father and him but long ago Mannie learned to smother the deep niggling of guilt he'd felt over his part in the setup. Getting Elena had been too important for him. Making her his wife had become a matter of pride, his own. Yet he'd loved her still.

He set the portrait down and rubbed his tired face with his hand. Back then, he and Elena were too poor to afford email. Brodie had sent her letters to Mannie, knowing Elena's father would never let them get through to his daughter. Mannie was supposed to deliver them but he never did. And he'd convinced another to stop the flow of Elena's letters to Brodie. Elena trusted her sister implicitly and had used her to skirt the watchful eye of her father. The Crawford and Alvarez families hated each other. The relationship would have never succeeded. It hadn't taken much for Mannie to persuade Elena's sister to give the letters to him. Mannie scowled, remembering the gentle words of love she poured into them. The hurt she'd felt when she didn't hear from him in return. Then the news about the baby. He burned every damned one.

Mannie smirked. Elena had been so insistent on Brodie's adoration, Mannie didn't think Chet's scheme would work. But it had. He tsked. His poor Elena hadn't been wrong. Brodie had adored her. Mannie had read some of the letters his buddy sent. They were short yet clear. He intended to marry the one woman Mannie sought.

Jealousy had taken Mannie until the ruse worked. And sooner than what he'd thought. That had surprised him but he'd come to understand why from Elena's letters. Her situation with her family threatened to get worse and she'd had nowhere else to turn. Soon the fact she carried Brodie's child would be apparent. He thanked God for that. It forced her into a corner. Her family and Mannie were all she had left after

Brodie's departure. With an unwanted pregnancy, she would be ruined. He was her only choice. When Mannie offered for her again, she accepted his proposal.

But she never gave him her love.

It wasn't fair. Brodie's family had had everything easy in life. Money, power, prestige. With his white-boy good looks, Brodie would inherit his family's assets someday, making him irresistible to a girl like Elena, the woman Mannie had wanted with undying passion. She was the one thing he wanted above all else. No, what he had done was the only way to even the score.

Convinced the Crawford family traits were what attracted Elena, Mannie realized he'd never have a chance with her until he got what the Crawfords had. He wanted the love from her she'd freely given Brodie. He knew he'd have to work hard, reprioritize some of the values he'd held in his life. And he'd done just that over the years to get where he was. The small stash of funds Chet had paid Mannie for his part in the breakup got Mannie started in the transport business. At first, he'd taken the illegal jobs until he had enough to care for Elena. He didn't really want to be in the business but when Janie came along, he had no choice.

Until by happenstance, the greatest opportunity opened for Mannie. At least it seemed so at the time. The Spider had come in and needed his services. He'd proven his worth, punching holes in the border, moving the portals around to keep them secret.

Killing, when needed.

He'd risen quickly in the new organization, making money. Lots of it. Money bought power. Then there was no stopping him.

Until the Feds found and approached him. They needed him, wanting his informational services. Offered him even more money and the inroads into society that went with it. He'd taken the bait, thinking he and Elena could flaunt their new standing in Chet's face. Besides, in some strange way, he thought the act absolved him of any wrongdoing. After all, he helped his government, didn't he?

Yet he'd found more on The Spider than was comfortable. There was an Asian connection to his mob boss. One he still worked to get information on. He had gotten the dope, most of it anyway. Yet this new government contact pushed him for more. The agent wanted The Spider's name and description, but even with the information he'd uncovered on the Asians, these details eluded him. At first, he thought Hector Castellanos would know. After all, he had been The Mouthpiece for The Spider for many years. Now Mannie wasn't even sure about that.

Huffing, he wondered how he would get what the agent wanted, especially with his dimmed stature and reduced effectiveness.

Damn Carlos. The killer had never made such an error before but now the murder of Ty Baker affected everything. Ty had been one his contacts on the other side of the border, letting illegals come to work for him and some of his friends' ranches. Albeit unknown to Ty, The Spider used the holes to send other products. The setup worked to both sides' advantage. Both his former and current Fed contacts had been well aware of

the operation, even covered any problems with the cops when they occurred. Mannie's reputation had stayed squeaky clean.

Yet, somehow, this last deal blew up on everyone. Squeezed by an undercover Laredo cop with more information than he should rightfully have, Ty discovered that more than illegals came across the line. In an exchange, Ty confronted Mannie about it. Mannie tried to reassure him they were safe without giving too much away but the head of the cattle association would have none of it. Ty had found religion, spouting crap, saying he wouldn't support some damn terrorists and wanting to protect his country.

Ty had become a liability, one who'd garnered an itchy trigger finger but Mannie had thought he might still get him back in line until Carlos threatened the man. Ty drew his pistol. Carlos gunned the banker down before he could even clear leather. The eerie action made Mannie think he'd been in an old western. He and his cohorts split up immediately, leaving nothing of the exchange exposed except Ty's broken body, but somehow the cops attached Mannie's name to the mess. Mannie still wondered how that had happened.

Which was why he had Carlos doing some shit work right now, work that kept him close to The Mouthpiece yet hidden and out of the way. Since the leak, Mannie wasn't about to trust anyone, especially not someone who'd been there. Mannie had his sources looking into how his name got connected, even the new federal contact, telling the agent that he would no longer cooperate until the man rectified this mess. Until he knew more, Mannie needed to keep Carlos out of sight. And a man who killed as well as Carlos would keep Elena safe.

Mannie grimaced, his stomach sick from the amount of covert people he dealt with. He never knew what his government contact looked like. They used the phone or blind package drops to pass information and instructions. He pressed his lips together, unease crawling under his skin. He didn't like the lack of information he had on the clandestine contact, didn't even know what agency the operative worked with. And this new guy had a harder edge than the last one, a man who replaced the former contact on his retirement. But Mannie had to admit, the deal he had with the government worked for him. The arrangement kept his association in the shadows and made him a lot of money, deposited in a very reclusive offshore account.

Mannie swallowed, still worried about his family. He took Janie simply because he couldn't protect her any other way. He knew Elena would follow, then he could protect her too. He needed the US protection, especially now that he would be getting his family together. He needed the agent to make sure they'd be safe. He still worked on getting The Spider's information, counting that the agent would come through with the deal on his end. Mannie had risen high enough in the organization to know he was close. Only The Mouthpiece stood between him and success.

Which meant it was only a matter of time. If The Mouthpiece knew anything, Carlos would let Mannie know. His hit man had proven to be a loyal asset, even with this last fiasco. Still, perhaps he should take a more hands-on approach.

No, Mannie shook his head, nixing the thought. The only safe course was to work through others and for Mannie to hide his tracks. He couldn't risk putting Elena or his child in danger.

Ringggg.

"Fuck, what now?" The phone interrupted Mannie's thoughts. "Ramirez." Irritation buttressed his response.

"*Jefe*," Carlos began. Mannie never liked it when the man started with that. It meant he'd screwed up something.

"What is it now? Where is she?"

"Safe," Carlos said.

Mannie frowned. "Then bring her here. Now."

Carlos cleared his throat. "Can't do that, *Jefe*."

Mannie furrowed his brows, trepidation seeping within. "What game are you playing, Carlos? I'll have you dead if you don't get here fast."

"No game, *Jefe*. Only a change of rules. Yours."

"I'll kill you myself. And it won't be clean."

Carlos paused. "You taught me how to terminate the unwanted. I perfected the art. But right now, I have no choice. I am not the one who wants her. *Don* Castellanos told me to bring her to him. I thought you should know."

"The Mouthpiece?" Mannie felt the blood rush to his face. This couldn't be. "How would he know of my plans, unless..." The line went dead.

Mannie slammed the phone down. "That bastard." He knew Carlos grew ambitious but he never thought the killer would turn on him.

He pressed his lips together with grim determination. It was obvious Carlos had a new handler. Elena could be in the gravest danger. But what did Castellanos want? A cold shiver took Mannie. Had The Spider discovered his secret connection?

Mannie grabbed the phone and muttered a small prayer, punching in the personal cell number on the phone pad that would connect him directly with The Mouthpiece. He paused at the last number, wondering if he should directly confront the man. If he did, The Mouthpiece would know who told him. After all, Carlos had warned him. Perhaps most of Carlos' loyalty was still intact? If so, blurting the fact to Hector would negate Carlos' continued usefulness.

And right now, he needed all the assets he had. Pressing his lips together, Mannie gripped the dread within and pressed the last digit. He held his breath as the phone rang, needing to clear his head. He had to know how much danger this new wrinkle held. And letting The Mouthpiece see his anger—and anxiety—would do him no good. The man thrived on another's pain.

"*Hola, mi amigo*." Hector's smooth timbre relaxed Mannie to some degree.

"*Hola, Jefe*. I have the new portal, as you instructed," he said, keeping his voice even, making sure his tone emulated respect, using the information as an excuse to call The Mouthpiece so quickly. Even though Mannie knew The Spider controlled Hector, Mannie always kowtowed to him, unsure of how many lies The Mouthpiece had told their silent leader. Right now, Mannie wasn't about to give the perverted bastard ammunition against him, not with Elena in The Mouthpiece's hands.

"Good, give me the coordinates."

Mannie repeated what he had written on his pad of paper but the conversation went much too smoothly. His gut churned as he pretended everything was business as usual.

Then he waited, hating the child-molesting, self-serving prick for taking his wife, hating himself for putting up with the man and his deeds. Hector fancied himself a movie star, starring in some of his own back-alley films. It disgusted Mannie and made him shiver to think little girls like Janie had fallen into his hands.

But there was nothing he could do about that. His first responsibility was his family.

Finally, Hector spoke. "Is there something else?"

Mannie knew the man too well. From the tone of Hector's voice, he knew The Mouthpiece would make him beg. Mannie tried to pose the question to cover Carlos' butt as best he could. "*Jefe*, I understand you know I am waiting for my wife."

Hector chuckled. "I know, my friend."

Mannie gritted his teeth, knowing *El Jefe* would wait until he dragged the question from him. He had no choice in the matter now. "Carlos called me."

"Ah..."

Hector's pause caused Mannie's stomach to retch.

"And you are worried?"

"*Si, Jefe*. I don't understand."

Hector tsked. "It is all right, my friend. I asked him to. Perhaps I should have called you myself. You see, it's just that you have so much heartbreak over this woman. And she has brought another. There may be more that we know nothing about. This woman brings trouble. You do not need her. You have your child. A beautiful little girl, with such blue eyes..."

Mannie's skin crawled. He didn't like the way Hector dragged out the description of his daughter.

"What more could you want?" Castellanos' voice deepened, a hint of malice within.

Mannie swallowed. "I want my family, *Jefe*," he said, keeping the business in his tone, his control at the brink. "All of it."

"Hmmm." Hector's low hum put Mannie's instincts on edge. "*La Araña* thinks you are distracted because of this desire of yours. This is why the bad things have happened—the murder of the gringo banker, the *policia* thinking you killed him. And

you have hidden poor Carlos away. He is too useful to sit idle. Our leader thinks you should let your woman go before more bad comes to roost."

La Araña – The Spider. Mannie inhaled a deep breath. What he said next could mean the safety of his family. "Jefe, I have never let you down—until now. I have rectified the mistake that led to the errors in Texas. You know that. I plead to you, let me have my wife. I will talk to her. She will cooperate."

Hector clucked like a chicken. "From what I've seen, she is not so submissive. Certainly not a good wife for you."

"Yes," Mannie breathed more easily, "but I have Janelle. If she wants to be her mother then she must make a choice. I will not bargain with her."

"I see." He clucked again. "So this is your plan?"

"Si, Jefe." From the sound of his voice, Hector seemed agreeable. Perhaps Mannie's ploy would work?

"But it is not me who has decided this," his boss admitted, his voice mocking a sorrowed whisper. "The decision came from higher up."

A chance to find The Spider.

"Success" and "freedom" flashed through Mannie's head. It would be a huge gamble but if he could get to The Spider then he could close the deal with the government agent, get his family out of the business and be done with this forever. "Then I need to speak to *La Araña*. Explain."

Hector chuckled softly. "You know he refuses to greet others but I will see what I can do. In the meantime, Carlos tells me you know your wife's lover?"

The Mouthpiece's comment grated on Mannie's pride. "I know him," he said, this time with undisguised furor.

His boss chuckled. "You do not like him."

"Not anymore," Mannie growled then stilled his ire, not wanting The Mouthpiece to suspect how much he hated Brodie. "We were friends."

"And now he has stolen your wife." Hector's voice held feigned sympathy. "You see what I mean? *La Araña* is aware of this."

"How do you know they're lovers?" Mannie queried.

"They have lived in the same room for several days. Carlos observed them. What do you think they were doing?"

Anger vibrated within Mannie's breast. "She wouldn't."

"Would you like to ask Carlos?"

"I just might."

Hector laughed. "I will see what I can do for you. You will owe me though, Manuel." The last The Mouthpiece stated with an edge to his voice, Mannie knowing this would cost him in some way he couldn't afford.

"I understand," Mannie said, knowing he'd pay any price to get Elena back.

Mannie heard Hector breathe deep. "Keep to yourself for now. Go about your business—and show our leader how loyal you are." His voice lowered again into a threat. "I will be in touch."

With that, Hector hung up. Mannie stared at the phone, relieved that his other activities weren't suspect. If The Spider ever caught wind of his double-cross, there would be no reprieve. Only death when he least expected it.

He swallowed, his throat gone dry during the conversation. He would need the CIA contact in the coming days, he was sure. He didn't want his back door out of this game of intrigue closed for good.

Mannie closed his eyes to think. Carlos had retrieved Elena. And as Hector said, there's one more wild card out there—that was if Carlos hadn't killed him. Hector would be keeping tabs on Mannie's whereabouts, caging him in, not letting him roam free to find Elena. Perhaps Mannie could use his rival's help instead. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?"

Brodie's voice eased Mannie's fears. "You must be a cat. You have many lives, my friend."

"Mannie?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Elena?"

His friend sounded pissed. Good. "I don't have her. My superior snatched her. I don't know why."

"You know where she is?"

"No, but I can meet you. Be at Antonio's Restaurant at 11:00. It's on the Southside. The owners of The Plaza can tell you where it is. I should know more by then." He paused for emphasis. "We can talk."

"But why—" The phone went dead in Brodie's hand.

"Who was it?" Officer Gutierrez walked into the room.

Brodie considered lying to him then dismissed the thought. Ferguson had warned him about the bugged phone. "Mannie," he finally said. "Wants to meet me at 11:00 at a place called Antonio's. He doesn't have Elena."

Gutierrez shook his head. "That isn't good."

"No?" Brodie couldn't help the cutting sarcasm in his voice. "You don't say, you damn son of a bitch."

The officer only looked apologetic.

Brodie clenched his jaw, his brain churning, thinking of what he could do to save Elena, his promise to her banging in his head.

I swear to God, I'll protect you and Janie or I'll die trying.

God condemn him if he didn't.

* * * * *

Chris scowled as they caught up with the others in his team, pissed his plans were shot to hell. He found them posted on the rear corner of what appeared to be an abandoned wooden warehouse. As instructed, Chris' driver pulled into a trashed alley across from the front and hid the car in the shadows.

As they settled in, Chris scanned the weary building. His team had done well, followed as close as they could, stopping only when Carlos the killer pulled inside the shabby two story place.

At least they didn't lose the bait.

The Ramirez woman still lived. Chris was grateful for that. The other vehicle in the team, a beat-up green van, was set up with a listening device and they'd picked up a conversation Carlos had with Castellanos that indicated as much.

Now there was only one thing for them to do—wait.

Chris used the time to think as he scanned a jaundiced eye over the reedy building. The small structure stood on the outskirts of town in an area once used by heavy industry. Now that the work had moved to Asia, the area was deserted, turned into a seamy place he didn't think Mannie and his money would appreciate—not anymore.

Mentally, he checked the exits, going through again what his team had quickly gleaned about the building. It had been used by a reputable company at one time. Then through a series of transactions, an investment company from the British Virgin Islands bought it. He'd sent the information on to his superiors, knowing they'd want to dig into the details, track down the connection to what ultimately had to be some terrorist funding. But right now, that didn't concern Chris. He only wanted—no, needed—to know what would get him to The Spider.

He studied the boarded windows that lined the second floor. With the men they had, they could take the place easy. Probably get the Ramirez woman out before the fireworks started. But his gut told him that would be a mistake. Something was up. Carlos had done this for Hector, which meant exactly what?

Chris didn't want to jump to conclusions but he doubted Mannie would have asked Hector to kidnap Elena, a job he'd be well equipped to complete himself. Which meant someone else knew Mannie's business, too much for Chris to feel comfortable. If it was The Spider then the jig with Mannie was up. Elena would be The Spider's pawn and Mannie would be talking—to save his skin. Although Chris doubted anything Mannie said would make a difference. Knowing The Spider as well as he did, Mannie's butt would already be toast.

Thank God Chris' undercover identity was intact. He just hoped that Mannie's elusive bastard of a boss hadn't found out about Chris and his team by some other means.

The agent released a slow breath as he took stock of the situation. The good news was he found out about this before he and the guys fell into a trap. Chris grimaced, chalking one up for the unknown prick. To have gotten so far? The terrorist was good. He had to give him that much.

But Chris was better.

And he knew what to do next. Wait—and expect to hear from an excited drug lord. When he did, he would offer Mannie the only choice he'd have to save his corrupted ass.

Chris smirked, suddenly warming to the unexpected twist in events as another thought churned in his brain. They had Carlos holed up for now, trapped, although the man didn't know it. Chris ruminated on those facts, concluding that he shouldn't mind that Carlos had the Ramirez woman. The killer had been ordered to keep her alive. As long as his team had a leash on the killer's whereabouts, it kept the bait under wraps as well.

He sneered, his new plan taking root. From the look of things, The Spider had to be close. And that tidbit was worth everything that went wrong. He'd use Mannie to get to the terrorist, make the drug lord take the risks. Ramirez was already deep in shit anyway. His life was forfeit unless he did what Chris told him. Then he might get out alive. Chris wouldn't help him otherwise.

The thought crossed his mind that he should be remorseful about using the man. Over the last few years, he'd been an invaluable mole, but Chris readily dismissed the sentimental thought. He'd long ago lost his ability for compassion. The last shred had dissipated when his only friend and partner, Mike Harrison, died in his grasp.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Chris rubbed his hands together and asked for an update on Carlos' conversation from the van.

"Nothing, nada," the com tech reported.

"Nothing?" Chris said. "Check the equipment."

Seconds later the tech reported back. "It's working fine."

He cursed under his breath. "Then up the sensitivity."

"I have it on the highest setting."

"Shit, why didn't you say something?"

The tech tried to respond but Chris interrupted. "Send someone in. Now."

"But—"

"Just do it," Chris ordered, his heart pumping. He watched as one of the men jumped out of the van, glancing around before pulling his firearm and easing to the building.

Sweat built on his brow. Chris wanted to jump out and follow but couldn't. He wouldn't risk jeopardizing his cover, a possibility if Carlos was still in the building. But where could he have gone? They had all the exits covered.

Anxiety burned within. Chris knew it would take a few minutes. Still, the wait made him crazy. He closed his eyes, praying the killer hadn't terminated Elena.

Moments later the inside man reported. "They're gone."

Chris interrupted. "What do you mean they're gone? How could they get out?"

"There's an open ramp that runs underneath the building. I followed it part way but then couldn't see enough to keep going. I think it leads to another building."

"Damn," Chris cursed and pummeled his fist against the armrest. "You've got to be shitting me."

"No, sir," came the crisp reply. "The rest of the building is empty. I checked."

Chris growled. "Get the team in there. I want to know where it leads."

"Yes, sir," the man added as Chris watched three others pour from the van, gear in hand. Chris derided himself. He should have suspected something like this. After all, Mannie was the expert at punching holes in the border. How else could he do it besides running tunnels underneath the barriers that had been erected within the last several months?

Ten minutes later the team reported in. "It leads to a deserted shack about half a block down. They're way gone. We've lost them."

Chapter Eleven

His bait had been snatched. Chris cursed. "You think they suspected you followed them?"

"Can't tell, boss." His man paused. "I didn't think so. Maybe it's their MO?"

Possible. Chris ground his teeth. "Let's hope so. Use your toys. See what info you can glean. I want to know as soon as possible. And I want to know every conversation Carlos and Hector have. Meanwhile, I'll be at the ranch," their code word for the house where Mannie holed up, where Chris worked as a lowly gardener.

"Yes, sir."

Chris snapped an order to the driver to return him to the safe house so he could change into his cover. He'd already been gone too long, not that anyone would suspect.

The agent growled, low enough that only he could hear. Chris had to figure out how to get Elena back.

* * * * *

Ferguson had given Brodie his vehicle back to drive to the meeting. Since Mannie's killer had followed them, Mannie knew he drove a company truck. It only made sense. If his old friend had seen him in something else, he could grow suspicious.

He arrived early, not liking the setup, nervous as to what Mannie expected. Gutierrez and another of Chris' cronies waited down the block listening through the bug Brodie had on him.

Brodie shrugged in the jacket he wore. He'd been given a button-down shirt and casual suit to wear by the cop. Now Brodie fingered the small lump underneath the lapel. Although they'd kept his other weapons, Lieutenant Gutiérrez had given him a handgun, one that could be shoulder-holstered but readily available should the pistol be needed. The cop had said that Mannie would expect him to be packing.

Brodie scowled. At one time, Mannie would have puked at the thought of violence. Brodie remembered a time when they were kids when a bully had hit Mannie and his friend had done just that. Brodie had stood up for him then, ensuring his friend didn't get pummeled. The kid never bothered Mannie again.

Brodie studied the surrounding area then entered the eatery. A bell attached to the door jangled. He scanned the interior. In a more middle-class area, at least for Nuevo Laredo, Antonio's looked like any other basic Italian restaurant he'd seen. Red tablecloths covered the wooden peg-leg tables, red *vino* on each one of them.

And no Mannie.

Knowing Mannie hadn't arrived yet put Brodie more at ease. He watched the host approach and Brodie held up two fingers. "*Dos personas.*"

The man nodded and led him to a table in the corner. Brodie took a seat so that his back was against the rear wall. He could watch the door from here. Making himself comfortable, his thoughts turned to Elena. He hoped somehow Mannie had gotten her back.

Brodie swallowed, hoping to suppress the fear that gripped his throat. The task of retrieving Elena's daughter had turned into a nightmare of its own proportions. US government involvement, a drug lord, Brodie's arrest, now Elena's kidnapping. Brodie ran a hand over his face, wondering what else could go wrong.

Then nixed the thought. There could be plenty of things—such as his or Elena's death. He didn't want to further jinx an already out of hand situation.

And he didn't want or need the negativity. Brodie had to focus to achieve his mission—which he'd added to since he'd been with Elena. He pressed his lips together, wanting to get her back now more than ever. Explain what happened to him so many years ago, find out what she'd been thinking then. Figure out why things between them didn't work. Learn the truth—for once.

Over the last few days, he'd realized he'd been lied to. She was right when she said he wouldn't let her explain. No matter what she'd said then, he wouldn't have believed her. He was too hurt. Now he'd come to realize his failed relationship with her was the one thing he had to resolve—for himself. Until he did, he'd never be able to move forward with his life.

A small warm breeze stirred him from his thoughts as the door whooshed open. The reaction surprised Brodie. He hadn't realized he'd dropped into deep introspection, virtually ignoring his current circumstances.

Not like me. Not when so much was at stake. Perhaps his friend Rick had been right—Brodie never did think straight when he talked about Elena. Sgt. Hansen had told him that more than once. It finally dawned on Brodie how right his friend was.

Brodie studied the door. An average-looking guy stepped through, waiting with his hands shoved in his pockets. Brodie caught the younger man glancing his way more than once, trying not to look obvious. Brodie shot the guy a look that told him to beg off. The hombre quickly looked away. He'd gotten the hint.

Then the host came out from the back. The man greeted the new guy. Obviously the two were friends.

Brodie watched the host seat the man at one of the few booths that lined the far wall, the customer asking for his usual. The customer avoided looking at Brodie again. *Good.*

Brodie poured a glass of the wine and took a sip. The bell rattled once more.

This time when Brodie glanced up, a familiar face stared back at him, the brown eyes piercing him with a hatred Brodie had never known.

Mannie stood in the doorway. A slow smile crept over his face, one that reflected recognition and regret.

Brodie nodded.

His ex-friend sauntered over. Yanking out the chair, he sat near Brodie, his back against the other wall. He bent over, close to Brodie. "I should kill you," he whispered.

Brodie reached inside the jacket. "Try it." From the corner of his eye, he saw the unknown customer jerk. He bent toward Mannie. "I'll drop you before your friend over there gets me."

Mannie snickered and relaxed in the chair. "If I wanted you dead, you would be." Then his body stiffened. He leaned his elbows on the table, dead-eyeing Brodie with clear intent. "I need you right now. But I warn you, touch Elena again in any way other than as a sister and I'll have you neutered."

"What makes you think I have?" Some perverse motive made Brodie smirk. What Mannie said wasn't true but Brodie for some reason didn't want the prick to know that.

Mannie's eyes narrowed. "I have my sources, you son of a bastard. She's mine. She'll always be mine. I made her mine in the church eight years ago."

Brodie took a sip of wine, ignoring the urge to spring on the man and beat him bloodless for his part in the scheme that tore Elena and him apart so long ago. "She doesn't think so."

"Only because you convinced her, damn you." The look that briefly took Mannie's face reminded Brodie of a charging bull. His ex-friend eased away from him. "You screwed up our marriage once with that fucking bravado of yours when you came home from Basic and threw a fit. I won't have you wrecking something I've taken years to repair. I will have her. She will want me again—as long as you leave her alone."

"You give me a lot of credit." It was the first time Brodie had heard he'd been the one to break them up. The comment stirred his ire. "If it's me she wants then why should I?" he growled lowly. "You lied to both of us to steal her from me. I should have suspected the deceit at the time."

Mannie's lip curled. "No. You should have appreciated my efforts. Your families hate each other. It would never have worked. She and I are well matched. Let me handle this."

Brodie stiffened and hardened his voice. "If you're so certain she'll fly back to you then why the hell do you need me?"

The drug lord glanced at his hands. The sorrow that took the lines around his eyes aged him suddenly, but for the first time since seeing him walk through the door, Mannie looked like the old friend Brodie once knew.

Then Mannie looked up. The boy Brodie had once known had returned, asking him again in his way for help. "I need you to get her home safe. I know you love her, at least you did. Tell me the man you've become isn't as heartless as the one you see before you."

Brodie didn't know what to say. The comment struck him dumb.

"Answer me, my friend. Will you do it, for what we had, all of us, together?"

Brodie had always protected the group. He now sensed the uncertainty in Mannie – and the fear.

Brodie paused, knowing in this he would tell Mannie the truth. "I'll kill to save her. And I'll protect her with my life."

Mannie's shoulders sagged with relief. "Thank you," he said, his contrite voice barely a whisper. He slid a cell phone to Brodie with a folded paper wrapped around it. "I haven't found her yet but here's a list of our known hideouts. Check them out, if you can. The phone's for you to call me if you find something. I'm the only one with the number. I can't trust anyone right now – except you."

The irony was laughable. Brodie allowed himself a small grin as he scanned the paper. "You trust me?"

Mannie nodded. "I always have." He began to rise. "You're the only honest man I know."

"Right." Brodie snorted, mentally noting some of the addresses Mannie had circled. "Then tell me why your boss took Elena."

Mannie stood, smirking. "He wants something from me." He pushed the seat of the chair he'd sat in under the table. "I just don't know what it is yet." His humor dissipated. "Find her as fast as you can. Hector Castellanos is unpredictable and dangerous." He swerved. "I'll be in touch."

Mannie breezed out the door, his man in his wake.

Taken aback, Brodie looked on as they walked away. *Mannie trusts me.*

Brodie fingered the bug under his lapel, nausea seizing him over his friend's misplaced faith. Brodie had crossed a line on his moral compass he shouldn't have, though the choice wasn't his to make. With the government on his tail, he had no secrets – and no one to trust at all.

Pocketing the phone, Brodie dropped a few pesos on the table and walked out. The sun beat down on him, stifling him in the heavy suit, yet inside his gut grew cold as a dark foreboding formed.

* * * * *

Elena groaned and fingered the lump on the side of her head. Her eyes flickered open. The room was dark. No windows made the place even darker. But a ray of light shone under the door. Struggling to rise off the floor, she tried the knob, ensuring she didn't make any noise in the process.

Locked. She'd figured that.

Now what would she do? Inhaling slowly to steady herself, she wondered how long she'd been out. Her brain felt scrambled and she wanted to retch. Leaning against the wall, she let herself slide down the wood panels to the floor.

"Janie," she mumbled, only wanting her little girl back. She wiped her tear-wet cheeks with the back of her sleeve. Where had Brodie been when she needed him?

Away. As usual.

But this situation wasn't his fault. It was Mannie's. Seemed like the gods of fate did whatever they could to keep her and Brodie apart. Why did things have to be so difficult?

She let her head fall against the planks of the wall. *Brodie loved her*. Larry had been right. Now what was she going to do? Assuming she could get out of this mess.

She stared at the light. She'd recognized Carlos. Shivering, she wondered what the man had in mind. Elena had heard enough about his murders to know he achieved success with a sick abandon.

But he hadn't killed her. Not yet. What did he want? Had Mannie sent him after her? Or was he working on his own?

She wondered. If Mannie had sent him, why did Carlos hold her here? A sliver of dread burrowed under her skin. There were other forces at work here she knew nothing about. The encounter with the CIA agent had told her that. Those unknowns frightened her.

The worst part was that Janie stood in the middle of the chaos. Elena's number one goal was to get her daughter home safe. And she'd decided after this morning to make things right with Brodie. She hadn't only betrayed him years ago, she deceived him now. He didn't know about Janie. And he should.

Elena bit her lip, realizing if things were going to change between them, she'd have to be the one to make the move. She forgave herself for the decision she'd made years ago because she'd been young and stupid.

But that was no longer the case. She was a grown woman and had to accept the fact that most of this was her fault. Even though the one she trusted years ago had betrayed her, Elena could only blame herself for the continued deception. For that, she would have to make amends. She hoped Brodie would forgive her. As to her family, she would have to deal with the damage as best she could.

She closed her eyes, thinking of the past. Theresa had been with her throughout this ordeal. The one who comforted her when there was no one else, the one who was the only human being to know about Janie's true father.

Theresa had been the one Elena trusted to send her letters. And her sister had betrayed her.

Elena pressed her lips together, wondering why. Theresa had purposefully withheld Elena's letters to Brodie. She had to have known what she was doing and

what the results would be. Especially since her sister knew what choice the lack of contact with Brodie had led her to make.

Muffled voices sounded in the room outside the door, interjecting the present into her thoughts. One was Carlos'. Although she'd never spoken to him, she recognized his accent. In the car, his voice was the one thing she could focus on, an attempt to identify her kidnapper as she vacillated between various levels of consciousness.

The other she wasn't familiar with but sounded male.

Footsteps echoed on the solid floor. Elena ruminated over whether she should pretend to sleep then decided the time had come to see what these men wanted.

The knob turned slowly. Light filtered into the room, blinding her for a moment. When her vision cleared, Carlos stood in the opening, a handgun pointed at her. Another man stood in front of her, a sleazy grin spread across his face.

"Buenas noches, Señora Ramírez. Your husband looks forward to seeing you."

"He does, does he?" Her voice sounded like gravel. "If that's the case then why am I here?"

"Perhaps because I need you."

"I see. Does he even know you have me?"

The man shrugged, flashing his even white teeth. "Yes, I think he does. But perhaps you do not want him. Maybe you'd rather have your boyfriend?"

"My boyfriend?"

"Si. Senor Crawford. Is he not your lover?"

She frowned, curious who this man was and why he wanted to know. "Did Mannie ask you to kidnap me?"

The man peered thoughtfully at her. "If you cooperate with me, I will answer your questions in time. Maybe even get your daughter back. If not..." He shrugged then crouched in front of her, reaching toward her face and running a few clammy fingers down her cheek. "You are too pretty of a woman to waste. I'm glad Carlos' previous attempt didn't bother you."

Her breath hitched from the unwanted touch. "What previous attempt?"

He pursed his lips. "It doesn't matter now but needless to say, your poor pickup did not make it out of the parking lot. It lies in a burnt heap."

She controlled her response even though tremors shuddered through her. "Who are you and what do you want?"

When he smiled, his eyes lit with unholy fire. "You may call me Hector." He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "And I think you and I will become fast friends."

The Mouthpiece. Elena knew him only by reputation—as the man who spoke for The Spider, the one who'd started the child porno video ring. "I doubt it."

"I don't." His mouth hovered close to hers for a moment. Then sitting back on his haunches, he smiled at her again. "Of course, all in due time, *chica*. Once we heal that bruise at your forehead, I think you could be very photogenic."

Elena couldn't disguise her shaking this time, her mind leaping to what this man implied. "Mannie will stop you."

Hector shook his head. "He won't have a choice. Of course, perhaps you can persuade me to let you go to him." He grazed his manicured thumb over her lips. "Perhaps." His voice lowered, threaded with brute sensuality. Then Hector chortled as he rose and left the room.

Carlos scanned her body and frowned. "I don't think The Spider will like this, *Jefe*. You said he wanted her dead."

"It will not matter, my friend," Hector replied from a distance. "I will inform our leader. This one will be worth the investment. Or can serve as a warning for those who cross us."

Carlos snorted as he leered at her. "As long as I can take her as a reward, one way or another. I need a woman."

"I'm sure that can be arranged." Hector sounded even farther away.

"Why should I answer your questions when you're threatening to hurt me?" she yelled at the disappearing voice.

She heard Hector's footsteps as he returned and looked into the room. "You will," he promised. "I know you want your daughter safe. You will do anything for her. Even pose for me. As to hurting you, that will not happen if you cooperate. Even Carlos here will treat you with respect. You'll see."

He turned to walk away but Elena's insistence stopped him. "What do you want to know?" She wanted him to tell her now.

Hector studied her breasts and hips then looked into her face. "When the time is right you will know, but not here. Not now."

He walked off and Elena heard a door close. Hector's footsteps sounded on the pavement outside.

Carlos stood quietly studying her, a lethal glare reflected in his eyes. His gaze skimmed her body and Carlos lifted a corner of his mouth. "Do not worry," he said. "My reputation isn't only as a skilled killer. I do take pleasure in my women. And Señor Castellanos has been very generous with the ones he shares with me."

"Bastard," she muttered.

Carlos only laughed and eased the door shut.

As darkness again swept over Elena, terror gripped her.

* * * * *

Smells from the rotten trash in the alley assailed Brodie as he slipped around a metal wall, easing inside the jimmied door. Gutiérrez took point on this one. He was already inside. Out of necessity, Brodie had been inducted as an unofficial member of Ferguson's team. Gutiérrez and he now worked as a pair. Using the night goggles and equipment he'd been given, Brodie glanced around, his AR-15 assault rifle at the ready, suspecting another dead end.

Empty.

He put a steel grip on his anxiety, reminding himself to be careful. Overeagerness could get him killed—and that wouldn't help Elena or her daughter. Still, he was frustrated with pussyfooting around. The building where The Mouthpiece held Elena was the one that mattered. Problem was Ferguson and company didn't know which one it could be, if any of them. And he still hadn't heard from Mannie.

Brodie grimaced, thinking again about the information Mannie had given him that he'd been forced to turn over. Mannie's words haunted him. *I can't trust anyone right now – except you. You're the only honest man I know.* Brodie bit his lip. Ever since Elena's betrayal, he'd had no tolerance for liars. Now, from necessity, he played in a deception in which he wanted no part. All he wanted was to locate Elena and get her and her daughter back home. Then he could get on with his life.

And yet, Ferguson had gotten a gold mine with the list. The agent wasn't about to let the scoop go. Thank God it didn't take much to convince Ferguson to let Brodie tag along on the searches. Doing so only made sense. Ferguson's manpower was limited. Brodie was good at this. He'd been trained to do the same thing in the Army. Besides Brodie needed the action to ease his unrest, even though all they'd found so far were abandoned buildings.

There were still the circled addresses, though. He remembered those. Brodie scowled. Ferguson had decided his other men should check those out. Brodie knew why. The agent didn't trust him, not completely. Their orders were to watch and observe, unless Elena's life was threatened. With Ferguson aware of Brodie's personal interest, the agent wouldn't take a chance on Brodie going rogue.

Brodie didn't blame him. He understood well what a mission involved. But being impassive to any personal involvement was only part of the deal. You needed the fire and guts to follow through. That Brodie had in spades.

"There's something here." Gutiérrez eased around the corner and signaled him to follow. "I wonder why the guys didn't see this before."

"Before?" Brodie questioned.

Gutiérrez nodded. "This is the building we lost them at. Ferguson thought we should check it again." The cop strode into an office and clicked on his infrared flashlight. "See what I mean? It looks like someone's been living here."

"Yeah." Brodie nodded. Wrapping papers still smelling of heavy spice from some fast food place lay strewn across the desk. A doodled-over pad of company paper lay on the grease-spotted mat by the phone. Different pictures of a spider covered it. A

trash can sat next to the chair. Brodie bent over to retrieve it, hoping they could find a lead.

"I didn't see anything worthwhile in there," Gutiérrez said.

Brodie straightened then picked up the pad.

"Or on there." The cop iterated with an edge of frustration.

"And you said they didn't tell you about the pad and the trash?"

"No," the cop winced. "But maybe because they didn't find anything."

Brodie shrugged and skimmed through the pad anyway, the logo and address at the top repeating with every flip of the page. Something about it struck Brodie as weird. Then he looked at the company header again. "And what address are we at?"

Gutiérrez shrugged. "Two-oh-two Pamplona Street."

Brodie nodded. "Yeah. This says four-twenty-one Lomas Avenue."

"What?" The cop took the pad and thumbed through the pages. "I must be tired. I didn't notice."

"Well the first page had webs drawn over it."

"Yeah." Gutiérrez's gaze met his. "This address isn't one on our list, either."

"No." Brodie studied the man, wondering why he didn't catch something so obvious. "Let's go. I want to check this out."

"Wait." The cop put up a hand to stop him. "I should call this in."

Brodie mocked, "To whom? Ferguson?"

"Of course." He reached for his cell phone.

Uncertain, Brodie stopped him. He knew too little of the lieutenant, of what his associations were or his political ambitions. The man could be telling the truth. He could be tired and just missed the info. Brodie had no way of knowing what Ferguson and his gang had been up to before Brodie and Elena were involved.

But he could be lying. And trusting him could be Brodie's undoing.

Brodie took a step forward. "Tell me something, Gutiérrez. Did you volunteer for this op or did you get assigned to it?"

The cop's dark brow shot upward. "I volunteered. Why do you want to know?"

Brodie gripped his rifle, ready to use it just in case. "Why?"

The sneer the lieutenant gave him let Brodie know the man didn't appreciate his inquiry. "You're questioning my integrity."

Brodie let a corner of his lip snake upward. "You catch on quick."

Brodie stood a good six inches taller but the fact didn't deter the man. He stepped closer, his eyes narrowing, meeting Brodie's challenge. "I have my reasons," he growled lowly.

Brodie put an edge of his own in his voice, threatening. "And they are?"

"None of your damn business." The cop swerved and headed to the exit.

"And what if I make them mine?" Brodie watched him walk.

Gutiérrez stood in the doorway, his body a shadow in the bleak streetlight streaming in through the dirty windows from the street. "What if you don't?"

Something about his stance let Brodie know he wasn't threatening. He just wanted Brodie to back off. If the lieutenant was a mole, he would be nervous.

But the cop was cool.

"I'm going to find Elena. We're using my truck. I have the keys. I don't want you telling Ferguson, not yet."

The cop crossed his arms. "Why not?"

Brodie neared him again. "Because you know he doesn't give a damn about Elena. Mannie sent me to find her. If she's there then me getting her will be part of Mannie's plan. It'll look on the up and up—at least to The Spider."

"And just what do you think Hector will say about it? He's the one who ordered the kidnapping. Mannie is going up against The Spider's Mouthpiece. Do you really think he'll win?"

Brodie played his last ace. "Do you really think a hired killer would keep her alive? Elena only wants her child back. She's an innocent. Didn't you say something before about too many helpless people getting killed because of the drug wars?"

Gutiérrez's brow quirked upward. "Your girlfriend is helpless?"

Elena, his girlfriend? Brodie didn't bother to correct him. "Does she have to be another statistic?" Brodie pointed the rifle at him. "Look, I want your help. But if I can't get it, I'm leaving you here and continuing the search on my own."

The cop glared at the weapon then at Brodie. "And you think threatening me is going to help you?"

"No," Brodie said, "it'll only give me a chance to get out on my own to find her."

Gutiérrez studied him then glanced at the phone in his hand and nodded. "I'll help you." He pocketed the instrument.

"Why?" Brodie wanted to know.

"Because, *amigo*," he stepped forward and grasped Brodie's forearm to shake it. "For my own reasons, I want Carlos dead."

The last Gutiérrez delivered with a venomous ring. Brodie shivered at the visceral heat the cop revealed then nodded.

Gutiérrez turned again and stepped out. "*Vamonos*, partner. We have much to do."

Chapter Twelve

They set up a plan, albeit a weak one, to cover Mannie's ass and to make their actions look like Mannie had not been a part of this. Brodie would snatch Elena if they found her. The Mouthpiece knew he'd been with her, thought he was her lover if Brodie's conversation with Mannie was any indication. Out of necessity, Lieutenant Gutierrez would be in the shadows. They couldn't nab Carlos yet. It would blow Ferguson's connection to The Spider although a perverse part of Brodie would love to do that, especially after the way Ferguson had roped Elena into this.

He glanced at his new partner. Mauricio Gutiérrez didn't want to capture Carlos either, not really. He wanted him dead. But the man was willing to go along with the plan for now, believing his revenge would come through the arms of justice. After Brodie forced the cop's help, Brodie came to respect the lieutenant. Gutierrez had told him more as they left. Carlos Huérfanos had killed his cousin. An idealist, the cop wanted revenge but he wanted the act within the bounds of the legal system, believing that the ultimate fix of the city's problems and to improve the citizens' lives was to end the corruption.

Brodie pondered that. The lieutenant had an agenda but the cop wasn't letting that take precedence. He was a man with a moral code. Brodie wasn't sure if he believed all Mauricio told him but for now, the cop allowed them to do the right thing—save Elena. Still...

Brodie pressed his lips together. It seemed everyone wanted something. Mannie wanted Elena. Elena wanted her little girl Janie. Brodie wondered how much of Ferguson's quest dealt with finding the terrorist and how much was revenge on his part. He'd seen for himself the change in the man when his partner, Mike Harrison, died. But what did Brodie want?

At one time, he thought he knew. But things had changed. He had changed. Carlos wasn't the only one in the game who was a killer. Every player in this fucked-up mess had knocked off someone, except Elena and her daughter. The slayers were just on different sides of the law, hopefully on different sides of right and wrong.

Brodie glanced at his hands on the steering wheel, wondering how many people he'd terminated. The bizarre thought struck him, made him think. Everything he'd done as an army operative had been with a decent purpose in mind—to stop terrorists aimed at hurting the United States. At least, he'd thought they were. But after being in an ops team for so long, you started to wonder. The CIA had clandestine plans of their own and the average soldier never knew if their command really understood the heart of the secret agency's deeper purposes. The matter was an issue of trust. A soldier had to believe that what he'd been commanded to do was the right thing.

Brodie knew that wasn't always the case. Politics played too much of a role—and people's personal agendas. Which was why he wondered about Ferguson. The man had grown more intense over the last few months. That worried Brodie. He'd seen the results of some past mistakes, certain he'd been part of a few of them. They weren't pretty, although Brodie was certain the full impact of some wouldn't be seen for years, maybe decades. He caged his emotions. Someday maybe he could forgive himself for anything wrong he'd done.

He pressed his lips together, a reminder to keep his perspective, keep his mind in the game. At this point, Brodie didn't care if he was innocent or guilty as part of some CIA fuck-up. All he cared about was rescuing Elena. He glanced at Gutiérrez. Even with the score the lieutenant wanted to keep with Carlos, at least the Mexican cop allowed Brodie to do that much. For that, he owed the man.

Brodie cut his headlights as they neared the address on the pad. They had followed the street to what looked like a dead end in a smaller storage area on the outskirts of town but that might not be the case. As Gutiérrez mentioned, The Spider's cartel had built tunnels underneath many of their buildings as getaways or to skirt any blockades the law—or a competitor—might put up.

The lieutenant raised his hand, the signal to stop. Brodie eased over to one side, a dark place under a gnarled tree. About two hundred yards away sat a rustic shack dwarfed by the larger warehouses around it. Would Elena be there?

He raised his head to look upward and said a short prayer. Then Gutiérrez nodded to him, signaling him to move. Brodie eased out the door, rifle and equipment in hand.

The lieutenant slid behind the steering wheel, ready to make tracks should the action be needed then pointed to the side of the rustic shack, indicating an entrance. Brodie signaled he understood then moved to the shadows—and moved with stealth.

The wind whipped up, rattling the metal roofs on the buildings surrounding them. The low howl through the narrow corridors between the buildings made the sense of danger crawl up his back. The eerie sense didn't bother him. The feeling had been a friend a long time.

Brodie edged closer. At about thirty feet, he tucked himself behind the flapping door of a sheet metal shed, studying the wormholes in the shack through the opening between the door and the hinges. A small light flickered through a few gaps between the wooden slats in the back. Then Brodie spied what he needed. The damaged fender of the blue sedan poked from behind the corner of the abode.

They had them.

He notified Gutiérrez on the headset. Getting an okay, Brodie moved forward, wondering where the dick-brain had put her—praying he'd find her alive.

Mauricio itched to join Crawford but they couldn't afford to blow this. They were too close. Nervousness caught up with him, edged on by eagerness. Finally, they would have something on his cousin's killer, something that would stick.

Mauricio cracked the window, letting the strong breeze cool the warm truck, allowing him to hear anything that went on. He grimaced as he thought of the choice he'd made to come here without Ferguson's permission. If things went bad, his ass would be a goner, might all ready be, knowing the CIA man. The agent didn't like to be crossed. Still Mauricio had told Ferguson he didn't like using the innocent woman.

The agent ignored him. Said the price would be worth it.

But the unconventional action wasn't worth it in Mauricio's mind. The drug wars, the illicit arms smuggled over the border from cheap dealers in Texas had taken their toll. Blinking his eyes to ease his thoughts, he rubbed his palms over the steering wheel, remembering the stains of blood he'd tried to wipe off as he held his dying cousin, an innocent bystander killed a few years ago as a testimony to those wars, a macabre tattoo that said a man could kill and kill viciously. Bile rose in Mauricio's throat. Carlos had taken Roberto's scalp as proof of his abilities to do the job, showing others how cold, how bloody he could assassinate someone, allowing fear to seep into his enemies and bringing respect from those who hired him. The act landed him a choice position with The Spider's cartel, Manuel Ramirez hiring him for his first big hit.

Swallowing, Mauricio forced himself to focus. He watched the American duck into the shed. Crawford was right. Too many innocents had suffered and Elena Ramirez was just that. An innocent. The woman may be guilty of bad judgment in husbands but not in consorting with The Spider and his minions. She only wanted her daughter. The humanity in him couldn't blame her for that. Just because she and Crawford had walked blindly into the CIA operation was no reason to involve them in a scheme that could make the child an orphan.

A gust hit the window again, this time carrying a strong scent with the blow.

Cinnamon. Someone must be cooking an evening meal in the ghetto a block over. Mauricio loved the smell. Made him think of better days when he was young, when he and his cousin played outside the kitchen while their mothers baked.

Crawford's shadow began to move.

Mauricio leaned forward to get a better view. A muffled click sounded behind him. Cold fear pricked his skin.

Pffft.

Mauricio heard the muted fire before he could react. His body tightened with the impact. His throat went dry. Moaning, he felt some wetness spring behind his ear. He touched the spot. His hand came back with blood on the tips. He thought a small moan escaped him.

Then everything went black.

Brodie crouched. Without a sound, he ran to the dark part of the building and flattened himself against the siding. Inching closer to the light, he peeked in one of the gaps.

Carlos sat at a table polishing a wicked-looking knife with the corner of his opened button-down shirt. The narrow blade was smooth and about the length of his hand—curved slightly at the end. It looked like a homemade job, almost like a filleting knife—and just as strong. The handle was wood with pearl inlay. As Carlos held it up to the light, Brodie saw the swirled etchings on the broad part of the blade—and the notches cut in the bottom of the handle.

A chill took Brodie but he dismissed it. This man was more than a trained killer.

He was crazy.

Brodie considered taking him out there and then. Be done with the man. But if he did, one of Ferguson's connections to The Spider would be gone. Brodie didn't want that but if he had to, he would. He wouldn't take any chances.

Besides, Mauricio wanted Carlos for himself. Brodie could give the cop that much.

Glancing around the rest of the room as best he could, Brodie noted the killer was alone. The sleek cell phone Carlos laid on the raggedy table buzzed, jumping around the table like a cockroach. Carlos picked it up and answered, snapping more awake when whoever called responded. The man eased after a moment, continuing to nod and occasionally muttering a one-word response.

Taking a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, he rose and Brodie heard the hinges squeak as Carlos opened the back door.

Brodie inched away, blending with the darkened part of the building, the smoke from Carlos' cigarette floating to him from around the building with the breeze. There were other rooms to search. As long as Carlos talked, Brodie could pinpoint where he was. Time to move.

Backing up, he went for the front corner and glanced around it, scanning the street as he did so. There was nowhere to hide. Brodie didn't like the exposure but he had no choice. He ducked and rounded the edge then the next, looking for another way in.

On the other side, he crouched again. This time when he neared the ground, he heard a moan. Elena?

Looking through another gap with his night goggles, he saw a dark-headed body lying on the ground. She groaned again.

Brodie tested a few of the boards. They were nailed tight. He figured he could break through a few but that would alert the killer. Brodie debated his options. He didn't want to take too long.

Having no other choice, he sidled toward the door again. From the direction and strength of Carlos' voice, Brodie figured he stood just past the door on the other side. Brodie crouched low. *On shot, one kill.* The old mantra taught to raw infantry recruits echoed in his head. Except this time Brodie didn't want him dead, just wounded. He had one chance. This shot had to count.

His rifle ready but flush against him, Brodie leaned slightly forward, peeking around the corner. Carlos stood with his side to him looking at the blue sedan, nodding

as he talked. The killer sucked in another drag as he hung up the phone. Brodie took his chances.

Deftly swerving, he took the shot, a pop sounding from the AR-15. Brodie hit him square in the meaty part of his thigh. Carlos cried out in pain. As he fell, Brodie rushed him. Using the butt of the weapon, he smashed the killer in the temple.

Carlos' body crumpled against the car. Looping the rifle behind him, Brodie grabbed the man's hands and pulled them to Carlos' back, securing them with the plastic zip cuffs Gutiérrez had given Brodie. Turning the wounded man over, Brodie noted the killer was out. Brodie had clocked him good. He checked Carlos' carotid artery for a pulse. It was strong enough. And the man still breathed. Brodie checked the rest of his body. The bullet had passed through the leg cleanly without hitting bone. The bleeding was minimal. Brodie spoke into his headset to inform Gutiérrez.

No answer.

Brodie tried again and got the same response. Uneasy, he spun, his rifle at the ready, and entered the open door, moving swiftly to the room where Elena lay. Something was wrong. *Time to get Elena out of here.*

He tried the door, another low moan escaping from within. *Locked.* Brodie couldn't wait. Kicking the warped boards of the door with his boot, he forced his entry, splinters flying. Elena lay against the inner wall. She had struggled to push herself up on her elbows.

She looked disoriented. "You have...a way...of making an entrance...don't you?" she said wispily, struggling to talk.

Her weak voice wavered but she was alive. Brodie rushed to her and muttered a silent prayer. "C'mon. We need to fly." Holding the rifle with his strong arm, he put another around her and pulled her up. "Can you walk?"

"Don't know..." Her knees buckled as he tried to steady her. "Hector left. Carlos forced some drug on me. Don't know what. Just know...wanted my cooperation but...changed mind...worry about what Mouthpiece would do. Can't see well, can't move..."

Brodie cursed under his breath. "I'll carry you." He swung the strap of the rifle over his shoulder and hefted her into his arms.

"Knew...you'd come." She leaned her head against him, her hand reaching to touch his face. Then she closed her eyes and the hand dropped against his breast.

She still breathed but Brodie noticed the bruise on her face. "Bastard," he uttered through his clenched jaw, exiting the room and the building.

Carlos still lay in a heap when he left. Brodie kicked him one for good measure then headed for the next building, ducking under an alcove when he reached it. Brodie scanned the street. His truck was nowhere in sight. "Shit," he mumbled and glanced at Elena. She needed care. But where could he go?

He looked back at the shack. *The blue sedan*. It could at least carry them somewhere, anywhere away from this place. Brodie had to think. Where would Gutiérrez have gone – and why?

Most importantly, had Brodie misplaced his trust again?

* * * * *

“Damn!” Ferguson pounded the armrest of the car door and cursed from the lack of data they were getting. Nothing. Not a damn thing.

A beeper in the front of the vehicle began to flash. Someone was in trouble. Chris leaned forward. “Who is it?”

The driver keyed in the code that would let them retrieve the information then glanced back at Chris, a worried frown adorning his normally stoic face. “Gutiérrez.”

“Gutiérrez...” Chris growled. “Find him. Where’s his location?”

The driver punched a few more keys and the tracking device hidden under the dash folded out, drawing electronically the shortest route to where the emergency beacon indicated.

Chris scowled. “Step on it.”

The driver notified the others and they were in pursuit. Chris watched the LED readout on the computerized map. In less than fifteen minutes, they would be there.

He just hoped he’d find Gutiérrez and Brodie alive.

* * * * *

Brodie rushed Elena to the sedan, feeling her shiver in his grasp. He kicked Carlos out of the way and still managed to open the door to the back while holding onto her and easing her inside. Her feet dangling out of the car, he sat her on the edge of the seat, holding her up with one hand while using the other to knock the trash off the seat. As soon as he cleared a space, he laid her down and slid her legs inside then closed the door.

He glared at Carlos. The bastard had done this to her. As much as he wanted to beat the life out of the son of a bitch, there was no time to dwell on what had happened. They needed to split.

Carlos grunted as Brodie rummaged through his pockets, finding the key. He pocketed the other crap he’d pulled out in the process, thinking any of it might be useful, hoping some held clues to get his butt out this jam. Ferguson wouldn’t like how this op went down.

A breeze blew again and a chill ran up Brodie’s spine. He smelled something on the wind. Someone was out there. His sixth sense told him there was.

Running to the other side, he hopped behind the steering wheel and peeled off before anything else happened, tossing the rifle and his goggles on the seat. Elena needed help. And Brodie needed to find her shelter and safety.

Dark eyes watched and wondered as the couple left. The two were in deep now, whether or not they wanted to be. Mannie should never have taken that child. He only complicated the game, made The Spider more exposed, led Christopher Ferguson even closer to discovery.

The marksman's lips thinned, remembering the smile of the son that the agent Ferguson and his partner had taken away. The boy had been pure. A child of seven then. He would have been eighteen now. But as a child, he had not known the trickery and deceit of his own father, a man who had aligned himself with Middle East politics and corruption. Yes, the American agents had gotten her husband in the end, but why her son? What had he done?

Nothing. A tear tracked its way down the terminator's cheek from the loss, the pain. Then the gloved delicate hands lowered the sight of the rifle, having mercy on the couple. The deaths of these two would be no benefit to the terrorist cause the operative served. They were only robots, following orders but not knowing why. And the sweet child, Janie, she needed her mother.

A brisk gust burned Victoria Serrano's eyes, the only thing exposed in the black garb she wore. She glanced at the killer. He still lay sprawled on the ground. Grabbing his cell phone from the dirt, she hit the number sequence for The Mouthpiece, sending a text message telling of Elena's escape, adding that Carlos needed help. The Mouthpiece would think his killer sent it. As drug-induced as Carlos stayed, he'd probably believe it himself.

She snarled in disgust at the two men who worked in The Spider's lair. Carlos and The Mouthpiece were loathsome. Two pathetic beings bent on human misery. They were a necessity for now but she counted the days when that would no longer be the case.

More importantly, she counted the days when she would get her final retribution. Vengeance on Ferguson for the death of her child.

Chapter Thirteen

Brodie sped away from the precarious area, the sporadic placement of working streetlamps marking his way.

"Think, dammit." He pounded the steering wheel. He needed to find someplace safe, somewhere where he could care for Elena, keep her out of Ferguson's and Mannie's hands, a location where he could operate incognito.

But where?

He glanced back again, making sure no one followed. He hadn't noticed the tails before. Why, he didn't know. Usually he was good at picking something like that up.

But with Elena, nothing was usual.

He studied her in the rearview mirror, watched her chest rise and fall with every breath. He loved her. And he'd be damned if he'd let anything happen to her.

"We almost there yet?"

Elena's weak, breathy voice made Brodie worry. "When I have an idea where we're going, I'll let you know." Looking at her from the rearview mirror, he watched her struggle to sit up. "Stay down. Rest. You need your strength."

She pushed herself up on her elbows. "Janie...needs me. Mannie...in too...deep."

"We'll find her. But you need care first. I'm looking for a place where we can get away from everyone."

She rolled from her side, laying her back against the bottom cushion. "Abandoned farm. South. Larry...found. Just in case. Go there."

"How?" Brodie wondered if maybe he should rush to the border. Elena might need a hospital and he didn't trust the medical care in Nuevo Laredo. But he hadn't had time to check her out.

After looking in the rearview mirror again to be sure no one followed, he pulled under one of the streetlights, letting the car run while he parked. Sliding out from under the steering wheel, he crawled over the front seat and knelt on the floorboard by Elena. Brodie lifted her head to peer into her eyes. They were dilated and unfocused. He fingered her neck to find her pulse. It was thready but stable. "I think you need medical attention."

"No..." She tried to grab onto him to pull herself up. "Get coffee."

"A stimulant with whatever they gave you? I don't think so."

"Cold..."

Brodie realized she shivered. "Maybe you're going into shock."

"No. Drug. Probably roofies. Date rape pill. Legal in Mexico. Told you. Changed his mind."

"Yeah." *Mexican Valium*. He gritted his teeth not realizing what she'd meant before, that the man had meant to rape her. Brodie scowled, glad he'd at least booted the prick. "We'll treat for both." He stuffed a bag he'd brushed off the seat under her feet. "I'll turn on the heat."

She nodded. "Be fine. Just...sleepy."

He looked at her again and guessed what kind of pummeling she must have taken to get the bruise that showed near her temple. "What about that mark on your head?"

"Was okay before when Hector came."

"The Mouthpiece?"

"Yeah." Her eyelids fluttered. "Tired."

Brodie pressed his lips together. "Roofies will do that to you." He looked at her, wanting to assess her injuries. Leaning over he moved her hair to see the wound better. "You have a nice lump."

She grasped his arm. "It's fine. Promise." Then she looked up. Her brown eyes wide and perplexed. "You...still love me?"

The question caught him off guard. "Yeah," he whispered then bent over and brushed her lips with his.

"We need to talk..." she mumbled.

"Later," he said, more certain she would be okay. "Right now you need to sleep this off. I'll see what I can do to find some coffee."

She closed her eyes and the ghost of a childlike smile formed on her face, warming a part of Brodie that had been cold for too long, and he knew then he would take care of her always. No matter what the future held. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "Elena, before you pass out, tell me where to go."

Her eyes batted open. "An arroyo. Just outside town. Follow *Guerrero Avenida*. See sign for chickens. Go...dirt road. Dead ends at farm."

"Chickens?"

She nodded.

"And just where did your partner find this oasis?" Brodie wasn't about to lead them into another trap.

She smiled again. "Part of...sting...with the Dallas PD...few years back. He checked...place. Abandoned. It's okay. Trust me. Besides...best we have. Last resort. My jump spot if I need help."

A backup plan. Something he should have considered. Brodie wanted to kick himself in the rear.

"Get coffee..." Her voice grew stronger. "I'll help you."

"Okay," he nodded, "I'll see what I can do."

"Feel better already...now you're here." She slipped her hand into his and closed her eyes.

"Sleep." He kissed her fingers then her forehead. "I'll get that coffee."

Brodie felt for the pulse in her neck again. It seemed stronger. Satisfied, he got back in the front seat and rummaged through the glove compartment, hoping to find some change.

He scattered the few papers inside over the floor, finding nothing he could use. Swallowing, he looked ahead at the road. Other than the equipment he had on him, they had nothing left. Ferguson had taken their cell phones, the other weapons he'd had in the truck, the list of names he'd gotten from his father and the money he'd given Elena. The few bucks he'd had left in his wallet after giving Elena that wad of cash went to the *policía* who'd arrested him for Sanchez's murder. And anything Elena had left was in his truck as well.

Now even that was gone with wherever Gutierrez went.

Brodie shook his head and put the car in gear. Chris Ferguson had ensured their cooperation by guaranteeing he and Elena wouldn't be able to contact anyone or get away. Glancing at the dashboard, Brodie eyed the gas gauge. The tank was over half full. At least that gave them something.

He opened the window to let his mind clear, grateful now that he had a place to go.

Following the dark road, he drove toward the end of town and wondered where the next turn would take them.

* * * * *

"There he is." Chris pointed to the Triple J company truck that Brodie and Gutiérrez used. Gutiérrez sat ramrod in the driver's seat, his hands on the steering wheel, staring at something up ahead. Chris could hardly see him through the tinted window. From all other indications, it seemed whatever was wrong had toned down.

The van arrived moments behind him and swerved in front of them near the truck. Chris moved to get out, wanting to check the area himself.

"Why don't you stay here, boss?" the driver asked. "This car's armored and something's fishy."

Chris agreed. "Maybe you're right." Instead, he ordered a team to scout the area, keeping a man back to check the vehicle when he got the all-clear sign. Undercover agents spewed out of the van, rushing in various directions.

After a few minutes, the leader radioed Chris. "Clear."

Chris ordered the last man out of the van. After glancing around, the younger agent exited. He was one of the new guys on the squad, inexperienced but sharp, smart. The man made for the driver's side of the truck. The Mexican cop sat stiff behind the wheel. An eerie foreboding filled Chris as he watched the younger agent move closer and examine the car.

"Looks like he's been shot," the kid said, his voice edged with panic. The agent reached for the door handle.

"Wait," Chris yelled. A niggling crawled in his gut.

The man backed off and glanced back at Chris.

"Check the vehicle first," Chris ordered. Jumping out, he ran to the truck as the rest of the team trickled in.

"Boss..." the driver yelled after him but Chris didn't care. Reaching the vehicle, he stared through the window. Focusing, he saw the bullet wound in the back of the lieutenant's head. Swallowing, he studied the body. Who would have done this? And why?

Then he noticed it—the wire running under Gutiérrez legs to the door, the other end disappearing beneath the dash. It had been a quick job but would have been an effective one had Chris not listened to his instincts.

A trap.

Fuck. He'd been in The Spider's lair before. Gutiérrez's alert was to draw them in. Chris ground his teeth and stared at the dead man behind the wheel. Gutiérrez had been a good man, an unusual find in the corrupt Mexican system. The guy was a hero to his people. He deserved better.

The young agent stood quietly next to him. When Chris pointed to the wire, the man blanched, realizing what would have happened. Nodding, he crawled under the carriage and began to search.

Looking again at Mauricio, some emotion swelled within Chris but he forced the sentiment into submission. Someday, he would kill the one who'd caused so much torment.

Hopefully soon.

Brown eyes narrowed at the agent's discovery, her delicately arched eyebrows wrinkling with derision. *The man's instincts were too good.* This was the second time Chris had escaped her trap. In her eleven years of operation, she had never had anyone be so lucky. *Dammit.* Why didn't he die in the Colombian jungle with his partner?

Victoria lowered her telescopic sight and cursed inwardly that she hadn't had the means to set up a secondary sensor bomb. She had hoped the simple but powerful bomb would have taken care of her problems. She'd loaded enough firepower in it to take care of the old armored car as well. The damage would have erased any trace of her involvement—in effect protecting the organization's secrecy from the ones threatening The Spider's security—and mission. As a trained sniper, she sat far enough away, ready to clean up those who would have survived the blast. But with the failure, her choices now would be limited. The Spider's organization couldn't afford any loose ends.

Still, she needed a way to dispose of his team and keep Mannie and the others away from suspicion. The war against the United States had only begun. The Spider still needed the drug lord's cooperation—and his connections—to complete their assigned tasks. Her personal revenge would have to wait. "Damn," she cursed her failure as she watched the operatives point to the undercarriage of the vehicle. *Chris is a clever one.*

But looking at the cruel, handsome agent, knowing his angst, she smirked, savoring the fact the man suffered—for his friend, for his failure to find The Spider. *Let him feel the pain, the torment.* He deserved the agony for what he and his partner had done.

Then the thought possessed her. This scrubbed operation exposed the organization. Chris now knew The Spider was after him but it was no important matter. He didn't know who lay behind the attempts. He did not suspect her. And any new information on their whereabouts would be easy to get. She scoffed. Instead, let him know fear. Let him know the dark would soon overcome him.

She hiked the rifle on her shoulder and aimed.

Pffft. The silencer prevented any echo that firing the weapon would have made.

The young agent next to him fell.

Chris jerked his head around, his face filled with anger as he scanned the buildings. He couldn't see her but watching him in her scope, she knew how he felt. Exposed. *Afraid.*

Her eyes grew to slits as she stared once more at her enemy. *No, this failure did not matter. She had the edge. Their fight would go on tomorrow.*

Mayhap even tonight.

But for now, let him suffer, let him shiver with terror not knowing what hovered over his shoulder.

With a mocking leer, she quickly packed her gear and left, knowing that enjoying another's suffering was a sin, uncaring that on the morrow she will have lain with her worst enemy once more.

* * * * *

The waxing moonlight highlighted the dirt drive. Someone had thrown the broken chicken sign to one side and Brodie ran over it as he turned into the entrance. With Elena's help, he had found the deserted road. He hadn't been able to get her coffee but at least some of the effects of the drug had worn off and she'd become more coherent.

Following the potholed trail to its end, he found the farm and left Elena in the car while he checked the place out. The adobe hut had a roof. The moon's rays poured in through the broken windows, lighting the interior. A small bed sat in the corner complete with a blanket. Even a few supplies stocked some open shelves although they were dated. He hoped they were good enough to eat. Elena needed food.

There was a table and three chairs and an adobe stove inside with a smokestack through the sidewall. He picked up a can of tomatoes from the small set of shelves. It would have to do.

Resetting his Stetson on his head, he strode out to get her. Opening the rear car door, he lifted her in his arms.

"You don't have to carry me," she protested.

"Yes, I do." He kissed her lips.

The moonlight made her tiger eyes glow. She snuggled against him, fingered his collar and traced light pecks with her lips up his neck.

His libido jumped. He caught his breath, knowing she was still under the influence of whatever Carlos gave her. "You think he gave you an aphrodisiac as well?"

She giggled and kissed his chin then his cheek. "I don't know but I've never needed one around you."

Brodie steeled himself, not knowing how to respond to the obvious invitation. "I'm not having sex with you." Turning, he carried her inside.

"Why?" she asked, looping her arms around his neck. "You said you would before. You said you love me."

"Yeah," he swallowed, "that's why. I'm not sure you know what you're doing."

Her eyes darkened with desire. "I know, Brodie," she whispered. "Quite well." She captured his lips with hers then stared into his face. "I'll never forget."

He swallowed and tried to dampen the feelings that sprang inside. This wasn't the time or place to rehash the past—or to make a future. Right now, his main goal was to survive long enough to get Elena and her daughter back.

She frowned and shimmied out of his grasp, trying to stand. "If you don't want me, I understand."

He steadied her. Turned her around and held her at arm's length. "I want you, Elena. But you need some coffee first." He sat her in one of the chairs facing the pantry then turned and crouched in front of the narrow floor-to-ceiling cupboard and proceeded to give the food stores a better accounting, hoping to find some coffee and *really* hoping his urge to possess her would go away.

"You still don't trust me, do you?" she said, her voice breathy, still thick with the drug.

Brodie half looked over his shoulder, seeing her in the corner of his eye then tried to focus on the faded label of a can of peas. He didn't want to answer the question. He didn't want to fight with her anymore.

But he couldn't lie. He released a breath and dropped his chin to his chest. "No, not entirely."

The moments seemed to tick by. Brodie glanced back at her. Tears dripped from her cheeks. Pivoting on the balls of his feet, he turned and knelt in front of her. "Elena, don't..." He brushed a drop from her face.

"Why?" she sniffled. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I...I..."

"Come on." He picked her up and carried her toward the bed. He couldn't take her crying. It pained him too much.

She pushed against him. "No, I don't want to lie down. I need to find Janie."

"We'll find her." Brodie held her fast. "But the drugs are skewing your judgment. You need a clear mind when we take our next step."

"Which is what?" she hiccupped. "Brodie, I'm scared. Mannie is in deeper than what he knows. I didn't realize all this was going on. I don't know what to do."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "Don't worry. We'll figure it out together." He covered her mouth with his, tonguing her lips briefly as he nipped lightly at them then laid her on the bed.

She grasped his arm. "You need rest too."

"I thought I'd check the area first."

She shook her head. "Unless someone followed us, we're safe."

Brodie scowled, upset at the mistakes he'd already made in that regard. "No one followed."

Her eyes grew luminescent in the scant light. "Then come to bed. You need your sleep. And I don't want to be alone." She shivered.

Brodie rubbed her bare arms and glanced out the open door. "Give me a minute." He eased her hand away. "Let me ready everything just in case."

She nodded then her eyes fluttered, closing again.

Brodie stared at her a minute, absorbing the sight. Elena was fragile. Beaten. But too stubborn to give in.

She needed him more than ever.

With that, Brodie swerved and left the hut. He didn't have her level of confidence in their security. He planned on checking the area just in case. Grabbing the rifle and night goggles from the seat, he left to reconnoiter their surroundings, glancing back once again at the door. Elena would be safe but on his return, he would prep for the time when they would be on the move again. Her safety would then be out the window.

His gut churned, wondering how he could protect her the next time, knowing now more than ever that they were in way deeper than what Chris let on.

He looked upward at the stars, the almost full moon, and prayed he could find a way out.

* * * * *

Exhausted, his nerves racked and back undercover, Chris made his way to the darkened cottage. He'd lost two friends tonight.

The rusty hinges of the door squeaked as he entered. The coolness of the abode struck his heated body.

His heart was colder though. *Frostbitten*. And he wondered if it would ever get any better.

A feminine moan escaped from the direction of the bed. Then he smelled the spicy scent. *Victoria*. She had come to him.

Swallowing, he squashed the desolate feeling that threatened to engulf him. Unknowingly, she had blessed him, saved a minute part of him that was still human. He needed her warm body tonight, needed the pretense of being loved—an emotion he would never admit.

He approached the bed. He knew the setup of this one room intimately. He didn't need to see the mattress or her. He knew where he could find her.

Stripping, he crawled under the covers. She was naked and had rolled on her side away from him. He grazed his hand over the soft warmth of her waist. His palm curved over her small rounded buttocks as if his hand had been made for her soft, tender skin.

His palm slid upward, reveling in the touch. She stirred, moved on her back so her pert breast slid under his fingers.

"Kris, is that you?"

"Who else?" he said with a breathy voice.

She snuggled into him. He felt her smile against his shoulder. "Just making sure," she mumbled her voice heavy with sleep.

He lifted her chin with a crooked finger and placed his lips against hers, lingering, savoring the taste of her. "Make love to me," he said, his tone commanding, telling—pleading all at the same time.

She returned his affection, deeper, more passionate. "*Si*," she whispered. "Yes," she said again, taking his lips tenderly with hers.

He swallowed, grateful she was here. Glad that for once he wasn't alone, even if it was for a short time.

Even if it was an illusion.

* * * * *

After putting some supplies and other things together as best he could, he checked again on Elena. She slept soundly, thank God.

He sat in a chair, the firearm by his side, and looked at her, his heart heavy with all that had gone wrong. He shook his head knowing there was no looking back. Still, he hadn't come up with a plan, one that would get them out of this, one that would get Elena away from Ferguson and Mannie, and her daughter home safe. Brodie thought about snatching the girl—if they could find where Mannie had her. They could make the border and get Elena to her dad's. Maybe the sheriff could pull some strings.

But he doubted it.

Sighing, he knew his father, with all his money, power and connections, couldn't do anything either. They were in too deep. They all were—Elena, Mannie, the little girl, and himself. Larger forces were at work here although he had little knowledge of what they were. All Brodie knew was that Ferguson pursued terrorists. The prick he was after had to be a big one for the agent to bend the rules so badly by getting Elena and her daughter involved.

But Brodie knew how desperate the agent was, and why. He bit the inside of his cheek, wondering what his father would say about the botched rescue, thinking about what a disappointment he'd been to his Dad, and what secret his father hid from him. He swallowed the lump in his throat, remorseful over the emotional chasm that stood between his father and him, knowing there was nothing he could do about the rift now. They had fallen too far apart. The only thing he could do was live his life the best he could. Hopefully, he'd be able to pick up the pieces of it after this mess was over—if he got out of this alive. To date the odds weren't good—a strung-out snitch dead and a missing-in-action cop.

Brodie pursed his lips. Even if he survived and got Elena and Janie home safe, there was Ferguson. The operative wouldn't let Brodie's abortion of his plan go unscathed. If he couldn't make amends with the man, his Army career was fucked. There was no future.

So what could he do? How could he protect the woman he loved and keep the hounds at bay?

What was their next step?

Brodie squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. The obvious choice was to head for the border but Ferguson would expect that. Another would be to find Mannie, or even call Elena's partner, but Ferguson tracked the cell phone his ex-friend had given him. The agency would find them pronto.

There were the drug cartel locations. If Ferguson had checked them all out, he might not look there again. Perhaps they could hide in one of them?

Brodie shook his head, deciding that wouldn't work either. He wouldn't take the chance that the agent would suspect the move as his and Elena's last resort and backtrack to locate them, or that the drug network would find them from their daily operations. Hell, with The Mouthpiece involved that would be even worse. The information was useless.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Brodie wondered if Ferguson would send the Mexican cops after him. With their grassroots contacts, the *policía* might have a better chance of finding Elena and him. Brodie hoped not. That force had been corrupted by greed, although per Gutiérrez things were better. But how could Brodie trust that the lieutenant wasn't on the take? Where had that man gone, anyway? Why hadn't he been there to back him up? And where the hell did he take his truck?

Brodie grimaced, not wanting to doubt the man's integrity. He'd seemed too genuine when he'd told Brodie about his cousin.

But guessing and knowing were two different animals and he couldn't take the chance that he might be wrong about the man. He looked at Elena and remembered how fragile she was then shook his head.

No, the safest course would be to suspect him.

The rapid thoughts made Brodie's head ache. His tired body needed sleep. He glanced at Elena. She lay nestled under the covers. The coldness that had frozen his heart so many years ago called for the warmth she could provide. Even with the lies and years between them, Brodie wanted her. It was as simple as that.

He blinked, trying to smother the aching feeling and stave off the effects of exhaustion but to no avail. He glanced at the small bed and yearned for its comfort. He'd made his rounds. The area seemed secure enough.

He batted his eyes again. He had intended to stay awake for a while and post guard just in case but his well-trained body wasn't cooperating.

Knowing he'd reached his limit, he walked over to the bed and gently slid Elena toward the wall. Keeping his boots on, he crawled under the blanket next to her.

She moaned and turned into him, the sound of her voice seeming more haunting, more erotic in the darkness.

He stiffened, hoping he hadn't wakened her. Instantly, he felt her breathing on his back, slow and steady.

Good.

Closing his eyes, he tried to doze but thoughts still ran through his brain.

Elena's small hand slid over his hip and landed in his groin. His penis jumped in response. His eyes popped open but he didn't move. Was she awake?

He listened again, heard her steady breath, felt it through his shirt.

No, she still dreamed.

Swallowing, he closed his lids knowing he should sleep but too aware of her touch to do so. He huffed softly and smiled, relishing the touch of her hand, the physical intimacy she unwittingly gave him, one that reflected a sense of trust, the warmer thoughts of remembrance of what they once shared.

Never had so little meant so much.

He closed his eyes and dreamed as well, savoring every second, every moment spent like this with her. Knowing that when the sun rose, the fleeting sense would dissipate and they would be on the run once more.

Chapter Fourteen

A sigh escaped Elena's lips from the dull ache behind her closed eyelids. Her head hurt. Dazed, she remembered the knock she'd gotten from Carlos and felt the lump at her temple. At least some of the swelling had gone down.

A deep restful moan sounded behind her. A man's breath rustled her hair. A beefy arm pulled her closer, his hand on her breast. She jumped and batted her eyes open. Judging from the scant light it was still predawn. But who held her? Where was she?

Looking down, she noted the red hairs on the man's bared arm. *Brodie*.

Now she remembered. He had come for her. He had taken her to her jump spot. A safe house where Larry could find her if all else failed. She couldn't remember much more than that except trying to make love to him. But he had turned her down again.

Relishing his touch, she nestled her back against Brodie's brawny chest. She was safe, for now. She let herself enjoy the small moment, knowing that it would be over soon enough. She gazed at the hand on her breast. She was sure he hadn't meant to touch her so intimately but how long had it been since she felt him loving her?

Too long, yet she still yearned desperately for his touch. A lone tear threatened to escape from the corner of her eye but she wouldn't let it, wouldn't let this moment be marred with regret.

A hand slid out from under the small pillow and Elena realized she'd slept on his other arm. Grasping his open palm, she slowly lifted his fingers and kissed each one, tasting the musky saltiness of his skin. He still loved her. Her heart ached knowing she had deceived him.

He stirred behind her and pulled her against him, burying his face in her hair. He inhaled a deep breath and the sensation of this intimate touch moved her deeply.

She bit her lip and gazed over her shoulder. "Brodie," she swallowed, afraid of what he might say. "Will you ever forgive me for marrying Mannie?"

"Does my forgiveness matter?" he whispered against her tresses then turned her to him, holding her as his blue eyes deepened and studied her face.

She pressed her palms to his chest. "It does to me." Her voice broke.

He sighed and looked away.

The cold response crept into her heart. She tried not to let him know how much his response wounded her. "That's what I thought."

She pushed against him but he wouldn't let her go.

"Elena," his lips caressed her earlobe, "it doesn't matter. We're in trouble. We have very few choices. You want me and God knows I want you. When the sun comes up, we'll need to move. Can't we simply just enjoy the few moments we have left?"

He looked at her. His rich blue eyes darkened as he swallowed and stroked her cheek.

He didn't trust her but he had risked his life for her. Knowing that, she wanted him more than ever. "Yes," she breathed against his lips. "We can but I don't want to be your enemy. I don't want you hating me."

"I don't hate you." His hooded gaze showed no emotion but Elena thought she'd glimpsed his pained soul before he hid behind the cool demeanor.

She closed her eyes against the onslaught of emotions assailing her, knowing she hurt just as deeply. "Love me, Brodie. Don't hold back." She needed this time to quench the passionate fire, the anguish within her.

He gulped. His caution crumpled. She could read the depth of want in his eyes. She pressed her lips together, forcing the harsher sensations to recede within, not wanting to waste this precious, fragile moment, knowing she would never regret the cost to her heart. She fingered his Adam's apple. "Make love to me, Brodie. Like you did before. Like none of the bad times ever happened."

For a short moment, he studied her, his eyes deepening with desire. Then he grasped her as if there was no tomorrow and held her, capturing her lips with his.

She arched against him, reveling in the feel of his taut, sinewy body. "Oh, God, Brodie," she murmured against his mouth, "I've missed you."

His body stiffened. He gazed at her. His ragged breaths caressed her cheek. "Have you really?"

For once, his look didn't condemn her. For once, he only questioned.

She wanted to cry, grateful for the small act of faith. She blinked to push back the wetness. "Yes." Her voice trembled with emotion. A salty drop leaked from the corner of her eye. "You don't know how much."

He pressed his thumb against the stain the track of her tear made and wiped the drop from her face. "If we get out of this, Elena, we'll talk."

"I would like that." Her voice choked, knowing that what she had to tell him about their daughter could break the fragile bonds they'd built between them.

He granted her a small smile and kissed her again, his tender tongue outlining her mouth then raking her lips with his teeth. "I love you, Elena," he whispered against her. "I always have." When he kissed her this time, he pulled her into him.

She wanted to tell him she loved him too, afraid he wouldn't believe her. But any derision would shatter the magical moment. Instead, she returned his ardor, putting her whole heart into the pursuit.

She ran her hands up the front of his shirt and fingered the closed button at the top where the shirt made a vee, working to get it open.

Brodie eased away, studying her. "Are you sure this is what you want?" His husky voice stirred her.

"More than anything," she said, the yearning for him catching fire within her.

His eyes flicked over her face and deepened again. "Then I'll give you everything I have."

He took her lips, this time with desperate ardor. His palms trembled as they ran down the length of her back and encircled her, grasping her derriere and pulling the crotch between her legs against his hardening shaft. She could feel him pulse through his jeans.

An urgent need for sex grasped her. She moaned. "God, it's been too long."

"Too long for what?" He nipped her ear.

"Since I..." She didn't want to finish, didn't want to think about the intimate times she and Mannie had shared.

They were nothing like this.

He paused and pulled away, studying her. "Since what?" he whispered against her lips.

She pressed her mouth closed and blinked her eyes twice, struggling to find the right words to answer him. What could she say? Since she'd made love to him? Because that was the only time she'd ever felt like this. Yes, perhaps the act between her and Mannie had been love but the feeling had only been on Mannie's side and he abused the privilege, making her feel guilty because she didn't love him in return.

She inhaled a slow and steady breath, resolved to say the right thing. "Since I've really been loved."

His eyes narrowed. "You mean since you and Mannie broke up."

Could she admit the truth to him, that she never loved Mannie—or any man—like she loved him or would he chide her once more?

She lifted her chin, determined no longer to live a lie. For once, he would know the truth. "No, Brodie. Whether you believe me or not, love had nothing to do with what happened between Mannie and me."

His eyes turned to slits. He grew cold in her arms. "Then from someone else." His low growl sent shivers up her arms.

She shook her head. For once, she wouldn't react to his bullheadedness and jealousy. She would speak the truth. "I won't tell you I haven't been with anyone else. But I'm not going to lie and tell you the rest have been because I loved them. I know you'd readily believe that before you believe what I'm going to say but I'm going to tell you anyway." She swallowed. "Brodie, there never has been anyone else who's had my heart. And whether you believe me or not, whether you turn away and we stop this before we start, it's the truth."

His body grew rigid. Anger flared in his eyes then the hooded look came back and he studied her.

She leaned into him, her mouth inches away from his. "Think about what we had. Is that so very hard to believe?" She stared into his cold blue eyes. Moisture beaded behind her lids but she refused to look away. She wouldn't back down from the truth.

He blinked a few times, his breath grew ragged then a wetness pooled in the corner of his eye. "No, not really." His voice shook. "But then, maybe I'm deluding myself again."

"Look at me." She circled her arms around his neck. "I'm not that good of an actress. For once, believe me."

"I want to."

"Then do." She let her tears fall. "Brodie, there was never anyone I loved—except you."

His lips thinned. He stilled for a moment. "Then why did you marry Mannie?" His eyes narrowed with anxiety.

"I didn't have a choice. My family..." Her voice broke.

Relief flooded his gaze. He sighed and put a finger over her lips then rested his forehead against hers. "You don't need to say any more. Our families were at war. Still are. And I know how demanding your father is. After all these years, I guess I just needed to hear you say it. You're right." He placed a light peck on her lips. "Let's love like we did before and make all the bad things go away." He swallowed. "At least for the short time we have left before we leave to find your daughter."

She shot him a weak smile. "We still need to talk."

His lopsided smirk made her grin more. "We need more than that. I expected to confront Mannie alone. I didn't pack any condoms."

"I'm covered in the baby area." She smiled. "And you said you were healthy."

"Like a horse." He nodded.

She let herself laugh and snuggled into him. "Then maybe I'd like that ride after all."

His old grin came back, the one that melted her insides. "Well, ma'am, I aim to please."

She fingered his cheek. "Love me, Brodie. For all the time we have left before the sun rises."

His smile faded and a seriousness captured his gaze. "My pleasure." He bent over and took her lips, tenderly this time.

She undid the button she'd fingered then the next as his lips caressed hers.

"Elena, I've wanted you for so long." His soft voice tantalized her ear.

She sputtered. "Oh? Even with all the women you've been through?"

She meant the comment as a tease but Brodie didn't take it that way. Instead, he pierced her with his crystal blue-eyed stare. "Every time I've slept with a woman all I could see was you."

She gulped. She didn't know what to say, pained by what she'd done to him, the secret she held, the lies that stood between them. "Oh, Brodie," she brushed his cheek with her palm, "what have we done to ourselves?" She wanted to cry but she didn't want him to see how deep the deception that she and others had wrought had wounded her. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and nestled her face into his neck. "I'm so sorry." She barely heard her own words. She sealed her eyes shut but her body shook as the tears still fell.

"Don't, Elena." His lips caressed her temple. "It's behind us. Don't look back."

"You don't understand." She kissed his warm neck then his strong chin. "There's more to this than you know. Janie..."

He kissed her and tightened his arms around her, possessing her with his embrace. "Will be fine. Even though Mannie's a bastard, he's her father. He won't let anyone hurt her."

"But..."

Brodie put a finger over her lips to hush her. "No more about Mannie. I don't care anymore. This is our time. It's about you and me. What happened is in the past. Right now, all I care about is what you want. Here. Now. In bed. And if that's me then as far as I'm concerned, I'm a lucky man."

She wanted to tell him about Janie but in a way, he was right. Now wasn't about Janie or Mannie. It was about the two of them. She needed him to love her, even if one last truth stood between them. Smiling, she stifled the sick feeling the deception gave her, resolved to enjoy the moment. "Lucky, huh?" Sexual tension surged in Elena as she brushed the back of her fingers against his shoulder, astounded by the absurdity of their situation. "Here I drag you into serious trouble and we get stuck in this rundown shack with only a stolen beat-up car. And all you care about is what I want?"

Brodie shot her a lopsided grin. "First, you didn't drag me. I came of my own accord." He kissed her quick.

She snickered against his mouth. "I thought your father made you."

Brodie grimaced. "He asked. I made the decision on my own. Now stop interrupting me. Second..." He kissed her again. "It isn't the first time I've been in deep crap and it won't be the last. The Army has this fetish of putting guys like me in harm's way."

"I bet..." She covered her smile with the back of her hand, trying to look very serious. "Look at the terrible situation you're in right now. Me in your arms..."

He arched a mocking auburn brow, looking down on her to hush her.

She giggled.

"Third..." He placed another peck on her lips and lingered for a moment. "This is exactly where I want to be." He glanced around. "This rundown shack is the first private place we've been. *I'm* not complaining. The bed may be dusty but at least it's

clean underneath the covers. Besides, the car runs and has a half tank of gas. It can get us where we need to go.

"And fourth and most importantly..." His mouth molded against her for several seconds then he pulled away. "We're still alive." He muttered against her mouth. "We have each other. For that, I'm more grateful than you'll ever know." He eyed her up and down then shot her a lopsided grin. "I guess love makes you stupid because I don't care about anything else." His eyes darkened as he rose and rested on his elbow next to her.

She smiled meekly, focusing only on the one emotion. "Yeah." She slid her hand around his neck. Rising to meet him, she kissed him. "Then love me, Brodie. For the rest of the time we have left." She arched her back, pressing her breasts against his chest.

Brodie groaned as she rubbed against him and he buried his head into her neck. "Oh, Elena. God, how I've wanted you."

"No more than how much I've wanted you." Warmth tingled within as his breathing deepened against her. His fingers squeezed and caressed the firm muscles of her rear cheeks then went higher and tugged at the ends of her shirt. Freeing them, he pulled her shirt open and ran his calloused palms against the naked skin of her back.

She moaned as he placed warm pecks down her neck. "Oh, Brodie," she muttered against his strong chin, her hands shaking as she reached to undo the few closed buttons of his shirt that remained. She needed him right now with a depth she couldn't understand. Reaching the last button, she tore his shirttails out of his pants, letting her hands slide over his muscular torso. Her pulse beat in her eardrums as she eased the shirt open, reveling in his masculinity, the hard muscles and soft hairs on his chest. She rubbed her fingertips against his skin, weaving them through the sparse hair to the nipples on his chest, squeezing the nubs she found there. Leaning forward, she swallowed before she brought her mouth to his warm skin. Lightly taking a small bit in her mouth, she laved and suckled him with her lips.

The sharp intake of Brodie's breath announced his need. His arms wrapped around her hips and pressed her against his aching member. "God, Elena, you keep that up and I'll blow this. I don't want to come before you."

She stopped and looked at him, smiling. "Maybe you should. Then I can get you excited again and enjoy you even longer." She laved a nipple then craned her neck to reach his lips, tonguing them.

His arms drew her into him like a vise, seeming as if he'd never let her go. She treasured the sense of him.

Her hands moved over his pecs, molding against the hard, sinewy muscles. She slipped her fingers under the shirt and stroked his shoulders then planted small pecks down his neck. She moaned as he stroked her hair and lavished his attention on her collarbone, gasping from the touch of his lips on the small sensitive spots he found, her skin tingling with each kiss, heat darting from every stroke of his tongue.

Pushing the fabric off his shoulders, she moved her lips farther downward, taking in a taut nipple when she reached the nub, nipping on it lightly.

He shuddered and groaned. "God...Jesus, I'm rock-hard. I don't know what's wrong with me. It isn't like..."

He stopped midsentence but Elena knew what his thoughts were. She eyed him from where she lay underneath him. "It isn't the same with someone else, is it?"

The color of his eyes turned to a deep ocean blue. "No." His panting grew soft and ragged. He brushed the hair from her face with his free hand. "It isn't the same at all. There's never been anything like this, Elena. Not for me."

That meant more to her than he would ever know. She shook her head. "Me, either."

He took her lips with his, ravishing them, making her want for more. With desperate abandon, she yanked the material down his arms. His tight grasp on her prevented her from taking the shirt off completely. She took advantage of his awkward state and pressed against him, rolling him on his back.

She went with him and sat on top of his hips to pull at her shirt. "Too many clothes," she managed to spit out as the folds of the shirt caught around her breasts.

Brodie chuckled. "Here let me help you with that." He reached to free her but his shirt kept his arms pinned. "Well, maybe not." He grasped her waist and rolled her back over.

She let out a small shriek as he settled on top of her, laughing as he nipped at her breasts through her bra. "Brodie, that isn't fair." Her shirt had flipped over her face and she struggled to move it but it had tucked itself around her body. "I can't even see you."

"Good, then I can have my way with you." One of his hands slid underneath the cup of her lacy brassiere and fondled her nipple. "And as much as I like your lingerie, I agree with you, right now it won't do. Too many clothes." He pulled the material down and freed her breast from the cup then sucked on her hard nipple.

She pressed her knees together, wanting him inside. "Brodie, you're going to drive me wild." She shivered in anticipation and worked harder to extricate her arms, little by little getting the shirt over her head.

She heard him snicker. "That's the idea."

Another inch and she'd released the blouse, flinging the clothing toward the floor.

He sat up and did the same with his shirt then hovered over her. "I love you." His eyes glittered.

She reached up and put her palms on his cheeks. "I know." She guided him to her, his face to hers and kissed him, understanding how deeply he loved, knowing she felt the same, squashing the niggling doubt she had to tell him now about his daughter.

Carefully, he resettled himself on top of her. "I never thought we'd be doing this again."

She smiled and said a prayer within her heart, wishing beyond hope that when the time came to tell him of Janie, he would forgive her again. "You're not the only one. But I'm glad we are."

"Yeah." He exhaled, his voice unsteady. He kissed her then traveled down her neck, raining tender pecks along her skin.

Elena's breathing deepened as his fingers eased the straps of her bra off her shoulders. His hands slid underneath her to reach the clasp, undoing it. She closed her eyes, eager to be free of the binding. Brodie slung the bra away from them and the strap caught on the edge of the back of the chair.

"Good shot." She chuckled.

He grinned with a rakish gleam in his eye. "I try." His lips slipped lower to capture a nipple again. Her chest rose to meet him.

"Oh, Brodie..." She ran her hands through his auburn locks. His teeth raked her nub, barely nipping it.

He eased back for a moment and laved the nipple then blew on it, making it peak even higher.

Her body shook. "Jesu, sweet Mary..."

Brodie chuckled against her. "How long has it been, Elena?"

"Huh?" In her stupor, it took her a moment to understand what he asked. She raised her head, wondering if he would condemn her if he knew.

But his look said he wouldn't. His eyes only shined with pleasure.

She swallowed. "More than a year."

"A year?" he said as if protesting. "Why in hell would a beautiful woman like you wait so long to have sex?" He placed an elbow alongside her hip and rose up, making a circle around the base of her breast with his finger.

She grimaced. "Maybe I didn't want to. Not with just anybody."

"Uh-huh." He licked her nipple like an ice-cream cone as his finger made another round, rising higher. "And why not?" He grasped her globe and squeezed her tit then bent to her and nipped the peaking nub.

A mewling sound escaped her lips. She lifted her hips to grind into him. "Because, I...oooh..." He held the nub between his teeth, alternating between blowing and tonguing it. She couldn't answer these questions when he did such delicious things to her. "You're not playing fair," she said when she could catch her breath.

"I'm not trying to," he replied then chuckled without stopping his tender assault.

The pitch of her moans rose. She grasped his shoulder to push him off. "Too many clothes," she protested.

"Hmmm," he licked her a final time then lifted his head and glanced downward. "You may be right." Then he eyed her other breast. "But I've also neglected half of your topside. We can't have that."

‘We can’t?’ Did she squeak?

“Absolutely not.” His grin grew seductively wicked. His hand came around the base of her unattended breast. Slowly, he slid his fingers upward, bringing them together around her nipple then tugging on the tip with the same slow pace, making her arch against him, making the woman’s flesh between her legs cry out in want.

She rubbed the front of her jeans against him, his shaft hard as stone.

His head folded into the breast he held. He groaned, the warmth from the release of his breath stroking her nub.

“You want me,” she mewed and grasped his hips so that she could grind into him better.

“I do,” he said and suckled again for a moment longer. Then he trailed his mouth down her ribs, fingering the apex of her breast as he did so. With his other hand, he reached for the snap that held her pants tight and pulled it open.

Letting his hold on her breast go, he sat up and straddled her, eyeing her while he eased her zipper down. “I want to always remember this. No matter what happens after we leave here.”

“Yes,” she breathed and fingered the clasp on his belt, opening it before he eased off her.

“Lift your hips for me, babe.”

She didn’t hesitate. She went to grab her pants to pull them down but he stopped her. “No, I want to do this.” The sexual glint in his eyes melded with his loving touch. He eased the pants downward, sliding his hands into the back of them at one point to caress her buttocks. When he got them to her knees, he stopped and pulled her legs open enough to tighten the fabric against her. He sat at her feet, beyond her reach, so she grasped the spindles of the headboard as he leaned toward the vee in her legs.

She shivered with anticipation. He blew his hot breath on her sex, her feminine nub. She jolted upward, unable to stop herself. Then he raked his teeth on her clit and she thought she’d come undone. “Brodie, for God’s sake.”

“No,” his breath caressed her labia, “it’s for our sakes. You need this, Elena. As much as I do.” He licked her bud then trailed his tongue down her major lip, tantalizing her. Without warning, he thrust his mouth against her, plunging his tongue into her depths. “God, you taste incredible. Sweet,” he said between heavy pants and the action of his tongue.

“Ooooh.” The pitch of her voice rose. Bracing herself against the headboard, she arched higher, rubbing her nub against his mouth. He grasped her rear and squeezed her cheeks, fondling them, holding her to him, sending heated bolts of carnal lust to her core.

He nipped her and once more thrust his tongue inside her. She bucked against him, wanting him, needing him, only him. Her body trembled as her climax rose. His hands

pressed against her glutes, forcing her sex against his hot mouth. He tongued her and plunged into her once again.

She shuddered with her release, her moans crying out to whatever deity there may be who would allow such intense pleasure.

"Oh, Brodie," she panted as he lowered her hips to the bed, a satisfied smirk gracing his face.

"Now," he straightened her legs and yanked off her pants then rose up off the bed and quickly discarded the rest of his clothes, "it's my turn."

Elena caught her breath. Seeing him nude, his penis throbbing, stirred her quickly. Her rapid response surprised her. Even after such intense delight, she was ready for him. She eyed his taut body, studying the extreme nuances the bulging muscles in his body made. "My, my, Brodie, but you have grown." She giggled.

He settled his hands on his hips and frowned. Arching a brow, he added, "In what way, smartie-pants?"

She giggled and shook her head in disbelief. "I knew you had gotten bigger and stronger but oh my God, I can see why the women fall for you." Slowly, she eyed him up and down, savoring the sight of his potent masculinity. "As a nude, you are an incredible example of the male species."

He smirked. "Thanks. I'm glad you like it." Kneeling on the bed, he put a hand on either side of her, hovering over her. "But if you don't mind, I'd like to keep myself for only you."

The truth shone in his eyes. He wanted her. Just her. Would he think the same after he discovered how deep her duplicity went? She bit her lip, not wanting to find out. "Then love me, Brodie. Take me. Because I'll always be only yours."

He lay on top of her, his lips caressing her mouth, her neck, her earlobe, his chest pressed against her aching breasts. *So close, so wonderfully close.* She wanted to cry out from the keen satisfaction she suffered with his touch. He held her in a way she could feel his heart beat against her chest. She wondered if he could feel hers in return and knew she had never experienced the sheer pain and joy of such a joining. She nestled her head against his neck, tasted the saltiness of him. Inhaling deeply, she savored his scent. Musky, male, mixed with the smell of her feminine perfume from the attention he'd lavished on her. The erotic blend stirred her senses, heightening and honing them to a pinnacle she could have never imagined. Only the act of their joining could ease the sweet torture.

Brodie's panting deepened. His erect penis rubbed against the opening to her vagina, the tip stroking the wetness that came from her. She mewed and pressed her hips up to him. "I want you," she uttered against his ear.

He quivered. She knew he held himself back, wanting her to come again.

"Take me," she murmured, her breath caressing his lobe.

He slid his arms underneath her and held her tight. Lifting his head, he studied her, the deep want reflected in his gaze. "I will," he whispered. "Just know this. There will never be anyone in my life like you."

With his confession, he captured her mouth and plunged into her. She bucked against him, savoring the contact, her vagina tightening uncontrollably around him. He sucked in a breath. In moments, he moved within her.

"Ohhh," she sighed as he sped his pace, the blood rushing to her temples, her only thought the pleasure she knew with him. Brodie thrust hard into her. Her orgasm hit with abandon. She cried with pleasure from the spasm of her inner muscles around his penetration.

His husky voice chuckled against her temple. "I know you have more."

He was right. She could feel the need herself, the quivering desire building in her core again.

He slowed, stoking her carnal fires, releasing a soft, ragged moan against her ear as he moved, his breath tantalizing her lobe.

"Mmmm." She exhaled a shaky breath. Then Brodie moved faster, the sensation of the head of his penis moving within her causing her libido to burst into flames.

Her want of him, of this ancient act, spiraled higher. She could feel the strain in him as he held himself back for her to come again, the delay of his climax causing her sexual hunger to intensify.

His pace deepened, sped, her breathing matching his rhythm with each powerful thrust.

Finally, she could take no more. She cried aloud, peaking in an exquisite glory.

Now, she wanted to please him in return. She slid her hands down his back to his glutes, massaging them then squeezing them as she slipped the tips of a few of her fingers down the crevice between.

He exhaled, his breathing labored against her cheek. "God, Elena, I don't think I can hold on."

"Then don't," she murmured in his ear.

He groaned. She felt him peak. His body shuddered as his seed burst into her. A few short breaths and he lay spent on top of her.

Panting, he laid his head against her, exhaling against her breasts. She ran her fingers through his short hair and kissed his temple. His breathing slowed. Looking at her, the intensity in his eyes of the completeness this joining gave him pierced her heart.

Slowly, he brushed the hair from her face, his unsteady voice a whisper. "That was the most incredible sex I've ever had."

She smiled and shook her head. "No, it was more than sex. You loved me, Brodie."

"Yeah," he nodded, grinning lopsidedly at her. "I still do."

Smiling, she kissed him. A warm glow covered her body.

Sunlight.

Glancing at the windows, she realized the sun was about up. "I think we're later than we thought we would be."

Brodie pushed his torso up and looked around. "Yeah." The corners of his mouth turned downward then he gazed at her. "And we need to talk. I still don't have a plan."

She swallowed, knowing the time for loving was gone.

The wind stirred the dust outside bringing some of the tiny grains into the old shack. The door creaked open with another gust. Rays from the morning sun peered through.

Brodie arched his brow and lifted a finger against his mouth. Rising, he covered her naked body with the sheet and grabbed the rifle he had set under the bed, turning his body so that he covered her. Elena sat up and pulled the sheets tighter, scooting behind him and glancing over his shoulder.

A shadow formed against the door. Brodie released the safety and waited.

The shadow stilled.

Brodie raised the sights and anchored the weapon against his shoulder. "You'd better come out before I put a bullet in your head," he ordered in Spanish.

The man turned into the opening and leaned against the doorjamb, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Chris Ferguson's leer made Elena's skin crawl.

Chapter Fifteen

Brodie lowered the weapon. "How'd you find us?" He held an edge to his voice.

Ferguson huffed. "It's amazing what a bug will do."

Relieved the intruder wasn't Carlos or another of The Mouthpiece's men, Elena slipped downward and rested her ear against Brodie's ribs but the view of his powerful back prevented her from seeing his reaction.

"I checked the car." Brodie's voice rumbled in his chest. "I didn't see a bug. And I know I didn't have one on me. Besides, you don't have one with that kind of range. Try again."

Elena shifted her weight to look around Brodie. Ferguson shrugged. "It's a new model. We were field-testing it. I'd almost forgotten until one of the men reminded me." He nodded at the rifle Brodie held and smirked. "It's in the firing mechanism. Every time you touch it, it sends a signal. You didn't finger it much last night but we got enough to zero in on your location."

Brodie looked back at Elena and grimaced, a signal that he didn't like her peeking out around him. She lifted her brows and pasted on a smile.

Brodie's frown deepened then he glanced at Ferguson. "Would you mind stepping outside?"

Chris snorted. "I thought you two were finished." His cavalier demeanor grated on Elena. "We've been waiting a while."

"Son of a—" Brodie pressed his eyelids closed a moment then glared at the man. "Get out. I'll be there in a minute."

The leer froze on Chris' face. He nodded and arched a brow. "Don't take too long. The guys are anxious." His eyes narrowed. "And I'm a little pissed myself." He swerved and exited.

Elena let out a sigh.

Brodie rose and grabbed his pants off the floor, slipping his legs inside. "We won't talk about you sticking your head out from behind me since, being a professional, you know that was stupid. What if it was Carlos? Or someone else who wanted to kill us? We have enough undesirables after us."

She wouldn't let him buffalo her. He was trying to take charge again. "I needed to see what was going on. This is my job not yours."

"Wrong." He fastened his pants then his buckle. "I'm supposed to protect you and get you and Janie home. Do what I say next time."

"God," she flung herself against the bed sheets, "you are impossible."

The mischievousness of his quirky grin arrested her. "Makes you want me more."

"And arrogant." She threw the pillow at him.

He batted the cushion away before he slipped an arm in the shirt he'd picked up off the table. "It isn't arrogance if you can back it up." He shoved his other arm in the sleeve, taking two steps to reach her. Bending over, he placed a kiss that lingered on her lips. "Get dressed." His gaze changed from playful to serious. "Ferguson won't wait long." He eyed her nakedness from her face to her toes and back. A glimpse of fire shone in them before he took on his hooded look. "I'll buy you a few minutes to pull yourself together but do me a favor. Stay out of this and let me handle Ferguson. I know him—and what makes him tick."

"Brodie..." She grabbed his collar to prevent him from leaving her before she finished. "Janie's my only concern. I need to be a part of this. Don't try and cut me out because you're trying to protect me."

He glanced over her face and sighed. "Trust me for once, will you?"

She released him and swallowed, unsure if she should, but the emotions of hope and past hurts swirled in his eyes. She nodded. "Okay."

His melancholy smile stirred her. She wanted to take away his pain.

He kissed her quick then turned, buttoning his shirt as he stalked out.

Looking at the steel rod his back had become, Elena guessed Ferguson was about to get a piece of Brodie's pent-up anger.

"You bastard, just what the hell were you doing out here without letting us know?" Brodie kept his voice low, not wanting Elena to overhear the conversation. He didn't want her suspecting his motives until he had everything in place. She'd hate him for what he was about to do but she'd stay alive.

Ferguson dead-eyed him. "I gave you a moment that I thought you needed. Don't fuck with me right now, Crawford. I have two dead men and a seriously FUBARed job." He poked Brodie hard in the chest. "And I bet most of it is your fault, damn it. Why weren't you with Gutiérrez? Where the hell were you when he needed you the most?" Chris bit his lip. Placing his hands on his hips, he turned away and inhaled a giant breath.

Brodie had wanted to punch the bastard but Chris' acute response made him wonder what had happened. He left Chris alone a moment so he could get his composure back. "Who died?"

Chris' glare gripped Brodie. "Gutiérrez, for one."

The report shook Brodie. "Shit." He glanced at the door of the shack, hoping Elena hadn't overheard. She didn't need to know this.

"Yeah." The agent's lips thinned. "Someone triggered the personal alarm he had. We found him sitting in the driver's seat of your truck. A nice, clean bullet hole underneath his left earlobe. The truck was set with enough explosive to send us to

kingdom come. If I hadn't noticed the first wire..." He shook his head and looked away. "At least they used a hollow point bullet on him. He didn't feel a thing, I imagine. It lodged on the other side of his skull."

This new information strengthened Brodie's determination. "You can't take Elena any farther. You know where Mannie is, where he's holding their daughter. Get Elena and Janie out of this. They're innocent. I'll stay and do whatever you need."

Ferguson turned his head slowly. "You love the adrenalin rush, don't you?" He scrutinized Brodie then huffed and shook his head. "Friend, after the info I've gotten, you're the only one who *could* be innocent of this mess." His smirk grew more sinister. "And you don't even know why." His gaze narrowed, his eyes only seen through the slits of his lids. "Get Mrs. Ramirez. I'll take her to her daughter."

Brodie studied him a minute, knowing he used Elena's married name to goad him. Deciding not to take the bait, he swerved to get her, praying he could get her and Janie out of this mess yet.

Chris signaled the men to load up. Biting the inside of his cheek, he squashed the pain he felt. There was no time for feelings, only action. The Spider was close. He could feel it, smell it—taste it. He would nail the fucker and make him suffer.

Snarling, he turned into the hard breeze. The wind had picked up. The torrid blow gusted against him, driving sand into his face. But the pricks didn't hurt him. His pain lay much deeper—and the chasm grew with every loss.

Chris bit his lip, remembering the agony of his partner's death. Now the terrorist could claim the kid from his team and Gutierrez as well. Chris swallowed. At least Victoria had come to him last night. Her kindness comforted him, dulled some of the pain. Chris rubbed his hand over his face. He could still smell the sweet, heady essence of her perfume.

Inhaling, he shoved the *niñera* to the back of his mind. He couldn't deal with the tender emotions she engendered. She didn't even know what a godsend she'd been for him.

Grit landed in his eyes and brought him back to reality, reminding him his dalliance with Victoria was only temporary. Chris gritted his teeth and worked to get his thoughts together. They'd go with his original plan—with a few modifications. But now he had more information. The Spider expected them. Chris wondered how his adversary knew, who could have been the leak. When he found that, he'd use the mole against the terrorist. For now, though, Chris only needed to figure out what trap The Spider would set for them next.

Then he'd be a step ahead with a trap of his own, knocking on The Spider's lair.

* * * * *

"You can't catch meeeeeee," Janie squealed and ran around Victoria. Victoria smiled and took off after her, making sure she didn't run too fast. She loved playing with the little girl. It reminded her of the time she had been a mother.

Not a killer with a cause.

Now she wondered if she had been in the business too long.

She caught up with her charge and picked her up, swirling her around then setting her on her feet to tickle her.

The child giggled and tried to tickle her back. "No fair," Janie cried.

"I caught you fair and square," Victoria contended. "But since you insist, I will close my eyes and you can hide from me."

The girl stood with her hands on her hips and gave Victoria a mocking glare. "You must count to ten—no, twenty. I need more time."

Victoria straightened and crossed her arms. "Agreed." She nodded her head once. "Now," she walked over to one of the larger trees in the yard. Covering her eyes with her hands, she leaned her head against the rough bark. "*Unooooooooo, doooooosss...*"

Janie giggled again as she ran, telegraphing her whereabouts.

Victoria smiled, relishing the rare feeling the girl gave her. A warm breeze stirred, loosening some of her locks from the tight bun she wore this morning, the 'do an attempt to quickly wrestle her wild hair into control. Chris had already left her when she awoke and she didn't want to be caught leaving his quarters alone.

"*Treeeessss...*" She rubbed the goose bumps on her arms the wind had produced. His lovemaking had been so intense last evening, yet so tender—and so filled with pain.

She knew too well the feeling. He needed her last night, needed the comfort she gave him.

"*Cuatrooooo...*" She shivered with a sick erotic desire. She hated him. She thrilled with the fact that he hurt, that she was the one to instill his pain.

Yet she had never experienced a touch that seared her soul with such love and passion as his.

Remembering the night, desire pierced her with rays of fire, pricking her skin and scathing her body. She swallowed, thinking she had lost her mind.

"*Cinnnnnncccccooooo.*" She pressed her thumbs against her temples to rid herself of the insane emotion. She was lonely, that was all. The love of the little girl Janie had shown her this. But her son, *her son*, she could not abandon the need to avenge him.

She quivered in disgust at the irony, the empty place she had inside her.

The wind blustered against her and she felt the heat of its power on her neck. Moisture pooled in her eyes. She brushed her arms again, sadness threatening to consume her.

"Why are you crying?" She heard the soft voice before she felt his touch on her bared arms.

She gasped and turned into Chris' arms. "You...you're here."

"Yes," he placed a soft peck on her lips.

Victoria heard Janie giggle from behind a bush.

Chris lifted a brow. "I see we're not alone."

Wiping the moisture from her face, she smiled for him. "No, we are not."

Janie peeked out but when Victoria glanced at her, she ducked behind the bush again and tittered like a bird. Victoria raised her brow. "We have a spy in our midst," she said pretending to lower her voice. Victoria gleaned a small measure of satisfaction when Chris flinched at her comment. Granted, the move was barely perceptible. Most would not have noticed. But she now knew him intimately and she used that knowledge as a barb to get to him—and as a reminder that he was her enemy.

"Where did you go this morning?" she batted her lids at him.

"I had some errands." He stroked his knuckles against her upper arms.

"I see." She fought the urge to lean into him. "Perhaps next time you could wake me before you abandon me?" She pretended to gaze at him with want and ran her finger down the buttons of his tan gardener's shirt.

The gray in his eyes deepened as if a storm brewed in them. "I'll remember that."

Behind the trees, Victoria heard a vehicle pull up. She glanced in that direction, hoping to dispel the sensual moment and almost gasped.

In the driveway sat the Triple J truck she had used to lure Ferguson and his team, hoping to blow them into oblivion. How did they find her?

"You okay?" Chris turned her face to him with the crook of his finger.

She pasted the smile on her face this time and studied him, needing to know if her ruse had been discovered. She nodded, hoping that indeed she was "okay".

The corners of his mouth rose, a sadness in them, a calling that echoed within Victoria's heart. "Good," he muttered. Bending to her, he grasped her lips with his and lingered for a moment then swerved and stalked off.

Victoria released a held breath and murmured a small prayer. He did not know. And he would not, she vowed, until the time of her revenge was at hand.

Mannie suddenly rushed onto the balcony, scattering her thoughts. "Victoria, bring Janelle to your room and keep her there." He swerved then looked back at her. "And keep her quiet."

"As you wish," Victoria nodded and glanced to where the girl had hidden, hoping Manuel wouldn't choose now to let the daughter go. She needed the nanny cover to stay close to Ferguson.

And to keep an eye on her supposed employer. She glanced at the balcony. Her new task was to find out how much Ramirez could be trusted and how much he knew about The Spider, if anything.

And to eliminate any loose ends if need be.

Her lips thinned as she pressed them together. The Spider's cover had become much too complex. The terrorist group had gleaned a lot through this association but, perhaps, the time had come for a change. Much was at stake.

Glancing at the bush, she waved Janie over.

"¿Si, mi segunda madre?" Janie's blue eyes widened.

Yes, my second mother. It was true. Janie felt like her own. Victoria ran her hand through the girl's dark locks. "Come, I will beat you to my room." The child took off giggling.

Victoria smiled at her back, knowing she would do almost anything to protect the sweet little one.

* * * * *

"Where is she?" Frantic, Elena had leaped out of the truck and run into the house.

Mannie grabbed her arm and stopped her in the foyer. "How did you find me?" His harsh voice irritated her as he glanced between her and Brodie.

"Good detective work." She poked his chest with each word with her free hand then yanked her arm out of his grip. "I'd call you a son of a bitch but your sweet mother doesn't deserve the slander." Her voice finally broke, hitched between sobs. She took in a steady breath to control her shakiness. "Dammit, Mannie, what have you done?" She hid her tears behind her hands.

Then felt Brodie's arms around her. He turned her into his chest.

"Let her go," Mannie threatened as he lowered his voice.

"I'm just comforting her." She heard Brodie's calm words rumble in his chest. "I don't think she'd let you do that. She's pretty pissed."

Mannie paused. "How did you find me?"

Brodie shrugged. "Elena's partner was a cop. He used some connections to tie the cell phone you gave me to this area. Don't ask me how 'cause I don't know."

"I see." Mannie lightly placed his palm on Elena's back then let it fall. "I'm glad you found her. I was worried."

"You should have been." Brodie spoke calmly but his tone sounded accusatory. Elena felt the anger vibrating through his body.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and looked at Mannie from the comfort of Brodie's embrace. He had turned his back and ran a hand through his hair.

"Why did you take Janie?" she asked.

"Why?" Mannie turned and gazed at her, a mix of loneliness and love in his eyes. "Because we should be together. All three of us."

She pulled away from Brodie, stronger now. "How can you expect that after you murdered Ty Baker? What were you thinking?"

He straightened, his brows pulled together in anger. "I didn't. I was framed."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"You must." He grabbed her upper arms and shook her once. Then swallowed when he saw she still didn't believe him. "Elena, I didn't. I swear by the Holy Mother." Brodie had stepped behind her. Mannie glanced at him and backed off.

"You had some involvement with him," she accused. "They placed you at the crime."

He nodded. "I was there. Business." He glared at her. "But I didn't kill him."

"Business..." she spat. "Drug business. Now you've drawn Janie into it. Your cronies kidnapped me. For what?"

Mannie shook his head. "They thought they were doing me a favor. I have convinced them that wasn't the case."

"Convinced them? About what? That I would stay with you because you have Janie?" Elena was appalled at Mannie's lack of judgment. "They were going to kill me at first. They blew up my truck!"

"What?" Mannie swerved on her. "This is the first I've heard of it."

"Your boss, The Mouthpiece told me. But then he was glad Carlos hadn't succeeded. Hector wanted to use me instead, for some other disgusting purpose that I didn't want to know. Dammit, Mannie, there's something deeper going on here. You must know that and have an idea of what it is. Hector and The Spider want something more. And they won't stop at me to get to you." She swallowed. "They'll go after Janie. Now take me to her. I want to get my daughter and get out of here as quickly as possible."

Mannie bowed his head for a moment then looked at her from under his eyebrows. "You won't be safe over the border. You need to trust me."

"Trust you?" She couldn't believe her ears.

He stepped to her and glanced between her and Brodie. "Yes, there *is* more to this. I will protect you but I can't do it over the border. I need you here until I can get us out." He glared at Brodie. "Did you find her or did The Mouthpiece let her go?"

"I found her."

Mannie's eyes narrowed. "Is Carlos alive?"

Brodie huffed with frustration. "Unfortunately." He paused. "You want to let us in on what's going on?"

Mannie paced for a moment then studied Elena and Brodie, his brows arching in a way that made Elena think a light had dawned. "Not here. This is Castellanos' place. We'll need to get out soon. I have a contact to help but I haven't been able to reach him. Everything else is ready." He stepped to Elena. "I'm not as bad as you think, believe me, but you're right. We're in trouble." He eyed Brodie. "All of us." He glanced at Elena then stared at Brodie. "I want them safe."

"Agreed." Brodie nodded.

Mannie studied Elena a minute. "Go down the hall to the right. Janie is in the nanny's room." He scowled at Brodie. "And I need to talk to our old *friend* a minute."

She placed her hand on Mannie's chest. "He's here to help. Just remember I want him here." She looked back at Brodie. The two men glared at each other, locked in a battle of wills. "No fighting."

Mannie grasped her hand and placed a light peck on the back of her fingers. "As you wish," he whispered. "Now, go. We have little time."

She sent Brodie a quelling look, hoping he'd get the message. They had no time for a macho standoff. Then she took off to find Janie.

Brodie watched her leave, watched Manuel's gaze follow her. Then Mannie turned back to him, hatred in the eyes that had moments ago shone with affection. "You son of a bitch. You did sleep with her. I told you hands-off."

Brodie raised a brow. "How would you know?"

"Dammit, she wouldn't have let you comfort her otherwise. She hates you."

"Maybe she got over that. Maybe she realized I wasn't the one she should be hating."

"You bastard." Mannie closed in on him. "What lies did you tell her this time?"

Brodie wanted to clock him, put a fist between those brooding eyes of his. "I don't tell lies. And I don't break a friend's trust." Brodie towered over Mannie, the ancient anger and regret surging in him. He'd lost Elena to this lying cheat.

But then his professionalism kicked in. They had a child to rescue. Taking a deep breath, Brodie let his ire abate. He could have taken Mannie easily but realized that wouldn't get him what he wanted—Elena and Janie out of this mess. Elena was right. Now was no time to settle their differences. "I think the important point is to get them to safety. What *have* you gotten them into anyway?"

Mannie backed off and turned away then glanced at a studio off the foyer. "Come." He bent his head toward the door. "Let's discuss this in here. The household doesn't need to know any more of my business."

Brodie entered the ornate room behind Mannie, wishing he had a weapon. Ferguson had taken the rifle. And anything else would have been found and confiscated when the guards frisked him at the gate. Still, he quickly studied the room, hoping to find something he could use, just in case.

"I can trust my security. I picked those men myself." He rounded a large desk that had been placed in the room to see out the door and the balcony at the same time.

Brodie took a stance across from him. "So who's this person who's going to get you out of this mess? I think you'd better contact him pronto."

Mannie shot him a sadistic gleam. "*Mi amigo*, don't you know? We work for the same employer."

Tension lanced through Brodie. Did Mannie know of Ferguson? And if so, what was Ferguson hiding from him and Elena?

"The US Government." Mannie snickered. "I've been filtering them information on the leadership of this cartel."

"Who specifically?"

Mannie shrugged. "I don't know – specifically. I only know I need to find out who The Spider is. Then my contact will get us out."

"And you don't know anything about this guy?"

"*Nada*. Nothing you don't know yourself. Hector is the key. Which is why I've been close to him. But I still don't know who the man behind him is, unless it's Hector himself."

"I doubt that," Brodie said. "From everything I've been told, The Mouthpiece likes attention and the power being a leader provides. Why would he hide his largest role from everyone?"

Mannie eyed him from under his brows. "I know. He says he gets his orders through other means and has never seen The Spider himself. I don't know if I believe that. Thing is I can't have him tailed without raising suspicion. And that I surely can't afford. Now things are more complicated. Hector assured me he'd only taken Elena because I've been too focused on her. He said The Spider thought my lack of attention was what caused the mix-up with Ty Baker but I know that wasn't the case. I don't make those kind of mistakes. Someone leaked."

Brodie tried to hide the skepticism he knew reflected in his face. "Who?"

Mannie shrugged and sat in the chair then picked up a pen and twirled it. "I don't know. It wouldn't be Carlos. He's already wanted for murder. He would have nothing to gain. But if I could find him, I could make him talk. He knows more than what I realized."

"If you didn't kill Ty Baker, then who did?"

Mannie pursed his lips. "Carlos. The man likes to kill."

"So I've heard." Brodie paused, studying his old friend and new enemy. "What was Ty to you?"

Mannie snickered. "I thought good soldiers didn't ask questions?"

"I don't work for you," Brodie said. "And a smart soldier will find out what he's up against."

Mannie snorted. "If you must know, he was my contact across the border. Cheap labor was important to him. He didn't care about the drugs brought across. But then he accused us of something else."

"What?" Brodie hoped he was getting somewhere. So far, Ferguson had told him nil, at least nothing he hadn't guessed himself.

Mannie studied the pen he fiddled with then tossed it on the desk and stared at Brodie. "Apparently other people besides migrant workers have made their way through, dangerous people." Mannie leaned forward. "I may have lost my way, my friend, but I am no traitor."

"Traitor?" Brodie stepped closer. "What have you done?"

Brodie stood close enough to see the regret and fear in Mannie's eyes as he swallowed. "The tunnels over the border. Terrorists have used them. They're associated with an Asian ring. I know more about the Asians than I do The Spider, but The Spider controls the operation here. Many are caught in the web the bastard has strung."

Brodie leaned on the desk. "Who else knows about this?"

Mannie shook his head and leaned back. "Only my CIA contact. A new guy. He had taken the place of another I worked with a few months ago who apparently wanted to retire."

"Or was forced to retire. The man could be dead." Brodie straightened as the new information slammed into him. Chris' partner had been killed a few months ago, dead from the same terrorist activities that Ferguson now pursued. "Hell."

Mannie leaned forward and rested an elbow on the desk, tense, his other in his lap, hidden from Brodie's view. "Is that why you came? Because of Baker?" He paused. "Did your father send you?"

The question raised Brodie's suspicions. "Besides getting Janie back, Elena was going after you for the reward the cattle association offered. I came along because she needed me."

"And because of your father. Don't lie. I know you too well." Mannie's eyes narrowed on him.

Brodie nodded. "And because he asked. Why?" The hackles on Brodie's neck rose.

"Your father paid me to lie to you."

Brodie pressed his lips together, the betrayal cutting him. "I know that now."

Mannie squinted. "Elena would never hurt me." His voice took on an edge. "She loves me more than you know."

Brodie tensed. "If you say so."

"I do." He stood, a pistol in the hand he'd hidden from him.

Brodie froze. "You think killing me will help?"

Mannie smirked. "No. Elena still thinks she's in love with you. I need to convince her that isn't the case, once and for all."

"You're obsessed with having her. You're going to get her and your daughter killed as well as yourself."

A muscle in Mannie's jaw flexed. "She's the only thing I've ever wanted. You ruined even that, damn you." He cocked the hammer.

"So killing me will help get her back?" Brodie tensed, positioning himself to pounce when the time came.

Mannie lifted his chin. "I won't kill you." His voice grew quiet. "I only want you gone."

"I can help, Mannie. You need an escape. Maybe I can get you and the family out of here."

Hope briefly drifted across Mannie's eyes then the arrogance of the drug lord returned. It was then Brodie realized his friend had lost some of his common sense. Maybe the effect was from the pressure of playing both sides of this game, maybe from the pain of losing Elena. Whatever it was, it had made him irrational. "Just go." The weapon shook almost imperceptibly in his hand. "Don't come back. You do and I'll kill you myself."

Brodie looked at him then at the pistol. "And just how many people have you killed?"

Mannie wiped his free hand briefly across his eyes. Brodie started to move but Mannie recovered too quickly. "Too many to count, my friend. Don't make me kill you too."

Brodie backed up. Both he and Elena had a homing device planted on them. Ferguson didn't want to lose them again. He had anticipated something like this would happen. The covert team would track their movements if need be but Brodie sure as hell didn't want to leave Elena and her daughter in a madman's hands. "Fine." He raised his hands and headed for the door, stopping at the entrance. "I still have that cell phone you gave me. If you need me, call. I'll come running."

Mannie snickered. "That won't be necessary but I appreciate the sentiment."

"One thing," Brodie's gaze narrowed, "if you don't know who The Spider is, how do you expect to get out? You said your government contact wouldn't help you otherwise."

Mannie snarled. "No, I don't know who my leader is. But I will today. The Mouthpiece is to set up the meeting. Finally."

"Why would he do that?"

Mannie glowered. "Because I promised to pay his price, but no matter," Mannie's sadistic grin made Brodie's skin prick, "word has it Hector's in trouble with The Spider, that The Mouthpiece has exposed him in some way. He will need me now to get him out of his difficulties."

"Except you won't."

Mannie tsked. "Yes, it's so sad."

Brodie turned and for the first time his father's words regarding Mannie slammed into him. *Take care. Mannie's no friend 'a yours anymore.*

Brodie stomped toward the door, pissed he couldn't get Mannie to let Elena and Janie go. But confronting the drug lord further would only make Mannie suspicious. Brodie cursed under his breath. Mannie's blind arrogance would get them killed yet.

He pressed his lips together, determined to see this through. The time had come for Plan B.

Until a scream wrenched the air.

Chapter Sixteen

"Elena," he muttered aloud and ran through the house toward the sound, reaching what must have been the nanny's room seconds before Mannie. A dark-haired woman lay crumpled on the ground. Legs from a broken chair lay strewn around the room as well as other signs of a struggle. He rushed to the woman's side and lifted her head.

Frightened, she stared at him.

"Where are Janie and her mother?" he asked in Spanish.

The woman blinked as she swallowed. "Gone," she croaked in broken English. "Taken. *La madre* try to..."

"Save your strength," Brodie said in Spanish then glared at the man standing behind him. "Damn you." He wanted to throttle Mannie and his idiocy but his old friend stood frozen in shock, the pistol dangling in his hand. He wouldn't be any help. Brodie pushed him aside and rushed through an open door in the hallway that led into the yard, hoping to catch the kidnappers.

A few men from Mannie's security scrambled behind him as Brodie ran to the driveway but Brodie suddenly realized Mannie's defense was undermanned. No one was at the gate.

Tires squealed on the street. Reaching the guard post at the entrance to the driveway, Brodie spied a white sedan speeding down the road.

Brodie had no way of chasing them. He ran back and found Mannie huddled over the *niñera*, interrogating her.

"How many were there? What did they say?" The lady tried to rise but the grip Mannie had on her prevented it.

Brodie stepped behind him. "So you beat up on helpless women these days?"

Mannie stopped, swerving to look at him. His eyes narrowed with rage.

Brodie took the pistol Mannie had dropped on the floor and stuffed it in the back of his pants before the drug lord could regain control.

Mannie dropped the poor woman and stood to confront him. "Leave me and mine alone, damn you. If it wasn't for your interference, none of this would have happened."

He lunged at Brodie but Brodie only grabbed him and shook him for good measure. "Get a grip, dammit. This is no time to go off half-cocked. We need to figure out who took your daughter and get her back." The crazed look in Mannie's eyes unnerved Brodie.

"I will get her back myself." He blinked a few times. Confusion set in his face.

Brodie had had it. "Dammit, Mannie, you don't have the upper hand here. There's more to this than what you're letting on and you know it. And your 'hand-picked' security let you down. There's no one at the gate." He grabbed a blanket and cleared the bed then picked the nanny up and laid her on top.

Mannie crumpled into one of the solid chairs and buried his head in his hands.

Another's shadow darkened the door. Suddenly Ferguson rushed inside, holding a rake and dressed in the gardener's garb. Brodie knew he'd be here somewhere but hadn't seen him in disguise.

"¿Qué sucedió?" *What happened?* Ferguson wore a veneer of worry on his face. Brodie had to give him credit. The agent was good.

"The child and her mother were kidnapped," he said in Spanish. "You know where most of the security force fled to?"

Chris shook his head. "No, but I found two dead men in the bushes," he replied in the same tongue. He walked toward Brodie, glancing at him before he knelt by the nanny. *Hector. We're following*, he mouthed so that only Brodie could see.

Chris' admission didn't comfort Brodie. His men had followed the last time and lost the tail.

But this time Elena had a bug on her. That was if it hadn't been discovered. He hoped she remembered to activate it.

"What am I going to do?" Mannie lamented, his face contorted.

Brodie glanced behind him. Mannie wrung his hands.

Chris looked back as well then eyed Brodie. *Meet me in fifteen*, Chris mouthed.

Brodie nodded. They had already set up a meeting location not far from here.

Then Chris turned to the nanny. Brodie thought the agent actually looked at her with more than a modicum of concern. "I'll take care of this woman," he said in Spanish. He brushed the hair from the nanny's face.

Brodie wondered how the lady fit into this.

Raising a brow, he took a hold of Mannie and dragged him out of the room and around the corner of the hallway. There was no time. He needed to know what his former friend held back. Grabbing his collar, he shoved him against the wall. "No more crap, Mannie. Time to get real. Why does The Mouthpiece want them? What does he want from you? Certainly he wouldn't take them just to get your cooperation?"

Mannie blinked and looked around confused. "The Mouthpiece?"

Brodie banged Mannie into the wall again for good measure. "Get a grip, dammit. You can't lose it now. We have to rescue Elena and your daughter."

A ray of sanity filtered back into Mannie's eyes. "Yes," he nodded, "Yes. We need to save them. Especially my daughter. She's the most important thing in my life."

Brodie took a deep breath as he let go.

His childhood friend steadied himself. After running a hand through his hair, Mannie looked away. "You always stood up for us, didn't you? I should have known I could never be the hero." He cut a glance to Brodie.

The thought struck Brodie that Mannie had wanted to be more like him and Brodie wondered why he never realized how jealous his friend was. "You can be, Mannie. Call Hector. Find out what he wants."

Mannie paused a moment, seemingly in thought then smirked. "I know what he wants. Hector is only a spokesman. He's never had the power or control, not really, not without the backing of The Spider. I told you. I'm supposed to meet with our leader. Hector took them to ensure I wouldn't say anything I shouldn't. Meeting with The Spider impinges on his power. He's afraid, and yes," he nodded, "probably to make sure I help him."

Brodie pressed his lips together, thinking there was something more. "You're guessing."

"Perhaps." He looked away, his rage abating. "And maybe I'm just hoping? Mannie's voice cracked. "He's been gawking at Janie. You know he's started a child porno business?"

Brodie nodded. "I know, which makes it more important that we get your daughter back pronto."

"My daughter..." Mannie huffed, a melancholy smile gracing his face, one that haunted Brodie. "You would like her," he whispered.

"I'm sure I would." He studied his former friend. The brief wish that things were different grabbed him. He shook his head to clear it. They needed to stay on task. If they were going to save anybody, he had to know what Mannie knew. "Who set up this meeting?"

"Well, Hector..." A light flashed in Mannie's eyes, indicating to Brodie that Mannie realized he'd put his trust in the wrong man. "So he probably lied."

"Call him," Brodie said. "Now."

Mannie nodded and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. Brodie could hear the ring from where he stood.

"Manuel," The Mouthpiece answered, speaking in English. "I know why you are calling. But all will be forgiven—in time."

"Forgiven?" Mannie's lowered voice seethed with venom, "I told you I would pay your price to speak to The Spider. What are you doing? I want back what is mine."

"Yours?" Brodie could hear the derision in The Mouthpiece's voice from where he stood. "Your wife belongs to another now, my friend. And your daughter, yes, I have found more about her, things you would not like others close to you to know. Your old friend, for example."

Mannie shot a quick glance at Brodie then turned away to concentrate on the conversation.

"But even though they do not belong to you, you still want them back, don't you?" The Mouthpiece continued.

"Yes." Mannie swallowed. "Hector, you said there was no problem. What difference is there for me to have my child and her mother?"

Hector tsked. "You took your *esposa* without permission so now I take more. Did you really think your actions would go unpunished? You must pay my price. No one crosses me." Hector's harsh laugh grated on Brodie's nerves. Mannie began to sweat.

"This thirst for your ex-wife has corrupted you," The Mouthpiece said. "Manuel, I put myself out for you, I covered your recent mistake. You did not trust me, yes? And now, I find there is more you are hiding. The Spider knows this. He is not happy. You have not been honest with me. Or with The Spider. It makes me look bad in front of my superior. I told The Spider how trustworthy you were. And here, you prove me wrong. You must pay for that too."

A nervous tick played in Mannie's jaw. "When have I ever betrayed you, *jefe*?"

"Look to your gardener my friend. Bring him to me. You will have your chance to come clean with The Spider, tell him what you know. He will be here, waiting for you."

"He has agreed to meet with me then?"

"Oh, *si*, my friend." The Mouthpiece lowered his voice. "He is looking forward to it."

"But?"

Castellanos hung up before Mannie could finish. He lowered his phone and studied Brodie. "Okay, hero. Now what?"

"Where is she?"

"Hector's place, not far from here," Mannie said. "His home is a virtual fortress. It would take a small army to penetrate it. 'Palace Castellanos' he calls it."

"And Elena and your daughter are there?"

Mannie nodded. "Probably. That's what he indicated. My men know how outgunned they are there. They would protect me here but none of them will go openly against that."

Brodie understood. His men were only for hire. Why take a sure risk of death for a quest where they had no stake?

Mannie glanced around. "Where are my men?"

"The gardener found two dead in the bushes," Brodie said.

"The mole?"

Brodie pressed his lips together and shrugged, not wanting to let on that he knew about Chris. "My guess is that others either ran off or were working with The Mouthpiece in the first place."

Mannie's hand shook as he ran his fingers through his hair. "How could I have misjudged so badly?"

"Maybe you wanted everything to work out so much you didn't really think through the consequences." Brodie paused, debating whether to assuage his friend's angst. "I want you to stay here. Gather up the weapons you have, figure out who you can trust. I'll be back as soon as I can." Brodie swerved to leave.

Mannie grabbed him by the arm. "And just where are you going? We don't have much time."

"You'll have to trust me." He broke Mannie's hold.

"Fine," Mannie huffed. "Then I'll get the gardener. Hector obviously knows something I don't. But I tell you what," his lids narrowed, "if I've been betrayed by this man, I'll kill him myself—as well as any other who crosses me."

"At this point, I'm not sure I'd care." Brodie swerved and stomped out, not wanting to deal with Mannie's threat and his instability, wanting to throttle him for being so stupid, wanting to pound Ferguson for using Elena and her daughter in his scheme. The agent played games with all of them.

He glanced at his watch as he rushed from the house and jogged down the stairs. Ferguson's fifteen minutes were almost up. When Brodie found him, he'd better have a plan to rescue Elena and her daughter.

* * * * *

From where she had sat on the edge of the small bed, Victoria had heard the conversation between the drug lord and his friend-turned-enemy in the hallway, heard Mannie calling for the guards before he rushed into her room.

"Where did the gardener go?" her employer asked.

She wore a mask, one of wide-eyed innocence. "I do not know. He left a few minutes ago."

One of the security men ran up behind Mannie. He ordered him to search the premises then turned again to her. "If he comes back, stall him. I need that man."

"*Si, señor.*" She nodded primly. Then Ramirez ran out.

She grimaced. This act was unexpected. Hector Castellanos had made an unwarranted turn. He was *not* told to do this! He wouldn't catch Ferguson with his meager bait.

She scowled. The drug boss had no heart. He would not care that a mother and child could be hurt in his scheming. Besides, the agent was hers to kill. She seethed with fury. The game had promised to be more subtle, more underground. Less open. Hector was to lure Manuel, confirm what he had told the agency, let Ferguson follow him, let her complete her number one mission, to destroy Ferguson and his cronies. Then perhaps they could continue to use Manuel's talent. They still had so much to do, more people and supplies to take over the border.

Now the little girl was in danger from Hector.

Victoria shook her head. Castellanos' rogue move threatened to expose all of them. And to bring innocents into this, give them information they should not know?

They would need to massacre everyone to keep them quiet.

She ground her teeth. She knew The Mouthpiece's ego would be The Spider's weakness. Now Hector was intent on punishing Manuel for taking Elena back, and he wanted a reason to use Elena and Janie for his perverted purposes.

Angry, she rose. There was only one thing to do. She knew those above her in the loosely knit *al-Quaida* community would agree. They had given her carte blanche on this mission.

Wrapping her shawl around her, she went to retrieve her things. Perhaps an army of guards could not penetrate the Castellanos palace but certainly, one small woman could.

* * * * *

Elena hugged Janie to her side, the child's bright blue eyes peering into hers, asking if they'd be all right. The steel gate to the large mansion opened and the sedan drove through. *Castellanos' place*. It must be, Elena thought. As soon as they were through, Elena saw Hector come down the steps. They drove to the front entrance and stopped. The armed men from the vehicle ushered her and Janie out.

Elena stood at the foot of the stairs, Janie pressed against her hip.

"Ah, welcome to my home." The Mouthpiece approached.

"That's Papa's friend, Mama," Janie whispered up to her.

"Yes I am, little one." He brushed the curls from her face.

"What do you want from us?" Elena asked.

Hector shrugged. "To keep you safe, of course. Manuel is deep in trouble, I fear. Oh, and I am so sorry, *Senora* Ramirez. I did not want Carlos to take such advantage and treat you so badly. Perhaps I had not mentioned that before?" He fingered the bruise she still had on her head. "Then your friend, was that your lover? Well, he came and found you. How lucky for you. But I wonder how he found you?"

"I wouldn't know." She gripped Janie.

The Mouthpiece smirked, not believing what she said. Then he lifted his arms and looked around. "Ah, but what a nice day we have. Why are we standing here? Come, *pequeña*, I will see you cared for. I must speak to your mother." He brushed his knuckles against her cheek. "Such pretty blue eyes."

Janelle flinched. Elena pushed his hand away. "Please do not touch her."

Somehow, The Mouthpiece smiled and sneered at the same time. "For now, I will allow you to address me as such." He stepped closer. "But soon, I think you will welcome my words," he leaned and whispered in her ear, "and my touch."

He straightened and snapped his fingers. "Take the child to her room. I must speak to the mother."

"Wait." Elena moved to stop them but one of the men grabbed her.

"Mama," Janie cried as another pulled her daughter away.

"It will be all right, *Senora Ramirez*, for now."

Elena studied Hector. She closed her eyes and said a short prayer, hoping Brodie would find them in time.

Then she nodded. "Go with him, Janie. I will be with you shortly."

The child pressed her lips together and left quietly with the man.

Hector waved away the guard who held Elena and came to stand next to her. "Come, *querida*," he whispered in her ear and grasped her arm, "we must speak. I want you to know what your husband has been up to."

She gulped. "Mannie isn't my husband."

Hector leered. "Yes, I know. But he still thinks he is."

With that, The Mouthpiece led her into his lair.

* * * * *

"They're at Castellanos'."

"I know where they are, dammit," Brodie growled at Ferguson. He stood hunched over in the company van a half a block down from Mannie's temporary place. "The point is how we're going to get them out. Mannie says the place is impervious. And you," he pointed to Ferguson, "somehow Hector knows about you. He told Mannie just now."

"What?" Ferguson's brows narrowed. "I can't believe —"

His gaze took on a faraway haze then a light dawned in his eyes. "Fuck." He paled. Anger seemed to vibrate on his skin but whatever his revelation, he kept the thought to himself. He scoffed then straightened as best he could, staring at Brodie. "Well, that changes things, doesn't it?" He plopped on top of a metal storage box. "We couldn't pick up the transmission. What exactly did he say?"

Brodie took a seat on a built-in bench next to some of the monitoring equipment used to track Elena's location. *She has turned the beeper on.* Good. He made note of the address that popped up and worked to keep his composure. Still, he snarled for good measure at Ferguson. "To paraphrase, something about Mannie was hiding something more, something deeper and Hector told Mannie to look to his gardener."

"Damn." Chris leaned against the side. Brodie could see the wheels churning in his brain. Then his lips thinned. "Fuck." He sat up and glared at Brodie. "Is that it?"

Brodie nodded. "Well, that and the fact The Spider would be there—at least, that's what The Mouthpiece said."

Animated, Chris bolted toward Brodie like a snake attacking its prey, stopping just short of his face. "The Spider would be at Castellanos'?"

"Yeah." Brodie studied the tension and excitement in the other man's face.

Chris leaned back and grinned. Crossing his arms, he appeared to review the blips on the screen next to Brodie.

"What are you thinking, boss?" one of his men queried.

"It'll be risky but we don't have a choice."

The deadly gleam in Chris' eyes irritated Brodie. Brodie bent forward, peering at the agent in a way to let him know Brodie meant business. "Why don't you let the rest of us in on it?"

Chris looked at Brodie. "You're the weapon's sergeant, right?"

Brodie shrugged. "Yeah."

"And you've led the team a few times I know."

Brodie nodded. "Roger."

"Good." Chris slapped his knee. "I'm putting my life in your hands."

"What are you talking about? I'm going in with you."

"No." Chris leaned over and rested his elbows on his knees. "You need to cover me. We'll put you in the van nearby. We already have the area set up as part of the contingency plan. And we have everything you could know about The Mouthpiece. If The Spider shows, I'll get him. If I can get the girls out, I will. If not, you and the rest of the team will have to accomplish the task. Castellanos is aware of me. I have to go. It'll be my passport inside, as well as Ramirez's. Besides, your old friend wants to be the hero."

Brodie arched his brows. "How did you know? About Mannie I mean, being a hero?"

Chris snorted. "I've been studying him a long time. Besides, I heard that part of the conversation when I left."

Brodie's relaxed posture didn't reveal the inner turmoil he felt. He leaned against the van. "You're his CIA contact and he doesn't even know it, aren't you? You've been spying on him this whole time. And here he thought you were located in some detached place."

Ferguson snickered. "He needed to be kept off guard. As you can imagine, I couldn't trust him, especially now. He's gotten too unstable."

"I'd bet odds you had a hand in that. Just like I bet you had a hand in replacing the agent who'd been his contact before."

Ferguson's face went blank, except for the pain reflected in his eyes. "Mike."

"Harrison?" Brodie raised a brow. "Your partner?"

"Yeah. It's how we got the information for the job in Panama. It's how I knew somewhere there was a leak. The botched Panama job was a setup. The fucked

operation got Mike killed." He snarled. "I won't let that happen again." He sat up, a vicious look on his face. "Besides, as you know, I like field work."

Brodie's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, but Mannie's unreliable because of you. The pressure you put on him made him crack. He isn't thinking straight."

Ferguson shrugged. "Can't help that. We all have a job to do. He's just a damn drug dealer, a tool. You, of all people, shouldn't feel so sorry for him."

Brodie controlled the urge to beat the man to a pulp. "Is that all human beings are to you? Tools to be used for your revenge?"

Ferguson donned his poker face. "You and I have an obligation to protect the American people. Using Ramirez allowed me to do that. I make no apologies."

Brodie swallowed before the bile that threatened to come up his throat got the better of him. "We do our jobs in different ways, Ferguson. I happen to like the way I do mine better."

"Really?" Chris leaned forward and chuckled with a nasty glint in his eye. "I don't know why you're being so kind. He screwed you big-time years back, didn't he?"

Brodie nodded and wondered what else the agent had found out. "Yeah, but the time comes to let some things go." Brodie had learned that the hard way.

Ferguson snorted. "Is that right?" He sat back, enjoying whatever private joke he had. He smirked at Brodie. "Now that you've made amends with Mrs. Ramirez, did she tell you about her daughter?"

Brodie arched his brows. "What is there to tell? She and Mannie had a kid. I don't care. We'll deal with it."

Chris slid his tongue over his teeth, sucking through them as if he'd just devoured a choice piece of meat. He nodded and leaned forward, "Oh, yeah?" He studied Brodie's face. "I tell you what, when you find out how deeply screwed you were then come talk to me. But for now, I don't need your damn lectures." His lips thinned as he stood. "Sean," he barked to the agent who'd asked him the question earlier. "Get the setup. Now. We'll amend plan Echo. This time, though, I'm going in with Ramirez. Brief our friend here." He pointed to Brodie. "He'll be controlling the action from his point of view." He glared at Brodie. "I'm putting you in charge, Sergeant, letting you make the calls once I'm inside. Just remember this is a mission. It isn't personal. You think you can handle that?"

Brodie nodded, his suspicions roused. "Yeah, it's my job, but why me?"

Chris smirked. "'Cause I need the rest of the men in their assigned positions and you've run enough successful missions I'd feel comfortable with you at the helm. Besides," he checked the equipment he had on him, deadly toys that Brodie had never seen before that wouldn't be detected with a normal search, "you have a lot at stake in this and you'll have the best view. We'll see how well you do," he snickered. "Sean will brief you on everyone's position. Learn fast. I'm putting the safety of your girlfriend and her daughter in your hands."

After testing his bug, a mini chip placed in his ear, Chris swerved then looked back at Brodie before he hopped from the van. "You coming? We have to get Ramirez on board first."

"Yeah." Brodie nodded then watched the agent's back as he stomped away. *When you find out how deeply screwed you were, then come talk to me.* He jumped out and caught up with him, wondering what the hell Ferguson meant.

* * * * *

Elena worked to steady her breathing and squash the fear that threatened to envelop her.

"He is working with the CIA, you know." Hector leaned his elbow on the mantel of the fireplace in the large room, sipping a tumbler of Scotch. "Are you sure you do not want a drink?"

Elena shook her head and swallowed, hoping her body language didn't hint to what she did know. "No, thank you."

He smirked as he approached, sitting on the couch next to her. "You do not like me?" He brushed her cheek.

"You are holding my daughter and me captive. Is there a reason I should?"

He leaned against the cushions. "I could make things comfortable for you, if you let me. But I need your help. Manuel will do anything to get you back. I have seen this."

"He's obsessed. I'll never go back to him."

"I know." He raised a dark brow. "You would rather have this other man, the father of your child. That man would don you with riches, is not that what you think?"

Elena couldn't hide her shock. "How...how did you know?"

"Medical records speak volumes, my dear." He brushed her cheek again. "With a few well-placed dollars, it doesn't take much."

"But?" She was sure confusion etched itself on her face. "Does Mannie know?"

Hector pursed his fat lips. "I doubt that. He trusts you. Completely." He slid an arm around her shoulders. "Which is why I need your help. He will tell me what I need if I promise to keep you from harm. But you must convince him."

"How?" Elena struggled to inhale as she felt disaster close in around her. No one else could get her and Janie out of this. She had only herself. "What is it you want me to do?"

His thick lips curled upward. "Manuel will be coming. He will bring the gardener with him, a man who is a spy. Manuel may or may not know this, but between the two, I need to find out who this man's boss is and what they know. It is important to the safety of..." he smiled, "my leader." He brushed the back of his knuckles against her temple. "Of course, you may never leave me. If you do, I will have to kill you as well."

He shrugged. "Then your daughter will be all alone." He bent his head to within inches of hers, his eyes upon her lips. "You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"No," she whispered against him and backed away as far as she could.

"I thought not." He lifted a corner of his mouth and rose. "So you will cooperate."

Did she have a choice? "What do you want me to do?"

"When he comes, you will be in the courtyard with your daughter, seated in play. Manuel will see how happy you are." He grabbed her and pulled her into him, holding her arms locked behind her back as he forced a drooling kiss on her lips.

Just as quickly, he released her and pushed her against the cushions. She stared at him, repulsed, afraid to say anything, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

He simpered. "You will come to appreciate my touch, *querida*."

She cringed inwardly at the prospect as uneven footsteps echoed through the door.

Hector glanced up. "Well..." He clamped onto her head and pulled her to his tepid lips once again, this time with a quick peck. "There is no time for play. Apparently your *esposo* is on his way." He lifted an arm toward the door. "You remember Carlos?"

The killer hobbled into the room, still injured, she surmised, from the damage Brodie inflicted upon him. Elena swallowed. "Yes."

Hector wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "He is my friend. He will take good care of you. Go with him and don't give him any trouble. I would hate for him to need to hurt you. Besides," Hector cocked his head, ogling her body as he brushed a lock from her face, "I think he likes you." He tsked. "So many men in lust for you. How do you manage?"

Elena wanted to protest at the absurdity but she dare not.

Carlos pulled a Beretta on her, waving it to indicate that she get up. "Come, *Señora*. As *Señor* Castellanos said, please do not give me any more trouble. I have had enough problems from you."

She nodded, afraid, wondering what Hector had in mind, knowing there was nothing for her to do but wait, praying Mannie or Brodie or even Ferguson could get them out of this mess.

She rose and passed Carlos as she headed for the door. Then she felt the cool steel of the barrel jammed into the small of her back. She stopped, hearing him spin on the ceramic tile of the floor. She gasped as he yanked her to him, her back to his chest, his hand a vise against her breast. "As I said, no games, *Señora*," he whispered, his fetid breath on her neck. "I will not warn you again."

Her breath hitched. Fear quivered over her skin. He chuckled in her ear as he felt the desired result.

He pitched her forward but she steadied herself before she fell.

As they left, The Mouthpiece's malevolent laugh rebounded against the walls.

* * * * *

Ferguson's team had placed cameras around the perimeter of Hector's compound and varying scenes played on each of the screens the men in the team monitored within the van. Brodie glanced away from one of them showing a side entrance for the servants and studied the floor plan again. That site might be a possible entry for them, should the need arise. Brodie grimaced. The Mouthpiece's home was essentially a large square, the center an open courtyard that provided privacy from outsiders. A hotwired wrought iron fence surrounded the area, a wide swatch of grass between the fence and the home. Security cameras covered every blade, every fence post and entrance and, unlike Mannie, The Mouthpiece's protective force was well paid and well trained. In fact, his personal bodyguards were ex-Mexican federal officers, ones who'd had special instruction from facilities in the United States, ones, who as his father had said, had gone rogue. From all accounts, the men were as loyal as they came. Still, that loyalty had its price and Brodie was sure Castellanos paid for it big-time.

Mannie's limo pulled up to the gate and, after a few moments, the vehicle drove in. Brodie watched the monitor as Mannie pushed a handcuffed Ferguson out of the car and into Castellanos' large home. It was a ruse, of course, Mannie acting like he was in charge. Part of the plan was to have Chris in cuffs but these weren't just any cuffs, they were actually a combination of a few tools. However, if the cuffs were tested they would appear solid. When needed, Chris could free himself easily.

Brodie huffed. In other circumstances, the toys these guys had would have impressed him but today all he cared about was that the equipment worked well enough to get Elena and the child out.

He listened on his headset. Ferguson had gone in subservient, his head bowed in submission. Now he played his part to the hilt.

Of course, the agent still held all the cards. Mannie wouldn't get out of this without him. Neither would Elena or Janie, and Mannie knew it. But there was one thing Brodie had come to learn that impressed him above all else—his former friend and drug thug loved his daughter, even more than Elena, and would do anything to save her. He'd said as much already, repeating it when he and Ferguson had gone to get him.

Brodie stretched his neck, trying to relax, letting the scene replay itself in his head. They had surprised Mannie. Ferguson had showed up armed, briefed the drug lord with enough information to let him know that the US government still had the upper hand. Of course, Mannie had been shocked to know Brodie and Elena were trapped in the intrigue, virtually Ferguson's pawns. Brodie wanted to shake Mannie. The man still lived in denial.

But he cooperated, realizing the plan was his only way out.

"Manuel, my friend." Brodie heard The Mouthpiece greet them and watched the scene on the monitor, a view provided by a hidden camera planted in the button of Ferguson's breast pocket.

Mannie pulled Ferguson into the room. "I brought the gardener as you said. Is this the man you wanted?"

Castellanos picked up a picture from the coffee table in the room and glanced at it. Lifting a brow, he snickered. "It appears you have done well."

Mannie nodded. "I have done my best. Now it is your turn. You promised I would meet with The Spider. I must clear up this misunderstanding you and he have, whatever it is, and get my daughter and wife back. Your accusations wound me deeply."

Brodie could tell from the look on Hector's face that he didn't believe a word. "As you say," The Mouthpiece nodded. "But perhaps you would like to see your loved ones before we start?" He pulled his white blazer open and shoved his hands in his pockets. "And perhaps our *gardener* here would appreciate seeing the grounds?"

Mannie must have agreed as Hector led them out of the room. The camera jostled as Chris walked.

"They're headed to the courtyard," Sean, Chris' lead man, stated.

"I see them," Brodie replied, irritated for some reason with the statement of the obvious.

The group entered the closed-in area in what looked like a large expanse of sculpted bushes and manicured flowerbeds surrounded by the walls of the house. Sunshine filled the open space in contrast to the grim business underway. In the distance, two blurry figures sat on a bench in a bricked patio area in the middle of the foliage.

As Chris made his approach, the outlines of the pair cleared and Brodie could see Elena and a dark-haired girl, her head bowed, sitting next to her mother, both with their hands fixed behind their backs.

"Ah, here they are, playing," The Mouthpiece's voice sounded over the speaker in the van. The group stopped, but from the camera, it looked like Mannie tried to go to them. Hector held him back. "I would not go so far yet. We need to talk." Slime reeked from the man's words.

Mannie growled. "You promised me an audience with The Spider. Where is he?"

Hector hissed. "You fool. I have never met The Spider face-to-face myself. And you expected to do so?" The putrid laugh came from his bowels.

Brodie watched Mannie's face pale. The camera shook. "Fuck," Brodie cursed out loud. "Change of plans. Let's get the extraction in progress. Women first." Brodie focused on the captives. "Can you get a close-up view?"

The camera narrowed in. Then Elena's little girl turned as if to stare right into the lens.

"Oh, my God," Brodie mumbled and stared at the screen. *Janie's eyes, his mother's.* His own. "I have a daughter." He shook with fear and anger, knowing what Ferguson had raved about. God, why hadn't Elena told him? The knowledge pierced his heart.

But there was no time for his pain. *Janie needed him.* Brodie swallowed. He had to think. Get his emotions under control. In order to save them, he had to be the soldier he had trained to be.

Gripping the fear within, he studied the screen. The information he gathered quickly assimilated in his brain. He looked at the monitor, this time with forced impassion. He assumed The Mouthpiece had tied them together, and hammered down the anger welling within him at the abuse. *This is a mission.* He had to remember that. He couldn't afford to let his emotions screw this up. Elena and Janie needed him.

He studied Elena and his daughter again, this time with calculated purpose. Their posture was stiff, as if a ramrod held them in place. "Can you adjust one of the exterior cameras to get a rear view of the women?" he asked as he tossed his Stetson and quickly suited up in body armor. He knew what he would do.

Sean nodded. "We'll try." He pointed to another tech who fiddled with the keyboard that controlled one of the cameras in a taller building across from Castellanos' palace. "Here," the tech said after a minute, pointing to the screen.

The view was too long. "Zero in on their backs, will you?"

The guy nodded and typed in a few strokes.

The view in the camera lens narrowed. Castellanos' men had strapped a small box behind the women. Brodie didn't need to see inside the container to know what it held.

"Explosive," Sean muttered behind him.

Cold dread rolled in waves inside Brodie. *Keep control.* He gritted his teeth. "Figure out what kind. Now," he ordered the tech. "You tell me how to disarm it when I get inside." *Time for action,* Brodie thought. He'd had enough of this bullshit of sitting around.

"You're going in? But you're supposed to be in charge."

Sean looked like he'd try to stop him until Brodie towered over him. "You've got the helm here," he told the agent. "I'll send instructions as needed when I get in."

"You're going alone?"

"Too many would only bring the enemies' attention. I've done it before. If I screw up, or if Ferguson makes his move, send in everyone else."

Sean nodded as Brodie grabbed a modified M-4 rifle. "Inform Ferguson if you can safely and study the area around the women. Document any barriers and radio me with the data. And have the men ready to move on my signal." He checked his headset. "I don't want to lose those two."

The agent nodded again and ordered the techs to their respective tasks then turned to monitor the hidden radio Ferguson had. Ferguson was too close to the others to get a message undetected. The tech would have to find the right time, if there was one.

Anxious, Brodie glanced at the other monitors, studying the one where he thought he'd have the best chance of breaking through. It was the nearest to the middle of the courtyard. If he could get through the building, he'd have them. Mentally, he went

through the list of men they had deployed. Three agents were undercover outside each of the entrances and Ferguson had posted two snipers on nearby buildings, one on each side of the mansion, poised to terminate The Spider. Ferguson wasn't taking chances. He wanted to get the terrorist operative bad and was willing to put his life on the line to do it. The team in the van was to give them their target but things had changed.

"From what I can tell, the explosive is remote-controlled," the tech analyzing the bomb interjected.

"That doesn't surprise me," Brodie snorted. Besides, he had another idea in mind for the hidden shooters. "Tell the snipers to look for the man with the controls," he told Sean. "Listen carefully to the conversation. If it sounds like they're going to initiate the explosion, take the triggerman down. Protect the women at all costs. They don't need to be the price of this bullshit."

Vaguely, his mind listened to The Mouthpiece's interrogation, ruminating briefly on the monitor, his mind quickly calculating his moves. From nowhere, a cloaked figure appeared on one of the screens. "Zoom in," he ordered the tech monitoring it. The lens narrowed and Brodie watched the hidden figure approach the small gate. The person waved the guard over with an effeminate hand. The guard smiled but shook his head, refusing the figure entrance.

When the security man waved the person off and turned, Brodie saw the flash of a stiletto in the sunlight. The killer grabbed the guard by the hair, deftly slicing into his neck.

The man crumpled without a sound against the iron railing. Before he hit the ground, the killer had the gate open and stepped over the body.

"Who's that?" he demanded of the tech.

The man shrugged. "I have no idea."

Brodie rushed out of the van, keeping to the shade of their hidden location. Something about the figure seemed familiar.

Regardless, he had an opening, a leak in The Mouthpiece's stalwart defenses.

There was no way he'd let the opportunity pass.

Quietly he approached the gate. Quickly scanning the area, he entered with his rifle at the ready, his guard up for known enemies – and for those unknown.

Chapter Seventeen

Hector extracted his hand from the pocket of his suit coat. A trigger jiggled in his palm. "An explosive is attached to the ladies. I can control the firing of it with this. Carlos set the bomb up for me. He says the corrosive will only disintegrate the two of them, melt them more than blow them up, so it will only bother my brick, perhaps? He said something about aluminum powder and rust. Very simple ingredients but together." He sucked the air through his teeth. "I understand the process is very painful. It eats away at the skin 'til there is no more of the powder." He nodded at the armed killer who had come into the area from the opposite direction. "Nice, huh?"

Sweat beaded in Manuel's armpits as he looked in horror at Elena and his daughter. "What do you want?"

The Mouthpiece chuckled. "They are your weakness, my friend. I knew you would cooperate."

Mannie had few options. "Let them go and I'll talk. I'll tell you whatever you want."

Hector shook his head and stood off to the side in front of him, giving him the full effect of seeing Elena and Janie bound to the deadly box. "You will talk first. My superior is not a patient person. He has been looking for a leak in the company. I think he will be pleased when he sees that I have it. Now," he raised his hands in mock sympathy, "you know I do not like violence. I would not want to do this, especially to such beautiful ones. You must tell me the truth." He pointed to the man Ferguson, the CIA contact Mannie hadn't known he'd had working for him. "Starting with this man."

Mannie cut a glance to the agent. Another of the guards had dragged him out and now held him. The agent only stared at Mannie, a subtle warning in the look of his hard gray eyes. Mannie blinked as he tried to view the area without detection. Brodie was out there somewhere. The question was would he get there in time—or was his best chance with The Mouthpiece?

"I didn't know he was a mole." Mannie needed to be careful. He let his voice shake to impress Hector. The Mouthpiece fed on subservience and fear. "He must have been the one to steal the compromised information." Mannie tried to stall.

"You did not know but yet you communicated with someone who was not our friend."

Mannie tried to determine whether The Mouthpiece just fished or whether he knew for real. The man was a sneaky bastard.

He glanced for a moment at the detonator in Hector's hand. "Is that what Carlos told you?" He growled and gritted his teeth trying to hold his emotions in check,

allowing his anger to show over Carlos and his betrayal, keeping control over the image he wanted to portray to Hector. His performance was the only weapon he had. And if he went down, he'd make sure Carlos did as well.

"Carlos?" Hector lifted a sculpted brow. "Why would you think he was the one to tell me?"

The Mouthpiece was a suspicious man. Mannie grabbed onto the only opportunity he could find. "Because he was the single person I trusted, the only other person who knew of our plans. Did I not tell you he was the one who killed the cattleman Ty Baker? Thinking on it, he was the one who set up the meeting with the head of the ranchers as well." Mannie glared at Carlos for effect. "And a few months ago, you had gotten out of jail in that backwater town outside of Laredo for lack of evidence. Murder brings a death sentence in Texas, especially for the likes of someone with your reputation. I remember this..." He drew out his words, playing into Hector's obvious doubt. Truth was Mannie's CIA connection had freed the killer, Mannie telling the unknown contact that Carlos was key to finding The Spider. Of course, at the time, Mannie thought Carlos was the only one he could trust.

Little did he know the man would backstab him.

Hector's gaze rested on the killer, studying him, his keen mind churning the scant facts. "Carlos, my friend, it is true you were released to us. We were all surprised."

Carlos backed away. "No, *Jefe*," he spoke to The Mouthpiece, waving his hands in front of him then pointing an accusing finger at Mannie. "He is lying. Trying to get out of this."

Mannie wore a sneer of his own, playing into Carlos' reaction.

"Perhaps." Hector eyes narrowed. "But then, maybe not." He snapped his fingers at the guards. "Take him. We have no time for this."

"No!" The killer struggled with the two larger men who grabbed him. He broke the guards' hold and slid in front of Hector on his knees, begging. "Do not do this, *Jefe*. I have pledged my allegiance to you."

"As you did with me?" Mannie raised his voice and shook with mock fury. Carlos had never been a smart man. Hector would only see his action as weakness and a sign that Carlos' loyalty had already been compromised. With Mannie's comment, he reminded Hector how easily the killer's allegiance was purchased.

The Mouthpiece raised his arms and stepped back from Carlos as if dropping a filthy rag he'd mistakenly picked up. A sick satisfaction adorned Hector's face, from the deadly glint in his eye to the snarl in his lips. "Oh, Carlos, you see the man does have a point. And after thinking on this, why would he risk bringing his daughter and..." he seemed to snort and huff at the same time, "his wife to be with him when he thought them in danger by doing so? By coming here, he has shown he treasures them above his own life." He shook his head. "No, I think you have not told us everything."

"But I only followed his orders," Carlos yelled.

The Mouthpiece glanced at the guards. "Hold him."

"What?" Carlos jumped up, seething with fury, but before he could flee, the two guards had latched onto him, another putting a pistol to his head. Mannie had never seen the killer shake so badly. Watching him gave Mannie a sick satisfaction, knowing Carlos had never had remorse for anyone he'd murdered.

Hector studied Mannie a moment, pondering, then stepped to the agent and glared into his face. "Perhaps this man can tell us the truth? I would hate to lose such good men for no reason. They are talented, Manuel, at covering our tracks and Carlos at..." he shrugged, "well, taking care of the unwanted. I could still use their abilities."

For all intents and purposes, Mannie didn't know what kind of man Ferguson was. He grew cold as he watched the taller man, wondering what the agent would say, praying he would not give up any vital information about Mannie's spying on The Spider to save his skin. His family's life depended on it.

The men talked. Elena's mind reeled. The strong scent of hyacinth wafted around her as she scanned the balconies of the mansion, thinking of a way out of this. Between the cloying odor and their predicament, she wanted to retch. She closed her eyes a moment and prayed, afraid for her daughter, proud of the way Janie had stood up to the killer when he had her dragged to the box. She glanced at Janie. Her daughter looked up at her, her blue eyes, Brodie's eyes, piercing Elena's hard core.

How could she have let this happen? Why didn't she suspect that Mannie would someday do something this foolish? A tear welled in her eye. She turned her head so that Janie wouldn't see the salty drop fall. When she looked up, a movement caught her eye from a second story window. She stared again, unable to see who the shadow was. But inside, something told her that the answer to her prayer had arrived.

Brodie had finally come.

Chris cut a brief look at The Mouthpiece, pissed that he'd let himself be so easily duped. He should have known better. He realized too late his thirst for revenge ate at him and made him reckless.

Keeping with the mode of his disguise, he slowly reared his battered head, a beating he took to make Ramirez look good. Chris was several inches taller than the drug kingpin, but he hunched over, wanting to look conquered, like he couldn't fight back, whether he wanted to or not. The enemy had to believe his ruse, because when the time came, Chris would need every advantage, including the fine-honed edge of surprise.

"Will you talk? Or will I have to have your tongue cut out?" The Mouthpiece leaned into him, a threatening gesture made with the intent of making Chris feel small.

Chris grunted and wondered where his personal bodyguards were. Of course, this was his home. Perhaps, here, he felt confident. "You're a big man to threaten women and children." He kept his voice lowered but let his look bore into the drug lord, enough to say that Chris may be defeated but he wouldn't grovel.

Hector slapped him with an open hand across his cheek, the loud crack echoing against the walls of the atrium.

Ferguson's head snapped to the side, pain shot up his neck. Slowly, he lifted his jaw again and leered at the drug lord, satisfied with his performance. Chris needed to show *some* spunk. He didn't want Hector to suspect he could rear back and nail him but the man wouldn't have believed him if he was too compliant.

The Mouthpiece lifted a corner of his mouth, smirking. "They would not be here if it wasn't for your kind. They would be happy," he waved an open arm toward Mannie, dramatic as ever, "and with the rest of their family. But you have complicated things." He stepped into the agent's space, unafraid.

Chris swallowed as if bothered, for good measure.

The Mouthpiece snickered. "Since he cares so much, tie him up with the ladies."

I have a daughter.

The thought slammed him. The odds that Brodie might lose her haunted him. He took a deep breath, steadying himself, and studied the layout in front of him. The snipers were useless. That's what the agent only known as Sean had told him. They couldn't get a sight on The Mouthpiece. Brodie listened to the feed from Ferguson's bug and scanned the atrium, hoping to find the assassin who had penetrated the place before him, glad he had come alone. From where he stood on the ground floor, he had a clear view of the small plaza where Elena and Janie sat on a brick-supported, open-backed bench. He could see the box that held the explosive and was glad he hadn't let anyone else come with him. The more shooters there were, the greater possibility of error. And a rush from the good guys into the large garden area may have made The Mouthpiece nervous, giving him an itchy finger, putting Elena and the child in ultimate danger.

If he couldn't find the assassin, the same thing could happen, depending on what the killer's agenda was. He didn't like that unknown.

Shit. He pressed his lips together in frustration. Even if the team didn't rush in, having them enter the building would risk further exposure, especially since he didn't know where the assassin went. And unfortunately, from where he was, Brodie couldn't get a clear shot on the cartel kingpin. Too much of the greenery, the raised brick flower boxes and too many guards blocked his view. If he could, he'd *already* have taken the prick down, killing anyone who'd gotten close to the body, hoping Ferguson would kick his damn ass into gear. 'Course, he needed to do that before the safety was released. Once Hector took the safety off, if the trigger hit the ground the wrong way...

He wouldn't let that happen. Brodie scanned the area. To get The Mouthpiece, he would have to move by either switching his position to one more directly opposed to where the kingpin stood, which would take him through the inner hallway and prevent him from having a view of the events, or he'd have to risk exposing himself. He didn't

like either option, but if he moved through the hall, he wouldn't be able to take out The Mouthpiece at all should the need arise.

He eyed an overhang well behind the ladies that had possibilities but how long would it take to get there? So far, his approach had been undetected. Others lived in this place. He took the risk of discovery, still...

Elena seemed to glance his way. Had she seen him? He stared at her, wishing his mind could speak into hers and prayed she had seen him, hoping she wouldn't be afraid, knowing if The Mouthpiece initiated the Thermite bomb, he'd kill both Elena and his daughter to save them from the agony.

Bile from his stomach ate his throat, a sick dread filling him. If they died, there would be no stopping him. He'd kill Hector and anyone who got in the way, even Ferguson. He wouldn't give a damn about The Spider, the CIA or anyone else. He'd have his vengeance, and retribution would be quick even if it killed him.

Glancing at the group of men, seeing them engrossed in their play, he took a steady breath. The cartel's leader moved behind the two guards who hauled Ferguson to the center of the action.

Shifting, he made his decision – and he knew he'd have to be quick.

The guards had grabbed Chris and jostled him between them. Chris had counted seven in all. "You could at least let the kid go," he said with irritation to the bastard Hector as the armed men pulled him along.

The Mouthpiece pouted and glanced at Mannie, who, along with Carlos, was forced to walk with him. "Perhaps he is right. If you are found to be telling the truth, there is no reason to hurt such a beautiful little one. *Rápidamente.*" He'd snapped his fingers at the guards.

"Si," one of the men answered sharply and hurried to the child.

In moments, the girl was freed, running for his exposed mole. "*Papi, papi.*" She ran past Chris as they led him to Elena and jumped into Mannie's arms, Ramirez comforting her and telling her to be brave. Chris would have been touched if he didn't know the truth about the crook, that Janelle was not his daughter, that he had deceived his boyhood friend and stolen the little girl's affection.

The guards made short work of placing Chris where the little girl had been and lashed his cuffs to a hook on the box.

"Now," Hector had followed him, "I assume you know what this mixture can do?"

Chris nodded, knowing too well. He'd used the stuff himself, seen how the chemical reaction melted steel, just like a hot knife through butter. He didn't relish the idea of slowly becoming a melted, half-eaten blob. He grimaced, remembering the one time a Palestinian child been touched by the stuff, trying to help Mike get away. They had saved the boy from a beating by thugs a few months earlier. The child had only tried to return the favor.

"What can you tell me?" Hector demanded.

Chris wanted to wipe the shithead's face with the white powder attached to his back. Instead, he licked his lips, pretending to be overly anxious about his predicament. "Will you let the woman go too?" He hoped to have Elena able to move so he wouldn't have to worry about freeing her. That way Crawford and he could get down to business. Perhaps she could even escape with the child. Although no one may believe it after what he'd done, he really didn't want to see them hurt. He saw now that anger had driven him, made him stupid. And although he and his partner had used civilians in their searches before, after that one particularly bad turn with the Palestinian boy, they'd agreed to keep those who helped them from ultimate harm. Even with Mike gone, it was the one rule he still held himself to, especially when it came to children.

At least he thought he had. His gut twisted with the idea he'd violated his own standards.

The Mouthpiece leaned into his face and huffed, shattering his thoughts. *Not a good sign.* Chris knew he fed on others' fears.

And that he wouldn't hesitate to kill with any means available.

"I know men like you." The drug lord's smooth voice reeked of snake oil. "You do not care about yourselves in a proper way. You are too worried about being the big man, the one everyone sees as his or her savior. I will use this, you see?" Hector mocked.

This time Chris swore he'd see the man's lopsided smirk obliterated from his face. He looked at Elena—fear sparked in her eyes. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he whispered with true regret, pretending he didn't know her, knowing that if she was killed with this damn thing, he was to blame. He inhaled deeply, playing the act out, hoping to give Crawford time to move the men in place. He glared at The Mouthpiece. "You're going to kill us anyway. Otherwise you would have let her go."

Hector sucked the air through his teeth. "No, no. Not the lady. She is only my guarantee. Besides," he chuckled, "she might be fun for a while. Although my superior has kept me from this lady's little girl, I do not think he would mind if I had her. And right now, I don't think Manuel will mind at all. Not if it will keep her alive. He knows he must be punished. I cannot think of a better way than by taking his lady in front of him. Now," he crouched in front of Chris' seated position, "what can you tell me?" His teeth gleamed white against his browned skin as the hot sun beat down.

"Let the woman go first," Chris demanded quietly.

The Mouthpiece snarled and nodded at one of the guards who pounded the blunt of the rifle against his head.

Chris recoiled from the hit, taking in slow breaths to ease the sharp pain running through his skull. Blinking, he glared at Hector again.

The drug lord narrowed his eyes. "Don't underestimate me. Tell me the truth and I will see your death is quick. Otherwise," he glanced behind him at Mannie and Janie, "I

will kill all of you. It matters not to me. I have others who can take the men's place, although they would not do as well."

Chris knew that to be true. Hector pulled out the trigger to the bomb. "Tell me," he crooned as he removed the safety and lowered his thumb toward the switch then ordered a few of the other guards to point their rifles at Mannie and the little girl.

From the corner of his eye, Chris noticed a flash of movement to his right but the dark figure was too quick for him to identify it. He stared at Hector. The man backed up and his finger vacillated over the button. Chris swallowed, knowing he took a risk, letting the shadowed form get into position. "I don't know."

"Really?" Hector spurned him with a certain vile determination in his eyes then tapped a finger on the skin of the box that held the switch. "You know, I have never seen this work. I have only heard about it. I would like to see for myself. Perhaps I should just light you up and hear you plead for death." Hector placed his thumb on the button and tensed. "This is your last chance, my friend," his raspy voice beat low and deadly, "tell me now."

Chris met The Mouthpiece's gaze with his in challenge. "Huérfanos," Chris blurted in a quiet voice, loud enough for only those around him to hear, hoping Hector would believe him. He'd bought all the time he could. Now he'd have to trust Brodie and the others to do their job. He just hoped he hadn't underestimated Brodie's skill—or his resolve.

Hector relaxed. "And what did he tell you?"

"I don't know. I didn't work with him. I only knew he was the contact. We were supposed to keep him alive." Chris scowled at the squirming Carlos in the distance.

"I don't believe you." Hector lowered his thumb again.

"It's the truth." He narrowed his eyes at the drug lord.

The Mouthpiece studied him a moment. "Bring them all closer," he told his guards.

One of the armed men pushed Mannie and the child as two others dragged a protesting Carlos along, one knocking him in the small of his back to gain his cooperation.

Hector shook his head at Carlos. "For a killer, you are a fearful man."

Chris wanted to say the murderer knew too well how much pain a Thermite bomb could cause. Instead, he kept his mouth shut.

The Mouthpiece nodded at Carlos. "He likes the lady. Put him with her. We will see what he knows."

"No." The prospect jolted Carlos into action. Chris thought adrenalin must have surged in his drug-laced veins as he ducked and broke away again but this time took the pistol from the one who held the gun on him, firing it at the guard and killing him, then using one of the guards that held him as a shield, holding him tightly around the neck, the pistol to his head. "I won't be put with those two. I have been loyal. I have a destiny. I will not be killed like a common whore."

In split seconds, the guards holding Mannie had forced him and the girl behind them. Backing up, they aimed their weapons at Carlos, waiting for an order to fire.

The two guards who had held Chris pulled their weapons as well and moved in front of The Mouthpiece but their leader shoved them both aside enough to peer through. "Carlos, what are you trying to do? Do you really think I care if you have a hostage?" Hector said, sounding nonchalant. "Kill Carlos and the guard if you must," he ordered.

Carlos nailed one of the men covering The Mouthpiece before he'd had a chance to register the order and within the split seconds of the movement, Chris wondered why this had been so easy for Carlos. It occurred to him The Mouthpiece hadn't prepared for the threat, but then, the drug lord thought his home his sanctuary.

The other guard fired, Carlos turning so it hit the man he held and fired back. His target's head snapped back as he dropped dead.

Then he turned the weapon on Castellanos. "I did not betray you, *Jefe*. And I will prove it."

Swerving, he aimed at the group of guards covering Mannie, who parted like waves from the keel of a ship and disappeared behind the raised bricked plots of earth. Mannie lowered the child to the ground and stood in front of her.

"Tell him the truth," Carlos insisted.

Mannie stood straight as an arrow. "And what truth is that? That you killed Ty Baker?" He paused then arched his brows in anger. "Or that you betrayed me." Mannie lunged for the killer. A shot rang out but the bullet must have hit the ground as the two locked in combat.

Brodie studied the ruckus. Carlos had Mannie on his back.

They had rolled close to the bomb and his old friend was losing.

This was Brodie's best chance. Keeping low and quiet behind the various raised planters, he'd gotten closer. From this position, he could topple Castellanos and take the trigger away from him. He wanted to kill him first so there was no resistance. Grab him before he let the trigger go. He pulled the knife from his boot, poised to jump.

But Janie's scream shattered his resolve.

Janie ran toward the men, in front of The Mouthpiece, who grabbed her and hauled her to him.

Then Chris went into action, lunging for the trigger, latching onto Hector's thumb to pull it from the lever. The remaining guards fired.

Brodie had no choice. He took two of them down one by one, the remaining men fleeing into the building. "Clear our perimeter," he ordered into the mike. Outside the building, he knew the other agents were on the move. They would get the runners.

Then Brodie turned to the men who struggled. Chris had the greater strength and skill. But Castellanos was ahead of him. The egotist had let the girl go and reached into

his jacket, pulling out a Makarov. The barrel of the pistol gleamed in the sunlight. The girl ran after her father, jumping on Carlos' back, pummeling him, Elena yelling for her to get back.

Change of plans. From this range, the rifle would blow the drug lord's head off, splattering blood everywhere. It didn't matter. He fired and hit.

Red matter bathed Ferguson. Castellanos slumped to the ground as Chris retrieved the trigger and clicked on the safety. "It's about damn time!" the agent yelled at him, scoping his position.

"Janie," Elena yelled before Brodie could warn Chris. The agent swerved, giving Brodie too short of a view of the killer.

Carlos was on his knees, taking aim at Janie. And Chris was in the way of Brodie's shot. *He couldn't let her die.* He leaped and shoved Ferguson to the side. *He would be too late.* Panic struck him. "God help..."

"No," Mannie yelled, pushing his battered body up and falling over Carlos' arms, his torso taking the impact of the bullet.

Brodie lifted the rifle to fire but the child got there first, punching Carlos in the face.

Elena yelled for her to stay away but not in time. The killer swung the girl around and held her in front of him, putting a death grip on her neck, holding the gun to her head. "You have ruined everything!" Carlos yelled. "This was my ride to the big-time."

Janie mewed in protest. Bile rose in Brodie's throat. He stood, aiming the rifle at the son of a bitch. "Put her down."

"I kill her," Carlos threatened in broken English.

Vile rage boiled in Brodie's veins, a hatred he'd never felt. "You hurt her in any way," his voice trembled with unrepressed malice, "and there won't be anywhere in this world you can go that I won't find you and make you suffer. I'll have you on your knees begging me to kill you."

"Brodie..." Chris warned.

Carlos smirked with a sinister grin. "I consider that a challenge." The killer backed away.

The man was crazed. Brodie knew what the bastard would do with Janie when he got away.

And he was letting his emotions get the better of him. *You need to save her.*

Inside, something broke. He had one choice now. Keeping the narrow view of Carlos' head in his scope, he timed his breathing to coincide with the pull of the trigger. He didn't want to miss.

Victoria looked on at the mess from the second story window. As per her usual procedure, she'd taken out anyone who'd been a threat to her escape, especially the elite bodyguards who had been enjoying their coffee in the kitchen. The other guards had run like the dogs, heading for home, she surmised.

Now her job was done—except one. She breathed in slowly, taking a bead on Ferguson. The stupid, evil man.

“Please don’t kill her.”

Victoria heard the mother’s plea. Her focus had been on the fight with The Mouthpiece. She needed to kill them both, yet for some reason, it pleased her that Chris had won. *It was one less for you to kill.* She let that be the reason. Her soul already had too many deaths to account for.

She glanced downward and saw the killer struggling as he yelled at Chris, a wound in his side, Janie in his grasp. “No,” she commanded in a whisper. “No.” The girl—her little one was in danger.

Her hand shook. Her hands never shook. She only had one shot. She heard the mother’s cries, remembered the torturous ache when she could not be consoled, the love that had been dashed to the pavement with her son’s blood. Tears grew heavy in her eyes. Then her hatred for Ferguson surfaced.

Aiming, she held her breath and steadied herself—and took the only shot she could.

Chapter Eighteen

The rifle shot rang out, echoing against the walls. Elena screamed then Carlos slumped to the ground.

Janie dropped feet-first against the brick. Shaking herself loose, she ran for Mannie.

Brodie scanned the second floor as he made his way to Elena. Chris' head whipped around to stare at him.

"Where?" Ferguson's brow rose.

"There." He pointed to the second floor balcony. "Get down, dammit. Have one of the men check it out." Then he turned to his daughter, needing to get her to safety. "Janie," Brodie called to her, frantic, "come here and help me."

Janie ignored him, and Ferguson still stood in front of him, sneering. "You know they're probably gone. I'll check to make sure."

"Suit yourself," Brodie spat as he rushed to Elena's side. Ferguson bounded toward the balcony, climbing up the heavily vined trellis leading to it.

"Janie," he called as he studied Elena's bindings, wanting to make sure he wouldn't touch anything to detonate the bomb.

"Janie," Elena pleaded, "get behind the wall, please."

But Janie wouldn't budge. "Stubborn like her mother," Brodie grumbled, wanting to hurry before something else happened.

"Just get me untied," Elena gritted between her clenched teeth as she struggled against the restraint. "I have a daughter to take care of and I'd rather not sit here like a stuffed goose."

He'd had his knife out but with her moving he couldn't get between the binding. "Dammit, women, hold still. That thing might still go off and I don't want to cut you. Ferguson's right. The sniper is probably long gone, besides," he glanced at Janie in wonder, "I have this feeling the shooter didn't want her hurt."

Elena stopped struggling and stared at him, uncertainty in her eyes as she wetted her lips with her pink tongue.

Growling, he sliced the ropes. When Elena moved to go to Janie, Brodie shoved her behind the planter he'd just come from. "Get down."

"But—"

"Stay," he commanded pointing his finger at her. "I'll get *my daughter*." He jabbed his thumb into his chest for emphasis.

Swallowing, Elena huddled behind the brick. A look of regret shadowed her eyes.

"Janie, honey, I'm coming to get you." Brodie swallowed, hearing the other agents in the background. He glanced a moment at the balcony where the shots had come from. Mixed emotions swelled up in his throat as he rushed to her.

"No." Janie squirmed away.

Brodie didn't want her afraid. "There are still some bad people out here. I'll make sure you stay safe."

A reflection of his mother's blue eyes filled with tears and stared at him with fear and confusion. "But *papi*..." She pouted and pointed to Mannie.

Brodie swallowed, knowing Mannie had finally become the hero he'd always wanted to be. "I'll get him when you're safe." He glanced back at Elena then looked at their daughter again and pressed his lips together. "Right now, your mother needs you."

The child nodded then crawled to him on her knees. He scooped her up and dashed behind the planter, sighing in relief as he lay back hard against the brick. Elena grabbed onto them both, covering them with as much of her body as she could and cried. "How did you know?" She looked up. Her tiger eyes probed him.

"How couldn't I?" Brodie brushed her hair with his fingers. "She has my eyes and she looks too much like my mother."

She swallowed. "I should have told you."

"You're damn straight." He was pissed but then he saw the anguish in her face. He couldn't conceive what she had gone through. "I'm sure you had a reason."

Elena's bottom lip trembled. "Her middle name is Vanessa." She could barely get out the words. "I named her after your mother to keep your memory close."

Emotion choked Brodie. *So she had thought of him.* He shifted Janie to one arm and brought Elena closer, kissing her temple. "It'll be all right." He held them both against him, knowing they were his most precious treasures. He couldn't remember ever feeling as wonderful as he did at this moment.

Chris jumped over the railing. The sniper was most likely gone. Besides, he didn't care if the assassin attacked him or not.

Throwing the curtain back, he scanned the room. *Empty.*

He took a deep breath to clear his head. The scent of spice pervaded his nostrils, confirming what he already knew, reminding him that he had failed his mission. The killer was the only person who could get him to The Spider now, and that person had vanished.

He wouldn't easily find the sniper again. He grimaced as a feeling inside gripped him. Moisture beaded in the corner of an eye. He knew well who the assassin was.

He had slept with her every night.

One of the agents rushed through the door. Chris had heard him on the stairway. "Did you see the guy?" his subordinate asked.

Chris stared at him a moment then shook his head. "No." He huffed and hefted a lopsided smile at the absurdity of his life. "Nothing. Let Crawford and the gang know. Then clear the house. With all the gunfire I'm sure the locals will—" Sirens from Mexican police vehicles wailed in the far distance.

Chris looked at the man. "In fact, get everyone out. Now."

The agent nodded.

Chris gave the room a once-over. Breathed in the heady fragrance, memorizing its flavor, relishing the memory of Victoria in his arms, hoping he'd smell the scent again soon. But for now his lover's secret would be safe from everyone—until he needed it for reasons of his own.

Walking briskly, he left the room, and didn't look back.

Sean nodded at Brodie. "Boss says to leave."

"No, *mi papi*." Janie pulled away and ran to Mannie.

"Janie..." Elena tried to stop her.

But before Brodie would let Elena go, he held her tight, kissed her then pulled his head back to study her. "She's safe. Otherwise Ferguson would have said something." He swallowed wanting to ask the question but not knowing if he'd like the answer. "Why *didn't* you tell me?"

She blinked the tears away. "I couldn't get in touch with you. Then when you finally came home, you accused me of betraying you before I could explain. After that, my pride held me back. Brodie, I just didn't know what to do. When Mannie asked again, I said yes so that Janie wouldn't have the stigma of being..."

"Shhh." He put a finger to her lips. "It doesn't matter now." He grasped her to him, held her tight and kissed her. "I'm sorry I left you to deal with this alone."

"*Papi!*" Janie's cry broke them apart.

They rushed to Mannie, Brodie getting there first. The man still moved. Brodie tried to staunch the blood flowing from the hole in his abdomen.

"Take her." Brodie handed Janie to Elena. Mannie moaned. Somehow he had regained consciousness.

"I thought you were dead." Brodie lifted and turned his ex-friend's head as blood sputtered from his lips. "Elena, press on the wound," he said. She let go of Janie and rushed to Mannie's other side.

His old friend grasped the arm holding his head. Brodie searched for a pulse in his wrist with his free hand.

"Don't bother," Mannie rasped then looked at Brodie. "I've seen these wounds before. Even gave a few..." An innocence shone in his eyes. The love of a friend. "You know, don't you? About Janie." His body shuddered from the loss of blood.

Brodie swallowed. "She's my daughter."

Mannie nodded, a smile brushed his lips before he coughed up more liquid. "Gut wound. I'm a dead man. Too late. Take care of them. They...they need you most."

"No," Elena muttered, shaking her head. "This can't be. And you knew?"

He gazed at her. "Always. Your sister gave me your letters. I read every one then destroyed them. I loved you. Did...didn't care." He reached for her face but his energy faded. The old Mannie smiled sadly, the one Brodie had known from so long ago. "Was going to leave the business. Thought we could be happy together. It's...all I ever...wanted." He looked at Brodie. His brown eyes filled with past regrets. "I...called her the child of my heart. Ne...never lied to her but knew she wasn't mine to keep."

"But you saved her..." Brodie asked.

With what little breath he had left, he laughed. "I love her. She is the...best of both of you. It..." he coughed again, "was a way to keep you both close, keep what we once had." His breathing grew more labored. "She loved me too, you see. For me alone. No one has ever done that." He turned to Elena. "Not even you."

Janie sidled up to Brodie, staring at him with distrust. Anger and curiosity gleamed in her blue eyes, eyes so like his own.

"Give me your hand," his friend asked him.

Brodie did what he was asked then his friend put it on top of Janie's small one. "Janie, this is your father now."

"No," she pouted, eyeing Brodie with tearful anguish. She looked so much like him.

"Si," he nodded. "Go," he closed his eyes. "I can hear them. The *policia* are at the door. And the angels have come." He chuckled as his eyes batted open, the red blood covering his teeth. "I am a hero now, *Si*."

"*Si, mi amigo*. The greatest one. Better than me."

Mannie smiled then his chest bucked with the expulsion of more spume. "Forgive me, my best and always friend." He swallowed, the pain of the past and of his body reflecting in his eyes.

"Always," Brodie whispered.

Mannie smiled weakly as he let his eyes flutter shut. A deep sigh left his mouth.

He was dead.

Brodie cradled him against his chest and kissed his brow. "Goodnight, *mi amigo*. *Hasta luego*. See you later."

Elena came around the body, blinking back her tears and took Janie in her arms as the little one cried.

"Time to go, Brodie," a soft male voice said. "Gather your family. I'll take you home."

He swerved and stared at Ferguson. So caught in his own swirling emotions, he hadn't even heard him approach.

"Quickly." Ferguson waved. "The men locked the doors and are fending off the locals. I want to get you to safety. No one needs to know you were involved."

Brodie nodded then looked at Elena and his daughter.

"Are you my new father?" Janie asked in a small voice, her small dark brows peaking with confusion and hurt.

"Yes, sweetheart." He swallowed. "Can I carry you out?"

She looked at her mother with a mixture of concern and curiosity then nodded.

Brodie grabbed her and they quickly followed Ferguson to one of the arches surrounding the atrium. "Will you love me as much as *papi*?" A large tear welled in her eye.

Brodie stopped, glancing for a moment at the body of his old friend. "As much? Yes," he nodded, "but differently. We will never forget your *papi*."

The fat tear rolled down her cheek as she bent over and hugged his neck, resting against his shoulder, crying soft tears.

Elena studied him, smiling weakly, her eyes shining with both love and sadness.

Brodie's chest swelled with pride as his throat choked with the myriad feelings churning in him. *He had a daughter.* And Elena was his.

"If you two don't mind, we need to hurry," Ferguson prodded.

"Let's go." For once, Brodie's smile came from his heart.

* * * * *

Brodie pushed the brim of his Stetson back, and let the rugged landscape of the ranch fly by unnoticed, too involved in his own thoughts. Chris had secreted them out and took care of any difficulties with the Mexican government. Brodie didn't know how he did that—and he didn't want to know. But within hours, they were safe, riding across the border in his father's company truck. It was as if nothing had happened, except they had Janie with them.

His daughter moaned next to him, her soft small body lay against him. She had latched onto him and cried herself to sleep. Then he studied Elena from the corner of his eye. They had talked, about everything between them. Nothing was sacred. And they decided they were going to try again, for Janie's sake, but there was still so much to work out. Thoughts swirled in Brodie's brain. So much had happened that he didn't know how to feel. He loved his job but now he could have the thing he wanted most—Elena, and their child. He glanced at her. So much had happened over the years to change both of them. Could they work this out?

Then there was his father. His love for his dad and what the man had done to him battled within him. The turmoil made him sick. His father may not have cared for him but he'd never betrayed him—until that fateful night Elena and he had conceived their daughter.

Gritting his teeth with anger, Brodie had decided to deal with his father first. The man had caused each of them torment over the last eight years in one form or another. Brodie just wanted to know why.

His lips thinned with his destructive thoughts. His father promised him an explanation. Brodie would be damned if he didn't get a full accounting. The moment of reckoning was at hand.

He glanced at Elena and quirked a smile as he entered the long drive to the ranch. "Are you sure you want to go in with me?"

She sent him a shaky grin of her own. "I'm not letting you go anywhere. Not without me."

He pulled the truck off the road and onto part of the brown-colored field. Bending over carefully so as not to disturb Janie, he grasped Elena's neck and eased her mouth to his, relishing the long kiss. Pulling back, he thumbed her bottom lip. "At least we got that straightened out, finally."

She caressed his cheek. "Brodie, I have always loved you. I always will. I just hope, when things are out in the open, well..."

"I know." He traced her lips with the pad of his thumb. "Elena, we can only try. Do our best. I know you've changed. So have I." He sighed slowly. "Things happened. You married Mannie because you thought you had no choice. Part of that was my fault. I should have found you sooner."

She shook her head. "How could you have known?"

He smirked. "I didn't hear from you. I should have known something was up. I'm not stupid. I was just so pissed at my dad for everything he'd said and done the night we were discovered making love. I avoided him as much as I could after that." He swallowed. "I wish I had avoided him the night I came home from Basic but I didn't." He glanced down and pressed his lips together then eyed her dead-on. "I promise I won't ever leave you stranded. Not anymore." After he'd heard her side, he realized his bullheadedness the night they'd argued so long ago had shut the only avenue she had of explaining to him. He had let his pain shut him off from listening to any excuse. He had walked out of her life once. He would never let that happen again.

His anger boiled over. "Besides, we had forces working against us at the time. I know my father's hand was in this, manipulating all of them. I recognized the man's handiwork. I just never thought my own father would do this to *me*."

Elena fingered his cheek. "Don't be angry at him, Brodie. Forgive him. What happened was too long ago and we have each other now." She glanced at Janie sleeping against him. "We both have you back. And we'll have a future of some kind, after we figure out how to put things back together."

He had the Army. She had her business. Yeah, their future wasn't assured. Still, he winced at the ache of betrayal. If anything, he should have been able to trust his father, even if the man hadn't agreed with what he did with his life. "Why should I forgive him?"

"Because he's your father and you love him." Elena licked her lips.

He huffed. "That's the only reason? He's never cared about me, not since Mom died, so why should I worry? He has screwed with all of us—you, Mannie and me. Even Janie. He made the last eight years hell. And God only knows what he did to Mannie to make him the way he was. I can't believe he paid Mannie to seduce you and marry you." He growled. "If he wasn't my father, I'd beat his ass into the ground. I lost you for eight years and I lost a good friend from his manipulations and now Mannie's dead."

She laid a hand on his arm. "My sister played a part as well and is just as guilty. She kept my letters to you. She and Mannie were obviously in cahoots. And I don't hate her. I think I understand now. They thought we'd eventually get hurt. Brodie, let it go. We need to move on with our lives. If Chet doesn't accept me, or my father doesn't accept you, then so be it. I'm finally prepared to live with that. Besides, Mannie made his own choices. He didn't have to do what he did. What happened to him was the result of his own decisions. That part wasn't your father's fault. You have us now. Together we have a life to live."

Love and tenderness poured from Elena's face even though she grimaced from the pain those years caused. "I've had more time to think about this than you. Years, in fact. Your father probably thought he was doing the best thing for both of us. After all, our families hate each other. He probably thought we'd only hurt each other in the long run." She shook her head. "Brodie, I love you." Her eyes wept but her smile remained. "After everything that's happened, I know that being angry about the past isn't the answer. Get angry with him if you need to but let it go and forgive him in the end. If you don't, it'll only come between us. And I don't want to lose you again."

He swallowed and brushed his fingertips through her hair. Wasn't that about the same thing he'd told Ferguson? Yet, he knew, when Elena's and Janie's lives were on the line, he wouldn't have stopped until he had his revenge. Now he somewhat understood Chris, kind of understood his father. The pain of loss made you do insane things. Still, look at what Ferguson's obsession with retribution had done to him. The man was eaten up by his bloodlust. And what had it done to his father? "I'll try," he promised, knowing he would do anything to keep her forever—even lose that Crawford trait for revenge.

She looked away a moment then gazed at him. "There's something else he needs to tell you. I know, but he should be the one to tell you. I think it's why he brought you home."

"You know?"

She nodded. "I think."

He shifted the truck into gear. "But you won't tell me?"

"No." She shook her head. "I don't want to have any secrets between us. They only serve to drive us apart. I promise if he doesn't tell you today, I will, but suffice it to say

that it was the thing I threatened him with when you walked in on us the night Janie was kidnapped."

He smirked and pulled onto the road. "So you *were* blackmailing him."

She only laughed. Brodie thanked God that he still could hear that beautiful sound.

* * * * *

Jake heard the whine of the engine first and ran to the door, yelling "They're here" over his shoulder. Rushing out onto the drive, he saw them in the distance.

Chet wheezed as he ran up behind him. "Thank God." He put a hand on Jake's shoulder, trying to catch his breath.

Jake eyed him over, hoping he wouldn't have to take him to the hospital to get his breathing under control again. When Chet started inhaling normally, he released his own held breath. This would be it. Jake thought there were no two men who couldn't be more alike, father and son for sure. From his figurin', Brodie loved Elena as much as Chet had loved Brodie's mother. And they were both bullheaded about it.

He grimaced. They would fight to settle this. And afterward, Chet would either have his son back or he'd lose him for good. Jake glanced upward at the cloudless sky and prayed. The act had worked so far. God had intervened. But just to be sure, he planned to stay pretty damn close in case anything got out of hand.

Brodie parked the truck and stepped out. The afternoon sun beat hot against him, but the anger twisting inside him was hotter still. His lips thinned as he stood on the other side glowering, knowing his fury showed plain on his face.

"Abuelito?" Janie muttered. Elena had awakened her as she pulled her out of the truck. The little girl rubbed her swollen eyes with her fists. "I never thought I'd see you again." She struggled in her mother's arms.

"Grandpa?" Shocked, Elena stood and looked at Chet. "How... What..." She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. "You *knew*?"

"Yes, Mami," Janie pouted. "*Papi* wouldn't let me tell you that he would bring me here. It was a secret."

"What?" Elena stared in confusion at Chet before Janie broke free and ran to him.

Chet grasped her up and holding her to his chest swung her around. "My pumpkin! Oh, you're home safe." Slowing, he hugged her close. "I was so afraid." He trembled and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, Grandpa, *Papi* is dead." Huge tears welled in her eyes.

"I know, sugar, I know." He patted her head. "But it'll be all right. You'll see."

Brodie stomped toward him, stopping short when Elena grabbed his arm. "You sorry son of a bitch, you *knew* and never told me."

"Brodie, please don't..." Elena pleaded with him.

Brodie quaked as he released his next breath, struggling to keep his rage in check. "I ought to beat the living hell out of you."

Chet eased Janie to the ground and stood with his shoulders back, head held straight, proud as always, his arm looped around his granddaughter. "You'd have every right. I won't stop you if that's what you want."

An invisible fist seemed to grab on and twist in Brodie's gut. "It ain't what I want, old man." He stuttered, wanting to tell his father that he only wanted his love, that even if he couldn't love Brodie, that at least he could love his newfound family. He looked at Janie. Perhaps he already did.

He gulped as her eyes grew wide with fear. Damn, he didn't want her to be afraid of him. His voice broke as he glared at his dad. "I just want to know why?"

Janie pulled on his shirtsleeve. "Grandpa?" she whispered. "Did you do something wrong?"

"Yes, pumpkin," he said to her softly, "and I have to fix it." Chet's shoulders drooped as he stared at Brodie. "Maybe you should bring everyone inside. We need to talk."

Brodie stepped to him. "You're damn straight we do. But they don't need to hear what I have to say at this point. Now I *know* you orchestrated this bullshit." He trembled trying to keep his anger in check and failed miserably.

"Son, you've got a seven year old listening." He pulled Janie closer as if to protect her.

"Damn..." He bit the inside of his cheek before he said anything more and watched Janie cuddle against him.

"Brodie," Elena walked up to take Janie's hand and grasped his arm. "Perhaps he's right. Let's go inside." Janie curled into her mother.

Brodie glanced at Elena's face then back at Chet. Brodie clenched his teeth and a muscle jumped in his jaw. "Is this what you wanted to tell me? That I had a daughter?"

Chet rested his hands on his hips and dropped his chin to his chest. "I don't expect you to forgive me," he choked out, blinking.

The show of emotion stunned Brodie. Elena rubbed Brodie's back and the hard look he'd had in his eyes softened.

Brodie glanced at Janie. His daughter had her finger in her mouth, watching. Damn, he didn't want to screw this up.

"You all git in the house," Jake urged, saving him. "Git somethin' tuh drink. It's been a long tough spell. You could use the rest."

Elena nudged Brodie's arm. He glanced at her, saw the hope in her eyes. Then he studied his dad. Fear showed in the glare under his grey brows. Grudgingly, he nodded at his father.

"Janie, girl," Jake swooped her up in his arms. "How'd you like to ride on that colt I told you about a few weeks ago?"

She nodded then whispered to him. "Uncle Jake, is he *really* my father?" She pointed to Brodie and mixed emotions welled up in Brodie's throat. One a yearning to be the kind of father he hadn't had in years. Another to beat the shit out of his dad for depriving him of the privilege.

Jake closed an eye and studied Brodie with the other.

The idea that he had someone else to be responsible for finally sunk into Brodie and hit him hard. The realization made him look back with fear as if to say, "A father? What the hell do I know about being a father?" Then he stared at his own dad, wondering how hard the job really was, swearing to do better than the man standing in front of him.

Jake chuckled then chucked his forefinger gently under her chin. "Yuh know I reckon he just might be. He's got all the signs." He jerked his chin in a nod. "Think yuh might hav' tuh train him though. He's a tough 'en."

She giggled then stared at Brodie with optimism. "I guess I can do that. After all, he looks just like me, doesn't he? Except the red hair."

Jake snickered and pretended to study Brodie. "I reckon you're right."

"Uncle Jake," she held her hand to one side of her mouth and bent over, whispering in his ear, "does red hair make you mad all the time?"

Jake about choked, laughing. "Naw," he said and waved his arm. "Just means he's got *passion*."

She screwed up her pretty, little face. "*Passion*?" she repeated with disgust. "What's that?"

"Uh," Jack glanced back at the rest of the group with a look that said he'd gotten in too deep but no one came to his rescue. "I'll tell yuh more when you git older." He jerked his chin in a nod to confirm his statement.

When Janie laughed, Jake touched the brim of his hat to say his goodbyes and took Janie off toward the barn.

Watching the two of them, Brodie couldn't help his grin.

But turning back to his father sobered him. He lifted his arm and waved it toward the door. "After you," he growled, not knowing how he felt or what he would say.

His father pressed his lips together and nodded. Then turned and walked up the stairs to the entrance of the old elegant home.

Elena pressed her hand against his chest before she let him escort her in, pleading, "Forgive him, Brodie."

He lifted her fingertips to his lips. "I'll try." Swallowing, he looped his arm around her shoulders and followed, knowing he'd do whatever he had to keep these two ladies in his life.

Jake glanced backward and watched them enter the house. Then he looked upward for one more request. "Please let them make amends."

Janie gazed up with him. "Who are you talking to?"

"God," he nodded without explanation. "Sometimes yuh just gotta." Then he headed for the stable, a new hope swelling in his breast.

Chet went for the bottle of whiskey behind his desk and pulled out the decanter and a couple of shot glasses. He poured one for Brodie and handed it to him.

"You never did talk business without offering someone a drink." Brodie removed his Stetson and put it on the desk.

Chet nodded at him and poured another, holding it up to Elena. "You want one little gal—" He stopped short then swallowed and said, "I mean, Elena."

She pursed her lips, her brows arched. "Should you be..."

He waved her off. "Brodie's right. I ain't never talked business without offering."

She swallowed. "But this is about your family."

He nodded. "Family business. Same thing."

"But it isn't," she insisted.

He ignored her and eyed Brodie a minute then sipped his shot. *Sipped?* The same eerie feeling he'd had about his father when he first came home grabbed him. But this time he knew. There *was* something wrong.

Brodie downed his glass and set it on the desk. "You promised to tell me why you wanted me to go to Mexico. Is Janie why?"

The old man nodded. "Partly." He waved toward the couch in the room. "Let's sit down. I'm tired." He stumbled from behind the desk.

"Dad?"

"It's nothing." He walked to the overstuffed leather chair he'd always sat in, staring at the picture of Brodie's mother.

Brodie and Elena sat on the couch facing him. Brodie waited, wanting him to talk first, too afraid that whatever he said would be too harsh. Instead, he studied his father more closely. Noticed the lines that had etched deeper in his face. The hair that had thinned and grown more grey. It was then Brodie saw what grief had done to him. It had made him hate and that hatred was killing him. His father was a shell of the virile man he once was.

Yet, as his dad looked upon the portrait, love and longing radiated from his face.

And loss.

In a way, Brodie felt sorry for him. The man was alone, friendless except for the few business associates he'd had—and the ranch hands. He always treated them well. Still, he had alienated a lot of people.

Especially his son.

Just once, Brodie wished his father would look upon him with even a tenth of the tenderness he gave the picture. Just once.

Finally, Chet pressed his lips together and stared at him. "Your friend, Rick Hansen, showed up."

"Rick? What the hell for?"

His father huffed with a smile. "Guess he thought you'd need help. After we didn't hear from you, Jake, Rick, and your partner," he pointed to Elena, "went to go after you. But someone had tipped off the border patrol. They were stopped. Held 'em for a long time until I came and got 'em. The authorities wouldn't let them go unless they promised not to cross."

The longing in his father's eyes told Brodie he was telling the truth.

"Dammit." Brodie ran a hand through his hair. The last thing he wanted to do was have another friend get hurt by his past.

His dad grimaced. "It got Hansen in trouble though. Someone had called the Army. Your captain chewed him out pretty good. Made him go back to the post. Forced him to take some leave without pay, but Garcia said it won't go on his record. I told him I'd cover his loss but he wouldn't take anything. Said he was going to hit the beach and to keep him informed. He didn't give a damn what they said."

"He wouldn't. That's the kind of guy he is. Besides, he doesn't need your money. He's got enough of his own." Brodie quirked a brow and sighed. "Wonderful. Just what we needed. To be another man short. I'm sure the captain was thrilled."

His dad chuckled then coughed.

"Dad?"

"It's nothing, I tell yuh," he grouched. "Forget it."

"No problem," Brodie bit out, tired of being yelled at. He glanced at Elena. She wore a worried frown. Then he looked at his father, stewing inside, trying to play this out without losing his temper. "So why did you bring me here?"

The glass in his father's hand shook as he placed his forearm on the armrest. He gazed at Brodie a moment then shook his head. "Aw, hell. You won't believe me."

His father was different. Something had changed him. Brodie leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, gazing into his dad's face. "Try me."

Water filled the old man's eyes, something Brodie had never seen. "I wanted to fix what I broke." He glanced at Elena. "It was my fault, Elena. My fault he never found you until it was too late. I'm so sorry." He buried his head in his free hand, choking on his quiet tears.

Brodie sat back, stunned. He stared at Elena. Sadness rimmed her eyes. "Go to him. Tell him it's all right."

Brodie didn't know what to do. He swallowed and studied his father. "Dad? What's the matter with you? You never cared about us." A sudden thought hit him, had his father gone broke? Was he about to lose the ranch?

Chet pressed the heel of his palms against his eyes then sat back and blinked a few times as he looked away, acting like he'd only gotten a speck of dirt in them. "I'm sorry, Brodie." Then he stared into Brodie's soul. "Sorrier than you'll ever know."

It was Brodie's turn to shake. Chet's sudden confession frightened him. "Try me," he whispered.

Chet swallowed. "When your ma died..." His haggard face glanced at the picture a moment. "I didn't know what to do. Didn't think I could live without her." He put the glass he'd been holding down and looked back at Brodie. "I began to hate everyone. Especially myself." He glanced at Elena. "I knew, deep inside, it wasn't your uncle's fault." He dropped his chin to his chest. "Just could never accept it, could never accept that someone couldn't do something to make her live. Yuh see," his Texas drawl thickened, "until then, I could always do something to make things work. Or make sure I had someone who could." He shrugged. "Guess I thought I was invincible but I wasn't." He huffed and shook his head then gazed back at Brodie. "You look so much like her. It hurt to see you sometimes. I know it wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's. It was just the way it was." His bottom lip trembled. "I love you, son. And I'm so damn sorry I never showed you how much."

Brodie's jaw dropped open. Stunned, he didn't know what to say. He'd finally heard the one thing he'd ever wanted from his father.

Chet stood and went to the window that overlooked the ranch, looking out as if he studied the landscape, the cattle lowing in the fields. He spread an arm open, as if surveying what he wrought. "I'd done all this for you. You were the only thing I had left. The only thing I had to live for." His voice trembled as he shook his head. "But you didn't know that." He paused, staring at the sky. "I ain't never told you. For some reason, I just couldn't. It wasn't you, boy. It was me. And I'm sorry."

He turned back, a determined look in his eyes. "Elena, I apologized to your uncle the other day. And your father." He shot Elena a sad smile. "Told him about Janie too."

"You did what?" Elena's voice rose and her tiger eyes seemed to leap out of her sockets.

Brodie chuckled, feeling suddenly elated, and patted her hand, a mocking arch to his brow. "Forgive him, Elena," he whispered.

She shifted a glare in his direction, a corner of her mouth twitching.

Chet's low snort gave rise to his grin.

"What did he say?" Elena asked with feigned sweetness, pasting on a smile.

The humor in Chet's eyes departed and his mouth thinned. "I went and saw him in his office. Figured he wouldn't try to beat the crap out of me there. He's too much of a professional." A gleam of humor shone in his dad's eye. Then he shrugged. "He didn't believe me at first. But then I showed him the proof."

"Proof?" Her brow rose.

Chet pressed his lips together a moment in thought. "Uh, yeah. I got a copy of the birth certificate, and, er, some other medical records. She was a full-term baby, not two months early like you'd told everyone. I see why you delivered Janie at your sister's. That way, no one would question the birth. Theresa kept your secret, you know. She wouldn't even tell me when I confronted her about it."

Brodie could feel Elena's temperature rise but he had to give her credit, she kept her hot temper under control. "Medical records are supposed to be private, Mr. Crawford."

Brodie chuckled. He could tell she was doing her best not to lose her perspective.

His father crossed his burly arms. "Well, they're not if there's a question about the parentage."

"Why would there have been a question?" she asked as her eyes narrowed.

Chet cleared his throat. "Well...I, uh, with Mannie's consent I had Janie's DNA tested."

"You did what?" Brodie's body rose with his voice.

Elena pulled on his hand to bring him back down. "There, there dear. It isn't so bad. All he needed was a piece of hair or something." This time she bared her teeth when she grinned, a mischievous glint in her look.

Brodie growled, "Point taken," knowing she was getting back at him.

Chet stared at them from under his bushy brows, smirking. "I told you when you got back I'd tell you everything." He nodded. "And I know'd you'd hate me even more for it." He lifted his chin. A seriousness shone in his eyes. "She's yours all right."

He bolted to his feet. "God dammit, Dad. I could tell that by looking at her. She's almost me with black hair. She's got Mom's eyes."

His dad grinned. "She does, don't she?"

Brodie wanted to pummel him. "Why?" He lifted his arms in the air, frustrated by his inability to make sense of any of this. "Why did you keep this a secret for so long? And why the hell tell me now!" He jabbed his finger in the air, pointing to his dad, not able to take any more. "You've spent *time* with my daughter, time I could have had. You fucked my life all to hell. And now you tell me you love me? What the hell kind of love is that?"

"Brodie." Elena tugged on his sleeve and pulled him down.

He let her, not knowing what to think and rubbed his forehead. "Christ, Dad..."

His father's eyes grew teary. "I know now I was wrong. I just thought you two were kids. You didn't know what you were doing. So I stopped it before it got too far. But then when yuh got so mad and just left. I never heard from you again except for the letters yuh wrote Jake. Then Janie came." He released a long sigh. "For a man like me, son, a stubborn, proud bastard..." he shook his head again, "I couldn't admit I'd made a mistake. And when I couldn't, well, that was the biggest mistake of them all." When he looked at Brodie, the hurt in his eyes punched Brodie in the gut. "I don't want to see

you do the same. I want you two to git married like you'd planned, give Janie a real home, be a real father. What Elena did marrying Mannie, that was my fault."

Brodie shook, the emotions swelling within him. "I know that."

Chet glanced down then eyed him and whispered, "I'm sorry, son. So sorry."

Brodie rubbed his face. He'd never thought he'd hear the like from his father. When he looked back, his voice grew soft. "How long have you known about Janie?"

Chet grimaced. "Since she was a year old."

"A year..." This time water welled in Brodie's eyes. He'd been in the Gulf fighting *al-Quaida*. "Those are years I'll never get back."

"I know." Chet bowed his head. "There's one more thing." He stood tall in his John Wayne pose. "I know you ain't wantin' to come back but I'm leaving you everythin' I got."

Brodie's lip trembled. "The damn place took you away from me. I don't want it," he blustered, stopping short of telling him all he wanted was to hear him say he loved him one more time.

Chet swallowed then spoke in a soft voice. "If you don't, I'm giving it to Janie. I just want you to think about it. You and Elena, you could be happy here. I was with your mother until..." He couldn't even choke out the words. "Anyway, if you don't, it's in my will. Elena will have control of the ranch until Janie's old enough. My advisors can help with the rest."

"What?" Brodie barely heard Elena's voice. "But it's been in your family for years. Your people settled this place."

Chet nodded. "Janie *is* family. And so are you. I may not have said it, but you were the only daughter I've ever had. If Brodie doesn't want the place and he won't hold it in trust for Janie, then I've got it set up so it goes to you to be held in trust for her instead." He smiled sadly. "I know you'll take good care of it. And your father will help. Luke promised me."

Her mouth gapped open. "You two must have had some Come-To-Jesus meeting."

Chet snickered. "Yeah, we made amends. As best as two old bulls could anyways."

She smiled and the glow emanated from her face. "Thank you, Chet."

He nodded, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth then he grew serious. "Big thing is, I want you two to figure things out. And I want to spend time with my granddaughter while I can."

She glanced at Brodie. "We've decided to try." And took Brodie's hand. When she set those tiger eyes on him, the luring gaze that always drew him in banished his confusion. The mixed emotions left him and all he could feel was love.

Then the realization hit him. He had a woman's heart to capture—again—and he wasn't about to lose her this time.

She arched her brow. "He still has his Army commitment. I have my work. We have a lot of things to figure out."

He lifted her hand and brushed her fingers with his lips. "We will though. I'll be damned if I lose this one."

"Well, then," his dad stepped forward and clapped him on the back, "yuh better get busy, boy. A pretty gal like that ain't gonna wait forever."

From behind, Brodie heard someone clear his voice. He swerved, seeing Jake standing there. "Put Janie with the cook. She's hungry and I thought I'd better check on ya'll."

Chet shifted from one foot to the next. "I said everything, dammit."

"Everything?" Jake squinted one eye. "Boss, I think there's one more thing you need tuh say."

"Aw, hell," Chet blustered. "They don't need to know. Brodie's got to be leaving soon and..."

"Like hell." Jake wasn't one to let his temper go but when he did, it fired.

Brodie only laughed.

"They need tuh know big-time," the ranch hand and friend demanded. "And I ain't leaving until yuh tell 'em."

Brodie knew there was something else. Now came the time of truth. "Have you lost money, Dad? Most of your fortune? The ranch isn't in trouble, is it?"

His father's face quirked, drawing deeper lines into his leather skin. "Hell, no, boy. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's business. It ain't that. The ranch is secure for many future generations. Trust me."

Brodie stood, pissed that his father wouldn't come clean. "Then if it isn't that, what the hell is it?"

Chet's face paled. Then he huffed and relaxed his stance as he crossed his arms. "I got lung cancer." He rolled his eyes, acting like the disease was nothing.

"What?" Brodie wanted to be sick. He'd just gotten his father back and here he could lose him again.

His dad shrugged. "It ain't bad. I probably still have a few years. They want to treat it but I won't let 'em. Aw, hell, I just don't want to go through the aggravation. Besides," he waved off Brodie's concern, "who the hell cares?"

Brodie wanted to go to him but he couldn't. Chet never did take to another's affections, except his mother's.

Brodie knew how he felt. To his dad, to him, it would have shown weakness to himself at a time when he needed to feel as strong as possible. It was a personal thing.

Instead, he sat and rested his elbows on his knees then folded his hands. "I do." He could barely mouth the words. But in doing so, he realized he'd accomplished the one thing Elena had asked of him—he'd forgiven his father.

He cleared his throat and spoke louder. "I do, Dad. And I'll be damned if we won't go down fightin' this. I promise. I'll be here."

Tears filled Chet's gray eyes. "Son," he choked.

For once, Brodie forgot those damn rules he'd grown up by. He went to his father and held him, let him cry.

"I'm so sorry, Brodie," Chet said against him, holding him as if he'd lose him again.

Brodie hugged him to his chest. "Dad, it's all right. I forgive you."

They stood there a moment and Brodie for once relished his father's affection.

"If it ain't a miracle," Jake blubbered. "One Crawford sayin' he's sorry an' another sayin' he's forgiven."

Both Brodie and his dad turned to look at Jake. The cowhand dabbed his eyes. "God have mercy, I'd never believe it if I ain't seen it for myself."

Chet started laughing first. Then Elena.

Chet patted Brodie on the back. "Well, hell then, who says you cain't teach an old dog new tricks."

Jake sniffed. "Hell, it just ain't the old dog. Ya'll have that damn 'gotta get even' gene inherited. About time yuh did somethin' 'bout it."

With that, everyone laughed. Even Brodie. And when he looked at Elena, he knew, somehow they'd make everything right.

* * * * *

It was dark. Exhausted, Janie slept, this time leaning against Elena as Brodie took them home. They were all exhausted. The day had held so much. Elena studied the man behind the wheel. Brodie had matured, grown more handsome if that was possible. And for once, angst and danger didn't seem to hover around him like a cloud. He glanced at her and gave her a tired smile. "Been one helluva day." His eyes radiated with warmth, love. She had only dreamed of seeing that and now it was a reality.

She grinned back. "You can say that again. A wonderful day, all in all."

Brodie's smile beamed before he looked back at the road.

Inside, her heart fluttered. She loved him. Before, she had only dreamed of them being together as a family, never believing it could be possible. Yet, here they were. She sighed and reminisced on the day's miracles. Before they left the ranch, Brodie had gotten Chet's promise to take the therapy and whatever else he could to beat this thing. And Brodie promised to get an early out and come back to the ranch to help his father, emphasizing that he loved what he did but he loved her more, and *his* family was more important to him than anything else.

Then they'd driven to her father's. Nervously, she'd held on to Brodie, afraid of what her father would say.

She shouldn't have worried. After her mother ran into the yard and grabbed Janie and her close, there was nothing Luke could do. He just shrugged and welcomed Brodie. Brodie even asked permission to court her.

Luke smirked and gave his tentative approval.

After having had part of his family almost killed, her father was just glad they were home.

She grinned with happiness. Like she'd said, all in all, the day had grown to be the best she'd ever had.

Reaching her street, Brodie pulled into the driveway and parked. "Wait there. I'll get Janie," he said then hopped out and ran around the side to open her door, helping her out then gently lifting Janie in his arms. She moaned a bit then settled into the crook of his neck. "Little pumpkin, huh?" He gently kissed her temple and gleamed at Elena. "I think she broke the old man's crusty shell, this little one of ours." He gazed at her with amazement. Elena imagined he was still stunned with the knowledge he had a daughter.

Then the porch light came on and her front door opened. Elena jumped and almost screamed, not expecting anyone, her nerves still raw from the danger they had faced.

Her breathing leveled when her partner walked out. "Ya'll coming in or are you just deciding to stay out there all night?"

"You could have warned us or something. You scared me out of my skin."

"Sorry." He shrugged.

Brodie had only swerved, staring a moment until his eyes adjusted and he recognized him. "Oh, it's you," he muttered deadpan. "Guess I should thank you for trying to find us."

Larry chuckled. "Yeah, well, unfortunately it didn't work. When I found out the CIA was involved, I got more concerned, so I just decided to be here when you got back. Besides, the wife wouldn't have it otherwise. She wanted me to be sure." He glanced between the two of them, ever the detective. He didn't miss a thing. He snickered as he looked at her. "Should I rub it in now or wait until you get in the office?"

Elena huffed.

Brodie lifted a brow. "Rub what?"

Larry nodded. "What I told her." He came to them and looked between Brodie and Janie then gazed at Elena. "I told you he'd be good for you. You're good for each other, it seems. Well, glad you're home." He kissed Elena on the forehead. "I'll talk to you later, partner." Then he eyed Brodie. "Unless of course, you want me to wait a few days. I imagine you have a lot of catching up to do." He smirked.

Brodie took a quick glance at Elena then nodded at him. "I can't answer for Elena but I can tell you I'd appreciate it. I only have a few more days before I have to report back."

"Will do." Larry jerked a nod and whistled as he walked off.

"Is that all you wanted?" Elena yelled after him. "To see we got home?"

He stopped to look at her and nodded. "You know Gloria. She wouldn't rest until I saw you with my own two eyes. Just remember." He glanced at Brodie. "I said you needed someone to keep your bed warm at night. I think maybe you found him."

Brodie chuckled.

Growling, she cut her eyes to Larry and quirked her mouth. "I think maybe you need to keep your thoughts to yourself."

She crossed her arms, feeling a bit embarrassed. Larry whistled the whole damn way to his car.

They watched him and waved as he drove off.

"Maybe I'll get to like your partner after all." A mischievous curl to Brodie's lip gave him a roguish air that sent Elena's libido in a tailspin.

She wanted him. Always.

"Not a bad idea, to my way of thinking," Brodie said and leaned in to caress her lips with his. "To keep the bed sheets warm that is."

"Yeah?" she muttered then leaned against him and brushed his cheek with her thumb. "I bet."

He kissed her. "Let's get our daughter to bed. I want to spend some time with her mother and show her how sorry I am for everything. That is, if she'll let me after the ass I've been."

She smiled, her heart breaking. "I just might." But doubts assailed her. "Brodie, there's so many things between us, so many years. We've both changed."

He locked her lips with his and outlined the edges with his tongue, plunging inside when she groaned and parted her mouth.

Breathing heavier, he released her and stared into her eyes. "There's still this between us, Elena, our desire to be together. And our daughter. I want you both in my life. And I'm willing to prove it."

She fingered his collar. "And just how do you plan to do that?" she said, lowering her voice into a seductive drawl.

He smirked. "Let me inside and I'll show you."

"Hmmm, I see..." She tilted her head and smiled then kissed him for good measure.

Turning, she walked into the house. Brodie followed, kicking the front door closed after he entered. She flipped the hall light on and led him to Janie's room. After she pulled down the covers, Brodie gently laid their daughter down and removed her shoes then pulled up the covers, tucking her underneath. "You think she'll be all right? She's been through a lot today." He couldn't keep his eyes off her.

"We'll leave the door open just in case."

He nodded and pulled her into his side. "She's beautiful, Elena." His voice choked. "I'm sorry you had to take care of her without me."

"Brodie, it's okay." She leaned into him and circled her arms around his torso. "At least I had her to remind me of you. You didn't have anyone." She wondered how much he'd suffered, what he'd been through with the Army. "I'm sorry too. I let my pride get in the way. It was as much my fault as yours." She laid her head against his chest, sadness threatening to overwhelm her.

"It's okay, Elena." He rubbed her back as he pulled her close. "We have today and the rest of our tomorrows."

She glanced at him. "Do you really think so?"

He smiled and the quirk of his lips made her blood surge. "I promised I'd prove it to you."

She watched his Adam's apple bob, fingering it then down the vee at the top where the button-down shirt lay opened. "I want you to spend the night, Brodie. I want you to spend every night. I want this to work between us."

"So do I." Quickly, he lifted her into his arms, carrying her out the door. She pointed to her room and Brodie swept her inside, laying her softly on the covers then he lay beside her, stroking his fingers through her hair. His gaze deepened, his blue eyes became the color of a dark sea. "I never thought I'd hear you say that though. I thought when I left eight years ago I had lost you for good. Elena, you don't know how much I hurt."

She wanted to cry but couldn't seem to shed any more tears. Instead, she choked out her words. "I know. I did too. I realized too late that when I let you walk out the door, I had made the worst mistake of my life." She sniffed. "Chet broke us apart, Brodie, but now he's brought us together. I don't want to lose another moment to regret. I want to live my life with you, make love to you and prove that you're the only one I want or need."

His eyes glistened. He caressed her cheek with his fingers then hovered over her and grasped her lips with his. She matched every stroke of his tongue with hers.

And he tasted like heaven.

"At least this part didn't get broke," he whispered against the softness of her mouth, the warmth of his breath stroking her skin, "the passion we have for each other. Elena, I love you. I always have and I always will."

Emotions swelled inside, the need for him filling her. "You don't know what that means to me. I feel the same but I don't know if I can ever really tell you in words." She slowly undid the buttons of his shirt. "So maybe I can show you instead." When she reached the last one, she stripped the shirt off him. Rolling him over, she sat on top of his crotch and ran her palms up his chest, combing through the curly red hairs that made a vee from his abdomen to his chest.

He groaned.

"I love you, Brodie." Leaning against him, she licked then nibbled the lobe of his ear, nipping his neck, going lower to the nipple on his breast, using her hand to coddle his penis through his jeans.

"Jesus, Elena," his hips pressed into her palm. "Hon, you know I don't have anything to protect you with."

She giggled. "Remember I told you I was covered in the baby area. Besides, if we're going to make this a long-term thing," she stopped lavaging him and looked into his face, "then I want a boy, and maybe this time he'll look just like me instead."

He laughed. "Then I never could get mad at him. He'd be too smart and figure me out."

She giggled then lowered her body to nip his chiseled abs. Opening the fly to his pants, she pulled down the clothing that prevented her access to his sex.

"Jesus, Elena," he groaned as his cock sprung from the binding.

She ran the edge of her teeth over the hard organ and licked the sensitive head.

He shivered as he got harder and lifted himself on his elbows to look at her. "God, Elena, no one has ever touched me like you."

She lifted a corner of her mouth, knowing he'd had several women. "I'm sure you've had this done before." She sobered. "I just want you to know that I'll love you in any way I can."

He lifted her chin with the crook of his finger and his cerulean eyes probed her soul. "Elena, I want you to know, every time I slept with a woman, the only one I thought about was you. There was never anyone else. Not in my heart, anyways."

"Oh, Brodie..." She swallowed, her throat closed with tears. She bit back the sadness. No more would they be apart. "Then take me. Because I have always been yours."

Rising, she stripped quickly, and his breathing deepened. His eyes never left her. His penis throbbed as she slowly peeled off each piece. Inside, she knew he was hers and she relished the effect she was having on him, knowing this one man held her heart.

When she crawled on the bed and straddled him, she gazed into his heady eyes with all that she had. "Love me, Brodie. Always. And I promise, you'll never be alone, never want for love again."

His eyes glistened. "It's all I've ever dreamed of." He stroked her cheek, brushing the hair back from her face.

"Brodie..." She leaned against him and smiled, shaking her head in disbelief that this time had finally come. "It's all I ever wanted."

The corners of his mouth lifted into the grin that had first stolen her heart. "Then, yes, ma'am. I will." He pulled her mouth to his, sealing their hearts with a kiss. "You and me," he whispered. "Until death us do part and beyond."

A warmth grabbed her inside, more than just the sex. Finally, she knew she was loved by the one man that she had loved alone, and when he entered her, Elena knew that whatever was ahead, they would work it out. And when she came, she knew he was hers forever.

About the Author

This award winning author, after writing and producing a neighborhood play at the tender age of six (earning all of twenty cents), took a sabbatical of many years before she found the love of creative writing again. Now, having earned her MBA and CPA, raised four children (three as a single parent), Lise brings her adventurous spirit and extensive experience to her captivating stories. Lise has traveled to several countries, studying the culture and enjoying the native way of life, and has explored our world from the watery depths of the Caribbean to the heights of the Rocky Mountains. Having married her hero, an ex-82nd Airborne paratrooper, she devotes her time to writing, educating the couple's thirteen-year-old, and her own personal accomplishment—body sculpting. Some comments of her work include:

It's the BEST I've read...in a very long time!

The emotion! Fast paced and sexy.

You just know it's going "to be Hot."

Great hooks! Drew me in right away.

You have a great voice. Love your characters!

Lise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

Also by Lise Fuller

Cutting Loose

On Danger's Edge



Cerridwen, the Celtic goddess of wisdom, was the muse who brought inspiration to storytellers and those in the creative arts. Cerridwen Press encompasses the best and most innovative stories in all genres of today's fiction. Visit our site and discover the newest titles by talented authors who still get inspired – much like the ancient storytellers did, *once upon a time*.

www.cerridwenpress.com