

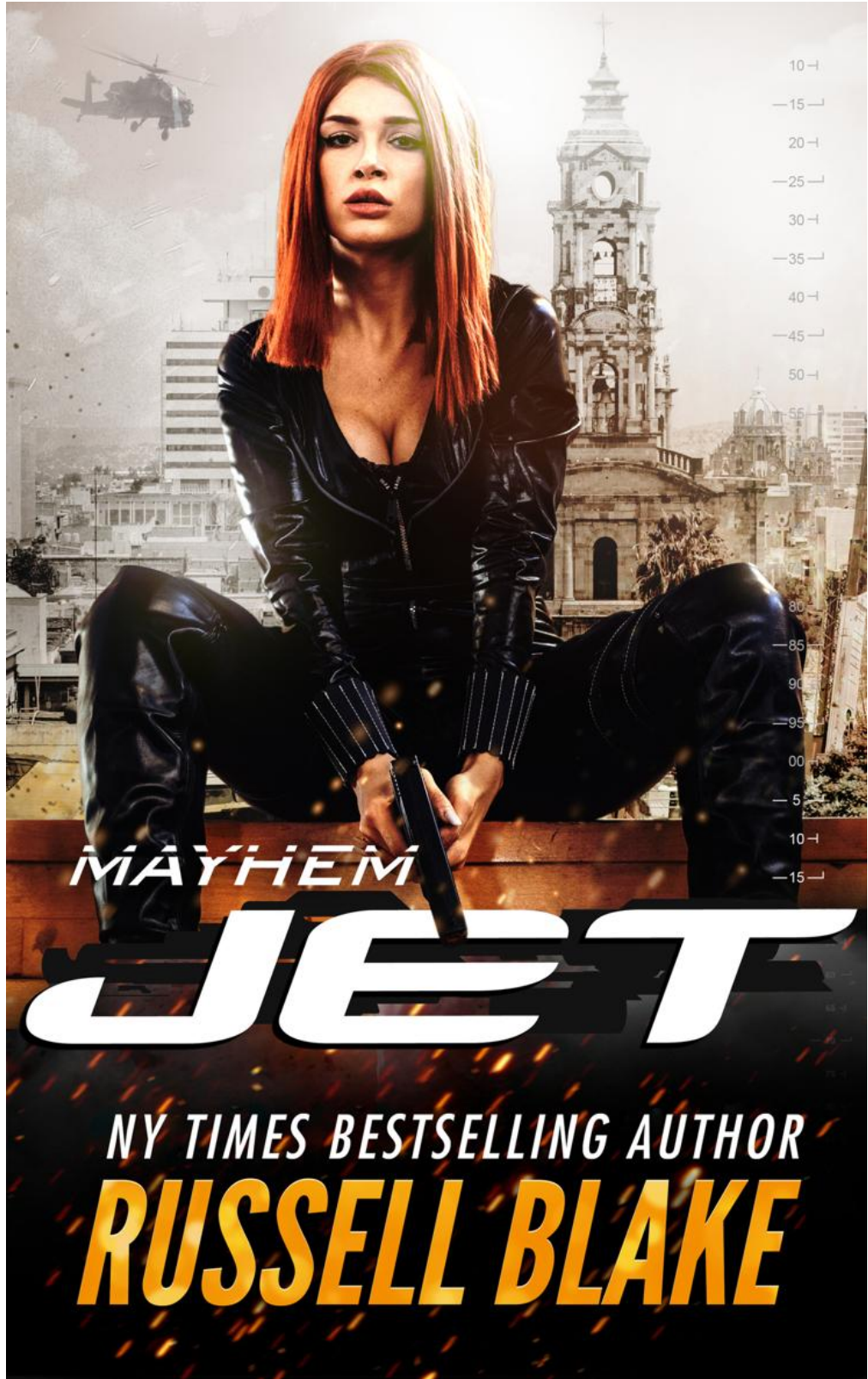


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MAYHEM

JET

NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RUSSELL BLAKE



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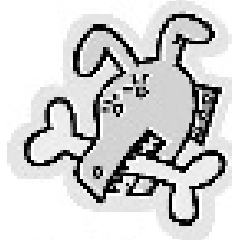
Mayhem

Russell Blake

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About the Author

Featured in *The Wall Street Journal* , *The Times* , and *The Chicago Tribune* , Russell Blake is *The NY Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of well over sixty novels, including *Fatal Exchange* , *Fatal Deception* , *The Geronimo Breach* , *Zero Sum* , The *Assassin* series, *The Delphi Chronicle* trilogy, *The Voynich Cypher* , *Silver Justice* , the *JET* series, *Upon a Pale Horse* , the *BLACK* series, *Deadly Calm* , *Ramsey's Gold* , *Emerald Buddha* , The *Day After Never* series, *The Goddess Legacy* , *A Girl Apart* , *A Girl Betrayed* , and *Quantum Synapse* .

Non-fiction includes the international bestseller *An Angel With Fur* (animal biography), *How To Sell A Gazillion eBooks In No Time* (even if drunk, high or incarcerated), a parody of all things writing-related, and *Expat Secrets of Mexico* .

Blake is co-author of *The Eye of Heaven* and *The Solomon Curse* , with legendary author Clive Cussler. Blake's novel *King of Swords* has been translated into German, *The Voynich Cypher* into Bulgarian, and his *JET* novels into Spanish, German, and Czech.

Blake writes under the moniker R.E. Blake in the NA/YA/Contemporary Romance genres. Novels include *Less Than Nothing* , *More Than Anything* , and *Best Of Everything* .

Having resided in Mexico for a dozen years, Blake enjoys his dogs, fishing, boating, tequila and writing, while battling world domination by clowns. His thoughts, such as they are, can be found at his blog:

RussellBlake.com



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Chapter 1

North of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico

Moonlight silvered the dimpled surface of the Sea of Cortez, the water inky in the shallows. The stars in the night sky provided a glittering canopy of light, and an occasional meteor streaked across the onyx backdrop before sinking into the horizon. The beige sand of Bella Vista beach stretched endlessly into the gloom, the rugged peninsula of Baja California Sur too far west for the naked eye to make out, and only a few homes to the south glowed dimly in the distance.

The drone of large diesel engines approached on the open water before they fell silent, replaced by the rattle of anchor rode feeding through the bowsprits of a pair of shrimp trawlers a hundred and fifty yards from shore. The boats' running lights were dark, and once the racket from the anchor lines quieted, their hulls were nearly invisible against the waves.

Four outboard motors roared to life just off the beach, and a procession of skiffs made their way out to the big boats, where the electric winches of their cranes were already whining, raising heaping tons of catch from below decks in overflowing nets and depositing them into coolers. Two of the smaller watercraft coasted to the sides of the nearest trawler and cut their engines, and the deckhands swung the cranes over the transom with a screech of metal on metal and lowered the coolers into the skiffs.

Once the little boats were low in the water, they glided away from the rusting hulls of the fishing vessels and made for shore, where a flashlight at the beach blinked rhythmically. The captains throttled the skiffs forward until they were in the surf line and then shut off the outboards and allowed their bows to plow up onto the powdery sand. Anxious calloused

hands grabbed the lines, and a row of men heaved the boats higher onto the beach, where another half dozen figures stood with baskets, standing like sentries, wordlessly awaiting the signal to move forward.

A short, whippet-thin man barked a few words, and they rushed to fill their baskets and carry them to where twenty women waited, each equipped with a head-mounted strap light to illuminate the work area on a row of portable white plastic picnic tables. The first loads arrived, and the women busied themselves with shelling and prepping the catch, dexterous fingers working with practiced precision. The second pair of skiffs beached near the first two, and the process repeated as the earlier pair slid back into the water for another trip to the trawlers.

Four hours later, all the shrimp had been cleaned and packed back into the oversized ice chests, which the workers carried and loaded into three cargo vans parked on firmer terrain at the edge of a dirt road that stretched inland. The terrain was black as pitch behind them, the nearest civilization miles away, the group's nocturnal labor shielded from prying eyes. The workers carefully stacked the ice chests into the bays, heaved the folding tables into the bed of a '60s-era Dodge pickup truck, and stood by waiting to be paid by a bulldog of a man with a sweat-stained straw hat pulled low on his head, a holstered pistol strapped to his hip, his dark complexion wooden as he counted out pesos and distributed them to the crew. Once they'd collected their night's pay, the group filed toward a retired school bus and climbed aboard. The drone of the skiffs motoring south along the water faded to a faint hum, leaving a small mountain of shrimp husks near the shore, with any that escaped the early morning seagulls to be reclaimed by the elements.

The bus left first, next the pickup, and then the vans at intervals five minutes apart. The final cargo van bounced along the rutted road, and its headlights jittered giddily, the dust cloud from the other trucks having coated the scrub with pale ash as it settled. The driver turned up the radio to block out the rattling from the ancient suspension, and softly sang along with a slightly dissonant tenor who bemoaned

unrequited love over a wheezing accordion and throbbing tuba. He shook a cigarette from a crinkled pack – one of the budget brands that purported to taste like a premium American type but fell predictably short – and fumbled for a disposable butane lighter in the pocket of his shirt. When he found it, he pulled it free, popped the cigarette between his lips, and flicked the lighter to life, the bright flame temporarily blinding him in the darkness of the cab. The ember at the tip glowed neon red as he inhaled the fragrant smoke, and he was exhaling in satisfaction when a loud bang shook the chassis, and the steering wheel skewed right like it had a mind of its own.

The driver swerved and braked to a stop off the dirt strip, and swore in frustration as he eyed the palm trees and heavy underbrush that lined it. He frowned at his reflection in the mirror and shook his head, and then unlocked the door and swung down from the cab and rounded the hood to assess the damage, cowboy boots dull from the sand and ever-present dust.

The passenger-side tire had blown out, and its shredded sidewall was now half off the rim. He swore again and removed a cell phone from his back pocket and, after another glance at the ruined tire, placed a call.

Moments later, a gravelly voice answered. “What?” the voice snapped.

“Flat tire.”

A pause. “You’re joking.”

“I wish. I’ll probably be twenty...thirty minutes late, with any luck.”

“Where are you?”

“On the dirt, about a kilometer before the highway.”

A grunt. “Call back when you’re en route. Need anything?”

“No. I can handle it. Just wanted to let you know.”

The line disconnected, and the driver stared at the phone before opening the passenger door, sliding the seat forward,

and feeling for the tire change kit and jack. His nose wrinkled at the pungent stench of shrimp drifting from the rear of the van, where some water from one of the ice chests had leaked onto the metal floor, the drainage plug broken when the workers had loaded it.

“Great,” he muttered, and carried the kit to the back of the vehicle. He removed a rod with a handle and inserted it into a hole beneath the bumper, and then cranked it, ignoring the cigarette smoke that drifted into his eyes as he worked, the creak of the spare tire lowering the focus of his attention. When he had the tire free, he dragged it clear and rolled it to the front of the van, and then circled to the rear and swung the doors open to fetch his backpack.

He shouldered it and walked heavily to the front fender, and then knelt by the shredded tire and felt in his bag for a flashlight. He didn't find one and cursed again under his breath and glared into the darkness. An idea occurred to him, and he retrieved his phone and stabbed the camera light to life. The tire and jack illuminated in ghostly white, and after wiping his brow, he propped the phone nearby and set to work, wedging the jack into place and then pumping it repeatedly until he'd raised the axle enough for the spare to clear the wheel well.

Ten minutes later, he straightened and massaged his lower back, which ached like he'd been mule kicked, and tottered off to the brush to relieve himself after lighting another cigarette.

Four shadows drifted from the tree line to the rear of the van while he was occupied with his business, and the figures removed one of the ice chests and jogged with it back into the scrub. The driver zipped his pants and walked back to the van and, after glancing around, shrugged to himself and returned to the lug nuts on the newly replaced spare. When he finished, he lowered the jack and stepped away to inspect his work, breathing heavily from the exertion. He wiped more perspiration away from his brow before dropping the cigarette and crushing it beneath his boot, and then hauled the flat to the back of the van...where he stopped, mouth agape, and stared in disbelief at the floor where one of the ice chests had sat.

He dropped the tire and ran to retrieve his phone, heart pounding in his chest. He scooped it up and directed the beam on the soil around the back of the van. After a sweep he spotted tracks in the dirt, with those leading away from the vehicle deeper than the ones that had approached, no doubt from the weight of the chest.

The driver followed the footprints into the brush but lost them after twenty yards, the area a tangle of vines and weeds between the jungle trees. When he reached the van, his eyes were flashing anger, his throat tight. He stabbed the speed dial again and noted that his hand was shaking, the sweat beading on his brow glistening like tears in the moonlight.

The surly voice answered on the first ring. The driver drew a hesitant breath and then spoke in a shaky voice.

“We’ve got a problem.”

Chapter 2

Caribbean Sea, east of Ambergris Caye, Belize

A ten-knot wind kicked up directionless chop on the open water, barely visible in the darkness save for the effervescent foam on the crests. The inclement sea conditions didn't slow the sixty-foot cigarette boat that cut through the waves at fifty knots, the roar of its triple motors loud enough to be audible many miles away on the mainland. A regular ocean run from Honduras to the Florida coast or the Yucatan for transfer to trucks headed north, drug smugglers would shoot up the coast at high speeds, often waiting near the western tip of Cuba before making the final leg at near a hundred miles per hour in order to trick the Coast Guard and naval frigates that were chartered with stopping the endless stream of cocaine-laden craft from Central America.

The speedboat was handcrafted out of fiberglass, the hull roughly finished and painted flat navy blue, the stern filled with a dozen fifty-gallon drums of gasoline lashed together to augment the fuel tanks for a one-way run north. The well-funded drug cartels employed every possible type of craft to carry their precious cargo to the largest market for illegal drugs in the world, from small planes to hand-built submarines launched off the eastern coast of Colombia to tunnels to trucks, but the favorite of the smaller traffickers with limited resources was this type of boat, which was relatively cheap to build, only had to last ten to twelve hours on the high seas, and could be crewed by three men: two to transfer fuel and dump the barrels overboard when empty, and a captain who knew the route from having plied the waters on fishing craft.

It was high risk, high reward for the crews, who could collect as much as a couple of hundred thousand dollars for a

single run; a fortune in areas like Honduras and Nicaragua, where a few trips could set a man up for life. There were plenty of takers, and even though the captains received sixty percent of the take, for the unskilled muscle who would otherwise be laying brick in the hot sun for a few hundred dollars a month, playing the odds was worth it, even if getting it wrong meant years in a Mexican or American prison.

The margin on cocaine that flowed from South America to North was such that the traffickers could afford to take the bet that most of their craft would get through. A typical shipment might contain two hundred kilos of uncut coke at a cost of twelve hundred bucks per kilo, with a boat and crew cost of another two hundred grand, for a total investment of four hundred thousand dollars, assuming the crew made it. If they didn't, they were on their own, the fee offered being one for successful delivery, not best efforts. The economics were staggering, with each load that made it through carrying a haul that would be worth an easy ten million on the street after cutting. Even if every third boat was lost, the profit margin made it a lucrative trade, and the boats were lined up to run the gauntlet whenever there was product to move.

The captain, a swarthy complexioned man in his early forties, regularly scanned the horizon with binoculars, conveniences like radar impossible for boats that wanted to avoid detection. He checked the gas gauge and nodded to himself with a half-smile – they had plenty of fuel in the barrels and would need to refill the three-hundred-gallon tank within an hour. He took a swig of beer that he'd brought in a portable cooler and peered into the night, the makeshift low windshield crafted from a wrecked car deflecting most of the wind buffeting, even at high speeds. Once underway there was no point in trying to carry on a conversation with the crew over the howl of the motors and the wind noise – not that he wanted to. He didn't know the men in the stern, and didn't have any interest in hearing from them. They were there for one reason, and one reason only, and if the boat builders had been able to fashion a larger fuel tank, they'd have remained at the docks.

He raised the spyglasses to repeat his perusal of the horizon, and froze at the sight of faint lights to the east – almost impossible to make out, but to his seasoned eye, plainly visible in the darkness. While they could have been from a fishing boat or pleasure craft making a nocturnal run south, his throat tightened at the sight.

“Bogey at three o’clock,” he yelled at the top of his lungs, and slammed the throttles all the way forward, urging the boat to a top speed better than ninety knots.

One of the deck hands made his way to the helm and called out to him, “When do you want to transfer the fuel? We’ll need to slow down.”

The captain took another look at the gauge, and his frown deepened. “Within a half hour. We’re burning just over a mile per gallon now, maybe more.”

“Won’t we be sitting ducks?”

“Let me do the thinking. Go back and tell your *compadre* to be ready when I cut the power.”

“Aye aye,” the man quipped, and earned a glower from the captain for his tone.

Ten minutes later the captain raised the glasses to his eyes again and focused on the lights, which were now noticeably closer. They looked to him like those of a military ship, medium sized, either a US frigate or destroyer, and the vessel was moving at north of thirty-five knots, minimum, on a course that would intersect with theirs if both of them maintained their speed.

The captain kept an eye on the fuel gauge, and when it was bouncing against empty, throttled back and called to the hands, “Transfer the fuel, and look sharp about it!”

The men went to work with a hand pump that featured large-bore hoses on both ends, and after twenty minutes had four of the barrels emptied.

“That’s enough,” the captain advised them. “Close it up, and let’s get moving.”

Another look through the binoculars told him the warship was now maybe fifteen miles away. He did a quick calculation and figured it would be too close to evade within another twenty minutes, and removed a handheld GPS from a compartment beneath the wheel and powered it up. It blinked to life, and he looked over his left shoulder, where the device told him San Pedro on the Belize peninsula lay roughly forty miles to the southwest, putting them well into international waters.

“Toss the empties,” he called to the hands, and didn’t wait for a response. He started the engines and eased the power back on, and the men slung the empty barrels over the side and lashed the rest of them into place. Once they were secure, the captain goosed the throttles, and the boat lunged forward like an attack dog, the engines screaming as they approached redline.

Five minutes later the starboard outboard sputtered, and then all three began coughing. The boat shed speed, and the captain looked back at the crewmen as one of them worked his way forward to the helm.

“Must have gotten some bad gas?” the man asked.

“Seems that way,” the captain agreed. “Probably water in it.”

The deckhand peered at the lights approaching from the east. “What do we do now?”

The captain’s expression was grim. “Not a lot we can, is there?”

The captain of the US Coast Guard cutter turned to the ensign manning the wheel and instructed him to switch on the spotlights. The young officer flipped three switches, and the surface of the sea illuminated with thousands of watts of candlepower. The spotlight operators swung the big lamps in the direction of the boat they were tracking, sweeping the waves with the bright beams.

The captain nodded at a lieutenant who stood to one side of the helm, and the man pressed the transmit button of a

handheld microphone. The unit crackled, and after a pause, he spoke first in English and then in Spanish, his voice measured and his words clear.

“This is US Coast Guard vessel *Defiance* . Stand by for boarding. Keep your hands where they can be seen at all times.”

The men in the speedboat obeyed the instruction, and the ship lowered a tender into the water with a dozen armed men gripping M16s. Its engine growled to life, and it tore across the hundred and twenty yards of sea to the suspect boat, where the forlorn crew watched the approaching inflatable with squints, blinded by the spotlights trained on their position.

The Coast Guard vessel reached the speedboat, and a pair of seamen lashed the two craft together so the search party could board and inspect. The chief petty officer directing the operation ordered six of the gunmen onto the boat, and they climbed aboard and sequestered the crew near the bow while the rest searched it.

The Coast Guard captain watched through binoculars, and when the radio at the helm crackled to life, he nodded, and the lieutenant depressed the transmit button.

“Well?” he asked.

“They’re clean. Claim to be having engine trouble,” the officer reported from the speedboat.

“Clean? They must have thrown the cargo overboard.”

“Maybe. But there’s nothing here but fuel and some fishing gear.”

The captain frowned and thought for several beats. “Did you ask them what they were doing in the dead of night moving at sixty knots?”

“They said they like to get to the fishing grounds early.” The officer paused. “I’m not sure we have any reason to detain them.”

“Did you go through the fuel barrels?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing but gasoline. But...sir? They tried to start their engines on my orders, and they won't turn over. Sounds like bad gas to me.” Another pause. “They want to know if we can tow them to the nearest port.”

The captain turned from the lieutenant and swore softly before returning his attention to the helm. “That's not our mission.”

“They're dead in the water, sir. Ambergris is an hour and a half away. We could notify the Belizeans we're en route and see if they can take over once we're in their water.”

The captain considered his options. This was a quasi-Mayday now, and he was sort of obligated to help a vessel in distress. It rankled that he would be aiding what he was absolutely convinced was a drug-smuggling boat, but absent any evidence, he didn't have a lot of choice. He exchanged a glance with the lieutenant and spoke again.

“We can notify the Belizeans of their position. We're on patrol.”

A pause. “They're afraid the Belizeans won't help out since we're in international waters.”

The captain scowled in displeasure. The bastards had him checkmated, and he knew it.

“Fine. We'll tow them to where the Belize coast guard can take over. We'll deploy a tow line. Let's get them on board so they don't drown on our dime.” He hesitated. “Is there any chance some part of the boat's made out of compressed coke?”

“Negative, sir. At least not as far as I can tell.”

“Then let's get this over with. I'll alert base that we're going to be diverting to Ambergris.”

“Roger that.”

Chapter 3

Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico

The Andares shopping mall was bustling on a busy Sunday, as Guadalajara's privileged strolled the boulevard that divided the massive complex. A string of high-end open-air restaurants lined the drive that played host to a procession of luxury vehicles and supercars in the late morning sun, as the pedestrians on the promenade dressed in expensive fashion watched the show from the sidewalks. At first glance the city's most prosperous area could have easily passed for Beverly Hills, the shops boasting every premium brand imaginable, the ever-present teenagers sporting Rolex and Gucci and Vuitton with the casual nonchalance only second- and third-generation dynastic wealth could affect.

Glittering glass towers jutted into the blue sky across Puerta de Hierro Boulevard, where the surrounding neighborhood boasted the most expensive real estate west of Mexico City's Polanco district, which in turn was some of the priciest in the world. Soft music drifted from hidden speakers along the walkways, and black-uniformed security guards sported submachine guns to protect the patrons from robbery, sending the clear message that predatory misbehavior would be met with the harshest of responses.

Jet squeezed Hannah's hand as she and Matt ambled to one of the snack restaurants, where a trio of white-clad chefs was preparing crepes as fast as they were able. A queue of customers waited patiently to order, chatting amicably, colorful shopping bags at their feet. A heavenly aroma of baking batter and melting Nutella drifted in the faint breeze, and Hannah looked up at Matt and then to Jet, her smile as big as could be.

“You hungry?” Matt asked the little girl with a trace of a grin.

Jet raised an eyebrow. “Is that humor? She’s practically tearing my arm out of the socket.”

Hannah nodded vigorously. “That smells yummy.”

Matt matched the little girl’s smile. “No argument there. But looks like a long wait.”

Jet surveyed the line from several meters away. “We’ve got nothing but time. Besides, you’re abandoning us. What do you care?”

Matt sighed. “I’m just going to Chapala for the afternoon. It was your idea to check out the area. And it isn’t like you weren’t invited to come along.”

Jet shook her head. “Meeting with Realtors doesn’t sound very fun with a kid. You’re the man of the family. Suck it up.”

Matt held out his hands. “The point being that I’m hardly abandoning you.”

Jet shrugged. “Call it whatever you like.”

He nodded. “Are you two going to be okay without me? What do you think, Hannah? Will you miss me?” he asked.

Hannah glanced at him before her eyes returned to the crepe makers. “Sure.”

Matt grinned at Jet. “See? Life will go on.”

Jet and Matt had settled on trying Mexico for a home base, and had selected the country’s second-largest city to get lost in, the multicultural demographic making it unlikely they would stand out since Guadalajara was home to a wide variety of American, Canadian, and European expats, as well as hundreds of thousands of natives of Spanish and Italian and Asian ancestry. Jet’s Spanish was fluent and Matt’s nearly so, and Mexican culture was such that nobody asked questions about where people were from or what they were doing there – an ideal set of circumstances for a family looking to vanish off the radar for good.

Best of all, the infrastructure was such that they weren't surrounded by cameras like virtually all first world cities, their faces being continually scanned by facial-recognition software that fed to AI-equipped computers. While that was the norm in Canada, the U.S., Europe, and Asia, Latin America had neither the budget nor the technological infrastructure to support it, which meant that they could live effectively off the surveillance grid that was being constructed to turn most of the developed world into an open-air prison. Jet's instinct was to eschew any culture where the inhabitants' every move was subject to tracking.

Even after her cosmetic surgery, her new appearance only afforded her a certain amount of confidence. Best to avoid being scanned every few meters, which was where the tech was headed, along with each purchase being tracked in a cashless society. It was bad enough that everything from cell phones to smart appliances to high-technology street lights were now surveillance devices – she didn't have to help the slowly encroaching oppression along by living in an area where it was normalized. Mexico was still largely a cash-and-carry environment, where the majority of the population didn't even have a bank account, and nobody trusted their government. That had been an attraction for Jet and Matt, as it had been in Argentina before the unfortunate events that had led to their exodus from South America.

They'd considered Central America, but it was too crime-ridden and undeveloped for them to feel secure raising Hannah in, and lacked in mandatory basics like decent hospitals and safe plumbing. Colombia and points south weren't as appealing as Mexico for much the same reasons, and after some research they'd settled on Guadalajara, where they could shop neighborhoods for exactly what they wanted upon arrival. They'd been in the Andares area of Zapopan for three weeks, staying at a rental condo with a perfect location in the metropolitan sprawl, and had heard good things about nearby Lake Chapala, which was famed for a moderate climate that boasted year-round spring.

They took up their position in line at the crepe station, and Matt pulled Jet close and kissed her. Jet molded to him for a

moment, and then he stepped back to check his phone navigation software for an idea of the driving time to Chapala.

“Don’t agree to anything before I’ve seen it,” Jet warned.

“Of course not. Don’t eat too much. Those things are pure sugar,” he said, and winked at Hannah, who burst out laughing at his expression.

“Send pictures,” Jet requested.

“Will do. Now I’ve got to run. It says an hour and a half with traffic. Lot of accidents.”

He kissed her again and then strode purposefully through the crowd to the underground mall parking where they’d parked his rental car, leaving Jet and Hannah to their errands.

The crepe line barely moved, demand exceeding the staff’s ability to process the orders, and after ten minutes with only a few meters of progress, Jet leaned down and whispered to Hannah, “Let’s go to the other one over by the boulevard. There’s never as many people.”

“Okay, Mama.”

They broke from the queue and made for the other side of the mall, where there were only three people waiting. Hannah ordered enough chocolate and strawberries in her crepe to power a small town, and Jet paid with cash, wondering again to herself how inexpensive everything was, even in the priciest section of the city. They watched as the crepe maker worked her magic, and Jet glanced across the street at the base of one of the circular towers.

“When they finish your treat, let’s head over there so I can get some coffee,” Jet said, indicating a cafe whose offerings she preferred.

The crepe arrived folded and slid into a flat cardboard triangle, and Hannah munched with delicate bites as they crossed the boulevard and made for the cafe. When they neared, there were relatively few people in the four-level shopping plaza adjacent to the shop, the hour too early for the gourmet restaurants that composed most of the upper floors to be open.

Jet led the little girl through a pair of double glass doors, and they waited in another line while the barista took orders. Jet's gaze flitted to a hard-looking man seated by the entry, who was wearing one of the tan tactical vests that announced him as a bodyguard for someone wealthy, and then her eyes roamed out onto the street through the plate-glass windows to where two more similarly clad men waited on the sidewalk – something she'd grown accustomed to in the area, where having guards announced your importance in a seemingly endless game of one-upmanship for people who had everything. She smiled to herself as yet another Mercedes G-Wagen rolled to a stop at the valet stand out front. It was the third she'd seen in as many minutes, and she once again marveled at the amount of money on display in a country most thought of as destitute.

The cashier finished with the customer in front of Jet, and she guided Hannah forward and ordered. After she paid, they headed to a seating area where a dozen tables were occupied, primarily by well-groomed women in trios, gossiping about whose husband had run off with his secretary or whose daughter had unexpectedly announced a pregnancy with no potential mate in evidence. Jet pulled a few napkins from a container and wiped away some of the chocolate that Hannah had managed to smear around her mouth and her hands, and was preparing to scold her when motion by the valet stand drew her attention.

Two SUVs screeched to a stop, and the doors flew open. Eight figures wearing flak vests and balaclavas spilled onto the street, AK-47 and M16 rifles in hand. The pair of bodyguards on the sidewalk immediately began firing at them, and the masked gunmen sprayed the front of the coffee shop with rounds. Chunks of concrete blew into the air around the guards, and one of them grunted when a pair of bullets punched into his abdomen. His partner ducked into the shop while continuing to shoot at the attackers, and the one who had been stationed inside ran towards where a pair of women had thrown themselves to the floor. He grabbed one of the heavy wooden tables and laid it on its side to protect them, and then did the same with another and drew a bead on the entryway.

Jet shielded Hannah with her body and pulled her behind the end of the counter, where any stray fire would be stopped by the refrigerated cases and the support structure, and winced when a hail of rounds destroyed the shop's glass façade. Another white G-Wagen skidded sideways from the parking area and blocked the valet station, and two more men in bodyguard vests threw open the doors and used them as cover as they blasted at the attackers with bullpup submachine guns. The masked gunmen split their attention between the shop and the new arrivals, taking cover behind their SUVs, and exchanged volleys. Bullets shredded the wood walls of the coffee shop behind Jet and still more peppered the Mercedes, which appeared to be armored given that the rounds didn't penetrate the doors.

A minute of gunfire back and forth later and three of the attackers had been hit, and one of the defending shooters from the G-Wagen was down. Jet watched from around the corner of the counter as a metal orb bounced from the SUVs and rolled beneath the Mercedes, and then a deafening blast reverberated through the complex as the grenade detonated, neutralizing the second bodyguard when it vaporized his legs.

Five attackers pressed their advantage and rushed toward the coffee shop, firing as they ran, and the remaining two guards pumped rounds at them as fast as they could squeeze their triggers. One of the bodyguards yelled instructions to the women and then made his way to them and guided one to the counter, hunched over her to shield her with his body while emptying his weapon at the approaching shooters. The pair had barely made it when the area around where Jet and Hannah crouched disintegrated from slugs hitting it, raining debris and plaster around them as the terrified staff cowered farther down the counter. The guard ejected his spent magazine and fished another from his vest pouch, his face glistening from a sheen of sweat. He slammed it into place, chambered a round, and was taking aim over the top of the counter when a bullet blew his skull off at the hairline, spackling the wall behind him, as well as the woman beside Jet, with bone and brains.

He slumped lifeless to the floor, and the woman clenched her eyes closed, trembling. More shooting from the entry and a scream signaled the other bodyguard had been hit, and Jet pushed Hannah towards the baristas and reflexively scooped up the dead guard's dropped pistol. She positioned herself by the edge of the counter, and a pair of gunmen rounded the doorway, leading with their rifle muzzles.

The pistol barked in Jet's hand. Her first shot hit the lead gunman in the groin, where his flak vest offered no protection, and he let loose an agonized shriek and blasted the ceiling of the café on full auto as he dropped to the floor. His companion fired at where Jet had been moments before, but she'd anticipated the move and managed three shots over the top of the counter, two of which hit his vest, and one of which slammed into his shoulder above the body armor. He retreated to the safety of the sidewalk while another gunman took his place and fired in measured bursts at the counter, but the structure's concrete block construction coupled with the refrigeration units stopped the rounds before they could have any effect.

The woman opened her eyes wide and stared in confusion at Jet, who reached to the side and fired blindly in the direction of the door several times, and then the distant howl of sirens approached from down the street. The shooting from the attackers abruptly stopped, leaving the café suddenly quiet save for the sobs of the patrons and staff.

Jet looked over at where Hannah was curled in a ball by the nearest cashier, and waited for any sound of approaching boots, ready to fire. Instead, she heard the sound of running footsteps through the broken glass façade, and dared a look at the street, where the surviving gunmen were dragging two wounded shooters into the SUVs. Jet fired off six more shots at them, and one hit a gunman as he was pulling himself into the passenger seat. The man screamed and tumbled halfway out of the vehicle onto the pavement, dropping his weapon as he fell.

Everything happened in a blur after that. The driver groped for the wounded man and floored the gas, taking off with

smoking tires and dragging the man down the road. The second SUV followed closely behind with a gunman hanging out the window, shooting at the café as it pulled away, his shots doing nothing but further destroying the counter front and the wall behind it.

Moments later three local police cruisers arrived, and another pair of Mexican army pickups flew past in pursuit of the SUVs. The uniformed troops in the beds brandished M16s of their own, with heavy Browning .50-caliber machine guns on turrets above the cabs manned by soldiers equipped with helmets and black face masks. The police stayed put until the army had disappeared around the corner, and then cautiously exited their vehicles with rifles and shotguns in hand, all of which were trained on the café.

An officer yelled an order through a bullhorn, advising everyone to drop their weapons and put their hands up and come into view, and Jet obeyed and called to Hannah, who joined her, tears streaming down her face as she eyed the dead bodyguard beside the trembling woman. It took thirty seconds, but everyone in the café got to their feet, and only then did the police approach, weapons at the ready, clearly apprehensive as more police and army arrived to provide backup.

Once the police were inside the café, they toed weapons away from the dead and wounded and barked orders at the customers and staff. The officers gathered everyone into a group and began questioning them as the rest kept watch. After five minutes, two police approached Jet with pistols drawn and instructed her to turn around with her hands behind her head. Jet protested, but their expressions didn't encourage argument, and she reluctantly did as ordered, and flinched when the edges of the steel cuffs cut into her wrist. One of the men twisted her free arm down behind her back and cuffed that arm as well, and then they dragged her out of the café as Jet called to Hannah to be brave, and then screamed at the police that they couldn't take her, that her daughter was in the café, that she wasn't involved in the attack – all to no avail.

Jet debated putting up a real fight, but she was badly outnumbered, and with Hannah standing watching her mother

being arrested, it would be a no-win situation. She forced herself to calm down, and allowed the officers to put her in the rear of one of the cruisers.

Jet's last impression was a vision of Hannah's shoulders heaving as she sobbed, and the sound of her daughter's screams of fear and anger as the car rolled away, taking her mother God knew where.

Chapter 4

Lake Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt sat back into the passenger seat of the parked Nissan Versa that he and his real estate agent had spent the better part of two hours in, bouncing along uneven streets barely wide enough for a horse to navigate as the man had persistently shown him a half dozen homes for rent, hinting broadly that many of them could be bought for the right offer. The Realtor, a ruddy-complexioned Canadian expat in his mid-forties with a perennially cheery tone, looked over at Matt and patted the steering wheel.

“What do you say, Michael?” he asked, using the name Matt had given him. “Ready for a cold brew and some finger food while we try to make sense out of it all?”

“That sounds amazingly good, Jerry,” Matt replied, and glanced at his watch. “But I really need to get back to Zapopan.”

Jerry shrugged. “No point in trying right now. It’ll be rush hour by the time you get over the hill, and that means it will be stop and go for hours. Best to wait it out with proper fortification, if you want the advice of a seasoned local.”

Matt sighed. It had been a grueling tour, with most of the options wildly overpriced and with glaring deficiencies Jerry seemed blind to. “I suppose I could manage to choke down one or two.”

“That’s the spirit!” Jerry declared, and twisted the ignition key with a flourish. “I know just the spot. A block off the lake, down by the lot where I picked you up. Marvelous sunsets, and a hell of a happy hour.”

“Sign me up,” Matt agreed, and winced inwardly as the Realtor nearly collided with a motorcycle-powered cart heaped with freshly cut fruit.

Fifteen minutes later, Jerry had wedged his car in an impossibly small parking space and was leading Matt down the cracked sidewalk to where '70s pop drifted from the open-air second-floor terrace of a restaurant. Matt looked up at the hand-painted sign that announced “Pancho’s Revenge,” which featured an image of an artistically stylized Mexican *bandito* replete with bandolier and sombrero. His eyes drifted to the blackboard hanging below it that promised “Coldest *cerveza* in Mexico! Twofer happy hour four to seven!” and he waited for Jerry to confirm this was his pick.

“Best chips and salsa in Ajijic,” Jerry said, and led the way through the twin saloon doors and up a brick staircase at the rear of a dark, empty dining room. When they emerged back into the late afternoon light, the scene was a collection of battered wooden tables packed with red-faced gringos who were taking full advantage of the promised bargains. A jukebox that was older than Matt pumped out a slightly distorted rendition of “Hey Jude” from beside a long bar, the glass doors of the four beer refrigerators proudly displaying their contents chilled to minus three degrees Celsius.

Jerry scanned the tables and chose an empty one near the railing, and motioned for Matt to join him. When they were seated, a young man with spiked ebony hair and an elaborate tattoo winding its way down his neck materialized beside them and asked in perfect English what they wanted.

“I’ll take a Bohemia Clara,” Jerry said, and pointed to Matt. “You?”

“Negra Modelo.”

“Chips and salsa?” the server asked in a tone that indicated he knew the answer. “Guac?”

“Sure,” Jerry confirmed, and the young man hurried away.

“That’s weird, isn’t it? I mean, no accent, nothing,” Matt observed.

“Yeah, well, lot of locals lived in the U.S. for years, then got deported for one reason or another. Usually because they were illegal. Bet if you asked him, he’d tell you he spent half his life in Fresno or Eugene.” Jerry shrugged. “But English comes in handy here. They make way better money being bilingual. At least in the expat and tourist areas.” Jerry paused and beamed a thousand-watt, cap-toothed smile. “Which I’m guessing you’ve figured out. Certainly in Chapala,” he said, motioning at the rowdy terrace.

“Free market at work, I suppose,” Matt said.

“Yep. I came down here ten years ago and never looked back. Live like a king on a third of what it cost just to get by back home.” The waiter arrived with their beers and a bowl of chips and salsa, and set them down on the table before going back for the guacamole. “And the natives are a lot friendlier here than the girls in Toronto.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Matt replied, and clinked his bottle against Jerry’s as the server approached with an overloaded container of green goo.

“So, now that you’ve seen what’s on the market here, what do you think?” Jerry asked after they’d swallowed some of their beer.

“A couple of them are possible. I’ll need to get my wife down here to see them. This was the scouting foray.”

Jerry’s expression hardened with disappointment. “Is she back home, or did you come with?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s up in Guadalajara. I’ll give her a full report and show her the pictures I took, and we’ll be back in a day or so.”

Jerry brightened. “Well, that’s great. It’s a hot market. Lots of interest. You don’t want to take too long and let someone snag something out from under you.”

Matt nodded, as though agreeing with the Realtor’s ham-handed attempt to create a sense of urgency. The truth was he’d only seen one townhouse Jet might like, in a gated community, but it was pretty shopworn in the way rentals

typically could be and would need considerable work to be appealing. But Jerry had been a good sport and spent a good amount of time tracking down candidates and arranging the showings, so Matt would play along and tell him what he wanted to hear so he'd remain cooperative and responsive.

Jerry interrupted Matt's thoughts when he waved at someone behind Matt, and called out over the music, "Logan! Hey, man! Grab a seat!"

Matt twisted as a tall man with graying hair approached through the sea of gringos and lowered himself into the free chair opposite Matt, whose expression remained pleasantly blank even as his eyes went cold. Jerry signaled to the waiter and then sat back with his beer aloft.

"Michael, this is Logan, another Chapala Realtor," Jerry announced. "Not nearly as honest as me, but he does what he can."

Logan nodded. "Michael. A pleasure."

Matt returned the nod. "Likewise."

Jerry pointed to his beer and held up two fingers and chuckled at Logan. "Figured you're drinking the usual, right, buddy?"

"Absolutely."

Jerry took a swig of his beer. "Michael here is in the market for a rental for himself and his wife. You know of any pocket listings that aren't on the feed?"

Logan shrugged. "I can nose around." He eyed Matt. "Are you thinking long term, or looking more at a monthly situation?"

"I haven't decided. I'm open to options."

More beer arrived, and the Realtors made small talk, much of which was inside jokes and industry scuttlebutt. Matt pretended interest, but spent much of his time peering at his watch. It was getting dark when he finished his second beer, and he tossed some pesos on the table and pushed himself to his feet.

“Guys? Thanks for the hospitality, but it’s been a long one, and I have to get back.”

Jerry’s face fell. “Really? Can’t stay for one more?”

Matt shook his head. “Wish I could, but nope – I don’t want to plow into a ditch or something. But don’t let me stop you. They’re right about the coldest beer in Mexico.”

Jerry stood as well and shook Matt’s hand. “You have my contact information. Give me a call when you want to show the places to your wife.”

Logan remained seated. “Safe travels,” he said, and toasted with his bottle.

“Thanks.”

Matt strode to the stairway, his progress slowed by the press of bodies around the tables, and when he reached it, glanced over his shoulder at where Jerry and Logan were seated. He took the steps two at a time, pausing to let a geriatric gringo couple in matching Hawaiian shirts up the staircase, and then continued to the dining area, which was beginning to fill up with the early dinner crowd.

He exited the building and looked both ways along the sidewalk, and then removed his phone from his pocket and activated the navigation app as he made his way up the street. Bad news – the expected rush hour traffic was stopped on the road to Guadalajara, with accidents peppering the way. He sighed, and when he reached the corner, he stopped and checked over his shoulder, and then continued along the sidewalk until he reached another restaurant with a rooftop terrace, checked the time, and entered, leaving the long shadows of the street behind him.

Chapter 5

Panama City, Panama, Central America

The waterfront boulevard was swimming with headlights winding their way along the coastline, the city's ultramodern glass skyscrapers illuminating the night sky, their gleaming towers reflecting the starlight like spectral giants in crystal and chrome armor. The Malecón was packed with pairs and trios of scantily clad, breathtakingly beautiful young women with dark hair and dancing eyes and their male equivalents, most dressed as though cast in a rap video. The tropical swelter blanketed the area in a fog of humidity, even after sunset.

Music pulsed from cars parked in enormous parking lots across the road, echoing off the surface of the Pacific, its surface marred by a scattering of huge container and cruise ships anchored offshore, awaiting transit through the canal to the Caribbean side or preparing to recross the ocean to Asia. The distant roar of a jet on final approach to the nearby international airport added to the cacophony of reggaeton beats from the vehicles, lending the balmy atmosphere a chaotic feel, the world seeming to teeter on the precarious edge of pandemonium.

A dark SUV rolled to a stop at one of the towers, and a security guard opened the rear passenger-side door and held it for a woman in dark pants and a blouse. She climbed from the vehicle, and the man shut the door and then guided her to the front entrance, where a doorman met her and escorted her inside. He showed her to a bank of stainless-steel elevators, and a duo of heavily muscled men with olive complexions and slicked-back hair watched her approach with impassive expressions.

When she reached them, the one on her right swept her from head to toe with a metal-detecting wand, and when it shrieked at the back of her pants, she withdrew a slim cell phone and handed it to him. He continued the search to her feet and then returned the phone while his partner punched the elevator buttons. One of the steel doors to her right slid open with a whisper, and he entered after her and stood behind her with his hands folded in front of him, eyes on his partner outside.

“Fifty-ninth,” he said in Spanish, and the woman depressed the indicated button and waited as the floor beneath them surged quietly upward, the whine of a ventilation fan the only sound. Her nose wrinkled at the man’s heavy-handed application of a cloying cologne. Fifteen seconds later the door whooshed open again, and she stepped out into a brightly lit lobby, where three more goons waited, their loose shirts poorly concealing the bulge of pistols. One of them stepped forward, his ostrich-skin burgundy cowboy boots out of place in the contemporary space, and motioned to a door at the far end of the expanse. She nodded and walked to the door, and it opened just as she reached it, pulled wide from the inside by yet another thirty-something dark-skinned man with dead eyes.

An oval conference table dominated the room. A half dozen men in casual attire sat around it, a bottle of coconut rum in the center, half-full glasses of the caramel-tinted liquor before them. The one at the head, his thousand-dollar Versace shirt open to reveal a diamond-encrusted crucifix dangling from a thick gold chain, raised his glass to the woman and indicated the empty chair at the opposite end of the table.

“Ah, our mystery woman’s here,” he said in Spanish. “Please, have a seat and a drink.”

Nabila sat where he’d indicated and smiled as she shook her head. “No thanks on the rum, Alberto. I don’t drink.”

“A woman without vices. Fine, then,” Alberto said, and took a long pull at his cocktail before setting it down and staring around the room. “Down to business, yes?”

Nabila nodded. “That’s why I’m here.”

Alberto addressed the man on his right. “Chuco?”

Chuco cleared his throat. “The interception the other night worked as you said it would. The Americans went for the decoy boat, and our shipment went through as hoped.”

Nabila nodded. “Fifty million dollars’ worth of powder delivered without a hitch. As promised.” She smiled dryly. “For which you owe me two percent. How were you planning to pay?”

“That’s what we wanted to discuss. We’re interested in a more...permanent arrangement,” Alberto said.

Nabila’s expression didn’t change. “I prefer a transactional basis. My fee is two percent per shipment that makes it through. As we agreed.”

“You’ll get your million,” Alberto said. “But we want to up the number of runs, and if we do that, under your fee schedule, we would be doing three to five million a week to you. What I would suggest is more of a discount for volume.”

Nabila didn’t speak for a moment and then stood. “How will I get my million?”

“We’re having your bitcoin transferred from one of our holding company wallets after this meeting.”

“How about now?” she asked. “I don’t like having discussions until I’ve been paid what I’m owed.”

Alberto stared at her. “We can do that.” He picked up a cell phone that was lying facedown on the table, powered it up, and tapped a series of digits. He spoke in rapid Spanish and then switched it off and removed the SIM chip. “There. It will be done in one minute. Now sit down. We’re here to work out a deal.”

Nabila slowly lowered herself into the chair. “We both know that my being able to get a large load past the gringos is worth more than a million. That *is* the discounted rate.”

“That isn’t the point. We don’t like to overpay.”

Nabila drew long, slow, deep breaths. She looked around the table and raised an eyebrow. “Is it okay to check my wallet on my phone?”

“Keep it short.”

Nabila turned on her cell, logged into her Metamask wallet, and confirmed the transfer. She thumbed off the phone and set it on the table. “Well?”

Alberto took a long beat before speaking. “You delivered results once. That’s obviously good, and you’re one for one. We got a win; you got paid. But if you can scale this to two or three shipments a week, you would still be making a fortune at a one percent per shipment rate.”

Nabila nodded as though agreeing, and stood again. “Gentlemen, thank you for your time. Let me know if you’d like to do any more business. You know how to get ahold of me.” She paused. “There are a lot of costs involved in getting the Coast Guard and Navy deployment schedules, and considerable risk for myself and those who are securing them for me. If you don’t feel they’re worth two percent per shipment, I won’t argue with you, and wish you the best of luck.”

She was halfway to the door when Chuco growled at her. “You don’t just walk out on us.”

She stopped and slowly turned. “Now you’re threatening me?” Her gaze shifted to Alberto. “I think we’re done here. You should have accepted my terms.”

Chuco sprang to his feet. “You –”

Alberto cut him off by slamming his hand on the table. Chuco sat back down, and Alberto smiled. “We want to do business. It’s just a matter of price. We could maybe go...one and a half percent for two shipments a week.” He locked stares with Nabila. “And no threats. You have my word.”

Nabila remained where she stood. “I’d be willing to do that for a month. If all goes well, my value goes up, not down – agreed? And we renegotiate.”

Alberto regarded her without reaction and then grunted. “You got it, lady. Now, you sure you don’t want that drink?”

Nabila offered a smile of her own and shook her head. “Let me know when you want to target for the next shipment. I’m

sorry about the drink, but I have work to do. You're not my only clients." She was turning when she stopped and looked back at Chuco. "You really don't want to threaten me. Nobody else can do what I do. Nobody. Or you'd be doing it yourselves. Besides, this is pocket change for you. Don't make it more difficult than it has to be."

She resumed her exit and waited for the elevator without looking back. When it opened, she stepped inside, and when the door closed, she exhaled uneasily and selected the lobby button, her hand shaking as she pushed it.

She'd managed to use her contacts to create a new business in Panama catering to the traffickers, but they were a mercurial bunch and could turn on her at any time, she knew. That said, if she delivered, the money was huge, even though she had to cough up half of it to get the intel she needed to succeed with the decoy strategy. And that wouldn't last. Maybe three or four shipments and the Americans would figure out they'd been compromised, and wouldn't fall for it any longer, and then she'd be useless to the traffickers – or worse, a liability. At which point she'd need to disappear and create something new, which would be considerably easier with three or four mil in her wallet and nothing holding her from finding new digs.

But for now, she was in the smuggling business, or more accurately, in the red herring business, and she only had to hope that her contact at the Coast Guard didn't get hit by a bus or go on a coke binge with his newfound wealth, and that Alberto was true to his word for a month, after which all bets were off.

Chapter 6

Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico

Two burly cops half dragged Jet to a common holding cell at the main jail, where sixteen women were incarcerated in an area that reeked of vomit and human waste. One of them rapped on the barred door with his truncheon, and two of the women near it stepped back, fear in their eyes. The other man removed a set of keys on a ring from his belt and slid one into the lock, and then pulled it open and held it wide while the other removed Jet's handcuffs and pushed her roughly inside.

The door slammed behind her with the finality of a gunshot, leaving her to take in the squalor that was the holding pen. A few of the women were obviously drunk and passed out on the floor, while others were scratching at their arms and legs, their faces gaunt from drug addiction. Many of the rest had the bored expressions of prostitutes who were used to the place, waiting for their pimps to get them out, their only emotion obvious annoyance at missing out on a night's earnings.

A pall of cigarette smoke hung near the ceiling, the closed high barred window high above reach offering no ventilation, and she swallowed hard at the stench emanating from a cracked toilet in one corner, which was clearly not functioning and had overflowed onto the nearby floor, where the effluence ran down a slight incline to a drain she guessed was used when they hosed the place out.

She had been processed with no explanation by a heavysset woman with an abrasive demeanor, who'd growled at her to hold still for her mug shot and printing. The facilities were grim and primitive, the equipment and computers at least a decade old, the walls layered with peeling paint with official notices taped to them, the entire place reeking of disrepair. Jet

had asked why she was being arrested, on what charges, but nobody had spoken to her other than to order her to stand here or go there, and the closest she'd come to any sort of warmth had been a latex-gloved search that had been as invasive as date rape.

Jet studied her cell mates, taking in the misery on the women's faces before moving to one of the steel benches affixed to the walls and seating herself as close to the doors as she could. The thought of her likeness going into the system infuriated her, but there wasn't much she could do about it. Being forced to leave Hannah on her own was another matter. She'd demanded to know what was happening to her daughter as the cops had driven her downtown, but they'd only said she would be taken care of, and didn't elaborate.

Jet had tried to reason with them, but they'd been uninterested in her pleas and had advised her to shut up and save it for the detectives who would be investigating the shooting. She'd argued that she'd only fired in self-defense, and that it wasn't her gun, but they'd stonewalled her, and she'd decided to keep quiet until she had more information on what she was being charged with, assuming she was being charged with anything, which seemed a safe assumption.

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the stink that permeated everything in the vicinity, and only opened them when she sensed someone standing in front of her. She blinked at the sight of a tall woman with a pockmarked face and home-inked tattoos on her arms and hands glaring at her.

"You're in my spot," the woman snarled, hands on her hips.

Jet looked her up and down and leaned her head back against the wall. "You really don't want to do this," she warned.

"I said you're in my spot, bitch. Now move, or I'll shove your head down the toilet."

Jet didn't respond and, when the woman reached out to grab her hair, dove herself to her feet in a flash and punched her in the abdomen. The woman's eyes narrowed in surprise, and she tried to scratch Jet's face with her long nails, and Jet caught

her hand and bent two of the fingers backward until they gave with a snap.

The woman screamed in pain and rage and sank to the floor, the fight having gone out of her after being so badly hurt in a matter of seconds. Jet debated kicking her ribs in, but thought better of it, not wanting to give the police any further reason to persecute her. She was under no misapprehensions about how the law in Mexico worked. It was Napoleonic, which meant you were presumed guilty until proven otherwise, and she was confident that the favored technique used by the authorities was to beat the truth out of you.

Jet sat back down, eyes locked on the woman but her mind on Hannah and her likely predicament. A blonde-haired girl of her age would be a target for human trafficking, and she had to pray that the system in Guadalajara was at least somewhat efficient and that she wasn't already being shunted somewhere dangerous where she'd be abused. The thought caused her teeth to grind, and she fought for control. Losing her composure wouldn't help matters, and she needed to be calm and collected for whatever happened next.

She assumed she would be questioned at some point, but had no idea how that would work or how long she'd be held. Nobody had responded to her request for a phone call, and she didn't know enough about Mexican police procedures to understand whether that was a right before she was questioned or not. Likewise, she had no idea about how to go about securing a criminal defense attorney or how that worked. Nor what laws the police were going to claim she'd broken by shooting assassins in self-defense.

Which left her sitting in a hellhole, waiting.

Jet glanced over at an orange plastic bowl near the bars that was half full of some sort of noxious gruel, and winced at the sight of maggots squirming in it, foreshadowing that mealtimes were likely to be something to skip.

The thought jolted her. Was she really going to be locked up long enough to have to worry about it?

And where would that leave Hannah?

She needed to reach Matt as soon as possible. If she only got one call, that was the number she'd dial. They had enough financial resources to be able to handle virtually anything the state could throw at them, not to mention that Mexico had a reputation for having the best law enforcement money could buy. But right now Matt was unaware of her situation, which left Jet helpless and furious at her unfair predicament.

Her thoughts turned to the gunfight, and she frowned. Why hadn't she resisted the impulse to get involved? It had been stupid, and she was now facing unknown consequences. All avoidable had she just kept her head down.

Assuming the hit men hadn't shot everyone to eliminate witnesses.

She remembered that thought flitting through her consciousness as she'd reached for the pistol. It had been a primal instinct to protect Hannah and secondarily herself. She could have no more switched that off than change her eye color at will.

The woman who'd attacked her moaned from the floor, bringing Jet's attention back to the present. She was framing a warning to the other women to not get involved in the scuffle if the authorities asked what had happened, when the steel door at the end of the hallway creaked open, and the pair of guards returned, one of them with cuffs in hand.

"You," he said, pointing his club at Jet after a disinterested glance at the hurt woman.

"Yes?" Jet asked, rising.

"Let's go," he said impatiently.

Jet moved to the barred door and waited as the man unlocked it, and then stepped out into the hallway with her hands held out before her. The second guard cuffed her while the first relocked the cell, and then they led Jet to the door they'd come through, a hand on each of her arms.

Once through, they escorted her to a police van, opened the rear doors, and lifted her into the back, where metal bench seats on either side ran the length of the cargo space, with the

area separated from the passenger cabin by a heavy steel grid. The doors slammed behind her. The men climbed into the cab, and the older of the two started the engine.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded.

The guards ignored her, and she was thrown backwards as the driver stomped on the gas and pulled to a security gate that rose automatically, a uniformed officer manning it displaying no interest in the vehicle.

They bounced along a four-lane street until they were on a highway, and Jet gave up asking where she was being taken. She’d know soon enough, she supposed, and assumed that the detectives worked out of a different building. Her pulse quickened when the van rolled west, and the buildings of Zapopan gave way to industrial parks and then open fields of sugarcane and corn.

Having her wrists cuffed in front of her provided her a small advantage, and she went to work on the link that attached the cuffs together, twisting methodically in an effort to weaken the link. The Achilles’ heel on most handcuffs was always the link, and depending on the integrity of the manufacturing process, it could be broken, given enough time and effort.

The van drove through a toll booth without pausing. She couldn’t make out any road signs from the cargo hold, but Jet was growing more alarmed by the minute as the van picked up speed until it was tearing along at a hundred and forty kilometers per hour, the only sound the thrum of tires on asphalt and the low roar of the big motor.

Jet continued her twisting project and could feel a bit of give in the link by the time the van exited the highway, the area around it dark and verdant.

“Where are we?” Jet asked, but the guards might as well have been mute.

They continued along a two-lane rustic road for what Jet estimated was ten minutes, and then turned down a drive before stopping where four figures in vests blocked the way, AK-47s in hand. Jet swallowed hard at the sight, because none

of the gunmen wore anything approaching police uniforms, and the sprawling, two-story hacienda home behind them bore no resemblance to a police precinct.

One of the men approached and peered into the back of the van at Jet, and then nodded to the driver. He called out to the other gunmen, and they stepped from the drive to allow the van to pass. The driver rolled beyond them before he coasted to a stop at the front entrance of the house, where another pair of gunmen stood at the ready.

The guards descended from the van and circled to the rear. When they threw open the doors, Jet blinked at them in the soft amber light from the house.

“What is this? Where are we?” she managed.

The driver stepped back. “Out,” he said.

Jet obeyed, seeing no other option, the link not quite weakened enough to snap apart. When she was on the cobblestone, the driver nodded to his companion, and he shocked Jet by unlocking the cuffs and handing her a manila envelope with a number written on it. She took it and felt the slim bulk of her phone and a few other odds and ends.

“Go inside,” the driver said, and the pair of guards returned to the van and climbed in. Jet’s forehead creased in confusion, but she made her way up three steps to the expansive front porch, where one of the gunmen reached for the door and pushed it open. Jet entered the foyer and found herself facing one of the two women from the coffee shop, who was regarding her from beside a row of French doors on the far side of a wide living room.

“Ah, you made it. I’m glad you weren’t held for too long. If I had been able to get you released sooner, believe me, I would have,” the woman said, and approached Jet, a calculated smile in place.

“I don’t understand,” Jet said.

“Were you mistreated in any way?” the woman asked.

Jet shook her head. “I’ll live.”

“Good. Come,” she said, indicating the French doors. “I’m Daniela Cervantes, by the way, and I think I owe you a considerable debt of gratitude for saving my life.” She paused. “And you are...?”

“Rachel. Rachel Simms,” Jet said, using her Mexican alias.

“Rachel. *Raquel* . How delightful. A pleasure,” Daniela said, and turned away.

Jet allowed Daniela to lead her to the doors, and peered out at where three children were splashing in a brightly lit swimming pool. One of the little girls was Hannah, and Jet’s hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes moistened.

“How –” Jet started, her voice tight.

“I’ll explain once you’ve had a chance to freshen up. It’s been a long day, no? I’m hoping you’ll accept my hospitality and stay the night. Your daughter is enjoying her time with my kids, and she’ll be excited to see you, I’m sure. I told her not to worry, but that only goes so far.”

Jet was speechless, and it took all her self-control to nod in agreement.

“Good,” Daniela said. “Carmela will show you to your room so you can take stock. I’ll be waiting down here whenever you want to come down.” She paused and smiled again. “Don’t worry. They haven’t drowned yet. They can manage another few minutes.”

“I have to get home,” Jet said. “I appreciate everything, but...”

“You don’t want to be on the roads after a certain hour. Best if you stay the night.”

“That’s not necessary. I can get an Uber or something.”

Daniela laughed softly. “I’m afraid you’ll find nobody will come this far out. We’re in the middle of nowhere. One of the problems with living in the sticks, but it is what it is. You probably noticed the security? I’m afraid it’s necessary. The country’s tearing itself apart with all the crime, as you saw today. Please – accept my hospitality as a sign of thanks. You

saved a lot of lives today. I owe you at least this much.” Her eyes flitted to the pool. “And your daughter is having the time of her life with mine. It would be an honor to have you stay. We have more than enough room. And dinner’s almost ready.”

Jet nodded, her mind working furiously as a woman in a maid’s uniform materialized from the kitchen when Daniela snapped her fingers.

“Let Carmela know if you need anything. Clothes, whatever. You look about the size of my oldest daughter. She’s off at university in Spain, but she left an entire wardrobe here to collect dust. Might as well have someone get some use out of it.”

Carmela stepped forward. “*Señorita?* ”

Jet nodded again and followed the woman up a travertine and wrought-iron staircase to the second level, her thoughts racing at the unexpected turn of events, beginning with the fact that her host not only had a small army guarding her but apparently had enough wherewithal to get Jet released from custody after a mass assassination attempt.

The questions tumbled over themselves in her head, and by the time the maid opened a door and indicated a suite complete with a separate sitting area and a four-poster bed, Jet was determined to figure out what she’d fallen into, because in her experience nothing was ever as it seemed at first blush.

Nothing.

Chapter 7

Lake Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt's beer arrived as he watched the street below from the terrace bar, his eyes fixed on the gloomy sidewalk. He tossed a few banknotes onto the table and took a long pull on his drink, and then set it down when he detected movement in the shadows down the road. A figure swam into view, and Matt rose and rushed to the stairs, leaving his sweating bottle almost full.

He was at the front entrance in a matter of moments and cautiously stuck his head out the door. The street was empty. He scowled and cocked his head to listen, cursing silently the music inside, but heard nothing beyond the pounding of his pulse in his ears and Luis Miguel singing a Spanish version of an Elvis ballad. He waited half a minute and then eased out onto the sidewalk, nerves tingling for a threat that wasn't evident.

Seeing Logan had thrown him, even though Matt hadn't visibly reacted. He'd known the man by his real name, Brian, during his CIA years, and the pair had been in the same marksmanship class during the intense training they'd undergone as part of becoming field assets. That had been twenty plus years ago, but Matt rarely forgot a face, and his appearance in Chapala at the same time Matt was there had set off all sorts of alarms, none of them good.

Had the agency tracked him down? How? It seemed almost impossible. And to what end? And why alert Matt by sending Brian? What was their game?

Matt slowly walked along the street and extracted his cell to figure out the fastest way back to his car. He squinted at it in

the darkness and adjusted his route to make it to the lakeside parking lot within five minutes. He was slipping it back into his shirt pocket when a shadow darkened the sidewalk in front of him as a figure stepped from one of the doorways. Matt stiffened when Brian charged at him, teeth bared and his expression grimly determined.

Matt sidestepped at the last moment and avoided the brunt of the roundhouse punch Brian managed to land, and responded with a jab to his abdomen, which was steeled in expectation. Brian grunted and punched Matt in the side, trying for his kidney but missing, but still drawing a grimace from him as it connected with ribs. Brian tried to follow up with a better targeted elbow to Matt's face, but he was off by a second, and Matt's stiffened fingers rammed into his esophagus, sending Brian sprawling to the pavement, gasping for breath.

Matt stood over him, his face dark.

"You want to give me a single reason I shouldn't end you now?" he growled.

Brian clutched his throat and fought for air. When he was able to breathe, he winced and shook his head.

"No. I..."

"How did you find me?" Matt demanded.

"I...I didn't. I'm not with the company anymore. I retired over a year ago and moved here. I swear."

Matt regarded him doubtfully. "So this was just fate? Random chance? You expect me to believe that?"

"I could ask you the same thing. How did you track me down?" Brian spat.

Matt studied him. "You seriously retired? Then why come at me like that?"

"I've made a lot of enemies over the years. I have no idea what you're into. I mean, what are the odds you're in a dive bar in Chapala at the same time I am?"

Headlights appeared from a street fifty yards away, and Matt could just make out an emergency light bar mounted to the car's roof. He debated delivering a killing blow with his boot while Brian was down, but held off, instead stepping back.

"Get up, and let's go somewhere where you can explain. It's either that or say your last prayer," he said.

"I've got no beef with you, man. Really. This was just... coincidence," Brian managed, rising to his feet with some difficulty.

"I'm not a big believer in coincidences," Matt growled. "Once the car's past, turn around and put your hands on the wall."

"I'm not carrying," Brian said.

"Let's just say I have trust issues."

The car rolled by, and to Matt's relief it was a power company sedan, not a police car. Matt nudged Brian, and he complied with Matt's demand. Matt conducted a quick frisk, and once he'd verified that Brian wasn't armed, he stepped back and waited for Brian to turn around.

"I left my drink back at an upstairs bar," Matt said. "Walk ahead of me, and if you try to make a break for it, just know I'm probably a lot faster than you, based on how you look."

"Ouch. That hurts. The years have been kinder to you than they've been to me."

"Just remember that if you get the urge to try to run."

"After the pounding you just gave me, that would be a small miracle. You almost crushed my windpipe," Brian complained.

"You're lucky I'm a little rusty."

Brian walked unsteadily down the sidewalk with Matt close on his heels, and when they reached the bar entrance, Matt called out to him, "To the left and upstairs. Make a scene and you'll see blood in the bowl for the next month."

"I get it."

They mounted the steps to the terrace bar, and Matt directed Brian to the table where his beer was still sitting undrunk. Matt snatched it up while Brian sat, and turned to where the waiter was standing.

“I’ll take a plastic cup for this,” Matt said. “And a matching one for my friend.”

“In a cup, too?”

“Yes. In case we need to go.”

“You’re the boss.”

Matt waited until the waiter reappeared with the drink and an extra cup, and poured his into the empty, handed the server his bottle, and sat across from Brian, who was watching him with obvious trepidation.

Matt took a sip of his drink and set it back on the table. He hadn’t wanted to give Brian a bottle with which he could attack Matt, and the plastic cup ensured that threat was neutralized. It was standard field craft, which Brian understood as well as Matt.

A motorcycle in desperate need of a muffler roared by on the street below, and when the racket had passed, Matt fixed Brian with a hard stare and cleared his throat.

“All right, then. Let’s hear your story,” Matt said. “And it’d better be good.”

Chapter 8

Tel Aviv, Israel

Noah looked up from the pile of paperwork on his desk when his assistant pushed through his office doorway with a concerned expression on her face.

“Sir?” she said, her tone apologetic. “They’re all there and waiting for you.”

He pushed back from the desk and muttered a curse under his breath. “Sorry. Lost track of time.” He checked his watch. “Tell me there’s a pitcher of coffee in there.”

She nodded. “And bagels. The customary spread.”

“Thank God for tradition,” he said, and rose. He rolled his shoulders a few times and walked to where his suit jacket was draped over the arm of a treadmill he had requisitioned with the best of intentions, and slipped it on while the assistant disappeared back through the doorway, leaving him to his preparations. Noah adjusted his tie and ran his fingers through his hair, frowning at his reflection in the gilded antique mirror the staff had gifted him as congratulations for his formal promotion to director of Mossad. He looked tired and had visibly aged years over the last few months since taking over the position. His mood was typically sour, as was his stomach, fouled by the daily duties that wore at him like sandpaper.

He blinked away the dark thoughts and squared his shoulders, the meeting one he’d called and then promptly forgotten about when inundated with other demands. Noah made his way to his office door and took a deep breath, and then marched purposefully past his assistant and down the hall to the conference room, where six of his subordinates waited.

“Apologies, everyone. Got swamped,” he said as he entered the room and took a seat at the head of the table. “Can someone pass the coffee while we go through the situation updates?”

The man beside him pushed a stainless-steel pitcher to Noah, who poured himself a serious cup of dark roast while his staff reported on the various crises that vied for the agency’s attention. An uprising in Africa with implications for the nation’s rare earth mineral demands, the usual Palestinian skirmishes with Israeli security forces, terrorism threats in several former Soviet backwaters, a shekel counterfeiting ring operating out of Egypt.

“The quality’s as good as anything we’ve seen, but based on all data, it’s a two-man operation, not a state player,” the subordinate finished. “As such, we recommend either neutralizing the counterfeiters or referring them to Egyptian authorities.”

“Why shekels and not something else? That’s the nagging question,” Noah said. “How sure are we this is criminal and not a destabilization effort? Seems like it might have Iran’s fingerprints all over it.”

“We’ve looked, and there’s no evidence of that. It’s a couple of would-be mobsters printing our currency because they mastered the security hurdles.”

Noah sighed. “Which obviously means we need to alert the Treasury so they can take appropriate steps to make it harder to duplicate our bills. Fine. Let me think about the best way to handle the response. Doesn’t sound like they’re going anywhere, does it?”

The man shook his head. “Negative. We’ve got an asset watching their place in Cairo. We can move on them whenever we like. I was thinking a gas explosion might be in order. Deniable, and it isn’t like those don’t happen all the time there.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Noah said, and looked down the table at a thin man in his thirties with prematurely gray hair and rectangular rimless spectacles perched on the tip of

his nose. “What news do we have about our nemesis Nabila? Are we any closer to finding her?”

“We’re cautiously optimistic. We’ve been tracking the activity of several crypto wallets we believe she has access to, and one of them appears to have been active from a Panamanian IP address, per our people. Which confirms our belief that she relocated to that region after escaping from custody.”

Noah sipped the dregs of his coffee as he considered the news. “I suppose that was always a possibility. She’d be smart to avoid Europe or the Middle East, and it fits with what we heard from our network when she disappeared.” He paused. “Are we certain this wasn’t just bounced through Panama by some sort of virtual private network scheme?”

“Yes, sir. Those leave footprints, no matter how sophisticated. Our people are certain the access came from Panama, which means she’s there. Or at least was as of yesterday late afternoon, our time.”

Noah nodded, thinking. He had agreed to help Jet and her family relocate, and had suggested Mexico based on his hunch that Nabila would eventually show up in Central or South America – the latter of which wasn’t an option for her due to her history in the region. Of course he hadn’t told her of his ulterior motive in doing so, calculating that it wouldn’t be important unless he had need for her special skills. The Mossad was thin on operatives in that area, it being off the agency’s radar in terms of strategic importance, but he’d figured that having Jet nearby might come in handy if Nabila ever surfaced. He’d ruled out Asia due to the Mossad’s larger presence in the region, and with it greater risk to her when she got back into business – which would be just a matter of time, given they’d been able to seize most of her assets and track the rest, like the crypto wallets.

“Obviously we should make it a priority to narrow this down to something specific. Something actionable. If she’s in Panama, she’s not there for her health, which means she’s trying to leverage her background for criminal gain. There can’t be an infinite number of bad guys to choose from.”

“I’m already on it. Due to the time difference, it’s nighttime there, but I’ve already contacted our desk in-country and alerted them. We have a couple of seasoned people in place, but unfortunately they aren’t field operatives.”

“They up to the task of shaking the trees to see what falls out?” Noah asked.

“That’s really their forte, due to the financial center activities.”

Panama was an international hub for money laundering, attracting despots, rogue regimes, drug cartels, and terrorists, the latter being the Mossad’s area of interest. Much of Hamas’ funding could be traced to Dubai, Panama, Singapore, and Lichtenstein, so the agency had a sophisticated presence in each country for chasing paper trails.

The meeting continued for another twenty minutes, and when it finished, Noah’s frown lines were pulsing. The damned woman had escaped the agency’s wrath once, as Jet had warned him she might, and her doing so had been such a dark stain on his first weeks on the job that he’d spend a lifetime trying to live it down. He had taken her betrayal, and her outsmarting him, personally, not for the least of reasons that it was mentioned by the prime minister several times as causing hesitation in Noah’s permanent appointment.

If she was in Panama, or nearby, he’d put all of the agency’s resources into finding her, and this time there would be no attempt at capture – it would be a terminate-on-sight order, with no acceptable outcome but her death.

Chapter 9

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Jet switched her cell on and frowned at the signal bar, which indicated no service. She held it aloft, but it remained out of service range, and she let out an exasperated sigh before slipping it into her back pocket and studying herself in the full-length mirror. The blouse she'd found in the closet was snug but comfortable and, best of all, was clean, as were the dark blue jeans she'd selected from several dozen hanging together. Her clothes so reeked of the holding cell that she figured she'd have to burn them.

She padded back down the hall and made her way down the stairway to where Hannah was standing draped in a towel, her hair wet and scraggly, with two girls a few years older than her. Hannah saw Jet and ran to her, bare feet slapping against the Saltillo tile floor, and threw her arms around Jet's legs.

"Mama!" she cried, and Jet knelt to hug her back.

"Sweetheart! Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I played in the pool all day. It's super warm."

"That's great, baby. Who are your new friends?"

Hannah turned to look at her companions. "That's Maria, and that's Elena." Hannah paused theatrically. "Maria's a year older than me, and Elena's ten!"

"Wow." Jet studied her. "Is everything...good?"

"I was worried about you, but Miss Daniela said everything was fine, and you'd be here in time for dinner."

Jet debated asking about how she was processing the gunfight, but decided that wasn't the best time, with the other

little girls looking at Hannah and her daughter obviously enjoying herself. Instead, she stood and smiled.

“Are you guys done in the pool?”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. We’re going to change and then play video games!”

“Well, that sounds like a full evening. I’ll be waiting for you down here.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Hannah ran to her two new best friends, and Jet’s heart ached for her. So innocent and so resilient, as only the young could be, the shoot-out paled to the prospect of pool time and video games. She watched as the older girls guided Hannah up the steps, and then walked to the dining room, where Daniela was sitting with a glass of white wine at the table.

Daniela beamed at her as she entered, and rose. “I see you found the clothes. Feeling refreshed?” she asked.

“Thank you, yes.”

“I had Carmela take the girls and dry them off for dinner. I hope you don’t mind.” Daniela indicated a chair beside hers. “Please. Have a seat. What would you like to drink? We have everything. Wine. Beer. And of course, tequila. Some of the finest.”

“Just some mineral water, please.”

Daniela called out in the direction of the kitchen door, and a minute later another servant hurried through with a bottle of mineral water and a glass with ice. She set it down in front of Jet, poured the glass half full, and then departed wordlessly, leaving the women to talk.

“What a horrible day, no? I’m glad it wasn’t worse,” Daniela said. “I’m devastated by the loss of my security team. And the shooting...it was unbelievable.”

“Does that sort of thing happen often? It was shocking.”

“Unfortunately, it’s becoming a reality in Mexico. Even in the best areas, no one is safe. I’ve shopped at Andares a

hundred times, and it's never been dangerous. But you never know. The insecurity is getting worse by the day, with the economy struggling and so many people having a hard time." She took a sip of her wine. "I hate having to live like I'm in prison, with guards everywhere, but if you're at a certain level of society, it's obligatory, I'm afraid. It was never like this when I was growing up."

"They were obviously targeting you," Jet stated flatly.

"Oh, I don't think so. It seemed more like an organized robbery gang. The value of just the watches and jewelry in that place made it worth it. But they probably didn't think they would encounter any resistance."

Jet studied Daniela. "Maybe. But your bodyguards seemed to feel otherwise."

"They're trained to stop bad guys and keep me safe. They died doing their job." Daniela hesitated, her eyes moist. "Such brave, brave men. And for what? The country's out of control, with so many scum having guns. It's a nightmare these days. So we have to hire our own private armies to do what the government can't. It's a tragic state of affairs, but one we've grown accustomed to. Still, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shaken. It was too close." She paused and took a deep breath. "The good news is your daughter doesn't seem too much worse for wear, given all the shooting."

"She's very brave. But I suspect she hasn't fully processed what she witnessed."

"That's certainly possible. Best to see how she behaves over the next few days. Kids can surprise you. I know mine do almost daily."

Jet took a long sip of water and fixed Daniela with a neutral stare. "How did you get me released?"

Daniela waved a hand. "Oh, there's an old saying in Mexico: the only ones in jail are the poor or the stupid. My husband is an important man, and his attorneys knew the right people to call to handle the situation. Don't worry, there's no record of you being arrested, so no problems with the

authorities. As far as they're concerned, you were questioned and released – another innocent bystander. Unfortunately, shoot-outs happen too often here, and a young mother is hardly the sort to be involved in violent crime. Thankfully they were willing to listen to reason.”

“I *am* just a bystander. I mean, I shot in self-defense...”

“Yes, of course. I was there, remember? There's no telling what those murderous thugs would have done if you hadn't taken action. Once my men engaged, all bets were off. For all we know, they wanted to kill any witnesses. Who knows? I'm just glad you were there, and that it's over.” Daniela studied Jet for a moment. “You were quite impressive, by the way. Where did you learn to shoot like that?”

Jet shrugged. “Oh, I was in the army. A long time ago, but the training stays with you, apparently.”

“I can tell by your accent you're not Mexican. Where are you from, originally?”

“Jordan,” Jet lied. “We're no strangers to danger, given the region. A lot of criminal activity and smuggling.”

“How awful. It seems nowhere is safe anymore.” Daniela smiled. “Hannah is absolutely precious. Her Spanish is already quite good.”

“Yes, we're very proud of her.”

“We?”

“Yes. My husband and I.” Jet hesitated. “I tried calling him, but my cell doesn't have any signal. Do you have a landline?”

Daniela nodded. “Of course. I should have warned you. We're quite far from the nearest cell tower. One of the downsides to our ranch.” She stood and motioned to Jet. “Come. There's a phone in the living room.”

Jet followed her to an ornate faux French antique telephone on a white porcelain base, and Daniela smiled warmly. “Feel free to use it as long as you need. I'll be keeping my wine company while I wait for the girls to get ready.”

Daniela retraced her steps to the dining room, and Jet waited until she was out of earshot before raising the gold-plated headset to her ear and dialing Matt's burner phone number. It rang four times and then went to voicemail, and Jet listened as an automated female voice advised callers to wait for the beep to leave a message.

"Matt, we're at a ranch near Tequila. There was a shoot-out at the mall after you left. Long story, but Hannah and I are fine. We're spending the night here. I don't have cell service, but I'll call when I do." She hesitated and considered what else to say. "Don't worry about us. I'm not in any trouble. It was just...one of those days. Nothing related to us, thank God. Just wrong place, wrong time." She paused again. "I hope you found something promising. Needless to say, the Zapopan honeymoon phase is over."

She hung up and shook her head. The whole afternoon had been surreal. The shoot-out, Mexican jail, and now a virtual country palace in the middle of the boondocks, complete with servants dressed in literal uniforms waiting on her hand and foot. Which made Jet uneasy. She didn't do well with the unexpected, and couldn't help but wonder whether her gracious host was genuine or playing some sort of game.

Jet walked over to where Daniela was sipping her wine and sat down.

"Then I have your husband to thank for getting me out?" she asked.

"Indirectly. I used his influence, which certainly opens doors. And not just jailhouse doors," Daniela said, and chuckled.

"Where is he?" Jet asked.

"Oh, he's off on business. At least that's what he says," she said. "With men, one never really knows."

Jet didn't know how to react to that, so didn't.

"Octavio and I were married at a young age," Daniela said. "Little more than teenagers. He was dashing and charming, and I was...young and beautiful. But after twenty years of

marriage, time has its way with everyone.” She eyed Jet and then her nearly empty wineglass. “Of course, men become more handsome with a touch of gray at the temples, whereas women develop a close relationship with their surgeons.” Daniela laughed dryly. “But I can’t complain. Three lovely daughters, a fabulous lifestyle...it would be ungracious to bemoan my gilded cage. And when all else fails, the shopping blunts the worst of any loneliness, as does the chardonnay.”

Jet tried a smile, Daniela’s awkward disclosure revealing that she had been working on the wine for some time. “Your girls are gorgeous.”

“Thank you. They’ll be heartbreakers when their time comes, I’m sure. My oldest already is. She’s at uni...I think I told you. Wants to be a doctor. We’ll see about that. But it must be nice to have a goal like that. In my day, very few of us could have that sort of dream. Mexico was very traditional until recently. A career was something you thought about as a fallback if you couldn’t land a good husband.” She finished her wine. “Or barring that, any husband...”

She called out to the kitchen, and Carmela appeared with a new bottle of wine. When Daniela’s glass was full, she offered a toast to Jet. “And you? In the army. How exciting.”

“Well, not really,” Jet said. “It was just something to do.”

“And how did you come to land in Mexico? Your daughter tells us you’re in Zapopan?”

Jet swore inwardly and hoped that Hannah hadn’t told Daniela about prior gun battles she’d witnessed with Mommy.

“Yes. We’re looking at places to settle down. We love Guadalajara, but after today...”

Daniela nodded. “Yes, it’s a shock. Perhaps somewhere a bit calmer.”

“That sounds good right about now.”

“And your husband? What does he do?”

“Oh, he works remotely. So we can pretty much live wherever.”

“That must be nice. The world’s changing so fast it’s hard to keep up.” Daniela smiled again. “And you?”

“Hannah keeps me occupied. At least for now. Once she’s older, maybe I’ll do volunteer work with kids or animals.”

“That’s wonderful. What a kind heart you have. All of my friends just shop and complain about their husbands.” Another dry laugh. “I suppose I’m not all that different than them right now, am I?”

“It’s been a hard day for everyone. We could have been killed,” Jet said, unsure of how to steer the conversation to more neutral ground.

“True enough. And we might have been if it hadn’t been for you. Are you sure you don’t want some wine? You’ve more than earned it.”

“No, thank you. I really don’t drink.”

They were interrupted by peals of laughter from the stairway, and then the girls were back, somewhat dryer and in pajamas. Hannah waved to Jet as she ran by, and Daniela’s gaze lingered on them as they disappeared into a room off the main living area.

Daniela smiled at Jet. “Are you hungry? My cook’s amazing. She’s prepared a traditional meal. I hope you like it. Enchiladas, chicken mole, tortilla soup, flan. If that isn’t appealing, she can whip up anything you want. Just ask.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Jet said, although she didn’t have much of an appetite after her stay in the cell.

“The girls will want to dine in the TV room, so it’s just the two of us. Say the word and we can eat.” She looked at her glass and pushed it away. “I could use something in my stomach. I’m sorry if I’ve gone on and on. I can be a bore. And I’ll admit that after today, my nerves...well, you know. I’m sure you feel it too.”

“Of course, and you haven’t been boring at all. We appreciate all the hospitality. You really don’t have to...”

“It’s really the least I can do, given the circumstances. So is that a yes to dinner?”

“Please.”

Daniela twisted to look at the kitchen doorway. “Carmela? Set the table and bring the soup. We’re ready!”

Chapter 10

North of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico

A fire blazed in the darkness at the periphery of a small village that was little more than a string of shanties along a forlorn stretch of dirt road an hour from anywhere. A group of twenty people sat in a rough circle around a firepit, passing a bottle of mescal while a half dozen children played tag in the darkness at the edge of the flame's glow, their peals of glee rising over the din of Norteño music blaring from the gloomy interior of a battered sedan with its windows down, parked by the nearest shack.

A warm wind gusted off the nearby beach, carrying the smell of wood smoke and roasting shrimp from the blaze, where the residents had suspended metal buckets filled to the brim with shellfish over the fire using pieces of discarded rebar. A case of beer chilled in the iced bed of a pickup truck nearby, and as the level of the mescal dropped, the laughter and exclamations from the gathering grew more raucous.

The village was one of countless like it that dotted the coast, where migrants eked out a hardscrabble life in the tomato fields, catching whatever they could in the Pacific to augment their diet of tortillas and beans, modern conveniences like running water unimaginable luxuries in their shelters built from cast-off pallets and sunbaked tarps. Many were from poorer southern states like Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Chiapas, where most never made it past second grade, their labor more valuable to their families than an ability to read. They lived as their ancestors had for centuries before, living off the land in perpetual squalor, their plight accepted as inevitable by parents who'd never known anything better.

A pair of headlights bounced along the rutted dirt track that stretched the many miles from the highway, through dense brush that encroached upon it like verdant metastasis. Nobody noticed, the glow from the fire bright in their eyes, and when a pair of pickup trucks roared around the final bend to the village, their arrival caught the gathering by surprise.

Six men in dark clothes leapt from the truck beds and ran toward the villagers, AK-47 rifles in hand. One of them screamed at the gathering in Spanish, and three of the seated men jumped to their feet and took off at a run into the darkness. A pair of the rifles barked short bursts and cut the runners down before they'd made it twenty yards, and the rest of the gathering remained seated, terror freezing them in place.

The passenger door of the lead truck swung open, and a man emerged, a pistol in his belt and a baseball cap pulled low over his brow. He strolled to where the gunmen were covering the migrants, and nodded slowly.

"Buenas noches ," he said, his voice gravelly. "You took something that wasn't yours. We're here to get it back." He glanced at where the runners were splayed on the dirt, bleeding out. "You give us what we want, and maybe you live to see morning."

One of the youths at the far side of the fire swallowed hard. "Please, *jefe* . It was only some shrimp. You can have everything we own. We had no idea whose they were. They're cooking right now. We meant no disrespect."

The man nodded again. "A perfectly natural mistake. You saw an opportunity and took it. I don't blame you. But I have no interest in your meal. I need the cooler the shrimp were in." He squinted at the youth. "Do you know where it is?"

The youth nodded. "If we return it, we're good?"

One of the women clutched her hands before her in a gesture of supplication. "Please. They're just children. They know nothing about anything."

The man shrugged. "Yes, the innocents are always at risk for the sins of their fathers. Be quick about bringing the cooler,

and I'm inclined to be forgiving." He pointed at the youth. "You go and get it. Two of my men will accompany you. And *amigo* ? This isn't the time to try to be a hero. You saw how that went for your friends."

The youth looked away and pushed himself to his feet. Two of the gunmen strode towards him, and he led them to one of the shacks. At the threshold, he turned to face them.

"This was where Eduardo and his brother lived. They're the ones who took your shrimp. You shot them and their cousin, Julio. The cooler is probably in here." He paused. "Do you have a flashlight?"

One of the gunmen tossed him a disposable propane lighter, and the youth flicked it to life, adjusted the flame higher, and pushed a flap fashioned from stained burlap aside and entered the shack. His nose crinkled at the odor of sweat and raw shrimp, and he crossed to where the cooler sat beside a bucket the brothers had been using for their waste.

The youth dragged the cooler to the doorway and stepped outside.

"This must be it, right?" he asked.

The man who'd given him the lighter approached the cooler, lifted one of the handles, and nodded. "Carry it to the truck and put it in the bed," he ordered.

"And then you'll let us be?"

"Just do it."

The youth dragged the empty cooler past the other gunmen to the truck and heaved it into the back. When he was done, he turned to the leader and showed him his empty hands.

"I did as you asked. We didn't know this was your property. I swear. We'd never have taken it if we had. It was them. The ones you killed. They did it."

The man stared at the youth for several beats and then pulled his pistol free and shot him point-blank in the face. The youth crumpled lifelessly to the dirt, and the leader retraced his steps to the passenger door and twisted to call to his men.

“Make it quick,” he growled, and was climbing back into the truck when the rifles opened up on the seated migrants, mowing them down without pity. The children stood, horrified, by one of the shanties, and then darted into the gloom, sobbing in fear and anguish as the gunfire died out.

Two of the shooters exchanged a glance, and the older one shook his head. “Not worth the trouble to hunt them down. If they’re smart, they’ll keep going to the border. If not, they’ll warn everyone not to mess with us. Either way, they pose no threat.”

The gunmen made their way back to the trucks and climbed into the beds, leaving the villagers dead or dying around the fire, the brass of the spent shells glinting in its glow, their spreading blood black as the night sky in the starlight. The engines roared to life, and the trucks reversed and then took off back down the track, leaving their gruesome work behind for the scavengers, unconcerned about the police holding anyone accountable given they were all on the cartel’s payroll and knew better than to probe too deeply into matters that didn’t concern them. Nobody but the children would mourn the dead, their extermination a routine part of life at the bottom of the hierarchy in Mexico, and it was unlikely the massacre would even make the local news, assuming anyone bothered to report it.

Chapter 11

Lake Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico

Brian sat back in his chair and toyed with his beer. He took a deep pull and set the plastic cup down with a sigh.

“First off, I really did retire. Got the hell out of Dodge after my twenty were done. Nice package, but not for the kind of lifestyle I’d envisioned for my twilight years, at least not in the States. So I started looking around for someplace where the weather was warm and the natives were friendly, and I could get by with gringo Spanglish until I learned the lingo. I spent a few months in tourist spots like PV and Cancun, and then one of the bartenders I’d befriended told me to check out Chapala. That was almost a year ago, and I’ve been here ever since. Love it. Totally relaxed, and way more affordable than the coast.”

“I appreciate the travel advice, but that wasn’t what I was after. You’re trying to tell me this is all one big coincidence?” Matt demanded.

Brian spread his hands on the table. “Swear to God. I saw you and did a double take. It’s been years, but I recognized you. Which set me off. I figured there’s no way you were here by accident.”

“Why would I be tracking you? I’m not company anymore, which you should have known.”

“I saw the burn notice, but we both know those can be bullshit. Half of them are to supply deep cover deniability. I mean, what are the odds one of the agency’s prodigals is sitting in nowhere, Mexico, having a beer with one of my new friends? Pretty slim, you have to admit.”

Matt's eyes narrowed. "And why would the agency be interested in one of its retired assets?"

Brian shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in the inner circle? Maybe someone to pin something on? Maybe they need something done here and want an outsider? Whatever it is, I'm not buying. I like my new life. Even started a side biz here. Little of this, little of that. I need the agency like I need a third hand. So I see your smiling face, and I figured the game's on. That's why I tailed you. To see what you were up to. And then when you jumped me..."

"Hardly. You came at me like I stole your wallet."

Brian ran a hand over his jaw. "Should have known better. Old habits die hard. But I was never in your league."

"Last I heard, you were running a desk," Matt agreed.

Brian nodded. "Promoted until I hit my perfect level of incompetence. Can't complain about government work." He laughed harshly. "Besides, do you really think if I was onto you, I'd have done it like I did? No gun? Alone? Think about it. Hardly how you run an op. If the company wanted you down, you'd be down. We both know it. And they sure as hell wouldn't have sent me." He took another swig of beer and shook his head. "This is one for the books, I'll give you that. Last I heard, you were deep in Asia. All hush-hush. That's obviously changed."

"I'm not sure I believe you."

"At least let me get some tequila. After the pounding you gave me, I need half a bottle. I feel like I got hit by a car. Then we can discuss your trust problem."

Matt nodded, and Brian flagged the server. The young man approached, and Brian held up two fingers.

"*Dos Don Julio Setentas, Joven,*" he said, his accent high school Spanish bad.

"Sure thing, boss," the waiter answered in English, and went in search of the shots.

“Speaking of doubts,” Brian continued, “mind if I ask what you’re actually doing here?”

“Thinking of getting a place. That’s why I was talking to your buddy.”

“Seriously? For good, or what?”

“All depends, doesn’t it?”

The server was back shortly with two shots of the high-test cristalino tequila, which he set down before darting off to another table where a heavysset man was waving a hand the size of a bear paw.

“You want one of these?” Brian asked.

“No, thanks. All yours.”

Brian gulped the first shot, exhaled in satisfaction, and did the same with the second. Matt regarded him without expression, and Brian offered a pained grin.

“One of the downsides to endless summer and cheap hooch is you can get used to it,” he said.

“What else have you been doing since moving here? Can’t see you just studying your navel twenty-four seven,” Matt asked.

Brian looked away. “Trying my hand at real estate. And I’ve taken on a few projects. Nothing big. Just mostly putting party A together with party B. Sort of consulting –” His gaze shifted to something over Matt’s shoulder, and the color drained from his face as his eyes quickly returned to Matt. “Sorry. I saw some guys I know.”

“Something wrong?”

“Just...never mind. Listen, I need to use the can. I think you busted one of my kidneys. Got a problem with that?”

Matt shook his head. “Don’t try to make a break for it. We’re not done.”

Brian stood. “If you say so.”

Matt turned and watched Brian walk to the back of the bar and disappear through a doorway with a hand-painted depiction of a peasant couple facing each other. He looked over the crowd and spotted a trio of hard-faced locals seated at a booth near the stairs, two of whom rose and followed Brian into the bathroom. Matt frowned and tried to figure out if this complicated his interrogation, and had decided it was probably no threat to him, when a series of gunshots rang out from the bathrooms – a pop, and then another two, and then a final pair of reports deadened by the block walls and heavy door.

A woman screamed, and the bar instantly transformed into chaos as patrons dove for the floor or ran for the stairs. The third man by the steps looked around and joined the exodus, and two of the servers tentatively made their way to the rear of the bar, obviously hesitant after the shooting.

Matt stood and followed them to the bathroom, where Brian lay on the floor with a red stain slowly spreading across his shirt, a 9mm pistol still clenched in one hand by his side, the two locals on the floor across from him, both clearly dead, another gun near their feet, and the wall behind them sprayed with blood from messy exit wounds.

The servers swore and backed away, and Matt rushed to Brian's side.

"You're hit," he said. "Looks bad."

"Get me out of here," Brian said through clenched teeth. "I'll live. Just hurts like a bitch."

"How am I supposed to do that? And take you where? You need a hospital."

"Just get me out of here before their amigo comes to finish the job."

"Who are they?"

"I'll explain once we're out of here. We need to move before the cops show up." Brian drew a tight breath. "Help me up."

Matt grabbed Brian's free arm and heaved him to his feet, and Brian waved the gun at the staff watching from the

doorway. “*Vamos, chicos* . Nobody saw anything, yeah? All you know is there were shots, and everything happened crazy fast after that,” Brian said in middling Spanish. “I was never here, or I’ll be back for you,” he snarled, punctuating his words with the gun.

Matt helped Brian from the bathroom and down the stairs, where the clientele had dispersed and were rushing away, hurrying down the dark streets. “Make a left,” Brian said hoarsely, and Matt and he staggered around the corner, Brian’s breath a pained hiss.

“You got a car?” he managed.

“Down a block by the lake. But what is this? I want no part of it.”

“I can make it a block. I’ll give you directions from there.”

“What are you into, Brian?”

“I don’t have the energy. I’ll tell you in the car.”

Matt swore softly. “I should leave you in the gutter.”

“That’s an option,” Brian said. “But I could use a hand here.”

They weaved along the sidewalk and reached the street that ran along the waterfront, and Matt half carried Brian to his rental car. When he opened the passenger door for him, Brian made a face. “Sorry about the blood. Is there an exit wound you could see?”

Matt shook his head. “Still in you.”

“OK. Help me in.”

Matt eased Brian into the seat and then shut the door and rounded the trunk to the driver’s side. He slipped behind the wheel and started the car, backed out, and turned to Brian. “Where to?”

“Head up to the highway. There’s a clinic a few kilometers from here. I know the doctor.”

“That’s convenient. And he does wound repair as a sideline?” Matt snarled.

“Everyone’s got to make a living. Nobody trusts the cops. It happens.”

Matt drove up the hill from the lake, and Brian coughed, the sound wet, his left hand applying pressure to the wound. “Take a right.”

Matt did as directed, and looked over at him. “Time to tell me what this is.”

“Like I said, I’ve been doing some consulting here. But these guys...they’re bad *hombres* .”

“What does that mean?”

“They aren’t happy with a deal we made.” He paused and squinted at the road. “Up ahead, you’ll see a chicken stand by a pharmacy. There’s a dirt road just after. Turn down it and stop by a white house on the right.”

“What the hell have you gotten me into, Brian?”

“Nothing. This is my thing. You’re just a drinking buddy.”

“The third guy got a good look at me.”

“They’re punks. Thugs.” Brian grimaced as the car hit a rut. “Up ahead there. See it?”

“What kind of deal? You running drugs?” Matt demanded.

“Nothing like that. Less you know, the better.”

Matt checked the rearview mirror and then made the turn, and they bounced sixty yards down a gravel and dirt road and skidded to a stop in front of a white residence with a sign on the gate announcing the office of Dr. Emiliano Garcia, internal medicine and orthopedics, homeopath, natural medicine pharmacist.

“This the place?” Matt asked, peering at the darkened house.

“Yeah,” Brian managed. “See if he’s in.”

Matt shook his head as he stepped from the car and walked up the path to the front door, and scanned the area when he depressed the doorbell button. A light went on inside, and a few moments later a male voice called from within the house.

“We’re closed,” it said in Spanish.

“I have someone who said you can help him. He’s hurt,” Matt said in Spanish.

“Hurt how? Take him to the hospital.”

“He says he knows you and you can help.”

The door opened, and a gray-haired man looked out at Matt and then past him to the car, where Brian was sitting. The doctor’s eyes widened when he saw Brian, and he frowned at Matt. “What happened?”

“Gunshot.”

“Damn,” Garcia exclaimed. “Pull the car down the driveway. I’ll meet you at the side door. You should back in to make it easier to get him out.” He paused. “Where was he hit?”

“Lower rib cage. Right side.”

The doctor shook his head. “I’ll meet you by the garage.”

The door slammed shut, and Matt made his way back to the car. Once behind the wheel, he turned to Brian. “You’re in luck. The doctor is in.”

Brian didn’t say anything, and a quick test of his pulse told Matt he was in serious trouble. He backed down the long driveway to where a separate garage sat at the rear side of the house, and a light went on outside a door, which swung open when Matt killed the engine.

“He’s out,” Matt called as he stepped from the car, and the doctor joined him at the passenger side to haul Brian from the seat.

“On the gurney,” the doctor said, indicating where one sat inside the doorway, and they dragged Brian to the bed and heaved him onto it.

Garcia pulled the gurney into the depths of the house and down the wide hallway. “Close the door and turn off the light,” he instructed Matt, nodding his head at a switch on the wall,

and continued to a room at the back of the house, where he made the turn with the bed and disappeared inside.

Matt switched off the light and pulled the door closed, and followed Garcia into the room, which to Matt's surprise appeared to be a well-equipped hospital suite complete with monitors, oxygen, defibrillators, and a reasonable rendition of a critical care unit. The doctor was already cutting Brian's shirt away, and frowned at the puckered wound and the blood-drenched fabric.

"There's a couch in the next room. Go wait. I don't work well with an audience. He's lost a lot of blood. We don't have much time," he said.

"Can you save him?" Matt asked.

"That's the idea. Let me get him on a drip. Don't suppose you know his blood type?"

"It would be on his driver's license, right?"

Garcia felt Brian's pants. "Maybe in the car?"

"I'll look."

Matt found the wallet by the side of the seat, along with the pistol. He thought about it for a moment and then slid it into his belt and turned back to the doctor. "A positive," Matt read from the back of the Mexican license.

"OK. I'll need to make a few calls and get some blood and an assistant here. First I need to stabilize him; then I'll work on the bullet. But this is going to take a while." He looked Matt up and down. "How will you pay?"

Matt exhaled heavily. "How much will it be?"

"Fifty thousand pesos." Garcia's mouth twitched. "If he dies, another twenty to dispose of the body."

Matt did a quick calculation. "I have thirty in cash. I can go to the bank tomorrow and pull the rest."

Garcia nodded. "Then make yourself comfortable."

Matt shook his head. "No. I mean I can come back tomorrow with the money. I have to get home."

Garcia's expression hardened. "That's not how this works. You stay where I can see you, and we go to the bank together tomorrow morning to get the cash. I don't do layaways or offer credit. I'm sure you understand."

"I hardly know him..." Matt protested.

"Well, if you want him worked on, you'll hand me what you have and go lie down. It's going to be a long night. That, and if this happened anywhere around town, you won't make it far – the police will be looking for anyone connected to the shooting, and there's only one way out of Chapala. Good luck explaining a car full of blood heading out of town at night."

Matt grunted. The doctor had a point.

"You say the sofa's in the next room?" Matt asked, pulling his cash wad from his pocket and letting the doctor see the butt of the pistol in his belt.

"That's right. Bathroom's down the hall. Now let me get busy, or your friend won't make it another hour."

Matt counted out thirty thousand pesos, which left him a grand total of four thousand, and went to the other room and sat on the couch. He pulled his cell from his pocket and saw that he'd received a voicemail. He entered his mailbox and listened to Jet's message, brow furrowed, and then called Jet, but the call went straight to message. He waited for the tone and then spoke softly to avoid being overheard.

"Hey. Something happened at the lake. I'll explain tomorrow, but I have to stay overnight. I'll leave my phone on. Call me when you get this."

He terminated the call and checked the power – sixty-eight percent, so more than enough to last until he could charge it at home. Matt grunted and swung his legs up onto the sofa and adjusted his position so he was reclining across it, annoyed that Brian had sucked him into whatever this was, and leaving him to pay for the privilege, to boot. He removed the pistol and checked the magazine, counted seven rounds plus one in the chamber, and then set it, and his phone, beside him on the

floor, and listened as Garcia murmured in the next room, presumably enlisting help for what was to come.

Chapter 12

Shanghai, China

The waterfront of the exclusive Bund district glittered with the light from countless restaurants and hotels, the Huangpu River a neon mirror whose banks were lined with ferries, luxury yachts, and lavish resorts that catered to the wealthy. Steel and glass towers jutted from the riverside, most darkened office buildings for multinational financial conglomerates, but some blazed in the darkness where exclusive penthouse clubs catered to refined locals who demanded the best and were willing and able to pay for it.

The Lazy Cat was one such establishment, on the thirty-third floor of a five-star hotel with breathtaking views through its floor-to-ceiling glass walls, where patrons could enjoy the metropolitan sprawl that stretched in glowing splendor in every direction. A members-only club for the rich and infamous, the Cat catered to celebrities and magnates of industry. Discretion was the bar's most celebrated commodity, along with its roster of gorgeous hostesses and single malt scotch menu, where even the rarest of libations were always stocked.

A trio of businessmen in dark suits sat at a booth off the dance floor, their ties pocketed and shirt collars open as symbols that they were off the clock, sipping Glenfiddich 18 on the rocks and chain-smoking Marlboros, eyeing the scantily clad young women in the center of the floor like birds of prey studying a field of mice. A tall young man in a tuxedo approached the table and offered a small bow.

“Greetings, gentlemen. See anything you like?” he asked.

The oldest of the three, his face flushed from alcohol, gestured with his cigarette. “The one in the blue sequins is gorgeous.”

One of the others slapped his arm good-naturedly. “You’ve got socks older than her.”

The older man laughed. “Which I still wear. Never let anything of value go to waste.” He tore his attention from the dancers and smiled frostily. “Put her on my tab.”

“Would you like the usual room readied?” the attendant asked.

“Of course. And another bottle of this swill waiting. And... whatever she drinks.”

“Not that it matters,” one of his companions said.

“I know what she’ll be drinking soon enough,” the other said, and cackled.

“What about you boys?” the elder man asked. “Ready to have some fun?”

Both shook their heads. “Maybe later. You picked the only one I would have,” the first said.

“You have good taste,” the older said. “Or expensive, which is almost the same.” He looked up at the server. “Ten minutes.”

“Very well, sir. I shall make it so.”

The trio toasted and continued their discussion until the tuxedoed attendant returned and nodded to the oldest man.

“Mr. Ma,” he said, “your suite is ready.”

Ma tossed back the remainder of his drink and stubbed out the cigarette he was half done with, and then pushed himself to his feet somewhat unsteadily. “Lead the way, young man!”

Ma followed the attendant to a gold elevator, where he handed Ma a room card. “One floor down, as always,” he said.

Ma nodded and waited for the attendant to turn a key in a lock mounted by the side of the elevator. The door opened, and

Ma stepped in and chose the floor below from a bank of buttons. The door slid closed with a soft woosh and almost imperceptibly eased lower before opening again, revealing the VIP section of the hotel.

Ma walked confidently down the hall, his footsteps muffled by thick gold carpet, and was nearly at his destination door when a figure stepped from a doorway and shot him point-blank in the forehead with a suppressed .22-caliber pistol. Ma's eyes were still wide with surprise as he crumpled into a heap at the figure's feet, and the assassin leaned over and shot him again in the temple.

The killer straightened and looked around, and then headed back to the stairwell, where he'd spray-painted the surveillance camera lens moments before Ma had arrived. By the time the oligarch's body was found and the alarm sounded, the shooter would be clear of the building, vanishing like a ghost into the night, the murder another unsolved blemish on the city's good name that would quickly be hushed up by the authorities.

A sleek black Maybach limousine rolled to a stop in front of a stately home near the waterfront, and an electric motor towed a wrought-iron gate aside, revealing a long cobblestone driveway. The car swung into the drive, and the gate whirred shut behind it, closing off any view of the vehicle from the street.

It coasted to a halt at the majestic building's side entrance, and the uniformed driver leapt from behind the wheel and hurried around the hood to the passenger-side rear door. He swung it open, and a tall, thin man in his fifties climbed from the interior and waited as a woman in her thirties stepped from the cabin and linked an arm in his. The driver closed the door, and the pair ambled slowly towards the entry, where another uniformed domestic waited with his hands folded in front of him, eyes averted.

They were at the steps when a phone trilled, and the man felt for his cell in his jacket's breast pocket. He retrieved it and snapped it open, and frowned as he barked into it.

“How did you get this number?” he demanded.

“I have my sources. Have you considered my proposal?” the caller asked.

“Your proposal? Absolute nonsense. You’re not going to get a penny of my resources, much less a percentage of our income.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Your brother was a madman, but at least he wasn’t an idiot. Never call me again. Am I clear?”

“Oh, perfectly so. I promise this is the last you’ll hear from me.” A pause. “Your daughter looks lovely today – her birthday, is it not? A shame her special moment is going to be ruined. Don’t say I didn’t try.”

“If this is some sort of threat –”

The man’s head snapped back, and half his skull disintegrated. A moment later the suppressed pop of a silenced sniper rifle echoed off the drive, followed almost instantly by the woman’s horrified scream as her father’s lifeless form collapsed in front of her, a fine mist of blood and bone dusting her features as she froze in shock. The domestic grabbed her and pulled her up the stairs and into the safety of the house, and the driver crouched by the car, scanning the windows of the buildings across the street for any sign of where the shooter had fired from. Thirty seconds dragged into a minute, and then another, the area silent, the dead man’s twisted form sprawled on the drive, his lifeblood pooled around him, cell phone still clutched in his lifeless hand.

Bai Zhang sat back in his executive chair and flipped the burner cell phone closed and tossed it onto his office desk, a grim smile on his face. A light rap at the door drew his attention, and he pushed himself to his feet and reached for a decanter half full of scotch on one of the wall bookcase shelves.

“Yes,” he said.

The door opened, and a young man’s head poked through the gap.

“I have some news,” he began.

“Well, come in, and be quick about it,” Bai snapped. He poured himself two fingers of scotch in a crystal tumbler and returned to his desk and retook his seat. The young man stood before it, eyes locked on his shoes, and Bai threw back half his drink and set it down on the desktop. “What do you have for me?”

“Ma has been handled.”

Bai grinned without humor. “Excellent. No complications?”

“It was clean.”

Bai nodded. “Chan wasn’t cooperative, so he also met his fate.” Bai toasted the young man. “All in all, a fair night’s work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bai drew in a long breath and studied his glass. “Tomorrow we will have a chat with their organizations and see if their successors are more willing to negotiate. If not, well, bullets are cheap.”

“I understand.”

“So long as there’s nothing that can lead back to us. I trust you’re using the appropriate cutouts, as instructed.”

“Of course, sir. Exactly as you ordered.”

“Then it’s a night for celebration.” Bai raised his glass to his lips and eyed his underling. “That’s all for now. You may go.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

The young man hurried from the office, closing the heavy door softly behind him, leaving Bai to his thoughts. Bai reclined in his chair and considered his next moves. The two men he’d had executed were holdouts who had refused to honor their commitments to the organization he had inherited after his brother’s untimely demise, thinking Bai weak or incapable of running the enterprise – the last mistake they would ever make. Unlike his brother, Bai favored violent solutions and action to byzantine schemes that, like Russian

dolls, always had another layer of complexity to achieve his ends. Now, word would circulate that those who had defied Bai had met unfortunate fates, and he expected that his future negotiations would be different than the insulting affronts he'd endured from the two dead men. Business was business, but they'd made no effort to hide their contempt for him, for which they'd paid the ultimate price. Others wouldn't be so rash, and would be more careful about incurring his wrath.

Which was the way he'd always operated, as opposed to Lun, who had been the thinker of the brothers. Be that as it may, Lun had died the same as any of Bai's street dealers had back in the day, so the different approaches hadn't been all that dissimilar in the end.

Bai finished off his drink and closed his eyes. When he learned who had murdered his brother, it would be scorched earth, and he'd go to the ends of the earth to make them pay. Bai would find and kill them, along with their families and anyone associated with them. There would be no mercy, and he didn't care what the repercussions would be. With Bai, it was an eye for an eye, and whomever had been foolish enough to kill Lun would be dispatched to hell without hesitation, and their body fed to the sharks.

The thought brought another half-smile to Bai's lips, and his eyes flitted open. Things were going to plan, and soon he would have consolidated his brother's fragmented organization and brought the whole thing under his direction. His brother's subordinates would swear loyalty, or they would be dealt with. Where Lun earned respect, Bai would commandeer it, and no dissent would be permitted. He was the new boss, nothing at all like the old boss, and the men would either line up behind him, or meet their maker.

There could be no third choice.

Chapter 13

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Jet finished her *chamorro*, a slow-cooked pork loin in a spicy red sauce, and pushed back from the table and smiled at Daniela.

“That was really delicious. One of the best meals I’ve had in Mexico,” Jet said.

Daniela’s eyes widened. “But we haven’t even gotten to dessert yet!”

Jet patted her stomach. “I’ll explode if I take another bite.”

The older woman sighed. “A pity. You sure I can’t tempt you with something?”

Jet shook her head. “Honestly. You’ve already been too kind. And I want to get Hannah to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Daniela nodded and rose somewhat unsteadily, having drunk wine throughout the meal. “I can completely understand. Maybe a nightcap? Digestif?” She gestured at the bar at the far end of the living room. “We have some of the best the region offers.”

Jet smiled sadly. “No, thank you. But you mentioned the TV room? Where is it, exactly?”

“Oh, come. Sorry, I should have given you a tour of the house. Where are my manners?”

“Not necessary,” Jet assured her.

“Well, follow me. The place can be a bit of a labyrinth. My husband’s idea of a country getaway turned into building a small town, I’m afraid.”

“The house is gorgeous.”

Daniela shrugged. “If you like this style. I prefer contemporary. This all just feels so heavy and old. Sometimes I feel like I’m staying in a monastery, with all the columns and arches.”

Jet followed her through the living area and down a short corridor to where the girls were laughing as they twisted at gaming controllers. Jet watched them for a long moment, taking in the half-full bowls of food on a small table, and then cleared her throat.

“Hannah? Bedtime.”

Hannah twisted to look at her. “Can I have five more minutes? I’m winning!”

“You are not,” one of Daniela’s daughters said in good English.

“I will soon.”

Jet shook her head. “Mommy’s tired. So no, let’s call it a night. I’m sorry, sweetheart, but it’s time to go to bed.”

Hannah gave her a dejected pout, but set down the controller and threw Maria and Elena a scornful look. “I would have beaten you this time,” she said, and stood.

“Say good night to your friends, honey,” Jet instructed.

“*Buenas noches*,” Hannah said.

“*Tambien!*” Maria replied, and Elena waved as she leaned over to where Hannah had left the controller and scooped it up.

Daniela smiled at her daughters and then escorted Jet and Hannah to the stairway. “You know where your rooms are, so I’ll just finish up down here,” she said, looking distractedly at the bar.

“I want to sleep with you,” Hannah said, squeezing Jet’s hand.

“Me too, sweetheart.” Jet looked to Daniela. “Thanks again for everything.”

“If you need something, just ask.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“Well, good night, then,” Daniela said, and stood smiling at the base of the steps as Jet and Hannah made their way to the second floor and down the hallway to Jet’s room. “Go get your clothes, and I’ll meet you back here in a jiffy, okay?” Jet said, and Hannah nodded and went running off, bare feet slapping against the hard tile. Jet waited at the door, and she returned with her clothes under one arm and a shoe in each hand.

“Did you have a good time with the girls?” Jet asked as she led Hannah into the bedroom.

“Oh, yeah. They’re great.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened today?” Jet asked, moving to close the door before sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Not really. *Señora* Daniela said some bad men tried to kidnap her, and you helped save her.”

Jet digested the information. “Did she ask you a lot of questions?”

“No. Just a few. I was pretty scared. She said everything would be okay.”

“It must have been terrifying. You’re very brave, Hannah.”

The little girl yawned. “I know.” She hesitated. “Can I play video games with Maria tomorrow?”

Jet smiled at her daughter’s resilience, more interested in beating her new friend than discussing a shoot-out. Then again, the poor thing had been through more than enough nightmare scenarios already, and this one was by no means the worst. The thought gave her serious pause, but she couldn’t do much about the effect on Hannah’s psyche at this point, so all she could do was be supportive and watch for any signs that she was struggling to process it all.

“Let’s see what time we’re going to leave in the morning. We can talk about it over breakfast,” Jet said.

“I like Maria. Elena’s kind of quiet,” Hannah said.

“Well, she’s older. She’s probably interested in different things.”

Hannah nodded. “I hope I don’t change when I’m old.”

Jet grinned at her daughter. “I’m sure you’ll grow up to be amazing, Hannah. You already are.” Jet glanced around. “Now come on, and let’s see if we can find a toothbrush. I’m super tired.”

The bathroom was well stocked with toiletries, and within minutes they were under the covers, Hannah’s breathing deep and untroubled, as only a child’s can be. Jet rolled onto her side and forced her mind to quiet itself, but after an hour of reflexively running the day’s events in a disturbing unending loop, she sighed and tried rolling to the other side, to no avail. When she checked the time in frustration, almost two hours had passed, and she was still wide awake while her daughter slumbered beside her.

She swiveled her legs off the bed and stood, and then walked to the bedroom door and unbolted it, suddenly parched but not wanting to trust the water from the faucet after countless horror stories about the quality in Mexico. The hallway was dark, and she padded to the stairs, but slowed when she heard Daniela’s distinctive voice speaking to someone in her bedroom off to the right, where the door was ajar.

“I know that, *mi amor* . I’m just suggesting maybe escalating this isn’t a good idea. I’m scared. They almost got me today.”

A long pause, and she resumed speaking.

“No, I really think they were trying to kidnap me. There were too many men for an execution. You’ve told me a million times the best way to do that is two shooters, up close, before anyone can react. They had trucks waiting.”

Another pause. “Of course I have faith in you. But you weren’t the one who was almost killed.”

A hesitation. “No. Octavio, I’d never try to tell you how to run your business. Of course not. I’m just telling you how I feel.”

Daniela walked to the door and pushed it closed, ending Jet’s ability to eavesdrop. But she’d heard enough. As she’d suspected, Daniela had been the target, and whomever she was talking to, probably her husband, was going to take matters into his own hands. Given what she’d alluded to over dinner, that would mean more violence – which was neither Jet’s business nor her problem. But it did explain why Daniela and her family were surrounded by guards. They were targets.

Jet crept down the stairs to the darkened kitchen, found a glass, and filled it with water from a dispenser. She peeked out the window and could make out one of the guards seated on a camp chair beneath the overhang that stretched along the back wall to the pool, with an entertainment area and bar protected by the tile roof. Judging by the AK in his lap, he looked alert and ready for action, which was both comforting...and troubling in its implications.

She heard a noise from the foyer and heard two male voices discussing their shifts in soft tones, which told her this was going to be an all-night vigil for the men. Satisfied that they’d be protected, Jet made her way back up the steps and to the bedroom, her mind more at ease now that she saw how seriously the security was taking their duties. She had no idea what she’d inadvertently landed amongst, but at least nobody would be getting the drop on Daniela’s retinue, removing one source of anxiety and insomnia.

Jet drank half the water and set the glass on the night table beside the bed, and then snuggled back beside her daughter, who moaned softly but didn’t awaken. Jet slowed her breathing and shut her eyes, and began a slow countdown backwards from three hundred, and was asleep before she made it half the way.

Chapter 14

Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

The streets of Tlaquepaque were empty at the late hour, with the only movement street dogs roaming the rutted lanes, scrounging for scraps from overloaded garbage cans and plastic sacks they ripped into with frenzied abandon. Snarls of wires swung overhead, shifted by a light wind from the south, the neighborhood one where bootlegging electricity and telephone service was a point of pride. An occasional chicken scurried along the dirt gutter, driven from shelter by feral cats, who in turn were fair game for the dogs in a perpetual violent circle of life.

The roar of a jet taking off from the airport five kilometers south shook the raw brick walls of the buildings, many without glass, rebar set in mortar across the window openings serving as security barriers, stained sheets hung inside offering privacy. The stench of raw sewage wafted along the roads that wound along the hillside; many of the homes had been thrown up without indoor plumbing, their outhouses left to seep into the ground and evaporate into the night air.

A trio of pickup trucks pulled off the highway onto a dirt strip that ran to one of the paved streets and climbed along the perimeter wall of a wrecking yard, headlights off, crawling slowly until the column reached the steel gate. The driver of the lead vehicle raised a handheld radio to his lips and spoke into it, and the two trucks behind him veered around to the street, where the largest of the pair, a Ford F-250 with a heavy steel pipe for a front bumper, rammed into the gate, tearing it off its rails and flattening it beneath the truck's tires.

The pickups made it halfway across the yard when gunfire exploded from the cinderblock building at the opposite end,

the staccato chatter of Kalashnikov AK-47s announcing that the intruders had been spotted. The trucks skidded to a stop, and men popped up from where they had been concealed in the pickup beds and returned fire. The lead truck's passenger door jerked open, and a tall man wearing a baseball cap and a bandana over his lower face ducked out carrying a bulky tube, positioning himself so the engine block protected him from the rifle fire. He fiddled with the tube and then, in a lull in the shooting, leaned out around the hood, shouldered the tube, and depressed the trigger.

An anti-tank rocket blasted from the launcher and struck the front of the building with a whump, and a fireball roared through its windows an instant later. The shooting from the building stopped, leaving isolated fire from several of the stacked, flattened car frames to pepper the attackers' trucks. One of the intruders hurled a metal orb at the closest pile of metal, and an explosion rocked the night. The gunfire stopped, and the attacking gunmen sprinted from the trucks, rifles in hand. A shadow ran from another clump of crushed automobiles and made for the back of the yard, but two of the gunmen opened fire and cut the escaping shooter down as he attempted to bolt to safety.

The attackers made a systematic sweep of the yard, shot the one wounded man they found in the head, and then walked nonchalantly back to the trucks, their job completed. The passenger of the lead vehicle fished a cell phone from his pocket and placed a call, spoke briefly, and then hung up and returned to the cab. The trucks circled around and raced through the gate as the wail of distant sirens echoed off the buildings along the foothills. When one of the vehicles stalled a block from the yard, steam hissing from its grille, the men piled out and climbed into the other pickups before they tore away along the dirt road, leaving the distressed truck where it sat, the conveyance having more than served its purpose in the night's events.

On the other side of town, in Providencia, one of the wealthy northern suburbs, a group of men sat at a table near the back of a lively steak restaurant on one of the quiet boulevards, a bottle of tequila and a platter of beef in the center of the table.

Outside, four bodyguards sat on a wooden bench by the entrance, their thick vests and the bulges of their weapons announcing their presence. A pair of large SUVs were illegally parked at an emergency response section of the curb, their armor and bulletproof windows obvious to the trained eye.

A Shakira song warbled from speakers mounted in the corners of the open-air front façade, mingling with the bantering voices of the customers. The atmosphere around the restaurant was redolent of wood smoke and seared meat, and the windows of the stately homes across the street were dark, traffic light due to the hour.

One of the men at the group took a call on his cell, and the color drained from his face as he listened. He hung up and barked orders to his companions, and tossed a sheaf of bills on the table as the four of them pushed back and made for the entrance. They were nearly there when an economy sedan with blacked-out windows swung around the corner, and a gunman in the rear seat opened up on the restaurant with a submachine gun, spraying the area with a hail of lead that caught two of the bodyguards in the first salvo, neutralizing them instantly. The other pair dropped from the bench, freed their pistols, and began returning fire, only to find themselves picked off by a duo of pedestrians who had been strolling down the street, now with bullpup submachine guns of their own in their hands.

The men in the restaurant ducked and reversed course as the customers around them screamed in panic. They bolted to the kitchen area, now brandishing pistols. One of the four grunted when a bullet punched through his back, and he coughed a spray of blood as he collapsed, left by his companions as they pushed through the service doors and sprinted to a rear exit as the staff stood in astonished shock, frozen at the sight of the armed men. Then they were through and outside in an alley, running flat out for the far end of the narrow way. They were nearly there when more shots reverberated from behind them, and one of them pitched forward, the back of his head blown apart, dead before he faceplanted into the pavement. The surviving pair spun around and returned fire as they took shelter behind an overflowing dumpster, and one of them

emptied his weapon at the pursuers as the other continued to the alley mouth, staying low, gun in hand. When he reached it, he began shooting, laying down covering fire for the other man, who zigzagged in a crouch to where the shooter waited, and darted around the corner.

A shotgun roared from a motorcyclist who was idling at the curb, and the double-aught load caught the first man in the chest. He slammed back into the second, who twisted to target the new threat, but was too late by an instant. The second shotgun blast liquified his face and half his neck, ending the exchange with the two men lying in a lake of blood. The motorcyclist slid the chopped shotgun into his backpack and held up a cell phone to shoot a photo of the carnage, and then slipped it into his pocket and tore off, the area behind him a cacophony of screams and shouts as the customers poured through the back door, desperate for safety from the indiscriminate gunfire.

By the time the lights of emergency response vehicles were coloring the intersection, the attackers were long gone, leaving fourteen dead and a half dozen wounded from the indiscriminate fire, the street littered with shell casings and the interior of the restaurant spackled with crimson. The massacre was unprecedented in the prosperous district, where civility and manicured lawns were the order of the day. Police closed off the boulevard, and news crews waited at both ends of the block, the reporters and camera crews craning their necks for a better view of a massacre that would stun the city the following morning.

Chapter 15

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Jet bolted awake at the sound of loud pops from outside the window – the distinctive cracks of suppressed rifle fire. She looked over at where Hannah was asleep beside her, and then eased herself from the bed and crawled to the window, careful to keep her head down.

When she reached it, she peered through the curtain gap at the window's edge and frowned at the sight of two of Daniela's bodyguards dead on the drive and a black Escalade idling just inside the gate with a gray Toyota sedan behind it, four of its occupants now creeping towards the house with their rifles at the ready.

A crash from the ground floor signaled the front door had succumbed to the intruders, and then unsuppressed gunfire from the interior told her that at least one of the villa's bodyguards was still alive. A volley of pops from the attackers silenced that resistance, and Jet spun and crawled back to the bed, where Hannah was now up, wiping sleep from her eyes and yawning.

"Come on, honey. We need to hide," Jet whispered, holding out her hand.

Hannah's eyes widened. "We do? Why?"

"Bad men. Now hurry."

Hannah crawled to where Jet crouched on the floor, and Jet led her to the window on the far side of the bedroom that faced the side perimeter wall of the villa's grounds. She peeked out at the empty lawn, and after considering the decorative balcony beneath it, eased the window open and hauled herself

through, keeping most of her weight on the sill with her arms until she was confident the balcony would hold.

“Here,” she said to Hannah, who scrambled through the gap and into her mother’s arms. “Shhh. Stay quiet. We’ll be okay,” Jet murmured, ear cocked for any hint of attackers making their way upstairs from the gunfight.

Heavy boots clumped along the corridor floor, and then the bedroom door burst open with a bang. Hannah cringed reflexively at the sound, but Jet smoothed her hair and hugged her tight, trying to keep her calm.

After several moments, a girl’s scream echoed down the hallway, and the boots rushed from the room. Jet breathed deeply and waited, and then heard Daniela’s voice pleading with the intruders. The sounds receded, and Jet waited until nothing stirred in the house, and then whispered in Hannah’s ear, “Stay right here, honey. I’m going to make sure it’s safe downstairs.”

Hannah nodded, and Jet released her and climbed back through the window, taking care to avoid making any noise. She slipped on her shoes, crept to the doorway, and paused, listening intently. From outside the front door, she could faintly hear Daniela’s daughters crying, but nothing from within the house, so she inched into the hallway and along the wall until she was at the top of the stairs. Another pause reassured her that she was alone in the house, and she edged down the stairway until she reached the ground floor, where one of Daniela’s guards was splayed in a crimson puddle, his pistol still in a shoulder holster, his M16 lying uselessly by his side.

Jet scooped up the rifle and checked the magazine. Half gone. She retrieved the pistol, felt in the man’s vest, and found two more full magazines. Jet ejected the partially spent one from the M16 and slid one of the new ones into place, wincing at the snick, and made her way to the front door.

The Escalade’s engine started with a low roar, and the Toyota followed. Jet looked around the door jamb and spotted Elena sobbing in terror as one of the gunmen dragged her the

final feet to the big SUV, where Daniela was barely visible in the back seat through the open door. Jet counted two shooters in the sedan and saw a dead man halfway down the drive, where one of the bodyguards had stopped him in his tracks. She calculated her next move unconsciously as she brought the rifle to bear and snapped off six shots, shattering the Toyota's glass and spraying the interior of the windshield with the blood of the two *sicarios* .

The one who was manhandling Elena into the SUV released her and spun in a crouch, and had almost levelled his gun at Jet when a pair of shots from the M16 shredded his throat, knocking him backward as he squeezed the trigger of his rifle, emptying the magazine harmlessly at the front of the house. The driver slammed the Escalade's transmission into gear and was backing toward the Toyota when Jet shot out two of the tires, causing the vehicle to list to one side and slow. A trio of closely grouped shots starred the windshield, and the truck ran into the sedan and stopped, engine straining, the Escalade's horn strident where the driver's head had come to rest against it.

Jet ran to the truck, ignoring Elena for the moment, and threw open the passenger door, rifle barrel leveled at the dead driver, and then looked at where Daniela was clutching her youngest daughter in her arms.

"You hurt?" Jet asked.

The older woman nodded. "My eye's swelling shut. One of them hit me."

"Get out of the car. There could be more coming, and you don't want to be exposed," Jet ordered.

Daniela shifted along the seat and urged her daughter out of the SUV, and then climbed out. Elena ran to her and hugged her, and Daniela knelt and embraced both girls while Jet scanned the area, listening for any more vehicles making their way towards them. The surroundings were still, the only sound the Escalade's engine and the chirping of birds and the soft snuffling of the girls as their mother sought to reassure them.

After several long moments, Daniela stood and faced Jet, her left eye half closed and the surrounding area turning purple.

“You saved our lives. Yet again.”

Jet shrugged. “I had to try.”

“All my men are dead,” she stated flatly. “The help, too?”

“I didn’t look.”

“We need to get out of here. Our location’s obviously compromised.”

Jet looked over her shoulder at the villa. “I’ll get my daughter. But I think it’s obvious that we’re best off parting ways. This isn’t my fight.”

Daniela nodded, but her expression darkened. “That may not be possible. Get Hannah and meet me at the garage, and I’ll explain everything.”

“There isn’t a lot you could say to change my mind.”

Daniela’s jaw clenched. “We’ll see.”

Jet frowned, but retraced her steps to the house, the copper stench of blood heavy in the foyer, her ears ringing from the rifle fire, her heart rate steady and measured, the adrenaline surge from the fight already seeping from her bloodstream with the imminent crisis over, at least for now.

Chapter 16

Lake Chapala, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt awoke to having his shoulder shaken by a clearly exhausted Garcia, whose dark circles beneath his eyes spoke to how little rest he'd gotten overnight. Matt peered at the morning light streaming through the blinds that covered the window, and groaned as he sat up.

"I'm awake. How is he?" Matt asked.

"Alive. It was touch and go," Garcia said. "But I was able to stem the worst of it."

"That's good news. Prognosis?"

"Guarded. He'll need days of bed rest, if not weeks."

"Which I assume you can handle?"

Garcia's stern countenance cracked into a weary smile. "For a nominal fee."

"That will be between you and him. I'll cover last night, as we agreed."

Garcia nodded. "And I'll accompany you to your bank. Just to ensure you don't get lost on the way."

It was Matt's turn to smile. "Always a risk when you're new to an area."

"The very least I can do," Garcia agreed.

Matt looked around the small room. "Give me a few minutes."

"I'll be waiting by the door."

Garcia departed, and Matt pulled on his shoes and stretched his arms to the sides before standing and reviewing the prior

night's events. How had he gotten sucked into this whole drama? It was crazy, and he needed to extricate himself now. Whatever Brian was involved in wasn't something Matt planned to take on. He'd pay the good doctor, clean the car, and get out of Chapala without ever looking back.

Garcia was waiting for Matt at the rear door with a tub of disposable disinfectant towels. He frowned sadly and held them out to Matt as though making a peace offering. "I would offer to help, but my back isn't what it used to be," he said.

Matt opened his rental car and methodically went through every inch of the front seat, scrubbing with the towelettes until they were rust-colored. Garcia approached and watched, and when Matt had done all he could, went into the back and came out with a pressure washer.

"This should handle anything left on the seat. Just leave your windows down so it dries quickly," he said. "Might want to stand back."

Matt did so, and the physician sprayed down the leatherette seat. When he finished, he tossed Matt a raggedy cloth towel.

"Sop up the worst of it, and we can hit the road."

Matt eyed the glistening seat. "You'll get pretty wet no matter what."

Garcia shook his head. "We'll take my car. This can dry while we're out. Probably best to limit its time in town, just in case anyone saw it." Garcia paused. "Could anyone have?"

Matt shook his head. "It was pretty dark, and we were out of there quickly."

"You'd better hope there's no report on it, or this could get difficult for you."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Matt protested.

"The law is a strange thing in Mexico. Better to avoid that battle entirely if you can."

"Point taken."

"Then come."

Garcia led him to the far side of the house, where an ancient VW Beetle with a cloth top sat beneath the spread of a parota tree. They got in, and the engine sputtered and coughed before starting and settling into a clattering hum.

The bank was several kilometers away in the downtown Ajijic section near the lake, and Garcia skidded to a stop at its entrance, seemingly unconcerned with the red painted sidewalk.

“I’ll wait here,” he said, and Matt pushed his door open, unfolded himself from the tiny interior, and walked purposefully into the bank.

It took fifteen minutes to withdraw all the cash he’d need, and he slipped the overage into his front jean pocket and carried the rest in a paper bank envelope to the Beetle and climbed in. He handed it to the doctor and then felt for the seatbelt when Garcia was done counting the money and had jammed the shifter into gear.

Once back at the house, Garcia nodded to Matt as he walked to the rental car.

“Your friend will probably be fine,” he said.

“Hope so.”

“Pleasure doing business with you. I never caught your name.”

“That’s right, you didn’t. Take care of him.”

Garcia nodded again. “*Vaya con dios* . Good luck.”

“Thanks. Let’s hope I won’t need it.”

Matt slid behind the wheel and started the engine after adjusting Brian’s pistol around to the front of his waistband so it wasn’t stabbing him in the small of the back. He crept down the driveway to the street and then followed his nose until he was on the highway that ran over the hills toward the airport, nestled between the lake and the Guadalajara metropolitan area. Once he was on the curvy road, he considered trying to call Jet again, but thought better of it when he almost collided with a bicyclist pedaling the wrong way around a blind curve.

“Moron,” Matt exclaimed, and shook his head. Traffic rules seemed to mean little in Mexico, which wasn’t unexpected, but certainly demanded all his attention lest he slam into a cow or a stray dog or a bicycle.

When he came over the hill, where the valley spread out before him under a pall of beige smog, he was greeted by a long sea of taillights, and he exhaled impatiently and tromped on the brakes.

The procession inched forward at excruciatingly slow speed, and after twenty minutes of stop and go, Matt’s breath caught in his throat. Two Federal Police cars were blocking the left lane, and each vehicle was being eyeballed by four officers as the drivers were stopped and questioned. He considered trying to wedge the gun beneath the seat or in the glove compartment, but instead opted for sliding it back to the base of his spine and enduring the discomfort, thanking Providence that it was a compact 9mm and not a .45-caliber 1911.

When it was his turn, one of the officers leaned into the car and scanned the interior before snapping a terse question.

“This your car?” he demanded in Spanish.

Matt shook his head. “No. I’m returning it to the airport. It’s a rental.”

“Where are you coming from?”

Matt tried a smile. “Chapala. Gorgeous area. Visiting friends.”

“You’re American?”

Another smile. “What was the giveaway?”

“You have your tourist card?”

Matt shook his head. “No. I’m a temporary resident. Guadalajara.”

“Where do you live?”

“Up by Andares.”

The man’s face hardened. “You’re a long way from home. Why rent a car?”

“Uber costs a fortune.”

“How long were you in Chapala?”

“Only one night. I have to get back to the family.” Matt shrugged. “You know how it is.”

The man considered Matt for several moments and then stepped back. “You can go.”

Matt waved and rolled forward, his heart thudding in his chest. The doctor’s warning echoed in his ears as he picked up speed, one eye on the rearview mirror, half expecting one of the cruisers to peel off after him with siren blaring. When the roadblock had receded into the distance, he breathed normally and shifted the pistol to a more comfortable position, grateful that he hadn’t had to use it, the prospect of shooting it out with four cops one he was happy he’d been able to avoid. His fingers felt for his cell, and he was withdrawing it from his pocket when a pair of police cruisers screamed past him headed in the opposite direction, convincing him to hold off on any distractions until he’d rid himself of the car and was completely in the clear.

Chapter 17

Panama City, Panama

Nabila studied her reflection in the mirror and grimaced at her new haircut. The '60s-style bob, dyed light brown, did nothing for her jawline or the crow's feet in the corners of her eyes, and the dark makeup she'd affected since traveling to Panama accentuated any slack in her skin. She sighed and applied a dab of lipstick, and offered herself a moue of disapproval before snapping her purse closed and drawing a deep breath.

She'd taken up residence at one of the narco money villas available for rent, which were plentiful in the city, as well as in the northern highlands. One of the problems of generating billions of dollars each month was investing it after laundering. Latin American real estate was a preferred place to park large sums, and it was arguable that a significant percentage of the skyscrapers and luxury homes were funded by illicit funds.

Not that the government minded. Everyone had to make a living, and nobody was holding a gun to the heads of the consumers of the drugs the cartels shipped into the U.S. It was a classic supply and demand situation, in the eyes of most of the regimes south of the border, and money was money, especially when it came to creating jobs and gentrifying neighborhoods.

This particular home was a lavish affair in the embassy district, filled with expansive colonial homes with ostentatious façades that emulated Southern antebellum mansions. Nabila moved around regularly, never in the same place for more than a few days, her operational training still keen after all the years gone by.

The money she was generating helping the cartels avoid the American Coast Guard was attractive, but she was under no misapprehension about how most involved in that game met their ends, and she was determined to get out well before someone decided she was of no further use and knew too much. Her long-term plan was to soak the Mexicans and Colombians for everything she could over the next few months and then vanish to somewhere civilized where she could restart her murder-for-hire business before the intelligence she'd filched from the Mossad became too dated. She was thinking Asia, perhaps Singapore, but was also considering some of the lesser capital cities in the region. Wherever the agency had limited or no personnel, thus reducing the odds of her being detected to zero.

That had been one of the draws for Panama, where there was a limited diplomatic presence in one of the towers proximate to the waterfront but no field assets. The office staff were invariably relatively low-paid bureaucrats, and any Mossad operatives were pencil-pushing analysts, nothing more. It wasn't perfect, but it was as close to it as she could manage while interacting with the cartels, and for the moment, anyway, she felt safe.

The weather was the worst thing about the place, the tropical heat and humidity relentless and oppressive the moment she stepped outside the air-conditioned interior, even at night. Any breeze off the Pacific was more akin to a moist blast furnace than something refreshing, but the locale, proximity to her clients, and relatively developed infrastructure offset the climate's negatives, much as she was sure they would in Singapore, which suffered from the same issue.

Nabila descended the marble steps to the entry foyer and nodded to the bodyguard who was seated by the door. She had hired this group on a day-by-day basis, the entourage too visible for her liking, but essential when she wasn't staying at a hotel with round-the-clock security.

"I'll be out for an hour," she said. "And I'm not expecting any visitors today, so treat any callers as a threat."

“Yes, ma’am,” he said in English tinged with a German accent. “Will you require someone to accompany you?”

Nabila nodded. “I’ll take Sven.”

“Very good.” He tapped an earbud and murmured into it, and then offered her a wan smile. “He’ll be at the front gate in one minute.”

“Excellent.”

Nabila moved to the entry door and braced herself, and when she swung it open, the swelter didn’t disappoint, even at the early hour. She stepped out onto the veranda, leaving the door for the guard, and ambled along the drive to the front gate, a ten-foot-high steel slab that slid to the side on a rail to accommodate vehicles. Another guard sat in a booth with a bulletproof glass window that faced the street, and he nodded to her and rose as she approached.

Sven jogged from the side of the house, his tall athletic frame clad in tropical-weight linen slacks and shirt, with a satchel containing a bullpup machine gun and several magazines slung over one shoulder. She waited until he reached her, and then called to the gatekeeper, “Open up. We’ll be back shortly. Call if anyone approaches. Cell’s on,” she said.

“Of course.”

The gate slid open, and Sven exited first, scanning the street in an apparently casual manner before signaling to Nabila that it was safe. She followed him out, and they made their way along the sidewalk, the shopping district only a few short blocks away.

Sidney Wiseheart lowered the zoom lens camera and raised his cell to his ear, his heart pounding in his chest like a panicked animal. The call connected, and on the third ring, a deep male voice answered.

“Yes?”

“I’ll send over photos, but we have a possible on the target.”

“Explain.”

“Woman of the right age. Hair and complexion different, but that’s not a disqualifier. The compound’s guarded, though, so looks like she’s expecting company. She just left on foot with one of the muscle. Want me to follow?”

A pause. “Transmit the images ASAP. But stay in place.”

“Roger that. Do not follow.”

“Correct. Sounds like she’d pick you up in a minute if you tried.”

Sidney was holed up in an apartment complex two hundred yards from the target’s villa, and had been watching it since the prior night – ever since the agency had been able to triangulate suspect cell calls. He yawned and inserted a cable into the camera, and then downloaded the images to his laptop for compression and transmission to Tel Aviv.

He worked meticulously, as was his habit as a forensic accountant. Sid was unaccustomed to getting his hands dirty, a desk more his habitat, but Mossad had only a handful of agents to choose from there, and he’d drawn the short stick.

When the images were reduced in size, he activated his VPN software, selected a node in the U.S., and then waited to tap in a blind email address. The screen blinked twice, and he sent the photos and then sat back and rubbed a hand over his weary face, the round-the-clock vigil with virtually no notice having drained him. He walked to the telescope that stood on a tripod well inside the window and lowered himself into the chair that had been his only comfort on the miserable job, resigned to watching and waiting until given the order to stand down.

Chapter 18

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Jet took the stairs two at a time as she rushed to confirm Hannah was safe, rifle still gripped in one hand so tightly that her fingers whitened from the pressure. When she made it to the bedroom, she burst inside and crossed to the window, and then relaxed when she saw her daughter's hair in the right corner.

She opened the window and reached her free hand to Hannah.

"Come on, sweetheart. It's safe now," Jet said, and a lump in her throat threatened to choke her as the little girl placed her tiny fingers in Jet's, her eyes frightened but trusting. Jet helped her through the window and leaned the rifle against the wall. "Hurry up and change into your clothes. We're leaving."

Jet helped Hannah dress and then scooped up the rifle and led her to the door. She cocked her head and listened, and heard Daniela's voice downstairs, speaking in rapid Spanish. Jet pulled Hannah along to the stairway and guided the little girl step by step until they arrived at the ground floor, where Daniela was waiting, her battered expression troubled.

"I thought we were going to meet at the car," Jet said.

"Yes. But I had to call my husband and let him know what happened. Come on. We can talk on the way."

Jet shook her head. "There's no 'on the way.' I want no part of whatever is going on."

Daniela exhaled with annoyance. "Yes, I completely understand, but you need all the facts before you can make a decision, right? Follow me, and I'll fill you in."

Jet glanced at Hannah and then followed the older woman out the door and around to where a late model Range Rover was parked inside a separate four-car garage. Daniela's daughters were already in the vehicle, their faces frightened, and Jet stopped at the rear of the SUV and leveled a stare at Daniela.

“So explain,” she said.

Daniela nodded. “My husband is involved in some... He's a member of a group that's involved in...extralegal activities. This was a kidnapping attempt by a rival gang from Jalisco. Same ones whose plan you disrupted yesterday. For whatever reason, they want to take my family hostage, so we need to get back to our home in Culiacán.”

“Like I said – not my battle to fight.”

“True, but just as I was able to learn you'd been arrested, and discover everything about you from the police, so too can these people. Which means you won't be safe in Guadalajara, or really anywhere where they have reach, which is a lot of Mexico. You gave them a black eye, and that's something they won't tolerate.”

“I'm not involved,” Jet repeated.

“That may be, but these groups view the world as allies or enemies. There's nothing in between. And now you're their enemy. I told my husband about you, and he agreed to allow you under his protection. But to do that, you need to come with me to Culiacán. He's arranged for a plane to pick us up this morning at a nearby airstrip.”

Jet digested the news and frowned. “There's no way I'm leaving my husband in Guadalajara. If you say I'm in danger, he will be too, right?”

Daniela nodded. “Probably. I mean, I don't know, but it isn't worth the risk. You can call him once we get clear of here. Cell coverage starts a few kilometers closer to town. Tell him to meet us at the plane. There's enough room.” Daniela regarded Jet and then Hannah. “But we need to get moving. There's no

telling what kind of backup the Jalisco cartel will send, or how long they'll take to reach us.”

“Sounds like we should just leave Mexico.”

Daniela's brow crinkled. “You have to understand what you're up against. Jalisco has tentacles everywhere. They've grown to be the most powerful group in the country. Which means you can't assume you won't get flagged by immigration and find yourself in a holding cell while they come for you. Money finds its way into every office: police, immigration, customs, politicians, the army, you name it.” She offered a resigned shrug. “The only way to guarantee your safety right now is to come with me. Otherwise, anything could happen. They have your photo from the arrest, just as I was able to get it sent to me. They have your ID, your passport info, everything I was able to learn with a few calls. Do not underestimate these people. Mexico is basically controlled by them and those like them. It's impossible for anyone to get elected without their financial support, and the money is endless, so of course it corrupts. That's just the way it all works here. Now come. I would hate to see anything happen to Hannah. You saw what you're up against. They're utterly ruthless.”

Jet considered Daniela for several moments. “Why are you so concerned with our well-being?”

“I would have thought that would be self-evident. You've saved my life twice in as many days. I don't take that lightly, and I won't see you and your daughter butchered by some thugs you wouldn't be involved with if it weren't for me.” She checked her watch. “We're out of time. Please get in. It's really your only chance. Jalisco isn't safe for you anymore.”

Jet's gut told her this was all moving too fast, but she didn't have many options, in the middle of nowhere, with no car, corpses everywhere, and more gunmen on the way. While she might have taken her chances had she been on her own, she needed to consider Hannah's safety.

“All right. But I want to call as soon as I have a signal,” Jet said.

“Absolutely. We’ll take back roads to the airstrip, but there should be service as we skirt town.” She eyed the rifle. “Might want to hold onto that, at least until we’re on the plane.”

“I was planning on it.”

Daniela nodded. “Can you drive? I’m blind on my left side and seeing double on my right.”

Jet grunted and opened the back door. Hannah scrambled next to Daniela’s daughters, and Jet took the driver’s seat, rifle barrel pointing at the floorboard, but the weapon ready to be brought to bear in an instant. Daniela climbed into the passenger seat, stabbed a button on the roof console to open the garage door, and then they were rolling down the drive, Jet swerving to avoid crushing a corpse as she neared the front gate, which was jammed open. Once on the road, Jet picked up speed, her eyes flitting to the rearview mirror every few moments to confirm they weren’t being followed.

The girls murmured in the back seat, and Jet could only guess at how they were processing the horror of the attack. She fished her cell phone from her pocket and frowned at it when the signal indicator failed to register anything.

“How long until we’re in cell range?” she asked Daniela.

“Maybe ten minutes.”

“And the airstrip?”

“About an hour. The roads are terrible out there. More trails than anything.”

Jet waited impatiently until the phone beeped, and then dialed Matt’s burner number. It rang three times, and then he answered. She gave him a hushed account of what she’d been through, and he listened without interruption, as was his custom, until she finished.

“But you’re okay?” Matt asked.

“Yes. Shaken, but otherwise fine. I’m not so sure about Hannah.”

“This airstrip – can you send me a location? I’ll stop by the apartment and get everything I can carry, and then head over.

But I need something to enter into the navigation app.”

“I’m on it. Now tell me what happened with you,” she said.

He gave her a short summary, and she exhaled heavily. “Seems like Mexico might not be the ideal spot to settle down.”

“It was one-in-ten-million odds I would run into a former asset. But yeah. So far it doesn’t look good.” He paused. “I’m halfway home. Send me the coordinates as soon as you can. I’ll see you when I get there.”

Jet terminated the call and turned to Daniela. “He’ll meet us at the plane. I need the location.”

Daniela checked her phone, where a map was displayed, and nodded. “Give me your number, and I’ll send it to you. The airstrip shows up as an empty field on navigation software, but it’s there.”

“That’s fine,” Jet said, her mind churning at Matt’s description of his tribulations the prior day. What had seemed like a great idea for relocation had suddenly turned into a nightmare with no end, and now they were on their way to one of the most dangerous places in Mexico, escorted by a woman Jet had known for barely a few hours, whom she was forced to trust with her family’s lives – a bad situation becoming steadily worse with every tick of the clock.

Chapter 19

Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt exited the Chapala highway at the airport and kept his speed down while he rolled along the two-lane to a roundabout that fed to the rental car lots. He pulled to a stop in the driveway of his agency, switched the motor off, and swung the door open. When he stepped out, he adjusted the pistol in his waistband and headed for the office, where a lone man in his thirties waited with a burnished brass name tag affixed to a blue sweater vest.

“*Buenos días* , Roberto,” Matt said in Spanish. “I’m returning my car.”

Roberto regarded him for several moments. “Of course, sir. You have the keys?”

Matt handed them to the attendant and followed him out to where the car was parked. They walked around the vehicle, and finding no dings or dents, Roberto popped the trunk and verified the spare tire and kit were there, and then opened the glove compartment to check the manual. He finished by inspecting the interior and switching the ignition on, and frowned when he noted the fuel indicator.

“We’ll need to charge you for gas. It would have been less expensive to fill it before dropping it off.”

“I’m in kind of a hurry, so that’s fine.”

“Very well. Will this be cash, or should I put it on your card?”

“You can add it to the card, if that works,” Matt said, eyes darting to his watch.

“Certainly. Follow me to the office, and we’ll have you out of here in no time.”

When the transaction was concluded, Matt removed his cell phone and thumbed it to life. “Is there somewhere Uber picks up around here?” he asked.

Roberto nodded and indicated a convenience store across the road, adjacent to a large parking lot. “Over by the Oxxo. The police frown on them picking up at the terminal or here. Eats into the taxi racket.”

“Thanks,” Matt said, and set off where directed, phone in hand.

Roberto watched him leave, and when Matt was crossing the street, removed a strip of paper from his pocket and dialed the number on it. A voice answered, and Roberto spoke softly.

“The car you asked about? Someone just returned it.” A pause as he listened. “One gringo. He’s headed for the Oxxo store at the airport. You probably have fifteen minutes, tops, at this hour before he gets a ride. He’s taking an Uber.” He listened some more. “I’ll be here. Five thousand pesos, right?” Another pause. “I’ll give you the address on his card when you come with the money.”

When Roberto hung up, he smiled. Easiest money he’d ever make. Someone connected had spotted the car’s rental sticker on the bumper and called that morning with the license plate number, and had promised a reward for making a phone call. Roberto had no idea what the gringo might or might not have done, and he didn’t care. It was none of his business. If someone with money was willing to pay for information, well, with what he was paid, it made no sense not to help a countryman out.

When Matt reached the store, he found a half dozen fellow travelers standing in the shade, staring at their phones with the telltale impatience of those waiting for rides. He entered his request and tapped his foot while the application searched for a vehicle, and then an icon popped up, indicating that a driver named Carlos would arrive in eleven minutes in a white Kia Rio. Matt memorized the plate number and went into the store,

where thankfully the AC was an arctic blast compared to the heat from the parking lot's baking asphalt. He strolled to the refrigerated cases at the back of the store, selected an energy drink, and took his time paying for it, savoring the cool interior.

A jet roared overhead on takeoff, and the store's glass façade vibrated as the airliner clawed its way into the sky. Matt reluctantly exited the shop and checked the app again, and frowned as the time updated to another twelve minutes until his car arrived. He popped the can top and took a long sip, the sun blazing hot against his face and the air perfumed by jet fuel exhaust and roasting pavement.

He felt no emotion at having left Brian to his fate, mildly annoyed at having had to pay for his care, although it was a tiny drop in a very large bucket. Matt believed that his appearance in Chapala was one of life's myriad strange coincidences, and made a mental note to avoid expat enclaves lest he have another unexpected encounter with a ghost from his past. Whatever trouble Brian was in, Matt wanted no part of it, his plate now full with Jet's revelation of having landed in the middle of a war zone.

Time crawled by, and more planes took off, and then his phone beeped a warning, and he spotted his ride edging down one of the parking lot aisles towards him. The car pulled to a stop at the curb, and Matt walked over. The passenger window opened, and the driver smiled at him.

"Front seat, please," he said.

Matt frowned. "Why?"

"The police will stop us if you're in the back. If you're in the front, you look like a friend rather than a fare."

"Ah," Matt said, and wedged himself into the front seat, his bag in his lap.

Traffic was moderately heavy to the highway on-ramp, where a half dozen federal police cars sat with their occupants watching the cars go by. Matt yawned and adjusted himself, the pistol jabbing him every time the Kia hit a pothole. He slid

the seat back as far as it would go so he could stretch his legs, and studied the cars behind him in the side mirror. A lifted truck caught his eye as it wended its way through vehicles, the driver impossible to make out due to the dark tint on the windshield, and a tickle of alarm spread from his stomach to his limbs as he watched its approach.

Carlos groaned when a wall of brake lights greeted them several moments later, and the Kia lurched to a stop. Matt kept focused on the truck, which was four cars behind them when it rolled to a halt, and clenched when he saw the passenger door open and a pair of thugs jump out and start towards the Kia, pistols in hand. Matt snatched up the strap of his bag and threw the door open, and then bolted toward the dilapidated brick buildings that lined the road.

Horns honked behind him on the highway when he vaulted over the guardrail and sprinted towards a gap between a pair of houses, and a street dog scampered away at the vision of a tall gringo running towards it at breakneck speed. Matt ducked low as he rounded the corner and drove himself faster, his legs pumping like pistons as his feet slammed against the narrow alley's hard-packed dirt. He reached the end of the row of buildings and slowed to scan the ones across the street, and then took off again toward an unpaved road that ran down the hill into a stretch of shanties with plywood walls and tarps for roofs.

He reached the slum and zagged left up a small hill, where the decrepit structures gave way to bare cinderblock and brick dwellings, and only dared a glance over his shoulder when he reached the first of them. He spotted movement back at the shacks, and knelt behind a rusting Dodge Dart on four flat tires, forcing his breathing to slow as he peered over a fender to see whether his pursuers had followed him this far.

The pair from the truck appeared from the dirt road and stopped to survey the empty road. An unmuffled '70s-era Ford pickup growled down the hill past Matt's hiding place and continued down towards the men, who showed no fear of being seen brandishing guns. Matt felt for his confiscated pistol and drew it from his waistband, waiting to see what the

two would do. There was no way he could make it from the broken-down car without being seen, and if he was going to have to take a stand, doing so from the cover of the wreck improved his odds incalculably against a pair of amateurs out in the open.

His breath hissed between his teeth as he waited for them to make their move, and he thumbed the pistol's safety off when the men began up the hill in his direction. A fleeting thought about penalties for gunning down two men in broad daylight danced through his head, but he shrugged it away and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with his free hand.

His pursuers stopped halfway to Matt's position, and one of them raised a cell phone to his ear and had a terse conversation before hanging up and saying something to his companion. The second man swore, and then they took off at a jog back the way they'd come, leaving Matt to watch them disappear around a corner, into the sea of shanties that marred the land between his hiding place and the highway.

Matt checked the time and waited five minutes, and when it was clear his welcoming committee had given up the chase, he stood, replaced the pistol in his waistband, pulled his shirt over it to hide it, and took his bearings. He removed his cell from his pocket and tried another ride-share app, but with no success – apparently the neighborhood he was in was a no-go for drivers, which didn't surprise him.

He set off up the hill, staying close to the buildings, wrinkling his nose at the stench of garbage and raw sewage. Eventually he reached an intersection, where a child was playing in the dirt with a chicken in front of a trio of wizened old men with skin the color of beef jerky, seated on scuffed plastic chairs in front of a tiny market. Matt spotted an ancient Nissan Tsuru, whose burgundy door had the word *Taxi* hand-painted in white, and he slowly approached the men, his expression neutral.

“Anyone know who owns that?” he asked, pointing to the Nissan.

One of the men laughed. “Ramon. He’s probably not up yet. Hungover, most likely.”

“How can I get a ride into town? Does Ramon like money?”

Another of the trio offered Matt a smile that lacked half its teeth. “Everyone likes money, no?”

“Can someone call Ramon and tell him he’s got a customer?”

The first old man twisted towards the market entrance and yelled into the darkened interior, “Maria? Wake your deadbeat husband up. He’s got a fare!”

A portly woman with a heavily lined face appeared in the doorway, scrutinized Matt with disapproval, and disappeared back inside, leaving Matt to wait in the sun, sweat from his run now soaking through his shirt.

Ten minutes later a heavysset man in his forties, hair matted to one side, squinted at Matt from the doorway and nodded to him.

“Cash only. Where you want to go?”

“Andares mall,” Matt said.

The man chuckled, coughed twice, and spit to the side. “Long way from that place, eh?”

Matt merely shrugged. “I hadn’t noticed. You ready to go?”

“I need to stop and get some gas.” He named a price.

“That’s fair. Let’s move. I have an appointment.”

Ramon nodded again, his eyes betraying nothing, and shuffled down the two concrete steps to the dirt. “Follow me. Hope it starts. Temperamental some days.”

Matt trailed him, wondering at how much his reality had changed in just a few short hours, from comfortably ensconced in air-conditioned luxury in the best zone of the city to unshaved, unshowered, having nearly been in a shoot-out, and now about to embark on a ride in a deathtrap hardly fit to transport the chicken, much less humans.

The car started on the third try with a loud explosion of black exhaust, and Ramon grinned at Matt, who was waiting by the door. “Your lucky day, huh?” he said with a chuckle.

Matt swung the door open and climbed into the back seat, bag in hand. He perused the grimy interior of the ancient car and exhaled heavily.

“You have no idea.”

Chapter 20

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

The plush Range Rover's air suspension softened the worst of the irregular pavement, but as they drove farther from civilization, the road worsened until it was barely passable at any real speed. Jet slowed further and checked the time, and then turned to Daniela, her eye now so swollen she looked like she'd gone five rounds with Tyson.

"You said the road's around here?" Jet asked.

Daniela nodded. "Map says it's up ahead maybe three hundred meters."

Jet took in the surroundings, which had transitioned from fields of agave, corn, and sugarcane to more of a dense tropical brush, the greenery thick and lush on both sides of the road. Jet glanced at the fuel gauge, which was still showing over half a tank, and drew a deep breath. The air conditioning was arctic, the motor purred almost silently, and they hadn't seen another vehicle for twenty minutes, so other than the rifle by her side and Daniela's eye, it was hard to believe they'd been in a pitched battle at the house only an hour earlier.

As if sensing Jet's thoughts, Daniela managed a pained smile. "Most of the area around Tequila is volcanic soil, which is perfect for growing agave, which is what they make tequila from. For centuries this region has been a farming community, and even the big distilleries started off as farmers. Of course, now a lot of that has changed, but it's pretty rural, and it isn't unusual to not see another soul for hours."

"Probably makes it perfect for clandestine airstrips," Jet observed.

“Well, yes. Not many prying eyes, and the locals are smart enough to see nothing and say nothing. Nobody wants trouble. The police out here mainly drive around and break up drunken fights on weekends, so nobody’s sticking their noses where they don’t belong.”

“Not sure how that’s going to work with a bunch of dead gunmen at your house.”

“Oh, that will be handled,” Daniela said, her tone unworried.

“Your husband?”

“His colleagues are very resourceful. And there was nobody around to hear the shooting. Our nearest neighbor is three kilometers away.” Daniela paused. “We should be right on top of the road now.”

Jet braked and swerved onto a gravel track that was barely more than a gap in the vegetation. Branches and vines scraped at the SUV’s paint as it bounced along the trail, and Jet slowed to a crawl and crept towards the sunlight at the far end of the narrow gap. The rifle banged her knee, and she grimaced at the lance of pain that ran up her leg, and then they were through the thicket and in a grassy field, where the gravel continued to a brick arch that had partially collapsed.

“It’s an abandoned plantation,” Daniela said. “Deserted for a decade. My husband knows the family.”

“And the airstrip?”

“A little farther. He said it was on the other side of the buildings.”

Jet drove beneath what remained of the arch and followed the track through more trees, past a run-down home that looked large enough to house a platoon, and emerged at the periphery of another sprawling field, where a red dirt strip ran from the tree line to another thicket at the far end of the spread.

Jet turned to Daniela. “Now what?”

“We wait. He didn’t say exactly when the plane would arrive. Only that it would be here soon.”

“We’re not getting on until my husband gets here. Not to be difficult, but just so you understand. We come as a unit,” Jet said.

“I perfectly understand. Hopefully he’ll be here shortly. They won’t want to sit on the ground indefinitely.”

“He was on his way when we spoke.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

They sat, time passing slowly, the motor purring softly, and the girls murmured in the back seat. Daniela turned to consider Jet, and pursed her lips before sighing. “I’m truly sorry you’re involved in this, and I completely understand why you’re angry. Nobody in their right mind looks for this kind of trouble.”

Jet shrugged and met Hannah’s eyes in the rearview mirror before addressing Daniela again. “Sometimes trouble finds you no matter what you do.”

Daniela nodded. “You sound like you’re no stranger to it.”

“We were hoping to start a fresh life in Mexico. Seems that’s now off the table.”

Daniela frowned but didn’t respond. The truth was that if the Jalisco cartel really had its tendrils in all areas of the bureaucracy, which seemed likely, given she had no reason to lie about it, then Mexico would remain dangerous for Jet and her family no matter how things resolved.

They sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts, and after a seemingly endless wait, Jet cracked the window and cocked her head to listen. A moment passed, and she murmured to Daniela, “I hear a plane.”

Daniela’s forehead creased, and she lowered her side and strained to hear. A low hum from the foothills in the distance grew louder, and a murder of crows alighted from the trees near the end of the airstrip. Jet squinted as she scanned the

horizon, and then a hint of a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“There,” she said, pointing at a barely visible dot in the distant sky.

“Your vision’s better than mine,” Daniela said, turning to look with her good eye.

A twin-engine prop plane drifted into view, and the sound of its motors grew to a roar as it neared the runway. It seemed to float over the far trees, hanging in defiance of physics for several seconds, and then dropped unceremoniously toward the dirt, which exploded in a red cloud behind it where its wheels touched down.

Jet nodded to herself. The plane was an older Cessna, a 414A, likely at least fifty years old, but seemed in good repair judging from its exterior, which gleamed in the morning sun as it slowed along the airstrip. It was well past the halfway point when a series of loud pops sounded from the jungle across from it, and Jet instinctively ducked at the reports. The plane picked up speed again and raced down the remainder of the strip as shots rattled from the trees.

Jet and Daniela watched in horror as bullet holes pocked the fuselage, and then the plane was turning and accelerating back the way it had come, the engines straining as the pilots firewalled the throttles. Rust-colored divots of dirt sprayed in its wake when more shooting erupted, and then the plane lifted off the ground, propellers clawing at the air as the engines redlined.

“What —” Daniela gasped, when smoke began streaming from the left engine, followed by an orange tongue of flame. Jet didn’t wait for the inevitable but slammed the transmission into reverse, anticipating that the gunmen would spot the vehicle and direct their fire accordingly. She nearly backed into a tree, and shots pocked the side of the SUV when she stopped and jammed the shifter into drive. The girls screamed at the pounding of slugs pounding into steel, their terror palpable.

“It’s armored,” Daniela yelled, her voice panicked.

“That won’t help much. We need to get away,” Jet said. “Hang on, everyone,” she warned, and stomped on the gas. The heavy vehicle lunged forward. More shots struck it, and two of the windows starred but didn’t shatter. Jet raced along the gravel drive and cursed when she saw a pair of pickup trucks blocking the way by the brick arch, with gunmen standing in front of the vehicles.

An explosion shook the Range Rover from behind them, confirming that the plane hadn’t made it far. More bullets tore paint from the hood, and one of the headlights shattered in a spray of glass.

“Crap,” Jet muttered, and twisted the steering wheel left, sending the SUV careening sharply off the track into the heavy brush. The girls shrieked again from the back seat as the Range Rover nearly tipped, but it managed to right itself, and they were bouncing through the brush, Jet concentrating with all her abilities to keep from slamming into the trees, her jaw clenched tight, their arranged escape now a headlong rush into disaster.

Chapter 21

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

A lone hawk wheeled in a lazy circle high above the red clay tile rooftops of a compound several miles outside the city, the sun's reflection blinding on its twelve-foot-high perimeter walls. At least thirty gunmen milled around the grounds, toting AK-47 rifles, their distinctive curved magazines earning them the nickname "goat's horn." In front of the main house, which was a lavish affair of over fifteen thousand square feet of interior, an assortment of SUVs and pickup trucks waited in a neat row as two shirtless teenage boys washed them with buckets and sponges.

Inside, Octavio Garcia Cervantes sat at a massive circular wooden table in the formal dining room with a steaming cup of coffee before him, frowning at a laptop screen as he scrolled through a long column of figures. A discreet knocking on the open door drew his attention, and he sat back before responding.

"Come."

Lorenzo, Octavio's second-in-command, approached with a grim expression and sat across the table from him. Octavio lifted the coffee cup. "Café?" he asked.

Lorenzo shook his head. "No, thanks." He paused. "I tried to get the plane on the radio, but no response."

Octavio frowned. "Maybe an equipment problem?"

"Could be. But right now I wouldn't assume anything." Another pause. "We got hit hard in our Tepic warehouse an hour ago. Twenty rigs burned. Molotovs."

Octavio shook his head. “We knew they would reciprocate after last night. They might have had it coming, but that doesn’t mean they’re toothless.”

“I still think you should make a call and see if we can’t get this straightened out,” Lorenzo said.

Octavio’s expression darkened. “Straightened out? They tried to kidnap my wife, and then shot up my place in Tequila. This has gone way past the talking stage. If they want to stop what’s coming their way, they need to cease and desist, and make amends. Otherwise it’s scorched earth.”

“The trucks alone...A full-scale war is going to cost a fortune.”

Octavio took a sip of his coffee. “Fortunately we have one. And a thousand *sicarios*. All of whom can be in Jalisco with a phone call.” It was Octavio’s turn to pause. “I don’t understand any of this. It’s like they’ve lost their minds. Makes no sense. But if it’s a fight they want, they came to the right place. Coming after my family? That crosses so many lines...”

“I know. They need us. Without our approval to move through the state, a quarter of their business is shut down. Nothing they’re doing is logical. That’s the only reason I suggested we call.”

“It’s their problem, not mine. They’re the ones who started this. And nobody comes after my family or takes on Sinaloa without paying ten times more in blood. This isn’t negotiable.” Octavio finished his coffee, pushed the cup aside, and removed a burner phone from his breast pocket. He pushed one of the speed-dial numbers, waited as the line connected and rang, and then slammed it down on the tabletop when the call went to voicemail.

“The pilot isn’t answering the phone either.” He checked his watch. “They should be on the ground by now.”

“Maybe there’s no cell service there. But it doesn’t explain the radio. They know they’re supposed to respond immediately.”

Octavio raised the phone, stabbed at another speed-dial number, and waited for the line to pick up. When it responded with an automated announcement that the call couldn't be completed because the phone he'd dialed was out of the service range, he grunted and replaced the cell in his pocket.

"Daniela isn't answering either, so you're probably right about the cell towers." He thought for a long beat. "I want every free hand on deck to strike back at Jalisco. Draw up a list of targets. Do we know where El Mencho is hiding?" Octavio asked, referring to the head of the Jalisco cartel.

Lorenzo shook his head. "No. His security's as good as it gets. Rumor has it somewhere in Bucerias or outside of Vallarta, but that's just talk. Nothing solid."

"Then work up from his lieutenants and figure out where these rats have gone to ground. I want targets on all of them. No exceptions. I don't care whose cousin or nephew they are. Everything's on the table." He scowled at his empty cup and then fixed Lorenzo with a glare. "They went after my babies, Lorenzo. My wife and family. The only possible response is to go nuclear on them. We both know that."

Lorenzo nodded. "I completely agree. Assuming there isn't something going on that we aren't seeing." He pushed back from the table and stood. "Let me make some calls. It can't hurt. And yes, in the meantime I'll assemble the troops."

"Do what you have to do. But I'm uninterested in excuses. If my family's fair game, then so's theirs. You can make that clear to whoever you talk to."

"This is bad for business. For everyone. There has to be an explanation."

"Maybe they've gotten too big for their pants and think they can take us on successfully. If that's the case, it will be their last mistake."

"Could be. But something about this feels off. We've been fine with them for two years, money pouring in for both of us, and then this, out of nowhere?"

“Find out what’s going on with the plane, and get everyone ready for full-blown war,” Octavio ordered, steel in his voice.

“I will.” Lorenzo hesitated. “Should you perhaps go to one of the safe houses?”

Octavio shook his head. “I’m not going to tuck my tail between my legs for these *pendejos* . Just get more men here and establish a heavier defensive cordon. Anything we don’t recognize tries to get past it, shoot first and ask questions later. Assume everyone’s an enemy. Police, military, priests, whoever – they try to get by, send them to hell.”

Chapter 22

Putrajaya, Malaysia

A Hawker 850XP materialized from the gray blanket of clouds that enshrouded the sky above Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport and drifted lower towards the main runway, lights twinkling in the gloaming. The overcast sky flashed with a streak of lightning, and seconds later the air trembled with the roar of nearby thunder, masking the scream of the jet's turbines when its wheels smoked against the tarmac and it hurtled along the black strip, slowing when it reached the midpoint before turning off and rolling to the private aviation area at the end of the main terminal.

A black Mercedes S600 sat with its headlights on near the row of sleek private jets that hulked in the growing darkness, and the Hawker taxied towards it and braked to a stop. The engines spooled down, and moments later the fuselage door opened and stairs dropped to the ground. A pair of heavily muscled men made their way out of the plane, followed by Bai, who wore a black dinner jacket and hand-tailored cr me slacks.

The group made their way to the car, and one of the guards opened the rear door and held it for Bai, while the other took a seat in the front, beside the driver. When Bai was settled in the back of the vehicle, he glanced at the waiting bodyguard and nodded.

“Stay here with the plane,” Bai ordered. “We shouldn't be too long. Supervise the refueling, and see if you can scratch up something edible for my return.”

“Of course, sir,” the man said, and softly closed the door before retracing his steps to the jet.

“Go,” Bai said, and the driver nodded wordlessly and eased towards the gate, where a security guard tossed off a lazy salute and opened the barrier for them.

Twenty minutes later the Mercedes coasted to a halt in front of a run-down building in an industrial area on the outskirts of the city, its corrugated steel walls bleeding rust. The only other vehicles in the gravel lot were a cargo van and an economy car. The bodyguard in the front seat jumped out and hurried to open Bai’s door, and when he stepped from the interior, his nose wrinkled in distaste at the stench of rotting tropical vegetation and fish that perfumed the humid air.

Another guard stood at the roll-up metal door and, when Bai neared, heaved on a chain to raise it. Bai ducked beneath it when it was halfway open, and his bodyguard followed closely, the bulge of his pistol beneath a light black windbreaker conspicuous.

Bai crossed the cracking concrete floor past piles of pallets and wooden crates to where three men with AK-47s waited by a figure slumped forward on a folding chair, his corpulent torso bare, rivulets of dried blood tracing to his soiled trousers, his chest laboring for breath.

Bai studied the figure like he was eyeing an insect, and then nodded to the men. One of them moved to the injured man and shocked him with a cattle prod, drawing a mangled scream of anguish that terminated in pained gasps.

Bai cleared his throat before speaking. “Good. I have your attention. Hatar, I don’t want to be here any longer than I have to, so I hope you’ll answer my questions honestly and completely – for your sake.”

Hatar slowly raised his head, revealing a battered face, one eye swollen completely shut, the skin on both cheeks torn and blistered.

“Who...are...you?”

Bai shook his head and gave the politician a disappointed look. “I would have thought you would have figured it out by now. But no matter.” Bai glanced at one of the trio, and the

man walked to a darkened corner and returned with a chair. Bai took it from him and set it three meters away from Hatar and then sat, facing him.

“I have...money...” Hatar tried, and Bai waved the utterance away impatiently.

“That will do you no good. The only thing I’m interested in is the truth.” Bai sighed heavily and leaned forward. “I know you poisoned my brother. What I don’t know is why.”

Hatar’s good eye widened. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, I think you do. You killed Lun. You were the last one with him. We have the security footage. He died immediately after dining with you. The question is why you did it. From what I understand, you weren’t involved in any recent business together. So why did you take him from me?”

Hatar swallowed hard. “I swear –”

Bai cut him off. “Look, you despicable dog. Your life is already forfeit. But those of your family aren’t. At least not yet. And I can assure you that the treatment you’ve received as a preamble barely scratches the surface of what my men are capable of. So no lies. What you say, how you respond, will determine whether you die over many hours, in unimaginable agony, or quickly, with your family unharmed. Do you understand?”

Bai sat back. “We know you received a half million euros the day before you killed him, and another half million two days later. So denials won’t wash. Your guilt isn’t in question. Now it’s about whether or not your beautiful daughter and your grandchild live to see tomorrow. I have no desire to torture and kill them, but if you make this difficult, you will have sealed their fates. A tragedy, to be sure, but as certain as the sun sinking into the western sea.”

“I...” Hatar drew a shaky breath. “It wasn’t personal. I respected Lun. But I had no choice.”

Bai nodded as though in sympathy. “Go on.”

“I was contacted...through an acquaintance. Someone who knew I was on a friendly basis with your brother. I...I’d had

some financial setbacks. Bad bets, and then I lost a fortune when a crypto exchange collapsed.”

Bai’s eyes bored into Hatar. “You were on the ropes financially.” Bai paused. “Who is the acquaintance?”

Hatar winced in pain. “An arms dealer. He was just a conduit, or so he said. He had someone who was interested in talking to me. I agreed to a meeting. That was all I thought would happen.”

“Where was the meeting?”

“In Turkey. Istanbul.”

“Why there?”

“I don’t know.”

Bai sat forward again. “Who did you meet, and what was the arrangement?”

Hatar hesitated. “You won’t hurt my family?”

“I swear.”

“It was a woman. You know the rest. She didn’t tell me she planned to kill Lun – the deal was I was to convince him to meet me in Scotland – that was it. All I had to do was arrange for your brother to have dinner with me. I didn’t know she was going to murder him.”

Bai snorted. “You thought you would be paid a million euros...for what, exactly, if not that?”

“I didn’t think it through. I was drinking a lot. And doing drugs. I wasn’t in my right mind, or I’d never have agreed.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I mean it. I only put two and two together when your brother...passed. But then it was too late.”

“Not to collect the money, though. Right?”

“If it’s money you want, you can have it all. Just let me go, and I’ll transfer everything I have to you. I swear I will.”

“A name. And everything you have on this woman. Now.”

“She went by Alicia Berenger. But that was an alias.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m not without resources. I had her followed, ran her prints from a glass she drank from.” Hatar swallowed again. “She’s a fugitive. Wanted by Mossad. Her real name is Nabila...”

Hatar spoke for two minutes and told Bai everything he had learned about Nabila. When he was done, Bai pushed back from the chair and stood, and pointed to a chain that hung from an iron eyelet in the ceiling, its length connected to an electric winch mounted on the wall. He looked to the three men and spoke in a soft hiss.

“Hang him upside down and take the welder to him. Draw it out. And then do the same to his family.”

Hatar strained at the restraints that bound his arms to the chair and tried to push to his feet, only to be clubbed on the side of the neck with one of the captors’ rifles. He collapsed, and Bai threw him a final dark look and then spun and made for the roll-up door, his expression a twisted mask of hate.

Chapter 23

Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt leaned forward as the decrepit taxi rounded the corner onto his street, and studied the parked cars that lined both sides. Down the block from his building's front entrance, he spied a green Ford Ranger with a pair of men sitting in it, and he sat back and spoke to the driver.

"Keep going. There's a store one more block down where I can get some coffee," he said.

The driver nodded. "Suit yourself."

The taxi pulled into the convenience store parking lot, and Matt got out and paid the man the second half of the fare. He then sauntered unhurriedly into the store and watched out of the corner of his eye to confirm the cab had pulled out and departed. He bought a cup of coffee and mixed a packet of sugar into it while he scanned the street, but saw nothing suspicious other than the truck, almost out of sight now over the roofs of the other cars.

Matt stood just inside the door, sipping his hot brew, and glanced up at the sky when a distant boom of thunder echoed down the street. Dark gray clouds blew from the east and blocked out the sun, signaling another of the regular storms that hit the area during the rainy season. He checked the time and considered how to evade the men in the truck, who were likely waiting for him to arrive. He didn't need to wonder how they'd gotten his address – the credit card from the car rental place was the obvious culprit, and the pursuit shortly after leaving the agency left no doubt in his mind that they'd managed to track his vehicle there.

He might have been paranoid, he realized, but after the events of the last twenty-four hours, he wasn't feeling lucky. But he also didn't have time to wait them out if he was correct. And he needed the contents in the apartment safe if he and Jet were going to have to go on the run again. Passports, diamonds, cash...there was no way he could forego getting them before he headed for the airstrip.

Matt chugged the coffee, tossed the cup into a trash can on the way out of the store, and walked in the opposite direction of the apartment, down the street to the next intersection. He turned the corner and continued to the next artery and then took a left, paralleling the apartment street but along the back side of the building.

The edifice was three stories, and their apartment was on the top floor. A security gate with an intercom protected the tenants, but Matt wasn't sure that it would do much good if he was right and the men in the truck were from Chapala. When he reached the dumpsters on the walkway that ran behind the building, he checked the vehicles along both sides of the street. Seeing nothing, he ducked down the walkway and hurried to the rear access door, where he used his key to unlock it. He did a final scan of the street and then closed the barrier behind him and sidled along the tall wall to the building's rear entrance.

The emergency access stairs had a landing at each floor, but Matt continued past the top floor to the roof. Once there, he edged to the roof lip and peered over at his balcony ten feet below, and eyed the top of a black steel storage cabinet five feet above it. Matt recalled that it was bolted to the concrete wall so it wouldn't fall in one of the area's earthquakes, and he offered a silent prayer it would support his weight and hadn't rusted out, like so much of the exposed metal on the exterior.

Matt dropped onto his stomach and backed to the lip, grunting as his legs swung down the side of the wall. He allowed the weight to pull him farther toward the edge, and then he gripped the lip with both hands and continued lowering himself until he was standing on the cabinet. He

tested his weight for several seconds and then released the lip and crouched atop the cabinet, head cocked, listening.

When Matt didn't hear anything, he pivoted until he was lying on his stomach again, and lowered his feet to the terrace floor, sweat beading his forehead. He wiped the perspiration away and froze at a deafening peal of thunder that roared from the heavens, followed almost instantly by a hail of heavy raindrops that quickly became thick sheets of white water pouring from the sky.

More thunder shook the terrace, and Matt crept to the sliding glass living room doors and peeked around the frame. The room was dark, but as his eyes adjusted, he made out a man seated on one of the sofas, facing the front entrance, watching something on his phone, a suppressed pistol beside him. He didn't seem worried about being surprised, which made sense if the lookouts in the truck were to alert him when Matt showed up.

The storm intensified, and more thunder boomed from the dark clouds. If Jet was correct that Guadalajara wasn't safe any longer, which certainly seemed the case with a gunman seated in their home, they would need everything in the safe, which meant he didn't have the option of just walking away.

Matt caught the reflection of the gunman on the flat-screen television as he stood and stretched and then walked to the powder room just down the hall to the bedrooms. A light went on, and Matt drew his pistol from his waistband, thumbed off the safety, and eased the sliding glass door open. He crept into the room and closed it behind him while another peal of thunder masked any sound he might have made.

The toilet flushed, and Matt stood dripping by the glass door, gun in hand. The man appeared in the hallway and froze when he saw Matt, who motioned with his pistol to one of the chairs by the television.

“Sit there. Nice and easy,” Matt said in Spanish.

The gunman glowered at Matt, but did as ordered.

“Who are you, and why are you in my home?” Matt demanded.

“Your partner screwed us over. Somebody’s gonna pay,” the man snarled.

“He’s not my partner.”

“Whatever. You owe us. He took the money and never delivered. So now you gotta answer for that.”

“You didn’t tell me who you are.”

“Don’t play dumb. You damn well know who we are.”

“How did you get in?” Matt asked.

“Your lock’s crap.”

“That’s a shame. Biggest mistake you’ll ever make is breaking in here.”

The man smirked crookedly. “You screw us over, you’re a dead man. You know how it works.”

“Again, I’m not involved in any of this.”

“You were there with him. Helped him shoot up my homies. You’re in it neck deep.”

Matt shook his head. “You’ve got it all wrong, but I don’t have time for this.”

“So what you gonna do? Shoot me? Neighbors are gonna love that.”

Matt closed the distance to the seated man and slammed the pistol butt against his temple with a sickening thwack. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he slumped forward onto the floor. Matt leaned over and checked his neck for a pulse, and then hurried to Hannah’s room and opened the safe.

All their valuables were in a sealed ziplock bag, facilitating a fast exit under any circumstances. He reclosed the safe and spun the dial, and was nearly to the living room when the front door opened and a voice called out, “Ramón?”

Matt had no more than two seconds before the intruder made it to where he would see his companion’s inert form, so

he sprang forward, freeing his gun as he moved. More thunder shook the sky, and Matt squeezed off a shot at the man in the doorway, striking him dead center in his chest and sending him splaying backwards into the door, which slammed shut with a crash. The gunman dropped his pistol as he went down, and Matt raced to him and kicked it clear, the pink froth burbling from his nose and mouth signaling that life was slipping away.

Matt scooped up the man's gun and chambered a round. He spun when a scrape from the living room drew his attention to where the original thug had thrown himself from the chair and lunged at the couch, groping for his pistol. He had almost retrieved it when Matt shot him in the lower ribcage. The intruder's .38-caliber pistol was quieter than Matt's 9mm, but not by much. The gunman groaned but didn't release his gun, and another shot from Matt punched through his sternum, finishing the fight.

Matt's ears rang from the gunfire in the enclosed space, but he wasted no time. He hastened to the shooter by the couch and withdrew the 9mm he'd liberated in Chapala, wiped it down, and then pressed it into the dead man's hand. He then crossed the room to the entry hall and repeated the process with the other gunman's pistol.

There would be no gunpowder residue on either corpse's hands, but Matt suspected the police wouldn't be that interested in details. To the eye, it appeared the pair had gotten into a fight and shot each other. Why they were in the apartment, Matt would leave up to theorizing.

He felt in the ziplock bag for the cash and removed several thousand dollars' worth of pesos while he made his way back to the corpse by the sofa. He tossed them near the man's free hand and then retrieved his unfired pistol, checked the magazine to verify it was full, flipped on the safety, and slid it into his waistband. Matt scanned the room a final time and then rushed to the sliding glass doors and stepped out onto the balcony. The wind and rain lashed at him like an angry bride, but he ignored them and heaved himself back up atop the cabinet, and then again onto the roof, pulling himself up over the lip and jumping to his feet. He ran for the roof door as

more thunder boomed, and exhaled heavily when he was back inside the building, his heart racing.

If he was lucky, the storm had covered the sound of the shots, and with most of the neighbors at work, it wasn't a bad hope. Still, he couldn't bank on it, and the apartment was now blown, as were the identities they'd used to rent it. The cops might be lazy and incompetent, but they'd have to be brain-dead to not pull the names of the tenants, and Matt didn't feel it was worth it to try to explain how he had no idea who the men were. The front door lock would show it had been jimmed, and the money would provide a motive for the tussle between thieves, but it was thin, and Matt knew it – no more than a temporary distraction to buy them time to get clear of Mexico.

He retraced his steps to the ground floor and ducked out into the rain, the sting of the heavy drops cool on his head. In an instant he was back on the street and jogging away from the building, eager to put distance between himself and the crime scene, wary of calling an Uber before he was well away from the area, sure that the cops would eventually get around to checking his history to track his whereabouts.

Two blocks later he was drenched, but he'd found a taxi parked outside a mid-level hotel and instructed the driver to take him to a mall that was four kilometers away, closer to the highway that led northwest to Tequila and the airstrip where he'd rendezvous with Jet.

Chapter 24

Outskirts of Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

The Range Rover's steering wheel jerked like a living thing in Jet's hands, the suspension taxed to its limits by the rough terrain as branches tore at the heavy SUV. Jet alternated between the brake pedal and the gas as she navigated between the trees, the chassis bucking as they bounced over rocks and fallen branches. Jet spotted a narrow trail on her left, which she turned down, and then shifted and stomped on the accelerator to gain traction as plump raindrops spattered the windshield, the dirt beneath the tires already beginning to turn muddy and slick from the rain that had started moments before.

After gaining control of the SUV and gunning it along the trail, when it picked up speed, she dared a glance at the rearview mirror and spied the pursuing trucks skidding onto the track a hundred meters behind them. She urged the vehicle faster, and the big motor howled in protest while the lower gear redlined, and lurched when she upshifted and groped for the wiper switch, the windshield now opaque with rain.

"Mama! Look out!" Hannah cried from the back seat, and Jet wrenched the wheel just in time to avoid a tree trunk that seemed to appear out of nowhere on the edge of the trail. Jet struggled to regain control, and the Range Rover careened off the track and shredded its way through a scraggle of brush before the steering obeyed her commands and she was able to manhandle the truck back on the path.

"What's down this way?" Jet demanded of Daniela, who was white-knuckling it in the passenger seat.

"I don't know. I've never been here before."

“We’re never going to lose them unless we find a road,” Jet said. “Can you pull something up on your phone?”

“I’ll try,” Daniela said, and felt for her cell in her pocket. She retrieved it, but they hit a particularly nasty rut, and it went flying. Daniela cursed and leaned forward against the straining shoulder strap of her seatbelt to fumble for the phone by her feet, and had barely found it when Jet called out a warning.

“Hold on –”

Jet swerved to avoid a fallen tree and braked hard, but the SUV had a mind of its own, and it continued forward, wheels locked up with slick trail mud, and glanced hard off a crumbling stone wall before slamming sideways into a towering ahuehuate tree.

The girls screamed in alarm when the airbags deployed, and Daniela cried out in pain. The Range Rover bounced off the tree trunk, and then skidded to a stop against the wall, the hood and passenger-side door crumpled like a crushed beer can.

Steam hissed from beneath the ruined hood, and Daniela groaned softly. The girls were sobbing and gasping in shock, and Jet hurriedly pushed the deflated airbag out of her way and grabbed the rifle. Daniela’s hand locked onto Jet’s forearm, and Jet shook it off.

“We need to get out of here,” Jet said. “They’ll be on top of us in no time.”

Daniela squeezed her arm. “Something’s wrong with my hip. I...I can’t move.”

Jet pushed the driver’s side door open. “You have to.”

Daniela shook her head. “Save the girls. I’m serious. I...you have no idea the pain.”

“I’m not leaving you. I can help you walk.”

“It won’t work. Save them. Think of your daughter. Please.”

Jet peered through shattered glass at the stone wall and exhaled heavily. “Are you sure?”

“Just get them to safety.”

Jet nodded. “I’ll come back for you. Just sit tight.”

Daniela winced. “Please hurry.”

Jet twisted to look at Hannah and the girls. “Everyone okay?”

They nodded in unison, terror written across their faces.

“We’re getting out of here.”

Jet threw her door open and leapt from the truck, and then pulled open the rear door and hissed at the girls. “Unbuckle and come on. Hurry.”

Elena sniffed away tears. “But our mother –”

“You heard her,” Jet snapped. “There’s no time. We need to get clear and find someplace safe.”

Thunder roared from the west, and the downpour intensified as the girls piled out of the SUV. Jet grabbed Hannah’s hand and fanned the trail with the rifle. Seeing nothing, she took off at a jog away from the Range Rover, following the wall. The girls fought to keep up, and everyone was soaked within minutes, the rain cool in spite of the earlier morning heat.

Jet slowed as they arrived at the end of the wall, which appeared to define the perimeter of a ranch, and peered through the deluge, trying to make out anything between the trees. She thought she saw gray stone on the far side of the crumbling wall, several hundred yards away, and called out to Daniela’s daughters, “This way. I think I see something over there.”

Jet guided the girls to a break in the wall, where it had been partially destroyed from a tree falling against it, and they picked their way through the brush, their feet sinking into the muddy ground and pulling loose with a sucking sound. Hannah’s hand felt limp in hers, and she paused to eye her pallid features and scraggly wet hair before turning to regard Daniela’s daughters, who looked like soaked rats, the misery and fear in their expressions unmistakable.

“Maybe there’s a building or something where we can get out of the rain,” Jet said, trying in vain to sound upbeat. “We have to keep moving.”

“What about our mom?” Maria asked.

“You heard me. I’ll go back for her once you guys are safe.”

“Who’s after us?” Elena demanded.

Jet frowned. “I...we’re not sure, but probably the same group that hit the house. Now pick up the pace. Minutes count.”

Jet continued forging her way through the foliage. After a thicket so dense she thought they would have to backtrack, they emerged into a clearing with tall grass. At the other end was a ranch house and several smaller outer buildings, and a barn whose roof had collapsed into the main structure.

All looked abandoned, the brick walls crumbling in numerous places, the window glass broken out, and the wooden doors and window frames eaten away by insects, leaving dark cavities they’d once occupied. Jet tightened her grip on Hannah’s hand and raised the rifle with her other, blotches of fading graffiti on the exterior telling a story of abandonment that had attracted predators at some point in the past.

Gravel crunched beneath her boots when they neared, and the grass gave way to what had at some point been a drive.

Jet whispered to the girls as they got closer to the barn. “Stay close behind me until we get to that tree,” she said, indicating a towering sycamore near the barn. “Then stay there while I check this place out.”

When they arrived at the tree, the spread of the branches shielded the girls from the worst of the deluge, and Jet knelt on one knee in front of Hannah and released her hand.

“You’re being very brave, angel. I’ll be right back. Promise.”

Hannah nodded and whispered, “Okay,” almost inaudibly, and Jet’s heart missed a beat at the defeated sound.

She turned to Maria and Elena. “Stay out of sight and keep quiet. If you see anyone coming, hide,” Jet said, and then set off towards the buildings, the rifle steady in her hands, the buildings rust-colored silhouettes in the heavy rain. She beelined to the barn, ignoring the water flowing down her forehead into her eyes, laser focused on the structure’s dark entry. When she reached it, she swept the interior with her rifle and confirmed that other than chunks of rubble in spreading puddles of water from where the roof had fallen in, it was empty.

Jet continued to the next building, which turned out to be a service quarters, the floor littered with broken glass from the windows and broken beer bottles, the walls tagged with graffiti. The rooms had been stripped, and the bathroom reeked, signaling that whoever had been using it as a party pad had done so recently.

The main house was in similar disrepair, with the main room a small lake from a partially collapsed ceiling, where waterfalls splashed down, forming small rapids that snaked out the back door. The interior was a disaster zone even without the flooding, and looked as though it had been left for dead many years earlier, anything of value long since looted.

She edged to a hall and inspected the bedrooms in the right wing of the house, and found one that was relatively dry, with a decent view of the approach. When she finished casing the dwelling, she retraced her steps to the entrance and jogged to where the girls were hiding by the trees.

“Come on. It’s safe inside, and you’ll be able to get out of the rain,” she said, extending her hand to Hannah.

The little girl entwined her fingers with Jet’s, and they set off for the house. Daniela’s daughters followed on their heels, the rain falling in gray curtains that obscured much of the grounds and transformed what had been bright morning light into the dark tones of twilight. When they reached the front door, Jet led them past the wreckage and into the driest of the rooms, and indicated an area of the floor unspoiled by the rain.

“You can hunker down here. I’m going back for your mom, okay?” Jet said to the daughters.

They nodded in unison, and Jet turned to Hannah. “You know the drill. Stay quiet and out of sight. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Whatever you do, don’t any of you leave here, or you’ll be in danger. Wait for me, and under no circumstances come after me, no matter how long I’ve been gone. Understand?”

Hannah nodded and looked away. “It’s scary in here.”

Jet forced a small smile. “I went through the whole place. You’re the only ones here.”

“No ghosts?”

This time the smile was genuine. “I promise.”

“OK.”

Jet leaned down and kissed her daughter, and then moved to the doorway and threw a stern look at the sopping girls.

“Remember what I said,” she warned, and then she was gone, leaving the girls to the sound of the rain and the boom of thunder that shook the earth with every peal.

Chapter 25

Shanghai, China

Bai paced in front of the backlit onyx bar in his penthouse apartment, an opulent spread that overlooked the Shanghai skyline from atop the most expensive edifice in the city. An angry frown marred his features as he listened to one of his subordinates report from a laptop screen on the dining room table. When the man paused, Bai cut him off with a brusque gesture.

“This is unacceptable,” he fumed. “We need to track this woman down and convince her to meet. She’s a hired gun, so it would make sense a large enough offer would draw her out.”

“We’re still trying to get a contact for her. We’ve put the word out through all our channels and are waiting to hear back, which we will. But it takes time, and we can’t be obvious, or she’ll go to ground,” the subordinate said.

“She can’t be invisible. Money talks,” Bai shot back.

“Of course. But we don’t even know what part of the world she’s in. This isn’t like searching for a website. There are wheels within wheels, and to mask our identity, we need to be discreet. But we’re working on getting a phone number. With that, we can narrow down where she’s based, and from there...”

Bai’s frown deepened. “I want results, am I clear? I don’t pay for failure or excuses. I’m uninterested in all the steps you’ve taken and the effort you’ve put in. That’s meaningless to me. Find the woman. And don’t call back until you do,” Bai snapped, and then stepped from the bar and slammed the laptop closed.

He drew a deep breath through his nose and exhaled slowly through his mouth, and repeated the process until his annoyance seeped away. His men were doing everything in their power, he was sure, but he'd learned long ago not to empathize or allow for anything but success, no matter how impossible his demands. He needed his crew to fear him, to fear failure, and to understand that their survival depended upon his satisfaction with their performance. Otherwise they would walk all over him, and his rule over his brother's empire would be short-lived, his stewardship over its assets all too brief.

Bai strode to the bar and poured himself a short glass of single malt scotch. He threw it back neat in a single gulp and then refilled the tumbler. He sniffed the liquor appreciatively and walked to the glass wall that faced the sea. The condo was one of countless properties his brother had invested in, decorated professionally by a talented mistress who was on the payroll as a designer at four times the going rate, and Bai had to admit it was impeccably tasteful, from what he knew of such things.

In his world, creature comforts and ostentatious displays were frivolous distractions from the cutthroat business that maintained the dynasty his brother had founded, and Bai had little appreciation for them. Still, he could benefit from the legacy Lun had left him, and he'd enjoyed the various properties he'd toured before settling on this one to use as a temporary home base while in Shanghai. Bai instinctively never remained in one place for long, the habit born of decades of avoiding assassination by rivals and enemies. If nobody could predict his location, it made it far harder to take him out, and the fact that he was still alive even as Lun's corpse had turned to dust was proof of the merits of his approach.

Not that his brother had been a fool or particularly trusting. He'd been as canny as anyone Bai had encountered, and had built a multibillion-dollar empire from the ground up, using nothing but his wits and strength of will. Bai had taken a different road, preferring the illegal and illicit, the money far easier in the shadows even if riskier to obtain. Now that he'd

stepped into Lun's shoes, the street savvy he had acquired over the years was serving him well, even if he'd been derided by some of Lun's associates. But after the untimely demise of the most vocal, now everyone who mattered seemed to grasp that Bai was a force to be reckoned with.

As satisfying as that was for Bai, avenging his brother's murder dominated his thoughts to the point of obsession, and his pursuit of the mystery woman who'd been behind it was at the forefront of his attention. He had uncountable money to throw at the problem of finding her and would stop at nothing to do so, but even so, he was frustrated with what should have been straightforward, the woman a phantom, as difficult to tie down as mist.

Still, it sounded like they were closing in on her, and he well understood his subordinate's point about things taking time. In his experience, finding someone who wanted to remain hidden was much like fishing, where you put your lines in the water and waited for something to bite, unable to predict which reel would scream to announce a strike, but alert so that when one did, you were ready to act. If they were too obvious, she would get spooked and might have the resources to remain hidden for years, which was antipodal to Bai's desired outcome. He wanted closure, and soon, so he could determine how far down the rabbit hole he would need to go in order to find who was ultimately responsible for giving the order to murder Lun. He suspected the Russians, but in order to take them on, he needed to be sure, and the woman held the key to the puzzle.

A police helicopter flying low over the city drew his attention, and he watched as the aircraft zipped over the rooftops, lights flashing, in pursuit of some unseen quarry. Law enforcement in Shanghai was efficient if not draconian, which Bai well understood as a career criminal who'd escaped prosecution. His tendrils infiltrated the police departments of every major metro area where he did business, and he viewed the payments he made for the privilege as just another reasonable cost – much like bankers paying off politicians to insulate themselves from the consequences of their misbehavior, bribes from criminals were simply another

necessary part of the financial ecosystem that kept the wheels turning.

Bai sat on a crème-colored Italian leather sofa, sipped his drink, and studied his handmade London oxfords, his mind racing over next moves, his bloodlust quieted if only for a moment. Bai had killed more men than he could remember with his own hands, but he'd learned to be methodical and calculating, his own impatience his most dangerous weakness.

“Revenge will come,” he murmured to himself, and then finished the drink and set the glass on the coffee table in front of him for the maid to clean up, his mind already on other matters, the demands on his attention never-ending.

Chapter 26

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Rain hammered a polyrhythmic tattoo on the roof of the Range Rover as Daniela clenched her teeth, the pain from her hip and leg so intense it took her breath away. She gently probed the damaged area with her fingers and winced when a white-hot spike of agony shot down her thigh and up into her ribcage. She swore softly and looked up when a shadow crossed the driver's window, and then gasped when a pair of men's faces materialized from the downpour and stared in at her.

One of the pair swung the door open. "You hurt?" he growled.

Daniela managed a nod. "My leg and maybe my hip. I think something's broken."

"Well, you can't stay in here. Thing could blow any minute. Can you move?"

"Not really."

It was the man's turn to nod. "Why did you take off?"

"I wasn't driving. My friend was." Daniela paused. "Why did you shoot at us?"

"That was Chavo. Trigger happy. He was ordered not to, but in the excitement with the plane..." The man surveyed the interior of the cab. "This the same friend who shot up the guys at the house? We got your text."

Daniela nodded. "Yes. And she took off with my girls. She has a gun."

"Let's get you out of here. I'll send some of the men after her. We'll get your daughters back and take care of your

friend.” He hesitated. “What’s her story?”

“Ex-military of some sort. She’s dangerous...and very capable.”

“Well, her luck just ran out. Four against one doesn’t care how dangerous she is.”

Daniela winced as pain surged up her side. “Don’t hurt my daughters.”

“I’ll pass that along.” The man turned to his companion and spoke in rapid-fire Spanish. The companion called out to some figures standing in the trees, and four of them moved away from the SUV, along the wall in the direction Jet had gone. The man then nodded to his companion, and the two of them reached in to Daniela. “We’ll pull you out. Your door’s totaled. This will hurt.”

“Do what you need to do,” she said, and closed her eyes when she gripped their hands.

The pain was excruciating when they hauled her from the passenger seat and into the rain, and she cried out when her injured side twisted against the steering wheel. Once they had her out of the vehicle, two more men joined the original pair and carried her to a crew cab pickup truck and laid her on the back seat. When she was settled there, two of them climbed into the truck bed, ignoring the rain, and the others sat in front.

“It’ll be bumpy getting back to the road,” the driver warned.

“I need a hospital,” Daniela said.

The driver didn’t respond, instead focusing on navigating along the trail without losing control in the heavy weather. After a seeming eternity, they were on pavement, and the truck picked up speed, the tires thrumming dully on the wet asphalt, visibility down to a few meters. Every bump was a hot poker to Daniela’s hip, and by the time the truck slowed and rolled to a stop in front of a closed restaurant, she was gritting her teeth in pain.

The men spilled from the truck, helped her out, and carried her to the front door, where a pair of hard-looking *sicarios* waited. They carted Daniela inside the darkened dining area,

where a trio of men were seated at a table in the rear. One of them leapt to his feet and approached. He laid Daniela on a padded booth seat and stood over her, hands on his hips.

“How badly are you hurt?” he asked.

“I need X-rays. Hospital. I think I broke my hip,” she responded, her tone agonized. “What the hell were you thinking, Luis?”

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Luis said, and turned to the men from the truck. “Explain,” he snapped.

“Chavo shot at them. The adrenaline or something,” one of them said.

Luis drew a Desert Eagle from his waistband and levelled it at Chavo, who was standing by the door. “You did this?” he demanded.

“I...I’m sorry, *jefe*. With the plane and everything else, I...I didn’t want them to get away.”

The big pistol barked twice and slammed Chavo against the wall, painting the plaster with a red smear as he sank to the ground. Luis glared at the rest of the gathering and replaced the gun in his waistband before turning to Daniela.

“I’ll arrange for a doctor. There’s a clinic in Tequila we’ve used. He’ll take care of you, and do it quickly. We need to get on the road.” Luis paused. “Now want to explain what’s going on? Why this has spun out of control so fast?”

Daniela sucked in a deep breath. “This woman...she’s ex-military or something. I thought I had her under control, but when your men attacked the house today, she went into overdrive. I’ve never seen anything like it. And then when we got to the airstrip, and you shot down the plane...she was driving, and made a break for it when Chavo opened up at us. We crashed, and she took the kids. That’s all I know.” Daniela hesitated. “You cannot under any circumstances hurt my children, Luis. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

He nodded. “I know. I spoke to the men we left behind, and they’ll make short work of your new guardian angel. They are under clear instructions not to harm the girls. You have my

word.” He sighed. “This has all gone sideways, Daniela. Octavio is in full-blown war mode. I’m sorry you’re hurt, but you have to know we’re going to continue with the plan. There’s no way out now.”

“You think he’ll pay after all this? He’s stubborn.”

“To save his wife and children? Of course he will. He has no choice. And then you, *mi amor*, will be free of him for good. He’ll no longer have control over you or the kids.”

“If he doesn’t, we’re all dead.”

“Nobody likes this kind of war. It’s bad for business. He’ll want it over as much as anyone. And then we’ll disappear, leaving him to work things out with the other cartel bosses.”

“What happened to taking over Sinaloa?” Daniela demanded. “I never agreed to spend my life on the run. He has infinite resources.”

“That’s off the table. His defenses are impenetrable now that he’s been forewarned. It would have worked if the first kidnapping had been successful. But your friend ruined everything, and this is what we’re left with.” He walked to her and leaned down to kiss her. “I’m truly sorry you’re in pain. We’ll get that dealt with immediately – on the road north.”

She shook her head. “Not until we have the girls. I’ll live until then.”

He frowned. “Are you sure?”

“If they have to sedate me or operate, I don’t want to be out without knowing they’re safe with me.”

“Fair enough. Shouldn’t be long. But we’ll hit Tequila to get you some pain relievers on the way out.” He turned to his men. “Grab a truck and go help finish this. And get that body out of here. It’s starting to stink.”

Luis dialed a number on his cell phone, spoke softly, and then hung up. “I just told the doctor to come here and check on you.”

“And then what, Luis?” she asked. “It’s just a matter of time before your cartel is looking for you. Where will we be safe?”

He stared at his men, two of whom were dragging Chavo's corpse outside, and his frown deepened.

"Culiacán. Or somewhere close."

"What? That's madness," she exclaimed.

"Not really. It's the last place Octavio, or my cartel, would expect us to be. And if he stalls on the ransom, I'll need to hit him in his own backyard. I can have fifty men there within a day, all without being detected. The last thing he would think of would be an army assembling under his nose. And it will keep us safe from Jalisco. It's better to make moves while we're ahead of them."

Daniela nodded and closed her eyes. The scheme had seemed so simple when she and Luis had hatched it. Stage a kidnapping, collect a big ransom they could split, and Daniela could leave Octavio at a later date when he least suspected anything, simply vanish with the girls, never to be heard from again, to live out her remaining good years with Luis somewhere off everyone's radar. But it had all gone badly wrong when the woman had interfered, and had changed from an easy way to get free money to a full-blown war between the two most powerful criminal entities in the country and dozens of dead to account for.

Which Daniela knew could spin still more out of control, with so many uncontrollable variables at play.

She swallowed hard at her foolhardiness, as well as the throbbing pain from her hip. What had seemed an easy exit from a relationship she felt trapped in had become a nightmare with no clear end. And she knew Octavio, like Luis, would do whatever it took to prevail once their backs were against the wall.

Which didn't auger well for anyone around them, including herself and her daughters. There were now too many unknowns to predict and too much blood spilled to back down. If anything, she'd placed herself and her family at even more risk than staying with the most bloodthirsty cartel kingpin in Mexico.

And with Luis hell-bent on going into Octavio's backyard, she was afraid there was no way things could improve for any of them.

Chapter 27

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Matt leaned forward as the taxi neared the junction that his nav software indicated was the access way to the airstrip. The atmosphere inside the cab was heavy with humidity, and the rain that hammered at the roof of the car was as loud as machine-gun fire. The driver squinted through the shower of water as his wipers, long past their prime, smeared wet road sludge from one side of the windshield to the other, further reducing visibility to nearly nothing.

“*Señor* , we’re going to have to pull over and wait until the rain slows,” the driver warned.

“My phone says we’re almost there. Should be up ahead.”

The man shrugged and exhaled heavily, resigned to keeping the crazy gringo happy even if it meant danger around every turn.

The car hit a flooded pothole and lurched to the side like a drunken sailor, and Matt could feel his molars crack together from the impact. Apparently shock absorbers were an unnecessary luxury for Mexican taxis, and the driver hadn’t wasted any money on frills. Matt gripped the door handle and held on for dear life as the driver swerved and regained control of the car. When it had straightened out, the man called out over his shoulder, his eyes glued to the road.

“You sure you want to continue?” he asked.

“We should be on top of it any second,” Matt replied, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. The drive had taken longer than he’d hoped, with traffic snarled on the way out of the city and accidents clogging the major arteries. The rain apparently drove everyone on the road into a kind of manic

state where any rules were abandoned in favor of dangerous maneuvers and taking ridiculous chances, which had turned a forty-minute drive into over an hour so far. Matt checked his phone screen and then looked up as red and blue roof lights swam into view ahead.

A pair of local police trucks were pulled over on the shoulder, blocking access to the road the map identified as leading to Jet's coordinates. The cab driver slowed to a stop beside them and rolled his window down a quarter of the way. A cop in a black rain parka strode over and glared into the car, and the driver nodded in greeting.

"*Buenos dias* , officer. My passenger needs to go up that road," he said, indicating the way they had blocked.

The policeman regarded Matt in the back and shook his head. "That's not going to happen," he said tersely. "Road's closed until further notice."

Matt leaned forward. "Why? I'm supposed to meet someone."

"There was an accident. That's all I know. We got the radio call and were instructed to wait for the National Guard to arrive."

Matt stiffened. "An accident? What kind of accident? Was anyone hurt?"

The cop's face hardened. "No idea. I just do what I'm told. But nobody is going up or down that road until the Guard is here. Orders. Now move along."

Matt felt for the cash in his pocket, but the officer's expression and clear distaste for being in the rain told him that a financial incentive to let them through probably wouldn't be met enthusiastically. The cop turned back to the trucks, where Matt could make out three other locals in the cabs, shielded from the downpour.

The driver glanced at Matt in the rearview mirror. "Now what?" he asked.

Matt thought for a moment. "I could use some coffee. We passed a little market back about a kilometer ago."

The driver performed a three-point turn. When they arrived at the shop, he cleared his throat and looked at his watch.

“How long do you think you’ll be? It’s an hour back to town, and I’m at the end of a long night shift,” he said.

“I’ll pay you to wait,” Matt offered.

“That’s not the point. I’ve got a wife and kids at home who expect me back. I can wait a little while, but not all day. How long is it going to take?”

Matt sighed. “I wish I knew. You want some coffee?”

The driver put the car into park and shut off the engine. “I run on it.”

They darted into the market, where a haggard woman with a stern expression that spoke to an indigenous ancestry watched them move to the coffee dispenser like they were going to rob the place. Matt filled one of the polystyrene cups to the brim and did the same for the driver. They were walking to the front counter when a man appeared from out of the back of the shop and offered a friendly nod.

“Twenty pesos apiece,” he said.

Matt fished out a pair of twenties and placed them on the counter, and then retrieved a hundred and set it alongside them. “You know anything about what’s going on up the road? Police everywhere,” he observed.

The man grinned, revealing a mouth filled with steel-capped teeth. “Hard to tell in this weather. But the cops were in here, and they said something about a plane crash.”

Matt’s face could have been carved from marble. “A crash? Was anyone hurt?”

The storekeeper shook his head. “Beats me. I just overheard them talking, is all. Not like they gave me a report or anything.” He paused. “Seems like the landowner doesn’t want them on his property, so they had to bring in the big guns. Nobody was happy about that, but it’s none of my business.”

Matt took a long drink of coffee, then removed his cell phone from his pocket, wiped the screen on his shirt, checked the signal indicator, and saw he barely had one bar. He dialed Jet's number, got the familiar message notifying him that the user was out of the service area and unavailable, and he thumbed it off with a scowl.

"How long does it take for the Guard to get here?" Matt asked.

The man shrugged. "That's anyone's guess. Depends on what else they have going on. The weather doesn't help, that's for sure."

"Has a woman with a little blonde girl stopped by?" Matt tried, figuring it was worth a shot.

The man looked to the woman, and they shook their heads. "You're the first customers since the cops were in here. Not like this is a high traffic area in the rain."

"And nobody earlier?" Matt pressed.

The woman pursed her lips. "I've been here all morning. Nobody like that's come through."

"What's farther up the road that way?" Matt asked, indicating the way to the airstrip.

"Not much. Ranches, mostly. Agave fields. But we're a ways from civilization. Tequila is back the other direction."

The taxi driver looked over Matt's shoulder and spied what looked like a doughnut crossed with a small loaf of bread, covered with a snowfall of granulated sugar, beneath a translucent plastic cover on the counter behind the register. "That today's?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Cops bought most of them. You're lucky they left any."

Both men laughed, and Matt fought to control his impatience and anxiety while the driver held up a grimy finger and the woman pivoted to get him the pastry. The driver made a display of checking his pockets for change, and Matt angled his head at the man.

“Take it out of the hundred,” he said.

They made their way to the exit, and both looked up at the gray sky and the deluge that continued unabated. The driver checked the time again and looked at Matt.

“Where to now?” he asked.

Matt took another long sip of his coffee and shook his head. “Damned if I know.”

The driver took in Matt’s wet shoes and anxious expression, and offered a fatigued smile. “I appreciate the bun, but I told you I can’t wait that long. You want to head back into town?”

“Just give me a few minutes to think. I’m waiting for a call,” Matt said, and stepped away from the doorway, his face clouded with worry, the sound of the rain’s splatter against the taxi’s roof and the occasional rumble of distant thunder more ominous by the minute.

Chapter 28

Tequila, Jalisco, Mexico

Jet jogged through the underbrush along the wall towards the Range Rover and froze when she heard voices from the wreckage, muffled and indistinct in the rain. She ducked down, rifle clutched tightly, and made her way to a tall tree, from where she could just make out the crumpled SUV and four gunmen gathered near the hood of a black Dodge Ram crew cab truck. She peered at the Range Rover's carcass and didn't see Daniela, and was calculating how to deal with the threat from the gunmen when they moved towards her hiding place, hugging the wall.

Jet retraced her steps and grimaced when she saw her boot prints in the mud. The rain would wash them away with time, but with the shooters only fifty meters away, time was one resource she was short of. Which left the wholly unappealing prospect of a four-to-one gunfight...or...

She spotted a tree that looked promising, shouldered the rifle's strap, and scrambled up the trunk to the lowest branches. They were thick enough to support her weight, so she continued higher until the ground beneath was barely visible. With any luck the rain would help her remain hidden, with the tendency of most to keep their heads lowered to minimize the amount of water they got in their eyes, she knew from her training. So long as she didn't make a sound, Jet could wait for them to pass her position and sneak up on them from behind.

The men made more than enough noise to tell her that they had little or no experience hunting prey in brush, which didn't surprise her given how inept some of the other gunmen had been at the house. These were likely *sicarios*, paid assassins

with military or law enforcement backgrounds, but no meaningful skills that would help them in a scenario like they were now facing. They passed close by the base of the tree, following her tracks, and then the lead gunman stopped, scanning the brush, the easy trail suddenly cold.

She could barely make out a hurried discussion between them, and then they split up into two pairs, clearly hoping that by spreading out, one of them might pick up the scent. They continued away from her position, and when she could no longer hear or see them, she lowered herself down the trunk until she reached the base.

Jet shrugged off the shoulder strap and began picking her way through the tall grass, the hunters now the hunted. Several minutes later, she saw one of the men moving stealthily ahead of her, and she stopped, waiting for the others to show themselves.

Her wish was granted moments later, and she squeezed off two bursts that cut her targets down. She was already in motion before the second man tumbled to the ground, running in the hopes of flanking the remaining pair before they could get their bearings.

Two against one was odds she liked, and after a surge of speed, she abruptly stopped and threw herself to the ground near a thicket, rifle pressed to her cheek, eyes unblinking even as the downpour eased. She knew that the sound of gunfire wouldn't travel far in the storm, so she didn't have to worry about the men at the airstrip hearing it, leaving only these two shooters to dispatch.

Jet slowed her breathing, her weapon steady in her hands, and waited patiently. Her stalkers had only two options now: continue towards the ruined farm, which was on her right, or retreat to the truck, which didn't seem likely. Seconds ticked by, and then she detected movement on her left.

She resisted firing into the brush without a discernible target, and an instant later a dark feathered form flapped into the rain – an owl that had been disturbed by something or someone nearby. Jet ignored the water streaming down her

face, hyper-focused on the spot from which the bird had fled, taking her time for a kill shot.

A baseball-capped head appeared, and then a soaking wet male torso in a soccer jersey. She thumbed the firing selector from burst to single fire, never moving the sights from the man. When she took her shot, it struck him squarely in the chest and knocked him back an unsteady step. He didn't go down instantly, as though unsure what had happened, and paused before dropping his rifle and slowly sinking into the grass as though lying down to take a nap.

Jet waited for the missing fourth man to show himself, but nobody materialized. She assumed the last shooter must have been spooked by that point, which would either make him extra cautious or panic him; which, depended entirely on his experience and temperament. Either way, she would need to neutralize him if she was to keep the girls safe, the beginnings of a plan already forming even during the lethal game of cat and mouse.

She remained motionless, scanning the brush, and after minutes crawled by without the final gunman making a mistake, Jet shifted slightly, reached for a fallen branch by her hip, grabbed it, and stirred the bushes to her left.

A volley of gunshots rang out ten yards from where she'd downed the last man and shredded the brush around her. She got enough of a glimpse of muzzle flashes that even in the rain she could pinpoint the gunman's position, flicked the firing selector to burst, and emptied half the magazine at him.

The shooting abruptly stopped, and she cocked her head to listen for signs of life, silently cursing the ringing in her ears from the shooting. She saw nothing and, after another tortuous pause, tried the branch trick again to see if she could draw out her adversary. When the area remained still other than the patter of rain on leaves, she pushed herself to her feet and made her way to where the first man had dropped. She relieved his lifeless form of two spare magazines and continued to his companion, who'd been hit a half dozen times by her burst and was in the final throes of death. Jet quickly searched him, and in addition to another pair of magazines,

found a wallet with no ID and only two thousand pesos, and a folding survival knife.

She pocketed everything, slid the magazines into the back pockets of her jeans, and was walking over to find the other two corpses when static from a radio caused her to stiffen. She spun, bringing the rifle up, and spotted a two-way a few yards from the second dead man, where it must have flown when he'd been hit.

“Paco, did I hear shooting? What’s going on?” a male voice demanded from the radio.

Jet crept back to where the two-way lay, and the voice emanated from it again.

“I’m at the truck. You have the keys, dumbass. I’m getting soaked.”

Jet leaned over and patted the dead man’s pants pockets, and felt a telltale bulge of a key fob. She retrieved it and then picked up the radio, turned down the volume, and set off towards the Dodge. The rain was easing to a drizzle, which made the going easier but reduced her advantage, especially now that a fifth player was in the picture, possibly with friends. Just because she’d only seen four didn’t mean that was all there were, and she cursed that she’d been so incautious that she’d believed she was in the clear.

She moved along the wall, staying in the brush even though it was harder going, and when she reached her prior vantage point, she spied a lanky man with a cowboy hat, smoking a cigarette, a rifle in his hand, the barrel pointed at the ground. He was clearly not expecting to be attacked, but the bad news was that with the storm passing, the sound of shots would travel farther, bringing more bad guys.

Jet checked the time and then leaned the rifle against the wall and switched the radio off. She laid it beside the weapon and continued along the barrier until she was past the truck and the wreckage. When she dared a peek over the top wall, she didn’t see the man, the view blocked by the SUV.

Jet heaved herself up and over the stones and edged toward the truck, keeping the Range Rover between herself and the smoker until she was at the wreckage. Her eyes darted to the empty interior, with no sign of Daniela, and then she was past it and moving fast toward the Dodge, unfolding the survival knife as she neared.

The man seemed oblivious to her approach, and she paused on the opposite side of the truck bed. He must have sensed her presence because he dropped the cigarette and brought the rifle up, but Jet was too fast and drove the wicked little blade into his throat before he could squeeze off a shot. His eyes bugged out and widened when she twisted the knife with all her might, and the rifle fell to the ground as he tried to hit her, which she ducked, his strength already leaching from him as blood poured down his chest.

Jet jerked the knife free and stepped back, and his hands flew to the wound before his knees gave out, and he pitched forward onto the muddy ground. His body heaved a few times while he struggled for breath and then lay still. She stepped over him, wiped the blade clean on his shirt, and depressed the key fob. The pickup's locks clicked open with a snap, and she started the engine, checked the fuel gauge, and hopped out of the truck and searched the dead man, relieving him of a .40-caliber pistol, the other radio's twin, and another wallet with no ID, along with still more full rifle magazines. Jet snatched up his unfired rifle and, after dragging him to the wall where he would be out of sight in the brush, jumped behind the wheel and drove to the ruined gate that blocked the farm drive. She shut off the engine and scanned the area, and then ran back to the farmhouse.

"Mama!" Hannah cried out when Jet appeared in the doorway of the room where they'd hidden, and ran to her with open arms. Jet hugged her tight and then looked at Daniela's daughters.

"I have a truck. Let's get out of here," she said.

"Where's our mother?" Elena asked.

“Someone took her to get help. But we can’t stay here. We need to move. Come on.”

“We heard shooting,” Maria said.

“There’s nothing to worry about now,” Jet deflected, and held out her hand to Hannah. “Let’s go.”

They hurried to the truck and climbed in, and Jet twisted to look at the girls in the back and then Hannah beside her in the passenger seat. “Everybody fasten your seat belts and hold on. It’ll probably be bumpy before we find a road.”

They did as they were told, and Jet started the engine, backed up, and considered her next move. She didn’t like the option of going back the way she’d come, so she pulled onto what had once been a single-lane road to the farm and bounced along the rutted surface until it intersected with another road, this one a two-lane in decent repair. She stopped at the junction and fished her cell from her pocket, saw it had one bar of signal, and called Matt’s phone, frowning when it didn’t answer. Jet typed out a short text telling him that the airstrip was off, that she was somewhere in the hills around Tequila, and to call her the second he could. She set the phone into the cup holder so she could reach it easily, and then swung onto the road just as a pair of headlights appeared in her rearview mirror from the abandoned farm road behind her.

Chapter 29

Jet accelerated down the road, thankful that the rain was abating enough so she wasn't in danger of hydroplaning at speed, and focused on dodging the water-filled potholes, any one of which could have been an inch or a foot deep, and as such a potential axle breaker if she hit one moving fast. After a minute of high-speed driving, she dared a glimpse at the rearview mirror and could see that the headlights had followed her onto the road.

The truck's wipers groaned in protest with every swipe, smearing almost as much water across the windshield as they cleared, making it difficult to make out the potential disasters lurking on the pavement. The sudden storm had downed branches and leaves from the trees that lined the road, giving her another challenge to dodge when they were large enough to cause damage.

She wiped water from her face with her sleeve, her hair dripping wet and matted to her head, and considered how she would handle the pursuers. Had she been alone, she would have probably slowed some and watched for a promising private drive like the one leading to the farmhouse, skidded onto it at the last minute, waited for them to do the same, and reversed and rammed them when they did. But with the girls in the cab, she couldn't risk snapping their necks from the impact.

Which was a critical weakness at the moment. Barring that, both trucks appeared evenly matched, and the chase truck had the advantage of her leading the way and so telegraphing any hazards well before they reached them.

The rain continued to lighten, and she increased her speed again as another glance at the mirror told her the truck was

gaining on her. She inhaled deeply and stabbed the accelerator to the floor, and only braked at the last possible minute when she reached a curve. Her move momentarily broke the grip of the big tires on the pavement, and the Dodge skewed dangerously close to the steep drop-off that served as the shoulder, and she had to get back on the gas quickly to reestablish traction.

The truck stabilized at the last possible second, and she goosed the throttle again, sending it surging forward as the speedometer needle climbed. The curve straightened, and the asphalt stretched straight into the rain, and she continued as fast as she could without killing everyone.

But she knew that barring evasive action that was far riskier than speeding down the road, it was just a matter of time until the other truck caught up, and then they would be sitting ducks when the shooting started. With precious cargo aboard, though, she had to be conservative in her choices, or she'd do her pursuers' job for them.

Her phone vibrated, but she didn't dare take her eyes off the road, which proved fortuitous as she narrowly missed another sizeable branch that was blocking half the lane. She slowed further, and a look at the mirror confirmed that the other vehicle was now drawing dangerously close, to the point where even with the rain she could make out at least three heads in the cabin.

Another curve loomed ahead, and she maintained her speed, willing to dare losing traction again rather than allow the other truck to get close enough to shoot with any accuracy. She was halfway around the bend when she had to stomp on the brakes to avoid colliding with an overloaded dump truck that was crawling along in her lane at a fifth of her speed, with no brake or running lights in the rain. She fishtailed, and the girls screamed when the rear quarter panel struck the side of the bed as they skidded past it, and then she was able to straighten and bring the truck under control.

Her focus shifted to her rearview mirror, and her eyes widened when the pursuit truck wasn't so lucky. It struck the back of the dump truck with a glancing blow that sent it

careening into the oncoming lane and then, as if in slow motion, sailing off the shoulder and down the slope, spiraling slowly before it slammed into the side of the hill. Jet braked and waited for the dump truck to reach her, and signaled for it to pass her. The driver complied, and she shifted into reverse and backed along the road until she reached the point where the truck had gone over the side. She switched on the hazard lights, pulled as far to the side of her lane as she could, and twisted to the girls, whose faces were pallid in the dim light of the storm.

“Stay here and keep your seatbelts fastened,” Jet said, and leapt from behind the wheel and ran to the slope.

She picked her way twenty yards down to where the truck had come to rest upside down, half the cab almost flattened and fluid seeping from beneath the ruined hood. Jet withdrew the pistol she’d liberated and approached the wreckage, noting two bodies that had flown from the truck on impact and landed, horribly twisted, farther down the hill. When she reached the cabin, she peered in and saw the driver crushed against the steering wheel shaft and obviously dead, and eyed the other occupant in the back seat, who had blood streaming down his face from where half his scalp had been torn off by the impact, his shirt ripped where the barrel of a rifle had impaled him. His mouth worked in agonized silence, and she stared at him dispassionately before speaking.

“Who are you?” she asked.

His eyes fluttered open, and he gave her an unfocused glare and then groaned a death rattle and stiffened.

Jet cursed and scanned the inside of the cab. She spotted a cell phone lying on what had been the roof liner, and she reached in and snagged it, and then backed away as flames flickered from beneath the hood, accompanied by the faint smell of gas. She debated searching the bodies that had been thrown free of the wreckage but decided it wasn’t worth the risk of being immolated if the truck’s fuel blew.

Jet worked her way back up the slope, the going more difficult than the ascent due to the drizzle and the mud, and

when she reached the road again, bolted to the truck. She threw open the door and climbed in, and Hannah tapped her on the shoulder.

“Mama, your phone beeped,” she said.

Jet put the truck into gear and reached for her cell as she got underway, wary of more vehicles arriving to check on the gunmen. She saw she had a missed call from Matt’s number, and pressed redial as she accelerated.

He answered on the second ring, and her entire body flooded with relief at the sound of his voice.

“Where are you?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Ran into some problems. They shot down the plane, and we had to dodge some hostiles.” She paused. “I’m on some road a few kilometers from the airstrip. What about you?”

“I’ll send you my location. I’m at a market down from the strip. Nothing much out here, but you should be able to find it.” He thought for a moment. “Anyone else coming after you?”

“Not so far. But I want to keep moving.”

“Fine by me. Can you pick me up?”

“Count on it.”

“I stopped by the apartment and got everything I could. I’ll tell you about it when I see you. Probably not a great idea to go back.”

“That’s a problem.”

“We’ll solve it.”

She swerved to avoid a pothole. “Let me get off the phone. Send me your location.”

“I’m on it.”

Jet hung up and concentrated on her driving. Her phone vibrated in her hand, and she thumbed the screen on and opened Matt’s message, which contained a navigation

waypoint. She tapped it, and her map program activated, and she saw she was six minutes away – the market was a half kilometer from where the road she was on intersected with the larger artery that they'd taken to get to the airstrip access way.

“When are we going to see our mom?” Maria asked from the back seat.

“I'm trying to figure that out. Let me drive. I need to pick someone up, and then we'll deal with that.”

“I hope she's okay.”

Jet nodded, her expression neutral. Daniela's injury hadn't seemed life threatening, but Jet was no doctor, and there were no guarantees. Anything could have happened to her at this point, and the truth was that Jet had no plan beyond picking up Matt and handling the immediate problem of an unknown number of murderous thugs who would stop at nothing to kill her for completely unknown reasons, since they had already snatched the mother. But one thing at a time.

“You okay, sweetheart?” she asked Hannah, with a glance at her dripping hair.

“Sort of. Wet.”

Jet nodded. “We're going to get Matt, and then we'll dry off and see what to do next. All three of you have been very brave so far. Thank you for helping.”

Hannah didn't respond, and neither did the girls, leaving Jet to her task with a feeling of guilt at having dragged her baby into yet another nightmare. It seemed like she was a magnet for trouble, and the little girl had seen a lifetime's worth of horrific scenes in her short existence. But right now Jet's job was to get her family to safety and put this one behind her.

And figure out what to do with Daniela's daughters.

Which was a problem with no immediate solution.

And one that could ultimately endanger them all.

Chapter 30

The rain had stopped by the time Jet swung onto the larger road that led back to the freeway from Guadalajara, and she urged the big truck faster, Matt's waypoint blinking on her phone as she neared. Daniela's daughters were quietly sobbing in the back seat as the events of the last twenty-four hours hit home, and Hannah was staring blankly through the windshield, her eyes barely higher than the dash no matter how straight she tried to sit up. Jet swallowed the lump in her throat at the pitiful sight, and deliberately avoided looking at where she'd tossed the narco's cell in the center console.

Her phone vibrated in her hand to alert her that she was nearing Matt's location, and she eased off the gas when she spied a market on the far side of the road. She approached it, eyes roving over the area to ensure it was safe to stop, and then smiled when she caught sight of Matt, hair askew and clothes bedraggled, standing beneath a tree fifty meters past the market.

Jet braked to a stop, and Matt squinted at the truck before a tired grin lit his face, and he jogged across the road. Jet turned to Hannah and spoke softly.

"Sweetheart, why don't you sit in back with the girls so I can talk to Matt?"

Hannah nodded wordlessly and, when Matt opened her door, hugged him tightly before hopping to the ground and moving to the rear door. He held it open for her, and she climbed in, and then Matt heaved himself into the passenger seat and set his backpack at his feet.

Jet leaned in and kissed him, and then pulled onto the road and accelerated before throwing him a sidelong glance.

“You want to go first, or should I?”

“The condo is blown,” he began. “I made some enemies down in Chapala, and they were pretty persistent. Which means our IDs are also burned.” He spoke in quiet tones and described the events of the prior night and that morning before exhaling heavily. “Your turn.”

Jet’s eyes darted to the rearview mirror, where Daniela’s daughters were still sobbing quietly while Hannah leaned away from them, and nodded slightly.

“You want the skinny on the various shoot-outs? Or the abridged version?”

“Whichever you feel would be the most valuable to know.”

Jet began by fleshing out the coffee shop kidnapping attempt, then recounted the night at Daniela’s, and finished with the plane crash and the gunfight with the cartel assassins. When she finished, he let out a low whistle.

“That’s impressive, even by your standards.” He frowned. “So you believe they got your friend?”

“It’s the only possibility. No body, so they must have grabbed her. She’s hurt, but if it’s a ransom situation, that won’t matter.”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“Not necessarily. Apparently her husband made an interesting career choice. Could be something worse.” She explained about the cartel, using agency terms the girls wouldn’t understand, and his scowl lines deepened.

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

“We need to find her.”

Matt blinked twice. “Why not drop the girls off at a police station and let the system handle this? We have enough on our plates, don’t we?”

Jet shook her head. “I can’t just leave them. This is enemy territory for her family now. Daniela made that clear. Her

husband controls Sinaloa, his rivals Jalisco. And it seems a war has broken out.”

“Then...what?”

It was Jet’s turn to frown. “I’m thinking.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, and then Matt reached for the cell phone Jet had retrieved from the wrecked truck. “You checked this for clues?”

“Not yet.”

He studied it. “Mind if I have a look?”

“Be my guest.”

Matt tapped the screen, and to his surprise it activated without asking for a security code or fingerprint. He studied the icons and grunted.

“Burner. Like ours. No protection.”

“That figures,” she said.

He thumbed the navigation software to life and smiled slightly at a red icon. “There’s a trip that’s still in progress.”

“That might be where they took Daniela. Where?”

He peered at the screen. “Um, no, it says it’s six hours away. Outside Culiacán.”

Jet’s brow furrowed. “Culiacán? That’s Sinaloa. Why would they be going to Sinaloa if they’re Jalisco cartel?”

“No idea, but that’s where they were headed.”

Jet nodded. “Could be a ransom after all. But I really don’t get why they would take her to Sinaloa.”

“I just read the maps, not minds.” He hesitated. “What are you thinking?”

“If that’s where they were going, it’s likely that’s where they’re taking Daniela. And they have no idea we know. So maybe we solve the problem by following them, and if it’s feasible, rescuing her.”

Matt stared at her in silence for several beats. “That’s the craziest thing you’ve ever said.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Want to tell the girls that they’re never going to see their mommy again? That we’re not even going to try, and see if we called this right? I’m all ears.”

Matt’s face fell. “That’s not fair. But even if you’re right, this isn’t our problem. Why make it ours?”

“I’ve been saying that all along. By coming after us, even after they got Daniela, they made it personal. If I can return the favor and it’s safe to do so, I see no reason not to.”

“How about your daughter back there?”

“I’m not saying we drive up and start shooting. I’m saying let’s follow the trail and see where it leads.”

“Into the narco capital of the world?” Matt said, his tone doubtful.

“Well, Zapopan was supposed to be the safest area of Mexico. How did that work out? Besides, we’re screwed if the apartment’s blown, and Daniela said her husband could help us since we helped her, so I don’t see any better options right now. If our passports are blown, it isn’t like we can leave the country until we figure that out. So maybe Culiacán is our best option.” She looked at the fuel indicator. “Almost a full tank. They were loaded for a road trip.”

He shook his head. “So we’re really going to do this?”

Jet tried an impish smile. “I’ve always wanted to see the Pacific coast.”

“Culiacán is inland an hour and a half,” Matt replied.

“I was speaking broadly.”

“Metaphorically,” Matt agreed solemnly.

“Think of going to Culiacán with a single rifle and pistol to rescue a damsel in distress as an allegory.”

“What’s an allegory?” Hannah asked from behind them.

Matt and Jet exchanged a look. “A crazy story,” Matt volunteered.

“A stroke of genius,” Jet answered, and gave Matt a withering look that shut down the conversation.

“I hope they have decent restaurants on the way,” Matt said.

She shrugged. “Gas station food. Gourmet, I’m sure,” Jet said, and took his hand, the map advising her to continue straight for another six kilometers before hitting the highway that ran north to Tepic and then into Sinaloa, one of the most dangerous states in all of Mexico, avoided by most sane locals for good reason.

Chapter 31

Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

A slender man in his late fifties stood at a picture window, looking through it and over a hillside at the city spread out beneath him. The grounds were protected by a high wall that encircled the acre spread high above the madding crowds but only minutes from the nightlife and restaurants the second-largest city in Mexico proudly hosted. While places like Oaxaca and Puebla were better known for their culinary scene, some of the best chefs in the country worked in Guadalajara, where the wealth concentration ensured a steady clientele of well-heeled gourmands.

He turned and walked to a table, where he tapped out a cigarette from a worn pack and lit it as he surveyed the skyline. He blew a long stream of gray smoke at the view and absently smoothed his dyed-black mustache with his thumb, eyes unfocused, lost in thought. He was halfway through the cigarette when a male voice called from the far end of the expansive room.

“Don Galleon? They’re here,” the voice said.

“Show them in,” the man said.

Galleon was the pseudonym the operational head of the New Generation Jalisco Cartel had been using for years, and it was now second nature to refer to him as such. Originally Rodrigo Garcia, from modest beginnings in one of the sprawling *colonias* to the east, his long career in crime was legendary and had spanned decades. He had the scars to prove it, and commanded respect from all with whom he dealt. While it was understood the shadowy figure known as El Mencho, legal name Nemesio Ruben Cervantes, was the

ultimate leader of the group, Galleon was the day-to-day voice of authority, and his word was law in the most powerful criminal cartel in Mexico.

Four men in their forties, all well padded and wearing expensive colorful dress shirts that strained against their bulk, entered the room, and Galleon gestured at a table near a bookcase at the far side of the space. “Sit,” he said. “We have much to discuss, and I need to leave shortly.”

Galleon rotated between a dozen safe houses owned by strawman corporations on behalf of the cartel, whose annual income was in the hundreds of billions of dollars from narcotics trafficking, gun running, extortion, and petroleum theft. Started as a loose consortium of marijuana farmers in the 1970s, the group had morphed into a transnational syndicate with reach from China to Argentina to Europe, and was an active target of the American DEA, FBI, and Mexican law enforcement, although it was impervious to prosecution in Mexico due to its network of bribed officials at every level of the police and judiciary as well as the military. There was simply too much money at play, and Galleon had made a career of paying generously for insulation from the vagaries of the criminal code.

The truth was that in Mexico, it was impossible for a politician to get elected without the support of one of the cartels, who represented a substantial chunk of the nation’s gross domestic product. Over the years, Jalisco had laundered its funds and was responsible for much of the residential and commercial construction in the state, as well as hotel chains, casinos, nightclubs, car washes, and convenience stores. Dirty money had integrated into the economy over many years to the point where, like the American mafia, the gunslingers from the early days had passed the torch to the current generation of offspring, half of whom were attorneys and bankers. While there were still eager recruits to act as *sicarios* and street-level dealers and smugglers, the surviving legendary cartel personalities from the heyday of the 1980s and ’90s had sent their children to Yale and Harvard and Oxford, and they’d returned to run whole swathes of industry in the legitimate economy.

Galleon, like his more famous adversary El Chapo Guzmán, was one of the last of the old school who'd fought it out as cocaine had replaced marijuana and heroin as the principal cash crop for the organization, and he was known for being as ruthless as he was cunning. He'd lost count of the number of rivals he'd buried in the fields outside Zapopan, and even though he was in the winter of his career, he was as dangerous as a cobra and equally merciful.

When the men had taken seats, he approached the table and stood at the head. He stubbed out his cigarette and threw the gathering a dark look before he spoke.

“Gentlemen, after years of peaceful cooperation, we’re at war with Sinaloa, and I’ll be damned if I understand why. They’ve hit us hard, we’ve struck back, but there’s no rhyme or reason for it. I’m hoping someone can make sense out of how we got here. I’ve heard whispers that Luis is responsible, but I want to hear details.” He fixed one of the men with a hard stare. “Juan?”

Juan sat forward. “Word is that he made a play for Octavio’s wife that went sideways, and Octavio has gone scorched earth. That’s the best information we have as of now.” He paused. “And Luis has vanished, along with his inner circle.”

Galleon nodded, his eyes blazing with anger. “Who approved this?”

“Nobody. He acted on his own.”

“And he’s jeopardized our Pacific traffic routes in the process. I want him found and his head brought to me, do you understand? This isn’t a game where our lieutenants get to make the rules and act without authorization. It needs to be made clear. His actions are already costing us, and our adversaries are circling, anticipating weakness. This cannot continue. I want him taken off the board, and I want a dialog opened with Octavio. He’s a hothead, but he’s also a businessman, and this war isn’t good for anyone – it’s attracting attention, and the army is going to have to do something shortly or seem inept.”

Galleon stabbed a finger at a newspaper on a coffee table by the window. "There's a front-page article saying Mexico is a failed state where there's no rule of law and the narcos run everything. I don't need to tell you that's waving a red cape in front of the government and daring it to get involved." He looked around the room and then back at the men. "Shoot-outs in broad daylight at Andares? Seriously? Fire bombings in Tlequepaque? Assassinations in Providencia and Chapu? This has to stop. Now. Am I making myself clear?"

Juan nodded. "We'll see about opening up communications with Octavio's people, but it won't be easy. They don't trust us."

"Going after his wife is beyond stupid. There's literally no logic to it," Galleon spat. "Is he into his own product? How could this happen without us getting a warning of some kind?"

"The best we can figure is it was impulsive. He saw an opportunity and took it, without thinking it through." Juan frowned. "Luis has never been a deep thinker. That's not his strength."

"He's a schemer. I want to know what he was up to. There's no way this wasn't planned. He's rash, but not crazy. But if it's a choice of taking him alive or killing him, I don't much care so long as we can deliver his head on a plate to Octavio. Because that's what it's going to take. He needs to see we're serious about honoring our deal. God knows how much we're going to have to pay as restitution for the attempt on his wife. That crosses every line there is, as you all know."

"No question, Don Galleon," Juan said.

"All right. I have to get out of here. Go get this done," Galleon ordered, and the men stood and trooped out, their marching orders clear.

Juan hung back and, when the others had left, turned to Galleon.

"You know that no matter what we say, Octavio is going to want his pound of flesh. This also raises the possibility that

none of our families are safe. From his perspective, we broke the rules, so now they go out the window.”

“No question. That’s why we need to quash this immediately and deliver Luis’s head on a pike. Octavio has to believe we are sincere about wanting to maintain the status quo, and by publicizing Luis’s demise, we’re sending the message that if anyone ever tries something like this again, they will be eliminated.”

“I’ll put out feelers. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Galleon exhaled and reached for his cigarettes. “In all my years, I’ve never seen anything this stupid. I mean, street dealers pulling a stunt isn’t uncommon. But a top lieutenant, someone who has been in the game for twenty-five years...it’s baffling. He had to know what would happen. And his neutralization is going to create a power vacuum we need to deal with in advance.” He stared out at the city and shook his head. “So lucky? Best we can do now is damage control. I don’t even want to tell you how much I’m looking forward to trying to explain to El Mencho why we’re suddenly in World War III.”

Juan nodded. “I can imagine. Please pay the boss my respects.”

Galleon lit another cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling. He offered Juan a grim smile and shook his head. “I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t use me for target practice. Get this done now. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Chapter 32

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

Daniela lay on the queen-size bed, her brow feverish after the long drive from Tequila. The pain medication the doctor had given her was disorienting, his assurance that she'd dislocated her hip and that his agonizing fix would solve the problem an unpleasant memory floating in an opioid haze. Her hip and leg still throbbed, but it was unreal, like it was happening to someone else whom she was observing. Thoughts flitted through her consciousness like fireflies dancing in the night sky, guilt, fear, regrets hitting as relentlessly as a snare drum roll before fading into the soup that was her awareness, at once agitated and numbed, the leaden taste in her mouth as unpleasant as the visions that tormented her.

The doctor had warned her that it would be a while before the pain receded enough so she could walk, so she was trapped in the hotel Luis had selected on the outskirts of Culiacán, sufficiently upscale that it was clean and had air conditioning, but not so much that it would be on her husband's radar. A place that catered to Mexican businesspeople visiting the city to negotiate deals, it wasn't a hotbed of cartel activity, so Luis had felt that they could go unnoticed so long as they lay low. She hoped that he was right, because if not...

Her youngest daughter's face materialized in her thoughts, and tears welled in her eyes. Despite Luis's promises, something had gone wrong, and her girls weren't with her. If she hadn't been so out of it from the drugs, she would have refused to budge; but the injection had dropped her like a sledgehammer to the head, and she'd floated in and out of awareness even as she'd been carried into the hotel many hours later. Tears streamed down her face, and her heart began

trip-hammering in her chest as a surge of adrenaline battled with the drugs for the upper hand.

The door opened, and Luis entered, followed by one of his men. Luis moved to the bed and sat beside her and stroked her forehead.

“What is it, *amor* ? Are you in pain?”

Daniela sobbed, and he bent to hug her. “Don’t worry,” he said. “The doctor said you would be good as new in no time.”

She shook her head and let out a low moan. “My daughters.”

“My people are working on it. Your friend must have slipped away with them. But the men are under instructions to keep looking until they find them. You have my word we won’t stop until they’re safe in your arms.”

“Oh, Luis...it’s all gone...so wrong...none of this was supposed...”

Her voice trailed off, and her eyes fluttered closed, and Luis stood and joined his man by the door. Luis leaned into him and spoke softly.

“Keep her out of it. Last thing we need right now is her pitching a fit and disrupting things.”

“I’ll stay right here. How much more should I give her?”

Luis looked over at Daniela. “Whatever it takes. Use your head. But don’t overdose her.”

“Okay.”

Luis left and made his way downstairs, where his men were waiting by their vehicles in the subterranean parking area. He approached a black Suburban and spoke to the two men standing by the rear door.

“Is it all here?” Luis asked.

“Everything we could manage on short notice,” the taller of the pair replied.

“Let’s see.”

The other man opened the cargo door, and Luis surveyed a pile of plate carriers and flak vests, and at least twenty AK-47s lying beside a crate of grenades, a pair of launchers, and two ammo cans. He opened the nearest and inspected the full magazines inside and nodded approvingly.

“What about the night vision gear?” Luis asked.

“We only were able to get four. But if you wait until tomorrow –”

Luis cut him off with a brusque hand gesture. “You know that’s impossible. I paid a fortune to confirm Octavio’s whereabouts, and we only get one chance at this. He has a big shipment arriving at one of his warehouses tonight – came in by boat the other day. He always inspects the big ones himself, so we know he’ll be there when the truck arrives. Pedro is watching the place,” he said, and patted his pocket, where a two-way rested. “Should be any time, so we need to be ready to roll out.”

“Maybe we won’t need the other scopes...”

“We make do with what we have. He’ll be on alert, so this won’t be easy, but it’s his backyard, so he won’t be expecting a full-on assault. That will give us the element of surprise. We hit him hard and fast, grab the shipment, and kill everyone. No more Octavio solves our biggest problem, which is that he’s like a pit bull and won’t let go now.”

“What about the ransom?”

Luis shook his head. “There’s no way we’ll make it out alive even if he agrees to pay, which after everything that’s happened, is fifty-fifty at best. If we kill him, we can take over his territory and work a deal with his subordinates to work closer with our group. Which will mean a lot more profit sticking to us.”

“Don Galleon will go berserk,” the man observed.

“He might if we asked for permission. But we won’t. We’re going to approach him with a done deal, where Sinaloa is fatally weakened and will have to go along with our terms. There’s nobody else like Octavio who can unite all the factions

here. You know how Sinaloans are – every man for himself when it comes down to it. Chapo held it together by sheer will for a long time, and when he went away, Octavio was the only one with the history and reputation who could step in. His kids sure as hell couldn't. They're small-time playboys. Dilettantes. And they don't have the respect of the older players." Luis shook his head. "No, with Octavio out of the way, we can dictate terms to the rest of this bunch, and they'll ultimately go along, because otherwise New Generation rolls hard on them and it's a war on their territory, where their mothers and kids are at risk. They won't like it, but in the end they'll bend the knee. And Don Galleon will have a unified group from the border of Michoacan all the way to Sonora. We've never before been able to pull that off. You think he's going to let his anger mess that up? Not a chance."

The man nodded, any trace of doubt erased from his expression. The stakes had never been higher, and Luis was making a bold move that could win them everything and make them legends before it was over.

Provided they lived through it.

Going up against Sinaloa on their home turf was no cakewalk. If it had been, the military would have taken over the state long before and imposed its version of the rule of law. The state was cowboy country, filled with hard men who were at home sleeping in the rough for months at a time and whose code made no compunctions about killing anyone who got in their way. It had been that way for as long as there had been a Sinaloa, which the French had discovered when they had invaded and tried to dominate the locals, just as the Spanish had learned before them. The northern states had always been left to themselves due to the territory, with much of Sinaloa, rugged hills and impenetrable brush, posing an impassable region for any invasion force and cementing the self-image of the natives as a breed apart.

But Luis's bet was that a lightning strike in the dead of night when it was least expected would be decisive and would redeem him with his cartel when he emerged victorious. For Luis it was now all or nothing, and he'd gone too far to

consider backing down. He couldn't go back to Jalisco without a massive win, and he'd never survive with an enemy like Octavio gunning for him. That left his present course of action, which with a bit of luck would enable him to grab all the marbles.

Daniela was more distraction than anything at this point, and while it troubled him that he'd lost contact with the men he'd sent to find her daughters, that wasn't his biggest problem now. Survival came first, and if he was successful, he would have all the time in the world to figure out what had happened to the girls and to make amends to Daniela – while slipping into Octavio's shoes as well as his bed.

A workable plan B, he thought to himself as he turned to his men.

“Grab the gear and get ready to roll,” he said, the confidence in his voice greater than any he felt internally. But his force needed to see a leader, and he knew from experience that any expression of doubt would risk their loyalty and conviction. So he squared his shoulders, picked up a plate carrier, and strapped it on with steady hands and his jaw set like he could hardly wait for the battle to come.

Chapter 33

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

Night had fallen by the time the lights of Culiacán glowed through the Dodge windshield, and Jet checked the fuel indicator to confirm they still had enough to make it into the city. The girls were slumbering in the back seat, and Matt had spelled her every two hours, trading places and driving while she got some rest. His face was drawn and dusted with three days' growth, but his eyes were alert and constantly scanning the surroundings and the rearview mirror.

The drive had been nerve-racking, but they had calmed down after the first hours when it had become apparent nobody was giving chase. It was a safe bet that the theft of the vehicle hadn't been called in by the Jalisco *sicarios*, and their only scare had been when a Federal Police car had pulled up on them with lights flashing...before blowing past them at nearly twice the legal limit.

"Why do they do that?" Matt had asked. "Drive around with the lights on? They do it in Guadalajara, too."

"Probably to warn any criminals they're on their way, so they have a chance to escape. Otherwise they might be in a shoot-out or something, and that's risky," she'd replied.

He'd laughed with genuine mirth. "Probably true. They aren't paid enough to play with their lives. Best to let the bad guys know well in advance so they can get clear."

Jet had chuckled. "Bingo."

Matt yawned and then held up the phone. "Says we're twenty minutes out from the waypoint."

"Never been closer," Jet agreed.

“Dare I ask if you’ve come up with a plan?”

She shook her head. “Playing it by ear.”

“Little out of character for you, isn’t it?”

“Not a lot of choices I can see. Depends on what the situation is. What I’m walking into.”

“You mean what we’re walking into, right?”

Jet gave him a steely look. “You need to safeguard the kids. Someone has to. And boys always underestimate girls. A big strapping hunk like you will draw attention. Nobody will give me a second glance.”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t think you’ve ever sounded less sincere.”

“I’m working on it.”

The nav software beeped, and a voice in Spanish warned of an off-ramp in one kilometer. Jet checked the rearview mirror and confirmed all three of the girls were asleep, and slowed as she took the exit and followed the prompts to the destination, which turned out to be a three-story motel with underground parking.

Jet continued past it and parked a block away. She looked to Matt and checked on Hannah in the back, and then spoke in a low tone.

“I want to nose around. Watch the girls while I’m gone?”

“You think they took her here? Why?”

“The waypoint was set for this place, so they were planning on driving here after they got the girls. It’s a fair assumption.”

“I don’t disagree. Is it even worth saying be careful?”

“I was going to tell you the same thing.”

Jet exited the truck and made her way along the sidewalk until she was outside the motel. She didn’t see anything obvious, like a parking lot filled with black SUVs or groups of tough-looking men watching the exterior, and after studying the grounds for several minutes, she walked to the office and

entered. A twenty-something woman wearing too much makeup gave her a courtesy smile when she looked up from her cell phone.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Jet studied the rate card mounted on the wall for a moment. “I may need a room, but I want something super quiet. Are you full up, or do you have any vacancies?”

“We have a few rooms. How many?”

“Mmmm, just me. But I’m a little concerned because I saw a lot of activity earlier, and I want to make sure it’s not going to be like that all night,” Jet said, hoping she’d called that correctly. If the cartel had taken Daniela to the motel, they would likely have had a decent-sized group, based on the number of trucks that had pursued her. So an educated guess was her best gambit.

The girl’s eyes widened, and then her expression hardened somewhat. “Not sure I know what you’re talking about.”

“The men? And the woman they were helping to the room.”

The clerk shook her head. “No idea. Look, if you want a room, we have several left. I can’t guarantee how busy we’ll get tonight, though...”

Jet pretended to consider it, and then shrugged and edged back to the door. “I’ll think about it. Thanks,” she said, and left.

Several minutes later, she watched from the shadows down the street as the clerk called someone on the house phone, confirming that Jet had guessed right. A man who matched the demeanor and build of the gunmen she’d dispatched, with the conspicuous bulge of a pistol under his baggy shirt, walked from one of the second-floor rooms and down to the office, where he had a short discussion with the clerk before he stepped out into the night air and scanned the surroundings with obvious concern. Jet pressed herself against the wall and waited. After a few moments ticked by, he retraced his steps to the room, glanced around again at the threshold, and disappeared inside.

Jet counted the doors and surveyed the adjacent rooms. Only one had its lights on, which boded well. But it was still a bad scenario – the doors opened onto an exterior walkway that connected to stairwells on either side, which meant that any approach would be out in the open. Tactically, that was a disaster waiting to happen.

And while she felt that her hunch had been paid off by the gunman's appearance shortly after she'd baited the clerk, she couldn't know for certain that Daniela was inside that room. It was a good bet, but like with all bets, she might be wrong.

She looked up and down the street and then rounded the block to check the rear of the building, which had a high wall punctuated with vertical iron bars where the back courtyard and pool were located. Jet regarded the sheer three-story rear façade, studying it for handholds, and saw nothing promising.

That left her with two options: she could wait for the cartel muscle to make a fatal mistake, or she could go in hard with the element of surprise.

Neither was particularly appealing, but she saw no third option.

“Unless...” she whispered.

She walked back to the front of the motel and eyed the areas by the stairs and, in the dark, made out what she'd hoped to see.

Jet noted the location and walked back to the truck, a determined expression on her face. She slipped back behind the wheel, and Matt cocked his head.

“Well?” he asked.

“I have an idea. But I'm going to need your help.”

He patted the pistol in his waistband. “Say the word.”

She shook her head. “Nothing like that.”

Matt gave her a confused look. “Then...what?”

She outlined what she'd seen, and then explained what she was thinking.

Matt nodded slowly when she was done. “Not the most subtle plan I’ve ever heard, but it could work.”

“All about results, not style.”

“Then what now?”

She started the truck and gave him a tight smile. “We find someplace to hole up for the night. Obviously, this motel is off the list. And then we drive around until I find the one missing element I’m going to need. And pray we don’t get shot or dog bit in the process.”

“If you’re trying to sell this, you’re doing a poor job.”

“I’ll work on my bedside manner when it’s over. Now buckle up. No point in waiting longer than we have to.”

Chapter 34

Tel Aviv, Israel

Noah checked his watch as he waited for the elevator to reach him in the lower-level parking. He'd been in the office until late the prior night, which was now his new normal, and couldn't help but speculate about how the previous director had managed to maintain this pace for decades without flinching. Noah was in his dewy youth compared to the old man, and he was already chronically fatigued and emotionally drained after just a few months in his shoes. He couldn't imagine what he would feel like in ten years, and pushed the thought aside, pessimism being unproductive in his role.

"Be careful what you wish for," he muttered to himself, annoyed at how long the elevator was taking.

Mossad had a reputation for chewing up its personnel and spitting them out, and while he was accustomed to high stress, the amplification of it in the top spot was stunning. He'd noticed more hair in the sink in the mornings, increased fat around his abdomen, and a faint darkening beneath his eyes that spoke to inadequate rest and high cortisol levels – none of which was optimal for peak performance. If he'd been a drinker, he would have climbed into the bottle after a few of the crises he'd fielded of late, and he had upped his Xanax consumption on advice of his physician so he could sleep at all; another warning he couldn't ignore indefinitely. He was more than aware of the link between benzo consumption and maladies like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and intuitively understood he couldn't continue down the path he was on.

The elevator pinged, and the twin stainless steel slab doors slid open with a whisper. Noah stepped inside and stabbed the button for the top level, and then waited impatiently as the lift

rose, the faint music emanating from a hidden speaker inexplicably annoying him. When he arrived at his floor, he crossed the open office space to his suite and only slowed when he neared his assistant's desk, the expression on her face demanding attention.

“Good morning, Zoe. What is it?” he asked.

“Hersh asked to meet the moment you got in.”

Noah swallowed a spurt of sour bile that rose in his throat. Herschel was the head of the agency's field ops – specifically wet works, which was the euphemism for assassinations and kidnappings.

“Give me five minutes to get organized, and then send him up. And could you please get me a cup of coffee? I ran out of time this morning.”

“Of course,” Zoe said with a frosty smile.

Noah entered his office and strode to his desk. He placed his briefcase beside a stack of files, removed his jacket and hung it on a coat rack by the credenza, and settled into the executive chair he'd ordered to ease his now chronic lower back pain from many hours seated. He did a quick perusal of the documents that had collected overnight, and browsed over two in particular that looked ominous – one a report of an insurgency in Africa where three Israeli citizens had been grabbed in the fighting near a cobalt mine, and the other a lengthy brief on Eastern European criminal gangs out of Ukraine and Bosnia funneling weapons and funds to terrorist factions in Lebanon.

Both appeared to be business as usual for him, and he was finishing up the second when a knock at the door signaled Zoe with the coffee.

“Yes,” Noah called, and she entered with a large mug of steaming brew.

“Black as always, I presume,” she said, without a trace of resentment.

He nodded. “I'm sorry for imposing on you. I know you're not a waitress,” Noah said, sensitive to her possible issues with

his request.

“You’re the director. I work for you,” she said. “You say dance, I do it.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m a big girl and can go with the flow,” she said. “Hersh says he’ll be up in a snap.” She considered him impassively. “Anything else? A warm croissant? Back rub? Laundry to pick up?”

Noah smiled at the sarcastic humor and, for the millionth time, reckoned that Zoe was one of the most attractive females on his staff. It was a shame that fraternization was prohibited, or he would have been interested, especially given her dry humor and deadpan delivery. Such was the weight of directorship...

Another knock drew his attention, and he looked to the door as Zoe departed. A thin man with a gray crown of wiry hair that framed an impressively shiny bald pate stuck his head in, eyebrows raised.

“Ready?” Hersh asked.

Noah nodded. “Come in. Am I going to need whiskey in my coffee?” he joked.

Hersh’s taciturn countenance didn’t change. “You may want to make it a triple.” He closed the door behind himself, crossed to Noah’s desk, and took a seat in front of it.

“That bad?” Noah asked.

“Our operative was held at the airport in Panama and refused entry,” Hersh said, his tone dour.

Noah exhaled in frustration. They’d arranged for one of their top field agents to fly halfway around the world to deal with the Nabila situation, and he’d been stopped from entering the country?

“Why? And why didn’t we foresee this as a risk?”

“Apparently one of his last missions, in Belgium, drew the attention of Interpol. We had no idea they had a bulletin out on

him as a person of interest.”

“That’s quite an oversight. What’s the status as of now?”

“He was put on a return flight, so he’s no longer in custody, thanks to a few shekels changing hands on the Panamanian side. But it leaves us...with a vacuum.”

“That’s one way of putting it. Every minute that woman walks free is a threat to our national security.”

“I understand. But we don’t have anyone equipped to handle a sensitive sanction there.”

“Can’t you sneak someone over the border?”

Hersh shook his head. “Not from the Colombia side. The Darien Gap prevents any land traffic from Colombia, and the marine area is heavily monitored.”

“What’s north, then? Central American geography isn’t my forte.”

“Costa Rica. I’m exploring who we can get in a hurry, but it isn’t promising. And Panama and Costa Rica have a contentious relationship with their border, so there’s no latitude given for those crossing from Costa Rica. We have operatives in the U.S., obviously, but it will take some time to get them to Costa Rica, and then we have to arrange for them to make the trip to Panama without being flagged. That won’t happen overnight. And all three are on active operations, so pulling them off...” Hersh gave Noah a hangdog look. “Not an ideal situation.”

Noah frowned. “If the Colombia traffic is so heavily patrolled, how do they manage to get so much cocaine through? That makes no sense.”

“Almost none of it lands in Panama, so the boats and subs stay well away from the Panamanian coast. They ship to Mexico or the U.S. and avoid Central America altogether, other than small-time smugglers who service the locals.”

Noah sat back and stared at the ceiling for a long beat. “Sounds like it might be time for my backup plan, then.”

Hersh's expression soured further. "Give me some time to find an alternative."

"I know you prefer to handle things your way, but we're out of time. She can vanish at any moment, and we may never pick up her trail again. We don't have the luxury of planning on this one."

"You can't have her go into a friendly nation and start shooting it up, Noah. I'm more than familiar with her exploits. She's a wrecking ball, not a scalpel. We need delicacy here..."

"What we need is Nabila neutralized yesterday." Noah tapped his watch, considering. "I can give you the rest of the day to line something up. Let's revisit at the close of business."

"That's a short leash."

"It's all we have. Do your best."

Hersh rose and made for the door. "I'll let you know what I come up with. But for the record, I advise against deploying her. If this were Russia or Moldova or Bulgaria, I wouldn't hesitate. But the Panamanians are cleaning up their house, and they're protective of their reputation. We can't have a mass shooting scenario with her involved."

"I completely understand, Hersh. That said, I need the target terminated now, not at some convenient time in the future. You've got until six o'clock."

Hersh left, and Noah took a swig of his cooling coffee, the acid in his esophagus burning as the liquid washed it down. He'd been afraid something would go wrong with what had been described as a relatively simple operation, and that doubt had proven prescient. Based on what Hersh had reported, they were now dead in the water, with no obvious solution – which meant Noah would be calling in a favor he'd hoped he wouldn't have to use.

Hersh was correct that Jet was a blunt instrument, and Noah knew that she worked autonomously, so she couldn't be controlled past a certain point. But if it was a choice between Nabila escaping justice again or turning Jet loose to put an end

to the chapter, he was going for the latter every time, Hersh's objections notwithstanding.

He just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Because she could always say no. Although given their history, he didn't think she would decline the assignment. But there was always that chance.

And of course, there was the problem of Noah then owing her a huge one. He didn't like having markers in the hands of wild cards who could call them at any time.

But if it put Nabila in a coffin, he would table his reticence and turn her loose, consequences be damned. The alternative was unthinkable, and Noah shook his head slightly at the thought.

"Not this time," he muttered, and stopped himself. The penchant to talk to himself had started early into assuming the director's job, and had been intensifying of late. Another warning that all wasn't well in his mental landscape.

He drained the rest of his coffee and placed the cup beside his briefcase, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Maybe he was going crazy, but he'd see that Nabila got her just deserts before they dragged him off to a rubber room.

"One way or another," he whispered, and this time allowed the smile to spread at his own self-awareness of his losing his grip. If he was going to hell in a handbasket, he'd make sure that Nabila was there long before, keeping his spot warm for him.

Chapter 35

Shanghai, China

A sleek anthracite Mercedes limousine purred along one of the city's large boulevards, with two SUVs in the lead and one following, the procession not uncommon in a society filled with ultrarich magnates. Despite the pretention that China was a communist society, it was so in name only for the entrepreneurs who had grown fabulously wealthy while the masses lived in relative destitution, tracked via facial-recognition software and social credit scoring systems that kept them virtual slaves to their masters in the hierarchy, even as they were allowed to accumulate material possessions and improve their prospects from the dirt-poor rice farmers and peasants who had made up the vast majority of the country only fifty years before.

China had emerged as a wealth-creation engine for those close to the seat of power and those who controlled access to policy. It was almost impossible to do anything within the country's borders unless a helpful general with his hand out approved your venture, and the upper ranks of the military had, like American politicians, managed to become fabulously rich in spite of meager salaries – which the regime turned a blind eye to unless one transgressed against the party's wishes, in which case a speedy example was made in order to prevent contagion of free will.

Bai Zhang was passingly familiar with the nation's tumultuous history, but he was far more interested in the opportunities its prosperity afforded, both in importation of goods frowned upon by the government – narcotics being a primary one – and in gaming the construction boom that was responsible for much of China's late-found success, and of

course old favorites like extortion and theft. His brother had built an empire from nothing as a largely legitimate actor, but Bai had chosen a different route that more suited his personality, and he was leveraging the street savviness and utter ruthlessness that had served him well to take the empire to another level.

He had come a lifetime from his memories as a street urchin with bare feet and filth crusting his face. Now he was sitting in the back of the commodious luxury vehicle, watching the lights flash by on the way to one of his favorite night spots. The convoy was mostly for show, although after his recent escalations against his rivals and adversaries, it was always possible one of them would attempt to remove the new prince from his throne. Still, better to be safe, and it wasn't as though he could even count the amount of money the empire was generating each and every hour.

Bai sipped Veuve Clicquot champagne from a crystal flute and contemplated his good fortune. As hoped, his surviving enemies had quickly fallen into line once it became obvious that he would resort to unthinkable levels of violence to address intractable problems, and any disagreements had been almost miraculously resolved in just the last few days. Even his foreign associates had gotten the memo and were suddenly far more amenable to his perspective in their business arrangements moving forward. Bai's brother had been a tough negotiator, but fair and honorable; Bai, however, saw the second part of his approach as weakness and pushed all his relationships past their limits in order to secure more favorable terms.

So far that had worked, and now he could let off the pressure some and allow the system to operate without undue stress.

His cell phone trilled from the breast pocket of his hand-tailored jacket, and he freed it, glared at the screen, and thumbed it to life.

“Speak,” he commanded.

“We have a fix on the package you’re interested in. The intel is recent. Twenty-four hours old,” one of his subordinates said.

Bai listened for several minutes, and when the speaker finished, he spoke softly.

“Get the necessary visas and prepare the Gulfstream for takeoff as soon as we have them. I’ll want to take only a few people with me. You, Chen, two more.”

He listened again for thirty seconds and then cut his subordinate off. “No, I will handle this personally. This is not something I’m willing to farm out. So do as I instruct. How long will it take to get the papers?”

“One or two days, at most,” the subordinate replied.

“See if that can be accelerated. However much is necessary.”

“I will try, boss. But diplomats can be difficult.”

“Do your best and keep me updated. I do not want to miss this chance.”

“Nothing will happen tonight. Nobody at the embassy is working until tomorrow. And this must be handled with delicacy. Let me see what I can do.”

“See to it,” Bai snapped, and hung up.

He took another sip of the champagne, marveling at the delicate grapefruit on the palate that the winemakers had managed to infuse into the sparkling wine, and then set the glass in a holder along the side wall of the cabin, the bottle still chilling in one of the refrigerated compartments built into the woodwork. It had taken time and considerable money, but he’d never been closer to his objective, and he could afford to celebrate.

Bai depressed a button that activated the intercom.

“Li, I’ve changed my mind. Take me to the Pink Doll instead, and have someone call ahead to arrange my usual distractions.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll let the other vehicles know.”

“Perfect.”

Moments later, the convoy swung off the boulevard and changed its route while Bai poured himself another glass of the effervescent nectar and lit a cigarette. He was now the head of one of the most powerful industrial complexes in China, and there seemed nothing that he couldn't have or achieve simply by wanting it. But there were still loose ends to tie up, and he couldn't lose focus on those until they were resolved, once and for all.

He belched and smiled as he took a deep drag on his cigarette, the smoke acrid in his lungs, causing them to ache in a familiar way. He suspected the filthy habit would kill him, but in his line of work he'd never expected to make it as long as he had, so if cancer took him twenty years from now, so be it. He'd been at it since he was nine, so there was no point in quitting now. What was done was done, and he'd made peace with the idea that there were some things that were unchangeable, and choices made in the past were one of them.

Bai exhaled the smoke and chuckled to himself. If his brother could have seen him now, riding in the company limo to a whorehouse, he would have been apoplectic. But the only constant in life was change, and Bai was now at the helm and would captain the ship as he saw fit, his sibling's disapproving ghost notwithstanding.

Another turn and the procession slowed at a nondescript block of darkened apartments. It stopped in front of a tenement, and one of Bai's men hurried to open the door for him as two lithesome young women materialized from a doorway and made their way to the long car. Bai stepped from the Mercedes and nodded in approval to the girls, who held their hands over their mouths and giggled – all part of the act, Bai knew, but well worth the fortune he paid for the bit of harmless theater. Inside was a club that only the richest in Shanghai knew existed, where there was nothing that was off-limits and no fantasy that couldn't be fulfilled. Bai linked arms with the girls and twisted to look at the eight bodyguards who had spilled from the SUVs and set up a cordon around him.

“You boys stay out here. Wouldn’t do to scare the ladies, would it?” he said to them, and then allowed the women to escort him to a darkened doorway, deep inside of which was a stairway that led to the kind of promised land of depravity that only a discriminating man like Bai could truly appreciate.

Chapter 36

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

The air was largely still, redolent with the perfume of jacaranda and hibiscus, only the faint trace of a warm breeze from the three rivers that flowed through the city lightly stirring the treetops surrounding the industrial area just north of the airport. There was little traffic in the district at the late hour, Culiacán being infamous for cartel violence and gunplay, and the law-abiding locals in certain areas of town had learned to keep to themselves once darkness descended lest they fall prey to miscreants looking for easy marks.

In the near distance, the whine of a jet's engines spooling up for takeoff pierced the relative quiet, and the ensuing roar as it hurtled down the runway and into the stygian sky sent tremors through the field where Luis's men were gathered near the warehouse that Octavio used as one of his group's primary distribution hubs.

"They bring it north in shrimp boats and pay off the navy to look the other way," Luis explained as he finished up his directions to his gunmen. "Formed into the lining of ice chests. My informant tells me he just received twenty million street value of uncut Colombian cocaine, so he's definitely going to be there to verify it all made it and to test the quality. They shouldn't be expecting trouble, so we have the upper hand for now, but it's sure to get ugly fast once the shooting starts. Some of us won't walk out of here, so make your peace now – there won't be a chance once we go in."

"Any idea what they're packing?" one of the men asked.

"Assume the worst. Sinaloa had first dibs on the best the U.S. could supply, so figure M16s and .50-caliber Barretts and

anything else the CIA would smuggle them.”

It was one of the worst-kept secrets in the Mexican underworld that the U.S. government picked and chose trafficking networks to supply the nation’s ravenous illegal drug demand, and that Sinaloa had for twenty years under El Chapo been its preferred partner, which was exposed when Obama’s regime “Operation Fast and Furious” was revealed as a program to funnel weapons to the cartel, weapons that were used to murder not only Mexican police but U.S. personnel as well. Rumor had it that El Chapo had remained free largely due to the partnership with the U.S. intel community, and was only captured when he refused to give his partners a larger cut of the proceeds – exactly as happened with Noriega in Panama, when the U.S. military suddenly found it a pressing concern to invade that sovereign nation and execute a coup while the world stood by, and in Grenada when that island nation’s government decided it wouldn’t allow coke-filled C-130s from Honduras to refuel on their way to Mina airport base in Arkansas.

Luis’s problem was that even though the partnership had fallen apart, the weapons remained with the cartel, which, although without CIA help had lost much of its territory and influence, still commanded a substantial chunk of geography. This made it a particularly dangerous adversary, given that its fighters were seasoned, ruthless, and extremely well-paid ex-military and police who had seen more live fire than the average mercenary. That said, Luis’s men were cut from the same bolt, and they knew what was expected of them and how to stage an assault on a fortified, armed compound.

“We’ll hit the gate with grenades first and then use the two launchers to sling them over the walls. That should buy us enough time to ram the gate, at which point we’ll move in and mow down anything that moves. The informant said there were roughly thirty-five men there, but not enough to matter if the first salvo of grenades does its job. As far as Octavio goes, no mercy. We have to cut the head off the snake, or he’ll have a thousand fighters here within hours, and there’s no way we can survive that.”

The men nodded in unison, their expressions determined. This was an all-or-nothing gambit with impossibly high stakes for the future of the centi-billion-dollar narco trafficking business in Mexico – if Luis was successful, he would quickly become one of the most important bosses in the country; if he lost, his name would be a curse uttered before the locals spit.

The handheld in Luis’s pocket crackled softly, and he raised it to his ear to better hear.

“Two Suburbans are pulling in now. Looks like your boy’s arrived,” a voice reported from the tiny speaker.

Luis depressed the transmit button. “Hold your position. We’ll be there in five or so.”

He looked at his group. “He’s there, so it’s game time. Our source has no idea how long he typically stays, so we’re going in now. Load up the trucks and ready the grenade launchers. We leave in three.”

Solomon, Luis’s main lieutenant, leaned into his boss and spoke in a low tone. “We’ll have maybe fifteen minutes from the time the first shots are fired until more of Octavio’s group respond, so this has to be over and done with in ten if we’re going to get away clean.”

“With the amount of firepower we’re bringing, that should be double as long as this will take.”

Solomon looked doubtful. “I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.”

The gunmen loaded into the pickup trucks and checked their weapons. Each bed held eight fighters, one of whom had a pair of night vision goggles strapped to his head. Luis walked to the black suburban and climbed into the big SUV, and Solomon took up position behind the wheel. Luis buckled his seatbelt, Solomon did the same, and then Luis turned to him.

“Let’s do this. Enrique can handle the launchers and the gate, and then we’ll ram it, and the rest can follow us in.”

“Good thing this beast is armored and has run-flat tires,” Solomon said.

Solomon twisted the ignition key, and the huge motor roared to life. He pulled onto the road, and the rest of the trucks fell into line behind him. They made their way along the deserted street with their headlights off, nearly invisible in the dark of night. Few industrial zones in Mexico bothered with the expense of streetlights, largely because the copper wire would be stolen within weeks of their installation, and this one was no different, the only illumination the faint glow from the stars.

When they turned the corner onto the road where the warehouse was located, the second truck peeled off and parked on the dirt shoulder a hundred meters from the gates. Two dark figures trotted from the vehicle, grenade launchers in hand, and made their way towards the large building while Luis and the rest of the group idled in the middle of the road.

When the pair was thirty meters from the gate, they knelt, brought the launchers to bear, and fired at the gate in unison. Both projectiles struck it simultaneously in a flash of orange, and then Solomon was bearing down on the entry while the personnel-filled pickups raced towards it behind him. The grenade launchers lobbed two more projectiles over the walls, and the detonations flashed bright orange against the night sky.

Automatic rifle fire chattered from a gap the explosions had left at the side of the gate, and then the heavy Suburban's reinforced front bumper slammed into it, blowing both sides inward and crushing whoever had been shooting. Moments later the pickups were through as well, and the night-vision-equipped gunmen leapt from the truck beds and took cover where they could, and began picking off Octavio's guards as they fired at the trucks.

A hail of bullets pounded into the SUV, and the windshield transformed into a tapestry of white starbursts where the slugs hit the high-density bulletproof glass. Large flakes of paint showered the ground from bullets striking the armored body panels, which defied their attempts to penetrate. Luis watched his men spread out and mow down several of the defenders, and then switched his focus to where Octavio's vehicle was

parked outside the main building, where two cargo vans sat beside a roll-up metal door.

“That’s where they’ve got the material,” Luis said to Solomon, pointing at the structure.

“Which means we have to be careful with the grenades. Don’t want to watch millions go up in a cloud of dust,” Solomon agreed.

“All right, let’s get out of here and join the fun,” Luis said. He crawled between the two front bucket seats onto the rear seats and then over them to the rear cargo area. Solomon followed, and Luis opened the rear door and hopped out, crouching low and using the SUV for cover. Solomon joined him and fired a three-round burst at a Sinaloa gunman who had managed to get onto the building’s roof. The man dropped his weapon, clutched at his chest, and then tumbled from the edge and dropped lifelessly to the ground, bouncing hard before coming to rest near the entry.

More shooting from several weapons pocked a line across the front of the SUV, and one of Luis’s grenade launchers targeted the shooters’ position and lobbed a round at the pallet stack the gunmen were hiding behind. The explosion shook the area, and the pallets disintegrated in a shower of wood, wounding the pair of guards behind it. Luis fired from around the Suburban’s rear fender and stitched the men with two well-placed bursts, ending their resistance in a pool of blood. Solomon spun and fired twice at another Sinaloan who had managed to edge around to the entry and was drawing a bead on them, and the gunman staggered backward three steps before his knees buckled, and he fell face-first onto the pavement.

A round from Luis’s left caught Solomon in the arm; a second bullet punched into his flak vest but was stopped by the ceramic plate. He grunted in pain and tried to bring his rifle up, but the slug had broken bone, and his limb wouldn’t respond. Luis turned and sprayed the area with the remainder of his magazine, and when no more shooting ensued, he leaned into Solomon and eyed his wound.

“You okay?”

“Got me in the arm. It won’t move. And I can’t shoot left-handed worth a crap.”

“You can still drive, right? Get back into the truck and patch yourself up before you bleed out, and wait for it to be over.”

“Damn. I wanted to go the whole distance with you.”

“Next time. Now go.”

Luis ejected his spent magazine and slapped another into place, and then he swung the barrel to scan for other hostiles in the vicinity. His men sounded like they were giving as good as they got from the defenders, and after another minute the gunfire quieted, and Luis’s radio squawked.

“Perimeter’s clean. We’re ready to breach the building,” a voice said.

“Remember – no grenades inside. It’s okay to use one on the door, but that’s it,” Luis warned.

“Roger that. Thirty seconds to ingress.”

“I’m right behind you.”

The grenade’s detonation blew the building’s steel door inward and tore it off the hinges, and before the blast wave had hit the SUV, Luis’s surviving men were breaching the building. The first one in sprawled back out of the doorway, shot a half dozen times, and two more of Luis’s force dog-crawled past his body and opened up on the interior, fire-hosing slugs into the space as answering fire snapped past them. One of the men rolled lifelessly away when a bullet liquified the top of his skull, and another took his place, propped his rifle into the doorway, and emptied his rifle on full auto without regard for a target. When he was out of ammo, he exchanged his spent magazine for a full one and continued blasting, teeth gritted and eyes closed.

There was a pause in the shooting from inside, and three more of Luis’s fighters threw themselves through the doorway and fired from where they landed on the concrete floor, targeting muzzle flashes since the defenders had killed the

lights. More screams from the far side of the warehouse greeted their efforts, and two more of Luis's team entered the expanse, firing from the hip as they moved in a crouch to cover their companions.

When the shooting inside the building stopped, Luis darted through the doorway and locked eyes with one of his men.

"Clear," the man said.

"Is that everybody?" Luis demanded.

"For now. We'll do a sweep to confirm we got them all."

The radio squealed, and Luis raised it to his ear. "What?"

"We've taken heavy casualties. Half the men either wounded or dead."

"Looks like we took out all of Octavio's, so worth it." Luis paused and yelled over his shoulder, "Somebody get the lights."

Tense seconds ticked by, and then the overhead dome lights flickered to life, revealing bodies strewn throughout the warehouse like discarded rag dolls, the stench of fresh blood thick in the air, the floor painted crimson. At the far end of the space, eight ice chests rested on a wooden table, three of them sawed open, revealing their insulation to be pure Colombian cocaine. Beyond them was an office whose metal door was closed, the walls pocked from bullets. Oddly, none of them had penetrated what looked like sheetrock.

Luis indicated the office with the barrel of his rifle and whispered to the man next to him, "See that? Notice anything strange?"

The man nodded, and Luis turned to three of his men. "Move the ice chests into the Suburban. I want to have a look in there. And be quick about it. We're running out of time."

Luis nodded at the gunman beside him, and together they strode to the office. Two more of Luis's fighters joined them as they neared, and Luis lifted the radio to his lips as he approached the door. "See if one of the dead is Octavio. My gut says no."

“Yes, sir.”

When they reached the door, Luis raised his rifle and nodded to the gunman again. He twisted the knob and gave the heavy door a push, and then stepped back, waiting for gunfire. When none greeted them, Luis waited and listened and, when he didn't hear anything inside, reached into the office and switched on the lights.

The office was empty. Just a few desks, an ancient fax machine, file cabinets along a wall, a bookcase, some folding tables with paperwork stacked on them.

“Clear,” Luis said, and then frowned and did a double take. He stepped outside and eyeballed the office, and then back inside, brow wrinkled.

“Interior's three meters shallower than the exterior,” he murmured to the men, whose eyes widened at the observation. “Must be a panic room. Makes sense. Help me find the door.”

The gunmen followed Luis into the office and approached the far wall, where the file cabinets stood. Luis studied them and then the floor and crossed to the bookcase at the end of the office. He looked it over for a half minute while his men moved the file cabinets to verify nothing was behind them, and then began pulling books off the shelves and tossing them onto the floor. Halfway down, one of the books resisted, and he pulled harder. The whole bookcase swiveled away from the wall, revealing a bank vault door that looked like it weighed several tons.

Luis turned to his men and froze when he saw a small dome camera in one of the corners of the ceiling. He smiled when he walked towards it and nodded in triumph. “So you're watching from inside? Think you're safe?” He nodded to his fighters. “Get those gas cans by the forklifts and douse everything in here. I want this place burned to the ground. And bring some of those broken pallets. We're going to have a bonfire. He wants to hide in his little room, fine; he can cook in there when his steel walls heat up and his air runs out. If he tries to escape, shoot anything that moves. Understand?”

The men left to get the gas containers, and when they returned, they emptied them onto the desks, the books, the walls.

Luis stood by the door as they worked, and turned towards the camera, cupped his hands over his mouth, and yelled, “This is your last chance, Octavio. You don’t come out now, you’re cooked. You have ten seconds, and then the whole place goes up. No second chances. You want to die, broiled like a rat over a campfire? That’s how this will play.”

When he got no response, he shrugged and felt in his pocket for a lighter. Then he went back to the office door, picked up one of the gas-soaked books, lit it, and tossed it into the room, stepping away immediately.

The fuel ignited with a woosh, and within thirty seconds the entire office was ablaze. Tongues of flame licked from the ceiling, and then the main warehouse roof caught, the old wooden beams dry as kindling.

Luis yelled to his surviving men. “Everybody out. The whole place is going up,” he said, and turned and jogged to the exit door, eight of his crew beside him. When he reached it, he turned to look at the office, where smoke so thick it was like black fog belched from the doorway from the raging fire within, and grinned.

“No way he’s going to be able to survive that or the smoke inhalation. What a way to go,” he said, and then led his men out of the warehouse and into the night air to watch the massive building burn to the foundations.

Chapter 37

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

The truck Jet had confiscated creaked to a stop a block away from the motel. Matt and Jet got out, she with the M16 held close to her body and a coil of yellow nylon rope slung over her shoulder. They'd left the girls at another motel they'd found a kilometer away, after cautioning them to remain in the room no matter what and promising they would be back as soon as they were able, hopefully with Daniela in tow. Hannah had nodded obediently, but Elena had given Jet a rebellious glare, at which point Jet explained that if she disobeyed, she would be putting everyone's lives in danger, including her sister's and mother's. That had seemingly registered, and Jet had felt confident they would stay put, allowing Matt to accompany her so he could play his part in the perilous drama she'd concocted.

"You ready for this?" she asked as they walked toward the motel.

"Piece of cake, right? How about you?"

"Couldn't be simpler."

"If you say so."

They'd argued in the truck, with Matt pointing out the risks to assaulting the cartel without any intel about how many gunmen were there, what rooms they were in, whether Daniela was even with them, and so on, but Jet had pointed out that she'd promised the girls she would find their mother, and this was the only lead they had. Matt knew from experience that when Jet had set her mind to something, it was useless to attempt to dissuade her, so he'd reluctantly agreed to do as she'd asked so she could make her move.

When they reached the motel, they separated. Matt strolled to the office, where the same clerk was working. He gave her a weary smile, doing a passable imitation of a tired traveler, which didn't strain his thespian skills after the day he'd had.

"Do you speak English?" he began, knowing the odds were low in a Culiacán motel.

"Mmm, no," the woman said, her tone indicating she was annoyed by the question.

"Ah, OK," Matt said, and then began asking her in deliberately terrible, gringo-accented Spanish to explain what kind of rooms they had available and what the rates were.

She complied, and he then asked if he could see one of the rooms before deciding. She said no, she couldn't leave the office, so he then asked if she had any photos of the rooms so he could make a determination. This annoyed her even further, but she rummaged beneath the counter and eventually found a faded photo album that looked like it dated from the revolution and set it in front of him.

Jet waited until the clerk was engaged with Matt, who was being as demanding as possible in order to distract her from the security monitors behind her, and made her way to the stairwell, where she used the rifle barrel to smash the lens of the camera mounted there. She took the stairs two at a time until she was at the top floor and did the same with that camera before hurrying to the end of the walkway, where she climbed the steel service ladder that led to the flat roof. When she was up top, she walked to the far end and paced off sixteen meters, set the rifle down on the tarpaper surface and freed the coil of rope from her arm, and then cinched it to one of the metal pipes sticking up from the roof with cables running from the tops.

Jet wrapped one end of the line around her waist two times and tested the knot with all her weight. When it held with no issues, she scooped up the rifle, chambered a round, and flipped the firing selector to burst mode. She glanced around a final time before edging to the rim and peering over at the sheer side and the hard ground three stories below.

She estimated the distance to the window of the second-story room below and then passed the rope beneath both armpits and gripped it with her free hand, the rifle clenched in the other. She again tested it and was relieved that her jacket afforded sufficient protection so rope burn wasn't likely, and then retrieved her cell from her pocket, punched Matt's speed-dial number, and when he answered, spoke one word.

“Ready.”

Matt had exhausted the clerk with a steady stream of inane questions about fumigation practices, bedbugs, possible discounts for foreigners paying cash, hypoallergenic pillows, whether they used bleach on the sheets, and everything else he could think of, when his interrogative was interrupted by his phone chirping. He held up a finger to the woman and answered, listened, and then frowned as he hung up.

“I'm sorry – *lo siento* . My wife found a better option. Thanks,” he said in English and then broken Spanish, “*Gracias, pero no necesito el cuarto .*”

The clerk's glare could have melted steel, and Matt beat a hasty retreat, leaving her to put all the material she'd placed on the counter back into its cubbyholes, the exercise pointless in the end.

He left the office and then ducked and ran to the stairwell. He stopped in front of it, noting the broken glass on the cement walkway from the camera, and then opened the fire alarm and pulled the red lever.

Alarm bells immediately began clamoring throughout the motel, and Matt sprinted away into the darkness, his part in Jet's first act concluded, and waited in the shadows at the edge of the property, his silent plea to the universe that Jet be successful one of many he'd uttered in their time together.

When the alarm sounded, Jet stepped to the edge of the roof and lowered herself slowly, feeding out the line as she descended until she was beside the target room's window. She peered around the edge and saw two armed men inside, with Daniela on the bed, looking around in fear. Both gunmen grabbed their AKs and headed for the door. One threw it open

while the second stepped out, weapon at the ready. Jet waited until he disappeared from sight, and quietly willed the first gunman out of the room.

Her telepathic powers failed her, but he at least moved to the doorway, increasing the distance between himself and Daniela. Jet couldn't wait any longer before the rope cut off her circulation, so she swung the rifle up, leveled it at him through the window, and squeezed off two bursts.

The first shattered the cheap glass and sent slivers flying into the room, and one of the rounds struck the gunman in the thigh. He screamed and spun around, firing his AK, but Jet's second burst knocked him back through the door, and he collapsed in the doorway, his gun clattering harmlessly beside him.

Jet pushed against the wall with her feet and swung out away from the building and then through the window. She released the rope and fired another burst, this one at the ceiling lamp, which burst and plunged the room into darkness. Jet leveled her rifle at the door, waiting for the inevitable arrival of the dead shooter's companion, and a moment later got her chance when he twisted around the door frame, AK searching for a target in the gloom.

Jet loosed a burst that tore through him, killing him almost instantly. She froze and waited for any other hostiles to present themselves, and when none did, she hurried to where Daniela was sitting up in bed with her mouth hanging open.

"Daniela, it's me," she hissed. "How many guards are there?"

Daniela blinked in confusion and then managed to focus on Jet's face. "It's you! What...where are my babies?"

Jet instantly realized that Daniela was drugged, and leaned closer to her, keeping the rifle trained on the doorway. "Daniela, how many guards? Think."

"I...I just saw the two. But...I think there are a lot more. Like fifty. An army."

Jet swallowed hard at the news and prayed that Daniela was delirious. Good as she was, she couldn't take fifty gunmen by herself.

"How badly hurt are you? Can you walk?"

"I...I don't know. They said I dislocated my hip. I've been taking something for the pain. It makes me sleepy..."

Great. Possibly immobile, doped out of her mind, fifty killers circling. Jet thought for a moment. "Let's try to get you on your feet and see how you do."

"Doctor said it would be a bit before I can walk."

"Well, your daughters are waiting for you, but you need to get out of bed so I can take you to them."

"My babies! They're okay?"

"I promised you I would take care of them, didn't I? They're fine."

Jet rose and crossed the room. She checked in both directions down the walkway and showed her rifle to a man at the last doorway, convincing him to duck back into his room and bolt the door. If there were fifty men, or even five more, they were nowhere in evidence, and Jet retraced her steps to Daniela's bedside, where she fished her cell from her pocket and dialed Matt. When he answered, she spoke rapidly.

"Bring the truck around. I may need your help. Not sure she's going to be ambulatory."

"I heard the shooting. Clock's ticking."

"Then hurry."

Jet hung up and peered at Daniela in the dark. "I'm going to help you to your feet, okay? But you need to help me, too. I can't do this alone."

"Oh, sweetheart, I don't know..."

"Daniela, we don't get you out of here, those fifty men will be back, and then you're never going to see your girls again. So concentrate. Swing your legs over here, put your feet on the

ground, and then I'll pull you up. You can lean on me for support."

Daniela drew a sharp intake of breath and nodded. "I'll do my best."

She moved with painful slowness, but once she was upright, Jet was happy that she seemed to be able to walk, albeit with difficulty. Her feet were bare, but Jet didn't have the luxury of searching the dark room for shoes, so she led her to where the dead men lay and whispered to her, "We're going to step over him and then past the other one. Neither of them is going to hurt you, but you need to focus so you don't slip."

Daniela nodded. "Okay."

She leaned on Jet's shoulder while Jet kept her rifle at the ready, and they awkwardly made it past the corpses and down the walkway to the stairwell. Jet helped her down the steps, taking them carefully, and when they reached the bottom floor, Matt roared into the lot in the Dodge and skidded to a stop in front of them.

"Help me get her into the back," Jet said, and Matt leapt from the truck and rushed over. Together they hoisted Daniela onto the rear seat, and then they were in the cab, Matt flooring it as the distant sound of sirens keened in the night air.

When they'd cleared the crime scene and had made several high-speed turns and were tracking back to their motel, Jet twisted to look at Daniela.

"We made it," Jet announced.

"I...we're going to see my girls, right? They're here in Culiacán?"

Jet nodded. "That's right. They're shaken up, and they miss their mother, but otherwise they're fine."

"Thank God." Daniela paused, and her eyes moistened. "I've made a terrible mistake. I'm an awful mother..."

Matt looked at Jet. "What's she talking about?"

"They were shooting her up with something. It's the drugs."

Daniela shook her head. "It's not the drugs," she shouted, and then quieted as though she hadn't been aware of how loud she was. "I...this is all my fault. I just want my girls. We can go home. Octavio will make all this right. He's forgiving..."

"I don't understand, Daniela," Jet said. "What have you got to do with any of this?"

The older woman waved a weak hand. "It's...complicated. And I'm...so tired..."

"Then rest," Jet said. "We'll be with your girls soon, and they won't want to see you crying. Is there any pain?"

"Some. But I'll manage. It was worse...earlier."

"That's good."

"How long...how long has it been? How many days?" Daniela asked faintly.

"Just since this morning."

Daniela paused, and then her eyes fluttered closed, and she drifted off.

Matt gave Jet a sidelong glance. "Want to give me the high notes?"

"Like I said. Piece of cake. Couple of mooks. Never stood a chance."

"Someone saw the truck. That's guaranteed."

"Then we'll steal a plate. It'll do for now. There are a million black Dodges in Culiacán, I'm sure."

Matt hesitated. "What do you think she was talking about?"

Jet's eyes narrowed, and she stared out through the side window. "I'm not sure, but I have a bad feeling. But it's not our problem. If I'm right, she made her bed and is going to have to lie in it."

"Care to expand?"

Jet yawned, the adrenaline from earlier seeping from her veins. "Not now. All will be clear in time. Just get us home so

I can love my daughter up. This has been the longest day of my life.”

He smiled ruefully. “I suspect you’ve had longer.”

“Just look pretty and drive.”

“You got it.”

Chapter 38

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

Luis stood near the gate with his surviving men and watched the warehouse burn, the wooden roof beams and columns fueling the conflagration along with the massive number of pallets and fuel containers stored inside. Waves of heat swam towards them whenever one of the fuel drums exploded, and after several minutes of his men helping their wounded to the trucks, they were ready to leave.

He'd started out with nearly sixty men, and between Tequila and Culiacán had lost fully half his force, with another six wounded. But they'd known that the toll was likely to be heavy, and the remaining fighters were somber though in good spirits at having emerged from the ordeal victorious. The cocaine they'd confiscated was worth a small fortune, but more importantly they'd delivered a debilitating defeat to Sinaloa, proving that Jalisco could reach all the way into their capital with relative impunity – a first in the cartel's history, and a game changer in the balance of power moving forward.

Luis walked to the Suburban and checked on Solomon, who lowered the passenger-side window when he neared.

“We did it?” Solomon asked.

Luis nodded. “Damned right. And we’re cooking Octavio like a pig right now. Nothing can survive that.”

“You saw him?”

Luis told him about the vault door.

“But you’re sure he’s inside?” Solomon asked.

“Nowhere else he could be. We searched the grounds. He’s in there. And it’s now the surface of the sun. Game over.” Luis

paused. “How’s the arm?”

“Used my belt as a tourniquet. I’ve been hurt worse. But I’m going to need a doctor. It might have nicked an artery, and the bone won’t set itself.”

“That’s going to be complicated in Culiacán. We’re in enemy territory. I’ll send a couple of the men with you, and you can stop in Tepic. We have people there.”

Solomon swallowed. “That’s a long way.”

“I know. But you go to a hospital here, you’ll be dead within the hour. We don’t have any other options.”

“Sucks. But you’re right.” Solomon winced as he adjusted the belt. “I hope I don’t lose the arm.”

“I’ll buy you two if you do,” Luis said with a grin. “Don’t worry. We won. Everything will be good from here.”

“Guess we’ll see. We should get a move on, though. It’s been too long already.”

“I know.”

Luis walked back to where his fighters were gathered by the trucks, and was about to order them to mount up when a screech of brakes from outside the gate interrupted, followed moments later by the heavy staccato boom of a large-caliber machine gun. The gunmen nearest Luis dropped as the .50-caliber slugs tore through them like tissue, their plate carriers no match for the huge rounds, and the rest scattered, taking cover where they could behind the vehicles.

Luis’s men returned fire, and more weapons joined in the firefight from outside the gate. One of the grenade launchers fired a projectile through the gate, and an orange fireball soared into the sky just beyond it after a deafening whump shook the ground. The fighter to Luis’s right took a bullet to the abdomen. He dropped his rifle and grabbed at the blood gushing through a hole in his flak vest, the body armor little protection against a high-velocity armor-piercing machine-gun round. He opened his mouth to speak, but a river of red poured from his jaws, and his eyes rolled back into his head, and he lay still.

Luis fired again and again at the unseen attackers outside the gate, the surroundings too dark to make anything out and his night vision shot from watching the fire. When his magazine ran dry, he ejected the spent one and inserted his last full one.

There was a pause in the shooting outside, and a voice called out over a loudspeaker, “This is Captain Ortega of the Culiacán Metropolitan Police. Throw down your weapons, or you will be executed. There will be no second warning. The army’s here, and we have you surrounded. There’s no way out. If you don’t comply, you die where you stand.”

Luis’s men stopped firing, and Luis yelled back at the policeman, “You don’t want to do this. You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“I know that if you don’t surrender, there won’t be anyone left to tell me. Make your decision.”

Luis scanned the trucks. Only ten of his men remained alive, the armor-piercing rounds having punched through plate carriers, truck beds, and everything else in their path. With the warehouse ablaze behind them, they were sitting ducks in the amber glow, backlit like targets on a shooting range. He had no doubt that the captain wasn’t exaggerating his predicament, and after a deep breath, he called to his men, “You heard *el capitán* . Lay down your weapons. We can’t win this one.”

The fighters reluctantly complied, and Luis called to the cop again. “Fine. We’re unarmed.”

“I want to see everyone’s hands in the air. Now. You have five seconds.”

Luis raised his arms and stood. His men followed suit, and then a blinding spotlight from outside the gates shined through, pinning him in its glare. He squinted to make out what was beyond it, but stopped when he saw a phalanx of police with M16s cautiously approaching, rifles locked on Luis and his group. When they had encircled Luis’s fighters, a tall figure ambled through the gates and stopped before Luis.

“You are all under arrest,” he said, his voice deeper than over the bullhorn.

“You really don’t want to get involved, Captain. This isn’t between us,” Luis replied. “I’m with the New Generation –”

“I see you are under the impression I care who you are. Who you are is my prisoner.” The captain looked around. “You’ve been busy. I have no idea how many counts of murder you’ll all be facing, but it will undoubtedly be many.”

“You do that and you won’t live to see the weekend.”

If the captain was concerned, his expression didn’t show it. “It was nice chatting with you,” he said. “Save your threats for the arraignment. I don’t care who you’re with. You have come to my city and slaughtered countless people here. I don’t know how things work in Jalisco, but in Culiacán, you’ll pay for your crimes.”

Luis frowned. “That’s not what I hear. Look, we can make a deal. Name your price.”

The captain chuckled and shook his head. “I see you still don’t understand. I’ll be happy to add attempted bribery to the roster of charges, but I suspect it won’t matter compared to everything else.” He looked to one of his men. “Cuff the prisoners and escort them to the transport vehicles.”

One of the policemen unceremoniously snapped a cuff on Luis’s right wrist and then wrenched it behind him and did the same with his left. After frisking him to confirm there were no hidden weapons, the cop escorted him through the gates, where a police truck was ablaze, a hole large enough to drive a jet ski through from the grenade detonation in its cabin. They passed a row of army and police trucks and stopped at a trio of paddy wagons emblazoned with the Sinaloa Metropolitan Police logo.

“Inside,” the officer growled, and pushed Luis to the open back of the nearest vehicle. Luis did his best to climb in, but with his arms cuffed, couldn’t maintain his balance and fell onto the asphalt.

“I need some help,” he said.

“In a minute,” the cop replied, and watched as the rest of Luis’s force were loaded at gunpoint into the hold of the second vehicle. Luis caught a glimpse of Solomon’s haggard features staring out of the back, and then the steel door slammed shut, and his men were locked in the wagon.

Luis was struggling on the ground when a pair of alligator-skin boots stopped near him, and he managed to raise his head. He craned his neck, and the blood drained from his face when he recognized their owner.

“Well, well. What have we here? Human garbage from Guadalajara, it appears,” Octavio said with a sneer. “The fact that it never occurred to you that I would have an escape route tells me you’re not only stupid but lazy. Which is in keeping with your bunch.” He drew a tired breath. “You think I would allow myself to die like a rat in your little oven? Please. You’re a fool. Now why don’t you tell me who ordered this, so I can have him skinned alive for the evening news?”

Luis glared at him. “Drop dead.”

Octavio stepped closer and kicked Luis in his ribcage. Luis cried out in pain, and Octavio gave him a malevolent smile.

“Very impressive. But we’ll see how you feel in a few hours after my boys have had a chance to discuss things with you. I know your balls must be tiny, since you’re from Jalisco, but even so, a thousand watts through them might change your attitude.”

Luis swallowed hard and fought back the tears of anguish, rage, and frustration that threatened to leak from his eyes.

Octavio sneered again. “You cry like a woman from just a kick? This is going to be most amusing. I can’t wait to see how you deal with real pain.” He paused. “That your bosses were stupid enough to try this tells me that they’ve completely lost their minds.” Octavio regarded him. “Unless...was this all your doing, eh? Are you behind the kidnapping? Why don’t we start with where my wife and children are?”

“You’ll never see them again unless you release me,” Luis growled through clenched teeth.

“And you will burn in the fires of hell unless you answer my question. So help me God, if you’ve harmed even one hair on their heads, I will drag your suffering out for weeks and will kill every family member of every member of your gang, understand? I’m sure you don’t know who your father is – that’s a given – but if you have a mother or children or a girlfriend or even a dog, if you don’t cooperate, they’ll all die in the most horrific manner possible.”

Octavio turned to the captain. “Get rid of the rest of this trash – they’re stinking up the city. I’ll take this one myself.”

The captain nodded. Two men dragged Luis to a waiting Lincoln SUV, and the last thing he saw before a black hood descended over his head was one of Octavio’s helpers lighting a cigarette and walking to the rear of the wagon with Luis’s men. The man lit a wick that was wedged into the neck of a bottle, and waited until one of the cops opened the door just enough so he could toss the Molotov cocktail into the cargo hold with the men before slamming and bolting the door closed again.

The screams as his men burned alive reached Luis as he lay in the back of the SUV, a bloodcurdling symphony of unimaginable pain that seared into his cerebrum like a laser.

Octavio slid into the passenger seat and twisted towards the back of the vehicle, his tone almost merry.

“Welcome to Sinaloa, *pendejo* . The party’s just getting started.”

Chapter 39

Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

Don Galleon sat with a brandy snifter half filled with Herradura 150 Anos Aniversario tequila, a cigar in one hand and a burner cell phone in the other. After a frustrating day of attempting to establish contact with Octavio, they had finally obtained a number for the phone he was using at the moment. Like Don Galleon and all the other cartel leaders, the upper echelon never kept the same number for more than twenty-four hours due to the tracking efforts of the American DEA, which worked in league with its Mexican counterpart, which pretended to investigate the kingpins but never seemed to have much success, even as its top brass drove new Escalades and Mercedes and enjoyed vacation homes on Lake Chapala or in the nearby mountain forests of Tapalpa.

He'd gotten word to Octavio that he would call at ten o'clock that night, and he studied the dial of his antique Patek Philippe wristwatch with absent satisfaction, the expensive bauble one of the rare treats he permitted himself. Unlike his newer colleagues, he eschewed ostentatious displays of wealth, understanding that they made him an easy target for those who were jealous of his power and status. Rather than gauche examples of stupidity with money, like the Vipers and McLarens and Lamborghinis favored by some of the other cartel leadership, he preferred to be driven around in Suburbans and Tahoes leased by a shell corporation with no ties to him that rotated a pool of vehicles used for mostly legitimate airport shuttle services when he wasn't on the move.

Galleon was a survivor of the bloody battles of the 1990s that had decimated his brethren in Tijuana, Chihuahua,

Tamaulipas, and León, and had emerged from that troubled time unscathed. It had taught him many valuable lessons, not the least of which was to avoid any sort of public profile, like idiots who declared themselves the “Lord of the Skies,” as Amado Carrillo had, or most famously to Americans, El Chapo, who’d cultivated the media attention that had ultimately been his downfall. In the heady 1980s and ’90s, even the Colombian bigwigs had forgotten that they were criminals who could be brought down by their governments, including Pablo Escobar, although Galleon had it on good authority that he’d staged his final capture and death in order to make a clean exit from the business so he could enjoy his billions, just as had Amado, who had been pronounced dead in Mexico City after a botched surgery, with the body disappearing and the two surgeons who performed the surgery found dead in oil drums shortly thereafter, in a long tradition of impossible-to-verify deaths of high-profile figures the world over.

Galleon took a long, appreciative drag on his Romeo y Julieta cigar and followed it with a sip of tequila, rolling it around in his mouth so he could get the full benefit of the taste buds on the sides of his tongue and his mid-palate. When his phone beeped to alert him it was time for his call, he perched the cigar on the rim of a crystal ashtray, eyed the serpentine spiral of smoke that drifted from the ember, and sat back, phone to his ear.

Octavio answered on the fifth ring, which Galleon interpreted as a sign of disrespect, but he brushed it aside – given the attempts on his wife and the attack on one of his properties, the Sinaloa boss was entitled to his annoyance.

“Don Octavio,” Galleon began.

“One moment,” a neutral male voice said, and static drifted over the line as whoever had answered passed the phone to Octavio – yet another snub given he’d agreed to take the call and should have answered it himself.

“This is Octavio,” he said when he came on the call.

“Don Octavio, are we on speaker?” Galleon asked.

“Of course not.” A pause. “You have something to say?”

“I do. On behalf of my organization, I want to apologize for the friction of the last two days, including the attempt on your wife. As you know, we have our rules and covenants, and we would never approve such a thing.”

“Interesting,” Octavio said, his voice giving nothing away.

“This was the work of a rogue faction. A lieutenant who was working outside of our sphere. Apparently he cooked up some hairbrained scheme and took it upon himself to put it into motion without our knowledge.”

“That’s...quite a story.” Octavio paused. “And where is this lieutenant now? What’s his name?”

“We’re trying to track him down. He disappeared yesterday with a group of his men. But rest assured, when we find him, we will gladly make amends by delivering his head to you, along with the heads of all those involved. We want no war with your people, and we will do this as a gesture of good faith and to indicate our seriousness.”

“His name?” Octavio demanded.

Don Galleon sighed. “Luis Ruiz Concho. A dangerous man, but impulsive. You have my word that when we locate him, he will be dealt with.”

Octavio was silent for several beats. “I can save you some effort. He made an attempt on me this evening. It went badly for him. So I will deal with him.” Octavio let that sink in for several seconds, and when he spoke again, his voice was hard. “Assuming I believe you, there is the question of restitution. I lost many men in the battle, and considerable assets that can’t be easily replaced.”

“We will make good on anything that was damaged or destroyed, Don Octavio. You know our reputation. We have a code, and we will follow it. You’ve been wronged by one of our group, and you will be made right.”

“It will not be a small number.”

“Whatever it takes to put this behind us. We have shipments to make, business to conduct, and we like having you as a trusted partner. It’s been a good few years, and the last thing we want is a lasting war over something that was out of both of our control.”

Octavio paused. “I will have someone contact you tomorrow with a list.”

“We will stand by to receive it and make full restitution. And you have my personal apologies for the attempt on your wife. That is so far over the line...”

“Indeed it is. The work of a madman, as you’ve said. I couldn’t believe your organization had sanctioned it. The implications...nobody’s families would be safe ever again.” Octavio hesitated, and when he spoke again, his voice was a low hiss. “Something it would be well to remember.”

Don Galleon swallowed the anger bubbling up at being addressed in so insulting a manner, and continued to maintain a civil tone. “Your point is noted. It’s a good one. I trust you won’t require any assistance with this Luis fellow?”

“The crabs will have him soon enough. Consider this chapter closed, so long as you deliver on your promises.”

“I’ve always been a man of my word. You have it.”

“Then that is good enough for me. Good-bye, Don G.”

“Good night, Don Octavio.”

Galleon hung up and shook his head, suddenly weary of bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. Octavio had been justified in his demands but not his tone; however, Galleon saw nothing to be gained by a reprimand. Still, he was not used to being spoken to like he was a liar or dealing in bad faith, and no matter how legitimate Octavio’s grievances, his approach had rankled and managed to put Galleon in a foul mood.

Which made him a very dangerous adversary.

Galleon finished the tequila, relit the cigar, and puffed until the business end glowed ruby red. He had no doubt the

Sinaloan's demands would be exorbitant, but it was only money, and the cartel was awash with it. Money would always pour in so long as the dimwitted and spoiled Americans consumed all the product he could ship north, so even if the bill came to tens of millions of dollars, that was a few days of profit just from the meth and fentanyl trade and would be a small price to pay to restore order and ensure their supply chains flowed smoothly.

“What a business,” he whispered to himself, and smiled dryly as he contemplated one final tequila as a nightcap. “Perhaps the Selección Suprema,” he muttered, and stood to get the ornate bottle of one of his favorite spirits – arguably the finest example of tequila Mexico produced.

The only good news to emerge from the discussion had been that Luis was no longer their problem, and they could extract themselves from a destructive war neither wanted to fight, for what would have been a considerable cost.

Both were wins in Galleon's book, and he opted for an extra-large pour to celebrate a job well done.

Chapter 40

Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico

Daniela stirred on the motel bed where Jet and Matt had placed her after her rescue. Her eyes opened, and she looked around the dingy room before fixing on Matt, Hannah, and Jet, who were sitting at a small circular table, eating tacos Matt had gotten from a corner stand up the block. Her daughters were slumbering on the other bed, exhausted from the tension of the long day.

Jet rose and moved to her. “Hungry?” she asked softly.

Daniela shook her head. “Not really. Just...everything hurts.”

“Car wrecks will do that. How’s your hip?”

“Aches. Whatever they were giving me was like a miracle.”

“Probably something like fentanyl. It works wonders for pain. Assuming you don’t develop a taste for it.”

“That’s...alarming.”

Jet shrugged. “It was developed for pain management in hospitals, so your use was legitimate.”

“If you say so.” She turned and looked at her sleeping daughters. “I want to get them home.”

Jet nodded. “We will. Daniela, you were saying something on the way here about this being your fault. You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

Daniela nodded weakly. “Water under the bridge, I suppose.”

“We can go whenever you like. It’s up to you,” Jet said.

Daniela sat up, wincing as she did, and checked her watch. “Octavio should be home. Let’s get going. Would you wake the girls?”

“Of course,” Jet said. She finished the taco she was holding and crossed to the bed to shake Daniela’s daughters awake.

Ten minutes later, Jet was behind the wheel and driving towards La Primavera lake, where Octavio had a sprawling mansion in the best area of town – one of his many residences and Daniela’s full-time home. The streets were quiet, with sparse traffic, and when she turned into the La Primavera neighborhood, the size and quality of the homes increased in opulence as they went.

“It’s up on the right. There’s a dead-end street that goes out onto a spit of land that fronts on the water,” Daniela said. “We have the whole point.”

Jet made the turn and rolled to a stop in front of a twelve-foot-high perimeter wall punctuated by an ornate wrought-iron gate. Four men with rifles stood just inside, and a fifth opened a pedestrian door and approached the truck, weapon in hand.

When he got to the driver’s side window, his eyes widened at the sight of Daniela and the girls, and he spoke quietly into an earbud communication system before saying a word to Jet. When he did, he practically bowed to Daniela.

“*Señora!* Lovely to see you. I’ll have the gate opened at once. May I ask who your guest is?”

Daniela smiled tightly. “A friend who is giving me a ride. Anton, it’s been a long day. Is my husband home?”

“Of course.” The gates swung open, and Jet turned to Daniela.

“This is where you get out.”

“Nonsense. My husband will want to meet you and thank you for your help in person.”

“I have my family waiting for me,” Jet said.

“It will only take a minute. Pull up to the house. One of the men will take the car for you.”

Jet braked to a stop in front of one of the largest homes she'd ever seen, easily thirty thousand feet of construction, and switched off the engine. A pair of guards hurried down the steps to open their doors, and they helped Daniela out of the passenger seat as her daughters hopped out and ran into the house. Jet swung her door open and stepped from the truck, and waited until the guards had Daniela between them and were practically carrying her into the house.

Jet followed them in, and Daniela instructed them to deposit her in the sitting area near the dining room to their left. They did so, and she thanked them and motioned for Jet to take a seat across from her. "I'm sure Octavio will be along in a moment. The men will have notified him already."

"This isn't really necessary, Daniela..."

"It's the least I can do. My husband has his faults, but a lack of gratitude isn't one of them. And you saved both me and my daughters several times."

"You would have done the same if the situation had been reversed. And you got me out of jail."

"Daniela!" a male voice boomed from the living room, and Octavio practically bounded into view. He stopped when he saw Jet. "And who is this?" he asked, his tone cautious.

"The woman who saved us. At the hacienda and after. Not to mention in Zapopan when they tried to grab me."

"How...very convenient," Octavio said. He regarded Jet. "And what is your name?"

"Rachel...Simms, is it not?" Daniela answered.

Jet nodded, surprised Daniela had remembered.

"Ms. Simms," Octavio said with a cock of his head. "Octavio Cervantes. I'm looking forward to hearing what sounds like an amazing story."

"Oh, it is, *mi amor*," Daniela said.

"The men tell me you're hurt?" Octavio asked Daniela.

“Yes. My hip. I dislocated it in an accident, but I’ll be okay. I just need a few days of rest and some painkillers.”

“I’ll have my doctor come immediately. And the girls?”

“They’re fine. Just frightened and tired.”

Octavio stood in front of Daniela with his hands on his hips. “Tell me everything that happened since we last talked.”

Daniela described the attack on the plane and subsequent chase and accident, then her kidnapping, and ultimately her rescue at the motel. Octavio listened intently and then turned to Jet. “What an unbelievable account. It’s like you’re Superwoman or something, no?”

“Daniela makes it sound far more interesting than it really was. I managed to crash a car, and got lucky with finding Daniela. There isn’t much more to tell.”

“You’re very humble, Ms. Simms. I suspect you’re downplaying your abilities.”

Jet shook her head, disliking Octavio’s polite but skeptical tone. “That’s the whole story.”

“Excellent. Please wait here for a moment, Ms. Simms. I have something I want to show Daniela before we put her to bed and get the doctor here. Say good night to your friend, Daniela,” he said, steel in his velvet tone.

“Good night,” Daniela said. “Thank you again for all you’ve done. We owe you tremendous thanks. Don’t we, Octavio?”

“It certainly appears that way,” he agreed, and helped Daniela up from the divan.

They walked together into the next room, and he led her to a tablet resting on a coffee table. He picked it up and held it so she could see it, and she gasped when she saw an image of Luis bound to a chair, his face barely recognizable, his shirt soaked with blood.

“What...why are you showing me this? Who is that?” Daniela managed, her voice shaky.

“My love, I know everything. Your boyfriend confessed the whole thing to me. There’s no point in lying,” he said, his grip on her arm tightening.

“I...I really don’t understand. Told you what? Whatever this man told you, it’s not true.”

“*Amor*, it’s a strange thing when a man is about to die and he knows it. He will inevitably speak the truth. He told me about your little scheme – about your desire to abandon our marriage and run away with him, your staged kidnapping in which you were willing to allow your bodyguards to be gunned down to add realism to the event. All of it. So there’s nothing I don’t know. Now, the question is how I deal with the mother of my children being a deceitful snake. Do I have you killed? Do I strangle you with my own hands?”

Daniela’s eyes widened in terror. “Octavio, no...”

“Never fear, my angel. After my initial anger, I realized that I know what I married, and have known it for some time. You simply proved your true nature. You couldn’t help it any more than the scorpion could help stinging the frog. So what I have decided is that I won’t kill you. I won’t cut your face to ribbons and leave you bleeding in the gutter, disfigured for the rest of your miserable life. No, you are still our girls’ mother, so you will remain in this house, and you will be prohibited from leaving. You cannot be trusted, so you will pay the price and be a beautiful canary in my cage. That is your future. You’ll be monitored twenty-four hours a day, and if you try to escape, you will be brought back and punished in a million ways. This is your sentence for betraying me and costing my men their lives. You will be a prisoner, you will honor your commitments, and you will behave or pay the price. Now, I can see that you’re in pain, so let’s get you to bed and have the doctor examine you and administer some painkillers.” He drew a slow breath. “As for our marriage, it is now in name only. I never want to see you except for when it’s necessary for the girls.” He called out into the hall, “Lisela! Jasmin! Come help the *señora* to her room.”

Daniela’s mouth worked to form words, but none emerged. All she managed was a combination gurgle and moan, and

then the housekeepers were taking her from Octavio and escorting her away.

Octavio drew a cell phone from his pocket, punched a speed-dial button, and spoke almost inaudibly into it. He then shut it off and walked back to where Jet was sitting and regarded her quizzically.

“I’m not sure what your role in all this is,” he said in a conversational tone.

“I don’t understand. I helped save your family. That’s my ‘role.’”

“Yes, I heard the story. What I mean to say is, I can’t decide whether you’re in on it or were just in the wrong place at the right time.”

Jet frowned and rose. “I don’t know what you mean by ‘in on it,’ but if you have a problem, it’s between you and your wife. Leave me out of this.”

“Perhaps that’s true. Or maybe it’s all an invention, an elaborate yarn to further muddy an already confused narrative. I honestly have no idea. But I will find out. If you’re, as you claim, an innocent who became Daniela’s salvation, you will have my undying thanks.” He paused and fixed her with a cold stare. “If not, you will spend the rest of your miserably short existence in the seventh circle of hell.”

“I don’t understand a thing you just said, but I’m leaving. Good luck with your daughters. They’re wonderful girls and deserve the best.”

Two bodyguards appeared from the foyer and approached Jet.

“I’m afraid you won’t be leaving quite yet. I need to figure out your role, and until I do, you’ll be my...guest,” Octavio said. He looked to the men. “Take her to the cellar and lock her up. Apparently she’s dangerous, so do not let your guard down, and see that she doesn’t have anything she can use as a weapon.”

Jet’s eyes narrowed. “You’re kidnapping me for saving your family? Seriously? You can’t do this.”

“Young lady, I’m quite tired at the moment, and when I’m tired, I’m extremely...unpredictable. You do not want to irritate me any further. I own this entire state, and there is nobody who will bat an eye if I put your head out on the wall by the gate. Understand? So you will do as you’re told until I have answers I can rely on, and until then, you are going to be held under lock and key. Now you can go easily, or I can have my men hog-tie you and drag you kicking and screaming. But go you will. How is up to you.”

Octavio nodded to the men and then turned on his heel and left. One of the guards trained his rifle on Jet as the other stepped close enough that she could smell onions on his breath, and ordered her to put her hands behind her back. She obliged, and he locked handcuffs on her wrists and grunted.

“This way,” he said, grabbing her arm and manhandling her down a long hall to a heavy wooden door and then down a flight of stairs to a stone cellar, one side filled with wine bottles and the other with iron bars and a steel jailhouse door. He drew a key from his pocket and opened it, and Jet could make out in the dim light a man, badly mauled, lashed to a chair in the far corner. The guard frisked Jet, and finding nothing but a plastic electric room key, pushed her through the opening and locked the door behind her.

“What if I need to use the bathroom?” she demanded.

“I’ll be back with a bucket in a while. Hold it until then. Or give our friend there a show. Doesn’t matter to me which.”

“You’re animals. I can’t believe this is the thanks I get for helping your boss’s wife.”

“Boss’s traitorous wife, you mean. I’ll be back shortly,” the guard said, and then followed the other one back up the stairs and slammed the door to the house.

Chapter 41

Jet paced the length of the bars, furious with Octavio, and berated herself for not disabling the two guards while she was with them. Much as she might have easily done so, it was all the others on the grounds who gave her pause. If her escorts had gone silent, the rest would have been on high alert, whereas if she escaped now, they wouldn't know it had happened until it was too late.

She'd suspected that Daniela hadn't shared the full story of why she was being so relentlessly pursued, but Octavio's reaction told her that her hunch that Daniela had planned at least part of it was correct, with the downside being that Jet was caught in the middle. The coincidences of the bad guys knowing Daniela's whereabouts at the hacienda and also about the plane had made Jet smell a rat, but she'd held her tongue on her suspicions, seeing nothing positive to be gained. And she had given the woman the benefit of the doubt when she'd been grabbed and her kids imperiled.

But now she felt like a fool. She didn't know the details, and she didn't need to. She could guess much of it, and the minutiae didn't matter.

Jet stopped in front of the man and looked him over. He had been put through a meat grinder, the work crude but effective, and he was barely conscious, so wouldn't be responsive to her questions. Seeing no point in interacting, she scanned the room for any cameras. Seeing only the one clipped to the bars that was trained on the man, she moved to the other side of the cage and went to work.

She leaned sideways and bent her head over as far as it would go, and worked one arm up to it, straining against the cuffs. Her fingers felt the bobby pin that held her hair out of

her face, and she pulled it free, cursing when she lost it, and it dropped to the floor. She drew a deep breath and looked at the hard concrete and, when she spotted where it had skittered to, lay down near it and groped for it until she had it in her hand.

From there it was textbook Mossad training. She opened the pin and slid one end along the edge of the cuff where it locked until she felt the pin hit the locking mechanism. A firm push and it retracted, and the cuff slid open with no resistance. Jet stood and opened the other one in seconds, and then the creak of the door at the top of the stairs warned her of someone's approach. She palmed the cuffs and held them behind her back, so it looked like they were intact, and scooted to the back wall.

The guard reappeared with a steel bucket and glared at her before his expression softened. He ogled her curves, accentuated from her arms being behind her back, and gave her a lascivious grin.

“You’re a looker, aren’t you?” he said.

“And you’re a pig who has to resort to goats,” Jet said, “or your friends upstairs.”

Anger blazed in his eyes. “You’ve got a mouth on you, too. You’re going to wish you’d been civil with me. I don’t have to put this bucket in there. I could forget. Get called away. Up to you.”

She stared at him without reaction. “Whatever you need to do to feel powerful, I guess. The weaker they are, the more they have to compensate.” Jet paused. “Wonder what Octavio will say when I tell him? He’ll figure out sooner or later that I helped his family and wasn’t in on anything. At which point you’ll be explaining. I’m sure he’ll understand. And believe your side of it.” She edged over to where the seated man was slumped in the chair, and smiled at the camera. “The guard is threatening not to put the waste bucket in the cell in order to torture me. I don’t know his name, but he’s the ugly, stupid one. So if you wind up with urine all over your wine cellar floor, you can thank him.”

The guard's expression hardened further, and he glared holes through her. "Enough. Step away."

She nodded. "Riiiiight. Because the fifty-three-kilo girl might give you a boo-boo or something, even cuffed. You bet, little man." She stepped from the seated man and moved sideways toward the door. "It's all yours, tough guy."

The guard's fury radiated from him as he unlocked the door and stepped in. He threw the bucket in the corner, and Jet's roundhouse kick caught him on the chin, snapping his head to the side. The light went out of his eyes, and he collapsed in a heap. Jet secured his pistol and his radio along with his keys, and checked his neck for a pulse. Thready, but there.

She'd been trained to enrage or distract a potential opponent whenever possible, because they were likely to miss things. That had worked well with the guard, who had been childishly easy to infuriate. She almost felt sorry for what would probably happen to him as punishment for allowing a slender girl to escape, but as with the tortured prisoner and Daniela, none of this was her problem. Her only imperative was to make it back to her family and get them out of danger.

Culiacán was not going to be their world for long, given the cartel boss owned the town and would no doubt turn over every rock to find them. That meant they needed to leave, which would be difficult without the truck, but she would figure that out later. For now she needed to escape the heavily guarded compound without drawing any attention, and quickly.

She turned the radio low and chambered a round in the pistol, even though she was determined not to use it. After locking the cell door, she took the stairs two at a time and hesitated at the top, ear pressed to the wooden slab. She heard nothing, so she inched it open, peered out, and then hurried down the hall to what she could see was a glass door that led out onto the lake side of the property.

Jet slid it open and slipped through the gap, and then reclosed it and padded across the manicured grass toward the water's edge. She was nearly there when she froze at the sound

of men talking to her right, and she slowly crouched and looked over in their direction. Two of the guards were smoking by a gazebo to the side of an elaborate pool, clearly unconcerned about anyone penetrating the high walls and gate with a small army there to stop them. She remained motionless while they finished their cigarettes, flicked them into the lake, and headed back to the house, the shapes of their rifles clear even in the darkness.

When they were out of sight, she continued to the water and scanned the shore. There were three plastic kayaks pulled onto the bank, and she quickly lifted one, carried it to the water, and quietly floated it until it was clear of the bank. She waded up to her thighs in the water, and then pulled herself up into the kayak and detached the paddle from its Velcro strap. With a final glance back at the compound, Jet set off towards the lights of the far shore, moonlight glimmering off the still lake's surface, the soft splash of her paddling as faint as the warm breeze that stirred the tops of the nearby trees.

Chapter 42

When Jet appeared at the motel, pants still soaked from the waist down, Matt looked her over with raised brows.

“There’s a story here, I’m guessing,” he said.

“You know it. But get Hannah. We need to move now.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll explain in the car.”

Matt woke Hannah up and carried her and his backpack to where a Nissan Sentra sat in the lot. Matt glanced at Jet, who shrugged and pulled her door open. “I had to hotwire it.”

“Truck finally run out of gas?”

“Something like that. Let’s move, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“That serious?” he asked.

“Deadly.”

Matt strapped Hannah into the back seat and slid into the passenger seat while Jet fiddled with the ignition wires. The car sputtered to life, and Jet put the shifter into gear and pulled out of the slot.

“Octavio didn’t want to play nice. Apparently Daniela is a snake in the grass, and he thinks I might be part of her scheme,” she started, and gave him the full rundown.

“Wow,” he said when she was finished. “I can’t let you out of my sight.”

“I stole this and then stole another plate from a different Sentra, so if we get hit on by the cops, it won’t register as stolen. At least not yet.”

“The lack of a key might raise eyebrows,” Matt observed.

“My plan is to avoid getting pulled over.”

“Good plan. But it begs a question. Where are we going? We don’t have any ID, the Jalisco and Sinaloa cartels are actively looking for us, which means so are the cops...so what’s the next step?”

Jet thought for a while. “We can’t go back to Guadalajara.”

“I’d say not, especially with corpses in our rental.”

“That might be hard to explain, even in Mexico,” she agreed.

“What’s north of here?”

“Los Mochis on the coast. Then Hermosillo, and then...the U.S.”

“Not going back there, then.”

“Agreed. So then...what?” Jet asked. “We can’t do anything international without passports. And ours are blown.”

Matt frowned. “You’re going to hate this. I think we need to call your old gang and see if they can help us.”

It was her turn to scowl. “I do that and I’ll owe them. You know where that leads. It took a lot to get out from under their thumb.”

“I’d say we could buy some papers, but since the largest criminal groups in the country want your head, that might not be prudent. I don’t see any other way, do you?”

She drove in silence for a full minute. “Crap.”

“Agreed. It sucks.”

“Give me your phone. They got mine with the truck.”

“I thought they traded you for a pistol.”

“Ha ha. Phone, please.”

He handed her his burner, and she dialed a number she knew by heart. It rang twice, and then a recorded message advised

her to simply leave a message. She left the phone number and nothing else.

They drove towards the airport, meandering until they got a return call, and when Matt's phone buzzed, he answered immediately and handed it to her.

"State your identification number for voice analysis and confirmation," a male robotic voice said.

"You could have done that with the phone number, you know," she said.

The line clicked and whirred, and then a human came on the line. "What is the purpose of your call?"

"I need to speak to the director."

"One moment."

A minute ticked by and then another, and then Noah's voice sounded in her ear. "We've been trying to reach you for hours."

"I lost that phone. But I must be psychic. Why are you trying to get ahold of me?"

"We have a situation."

She nodded to herself. "What a coincidence. I do too. I need an extraction. Now."

"Explain."

"I've run into a hostile development. I'm in Sinaloa. A city called Culiacán. I need out of Mexico, or at least out of the state. Roads north and south are likely not an option. My family's with me, and we can't use our IDs, so we'll need papers for all three of us in addition to the extraction."

"Let me look at a map and see what assets we have in the area. Give me half an hour. Stay on this phone, please. I'll call back."

"And your situation?" Jet asked.

"Let's take care of yours first."

Noah disconnected, and Jet handed Matt the phone. “Keep it on. He says he’ll call back. He’s checking to see what he can do.” She sighed. “But Matt? He says he’s been trying to reach me. Needs my help. That can’t be good.”

“It never is.”

“But we don’t have much choice, do we?” she asked.

“None I can see. Did he sound positive?”

“No way to tell. But we’ll know in thirty minutes.” She yawned and eyed an all-night taco restaurant with a group of airport workers standing around, munching on their late-night snacks. “Might as well kill some time. I never got to finish dinner.”

“Nobody will be looking for you here, that’s for sure,” Matt observed.

“Another plus. Hope it isn’t dog they’re serving.”

“Or rat,” Matt said with a grin.

The tacos were delicious, and Jet took her time while Matt waited in the car with the engine running. When she returned, they still had ten minutes to go before the call, so they passed the time discussing possible places to travel to with the potential of establishing a permanent home, or at least something that wasn’t actively dangerous and where Hannah could have some semblance of a normal life.

When the phone rang, Jet answered it, and Noah spoke with some urgency.

“If you can get to San Pedro de Rosales in the next hour, you’ll be met by a man named Jorge. He’ll take you to meet a plane, which will get you to Baja, where we’ll arrange for a place to lie low while we generate your documents.”

“How far is San Pedro from the Culiacán airport?” Jet asked.

“Six kilometers. He’ll meet you at the first Pemex station as you arrive from Culiacán. Driving a meat van.”

“Meat van?”

“From a butcher shop. It’ll have a steer’s head logo on it.”

“Ah.”

“Good luck,” Noah said, and disconnected.

Jet relayed the information to Matt, whose attention drifted as she was finishing. “We’ve got a problem,” he said, eyes fixed on the rearview mirror, where blue and red emergency lights were strobing as they approached on the highway.

“*No bueno*,” Jet said. “But might not be related to us.”

“Let’s hope not.”

Jet put the car in gear and took off ahead of the onrushing police vehicles, and watched in the mirror as they skidded to a stop behind them and blocked the lane that led out of Culiacán. She gave Matt’s leg a small squeeze. “Octavio wasn’t kidding about owning the whole town. Let’s hope his claim about the state was overblown.”

She continued along the route until she saw the Pemex station Noah had described. She slowed, pulled into the station, and parked by the bathrooms, the only car in sight, the attendant at the pair of illuminated pumps a fat man slumped in a red plastic chair, his chin on his chest, catching up on his rest.

They waited in silence, Hannah’s breathing a faint snore from the back seat, and when the promised butcher van pulled in and rolled to a stop beside them, Jet nudged Matt with her elbow. “Showtime.”

Jorge turned out to be a short, dark-complexioned man who volunteered that he was from Yucatán. Once they were loaded in the rear, he drove for an hour and a half before he stopped in the middle of nowhere at a dirt and gravel road near the ocean. He left his lights on and placed a call on a sat phone, and then set out a set of solar-powered lanterns along the sides of the strip, taking his time. Fifteen minutes later, a Bonanza single-engine prop plane descended from the night sky and skidded along the gravel until it stopped a dozen yards from the van. Jorge handed Jet the sat phone and indicated she

should hold onto it, and then escorted them to the waiting plane.

Moments later they were strapped in, and the pilot was executing a pivot before firewalling the throttle and hurtling along the strip. Just before it transitioned into a field of corn, he pulled up on the yoke, and the little plane soared into the sky and then immediately banked to the left and set out towards the Gulf of California and the dimly visible lights of La Paz a hundred miles away.

Chapter 43

La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico

After a flight that lasted less than an hour, the plane touched down at a dirt airstrip at Los Frailes, in the East Cape, north of San José del Cabo, where a Ford Expedition was waiting for them. The driver wordlessly helped them into the SUV and then began a bouncy ride north along a white sand road that glowed in the moonlight. When it transitioned into pavement, he increased his speed, and in another hour or so they were being handed the keys to a two-bedroom row house in a working-class neighborhood of La Paz, where graffiti and street dogs were apparently the main attractions.

Jet yawned as she walked through the simple dwelling and scrutinized the furnishings and bathroom. Luxurious it wasn't, but what it had going for it was that it was safe and off the radar. Noah called again after they arrived, and he explained that La Paz was controlled by Jalisco's competitor, the Tijuana cartel, which was at perpetual war with Sinaloa, and as such posed no risk to her. He asked her to call once she was situated, which she agreed to do, but was dreading because of the obvious quid pro quo involved in their rescue.

"I'm going to hit it," Matt announced from the master bedroom doorway. "Let me know what your new BFF says."

"It won't be anything I want to hear, I'm sure."

Matt smiled and nodded. "No such thing as a free lunch."

"You're no help. Go to bed."

"I'll wait up. I tucked Hannah in. She's already out."

"See you in a minute."

Jet pressed the redial button on the sat phone, and after two rings, Noah's voice came on the line.

"So?" he asked.

"It's fine. Now what is your situation?"

"Nabila is in Panama. We don't have anyone skilled enough to dispatch her. Your name came up as the perfect candidate given your relative proximity."

"What's the wrinkle?"

"There is none. Just that it needs to happen ASAP, as in tomorrow."

"And how do you see that working?"

"We need you to take a photo against a white background for a new passport we're already having created on the mainland. I'll give you the email address to send it to. You'll be transported to the Guadalajara airport, where you'll just make the five a.m. flight this morning to Panama City. You'll be met at the airport and given the passport and ticket, and then met again when you arrive in Panama, where you'll get a whole briefing report so you can plan the logistics. But I want her neutralized by this time tomorrow, in return for which your family will be given travel documents from the same group that's making yours, along with a private flight anywhere you want to go."

"Wow. For the company to be willing to shell out this much to get her, you must really want her taken out. Normally you fly your operatives coach."

"There's no time, and I don't want to negotiate and risk a no. So the deal I'm offering is the sweetest one you'll hear. It's easily a couple of hundred thousand dollars, between the ID, all the flights, extracting you from Sinaloa..."

"There's an hour time difference here. We're one hour earlier. So it's already past midnight in Guadalajara."

"Correct. We'll have a Hawker 800 on the runway in La Paz at three a.m., so you have four hours to rest. And of course, the four-and-a-half-hour flight to Panama."

Jet exhaled. “Obviously I’m going to say yes. How long will it take to get my family’s docs?”

“One week. Yours was a rush order. Triple the going rate. Complete with a chip that will register as genuine but somehow corrupted. It will pass muster.”

“And a kit when I land?”

“The office there is under instruction to provide you anything you need. There’s no shortage of arms of all types in Central America.”

“I’ll need cash, too.”

“They use dollars in Panama. You’ll get twenty thousand in hundreds with the report.”

Jet paused to think. “Done. What’s the email address?”

Noah told her, and she committed it to memory. “I’ll keep this phone to communicate?”

“Yes. Someone will be at the house at two forty this morning to take you to the airport.” Noah paused. “Good luck. You can’t fail.”

“You know I won’t,” she said, and hung up.

Jet slipped into where Matt was sitting up in bed and asked to use his phone. He gave it to her and stretched. “Want to tell me about it?” he asked.

“In a minute.”

She returned to the living room, sat on a dining room chair with her back to a white wall, and took several selfies straight on. She picked the least terrible and sent it to the address Noah had given her, after logging into a VPN so Matt’s number couldn’t be traced. When it registered as sent, she checked the time and went back to Matt and lay beside him.

“I’m here for three hours, then off to the races,” she said, and told him about Nabila and the sanction Noah had ordered.

“About time she got what was coming to her,” he observed, and she nodded in agreement.

“There’s definitely no love lost. Plus she’s a flat-out traitor. She made her bed.”

Matt studied her and smoothed her hair. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I can sleep anywhere. And frankly, this is way easier than I thought they would be looking to get me to do. In the old days, it would have been something impossible, or they wouldn’t have asked for me. This? Child’s play.”

“So you’ll be gone...a couple of days?”

“Tops. Noah’s spending like he’s printing money, which is out of character for the agency but a nice change. He sounds like he’s taken this personally. Probably because he knows I told him so. I warned him about Nabila, but he didn’t listen. This time he wants to make sure there are no screw-ups.”

“Hannah and I will be fine. Maybe we can find a Walmart and get some clothes while you’re gone. My shirt’s getting pretty ripe.”

“Not to mention your underwear.” She rolled towards him and kissed him hard, and then pulled away. “We have a couple of hours. How tired are you?”

He smiled.

“Let’s take a shower and find out.”

Chapter 44

Panama City, Panama, Central America

Jet opened the door of her Uber ride and stepped from the car, adjusting the black nylon backpack slung over her shoulder as she began walking. She was two blocks from the building where the Mossad had Nabila under round-the-clock surveillance, and she'd caught up on her rest while waiting for night to fall.

The contact had met her at the Guadalajara airport and given her a newly minted Belgian passport, complete with Mexican entry stamp, as well as several other countries over the last year; a Belgian driver's license with a subtly edited version of her passport photo so they wouldn't look identical; and two debit cards in her new name: Elena Sorbo, thirty-one years old, a geriatric care nurse on a one-year adventure to see the world.

In Panama, one of the consular staff had met her Copa flight and escorted her to an apartment leased by a cutout corporation on behalf of the agency, where they'd supplied a change of clothes that were slightly too large but in her preferred dark tones, the promised cash, and a serviceable Makarov 9mm pistol with a suppressor and an extra magazine, the thought being that if she were somehow apprehended, a Russian pistol would deflect blame onto that pariah nation rather than her true sponsor.

She'd broken the gun down and confirmed it was clean and oiled and that the serial numbers had been removed with acid, and then counted the crisp hundred-dollar bills, Ben Franklin's slightly bemused but irritated countenance staring at her as she thumbed through them.

Jet had then read through the entire report twice, marveling at how many pages could be generated by bureaucrats with little to say, and finally slept for five hours before packing her bag and venturing out for something to eat while she awaited dusk.

Nabila had left the compound and checked into an expensive high-rise hotel on the waterfront, probably to keep moving around so as not to make an easy target. That created both opportunity and obstacles, with hotels typically having surveillance cameras and nosy guests, so Jet had adjusted her makeup by going dark on the base, lending her the appearance of a local, or at least someone with significant indigenous blood. Panama was a melting pot, with Colombia to the south and Costa Rica to the north, and her vaguely Asian features and newly darkened coloring fit right in with every third Panamanian she passed on the street.

That would come in handy in terms of any potential witnesses or surveillance footage that might capture her in the hotel. After considering several possibilities, including getting a room there so she was a legitimate guest, she decided that making a clean in and out without any trail to follow would be best, and if the top of her head was caught by the cameras, so be it. She'd been trained by the best on how to hold herself so her face wouldn't be captured by surveillance, so she wasn't worried, especially nowadays when half the world was staring rapt at their phone screens when walking anywhere.

Jet had toyed with the idea of throwing Nabila out one of the windows and letting her plummet to her death, but a perusal of the hotel had revealed that they were fixed and didn't open. Not that it had stopped supposed suicides by bankers and meddling journalists the world over, but she couldn't expect the police to instantly rule such an unlikely occurrence as self-harm, so there was no point in trying. She'd requested, and received, a syringe filled with one of her favorite substances to induce cardiac arrest, which wouldn't show up on a routine tox scan post-mortem. Her plan was to gain entry to Nabila's room, incapacitate her, inject her, and then slip away undetected. Nabila's passing would be attributed to natural causes, and so no murder investigation or

manhunt would be warranted. Jet had played this gambit numerous times in her career, and it had never failed her.

The hardest part would be breaching the hotel room door. Her chosen solution was a microcomputer that the Mossad's engineers had designed to simulate an electronic card key, guaranteed to open any commercial lock of that type in thirty seconds or less. Just plug the sensor card into the slot or press it against the lock, hold it in place, and within no time the code would be tripped and the door would open. The field office had been helpful in obtaining one of these, flown in from one of its U.S. counterparts when she'd requested it that morning.

According to the Mossad surveillance, Nabila hadn't left the hotel since checking in, and was either ordering room service or dining in one of the facility's three restaurants. Jet bet that she was going the in-room dining route in order to minimize detection by whomever she was avoiding. That would have been in keeping with her tradecraft, especially if she were involved with untrained criminals of the sort who frequented Central America.

The lights were ablaze in Punta Paitilla when she neared the hotel, and music was booming from countless bars as the night got under way. Panama enjoyed a party nightlife for vacationers and seafarers alike, and a fair number of the natives earned their livelihoods by plying them with alcohol and every sort of imaginable diversion. Despite harsh drug laws, the country's proximity to Colombia and the mountains of cocaine it exported resulted in easy access, and narcotics were a large part of the city's nocturnal economy, as was prostitution, due to the ninety-day visas given to Colombian sex workers who plied their trade in the seedier hotspots.

Jet rounded the corner and was approaching the mirrored glass tower's elaborate front entrance when a trio of Asian men headed for a black Cadillac Escalade illegally parked at the curb nearly ran into her. The man leading the procession was clutching a laptop bag and glared at Jet for being in his path. He snarled something to his companions, who uttered ugly laughs and continued to the car. She resisted the urge to escalate and instead entered the hotel, where she'd been told

her quarry was on the eighteenth floor, and bowed her head over her cell phone as though entranced by what she was viewing.

There were no attendants at the elevator, so she waited until an empty car arrived and pressed the button for her floor, all the while keeping her head down so the inevitable cameras would just get the back of her skull. When the elevator slowed and pinged, signaling it had arrived, she walked into the long, carpeted hall, maintaining the cell phone ruse for the cameras installed there.

Jet stopped at the door of the room adjacent to Nabila's and knocked. No sound inside assured her the room was vacant, at least for the moment, so she slipped the lock unscrambler into the slot and waited for it to work its magic while pretending to fuss with her card. The lock LED switched to green after fifteen seconds, and Jet entered the room and closed the door behind her. She stood motionless, confirming she was alone, and then switched on a light and donned a pair of latex gloves so she wouldn't leave prints.

She moved to the connecting room door and unslung the backpack from her shoulder. After she examined the deadbolt, she removed a small leather case from one of the pockets and extracted a rake and a flat-bladed pick. Jet knelt in front of the lock, inserted the pick, and massaged the tumblers with the rake, moving it back and forth until gentle pressure on the pick turned the deadbolt with a soft snick.

Jet set the pick kit aside and retrieved the syringe and the silenced pistol. After switching off the lights, she pushed the connecting door open and stepped into the room, which turned out to be a suite. An uneaten meal sat on a silver tray by the door, and the unmade bed looked as though it had been recently slept in. Jet cocked her head and listened, and the faint sound of water running from the bathroom drew her there, pistol at the ready.

She pushed the partially open door wide and stepped back at the sight of Nabila, naked in the tub, the water bright red and nearly overflowing as the open tap ran, her wrists slashed

vertically halfway to the crook of her elbows, her eyes open with the vacant blank stare of the dead.

Jet stepped away from the macabre scene and did a quick scan of the room. Seeing no phone or computer, she retreated to the other room, relocked the connecting door, replaced all her things in the bag, and left, taking a moment to wipe the door handle before she continued down the hall to the elevator.

Outside on the sidewalk, she dialed Noah's number on the sat phone and, when he answered, spoke rapidly in a hushed tone.

"Target is neutralized. But someone else got there first. Made it look like a suicide, and if she had a computer or phone, confiscated them."

Noah was silent for a long beat. "Who?"

"No idea. You had the room under surveillance?"

"A maid placed a microcamera on the trim above the door, broadcasting to another room where one of our people is monitoring."

"Well, there's your answer waiting. I'm headed to the airport. Flight leaves in a couple of hours. I can leave the kit at the apartment. Cash goes with me."

"Affirmative."

The line went dead, and Jet switched the phone off and shook her head in amusement. Somebody else had wanted Nabila dead, and in her new line of work, it was a given they'd eventually be successful if she couldn't eliminate them first. But like Octavio, it wasn't her problem, and Jet felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders when she turned the corner and picked up her pace so she wouldn't miss the flight to take her back to Mexico and the loving arms of her family.

Noah crossed his office and punched the speakerphone button. "Get me Egret in Panama. Now."

Moments later a voice came over the box. "Yes, sir?"

"Have you been watching the room continuously?"

“Um, of course, sir.”

“Take any breaks? Get something to eat, watch a show, maybe use the bathroom?”

Silence. “How...how did you know? I must have gotten something bad to eat, because I’ve had a few bouts of...I was indisposed a few times, but for no more than five or ten minutes, tops.”

Noah choked down an exasperated curse and took a calming breath. “Rewind the feed to forty-five minutes ago, fast-forward while viewing, and tell me if anything happens.”

“Yes, sir. Give me a second.”

Noah waited patiently as the agent did as instructed, and then the man’s voice came back on the line. “Oh. Yeah, that’s not good. Three Chinese just showed up. Looks like she was expecting them. And...they were in there for ten minutes. Now they’re leaving. Crap. One of them has a laptop bag he didn’t have before.”

Noah shook his head in frustration. “Pack up and get out of there. Retrieve the camera and go,” he ordered. “All hell will break loose at any moment.” He sighed heavily. “Send us the contents of the feed immediately, understood?” He stabbed the line off and looked to the ceiling, and then slowly lowered himself into his seat.

The Nabila problem had been solved by unknown actors, but her laptop, and the contents thereof, which had to be presumed as dangerous as she’d been, was missing – which created an entirely new potential crisis.

Noah’s hand was shaking when he smoothed his hair and muttered to himself, “It never frigging ends.”

Chapter 45

La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico

Jet and Matt lay under the shade of a tree, side by side in a hammock that had been no mean trick climbing into, the balmy gusts off the Sea of Cortez stirring their hair as they watched Hannah play nearby. Jet had gotten back from her mission two days earlier, and they'd been making up for lost time, lazing away without a concern, waiting to have the difficult conversation they both dreaded.

Jet reached for a sweating water bottle on the nearby rustic table. She took an appreciative sip and then snuggled closer to Matt, in the moment and happy.

"I don't want to ruin this," Matt started, and Jet shushed him.

"Then don't."

He shifted and looked at her, studying her face and eyes as though seeing her for the first time.

"We need to discuss what we're going to do. Hannah needs stability, to go to school, to live in a safe world where it's not endless drama," Matt said.

Jet closed her eyes. "I'd get a soapbox, but I'm too lazy."

"I'm serious."

She sighed. "I know. Why don't we try looking around Baja? It doesn't seem to have any of the cartel problems the mainland does."

"That we know of."

"Everywhere is going to have something going for it and something against it. This feels pretty damned good, if you ask

me. Fresh fish tacos, slow walks along the waterfront...and you seem to have taken a liking to the local beer.”

“Nothing wrong with a cold Pacifico,” he admitted.

“So why don’t we rent a car and check out the rest of the city, and maybe head over to Todos Santos and the Cabo area? Or farther up the coast? I was looking at a map, and there’s a town a couple of hours north that looks like we could disappear in forever. Ciudad Constitución.”

“You really want to stay in Mexico? After what just happened?”

“It’s a huge country. We’re on a peninsula that time forgot. Nobody comes here but tourists for fishing or partying. It could be perfect, at least for a while. Don’t you feel safe right now?” she asked.

“I’m not saying this isn’t nice. But it’s a little...rustic, don’t you think?”

“Says the man who spent how many years in a jungle tent, eating bugs and showering with rainwater.”

“The point is we can live anywhere in the world. Why limit ourselves to here?”

Jet propped herself up on her elbow, which nearly tipped both of them from the hammock, and matched his look of concern.

“I’m home whenever I’m with you. The rest of this is window dressing. Noise. Hannah seems happy for once. She’s recovering in her own way. This is all good, Matt. I think we’ve been on the run for so long now we’ve forgotten how to be happy.” She kissed him. “I want to remember how to be. This is helping.”

It was his turn to close his eyes. “Put that way...I suppose I could give a few months here a whirl. Maybe get a job on a fishing panga.”

“We can have Hannah sell Chiclets.”

“You can clean windshields at traffic lights.”

Their breathing fell into an easy mutual rhythm, and they swayed in silence, Hannah focused on the dolls Jet had bought her the prior day when they'd explored the markets.

"We should see about rentals. We can't stay here much longer," she said.

"We'll get a Realtor. Or look online. I'm sure there are plenty of places. There usually are in spots like this."

"Then it's a deal? We can stay?" Jet asked.

Matt kissed her. "How can I refuse my completely-age-inappropriate-somewhat-more-than-a-girlfriend?"

She kissed him back and smiled mischievously. "I saw they sell Viagra over the counter in the markets. So you've got that going for you."

"I'll let you know if I need it."

She twisted, and they both landed on the grass, laughing. She rose and took his hand, a smile beaming ear to ear, and pulled him to his feet and whispered in his ear. He smiled as well and allowed her to lead him inside, the enclosed yard silent except for the plaintive mating call of a bird high up in the tree and a distant radio playing a throbbing cumbia beat.

<<<<>>>>

Thanks for reading *JET XIX ~ Mayhem*

I hope you enjoyed it.



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Turn the page to read an excerpt from

A Girl Apart

Excerpt from

A Girl Apart

Chapter 1

Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

Emilia ran tired fingers through her thick ebony hair as she and a pair of co-workers pushed through the iron gates of the factory grounds. They offered waves to a grinning security guard and continued down the cracked sidewalk, the darkness enveloping the street as the spotlights from the compound faded behind them. In the dim light she squinted at her fingers, whose nails were worn to the quick by another twelve-hour shift on an assembly line that never stopped. She sighed. Although barely out of her teens, Emilia had the hands of a middle-aged fishwife, and her joints ached like those of a geriatric, not a slim young woman with a quick smile and a bouncing step.

The gloom deepened as the trio hurried along the empty street. Their shift had ended earlier, but Emilia had been forced to delay their departure for an unplanned meeting with her supervisor. Exhaust and sewage wafted on the breeze along with the pungent smell from the nearby Rio Grande river basin, its brown seepage only a few hundred meters away separating them from the United States and its world of impossible luxury and boundless prosperity.

“Slow down, Rosa,” Emilia said. “This isn’t a race.”

Rosa, the tallest of the three, her long legs wrapped in skintight jeans, her makeup garish as a showgirl’s, slowed and twisted her head toward Emilia. “You may not have a life, but I do, and I have a date tonight, so I need time to get ready.”

Emilia rolled her eyes. “You have a date every night.”

The third girl laughed, her eyes dancing as they flitted to Emilia. “You would too if you weren’t so standoffish.”

“You mean selective, don’t you, Marisol?” Emilia replied. “Is it my fault I won’t hop in the backseat with every shop clerk or truck driver with a smooth line?”

“Don’t knock it,” Rosa said with a shrug.

The glow of a street cart illuminated a corner of the empty intersection as they approached, and Marisol’s nose twitched at the aroma drifting from it. “Just a small one,” she said, and Rosa nodded.

“Not for me,” Emilia said, eyeing the fresh churros hanging from a bar over the cart front. “My mom’s making dinner.”

“This *is* dinner for me,” Rosa countered, smoothing her blouse over her flat stomach.

“That and a dozen Tecate Lights,” Marisol said, and the girls laughed.

The vendor wrapped their selections in brown paper and exchanged them for a few pesos before returning to his newspaper, the evening rush over, his only hope now to pick up a few stragglers late to work on the night shift. The maquiladora section of the city was a buzz of activity when the crews changed, but deserted much of the rest of the time. With over three hundred plants turning out everything from printers to hair dryers, the area along the border was a magnet for those without options, but nobody lingered in the factory strip after dark – the crime in Juárez was infamous, and even if you minded your own business, robbery or worse was a constant threat.

Emilia checked her watch as her friends chewed on the fried confections, cinnamon dusting their hands as they ate. Her stomach growled and Rosa eyed her, one brow raised, hip cocked at a saucy angle. Emilia laughed at the vision, her friend’s provocative outfit completely out of place on the dusty street.

The wages Emilia made amounted to a little over a hundred dollars a week, paltry even by Mexican standards, but better

than nothing. With no degree or vocational skills, young women in the border town were limited in how they could make a living, and those uninterested in prostitution or serving fast food were faced with grim choices in a labor market constantly swelled by a surge of unskilled Central American workers hoping to build nest eggs before sneaking across the river to the promised land beyond.

The girls finished their treats, wiped their hands on scraps of paper that served as napkins, and proceeded down the street toward a larger intersection with a dozen bus stops within a block of each other. Rosa's cell phone chirped from her back pocket as they passed a narrow alley, where an emaciated dog with drooping teats from a fresh litter foraged for scraps near a pile of garbage.

"Hello?" Rosa answered, and then giggled at something the caller said. Emilia and Marisol exchanged a knowing look, and Emilia shook her head as they slowed so their friend could fake amusement at whatever her latest suitor was saying.

A pair of dim headlamps swung from behind them and bounced over the uneven pavement. Rosa chattered on her phone as the vehicle approached, but Marisol slipped her arm through Emilia's, her expression troubled. Ciudad Juárez had long been synonymous with unexplained disappearances of young female factory workers, and even though the crime wave had abated, rumors still circulated about this girl or that who'd ended her shift, left for home, and was never seen again.

Emilia's brow furrowed as the van drew near, and her mouth formed a silent O when it screeched to a stop beside them and the side door slid wide with a clatter. Two men wearing dark leather jackets and jeans leapt out and rushed the girls, who drew back in shock. Rosa screamed as the assailants waved handguns at them, and the nearest slapped the phone from her hand.

Marisol's eyes widened when the second gunman stuck his pistol in her face and then shifted his aim to Emilia, who stood frozen, purse clutched to her chest. The man eyed her terrified expression, and then his gaze drifted to her yellow top and

black pants and his mouth twisted in an ugly grin. He nodded to his partner, and they lunged forward and seized Emilia by the arms. She struggled and cried out as they manhandled her toward the van. Marisol ran after them, swinging her purse like a weapon, her stocky frame moving surprisingly fast. The bag caught one of the men in the back of the head, and he cursed and spun around. Marisol tried to kick him in the balls, but he saw the move coming and sidestepped it. A brutal blow from the pistol to the side of her head sent her sprawling to the ground. Her attacker stood, pistol leveled at Marisol curled in a ball on the sidewalk as his companion forced Emilia into the van.

“You’re lucky tonight,” he snarled, and then made for the door, where Emilia was staring from the interior with a look of horror on her face as the other gunman pressed his weapon against her temple.

The engine revved, and the second attacker jumped into the van. He pulled the door closed, and the vehicle tore off with a screech of rubber, leaving Rosa and Marisol to choke on a cloud of exhaust. Rosa squinted at the back of the van, trying to make out a license number, but there was no plate, only a pair of cracked taillights flickering above a dented bumper. Marisol struggled to her feet and screamed for help. Rosa moved to where her phone lay on the sidewalk and scooped it up, and then swore when she saw the shattered screen.

“Don’t just stand there,” Marisol cried. “We have to do something.”

Panicked tears coursed down Rosa’s face as she held up the broken cell for Marisol to see, and then she joined her in screaming for help, their voices echoing off the ribbon of pavement that stretched endlessly into the gloom.

Chapter 2

El Paso, Texas

A faded sign announcing *Whispering Pines, Apartments 4 Rent* rattled in the morning breeze before a dilapidated string of low-rent dwellings around a courtyard devoid of anything resembling conifers. A harried-looking young woman emerged from one of the apartments and rushed along the path to the front gate, a battered messenger bag in hand and a purse hanging from her shoulder, auburn hair pulled back in a loose ponytail as she scanned her cell phone screen through heavy black-framed glasses.

“Leah! Hold up. You got a minute?” a scratchy female voice called from the first unit’s open doorway.

Leah paused, her lips pursing in annoyance. “Not really, Aunt Connie. I’m late again.”

Aunt Connie stepped from the doorway, hair in curlers, her face weathered by decades of cigarettes and drugstore bourbon. “Didn’t see you come in last night.”

“I worked late,” Leah said, her tone reasonable.

“You might have called to let me know.”

Leah drew a measured breath. “I was really busy with a story.”

That drew a worried frown. “I was worried about you.”

“We’ve talked about this before. There’s no reason to be. The hours go with the job.”

Aunt Connie’s scowl deepened. “I don’t like not knowing where you are.”

“I appreciate that. But you really don’t have to worry about me.”

Leah’s aunt eyed her baggy cargo pants and hastily chosen top with a raised eyebrow. “I thought that maybe you had a

date or something. That would be nice. But then when it got so late..."

Leah groaned inwardly. Not this again.

"Your concern's appreciated, but—"

"You're still seeing that nice Bill boy, aren't you?"

Leah bit back the sharp response that rose in her throat in favor of something more diplomatic. "No, as I explained before, we broke up when I moved to New York." Leah had brought Bill, a co-worker she had been dating at the time, to a family event four years earlier, and he'd obviously made a lasting impression.

Aunt Connie nodded sadly. "Oh, that's right. Well, it's just a shame to see you...spending your life without a family."

"You're family, Aunt Connie. And I'm not lonely, really. But what I *am* is late this morning, so..."

"I know I'm the only family you have here, Leah, and that's why I worry, girl. It's just... I don't want to get in your way, but I'd appreciate the courtesy of a phone call if you're going to be out half the night. These days you can never be too careful."

"I know, and as I've said before, I'm always careful. And I was at *work*. Inside. At my desk. Working." Leah glanced to where her beater car was parked only a few yards away. Only a few of the units had a parking slot, and so she was one of the unlucky ones relegated to battle it out on the street. She did her best to avoid letting her impatience show. "We can talk about this later, but I really need to get moving if I'm still going to have a job at all."

Before her aunt could respond again, Leah spun on her heel and made for the car. Ever since she'd returned to El Paso three months earlier, she'd been trying to get along with a relative she'd never known very well, and one who seemed compelled to mother Leah as if she were twelve. Leah accepted that she was exchanging some amount of companionship for a more-than-reasonable rent, but she wished she could go about her business without feeling she

owed an explanation for her lifestyle, let alone her whereabouts.

Leah's gray Chevrolet Malibu's lock resisted her effort to open it, as it did every morning, and she forced herself to calm down and not take it personally. The clunker had been a budget purchase from a questionable used-car lot that extended credit at usurious rates and had been willing to accept a paltry down payment, so what could she expect? That it ran at all was a minor miracle, and she gently worked the key until the lock flipped open, reminding herself to be thankful for what she had.

The thought stopped her.

What she had was a cracker-box apartment, with noisy plumbing and pot residue on the ceilings, that was rock-throwing distance from the border, in a complex inhabited by meth heads and stragglers on their last legs. Her life was in shambles, her career all but at an end, and with no social life to speak of beyond a nosy relative she couldn't connect with.

Leah tossed her bag and purse onto the passenger seat and slid behind the wheel, sniffing automatically as she did so. The car smelled vaguely like something had died inside after burrowing deep into one of the seats, and the faint odor was another reminder of her current reality versus the one she'd imagined for herself only a few years earlier.

She twisted the ignition and the car rumbled to a stuttering idle. Leah pulled the windshield wiper lever to clear the thin film of Texas dust off the glass so she could see more than hazy outlines. An anemic stream of water spurted forth, and the blades smeared the beige dust into a series of muddy streaks. She sighed as she put the transmission into drive and pulled from the curb, narrowly missing a migrant worker riding a bicycle the wrong way down the one-way street, who saluted her with a middle finger by way of thanks.

Leah stopped at a convenience store for a cup of coffee and stood impatiently in a line that was a microcosm of El Paso charm – a rail-thin man in his thirties with a Stetson, oversized belt buckle, and straight leg jeans who'd never been near a

horse in his life; a pair of yard workers cradling jumbo bottles of full tilt Coke and speaking softly to each other in Spanish; a crone shuffling forward in sweat pants and a stained T-shirt to buy a pack of menthol cigarettes; a woman standing by the register with a meth twitch and furtive eyes.

How had Leah wound up back in a place she'd spent her entire life escaping? It was worse than any punishment she could have engineered. She'd aced her exams and won a scholarship to Columbia University, majored in journalism, and come back from New York to spend two years in El Paso plying her trade before her mentor at school had suggested her to the *New York Herald* as a promising recruit.

The day she'd gotten the call from the *Herald* had been the best of her life – the beginning of her ascent to a higher level in her chosen profession and her ticket out of El Paso. Her mother had passed away five years earlier, and her father had sold his hardware store shortly thereafter and moved to Argentina to live the good life at the base of the Andes, so there had been nothing to return to – not that she'd ever planned on doing so, after living in the Big Apple for three years, a rising star in a dream job that had exceeded her wildest aspirations.

Leah's ruminations were cut short when the cowboy bumped her with his elbow as he reached for his wallet, and a sluice of coffee splashed from a slot in the lid and christened her shirt. She gasped at the burn, but he didn't even notice, too busy buying a fistful of lottery tickets and a pack of Marlboros, unaware he'd just ruined her blouse.

A glance at a mirror mounted on a rack of cheap sunglasses confirmed that the stain would be noticeable, and she frowned at her reflection – hazel eyes artificially small behind thick glasses, a face that her mother had described as cute or pretty, but never beautiful, the cheeks a tad too round for her liking, as were her curves. Leah was always twenty pounds from what she considered her fighting weight, but could never bring herself to push for the final stretch, seeing little point, especially now that she was back living in Purgatory.

As the cowboy sauntered off like a B-movie extra, Leah shuffled forward with her coffee, resisting the urge to check her watch every thirty seconds. She tossed a fistful of coins on the counter, shifting foot to foot as the clerk counted them with agonizing slowness, and then bolted for the exit, the coil of anxiety in her stomach tightening with each passing moment.

The remainder of the drive to the squat two-story building that housed the offices of the *El Paso Examiner* was the typical morning stop-and-go misery. Other drivers were aggressive for no apparent reason, their tailgating a symptom of a pressure-cooker society. One particularly domineering SUV stuck to her bumper for the final stretch like she'd stolen the driver's wallet, and she took perverse delight in keeping to the speed limit even though she was beyond late for work now.

She pulled into the *Examiner* lot to an angry roar of exhaust from the lifted truck and smiled as she found a spot near the building – no point in getting an ulcer over what was already done if the driver was willing to do it for them both.

Leah hustled past the receptionist and took the stairs two at a time while debating stopping at the restroom to do some damage control on the coffee stain – but decided to wait until she'd checked her messages – it had dried in the car's air conditioning, so there was no hurry.

She was halfway to her desk in the corner of the newsroom when a woman's voice called out from behind her with a tinkling laugh.

“Mason! Finally decided to grace us with your presence?”

Leah swallowed a knot and stopped, reminding herself to play nice, given that she badly needed the job.

“Good morning, Margaret,” she said, turning with a half-smile in place.

“Got stuck in traffic, I suppose?” her supervisor said as she made her way toward Leah. “I guess you haven't quite figured out the timing from your new apartment, but...” Her voice trailed off as she stared expectantly at Leah, obviously waiting for an apology.

“Well, I was here until eleven last night,” Leah said innocently. “You wouldn’t know, of course, since you left at five.”

“Well, nobody asked you to stay till all hours. That’s always your choice if you don’t finish your work. But I have an assignment for you, and not being sure if you were coming in today, or when, I was scrambling to find a replacement.”

“An assignment?” Leah asked suspiciously. Assignments from her supervisor were rarely good and inevitably tedious and demeaning.

Margaret did a poor job of trying to hide her dislike for Leah, possibly borne from jealousy when Leah had landed the plum job in NY and left the paper. Now that she was back, Margaret seemed to enjoy subtly reminding Leah of the pecking order by delegating countless menial jobs to her and keeping her busy with stories Leah judged to be nonsense. Either that, or Margaret really did believe her constant exhortations to “find the extraordinary in the ordinary” – something Leah had a difficult time buying into.

That Leah had just broken the first installment in a story that had caused a local sensation and been picked up by the wire services didn’t alter Margaret’s treatment of her; if anything, it made the jealousy worse and Margaret more determined to teach Leah her place.

Margaret’s face broke into a brittle smile. “That’s right. A new strip mall at East 3rd, down by the border. They’re having a grand opening. We want a thousand words on it by the close of business today.”

“A mall opening. Are you serious?” Leah said, her voice flat. “How about I write it now and skip driving over there?”

Margaret’s smile hardened. “No, I want you to go down and talk to some of the shop owners. Get some local color to sprinkle through the piece. How excited they are, that sort of thing. I don’t know how things operate in New York, but here what sells papers is local color. Personal interest. People like to read about themselves and the places they go. You may feel it’s beneath you, but we know our market.”

Leah had two options: she could refuse and go to Ridley Talbert, the editor, to protest being handed an assignment that was a complete waste of her time; or comply, keeping the fragile peace with Margaret but flushing her day and the research she'd hoped to continue on the series she'd started with such a bang.

She opted for the safe route. She could always work late again after the mall event. The Internet never slept, even if she had to occasionally.

“Sure...you're right, of course. Let me check my messages, clear my desk, and I'm all over it, Margaret.”

Margaret's eyes swept over Leah's ensemble. “You might consider wearing clean clothes to work so you're presentable.”

Leah looked down at the coffee stain. “Some jerk spilled on me at the store on the way in. I can always go back home to change if you think it's important.”

Margaret didn't take the bait. “No, no, there wouldn't be time now. Just try to get the worst of the coffee out of it and head to the mall.”

“Do you want me to take photos?”

Margaret shook her head. “We'll use some of the stock ones they sent us.” She gave Leah a final look that managed to convey annoyance and superiority in a single glance, and then turned on her heel, leaving Leah almost trembling with anger.

Leah was used to the woman's arrogance, but that didn't help with her frustration over the incessant undermining, which sometimes bordered on sabotage ever since her big story had broken and Talbert had commended Leah on a job well done. Leah should have expected it – she'd known Margaret for years and was more than aware that she despised her own situation, working as an associate editor for a third-string rag in a dusty backwater with no future. She had the personality of a weasel and, like most petty bureaucrats, took out her feelings of inadequacy on her staff, particularly someone like Leah who had dared to achieve something she never would.

Leah plopped down in a worn swivel chair behind a cheap metal desk and eyed her computer screen as her system booted up. The PC was older than her degree and took forever to do even the simplest of tasks. She'd been spoiled at the *Herald*, where everyone had state-of-the-art equipment, and she'd gotten used to the fastest systems money could buy. Here at the *Examiner*, everything associated with the business was a relic, from the phone system to the furniture, which was to be expected, as circulation revenues had shrunk in the wake of the Internet. Talbert had been a cheapskate even when times had been relatively good, and now that they were lean and headed worse, she was grateful that the *Examiner* still supplied toilet paper and meager air conditioning for its underpaid staff.

Leah's eyes were drawn to her telephone and its blinking message light. She lifted the handset to her ear and entered her passcode, and the system informed her that she had one new voicemail. A male Hispanic voice, heavily accented and gravelly, spoke slowly, as though unsure of how to proceed.

"Miss Mason? Leah Mason? This...my name is León Sánchez. Congratulations on your article about the killings of the factory workers in Ciudad Juárez. It attracted my attention, and I wanted to call...and...here is my number. I would like to meet with you as soon as possible. I can't say much on the telephone, but it will be worth your while to talk."

Leah groped amidst the clutter on her desk, found a pen, and scrawled the Juárez phone number on a scrap of paper before the message stopped with a beep. She rewound it and listened to it again, and then depressed a button to check the time stamp. Only twenty minutes ago.

Leah had written a four-thousand-word think piece on the infamous Juárez murders of the nineties, when hundreds of young female workers had disappeared, later turning up in mass graves. A number of perps had been prosecuted after an almost decade-long investigation, but even after a series of convictions, some believed the entire proceedings had been a cover-up. She'd penned an exposé that highlighted the fact that the disappearances had never really stopped until two years after the convictions and, more ominously, had recently started

again, with six women gone missing over the past four months – the latest only a few days before. The end of the piece had speculated that the killers might have never been apprehended, and promised follow-ups that would pursue the cases until the truth was revealed.

The article had been sufficiently lurid to catch the imagination on a slow national news day, and her words had gone viral after several papers on the coasts picked it up, making her a minor sensation for the second time in her life.

She shook her head to clear it, trying not to think about the first time.

That hadn't ended well.

Leah checked her email and saw nothing urgent and, after a final scan of her desk, gathered her purse and messenger bag again and made for the door, tossing a salute to Talbert through his office window as he berated some unfortunate over the phone, her mind replaying the unusual message and wondering what could be so sensitive that Sánchez needed to discuss it with her in person.

Chapter 3

Leah arrived at the mall as the local high school marching band was finishing its performance in the relentless broil of the late summer morning, the sun a blinding orb in an azure sky devoid of clouds. A new parking lot with thirty or so vehicles scattered around the periphery shimmered from the heat, and a handful of minor dignitaries stood by a ribbon, looking like they'd rather be anywhere else on the planet.

She killed the engine and stepped from the car. The swelter assaulted her as she made her way to the gathering. The toot of a tuba and snap of a snare drum signaled the end of an uninspired rendition of *The Yellow Rose of Texas* played to a crowd of largely bored unemployed laborers, taking advantage of free lemonade and snacks, plus a huddle of beaming band member parents who clapped like they were attending a Broadway premiere.

The mayor offered a smattering of applause before stepping to the ribbon, accompanied by a local beauty queen in a ball gown wholly inappropriate for the outdoor event, and what Leah guessed was the developer – a lanky, tanned man with the look of a golf pro who dabbled in real estate between tournaments. The man grinned at the gathering, displaying a full set of blindingly white teeth that would have been the envy of a Kardashian, and launched into a speech about community, diversity, opportunity, ultimately finishing with a rousing plea to the Almighty to bless this proud undertaking. Leah had to bite her lip to keep from rolling her eyes. It was a frigging strip mall, not the Sistine Chapel, but to hear his oration it was the eighth wonder of the world.

The mayor, his brow beaded with sweat, his suit inadvisable given the temperature, went next, and his speech was thankfully short. When he was done, Miss Armadillo or whatever handed him a pair of oversized scissors and he cut the ribbon strung across the doors of the grocery store that was the anchor tenant, and more applause signaled that the festivities had reached their dizzy crescendo.

Leah circulated among the few shop owners who stood beside their storefronts like dazed night creatures exposed to light, waiting with banners announcing grand opening sales and promising unbelievable discounts. She made small talk and got a few obligatory quotes she could have invented while in the john, and after taking down their names, put away her notepad and felt for her cell phone.

The Mexican line carried a hum of static, and the ringing warbled tremulously in her ear. It was answered by the same voice that had left the message for her, a scratchy baritone that sounded challenging with just a single syllable.

“*Si* ?”

“Mr. Sánchez? León Sánchez?”

“Yes,” Sánchez said, switching to English.

“This is Leah Mason. You left a message for me earlier?”

“Ah, Miss Mason. Of course. Thank you for calling me back.”

Leah waited, hoping he would get to the point before she melted in the sun. She cleared her throat expectantly. “Sure.”

“As I said, I read your article with great interest. It presented many of the questions we’ve all had about the case of the missing girls,” Sánchez said, his English oddly formal. “I was instrumental in the investigations that led to the prosecutions being brought, but was never satisfied with the resolution.”

Leah’s ears perked up. “You were with the police?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“You mentioned that you’d like to meet?”

There was a long pause, and Leah felt a bead of sweat trickle from her hairline and work its way down her spine.

“If you can, yes. I have information...I can’t discuss it on the phone, but if we can meet somewhere today...I have a file you must see.”

“A file?”

“That’s all I can say.”

“Why me? Why don’t you take it to one of the papers down there?”

“No one cares. They are all corrupt. Nobody here would print this story. It would be killed immediately.”

Leah considered his words, her curiosity piqued. “Can you come to the U.S.?”

“That would be difficult for me. It would be better if you could come to Juárez.”

The thought of crossing the border didn’t thrill Leah. She’d been enough times to hate the place, and hadn’t been back in years. Bad as she thought El Paso was, Ciudad Juárez was a whole different level of despair and poverty, and she had little interest in subjecting herself to it if she could avoid it.

“I don’t know, Mr. Sánchez. I have a pretty full day,” she said, eyeing the throng in front of the grocery store dispersing now that the free show was over.

“I can assure you it would be worth the effort. This...it is the story of a lifetime. No exaggeration.”

“Can you be more specific?”

Another long pause. The faint humming on the line buzzed in her ear. A jet soared overhead on takeoff, and she winced and jammed a finger in her other ear, straining to hear the Mexican’s response.

“It is not safe to talk over the phone.”

Leah sighed. Fine. Part of her job involved melodrama, and this guy was pouring it on thick. But there was something in his voice and his cautious words that commanded attention. He didn’t sound like a kook. She’d spoken to her share of nut jobs, and this was...different. Serious.

“I can be there in an hour and a half, tops. I have to get my passport, and I’d rather walk across than take my car and hassle with insurance. Is there someplace near the border we can meet?”

She could hear his breathing. “Yes. A cantina. *Mi Ranchito* . It is in the town center. Any taxi here can take you. They will all know the place.”

“*Mi Ranchito* ,” she repeated. “Too far to walk from the bridge?”

“I’m afraid so. But a short ride.”

She glanced at her watch. “Want to say...one thirty?”

“Or two. I must get the file.”

“Fine. I’ll see you at two. How will I recognize you?”

“You won’t have to. I have seen your picture on the Internet.”

Leah disconnected and stared doubtfully at her phone. Going to Juárez when she was supposed to be covering the mall shindig was crazy, but her gut said that Señor Sánchez was the real deal. When he’d said that he had the story of a lifetime, she’d actually shivered. If he was pulling her leg, he deserved an Oscar, because she believed him. And if he’d been part of the original investigation of the girls, the mystery file might hold the key to breaking the story wide open.

God knew she needed a break – one big bombshell that could put her back on the industry radar rather than spending a career covering minor celebrity weddings and missing pets, tormented by the Wicked Witch of the Southwest.

Her heart beat faster as she slipped behind the recalcitrant car’s wheel and started the engine. She might have been thrown a few curveballs, but she was still at bat, and as long as she could swing, she was doing what she’d always wanted for a living, even if it was from the armpit office of the local fish wrap. The Juárez murders had been shocking and brutal, and her revisiting of the story had struck a chord. If she could follow it up with something nobody had ever seen before, it could be what she’d been dreaming of ever since her disastrous departure from the *Herald* .

Leah hurried home, thankful that her aunt was now closeted away with the AC blowing, watching her soap operas and crocheting more doilies that nobody wanted. Inside her

apartment Leah ferreted around in her nightstand drawer and found her passport, issued when she'd moved to New York with visions of traveling the world in pursuit of the stories lesser reporters didn't dare cover. Now its unstamped, blank pages were just another reminder of how far she'd fallen since then. She slid it into her back pocket, changed into a clean top, and was out the door with just enough time to grab a hasty lunch and walk across the bridge at the Paso Del Norte border crossing.

The *Puente Internacional* was dense with pedestrians trudging over the dry riverbed that delineated the Mexican border. The fifteen-minute walk in the heat of the day felt like an hour's forced march, and when she passed through the Mexican customs building, she sighed in relief. Leah stepped from the immigration checkpoint into a dusty haze of Juárez exhaust and contrasted the antiseptic U.S. side to the chaotic pandemonium of Mexico, with vendors hawking every manner of snack and junk to anyone who would listen and cars growling past, blaring their horns as tempers frayed in the heat. A sweating one-legged man with copper skin and clown makeup on his face juggled bowling pins by a line of taxis, his dog beside him with a party hat affixed to its head and a tip basket clenched in its jaws. Leah deposited a dollar into the basket, mainly for the dog's sake, and continued to the head of the queue.

The cab driver knew *Mi Ranchito* and, after they negotiated a price, swung into traffic with suicidal abandon, Banda music screeching from the car radio.

"Do you have air conditioning?" Leah asked from the backseat.

"Oh, no, *señorita*, I'm sorry, ees broken. But the breeze is fresh from the windows, no?"

Leah shook her head. "No."

"Ees no very far. You will see."

The cantina was a seafood restaurant with garish pink paint and a palapa roof. Leah paid the driver and ducked into the shade of the interior. Only a few tables were occupied, all by

locals, and a young waiter led her to a corner beneath a ceiling fan that afforded slim ventilation. She checked the time, ordered a soda, and thanked the universe that she only had twenty minutes to wait before Sánchez was due.

Two hours later she paid her bill and stalked to the entrance, where the waiter had called her a taxi. She'd tried Sánchez's number three times, with no answer, and had ignored a call from Margaret a half hour earlier, not wanting to deal with it. Leah fumed at having been suckered into a wasted trip as the cab wended its way back to the border. She'd squandered precious time she didn't have on the empty promise of the story of a lifetime that had turned out to be a hoax.

Chapter 4

El Paso, Texas

Leah checked the trace of mascara beneath each eye in her rearview mirror and slid her glasses back in place before easing from behind the wheel and climbing out of the Malibu. She'd made it back from Mexico and returned to the office only to run into Margaret first thing, who'd predictably wanted to know why she hadn't responded to her calls. Leah had told her that she'd run out of battery. Margaret had looked only half convinced, but had only asked that Leah not leave work until she'd written her piece on the mall opening, which had taken Leah all of twenty minutes to churn out.

She'd foregone any research after work and gone home to freshen up before a dinner she had been dreading: her old boyfriend Bill had been pestering her for weeks to go to a trendy new restaurant near the El Paso Museum of Art, and she'd finally acquiesced just to shut him up. It had seemed harmless enough at the time she'd agreed, but after a day like she'd had, she wanted to do nothing more than climb into a quart of ice cream in front of the TV, not make small talk with an ex who'd never been a great fit in the first place and who, although he claimed to value being "just friends," she worried would be trying to pressure her into more.

Leah brushed her bangs out of her eyes and walked to a red canopy over a darkened doorway. Bill was standing inside, and she turned so his greeting kiss landed on her cheek. If he was disappointed, he didn't show it. The maître d' escorted them to a square koa wood table with contemporary low-back chairs and waited while they sat before presenting them with two aluminum clipboards with a single sheet of menu attached to each.

An emaciated waiter with a severe bi-level dyed black haircut and a moue of ennui for greeting looked them over like a banker considering them for a loan.

“May I get you started with something to drink? Cocktail? Wine?” The young man paused. “Beer?” he asked, pronouncing the word with distaste.

“I’ll take an Amstel Light,” Leah said after scanning the list of beverages at the bottom of the menu.

“Me too,” Bill said, and the server nodded slightly and flounced away.

Leah ran down the column of entrées and selected poached salmon. Bill went for a filet, and when the server reappeared with two sweating bottles of beer and poured them into tall glasses, they ordered. The young man eyed them unblinkingly before sighing as though disappointed by their choices.

They watched him depart with their clipboards, and Bill held his glass aloft for a toast.

“It’s good to finally have a chance to see you one-on-one, Leah,” he said.

“Cheers right back atcha, Bill,” she replied with a half-smile.

He took a long pull of beer and set the glass down. “Didn’t see you all day.”

“I was covering a mall opening for Margaret.” She hesitated before continuing. “And I had to go down to Juárez to chase down a lead.”

Bill’s mouth dropped open. “Juárez? Why there? Was it something about your story?”

Leah nodded and told him about the call. When she finished, he was frowning.

“You shouldn’t have gone. It’s dangerous as hell, even now that the worst of the cartel wars are over.”

“It’s not like I was trying to buy a couple of kilos, Bill. It was just a cab ride and a fruitless wait in a stifling hellhole.”

Bill shook his head. “I’m surprised Margaret asked you to do that.”

Leah looked away. “She didn’t exactly tell me to.”

His eyes narrowed and he studied her. “So this was you going off on your own?”

“I’m researching my story, Bill. You know, the first installment of which got the paper more visibility than it’s had in years? That story?”

“About the Juárez murders. Which involves killers, last time I checked. And which your piece hinted are still out there. So tell me again how going to Juárez, where they’d be, to meet some anonymous voice on the phone was a good idea?”

“You have to follow up leads, Bill. It’s what reporters do.”

“Not at this paper. You’ve been watching too many movies. What reporters, real reporters, do if they want to keep their jobs is what their bosses tell them to do.” He paused. “Didn’t New York teach you anything?”

Leah’s face hardened. “That’s not relevant, Bill, and you know it.”

He held up his hands in a sign of surrender. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that...well, you went off on your own that time, too. It didn’t work out the way you planned, did it? And that wasn’t even murder or anything.”

She controlled her breathing and willed away the anger she felt rising in her gorge. Her face flushed and she placed her napkin on the table and stood. “I’m going to use the ladies’ room.”

“Leah,” Bill began, but she shook her head.

“Leave it there, Bill. I’ll be back in a few.”

He opened his mouth to say something, but appeared to reconsider it. Leah made for the restrooms at the rear of the restaurant, past chic urbanites doing their best Manhattan impressions with varying degrees of success.

The thought slowed her. Bill had a point – but the wound was still raw, and it wasn’t his place to rub her nose in it. She knew she’d crossed a line when she hadn’t obeyed her boss’s instructions to drop the investigation. When her digging brought the world down around her, it had been too late for

regrets, and she'd found herself out on the street with no job, no money, and no prospects.

And now she was back where she'd started, only worse. She'd been in the big leagues but had screwed it up and was now starting over with a suitcase full of ugly baggage and a reputation to live down. It didn't help that her old colleagues at the *Examiner* seemed to be reveling in her fall, even if they didn't show it. Schadenfreude was human nature, and she understood it, even when she was the target of it.

She shouldered through the bathroom door and saw with relief that it was empty. Speakers crooned a reggae acoustic guitar version of a nineties grunge song, and she imagined its author spinning in his grave. Leah smoothed her blouse and studied herself in the mirror, taking stock and not loving what stared back.

Why had she even agreed to dinner? She and Bill had been on again, off again for the year before she'd turned in her notice and moved to New York, but since her return he'd been obvious about wanting to give it another try. He wasn't bad-looking and made decent money as the top ad rep at the paper, but she knew him well enough to want someone more compatible. She hadn't hit such a bottom that she was willing to go back to something she'd walked away from for good reason.

She hoped she didn't hurt him when she made clear it wasn't going to happen, and then decided she didn't really care if he got bent or not. She wasn't the one doing the pursuing, and they were both adults.

Leah adjusted her slacks and tried a smile at her reflection. Satisfied with her composure, she took a deep breath and nodded. They would have a nice dinner, chat about crap neither of them cared much about, and then she would go home alone, Bill hopefully having received her message loud and clear.

She checked her phone for messages and, seeing none, pushed back into the dining room, where beautiful people bantered about meaningless trivia while some monster was

snatching helpless teenage girls only cigarette-flicking
distance away.

Chapter 5

The *Examiner* offices smelled like coffee and doughnuts when Leah arrived for work two days later. The prior day she'd spent most of her time researching the Juárez story while Margaret was busy in her office with the computer tech trying to coax more life from her system, and Leah had given her a wide berth and left with the rest of the staff at precisely five. This morning she had a headache from insufficient sleep and too much convenience store caffeine, and she wanted nothing more than to keep her head down and go unnoticed.

When Leah reached her desk, her shoulders slumped at the sight of a bouquet of grocery store flowers in a plastic vase on her blotter. She looked around the half-empty newsroom, but everybody was going about their business, so she sat heavily and reached for the small card taped to the vase.

Sorry to be a bumner the other night. Let's start over, okay?
Bill

She closed her eyes for a moment. Dinner had been tense, Bill being the type who was unable to let go of a topic, and she'd finally had to cut their meal short with a terse explanation that she wasn't feeling sociable and she wanted to go home. Bill had realized too late that he'd pushed too hard, but the damage had been done, and she couldn't get out of the restaurant fast enough, her evening ruined by his prodding. She'd considered herself lucky when he hadn't come into the office yesterday, but her celebration of her good fortune had obviously been premature.

She moved the flowers and considered tossing them into her garbage, but elected to keep them so Bill wouldn't feel any worse than he probably already did. If he came in today, they'd be on display, and his gesture wouldn't have been in vain. Leah rose and walked across the room to the coffee area and poured herself a large steaming mug, and then retraced her steps to begin her day by scouring the wire for anything that might be relevant to her story.

Her Spanish was rusty at best, two years of high school language class coupled with living in a border town leaving her with little more than a rudimentary vocabulary, and it was hard to decipher many of the online Spanish news pages and blogs that centered around Juárez. The papers were a quick read that she could plug into an online translator for a rough interpretation, but the blogs and Facebook pages devoted to crime in the city were more difficult, as much of the commentary was written in slang and riddled with spelling or typing errors and nonstandard grammar, confounding the translation software and often leaving her shaking her head.

Juárez, like many cities near the border, had a thriving social media network that advised residents of unsafe routes where robberies had recently occurred, where gunfights had broken out, or where a military sweep was in progress. She'd discovered that the amateur sites covered topics that the mainstream publications refused to, in part because the cartels routinely threatened reporters and editors and in some cases went as far as murdering any that published articles critical of their interests.

Leah was finishing her first cup of coffee and arguing with herself about whether her nerves really needed another when her desk phone rang.

"Leah Mason," she said, typing in another web address as she answered.

"Miss Mason, thank goodness I reached you."

The male voice was almost a whisper, the Spanish accent light. Leah glanced at Margaret's door and sat forward.

"Who am I speaking with?"

"I'm sorry. My name is Uriel. Uriel Sánchez."

She gulped the final swallow of coffee and exhaled.
"Sánchez?"

"Yes. I see you recognize the name."

Leah didn't respond. Instead, she leaned back in her chair and looked at her monitor.

“Miss Mason?” Sánchez asked.

“I’m here. What can I do for you?”

“I received a rather cryptic message from my father, Miss Mason. It says that if anything happens to him, I should get in touch with you.”

“I have no idea why, Mr. Sánchez. Your father made an appointment to see me the day before yesterday in Juárez and then stood me up. We have nothing to talk about.”

A long pause hung over the line. Sánchez’s voice softened further. “What time was your meeting?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Please. It’s important.”

Leah removed her glasses and set them on the desk. The monitor and her surroundings blurred, and she blinked several times. “Two o’clock.”

Sánchez said something unintelligible that sounded like a curse. Leah frowned and waited for the man to get to the point, and then something he’d said registered. “You said he told you to get in touch with me if something happened to him?”

Sánchez’s sigh on the other end of the line was audible. “That’s right, Miss Mason. He was killed two days ago at one fifteen. That’s why he never made it to your meeting.”

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