

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

*Back In
Your Arms*

Laura Guevara



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This book is dedicated to all the men and women who risk
their lives every day to serve their country. Thank you for
your service!

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Much love,

Laura

Caveat

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

One

Horn of Africa: Bosaso, Somalia

Not even 10 AM and already the temperatures were in the nineties. The blazing sun bearing down on Vadik would have the temperatures soaring even higher by that afternoon. Yet on patrol, he had no protection other than the sunblock he'd slathered on that morning.

He'd been hired on to protect Sergei, a top member of the Zakarov family. Sergei was in the busy Somali port to complete business on an arms deal that had started back in Moscow. This was the second day and already everyone who'd made the trip was ready to return back home. None of them were used to the sweltering heat. Right now, Sergei was still asleep in his air-conditioned room and wouldn't be leaving again until after lunch. Adjusting his AK-47, Vadik continued with his patrol until midday.

"Vadik, Boss calling for you inside," someone yelled down to him in Russian.

He looked up, confused. This was not good. Sergei never called for someone unless there was trouble. "Shit!" he exclaimed under his breath. Putting out his cigarette, he went to the main house. A guard took his gun at the door. No matter, he had one in his boot along with several deadly knives.

“Ah, Vadik, there you are.” Sergei stood by a window dressed in a white shirt and khaki pants, looking very much like a tourist.

Vadik nodded in acknowledgement. He wouldn’t speak unless directed to do so. He looked straight on, aware of the three guards standing behind him and two others on either side of Sergei.

“I have heard very disturbing news about you, Vadik.” He still remained silent. “Do you want to hear what it is?”

Vadik shrugged, “Matters not; most everybody who knows me has nothing good to say.”

“This is different Vadik. I was told that you are not who you say you are.”

“Who did they say I was?”

“A traitor,” Sergei spat venomously.

Vadik remained impassive. “You heard wrong.”

“I do not like being made a fool of Vadik, especially not by a lowly American like you.”

Without warning, someone hit him on the back of the head. The last coherent thought before everything went dark was wondering how the hell Sergei knew he was an American.

Two

A rural house somewhere in Somalia

Studying his surroundings, Captain James Burckhardt saw no windows to let the air in or him out. The only exit was the closed door shutting him from the outside world. He sat in a metal chair with ropes tying his feet to the front legs and his arms pulled behind him to the back of the chair. The chair was somehow bolted down to the floor and no amount of moving or pushing could dislodge it. Held captive in a remote village in Somalia in a miserable, little room, the chances of escaping alive were slim to none for anyone but him. As the leader of his special ops team, he had to be patient for it to save him. Or at the very least, get his body back home.

James trusted his second-in-command to get him out alive. He just had to keep enduring whatever his captors inflicted. He'd witnessed several interrogations during his stint with the Zakarov family; but knowing what was coming had not prepared him for enduring the indescribable, searing pain they inflicted.

For the past ten months, James had been deep undercover as Vadik Dashkov. Vadik had been able to infiltrate the Zakarov organization, a notorious Russian mafia family. They were deadlier and scarier than any of the mafia families the United States had ever seen. They had close ties to terrorist

organizations and often employed terroristic tactics to gain control. Olik Zakarov didn't follow any rules and stopped at nothing to get what he wanted. Olik coveted power, control, and money. He demanded loyalty. Nobody stood in his way. Nobody ever challenged the forty-four year old mob boss.

Olik had taken control of the family enterprise twelve years ago after a bloody and deadly power struggle, where it was rumored he'd killed his two brothers, their wives, and children as an example for those who'd oppose his takeover and for anyone thinking of double crossing him. There was nothing Olik wouldn't do to get the respect he thought he deserved. Olik learned fear was his greatest motivator. Money was a close second. He wielded both with terrifying results.

When US intelligence had learned he was trying to expand his operations to include the United States, the CIA and Force Recon had teamed up to stop Zakarov from doing so. After months of intel and planning, Operation Ice Zak had been formed. James had been recruited to become Vadik Dashkov because he was fluent in Russian, trained in infiltration tactics, adept at special reconnaissance and tactical casualty care, and one of the more reliable agents in unconventional special operations. And, like his second-in-command had joked, he had the "Russian thug" look locked down. With blue eyes, blond hair, and a disposition as friendly as a viper, he made the perfect Russian gangster. Vadik would gather as much information about the inner workings of the Zakarov, who they associated with, and how they laundered their dirty money. The higher-ups

had considered placing bugs, but James had quickly shot that plan down. Olik was very paranoid. He conducted bug sweeps every couple of days.

Letting his head fall forward against his chest, James tried to alleviate some of the pain. He racked his brain trying to figure out how they'd discovered he was an American undercover agent. As Vadik, he'd gained some resemblance of trust, working his way to the top of the chain of command within months of joining the organization.

Keeping his communication minimal, almost nonexistent, he was careful not to give the bastards any ammo to use against him. When he'd learned he'd be one of the twenty or so men who accompanied Sergei, Olik's top lieutenant, for protection as he met with warlords that controlled a vast majority of Somalia, he'd informed his team about as much as the trip as he could. Once he'd arrived in Somalia, he'd again contacted his team and had relayed his exact coordinates. Yet for all his careful planning and staying in character, Sergei had still learned of his double life.

James wasn't sure where he was exactly but he assumed they'd taken him to a rundown shack in a remote location in the middle of nowhere. It was how Sergei operated. James hadn't had the chance to fight off the men as they'd tied him to a chair because he'd been unconscious from the blow he'd received at Sergei's house.

"What is your real name," they'd asked him repeatedly.

"Vadik Dashkov. My real name is Vadik."

“Lie!” someone would respond in English, and James’s head would snap back as some bastard pulled on his long hair to land another punch to his face. During one of these times, James had vowed to cut it all off as soon as he could.

Over and over they’d asked where he was from, who he was, for whom he worked. When they hadn’t liked his responses, they’d rain blow after blow on every part of his body as they could. Sergei hadn’t been one of the four people in the room, but James had known he would eventually come.

He’d soon lost count of the days. His captors had been merciless trying to coerce him into spilling his guts, but he remained tough. No amount of beatings, taunting, starvation, or threats had broken him. All they knew was James was not who he said he was and kept insisting he was American. He wasn’t sure if that were a good thing because it had only made them more desperate to find out for the facts about him.

After long days and nights of interrogation sessions, James had still not revealed anything to them and Sergei was getting impatient.

“Six days with him,” Sergei, Olik’s loyal lapdog, said in broken English, “you are to be best, yet you not broken him.” He hadn’t let the interrogator respond. He’d pulled out his blade and quickly dispatched it. It had landed with perfect accuracy in the interrogator’s throat, killing him instantly. Sergei had then retrieved his blade and wiped off the blood with his expensive handkerchief, walking toward James.

“I will know who you are, who sent you,” he had promised as he’d run the blade down James’s arm, the new blood combining with the old, dried blood and grime that covered his whole body. “I have business to attend; if not, I deal with you personally. I fly in a new man, an apprentice of mine that will have you begging, crying for mama.”

James wasn’t sure, but he thought that had been two days ago. Nobody had been back to question him since then, and he was worried no one ever would. He had given himself new injuries trying to dislodge the chair and rope that bound his feet and hands. Screaming hadn’t helped, either. He wasn’t sure if no one had heard him or if people had decided to ignore his cries for help. Either way, whether they came back to finish the job or they simply left him, he was a dead man. All the people he had killed, all the things he had done to rid the world of the sadistic bastards was going to land him in hell with them. The only good thing in his life was thousands of miles away and probably cursing his very existence.

He focused his thoughts on Carolina to forget his agonizing pain. Her smile, her scent. How her soft, curvy body felt under his bigger, harder one. How she’d repeated her name and had him practice until he could roll the Rs to her satisfaction. James knew six languages, but he couldn’t roll his Rs until he met Carolina. He would never forget the last days they’d spent together before he shipped out a year ago. She had taken four days off from work and during all of them they’d been naked in her apartment. He closed the eye that wasn’t already swollen

shut, grinning despite his dry, bloodied lips, as he relived the ways they had made love.

“Black Wolf, we’re busting our ass trying to save yours and you’re sitting there with a damn smile on your face!”

His eye snapped open. Standing before him was his best friend, trusted partner, and fellow special ops agent.

“Satan, you don’t know how damn relieved I am to see you!” James managed to get out through parched lips.

“Bet you thought you’d be meeting the real one for sure! You didn’t hear us whistling, signaling our approach? We thought you were dead for sure!” he chided him as the rest of the rescue team entered.

Quickly moving to him, Satan began breaking through the ropes to release him. James was too weak to stand on his own and felt his knees start to give before Dragon, another team member, moved in to help him from disgracing himself by collapsing on the floor and sustaining new injuries. James’s whole body was on fire as they led him out of the hellhole where he’d been imprisoned. They didn’t stop until they reached the Black Hawks waiting for them. The sun was bearing down, blinding James and making him rely heavily on Dragon and Satan for support. He nodded to the rest of the team, damn grateful to see them again.

Once inside the helicopter, the medics started checking for vitals, prodding and poking him, asking him questions, but all James wanted to do was the one thing he’d avoided so far—

pass out. He could do that now, knowing he was safe and would be reunited with Carolina soon.

“How bad is it,” Satan asked the medic attending James. The team leader had promptly fainted as soon as the copters had lifted. Dried blood and dirt covered James’s entire body. The right side of his face was swollen, barely recognizable. The only thing he was wearing was a pair of filthy boxers. The bastards hadn’t finished James off, but an infection certainly could.

“His pulse is weak but steady. If he hadn’t been rescued today, this would have been a recovery mission instead of a rescue.”

Satan nodded and cursed the worthless pieces of shit that had done this to James. After making sure his friend was in stable condition at the base hospital, he was going to track those responsible and take them out of existence.

“Your informants were correct, Satan. Black Wolf was just where they described. How the hell did they get that information?” Hammer, the other special ops agent, asked.

“I don’t care how they got it. All I was concerned about was getting him out alive,” Satan said savagely.

For the next hour, all remained silent as they flew back to the US base in the neighboring country of Djibouti where James would be stabilized before flying back home. Satan would gather as much intel as he could before moving out. Even now there was a special ops team he’d handpicked back in the hell-

hole where Sergei had kept James, trying to learn as much as they could from the area.

Satan would also need all the information he could get from James so he could start his investigation into who'd leaked the valuable top-secret information. Only a number of people knew about this mission. He had already begun his inquiry into everyone associated with Ice Zak, but he wanted to hear what James had to say before going any further. Looking back down at his friend, the anger burned through him at seeing James in this condition. He vowed to do whatever necessary to punish those responsible.

Satan, or Second Lieutenant Santiago del Olmos, along with the rest of the team, had been on the Djibouti US base when James had informed them of the trip to Somalia. The team followed wherever their leader went, especially to a country as volatile as Somalia.

When Santiago had announced James had been taken captive, the CIA had wanted proof James had been taken. The team hadn't needed proof, however; the members had believed and trusted Santiago. So, they mounted their own secret operation and had searched for their team captain and friend.

Three

Three months later...Walter Reed Army Medical Center

“Burckhardt, you are the most stubborn son of a bitch I have ever worked with!” his commanding officer Colonel Waters said as he watched James do some physical therapy. “The doctor wants you to stay for another two months.”

James felt the therapist working with him flinch at the colonel’s tone.

“I’m leaving at the end of the month. I can finish the rest of my physical therapy back home.”

“That’s not the point goddamn it! We still don’t know who blew your cover. You could still be in danger!”

James had heard this from everyone who’d checked in on him. The only one who had not given him this speech was Santiago. He was also the only one who understood James’s desire to get back home as soon as possible. Although he had several houses throughout the States, the one place he considered home was a secure house outside of San Antonio near Lackland Air Force Base. The only other person who knew this was Santiago, and James trusted him to keep the secret. It was where he’d first seen Carolina.

James thought back to that time. He had recently returned from a tough mission that had not gone as planned. Needing to clear his mind, he’d left base, looking for a park.

Finding one not too far, he'd set out for his usual five-mile morning run. The sun hadn't yet risen, and it had been silent. It had fitted his mood just fine as he made his way down the trail. An hour later he'd still been going strong, his energy limitless, his mood less deadly.

He'd reached the other side of the park, following a clear path. Others had come out for their morning runs as well. One in particular had caught his attention. About fifty yards in front of him, the woman had been wearing black running pants and a turquoise fitted tee that had been hard to miss. Her ponytail had swished as she'd made her way around a bend. But her figure had garnered his attention. The only thing average about her was her height. Her body was as curvy as the trail they were on. Strong, thick thighs and a full, round ass, he couldn't take his eyes off of her lovely lower half. Becoming her shadow, he'd slowed his pace and followed her. Four miles later, she'd stopped at a corner store across the street from the trail.

James couldn't help but enter as well. She hadn't noticed him as she went to coolers located in the back. He'd slowly gone down another aisle, keeping out of her line of sight. After she'd returned to the front, he'd grabbed bottled water for himself.

"I know I have some money somewhere," she'd muttered, checking the pockets that were on her shirt. She'd pulled out her cell phone and a set of keys but no money.

“I got this,” he’d said as he’d come forward and put his water bottle next to hers. Taking a five-dollar bill from his shorts pocket, he’d handed it to the cashier.

“Thank you,” the woman had said as the cashier handed back the change. They’d grabbed the bottles and gone back outside. Walking down the street, they’d both rehydrated themselves before speaking again, the cold, clear liquid feeling so good as it went down.

“Thanks again for the water. I could’ve sworn I put my money inside my pocket,” she’d said before taking another long drink.

“You’re welcome. James Burckhardt,” he’d introduced himself.

“Carolina de Anda.” She’d accepted his outstretched hand with a firm handshake, never breaking eye contact with him. He’d admired right away. She was confident.

Some tendrils of hair had slipped from her ponytail, clinging around her face, just like her T-shirt had clung to her sweaty body. He’d felt an instant attraction to her. Towering over her smaller frame, her head barely reached his shoulder. He must have taken too long in his inspection because she’d looked down at herself.

“What? Do I have something on me? A bug?”

“No, just checking to see if you were wearing a ring,” he’d heard himself say.

“No, I’m not wearing one, but that doesn’t mean I’m not in a serious relationship,” she’d countered.

Her challenge had made him smile. “I don’t think you are.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because no man would let his woman run this early looking like that.” Again, he’d let his eyes roam from the top of her head to the bottom of her shoes.

“That’s the most absurd...what do you mean ‘dressed like that’? There’s nothing wrong with the way I’m dressed!”

James had suspected the color in her cheeks had had nothing to do with exertion and everything to do with her growing anger. She’d been exquisite. But most importantly, he’d been intrigued. It had been many years since he’d last felt this way.

“I mean, you are dressed too provocatively to be running by yourself this early in the morning. Your clothes enhance every curve on your body, tempting every male you run across. If you were my woman, you wouldn’t be allowed out in public looking so alluring, much less to run by yourself this early.”

“Did we somehow get sent back in time? That is the most chauvinistic, egoistical bullshit I’ve ever heard! It’s comments like those that set back women’s rights! And you’re damn right I’m not your woman. I wouldn’t be in a relationship with someone who has caveman tendencies like you!”

She’d started to storm away but he’d stopped her.

“You never answered my question.”

“What question? All I heard was a bunch of bullshit spilling from your mouth!”

He'd ignored that. "Are you in a relationship?"

"That is none of your damn business!"

"I take that as a no. How does dinner tonight sound?"

"Like it's never going to happen! Didn't you hear me say I don't date men who behave like cavemen?"

"Who said anything about dating? I'm talking about dinner and then going back to my place or yours."

The saucy little wench had sealed her fate when she'd merely thanked him for the water and jogged to her car. James had become more than intrigued then, determined to have her. He'd seen the spark of lust and attraction in her eyes regardless of what her mouth had said. And as he'd watched her drive away, he'd committed her license plate to memory.

His commanding officer still yelling at him brought James out of his memories.

"I've made up my mind, Colonel. I will be leaving at the end of the month. I can do my physical therapy from anywhere. I promise to continue with it, but I'm going home."

Seeing he wasn't going to change his mind, Colonel Waters left. James continued with his exercises. He tried not to think too much about his captivity. During the day, he could keep the memories at bay; but at night, he relived every single nightmare of his imprisonment. He learned he'd lost eight days of his life. The doctors had told him he would need extensive physical therapy to rehabilitate his shoulder. It had been dislocated, then applied with pressure that would've had most men faint dead away from the pain. James hadn't thought a human

body couldn't survive that much agony. Yet, he had, much to the disgust of his torturers.

James switched mental gears and went over what he was going to say to Carolina. He wasn't sure what he would find when he returned to San Antonio, but he was damned if he'd stay away much longer. A year was too long already. He reminded himself that she could've moved on with her life. He shouldn't begrudge her of that, but another part of him would go into a killing rage if there was another man in her life. With his training, it would be simple to make someone disappear. Never before would he have thought this way, but Carolina meant that much to him.

Four

“Carolina, we aren’t taking no for an answer! You either get dressed yourself or we will do it for you!”

Carolina looked at the faces of her three best friends and sister. They were all dressed for a night out on the town and they wanted her to go with them.

“We’ve already gone out three weekends in a row. Why do we have to go out again? Why can’t I just stay home?” She knew she sounded like a little whiny baby, but she really did *not* want to go out tonight. She just wanted to take a relaxing bath and get some reading done. Carolina had had a funny and uneasy feeling all day long that she couldn’t shake. A little nervous, a little anxious, the last thing she wanted was a night out with her sister and friends.

“*Chica*, you have ten seconds before I drag your ass to your room and change you!” This was from her sister Maribel, the oldest and therefore Ms. Know-It-All. She was also the tallest at five-nine. Maribel looked like a model but she was a total computer geek. She’d quit her IT job in Dallas with a big law firm to come back to San Antonio. It hadn’t taken long for Maribel to find a job, helping two local business owners to expand their bookstore and busy café to include wi-fi and a computer room/lounge area. They were in the process of renovating the top floor, getting it ready for Maribel.

“Then I’m going to strap you to your vanity chair so I can do your hair and makeup,” her best friend since second grade, Lizzie spoke up. At twenty-six Lizzie had also just moved back from College Station where she’d graduated with a degree in Veterinary Medicine. She, too, had recently found a job at a local veterinary clinic.

“And what the hell are y’all going to be doing?” She turned to Jessica and Crystal, friends she’d met at college.

“Helping me, is what,” Maribel said as she toed off her stilettos, coming towards her, “your time is up.”

They were certifiable, all of them. Yet she couldn’t help but thank the Lord every day for each and every one of them.

“Okay, okay. I will go change,” she said, giving in. She knew she wouldn’t get rest otherwise. They followed her to her room, of course, and gave suggestions on what she should wear and how she should do her hair and makeup.

“Don’t you have something short and sexy, Caro?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

Carolina simply let them do what they wanted until they found a dress she’d specifically bought for James. It was a little black, low-cut number that had brought him to his knees. The dinner she’d taken hours to make had ended up forgotten in the kitchen as he’d fucked her on the couch in his urgency. He’d told her in no uncertain terms that she was not to wear the dress but for him, if he hadn’t already ripped it, that was.

Carolina had kept up her end of the promise; but since she hadn’t heard from him in over a year, she figured the prom-

ise was now null and void. She allowed them to talk her into wearing it. She'd never told them about James's reaction, and she wouldn't because it was a killer dress and she didn't want to see it burn to ashes in her fireplace.

With a final swipe of her brush, she stood back and looked herself over in the full-length mirror. The black, halter-top dress was made of soft gauze, stretchy material that showed off her toned arms and cleavage to perfection. She had lost some weight since the last time she'd worn it, but the dress still did its job, the fabric clinging to every curve on her body. Her dark, thick hair fell in waves about her shoulders. Jessica and Lizzie had spent a lot of time and hair products to give her the shiny, bouncing curls elite salons advertised.

"Stunning," she heard Lizzie say.

"*Dios mio*, we're going to have to go home to get daddy's shotgun," Maribel joked.

"Just remember that this was *your* idea!" Carolina reminded her sister, then she took a deep breath. "Okay, let's go before I change my mind." Gathering their things, they filed out the room and out her apartment. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Locking the door, they made it down the stairs. Carolina prayed with each step she took, trying to walk down the stairs in three-inch stilettos without breaking her neck. If she happened to tumble down, no doubt she'd land on the hard, concrete floor.

“You remember my friend Marci? Well, she works at a new club called *Atormente* that opened up last month. She added us to the guest list so we can skip the lines,” Jessica explained as they made their way inside the SUV.

“Isn’t *atormente* Spanish for—?”

“Tantalizing,” Jessica finished for Carolina. “I can’t wait! I read in the weekender that it has some of the best music. The owner already has clubs in Houston, Dallas, and Austin.”

On the drive to *Atormente*, they filled Carolina in on the clubs, the sexy owners, and some of the celebrities who had danced the night away there.

~*~

Even though James had considered Carolina could possibly not be home, it still burned him to find not only that she wasn’t, but she also wasn’t answering her cell or house phones. Looking at the clock on the dashboard, he saw he’d been waiting for over three hours for her to come back home. Already midnight, he wasn’t leaving until she returned. Parked with a clear view of her apartment, he’d driven straight here after the plane had landed. He had to see her. She was the best thing in his life, and he was prepared to drop down and grovel at her feet, do whatever it took, to get back in her arms.

James wasn’t sure what he would do if she came back with a date. He usually considered himself a level-headed man,

he had to be in his position, but seeing Carolina with another man would simply be too much.

Couple more hours passed and he was still waiting. “Fuck,” he cursed, banging his steering wheel in frustration. Another pair of lights turned the corner, making its way towards him. It looked like it belonged to a large SUV. The vehicle pulled into an empty spot, its motor still running. Sitting up on alert, James watched the door open, his fists closing and opening in agitation.

Finally, Carolina stepped out into the night in the black dress he’d forbidden her to ever wear again. He thought he had ripped it in his need to have her, but obviously she’d been able to mend it. He’d make sure that sexy little bit of material would never be wearable again.

Biding his time, James saw her say goodbye to the others in the car. He could only assume they were her sister and friends. Good thing, since he didn’t want to waste any time of their reunion disposing of any bodies. As soon as Carolina started up the stairs, he exited his truck. The SUV waited until she opened her door before driving off. James wasted no time running across the parking lot, taking the stairs two at a time up to her apartment.

Not bothering with the doorbell, he pounded on the door until she opened it.

“I said—?!” Carolina stopped midsentence when she registered him.

James wanted so much to reach out to her and lose himself in her, but he knew once she recovered from the shock, there would be hell to pay.

He was right.

She slammed the door in his face, only to open it seconds later.

“How dare you just show up after all this time?! Now that I know you’re alive, I want you to stay the hell out of my life!” She would’ve slammed the door in his face again but he wedged his foot between the door and its frame.

“Carolina, we need to talk,” he said. He knew he sounded plaintive, but he didn’t care. He was going to say his piece.

“No!” she responded, trying to get his foot out of the way, “I don’t want or care to hear what you have to say. You had a whole fucking year to talk and now it’s just too fucking late! You are so fucking lucky I don’t own a gun or I would shoot your damn foot off!”

The anger blazing in her eyes didn’t deter him. Making his way inside, he closed and locked the door behind him, dropping his overnight bag by the door. Turning towards her, he realized she was getting ready to start yelling at him again.

He beat her to it. “I thought I told you never to wear this dress again.”

“Fuck you! I can wear whatever the hell I want! I don’t need your goddamn permission!”

“Who did you wear it for? Another man?” James knew he was antagonizing her, but he needed her to say she hadn’t been on a date.

“What if I did?”

“Carolina, you don’t want to anger me right now, baby. I’m in no mood—”

“Neither am I! I want you to get the hell out of my apartment right now!”

She tried to move around him to the door, but he pulled her into him instead.

James quickly brought his mouth down on hers, stopping her tirade. Words couldn’t express how great she felt in his arms. This was what had kept him alive during all those dark moments. Her tongue dueled with his, showing him how much she still wanted him. Her breasts pressed against his chest; her arms wrapped around his neck; her scent filled his senses. His hands caressing all of her softness was pure bliss, what he lived for. They were trying to touch her everywhere. She didn’t make it easy on him, either, rubbing herself against him, as if needing to get closer after a brief moment of hesitation.

He’d wanted to talk, to explain why he hadn’t been able to contact her. Now, he couldn’t think about what he wanted to say. Seeing her face to face had muddled his mind. Their kissing had burned every single thought in his brain to anything but stripping her naked and getting reacquainted with every inch of her luscious body with his mouth, hands, and cock.

Moving his hands to her ass, he lifted her up and began the walk down to her room, never breaking the kiss.

Carolina was confused. One minute she was wishing she had a gun and the next James was laying her down on the bed. She knew she should put a stop to this, but her body had been deprived for so long that it would be like trying to stop the blood flowing through her body. She just couldn't do it. He felt so good, so strong, and so alive and wanting her that she reveled in his attentions. Tomorrow she would probably hate herself for being so weak and giving in; but tonight, she needed him too much to deny herself.

Breaking away from the kiss, she drew in much-needed air. "This changes nothing."

"*Shh*, baby, just feel. Don't think about anything but me touching you, kissing you, loving you, and fucking you." Moving down her body, he tugged and pulled at the material of her dress, leaving her naked from the waist up.

His eyes were drawn to her heaving chest, her hard nipples puckering before him. His blond head descended to take a bud into his mouth. He began licking and sucking; then, he brought his teeth into play, grazing, tugging, and making her crazier.

Her hands gripped his head, trying to guide it so he could pay the same attention to her other breast.

He only laughed at her antics, pissing her off. He took his sweet time switching nipples.

“James,” she warned, but he continued maintaining his pace.

“God, how I have missed this, Carolina,” he murmured, looking up at her before his mouth came down on her again.

Carolina could do nothing more than bask in his attentions. He remembered how much she loved her breasts to be played with, making her wonder what else he remembered about her body.

His hands began to slide down her belly and then slipped inside her dress, pushing up the material. She couldn’t help the cries and whimpers that escaped her. Her body definitely remembered his and begged for more.

“You feel so good. So soft. So perfect, little Caro,” he kept whispering between kisses. He never stopped praising or kissing any part of her body he came in contact with.

His mouth began to take the same path that his hands had taken. By now, he’d removed her tiny panties without much effort. His mouth soon found that secret part of her that he knew so well. His calloused fingers parted her wet flesh. Carolina could feel his hot breath before his tongue reached out for a taste.

“Carolina,” he breathed, taking her engorged bundle of nerves into his mouth and giving it the same treatment as he had to her breasts.

She couldn’t stay still. Writhing in the bed, she took her pleasure, something she hadn’t thought she’d feel again. It had been so long that she came quickly.

“James! James!” she screamed as her body convulsed in rapture.

Five

James couldn't get enough of her. Her sweet and unique taste was a balm to his tortured soul. Not waiting another a second, he quickly tore off his clothes and moved back on top of her body.

Engaging her in another wet, tongue-dueling kiss, he fitted himself between her supple thighs. He had to have her now. His mouth devoured hers, letting her know how much he'd missed.

Bringing the kiss to an end, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes as he entered her. His eyes conveyed all that he couldn't say out loud. His love, adoration, and respect for her.

Both gasped when he was finally seated all the way inside her, joining them as close as they could be in the tight, wet clasp of her pussy that was adjusting to his size after a year of celibacy.

He began a slow tempo, savoring the moment, letting their bodies get reacquainted. It didn't take long before they both needed something more. Picking up the pace, James began plunging into her welcoming heat, taking them higher and higher.

"Oh, oh, yes...*James*..." Her sweet moans and cries mingled with his groans and grunts of pleasure. He was a man possessed and the single thing that could soothe the animal in him was to reclaim what was his. James needed to hear his name spilling from her lips again and again.

“Almost there, Carolina, just a little bit more...” He continued moving fast and hard into her as he felt her orgasm surge through her body. Her muscles tightening around his cock, her head thrown back, and his name spilling from her mouth sent him over the edge. With quick, powerful thrusts, he finally emptied himself inside Carolina, her sweet pussy milking him, draining him.

He let some of his weight on her, pushing her further into the bed. James knew he was too heavy, but Carolina assured him that she loved the feel of him and he liked it too.

Raining kisses all over her face, he waited until his body relaxed before attempting to speak. His cock had other ideas. After a year without her or anyone else, it was more than ready to make up for lost time, especially with her tight, red-hot pussy squeezing like no other.

James began moving again, a little less frenzied than earlier, but with the same intense need. Before long, they were both shouting out their release.

Sometime later he untangled himself from her arms and went into bathroom. Washing up, he looked in the cabinet for a wash towel to clean her up. Dipping it into the warm water, he rinsed it out before walking back to her.

Carolina sighed as she felt him leave the bed but she had no energy to enjoy the backside view. She was so drained she couldn't even open her eyes, much less close her legs or cover herself. So when James returned to the bedroom, he found her

legs sprawled, her breath still a little choppy, and her eyes closed. She couldn't even remember him removing the dress, but it was most likely lying tattered on the floor.

The wet towel against her center didn't surprise as it once had. James always took excellent care of her after lovemaking, and he still remembered. But that wasn't enough. He might remember how to sexually satisfy her body, yet she still remembered how it felt not knowing where he was or how he was doing. Hell, she didn't even know what he really did for a living other than he was in the military and gone for long periods of time.

Carolina had to be strong, though. She couldn't allow him to just simply move back into her life. But his hands were making it extremely difficult to stay mad at him. She felt him shift again, and then his strong arms enveloped her, her back to his chest.

"James, this isn't—" She was shocked silent when she felt his hardness press into her again.

"I know this is crazy, Caro, but I need you again."

So began another round of lovemaking. Hearts pounding, sweat covering every inch of their bodies they moved in a choreographed rhythm known only to the desire burning inside them.

Six

Wrapping a worn-out Carolina in his arms, James closed his eyes, breathing her in. He hoped that being back in her arms would help keep the nightmares at bay. He'd not had a good night sleep in over a year, always on alert, trying to stay alive.

Listening to Caro's deep, even breathing and feeling the beat of her heart against his palm had his body unwinding and preparing itself for sleep.

James came instantly awake as he felt Carolina move against him. He tightened his arms around her, not wanting to let her out of his embrace. It took him a minute to realize she was still asleep and getting into a more comfortable position. Her squirming had other parts of him coming awake as well. Pinning her under him, he waited until she settled down before trying to go back to sleep.

No such luck. Instead, he used the time to sift through the information Santiago had sent him yesterday. Santiago hadn't managed to uncover much, but he was following a lead in D.C. James had already tapped into his sources, sending cautious inquiries that James was looking for information on a leak.

James thought the number one reason for someone betraying him was greed, so he was digging into the financial history of everyone associated with the mission. It was taking him a little longer than he would've liked, but he had to make sure he covered his ass, not wanting to leave a trail back to him.

James also knew that he wouldn't be able to do it all himself. His computer-hacking skills only took him so far. He would need to find someone with much more expertise in the area and he'd need to guarantee his or her safety.

Several hours later, sunlight started seeping through the shades. Carolina was still fast asleep in his arms. It was a Saturday, so he knew she didn't have to work. He remained still, not wanting to awaken her.

Being back in her arms nourished his soul, restoring faith back into him. He knew it was going to be difficult, but somehow, he was going to keep her in his life. James was going to be as honest as he could and try to answer all of the questions she had for him. It was something he'd never done, but she did deserve that much.

Stretching, Carolina was brought up short. She was trapped under something heavy but warm. Panicking, she opened her eyes and stared right into James's blue ones. It took her a moment for last night's events to come rushing back. They stared at each other, neither wanting to break the peaceful mood with words.

She didn't want to hear what he had to say yet. Being this close to each other brought back memories of how things used to be, showing her exactly what she'd been missing. But more importantly, she knew James needed her right now.

Carolina was mad and hurting, but her turmoil couldn't compare to what she saw in his troubled eyes. Wanting to erase

some of that distress, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly to her. She felt the tension ease out of his body as he snuggled her. Needing to answer nature's call and brush her teeth, however, she made a suggestion.

"Why don't you give me ten minutes and then join me for a shower?"

Rising up on his elbows, he gave her a quick, hard kiss before lifting off of her. Not wasting any time of her ten minutes she dashed to the bathroom starting the water before brushing and rinsing her teeth in record time. She then quickly entered the shower, knowing James would be joining her before the ten minutes were up.

The warm water helped soothe some of her aches. A bath would have been ideal but the shower was more convenient.

James came in as Carolina was under the spray, letting the water soak all of her hair. He picked up the bottle of shampoo and squeezed a generous amount onto his hand.

She turned around and let him massage the shampoo into her hair. He had the best hands. Big and strong, they massaged her scalp as he lathered her thick mane. Going back under the spray, he washed out all of the shampoo before applying the conditioner. Again, his hands worked it into her hair. Carolina sighed, feeling so relaxed and happy.

Without speaking, he finished washing every single part of her body, both with the loofah and his hands. She would

have returned the favor, but he washed himself quickly and efficiently.

Carolina had felt his new scars last night and she could see them now. James said nothing as she traced a nasty-looking one on his bicep. Whatever had happened this past year wasn't good. She could understand that, but she wasn't sure if she could forgive or forget.

Stepping out of the shower, she wound the smaller of the towels around her hair like a turban and wrapped the bigger, fluffy one around her body. Turning, she watched James towel dry.

He had lost some weight. Oh, he was still strong and powerful with a deadly vibe to him, but he'd definitely lost weight. She had so many questions, wanted nothing more than to bombard him with them. At the same time, she wasn't sure she was ready to hear what he had to say. Sighing, she left the bathroom and entered her walk-in closet.

Donning a summer dress, she walked into the bedroom to make the bed. She stripped the sheets off to wash. Then, James brought out the clean sheets and helped her put them on. Once the bed was done, she took the dirty sheets and walked out, knowing James would follow her.

Her utility closet was in the hall before reaching the kitchen. Carolina started the washer, then went into the kitchen to see James starting breakfast. He was mixing something in a large bowl.

"What are you making?"

“Mexican omelet, your favorite.” He added more ingredients to the bowl.

“What can I do to help?” she asked a little awkwardly.

“Just sit here by the island and ask me all the questions you want. I will try to answer as honestly and as much as I can.”

Carolina was a little taken back. Making her way slowly to the island, she pulled out a barstool and got comfortable. James was only wearing his jeans, which were riding low on his hips. There was nothing sexier than watching her man cooking for her looking like that. There was just one small glitch. Was James really Carolina’s man?

Seven

James waited patiently for Carolina to begin her questioning. Though he'd promised to be truthful, there were some questions he wouldn't be able to answer because he didn't know the answers himself. The threat wasn't over and she should know what he was up against, the possible danger to her. She didn't need to know how he'd been tied up and tortured so he'd keep those unbecoming little details to himself.

Finished cutting up the veggies, he dropped them into the searing-hot pan on the stove. He'd sauté them first before adding in the whipped eggs.

"Are you taking care of yourself?"

Out of all the questions she could've started with, she wanted to know the answer to that. He shouldn't be surprised. Carolina had tried to hide her feelings, acting as if his prolonged absences or unanswered questions didn't affect her, but he saw through her façade.

"Yes. I'm still doing my physical therapy."

"You didn't hurt yourself last night, did you, or this morning in the shower?"

Smiling, he turned back to her worried face. "No," he said. "Now ask me what's really on your mind."

"What's the point? I know you won't tell me where you went, what you did, or what happened."

Ah, there was the anger he was waiting for. He poured the mixture into the nonstick pan.

“I don’t even know why I let you in last night,” Carolina muttered, shaking her head. “I told myself that if you ever came back, last thing I would do was let you in my bed.”

James kept an eye on the omelet while Carolina vented. Grabbing the bag of shredded cheese, he added a liberal amount of cheddar before sliding the cooked omelet from the pan onto the plate. He started on the second omelet as Carolina continued.

“Are you even going to say anything? You tell me to ask, but you’re not talking!”

He glanced at her, sprinkling more cheese onto the omelet. “I was on a mission, deep undercover. I couldn’t contact you for fear of blowing it. About four months ago, someone leaked my identity to the people I was investigating. I was held hostage, rescued, and started rehab at a medical base before leaving yesterday and coming back to you.”

“So, let me get this straight, all three hundred sixty-five days could be summarized in one sentence? Well, you want to know how I spent the past year? At first, I was worried that you had finally grown tired of me and found someone else. I spent a lot of time thinking of ways of killing you and that bitch you left me for,” Carolina paused a second to take a deep breath. “But I comforted myself by saying you wouldn’t be so stupid as to leave me for another woman, because of all the things you are, stupid isn’t one of them. Then, I was worried that something

bad happened to you and that I would never know because I have no idea who the hell you really are. I didn't know where to even begin to ask about your well being. I could've missed your fucking funeral. But the single thing that angered me the most was while knowing you weren't always completely honest with me, I still let you get so close that when you left me, it disrupted my life. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was distracted at work. I became someone I didn't know, thought I would never be. All because you left me. So you can take your goddamn explanation and get the hell out of my apartment!"

James moved quickly, getting the pan off the fire and turning to face Carolina.

"Let's get one thing straight. I would never, *ever*, leave you for someone else. How the hell could you even *think* that?! I've always told you the truth about myself. I might have not been able to talk about my job but that was to protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

"From the evil that I face every day," he responded as he crowded her to the island. "I go in and take out the people who would kill an innocent child without blinking an eye. They don't care who they hurt or kill as long as they get what they want. Money and power are the only things these criminal bastards know."

"So being a hero gives you the right to leave me in the dark? For not communicating with me, letting me know you're all right?"

“You don’t get it, do you, Carolina? I don’t tell you anything about what I do because when I’m with you, I want to forget all the horrible things I have seen or done. You’re the only good thing in my life, reminding me there are still decent and honest people on this earth worth risking everything for. As for not contacting you, I admit a year was too long without hearing from me; but at the time, I thought it was for the best. From now on, I’ll make sure that that never happens again.”

Eight

Carolina was stunned. She'd never seen James lose his composure. He was looming over her, intimidating. Although surprised, she wasn't afraid. After his rant, her anger seemed insignificant. While he was out risking his life, she was wallowing in self pity. She knew when she'd become involved with him that he'd be gone for periods of time. He'd warned her about that.

He had just revealed more about his job than he had since she'd known him. Hearing him talk about some of the things he'd done and seen drained her remaining anger.

"I'm sorry," she said into this chest, not able to look him in the eyes.

"Why the hell are you apologizing?" he growled out. "I didn't tell you this to feel sorry for me. I don't need your fucking pity."

"Don't you dare yell or fucking curse at me! I don't feel pity for you, idiot!" She actually didn't know what she felt. A part of her was still mad as hell for the way she pined away for him the past year. Another part of her wanted to be rational, reasonable, to understand what he did. She didn't know what to say.

Luckily, his cell phone's ringing saved Carolina from having to saying anything.

“Burckhardt,” he said into the phone as he made his way out the kitchen, not glancing back at her.

Carolina stung a little at his cold dismissal, but it was probably some important secret work thing that he didn’t want her to know about to protect her.

“Protect my ass,” she snorted as she went to the stove and finished cooking the omelet. When that was done, she popped some bread into the toaster. Then, she set the small kitchen table. Walking back to the fridge, she brought out the orange juice and poured two glasses. Not knowing how long he was going to be, she went ahead and sat down to eat after the toast was done.

Starving after last night, Carolina inhaled her breakfast; and if James didn’t hurry up, she was going to eat his omelet. It had been a long time since she’d had one. In fact, it had been the last breakfast they’d shared together before James had left.

Carolina was ashamed to admit she’d become one of those women who fell apart when a man left her. Her brain had told her to move on, but she just couldn’t do it. Her family and friends couldn’t understand it. Neither could she. The sad part was now that he was back, she felt alive again.

“I see that your appetite has returned,” James commented as he walked back into the kitchen. Carolina had given it and devoured his omelet. They’d been too tasty to deny. “Good. I’m going to have to fatten you a bit.”

“The hell you are! I like being the size I am.” Eight was a good number, her lucky number, and it looked damned good on her.

“We’ll see about that.”

She watched him make another omelet and toast. “So, where do we go from here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s obvious you’re not done with your mission. You want to find out who betrayed you, finish up your physical therapy, and whatever else you have neglected while you were gone. So that probably means you’re going to be going back and forth getting things done. I can’t live like that again, not knowing where you are, if you’re safe or not. I thought I could handle it. Thought it would work out because I didn’t want to feel suffocated, but I just can’t go through with it again.” She paused, taking in his reaction.

“You want to stop seeing each other?” he asked after he’d polished off his omelet and four slices of toast.

“Yes. I think it’s for the best.” Not really, but she didn’t want to go back the empty person she had become.

“You can say that after last night?”

“We both needed last night. It was sort of closure—!”

“Closure?” he repeated, his voice icy.

Carolina was getting a little worried. His gaze locked with hers, sending shivers though her body. This wasn’t the loving man from last night. This was the undercover agent. She

watched as he gathered the dishes and put them into the dishwasher after rinsing them off.

“So, if I were to walk out right now, that would be okay with you?”

Carolina could do nothing more than watch him cross his arms over his naked chest, his hip leaning against the counter while he regarded her with cool indifference. She had to look away from him briefly, knowing she should keep focused on the conversation and not on how incredibly buff and sexy he was without even trying. It didn’t help she had the urge to soothe away the visible scars with her tongue, as if her attentions could erase the gory reminders of what he did for a living.

“Not okay, but necessary. I would at least know you were alive.” She wasn’t going to back down. She needed to know where she stood. If that meant letting him go, then so be it, but she wasn’t going to take him back like nothing happened. She needed to know that he cared enough to let her in.

“I don’t think so, little Caro. I’m not leaving because you think it’s necessary. Not after last night. Not after you screamed my name in your pleasure.”

Nine

Santiago sped away as the rendezvous meeting site exploded behind him. If his informant were inside, he'd be nothing but ashes by the time the firefighters put out the flames.

Banging the steering wheel in frustration, Santiago cursed in several languages as his only link to finding the leak source was burning to a crisp.

"It would've helped if you would've just told me who the hell is responsible for this; that way, I wouldn't be in danger!" he grumbled as he merged onto highway traffic.

Dead silence surrounded him. Not even the spine-chilling sensation remained. It never stayed long. It surfaced only long enough to warn him of danger before disappearing, saving him time and time again. Sometimes images entered his thoughts, letting him know locations, and sometimes he was told specifics. The latter was what had happened with James. He'd just somehow known the coordinates of the house.

Santiago shook his head, clearing away the unwanted thoughts. He had to figure out who was behind this before he or she could get to James or Carolina. Although he'd never met Ms. de Anda, he knew James cared deeply for her.

Switching lanes, he didn't understand how someone could've found out about the informant at their undisclosed location. As soon as he returned home, he was going to tear his

SUV, cell phone, and house apart for planted bugs. That could be the only explanation.

One hour later, his cell was spread out on his kitchen table. The SUV was parked in garage looking like the DEA had gone through it searching for drugs. He found a tiny device hidden in his phone. Something like this didn't come by easily or cheaply. The SOB who'd planted this had left a clue behind to his identity. Although unnoticeable to the naked eye, Santiago could trace the bug back to who had ordered and/or planted it. Since very few people could've had access to his cell, his list was blessedly short.

~*~

James remained calm, suppressing his anger. He couldn't believe she thought she could end their relationship. Anger. Resentment. Those were the reasons why she was talking nonsense.

He could understand and deal with that, but he needed her honesty too. Moving away from the sink, he approached her.

"James you know I'm right. We can't continue like this—hey, what are you doing?"

He cleared the remaining things away before turning back to her. Pulling out the chair, he sat down and brought her in front of him.

"James, what the hell are you doing?!" she asked again.

“You said last night was closure. Well, I don’t think I have completely found my closure yet.” He could see from her expression that she still didn’t understand he wasn’t going anywhere. Ever.

“That’s too damn bad because I’m done!” Again, she futilely tried to push him away. Bringing her head down, he took her lips in a soft kiss that was completely contrary to how volatile he felt inside.

Taking her lips between his teeth, he tugged until he had her undivided attention. She quit struggling against him, her hands resting on his shoulders. When she opened up to him, he took absolute control of her mouth. His tongue swept in, laying claim to her. She whimpered against him, making him feel invincible, but that wasn’t true. He needed to keep her safe. He needed to keep her by his side.

“Tell me to leave. If you really mean, it tell me now.” He didn’t wait for a response, but instead captured her mouth in another numbing kiss. Drawing back, he waited for her to open her eyes. “Say the words, little Caro, and I will be gone.”

“Damn it, stop kissing me and I will! That’s not fair!” she shouted as she pounded her fists against his bare chest.

“You’re still not telling me to leave,” he goaded.

“Go to hell!” She tried to free herself but, he held on.

“I probably will, but I’m not going yet. If you want me out of your life, say the words, Carolina. If you don’t, then I’m going to fuck you on this table.” Her pupils dilated; her breathing hitched; her chest heaved. “After we’re done, we’re going to

have another shower and then pack. You're going to be staying at my house since it's more secure than your apartment. So, decide now. Either tell me to leave or let me fuck you. It's your choice."

That was laughable. She didn't have one.

"What do you mean 'pack'? I'm not going anywhere! The only one leaving is you!" She'd finally given up on fighting him, no doubt realizing she wasn't going to win a battle of strength with him.

"Don't dance around the question, Carolina, or is your silence all the answer I need? If that's so, then we're done talking."

And with his hands making their way under her dress, he was done talking too. Her body still wanted him, just as his body would always want hers. He groaned in pleasure when all he felt was smooth, warm skin. The little witch was trying to get rid of him, yet she wasn't wearing any panties. It was a good thing he'd made up his mind to keep her because he didn't have time to decipher all of the mixed signals she sent.

Pushing the dress off, he stared at the sexy, blue-lace bra she wore. He didn't want to take it off, but he had to see her bare breasts.

"Remove your bra. I need to see your hard, little nipples and suck on them." He shook his head. "Never mind, leave it on. Just show me your breasts." Caro gave him a look but did as told. It was one of the most erotic sights. "That's a good girl,

little Caro. Now, why don't you lean back and just enjoy what I'm going to do."

His hands cupped her breasts, and he watched the emotions play across her face. James toyed with her nipples, making them harder before swooping down and taking one in his mouth. A hand kept playing with her breasts while the other teased her hot little cunt. He wasn't surprised to find she was already wet.

The strong burning desire to have her again still rode him hard, no matter how many times they'd had sex. Already his cock was erect and ready to plunge into her wetness.

James kissed his way to the other breast, his fingers tracing her slit in a lazy fashion, driving her crazy.

"Damn it all to hell, James, don't you dare tease me now!"

"I just started, little Caro."

Was the man for real? He just started her ass! His words alone had her obeying his commands and spilling over like Angels Falls. After the way he was ordering her about, she wasn't going to let him hold off on her orgasm.

"James, please, I need you inside me. I'm so hot, so wet. I'm ready. I want to feel your thickness inside me, filling me up, making me burn."

Carolina followed her words by grinding her pussy against his fingers. She didn't want them, though, not when he was rock hard and ready to take her again. She heard his harsh breathing and groans.

“Turn around, little Caro, and then lower your body on my cock. Brace yourself on the table and move against me.”

Carolina turned on wobbly knees, her hands on the table as she began to sink herself onto his cock, his hands guiding her. This position brought him so much deeper. With his grip on her hips, he controlled her pleasure and his thrusts. All she had to do was keep a hold on the table.

Ten

Both were quiet as James sped down the highway. He'd received another phone call while recovering on the kitchen table after very satisfying post-breakfast fun. Once he'd finished the call with Santiago, James had ushered Carolina into her room and ordered her to start packing. That had obviously been the wrong thing to do because she'd dug in her heels, crossed her arms, and refused budge until he'd explained why he was in such a damn hurry. It'd been hard as hell, though, considering she'd been delightfully naked the entire time; but his lust would always come second to her safety.

"Santiago just called to tell me someone killed the informant he was on his way to meet. Only he and I knew of the contact. Going home he found a bug planted in his phone. You're simply not safe in your apartment. My house is the only place where I can absolutely be certain you'll be safe. Now hurry and pack or I'll do it for you. And I'm not going to pack anything but that sexy lingerie I know you have in your drawers." That last part got her moving, much to his dismay.

His house was located in the hills outside of San Antonio, an impregnable fortress he and Santiago had built. His home had sensors, cameras, triggers, infrared lights, and the best alarm system on the market. No expense had been too great. Carolina would be as safe at his house as the president was in the White

House. If someone came after James, he had the means and weapons to fight back.

“This will be the first time I’ve seen your house.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel at her observation. This was true; it had seemed every time he’d wanted to take her to his house, he’d been called away. It had always been easier to stay at her place.

James slowed down to make the turn onto his street. Turning into his driveway, he entered his pass code before presenting his thumb to be scanned, then, the intercom asked for him to speak. His voice would be analyzed before gaining entrance to his house. Excessive? Paranoid? Yes, but he believed it was absolutely needed.

“Wow, I have never seen anything like it!”

James glanced at Carolina, noticing the stunned expression on her face. “We’ll have to get you into the system so you can have access.”

Continuing down the driveway, the trees gave way once they reached the house.

“Oh, my gosh, James, you son of a bitch! Why the hell didn’t you ever bring me out here?”

“You like it?”

“Like it? I love it! It’s amazing!” The two-story house with its wraparound porch blended so perfectly into the scenery. There were also flower pots of various blooms hanging all around.

After parking the SUV, James went around to help the still-shocked Carolina out. “Come on, little Caro, let me show you around.” As they turned to retrieve the bags from the back, five yapping dogs came around the corner, happy to see their master return back home. James pushed Carolina behind him as the dogs bared down on them. Shit, he should have told Maggie to lock them up until he could introduce Carolina to them one by one.

“Sit,” he said in German. All at once the five charging dogs came to a complete stop, obeying his command.

“You have five large Dobermans. Why do you need five?” she asked, peering around his shoulder at them.

James laughed at her reaction. Pulling her forward, he wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Ranger, come,” he commanded. Ranger, bluish gray in color, approached.

“Just give him a moment to sniff you. He’s the leader of the pack. Once he feels comfortable with you, the others will quickly follow. Slowly put your hand out and let him scent it.”

Carolina followed his instructions exactly. Ranger took his time before sitting back and staring at her. The dog then stood back up, barked once, and licked her still-outstretched hand. That seemed to be the cue the others had waited for because they all began sniffing and trying to jump up on her until James called them off again.

“Like I said, Ranger, is the ring leader. Pixie is the red and rust-colored one and the baby. That big, dark-brown one is

Titan, and his smaller brother is Winston. You watch out for them, they love to take things and hide them. But if you're having a bad day and need someone to talk to, then the fawn-colored one Winifred is your girl."

Carolina was in awe of the beautiful creatures in front of her. They were so well behaved and trained. This shouldn't surprise her since James had probably put them through a rigorous form of doggie boot camp. Carolina loved dogs, she really did, but these were all so big and menacing looking, especially Winifred.

"She doesn't look like the type to cuddle."

Again, James just laughed. "She is the sweetest of them all. She will come around as she gets to know you better."

Carolina quirked an eyebrow at that. "Exactly how long am I staying here, James? And you need to drive me back for my car, or do you have something for me use if you plan on keeping me here longer than the weekend? I have to go to work on Monday."

"You're not going to work. Not until we find out who is behind this."

Carolina watched as he turned back to the SUV to get their bags.

"Excuse me? What do you mean not going to work?" She couldn't keep the hard edge from her tone.

"Carolina, you aren't to leave this house unless Santiago or I accompany you. And we aren't going to waste our time

driving you back and forth to work. Besides, we would have to make sure your office is secure. We don't have that kind of time."

Carolina stared, incredulous. She wasn't the violent type, but she wanted to hit him. If she weren't afraid of being mauled to death, she would've picked up the nearest heavy object and whacked him over the head.

"James," she started off as calmly as she could, "if you think I'm going to just to agree to all that bullshit, you're out of your fucking mind! If we would have parted ways this morning like I'd suggested, then—"

James dropping the bags on the ground in a loud plop killed the rest of her sentence. With a crazed look in his eyes, he charged at her, grabbing her arms, and put his face in hers.

"You. Are. Mine. Do you understand, little Caro? You are mine and I'm not going anywhere. *You're* not going anywhere. Let this be the last time that you say those words to me. I will never let you go. I will protect you, always."

Holy shit! Staring up into his furious gaze, Carolina wasn't sure what to do. James's words had her wanting to tackle him to the ground and fuck him blind. No matter they had spent all night and the better part of this morning having sex. But someone calling out behind them stopped Carolina from following through.

"James, where are your manners? Why are you keeping the pretty lady out in this heat? And when the hell did you get back that you couldn't call and tell me to expect you?!"

James didn't release Carolina; instead, he pulled her in close to him and faced the woman.

"Maggie, I just got back last night. This is Carolina. Carolina, this is Maggie. She stays here when I'm out and cares for my dogs."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am." Carolina offered her hand and it was soon engulfed in a firm handshake. She smiled at the older woman standing before her. Dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and work boots, the woman returned the smile.

"Call me Aunt Maggie," the caretaker ordered. "James, get the bags. We will wait for you inside."

Carolina found herself walking alongside Aunt Maggie, the dogs following close behind.

Eleven

The plane was in its final descent into the Alamo City. Strapping himself into his seat, Santiago shut his laptop and put it away. After finding the bug, he'd collected his things from his Maryland apartment and drove to the airport. Along the way, he made sure he wasn't followed before making a pit stop. Changing into a disguise, he got rid of the old clothes and assumed a new identity. He was now William Walker of Texas, returning home after a business trip to DC.

After landing, he would change disguises again before driving over to James's house. He knew it sounded paranoid, but he didn't want to lead anyone back to James. This would also be the first time he met Carolina. He was looking forward to seeing the woman who had completely ensnared James.

Then he and James would get back to business. The trip to DC had not been a complete waste of time. Another of his contacts had given him valuable information that he had not yet shared with James. He'd wait until they were face to face before delivering the news.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. Welcome to San Antonio. We will be landing at 12:38PM. The temperature is currently 98 degrees and is expected to climb into the 100s later on this afternoon. Thank you for flying with us today and have a pleasant stay in the Alamo City or wherever your final destination may be."

Santiago was the fourth passenger off the plane after it landed and soon disappeared into the crowd. After a quick change, he was walking out into the hot San Antonio temperatures he'd grown to love. Taking a moment to look around him, he slipped on his shades. Having no luggage, he went to long-term parking and got in one of the vehicles he and James used.

Thirty minutes later, he was at the gate of James's compound giving an eye scan, a fingerprint, and a sentence for voice recognition. Passing all tests, he continued on and parked behind James's SUV. Pixie and Ranger greeted Santiago when he opened his door.

"Whoa, sit." After they did, he threw each a doggie treat. Patting their heads, he walked into the house, the dogs following.

He heard loud voices from the left. He headed to the den, stopping just outside and leaning against the doorframe.

"I don't give a fuck what the hell you just said! I'm not going to miss work. You and Santiago can stay here and figure out who sold you out, but I'm going to work on Monday and that's final!"

"Goddamn it Carolina, this is not a joke! You're not leaving this damn house! Santiago, stopping dragging your ass and get the hell in here!"

Twelve

Carolina turned quickly to finally meet Santiago. She was stilling fuming mad at James and embarrassed to have Santiago find them fighting. She wasn't one to air her dirty laundry and wondered how much he'd overheard. After Maggie had fed them, they'd come to the den to talk. James was adamant about her staying here.

"Santiago del Olmos."

Carolina could only stare. The man in front of her was one of the scariest men she'd encountered. Though about the same height as James, that was where all the similarities ended. He wore his black hair longer than the military cut James favored, had dark, chilling eyes, and appeared broader than James, if that were possible.

She nodded to him. "Carolina de Anda."

He didn't offer her hand and neither did she. James came around the desk and stood beside her.

"Are you hungry? Aunt Maggie left a plate of your favorite enchiladas for you in the kitchen."

"Hell, yes. She makes the best enchiladas ever."

"We will talk later, then."

Santiago nodded and left, three of the dogs following as he closed the door behind him. She wasn't quite sure of the names yet, but Winifred and Ranger stayed behind. Those two she wouldn't forget.

Carolina put some distance between her and James. She feared that she'd slug him if he kept up with the crazy notion that she was going to obey his every command. He sat on the edge of his desk, his hands braced on either side of him.

"Talk to me. Tell me exactly why I should stay here. And I want more than 'it's safe.' I want to know exactly why I need protection to begin with."

James was quiet for a couple of minutes before he responded. "I went undercover to stop a notorious Russian family from setting up shop in the US. They have contacts in all major cities and control in small, worn-torn and developing countries. They are vicious and dangerous. I had made some headway, working my way up the ladder when I was taken and held captive for eight days. My team rescued me and brought me back to the States to recover."

"Okay, so what does all of that have to do with keeping me here?"

"I was to remain in DC until after the issue was resolved, but I couldn't stay away from you any longer. I defied orders and flew back to you once the doctors cleared me."

Staring at him in silence, his confession startled and touched her.

"These people will stop at nothing until they find me and kill me for betraying them; and if they can't get to me, they will get to anyone I'm near to hurt me. I have everything I need to protect you, Carolina. I would have not come back otherwise."

Carolina didn't know what to say. The entire situation could get her killed, but his actions meant so much to her. She wasn't going to sit back and doing nothing.

"I could help."

"No, absolutely not, Carolina."

"James, think about it. Someone not involved with the mission might be able to find something you guys have missed."

"We are trained to gather the smallest details. You think a civilian can find something we couldn't?"

"She has a point, James." Both turned to see Santiago once again leaning against the door frame. "We need as much help as we can get."

"We have the CIA and military special forces working together—"

"And how many of them can you trust?" Santiago challenged him.

James stood and began to pace. Carolina remained by the windows, watching both men. Then there was the Sentry, which was what she'd started calling the five dogs. They had come and made themselves comfortable around the room. Ranger watched her while Winifred eyed James.

"I learned something interesting while in DC," Santiago said, making James stop in his tracks.

James quickly turned to Santiago, piercing him with a shut-the-fuck-up glare. He didn't want to discuss anything with

Carolina because she was safer not knowing any of the details. Santiago didn't take the hint.

"Remember that guy Evans, one of the CIA agents sent to London to gather intel?"

"What about him?"

"He's gone missing."

"What do you mean 'gone missing'? How long ago?"

"No one knows."

"Fuck!" James couldn't believe this. He resumed his pacing, wondering if Evans's disappearance had anything to do with his. He swore again in several languages. "We need to find out everything we can about Evans."

"Already started. I was waiting until I got to a secure computer and phone before I made more calls. I sent Mark to London to start making inquiries. He should be getting back to me tonight."

James nodded. He needed a way to get the Evans file. The CIA wasn't likely to hand over a personal file on one of its agent, so that meant getting it the hard way. He went through his mental contact list for a computer expert he could trust, someone who could hack into the CIA database and get him everything he needed to know. James had never fully trusted the CIA but kept that to himself and worked with them when the job called for it. This wouldn't be the first time they'd fucked up something.

James saw Carolina out of the corner of his eye, her eyes darting back and forth between him and Santiago. Shit. Once

Santiago had started telling him about Evans, he'd completely blocked her out. It was too late now to keep her in the dark. He continued pacing, ignoring them both as he contemplated his next move.

"I can help. Well, I know someone who can help you get the information you need on Evans."

The very exact words he didn't want to hear.

"No," he barked out.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me, James Burckhardt! What you need is a computer expert who could hack into anything and not get caught."

"She's right."

Santiago straightened and walked into the room to stand next to Carolina, giving her his support. Great just what he needed. Turning his back on them he looked out the window.

"You need someone fast and someone you can trust, right? Maribel meets the criteria. She graduated top from her class at the University of Texas and then went on to obtain her master's in Security Informatics from Johns Hopkins before getting her PhD in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science from MIT. She is more than qualified to hack into the CIA or anywhere else for that matter."

"You've met Dr. Brainiac, James?"

"Don't you dare call my sister that when she gets here or she will have your ass!"

"Listen, Short Stuff, we don't have time to argue about names."

Carolina's sharp gasp had the dogs on alert, staring at them.

"Listen, asshole—!"

"It's Satan," Santiago corrected.

"What?"

"My nickname is Satan, not asshole."

"Satan, asshole, same thing; I don't see a difference!"

If the situation weren't so serious, James would have laughed his ass off. Seeing Carolina stand up for her sister was endearing. Santiago towered over her and outweighed her by good one hundred or so pounds of pure muscle. The scowl he sported had sent many tough Marines backing away and treading carefully around him. Carolina stood her ground, though, scowling back just as fiercely.

"Enough." He interrupted their glare-off. "Maribel is out of the question, Carolina. I will not risk any of your family or friends further than I already have. I have someone in mind whom I will call and have him flown here."

"Maribel could be here sooner. Besides, don't you think they're going to wonder where I am? They will start digging and you don't want that."

"How many sisters do you have, Short Stuff?"

"My name is Carolina. If that's too long for you to remember, try Caro, and I have one sister."

James ended their squabbling before the pounding headache he felt forming in the back of his head grew.

“Santiago can damn well remember your full name, Carolina.” James sat at his desk. Like hell another man would call her Caro! “As for you sister, she can have all the top awards and accolades she wants, but she’s still out.”

“Why, because she’s female and you don’t think she can get the job done?”

“For the love of God, Carolina, this is not about gender discrimination. This is about keeping you and your family safe!”

“You said yourself that the reason you brought me here was to keep me safe, that if these people after you can’t get to you, then they would get to someone you cared about. And if they know about me, then they most certainly will know about my family. While I’m here protected, my sister could be out there in danger.”

“Short Stuff’s got you there,” Santiago snorted.

“Shut up,” they both said in unison.

But it was true, James thought. The sisters would be safest here in his compound. He might not like it, but it was for the best.

“Fine, but we’re doing this my way. Know that you will be staying here until this issue is resolved. That means you, along with your sister, won’t be leaving my house without Santiago or me as an escort. No work, no leaving, understood?”

Thirteen

Carolina nodded. If she were to be a prisoner in his house, then she would help him, no matter what he said. Things would go a lot smoother if her sister were here to help. She wasn't lying or exaggerating when she said Maribel was the best. She could find anything about anyone. Carolina had come close to asking her sister to find James during his AWOL year, but she'd resisted. Maribel also had a way with animals and great instincts. She'd definitely come in handy in dealing with the Sentry.

"Call and tell your sister that you're going to pick her up for a little gateway. Tell her to call in sick for the next week until we know for certain what is going on. Don't say anything over the phone. Understood?" James ordered as he tossed a cell phone at her.

"Yes, and you can stop treating me like a child." Dialing Maribel's cell, Carolina waited for her sister to answer. It was going on three in the afternoon; surely she was out of bed already. Then again, Maribel usually stayed up all night playing on her computer and slept the day away—and those were the nights when she didn't go out clubbing. Carolina was about to hang up and try her house phone when Maribel finally answered.

"Who is this?" the groggy voice asked.

"Bel, wake up; what are you still doing in bed?"

"Go to hell, Caro, what the hell do you want?!"

“Maribel, seriously, wake up! Listen, remember how you guys were on me last night about getting out and living again? Well, I’m going to do it. I have booked a little spa getaway for us. So, I need you to get your lazy ass out of bed and pack about a week’s worth of clothes—damn it, Maribel, are you listening to me?” Carolina had to pull the phone away from her ear as Maribel screamed. Damn, but that girl had some lungs on her! Carolina heard one of the dogs whine in the back.

“*Mira, chica*, this better not be some kind of joke or I’m going to kick your sorry, pathetic ass! I swear on all that’s holy I will make you pay!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever; listen, do you want to go or not? Then shut up and start packing.” Carolina hung up on her sister shouting something at her.

“That was Dr. Brainiac?” Santiago asked, an eyebrow quirked up in amusement. Since he couldn’t bring himself to use their real names, Carolina ignored him. “Damn, James, I’m starting to rethink the whole issue of having Dr. Brainiac help us.”

“What the hell did you two expect? I couldn’t tell her anything over the phone so I had to make up a lie.” Carolina handed the phone back to James who was still seated behind the desk, an intense look in his eyes.

“What did you mean when you told Maribel about going out and living again?”

Well, shit, he would have to remember that part.

“Nothing, we will talk about it later. We have to go pick her up.” Carolina hoped James would drop it. Maribel was going to go through the roof when she found out Carolina had taken James back after the discussion they’d had last night. Her friends wanted her to forget he’d ever existed and move on. There had been plenty of guys hitting on her last night so they’d suggested she take one home. Carolina was glad she hadn’t that because there would’ve been hell to pay if James had seen her with another man. Not that she’d wanted anyone who had come on to her, anyway...

“Santiago, while we’re gone, call your contacts and see what you can find out about Evans. As soon as we get back, I want Maribel to get those CIA files for me.”

Santiago left the room. James came around to stand directly in front of her.

“We aren’t leaving until you tell me what your sister and friends meant, Carolina.”

“James, we don’t have time to discuss it right now. I promise we will talk about it later.” She tried to follow Santiago out, but James clasped a hand around her arm, not letting go anywhere.

“We will talk about it now.”

“It was nothing—I didn’t tell you this morning. They all said I should stop wasting my time waiting for you to return and to go out and start dating again.” She could see he wasn’t happy with that advice. “They were worried about me, that’s all.” More like furious at him, but she didn’t say that.

“Is Maribel going to have a problem being here, Caro? Because I need to stay focused on finding the traitor and not have to worry about your sister.”

“I promise she won’t be a problem. I will talk to her and we will help you find this traitor.” He remained silent for a while, then finally nodded his head. He gave her a quick, hard kiss before leading her out of the house.

For the second time that day, James found himself driving in silence. This time he was headed east on Loop 1604 to pick up Maribel. He was still not happy about getting her and Carolina involved, but the little witch had corralled him into a corner. It also didn’t help Santiago agreed with Carolina.

All too soon, he was pulling into an apartment complex, Carolina giving him directions on where to park.

“Okay, wait here; I will be right back,” she said, rushing out of the vehicle. He wondered about Maribel’s reaction; James knew she wouldn’t be happy to see him considering the stories Carolina had told him about her.

His prediction was confirmed twenty minutes later when a pissed off Maribel got in the back seat, completely ignoring his attempts at being civil. He could’ve sworn he heard her mutter something about a gun. Carolina just shook her head and told him to drive.

James looked back at Maribel through the rearview mirror. Up until now he’d only seen pictures of her. She was a very beautiful woman, tall and curvy. The de Anda genes had blessed

them both. He would have to warn Santiago off. He trusted and loved him as a brother; but if he messed with Carolina's older sister, he would simply kill him. It would be easier for everyone involved.

Reaching over, he took Carolina's hand in his, giving it a tight squeeze. She looked at him and smiled.

~*~

"Bel, you can't be mad at me forever," Carolina tried talking to her sister as she helped her settle into her room. Maribel hadn't said anything since seeing James other than mumbling she should've gotten their father's gun last night.

"No, but I'm going to very well try."

Carolina sighed as she sat on the bed, watching her sister unpack her things. Instead of bringing clothes, Maribel had packed all of the computer equipment she could fit into a small, carryon suitcase. She'd planned on working on their spa gateway. In a way, Carolina was glad because she'd need all her techie things.

"Bel, you know I wouldn't have involved you if we didn't really need your help. You think I want to stay here until this mess is cleared up?"

"When did he come back, anyway?"

"He was waiting for me after y'all dropped me off last night. I thought it was one of you guys needing to use the restroom or something, so I just opened the door. And

then...well one thing led to another and we ended up in my bed. I knew I should've said no, but I just couldn't. God, I am so fucking weak!" Carolina tried to stop her tears from spilling. She wasn't even sure why she was crying. She was mad and happy and confused.

"*Ay, chiquita, no llores.*" Maribel had stopped taking things out of her suitcase and came around to hug her. Maribel couldn't stay mad at anyone for long, unlike Carolina who would take a grudge to her grave. "*Shh*, it's okay, *hermanita*. Listen, we will figure out what's going on and then we can leave and go on that week-long spa retreat so you can think."

Carolina hugged her sister back and tried to stop the waterworks. She really needed to get a hold of her emotions.

"Okay, then, let's go. James and the asshole are probably anxious to get started."

"Who is the asshole?"

"A member of the team here to help James. His name is Santiago."

Opening the door, there were two of the Sentry sitting there waiting for them, Ranger and the bigger of the mischievous ones—Carolina couldn't remember the exact name.

"Why in the world does he need five huge Dobermans?" Maribel asked as they went to the den.

"I don't know; but if you don't want any of your things taken, you better hide them. James said the brown one and his brother will take your things."

“They chew on any of my wires and James is going to replace every single one—”

“Where the hell is Dr. Brainiac and Short Stuff? If they’re gossiping in their rooms I swear I’ll—”

“Do what?” Maribel asked as she entered the room. “I’m going to be doing you a huge favor the least I could have is a couple of minutes with my sister. I know I’m the smartest person in this room, probably in all of Texas and several states nationwide, but it is rude to call people names, especially if you haven’t met them. So if you ever address me as Dr. Brainiac again you’re going to find yourself looking up at the sky, after you regain consciousness.”

Fourteen

Santiago didn't receive any good news after speaking to his contacts so he was already in a foul mood. When James said that Dr. Brainiac and Short Stuff were in the guest bedroom, and had been since they'd arrived thirty minutes ago, his mood had gone straight to hell.

Another reason why he was nicknamed Satan.

Then in walked Short Stuff and a taller, darker version of Short Stuff shooting daggers at him. His eyes were so busy feasting on her that he only caught the last part of her tirade. She was dressed in long, tight leggings that molded to her long, fleshy legs and a tunic that barely grazed the top of her well-rounded thighs. Her hair was dark brown tight curls that molded her face.

"*No creo yo, muchachita,*" he muttered, scowling at her.

"I don't care what you think, *muchachito*, but that what's going to happen."

He almost cracked a smile seeing her bristle at being called little girl. She'd walked straight up to him without hesitation to tell him what she thought. The top of her head reached his chin.

"There is nothing 'little' about me," he murmured, letting his eyes rove her body, especially her chest, "or you." Most men wouldn't have dared called him a little boy, but she did and he ate it up.

Her hazel eyes narrowed in irritation, her hands clenching at her sides, and he wondered if she'd really try to lay him low. Images of both of them wrestling on the ground—or better yet, in his bed—invaded his thoughts. Oh, yes, he was going to enjoy the rest of this mission.

“Enough, Santiago, we need to focus. Carolina, how much have you told Maribel about what is going on?” James stared at Carolina and immediately knew she'd been crying. *Sonofabitch*, he cursed internally. They had to talk as soon as they got things squared away; but first, they needed to get busy looking for new leads.

“I haven't told her much, just that we need her to get some very sensitive information the hard way.”

James nodded. “Okay, then, have a seat and I will fill you in on what exactly we need from you Maribel. Then you can decide if you want to help us.”

Everyone but Santiago sat. They had spoken while the girls settled in and concluded that while they were going to be as honest as possible, there were some things that would remain under wraps. It wasn't a matter of trust but rather top-secret clearance. So James got started on what the mission had been and what the women needed to know.

“We need to find everything we can on Evans. I want to know what his exact mission was in London. Who he met, where he stayed, codenames, anything. The CIA won't give us shit, especially if he's gone missing.”

“I’m going to need his full name and anything else you can give me.”

“Santiago will get that. We’re awaiting calls back from several sources.”

“If you’re ready, I’ll show you where you will be working.” Standing up, James led them out the room and down the hall to the basement. At the door, he entered his code to gain access. The basement had separate wiring, security, and existed apart from the rest of the house. It was a sort of panic room. James had all of his ammunition, weapons, and the communication center down here.

He could control everything in the house and surrounding areas in this room. If attacked, he could stay below and fight back. If needed, there were escape tunnels that led out to safety. He’d be far away before the intruders realized the house’s occupants were gone. Lots of time and money had gone into creating his secret lair, but it was specially designed for a moment like this.

The stairs opened up into a large, nondescript living room. It didn’t appear to be a very large room unless the person knew about the secrets hidden within its walls. Walking over a bookshelf located in the far corner, James reached down and placed his right hand under the fourth shelf. Then the bookshelf moved to the side to reveal a secret passageway.

“Oh, my goodness, this is like a James Bond movie!” squealed Maribel behind him. “Tell me—what was that? What

is a hand recognition scanner?” James smiled and glanced at Carolina. Her eyes were wide in surprise but she remained quiet.

“Santiago will fill you in with all the details; it was his design. We also need to upload both of your data and prints into the system.”

Moving through the door, they walked into hub central. Televisions, monitors, computer stations—everything that someone needed to get information with a secure connection was available in the room.

“Ohmyfuckinggosh!” Turning to look at Maribel once again, James couldn’t help but grin at her reaction. She stood in the middle of the room, looking around and clearly wanting to touch but was afraid she’d break something.

It was an expression he wanted to see on his children’s faces on Christmas morning and their birthdays. He didn’t know where that thought had come from, but he could see dark-haired little girls sitting on his lap while opening presents. Learning he was now ready to settle down was damn inconvenient at the moment, but it was something he fiercely wanted. Once this mission was resolved, he was going to let Carolina know he was ready to start planning their wedding and honeymoon where their first child would be conceived.

Fifteen

Carolina was impressed. No, impressed wasn't the correct word; she was astounded, shocked, rendered speechless. She thought things like this only existed in Hollywood movies, not in someone's basement. She could tell her sister was in IT heaven. After she squealed out her excitement, Maribel began running her hands everywhere, wanting to make sure she really did have access to all the equipment James had. Carolina was more than sure her sister was on cloud nine.

She saw Santiago staring at Maribel a little too closely for her comfort. Carolina was going to have to say something; the man was called Satan for Christ's sake! That got her thinking to what James was called. Glancing over at him, she found him staring at her just as intently as Santiago stared at Bel.

Uh-oh! Carolina knew that look, the one that meant she'd find herself naked and surrounded by a one-hundred-percent virile man. A shot of lust tore through her body, making her shiver under his close scrutiny. She'd lost count of the many orgasms she'd had since his return, but her greedy body just wanted more and more and more.

Damn, but if James didn't stop staring at her, she was going to dunk herself in ice-cold water. Turning back to her sister, Carolina tried to put her lascivious thoughts away.

“I don’t really care if this is your chair. James said that I was going to be working down here, so that means I get to choose where I want to sit so I can work. And if you want me to work, I need to be comfortable; this chair has my name written all over it.”

Santiago wanted to toss the annoying little baggage over his shoulder and to the nearest bed.

“Well, then, we have a problem, *muchachita*, because I’m sitting in that chair. I wouldn’t mind sharing, though. You can sit on my lap as we work.”

Her growl of annoyance was music to his ears. “A gentleman would offer me the chair.”

“I’ve never been a gentleman.”

“Maribel, what do you expect from someone who goes by Satan?” Carolina asked.

“Satan? Your nickname is Satan?”

He shrugged at her outrageous tone. He’d earned his nickname growing up in the barrios of Houston and then in the Marine Corps. He wasn’t going to apologize for it. It served him well.

“Among other things. Now that we have settled the issue of the chair, can we get started?” He sat in said chair right at the nearest console.

Maribel wanted to yank the chair right from under him. And when he landed on the floor, she would ride him to her satisfaction. The man was a dark, sexy menace who was going

to distract her from work. She prided herself on being thorough and detail oriented, but the only thing on her mind was getting him naked and checking *him* thoroughly.

She was a big girl, so she needed someone bigger, someone she couldn't snap like a twig. His dark glares and scowls didn't scare her one bit. Instead, they turned her on. Yep she wasn't going to get any work done until she fucked him out of her system or he left her alone. She didn't think either was going to happen, unfortunately; so with a lot of loud grumbling, she made herself at home on the furthest console.

"Okay, James, you said you needed to input our data and information so we can have access to this. Where do we begin?"

For the next two hours, James explained the ins and outs of his security system. He also scanned and recorded their prints, voices, and eyes.

"Wow, you want some DNA too?" she asked jokingly.

"I was saving that for the end; going to need blood and hair samples. You two current on your vaccinations?"

"You're kidding, right?" both she and Carolina asked at the same time.

Shaking his head, James tore open an alcohol wipe and approached Carolina. Then, Maribel saw Satan approach her. Well, shit, this was just too much!

"Oh, no, you can stop right there!" Moving around the chairs, she tried to get away from him. "This is where I draw the line. Taking a sample of my DNA is an invasion of my privacy."

“Bel is afraid of needles,” she heard Carolina explain.

Maribel kept her eyes trained on Santiago, watching his every move.

“Dr. Brainiac is scared of a little needle?”

“There is nothing little about it. It is a torture device used to inflict pain!”

“*Muchachita*, you know nothing of torture. You will feel only a little pick on your forefinger. All we need is a small sample.”

“No. No. y No. You’re not going anywhere near me with that thing!” She’d now moved all the way to the entrance of the room, ready to make her escape. She wished James had told them where the secret getaways were located.

“Maribel.” She stopped moving and stared up at Santiago. He’d called her everything but her name until now and it sound right coming from his lips. “I promise to be careful. I will even give you my chair.”

Fear rose up in her again. She knew it was silly, but she just plain didn’t like needles. Every time she had to have blood drawn, she was sedated and damn near unconscious. No one knew where the phobia came from, but it made itself known.

“No. You can keep the damn thing!”

“Bel, come on, honey, just close your eyes and stretch out your hand. I promise it will be over before you know it. I barely felt mine.”

Maribel loved her sister, she really did, but she’d knock her cajoling ass out if she came at her with a needle.

Now shaking, thinking they were going to tackle her down to get the sample, Maribel fled to the outer basement. Going over to the plush sofa she sat down, her head hanging between her knees. She felt someone come up, and her body went rigid with tension, ready to escape.

“*Sbbb*, Maribel, it’s just me. I don’t have anything with me.” Santiago sat beside her before he continued in a soft voice, “where is the woman who was going to drop me on my ass if I called her Dr. Brainiac again?”

“I know you think this is silly and stupid, but I can’t stand it. So go ahead and make fun of me all you want; there is nothing you can say that I haven’t already heard.” Damn it, she couldn’t stop the tears from wetting her leggings.

Santiago was at a disadvantage. He didn’t know what to do. Give him a gun and a target and he’d hit his mark. Want to free a man being held hostage in a war-torn country, piece of cake. Facing a crying woman on the verge of hysterics over something as simple as getting a finger pricked for several drops of blood and he was clueless.

He was never shown comfort, compassion, or love growing up, so he didn’t know what to say or do. But he had to do something. They needed the blood samples for their records just in case anything happened. Reaching out, he began to rub her back, hoping he was doing it right. He’d seen other people do this; it looked easy enough. It had been a very long time since he’d comforted someone.

“*Por favor, déjame sola,*” she requested, trying to dislodge his hand.

Like hell he’d leave her alone. He didn’t like seeing her like this. He remained silent and continued to rub her back, moving closer to her until his hard thigh touched her softer one.

After sometime passed, she finally began to straighten up, but he still kept his hand on her back. He liked the way she felt under his touch.

Her face was blotchy and tear-streaked, but she was beautiful to him. Crying, hysterical women usually scared him away; but now, at this moment, he wanted to hug her, a hug like he’d wanted growing up as a child.

Not thinking about it, his arms came around her and pulled her in for a tight embrace. Maribel didn’t push him away. His hands began to rub her back again, starting from the base of her spine all the way to her neck. Soon she relaxed against him, her face burrowing his neck, her arms going around his torso tightly. Needing to find a more comfortable position, he cradled her in his lap with her face still hiding in his neck.

Santiago didn’t know how long they stayed in that position, but he looked up to see James standing there with a needle in hand. Damn, he hated to put her through that, but it had to be done.

Bringing his head down to her ear, he began to whisper to her, “Maribel, *shh*, don’t tense up on me, honey.” He kept his voice gentle, trying to coax her into stretching out her hand so James could take the sample. “Just stretch out your hand,

sweetheart.” He didn’t know where the word had come from, but he liked the sound of it. “I will hold you while James takes your sample, okay?” He felt her shake her head no. “I promise he will be as quick and painless as possible. I will kill him if he hurts you.”

“You can’t kill him; Carolina won’t allow that,” she mumbled against his skin.

“Okay, no killing. I will just rough him up, then.”

She moved slightly, opening one hazel eye to peek at him. He smiled down at her. “And I can still have the chair?”

The little witch was just as manipulative as her sister. While he’d applauded Carolina boxing James into a corner, he didn’t like the feeling at all.

“You can have the damn chair,” he growled out at her. She tentatively reached out her hand as she pressed herself closer into his body.

Nodding his head at James, he held onto to her outstretched hand, keeping it steady as James pricked her finger. All the while he spoke into her ear, encouraging her, letting her know that it was all going to be all right.

Within seconds, James was done. Santiago pulled Maribel back into him and simply held her.

Sixteen

Standing outside in the bedroom patio, Carolina felt the cool breeze lift her nightgown. James was holed in the study with Santiago, having received a call from Mark in London. They hadn't even eaten their dinner. Maribel was down in the basement researching after recovering from her latest bout dealing with her needle phobia.

Carolina couldn't help but smile at how Santiago had held her sister in his arms and talked to her as James took the sample. He'd been so gentle and careful with her. Carolina was amazed he'd been able to deal with the situation when everyone else had failed.

Hearing the door open and shut behind her, she looked over her shoulder to see James coming toward her.

"All done?" she asked.

"For tonight." His arms wrapped around her middle; his hardness pressed into the soft globes of her ass.

She reveled in his strong embrace. Carolina loved being held against a virile body. This was one of the things she'd missed very much during their year apart. They stayed outside enjoying the relaxing breeze up in the Hill Country.

He broke the silence. "Santiago went back to keep Maribel company."

“I don’t think she wants to be near him right now, James. She’s so embarrassed about her earlier episode she was so quiet during dinner.”

“I didn’t realize people really could react so strongly to needles. I knew about people being scared, but not to that extent.”

Carolina sighed as she moved closer to him, absorbing his heat. Her eyes began drooping. She soon found herself being carried in his arms. Walking back into the bedroom, he went to his Texas-sized bed that could easily fit someone twice his size.

She’d already pulled the covers back so he laid her down on the sheets before getting into bed with her. She waited until he was comfortably lying on his back before cuddling on top of him. It had been a very long day and it would be an even longer, sweeter night. Within seconds, she was asleep.

~*~

“What is the name of the traitor?”

The man was barely conscious, not sure how much pain he could take. He’d been chained to the wall for endless days and nights. He remembered being kidnapped on a Thursday night, yet had lost count of the number of days he’d been held captive.

He’d been in London gathering valuable intel. After making several connections, he’d been introduced to someone in the Zakarov family. Thinking he could do a better job of infiltrating

the family than anyone else, his stupidity and pride had landed him in this torture chamber.

Every day, sometimes twice a day, someone came in to “ask” questions. Although trained on torture techniques, nothing had prepared him for this. His body was on fire; his head felt as it had been split open; and the pain was a constant reminder of his betrayal. The human body could only take so much before breaking.

He’d given them information on the mission, revealing someone had infiltrated their crime syndicate in Moscow. He’d told them the person was a CIA agent with military experience. He hadn’t given them names, but he’d given enough to stop the beatings, the electric shocks, and the sadistic bastard who liked knives and other razor-sharp objects. But he could only hold them off for so long. They wanted more details of the operation now. They wanted names of everyone involved. But he’d already given them too much. He would die before he gave them anymore.

~*~

Carolina awoke in the dead of night, her blood pounding, her heart racing, and her hands clutching the bedding. Adjusting to the dark, she saw James rising from between her sprawled legs. She also noticed her nightgown had been taken off sometime while she’d slept. She was completely amazed at his hungry gaze. Moving up her body, James settled himself between her

thighs as he lowered his head for a kiss. He balanced most of his weight on his forearms.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she smiled up at him. A second later, she sucked in her breath as he surged into her. All she could do was cling to him as James moved within her. She could feel his urgency as he rode her hard and fast.

“James, James....” Carolina could only chant his name as another orgasm tore through her body.

James followed soon enough. With one last, powerful thrust, he spilled his seed deep inside. Carolina was glad she was still on her birth control because they hadn’t used condoms since his return. They would need to have another talk about protection since the Pill wasn’t foolproof.

Her body was jostled as he came down hard beside her on the bed. After several minutes, she had enough strength to turn towards him. Going up on one elbow, she saw he was fast asleep.

Great, she was wide awake now! Lowering herself back on the bed, she waited until sleep overcame her again.

James awoke to an empty bed. Looking at the clock on the nightstand, he saw it was after nine in the morning, late for his standards. Groaning, he got out of bed and noticed Carolina’s torn nightgown on the floor. Picking it up, he held it in his closed fist, trying to remember when and how he’d done that. They had both gone to sleep after he’d carried her back inside. She’d been draped across his body, her breath tickling his skin.

When sleep had finally claimed him, he'd dreamed that somehow his captors had gotten their hands on Carolina. He'd been racing through long corridors in the Zakarov mansion to get her back. He'd gotten himself trapped in something and had shredded it with his bare hands.

Looking down at the tattered material in his hands he now knew that it had been her nightgown. He remembered waking up, Carolina still atop him, his hands knotted in her nightgown. Slowly, he'd turned them so she was lying on her back and had peeled the torn pieces from her body.

Still asleep, Carolina had looked so beautiful in the moonlight. With soft kisses and gentle urgings to wake up, he'd slid down to the wet flesh between her lovely thighs where he'd kissed, licked, and sucked her into consciousness.

Then he recalled how savagely he'd taken her after she'd awakened.

Damn! He needed to shower and change. He needed to find her and make sure she was okay. In less than ten minutes, he was done and out the door in search of her.

What he found was mayhem in the yard.

"Caro, are you sure you got this on video?"

"This" was Santiago flat on his back with Maribel standing over him while shouting that she had bested Satan. James had been one of the few who had ever brought his partner down. By the look on his face, Santiago was just as shocked as he. James couldn't help but throw his head back in laughter.

Then an enraged Santiago pushed past him and entered the house.

“What the hell happened? How did you manage it?” James had to know. He and his men had all gone through intensive training in several martial art forms.

“I warned him about calling me anything but my name. After a long night of trying to crack into the CIA database, I wasn’t in the mood to hear it. So I came up to mediate and do some yoga to relieve some stress and he couldn’t help but follow me. So I kept my promise and now he’s mad at me.”

“Here, take a look,” Carolina held her video phone to him.

James took the phone and saw how Maribel had gone up to Santiago and without much effort taken his wrist in her hands and used her long legs to topple him over. Santiago then looked up in awe of the woman standing a couple of feet from him, going through her yoga positions once again.

Giving the phone back to Carolina, James was sure any footage of Santiago being handed his ass would be erased by the end of the day.

“I need some coffee; let’s go back inside and so Maribel can finish her yoga.”

Carolina followed him into the kitchen. He went straight to the coffee pot and poured himself a mug full of the dark liquid. Taking a sip, he spit it back out into his cup.

“Who made this god-awful coffee?” Wiping his mouth with the back his hand, he poured the coffee out into the sink.

“You better not let Maribel hear you say that or you will find yourself on your ass too!”

“You sister made this weak-ass coffee?”

“Yes.”

Shaking his head, he dumped the remaining coffee in the pot and started a new one. While the coffee machine percolated, he faced Carolina. She looked beautiful this morning. Her hair was up in a ponytail and she was dressed in khaki shorts and blue print shirt. He closed the distance between them.

“How are you feeling this morning?” His hands went to her ponytail, taking out the band that held it up. He preferred her hair down.

“Hey! Stop that...”

“Answer the question, little Caro.” He needed to make sure he hadn’t hurt her.

“I’m fine. Why?”

“Because I found your ripped nightgown on the floor and I remember taking you more than roughly usual.”

His little Caro’s blush at his words went straight to his heart. Raising her on her tiptoes, he kissed her. His tongue swept in, tasting the coffee she’d had earlier.

“Geesh, don’t you guys ever stop?”

Drawing back, James gave Carolina one last, quick kiss before separating from her delectable mouth. He had plans for those soft lips later. Going over to the coffee pot, he refilled his cup with the strong brew he made.

Carolina stood on wobbly knees, recovering from the kiss and the images from last night. Moving to take a seat with her sister, Carolina fought to get her breathing under control.

“I have some information you’re going to want to hear before I crash.” At James’s nod, Maribel continued. “I was able to get in early this morning. I printed a copy of the John Michael Evans file. All I can say is I’m not sure how he’s lasted this long as an agent.”

“Has Santiago read it?”

“Yes, and then he made several phone calls.”

“Where is the file?”

“Down in the computer room; I didn’t want to bring it up.”

James thanked her before leaving the room.

“Well, I’m going to bed for a couple of hours.” Maribel hugged Carolina, then went down the hall to her room.

Sighing, Carolina was left alone with the Sentry. All the dogs were looking at her, waiting for her next move. Putting her cell phone in her back pocket, she decided to explore the outside. First she needed to put her thick mane back in her ponytail.

“Okay, guys, let’s go for a walk.” They all stood up and followed her out the door.

Seventeen

Down in the computer room in the basement, James poured over the file on the desk. Santiago was also in the room on the phone with Mark again. The file had Evans's detailed reports that the CIA would have never released. And if it had, large chunks would've been blacked out. Evans's current assignment was to go to London to meet contacts who had information on the Zakarov. He was to report back every other day to his controller back in the States, but the last check-in had been three days before James was taken.

He looked up at Santiago's cursing. He listened as the dark man asked Mark who'd been the last person to Evans alive and where he or she could be found.

James returned back to the file, picking out the names of everyone involved. He needed to know if all were accounted for or if anyone else was missing.

"Mark is trying to locate a woman who was with Evans during his time in London."

"Has he had a chance to get into his apartment?"

"No, he says it's being monitored. He's going to try again tonight."

"What else did you learn?"

"That Evans really resented you for being chosen. According to several sources, he let it slip that he thought he was

the more qualified agent for the mission, not ‘the muscle from Force Recon’.”

James bit back a curse. “The higher ups had wanted someone who could get results and assume a new role. After reading his file, I think he would have gotten himself killed or forced us to go in and rescue his sorry ass. So instead, Evans puts the whole operation at risk because he thought he was overlooked. I was taken captive because he couldn’t he accept orders. If I weren’t sure he wasn’t already dead I would kill him myself.”

James was mad not only because of all the horrible things that he’d gone through, that was part of the job, but also because they’d had the chance to bring down another organized crime family. Now, Zakarov had increased his security and continued his evil reign of power, waiting to exact his revenge.

Wanting to punch something in his anger and frustration, he left the computer room and went up to his gym. He spent the next two hours in a rigorous workout that left him drenched in sweat and, more importantly, with a clear mind.

~*~

Zakarov Mansion....Moscow, Russia

“I want the name, Sergei,” Olik said in Russian. “I want him brought here so I could personally see to his demise.” He was seated behind a lavish desk that had once belonged to the

Czar Nickolas II of Russia. Dressed in an expensive dark suit, Olik exuded power and control over his domain. No one had ever infiltrated his organization, much less an American CIA agent. Olik wasn't sure how it had happened, but people were being questioned and handled.

“Have my car brought around. I promised my little Dasha a night at the opera. I want a name when I return, Sergei, or you will find yourself down with that filthy American.”

When Olik left, Sergei went down to the deep, underground dungeon where people were held for questioning. If they were found guilty, they were executed with some bodies shoved into a large furnace for disposal. Others were chopped into small pieces and fed to the various dogs around the compound.

The latter was a favorite of Olik's. It was what kept Sergei in the boss's good graces. Sergei continued to think of ways to torture and rid bodies. He was extremely loyal. As Olik's confidante, he had access to power, cars, money, and women. Sergei wanted to stay alive and keep all the material things he'd grown accustomed to having. He would personally extract the name of the agent they'd found in Somalia.

Removing his custom-made jacket and hanging it outside by the door of the concrete room where Evans was being held, he rolled up his sleeves and pulled out his razor-sharp Swiss hunting knife as entered the room. He'd get an answer by the time the curtain came down.

An hour later, he was wiping down his knife as two guards dragged the lifeless body out of the room. Another guard brought in a hose to wash off the blood from the walls and dispose of any body parts left lying on the floor.

Now he had a name. Looking down at his watch, he saw Olik would be home within the hour. He'd clean up while the computer geeks ran a check on the name. He wanted to know everything about this agent by the time Olik returned.

Once Olik read the file, Sergei would retire to his home where three beautiful girls would help him celebrate.

Eighteen

Wednesday evening found James, Carolina, Santiago, and Maribel having dinner. They'd been up the past few days and nights analyzing reports or sitting in front of a monitor with not much time to do anything else.

Carolina had decided they needed a break, so she cooked dinner, telling everyone to be at the table by seven that evening. Going through James's pantry and fridge, she'd found everything she'd need to make chicken, fried and baked, mashed potatoes and gravy, steamed vegetables, a salad, biscuits, and even a Dutch apple pie from scratch. No doubt Maggie was the one who kept his kitchen that well stocked.

Tying an apron around her waist, Carolina had started cooking around two that afternoon. With the others busy or sleeping, she'd needed a distraction from all the grim details she'd learned about the mission. The Sentry had decided to keep her company, but she'd figured they'd been lying around waiting for something to hit the ground so they could pounce on it.

Once everything was done, Carolina went to change and wake up Maribel, though she'd had to threaten her sister with Santiago coming to get her when Maribel didn't move fast enough. When she'd returned to the kitchen, she'd been surprised to see everyone there on time. And as they'd sat down

for dinner, her stomach had grumbled loud enough to draw three pair of eyes to her.

“What?” she’d asked as she put a big piece of fried chicken on her plate and a large serving of mashed potatoes and gravy. “I worked up an appetite making all this for you!”

The other had just shaken their heads and fixed their plates also.

As they were finishing their meal, Santiago’s phone went off. He took the call as he left the dining room. They continued to eat until Santiago came back.

“James, we need to talk in private.”

They all looked up at Santiago’s grim face and put their forks down. James began to stand but Carolina stopped him

“What’s going on, Santiago? We need to know too.” She saw James motion for Santiago to continue. He didn’t look happy about it.

“Evans is dead. The US Embassy in London received a package an hour ago that contained a video. Mark was able to see and confirm it. We’re to expect a phone call from Colonel Waters and be briefed on the situation. They are going to keep it secret for obvious reasons.”

James excused himself and left the table.

“We will be down in the computer room. Maribel, stay up here until we’re done,” Santiago ordered.

The women waited a bit before speaking. “There’s more going on than Santiago says,” Maribel mused.

“I know. It has to be something big for them to keep it hush. If you’re done we can start cleaning up.”

“Yeah, we can kill time since I won’t have access to the computer room until they’re done.”

~*~

“What did you leave out?” James asked once Santiago made it to the basement.

Santiago’s jaw clenched. “They sent his index finger as proof of his identity.”

James was glad he hadn’t said anything in front of the women. It had been a very nice dinner that hadn’t needed to be ruined like that.

“Is Mark sending over a copy of the video?”

“Yes he said we should have it in our e-mail. He warned we aren’t going to like it. He also was able to find the girl who’d been with Evans. Her body had been dumped in a seedy area, throat slit. The authorities had treated it as another trick getting killed by a john.”

James remained silent as he opened the video and played it. It showed Evans strapped in the chair just as he had been. His face was swollen, both eyes shut, with cuts all over his body. A man was standing to the side and asking him questions in English. It was a familiar voice.

“That’s Sergei, Olik’s right-hand man and the bastard who I’d been ‘protecting’ in Somalia. He was also there in the end before they left me to die.”

Sergei’s face never came into view, but James knew it was he. Though too far gone the day Sergei had visited him that day in the room, James had already committed his voice to memory.

They continued to watch as Sergei toyed with Evans, his knife slicing various parts of his body.

“Give me the name and we finish with this ugly business. Name for your life that is all I want.”

“Don’t lie to me, asshole, I was dead the moment you learned my name!”

Sergei shrugged his shoulders, “True, but you can die quicker, less violent death if you give me what I want. The man calling himself Vadik Dashkov lives. I want to know where.” He called for someone in Russian to hold Evans’s hand down. He turned away from the camera and reappeared with what looked like a small cleaver that a butcher would use.

“The name,” he demanded again. When Evens didn’t say anything, he brought down the cleaver with enough force to chop off two fingers from Evans’s left hand. That explained the finger in the mail, at least.

Evans screamed and writhed in pain, blood dripping onto the floor.

“Ready to talk now?” Sergei queried.

Evans shook his head. Again, Sergei shouted to someone in Russian off camera.

James and Santiago both shared a look as they saw someone bring in a large German Shepherd James knew as Dimah. Evans also understood and began to quake in his chair, his screams getting louder as the dog growled and barked.

Both men wanted to look away from the computer monitor as the dog attacked Evans, but their eyes remained glued to the screen, their anger growing with each passing second.

Calling the dog off, Sergei once again asked for a name. "Tell me name or Dimah go for your dick next."

"Kill me quickly!" Evans cried. "As soon as I give you the name, kill me!"

"As you wish; give me name."

James and Santiago tensed, waiting for him to speak.

"James, his name is James del Olmos!" He dropped his head wearily, defeated. "Kill me now."

Sergei kept his word and dispatched the knife. He was a perfect marksman, blood gushing out from Evans's throat, then the video cut off suddenly.

James and Santiago stared at the blank screen, trying to process what they just witnessed. A cell phone's ringtone brought them both out of their disbelief.

"Burckhardt," he snapped into the phone.

"I want you, Santiago, and Mark back in DC tonight. There is a plane waiting at Lackland that leaves in two hours. Be on it." His commanding officer hung up, not waiting for a reply.

Sighing, James relayed the message to Santiago even as his mind replayed the video. He wasn't sure what to think about Evans's confession. It would buy them some time; but soon enough, the Zakarov would know that no such person exists. The del Olmos name wasn't common in the military. They would quickly discover they'd been deceived, and then would probably pursue Santiago to get more information.

Turning back to the computer, he made sure that the video and e-mail were destroyed so that Maribel or Carolina wouldn't come across it.

"Let's go back upstairs and pack. We have to tell Carolina and Maribel we're leaving."

"They're going to be full of questions."

"I know, but they'll remain here. It's definitely the safest place for them now."

After making sure all evidence was deleted, they went up to the main level. There was no choice now but to finish off the Zakarov family and anyone associated with them once and for all. They must be destroyed. If not, James and now Santiago would be looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives, which was completely out of the question. James wanted to marry Carolina. He wanted to have children with her. He wanted to raise them and know they were safe at all times. That meant he had to take out the people who could do them harm.

He was already forming a plan to get into Olik's Russian mansion. Maribel had been able to get him detailed plans of the grounds. He would have kissed her but he doubted Carolina or

Santiago would have appreciated that. Once his team gathered in DC, he would let everyone know how the mission would go down.

But first, James had to survive telling Carolina he was leaving again for an uncertain amount of time.

They men found the sisters dancing and laughing in the kitchen. Looking at each other, he and Santiago clapped their appreciation. That would be a beautiful memory to stay with them in the coming chaos.

Nineteen

Carolina and Maribel turned at the sudden applause and bowed through their embarrassment.

“We were dancing off some calories, making room for dessert. You guys ready for some apple pie?” Carolina didn’t wait for a response and instead began cutting slices. She just knew she didn’t want to hear whatever came next.

“Carolina, we have to talk. Put the knife down, honey, and come sit over here.”

Bracing herself, she went to stand with him by the island. Maribel had already taken a seat on one of the barstools, Santiago going over to her.

“We’ve been ordered to return to DC tonight.”

Carolina fidgeted on the barstool. “Why? Because Evans is dead?”

James and Santiago shared a look before James answered. “Yes, we need to regroup and re-strategize.”

“How long will you be gone?” Bel asked.

“We don’t know, but we *will* come back. That’s a promise.”

Carolina pulled James into her embrace. She didn’t want him to go, but she knew this was something he had to do. Needing to stay strong for him, she whispered in his ear, “If you don’t come back to me, you can rest assured I will be wearing that dress again until I find a replacement for you.”

James growled at her threat, especially when Carolina bit his ear in return. He squeezed her tight before leaving the kitchen with her wrapped around him. Heading to his room, he breathed her in, her scent imprinting on his soul.

Laying her on the bed, he came down on top of her. “I’ll come back, little Caro. No other man is going to take what’s mine.”

“You better keep that promise, James Burckhardt, because I’m not going to sit at home for the next year waiting to hear back from you, waiting for you to return to me.”

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll even call you beforehand so you can be waiting for me in that dress.” Finished talking, he spent the next twenty minutes sealing his promise with a ravaging kiss and securing their love as they held each other close. All too soon, he was pulling back and moving away from the bed so he could quickly pack his things. It was a forty-five minute drive to base.

James felt her eyes follow him as he got ready. He didn’t look back at her on the bed, knowing if he did he would never leave. Once done, he walked to the door and waited for her to come with him back downstairs

~*~

Maribel couldn’t take her eyes off of Santiago. His black eyes burned with anger, excitement, and something else she

couldn't name. She wanted to hug him as he'd hugged her during her embarrassing debacle, but she didn't know if he'd want that. She went with her instincts anyway, and he easily caught her to him, his arms banding around her, pulling her close.

Burying her face in his neck, she tried not to cry. That would be the last thing he needed right now. Instead, she simply hugged him. Then, he lifted her and started walking out of the kitchen.

"Santiago, put me down; I'm too heavy!"

Grunting, he continued to his room, not stopping until he deposited her on his bed. Looking down into her eyes, he shocked her by saying, "For another man, maybe. But for me, you are the right size."

Her breath hitched as he came down on her, covering her from head to toe. He was right; they were the perfect fit.

"While I'm gone, you're going to stay here with your sister. You are not to leave whatsoever. Is that understood?"

Her eyes narrowed in irritation; while she was thinking she'd finally get to kiss him, he was giving her orders.

"Do you understand, Maribel?"

"*Si, entiendo muy bien,*" she responded.

Santiago took in her annoyed glare and wanted to kiss the anger away. He'd wanted to get a taste of her soft, full lips and now he would get his chance. Lowering his head, their eyes remained locked until his mouth touched hers. Then she slowly

closed her eyes as he deepened the kiss. Santiago showed her how much he wanted her.

Keeping his desire in check, he let her have only a small sample of what would come when he returned from this mission. Then he was going to spend at least a week getting to know her body very well. Ending the kiss and pulling back was one of the hardest things Santiago had ever had to do.

“We will continue this when I get back. But you have to promise me you and Carolina will stay here.”

“I promise. You have to stay safe too.”

“I’m good at my job, *muchachita*,” he teased.

“All it takes is one lucky shot, *muchachito*,” she challenged.

“I will be back to finish what we started.” Santiago sealed his vow another kiss.

Twenty

Surrounded by the rest of his team and various other CIA uniforms, James summarized the details about what had happened to Evans. Now, one of the most elite teams of the United States military, simply known as Force Recon, would have to risk their lives to destroy the Zakarovs because Evans had sabotaged Operation: Ice Zak.

But, of course, James didn't say that *out loud*...

He surveyed the four men he trusted with his life and for whom he'd sacrifice his. Santiago del Olmos, codename Satan, second-in-command; Mark Drageau, codename Dragon, weapons and technology expert; Jake Hammergren, codename Hammer, another weapons expert and mechanic maven who could pilot any aircraft or drive; Andrew Carrington, codename Hawk, top sniper and kick-ass chef who kept them well fed during their missions. All were deadly in hand-to-hand combat.

Once the CIA suits left, James would brief his team on logistics. Until then, he waited and listened as the CIA droned about how it had lost a good agent. Santiago snorted beside him but otherwise kept silent. Jotting down some notes, James was itching to get this over and done with.

Three hours later, James and his team were finally able to discuss strategies. Standing up, he assumed control of the room. All eyes were on him; even Colonel Waters stood back as he laid out the plan. Clicking a button on the table, the lights went off

and a white screen lowered opposite where he stood. Moving to the side, James held the remote that would allow him to go through the slides Santiago had prepared on the flight.

“This is the Zakarov stronghold.” An aerial view of the mansion filled the screen. “It’s heavily guarded with motion sensors, security cameras, the works.” He used the laser pointer at the end of the remote to indicate places that needed to be taken out first.

“Dragon will go in and knock out the power to the main house. The rest of us will go in during the confusion and eliminate the guards we encounter. In addition, Dragon will jam all forms of communication.” James looked directly at his two weapons and equipment experts.

“Hammer, Hawk, make sure we have everything needed for this operation. You have two days to prepare.” His team would be ready to go that night if he so wished, but James wanted to ensure he had all his T’s crossed and all his I’s dotted. Failure was not an option.

“We will go in after midnight. There are escape routes that need to be covered.” The screen switched to show where the underground tunnels led. “There will be men posted here and here.”

James went on to describe the specifics of the mission. His team was disciplined and organized enough that he quickly went through the plan and assigned duties. Breaking for dinner, the men were anxious to get started.

They were staying in Quantico, before shipping out. Needing some privacy so he could finalize his plans, James stayed behind in the conference room.

“Here, I brought you back a plate.” He looked up to see Santiago set a covered dish and water on the table. James nodded and removed the cover. Not really tasting the burger and fries, he consumed them to assuage his hunger.

Together, James and Santiago put the finishing touches on the mission. They would brief the team again tomorrow morning and then fly out that evening. This was a top-secret job; the CIA only had limited information. Keeping the facts tightly disseminated would avoid another leak. After doing all they could for the time being, James and Santiago gathered their belongings and left the conference room to find a bed for the night.

~*~

“Black Wolf, everyone is ready to go.”

James nodded at Mark and grabbed his gear. He met his team and boarded the military plane that would take them to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. There they would board another plane and enter Moscow under radar. They would only have hours to regroup before they attacked. James had wanted to call Carolina before hand, but decided against it. He needed to concentrate and stay focused on the mission at hand.

A man simply known as Victor greeted the team at the airport in Moscow. James had first met him nine years ago while on another mission in Russia. They'd bonded over vodka after another scumbag was taken down. Victor and other contacts of James were assisting his team with this assignment.

"There are four SUVs ready to go," Victor told James in Russian. "Men are set up around the perimeter, ready to start the distraction. Target is at home."

James took everything in as his team prepared for the attack. They were all dressed in black, wired to everyone else, wearing special night goggles, and armed to the teeth. But most importantly, they didn't have any signs they were American military. All of them spoke Russian, and that was going to be their communication language.

The team boarded the vehicles and followed Victor who was driving the lead SUV. Driving along the Moscow streets, they heard sirens blaring ahead of them.

When they reached the mansion, they saw chaos at the end of the block. An empty house undergoing renovations had gone up in flames. Fire trucks, police, and gawkers filled the street.

All the attention on the fire made it easy to catch security off guard. Dragon slipped out first and went over the wall to take out the fuse box, cutting power to everything. He also had a device that would jam all forms of communications. It was his own design and not available on the market.

"Power out," Dragon said, giving the signal.

Ten silent soldiers went over the wall and moved through the grounds in all directions, killing any guards they encountered.

One by one, they each made it inside the house without being seen. Everyone had committed the floor plans to memory. James, along with three others, went up the marble steps to the second floor while Satan took two others with him down to the basement. Viktor and the remaining two soldiers remained on the main level.

“I got movement,” Viktor said into the earpiece. James paused, signaling for the others to do the same.

“Clear,” Viktor said several moments later.

James continued to go through the upstairs bedrooms but found nothing. Checking closets, under the beds, and any place someone could hide, they cleared it.

“Nothing upstairs.” Going back to the master suite, James opened the secret panel next to the bed and went through, followed closely by the two soldiers. The third one would stay behind to keep watch. They went down a low-lit hall, and then stairs that brought them to the basement.

“Coming down,” James announced.

Once they reached the bottom, they met up with the others. They stopped briefly, seeing the three corridors stretching from the main floor.

“Satan, what’s your location?”

“Halfway down the right corridor. No target; several guards.”

James took the left corridor while Dragon took the middle one, the rest of the troops falling behind. They came across several rooms, blood still staining the cement floors and walls.

“Target found! Target found!” Satan broke through the earpiece, sending everyone on alert. They heard the faint sounds of gunfire. They went way back up to the main room and down the right hallway to help.

The third corridor opened into a bigger room where Satan and two others were engaged in a gunfire shootout. Taking positions, they began firing back. Olik tried escaping further down the corridor, but a bullet to the right thigh slowed him down. The team soon overpowered Olik and the five or so guards still protecting him. Another shot hit Olik in the left leg, completely immobilizing him. One more shot got Olik in his right shoulder, his gun falling to the floor.

Quickly surrounding him, James’s team cuffed Olik and searched the rest of the area. They found two tortured bodies that hadn’t yet been disposed.

Viktor took Olik into one of the rooms and began to interrogate him, taunting him. They would get all they needed from his private computers and private papers upstairs. The briefcase Olik had been trying to flee with also held invaluable information. They had enough evidence to bring down not only Zakarov but his associates as well.

“Out! We need to get out now! There’s a bomb waiting to go off!” Santiago shouted through the earpiece.

“No!” Viktor yelled. “I need more time!”

“Finish him! We don’t *have* much time! If you stay, you die with him!” Santiago warned.

Zakarov began cackling. “If I’m going down, I’m taking you all with me!”

Viktor shot him in the head three times before picking up the briefcase and running out the room, James right behind him.

They had no idea how much time they had before the bomb went off. They reached the fence just as the house exploded, sending them flying over the fence. They somehow got to the parked SUVs and sped away before more emergency vehicles descended on the burning house.

Twenty - One

While the rest of the team celebrated a mission accomplished, James did not. The bastard Sergei hadn't been there. James had taken a good look at all the bodies, and Olik's second wasn't one of the dead. Looking out the window as they drove back to the airstrip, he remained quiet. James had personally wanted Sergei even more than Olik.

"A bomb! A fucking bomb!" Viktor exclaimed from the driver's seat. "How did your man know?"

"It's his job to know," James replied, though he himself wasn't sure how Santiago knew certain things. Yet in the twelve years since James had known him, once Santiago said something, it was in everyone's best interest to do as he said. This was why James had been confident he'd be found when taken hostage.

Once back at the private airstrip they quickly vacated the vehicles and boarded the planes, which were fueled and ready to go. They wanted to be out of Russia as soon as possible.

James nodded towards his friend. "Viktor, anything I can do to return the favor, let me know."

"I think I'm still in your debt for helping take Zak down."

Shaking hands, James added, "Call if any problems come up."

The last one to board the plane, he closed the hatch behind him and told the pilot they were ready for takeoff. Five minutes later, they were in the air.

“Injuries?” James asked, standing at the front of the plane while looking at his team.

Hammer shrugged nonchalantly. “Bullet to the right thigh.” Dragon was already tending to the wound.

Everyone else had escaped with only minor scrapes after the explosion. Sitting down, he addressed Hawk and Santiago.

“I want to know where Sergei is and why the hell he wasn’t at the house.”

James’s tone brooked no argument. Pulling out a satellite phone, Santiago began to make inquiries. James wouldn’t be satisfied until he killed the evil sonofabitch.

~*~

A plane landed in Houston. The three men on it had explicit orders not to return to Moscow empty handed. The three would meet up with more hired guns before leaving Houston.

Sergei was in charge of completing the task. He had yet to fail Olik in getting what he wanted.

Upon clearing Customs, his BlackBerry beeped, alerting him to a voicemail message. A frantic voice on the recording said Olik was dead.

He erased the message dispassionately. He'd personally overseen the security of the house and exits; if Olik had been attacked, he'd made it out.

Sergei went on with the mission. It would be a four-hour drive to Burckhardt's hideaway. He would not fail.

~*~

"Damn it, Caro, you're cheating! This is the fourth hand you've won!"

"Don't be a sore loser, Maribel." Carolina pulled in the chips to her growing pile of winnings. Her daddy had taught her the poker, but her mother had helped her master the poker face. She'd made a killing in Las Vegas before one casino had politely asked her to leave.

After sun-tanning out in the backyard, the sisters had come in for a game, hoping to pass the time away. The guys had been gone for almost two weeks and the sisters had only heard from them once, which had been last week.

"I'm done. You wiped me out," Maribel said, ending the massacre.

"Too bad we weren't playing with real money."

Carolina laughed as Bel stuck out her tongue. They both began to clear the table for dinner.

"I don't know how you waited for so long, Caro. I can't take the not knowing anymore."

Carolina sighed. “Me, either, but look at it this way—no news is good news in my opinion.”

Suddenly an alarm went off and the dogs went on alert, barking and peering out the door.

“What the hell? Maribel, what’s going on?” Just then, the phone started ringing. Running over, Carolina picked it up. “Hello?” she answered breathlessly.

“Carolina, pay close attention. Get Maribel and go down to the safe room with the dogs. Lock yourself in. Do not come up under any circumstances. Do you understand?”

Carolina didn’t like the stillness in James’s voice. “What’s going on? The alarm just went off right before you called.”

“Hang up and get down there quickly. I will call you on the secure phone in two minutes. Move!”

Carolina held the phone away as he yelled the last part. She was definitely going to have a talk with him about his phone etiquette.

“Maribel, quickly, we need to turn off the stove and oven. We have to get down to the safe room fast.” After doing so, Carolina eyed the animals. “Sentry, let’s go!” she ordered the dogs as they made their way down to the basement. Once through the secret door, a phone rang. Maribel got to it first.

“What the hell is going on, James, and you better not give me any bullshit, either! All the alarms are going crazy! Wait, hold on, let me put you on speaker.”

James was already talking when the speakerphone clicked on. “Look at the monitors and tell me if you see the intruders.”

“What intruders and how do you know?”

“Doesn’t matter how I know, just look at the fucking monitors and tell me what you see!” There was static on the other end.

“Dr. Brainiac, use that brain of yours and stay focused!” Santiago ordered over the line.

Maribel sucked her teeth. “It wouldn’t kill you assholes to be a little friendlier! And before you give me anymore shit we’re looking at the monitors and we don’t see anything.”

“Do you know how to use a gun?” Santiago asked.

“Yes,” they both answered simultaneously.

“Go into the weapons closet and choose one.”

“The code is your birthday, Carolina,” James chimed in.

Carolina went to the closet and typed in the eight-digit code. The door opened and revealed a cache of weapons. He had an arsenal for every type of situation.

“Fuck, James, you planning on starting a war?” Maribel asked as she came up beside her.

“Pick a gun you’re comfortable with and then get back to the monitors,” James commanded, ignoring the question.

Carolina had always felt safer with something smaller, but she knew she needed something with a little more firepower this time. She chose a 9mm Glock. Maribel, on the other hand, went straight for the rifle and grabbed some grenades too. Carolina gave her a look.

“You can never be too careful,” was her response.

“Okay, we’re armed.” Going back to the monitors, they looked for any sign of movement.

“We’re four hours away. They won’t attack until dark, so that gives us time to get there.”

“You’re going to be cutting it close. It’s already after three.”

“I know, that’s why I need you two to pay close attention. Maribel, log into the system and start securing the premises.”

Maribel’s fingers flew across the keyboard, rapidly entering commands. Glancing back at the monitors, Carolina saw storm shutters coming down over all the windows. She stood back as Maribel went through all the security checks that James had set up around the house and the outside perimeter. If the intruders were stupid enough to try to break in, Carolina and Maribel would see them on the monitors. And depending on where they were, there were booby traps now activated that would blow them away.

~*~

Flying over the Atlantic, James and his team could do nothing while Carolina and Maribel were being surrounded. Halfway back to the States, Santiago had had another premonition, saying the sisters were in trouble. James already knew it was Sergei. The bastard had come to America to get him. He wasn’t worried, though; his home was impermeable. On the off chance Carolina and Maribel needed to escape, they knew of the

secret tunnels out. He'd made sure Maribel had learned his security system before leaving.

Beside him, Santiago vibrated with rage. Neither appreciated being helpless thirty thousand miles above sea level.

Twenty-Two

“Boss, looks like the house is empty. I haven’t seen more signs of movement since we arrived over an hour ago.”

“They are there,” Sergei spat out in Russian. One of his men had seen movement in the kitchen, but nothing since. Sergei could wait them out.

Lighting another cigarette, he tried another number for Olik. He’d still not been able to get a hold of his boss. Sergei needed concrete proof Olik was dead before celebrating his rise to power.

With Olik gone, he would assume power and keep operations moving as before. Any dissenters would be simply executed. He’d control his empire and demand absolute loyalty. Olik had been a worthy mentor.

Sergei’s first decree would be to eliminate James Burckhardt, Santiago del Olmos, and anyone else working with them. The fool Evans had tried to pull a fast one on him, but money gave him what Evans didn’t.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. “It’s true; Olik is dead.”

With official confirmation of his death, Sergei watched the sun go down and prepared for battle. He didn’t ask for specifics and he didn’t care. He was in power now.

“The backup generators will kick in if they cut power,” Santiago informed Carolina and Maribel. A communications link had been established between the sisters and the soldiers, and now everyone could see each other on the computer screens. Santiago and James had almost shut theirs off when they saw the women in their bathing suits, Maribel cutting them off before they could even draw in breath to complain. Glaring at the rest of team, the men silently warned the others to avert their eyes if they wanted to keep them.

Looking back at the monitor, Santiago was going to tear apart the motherfuckers for scaring them. He blamed himself for letting Sergei get anywhere near San Antonio. He should have been more diligent.

It's not your fault. You will stop them. Maribel and Carolina will be all right.

Enough, he mentally challenged. What good was having a sixth sense if it only worked occasionally?

Don't take that tone with me, Santiago del Olmos! If it weren't for me, you would've been dead a long time ago and so would James! You should be thanking me, not cursing me!

“Satan, Satan!”

“What?” Santiago asked, shaking his head to clear it.

James clapped his shoulder. “Buckle in; we’re ready for landing.”

Keeping an eye on the monitors, Carolina watched the sun descend lower and lower, the night taking over. A little worried, she knew she and Maribel were safe, but James and his team wouldn't be. They'd be out there fighting it out with the Russians, after all. Before cutting off communication, Santiago had ordered them to stay inside no matter what they saw on the cameras.

Both she and Maribel had promised because they didn't want to be a distraction. They also didn't want to stupidly be taken hostage and put in a situation they didn't want or need. So, no matter how ugly things got, they were to stay inside.

"Carolina, we need a plan though. All I'm saying is I'm not going to stand around and do nothing. If Santiago goes down, my promise goes out the window and I'm going to get my revenge."

"What do you have in mind?"

"No sé, pero no voy a quedarme aquí siendo nada."

"I know. I don't think I can just watch either."

They made a plan and went back to looking at the cameras. Carolina saw a small movement on the east side of the property.

"Bel, right there, can you zoom in on that area?" she asked, pointing to camera five. "There! Do you see that?"

"Yep, and there's another one right behind him!"

A SUV sped away from the military base straight for the Hill Country, Satan at the wheel.

“Dragon, get me a visual of the house and its surroundings.” James was in the backseat on the passenger side in full gear, just like the rest of his team. They were again ready for battle in less than twenty hours. Even Hammer, who’d received the most severe wound during their previous mission, was already patched up and ready to go. James expected nothing less.

“Here you go, Black Wolf.” Dragon handed him a small computer that gave him an aerial view of his house.

“How many?”

“It looks like four are moving towards the house with another group waiting on the outskirts. Added together, looks like eight, maybe more, waiting for a better signal.”

“Hawk, Hammer, we’ll drop you off first. Go through the west tunnel and then make your way up on top of the house. Anybody who comes into your view, shoot to kill. I will alert the sisters so they know friendlies are coming in.” Looking back down at the computer monitor, he saw the foes advancing on the house. Twenty more minutes and James and his team would be there.

“Dragon, you’ll track everyone’s movement and communicate with the women and us. The rest of us will go up the east side of the premises, right behind these bastards.” Finished with his orders, he called the house.

“Where are you?” Carolina asked when she picked up the phone.

“Twenty minutes out, little Caro. How are you and Mari-bel doing?”

“Pissed and hungry!”

James couldn’t help but smile. He shared a look with Santiago, who just rolled his eyes.

“There are rations in one of the cabinets,” he reminded them.

“Right. You expect us to eat those things? They taste like cardboard! There’s not enough hot sauce or lime to make them edible!”

This time James couldn’t help laughing. Several pair of eyes turned to him, but he ignored them.

“This will be over before you know it, honey. Now listen, you’re going to see several figures in black enter the house via the secret tunnels. Don’t shoot them.”

“What are their names?” he heard Maribel shout in the background.

“Hammer and Hawk. Dragon is going to stay behind and—”

“What’s your codename?” Carolina interrupted him.

“Black Wolf—listen! Don’t shoot any—”

“Hey, can we get codenames too?” Maribel yelled again. This time, everyone onboard had heard her.

Cursing, Santiago grabbed the phone. “Short Stuff, tell you sister she already has her codename—Dr. Brainiac; and if

she doesn't stop interrupting Black Wolf and shoots somebody on the team, I'm going to turn her over my knee!" he barked out before handing the phone back to James.

Ignoring Maribel's outrage and taking control of the situation, James continued. "Carolina, keep track of everyone's movement on the cameras. You'll be communicating with Dragon and he'll relay the message to the rest of team. Do not shoot or detonate any of the traps. We're going in and don't want to be accidentally attacked."

"But what if we have a clear shot of the enemy?" Carolina asked.

"No, and that is an order."

"I'm not a member of your team to order me about, James Burckhardt! I'm your woman and will do as I damn well please!"

James couldn't argue with that. Hearing the dial tone, he too hung up the satellite phone and put it in one of his many pockets.

"Black Wolf, what do I call your woman?" Dragon asked beside him.

Hearing Carolina called his woman affected James on so many levels. Once he got her back in his arms, he would show her just how much he liked that label for her. Then he was going to put a ring on her finger.

"Since Satan already named her Short Stuff, you can call her that."

“And the sister, Satan’s woman, do I really call her Dr. Brainiac?”

“You do that and be prepared to be dropped on your ass when you meet her,” James warned him. He ignored Santiago’s growl of displeasure as they reached the first drop off. After receiving the directions and code to get in, Hammer and Hawk got out the SUV. They were armed with the best sniper rifles available. Several miles down the road Santiago stopped the SUV.

“Dragon, remain here until this mess is cleared up. Drive up to the gate and we’ll let you in.” With that, Santiago and James got out and made their way up the hill.

Twenty-Three

“Look, there are two dark figures going to the tunnel,” Carolina pointed out, “Hammer and Hawk.”

“I’m going to kick Santiago’s ass again when I see him! I can’t believe he told them to call me Dr. Brainiac!” Maribel fumed beside her.

“Ah, come on, Bel, it’s better than Short Stuff. How about you just go by Doc?” They were both startled by the image and voice of a guy in full black military gear popping up on their screen.

“Ladies, this is Dragon checking in.”

“Shit! You almost gave me a heart attack!” Maribel shrieked.

“My apologies.” Carolina thought he sounded amused.

“I’m Short Stuff, and this is my sister—”

“Who you can just simply call Doc,” she interrupted.

“Roger that. Can you see Hawk and Hammer?”

“Yes, they’re halfway up the tunnel. Are Black Wolf and Satan on the east side coming up?”

“Affirmative.”

“Dragon, can you see the house? There are four guys approaching it from the all sides.”

“Affirmative. I have their exact locations.” They saw him talking into a walkie-talkie but couldn’t hear what he said.

“Hey, did you just put us on mute, Dragon?”

“Affirmative, Doc. I was relaying the coordinates. Just being safe.”

They were skeptical.

“Are the infrared cameras on?”

“Affirmative,” Carolina mimicked.

“Do a sweep and try to locate anyone else.”

Maribel did so. “There are several more bodies moving up; do you see them?”

“Roger that; I see them.”

“Hawk and Hammer are in position, Dragon.” No sooner had she said the words, the first shots rang out. They saw two bodies drop to the ground. The other intruders paused, then tried to get inside, but they too fell dead.

“Boss, four down. There is someone on the roof.”

Sergei gritted his teeth. “Fuck! How the fuck did they get up there? Take them out!”

His guards took cover and began firing up on the roof of the house. He then ordered two others to go around while the snipers were busy and kill them. Sergei stood in the shadows a good distance away, watching through his night-vision binoculars. It looked like two were up on the roof. He was going to skin the remaining crew alive for missing them.

Del Olmos and Burckhardt had to be up there; yet he was going to be careful, not putting anything past them.

“What is your position?” No response. “What is your position?” he asked again impatiently.

“They’re dead, just like you will be when I get my hands on you.”

“Vadik, is that you? Or should I call you Burckhardt?”

“It is, Sergei.”

“I should have killed your traitorous ass when I had the chance. I’m saddened I did not make the time to get to know you personally. It is something I will rectify shortly.”

“I don’t think so, Sergei!” The laughter coming through the two-way radio taunted before the Russian lost communication.

Sergei was livid. He would enjoy ripping Burckhardt to pieces here before burning the house down with everyone else inside.

“I want Burckhardt alive!” he yelled at men around him. Sergei would kill him on sight himself.

James and Santiago split up to cover more ground. Dragon kept feeding them information. So far, six of Sergei’s men had been taken out. That left Sergei and two others. James had given Santiago specific instructions to leave Sergei to him. He wanted the bastard for not only ordering his torture, but for also endangering his woman. For that, Sergei would die a slow and painful death.

“Dragon, did you get a fix on his location?”

“Black Wolf, he is thirty-three yards northwest of you.”

“Copy that, Dragon.” Moving silently through the trees, James approached his target.

~*~

“Six down,” Carolina said as she scanned the cameras. Hawk and Hammer were still engaged with some enemy fire in the woods. They didn’t look hurt. Then, a shadow emerged. The two snipers didn’t see it.

“Dragon, someone made it to the back of the house! They’re at the kitchen door!”

“Copy that.” Again, he put them on mute as he relayed the message. “Satan will take care of it.”

“Oh, shit, he’s trying to break in the door!” When pounding and kicking didn’t work, he began shooting at it. When that failed, he used small but powerful explosives to bring it down. A dog began to whine, scratching at the door to go out.

“Winston, you get the hell away from that door right now!” Maribel ordered. Winston immediately returned to sit by Maribel, placing his head on her lap.

“That’s a good boy. Now, be patient and let’s wait for Daddy.”

“Daddy?” Carolina snickered beside her.

“Oh, shut up, Caro!”

They saw Dragon trying to hide his amusement, but he was failing miserably.

“Dragon, you say anything to Satan about this and your mouth is going to be wired shut.”

“He doesn’t have to say anything, Dr. Brainiac. I can hear everything you say.”

“Bloody hell, Dragon, why the fuck didn’t you let us know they had audio?!”

“He doesn’t answer to you, Doc. Are you still wearing that bathing suit?”

“Go to hell!”

“Dragon?”

“Affirmative, Satan.”

Carolina laughed while Maribel cursed Dragon out. The last thing they heard was Santiago’s laughter as Dragon placed them on mute again.

“I know you can hear me, Dragon!” Maribel challenged.

“Bel, shut up! That guy just made it inside the house. Dragon, did you see that?”

“Affirmative, Short Stuff; already relayed the message to Satan.”

“I’m in, Boss,” the mercenary said into the radio.

“Go up and take out those snipers on the roof.”

Sergei was a little closer to completing his mission. Once inside the house, he was going to find out everything he could about Burckhardt. A thorough background check didn’t reveal a wife or girlfriend, but he knew the traitor had to have someone. He’d learn who the woman was and enjoy her company. A part of him wished Burckhardt would be alive to watch, but he didn’t

want to take any chances. Sergei had to kill him at the first opportunity.

“Boss, there are women in the house. I found purses and different women’s shoes.”

“Excellent! Eliminate the snipers and then find them!”

Sergei couldn’t be happier. This was just the kind of treat he wanted. Maybe he’d keep Burckhardt alive after all.

He was so happy with the news, he didn’t notice the dark figure closing in on him from the side.

Twenty-Four

James's blood ran cold when he heard the joy Sergei's voice as one of his goons reported he was in the house. Pausing to make sure no else surrounded Sergei, he attacked.

"We meet again." James pounced on him, propelling them out of the tree line and into the clearing. James landed on top of Sergei, a knife at his throat.

"Burckhardt!" he spat out, the single word full of hatred. "We found your women inside."

"If you mean him," Santiago said as he approached, dropping a man on the ground, "he's dead."

Sergei struggled against James, cutting himself in the process.

"Dragon, stop the feed to computer room," James spoke into his mouthpiece. Carolina and Maribel didn't need to see him kill the sorry motherfucker.

"Feed has been severed, Black Wolf."

"I will see you in hell, Sergei!" he snarled in English as he slit the Russian's throat. Gargling noises came out of Sergei, his blood staining the dirt red beneath him. James had to do away with the slow-and-painful death plan because he had an angry woman inside waiting for him. Too much time had been wasted and now he wanted peace.

Hammer and Hawk approached them, still on alert.

“Is there anyone else on the grounds, Dragon?” James asked.

“No, Black Wolf, everyone has been taken care of.”

“Pack up and drive to the house. Hammer, Hawk, do a perimeter check. Gather the bodies and prepare them for disposal. There is a cargo van in the garage. The keys are in the ignition.”

James began stripping off his gear as he and Santiago went into the house.

“Satan, ready to find out how angry they are?”

“By the time I’m done with Maribel, she won’t even remember this miserable day,” Santiago muttered.

James bit back a snort. If only it were that easy.

~*~

“That sorry motherfucker!” Carolina had exploded as the feed had stopped. Not waiting another second, she’d started for the door, Maribel and the Sentry following. Going through the secret panel, they were halfway up the basement stairs when James blocked their way, Santiago right behind him. They forced them back down the stairs.

“You sonofabitch! How dare you cut—?”

James’s hungry mouth came down on hers in a searing, consuming kiss. Picking her up, he ordered her to wrap her legs around his waist.

Tightening her hold on him, she fought him for control of the kiss, their tongues battling each other, neither giving any quarter. She lost her breath as he slammed her into the wall. She pulled back and opened her eyes. Through the haze, she saw James's bright blue ones burning with pure, unadulterated hunger.

They stared at each other, catching their breaths, before their lips collided in another brutal kiss.

James had to finally draw away or fuck her up against the wall. Looking around, he saw Santiago and Maribel were gone before facing Carolina again. Her lips were swollen from his branding and her eyes were still closed. His fists were wrapped in her glorious long hair.

She also had no business wearing this red string bikini. It would be easy for him to move the insignificant material covering her pussy and shove his cock as deep as it would go, but he needed to make sure everything was okay upstairs before he lost himself in her delectable body.

"Little Caro, open your eyes, honey."

"Is it over?"

"Yes it's over."

"Then take me upstairs and fuck me," she demanded.

He groaned, dropping his head against her sweet neck and nipping at her before bathing the sting away.

"I will, little Caro, I will; but first, I have to make sure everyone is okay." That wasn't completely true. He had to

check that his team had cleaned up the garbage and loaded it into the van before he could take her upstairs and follow her command.

“Hurry, then. I need to strip you naked and make sure you’re okay.”

“And if I’m hurt?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Then I will lay you down on the bed, kiss the hurt away, then ride you hard and fast. You wouldn’t have to move; I would do all the work.”

His cock throbbed in pain behind his zipper, demanding to be set free. “Go wait for me in our room, Carolina. I will be there shortly.” Pushing her up the stairs, he went back outside.

“Black Wolf, bodies are loaded and ready to go,” Dragon informed him.

James nodded and went upstairs. His team knew what to do. Sergei’s body would be flown back to Russia as proof of his death. Viktor would take care of the details but the Russian police would take credit for taking down another monster off the street. The rest of the bodies would never be found again.

Walking into the room, he saw Carolina sitting on the bed and, waiting for him. He unzipped his bag, his hand closing around a blue velvet box. Inside was a princess-cut diamond engagement ring with a white-gold band. He walked straight to her, dropped down on one knee, and took her left hand in his, slipping the ring on her finger.

Carolina sat motionless, her heart beating feverishly against her chest.

“Shouldn’t you ask me if I accept your proposal of marriage first?” She knew she would, but she wasn’t going to make it *that* easy for him!

“The way I see it, we’re going to be together for the rest of our lives surrounded by our children, grandchildren, and friends regardless. I figured you’d want to be married along the way, so why bother asking?”

“Because, you asshole, that’s what you’re supposed to do! It’s tradition for the man to ask—you can’t just *assume*! What if I don’t want to get married?”

“Then we’re going to have a problem because we’re getting married as soon as possible.”

Carolina could barely see him through her anger. “You are the most arrogant sonofabitch...”

James stood and began to strip right in front of her, stealing the wind from her sails. He was naked within seconds, his erection hard and throbbing in her face.

“I think we’ve done enough talking for now, little Caro.” Taking her hand, he pulled her up and began to undress her as well. “I love you, Carolina, and you will always be mine.”

They were on the bed, lips locked, and hands touching anywhere they could reach. Their need was urgent as their bodies moved against each other. All too soon, she was ready to explode.

“Will you marry me, Caro?”

Carolina's eyes snapped open and looked into the loving blue eyes of her future husband. "Yes, yes, yes!" she chorused, loud enough to be heard three doors down the hall as they both went over the edge together.

Epilogue

Santiago threw Maribel over his shoulder and started up the stairs.

“Quit squirming, Doc, or I will give you that spanking on the stairs, in front of anyone who comes in the house.”

“The hell you are, asshole!” She tried to use her long legs and arms as weapons. One of his hands came down hard on her ass that was barely covered by blue bikini bottoms. When she continued to struggle against him, he stopped at the top of the staircase and sat down, draping her across his lap.

“I warned you what would happen, *muchachita*, if you didn’t behave.” Santiago needed to let her know he was in control. “Remember that next time I tell you to do something,” he got out before his hand came down on her bottom.

“Motherfucker, what the hell did you tell me to do?!” she shrieked.

Santiago ignored her question and spanked her again. He was enjoying himself too much, watching her ass jiggle, her arousal reaching his nostrils. Maribel gained the advantage, moving quickly and toppling him backwards. Ah, yes, he was going to enjoy this wrestle match immensely. First, though, he needed to get them to his room. In one swift, fluid action, he was back on his feet with an out-of-breath Maribel over his shoulder once again.

There were still unanswered questions he had about the mission, but Santiago would worry about them later. Much later. Instead, he was going to focus on the pissed-off armful he held.

About the Author

Laura Guevara is a little lady with a big love for family, friends, and unexpected fun. On the surface, this bilingual babe is cuter than a button, while on the inside she is just like her favorite color red.....CALIENTE! This sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice, truck-driving dame loves country music and country boys. Reading, writing, and relaxing keep her busy while she waits for her towering Alpha to arrive.

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