

 Blushing Books PUBLISHING



# HELLCAT

MELINDA BARRON

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MELINDA BARRON



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Melinda Barron

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## Prologue

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"SHE LIKES TO FUCK, doesn't she?"

Mateo de los Santos stared at the woman on the screen, her face contorted in pleasure. He didn't care that she was enjoying the dick that was inside her, which was obvious. It was what she could do for him that mattered.

"Are we going through with this?"

"We are, Carlos," Mateo said. "If you have doubts, you should have stayed home."

"I am ready to put the plan in action," Carlos said.

Mateo turned toward the back seat of the SUV. "Doctor, you stay here. I don't wish her to see you before tonight."

"I agree," the older man said. "And I'm to watch for cops, or anyone else who goes into the bar."

"Exactly," Mateo said. He and Carlos exited the vehicle and walked into the bar. The woman he had just watched on the video stood behind the counter. She laughed at something someone said, then waved at them.

"Gentlemen, welcome!" She slapped the bar with her hand. "Have a seat. Can I get you a beer?"

"That would be very refreshing," Mateo said.

"Domestic? Bottle? Can? Draft?"

"Draft, please," Mateo said as he slid onto a bar stool. "Whatever flavor you recommend." He watched as she

expertly used the pulls and drew two beers with very little foam.

“It’s a local brand. I think you’ll like it.” She set the beers in front of them, and said, “You look a little familiar.”

Mateo took a long drink of his beer. “Very good.” He glanced at the blonde whose face he’d just seen contorted in pleasure. He wanted to make small talk with her, but they were in a hurry, and he would have more time with her later.

“Perhaps I look like the man you fucked the other evening.” He took another drink. After he’d swallowed, he continued, “His name is Felix Cortez.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name, and I think I’d like you gentlemen to leave.”

She reached for their mugs, and Mateo grabbed her hand and squeezed.

“You’re hurting me,” she whispered.

“And Carlos can hurt you even worse.” He nodded in his friend’s direction.

Carlos opened his jacket to show the gun he’d brought in, and Cara’s soft inhale let Mateo know he’d made his point. They’d argued about the gun, but he had insisted. *“You don’t have to use it, Carlos, just let her know it’s there.”*

“What do you want?” Cara asked. “Money? I don’t have much.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Cara.” Mateo traced a figure eight on her wrist “You and I are going to go upstairs. To your office. Carlos is going to stay here and make sure everything stays calm. You are going to open the safe and I am going to take something in it that belongs to me. And then we’ll be done, and Carlos and I will leave.”

“No one gets hurt,” she said. Her face registered that she was nervous, but she seemed willing to follow his instructions, to make sure no one got hurt.

“No one downstairs gets hurt,” Mateo said.

“Then let’s get it over with.” She made for the stairs and stopped at the bottom. For a moment he thought she would spill the beans to her friends, but instead she said, “Lindsay, will you watch the bar for me for a few minutes?”

“Sure, Cara.” There was a short pause. “Is everything all right?”

“Perfect,” Cara answered. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll be down. In fact, give everyone a round on the house.”

The small group cheered in response, and Cara started up the stairs. Once they were in the office, she wheeled on him. He braced for her to fight him, but instead she said, “My business partner will know the minute I open the safe.”

He laughed and saw her cringe. “I’m counting on it. His name is Gabe, right?”

“Yes.” She looked a little confused. “Gabe Hernandez.” She studied his face, and he could see she was working things out.

“Will he call you?”

“Yes,” she answered. “The safe is his.” She didn’t move, and for a moment he thought once again she would refuse to do as he asked.

“Cara, the safe, please.” When she didn’t move right away, he pointed at his wrist. “We’re on the clock.”

She punched buttons quickly, and he could see her hand shake as she did so. Before she could open the door, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She gasped and started to struggle. But just as she had done when she saw the man with the gun downstairs she stopped as quickly as she’d started.

“Is there a gun in there, Cara?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Naughty, naughty,” he whispered in her ear. “Open it.”

She did as he asked, and he pocketed the gun and waited for the phone to ring. When it didn’t happen, he said, “Is he



always this slow?”

“He’s at work,” she said.

“He’d call faster if he thought you wanted an afternoon quickie.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“I’ve wondered, Cara in those videos I’ve seen of the two of you if he’s in your pussy, or your ass.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“You’ve already said that.” Mateo chuckled. “Oh, come now, Cara, satisfy my curiosity. I know Felix well enough to know how he loves to fuck a woman in the ass.” His gaze landed on the box he wanted just as the phone rang. He pocketed the small object and smiled, just as she spoke.

“Who is Felix?”

“The man you’ve been fucking.” Mateo watched as she clicked the answer button on her phone. “Put it on speaker.”

She did as he asked.

“Hey, babe, what did you need out of the safe? Is everything okay?”

Mateo held up his finger to his mouth, and Cara nodded.

“Hey, babe,” he said.

There was a moment of silence before the caller said, “Who is this? Where’s Cara?”

“Tell him you’re fine, Cara.”

“I’m okay,” she said, softly.

“That’s far from fine, Cara,” Mateo said.

“Who is this?” Gabe said.

“Cousin, you wound me. All those years we spent together. All those women we fucked together.”

There was a short pause and then Gabe said, “Mateo?”

“Tell me, cousin, why haven’t you told your lover and your business partner about Barbara Runnels? January 1, 2006. That’s the date you murdered her. He strangled her while they were having sex, Cara.”

The horrified look on Cara’s face told Mateo everything. Felix had tried it on Cara, too.

“Cara, Cara, listen to me! He is lying to you. Cara!” Felix’s voice rang out over the phone, and Mateo hit the end button and handed Cara the phone.

“It has been a pleasure,” he said. Then he left the room and started down the stairs.

“Who are you?” she yelled after him.

“My name is Mateo de los Santos.” He paused at the bottom of the stairs. “And unlike Felix, I am telling you the truth.”

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## Chapter 1

---

BY THE TIME the bar closed, and she'd counted money and restocked beer for the next day, Cara was exhausted. She was running behind because she'd had to do quarterly reports that afternoon. But she had taken the time to sit in the parking lot and look up Barbara Runnels on the internet. The woman had been twenty-two when she was murdered on Jan 1, 2006, in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

The main suspect in the slaying had been Mateo de los Santos, because his fingerprints had been found on the woman's neck. But he had later been cleared, and police had been searching for Felix Cortez, de los Santos' cousin, since then. The story Cara read said the two cousins had picked up two women that night and gone to the apartment the ladies shared where Cortez and Runnels had gone to her bedroom and de los Santos had gone with the other woman, Misty Boxer.

Cara read through the first story and called up the second one. There were two mugshots with this one. They were grainy and had obviously been scanned before digital was used. One was a younger version of the man who had appeared in her bar that afternoon. The other was a young Gabe.

Cara opened the door of her truck and retched. The little bit of food she'd eaten for dinner fell to the ground. De los Santos had been telling her the truth about the murder. But was he the guilty party, or was Gabe?

Gabe had come into the bar as soon as he'd gotten off work, but she had ignored him. He'd finally told her he'd meet her at her house when she got off. Her house was fifteen miles out in the country. She loved the open space except for now, when she might be meeting a murderer.

"Get a grip, Cara," she said to the empty truck. After all, she had known Gabe for nine years. He had loaned her money to buy her bar. They had become lovers six months after they'd met, and except for the one incident, he had never hurt her. The only problem was the one incident was him trying to choke her during sex, which was how Barbara Runnels had died. It had scared the hell out of her, and he had sworn it would never happen again... and it hadn't.

But now, as she drove to her home, she thought about the man waiting for her, she considered who was telling her the truth, Gabe, or de los Santos. She knew nothing about the man she'd met today. But then again, she knew very little about Gabe. He was very secretive about his younger years. When they were first together, he'd told her he'd been in a great deal of trouble, with drugs and alcohol. Now, as he neared forty, he drank very little, and did no drugs that she knew of. Now he liked to spend time on trips... and to fuck.

They had been lovers for years and except for that one time he had never put his hands on her neck. There was no reason for her to believe de los Santos.

She drove the twenty minutes to her house, and as she turned into the driveway the open gate told her Gabe was there. She wasn't sure she wanted to see him tonight, but she didn't have a choice. She drove the half mile to the house and parked her truck. Gabe sat on the deck; at the table he'd bent her over so many times.

He jumped up the minute she parked and ran toward the truck. "Cara, you have to believe me, please."

Cara pulled out her phone and unlocked it. She flipped to the story she'd called up earlier, and turned the phone so Gabe could see. "Is this you?" After he looked at it, she turned it

back to look at it again. It looked even more like Gabe than it had before.

“Cara. Cara, baby, listen to me.” He took her face between his hands and gently kissed her. “People can put anything on the internet. You know I’ve been arrested before. Somehow, he got hold of my mug shot and put it on a fake webpage.”

What Gabe said had merit, but the webpage had looked legitimate to her.

“Cara, you know I love you. I would never lie to you. You have to know that.”

She nodded, unable to agree with him verbally. Maybe it was time to change the subject.

“He took something out of the safe.”

“And you let him!” Gabe’s mood changed instantly. He drew his arm back and for a moment she thought he was going to backhand her. He caught himself at the last minute and put his arm down. “Let’s stay calm,” he said, and she got the feeling he was talking more to himself than to her.

“What did he take?” he asked, his voice strangely even.

“The old box, the one that looks like it’s a hundred years old.” His accusatory stare sent a chill through her. “His friend had a gun! What was I supposed to do?”

“Pull the one you have behind the bar and shoot the bastard!”

“Over a box?”

“It’s more than a box!”

“How would I know that!” she yelled. “You never let me see what was inside.”

Gabe held up his hands. “It’s not important. Did he tell you where I could find him?”

“No,” she answered.

“If he comes back in the bar, call me immediately.”

“Okay,” she responded. Although she didn’t want him to come back.

“Now, let’s kiss and make up.” He kissed her, first on the lips, then on her forehead. She felt warm and needed when she was next to him. “But you know it means I have to take off my belt, right?”

“No. Gabe, no.”

“Cara, you know it has to be.” He stroked her hair, and for a moment she felt he was right. But she hated it when he spanked her.

“I don’t want it,” she said.

“You need it,” he said. “You let de los Santos walk in there like he owned the place and take what was mine.”

“His friend had a gun!”

“So did you!” Gabe started to undo his belt. “Take down your pants, and your panties. I want your bare ass.”

“No.” The word didn’t hold much conviction to her ears.

Gabe narrowed his eyes at her, and she swallowed hard. He cocked his head, and she shook hers.

“No. It’s been a long day, and I’m not playing games tonight.”

“This isn’t a game.”

For the second time that evening, she thought he might hit her. He’d never done it before, except for the spankings. The look on his face frightened her, and she took a step toward the front door.

“I want you to leave now,” she said. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Don’t make me force you, Cara.”

His words shocked her so much that she thought the world lit up, even though it was not yet dawn.

Turns out what she saw was the lights from a cop car, and the whoop of a siren.

“Fuck!” Gabe exclaimed.

“Calm down,” Cara said.

The door opened and the sheriff’s voice filled the air. “Cara, Gabe. What’s going on?”

“Jay, what are you doing out this time of night?” Cara asked.

“You mean morning,” the sheriff said. “It was all hands on deck for a bog wreck on the Amarillo highway. Mr. Hughes called about your fight. He said something about hearing the word murder.” He paused and then said, “Does this have anything to do with what happened at the bar today?”

“Nothing happened at the bar,” Gabe yelled. “And Hughes is ten miles down the road. He doesn’t know what he heard.”

“Sound travels in the country,” the sheriff said. “And I heard there was an incident today. I’m asking Cara, not you, Gabe.”

Gabe turned his back on the sheriff. “I’m the victim here, Cara. Remember that. What was taken belonged to me. Don’t say a word.”

His words were so low and cold, and so full of venom that Cara shivered.

“What was that, Hernandez?” the sheriff asked.

“Nothing, Sheriff,” Gabe replied.

“Jay, I’m really tired.” Cara took a deep, fortifying breath. “I’d like both of you to leave, please.”

“Cara, that hurts,” Gabe said. “I thought we were going to... you know—”

“I’m just so tired, Gabe.” She hoped her voice didn’t shake, but by the wicked grin that appeared on Gabe’s face, she knew it did.

“Well, Sheriff, it looks like she’s kicking us out.”

“You first, Hernandez.”

“Why, Sheriff, are you trying to take my place in Cara’s bed? Y’all got something going on I need to know about?” He chuckled and then walked toward his bike. “Cara, I’ll talk to you tomorrow, bright and early.”

He roared off, and Cara felt a deep sense of relief. She watched as the sheriff reached for his phone. He hit a few buttons then said, “Parker, you done at the accident site?”

She couldn’t hear the answer, but she heard Jay say, “You live near Gabe Hernandez, right? I just broke up a fight between him and Cara Anderson. I want to make sure he makes it home. Give it about fifteen minutes and let me know.”

Jay disconnected the call and smiled at her.

“I’ll just wait here.”

“Jay, he would never hurt me.”

“You sure about that? I heard the word victim when he turned his back to me. What was he talking about? What happened at the bar?”

“Jay, it’s late, and I’m really tired. Please, can we talk about this tomorrow?”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he nodded. “What time do you get to the bar?”

Cara checked her phone. It was almost four in the morning. “At this rate, probably one.”

“But you don’t open until two?” His phone rang and he answered. She heard him say, *yeah, yeah, good*, and then he thanked the caller and hung up.

“He’s home. Go inside and lock your door.”

Cara laughed. “He has a key, Sheriff.

“You should take it back.” He tipped an imaginary hat in her direction, then got in his truck and left.

Cara went into the house. For the first time she wished she had a dog, or cat... someone to talk to even if they could not talk back. She thought about taking a shower, but decided to



wait until morning. She would need the hot water hitting her in the face to wake her up. She lay down on the bed, and before she closed her eyes, she remembered that she hadn't locked the front door. She thought about Gabe coming back, and thought she should get up and lock it, even if he did have a key.

It wouldn't keep him out, but it would slow him down. She thought about how angry he'd been, and his words about being a victim because de los Santos had stolen from him, not her. She'd never seen him like that before, and it made her wonder if he could kill a person. She'd heard that anyone could take a life, but she wasn't sure that was true. Still, remembering the look on Gabe's face scared her.

There was a part of her that wanted to call Jay and tell him everything. She reached for the phone and was about to dial when she heard the front door open.

She'd gone to bed in an old t-shirt that she'd cut the neckline out of. One of the reasons she'd done it is because she knew Gabe hated it. He'd expect her to be naked and waiting on him. Well, not tonight. She turned on the lamp near her bed and called out his name.

“Did Jay not ask you to leave? Please, Gabe, not tonight.”

She didn't get an answer, so she got up and went to the living room.

Cara flipped on the living room light and her heart caught in her throat.

Near the doorway stood Mateo de los Santos.

“You've had a busy night, Cara,” he said. “Or rather a busy morning. First, a visit from Gabe, in which he threatened to spank your bottom. And then the sheriff. You know, I think the sheriff has a crush on you. So protective he was. He was your savior tonight, wasn't he? But we are behind schedule and need to hurry.”

Her legs felt rooted to the ground, until he said, “Cat got your tongue, Cara?”

She whirled around and ran for the bedroom.

His voice rang out as she opened the nightstand drawer.

“Cara, if you’re looking for your gun, I must tell you I already have it. And your taser. And the shotgun you keep behind your door. I have them all. And your phone is being jammed. For now, it’s just you and me.”

He now stood in the doorway to the bedroom.

“What do you want?” she asked. “I have nothing of value here, nothing of Gabe’s.”

“That’s not true, Cara. You’re here, and Gabe, as you call him, thinks you belong to him.”

Despite his earlier words, she dialed 911 on her phone, and got nothing.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“What purpose would that serve?”

“Are you going to rape me?”

“I am not a rapist.” He held up a finger. “Having said that, I am not an entirely nice man, Cara. I am here to relocate you.”

“What?” His words confused her. At the same time, she thought of something she could use against him. She dove across the bed to Gabe’s side and opened the nightstand drawer. Her heart sunk as she saw the empty space where he kept his Bowie knife.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, I took the knife, too.”

Cara bent down and picked up the wooden baseball bat Gabe kept under the bed. She came up in a batter’s stance only to be greeted with Mateo’s laughter.

“Are you going to try and hit me with that?”

To show him she was serious, Cara took a swing, and connected with the shelf behind her. She heard breaking glass. She turned to look and saw the remains of the crystal fairies she collected lying on the ground. She’d been buying them for years, and a few had been presents from Gabe.

She swung the bat again and heard an oomph of pain and knew she'd connected with him. When she swung again, she aimed lower. She'd hoped to hit his crotch but got his thigh instead.

“I do believe you were aiming for my dick.”

“Your balls, if you have any.”

“I assure you; I do. And I don't appreciate you threatening them.”

“Like you're threatening me?”

For a few minutes she felt like she had the upper hand. She kept swinging the bat, but all she really heard was the sound of breaking glass and cracking wood. She took another swing, and it threw her off balance. He grabbed her around the waist and threw her on the bed. Cara flung the bat in his direction. He caught it as if it were a piece of lint and tossed it to the ground. She lashed out with her arms and was rewarded with another oomph of pain.

Then suddenly, a voice she'd never heard before sounded out, “We need to hurry. He's on his way back.”

De los Santos knelt over her, trapping her arms to her sides. Then he placed a cloth that stunk to high heaven over her mouth. She tried to turn her head, but he held it in a tight grip.

The room started to spin. “That's it, hellcat, go to sleep.”

Before Cara lost consciousness, the new voice said, “I'm so sorry. I'm so very sorry.”

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## Chapter 2

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"IT WAS LIKE WRESTLING WITH A COBRA." Mateo sat back against the side of the van and tried to get his breathing under control. "Is she injured?"

"I don't think so," the older man said.

"So, tell me, Doctor, how long will that stuff keep her out?"

Dr. Bruce Runnels stared at the prone woman before him. "Twenty, thirty minutes maybe. She's younger than I thought."

Mateo threw him a length of rope and said, "Tie her hands."

"I will not!" the doctor said. "I help people, not hurt them, or tie them. I'm a doctor."

Mateo lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. "You're a kidnapper just like I am, Doctor." He exhaled the smoke and said, "Are you prepared to fight her if she wakes up unbound?"

"No," Bruce said. He took the ropes and wound them around her wrists. "I'm sorry," he whispered to her, even though she was unconscious.

"Doctor, it's a little late for regrets, don't you think?" Mateo took another drag. "Focus, Doctor. Focus."

"I didn't realize how much she would look like Barbara."

“My cousin has a type, Doctor. Blonde and busty. But she is not your daughter, Doctor. She is the best way of getting justice for your daughter. We are not home free yet. Do we have everything in place to get her across the border?”

“Yes,” Bruce said. “We fly out of Roswell, where we pretend she’s a medical patient going for a procedure in Mexico City.” He took a deep breath and continued, “Then we make an illegal stop outside La Paz, and the young lady I hired will take her place. I will continue to Mexico City with the decoy, and you will go to the resort with Cara.”

“Excellent.” Mateo finished his cigarette and ground the butt into the van’s floor.

The doctor glared at him, and Mateo couldn’t help but grin. “Don’t worry, I won’t light another.”

“Good.” Bruce put his hand on Cara’s shoulder. “The planning of this and the execution are two different things.”

“They unusually are.” Mateo reached for his cigarettes, then remembered that he’d promised not to light another. “She’s not your daughter, Doctor.”

“But what are we doing to her? She had no part in Barbara’s murder.”

“But she fucks the man who did,” Mateo said. “And he is such a good liar she believed him, not me, when I told her the truth. You heard her on the wire we had on her deck. *I love you, Gabe.* You heard her tell the sheriff; *he would never lie to me.*”

“He’s probably run by now,” Bruce said. “We’ll have to hunt him down again, and this will have been for nothing.”

Mateo noticed movement in front of him. Cara’s eyes were open. She glared up at him with open hatred, but she didn’t say a word. “I think she’s been listening. Perhaps she’ll believe us now. As I was going to say, Felix will not run this time. The cousin who has been funneling him money has died. He is slowly going dry. He needs money, her money, to run this time. I’m sure that’s why he was coming back to the house. For money. Or maybe to kill her. We’ll never know.”

“He has the bar,” Bruce said.

“All in Cara’s name,” Mateo said. “He can’t get a dime of it without her. Tell me, Cara, what excuse did he use for putting everything in your name? Back taxes? The IRS would come after it all? The real reason is he couldn’t be fingerprinted for the liquor license because they would find out he isn’t Gabe Hernandez.”

“You lie,” she said. She licked her lips, and he could tell she was thirsty.

“Some water for our guest, Doctor.”

“Guest,” she whispered sarcastically, which made him smile.

“Let’s sit her up,” Bruce said.

Mateo took her by the arms. He saw the flash in her eyes and the swing of her bound wrists. She hit him on the chin and pain shot through him. None too gently he threw her back down. “You know, Cara, I appreciate your need to defend yourself, but it is getting tiresome. Calm down and accept your fate.”

“Never,” she hissed.

Mateo placed his lips right next to her ear. “If things were different, we might be friends, even enjoy each other’s company, if you know what I mean. Felix and I shared a woman or two. Maybe we could do it again, just not at the same time. He always got to take her ass, but I’m sure you know that.”

She tried to push him away and he chuckled.

“Never,” she said, and then spit in his hair.

“You know what they say, Cara, never say never.”

“Hold her down,” Bruce said.

She started to struggle when she saw the syringe. Mateo held her down as the needle went into her arm. As her eyes started to close, he again whispered, “Never say never.”

---

“Looks like a tornado hit one room of the house.”

Jay nodded but didn't respond to Parker's comment. He let his gaze roam over Cara's destroyed bedroom. It was the first time he'd been in there, and he had no clue what sort of a housekeeper she was, but the rest of the house was clean and tidy. So, this destruction was unusual.

“Parker?”

“Sir?”

“You're sure Hernandez went home last night?”

“I watched him walk into the house. I didn't stick around to see if he left again. Should I have?”

“No.” Jay scratched the top of his head. “I just... fuck. Go to Mr. Hughes' house and ask him if he heard anything.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, come back after you talk to Hughes. Help Scott process this room. I want Josh to go pick up Hernandez at whatever job he's working and take him to the station.”

“Do you want to charge him with anything?” Parker asked.

“I want to see his reaction when he finds out we can't find Cara.”

“Where do you think she is?” Parker asked.

“I have no clue,” Jay said.

---

Where was she? The last thing she remembered was lying on the floor in the back of a moving van. Now she was on a bed, she opened her eyes and tried to focus. Things seemed fuzzy. She tried to sit up, only to feel a gentle push backward.

“No, *senora, por favor, abuestate.*”

“I don’t understand,” Cara said.

“She is asking you to lie down. You have been ill.”

“Ill?” Cara asked.

“Vomiting,” de los Santos said. “You’ve been awake a few times and it has not been good. I have worried.”

“I’m touched by your concern,” she said sarcastically.

“This is Blanca. She is Carlos’ wife. You remember him from the bar?”

Oh, she remembered him... the one with the gun.

“She will be helping to take care of you.”

Cara glanced at the younger woman and smiled at her. Maybe she could get this woman to help her escape.

“She doesn’t speak much English. Perhaps you could help her with that. You know, words and syntax.”

Cara nodded. Best to make him think she was willing to do whatever he said.

“Now, before the doctor gets here, I’d like us to have a talk.” He continued without waiting for an answer, “This is my home, and as such I set the rules. You will be expected to follow those rules.”

“Are they written down somewhere?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them.

“I don’t care for your tone,” Mateo said. He was looking directly at her, so Blanca could not see his face. But she could.

His voice was soft and seductive, but the look on his face was not.

“I can be a nice man, Cara. But if you cross me, I will not be a nice man.”

She had no trouble believing that. He was a charismatic man, and she had no doubt women would be attracted to him. She remembered seeing him for the first time in the bar. He wasn’t classically handsome, but he was nice to look at with dark hair, a little longer than she usually liked, it hit his



shoulders, and was a little curly on the ends. His dark eyes gleamed mischievously. Cara hated to admit that she'd wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

But not now. She wanted nothing to do with him.

“Are you listening to me?”

“No,” Cara said, and she was surprised to see him smile.

When it faded, he said, “The rules are simple. I am in charge, and you will do as I say.”

She gave him a mock salute and said, “Yes, sir.”

He turned and said something in rapid Spanish to Blanca. The younger woman scurried from the room and when she was gone, he said, “Your attitude is unacceptable. I would hate to punish you on your first day here, but I will if necessary. Now repeat after me if you please, *There will be consequences if I disobey.*”

He was talking low, and that made it scarier than ever. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

She put her hand on her throat, but still no words came out. Tears fell from her eyes, and he stroked her cheek and said, “Calm down, it's all right.”

She hiccupped a few times, then said, “Consequences.”

“Excellent.”

Cara ran her shaking hands through her hair.

Mateo shook his head slowly. “Cara, dear, I don't want you to be afraid of me.”

“Too late,” she said.

He took her hand, and his touch was gentle.

Cara inhaled sharply as he caressed the palm of her hand. It looked like he was about to speak again when a noise came from the doorway.

“What did you say to her? She looks terrified.”

“She's just been kidnapped, Doctor. She's allowed to look terrified.”

Cara kept her mouth closed. If she could find a fracture between these two, she might be able to use it.

“If you’d let her stay in the clinic with me, she would be more comfortable.”

“No, Doctor, we’ve discussed this.” Mateo sounded pissed, and there was no seductive tone to his voice now. They were not on the same page where her care was concerned.

Cara watched them and wondered how she could use it in the future.

“I don’t know if you remember me introducing myself while we were in the van, my name is Dr. Bruce Runnels. Barbara Runnels was my daughter.”

The look of pain that crossed his face made Cara wince. She glanced over at Mateo, who showed no emotion at all. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” he said. “She’s been gone for years, but no one has been brought to justice for her murder.”

“That must make it very hard.” Cara fought the nervousness running through her. She tried to keep it together, tried not to look at the man sitting at the end of the bed, who scared the living daylights out of her.

The doctor continued and she focused on him. “I tried for years to find Felix Cortez. Every time I located him, he disappeared, even when I told the Las Cruces police where he was. In the meantime, my wife committed suicide on the fifth anniversary of Barbara’s death.”

“I am so, so, sorry,” Cara said. There were tears in the man’s eyes, and she wanted to hug him, offer him some comfort.

“That’s when I went to Mateo. I knew he had money, and a way to find his cousin.”

Cara looked between them, and said, “I don’t understand what any of this has to do with me.”

“Felix Cortez and Gabe Hernandez are the same person,” Mateo said.

Cara shook her head violently. “No, no, no! You are so wrong! There is no way! I’ve known Gabe for years. He couldn’t have lied to me for that long.”

“He lies,” Mateo said. “Cara, you know the truth. It’s why you looked it up the day we met.”

“Even if it’s true, why did you bring me here?”

“Your disappearance will be blamed on him,” the doctor said. “When he is arrested, they will fingerprint him, and they will find out he is not who he says he is. They will find out he is wanted for murder.”

Once again, Cara looked between the two of them. “You have lost your minds. That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

“Is it?” She looked at Mateo, who had a look of derision on his face. “They are questioning him already.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

Mateo shrugged.

“Gabe told me you were a liar,” Cara said. “How can I believe a word you’re saying?”

The doctor reached into the envelope he’d carried into the room. He pulled out newspaper clippings and laid them on the bedside table.

“I’ll leave this for you to read,” he said.

Cara shook her head. “Anything can be faked.”

Mateo chuckled. He inhaled deeply on a new cigarette, and on the exhale, he said, “Tell me something, Cara, why is everything in your name?”

Cara said, “None of your damn business.”

“I still think he told you he was having trouble with the IRS. Am I right?”

“As I said before, it’s none of your damn business.”

“She’s a difficult audience, Doctor.”

“Yes, she is.” The doctor reached into the envelope and pulled out two more pieces of paper. He handed one to Cara.

“This is Gabe Hernandez’s birth certificate.”

Cara took it and nodded. “Yes, I’ve seen it before.”

“March 2, 1985,” the doctor said.

Cara nodded.

“And this is Gabriel Luis Hernandez’s death certificate.” He handed her a second piece of paper. She took it and felt a chill run down her spine as she read it.

“He died March 6, 1985. You will see the same parents are listed on both certificates. The real Gabe Hernandez died when he was four days old. He was born with a heart defect and died while doctors were trying to fix it in surgery.”

Her hands started to shake. The doctor was right. The names were the same on both pieces of paper, and that meant it was the same person. She wasn’t sure what to say, so she remained silent. Finally, the doctor nodded.

“I’ll leave it all with you,” he said. “Have a good evening.”

Cara snorted. “When I’m a prisoner? Unlikely.”

“I am sorry,” the doctor said. He left without giving her a chance to answer.

She looked at Mateo who offered no apology but said, “Good night, Cara.”

When they were gone, she turned her head into her pillow and cried.

---

Mateo slept fitfully. He got up before dawn and showered. Once he was dressed, he went down the hall to the place where a man monitored the camera in Cara’s room.

“Did she sleep?” he asked.

“No.”

“Did she eat anything?”

“No.” Ramon turned to him. “She got up once during the night to pee. She paced the room. She lay down. She got up. She paced. She lay down. Up and down. All night long.”

“Shit.” Mateo left the room and went back to his apartment. He ate a grapefruit and some cereal, then did a few laps in the pool. He took another shower, then went to Cara’s room. When he opened the door, she was lying on the bed, and her face brightened when the door opened. But then she suddenly frowned, and he knew it was because it was him, and not the doctor.

“*Buenos dias*, Cara.” She turned her back to him at his greeting, and he couldn’t help but smile. He offered the same greeting to Blanca, who returned it with a smile.

“I hear you’re not eating, Cara.”

“Why bother.”

“Because food keeps our bodies working properly.”

“What does it matter if I’m a prisoner? I might as well die.”

“Very dramatic, Cara. I’m sure it would work on the doctor. But it won’t work on me.”

When she didn’t reply, Mateo lit a cigarette and after a few puffs he said, “Tell me what you want, Cara.”

“A clock, so I know what time it is. And a calendar. And windows. And to go home.”

“One thing, Cara. Only one.”

“A clock.”

Mateo inhaled on his cigarette. He had expected something like this. He paused, so she would think he was considering the request. He exhaled and took another puff. Finally, he said, “I will make you a deal, Cara. You promise me you will eat your meals, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for two weeks, and I will get you a watch.”

“Three weeks.”

Mateo turned his head to where the doctor stood in doorway.

“You are negotiating, right? Food is much more important than time. Three weeks fits better.”

Mateo turned back toward Cara, who was shooting virtual daggers at the doctor.

“Always do what the doctor orders,” Mateo said. “Three weeks.”

“I have to wait three weeks? And I’m going to be here that long?”

“If you eat breakfast and lunch, you will get a watch at dinner.”

A watch is not a clock,” Cara said.

Mateo finished his cigarette and lit another one.

“You smoke too much,” she said.

“Let’s take one issue at a time,” he responded. “I’m not going to give you a clock so you can bean someone over the head with it, and then use the cord to tie them up.”

“I would never do that.”

“And you would never use a baseball bat to try and hit someone in the nuts, either.”

“You were kidnapping me!”

“Relocating,” Mateo said.

“Oh, fuck you!” Cara screamed.

The doctor gasped, and Mateo chuckled. “Naughty, naughty,” he said. He hid his smile by taking another drag on his cigarette.

“Doctor, you’re going into town. Why don’t you pick up a watch for our guest?”

Mateo watched Cara sit up. “Town? Where are you going?”

“Nice try, Cara,” Mateo said with a chuckle.

After the doctor was gone, Mateo indicated Cara should take her place at the table. He watched as she ate two triangles of peanut butter toast and a few apple slices.

“Do I have to eat it all?” she asked.

“It’s two pieces of bread, a small apple, and a cup of coffee, so yes,” Mateo answered. She ate a slice of apple and he pointed at the papers on the table. “You’ve read the evidence? You accept the fact Gabe is really Felix?”

“I haven’t decided.” Her voice was hesitant, and he could tell she was lying. She had decided and had accepted the truth.

“Even if Gabe is Felix, you’re going about this the wrong way. Take me home and let me talk to Jay. He will believe me. He has a crush on me. We eat lunch together all the time. Please, take me home.” When he didn’t answer right away, she said, “Please.”

“Blanca is making lasagna for dinner. She’s gotten quite good at it. The last one was very tasty. I’ll join you, and we can talk.”

“I’d rather eat with the devil,” she said. “Oh, wait, I will be.”

Mateo chuckled. “*Buenos tardes*, Cara. I will see you tonight.” After he closed the door, he heard a muffled thud, and he was sure she’d thrown the pillow at the door.

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“Where is she, Gabe?” Jay tried to keep his voice calm and even, but it wasn’t easy.

“How the fuck should I know? When I left, she was with you!”

Jay laid out photos of Cara’s wrecked bedroom. “Did you go back after I left? Did the two of you get in a fight?”

Gabe remained silent.

“You don’t look surprised to see them.”

Gabe looked away, and Jay gathered up the pictures. “Do the names Barbara Runnels, Felix Cortez, and Mateo de los Santos mean anything to you?”

“No,” Gabe said curtly.

“They’re the last searches Cara did on her phone before she disappeared. Barbara Runnels was murdered. They thought this de los Santos guy did it, but now they are searching for Cortez. It’s been years and they can’t find him. You don’t think it has anything to do with what happened at the bar that day?”

“Who cares?” Gabe stood. “I’m leaving.”

“Not yet,” Jay said. “Parker is going to take your fingerprints.”

“Why? They’ll be all over the house. I practically lived there.”

“For elimination purposes,” Jay said and studied the man. Gabe had started to fidget, tapping his fingers against the table. His gaze went all over the room as if he were trapped and looking for the nearest exit.

“You know what, Gabe, I’m going to put you on a seventy-two-hour hold.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Actually, I can. You’re a suspect in a potential murder case.”

“Then I want to call a lawyer.”

Jay wanted to deck the man. “Be my guest. Parker!” When his deputy came in, Jay said, “Lock him up.”

“On what charge?” Parker asked.

“For being a pain in my ass,” Jay said. He then held up a hand and said, “A seventy-two hour hold as a murder suspect.”

“We found Cara?” Parker asked.

“No,” Gabe said. “Jay’s just being a pain in my ass.”



When they were gone, Jay called out, “Val!” When the receptionist appeared in his doorway he said, “Get ahold of the officer handling the Barbara Runnels COD case at the Las Cruces, New Mexico police department.”

“On it,” she said. Moments later she buzzed him to say a Sgt. Helen George was on the phone.

After they exchanged greetings, Jay explained what was happening, he asked if she would email him pertinent information on the case. She took his contact info and hung up. Moments later the email came through, and she called him back.

“I can send you photos, too,” she offered. Jay told her that would be great. The file was still printing when the photos arrived. He flipped through them on the screen, lamenting the loss of so young a woman. The next photo was a booking photo of Mateo Roberto de los Santos. Jay nodded to himself. The women at the bar had said the man who had gone upstairs with Cara had been handsome. And this man fit the bill.

He printed out the photo and called Parker into his office.

“Take this down to the bar. Ask the ladies that were there if this is the same guy.”

“On it.”

When Parker was gone, Jay flipped to the next photo.

His mouth dropped as the image of a young Gabe Hernandez stared back at him.

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## Chapter 3

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"BACKGAMMON?"

"If you have spent any time with Felix, you know he's a shark."

Cara sat on the edge of the bed and watched Mateo set up the board. Dinner had been wonderful. The food was delicious, and she hated to admit it, but so was the company. Blanca and Carlos had been there, as had the doctor. It had been the only time she'd been out of her room for anything other than to take a shower.

They talked about books and travel and it had been a great time. Well, she enjoyed listening. She hadn't talked much.

But now they were back in her room. She had been surprised when Mateo had asked to join her, and even more surprised to find the backgammon set on the table. After he set it up, he picked up the dice and rolled. "Oh seven, let's see if it's my lucky number and I get to go first. She hadn't moved from the bottom of the bed, but finally she decided playing a game with him was better than being alone. She rolled a three, so she lost the face off.

"Shall we make a wager on the game?"

Cara thought about it for a moment but remained silent.

"What's the matter, afraid of losing?" Mateo asked.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid of what you'll ask for."

“Fine, let’s set the stakes before we actually make an agreement. If I win you will tell me about the first time you met the man you know as Gabe. I’ll let you go first even though I won the roll. And if you win, what do you want?”

Cara considered the list she’d made that morning. “If I win you have to tell me where we are.”

She was shocked when Mateo said, “Agreed.”

After a few moves, Cara realized he was as good a player as Gabe. She would have to be on her toes to beat him. He set her back many times, and when she was starting over and all his bases were filled, she knew she would lose.

Sure enough, six plays later, he won. He sat back in his chair and lit a cigarette, and it took her a moment to realize he hadn’t smoked the whole time they’d been playing.

“I’m waiting. You can start anytime now.”

Cara pondered where to start, and how much to tell him. Before she could even get out a word, Mateo said, “I want details. I want to know the true story not just we met on a Wednesday night. Be very specific, unless you expect me to give you nothing more than the state, or city, when it’s your win. Tit for tat.”

She took a deep breath. This wasn’t something she really wanted to talk about, since Gabe was a possible murderer, and he had gotten her kidnapped.

“I’m not cheating when I say that I met Gabe on a Saturday night. I was in Lubbock dancing with a group of friends and I mean, seven or eight. We’d taken a few cars and decided to go barhopping. I was not a designated driver, so I was drinking.

“He kept sending drinks over to our table, not just for me but for all of my friends. But I was the only one he was asking to dance. He was nice, and he was respectful to us all, and I appreciated it.”

“Did you sleep with him that night?” Mateo asked.

“No, I did not.” She thought about it for a few moments, and then continued, “You’re missing the part where I was with a bunch of friends. He didn’t even bring it up.”

“What happened then?”

“He asked how to get hold of me later and I told him.”

Mateo lit a cigarette, and then said, “Another?”

Cara looked at her newly acquired watch. The doctor had given it to her at dinner, and she was thrilled with it.

“Sure, it’s only nine o’clock,” she said. “That’s early for me. I usually don’t get off work until two or three so I’m a night owl.”

“I have until midnight before I must go upstairs. He rolled the dice and Cara said, “What’s upstairs?”

“You can make that part of your wager if you’d like.” He took a drag off his cigarette. “If I win, I want to hear about the first time you slept together.”

Cara shook her head. “That’s a very personal thing.”

“So it is,” Mateo said. “But you’re forgetting I’ve seen videos of you being fucked.”

Heat rushed into her face, and she turned away. “It’s very rude of you to bring that up.”

He laughed as if she’d just told the funniest joke in the world. “This coming from a woman who screams when she’s being screwed on her deck. I’m surprised your neighbor didn’t call the sheriff on you. Maybe he enjoys listening. Or maybe he called the sheriff, and he came to watch too.”

“How long did you watch me?”

“A while.”

“I think I’d like you to leave now,” Cara said.

“If I offended you, Cara, I’m sorry,” Mateo said.

She wanted to tell him she didn’t care, but she kept her mouth closed.

“You like sex, Cara. There’s no shame in admitting it.”

She wasn't sure how to respond, so she didn't.

He said, "That's what I want if I win tomorrow. I want to hear the story about your first time with Gabe. What would you like?"

Since she hadn't won the last time, she repeated that she wanted to know where they were. And wasn't surprised when he shook his head.

"Think of something new," Mateo said.

"Very well, I want to know what is upstairs."

"Very good, Cara, you're paying attention and I appreciate that. Tomorrow will be fun." He winked at her and left.

Somehow, she doubted it would.

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The next morning, Mateo showed up with a woman she'd never seen before. Cara instantly pegged her as a cheerleading type, one who was always perky and wanted to make others smile.

"Cara, this is Misty."

She recognized the name immediately from the news report she'd read. There couldn't be that many women named Misty around. "As in Misty Boxer?"

"Yes," Misty said.

"I thought the two of you could get to know each other."

"Welcome to my cell," Cara said. "Make yourself at home."

The irritation that flashed through Mateo's eyes made her smile. If he thought she needed a friend here, he was sorely mistaken.

"I'll leave you ladies to it," he said before he left.

"Let's go for a walk, shall we?"

Cara flashed her a look. “Without the permission of my overlord?”

Misty didn't answer and Cara narrowed her eyes at her.

“You do know he kidnapped me. I'm a prisoner. This isn't a game.”

“I know.” At least she sounded a little contrite.

“And you don't care.”

“If it helps us find Cortez, it's worth it.”

“For you, maybe,” Cara said.

Misty's smile disappeared.

“If I hear another person say I should just accept my fate, I may vomit. No fucking way.”

“Let's go for a walk,” Misty said. “It will get you out of this room.”

“Not to repeat myself, but no fucking way,” Cara said. “For one thing I was warned not to leave without his permission. He told me he wasn't a nice man when he was angry, and I believe him.”

Misty giggled. “He can be quite, shall we say, intense. But he's the one who suggested the walk. There's a garden not far from here. You said you were wanting sunlight.”

“No offense, but I don't know you,” Cara said. “He told me on my first day here to stay in this room, and I'm going to do just that.”

Misty pulled a phone from her pocket, and hit a few keys. She was obviously texting Mateo, or at least Cara figured she was. Moments later he appeared in the doorway. “You need me?” he asked.

“She won't leave,” Misty said. “She said you warned her not to leave.”

“And she is right. Cara, you have my permission to leave the room.”

“Should I get down and kiss your feet first?”

A look of irritation flashed over his face, and he said, “Your attitude needs some adjustment. Perhaps a walk will help, but I seriously doubt it.” He left without saying another word.

Misty said enthusiastically, “Shall we?”

“Sure,” Cara said. “Anything is better than sitting here.”

They were quiet as they walked down the hall, and Cara studied her surroundings. The hallway was long, as if it were one in a hotel. But there were only three or four doors, and none of them had markings which was weird.

They turned to the right when they came to the end of the hall. “How long have you been with Mateo?” Cara asked.

“Oh no, Mateo and I have not been together for years. My husband, Lee, and I have been married for eleven years now. Lee is my rock.”

Cara wanted to tell her she’d never had a rock, but instead she said, “I thought Gabe was my rock, but I was wrong.”

They made it to a door, a solid one at the end of a second hallway.

Misty opened it. Cara was immediately hit with the incredible smell of roses. She hurried to the open door and stopped and took a deep breath. Then she looked up. She saw blue sky and white, fluffy clouds. She turned to her new friend and said, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Mateo.”

“I’d rather not,” Cara said. “He’s not exactly my favorite person.”

“Give him a chance,” Misty said. “He really can be a nice person.”

“Yeah. I don’t think so.” Cara moved toward the flowers. Not only were there roses but there were brightly colored flowers that she couldn’t identify. She’d never been a gardener. She wondered if Mateo did this himself or if he hired a gardener.

“I’m rather surprised to find this here,” Cara said.

“The doctor does it all. Barbara loved flowers, and it’s a tribute to her.”

Cara had no trouble thinking the sensitive doctor would do something like this to honor his only child. She thought about the number of times he’d apologized to her about the kidnapping. Mateo never had. Now she’d met Barbara’s best friend.

She turned to the other woman. “Were you there the night I was kidnapped?”

“Oh no,” Misty said. “Lee and I stayed here to run the club.”

“Club?” Cara said. “What club?”

Misty stood suddenly, almost losing her balance. “I’ve said too much. I’ve just been thinking and well, there’s no club.”

“I know you’re lying to me,” Cara said. “Every night since I’ve been here, Mateo goes where he calls upstairs. What does that mean?”

Her new friend was agitated, and she made her way toward the door they’d come in through. Cara glanced around and decided that if she was out of her room with her captor’s permission, she should try and make an escape. If she could make it to a highway, maybe she could find someone to help her.

There was a door against the wall behind them. Something told her she would be able to make it without Misty seeing her, but she really couldn’t take that chance. Cara stood, and with determination, Cara ran toward Misty and pushed her in the back, so that Misty lost her balance and fell forward. Cara turned to run.

Misty’s cry of pain almost stopped Cara in her tracks. Someone could have heard. But this was her only chance. She ran to the door, grabbed hold of the doorknob and turned, it was locked.



“Let me out! Let me out!” she yelled. She pulled on the door as hard as she could, but it wouldn’t budge.

Frantic now, she returned to the table. There were a few pots and plants and she searched them all for a hidden key. She found nothing. Her friend Lindsay kept an extra key to her apartment taped under a ceramic frog on her porch.

With that in mind, Cara turned over every ceramic animal she found in the garden. There was nothing. She was just about to start smashing them when a voice called out, “Is this how you repay me?” She turned towards Mateo. He stood in the center of the garden, his hands on his hips and an angry look on his face.

Just past him, she saw the doctor kneeling over Misty. She was holding her arm, and Cara felt guilty. Had she hurt the woman? That hadn’t been her intention.

“Answer me. You wanted sunshine and I gave it to you, and you respond by trying to hurt the person I brought to talk with you.”

“Kindness? You kidnapped me! There is no kindness to repay.”

Before he could open his mouth, Cara continued, “And if you tell me one more fucking time to accept my fate, I’m going to slap the shit out of you.”

He didn’t answer, but he did cross to her and take her by the arm. He pulled her from the room, and she looked back at Misty. The doctor was gently examining her.

Cara and Mateo were silent as they walked back towards her cell. He shoved her through the door, and then pointed to the corner.

“If you think I’m going to stand in the corner, you’re crazy.”

In response, he pushed her. She stumbled, and by the time she gained her balance, he had her exactly where he had directed her to go. Cara wasn’t sure why she’d never noticed the bondage equipment secured to the wall. She tried to fight,

but he took one of her wrists and lifted it to a cuff, then the other, and he had her secured within seconds.

She struggled against her bonds, but there was no way she could get free.

“You should have behaved.”

“Why? I don’t remember it being one of your rules. But I couldn’t not try to run. You gave me permission to leave the room.”

The more she talked the more she wanted to spit in his face and tell him she hated him. Then, she looked at him and said, “Fuck you, and fuck your stupid ass idea.”

He moved right in front of her. She could feel his breath on her face, and she fought the urge to spit at him. “I don’t care for your mouth.”

“I don’t care,” Cara retorted.

The doctor and Misty came into the room. “Misty is fine. I’m going to x-ray her arm just to make sure. I don’t think anything is broken, but I want to be certain.” He was quiet for a few seconds, and then he said, “What are you doing?”

“I am going to punish her, Doctor. She can’t get away with pushing someone down.”

“You’re not going to whip her, are you?”

Cara felt her blood run cold. She glanced at Mateo, who shrugged.

“I don’t like to see Misty in pain. But I promise you, if you can show me nothing is broken, I will go easy on Cara.”

“She is fine,” Bruce said. “Promise me you won’t whip her.”

Cara struggled against her bonds. “Help me,” she said to the doctor.

Mateo shook his head. “Sometimes just thinking about the punishment is punishment enough. And sometimes you must follow through.”

“Let her go,” the doctor said.

“When she apologizes to Misty.”

Cara shook her head. “Fuck you,” she mouthed to Mateo.

Misty’s voice filled the air. “I’m fine, Mateo.”

Mateo turned back to Cara. “Apologize to her,” he said.

“Fuck you,” she mouthed again.

Mateo took another step toward her, until she could feel his breath on her face again. “Apologize, Cara, or I will take you down, and break my promise to the doctor.”

She had no doubt he would do just that.

“I’m sorry, Misty.” She took a deep breath and looked over Mateo’s shoulder to where Misty and the doctor stood.

“I’m sorry. You were nothing but nice, and I should never have done that.”

“I think I understand why you did it,” Misty said. “Doctor, I think you and I should go to the clinic.”

The doctor nodded. After Misty was out the door, he turned to Mateo and said, “Take her down.”

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Mateo sat down at the table. He lit a cigarette and looked over at Cara.

“Aren’t you going to take me down?”

Mateo took a drag on his cigarette and said, “No,” as he exhaled.

“Why not? I did what you wanted.”

“Because I think your apology was less than sincere.” He continued to puff on his cigarette. “I think you did what you had to to keep from tasting leather. You can see what the problem is. You’re not sorry. In fact, I bet you’re sorry she’s not hurt.”

He saw anger flash over her features.

“The problem, as you say, is the only thing you and your friends think about is what you can get from me. I’m just a pawn. You don’t think about me. You don’t give a shit about me.”

“I am sorry you feel that way.” He finished his cigarette and ground it out on the floor. “I assure you the doctor and I thought about it a great deal. But...”

“You don’t have to say it,” Cara said. “What you wanted was more important and to hell with me.”

They stared at each other from across the room. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, but he wasn’t sorry; it was working, and Felix would soon be in jail. As much as she hated it, she was here until the business was resolved.

Mateo’s phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket and stepped out of the room. Cara’s screams of *‘Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me like this!’* followed him into the hallway. The information on the screen showed it was Misty on the line.

“Please tell me nothing is broken,” Mateo said by way of greeting.

“I’ll have some bruises, but nothing too bad,” Misty said. “How is Cara?”

That was just like Misty, more worried about someone else than herself.

“She is fine,” he said, even as she continued to scream.

“I know your fifteen-minute rule, which means you haven’t let her down.” The phone went silent. “Mateo she is not of our world. This is very hard on her. Please let her down. Be gentle with her. She’s just found out her lover is a murderer. She’s been ripped from her home. She’s frightened. Please.”

“Thanks for thinking of her, but I feel she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Mateo, I know you. You can’t resist the challenge. For all I know, you’d planned on doing it the whole time. I know you’re going to try. But I’m serious and she’s hurting. Please. For me.”

Mateo was silent for a few moments, and finally he said, “Thank you for your advice. I will consider it.”

He waited for her to reply, he was about to disconnect when she spoke again. “I have a favor to ask. Bring her tomorrow night and let her see some of what we do. And the next morning I can talk to her. Let me do this for her.”

Mateo wasn’t sure it was a good idea, but after what Misty had been through this afternoon, he should consider it.

“You want me to be gentle with her, but you want me to bring her to watch your whipping? That is a mixed message.” He thought about it for a few moments, and then said, “But in your eyes, I can understand.”

“Thank you.”

Before she could ask anything else, Mateo disconnected. He went back into the room and found Cara sobbing. “Tears, hellcat? So not like you.”

“No? Then try this on for size. Fuck you, fuck you, and fuck what you’ve done to me!” Her words were garbled by her tears, but her anger was clear.

“That’s more like it,” he said.

Blanca came into the room. She looked to where Cara still hung on the wall and giggled. She put a tray of food on the table and quickly left.

“Why is she laughing?” Cara asked. “Is my pain funny to her?”

“Not funny,” Mateo said. “Blanca and the submissives who are here think punishments are fun. She thinks we’re playing a game.”

“It’s not a game!” Cara screamed.

They had gone a few minutes over his fifteen-minute rule, but she didn't know that. Only he would know that he wasn't following his rule. He crossed the room and unhooked her left arm and she sagged, when he undid her right one, she fell into him. He knew her legs were wobbly, from having to hang. He was surprised that she didn't try running away from him.

Finally, she gathered her strength and pushed him away.

"Tell Blanca this is not a joke," she said. "And I am not eating."

"We had a deal, remember?" Mateo inclined his head toward her wrist. "Food for time."

"Fuck your deal!" Cara yelled.

"Then I will take your watch."

"Screw you," she said. She took a few steps away from him and said, "Fight me for it."

Mateo wanted to laugh. Instead, he went to the table and sat down. "I will give you until dinner to reconsider."

"Get out," she said. "I don't want you in here and I don't want to look at you."

"Very well," he said. He started out the door, but stopped when she said softly, "I hate you."

"So be it, Cara." He left and was not surprised to hear a thud as she obviously threw the pillow at the door once again.

---

It had been pure hunger that made her eat that afternoon. She looked at her watch about three o'clock and realized neither Mateo nor Blanca had come with a snack. She imagined Blanca was leaving Cara and Mateo alone thinking they were still playing. How could she convince her it wasn't a game? The language barrier would be hard enough, but not knowing anything was tougher.

One thing Cara knew for sure. There was no way she was getting out of here, but there was no way she was going to let it go. She would keep trying to find a way.

She fell asleep and when she woke up and looked at her watch, she saw it was close to six. Knowing what time it was made her happier than she'd been in ages. When the door opened at 6:45 she was surprised to see Mateo. She didn't really want to see him, but it was better than being alone. Maybe he was taking her to dinner, like the one they had the other evening.

"Blanca was afraid she was interrupting us, so she hadn't brought the food yet. I'm sorry for the delay." He set the tray on the table. "I'm surprised you actually ate earlier."

"I was hungry." She glared at him. "Now that you delivered the message about my dinner, you can leave. Sorry I don't have money for a tip."

"It amazes me that you think you can order me around."

"This is my room. I should be allowed to say who stays and who goes."

He sat down in the chair. "Actually, you're in my house, and I believe we've been through this before."

"Whatever," she replied.

"I have a dilemma, Cara and I think you can help me."

"Does it have to do with your self-destruction? If so, I'll be glad to help."

"No, but it is something we need to discuss. Given what happened today, I'm loathe to grant this request, but it comes from someone I care about a great deal."

Hope sprung up inside her. Had Misty asked him to let her go? Was he considering her request? Had he actually decided that taking her had been a bad idea? She certainly hoped so.

"What is your dilemma?"

"Misty is very special to me, as I said. She and I were lovers for years. Tomorrow, she and her husband are

celebrating their tenth anniversary.”

“And they are going to Coldwater for their anniversary and want to take me home. Very well, I accept. Problem solved.”

Mateo chuckled and she could see that her leaving this place had nothing to do with what Misty wanted.

“Misty and Lee are going to do a scene for their anniversary.”

“A scene? What does that mean? They are acting out a play?”

She watched while he lit a cigarette. He put the lighter on the table and took a few deep drags. After the third one he said, “You’ve asked me what’s upstairs.”

“Yes, I have.”

“It’s a BDSM club; a resort where people of like minds can enjoy themselves.”

Cara mumbled, “Huh.” It wasn’t a question, just a word she used when she wasn’t sure what to say. Finally, she said, “So they are going to have sex, and they want others to watch?”

“No. Lee is going to whip her while others watch.”

Cara’s mouth dropped open. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

When, she didn’t say anything, Mateo continued, “Lee is a master, as I said, there will be no blood.”

“There will still be pain?”

“Which Misty loves.”

“How can that be possible?” She couldn’t wrap her mind around what he was saying. “So, a bunch of men are going to watch a man beat a woman? That’s disgusting.”

“Submissives are male and female,” Mateo said.

“So there will be some perverted females watching Lee beat Misty?”

“Perverted is in the eye of the beholder,” Mateo said.



“I can’t believe you are asking me to do this.”

He’d barely finished a cigarette before he lit another one.

“It was Misty’s idea that you come. She enjoyed meeting you and wants you to be friends. Hence, my dilemma. I don’t think you should go.”

“That makes two of us,” she said.

Mateo stood, and Cara stayed where she was.

“You can think about it, and I’ll come see you later tonight.”

“The answer will still be no,” she called after him as he closed the door.

“Bunch of weirdos,” she whispered to herself after he’d left. She wished there was some way she could get ahold of Misty and talk her out of this *celebration*.

Cara thought about it for a few moments. She might not be able to talk to Misty, but if she went upstairs, she might find a way out of this place. There had to be something upstairs that would lead her outside, and away from here.

There would have to be a time when Mateo was not watching her like a hawk. Maybe she would be able to convince one of the guests that she was really a prisoner and not here playing one of their sick games.

She would have to act normal, and not set off Mateo’s radar that something was wrong. It had to work. She had to find a way out of here or she was going to go crazy.

When Mateo opened the door sometime later, she stayed where she was on the bed and said, “Please tell Misty if she is willing to forgive me for what happened today, then I am willing to accept her invitation.”

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Jay Rhodes stared at the photos on his desk. Cara has been missing for almost a month now, and they were no closer to

finding out what had happened.

He was sure fucking Gabe Hernandez was really Felix Cortez, but he could not prove it. He sent the Las Cruces Police Department a photo of Gabe, but they had wondered, too. Hernandez's lawyer had gotten him out without having to give his fingerprints. So, they were pretty much up shit creek.

Hernandez refused to cooperate and was riding around town on his motorcycle like nothing was wrong. But he hadn't left town, and Jay kept hoping they would find some evidence that would lead them to Cara.

The women who had been at the bar that day had been certain that Mateo de los Santos had been the man who had come in, but they had not been able to find him.

Jay had studied the photos and the evidence they collected from Cara's bedroom. Her fingerprints had been there, and still had another set they couldn't identify. He was sure they belonged to Hernandez, but since he wouldn't cooperate, they couldn't prove it. He had done something to Cara, Jay was sure of it. There was a big problem... his department was not equipped to handle this kind of case. He should have called for help sooner, but pride had held him back.

He picked up his phone and told Val at reception to call the Lubbock FBI office. He hated to, because it was admitting that Cara was dead, that Gabe had killed her, and Jay could have prevented it.

When he mentioned Cara's name, he was immediately put through to the agent in charge of the office SAC Wayne Michaels.

"This is Jay Rhodes, of Coldwater County. I need help with a missing person case."

"To tell the truth, Sheriff, I expected your call sooner. I've been following the story on the news." The agent cleared his throat. "Jay, may I call you Jay? Could you email me a copy of your file so I can study it tonight?"

It was more a request than a question, and Jay took down the email address and sent off the file.

“Oh, and Wayne,” Jay took a deep breath to steady his voice. “I think you should bring a cadaver dog.”

“Understood,” Wayne said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

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## Chapter 4

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CARA WOULD HAVE LIKED to talk with Misty before her “thing” but there was no time. Or at least that’s what Mateo told her. Or maybe he just wanted to keep them apart. Cara thought the latter was true, but she didn’t push the issue. She may not agree with what was happening, but she had other plans for tonight,

If things went right, she would be home in the next few days.

The day went pretty much as any other day until around four o’clock when Mateo showed up at the door. He had a box in his hands, and it was almost as if he were presenting her with a gift. He set it on the bed and sat in his regular chair.

“Is it my birthday?”

“It’s things you need for tonight.”

Cara stared at it as if it were a snake.

“It’s not going to jump out of the box,” Mateo said.

Cara tossed the top off and found tissue paper. She folded it back and looked at the clothing underneath it. Well, clothing was being generous. It was a skimpy teddy, and a short, satin robe, all in red.

“Am I supposed to wear this tonight?”

Mateo grinned at her and lifted his eyebrows. “You could go naked. Either works for me.”

“There is not much to it,” Cara said.

“You will find that people playing upstairs don’t wear any clothing,” he said.

“But I’m not playing,” Cara said. “I’m just an observer. Is everyone coming to play? Surely, I won’t be the only one just watching.”

“There is not a cheering section, Cara. And even though you will be an observer tonight, I want you to dress appropriately.”

She looked at the small amount of fabric in the box, and was about to tell him it wasn’t appropriate for anything, when he continued.

“I know you, and I know you’re not going for Misty tonight. You are going so you can figure out a way to get out of here.”

His voice had deepened with every word, and she knew he would be watching her like a hawk.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, or yours. You will wear the outfit I brought, and you will be ready at nine o’clock, on the dot.”

Mateo started for the door and turned around and glared at her. “You should know, if there are any shenanigans tonight, there will be consequences. The doctor will not be there to save you, nor will Misty. This is her night and I want it to go smoothly. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

She understood him, but she didn’t mean to obey him.

“And just so you know, we will be in a BDSM club, and any punishment I must administer will be of a sexual nature. Mull that over while the gears are turning in your mind.”

He had stopped in the doorway, and he looked so large and intimidating that Cara felt her blood go cold. What would he do to her if she didn’t manage to make good on her escape? It was all the more reason she couldn’t fail. Tonight, had to be the night.

At eight o'clock, Cara started changing her clothes. The teddy was so tight it took twenty minutes to wiggle into it. And it took her another twenty minutes to wiggle out of it. There was no way she was wearing it in public.

She put on the robe, sat on the bed and waited for Mateo. At nine o'clock on the dot Mateo came through the door. She was nervous, and ready to get the hell out of this place.

Mateo sat down in his usual chair and twirled a finger in her direction. The meaning was clear. Let me see. Then he lit a cigarette and crossed his legs.

"There is no way this is fitting." She picked up the teddy and threw it in his direction. "Either get me a larger size or let me wear my regular clothes."

To her surprise he winked at her. "That is how it's supposed to fit, Cara. Put it on or go naked, it is your choice."

"It doesn't cover a thing," she said. Panic welled up inside her. She couldn't escape without clothes.

"That's why I gave you the robe, because I knew you would be... shy." He uncrossed his legs and stretched them out in front of him. "Dress or go naked."

Cora threw off the robe and started to put on the teddy. At one point he stood and took hold of a strap. She turned and slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch me!" She wanted to slap more than his hand. "I don't ever want you to touch me."

"There was a twisted strap. Just trying to help."

"The only help I need from you is to be able to go home."

"This is hardly the time to discuss that."

Cara turned away from him. "Fine. I'm dressed, and we're late."

"I lied about the time. It's not until eleven." He let his gaze roam over her. "You look lovely. That outfit highlights your attributes."

"You mean my tits."

He laughed. “Yes.”

She wheeled back around to stare at him. He had sat back down in his chair and had a sheepish look on his face. She hated the fact that it made him look attractive. He wore a light blue button down, and linen pants.

“Why would you lie to me?” she asked.

“Because I know what happens next, and I wanted time to deal with it.”

Cara shook her head in confusion. Something told her she wasn't going to like what was coming.

“Carlos,” he called out. Carlos came in and placed a wooden tray on the bed. When he was gone Cara looked at the contents.

“Absolutely not!” She pointed at the tray. “I am not wearing—those.”

“It's for your protection.”

“Handcuffs are for my protection? Bullshit!”

Mateo chuckled. “No, those are for me. I don't trust you, Cara, and they will make sure you do not run. But the collar, that is to keep you safe.”

“I know what collars are for in your weird ass world. It means you own me. No fucking way am I putting that around my neck.”

“In this instance, it is for your protection,” Mateo said. “There are, shall we call them, freelancers upstairs, looking for a submissive player. If you are not wearing a collar, it is possible a Master, or Mistress, might think you are available. That and the cuffs will show them that you are with me.”

While she understood what he was saying, it still didn't make her want to put the collar around her neck. “What if this is a trick? What if you find a way to get it around my neck and then put a lock on and I can't get it off?”

“It is just to keep others from hitting on you.”

After pondering the situation for a few moments, Cara said to him, "I think I should not go."

"It is too late," Mateo said. "I've already told Misty you will be there, and I don't want to disappoint her."

She thought that sounded right, and knew if there was a problem with the collar, the doctor would help her. Besides she was going to break her promise to him when she tried to escape. She wasn't sure how the collar would help, or maybe it would. She would have to figure it out once she got up there.

"Fine, I'll do it. But I'm doing it for Misty, not for you."

"I would expect nothing less," Mateo said. "Now we are getting close to when we need to go. Turn so your back is to me and lift your hair."

She hated the feel of the thin leather choker around her neck, and when he touched her, she tried to shrug him off.

"Calm down. Think of it as a piece of jewelry."

"One that means I've lost my mind."

She wanted to tear it off. Her breath felt as if it were stuck in her throat, as if this piece of jewelry was cutting off her air. He put his hands on her shoulders and she pulled away from him.

"Don't touch me!" She worked to get herself under control. Finally, she said, "I hate you. I hate you so much."

"I would expect nothing less," he answered.

Mateo grabbed the handcuffs off the table and started out of the room. She fell into step behind him, hopefully for the last time. He turned left once he was in the hallway. She saw Carlos at the end of the hall. He fell into step behind them and followed.

Soon they stepped into a small square room with four doorways, including the one they'd stepped through. Mateo stopped in front of a green door and held up the handcuffs. Cara offered her wrists. She didn't want to fight him anymore.



“I got the furry ones, so they wouldn’t mark you,” Mateo said.

“You mean so you wouldn’t have to explain marks to the doctor.”

He shrugged and took a coil of rope from Carlos.

“What is that? A leash?”

“So, I can keep track of you.”

“Fuck you,” she said as he tied the rope to her cuffs.

“Is that an offer?” he asked.

“It will never be an offer.”

He tugged on the rope as if to test the binding. Then he said, “We’ll see.”

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Cara was not sure what she expected. In her mind, the club, of which she still didn’t know the name, would have naked women chained to the walls with men beating them. There would be female screams of pain and male laughter. What she was seeing now was like a bar, a bar with naked people, true, but nothing weird was happening.

“Close your mouth,” Mateo said.

“It’s so normal,” she said.

“We have a human ritual sacrifice space on the roof, but it’s full right now. Booked solid for months.”

Her mouth fell open again, but she could tell he was holding back laughter. In response, she stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed which really infuriated her.

“So where is the weird sexual stuff?” she asked.

Mateo pointed up. On the second floor there were numerous doors with numbers. She looked further up, and there were two more floors.

There was wrought iron railing around each floor, and Cara almost felt as if she were looking at the outside of a house in New Orleans.

Before they could discuss architecture any further, Misty's voice interrupted them, or rather her screech. She ran to Cara and hugged her. When she pulled back, Cara could see Misty was naked under her robe, and she wore a wide leather collar around her neck with large steel rings hanging from the front and both sides.

"I'm so glad you're here. I have to admit that I thought you might change your mind, but here you are, and you're looking so wonderful." She ran her finger along the strip of leather around Cara's neck, and laughed. "He even dressed you properly."

Cara couldn't help but smile. "You were a cheerleader in high school, weren't you?"

"And in junior high," Misty said. "I've always been the type to push people in the right direction." Misty giggled, then hugged Cara again. "I was always good at matchmaking, too."

Her meaning was clear, and Cara was about to tell her what she could do with her idea when Carlos and Blanca arrived.

"I love these events," Blanca said. "They are so festive."

"Speaking of festive, thank you for the cake," Misty said.

They hugged, and Blanca said, "You're most welcome. It is strawberry. Your favorite."

Cara glared at her supposed friend. "Your English has gotten much better since the last time we talked."

Cara looked between them all. Both women looked sheepish.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Why?"

"This is hardly the time or the place." Mateo's voice had that stern, pissed off, yet calm tone to it, the one that scared her half to death. But she did not care. She was tired of this bullshit.

Blanca looked upset, but before Cara said anything, Misty took the hand of the man standing next to him. “Cara, this is my husband, Lee.”

If opposites attract, this couple proved the rule perfectly. Lee was a small man, at least a few inches shorter than Misty. But he was powerfully built.

He made a slight bow in Cara’s direction and said, “A pleasure.”

“Meet many kidnap victims?” she responded.

“I am warning you, behave.” Mateo’s voice was even deeper, and Cara knew she’d pushed him to the limit. That wasn’t good for what she had planned for the evening.

“Misty, Lee, I am sorry. Forgive me.” She could play the lying game, too.

“It’s okay,” Misty said. “You’re still getting used to things.”

“We’ll be leaving you to get ready now,” Lee said.

Once they left, Mateo turned an angry gaze on Cara. “Need I remind you that punishments tonight will be sexual in nature?”

“A chance to break your promise to me and rape me? It’s okay for you to lie to me, but heaven forbid I should fight back.”

“I won’t rape you, hellcat. When we fuck, you will beg for it.”

“When Hell freezes over,” she responded.

“We should find our seats,” Mateo said. He walked in front of her, and she fell into step behind him. They walked down four steps that took them into a pit. In the center of the room was something Cara hadn’t noticed before, a stage. It was surrounded by a wire cage, and had a wooden frame in the center.

The four of them sat at a table on the front row, and a waitress appeared almost immediately. “Soda tonight,” Mateo

said. The scantily dressed woman left quickly. Carlos looked at Mateo and Cara noticed the unspoken looks they exchanged. Carlos left the table.

“I’m really sorry,” Blanca said.

Cara shot a dirty look in Blanca’s direction. “I don’t want to hear it.” Tears welled in the younger woman’s eyes, and Cara almost felt guilty... almost.

Carlos was back within moments, and he set something on the table that made Cara’s blood run cold. It was a gag, not a piece of material, but a piece of what looked to be silicone in the shape of a dog bone, there was a chain that would go around a person’s head after the other piece went in their mouth.

“If you don’t behave, you will wear this the rest of the evening,” Mateo said.

She had no doubt he was telling the truth. She nodded. He lifted his eyebrows, and she knew exactly what he meant.

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered. She looked at Blanca who was silently crying, and said, “I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean... I’m very sorry.”

She got up and went to where the woman sat and put her arms around her. “I’m just having a hard time dealing with all this.” Cara patted Blanca’s hair, and when she did she felt something that made her heart leap for joy. A bobby pin.

She grabbed it as quickly as she could, and hoped that Blanca’s long hair didn’t fall around her shoulders so someone would notice she’d taken it.

Cara stepped away, and when nothing happened with Blanca’s hair, she felt her first ray of hope of the evening.

Jay had taught her once how to get out of a pair of handcuffs. She could still remember the laughter in his voice as he’d told her of watching someone on TV get out with no implement.

He’d come in to have lunch with her and they joked about it after he’d told her the story. “What you need is a bobby pin.”

Cara had given him one, and he showed her how it worked. After one failed attempt, she had done it twice. Tonight, she would do it again. She just had to make sure she did it carefully, so no one noticed.

She stayed quiet after that. Moments later, Mateo handed her leash to Carlos and got up from the table.

He walked to the stage and climbed the three steps it took to reach the top. He crossed to where Lee and Misty stood. He took hold of the microphone that had been on a stand and welcomed the crowd.

“Tonight, we help celebrate the anniversary of two of my favorite people who were lucky to find each other, and lucky they have been able to stay together, through thick and thin. Let’s welcome Lee and Misty, as they mark their love and their years together.”

Everyone clapped and Mateo came back to the table. He took the leash from Carlos, and didn’t even look in her direction. Good, she thought. The more angry he was, the more he would ignore her, and the easier it would be to slip away.

Cara ignored the world around her and started to work the bobby pin into the lock. There were clicking noises, and she once again worried about being overheard. She thought it was probably her imagination, but it sounded as if they were very loud.

After what seemed like forever she stopped and looked up to where Lee was hooking a chain to Misty’s left wrist. She hadn’t noticed them before. They must have dropped from the ceiling. When he was done with that he moved to her right side. When he took out a bullwhip, Cara thought she was going to throw up.

She would definitely have to concentrate on the handcuffs, because she could not watch a person being whipped.

The crowd seemed mesmerized. Lee flicked the whip, it made a loud cracking sound and Cara flinched. Misty remained silent. The second time he flicked it Cara looked up,

and could see that he was moving it around the stage, hitting close to Misty, but not making contact. The first time he made contact, there was the sound of leather hitting flesh, and Misty inhaled sharply.

Was it Cara's imagination, or had Mateo pulled harder on the leash? She wasn't sure, but she knew that to make good on her escape she needed to get the handcuffs off during the whipping. A second lash landed, and Misty's cry was loud. At the same time, Cara took advantage of the noise and put the pin back in the lock.

By the time the whip had made contact with Misty for the fourth time, Cara felt the satisfying release of the first cuff. *One more and I'm out of here*, she thought.

It was at that time Mateo decided she needed attention.

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"This is sick," Cara said.

"Sick like the kids say something is sick nowadays, or sick like I may vomit?"

"Show me the way to the bathroom sick," she said. "How could someone let another human being do that to them?"

"I don't hear Misty complaining."

"If I understand correctly, she also thinks you and I are going to get together, so she has a screw loose somewhere."

"I'll be looking for a coat for you. When Hell freezes over one of these days, you may like it."

"In your dreams," she said. "And my nightmares. I really do need to go to the restroom, though."

"I'll have Carlos take you when it's over."

"I'm in a room full of people, and I'm in lingerie. Just point me in the right direction."

Mateo's look told her he didn't trust her. "You can wait. I want you to see the whole thing." He turned his attention back to the scene, which was just fine with her.

She quickly undid the second one, but held them close to her chest so hopefully, Mateo wouldn't notice.

He was way into the whipping. It was almost as if he had forgotten that she was there, even though he'd only talked to her moments ago. She let the furry cuffs drop on the table, and waited to see if he would notice.

He didn't. She looked over to where Carlos sat. He and Blanca were watching the action on the stage.

While Mateo's attention was otherwise engaged, Cara slipped from her chair and moved as slowly and silently as possible. When she made it to the second row of tables, she started moving faster. She took the three steps to the main floor and felt like she was home free.

The big problem was there were many doors, and she didn't know which one to take. She walked as quickly as possible and started reading what was written on them. Some of them had colors, but pointed to the floor above them. There was an arrow that pointed to an elevator. But the one that gave her the most hope was one that said Hotel.

She opened the door and found herself at another stairwell. She climbed them, opened the door, and found another long hallway much like the one from her cell.

There were many doors on this hallway though, and they all had numbers. She started pounding on them as she ran, screaming for help, begging for someone to answer. Finally, one door opened, and a man stepped in front of her.

"Yes?" he said.

"Please, please you have to help me, he's kidnapped me."

The man laughed, took a step back and slammed the door in her face. She pounded on it and when it didn't open again, she went to the one across from her. It wasn't until she got to the end of the hall that another one opened.

When another man stepped out, she repeated her pleas. "He's kidnapped me," she said. "Please help me." Was there no one here who would believe her? Something told her there was not.

The man shuffled, just as the man at the other door had. A young woman stepped up behind him and put her arms around his chest.

“What fun,” the woman said. “Baby, will you kidnap me?”

“Anytime sweetheart.” He took a step back, but stopped, looked up and said, “Does this sub belong to you, Senor Mateo?”

Just then a voice came from over her shoulder, one that made her shiver in fear.

“I’m sorry if she disturbed you,” Mateo said.

Cara glanced up at Mateo and felt her heart drop to her feet. Mateo looked angrier than she’d ever seen him before.

“We’re playing a little game and she’s taken it a bit too far,” he said. “You get a free night for her bothering you and interrupting whatever you were doing.”

“I appreciate that,” the man said. “And thanks for the fun idea, kidnapping sounds like wonderful entertainment.”

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He’d been duped. And he was pissed. After Lee had given Misty her anniversary whipping, he turned to Cara only to find a vacant seat, and the empty handcuffs on the table.

“What the fuck!” he said. He looked to where Lee was leading Misty from the stage and knew that they would go back to their room for aftercare and have great sex together.

What was he doing babysitting? And the willful little brat had gotten away from him.

“How did she...?” Carlos didn’t finish his sentence. Mateo picked up the handcuffs and pulled the bobby pin from the lock.

“Where did she get that?” Carlos asked.

Blanca patted her hair, and a hank of it fell. “From me,” she said, “it’s my fault. She must have taken it when she



hugged me.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mateo said. “It’s the little hellcat who’s at fault.”

He got up from the table and with Carlos right behind him, they made for the security booth. It didn’t take them long to find her in the front hall, right off the entrance. If she had kept going, she would have been out the front door. She was pounding on doors, and he knew exactly what she was saying. It was a good thing no one here would believe her.

Everyone would think it was a game. Still, she was disturbing his guests, and that only increased his anger.

“Carlos, tell the security guard in the main lobby that my new submissive needs to be kept for me.”

He ran up to the first floor, and opened the door just in time to hear her screaming that she’d been kidnapped and needed help. He shot down the hallway and watched as she fell at the feet of the man who had opened the door. Mr. Rosin. Mateo knew all his guests, and Mr. Rosin was a repeat visitor, bringing a different submissive with him every time. Most of the guests were repeat customers, and they didn’t need to deal with this crap.

He stopped right behind her and after he and Mr. Rosin had a short conversation, he looked down to where Cara was huddled on the floor, crying.

“Get up, hellcat.”

“Fuck you,” she said venomously.

“I said get up.” He didn’t want to have a fight with her here in the hallway, where guests could see them. Now that Lee and Misty’s scene was over, guests would be returning to their rooms to enjoy themselves.

When she didn’t move, he reached for her arm and she lashed out at him, raking her nails down his arm. The pain wasn’t the worst he’d ever felt, but it did hurt. He grabbed her arm and she pulled away from him, grabbed the vase of flowers that sat on a nearby table, and smashed it on the side of his face.

He felt water dripping down his face, and something a little bit warmer. Blood.

“Little bitch.” Carlos had been standing behind him and the security guard they had alerted stood at the end of the hallway.

He pushed her toward Carlos and said, “Take her to 4C, I’ll be there soon.”

“You need to see the doctor, to make sure there is no glass in your eye,” Carlos said.

Mateo did not answer. Instead, he said to the security guard, “Help him, and be careful. She can be lethal.”

Cara screamed as the men dragged her down the hall. When they were gone, Mateo went to the office off the front desk and ran his finger over the cut on his face. He didn’t feel any glass in his eye, but he could feel shards in his cheek.

He should go to the doctor and have him look at the injury, but he wanted to take care of Cara first. He wasn’t going to force himself on her, but the punishment would be sexual. Whether she enjoyed it or not would be up to her. But he would work his hardest to make sure she had an orgasm before it was all over.

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Jay stood in the doorway of Cara’s house, next to SAC “just call me Wayne” Michaels. The two of them watched as a man who just introduced himself as Nick, followed the cadaver dog around the room.

“It’s all clean,” Nick said. The dog had already searched all three bedrooms, the kitchen and both bathrooms. Now he sat next to his handler and waited as if to say, Well, am I done?

“We should have him look outside,” Wayne said. “There is every chance he took her out there to kill her.” As if realizing he’d said something insensitive, the agent turned to Jay and said, “Sorry, Sheriff. I know she was a friend of yours.”

“Which is why I want her found,” Jay said. “Even if she’s dead.”

Without saying another word, Nick took the dog outside. Once they were off the deck, he unhooked the dog’s leash, and pointed toward the back part of the land.

“Have at it, boy,” Nick said. The dog took off at a run, and every once in a while, he stopped and sniffed the ground around him. The three men trailed him. After a while he got to a shed at the back of the property.

Hope grew inside Jay every time the dog sniffed then left the spot. He’d yet to find anything so maybe, just maybe, Cara was still alive.

But at the shed, that hope died when the dog started running in circles.

Puzzled, Jay looked at Nick and said, “What does that mean?”

“Nothing good,” Nick said. “That’s the signal that he’s found something.”

The dog sniffed a large area then went to the center of it and barked, then lay down.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“It indicates the area he hit on,” Nick said.

“We have to dig,” Wayne said.

“I’ll do it,” Jay said.

“Not a chance,” Wayne said. “We have men trained for this. If there’s a body down there, we need to be careful, so we can preserve evidence.”

Jay was just about to say that he could be careful and dig when the dog got up, ran to another area, and started to circle it. He went to the center sat down and barked, then lay down.

“What the hell does that mean?” Jay felt as if he might throw up. “He already found the spot.”

“It means holy shit,” Nick said. “You better bring two teams, Wayne.”

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## Chapter 5

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NO MATTER how hard she tried, Cara could not get away from the two men. They dragged her through the room where Misty had been whipped, and people laughed and pointed. There had been one man who had asked if Cara was a willing participant. Carlos said it was a kidnapping game, and Cara was crying so hard she couldn't answer. The man nodded and they moved on.

They stopped in front of a red door marked 4C. Once they were inside, the men strapped her to a chair that reminded her of one found in a dentist's office. When she was secured to it, Mateo entered the room.

"Thank you, Brett," he said. "You may go back to your post."

"You're still bleeding," Carlos said after the other man had left.

"It's not bad," Mateo said.

Carlos turned to Cara. "You made my wife cry tonight, and you made my best friend bleed. If you were mine, you would be doing both in a little while."

"Go to hell," Cara said.

Before Carlos said anything else, Mateo held up a hand. "Carlos, go. But send in Erin with her kit."

After Carlos was gone, Mateo sat down in a chair, and he rolled to Cara's side.

“Cara, this has to stop.”

“I’m going to keep trying until I’m successful. So, fuck you.”

“Cara, you are on an island. So even if you make it out of the building, there is nowhere for you to go.”

She felt as if someone had slapped her. “An island, where?” She wasn’t sure she believed him, but it was best to ask questions and keep him talking.

“In Mexico,” he answered. “And unless you can swim more than thirty miles to the mainland, you won’t be going anywhere.”

She thought she’d cried herself out, but obviously not. Tears leaked from her eyes. There was no getting away from him and there was no getting help. Everyone here thought it was a game, and she was a playing piece.

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t sure what else to say, but she hoped it would work again.

Mateo moved closer to her, she felt his breath on her face, and could see the blood drying from the cut near his eye. “I don’t care.”

The door opened and an older woman came inside.

“Shave her,” Mateo said. He got up, pressed a button on the wall, and the legs on the chair moved apart. He got a pair of scissors and cut the teddy, so her mound was open for all to see.

“She’s had a bikini wax. Would you rather I waxed her, Senor?”

“Good idea. Full Brazilian.”

“I’ll have to turn her over to get to her anus.”

“True,” Mateo answered. He seemed to consider it for a moment and then said, “Just her pussy.”

“Yes, Senor. I have heated wax at my station, I’ll be right back, with your permission.”

“You have it,” he said.

When she was gone, Cara said, “People really grovel at your feet, don’t they?”

“The perks of being the boss,” he said. “I’m the main boss, but all the dominants here are bosses.”

“Do you own this place on your own, or do you have partners?”

Before he could answer, Erin returned. She pushed a small cart in the room and Cara braced herself for what was about to happen. Being waxed was not fun, but she enjoyed the results. The woman worked quickly and efficiently, the wax was just the right temperature and when she put it on, Cara didn’t feel the burning sensation she had the last time she’d been waxed.

It still hurt when she pulled off the strips of cloth, but she moved quickly, and Cara’s sharp intakes of breath were not as loud as she’d expected them to be. Heat infused her as Erin finished her job.

“Senor?” she asked Mateo.

Having him examine her afterward was worse than the actual waxing. Cara shivered as he put his fingers on her. He ran his finger over each side of her mound, as if he were feeling for stray hair. Then he ran his finger down her slit and dipped it inside. It went in easily, and she heard his noise of approval.

“That will be all, Erin, thank you.”

The other woman was barely out the door when Cara said, “Is that all? Are we done?”

“Not hardly,” he said.

“You’re going to whip me, aren’t you?”

“No, I am not. I should, but frankly I don’t think it will serve any purpose right now. It will just make you angry, and there is enough of that right now.”

Cara exhaled in relief. But if he didn’t have that planned, maybe there was something worse. She hated not knowing.

She hated not being in control.

He had sat back down in the rolling chair and was leaning in towards her. She also hated being bound, not being able to move. Something told her he knew that and was doing it on purpose to keep her off center.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked.

She hated the look that came across his face, a smile mixed with just enough menace to make her shiver.

“What I’m going to do, is give you an orgasm.”

“No!” She fought against the leather that bound her to the chair. It pissed her off that all her squirming did was make him chuckle.

He got up and pressed a button on the wall. When a male voice sounded from an intercom, Mateo called for a rack.

Moments later, two men wheeled it in. It was nothing more than a wooden, square frame with rope strung between the frame.

“Now, Cara, are you going to fight me on this? Because if you are I will have my men transfer you. But it will be more personal if I do.”

She’d already had Carlos and the security guard drag her through the room and bring her up here. The thought of these two men handling her was more than she could take.

“I’ll behave.”

“I’ve heard those words before, or a variation of them. I’m not sure whether to believe you.”

“Mateo, this time I mean it.” Besides, maybe she could talk him out of it. Something told her she couldn’t, but she could always try.

When the men were gone, he undid the bindings around her ankles, and then the ones around her wrists. He offered her his hand, and she thought about pushing him away and running for the door. But she knew she would get nowhere.



She noticed the injury near his eye trickle a little bit of blood, and she knew that if she tried to run, he would never believe her again. There was still time to change his mind.

On his order she took off the robe, and the teddy followed suit. She reminded herself that he had seen her naked before, the night he kidnapped her, and when she'd changed tonight.

She took his hand. And they walked to the rack.

“Please don't do this,” she said as he took one of her wrists and attached it to the frame. He didn't answer her. Instead, he attached the other wrist.

“Would you rather I whipped you, hellcat, because that's what you deserve?”

He bent in front of her and attached her ankles.

“Mateo, please, don't do this.”

Tears leaked from her eyes as she watched him walk to a chest and open the top drawer. He rooted around in it for a moment before he closed it and opened the one below it. He took out something she couldn't see and put it in the pocket of his pants and then took out something else. He closed the drawer and walked over to the rack.

Mateo held up the item in his hand, and her eyes widened. It looked like a clothespin, only it was metal.

“Please, please don't. I'm sorry. I apologize. I'll never lie to you again. Don't do this to me.”

“You should be apologizing to Mr. Rosin, there's no telling what you interrupted between him and his submissive. That is unacceptable behavior. And you will apologize to Blanca, also.”

“I didn't know. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.” The last few words were blurred because she was crying so hard.

Mateo went to where he left the rolling chair and moved it in front of her. He sat down and his face was right next to her pussy. He clasped the metal clip onto her clit, and Cara screamed.

The pain was excruciating. She jerked her hips in an effort to get away from it, but he put his hands on her thighs and said, almost gently, “Relax, hellcat, let the pain soak into you.”

It seemed as if he’d left it on for hours, but it was only a few minutes before he released it and the pressure left her. Her clit throbbed in protest, and she could not stop the tears that were falling down her face.

“We’re going to do that again, and then I am going to have Carlos bring Mr. Rosin here so you can apologize.”

Yes, yes she would say anything just about now to make him stop doing what he was doing. The problem was, she wasn’t sure he would stop.

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Mateo sat and watched the hellcat deliver her apology. She was sincere, and he believed every word she said to Mr. Rosin.

During the time they waited for him, he had used the clamp on her clit three more times. She’d cussed him the first time, screaming about the pain, telling him how much she hated him. But on the second one she was no longer begging him to stop. She simply let herself feel the pain, which is what he wanted her to do.

The whole thing had been an experiment, to see her reaction. Well, not the escape. That had been all her. He’d been pissed, and it had taken him a while to get ahold of his emotions and not issue punishment that involved leather smacking her ass. But that would have served no real purpose. It had been Misty’s words about him seeing Cara as a challenge that had set it all in motion. He had hoped she would come close to orgasm, but she had not, which was disappointing.

After the last time he’d used the clamp on her, he released her from the rack and moved her to the chair. He didn’t want her to be on her knees when she apologized. The first time she got down on her knees for something like that, he wanted it to

be in front of him. He even covered her with the robe, because he knew she wouldn't want to be naked in front of Mr. Rosin.

Mateo had expected Carlos to bring Blanca with him, but his friend had told him that Blanca was upset and didn't want to be out in public right now. It would be better for Cara and Blanca to talk in private, tomorrow.

When Mr. Rosin turned away from Cara, Mateo went to one of his most loyal customers and shook his hand. "I'm going to give you a free week from me," Mateo said. "I know I suggested one night, but it seems like more is needed."

"I thank you for the offer," Mr. Rosin said. "But really, it's not necessary. I'm just glad to see you have a new toy, one that you're enjoying so much."

"Yes, I am rather enjoying her. She and I are very different. That can make it fun. She still has a lot to learn, and I'm going to enjoy teaching her."

When they were alone again, Mateo went to her and removed the robe. He let it drop on the floor and was surprised that she didn't object.

"I want my apology," she said. "I've been apologizing to people left and right, and nobody, I repeat nobody, has said they're sorry for what you have done to me."

"That's not true. The doctor has apologized several times."

Mateo ran his hand over her stomach, she shivered and it made him want her even more. He had been hard since he'd seen her on the security camera, pounding on Mr. Rosin's door. She was feisty, which is why her nickname fit her so well. But he didn't know if he would actually be able to train her enough for her to be submissive to him. Of course, he'd only had her here for a month, maybe after she'd been here a while it would be better.

"Do you want an apology?" He continued caressing her stomach. He wanted to move his hand up, to fondle her tits, but it was best to move slowly.

Cara stared daggers at him. "You don't think I deserve it. Yes, the doctor has said it, but you haven't. You're so

concerned about how I treat people, but nobody gives a damn how they treated me. I'm the victim here, or don't you remember that?"

"I'm sure you'll get one tomorrow," he said. "Blanca is very upset about the whole thing and I'm sure she'll tell you how sorry she is that she lied to you."

"Why did you have her lie to me? It served no purpose. The whole thing doesn't make any sense."

Mateo moved his hand down one of her legs, and up the other. He was dangerously close to her pussy, and he wanted to feel it, to feel her move into his touch, to see if she was wet. She'd been so bent on talking to him that she hadn't even noticed what he was doing.

"I want an apology from you, and I want another one from the doctor. He thinks he's so innocent in all this, and he's not. I don't understand the reasoning, I guess, but... What are you doing? Get your hands off me!"

He cupped her nude pussy and let a finger dip into it. Oh, she was wet. She was very wet.

"Well, look at that, someone who hated the pain is aroused."

"I am not! Get your hands off me!" She tried to roll away from his touch, but he held her still.

Mateo couldn't resist, he moved his fingers up to her clit, and gently rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. "You're a little liar, Cara," he whispered. He rubbed her again and her hips shot up.

"For someone who doesn't like my touch, your reaction is perfect. You just had an orgasm."

"I hate you," she said softly. "Don't think this changes anything."

"Oh, hellcat, it changes everything."

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“I don’t do very well with TV cameras.” Jay Rhodes looked out at the number of people in front of them, waiting for the event to begin. There were a few print journalists, as well as reporters from TV stations from both Amarillo and Lubbock. He hadn’t expected so many.

“You let me handle it,” Wayne said. “Unless they ask you a direct question, I’ll answer everything. Remember, this is an FBI case, except for Ms. Anderson. That one is yours.”

Jay was thrilled to hear that. The last thing he wanted to do was deal with twelve dead women. Or at least they thought they were all women. The coroner from the FBI said something about the size of pelvises being that of women, unless they missed one “in all this mess.” All the bodies had been skeletons. Except for two, which had been buried for less time than most.

How Hernandez had done all this without anybody knowing was beyond comprehension. You would think someone had seen something. Jay remembered standing there and staring at twelve tarps that covered human remains and thinking, I’m looking at twelve people who vanished, whose loved ones had always wondered where they were. How could Hernandez have done this? How could any human being do this to another? He couldn’t fathom it.

The dog had gone wild, searching other areas of land, but had not found anything besides the two mass grave sites.

Wayne had brought in several other agents to help when they started bringing up the dead. Jay’s deputies worked extra hours to control the crowds who gathered at the edge of Cara’s land to try and get a look. There was only one woman missing from Coldwater, a young woman named Deidra who Cara had reported missing more than a year ago. Jay prayed she wasn’t one of the bodies, but he was pretty sure she probably was.

Jay tried not to be nervous once again about speaking in front of these people, especially when Wayne looked at him and said, “It’s showtime.”

Wayne stepped up to the microphone and called everyone to order. Camera lights went on, and Jay heard the clicking of

recorders.

“Good afternoon ladies, and gentlemen,” Wayne said. “I am SAC Wayne Michaels of the Lubbock field office of the FBI. To my right is Sheriff Jay Rhodes of Coldwater County. We are here today to discuss rumors that have been circulating after we located the bodies of twelve women in Coldwater County at the home of a woman who has been missing from Coldwater County for more than a month now.”

Rumor was a nice way to put it, Jay thought. The minute people found out they were digging up bodies, the news spread like wildfire. People made accusations against Gabe and were concerned Cara was one of the ones found. Some people even said the two of them killed the women and buried the bodies. Hopefully giving out this information right now would keep people from spreading misinformation. But Jay knew that wasn't true.

“We are here today to announce that we have found the bodies of twelve women buried in Cara Anderson's backyard. Pathologists from the FBI are working frantically to identify these women, and to discover how long they have been buried there.”

The reporters started screaming out questions. No matter how hard Wayne tried to get them to be quiet, they would not stop.

Jay put his index fingers in his mouth and whistled. The room grew silent. “Let the man speak, and then we'll take questions.”

“Thank you, Sheriff,” Wayne said. He then continued, “In your press packet, you will find two photographs. One is a photo of Gabe Hernandez and Cara Anderson taken at a Christmas party last year. People around here know him as Gabe Hernandez. After executing a search warrant at his home, and matching up fingerprints, we have positively identified Hernandez as a fugitive named Felix Cortez. He is wanted in the January 2006 murder of Barbara Runnels in Las Cruces, New Mexico. If you see him do not approach him. He is considered armed and extremely dangerous. Call any law

enforcement agency, or the tip line that you see at the bottom of your screen.” Wayne paused. “Of course, you’ll want to edit that with whatever you do with your scroll. I would hope that you would run that tip number when you run the story.

“The other man we are looking for, and Sheriff Rhodes can speak to this, is Cortez’s cousin. His name is Mateo de los Santos, at this time he’s not a suspect in the murders, but we do believe he is involved in the disappearance of Cara Anderson.

“His photo is at least fifteen years old, so take that into account. Now, Sheriff Rhodes will speak to Ms. Anderson’s disappearance, and then we will take questions.”

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## Chapter 6

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THE NEXT MORNING, Cara felt like a different person. Truthfully, her body still hummed from the orgasm she'd had the night before.

She didn't want to give Mateo credit for it, but it had been him or rather the hard stimulation he provided, that had given it to her. And although it had been good, and it had been fun having him play with her, she still woke up in her cell, with no windows and no door she could open, and no sunshine. She was still a prisoner.

She glanced at her watch and saw it was just after nine. Later than when Blanca usually showed up with her breakfast.

At nine-thirty the door opened, but instead of Blanca it was Mateo who came in carrying a tray of food. He set it down on the table, and she saw it was just toast, and a cup of coffee.

"Where is Blanca?" she asked.

"What, no good morning, Mateo? No thanks for the orgasm?" He chuckled and continued, "She is already working on lunch."

"I hope it's more than what we have here," Cara said. "That toast is not going to last me long."

Mateo sat down at the end of the bed, and she pulled the covers around her. Even though she put on clothes last night, she still felt naked and alone after what happened.



“Being shy this morning?” He winked at her, and she looked away. “The doctor is joining us for lunch. We have some things we need to discuss.”

“Please don’t tell him about last night,” Cara said with urgency. “Please, Mateo, please.”

“You mean about your escape attempt, or about your...” He leaned closer and whispered, “Orgasm?”

“You’re a pig.”

He snorted several times, then laughed. She hated to admit it, but the smile, and the laughter made him attractive.

“He’s going to notice my eye though, and, well, he’s a smart man.”

“I just don’t want him to know about the other thing.”

“You mean you don’t want him to know I gave you an,” he looked around as if to make sure they were alone, “orgasm.” He said the word as if he were imparting a state secret.

“Stop saying that!” she hissed.

“Okay, we’ll just tell him that I made you come. Does that sound better?”

The doctor appeared in the doorway at that moment. “I heard about your injury, Mateo. Let me see.”

Mateo turned his face up and the doctor examined the area, using a small pen light. “There’s a shard of glass in there. I’ll need to get it out before it becomes infected. May I ask what happened?”

“I got into an altercation with a guest.”

“Cara, what did you do?” the doctor asked in an accusatory tone.

“Told you he was smart,” Mateo said. “She tried to escape. She almost made it to the front door, too, and she disturbed guests. Hence my calling this meeting.”

The doctor sat down in his usual chair at the table. He nodded at Mateo, who said, “Cara, we can’t keep doing this.”

“None of us like this situation,” the doctor said. “You’ve lost your life as you know it, and that is plain to us.”

“So, we are proposing a deal,” Mateo said.

She wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. “Exactly what kind of deal are you talking about?” she asked.

Cara looked at the doctor, and then Mateo. She couldn’t help herself, try as she might to concentrate on a deal, but think about last night, not the painful part, but the orgasm that had been incredible. How his wonderful fingers had played with her clit. How she wanted him to do it again.

“Stop trying to escape,” the doctor said. “Mateo told me that he let you know where we are, on an island. If you stumble out there in the middle of the night and fall into the ocean, that could be bad.”

*It couldn’t be any worse than what she was going through right now,* she thought, but she kept her mouth closed.

When no one spoke for a few moments, she said, “So you want me to stop. What are you giving in return? Are you saying be good, don’t rock the boat and you get nothing in return?”

“Not this time,” Mateo said. “To fully understand what we’re offering, you need to take a walk with us.”

Cara said, “I’m not fully dressed. Could you wait outside please?”

The doctor agreed and got up and left. Mateo looked at her and lifted his eyebrows, and she pointed at the door. “Orgasm,” he said.

“Go.”

“Your mouth says go, but your hard nipples say stay and play.” He laughed and left the room.

Cara looked down at her chest. Damn, he was right. She wanted to blame the cold for their hardness, but it wasn’t cold. It was being close to him that did it. He was right. Last night had changed everything.

Once she had put on her clothes, she went into the hallway where the two men waited. They turned left, away from the garden area, and walked down the hallway. When they got to the square room with numerous doors, Mateo opened the door near the corner.

She knew they were dangerously close to the stairs that led to the play area they'd been in last night, and she held back. Despite her orgasm, and her hard nipples, she wasn't ready to take things any further. The doctor started up in front of them, and when she didn't follow suit Mateo looked at her. She shook her head and he said, "We're not going upstairs."

"Then where are we going? Tell me or I won't go."

"We are going to my apartment."

He indicated she should walk in front of him, and she tried to decide what to do. She was still a little afraid of him, and what he could make her do and feel. But if they were really offering her something that could be good, she needed to take the chance, no matter what.

She followed the doctor. They ended up in a large living area, beautifully decorated with wooden furniture, warm colors, and native art on the walls. The doctor crossed the room to a ramp and started up. He opened the door at the top, and Cara saw sunlight filter into the room. She pushed her way past him and walked onto a patio. She stopped in the center, lifted her head to the sun and took a deep breath. She could smell flowers, and seawater.

"Beautiful." The area was decorated with red and blue furniture, umbrellas, and near the edge of the roof was a pool. It ran the length of the wall but was not overly wide. She wanted nothing more than to dive into it.

Mateo moved around the doctor and sat down at a table. He nodded at an empty chair, and Cara sat down. The doctor joined them. Hope filled Cara's chest.

"All this could be yours," Mateo said. "You will get access to this area, anytime you wish. You will have a guard who will come with you. In return you will stop trying to escape."

It sounded like a good deal, but she wasn't sure she liked the idea of a guard being in her room with her. She told him so in no uncertain terms, and Mateo shook his head.

"You will have new quarters, one in which there will be an intercom system for you to call for the guard."

"Where?" she asked.

"They are in my apartment," Mateo said.

She wanted to ask to see them, because she was nervous about being too close to him during the night, or hell, not just the night, during the day too, when her body would want what he could provide.

"Do we have a deal?" Mateo asked.

She got up and went to the edge of the roof, right next to the pool. She looked out at a pool and beach on the ground. Beyond that was crystal blue water. A lot of it. Far too much for her to try and swim when she did not know where she was going.

"Yes," she answered.

"Excellent," Mateo said. "I will show you to your room. Your guard's name is Phillip, and he is waiting to meet you."

"And then we will go and look at your eye," the doctor said as he got comfortable in a lounge chair.

They went down the ramp and Mateo pointed out extra bedrooms and bathrooms as they headed down the hall. He opened the door at the end and led Cara inside. It was a large bedroom, with a bed surrounded by a heavily carved frame and headboard. It sat on a twostep dais that made it the centerpiece of the room.

"This is mine?" she asked.

"No, it's mine," he answered.

"I'm not sharing a room with you," she said.

"Think of all the fun we could have. All the orgasms I could give you."

“No.” She thought of them, but she didn’t want him to know that. Although something told her he already did.

“Your room is through that doorway.” He pointed to a spot to the right of the bed.

“It’s too close to you,” she said. “I’ll take one of those we passed.”

Mateo took a step closer to her and she wrapped her arms around her chest. “You’ll take what I give you, or you can go back to your cell.”

“Does Bruce know about this?”

“Are you really threatening me with the doctor?” Mateo asked. He sounded as if he were about to burst into laughter. “It’s this or the deal is off, hellcat.”

“I hate you.”

“So, you say,” Mateo pointed at the door across from the bed. “The bathroom, is over there.”

“I must go through your room to get to the bathroom. Why don’t I just pee on your bed on the way through?”

“To mark your territory? That would mean you wanted my room to be your room.”

“I hate you!” she screamed as she stalked into her new ‘home.’

As she examined the bed, dresser and to her surprise, TV, she heard Carlos’ voice from the other room. “I hate to interrupt your fight, but there is something you’ve got to see.”

“What?” Mateo asked.

“There is something none of us saw coming,” Carlos said. “Turns out your cousin is a serial killer.”

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Mateo set next to Cara in the home theater room and watched the screen with absolute horror. Twelve women, they had

found the bodies of twelve women on Cara's land. Did that mean they'd been there for a while, or did that mean Felix had killed and buried them? The lawman talking said Felix, and yes, he had called him Felix, was a suspect.

Next to him, he heard the telltale sounds of Cara chewing on her fingernails.

"Get your fingers out of your mouth."

"Get your cigarette out of yours," she fired back.

He wanted to say they should not convict Felix yet, but something told him that his cousin was guilty.

"Who picked your house and land, you or him?"

She didn't answer his question at first, but finally she said, "He did. The house had been empty for a while. The couple who owned it lost it for not paying their taxes. I bought it ridiculously cheap."

On the screen, the FBI agent finished answering questions, and the reporters called for the sheriff.

"Do you believe Felix Cortez killed Cara Anderson?" a woman asked.

Cara inhaled sharply. Her photo appeared on the screen, and Jay's voice came out of the TV. "We are still looking into Ms. Anderson's disappearance. The only suspect we have right now is Mateo de los Santos. As far as we know Cara is still alive."

"Jay," she whispered.

"You got something going on with the sheriff?" Mateo asked.

"He's my friend," she said. "Nothing more, just my friend. I'm sorry he's having to deal with my disappearance and all the while he thinks I'm dead. He said he thinks I'm alive, but I know him better."

"Let's not forget that they found those women because they were looking for you," the doctor said. "That's twelve families that will get closure now, and that's a good thing."

“I hope so,” Cara said. “This whole thing stinks to high heaven.”

From behind them, Mateo heard noises. He turned to see Misty and Lee walk into the room.

“Is it true?” Misty asked.

“Yes,” Mateo said.

Misty hurried across the room and knelt in front of Cara. She clasped her hands around the other woman’s, looked her in her eyes and said, “Are you okay?”

“No,” Cara replied. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

Misty offered to take her to the bathroom, but Cara declined. “I don’t want to miss anything. I want to hear everything they say.”

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When the news program was over, Mateo took the remote and switched to different national news stations. The story had been picked up by several of them, and they watched pretty much the same thing, just different clips of it.

After they’d watched three newscasts and the cycle had run through on all of them, Blanca announced that lunch had turned into dinner, and she’d made Tex-Mex in honor of Cara’s move.

“I made two different kinds of enchiladas, corn, and rice.”

“Sounds delicious,” Cara said. Even though she didn’t have an appetite right now, she would eat, because Blanca had worked so hard on it.

They all ate, and obviously enjoyed the food, because there were no leftovers. The only one who hadn’t been too eager was Mateo. He ate very little, and Cara knew exactly how he felt. He wanted his cousin punished for killing Barbara, but he didn’t want to find this out.

After everyone was done, Blanca brought out a Tres Leches cake. It was one of Cara's favorites, and she couldn't resist. She ate two pieces, and immediately regretted it. Her stomach was more than full, and she had a feeling she wouldn't be sleeping because of what happened today. Everyone went their separate ways quickly. Misty and Lee had to work, and Carlos and Blanca simply said they had plans.

Cara went to her new room, happy that she could leave the door open. It wasn't long before Mateo was standing in the doorway.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"I imagine about as good as you are," she replied. "I'd like to think they are wrong, but I have a feeling they're not."

"Why do you say that?" Mateo asked.

"Gabe used to take weeklong trips on his bike. About every two months or so."

Mateo came in the room and sat down on the bed next to her. "Go on," he said.

"He would always come back happy and smiling. I told myself it was a middle-aged crisis, although he was only forty."

She wiped away tears that were falling down her cheeks. "I feel guilty. I should have known he was doing something."

"And how would you have known?"

"There had to be signs, evidence of it. I missed it. What if all those girls are dead because of me? What if there are more?"

"Cara, those women are dead because of Felix, not because of you."

He cupped her cheek and she leaned into his touch. He swiped away some of her tears with his thumb. "You're not at fault here, hellcat."

"Then why do I feel guilty?"



“I’m not sure,” Mateo said. “But you’ve done nothing wrong. Remember that.”

“I have to make my rounds,” he said. “Would you like to join me?”

“I’m not sure I want to go upstairs again.”

“You shouldn’t be afraid of it. You came rather hard last night.”

“That doesn’t mean I liked it.” Cara took a deep breath. “It was a physical reaction. Nothing more.”

“You didn’t enjoy your orgasm?”

“Of course, I did. But the pain before it... I’m not so sure about that.”

Mateo stroked her cheek again. “The pain is what made it so intense. I think you understand that.”

Oh, she understood. But it still made her nervous.

“I handled last night badly. I let my dick think for me, just like Misty said.”

“Tell me what she said.”

“She said I wouldn’t be able to resist the challenge. She was right. But one of the main tenets of BDSM is it should be safe, sane, and consensual. I broke that rule last night. You weren’t ready. Even if I called it punishment, I should have figured out something else.”

She waited for him to say he was sorry, but he didn’t. Something told her the words ‘I’m sorry’ would never come out of his mouth.

“Do you trust me, Cara?”

“No,” she said.

“I’ve fed you, clothed you, and put a roof over your head.”

“You also kidnapped me, stuck me in a windowless room for a month, chained me to a wall, stole something from Gabe, and tortured my clit.”

“I didn’t steal from Felix. I took back something that belonged to my family. To my side of the family.” He went into the other room and returned seconds later. He held out the box Gabe had put in the safe all those years ago.

Mateo handed it to her, and she lifted the lid. Inside was a ruby ring, one that looked to be at least a hundred years old, she guessed.

“It was given to my father’s great-grandmother by Pancho Villa, which is the family legend. Our mothers were sisters, the ring had nothing to do with Felix’s side of the family. But he wanted it. He wanted it so badly he broke into the house and stole it. It was after he killed Barbara, before he went on the run. My parents were too busy worrying about me in jail facing a murder charge to spend much time at home. Humans have disappeared, I am open to help online.”

“If your parents weren’t home, how did you know Felix took it?”

“My younger brother Stefan, who was about fifteen at the time, was home. He hid our younger sister, Manel and watched him take it. I promised my father before he died that I would get it back.”

Cara tried to think how she would feel if she were fifteen and a man she knew had killed someone came into her house. She would’ve hidden too.

“It’s really beautiful,” she said.

He took back the box and closed the lid.

“What did Felix tell you it was?” Mateo asked.

“He told me it was none of my business.”

“I suppose it’s hard to explain something that’s stolen.”

“Or someone you’ve killed.” Cara leaned into Mateo. She felt the need for human contact right now, to feel the warmth of another body.

“Do you want to go with me on my rounds?”

She pulled away from him. “No. I... no.”

“All right. I’ll be gone about an hour or so. Maybe longer depending on what’s going on.” He paused. “Are you going to be okay until I get back?”

“All of a sudden you’re worried about my wellbeing?”

“You’ve had quite a shock today.”

“So have you. Your cousin is a mass murderer.”

He went into his room, and Cara stayed where she was. She hated the idea of being here alone, but she didn’t care for the idea of going upstairs, either. She heard him moving around, and she wondered if he was changing his clothes. When he reappeared a few moments later she knew that was exactly what he’d been doing. Now he wore white linen pants, and a black tunic style shirt.

“Phillip is outside if you need anything.”

“I’m sure I’m expected to stay where I’m at and be a good girl.”

“Yes, you are. I will see you in the morning.”

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. The minute she did, she saw Gabe, laughing. He had his hands around the necks of twelve women, one right after the other, before they crumpled at his feet. Then he threw them in a pit. He appeared in front of her face. He seemed real to her, as if she could reach out and touch him.

The more she tried to push the image away, the realer it became. She shivered. She got up and went to the bathroom and washed her face. She could smell Mateo on her, and it made her want him, want to talk to him, to touch him, even though she hated him. It would mean she wasn’t alone.

*Damn him. Damn him. Damn him.*

She stared in the mirror, then sat down and peed. After that she washed her hands and splashed water on her face, but it didn’t do any good. Her hands shook and she wanted to vomit.

She wanted out of here, back to her own house, to her bar, to her bed. But she would never be able to stay in that house again, never be able to sleep in that bed. Gabe had ruined that.

Cara needed to get out of this room, even though she had seen sunshine that day, and she wasn't behind a locked door, she was still a prisoner. There had to be some way to get past Phillip, even though she wasn't sure exactly how.

She'd never met the man, she wasn't sure if he was a big guy, or a little guy. She wasn't sure if he was intelligent, or just brute force.

Cara went to her door and examined it. There was a lock on it, but there was no key. Which to her meant there had to be a key somewhere.

A search was necessary. She went to Mateo's nightstand and opened the drawer. There were a lot of sex toys—a lot. They ranged from handcuffs, chains, vibrators, and dildos. The ladies he brought here must have a lot of fun. Or at least Cara imagined it was good. Cara thought Mateo must be an imaginative, if weird, lover.

The only key in the drawer belonged to the handcuffs. The next place to look was the dresser, so she rooted through the drawers. The man was a clothes horse that was for sure. But she didn't find the key. On top of the dresser was a wooden box, she opened it and found the ring box he showed her earlier.

Sitting next to it were several keys. She picked them up and went to her door. On the fourth try, she hit paydirt.

She sat on the bed and wondered. What would entice Phillip to come in here? She couldn't offer him sex, but she could make it seem as if she needed help with something.

Many different ideas went through her mind, but nothing stuck as the thing to do.

He would come into Mateo's room if she screamed to see if she needed help. But she had to get him into her room, not Mateo's. She looked out the door. Phillip sat on the sofa, reading a book. He seemed relaxed, which meant she could catch him off guard.

It would be easy to make it seem as if she needed help. He was a big fellow, which meant she couldn't fight him off. She

might be able to run faster than him. But she had to get him in here.

In for a penny, she thought. She was wasting time standing around trying to decide what to do. Cara wasn't sure it would work, but an idea popped into her mind. She grabbed hold of the twin-sized mattress and pulled it halfway off the bed. Then she lay down and put it on top of her right leg. It wasn't that heavy, and she was close to the door.

Seconds later she called out for help. Cara hoped it sounded convincing, and when nothing happened, Cara yelled louder.

Phillip showed up in the doorway, and said in a deep voice, "What happened?"

"It just came off," she said, unable to think of a convincing lie in the few seconds that she had. The man moved around her and grabbed hold of the mattress. When it came off her leg Cara jumped up and sprinted to the door, she had left the key in the lock. She slammed it and turned the key fast. He was pounding on the door seconds later, but she didn't wait to hear what he had to say.

Cara ran from the apartment and then took off down the hallway.

It didn't take her long to find the stairway that she knew led upstairs. When she reached the top and opened the door, Mateo stood there his arms crossed over his chest. The look on his face showed he was pissed off...very pissed off. He held the door open and said, "Get in here."

"I was looking for you," she said. "How did you find me so fast?"

"If you were looking for me, why are you so upset I found you so fast?"

He held up a cell phone and said, "How do you think? Phillip called me, and there are cameras all over the place."

Cara took a deep breath. "I couldn't stay in that room a minute longer, I just couldn't. I know it's a new one, but it felt

the same way as the old one. I kept seeing Gabe hurting women in my mind.”

They were standing just inside the doorway, and when it opened, she jumped. Carlos walked in, with Phillip right behind him. This was like the final straw to her. She knew there was no way of getting out of here ever.

“Are you injured, Phillip?” Mateo asked.

“Only my pride,” Phillip said.

“I’ll take it from here,” Mateo said.

Carlos and Phillip left, and to her surprise, Mateo took her hand and didn’t grab her by the arm or the shoulder. He pulled her after him, and she tried as hard as she could to keep up. They took the stairs up to the second floor, and Mateo stopped to talk to a man standing nearby.

“Which room is open?”

“2C,” the man answered.

When they got to the door, Mateo practically threw her into the room. She could feel the anger rolling off him now.

“What do I have to do to make you behave? I told you if you tried to run again, I would whip you.”

“I wasn’t running. I was looking for you.”

“Cara, I gave you everything today. I gave you the sunshine you craved, I gave you freedom from your cell, I gave you the pool, and this is how you repay me?”

Cara took a deep breath and tried to see things from his point of view. She just wished she could convince him that she had not been running.

“You must believe me. I closed my eyes, and I could see Gabe killing women. It scared me. I couldn’t stay there.”

“Then why didn’t you tell Phillip? Why didn’t you tell him you needed to speak with me? Instead of locking him in the room? What am I supposed to do?”

“Why would I come to where you were? Why wouldn’t I find a different way out?”

“I think you heard me tell the doctor how close you were the last time. I think you thought you could make it.”

She knew there was no convincing him. He had made up his mind.

“You’re going to whip me.”

“No, I am not. I am going to give you a good old-fashioned spanking. I am going to take you over my knee and give you forty-five swats.”

“Forty-five?”

“You remember I do things in fifteens.”

“That’s a lot.” She started to pace.

“Would you like to try for sixty? Now, stop complaining and take your punishment. First, you are going to go with me on my rounds. Take off your clothes and put on one of the robes hanging in the closet.”

“Hell no,” she said.

“Sixty is still out there, Cara.” He sounded calmer than he had at first, which made her feel good. Maybe she would be able to talk him out of it before the end of the night. She went to the closet. Talking him out of the spanking was her goal for the evening.

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“What are you doing, Sheriff?”

Jay looked up from where he sat in the middle of Cara’s bed and stared at Wayne. The remains of Cara’s ruined bedroom reminded him of his failure of that night.

“Thinking,” he said.

“Thinking, or beating yourself up? There’s a big difference.”

“I just can’t help but think that if I had stayed that night, she’d still be here.”

“You don’t know that. There are always what ifs, and you can’t dwell on them.”

“Either Hernandez murdered her, or de los Santos kidnapped her, one of the two. It’s some sick power play between the two of them. I could’ve stopped them.”

“Okay, you need to see this. I have new information. We talked with Cortez’s family, which in turn got us in contact with de los Santos’ family, and de los Santos owns a BDSM resort by Mazatlán. It took us a while, it’s a very popular place, but we got a couple inserted in there. They met the man, and then last night well...” Wayne reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “Take a look at that picture, and tell me who that woman is.”

Jay took the phone, and said, “Fuck.” Then he whispered, “Cara.” She had long blonde hair, but she was dressed as he’d never seen her before. Wearing a short purple robe and nothing else, except for the black leather collar around her neck.

“So that’s her,” Wayne said.

“Yes.” Jay stared at the photo. She had a smile on her face, and she was looking up at the man whose arms she was holding on to. Mateo de los Santos. There was no mistaking him. Other than the age difference he was definitely the man in the booking photo they had.

“I have to say, Sheriff, she doesn’t look like she’s a hostage. There’s such a thing as a captive falling in love with their captor but the look on her face—it’s one of pure adoration. She doesn’t look afraid of him, as a matter of fact, she looks like she’s enjoying herself.”

“I don’t believe it,” Jay said. “We have to get there. We have to leave now.”

“We can go down and talk to him, but we have no evidence that he took her. We have no evidence to get a warrant to search his home. We’d have to work with Mexican law enforcement and he’s a very wealthy man. He contributes



a lot to charity. He's very well-known. Trying to get a warrant to search his place, that's not going to be easy."

The more Wayne talked; the angrier Jay became. "Are you saying she went with him willingly?" He threw out his arms. "Look at this, look at this mess they made. Does this look like a willing person did it? Maybe he's brainwashed her. He's had almost two months to do it."

"I repeat, we have no evidence he kidnapped her. We can go down and talk to him, but we can't arrest him. Not yet."

Jay jumped up and yelled, "What the fuck are we doing sitting here? Let's get on the plane and get the hell out of here!"

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## Chapter 7

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"DON'T THINK I don't know what you were doing."

Cara followed Mateo into the room and giggled. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Looking at me like you had a case of puppy love, stroking my arm, being very attentive, things you don't do to someone you hate," Mateo said.

"I was not." Cara giggled again.

"There it is, you don't giggle. You're trying to get out of your spanking and it's not going to work."

Mateo crossed to the large dresser on the other side of the room. The one she hadn't searched when she was looking for the key. She watched him open a middle drawer and take out a paddle, one that made her blood run cold. It was a thick, long piece of wood that looked lethal.

"We have stopped at forty-five. But if you continue to lie to me, we can take it up to sixty. Or even seventy-five."

"Fine, I was trying to change your mind. I hate being punished for something I didn't do." She certainly hoped she could still change his mind about using that on her ass. "What can I do to change your mind?"

"Nothing." He moved to a bench and sat down. "Come across my knee."

"If you think I'm going to make it easy for you, you're insane."

“If you don’t follow my directions it is you who will feel it worse than what I have planned. Do as I say. Come across my knee.”

Cara glared at him. She knew if she didn’t do as he said that things would go, as he said, worse for her. There was no getting around it. She would have to go across his knee and take the spanking. She wouldn’t like it, but she would endure it.

When she was in position, he lifted her robe to bare her ass. There had been a part of her that had hoped he would forgo that part, since he’d let her keep the robe on. He rubbed his hand over her bare flesh, and she tensed, praying he wouldn’t try anything sexual.

“Don’t tense up. It will hurt worse. Try and relax and take your punishment.”

She didn’t answer him, and when he smacked his hand against her, she squealed. He swatted her again and again and again, but he was not using the paddle to swat her. Maybe he had forgotten about it. Or maybe he had decided it was too much for her. She wasn’t sure, but she was glad that all he was doing was using his hand.

After the fifth one, Cara was so angry she couldn’t remember what she was supposed to do. As she tried to remember, Mateo smacked her thigh, and she cried out in frustration. The resentment at the situation made her focus and she said, “Five!”

“Good thing you remembered. I’d hate to have to start all over again.”

His words made her even madder, and she screamed, “Fuck you!”

“I’m tired of your mouth!”

“Yeah? Then fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

He smacked her ass with his hand again and she screamed, not from pain but from resentment that he thought he had the right to do this to her.

It didn't hurt as bad as she thought it would, not physically. But mentally, it was excruciating.

"We have ten more before we get to the first fifteen," Mateo said.

Cara thought they had less than that, but she didn't want to argue with him. She just wanted to get this over with.

She stayed silent and didn't move as he continued to smack her bottom. She counted out each one in her mind, then when he'd given her fifteen swats, she sighed in relief. Only thirty more to go.

*I can do this*, she repeated to herself over and over. But after the fifteenth one, he stopped using his hand and started with the paddle. The sting was more intense, and she bit her lip to stop from crying out. Or at least she tried to. By the time he got to twenty she begged for him to stop.

Mateo ignored her and continued to swat her. Before he got to thirty, she pleaded for mercy. When they got to thirty-five, she mentally chastised herself for pushing him. It could be over by now, if she had kept her mouth shut, but she didn't. Only five more, only five more. But Mateo slowed down his swats. There was more time between them, as if he were trying to prolong the punishment.

"Stay where you are," he said when they got to forty-five. She heard the paddle drop onto the floor.

She was crying, tears streaming down her face, well as much as they could with her being over his lap and her face facing down. Then something cool replaced the warmth on her bottom. She rather enjoyed the feel of it. It took her a few minutes to realize it was lotion, and he was rubbing it into her burning skin.

When he was done, he said to her, "It was a very mild spanking. It could've been worse. It probably should've been worse."

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

"I would expect nothing less, hellcat."

Cara got off his lap as quickly as she could. She rubbed her bottom and stared down at him where he still sat on the bench. She wanted to tell him how she felt about him, but decided it was overkill, so she said, “I’ll just go to my bedroom now.”

“I’ll need the key to lock the door after you. Where is it?”

She hadn’t thought of that. “It’s in my pants pocket. And my pants are in the room we started out in.” She paused to gather her thoughts. “I thought we were done locking me in.”

“I can’t trust you, Cara.”

“So, I’ve lost everything I’ve gained?”

“You should have thought that through before…” Mateo’s voice trailed off, and Cara felt as if she’d had the rug pulled out from under her.

Her tears had stopped, but they started again.

“It wasn’t that bad, that you should still be crying.” Mateo stared at her, and she could tell he was trying to work something out.

Finally, he continued, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“When I closed my eyes earlier, I kept, well, I kept…” She tried to make the words come out of her mouth, but they wouldn’t. Finally, she gave up and turned towards her bedroom. She’d taken a few steps, her crying became louder, and she felt as if she might just drop to the floor. “I kept seeing Gabe. He was killing women and dropping them into the pit.”

“Then you really were telling me the truth, you were just looking for me.”

Cara couldn’t stop the tears. They were coming so hard now everything seemed blurry.

It surprised her when he got up and stepped in front of her. He put his hands on her shoulders and gently rubbed. It was even more shocking to her that she didn’t push him away, especially after what had just happened.

“I’m sorry, I really am. I’m sorry you’re having to go through this, and I’m sorry Gabe turned out to be a—”

His words drifted off and she looked up at him.

“A serial killer,” she said.

“I still have no faith that you won’t run,” Mateo said. “The only way I would really feel comfortable with you not locked in the room is—”

Something told her she knew what was coming, and she said it without him having to.

“Do you want me to sleep in your bed?”

“My bed has restraints on it,” he said. “It’s your choice: locked in your room, or—”

“Chained to your bed,” she finished the sentence for him. “I pick chains.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.” That one simple word sealed her fate. There was no real choice. She couldn’t stand the idea of being behind the locked door. And he had promised her he would never force himself on her, since he hadn’t yet, she knew he was telling the truth.

“I’ll take the chains,” Cara said.

He went to the dresser, and she watched as he lit a cigarette. It was the first one since he’d started his rounds.

“You smoke too much,” she said.

Then, without asking for permission she went into her bedroom, dropped the robe and put on a T-shirt and a pair of panties. Her bottom ached as the material slid over it, but he’d been right. The spanking had not been that bad. Her crying had been more from frustration than from pain.

She went back into Mateo’s bedroom. He was sitting in a chair, smoking. After he finished one, he lit another.

“Like I said, you smoke too much,” Cara said.

“Are you concerned about my health?”

“Not in the least.”

Mateo pointed to the bed and said, “You’re on the left.”

She wasn't surprised that he would take the side near the door, maybe that was the regular side for him. Or maybe he slept in the middle. She really didn't know. She took the two-steps up to the bed and lay down as far from his side as possible.

“You think I'm going to bite you?”

“I don't know, you do all sorts of weird things.”

He barked out a laugh, and she watched as he finished his cigarette. He stood and started to undress. She wished he'd done that while she was gone, but she tried to tell herself she didn't have to watch.

She would have to close her eyes to do that. But she couldn't help it. He took off his shirt, and she was rather impressed with the muscles. She'd felt them when they had fought back in her bedroom. But she hadn't seen them. When he started to pull down his pants, she couldn't help herself. When they fell to the floor, she gasped. He was larger than Gabe. Not by much, but enough that it would make a difference if they fucked.

He started toward the bed.

“Put that thing away, will you?”

“I sleep naked and I'm not changing for you.”

It was a question she should've asked before she decided to share his bed. He hadn't attached her leg to a chain, and she was glad. He sat down on the bed, and to her delight, lay down and covered himself up with the blanket. She couldn't help herself, she kept thinking about his dick being only inches away. It had been far too long since she'd fucked, and his dick was too tempting. She needed to turn away and go to sleep. Now.

“Now, what can we use as pillow talk?”

“Oh hell no.” Cara pulled the covers closer to her chest. “Pillow talk is for intimate people, for those who have had—” She stopped talking.

Mateo lifted his eyebrows and said, “You mean who have had sex? Let’s not forget that I—,” he lowered his voice and whispered, “gave you an orgasm.”

“Maybe I should go into the other room,” she said.

He didn’t respond, and she stayed put.

Finally, he said, “Come on, Cara, you have questions. I know you do. Let me answer them for you.”

She was probably going to regret this but she decided to take him up on his offer.

“All right, did you enjoy spanking me? Did you enjoy giving me pain?”

“No, I did not. I like to spank women who enjoy it. What we did was punishment. There’s a big difference.”

Cara couldn’t wrap her mind around how someone could like that. The thought must have shown on her face, because Mateo said, “Let me ask you something. Is there something you like that most people don’t? I’m not necessarily talking sexual, just anything at all?”

She thought about it for a few minutes, and then said, “There’s some food I like that most people don’t.”

“What sort of food?”

“Brussel sprouts. I love the taste. Most of my friends hate them.”

They were facing each other now, both lying on their sides. It felt oddly intimate, and she hated to think of it as pillow talk, since she didn’t even like him. But talking with him wasn’t so bad. She didn’t really want to think that, because she didn’t want to like him, didn’t want to enjoy his company.

He laughed, and said, “Yeah, I’m not a fan.” It took her a minute to figure out what he was talking about, and then she went back over the conversation. Better to talk about vegetables than sex.

“But here’s the thing,” he continued. “What makes you like Brussel sprouts?”



“I like the taste. I roast them in the oven with butter and almonds and salt. Yum.”

“So what if someone thought you’re weird for liking them?”

“Most people do.”

“What if I told you that you couldn’t eat them, because I didn’t like them?”

He gave her a look, one that told her she needed to carefully consider her answer.

“I understand what you’re saying, but that’s food, that’s not one person hurting another.”

“Cara, you don’t understand a word I’ve said.”

“No, and I don’t want to. Anything about one person inflicting pain on another person is just sick.”

He got up from the bed and went to the dresser. His naked backside was as attractive as the front, and she turned her head. She heard the click of a lighter, and knew he was starting another cigarette.

“You really do smoke too much,” she said.

“One of my many faults,” he replied.

He brought the cigarette back to the bed with him, and sat down with his back against the headboard.

“BDSM is about power. It’s about one person giving power to another, one person taking power from another. Or two people taking power over another. The number of people in a partnership is up to the people in the partnership.”

Cara glanced over to see that he covered himself up, which made her happy. Or did it? She wasn’t sure.

“The Dominant has power over the submissive. But that submissive gives the power willingly. If not, it’s not true BDSM.”

She wanted to say once again that she didn’t understand how someone could handle pain, but then she remembered

their night “upstairs.”

She didn't want to go there, so she changed the subject. “What broke up your relationship with Misty?”

He took a few drags on his cigarette, finished it and crushed it out. “We weren't suited for each other.”

“Why not?”

“As you saw the other night, or maybe you didn't because you were running, Misty likes her pain on the intense side. I could not give her what she wanted.”

Well, that was good news. “So, you don't like giving pain?”

“One of the things about BDSM is the Dominant controls the submissive. He or She helps her or him to see things that they wouldn't normally see. The Dom pushes them to do things outside their comfort zone. Misty and I just didn't gel. We tried. But when she met Lee, I could see that they were perfect, and they fell in love.”

He finished the cigarette and crushed it out on an ashtray on the night table.

“Now, all this talk about BDSM is going to make me horny. We either need to stop or you need to help me take care of what's going to come up from the situation.”

“Good night,” she said. Cara snuggled down into the covers, closed her eyes, and prayed he wouldn't press the situation.

He didn't.

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Cara pressed the button that illuminated the dial on her watch. It wasn't quite seven o'clock. Mateo was still asleep. Both of them were side sleepers, and at several points during the night she'd woken to find herself facing him. It had taken all her willpower not to reach over and touch him.

But now that it was morning, and she could leave the bed and there were others around, she couldn't resist a little peek. She lifted the blanket to see him lying there. He wasn't hard, but he looked tasty.

She licked her lips and then thought, how could I want him? He kidnapped me. He'd broken up her life, and just last night he'd spanked her. How could she be looking at his cock as if it were an after-dinner treat?

"You're going to wake him up, and if you do, you'll have to deal with the consequences."

She dropped the blanket and looked up to where his head lay on the pillow. His eyes were still closed. How long had he been awake, she wondered? Had he been awake last night when they had been so close? Bastard, he probably had.

"Cara, are you going to give him a proper greeting?"

She looked down and saw the tented covers. He'd moved onto his back. And she hadn't even noticed.

"Sorry, I didn't... I didn't..."

She didn't want to do what? Her heart was beating as if she'd just run a marathon. Mateo reached over, took her hand, and guided it to his cock. It felt good under her hand, but that didn't make it any easier.

"Go on, Cara, give him a good morning kiss." His voice was low and seductive.

"No. I don't like you, remember?" Then why wasn't she running for the other room?

He threw the covers off. Cara couldn't help herself; she leaned over and kissed him lightly. It had been so long. Two months. For her that was an infinity.

"Good girl." He stroked her hair, and she lifted her head. He put his finger on his lips and said, "Give me a kiss."

Cara leaned in to do as he asked then thought, *What the hell am I doing? No. No.'*

She shook her head and tried to convince herself to get off the bed. She turned her back to him and gathered her knees to her chest.

“Cara, Cara, it’s okay. You know you want it. Let me give you pleasure.”

She felt his lips on her shoulder and pulled away. “I can’t.”

He put his fingers on her chin and turned her head. Then he kissed her. He claimed her lips with just the right amount of pressure. He must have gotten up in the night to brush his teeth, because that’s what she tasted—mint.

Cara leaned into him, and he cupped her breasts. He thumbed her nipple and she groaned. It felt so good.

“Let’s get that shirt off you,” he said after the kiss broke.

“Okay,” she said. And then the phone alarm went off, the squeal filling the room. Cara pulled away as if she’d been shot.

“I can’t, I can’t,” she said as she jumped off the bed and ran into the other room. Seconds later, Mateo was in the doorway. He no longer had a hard on, and for that she was grateful.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be sorry,” Mateo replied. “I won’t force you, but I will keep trying to seduce you. I’m going up to the roof to swim and then have breakfast. I hope you’ll join me.”

He left without waiting for an answer. She couldn’t sleep in his bed that night. Something told her she would not hold out. She needed the physical contact. And soon.

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Mateo went up to the roof and did a few laps in the pool. By the time he was finished, Carlos was sitting at the table drinking coffee.

Blanca brought some for him, and he took a drink. He lit a cigarette and sat back to enjoy the morning.

“Did you get some last night?” Carlos asked with a grin.

“Crude question,” Mateo said.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Carlos said with a laugh. “I don’t understand why you don’t just get her drunk and fuck her. She was in your bed last night. You missed a golden opportunity.”

“Although I want this woman, I’m not going to get her drunk to do it. I did get a kiss on my cock.”

“Just like a teenager in the back of daddy’s car. Good luck getting any more.”

Mateo drained his coffee and ignored the comment. “Now, to business, what do you have for me today?”

“The couple in 1406, the Goingas, their credit card was declined. How do you want me to handle it? I’ve already run it again and got the same response.”

“That’s unusual for them,” Mateo said. “Ask them for another card. If it continues to be a problem, I’ll handle it. They are regulars.”

Mateo looked toward the ramp where he hoped to see Cara, but still nothing. Then Cara appeared on the roof, and his cock sprang to attention. He had to figure out a way to get into her mind. As soon as the problem presented itself, so did a solution.

“Anything else?” Mateo asked.

“Nope,” Carlos said.

“Good. You’re in charge. I’m taking the night off. Tell Devon to get the boat ready. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind? There is a killer on the loose.”

“Tell Blanca to prepare a day’s worth of meals and snacks. And some margaritas. It’ll be fun.”

“If you don’t come back in a body bag,” Carlos said.

You’re being melodramatic,” Mateo said. “Have you seen the doctor lately?”

“That came out of the blue,” Carlos said.

“He told me he had to go to Mexico City for a few days, but that was five days ago. His friend Max has been running the clinic, and he hasn’t seen him either.”

“Not a clue,” Carlos said.

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## Chapter 8

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CARA STARED AT THE BOAT. From the deck, Mateo held out his hand in offering.

“I’m a land lover,” she said. “I don’t know anything about the water. What if I get seasick?”

Mateo wiggled his fingers. “Take it. You may not know anything about boats, but I do. You’re going to love it.”

She took his hand, and he helped her into the boat. It swayed under her feet, and she fell into his arms. Cara laughed nervously and he held her close. He kissed her.

She thought about his comment that morning, Cara knew exactly what he was doing. But taking her out on the water ratcheted things up just a bit. There would be nowhere for her to go if she decided not to give in to his advances.

Oh, who was she kidding? One kiss and she wanted to leave her clothes on the floor and let him have his way with her.

“Mateo,” she said softly. “I don’t think we should do this.”

“You think too much,” he said, his lips against hers.

“We’re not supposed to be lovers, we’re supposed to be enemies.”

“Where is that written?” Mateo let go of her and moved to behind the steering wheel. “Sit at the front and enjoy the breeze.”

Mateo pointed at the front of the boat and said, “Go sit down and enjoy the ride.”

Cara sat on a cushion and grabbed the railing. She enjoyed swimming, but it had always been in a pool. She’d never been to the ocean. She had to admit it was beautiful, and as the boat started moving, it rode the waves gently.

But as it picked up speed, she tightened her grip on the railing. She felt out of control and a little bit afraid.

Her name sounded on the wind, and she turned her head toward Mateo.

“Relax and enjoy yourself.”

Cara lifted her face toward the sun and savored the warmth. As the boat picked up speed, and the wind brushed her hair around her face. She pulled the back of it into a ponytail, but the front was flying around as if it were a windy Texas day.

It made her miss home, but it also made her think about what was happening there in her own backyard. If she had thought about it three months ago, she never would have thought she’d be on a boat with the man who had taken her captive. She opened her eyes and looked over to where he was manning the boat.

She hated to admit it, but he was handsome, and he was trying to be nice to her. Sure, it was only to get into her pants, but would it be so bad? Of course she would have to forget about him putting her in that chair and torturing her clit, chaining her to the wall, and of course spanking her.

It was that incredible orgasm that stuck with her. As much as she hated to admit it, she’d never felt one that intense before. Maybe she was weird like he was, and she’d never experienced it until now. The only way to find out was to do it again.

Cara walked towards him on unsteady legs, rocking with the boat as it rode the waves. She saw him move his hands and the boat slowed. He had an unsure look on his face.



“Are you not enjoying yourself?” Mateo asked. “I was hoping you would like the fresh air and water. If you want, we can stop here. We’re not very far out but it’s okay. Are you hungry? There is a platter of cheese, meat, and fruit. It’s in the refrigerator. I can get it.”

Cara cleared her throat and said, “Wanna fuck?”

Mateo looked around as if expecting something to fall from the sky.

She’d overstepped. “I asked wrong, didn’t I?”

“What’s wrong here?” he asked. “I figured since Hell had frozen over; the world was ending.”

“Very funny,” she said. “If you don’t want to, I understand, the women you like they don’t go around asking questions like that. But since you said you were going to try and seduce me, I thought I’d make it easier for you.”

She laughed nervously. “I’m not doing this right. I guess submissive women get on their knees? Should I do that?”

“Cara, I wanted to fuck you since you came here. But I promised you I wouldn’t force myself on you. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “I want to see, well, I want to see if I, well, if I, well...” She looked away, she’d stammered the words, and he probably thought she was an idiot.

“You want to know if you will come as hard as you did the first time?”

“Yes.” She exhaled in relief. She hoped she was doing the right thing.

“So, we’re going back to the resort?” she asked.

Mateo chuckled. “Says the woman who likes to have sex outdoors. When all the stars start coming out, you and I are going to come out of our clothes.”

She wanted to tell him that was very corny but decided not to because it felt a little seductive. She’d never thought of him as fun, and to her that’s what he was trying to be.

“So, we’re going below deck?”

“Why don’t you go down and bring up the platter I told you about. You can eat a little bit and get ready to see stars of your own.”

The boat took off again, a little slower than it had the last time, and Cara wobbled down the stairs. She opened the refrigerator and shook her head. Blanca must’ve thought they were going to be out here for days because the fridge was stuffed. Sandwiches, salads and Cara stopped and stared—wait, was that a pitcher of margaritas? How long had she been without a margarita?

Once she had the pitcher in her hands, she took off the lid and sniffed. It smelled like heaven.

The platter Mateo had told her about was full of grapes, strawberries, apple slices and kiwi. She took the platter and the pitcher and started up the stairs.

She weaved up the narrow staircase. Her arms were full, and when she got to the top Mateo stopped the boat and took the platter. He put it on a table near the benches. Then he came back and took the pitcher. He opened a storage cabinet and brought out two glasses and a container of drink salt. After he’d salted the glasses and poured two drinks, he clinked his glass against hers.

“To a good fuck, or two,” he said.

“I’d go for two,” Cara said.

“You don’t sound very convincing,” Mateo said. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am,” Cara said. “It just feels weird.”

“Then let’s see what we can do to make it incredible,” Mateo said. He took a drink of his margarita and pointed at hers. “Drink up.”

That she could do. She took a big drink of her margarita, took a deep breath and then drained her glass.

“Delicious,” she said.

“Yes, you are. Tell me, hellcat, how would you like me to fuck you?”

“You’re going to give me a chance to decide which position we’ll use?”

Mateo refilled her glass, and said, “I want you to enjoy it. I want to see you come and feel you tighten around me when you do so.”

She hadn’t expected this. She had expected him to take over and make her do what he wanted.

After all he hadn’t given her any choice the first time, and it had hurt like hell. This time there would be no pain. She took another big swig of her margarita.

“I’m not doing very well at this,” Cara said.

Mateo stood and quickly peeled off his clothes. When he was naked, he sat down next to her and stroked himself. “How’s this for inspiration?”

Cara dropped to her knees in front of him. She lowered her head to his crotch and opened her mouth. There was a part of her that wondered what she was doing. Then he pulled on her hair. She looked up at him and he said, “Tit for tat. Naked. Now.”

His order thrilled her, and she stood, took off her clothes as quickly as possible and returned to her knees.

Cara returned her head to his crotch and took him in her mouth. She savored the salty, male taste of him and sucked him in as deeply as she could.

She flicked her tongue around him, loving the moans her movements elicited from him. She wanted to taste his come down her throat, but her body had other ideas. He stroked her hair as she sucked him. She wrapped her hand around the base of his cock using her free hand to caress his balls. She took him in and out until she thought he was right on the edge of release.

She pulled back and stood up. Cara straddled him and centered herself over his cock. When his tip entered her, she

groaned in pleasure. He grabbed her hips and guided her pussy on to his cock.

“That’s my good little hellcat. Ride me, ride me hard.”

She put her hands on his shoulders, and rode him, taking him in and out, hitting just the right spot with each thrust.

As she increased the tempo, he took a nipple in his mouth, taking it between his teeth, and nibbling. She threw back her head and groaned.

Cara put her head on Mateo’s shoulder and kissed it. Part of her kept thinking she hated this man, and she should not be doing this, even though it felt so fucking good.

Without breaking their bond, Mateo stood. He held her close to him and turned her so that she was lying on the bench.

He lay down on top of her and fucked her hard, pounding into her. She wrapped her legs around him and took each thrust with pleasure. When he came she tightened her legs and pussy around him as if it would kill her to let him go.

When he stopped moving, Cara looked up at him, almost afraid of what he would think. He was smiling down at her.

She knew she was supposed to say something, but she could not think of what. When she and Gabe finished making love, they usually said I love you. She couldn’t say that now. He kissed her forehead and then her right cheek, and then she said something that was true, “That was incredible.”

“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?” His voice was low, and the tone said he expected the truth.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Cara said. “The sex was good but—”

A silence grew until he said, “Tell me, I want to know.”

“Usually, Gabe and I would say I love you, and I can’t say that.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I can’t even say it to him anymore.”

“Just because you have sex with someone doesn’t mean you love them; I do hope you weren’t lying about the

incredible part.”

She giggled. “No, I wasn’t kidding about that part, it really was incredible.”

“I am going below deck to get a blanket. Stay here.”

He came back with a blanket and a lit cigarette. Within moments they were snuggled together under the blanket, and Cara thought she could get used to sleeping like this with him.

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“Mateo. Mateo! Fuck! Answer me, Mateo!”

Carlos’ voice cried out from below deck. Mateo stirred, and then snuggled back into the warm female body he had just left. Cara still slept, her even breathing making him smile. She was definitely a heavy sleeper.

He got up, and went below, and picked up the mic to the hand radio.

“What?” he boomed out.

“About fucking time,” Carlos said. “I’ve been trying to reach you for over an hour.”

“What do you want?” Mateo said. “I’m a little busy.”

“Yeah, well put your dick away and listen to me. We have a problem, a big problem, and it’s sitting in our conference room.”

“What sort of problem?”

“An FBI agent and Cara’s sheriff friend. They showed up here about three hours ago, and they’re looking for you. Well, not just you. They want to know where Cara is, too.”

“Fuck.” He thought about it for a minute and tried to produce a solution. He felt as if he’d been hit with a stun gun. He hadn’t expected the sheriff to show up on Mexican soil.

“What did you tell them?”

“When they asked where you were, or when they showed me a photo of you and Cara in the playroom? I knew then we were screwed.”

“Somebody broke a rule,” Mateo said.

“No shit,” Carlos said. “I told them you were out until tomorrow. I don’t think they believed me but they didn’t have a warrant of any kind and no *federali* with them.”

He had to talk to Cara and he had to talk to her now. They had to be on the same page, or his ass might be going to jail.

“Offer them a room for the night, tell them I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon. Don’t let them know you’ve been able to contact me.”

“I hope she was worth it.”

“She was, my friend. She was.”

Mateo grabbed a blanket and headed to the upper deck. Cara sat with her knees pulled to her chest, her arms wrapped around them.

“I’m cold,” she said.

“Let me warm you up,” Mateo said. “Stand up.”

She did as he asked, and he took her place. She sat down between his spread legs and they wiggled around until they were cuddled up like two peas in a pod. Then he pulled the blanket around them.

He kissed her on the temple. “Better?”

“Much.”

“Good. I want to play with your body, but we have something to discuss first.”

“Is this your first time?” Cara giggled.

“Watch it, hellcat, or you might get spanked.”

“Isn’t that playing with my body?”

“You’re learning,” he said with a chuckle. “But seriously, we have visitors at the resort.”

“What sort of visitors?” she asked.

“The FBI and your sheriff friend.”

“They’re here?” She pulled away from him and turned her head so she could look him in the eyes. “How?”

“He’s more of a bloodhound than I thought.” Mateo pulled her back into his chest. “I would say he’s here to take you back to Texas. And to take me to jail.”

“What if I don’t want to go home?”

He was so shocked he didn’t know what to say at first.

“It’s all you’ve been talking about for the last three months. Is going home not your goal now?”

She snuggled into his chest and turned her face into him. It took him a few moments to realize she was crying.

“Cara, talk to me, tell me what’s wrong.” He stroked her hair.

Finally, she took a deep breath and said, “By this time tomorrow you might be in jail. Three months ago, I would have thrown you to the wolves. Now...”

“Because I make you come so hard?”

“Because you protected me from Gabe.”

“You mean Felix?”

“He’s ruined everything for me. My house. My bar. I’ll never be able to go back there.”

Mateo held her close and asked, “What are you saying?”

“I don’t want them to force me to go back.”

“Cara, nobody can make you do anything.”

She snorted out a laugh. “You made me come here, you and the doctor.”

“Well...”

“Don’t justify my kidnapping,” she said. “Just don’t let them take me.”

“I promise I will stop them.” He was sure he was making a promise he couldn’t keep, but he would do his best to protect her.

“We’re going to have to be on the same page.” He reached for his cigarettes and lit one. “It would be lying. We need to talk about our story and stick as close to the truth as possible.”

Cara snuggled into him, and he felt his cock stir. *Not now*, he said to himself.

“If I’m going to stay out of jail, it needs to be convincing.”

“You promise to take care of me, and I promise to do my best to keep you out of jail.”



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## Chapter 9

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MATEO STRODE into the conference room and said, “Gentlemen, welcome. Mateo de los Santos.” He held out his hand and the two men did the same.

“I am Wayne Michaels of the FBI. This is Sheriff Jay Rhodes of Coldwater County, Texas.”

As they shook hands, Mateo said, “A little out of your jurisdiction, aren’t you?”

“Where’s Cara?” Jay asked.

“We’re just here to talk,” Wayne said.

“Where is Cara?” Jay repeated.

Mateo ignored him and said, “I hate to disappoint you gentlemen, if you’re here to talk about my cousin, I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Yet you knew enough to go to Clearwater to see him,” Jay said. “Where is Cara?”

Mateo took a seat at the table. “It took the doctor and me years to find him, but it has been worth it. I hate what he’s done, but hopefully you will find him soon.”

Jay opened his mouth, and the FBI agent put his hand on his arm.

“We’re not really here to talk about Felix Cortez,” Wayne explained.

“We’re here to talk about Cara Anderson,” Jay said. “I repeat, where is she?”

“I hear you have a photo. I’d like to know where you got it. Cameras are strictly forbidden in the playrooms.”

They didn’t answer. Mateo lit a cigarette, and sat back in the chair. “She’s upstairs in the apartment. She’s helping to make lunch. Would you gentlemen like to join us? I can have them set two more places.”

“You’re not going to deny that she’s here?” Jay asked.

“Not at all,” Mateo said. “She’s been my guest for almost three months now.”

“Three months since you kidnapped her, you mean,” Jay said.

“Kidnapped? Whatever would give you that idea?”

“How about the mess in her bedroom?” Jay asked.

“We did that on purpose, to make it look as if Gabe had done something to me,” Cara said from the doorway.

The sheriff jumped up from his chair. “Cara!”

“Hello, Jay,” she said.

Mateo was impressed with her acting skills. She was cool and calm, and it was as if she were telling the truth.

“Cara, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Jay,” Cara said. “I’m sorry. I was so frightened when I found out that Gabe had killed a woman that I took the first place of refuge I could find. It was with Mateo.”

“Why didn’t you call me? Especially when you knew we were looking for you?” Jay demanded.

“I told you I was frightened. It might’ve been wrong, but I ran, as far away as I could get.”

“I thought you would’ve called me, especially when you heard about Deidra.”

“What about her?”

“She was one of the bodies we found buried behind your house,” Jay said.

“What?”

Mateo heard the fear in Cara’s voice.

“What?” she repeated. She started to cry and then said, “It can’t be.”

Mateo got up from his chair and crossed the room. She threw her arms around him and started to sob. “Who is Deidra?”

“She was a young homeless girl the ladies at the bar took in,” Jay said. “Cara reported her missing last year.”

She continued to cry, her head against his chest. He took his phone from his pocket and texted Carlos to join them. When Carlos arrived, he asked him to take the men up to the apartment. “And ask Misty to come up, too.”

The look on Carlos’ face asked for an explanation, but his friend just said, “Yes, sir.”

“He killed her, he killed her, he killed her,” Cara repeated.

“I’d like to stay with Cara,” Jay said.

“Give her time to absorb the news,” Mateo said.

The sheriff nodded. Mateo saw he wasn’t happy about it, but he didn’t argue.

When they were gone, Mateo sat down in the chair and pulled Cara onto his lap. He held her close as she continued to cry. After a few minutes she pulled back and said, “Why can’t you just kill him? Find him and kill him.”

“Because I am not a murderer, Cara,” he said. “He needs to face justice, but I can’t be a vigilante.”

She put her head on his shoulder and started crying again.

Moments later Misty appeared in the doorway. “What has happened?”

“Cara has received some upsetting news. Please take her to the gardens.”

Misty didn't ask any questions. She just crossed the room and put her hand on Cara's shoulder. Cara looked at Mateo. He hated the tears in her eyes, but there was no other choice. He had to face the two lawmen.

The two ladies left the room.

He didn't want to deal with the two men in his apartment, but he had to. Hopefully they would leave soon, and he could get back to holding his hellcat, and letting her cry.

Damn, damn, damn Felix to Hell. He was the devil, and he had told Cara the truth. He wanted the man dead, but he could not do it himself.

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Cara didn't want to sit around and cry anymore. After an hour, she sent Misty back to the club, and made her way into the apartment.

The men were on the roof, and she stood on the ramp near the bottom and listened to their voices. The FBI agent was not asking a lot of questions, but Jay was, and he was pissed. She heard the word kidnapping twice, and decided she needed to go up and add her two cents worth.

When she was at the top of the ramp, she stood in the doorway and listened again. Jay was threatening to take Mateo into custody, but Mateo assured him that he wouldn't be able to do any such thing. He would need a Mexican law-enforcement agent to do it.

The FBI agent agreed, and when there was a lull in the conversation, Cara cleared her throat. All three turned towards her.

“Are you feeling better, hellcat?” Mateo asked.

“Somewhat,” Cara said. “What are the three of you talking about?”

She knew the answer to her question, but she didn't let them know.

“Sheriff Rhodes thinks I need to be arrested,” Mateo said.

“You do,” Jay said. “Cara don’t continue to lie for him. Let me take you back home.”

“I’m where I want to be,” Cara said.

“Cara, let me—”

“Let you what, Jay?” Cara said. “Let you protect me from Gabe or Felix or whatever the hell his name is? He doesn’t even know I’m here. I feel safe here. I feel safe with Mateo.”

No one spoke for a few minutes, and finally Jay said, “Stockholm syndrome. He’s convinced you that you’re in love with him, he’s brainwashed you.”

“How are you sure I’m in love with him? Sometimes I don’t even like him. But he has and will continue to protect me from Gabe. I’m not going anywhere with you today.”

She saw the pain etched on Jay’s face, and she wanted to tell him that she didn’t mean to hurt him, this was best for her, but she didn’t.

Mateo stood. “Listen gentlemen you have no authority here, we have established that. Unless you come back with a Mexican warrant, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I think we’ve been more than generous with our time.”

“You have,” Wayne said. “I am going to leave you my card and if you hear from your cousin, I would appreciate it if you would give me a call. The sooner we get him off the streets the better it is for the women of the world.”

“I agree with you there,” Mateo said. He took the agent’s card and said, “I will have Carlos take you to the mainland.”

Cara looked away from Jay, who continued to stare at them. Finally, they walked towards the ramp without saying another word. She watched as they disappeared, and then wiped tears from her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she was crying for Deidra or crying for the pain she’d inflicted on the man who was her friend. Or who had once been her friend. She was sure he would never want to speak with her again.

She didn't blame Jay. She didn't blame Mateo. She didn't even blame herself. She blamed all this crap on Gabe.

When they were alone, she turned to Mateo. "You found him once. Can you do it again?"

"I can try my damndest. But I can't promise anything."

"Then let's go fuck. I need the release," Cara said.

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## Chapter 10

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CARA FLIPPED ONTO HER SIDE, punched her pillow and tried to close her eyes. They remained wide open, with a picture of Deidra staring back at her.

Seconds later she flipped onto her other side, and next to her, Mateo groaned.

“Cara, if you keep tossing and turning, you’re going to affect the tides outside. Please be still and go to sleep.”

“I can’t, I just can’t. I keep seeing Deidra. She was just a kid, barely twenty. How could he kill her? She was just a kid.”

“Did she work at the bar?”

“She wasn’t even twenty-one. I was breaking the law by letting her in, but she had no home. Her parents kicked her out because she was addicted to meth.”

Cara snuggled up to Mateo. Thinking about home made her sad. Part of her wanted to take Jay up on his offer and go home so she could see Lindsay, and her other friends.

“Come on, tell me her story.” Mateo held her close, and it made her feel safe, like she had told Jay.

“One morning in January when it was freezing cold outside, Lindsay, my assistant manager, found her huddled in the back doorway. We brought her inside and fed her, and she was starving. Then we got her some warm clothes and let her sleep in the back room before it got busy. When it was time to

close that night, Lindsay took her home with her. After that, we would take turns taking her home with us.”

Cara’s voice broke, and she wasn’t sure how to continue. Finally, she said, “I don’t know why he would do it.”

She started to cry again, her body shaking as Mateo held her close. She’d cried most of the afternoon, and then he’d fucked her until she came, hard. “Fuck me,” she whispered through her tears.

“I have a better idea,” he said.

“I don’t want to go upstairs.”

“We’ll stay here, but I want to teach you something new.”

Cara wiped away her tears. She wanted to ask what he had in mind, but she stayed silent. Mateo sprang from the bed. Cara watched as he put on the linen pants he usually wore in the morning when they had breakfast. He went to the bottom of the bed and pulled off all the covers. She propped herself on her elbows.

“What are you doing?”

“You will be quiet,” Mateo said. He held up a finger. “Lie in the middle of the bed.”

“Why, what are we...”

He knelt above her, her hips between his knees.

“Did I give you permission to ask questions?”

Cara started to say something then clamped her lips together. She shook her head. The look on his face was much like the one he’d had the first time she’d seen him upon arriving here.

Mateo moved to the side of the bed, and she put herself in the position he’d instructed her to.

It didn’t take him long to put leather cuffs around her wrists and attach them to the straps she knew were there. He did the same with her ankles. When he was done, she wondered what she had allowed herself to get into. She was naked. She was bound. She was at his mercy.



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Mateo pulled a chair over to the bottom step of the dais. He lit a cigarette, crossed his legs, and stared at Cara.

She looked at him and he could see fear in her eyes. That wasn't what he wanted, but he refused to give up the upper hand. He needed her to think about something other than her friend who had been murdered.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Whatever I want,” he said. He took a drag off his cigarette, and she looked away.

“This is so unfair. I don't understand why you're angry with me.”

“I am not angry with you, hellcat, I am trying to help you focus on something besides Deidra.”

She glared at him and he continued to smoke. When she said, “You smoke too much,” it was all he could do to keep from bursting into laughter.

“You're right, I do.” He finished his cigarette and crushed it out in an ashtray. He went and sat down on the edge of the bed. With his left hand he made circles around Cara's breasts.

First one breast, then the other. She moaned and wiggled under his touch as he continued his movements. Her sharp intake of breath let him know she enjoyed the touch. He wanted to tell her good: that's what he wanted, but he stayed silent.

He moved his finger down to her belly button and circled it, then let his finger drift down to her pussy. It opened easily for him, and his finger went inside her slit.

Mateo turned and put his face right over her pussy. He spread her lips apart and blew on her. Her hips jerked in response, and he blew again knowing how the air affected wet flesh.

She wiggled in an obvious attempt to get away from his attention. "People don't. Don't," she whispered.

Mateo climbed on top of her and put his face next to hers. "Did I give you permission?"

"What?"

"To speak. Did. I. Give. You. Permission. To. Speak?"

"I've never had to ask for permission to speak."

"You do now. The last word you spoke will be the last one out of your mouth until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

Cara nodded. At least the fear was gone from her eyes, although she still seemed very uncertain about what was happening.

He hoped that meant trust was building between them. Not immediately but hopefully she knew he wasn't going to hurt her.

"Good girl," he said seductively.

He knew from their earlier encounter that she'd come from a bit of pain, but he didn't intend on using any tonight. He pressed his hard cock against her. She didn't say a word, and he was rather proud of her for that. But her eyes widened, and he knew she wanted to fuck. Her hips popped up against him once more. She wanted his cock, but she would have to wait.

Mateo got off the bed and opened the drawer in the nightstand. He made it look as if he were rummaging around searching for something, although he knew exactly what he wanted. After a few moments he took out a vibrator and passed it in front of her face. Her eyes widened, but she didn't nod or shake her head.

"Used one of these before? Oh yeah, I know you have. But we're going to save it for later."

He set it on the nightstand and then pulled out a flogger, one made with suede strands.

"Tonight, we try a different kind of torture," he said.

“No, no, I don’t want to be tortured.”

“You’ve just made it worse for yourself. I told you. No speaking.”

She opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. She clamped her lips shut, then opened them again. The fear was back in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, Cara, it won’t be bad.”

Mateo sat down on top of her, sitting on her stomach. He held the flogger up so that the ends touched her, just barely. Then he started moving it, first in circles on her breasts, and then from side to side. He could tell the touch was driving her insane. The fear was gone, and she stared at him. She pulled against her bonds. It was obvious she wanted her hands and her legs, but what he wanted was to drive her crazy.

Cara moaned softly as he moved down and sat on her thighs. Mateo gently teased her pussy with the flogger. She rolled her head from side to side, and he increased his movements up to her breasts and back down.

In response, he put the handle of the flogger on her lips and forced them open. He pushed the handle inside and said, “Hold it there.”

He retrieved the vibrator from the nightstand.

The vibrator whirred as he turned it on high. Starting with her breast, he ran it around her nipples, and rubbed the silicone against her hard nubs. She tried to expel the flogger handle from her mouth, but she failed.

He moved the vibrator up and down back-and-forth. She finally managed to spit out the flogger.

“You’re driving me crazy, stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it!”

“I was just going to give you a few swats, but now...” Mateo chuckled. “Just remember you brought it on yourself.” He turned the vibrator off and put it on the bed next to her.

He lay down next to her and propped himself up on his elbow. He put his lips next to her ear and said, “Mine.”

He brought the flogger down on her thigh, some of the strands hitting her pussy. She cried out, and Mateo slapped it down again. “How many, Cara?”

“Fifteen,” she whispered.

“Yes.” He delivered them in quick, hard succession. She cried out for mercy.

After the fifteenth he slipped off his pants and lay down on top of her. He was inside her in seconds, fucking her bound body with hard thrusts until she cried out his name.

“Whether you know it or not, Cara, you are mine. All mine.”

He left her body and undid the ties on her ankles. He lay down and took her again. This time he fucked her slowly and without being told, she wrapped her legs around him. When he spilled himself inside her he claimed her lips. She kissed him back, and he knew she wanted to be his, she was just afraid to say it.

And that made him warm inside.

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“Mateo! Mateo!” Cara shook his shoulder and he groaned lowly. She shook him again. “Wake up.”

“Cara, it’s the middle of the night go back to sleep,” he grumbled.

“I have an idea.”

“Can’t it wait until morning?”

She bounced on the bed. “No, it can’t. You have to call that FBI guy, and you need to do it now before he and Jay leave.”

Mateo sat up; he shot her a look that could’ve started a fire. “They are probably already gone. I’m not calling in the middle of the night. Go to sleep. I need sleep. I’m not one of those people who can go without. We can deal with this in the morning.”

“But what if it’s too late?”

“If it is a good idea they will come back.”

Mateo punched his pillow and laid his head down. Next to him, Cara let out an angry huff, and turned her back on him. “I have an idea to get Gabe to come back to the house. They can catch him, and it will be over.”

He could tell how upset she was and that she would not let it go until she told him exactly what she had planned. He sat up and propped his back against the headboard. “Fine, tell me your idea.”

“We need to make him angry. He has a bad temper. The FBI needs to hold a press conference. They need to say that they found me. But I was with you. We must do something on TV like kiss or something. It will infuriate him. He will come back to Clearwater to kill me.”

“You want to use yourself as bait?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I like that idea.”

“You’ll be there to protect me.”

“You don’t even like me, remember?”

She laughed. “You’re not so bad, when you’re not kidnapping me.”

“Only when I’m fucking you?”

“I really like you, then.” She cuddled up to him, and Mateo held her close.

He would take that, and make it grow, hopefully.

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Mateo took a drag off his cigarette and stared down at the sleeping woman next to him. Figures, he thought. She wouldn’t let him sleep until she told him her plan, but the

minute she was done she fell asleep, and he hadn't been able to.

It was now just after six in the morning. Carlos would show up at eight for his daily report on how things were at the resort. He should just get up and start his day. He flipped on the bed side light and prepared to go to the shower. But on second thought, he should go to the gym; an extra half hour to work out wouldn't hurt anything.

He needed to get up and put some clothes on.

A male voice came out of the darkness near the doorway. He didn't recognize it, and it stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Who are you?" He sat back down on the bed.

"Hello cousin," Felix said. "You're a hard man to find."

"It looks like you didn't have any trouble finding me."

"I just followed the sheriff," Felix said. "In a town as small as Clearwater, the gossip is unbelievable. Everybody knew where he was going, and I still have friends there."

Mateo looked back to where Cara still slept. She hadn't stirred at all, and for once he was glad she was a heavy sleeper.

"Don't wake her," Felix said. "I want to have a talk with you before we get to her part."

Mateo thought about telling him to go to hell. But Felix had a gun, and he was a known killer. There was no telling what would happen if Mateo turned him down. Besides, if he did as Felix asked, it would give him a chance to think about a way to fight back, and it would get him away from Cara.

"Fine, let's go to the roof. That way I can throw you off when we're done talking."

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Once they were out of the room, Cara sat up, her heart beating so fast she thought it would jump out of her mouth and bounce

around on the floor. It had been all she could do to pretend to be asleep when she heard Gabe's voice.

She jumped up and ran for the house phone. She knew Carlos' number was programmed in somehow, but she wasn't sure which button to push. She did find a button for Security and hit it quickly.

She didn't want to tell everyone what was happening, so when the male voice came on, she told him to connect her to Carlos, immediately.

When Carlos answered, she could tell he was barely awake. Cara was talking so fast her words all ran together.

"Felix is here keep Blanca out of the kitchen. Get up here get up here get up here."

"Cara, I can't understand you, calm down."

She managed to calm herself enough to say, "Felix is here. Help help. He has a gun," before she dropped the receiver. She fumbled for it and when she picked it back up again, she tried to talk but there was no one there.

What should she do now? Should she go to the roof and try to help Mateo overpower Felix?

Cara debated with herself for a few minutes, then decided to go to the roof. She started down the hallway, her fear increasing as she got near the living room. She stepped out of the hall and moved toward the ramp, when an arm went around her shoulders and a hand went over her mouth.

She screamed; the sound caught against the person holding her.

"Cara, Cara, it's Carlos."

She relaxed a little, and he let her go.

"Are you sure they're on the roof?" Carlos asked.

"Yes. Mateo was talking about throwing him off the roof."

Lee and Misty and a man Cara had never seen before came in the room.

“I had security call the Mazatlán police,” Lee said. “For now, we have God, and he has a gun.”

“If we go up there with a gun, Felix might start shooting. If anything happens to Mateo...” she buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

“I have an idea,” Blanca said. “We use the stairs from the kitchen, grab a skillet and bean him with it. He won’t even see it coming from that way.”

Suddenly, Felix’s voice rang out from upstairs.

“You ruined my life! It was perfect and you came along and ruined it!”

“Not so perfect for the women you were killing,” Mateo answered.

“They were whores they didn’t matter,” Felix said calmly.

Cara couldn’t wait for anyone else; she took off towards the ramp, with Carlos calling out behind her, “Stop. Don’t go up there.”

She made the top of the ramp in record time. The sun was just coming out.

Mateo and Felix sat across from each other at the table. Felix had the gun trained on his cousin.

“Mateo, are you all right?”

“Yes,” Mateo answered. “Go back downstairs.”

She had hoped to distract Felix, so Mateo could grab the gun, or dive under the table or something. But Felix didn’t take his eyes off of Mateo, he did acknowledge Cara’s presence though.

“You, after everything I did for you, you jumped into his bed at the first chance. You betrayed me.”

“I betrayed you?” Cara asked him incredulously.

“I gave you everything, I gave you the bar, I gave you your house, that all came from me.” He pointed to his chest with his free hand.



His words really pissed her off.

“You might have loaned me the money, but I paid you back. Every cent.”

She wanted to say more, but she wasn't sure what was going to set him off. What would make him fire the gun.

“Where did you get the money for the bar?” She had asked the question to Felix, but it was Mateo who answered.

“Our family has money,” Mateo said. “One of our cousins probably gave it to him.”

“Sesay did. She always did like me. Now, Cara, if you would have a seat here next to me.”

He indicated the chair next to him, but Cara moved to the other side of the table and sat down next to Mateo.

“You little bitch,” Felix said. “That right there shows you never gave a damn about me.”

“I did until I found out you were murdering women and burying them on my land.”

“You left with him long before then. That hurts, Cara. It really hurts.”

“What hurt is all those women you killed. What about their families? What about their friends? What about their lives? What about Deidra?”

Felix started to laugh, and it scared her more than anything they'd talked about before then.

“I only kept the ones that made me happy. The ones that were good.” He drew out the last word, and Cara thought she might vomit.

“What are you saying, Felix?” Mateo asked.

“I'm saying that the women out there are just a drop in the bucket.”

“Oh my God, Felix. What have you become?” Mateo said.

“It all started with Barbara,” he said. “We were just fucking around, and it went too far. Truly, it was an accident.”

But, what a rush. I just had to do it again. And again. And again.”

He took a deep breath. “But that damn doctor kept hunting me down. So, I changed my name, and I met Cara. And life was good. Until you showed up, Mateo. You took my woman. And for that you must die.”

Felix had placed the gun on the table. Now he picked it up and pointed it at Mateo.

Cara knew she had to distract him. “What about Deidra? Tell me about her.”

At first, she didn’t think he was going to answer. He continued to stare at Mateo, then he put the gun back on the table.

Finally, he said, “Fine, I’ll tell you about your precious Deidra.”

“About a year and a half ago, she came up to me in the parking lot, and said, and I quote, ‘I’ll suck your dick for thirty dollars’. I thought about telling her no, but I’m a guy, and we like to have our dicks sucked. Right, Mateo? She did okay, but she didn’t do it as good as you, Cara.”

He pointed at Mateo. “She gives good head, doesn’t she?”

“So anyway it went on for a couple of months and then I got bored with it. I found that dealer, what’s his name, Tyler. I bought some meth off him and when she met me in the parking lot that afternoon, I said we’re going to do something different today.”

He wiggled his fingers. “When she saw the meth, her eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning.”

Cara started to cry. “You bastard. She needed help and you just... you bastard.”

Felix ignored her. “I told her she could have it, but she had to let me fuck her up the ass for it. At first, I really thought she wouldn’t, but she went over to the picnic tables, took down her pants and let me do it.”

Cara continued to cry.

“About a month and a half later, she acted like she was going to tell you, like it would make me give her more. She wasn’t one of the ones who made me happy, but I had to keep her. If Jay had found her body, I would’ve been up shit creek.”

With every word he spoke, anger built up inside her. At the end, when all he worried about was him being in trouble, the dam inside her broke.

Cara launched herself at him, climbing up on the table and slamming her fist into his temple. She heard the gun clatter onto the floor, heard Mateo yell at her to calm down, and to get down. She heard Felix’s laughter, and all it did was make her madder.

Then new noises were added to the mix. Men were yelling for her to get down, she heard one person say, “Don’t let him get away.”

And then there was a gunshot, and another one, and a third. Cara heard a cry of pain, and recognized Mateo’s voice. She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to where he’d been sitting.

He wasn’t there now. She looked down to see him lying on the floor. Cara dropped to his side. The t-shirt he’d put on had blood on it now.

“Mateo, please Mateo, talk to me.”

She got no answer.

There was still a lot of noise in the area. She heard Felix screaming, and Jay telling him to shut the fuck up.

A hand squeezed her shoulder. She looked up to see Carlos looking down at her. “Let the medics tend to him. Come with me.”

“Carlos, is he?” She couldn’t even say the word.

Carlos helped her up, and Blanca took her other arm.

Cara took that moment to faint dead between them.

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## Chapter 11

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THE DOOR to Mateo's room opened, and a nurse stepped out. Cara stared at the woman who came out and waited for her to tell her what was happening. She did not.

"When is someone going to tell us what is happening?" Cara said.

"They already told us that he's been shot twice, but they weren't bad wounds, and that he was going to survive," Carlos said as he took her hand and squeezed. "You need to relax."

"But I want to see him. The next time a nurse comes out, I'm going in while the door is open."

"So, they can kick you out of the hospital?" Carlos asked.

"Maybe we should go get something to eat," Blanca said. "It's been a very long day and we've been here for hours."

"I'm not leaving this spot until I get a chance to see Mateo."

She didn't want to sound like a witch, but that was how she felt. When she thought Mateo was dead, it was the worst feeling in the world. She felt as if she couldn't breathe, as if she didn't want to live.

The medics worked on him and told her he'd lost a lot of blood, and they would have to get him to the hospital as quickly as possible.

Carlos and Blanca had held her back when she tried to accompany them. Then they'd had to talk with the FBI guy

and Jay.

The lawmen had told the Mazatlán police when they had arrived as a courtesy. The police had called them when they were summoned to the resort.

Now, Cara sat there, and watched different nurses enter and exit the room. She wanted to follow through on her threat to just walk in, but never could. She wanted to see Mateo, but she was afraid of what she would find.

Finally, when an older nurse went in, she decided it was time to make her stand. Despite Carlos trying to grab her by the arm and hold her back, she shook him off and went into Mateo's room.

His normally brown skin looked pale in the low light of the room, and she put her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out.

“You shouldn't be in here, he needs his rest he's lost a lot of blood.” The nurse checked a chart. “Are you family?”

Cara was about to lie when Carlos' voice came from behind her.

“She's his fiancée,” he said.

The nurse looked at Mateo, and then looked back at Cara. “I could get in trouble for this but who cares really? The orders say no visitors. But I'm close to retirement.”

“Thank you,” Cara said.

“Ten minutes,” the nurse said. “The rest of you out.”

Cara turned to see Carlos, Blanca, and Misty trying to crowd into the room.

The nurse moved towards the door and shoed them all out, then shut the door. Cara made her way towards the bed and touched his hand.

He was sleeping, and she didn't want to wake him, but she couldn't stand not touching him for one minute more.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek, and was shocked when he said, “I recognize those lips. Give me a proper kiss.”

She kissed him deeply, savoring the taste of him, and the feel of his skin as she cupped his cheek.

“I have to thank Carlos for proposing for me,” he said with a laugh.

“It was the only way they would let me in.”

“Remind me of that when I actually do ask you to marry me.”

His words shocked her to the core. She wanted to say something about him marrying her, because it was a new subject, but she really didn't want to push issues right now.

“Are you in pain?” Cara asked.

“Good way to avoid the marriage subject. They have me on painkillers, so I'm feeling fairly numb. Like I'm floating on a cloud. Kind of like when you give me a blow job.”

This was material she could deal with, the man who made jokes about sex.

“I was frightened when I thought you were dead. I'm so glad you're breathing.”

“So am I,” Mateo said.

He had been looking up at the ceiling, now he looked at her and said, “It will take more than this for you to get rid of me.

“Is he dead?” She didn't have to ask who he meant.

“No.” She wasn't sure how much she should tell him, how much to let him know about what happened. Truthfully, it was still all a blur to her. If someone asked her to recount the whole thing, tell them exactly what had happened, she would not be able to do so.

“What happened to him?” Mateo asked.

“I know he was shot, that he shot you. His injuries are worse than yours I think, but he didn't die.”

“That sucks,” Mateo said.

“Not considering what he told you.”

Cara turned towards where Wayne, Jay, and a man in a uniform she didn't recognize stood. The unknown man spoke in rapid Spanish to the nurse, who answered him in an angry voice.

"Screw your orders," Mateo said. "This is the woman I love, and you can't keep her from me."

"What did he say?" Cara asked.

"He was berating her for letting visitors in," Mateo said. "Who are you?"

"Captain Tom Fuentes, Mazatlán police."

"I've never met you," Mateo said.

"Just transferred in," the officer said.

"Just in time for the fun," Mateo said. "Tell us why you think it's good he's alive."

It was Wayne who answered. "We were on the ramp, listening, trying to decide the best time to attack. We heard him say that the bodies they found on Cara's land were just a drop in the bucket. Which means there are more women out there that he killed and buried. It's good he's not dead, because we might be able to get the information out of him."

Jay cleared his throat. "He wants to talk to Cara."

"Absolutely not!" Mateo tried to sit up, then ended up collapsing onto the pillows.

"Mateo!" Cara scrambled toward him, and he smiled at her.

"I'm fine," he said. "Don't go see him alone. Don't."

The nurse put her hands on Mateo's shoulders and glared at the others.

"Everyone needs to leave," the woman said. "Out, out, everyone!"

"No, no, I'm fine," Mateo said. He grabbed Cara's hand, and she felt like he might jerk it off her arm.

“There is no way in hell she’s going to see him. Felix has seen the last of her.”

“Would you like to ask Dr. Runnels about that?” Wayne asked. “He could tell you how it feels to see a relative’s murderer arrested.”

“We don’t know where he is,” Mateo said.

“He’s in a hospital in Mexico City,” Wayne said. “He is dying of prostate cancer.”

Cara broke out in tears, turned and buried her head in Mateo’s chest.

“He never told us he was sick,” Mateo said.

“He didn’t want to stop you from hunting for Felix,” Wayne said. “I talked to him today. He confirmed your story that Cara came with you of her own accord.”

The only sounds in the room came from the beeps of the machines, and Cara’s sobs. Mateo continued to hold her.

“Which brings us to another point of business,” Jay said. “The county wants to charge Cara for the hours that we spent looking for her. It’s a great deal of money. Around a hundred thousand dollars.”

Mateo snorted. “Send me the bill, I’ll pay it.”

Wayne cleared his throat. “There is also the matter of how Cara got across the border. Records show she never did.”

“We used a fake passport,” Mateo said. “Before you ask, I don’t know where the doctor got it.”

“There could be a criminal charge for that, unless...” Wayne let his words drift off. “She can help us bring closure to other families.”

“Nothing like a little blackmail, huh, Mr. FBI man? Mateo said.

“Nothing like a kidnapping to set off a search for a murderer,” Jay said.

Cara looked up at Mateo. He kissed her forehead.



“I’ll see him,” she said.

“Not without me,” Mateo said. “Do you understand?”

Cara nodded. “Having you there will make it easier.”

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“I didn’t send out party invitations. All of y’all can leave, especially you, Mateo.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Mateo said.

“I asked to see Cara, that’s all.” Felix wiggled his hands. “And while you’re at it, are both of these things necessary? I’m not going anywhere. It seems to me as if you could just keep one of my wrists handcuffed to the bed.”

Wayne crossed his arms over his chest, Jay did the same. “You expect special treatment? You’re not getting it,” Wayne said.

“And if you’re going to talk to Cara, you better get to it,” Mateo said. “I have one more night left in this hell hole, and I don’t expect to spend it with you.”

“Then fucking leave,” Felix said. “I don’t want to spend time with you. I repeat I asked to see Cara and Cara alone. If you guys think you’re running the show, you’re wrong.”

Cara thought about it for a minute. She knew Gabe well enough to know he was stubborn and could hold out and get what he wanted.

“If I stay here with you alone, you have to give them names of women who are buried, women who you killed.”

“One woman.”

“No, that won’t do,” Cara said. “You have to tell me the truth. You must tell me how many there are, and from there we’ll figure out the rest.”

For a moment she thought he would say no. But then he nodded.

“Five names and they leave.”

“One,” Felix said.

“Five,” Cara countered.

“One. My final offer.”

“Then I’ll leave.” She took a deep breath. “Or you give us three, and Mateo stays.”

“Names and locations,” Wayne said.

“I’ll give you three, names and locations. But I’ll give you five if that fucker leaves.”

He pointed a finger in Mateo’s direction, and Cara looked at the man she loved.

For a moment she thought he was going to say no, but then he nodded and left the room.

“Five names and locations,” Wayne said. “And you get ten minutes with her.”

Felix rattled off the information fast. Jay took out his phone and asked Felix to repeat it.

With each name, Cara felt like she would throw up.

When they had the names, the lawmen left the room, until it was just her and Felix.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Do you hate me now?”

“What do you think?”

“We had fun together, didn’t we?”

“That was before I knew you were killing women. How could you do it, how could you?”

“It was fun.”

He shrugged, and the urge to vomit intensified.

Cara wasn’t sure what to say, so she sat and waited for him to speak.

Finally, he said, “Don’t you wonder why I didn’t murder you?”

What was she supposed to say to that? Yes, she had wondered, but she couldn’t quite voice the sentiment. Instead, she just nodded.

“It’s because you made me wait,” Felix said.

“I can thank Lindsay for the fact I’m still breathing.”

“She the one who talked you into turning me down that first night?”

“Yes.”

Thinking about that first night gave her the courage to ask a question she knew Jay and Wayne would want her to ask.

“How many have there been, Gabe?”

Something told her he would react better if she called him by the name she knew. And she was right.

“Quite a few. Whenever I would get the urge, I would take a trip.”

And he had taken a lot of trips. “How could you?”

“You’ve already asked that question, and I told you. It’s fun.”

Cara stood. “I’m leaving.”

“My ten minutes aren’t up,” he said.

She turned to him. “You make me want to vomit.”

“You didn’t think that before, when we were fucking, and you slept beside me. I haven’t changed, Cara.”

“You still make me want to throw up. If I’d known about it before, I would’ve felt the same way. Be a decent person, Gabe, give them all the names, give them all the locations. Give their families closure.”

He was shaking his head no before she stopped talking.

“Go ahead and leave. If you come back again, I might give you a few more. Maybe.”

“You’re an animal. Or demon, I can’t figure out which.”

He glared at her, and she saw the hint of evil in his eyes. “Go back to my cousin, he’s not half the man I am, and he can’t satisfy you like I did.”

“You have that the other way around. I’ve come harder with him than I ever did with you.”

Cara stalked out the door and didn’t look back.

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*One week later*

“Don’t coddle me, either of you.”

Cara put her hand over the doctor’s and stroked it gently.

“That’s what family is supposed to do when someone is sick, they care for them. Don’t deny us that.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mateo asked from the chair he’d pulled up beside the doctor’s bed. It had taken all of his powers of persuasion to convince the doctor to come back to the resort. Now he expected them to ignore him?

“You had other things to worry about,” the doctor said. “There was Felix, and despite my objections, you were falling in love, I could see it.”

“How long have you known, about the illness?” Mateo asked. He didn’t answer for a long while, and Mateo was afraid he wouldn’t. But he finally mumbled two years, and Mateo felt as if there were a boulder in his stomach.

“The only reason you came to me for help with finding Felix was because you were sick?”

“I knew it would kill me soon and I had to see that man brought to justice before I died.”

The doctor moved his hand out from under Cara’s and covered hers with his. “It’s the only reason I agreed to kidnap

you. I thought it would work to get him behind bars.”

“It did work,” Cara said. “He’ll never see daylight again. He’ll never kill another woman.”

“When I think about the families, and what they’ve been through... If we’d found them faster...”

“Don’t,” Mateo said harshly. “There’s nothing we can do about it now. I agree with Cara, he’s behind bars and will never be free again.”

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*Mateo remembered the gentle soul who had come to see him that first day. He asked for help in finding Felix. Mateo remembered how outraged the man had been when Mateo had proposed the kidnapping. They had argued about it for days until the doctor had given in.*

*“You shouldn’t have to go through this alone.”*

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The doctor’s voice was weak when he spoke again. “Don’t grieve for me, either of you. I will be with my wife and daughter; I truly believe that. And that’s all that matters. Take care of each other.”

The doctor stopped talking, and after a few minutes, Mateo realized the man was asleep.

“I will make sure you get the best of care,” he said

“No,” Cara said. “We will.”

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“How is it the doctor knew we were in love before we did?”  
Cara climbed under the covers and snuggled up to Mateo.

“He’s a very intuitive man. Sometimes you can’t hide things like you think you can. And I’m not just talking about you I’m talking about everyone.”

Cara placed her head on his shoulder. She savored the feeling of his arms around her.

“I love you,” she whispered. “It scares the hell out of me, but I love you.”

“Don’t be frightened by it, I love you too, Cara.”

He turned onto his side so they were facing each other, and she could tell it caused him pain. They hadn’t made love since he’d been back from the hospital. They’d gone to Mexico City, retrieved the doctor, and set him up in his room, though.

They both wanted each other, but physically, Mateo was not up to it.

“I’m going to have to go home at some point, and do something with my house, and with the bar.”

“They may not let you have the house for a while. They may be searching for evidence, or information.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Cara said. “They can have it. I don’t want to live there. I want to stay here with you.”

“That makes me a very happy man.”

Her heart was beating so fast, she couldn’t get it under control. “But what if I can’t please you? What if I can’t do the things you like? What happens then?”

“I will teach you, Cara. I will be an excellent teacher, and you will be an apt pupil. We will be wonderful together.”

“But what if...” Cara stopped talking when Mateo put his finger against her lips.

“If you insist on keeping your mouth open, I have another way for you to make use of it.”

He took her hand and guided it to his dick, which was hard as a rock.

“Is that an order, Mateo?”

“When I give you orders, I am Senor Mateo. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“No, hellcat. You say *si*, Senor Mateo.”

“*Si*, Senor Mateo.”

“Very good, hellcat. Now, take me in your mouth and suck me.”

“*Si*, Senor Mateo,” she said just before she took him in her mouth.

“See, you’re learning already.”

Cara and Mateo will return in *Si Senor*.

# Melinda Barron

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castle towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda loves to lose herself between the pages of a book. The only thing she loves more is creating stories from the wonderful heroes and heroines that haunt her dreams and crowd her head. She believes love is for everyone, not just those who are a size 2. Her books are full of magic, suspense and love, in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Mel currently lives in the Texas Panhandle with two cats and a file stuffed with new ideas to keep her typing fingers busy and your heart engaged.

Mel also writes as Maura McMann.

Visit her blog here:

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