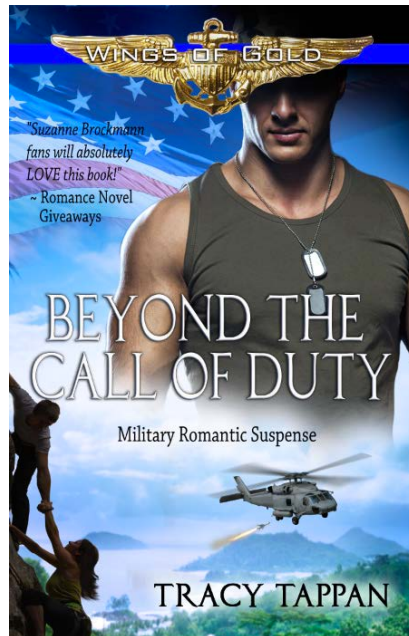




**From bestselling and award-winning author Tracy Tappan
BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY (Wings of Gold Series)**

Chapter One

June, JW Marriott Hotel, Calle 73, Bogotá, Colombia

“So which one of you am I going to have sex with?”

Eric O’Dwyer snapped his eyes up, meeting the gaze of the woman who’d just settled her shoulder against the doorjamb of the hotel suite living room. Tipping his chair back, he ran a hand over his jaw. The idea was to present a picture of naval aviator cool, when in reality he was using his hand to keep his jaw from dropping at the sight of her...a level of subtly he at least managed. The other men on his flight crew?

Not so much.

Lieutenant Kyle “Mikey” Hammond, second-in-command of Eric’s air detachment, who was currently jacked back in another chair, jolted so hard he almost did a header. Kyle was

usually a bit smoother around the ladies...although being stupid was also fairly common for him. In fact, Kyle had earned his call sign, Mikey—after that Life Cereal commercial kid who’d eat anything—for doing a very public ugly on liberty with a woman. An act Eric would’ve given half the money in his bank account to have avoided seeing.

Petty Officer Justin “Bomber” Miller, who was slouched on the couch, transferred his soggy, unlit cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, chewing on the damned thing so hard he looked like a crusty version of Colonel Klink chowing down on a rotten burrito—just like the colonel from the TV show *Hogan’s Heroes*, Miller kept his head shaved.

The silence stretched.

“An interesting introduction.” Eric rose smoothly, giving her another quick once-over. His gut snarled up. The Latin woman brought to mind a tasty treat: cappuccino skin, chocolate eyes surrounded by long, licorice lashes, and a root beer waterfall of hair currently hiked into a high ponytail. She even seemed to have brought a slight whiff of caramel in with her.

Height-wise, she was somewhere between tall and short—maybe about 5’5”—with a body that might’ve been considered voluptuous if only her shapely hips and full rack had been taken into account. But she was sporting one hell of an athletic form. Her dark brown cargo pants were tight enough across her pelvis to emphasize a flat, curvy waist, and her tan-colored tank top exposed the ripped muscles in her arms...nothing bodybuilder-like, just very defined.

A time or two Eric had slept with her kind: fit as shit, but soft in all the right places. There was a certain erotic satisfaction in being with a woman who could kick serious ass. Not his, of course. *But still*...this could mean trouble for him, and, gee, maybe he should’ve remembered he hadn’t been laid in over four months before he opened his yes-sir-I’m-a-team-player mouth and said “aye, aye” to this mission.

Problem was, he hadn't expected her to look like this when he signed off on the job. Not that he was some kind of Cro-Magnon who assumed, just because his counterpart on this op was a DEA agent, that she would be mannish or unattractive. He just...hadn't expected her to be *this* attractive. Hell, she wasn't just attractive, she was striking. *No*. Ball-tighteningly gorgeous, which was exactly what was happening inside his flight suit. Good thing his dick was smart enough not to get in on the action, or he never would've made it to his feet.

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and cocked a single brow. "I assume you gentlemen were briefed about the particulars of this mission."

Ah, yes, the *particulars* of this infamous mission...

Bomber's teeth snapped off the back half of his cigar, and he made a choking noise. He even blushed a little, which didn't entirely make sense. Bomber wasn't taking point on this mission.

No. Eric had that dubious honor. Boo-yah for him. "Only the basics. I'm Lieutenant Eric O'Dwyer, by the way, officer in charge." He came around the table and offered her his hand with his best grin. "I'll be your partner in crime."

The woman pushed off the wall and stepped inside. "Special Agent Nicole Gamboa." She shook his hand, and, *damn*. That was quite a grip.

"My crew—" Eric introduced, gesturing first to his Aviation Warfare Specialist, or AW. "This is Bomber." Whether Bomber had earned his call sign from his perpetual habit of plugging up the head every time he dropped a deuce or because he got snot-slinging drunk on port calls, Eric didn't know yet. This was his first time deploying with the seasoned Aviation Warfare specialist. Their current cruise was a three-month-long counterdrug operation off the coast of

South America aboard the *USS Lake Champlain*—the ship they’d left a few hours ago to join an operation that now looked guaranteed to bring Eric a world of hurt.

“And this is Lieutenant Kyle Hammond.” He gestured at Mikey, who pushed to his feet, and tossed Agent Gamboa one of his trademark *can’t-wait-to-get-you-naked* smiles.

She wasn’t amused. Could hardly blame her. In the case of this mission, that probably hit too close to home.

But when it came to women, Mikey only had one speed: player. And despite how plainly he projected his intentions to the fairer sex, he rarely ran short on female attention. Sandy-haired and blue-eyed, Mikey had some definite *goods* going for him: good height—he clocked in at an inch below Eric’s 6’1”—and good-looking. His *great* was that he had the naval aviators’ swagger and smirk down pat, and that’s what regularly got him laid.

Special Agent Gamboa turned back to Eric. “What about you?” Her focus dropped pointedly to his name tag. “What’s with the LZ?”

“It stands for Landing Zone.”

Agent Gamboa’s lips slanted. “Thank you, I was able to translate that much.” She switched to a wide-legged stance and crossed her arms again.

The posture didn’t suit her, boxing in her body, making her appear awkward—when he’d guess she was the farthest thing from—and almost mannish, which he *knew* she wasn’t.

“Why are you called Landing Zone?” she asked.

Chapter Two

Fifteen hours earlier, USS Lake Champlain (CG-57), Ticonderoga class cruiser, off the coast of Venezuela

The man's look of sheer terror appeared out of the dense night fog.

Eric locked a curse behind his teeth, catching only a glimpse of a pair of wide-open eyes before the surface warfare officer dove down the back stairs of the control tower—sent there by Eric's helicopter rotor blades slicing through the air mere inches from the tower's glass...and the man's face. Eric yanked back on the stick.

"Wave off!" Mikey yelled.

Yeah. Already there, man. Eric pulled up on the collective with his left hand to add power while he increased pressure on the left pedal. The ship's deck lights smeared back into the goo as he swooped the bird low over the surface of the ocean, the subsonic movement of the blades whipping up a mist of rotor wash. Eric added more power and gained altitude, flying into open air.

"Fuck, that was close," Mikey hissed, his voice coming through Eric's earpiece. "Have you ever flown in weather this bad before?"

"Negative." Sweat ran through Eric's hair, making his helmet feel too tight for his head. They'd been in this mess for more than forty-five minutes, ever since returning from an emergency MEDEVAC to find ceiling and visibility conditions sitting squarely at zero-zero; lights on the ship were barely discernible, and the small deck of the cruiser where they were supposed to set down was completely invisible.

"LZ," Mikey said, his eyes pinned on the gauges. "Fuel is now below minimums. We're down to three hundred pounds of gas."

Shit. "Enough for one more approach, and that's it."

Mikey turned his head, glancing up from his vigilant study of the gauges. "So we need to consider ditching?" His tone was calm on the outside, but Eric could detect a note underneath it.

Probably because setting down a helicopter in the ocean at night while in foul weather—both of which negated use of the horizon as a reference point—was a tricky maneuver to manage safely. If not impossible. Eric would need to be able to hover steadily over the ocean, then lower down to the surface gently and immediately slam on the rotor brake. If he landed at all lopsided, the helo would flip over while the blades were still spinning, catapulting them into a high-speed tumble that would most likely kill them. And if that didn't, then the steel rotor blades exploding into shrapnel would.

None of the options were on Eric's bucket list. Unfortunately, there weren't a whole lot of other choices he could see. With so little fuel, flying to another airfield was out. It was either plant his wheels on the deck of the *USS Lake Champlain*—and they'd nearly crashed during that last attempt—or land in the ocean.

A man's true character is tested by how he behaves under stress, Eric, not when times are good. Eric drew in a tight breath. "If I wave off after this pass, I'm going to line it up to set down in the water. Is your head on straight yet?" The first couple of rough, low-vis landing attempts had thrown Mikey into vertigo—a pilot's worst nightmare, where up could be down, and left could be right, but the brain was too messed up to tell. Not the best of conditions to be in while inside a cockpit.

Mikey glanced out the front window and grimaced. "No. I'm still upside down."

Which meant Mikey could assist on the gauges and manage comm with the ship in order to pare down Eric's duties to the sole task of flying, but he couldn't put his hands anywhere near the controls. In many respects, Eric might as well be flying solo.

Mikey turned back to his vigilant study of the gauges. "You'll stick it on this pass, LZ. C'mon, man, you didn't earn your call sign for nothing."

Eric adjusted his fist around the stick, his glove squishy with sweat. The pitch of the helo engine increased as he cranked into a turn to line up on final approach *once again*.

After a couple of minutes, Bomber, his AW, who was monitoring screens from the back of the aircraft, spoke. “You’re at 1.2 miles, sir. Ship dead ahead.”

It was time for Eric to start his descent. “Okay, this is the one. Rolling in on final.” How many times had he said that at this point? “I’ll try not to put us in the hangar this time.”

“Hangar’s good,” Mikey returned. “Just *after* we’ve landed.”

Eric eased forward on the stick, focusing on the ship’s fog-blurred landing lights until his eyes nearly crossed. The small dots slanted ninety degrees to port, and an upsurge of nausea drenched his tongue with saliva. Wouldn’t it be just great if he got vertigo too? He swallowed hard.

“Four degrees left off course,” Mikey told him.

Tension sat like a dead weight in Eric’s chest. How the hell was he supposed to monitor the rate of closure on his glide path when he couldn’t make heads or tails of any frame of reference? He needed a fucking horizon...the edge of the ship...*something*.

“LZ...come right.”

He gritted his teeth. His muscles were so tense, every adjustment he made was erratic. If he fucked this up then a Navy chaplain and a Casualty Notification Officer would end up on the doorsteps of Mikey or Bomber’s loved ones’ homes. Eric wouldn’t be able to live with himself—if he lived.

Dammit, stick this! He forced in a breath, then another. *Don’t get so hung up on trying to fix what isn’t working. Use what is.* Licking the sweat from his upper lip, Eric lowered his eyelids to half-mast, concentrating on the perturbations of the helicopter around him, the change

in atmospheric pressure, the heightened moisture he could feel in the air as he descended closer to the water. *Use the gauges. Trust your experience.* His hand made necessary changes at the stick, his gaze periodically swept up from the gauges to double-check where he was, and his feet worked the pedals with scarcely any input on his part. Muscle memory and training were taking over.

“You’re good,” Mikey said in a gravelly voice. “Reduce to sixty knots, descend and maintain glide path.”

The voice of the Landing Signal Officer in the landing shack now came through Eric’s earpiece. “You’re just aft of the deck, Lieutenant. Easy forward ten...five...steady.”

Normally, an H-60 Seahawk helicopter landed using a RAST system, where a probe on the bottom of the aircraft was inserted into a box on the flight deck below. But the LSO must’ve decided the beleaguered pilots had been through enough tonight without requiring that kind of precision in bad weather.

“You’re over the deck!” the LSO’s voice blasted through Eric’s earpiece. “Land!”

Eric slammed the collective down, and they fell out of the sky, hitting the deck with thunderous impact. The blades bounced, the technical publications on the dashboard hit the ceiling, and Eric’s vertebrae jarred together. *Ouch. But, fuckin’ A, alive.*

Eric blinked the sweat from his eyes as the flight deck crew, all dressed in multi-colored float coats, rushed onto the deck to chain the helo and throw down tire chocks.

Eric received an amber deck signal, indicating that it was okay to shut down. But he and Mikey just sat there for a moment, rotor blades turning. Mikey finally reached out and shut down.

The engine ground down to quiet.

The LSO was performing a bunch of hand signals that Eric didn't understand. The gestures weren't about flight operations, so he must've been trying to ask, "Are you okay?"

Mikey answered that. "Has anyone seen my seat cushion? Oh, wait. I think my ass ate it."

Eric snorted. Joking about this was good. "Great time to ask the Navy for a raise." He unhooked his seatbelt. His fingers were a little numb, but his hands were steady. He was already shoving their near miss into a *doesn't help to dwell on it* part of his brain. Flying was risky, always. A pilot learned from his mistakes, yes, but if he couldn't set aside the danger part, then he'd go dead from the neck up every time his ass hit the cockpit.

Mikey leaned back and exhaled. "Just happy I was flying with a guy whose call sign is LZ and not Crash." Mikey chuckled unevenly. "You landed totally blind. Well done, man."

"It's over now." Eric hauled off his helmet and wrenched the helo side door open. "Let's grab something to eat."

"Nah, I'm not hungry. Could use a drink, though. Think anyone spiked the Kool Aid? Oh, and I need a wet wipe for my onion." Mikey removed his helmet. His hair was pasted to his head. "Fuck me, but coming that close to dying was not fun."

They waded through a bunch of back-slapping congratulations from the deck crew and entered the small personnel door at the back of the hangar.

After ascending one deck, they split up, Eric heading for his stateroom to change clothes. He threw on workout gear instead of a clean flight suit, and took off for the ship's gym. He was so exhausted he lost his way twice, his subconscious probably trying to tell him he really should be heading to bed. But there was no way he could sleep, or even sit still, read, eat, dick around on the computer, or any of that. Right now, he needed rock music pumping through his head and his muscles working to the brink of lactic acid poisoning.

The gym was a small room, deserted at this time of night, with only one floor-to-ceiling mirror, a squat rack, three stationary bicycles, and the most basic selection of free weights. Eric took full advantage of what was there. Bench press, bicep curls, lat pulls, ab crunches...

By the end of it, he was swimming in sweat, nearly every muscle in his body protesting the abuse. He dragged a towel over his face and looked at himself in the mirror. His green eyes stared back at him steadily. Kind of blankly. He held out a hand in front of him and checked it. Stone-cold solid.

He supposed he should be glad he was squared away, but this iceman thing he so often pulled on himself felt really spooky tonight. *Fuck me, but coming that close to dying was not fun.* Shouldn't he be at least a little—?

“Yo, O’Dwyer.”

He turned around.

The chief engineer had his head poked around the doorjamb. “Captain wants to see you.”

“Roger that.” It was one o’clock in the morning, but that wasn’t any big deal. The captain of an underway naval vessel was the busiest man on the ship. If the captain was awake and Eric was still awake, then the captain would conduct business.

Eric made a pit stop at the showers, cleaned up and changed into a fresh pair of blue camos, then headed off. His booted footsteps echoed hollowly in the ship’s empty metal corridor. Only a skeleton crew was on night watch right now, most congregated on the bridge of the ship.

He reached the stateroom of the man who commanded the *USS Lake Champlain* and knocked on the door, then strode in at Captain Blakely’s call to enter. Passing an L-shaped cushioned seat built into a corner of the cabin plus a round table complete with navy blue tablecloth and silver coffee carafe, Eric came to attention. The captain’s wooden desk was

shoved against the wall, with an array of communication equipment tacked above it. The phone and speaker and other machinery were blech beige, so ugly that the sight of them in a living space would've given any homemaker of the female persuasion the vapors. On the wall above the comm equipment was a large electronic screen displaying a digital readout of navigational data: speed, course, time.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Blakely gestured abstractedly. "Sit down."

Eric relaxed and sat in the chair adjacent to the man's desk.

The captain leaned back and assessed him. "Rough night," he commented.

"Yes, sir."

"You all right?"

Eric smiled. "Just hungry."

Blakely pursed his lips.

Eric brought his smile down a notch. "No worries, sir. We train for these kinds of emergencies." *True, but still...*

Nodding, Blakely leaned forward, setting his elbows on the armrests of his chair, his fingers loosely clasped. "I hate to bring up another op so soon after such a sphincter-tightening night."

"That's fine, sir," Eric jumped right in. "As long as it's not *this* night." After that violent landing, his helicopter would be down until his maintenance crew could conduct a thorough inspection. Plus, the idea of putting Mikey back into the cockpit so soon after having vertigo and almost dying didn't thrill him. And himself? Well, he'd just sit here and continue to be some kind of creepy robot.

“It’s tomorrow,” Blakely said. “The Drug Enforcement Administration liaison at the US Embassy in Colombia has requested your flight crew’s help in a joint undertaking with one of their teams. Since it’s a counterdrug operation, and that’s our mission, I’m inclined to lend you to them. But...” Blakely blew out his cheeks and heaved a massive gust of air. “This is a mission for the record books, O’Dwyer.” He shook his head. “Scuttlebutt is the DEA asked the Army first, but they wouldn’t touch this with a ten-foot pole.”

Eric drew his brows together. *What?*

Blakely *humphed*. “Don’t know why everyone’s always got such a hard-on for Black Hawk helicopters, but—” He made a satisfied sound in his throat. “When the DEA heard about your reputation, they changed their tune real fast.”

The phone above Blakely’s desk *waaa’d*. The Captain picked it up and listened.

Gazing vaguely across the room, Eric fought the urge to tap his fingers on the armrests. *Why the hell did the Army refuse this mission?* On the wall above the L-shaped seat was a picture of the *Lake Champlain*’s stern, underway, a wide swath of foamy wake churning out behind it. Like having a picture of your house in your house.

“Very well,” Blakely said into the phone. “Slow to twelve knots and maintain course.” He hung up and turned back to Eric, continuing as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Tonight’s impossible landing is exactly what the DEA needs out of you, O’Dwyer, along with your Anti-Submarine Warfare expertise. Although you being fluent in Spanish is definitely a cherry on top.” He picked up his *USS Lake Champlain* mug and slugged back some coffee. “That, and, you know, you don’t break any mirrors with your looks.”

Had Eric caught a case of Mikey’s vertigo? “My looks?” Okay, he knew he didn’t break mirrors, but it was the *how is that relevant to the mission?* he should’ve pushed out of his mouth.

“You’re to meet with a couple of agents at the JW Marriott Hotel in Bogotá at ten hundred hours tomorrow. Even though this assignment is being organized through the embassy, it’s an undercover op, so you can’t meet at the embassy itself because the local guard would ID you.”

Eric was tempted to shake his head, rattle loose more usable brain matter. “Excuse me, sir, but what is this op?”

“It’s...” Blakely started, stopped, re-tried. “Truth is, Lieutenant, this one really goes beyond the call of duty.” And then the strangest thing happened.

Captain Adam Blakely, commander of the *USS Lake Champlain*, blushed red as the sea of Moses.

Chapter Three

Nicole managed to keep her eyebrows from arching into her hairline when the Navy lieutenant stood up from the conference table, but it was a near thing. Close, too, the temptation to roll her eyes at herself. So he was handsome, so what? Would she rather do this mission with someone who made her skin crawl? The honest answer was she’d rather not do any mission that required her to use her body for anything other than what it was trained for: fighting. She had two black belts, one in taekwondo, the other in aikido, and was one of the rare few who’d scored a perfect 50 on the physical fitness course at the DEA Academy.

It didn’t matter.

Whenever she walked into the office, the predominant expression to greet her arrival was a leer. In the break room, male agents would sidle up close and remark how much they’d like a chance to partner with her. Her face would boil from the insinuating tone. They didn’t want to be

her partner because of her abilities, but because the consensus was that sex came as a part of a package deal with her. Unfortunately this opinion had been helped along considerably by her partner developing a thing for her.

Within a week of being assigned to veteran agent Ryan Aagaard, she'd set him straight about where his cock needed to stay when he was around her: securely behind his zipper. But the damage had already been done. Every time she got a good assignment, rumors flew that she'd slept with Aagaard to get it.

Now here she'd landed a primo mission—an international posting, after only three years as a field agent—and she'd been chosen for the one thing she didn't want to be selected for: her beauty. Her half-Colombian ancestry and her perfect Spanish had played a part in the decision, too, but mostly it had been her looks, which was a bitter pill. And also made it a sure thing that she'd slept with the boss to get the assignment, right?

She probably should've refused the assignment, taken a righteous, I-am-woman-hear-me-roar stand. But this “whore scheme” the DEA had developed was their best chance for capturing Alejandro Carrera, and it was impossible for her to turn her back on that. Not with Carrera, not when taking down that particular drug lord could confirm, secretly to herself, that the Gamboa name—and by association, her father's real name of Muñoz —wasn't complete dirt. Anything that would cleanse the family name was something she had to do. *You've got bad blood, mija. You need to work twice as hard as everyone else, be twice as good.* It'd be nice if she could finally get her father to shut up about that.

The Navy pilot offered her his hand to shake. “I'm Lieutenant Eric O'Dwyer, by the way, officer in charge. I'll be your partner in crime.”

She stepped into the room. He probably wasn't as tall, lean, and broad-shouldered as he appeared. No doubt his physique was being enhanced by the sleek stretch of his flight suit, the olive drab material offset with colorful patches adorning each of his well-formed biceps and broad chest. His name tag sat on his left pec, just above a zippered pocket, and on the right was a squadron insignia, which proclaimed him out of the San Diego HSM-75 Wolf Pack. His left arm sported the American flag, and his right, a *US Navy!* patch.

The lieutenant smiled as he shook her hand, presenting a row of perfect white teeth set in a frame of sexy male lips.

Dios mío, this Eric O'Dwyer's smile was a thing to behold. "Special Agent Nicole Gamboa." She gave his hand a good crunch. The gesture screamed *I am not just a pretty face!* but she was in no mood to be subtle about her going-in position on this mission.

The lieutenant introduced his crew, and she was treated to the requisite leer from the blond pilot.

Teeth clenched, she turned back to O'Dwyer and asked about his nickname, Landing Zone.

"Oh, a pilot never tells." He chuckled, his grin cutting masculine creases into his cheeks and lighting his leafy green eyes from behind. "Call signs are usually earned from something...not good." He cast a look at the blond pilot, who flashed an unrepentant grin.

"Isn't O'Dwyer an Irish last name?" He appeared almost Italian to her, with his near-black hair and olive skin.

"I'm what you call black Irish." The smile that creased his cheeks now was almost boyish. "Black sheep, too, I guess. The rest of my family is fair."

“Good morning, everyone,” Ryan Aagaard said as he entered the hotel room, a thick file in his hand. “I’m Special Agent Ryan Aagaard, Special Agent Gamboa’s partner.”

Ryan strode to the faux-marble-topped table, exuding all the confidence and strength of his tall, blond, Viking ancestors. He was used to owning any space he walked into, but as he came into this room, a slight pleat flickered across his brow.

First time in a room full of naval aviators, Ryan? Poor thing.

Aagaard set down the file on the round table. “Has Special Agent Gamboa briefed you yet?” His hands landed on his hips and his legs spread in a powerful stance.

Snap. King Ryan returned.

So much for *poor thing*. “I was waiting for you,” Nicole said, *and feeling the bizarre need to chat with the guy who will soon see me in my naughtiest underwear*. Why she would do that, she didn’t know. In—do the mission—out. That’s all there was to this. There wouldn’t be any Miller Time afterward. She introduced the three men, and Ryan zeroed in on O’Dwyer.

“I presume you’re taking the lead on this.” Ryan gestured at Blond Pilot and the bald guy. “Those two are too fair.”

“That’s affirmative.”

Ryan nodded. “What do you know so far?”

“Not much,” O’Dwyer admitted. “Just that you need me to act the role of a male whore and pretend to have sex with one of your female agents.” He glanced over at Nicole, his eyes only touching her face, but somehow in that limited perusal she detected his keen awareness of her entire body. “I’m assuming Special Agent Gamboa is the female in question, considering the way she introduced herself.”

Nicole offered up a smile loaded with bravado. Good thing heat was forming at the back of her neck and not in her cheeks, or she'd be making herself do a hundred push-ups later tonight back at her apartment.

The bald guy made a little choked sound deep in his throat.

O'Dwyer glanced at him. "Bomber, why don't you go outside and take a smoke break?" As the man left, O'Dwyer explained, "Bomber can't handle the sex talk. Not while deployed, at least." He waved Blond Pilot closer. "So what's the rest of the story?"

Ryan opened the file. "Our bad guy is Alejandro Carrera."

O'Dwyer's eyebrows rose. "I've heard of the man." He passed a skeptical look over Nicole and Ryan. "He's a big fish."

Ryan nodded. "Very big. He's kingpin of FARC, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. At one point, the United States recognized FARC as one of the most merciless foreign terrorist organizations out there. In the old days, drug cartels used to hire FARC to guard drug routes and protect cocaine labs—hence the terrorism. Now Carrera has taken over and gone into the drug trade himself, although his drug of choice is heroin."

Nicole turned her head aside. One of FARC's former clients had been the infamous Medellín Cartel, a ruthless organization she knew entirely too much about.

Ryan produced a picture of the drug lord, a tall, handsome Latino in a stylish suit. "Carrera transports thousands of tons of H into the United States every year. How he manages it has been a mystery...until recent intel cleared it up." Ryan's lips flattened into a hard line. "Via submarine."

O'Dwyer snorted. "Smart."

“Yes, we’ve never been able to catch the sneaky bastards. But now we’ve got a plan.”

Ryan extracted several satellite images from the folder. “Carrera lives here, on Isla Gorgona, twenty-two miles off the west coast of Colombia. See this heat bloom?” Ryan pointed to a spot on the satellite photo. “That’s the drug sub. It’s enclosed in a man-made waterway within the walls surrounding the grounds of Carrera’s hacienda, and the place is a damned fortress. Radar, armed guards, and cameras everywhere.”

“The one viable way onto the island is here.” Ryan indicated a mountain on the far west corner of the picture. “And *only* when there’s no aerial radar coverage. That happens whenever the Colombian Air Force conducts maneuvers nearby. Carrera directs his air radars onto those planes to make sure they’re not aiming for his island. The Colombian Air Force and U.S. Customs work together on some missions, and Carrera is understandably paranoid. Intel tells us the Colombian Air Force will be on maneuvers off the west coast of Colombia the day after tomorrow at 15:00—at which time a wedge of open airspace will appear.” Ryan glanced at O’Dwyer. “The DEA needs your helicopter to get us through that wedge and onto Isla Gorgona.”

O’Dwyer studied the photo. “What kind of flight conditions are we talking about?”

“Dangerous ones. High winds and a small landing area.”

“How small?”

“About one hundred feet by one hundred feet.

O’Dwyer shrugged that away. “That’s slightly bigger than the size of a destroyer’s flight deck. I should be able to manage it. The high winds could prove problematic, especially if I’m forced to fly in a certain wedge. If I can’t land into the wind, tail rotor authority will be an issue, and no tail rotor equals several tons of metal going down hard. The high temperature also adds

another layer of risk, messing with aerodynamic efficiency—heat makes the controls sluggish. How about a sea ingress?”

Ryan shook his head. “The entire circumference of the island is protected by radar for several miles out. There’s no way to avoid detection. We wouldn’t care about that, of course, if we were just storming the castle, but”—Ryan spread his hands—“we don’t have enough evidence to warrant a move like that, yet. This mission is about obtaining that evidence, which is why it’s so important to get you and Gamboa inside.”

O’Dwyer’s lips slanted. “And we need to play a couple of whores to do that?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Do you see this small pier?” Ryan pointed to it. “Only Carrera-owned ships are allowed to dock at it. No outsiders are ever permitted. Except—and here’s our ace in the hole—every Friday at 15:30 Carrera sends a couple of his goons to the town of Guapi on the mainland to pick up two prostitutes from a whorehouse there.”

“A man *and* a woman,” Nicole put in. “Turns out Carrera has a voyeur fetish, and this is his weekly fix.”

O’Dwyer’s eyebrows eased up. “He only watches them have sex? That’s it?”

“Correct,” Nicole confirmed. “No participation.”

Aagaard went on. “Having you and Agent Gamboa pretend to be the whores putting on Carrera’s sex show is your ticket inside the hacienda. Once inside, you two will plant a tracking device on the drug sub. When this sub deploys with the device in place, part two of the Navy’s involvement comes into play. Your team will use its Anti-Submarine Warfare capabilities to help us catch Carrera red-handed with a full load.”

O’Dwyer’s eyes narrowed a little. “How, exactly, are Agent Gamboa and I supposed to *pretend* to have sex?” Again, his gaze never strayed below Nicole’s neck—the man deserved a

medal—but still...something about the way his pupils widened made Nicole think that plenty of images were parading across his mind.

A tightness fluttered up her throat.

O'Dwyer ran a hand over his clean-shaven chin. "You don't expect Carrera to be stupid about something like this, do you?"

"No," she said. "We're going to have to be real about it, but we shouldn't have to push our show too far." Who, exactly, was she reassuring here? "Special Agent Aagaard and I have a distraction planned." She sifted through the photos on the table and pulled out a satellite close-up of the hacienda. She pointed to a gate on the east side of the house. "The corner of a gas generator is visible through the bars of this gate. See that? Special Agent Aagaard will position himself at the top of this hill with a sniper rifle"—she moved her finger to indicate it—"and shoot out the generator. This will provide a nice, chaos-inspiring explosion, allowing you and me to sneak off to the drug sub and plant the tracking device."

Ryan braced his hands on the table. "So here's the entire plan in summary. Step one: fly undetected onto the island. Step two: go down the mountain, intercept the two hookers, take them out, and switch places. Step three: get inside the hacienda and—"

"Hold up," O'Dwyer interrupted. "*Take them out?*" He exchanged a glance with Blond Pilot. "Look, Aagaard, I'll drill a Hellfire Missile up the asspipe of any scuzzy drug lord out there. But these hookers, besides being guilty of making a poor occupational choice, are innocent."

"We're not going to kill them," Nicole clarified. "Just secure them: knock out, gag, tie up—that sort of thing."

“Once you’re inside the hacienda,” Aagaard continued, “I’ll blow the generator, you two plant the tracking device, then it’s back up the mountain to the helicopter for a rapid egress.”

O’Dwyer frowned. “Doing the math, it doesn’t seem like we’re going to have enough time to pull this off. You say the airspace will open over the mountain at 15:00, then the hookers *du jour* show up at 15:30. That gives us all of thirty minutes to manage a hazardous landing, get down the mountain, and...how far down is it?”

“About two thousand feet,” Ryan answered.

“Thirty minutes to land,” O’Dwyer recapped, “cover two thousand feet down a winding mountain path, and intercept those whores. That’s extremely tight timing. Wouldn’t it be better to switch places with the hookers in Guapi?”

“Can’t.” Aagaard shook his head. “Carrera keeps them under heavy guard from the mainland to the Isla Gorgona dock. So are you in?”

O’Dwyer paused. “Just out of curiosity, why isn’t a Latino DEA agent doing this?”

“There isn’t anyone who fits the role who is currently available,” Nicole jumped in to answer. Translation: she’d refused outright, privately to Aagaard, to do this assignment with a male coworker, all of whom she was trying to convince *not* to think of her as a sex object. “Since you’ll already be on the aircraft, it makes sense to have you do the job. It’s sheer good luck that you look so Latino and speak Spanish, although...” She switched to Spanish. “*Imagino que habla español como gringo.*”

He chuckled. “*Aprendí a hablar español desde que era niño, lo hablo sin acento.*”

Nicole arched her brows. “All right, you’ve shocked me.” She’d accused him of speaking Spanish like a white boy, and he’d answered in perfect Spanish, *I learned Spanish from the time I was a child. I speak it without an accent.*

O'Dwyer's eyes warmed on her, lighting off a corresponding—and disturbing, questionable, odd—warmth in her belly.

“Are you in?” Aagaard demanded again.

“Yes.” O'Dwyer looked at Aagaard. “But Mikey does the shooting.” He indicated Blond Pilot. “The more people I take on board the helo, the less gas I can carry, which isn't optimal. I'll also want to keep light to deal with the high winds and the heat; I'll need to be able to maximize my available power. Aagaard, you stay behind.”

Nicole gave Blond Pilot an uncertain once-over. “That's a difficult shot. Not much of the generator is showing.”

“Mikey's a certified sharpshooter,” O'Dwyer said.

Nicole checked eyes with Ryan.

Aagaard nodded. “We need to work on your disguise,” he told O'Dwyer. “Your haircut, for one, is too Uncle Sam.”

O'Dwyer ran his hand over his short hair, the gesture flexing up his right biceps. Something Nicole noted with the objectivity of someone who could comment, if asked, that the Navy lieutenant would probably be a good man in a fight.

“We want to shave your head,” Aagaard added. “And paint a tattoo on your skull.”

O'Dwyer laughed in a burst. “Great. When do we start?”

“First thing tomorrow morning.” Ryan scooped the photos back into the folder. “You and Agent Gamboa only have one day to train for this.”

Chapter Four

Monserate Mountain, city center of Bogotá, Colombia

It was a good thing Eric made a habit of running the treadmill for forty-five minutes a day when he was deployed. He also vigorously pumped iron, daily...all to stay in shape? *Sure* was his answer to anyone who asked, but mostly to jettison extra energy before it made him go nuts; not a good place for a leader of pilots to go.

A guy could wander into strange places inside his brain when he was floating for so many long months, and every man handled it differently. For Eric, functioning at high operation tempo always jacked up his energy too much, giving him more than he knew what to do with. Release in the form of warm female companionship wasn't an option. He didn't sample the local color in foreign ports—terrified of dick-eating diseases? Check. Nor did he hook up with female sailors on board—not interested in conduct unbecoming an officer? Double check. So with too much energy and not enough places to expend it, the extra exercise was just a preemptive strike.

He never thought he'd be thankful he'd adopted his exercise regime for anything other than anti-insanity reasons, but he was now. Anything less than his current top physical condition would've had him hurling his lungs out on this, his *fifth* trip down the despicable Monserrate Mountain, running next to Special Agent Nicole Gamboa, who was, incidentally, looking hardly taxed. She was sweating, yes—it was a hundred fucking degrees out here—and her breathing was labored, but otherwise he had the embarrassing sense that if they did this run many more times, she would outpace him.

They'd chosen to train on Monserrate—minus the helicopter landing—because it was a near replica of the mountain on Isla Gorgona, at least in terms of the heavy jungle vegetation and the steepness of the trail. The Isla Gorgona mountain was much smaller in total altitude than the massive Monserrate, which rose over 10,000 feet above sea level, and Eric was pretty sure Isla

Gorgona didn't have restaurants and souvenir shops like Monserrate did. The Church of Monserrate was a pilgrimage site, and every time he, Gamboa, and Mikey thundered down the path, they received more than one startled glance from religious devotees strolling the opposite direction.

"You made it this time," Agent Aagaard announced, staring down at a stopwatch as their group pounded up to him. "Two minutes to spare. Except for you, Hammond," the agent called out to Mikey.

Eric forced himself *not* to plant his hands on his knees while he caught his breath.

Mikey heaved up to them. "I'm doing this in flight boots," he complained. "*And* hauling this." One-handed, he held up his sniper rifle, which had earned most of the startled glances.

"She gets to wear running shoes." He gestured rigidly at Gamboa.

"O'Dwyer made it," Aagaard pointed out. "In flight boots and wearing a backpack."

Yeah, but Eric could shut down the city with the stink of his flight suit by now.

"Everybody unbunch," he said. "It's not mission critical for Mikey to arrive at the same time we do. He doesn't have to change clothes."

Aagaard nodded grudgingly. "All right. Get changing, then. Let me time you on that."

Aagaard thumbed the button on the stopwatch. "You only have those spare two minutes."

Eric whipped his backpack off at the same time Gamboa threw off hers. He yanked out a pair of leather sandals, cream-colored canvas pants, and a dark-brown-and-cream striped pullover of the same material: all very Colombian clothes to—

"Ho-ly shit." Mikey whistled.

Eric glanced up. And somehow kept undressing, even though all the blood in his head instantly vacated his brain for southern regions of his body.

Agent Gamboa had stripped off her running shorts and tank top, and was now working at getting a skimpy red dress dragged down over a lacy purple thong and bra set. *Holy shit* was right. In fact, *quadruple holy shit*.

“Lieutenant Hammond,” Aagaard snarled. “Conduct yourself as a professional.”

Eric plugged his legs into the pants, and silently gritted *down, boy, down, boy* to his cock. Gamboa’s body was better than he’d originally predicted, or dreamed. Leggy, curvy, sleek muscles all over the place, tons of soft-looking cappuccino skin set off to drooling perfection by that sexy purple number she was wearing. And how the hell did she still manage to smell like caramel in this heat?

“I’ll be reporting this to your superior officer,” Aagaard was still haranguing.

“K.”

Eric tried to tug on the pullover, but one of the sleeves was inside-out and he got tangled up in it. He stumbled sideways and bumped into Gamboa. “Dammit.” He jerked off the shirt...and saw her, all decked out in her hooker dress. It was short enough to barely cover her crotch, and low enough that her stacked-up boobs overflowed the neckline. A pair of treacherously spiked heels emphasized the long, tapered length of her legs. His mouth went dry, and the buildup of frustrations pulled the pin on his ability to deal rationally with this hosed-up mission anymore.

“Fuck it!” Eric threw the shirt down. “It’s too hot to wear that thing! I’m going bare-chested. I can do that, right? I’m a whore, so why not, because, you know, I’m a fucking whore!” He was yelling. Well, this op was stupid.

They hadn’t even started, and he was already handling it like a monkey fucking a football—not well. But, dammit, he’d been all nice and neatly tucked away into his I’m-on-

deployment-no-woman zone, and then Special Agent Nicole Gamboa had entered his life mid-float. And now, tomorrow, he was supposed to put his hands on a woman whose looks knocked him completely cockeyed, but not in the act of heart-pumping, fingernail-scraping, ball-exploding sex. Not during some roll around on the bedsheets, playful, laugh-your-ass-off-while-having-sex sex. Certainly not in any kind of situation where getting the high happy hard one would be cause for, “Hey look at that! Wahoo, let’s use it!” But rather for the type of blushing embarrassment the likes of which he hadn’t experienced since he was thirteen and ejaculated a full payload into his pants when his sixteen-year-old neighbor, Sandy Burbank, stuck her fingers into a jar of Smucker’s apple jelly during lunchtime. No. This was a *job*, where touching DEA Agent Nicole Gamboa couldn’t be actual fun, but something easily misconstrued as a breach of ethics, or abuse, or as breaking the rules of a man-woman-coworker doctrine he hadn’t even received the memo about.

Happy thoughts.

Happier ones to come...

“Whose screwed-up idea was it to do an op in Colombia in the middle of June, anyway!” Irrational anger was so much better than having to convince his cock that all of this was just pretend, like Ren and Stimpy or...or puppets.

Aagaard slowly stuffed his stopwatch into his pocket.

Yeah, that’s right, move carefully around the Navy pilot in the middle of some kind of bizarre check-out, kiddies.

Mikey had a strange expression on his face, like Eric was holding out his cruise spunk sock to everyone and gushing, “Guys, look how full it is!”

Well, it was rare indeed to see Lieutenant Eric O'Dwyer come off his spool. There was a reason for it. He hated this. *You cannot perform at peak capacity, Eric, when you let emotion rule you.*

Yeah. No shit.

A Spanish couple chose that moment to hike around the curve in the road just below their group. The man's jaw dropped. The woman's face went red, and she started screeching at her man in Spanish, batting at him repeatedly as she hustled him up past Gamboa.

Eric snatched up his backpack and stuffed his flight suit and boots in. "I need a break." Water, food, more water, an ice pick to gouge out his sex-crazed eyeballs, a memory erase stick with superpower abilities to eradicate the color purple from his brain forever, and some KY jelly for the *obvious*.

"All right." Aagaard pointed to the E-Z Up canopy they'd erected slightly off the main path for shade. "Why don't you go there and check your gear. I'll be back in a bit with lunch."

Chapter Five

Eric stalked over and thumped his backpack on the card table underneath the canopy.

Mikey followed, shrugging out of the top half of his flight suit and tying the empty sleeves around his waist.

From the side of Eric's vision he watched the nubile muscles in Gamboa's legs flex as she approached in her high heels. "Sorry," he told her through a tight jaw. "I'm usually not like that." He was *never* like that. "I despise the heat."

"San Diego's weather is hot." She slipped her high heels off and stuffed her bare feet into her running shoes.

“San Diego’s weather is *perfect*,” he countered, then shot her a narrow look. “How do you know I’m stationed in San Diego?”

“From one of the patches on your flight suit. I’m a DEA agent, remember?” She tapped a finger under her right eye. “Observant.”

He snorted. He was starting to feel less cranked up, a state of being that would be helped tremendously if she’d change out of her boner-maker dress. Taking responsibility for his own part, he forced himself to quit staring at her boobs...but as his attention drifted up and to the side what he found instead was also interesting. Directly underneath her left collarbone she had a neat, round scar: the obvious remnant of a bullet wound. Special Agent Nicole Gamboa had once been shot, and why that should make him want to tear someone’s throat out, he didn’t know. His mood-for-the-day must just be pissed off.

“Anyway, it’s the humidity here that’s the real killer.” Gamboa placed a gym bag on the table. “Okay, here’s the gear we’ll be dealing with.” She unzipped it, exposing a smorgasbord of sex toys.

He peered in and, although he wouldn’t have deemed it possible, sweated more.
Gear...but he thought...

She reached in and extracted a large prosthetic fist.

He felt his eyebrows soar, up, up, up, high on his forehead. “Um...” *No, don’t ask. Just don’t.* He dragged a hand across the back of his neck. How could he not ask? “What’s that for?”

“It’s a rubber fist. You know, like a dildo, but for fist-fucking.”

See, O’Dwyer, should’ve kept your mouth shut. “Didn’t know...there was...such a thing.” And he’d had a port call in Thailand. He checked over Gamboa’s shoulder to see if anyone else was wandering up the path.

She glanced at him. “We’re not going to *use* it.”

He felt some air leave his lungs. Jesus, he’d been holding his breath? Yeah, monkey fucking a football mission, one hundred percent.

Mikey dropped down onto a camp chair. “Top ten conversations I never thought I’d overhear in my life, this ranks as number one.”

“And, no,” Gamboa continued to Eric, “to answer your question, there isn’t exactly such a thing as an imitation fist-fucking...apparatus. We invented it to hide the tracking device in. See?” She unscrewed the cap off the wrist end and showed him the interior. “We could’ve made an extra-wide dildo, but that would’ve looked unusual.”

Mikey propped his booted feet on the card table. “Admit it, *chica*, you just don’t want anyone thinking your vajizzle is big enough to take an extra-wide dildo, right?” He flung an arm behind him and flipped open the lid of a cooler. “And speaking of the almighty vajayjay—mainly *yours*—shouldn’t you and LZ practice your act so you’ll be comfortable with each other when it comes time for the Main Show?” He yanked out a water bottle, letting the cooler lid flop closed. “I’ll make the sacrifice, play Carrera and watch you guys. Hey, grade you, too, if you want.”

A tic pulsed in Gamboa’s cheek. “You know what, cowboy—”

“Extra points if you show your V, you know, since that’s the theme of—”

“Here.” She thrust her hand into the bag and pulled out a rubber vagina. Cranking back her arm, she threw it at Mikey.

Mikey didn’t move. Just let the rubber vagina slam into his chest and tumble down to his lap, his face a closed mask.

“Fake beav is about your speed, eh, *hijueputa*?” Gamboa’s eyes were dark like espresso beans, and very angry. “Because no way a guy like you gets the real thing.”

Eric exhaled a heavy breath. Not good that shit was already falling apart on their team, but, uh, sort of selfishly good to discover he wasn’t the only one off his cork.

Gamboa stalked over to Mikey, grabbed two fistfuls of his T-shirt, and jacked him off the camp chair, the rubber vadge rolling to the ground. She gave him a hard shove backward.

“That’s enough,” Eric barked.

“I don’t want this asshat on my team,” Gamboa said through the grate of her teeth. “A pervert like him will purposely delay blowing the generator so you and I will have to push our sex show too far. ¿*Me comprendes*? I don’t trust him.”

Eric looked at Kyle. “Mikey,” he said. “Why don’t you go to the gift shop and get more water to restock the cooler?” Voiced as a question, meant as an order.

“Sure,” Mikey drawled and sauntered off, leaving Eric alone with Gamboa.

Eric walked over to the cooler and dug out two water bottles, waiting until Mikey was out of earshot before saying, “One thing about deploying off the coast of South America instead of in the Med, we get regular text messages.” He strode back over to Gamboa and handed her one of the water bottles. “Mikey has been receiving quite a few lately, and when he reads them, he gets an expression of enraged pain on his face he reserves only for his ex-girlfriend.” He cracked open the lid of his water bottle. “He’s just really anti-woman right now, Gamboa, but I’m telling you, there isn’t any other pilot I’d want watching my six during an operation than Mikey. He won’t let us down.”

“No,” she stated flatly, setting aside her unopened water bottle. “I don’t want that man on the team.”

Eric's temper flared at her brusque reply. He tapped it down. "It's not your call to make."

Gamboa's eyes narrowed. "This is a DEA operation."

"And it's my thirty million dollar helicopter that'll go into the shitter if this mission fails," he shot back. "I'm the aircraft commander. I give the orders."

A darker shade of rage bloomed in her eyes. "This is my life on the line, too, O'Dwyer. I should have a say about putting it in the hands of Mutt and Jeff." She shook her head. "Two complete juveniles who think this is a big joke."

He thunked his water bottle down on the table. Her aggressive attitude was really starting to get on his nerves. "There's nothing at all," he said in slow, succinct syllables, "about this mission I find humorous."

"No? What if I'd bought off on the idea of practicing our act, *hombre*? I mean, there's no reason for a couple of whores to get comfortable with each other, but, hey, it'd give you another chance to get your hands on some Latina ass. You'd be laughing, then, wouldn't—"

"Wait just a damned minute." It felt like a tankload of JP5 fuel had been poured into his chest, he was getting so pissed at this woman. "I'm far from hard up for getting my hands on a woman, Gamboa, so why don't you try dialing down the accusations? And, sidebar, if you were a man, I'd coldcock your ass for even *suggesting* I would use this situation to take advantage of you."

"Don't do my wilting flower femininity any favors." She stepped forward and rammed the heels of her palms into his chest.

He stumbled back a couple of paces, shocked again at her strength. Christ, the woman knew how to deliver a hit of focused power.

She followed him step for step. “I’d be more than happy to show you what I can do in a fight, *madrado*.”

Asshole...she’d just called him an *asshole*. He held up a single, rigid finger to stop her, not trusting his voice at the moment.

Gamboa sneered. “Tell me something, flyboy. Why did you agree to take on this assignment? Because in my mind, I hear your CO telling you that you have to play a male whore and pretend to have sex with a female DEA agent, and I can’t figure there’s any kind of honorable, patriotic reason for agreeing to do that.”

He inhaled two hard breaths through his nostrils. “Not that you deserve an answer, seeing as you’re being such a pain in the ass about it, but I agreed to do this op for the high pucker factor. It’s dangerous. Twenty things could go wrong and nineteen of those could get us killed, and like any good Navy pilot, I’m an adrenaline junkie.” *Well, sort of*. Mainly, he was a career-minded officer who hadn’t wanted to look like a pussy in front of a superior officer by turning down a mission. *Always reach to be the best, Eric*. Although the moment he met Gamboa, he’d been tempted to back out, save himself a shitload of high psychiatric bills in the future. But that thought had lasted all of a millisecond before the next thought had arrived: if *he* didn’t do this op, some other man would, and that pumped up his veins with...what emotion, he wasn’t sure. But it wasn’t good.

Not that he was jealous. He...didn’t...think so, at least. The situation was just lighting off the side of him that wanted to protect those who needed it. Gamboa would probably try to knock his block off for the sentiment, but like it or not, she was a woman, and that made their Big Show a lot worse for her than for him. Truth was, the only guy he did trust not to use the situation to take advantage of her was him.

Stepping up to the table, he shoved the sex toy bag aside. “But now here I am on this mission, neck deep in it, and I’m completely out of my element. Because here’s the thing, I’m not an actor. I don’t know how to be anything else on this op but me, and who I am is a healthy, twenty-nine-year-old male in his prime. When you and I put on our so-called act, I’m going to get hard. I don’t see any way to avoid some *hello, niceta meetcha* happening. And that’s the Himalayas of all reasons why this mission isn’t even remotely a joke to me. Because you’re going to look at me like that...” he pointed at her face, “...with those *I told you so* lines between your brows when it does.”

“Hey,” Ryan said as he entered the canopy area. “I’ve got chunchullo for everyone.” He set four plastic bags on the table.

Gamboa turned stiffly to Ryan. “Chunchullo is cow intestines, Aagaard.”

“What? No, it’s sausage. They said...” He stopped talking and glanced between Eric and Gamboa. “What’s up with you two?”

Mutely, Gamboa tugged the front of her dress up to cover more of her breasts. ‘Course that didn’t help the situation down below any.

Still glaring, Eric planted his palms on the card table. “This op is a disaster, that’s what’s up. Did anybody bother to wonder how it’s going to seem when a couple of whores show up at Carrera’s hacienda covered in sweat from running down a mountain in one hundred degree heat? Her lingerie,” he gestured flippantly at Gamboa, “is too high-class for a Colombian hooker.” He straightened. “And this”—he grabbed the prosthetic monstrosity and held it up, the rubber fist making a *wubble-wubble* noise as it bobbed back and forth—“is fucking terrifying.”

Chapter Six

Bogotá Beer Company, Los Rosales, Bogotá, Colombia

“You’re not in your apartment.”

Nicole didn’t turn around on her barstool. She knew who it was, and, *great*, it was the exact man she’d been trying to avoid. “Very good, Aagaard,” she drawled. “No wonder you’re on the fast track to becoming a DEA muckety-muck.”

“You never come in here,” Ryan commented.

“Sure I do.” She flicked a piece of dust off her beer foam. “All the time. It’s an embassy hangout, isn’t it?”

This particular Bogotá Beer Company was located on Carrera 5 in the upscale Zona Rosa district. On the outside it looked like a middle class residence, peaked roof, paned windows, neatly trimmed hedgerow, and planters filled with bright red flowers, while on the inside it resembled an English Pub. The flooring and wainscoting were of dark red wood, as was the bar itself, along with black leather seats on matching dark red wood bar stools. Another wall was built of red brick.

“I’ve never seen you in here with other embassy people.” Ryan’s droll tone said he knew she was lying.

She shrugged. What could she say? A life spent flying under the radar had created hard-to-break loner habits.

Her partner set his hand on the bar next to her beer mug. “You’re drinking.”

She finally looked at him. “Damn, Ryan, you’re on fire tonight.”

Ryan’s lips seamed. “You never drink before a mission.”

She turned away from him again. “I’m drinking before this one.”

Ryan went silent for a long moment. “What are you having?”

“A Zipaquirá Abadía beer.” One of the restaurant’s house brews, it was based on a Belgium beer recipe, so its alcohol percentage ran higher than average. “With a shot of aguardiente on the side.”

Ryan caught the bartender’s attention and pointed at Nicole’s setup. “*Uno de esos.*”

When the bartender set the drinks in front of Ryan, the beer was in a fancy stein. Off white in color with a pewter top and the BBC logo on the side, the stein was engraved with Ryan’s name. All the regulars had these steins; they were kept behind the bar.

Nicole didn’t have one. Which was kind of a dead giveaway about her lie.

Ryan paid and picked up his two drinks. “Let’s grab a table.”

She sighed. One of Aagaard’s senior agent lectures was on the way. She’d suspected Ryan was gearing up to dazzle her with all the ways she should be living her life better from the instant he’d witnessed the massive tension between her and O’Dwyer on Monserrate Mountain earlier. Such a thing was too irresistible for a man like Aagaard, who loved to show others how much more he knew about the world than they did. “Kind of looking for some alone time, Aagaard.”

“You can have it later.”

She rolled her eyes and stood. Argument was futile when her partner used that tone. Might as well get it over.

They sought out a private table in a corner and sat.

Ryan studied her. “You still look pissed off.”

She sipped her beer. *At who? At Kyle “Mikey” Hammond?* Damned right, freaking misogynist. At herself for letting such a patent douchebag rile her to act childishly? Without question: first and last time she’d ever throw a vagina at someone, that was for sure. At O’Dwyer for standing around without his shirt on today with that body of his? And...and, yes, more anger at herself for getting so distracted by that.

In a flight suit, O’Dwyer’s physique had been slightly easier to ignore. *Move along everyone, nothing to see here but a mass of indiscriminate brawn.* Out of a flight suit, he was a sculpture of definition and chiseled power, his pecs underscored with carved arcs, his abdominals roped with muscle, and the area where biceps met triceps clearly delineated. A light dusting of dark hair covered his pectorals and tapered down his body, becoming a silky cable that arched into the waistband of his pants, as if to advertise *bigger and better things here!* It rankled that she’d caught herself wondering, how much bigger and what level of better?

She’d had her suspicions about the lieutenant’s high level of fitness, when she, record-holder of the DEA’s obstacle course, “Yellow Brick Road,” had given herself a side ache and a small charley horse trying to shake the jerk all day on Monserrate Mountain...and never had. Speed, agility, power—O’Dwyer had the kind of well-coordinated body that would excel at anything he put it through: any number of sports, the challenging mechanics of flying a helicopter, a bar brawl, even ballroom dancing.

Sex...

The three letter word was unfortunately—unavoidably, considering this assignment—at the forefront of her mind. Dirty thoughts weren’t generally her style, but Lieutenant Eric O’Dwyer was more than the owner of a hot, dexterous body. He was one of those rare men who

didn't have to act masculine, prove it, or megaphone it out to the world. He just *was*. And that so happened to be better'n chocolate when it came to her favorite things.

She also believed he was genuinely reluctant to do this mission with her. Yes, after careful consideration, she'd decided he wasn't out for a quick grope, and if she was going to grudgingly give him some points for that, she'd have to admit it was touching. All of that amounted to her mind being in the gutter and her belly doing a weird squish-thing that was unacceptable for the job at hand. If lines weren't drawn and maintained, their pretend-to-have-sex act could spin out of control.

Stay focused on this as a mission needed to be her adage, although...she was nervous about this one, beyond the obvious weirdness of having to touch a strange man in a sexual way. It wasn't like she hadn't gone undercover before. She had, many times, playing a bedraggled street junkie, a smarmy wannabe drug dealer, and once a nurse to infiltrate the office of a doctor writing illegal scrips. She'd also been in plenty of danger, raiding cocaine labs and meth houses with gun drawn, employing her martial arts skills against criminals not too enthusiastic about being arrested. But playing a hooker...? She'd never done that before. Truth was, she wasn't even sure how to act sexy.

She supposed it sounded ludicrous for a woman with her looks, but for so many years now, she'd made a habit of underplaying her feminine attributes, taking pains to represent herself, with body language and mode of speech, as just one of the boys. She didn't ugly down or anything. She wore light makeup, kept her hair long, and dressed well, even if her clothes leaned toward "operationally comfortable." But she couldn't remember the last time she'd flirted or purposely tried to be sexy.

But admitting to Aagaard that she had a case of nerves would be about as pleasant as an all-natural root canal. If her partner wanted to think this was only about her being pissed, let him. She took another sip of her beer. “If you have a point, Ryan, maybe you could go about making it expeditiously.”

Ryan exhaled broadly. “I’m considering scrubbing the mission.”

“Well, I want to be in the room when you tell O’Dwyer that, seeing as the poor guy already shaved his head.” An act of grooming which had done surprising things to the Navy lieutenant’s face. Without his lush, dark hair as a distraction, focus was drawn to the masculine lift of his cheekbones and his strong brow, although the real attention-grabbers were his eyes. Turned out, he had doe eyes, with the kind of thick, dark, and long lashes that most women would knock little children into the mud to possess.

Ryan circled his beer mug on the table. “I’ve never been crazy about this operation, Nicole. The idea of sending you in to have sex, fake or not, when we have no idea how far you’ll have to push it, just doesn’t sit well with me. Especially when the DEA can’t provide backup for you on the island. If something goes haywire, there’s no way to extract you—short of a serious firefight that could just as easily get you and O’Dwyer killed.”

She shrugged. “We’ll handle it, Ryan. We’ve got the distraction planned, although...” She twisted her mouth into a grimace. “I’m not crazy about Hammond’s role on the team. From what I can tell so far, that man is only capable of conversing directly with my breasts.”

Ryan blew out a breath, projecting all kinds of exasperation with her.

She stiffened her spine. “Do you have a problem?” she asked tightly.

“What did you expect today, Nicole? You were half-naked. Any man with red blood in his veins is going to look at a sight like that. It’s damned unfair of you to expect otherwise.”

Heat rose, the familiar boil of anger. Yes, O'Dwyer had checked her out, too, and shame on her for allowing a small part of herself to hope that maybe a man who fought for freedom and democracy wouldn't be like all the rest. Knocking back her aguardiente, she gave her partner a glib stare. "I wouldn't have thought it was so damned unrealistic to expect it from my *partner*, although apparently it is."

A muscle leapt in Ryan's cheek.

"You know what, I'm sick of this." She threw out her hands. "Would you please explain to me what this magical power is I have over men? Because I really want to do something about it."

His jaw working, Ryan turned his head to stare across the room. He was silent for so long Nicole thought he wasn't going to answer. Fine by her. The question had been rhetorical, anyway...but then he *did* answer. And it was horrifying.

"It's because you're like a chocolate candy," Ryan said in a soft, tense voice. "A hard coating on the outside with soft nougat on the inside. A man takes one look at you and wants to get under your shell. It's like a compulsion, because he knows that once he gets down to the soft part, he'll have one helluva woman on his hands."

Blood flooded her face, painfully stinging her cheeks. "Oh, that's rich. All right, from now on, I'll plaster a sign on my brow, letting everyone know that 'what you see is what you get.' I'm no mystery woman, Ryan." At least she hoped she wasn't. She slugged a mouthful of her beer with a quick jerk of her wrist. "And, thank you, by the way, for saying I'm not one helluva woman as I am now."

"You're too defended as you are now," Ryan returned unapologetically. "You chew through men. I've seen it. Hell, I've *experienced* it."

“You’ve experienced dick, you pussy.” She slammed her drink down. “I never slept with you, Ryan, so you didn’t officially get chewed up.”

Ryan’s expression blackened. Leave it to Aagaard to process every emotion into rage. “You were never even willing to give me a chance.”

She ground her teeth. “It’s called professional boundaries. Try it sometime.”

“Yes, I got a bird’s eye view of your professional boundaries today when I showed up at Monserrate with lunch and saw O’Dwyer on the verge of spitting nails. You did it again, didn’t you? You alienated another partner.” Grooves dug into the sides of Ryan’s mouth. “*He* dared to glance at your boobs, which kicked off all of your woe-is-me bullshit. Boo hoo, my partner wants to date me and my coworkers sometimes check out my nice chest.”

Air rushed through Nicole’s lungs. She curled a tight fist around her empty shot glass. “You’re unbelievable, Aagaard. Remind me never to recommend you to head up the DEA’s sexual harassment training seminar.”

The rims of Ryan’s nostrils tensed. “Right. It’s always my fault, never yours. There are a hundred different ways you could handle men hitting on you, but you choose to cop an attitude and then blame the fallout on anyone with a cock. You’re a beautiful woman, Nicole, and when men admire your looks, it’s not an insult to your abilities or your character. It’s just *admiration*. At work, the guys lay on the smack-talk because they know it bothers you.” He chopped at empty air with his hand. “You put every man who crosses your path to a test, but he can never pass it because you set him up to lose every damned time. Why?” he demanded. “What the hell are you so afraid of?”

Afraid of? Nicole's throat cranked into a knot. Anyone who hadn't lived with fear—anything from low grade dread to outright terror—as a constant companion in his life shouldn't be allowed to speak of it so blithely.

“Is it because of who you really are?”

She managed to get some of the air in her lungs exhaled. “If this is a See's Candy analogy again, Ryan, then—”

“No,” he cut in. “I'm talking about your father's true identity.”

Metal cables in her stomach pulled taut and bile burned up her throat so quickly it was hot in her nose before she could swallow. She coughed, took a quick drink of her beer, then forced herself to draw a slow, even breath and calm the panic jumping in her veins. No way Ryan could have that kind of intel on her. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Ryan leaned back in his chair and paused, the ensuing silence humming with all kinds of Aagaard melodrama. “A buddy of mine is in the marshal service,” he told her. “In witness protection.”

All the blood poured from her head. The room spun. She curled her upper lip; if God liked her today, He'd help the expression come off as disdainful rather than sickly.

“You really don't think I would work with someone I didn't know everything about, do you?” A smug look came over his face, quintessential Know-it-all Aagaard. “Your father's name was Manolo Muñoz before he changed it to Salazar and—Sit down.”

She had lunged to her feet at the sound of her father's real name, her chair shooting back with a harsh scrape. The loud pounding of her heart filled her ears—probably the whole bar. The lesson had been pummeled into her since childhood that discovery equaled death. She could only react by running away.

“I’m not finished speaking,” Ryan informed her coldly. “Sit. Down,” he repeated in the voice he used when he was pulling rank on her.

She pulled her chair back in and sat. Her legs were about to buckle, anyway.

“Your father was a key lieutenant in the Medellín Drug Cartel, serving leader Carlos Enrique Lehder-Rivas until the man was extradited to the US in 1987 and sent to prison. Apparently your father didn’t want to be a deputy to anyone else, so shortly thereafter he turned state’s evidence.”

Nicole gazed down at her hands. Her fingers resembled lifeless, flesh-toned caterpillars in her lap. So, Mister Egotistical Douchenozzle didn’t know everything. Manolo had met and fallen in love with Hawaiian beauty, Kalani, got her pregnant with Nicole, and that’s why he’d decided to turn over a new leaf.

“So Lehder-Rivas trots off to jail and your father goes into WITSEC with his pregnant wife.”

She focused on a chipped fingernail. “Do you also know the brand of coffee I drink, Aagaard?” The flip tone she’d attempted was somewhat lost in her struggle to keep her voice from trembling.

“I know that the Medellín Cartel used FARC for their security during the time your father was part of the organization.” Ryan’s voice lowered. “I can guess exactly what you’re thinking, Nicole—that taking Carrera down will kill off some ugly ghosts.”

Head still bowed, she closed her eyes.

“If this is why you push men away, then I’m telling you to stop.” Ryan’s voice tightened. “Your father’s past doesn’t matter to me. I still want to be with you.”

She blinked at her fingers. *Wait...* This was just another ploy to get into her pants? She snapped her chin up. “Aagaard...wow...I’m *honored*, truly, that a man of such legendary stature would be willing to slum around with the scum of the earth like me. But—”

“Dammit,” he gritted. “Don’t twist this into—”

“I will *never* be with you,” she bit out, “you unprincipled slimeball.” She stood. “And as soon as this mission is over, I’m getting a new partner. Meanwhile, O’Dwyer, Hammond, and I busted our humps today preparing for an operation to dethrone one of the most heinous drug lords in history. I don’t care if you feel uncomfortable about this mission, if you think it’s too dangerous, or that I’m in it for my freaking ghosts. We *are* doing it, Special Agent Aagaard. Unless I hear a cancellation order from a DEA head honcho way the hell higher up the food chain than you, it’s happening. In the interim, please feel free to contact our supervisor and express your concerns about me. You know, my boo-hoo attitude and my too-stringent professional boundaries that stop me from yukking it up with my drug enforcement buddies when they proposition me in the locker room.”

Ryan’s eyebrows crammed together in a thunderous look.

“And don’t forget to tell him how I’m setting aside my dignity tomorrow, as well as my safety, for the good of the drug war. And please, oh, pretty please, mention my connection with FARC. The Medellín Cartel may have disbanded, but Lehder-Rivas still has plenty of followers, and since I had to drop out of WITSEC to join the DEA, my butt is hanging out in the open. Information about my true identity would definitely get me killed.” She laughed, a short burst of frost. “That would really stick it to me for daring to cop a fucking attitude with you, right, Aagaard? Silly ol’ me, refusing to suck your dick all the way up the promotion ladder. Ha!”

Ryan’s face turned a deep shade of magenta.

“And, hey, coach, one last thing. Thanks for the pep talk. You know, I’ll feel so much more confident going into tomorrow’s mission now that you’ve made me feel like the lowest common denominator on the team.”

“Nicole,” Ryan growled. “I didn’t—”

“No,” she snapped off the single syllable like a curse. “You’re done.” She braced a hand on the table in front of his beer mug and leaned into him, her voice so low in her throat, it felt like it was choking her on the way out. “And your marshal buddy who gave up confidential information about me...? He’s on his way to becoming a shopping mall security guard.”

She turned on her heel and stormed out into the balmy Colombian night. Long strides took her toward the parking lot where her car was...and who should she happen to run into on the sidewalk? *Mierda*. She really wasn’t in the mood for this.

“Hey,” O’Dwyer called to her. He was with Blond Pilot, who was still utterly unable to acknowledge that she was more than a life support system for a pair of breasts.

“Hi,” she said shortly, struggling to control the emotions her fight with Aagaard had stirred up.

O’Dwyer came to a stop in front of her. He was dressed in jeans, heavy boots, and a dark gray T-shirt that managed to hug his V-shaped torso without looking tight. The result was staggering. She pulled her eyes away, blood rising into her cheeks. Here she’d been giving O’Dwyer all sorts of grief in her mind for checking her out, but, really...was she any different? She cleared her throat and gestured at O’Dwyer’s head. “So have you finally cooled down?”

He smoothed a hand over his bare skull and grinned. “The haircut is helping.”

She glanced away from his smile. *Stay focused on this as a mission*. “Well, I should—”

“We’re staying at the Bogotá Hilton a few blocks away,” O’Dwyer said, “and they told us this was a good place to eat.” He gestured at the bar.

“They’ve got great burgers. The beer’s even better.”

“I’ll check it out,” Blond Pilot said and went inside.

A Colombian couple strolled by, moving in the lazy way of people who lived in extreme humidity.

O’Dwyer stepped closer. “Hey, are you okay?”

His warm-bodied nearness and the question startled her. She took a swift step back. “What, uh...?” *Well, I just had a knock-down-drag-out with my partner, who outed my true identity, and now you’re standing here, making me realize that I do tend to enter most male relationships with don’t-even-think-about-it-buster leading the way...does it show?*

“You seem a little off,” O’Dwyer added.

Apparently so. “Well, my legs are sore from all that running today,” she hedged.

He laughed. “Actually, mine, too.” He pointed a finger at her. “But don’t forget who admitted it first.”

She stared at his finger. He had nice hands, his fingers tapered but strong-looking with well-formed knuckles. He probably made a very masculine-looking fist. More heat crept into her face. “It’s a bad habit of mine, you know,” she stumbled on, “pushing myself too hard.”

He paused. “I do know,” he said softly.

Her breathing skipped out of rhythm. His tone implied an intimacy with the subject that did weird things to her insides. More belly squish? *Dios mío*. What was the Colombian equivalent of hara-kiri? She needed to do that. “Well, I have to go. Bye.” She turned and started quickly for the parking lot, shivering when O’Dwyer’s “Have a nice night” caressed her spine.

Chapter Seven

Ten miles off the coast of Isla Gorgona, Colombia

Nicole swallowed hard for the third time as the deafening *whop-whop-whop* of the helicopter blades pounded into her head and vibrated up through her seat into her body, gyrating her like she had a fat burner vibrator belt wrapped around her body. Her vision jerked, her teeth clacked whenever she unclenched her jaw, and her boobs bounced like she was on a hard, downhill run. Or made of Jell-O.

Hammond's easy drawl came through her headphones. "Weather is clear to the moon today," he commented to O'Dwyer. "Sweet."

"After that socked-in hell weather the other night," O'Dwyer agreed, "this is most definitely sweet."

Nice to know O'Dwyer and Hammond were feeling calm as the Dead Sea about all this. Just another day in the line of fire for them, ho hum.

Wham! A huge jolt of turbulence rocked the aircraft. The bottom edge of Nicole's ribcage slammed into her stomach, and she gasped. *Santo Cristo—!* The aircraft began to *rattle, rattle, boom, bam*, shaking so wildly around her that springs and gizmos in their sex toy bag had to be popping lose. Not to mention every screw, pin, and rod on this POS helicopter.

"Isla Gorgona bearing 3-5-8," Hammond reported. "Five miles out."

"Have you got a visual on the Colombian Air Force?" O'Dwyer asked.

"Negative."

"Shit," O'Dwyer hissed. "Throttling back speed."

Ka-bam! The upper portion of Nicole's spinal cord rammed into the base of her skull like a broomstick into a ripe melon. It was impossible that this bucket of clattering bolts could endure such violent turbulence and not come apart. She gripped the edge of her jump seat, her breathing speeding, and stole a glance at her backseat companion. The bald man called Bomber had a black, steel-toed flight boot casually jammed against the airframe to brace himself. Should she find comfort in his blasé attitude?

"Whoa, check out the bend in those trees," Hammond remarked. "Wind must be going forty knots. This is going to be choppy once we get into those high winds."

Nicole stretched her eyes wide. They weren't in the high winds yet? No comfort. Comfort gone.

"The Colombian Air Force is late," O'Dwyer observed tautly.

"You want to abort, or give it—? Tally ho!" Hammond exclaimed. "I mark three aircraft at our ten o'clock. Look like Broncos."

Nicole glanced out the door window, but it faced the three o'clock position, so she only saw a bunch of blue sky doing the jitterbug.

"Affirmative," O'Dwyer came back. "I have a visual on three aircraft at ten o'clock high." The helo picked up speed. "Let's hope that wedge is open, or Carrera's RPGs will make this a very short flight."

Nicole's heart beat faster. In their pre-flight briefing, they'd been presented with the disconcerting intel that some of Carrera's guards carried Rocket-Propelled Grenade launchers and Stingers, either of which could be used with lethal effect to shoot down a helicopter. Rivulets of sweat slid between her breasts and down to her waist, forming a ring around her belt.

Normally the heat didn't bother her, but it had to be a hundred and twenty degrees in this freaking helicopter.

A yelp was jarred out of her as Zeus reached his mighty hand down from the sky and bitch-slapped the tail of the helicopter to the side. The aircraft swung, jerked, shuddered. *Santo Cristo Jesús*, had they been hit? *Wacka-wacka-wacka*. It sounded like they were coming apart!

"Five degrees right," Hammond instructed in a calm tone. "You're skirting too close to the boundary of our wedge, LZ."

"Roger that."

The bottom half of the helicopter skidded out from under them, sending the aircraft tipping over ninety degrees. All right, not a full ninety, but her belly was telling her brain it was that much. She tightened her grip on the jump seat until her knuckles hurt. Stomach acid sloshed up into her throat. Saliva flooded her mouth and her esophagus pumped.

Bomber, who had been studiously ignoring her, probably because of her Bouncing Baby Boobies display, now handed her a bag.

A bag? She swallowed convulsively. It was a barf bag. Squeezing her eyes shut, she crushed the bag in her fist and called up every iota of willpower she owned to force the bile back down her throat. Maybe her first thought should've been the need to cultivate her rep as an unshakeable ass-kicker of drug lords, but somehow it popped into her mind that if she was going to have to kiss O'Dwyer soon, she didn't want to taste like vomit.

The helo tail rocked wildly, jarring her eyeballs against her closed lids. She bumped shoulders with Bomber, and then—*clunk!* Her boobs gave a final hard joggle.

"Son of a bitch," O'Dwyer growled.

He was cursing? Did that mean they were dead? She pried open her eyes, spying a string of windblown trees out the door window. *No*. Unless Heaven was Isla Gorgona, they'd made it.

"Our timetable is shot to hell," O'Dwyer ground out. Up ahead in the cockpit, she saw him tear off his helmet and leap out of the aircraft.

"Bringing engines down to idle," Hammond said.

Bomber unbuckled and hauled open the side door, exposing a tropical island paradise: waving palms trees, thick vegetation, richly turned dark earth on a path. Any second a loincloth-clad waiter would appear with a tray of mini-umbrella-bearing cocktails, Hawaiian music accompanying his arrival. O'Dwyer suddenly materialized in the side door. "Can you run a six-minute mile?" He slung the pack of his whore clothes onto his back and grabbed the bag of sex toys. "That's about all the time we have."

Her fingers shook as she threw off her helmet and unhooked her seatbelt. "Yes." She grabbed her own backpack of sleaze attire and jumped off the aircraft, her knees nearly caving in. *Freaking rocky flight*.

They took off down the hill together.

She stumbled in the soft dirt, the rubbery muscles in her legs refusing to respond efficiently to her command to accelerate into bionic speeds. She watched, sweat draining down her face, as O'Dwyer pulled ahead. Within several more strides, he had a good lead on her. She started to breathe heavily.

You can never let yourself fall behind, mija. Never.

She pushed herself harder, her heart banging for freedom from the bars of her ribcage. Air hissed between her teeth as her lungs fought for necessary oxygen. Her lips went numb and dots prickled at the sides of her vision. *Mierda!* She made herself slow down. It was either that or

risk a humiliating wussy-faint. *Don't do my wilting flower femininity any favors.* Right.

Hahahaha! A maniacal laugh bubbled up her throat followed by a scream of frustration. A six-minute mile wasn't a breeze, but it should've been doable for her. Mister God Of All Aviators had done it.

Down the dirt path, she saw O'Dwyer waiting near a clump of eight-foot-tall bushes, thickly leafed over most of its girth, but thin on the right. This was the area they'd designated from the satellite photos as their takedown point. On the other side of those bushes was the path the whores took, leading from the boat dock to Carrera's hacienda. These bushes were conveniently near a concealing bend in the road.

O'Dwyer turned around and tapped his watch at her.

A scream hammered against the grate of her teeth. *Yes, I get it, we're late.* Or just *she* was the one making this mission go up in smoke. She slammed to a halt in front of O'Dwyer, temples pounding and lungs heaving. "What now?" she gasped out.

"Change of plans," O'Dwyer whispered back. "We take down the hookers first, then swap our clothes."

"What?" she panted. "We didn't miss them?"

"No. We lucked out. Listen."

From several yards down the path on the other side of the bushes, Nicole could hear a shrill female voice. *¿¡Qué mierda con estos zapatos, acabo de comprarlos y ya están rotos!?*

She caught O'Dwyer's gaze, the throb of her pulse speeding into her throat. "The woman broke her shoe," she muttered.

O'Dwyer nodded. "That held them up. Now we have the time we need. The luck of the Irish." He wagged his eyebrows at her. "You can thank me later." He made a quick scan of her. "You...okay, by the way? Kind of didn't expect you to be late coming down that hill."

She used the heels of her palms to sweep the sweat out of her eyes. She was never one to make excuses for a poor performance, but O'Dwyer deserved to know if he could count on her. "That helicopter ride was, uh, a little on the bumpy side for me."

His chin began to pull in.

"I'm okay now." Which was a half-truth. She wasn't ready for anymore hardcore running, but drop-kicking a hooker was in her current repertoire. She moved in close to the bushes, crouching down and peering through the heavy sticks and leaves.

O'Dwyer hunkered down next to her.

She caught his scent, and her belly did a weird shimmy. Odd thing was, he should've smelled bad. The stink of jet fuel permeated his flight suit, along with some bilge-type odor she suspected came from living on a Navy ship. But all that seemed to be counteracted and overwhelmed by the scent radiating off his flesh, that of sun and ocean and earthy sweat. And it was everything exactly *not* bad.

Through the leafy vegetation, Nicole caught a glimpse of a blue dress, and she tensed. *Twenty things could go wrong and nineteen of those could get us killed.* A hot and prickly sensation came over her, like breaking out in a rash. In seconds they would face deadly challenge number one: if their timing was even slightly off on this ambush, then either the male or female hooker could start screaming or run for help, and then—

She nearly startled out of her shoes at the sound of footsteps behind her.

She whirled on her heels.

O'Dwyer turned at the same instant.

Hammond appeared on the path they'd just raced down, moving at a steady jog, a sniper rifle gripped in his right hand. His face was sloppily smeared with camouflage face paint and he'd taken the colorful patches off his flight suit. O'Dwyer had done the same, removing anything that might identify him in case their escape got fast and nasty and they didn't have time to retrieve their backpacks.

Hammond slowed his stride and raised his eyebrows in question.

O'Dwyer gave him a thumbs-up. *Mission still a GO.*

Nodding, Hammond chopped his hand toward the hill he was supposed to man, then tore up it.

She and O'Dwyer turned back to peer through the leaves again.

Nicole's adrenaline spiked. The hookers were directly in front of her now, the woman still yammering about her defective shoe. Nicole could smell BO, and one of the two was definitely a mouth-breather.

O'Dwyer held up a fist. He extended one finger, counting down, then a second finger...

Nicole spring-loaded her muscles, sweat accumulating along her spine.

Third finger.

She leapt through the thin area of bushes, took a single step onto the open path, and whirled herself into a spinning back-kick, landing a head-snapping heel to the woman's jaw. Coming out of her turn, Nicole saw the man's mouth open wide as a drug smuggler's anus, and she kept moving, throwing a hard right cross. She punched the man off his feet, sending him skidding onto the dirt path in a billow of dust...dazed, but not unconscious.

The woman was out cold.

O'Dwyer seized the man by the shirt and delivered a quick, hard jab to the middle of the guy's face, knocking out the rest of his lights. He towed the guy behind the bushes.

Nicole grabbed the unconscious woman under the armpits and dragged her out of sight, too. She laid the woman beside the man, who was a mustachioed fellow with a small paunch and oily, slicked-back hair. Nicole's nostrils pinched and her stomach crawled. What if she'd had to do the mission with a man like this?

"That was impressive," O'Dwyer observed quietly, already tying and gagging the greaser. "You made my side of the job boring, though."

She unzipped her backpack and yanked out a line of rope and a gag, setting to work on the woman. "After my late arrival, I figured my reputation could use some flash."

O'Dwyer cut her a wry glance. "I hope you're kidding."

She finished wrangling her hooker, then stood and quickly stripped out of her clothes, cleaning the sweat off her body with the towel she'd brought for that purpose. It seemed her perspiration returned the moment she swiped it away. She gave up and wriggled into her dress, eyeing the unconscious hooker's high heels. She tugged them off the woman's feet. "I'll carry these," she told O'Dwyer, dangling one with a broken heel in front of him. "The guards have no doubt noted our tardiness. We'll need an excuse."

"Good idea." O'Dwyer was dressed and ready.

She started to go, but he grabbed her gently by the shoulder and turned her back around, taking hold of her other shoulder as he did. "You're still panting a little," he told her quietly. "Take a second, draw a breath, and let's get focused." O'Dwyer's muscular chest expanded as he filled his own lungs. He exhaled, his breath drafting warmly past her. "I've got your back, and you've got mine. A team, right?"

She couldn't believe the size of the lump that pushed into her throat. She'd done nothing but antagonize this man from the first moment she met him, not for anything he'd necessarily done, but for no better reason than because she was scared. Oh, the horrors of admitting that, but it was true. Of softness. Of failure. Of emotions. Of this mission...so many feelings that had somehow been magnified tenfold in the three days she'd known Lieutenant Eric O'Dwyer. But regardless of her pushing him, both verbally and physically, he was setting it aside to be a unit. She swallowed and nodded. "Absolutely."

His expression eased into a smile. "Let's do this thing, then." He turned and headed for the gap in the bush.

"Hey." She held him back. "Watch how you walk, all right? Your stride is too confident. Maybe try and slouch into your hips a bit."

"Roger that." Appreciation warmed his eyes. "Thanks."

Her chest tightened, so tight she wasn't sure she'd be able to follow his suggestion and keep drawing oxygen into her lungs.

They tramped onto the path.

Her pulse shuddered through her veins as they put themselves out in the open. *This is it.* "Hablemos sólo español desde ahora," she said to him. *We only speak Spanish from here on out.*

O'Dwyer didn't have a chance to answer.

A tall Colombian man dressed all in black, including a pair of mirrored sunglasses, strode around the bend in the road, appearing on the path in front of them. He had a very black AK-47 assault rifle slung across his shoulder along with a bandolier of bullets. The moment he caught sight of them, he swung up the weapon and pointed it at O'Dwyer.

"*Llegan tarde,*" he hissed.

You're late.

Chapter Eight

Kyle left Eric and the *chica* down in a small gully as he sprinted up his designated hill, doing his best not to wheeze and *clomp-clomp-clomp* his presence out to all the bad guys on the island. Not so easy to do when each of his flight boots felt like cinder blocks. It didn't help matters that he, unlike Eric, lazed around while on deployment. In home port, he played racquetball four times a week. At sea, he was in his rack catching Z's if he wasn't flying or eating...something the overworked Surface Warfare Officers hated about him. "Sleep till you're hungry, eat till you're tired" was how the surface sailors snidely described the working day of an airdale.

Cresting the hill, Kyle ducked behind a tree. The top was a narrow ridge, only about six feet across, three feet in other spots, but concealing foliage—trees and shrubbery—had still managed to sprout up along it. Good thing, or else his silhouette would've been visible for miles. Might as well be a duckie at a carnival shoot if that was the case. He darted stealthily and quickly from tree to tree, aiming for a spot overlooking the walled front gate which led to *Señor Meat Gazer's* mansion. No sense setting up shop in front of the generator until he was sure Eric and what's-her-name had made it inside.

He found a bush and lowered down onto his belly just to the side of it, legs jacked apart. Automatically, he started to control his breathing and heart rate, something he'd learned at sniper training school at the Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia.

A childhood spent in the Young Terrace projects in Norfolk, Virginia, bored out of his mind and unsupervised by an overworked mother, had been filled with adventures using his BB rifle shooter, stirring up all kinds of trouble along with his little brother. The skills he'd

unintentionally acquired on those exploits had specially qualified him to become a sniper for the Marines when he hadn't passed his ASTB entrance exam into pilot training.

But, whaddya know, turned out he *had* passed his exam, with flying damned colors, fuck you very much. His scores had accidentally been switched with someone else's. In acknowledgment of their dick-up, the military had offered him a lateral move to the Navy's flight program, if he still wanted it.

If. That was funny.

The Navy had always been his number one choice, seeing as the sole reason he signed up was to prove to Sienna Kelleman, daughter of the prestigious Admiral Robert Kelleman, that the scruffy, underfed teen from Young Terrace was worthy to kiss her ring. Sienna had stuck up her nose at the thought of him joining the Marines, even though the Marines were considered to be the elite...same as her response to so many of the things he did. So, yeah, "if," his ass. He'd been on the next flight to Pensacola, Florida, quicker than shit through a goose.

But not before Sienna had sent him off for his one-and-a-half year stint in flight training with the surprising gift of her virginity. *That'd* been a real breath-releaser, considering he'd dated the blonde beauty for six long years—since they were both juniors in high school and throughout college—without ever once being allowed the esteemed privilege of having sex with her. Sienna's sweet farewell had been the best night of his life, although not, apparently, a photo album moment for her...at least after she'd had a couple of weeks to think about it. He'd received an angry Dear John letter a month into aviation ground school.

Heartbroken, he'd contemplated striding into his CO's office, squatting on the man's desk, and taking a dump right on the training schedule to earn himself a one-way ticket to the *USS Backyard*. Luckily, he'd had the foresight to go away for a weekend of introspection before

he threw his career away. He'd spent it sitting in a hotel room with a bottle of Jack Daniels and evaluating his relationship with Sienna, coming to the long overdue conclusion that his ex-girlfriend had always treated him like no more than her foot-bather for the sum total of their relationship. *So, fuck her.*

Turned out he had an aptitude for being a pilot, anyway.

Tossing the bottle of Jack into a corner of his hotel room, he'd run to the closest bar, practically with his arms spread wide and the word *freedom* pouring from his lips, and found himself a cute brunette to ride his flagpole. And so it'd gone... From the second he was no longer held back by Miss Ice Thighs, who'd forced him to live the years of his sexual prime as a monk, he'd been moving on any and all babes who struck his fancy.

Worked out he had an aptitude for screwing, too.

A fly buzzed across his cheek, and he swatted at it, then swiped his sleeve across his brow. Setting the stock of his weapon against his shoulder, he raised the sight to his eye. He was carrying a sound-suppressed CAR-15 sniper rifle with a Leupold 10-power scope, and through the crosshairs he saw...nothing. Crap, LZ and *la muchacha* should've been at the gate by now. He swept down the path, and found them talking to a baddie with an AK-47. Kyle sighted on the man's ear and eased his finger around the trigger. *Go ahead and flinch, mudderfucker. I'll put one in your farging icehole.*

But the dude lowered his assault rifle and gestured toward the gate. The threesome continued down the path.

Kyle tracked their progress.

More baddies at the entrance, and lots more tense conversation. Some kind of racket about the bag of smut toys, by the look of it. What's-her-face withdrew something from the sack,

but Kyle couldn't see what it was or what she was doing with it. Maybe she was going to throw a latex vagina at one of the guards. Kyle smirked. He could almost wish for it, if such a maneuver wouldn't have gotten LZ up to his neck in grumpy Colombians with weaponry.

Kyle cut the smirking. Who was he kidding? His friend was already in neck-deep...or soon would be with this Fed chick, who was—her ball-busting propensities aside—some serious tail. And Kyle, of all people, knew how much high-end trim could tangle up a guy. As soon as LZ got within sniffing distance of that piece of ass, he'd come to full salute. Kyle himself had almost thrown wood at the Marriott, and he didn't even like Maria Guadalupe Lucia Teresa, or whatever the hell she was called. And since Eric couldn't bust his nuts inside hot mamma jamma, LZ was heading for some mammoth-sized blue balls. *Pure agony.*

Kyle squinted harder through his scope. Everyone was *still* conversing in front of the gate. He zeroed in his sights on LZ. The line of Eric's shoulders looked rigid. It was subtle, only noticeable to someone who knew him well, but something was definitely up. With Fed Chick? Seemed like it. Whatever she was doing, she had everyone's focused attention. Including Eric's. *Mostly* Eric's. Kyle slowly eased his crosshairs from one guard to the next. He'd been authorized to meet any act of aggression with an equal measure of aggression. No problem with that at all. If anyone—

The guard holding the AK strode forward and pushed open the gate, leading Eric and Whatsa Whosit inside.

Kyle released a breath. *Time to rock.* Lifting his head, he checked the perimeter, then hopped to his feet, slung his rifle over his shoulder, and repeated his tree to tree maneuvering as he made his way to a spot across from the generator. Canvassing ahead, he saw that the area in

front of his target was on a narrow strip of the ridge, which would, unfortunately, force him to angle his body off-center during the shoot to keep—

He grunted as earth gave way beneath his left boot on the lip of the ridge. His leg slipped, and the rest of him started to follow in a downhill skid. He grappled for the edge, alarm spearing through him. More ground crumbled away beneath his fingers. Gaining speed and momentum, he jackknifed into a tumble down the hill, cartwheeling ass over boots, his heartbeat surging into a wild rhythm as his rifle flew off his body into nowhere.

Chapter Nine

Eric hooded his eyes, trying to make himself look like a bored man-whore who was also probably stoned off his gourd, when he was actually miles from bored—not with the barrel of an AK-47 aimed at his chest—and the only thing he was high on was adrenaline.

“I broke my fuckin’ shoe!” Gamboa flapped her high heels around in the air. *“See, man, these piece of shit things!”*

Through the slit of his lids, Eric double-checked that the woman who’d just spoken the guttural street Spanish was Gamboa. He hardly recognized her voice.

“See my feet?!” Gamboa went on, verging on hysteria. *“Torn up from this ass-sucking ground.”*

“Shut up.” AK-47 commanded her. *“And lift your skirt.”*

Gamboa flung her shoes to the ground and tugged up her dress, exposing the purple thong which, even though Gamboa had scuffed it up, was rapidly becoming the stuff of torturous dreams.

Eric scratched the back of his ear. That's what a bored, totally unconcerned about a low-life staring at his partner's crotch did, right? Scratched his ear?

"Higher, slut. Now turn around." Scuzzwad stared at Gamboa's ass.

Eric fought the urge to take AK-47's face and grind it into the dirt. Huh. Unexpected. Moving on to lazily scratch his belly, Eric sighed. *"If you're looking for a cock, man, I'm the one who has that."* Probably a good thing that AK-47 was wearing sunglasses. Eric was about ninety percent certain he didn't want to see the expression in the man's eyes when he rounded on Eric.

"Raise your shirt, something." Insert blank space here: whatever AK had called Eric, he didn't know the Spanish word for it. Good guess it wasn't a derivative of friend, though.

Eric pulled up his shirt and turned around without being asked. *"See, no weapons,"* he said, facing front again. *"Unless you count my cock."* He lifted one side of his mouth. *"Look, man, bitch here is just moving slow because she's got an ass full of spunk."* He chuckled, like he found himself so funny. *"She had a busy morning, understand?"*

Gamboa gave her lashes an exaggerated flutter. *"Expect to feel my teeth when I suck your cock today, son of a poxed whore."*

"Shut your fucking holes," AK-47 barked. *"Follow me."*

Gamboa scooped up her shoes, and picked her way carefully over the pebble-strewn dirt road.

Eric made sure to shuffle his feet and slouch as he trailed AK-47 to the front gate, where there were two more rifle-toting guards, one sitting behind a table. Beyond, the hacienda rose two stories high, the façade painted a flawless white while each of a half a dozen windows were bordered in dark brown wood. The roof was shingled in rounded red clay tiles, and a balcony surrounding the entire second floor was painted the same muted red color.

“Leave the bag,” the standing guard with a mustache ordered them.

Eric showed him the contents. *“These are our props, friend.”*

“Mister Carrera doesn’t need you to use props.” Mustache grabbed the bag and tossed it onto the table.

It landed with a *clunk* loud enough for Eric to wonder if their tracking device had shit the bed. *“It’s part of our show.”*

“Leave it.” Mustache gestured curtly at AK-47. *“Pablo, take them inside.”*

Well, crap. They hadn’t planned on this happening.

“Handsome,” Gamboa purred to Mustache, once again *really* not sounding like herself. *“Mister Carrera is for sure going to want to see what I can do with this.”* Gamboa looped a finger through one of the bag’s straps and lifted slightly, letting the mouth of it gape open. She pulled out a large rubber flesh-colored cock covered in bulging veins. Ballsy of her to pick that particular dildo, seeing as it was the hiding place for their two .25-caliber pen guns. She offered Mustache a sultry look as her fingers danced up the length of the fake cock and toyed with the ridge. Parting her lips, she rubbed the length of the cock against her cheek, right beside her open mouth, so close it was, like, *God, please*, jam it in there.

The spectacle caused a level of havoc inside Eric as unexpected as it was startling. For two quick jackhammers of his heart he forgot to breathe as heat flooded his groin so fast he would’ve fallen over if he’d been standing in his normal posture.

Jesus H. Christ. He might not be an actor, but Gamboa sure as shit was. Her transformation was mind-blowing. Her body had changed positions, her hip now outthrust and her back arched a little to display her breasts to their best advantage. Her expression begged a man to *do me now, and hard*, her nostrils fluttering slightly and her lashes drooping low over

sensual eyes. Sexuality poured off her, and it was that, more than what she was doing with the dildo—which was, admittedly, an incredible turn-on—that had all of the men nearly passing out from lack of adequate blood supply in their brains.

Mustache was the one to break the moment first. He stepped up to Gamboa, almost nose to nose with her, and gave her a hard, venal stare. “*You come see me after you’re done with your show for the Captain. You hear me, little rose?*”

Good bet ear-scratching wasn’t going to get Eric through this one. Protective anger, the urge to do raw, brutal violence—and, okay, yes, searing jealousy—detonated across his vision in a red haze. All emotions that didn’t bode well for his ability to manage Carrera’s voyeurism. What the hell had happened to the control he’d always been able to summon as easily as his next breath? He’d genuinely like to know. Because *now* was kind of not the best time to be losing that.

Gamboa shrugged. “*You got the money, treasure, I have the time.*”

Her unperturbed air was once again award-worthy. Although since none of the guards were staring down Eric and snarling, “*What’s your problem, meat?*” he supposed he was managing to keep his insane reaction all nice and private, too.

Mustache handed Gamboa the sex toy bag, and Pablo opened the gate. They followed him inside the hacienda, Eric too keyed up to feel any relief over the tracking device success. Two other guards armed with Uzis were posted inside the house’s domed foyer. Beams of colorful sunlight angled through eight small stained glass windows ringing the top of the dome.

“*Where does the Captain want them today?*” Pablo asked.

“*The dining room.*”

Eric and Gamboa followed Pablo down a long white hall, with Raphael-like paintings of religious figures on both walls, to a set of open double doors at the end. Two more guards were stationed inside the dining room, these guys dressed in black suits. They weren't openly carrying weapons, but it was more likely that Nicole Gamboa was in possession of a tucked-back penis than for these two not to be packing.

To the right a two-story waterfall cascaded into a clear pool. *Jesus*. Understated wealth was clearly a concept beyond Carrera. To the left was a formal dining room table made of polished wood, twelve high-backed chairs positioned around it, and a lavish crystal chandelier hanging above. One of the chairs had been removed from the end of the table and set aside, opening a space for Eric and Gamboa to do their show. Because where else? A row of tall, paned windows let in the hazy late afternoon sun.

A comfortable-looking armchair had been set up just off of a sideboard, placed in good viewing position of the dining room table. Another table, small and round with a cigar leaning in a gold ashtray, was next to the armchair.

"*You're late.*" This icy statement came from a tall man standing at the sideboard, his back to them. He was pouring tawny liquid into a crystal glass from a decanter.

"*This stupid whore broke her shoe,*" Pablo explained. "*Do you want me to beat her, Captain?*"

Also not planned for. Eric's mind sank into a disjointed, psychotic place, imagining anyone putting their hands on Gamboa in violence.

The man at the sideboard turned around, presenting a replica of the photograph Eric had seen of Alejandro Carrera, all the way down to the über-expensive suit. The drug lord's brown eyes were the most merciless Eric had ever seen, and the narrow inspection he passed over Eric

and Gamboa lit several more burners of aggression inside Eric. There was a dark edge of challenge in those brown eyes, and a Navy pilot—at least this particular one—generally didn’t let such provocation pass by unanswered. The temptation was strong to stride over and knock foreheads with the drug lord for being dumbfuck enough to look at Eric that way.

But he wasn’t an aviator. He was a man-whore who was no doubt piss-pants terrified of a FARC kingpin, and so Eric fidgeted his feet and wiped his palms on the front of his pants. The little scaredy-cat pretense seemed to convince Carrera that he and Gamboa—both a solid double-digit level of better-looking over the two whores they’d knocked out—belonged here. Hell, maybe he could act.

“I see Consuela has finally listened to my demands for better quality couples.” Carrera flicked a wrist at Pablo, sending him off.

With no hitting, thankfully, or God knew what Eric would’ve done. Blown the mission and gotten them both killed? Just as well it hadn’t been tested.

The double doors shut, and the two suited-up guards planted themselves in front of it, faces forward, wrists crossed at their waists.

Great. Two more audience members to watch the sex show. Not to mention that extra men would complicate the matter of getting out of here and to the drug sub when the generator was blown.

And sidebar: shouldn’t that be happening right about now?

Carrera swept his arm toward the dining room, like a game show hostess presenting an array of prizes...an effect that was ruined when one of his eyebrows also slanted at a sharp angle, as if to suggest he shouldn’t have had to make the gesture, *you stupid whores.*

Gamboa sauntered toward the dining room, the graceful motion of her hips and the sway of her long hair against her back grinding a deep need into the pit of Eric's belly.

He followed, working his jaw in a circle to keep it from seizing up.

Gamboa tossed her broken shoes and the sex toy bag on the pulled-out chair and strolled to the open end of the dining room table, hitching a hip against the edge of it, one foot swinging.

Eric checked out the length of her shapely leg, from her thigh to her bare foot. Her toes were painted. His belly rolled over. Spinning-back-kick Nicole Gamboa had pink toenails. Why would the discovery of that give him such a sensational thrill?

Carrera took a seat in his armchair and busied himself with lighting his cigar.

Gamboa's chin dipped down, and she gave Eric a look from beneath the sultry sweep of her lashes that raised every hair on his nape.

Okay. She was managing this sex kitten thing a little too successfully. He ambled up to her and paused, his stomach balling into a knot. Now he wished they had followed Kyle's self-serving suggestion and practiced their act. Or at least verbally choreographed something so Gamboa would know that every move he made was planned and deliberate.

She stared up at him, unmoving. It was no more than a shift of her irises in Carrera's direction that let him know he needed to get his ass in gear before the drug lord felt the need to make another *gesture*.

Eric licked his lips. His pulse kicked hard at the skin of his throat. Slipping a hand along her cheek, he tilted her chin up and set his mouth on hers.

Chapter Ten

A rocket went off in Eric's pants. *Ah, hell...*

He'd warned Gamboa that he was going to get a boner if they did anything, but he really had thought to push it beyond a measly kiss. Although this wasn't exactly measly, was it? He'd never kissed lips quite like hers, so pliant and mobile, softer than...velvet...? silk...? than anything he could compare them to. This was a mouth to be savored, and he couldn't help but move his lips slowly over hers, exploring and tasting as her caramel scent tickled his nostrils and her femininity seemed to engulf him. If a woman could taste like desire, she did, the sensation of warm lust on his tongue staggering. He didn't feel any hesitation in the way she kissed him back, making a little red devil plop down on his shoulder and whisper in his ear, *She's not acting, bro, she actually wants to—*

"No." The single syllable whiplashed from Carrera's mouth.

Eric and Gamboa startled apart.

Gamboa's cheeks were a little pink.

His lungs were pumping more rapidly than he would've preferred.

"*Do you not know how this must go?*" Carrera demanded, annoyance drawing tight lines on his face.

How this must go did not give Eric a warm 'n' fuzzy feeling on the inside. Nor did this lapse in their intel, but at least he had an excuse ready to go, one based on Carrera's offhand comment about Gamboa and him being a better quality couple. "*We don't work for Consuela regularly,*" he said. "*She hired us only for this, sir.*"

Carrera set down his cigar and picked up his cocktail glass. He took a sip, then set it down, and reclaimed his cigar.

The whole evolution seemed to take a small eternity.

"*I direct your actions,*" Carrera informed them.

The muscles in Eric's abdominals stiffened, the implication of those four words shooting straight to his gut. At his side, he sensed, more than saw, Gamboa tense. She knew what had happened, as much as he did. Their control over the pacing of this show had just been punched out of the aircraft.

"You." Carrera gestured at Eric. "*Get undressed.*"

Yep, total fucking loss of control. *Squawking 7700, declaring an emergency, lost hydraulics; the ability to manage a safe landing has been seriously compromised.*

Kyle? Now would be a very good time for that generator to bite the bullet.

With deliberate and measured movements, Eric grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled the garment over his head, moving slowly enough to give himself time to think.

Sorry, señor, but I have a terrible skin rash, I cannot disrobe completely.

Oh, really, whoremonkey. Why did Consuelo send you, then?

Gooooood question.

Nothing. Not a single plausible idea came to Eric about how to avoid getting bare-assed naked. Okay, shit. *Well.* Gamboa had seen dick before, right, so, just...you know. He yanked on the drawstring of his canvas pants, making sure to push his underwear down at the same time as his pants—his bad, but he wasn't sure if his skivvies were typical Colombian wear. Weird thing to worry about now that he was standing naked in front of a notorious drug lord, two of his goons, and a knockout woman who any man of sane mind would celebrate his nakedness in front of with the touchdown dance.

Except like this.

As a part of her act, Gamboa leaned back, bracing her hands on the dining room table behind her, and gave his body a leisurely inspection. Her gaze lingered on his cock, already at

half-mast from their kiss, and... Lingered? Wait. *Was* this part of her act, or did she really—? *Fucking stop.* He was going to spend this whole show in the land of the mentally enfeebled if he kept asking himself questions like that.

“Take her in your arms,” Carrera instructed. *“Kiss her, mouth open, with your tongue.”*

Eric felt a tic jump in his jaw. *No, thank you.* He’d prefer not to do that, now he was naked ’n’ all. His knees felt constructed of broken glass as he stepped back over to Gamboa, the cords in his neck taut.

She straightened off the table.

He aimed his vision at her neck. Whatever was going on in her eyes, he didn’t want to see. He tugged her against his body and exhaled. Her hooker dress and lingerie provided little barrier against the feel of her figure, ripe, full, and young, against his bare flesh. His balls came to attention with a hot pulse, and, dumbstruck, he froze there for a combined moment of sublime wonder and heart-stopping panic.

She linked her arms around his neck, obviously meaning to help him along, but as she leaned into him, her lips brushed his ear in a soft kiss, and that ended him. He groaned softly. Idiot, stupid-ass mook, why hadn’t he warned her about his ears? An interstate highway of lust traveled a direct route from his ears to his cock. Mess with his ears, and he pitched a tent. There weren’t any toll booths in-between; it just happened.

The resounding thunder of his heartbeat roared into his head as the length of him juttied up against her soft belly. Something dropped away inside him. He’d tried to prepare her for this, but now that it was happening, it came to him, swift and hard, that he hadn’t adequately prepared himself. This wasn’t the mild embarrassment he predicted he’d feel should he get a stiffy. No. This was gut-flinching vulnerability.

Because he didn't want her to see him like this. This woman who so often displayed herself with ill-fitting mannish mannerisms—which was really lovable for how wrong it was—who had pushed herself beyond what was reasonable on Monserrate Mountain...just like he had, who felt she needed to show off her fighting skills to prove her worth...something he could totally relate to. *There's no point in doing something, if you can't do it well, Eric.* Who, he could tell from the look in her eyes, wasn't as tough as she tried to prove. *This* woman he wanted to see him erect during a night with candlelight, a bubble bath, and lots of low, soft laughter. Not with them both drowning in this head-fuck.

Her lips were still by his ear, so he heard her perfectly well when she breathed the words. "It's all right."

His lids sank shut. His heart stepped into his windpipe. No, it wasn't all right, but for her to say it was...more screwy stuff for him. Chest tight, he wrapped his arms around her, spreading his fingers against the feminine turn of her spine. He kissed her hard, going immediately for open-mouthed hunger, slanting his lips back and forth over hers, passionate-looking, but still somewhat restrained with his...

She was the one who forged her tongue into his mouth.

Air whooshed from his nostrils. The feel of her warm, moist tongue stroking over his sent any lingering control he had the way of the dodo. His cock throbbed against her, and she answered with a soft groan, warm breath spilling into his mouth. His head reeled. Where did fake Nicole end and the real one begin?

"Take her dress off." Carrera's voice pounded against Eric's eardrums.

Eric lurched backward, his heartbeat a scattered mess. *Okay. Okay. Throttle back. It's only her dress.* Leaning forward, he curled his fingers under the hem of Gamboa's dress, his

fingertips encountering soft skin, his nose nearly brushing the feminine slope of her shoulder. He pulled upward, and she raised her arms, letting him haul the garment all the way off, exposing her lingerie. *Purple, purple, purple.* Eric would never look at a plum the same way again.

“Now her bra,” Carrera said.

A vein pulsed behind Eric’s left eyeball. *Shit.* Gamboa escaping this thing without getting naked was now a goner. Why did that feel like such a failure on his part? Dragging a hand over his bare skull, he checked in with her and received the silent message that she was still pressing ahead. And, really, what choice did they have? One foot in front of the other until that distraction came along.

Kyle, what the fuck, you ass?

Gamboa inched forward, subtly urging him on.

He focused intently on the clasp at the front of her bra as he unhooked it, the backs of his fingers brushing against her plump cleavage. He peeled open her bra, and all the moisture abandoned his mouth. Maybe it would’ve been gentlemanly to have ignored the sight, but he didn’t, and her breasts were magnificent, perfectly round and buoyant, topped with nipples of deep rose.

“Her underwear.”

A tightly bunched knot moved painfully down his throat as he swallowed hard. He grabbed her underwear and gave it a shove down her hips, then let go, hoping her thong would drop the rest of the way on its own. Because he absolutely wasn’t bending down to take it off. That would put him at eye level with her... He looked, anyway. His Y chromosome just wouldn’t allow him not to.

Damn him, she was hot-looking down there, too. Her light brown pubes were groomed into a racing stripe, leaving behind just enough hair to invite a man to nuzzle his face in the feminine softness right before dipping lower to explore the little pink lips he saw peeking there. His jaw muscles flinched as the image slammed into him before he could stop it. Of him grabbing her by the thighs and pulling her up hard, jacking those sweet feminine lips into his face, her taste coating his tongue, and why the hell was he letting himself imagine that? He compressed his back molars together as his balls drew in close to his body on a near painful surge of lust.

“Grab his cock,” Carrera said, switching to instruct Gamboa.

Eric crushed his eyelids closed, feeling sweat squeeze out from beneath his lashes. *Please, God, I’ll eat all of my vegetables for the rest of my life if you could just see it within Your power to blow up that generator exactly right now this minute.*

Gamboa’s fingertips skimmed across the skin low on his belly, making the muscles there jerk and spasm. She lingered, her touch uncertain.

He parted his lips apart on a silent *yes*.

Gamboa’s warm fingers encircled his shaft.

His breath came hissing out of him. His cock leapt against her palm, and he lurched forward, clutching her shoulders to keep from collapsing on top of her.

“Stroke him.”

No. He stared a hole straight through the back wall. *No, no, no.*

Gamboa took hold of the end of his shaft and tugged, not his whole length, probably trying to cut him some slack, but it didn’t work out so well. The crest of his cock was too sensitive. A bolt of hot, stabbing pleasure shot from the top and traveled into his balls then

through his anus. His spine spasmed, arching him involuntarily into her hand. He clamped his teeth against a primitive groan of pleasure.

Biggest mistake he'd ever made was not planning an exit strategy in case the distraction never showed. This thing with Gamboa was going too far...just way too damned far.

I'm sorry, Mister Carrera, but I suddenly feel ill. I must've eaten some bad chunchullo. We're going to have to leave.

We? No. She stays. Rico, get over there and fuck that girl.

No! No, sir, we're both sick!

Oh? Rico, call Consuela over to my hacienda. We'll see what she has to say about her two defective whores.

You mean the DEA Agent and the naval aviator Consuela has never seen before? Could we skip that part...?

Gamboa's grip loosened around his cock, and he felt a tremble run through her fingers.

He'd lay odds that she didn't have a plan, either, of what to—

"Put her on the table," Carrera told Eric, "and fuck her."

Gamboa's gaze flew to his.

His belly sagged to the floor. He swayed back, but she caught his face in two hands, easing him forward as she scooted back and hiked her bottom onto the dining room table.

"We can fake this," she whispered in Spanish. "Thrust your cock against the back of my thigh. It'll be okay." She spread her legs for him.

The sight was a mule kick to his gut. His balls twisted tight as he imagined doing what she'd suggested. He would climax. The friction of his boner hitting the back of her thigh and the hip movements that mimicked the sex act would... No way to avoid it; he'd spurt. He supposed

he'd have to pretend to pull out and do the whole porno-cum-shot thing. Which meant that everyone in the room would see him make his O face. Another thing he would've like to avoid Gamboa witnessing in these circumstances. But they'd come this far, probably too far to walk away without planting that tracking device.

She smoothed her hands around his butt and urged him forward.

The act of stepping between her spread legs, of bringing his cock so close to her entrance, washed out his vision. He took the briefest moment to regain himself, then slid his arms around her and drew her close. He suffered another near-lapse in control as her naked breasts came in contact with his chest. Her nipples hardened into rigid little points against him, and her athletic thighs encircled his waist. He worked hard to steady his breathing. He cupped her firm ass cheeks in his palms and angled her hips up, putting her into a position that would allow him to pump against the back of her thigh. His diaphragm clenched.

"Turn toward me," Carrera directed. "Both of you, so that I can see you enter her."

Their eyes slammed together, locked and held.

A long line of Eric's pulse pounded from his throat, down the left side of his sternum, into his stomach, and finally his aching balls.

She was going to do it. The look she gave him was steady and sure...although not before he caught something else. An unnamable emotion slipping through the depths of her eyes that said if they did this, a piece of her would be irretrievably stolen.

A fist closed around Eric's heart. He couldn't do that. He'd rather be gunned down than be the cause of this woman losing anything. "No," he said in a suffocated voice, and eased back from her.

Panic dashed across her face, her nails digging into his elbows to try and stop him.

He pulled free of her fingers and faced Carrera. The sweet stench of the drug lord's cigar tunneled into Eric's nasal passageways. The stupid waterfall sounded like surf booming against rocks. Steel entered Eric's jaw as he readied himself for the savage fall he was about to take.

Kyle, Jesus Christ, what happened to you?

Chapter Eleven

Kyle Hammond's imitation of a clown in a barrel rolling down a hill—*sans* barrel, but still feeling like a huge fucking clown—wasn't a quiet operation. He scuffled, scraped, snapped twigs, threw up a jet stream of dead leaves, and *oomphed* all the way down, finally belly-flopping to a halt at the bottom. Biting back a groan, he shook dirt out of his face and looked up. His eyeballs were still swinging in their orbits, but he could see well enough to determine that he'd landed in bad news.

Three Colombian bandidos dressed in forest camouflage were seated on logs around a campfire. Kyle would've found their expressions downright comical—faces frozen, eyes flexed wide, mouths formed into the shape of oooooo's—had his dick not been put in such a serious sling by the situation.

A bandido with a scar near his eye managed to line up the facts first—Caucasian male in a flight suit with military green paint on his face—and he woke up real quick. Bounding to his feet, he grabbed a carbine rifle.

No! In a breath, Kyle was on his feet and lunging forward, using his forearm to knock the nose of the rifle skyward, luckily before it went off or else more bandidos would've surely been summoned to this soiree. He sent his other fist smashing into the bandido's sweaty face. The man flew and fell.

The other two shouted and sprang to their feet.

Dammit, wasn't there something in the Geneva Convention about excessive noise-making during a life-or-death fistfight?

The taller of the two threw a roundhouse at Kyle, but the man telegraphed the punch, and it was easy to duck. Kyle spun around—the shorter one had darted behind him—and landed a blow that sent that guy reeling to his knees...just as the tall bandido grabbed him from behind. Kyle growled through clenched teeth as the tall bandido cranked one of Kyle's arms behind his head, locking him into a half-nelson. The position left one arm free, and Kyle gut-rammed his captor with the sharp point of his elbow. Air rushed out of the tall man, but he didn't loosen his grip, and... Metal flashed.

Instinct whipped into high gear. Kyle snapped his hand up and grabbed the tall man's wrist. A large, serrated K-bar knife stopped inches away from his cheek.

The tall bandido grunted with effort and his muscles flexed as he poured on the pressure.

Adrenaline pumping, Kyle struggled to hold off the blade, scuffling back and forth with the tall man, their boots churning up a ring of dust around their feet.

Problems multiplied as the short one scrambled back to his feet, a stream of Spanish profanity spewing from his lips. Half the words Kyle didn't recognize, but the tone sure wasn't an invitation to a *quinceañera* for the guy's niece or sister or—The short bandido wrenched out his own knife and rushed forward, jabbing at Kyle's gut.

Heart skidding sideways in his chest, Kyle kicked out, barely managing to keep the tall one's knife off his throat while he was dealing with the short one. His new attacker leapt back, but slashed open the leg of Kyle's flight suit along the way. Wet warmth flowed down Kyle's

lower thigh. *Fucking suckbag cut me!* A raw shout funneled up Kyle's throat. Sweat sheeted down his face.

The short bandido came at him again, teeth bared.

Kyle jacked back one knee and pistoned out his leg. The sole of his flight boot caught the short one full in the face. The man's nose flattened on impact, blood rainbowing out from the spongy mess, and Short Bandido sank to the ground for a nap.

Tall Bandido shouted and rammed a hard-boned knee up into Kyle's tailbone. Stars of pain sprinkled across Kyle's vision. The K-bar knife flashed toward his throat again. Kyle flinched back in time to avoid getting his jugular severed, but a streak of hot pain opened along the line of his jaw, and he felt more wet warmth flood down. Before the tall man could recover, Kyle used the back of his skull to bash his captor in the face—jerk forward, slam backward. *Hard.* Tall Bandido's arms fell away, and Kyle lurched forward as the man keeled over unconscious, knife dropping to the ground.

Click!

Kyle whirled around, staggering as his buttery knees objected to the suddenness of his movement. Pain from that head-butt shot up from the base of his skull like iron railroad spikes.

The first bandido with the scar was pointing his carbine rifle at Kyle, two eyes glaring from above a bloody nose. His intention had clearly been to put a bullet in the American, and had the action not just jammed, Eric would be picking out Kyle's coffin right now.

Exhaling a breath that was also a curse, Kyle scrambled for Tall Bandido's fallen knife. In the next second, Scarface rammed a hard shoulder into Kyle's side, driving him to the earth onto his back. Kyle's pulse pounded into the back of his throat as Scarface jumped onto his chest and clamped a hand around his throat. Kyle grabbed Scarface's wrist with both hands and

counter-pulled against the man's attempt to cut off his airway, his nostrils flaring. Cocksucker's breath could peel the bark off every tree on this island.

But then halitosis and hypoxia took a backseat in importance to Scarface's next intentions. The bandido raised his carbine rifle high overhead, then swung down. Kyle blocked the blow with his forearm, screaming hoarsely when, *crack*, the metal stock met his radial bone with bruising force. Rotating his arm in a blare of agony, he grabbed the nose of the rifle and yanked it out of Scarface's grip.

While the maneuver saved Kyle from any more skull-bashing bright ideas, it freed up both of the Colombian's hands to strangle Kyle double-fisted, which he did, squeezing with the strength of a wire cable, his pupils dilated with maniacal determination. Kyle's arms shook violently with the effort of holding him off. Already weakened from his fight with tall and short bandidos, Kyle's lungs soon shrank...from Scarface's weight on top of him and from lack of incoming air. From fear. *I'm in trouble*. He'd been up Shit Creek all along, but it finally hit him just how far. He bucked and thrashed.

If he made it out of this, no more lazing around on deployment. *Ever*.

Taking a calculated risk, Kyle shot one hand out to the side and swept his arm back and forth, searching again for Tall Bandido's knife. As suspected, Scarface was able to strangle him more effectively without both of Kyle's hands to offer resistance. Kyle's tongue ballooned in his mouth and his pulse pounded frantically behind his optic nerves. Panic escalated as his eyes crossed, his vision fading. Then...his fingers brushed over a hilt.

He snatched up the K-bar and slashed it at Scarface's throat. Turned out killing a man with a knife wasn't easy. The movies made it look like it was; it wasn't. Kyle only succeeded in skidding the blade over the bandido's flesh. Blood bloomed on Scarface's neck, and, here, at

least, was a bonus—the pain of the strike startled the man into loosening his grip. Kyle was able to draw a small breath. Attacking again, this time Kyle aimed the sharp tip straight in. The blade drove inward with a meaty *thunch*, jerking raggedly over vertebra bone. Drops of blood the size of Christmas tree ornament balls splotched down on Kyle's face and chest. He spluttered. He'd never seen so much blood. The front of his flight suit was soaked in a matter of seconds.

Scarface's eyes glazed. Kyle heaved him off, then rolled onto his hands and knees and pulled in a huge breath. He rasped out a cough, and tried to get to his feet, but his legs were having none of that. Glancing drunkenly around the campsite, he confirmed that no one else was presently trying to kill him. He sat back on his heels and turned his face to the sky, inhaling more gulps of oxygen into his parched lungs. After all the loud scuffles, thuds, grunts, and low shouts of fighting, the sudden silence sounded creepy. His breathing and the soft crackle of the campfire were the only sounds. *LZ and Nicole... Gotta go, gotta get moving.*

He planted one foot, pushed himself up, then planted the other, taking a moment to secure his balance. He shuffle-stepped over to the short bandido with the smashed face. The man's nose had been driven into his brain by Kyle's boot. So the dude wasn't just taking any old nap, but the dirt nap. *All right...* He wobbled over to the tall one and checked for a pulse. *Still alive.* Kyle blinked slowly. *To kill or not to kill...?* He was too tired to kill anymore, which he supposed saved him from the moral dilemma of really deciding. Ripping some fabric off the tall bandido's clothes, he used it to tie and gag the bad guy. He couldn't chance the beeyatch coming awake and alerting his other bandido *amigos* that an American soldier was running amok on their little fucking *Isla Bonita*. Such tattle tailing could get LZ and Nicole killed. Or Tall Man could decide to sneak up on Kyle while he was trying to shoot out the generator.

The generator...gotta get to the generator. Shit, he needed to find his sniper rifle.

Kyle limped to the foot of the hill where he'd landed after his fall. Best place to start his search for his CAR-15 was here. He'd fan out in an ever-widening—

He smacked his palms onto his knees as a groundswell of dizziness made the vertigo he'd endured that zero-zero night with LZ feel like a head rush, like the kind a guy got from sucking helium out of a balloon then seeing how many verses of *Call Me Maybe* he could get out before his voice re-normalized. Or possibly that was just what *he* did after too many shots of Jägermeister. His bent-over position put his injured leg into his direct line of sight. He watched shiny blood push to the surface of his pant leg, seep away, then more appear instantly. He was bleeding like the proverbial stuck pig.

Straightening in slow increments, he stumbled over to the nearest bandido—Scarface—and tore a length of fabric off the guy's clothes. Hands shaking, Kyle tied the strip around his upper thigh as tight as he could. Here's hoping his femoral hadn't been hit. Because then it'd be back to the coffin shop in about five minutes.

Please don't be dead, Eric. I AM coming.

It felt like he was walking in moon boots as he moved back over to the foot of the hill. Fuck, but he needed a drink...water, he meant, lots and lots of water, so his mouth could stop feeling like Al Qaeda's living room floor. He set to methodically searching the area for his rifle. *I killed two men* was the thought most interested in keeping him company. Scarface and the short bandido were his first. As a military man, Kyle knew he might someday have to take a life, but he'd figured it would come down to him dropping a torpedo on a submarine full of faceless people. He'd never imagined killing men with his bare hands. Jamming a knife into someone's throat had been...something else. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel about it, what the

protocol was. Pumped to be alive? Sickened? Filled with regret? Honestly, he felt exhausted. It was the best he could muster.

He tripped over a tree branch, and ground out a curse. This was taking too long. And what if he couldn't find his sniper rifle? Should he try to take out the generator with the carbine? No, the shot was too tough for such a crap-o-mundo weapon, which appeared to be broken anyway. But what would Eric and Nicole do without a distraction? No Plan B had been developed. Because Eric trusted Kyle to get the job done. Fuck, he couldn't believe—

Finally! He found his rifle and snatched it off the ground.

Now the next mountain he had to hurdle was, in fact, an actual mountain. Or a hill, but climbing back up the way he'd tumbled down, hands clawing, boots skidding, an avalanche of debris cascading down in his wake, made it feel like this hill was the damned Matterhorn.

By the time he reached the top, his vision was glassed over with sweat and pain, and his heart was nearly pounding out of all sorts of places on his body—ears, chest, veins on his neck. Gasping, he slipped over the lip of the ridge, skulked over to the spot across from the generator, and hunkered down on his belly beside a shrub, his feet draped over the opposite edge. He adjusted the rifle scope—which was pointing up at the big blue sky from its own fall down the hill—then lifted it to his eye. The crosshairs swung crazily across the visible edge of the generator.

Kyle lowered the scope and bowed his head. *Come on, man, come on, man... Okay, so yeah.* He was fucked up. His brutal fall down the hill, the knot of bruise on his forearm which was already the size of a boar's testicle, the knife wounds to both his leg and jaw, the balls-out fight for his life, and the aftershocks of an ass-truck of adrenaline abandoning his bloodstream were all taking their toll. His entire body was shaking like he was suffering from late-stage

hypothermia. But he needed to Pull. Himself. Together. He couldn't make a tough shot while he was in this kind of shape...not even an easy shot.

Smashing his eyelids shut, he drew in several deep breaths, and tried to mind-over-matter himself. He lifted the scope again. His shakes were a little better, but, crap, not by much, and he saw another problem. A guard was loitering near the generator. Did Kyle have time to wait for the man to leave? Not that he cared overly much about collateral damage from the explosion—he was on a killing spree today, right?—but if he missed, he'd give away the distraction before it even became one. On a normal day, he wouldn't worry about missing. Today? Big time.

Kyle squinted harder at the man, who was dragging on a cig and looking as relaxed as if a coke whore was on her knees in front of him, chroming his dome. Dude wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Tick-tock, tick-tock—Screw it.

Kyle sighted, held his breath, and squeezed off a shot.

A hole appeared in the wall of the hacienda just above the generator, a single plume of dust curling up from it, a few chunks of plaster spilling out.

So luck be a lady, *not*, but rather an old hag giving him the one-fingered salute. He'd fucking missed.

The nearby guard frowned and turned his head toward the *ping* Kyle couldn't hear this far away.

Kyle's chest socked in. He wasn't going to be able to do this. He was too messed up. Dammit, how far had Eric and Nicole been forced to play out their sex show?

Chapter Twelve

Nicole was pretty sure her knees had gone nerveless. The rest of her, most definitely, had not. In fact, she could count every one of her senses alive with Navy lieutenant Eric O'Dwyer. The warm feel of his flesh was imprinted on hers, the scent of his masculine sweat—how did he manage to make it smell so good?—was still in her nose and on her skin, the sound of his heartbeat in her ears, the sight of him...well, no memory was required for that. He was standing right in front of her, naked as the day he was born, tall and sleekly muscled, beautifully erect. *How much bigger and what level of better?* Oh, no words could describe his degree of magnificence down there.

When it came to taste, his kiss lingered on her tongue. That first one had sideswiped her, the tender reverence of it making an inexplicable yearning surface inside her, a hunger for him, both tender and fierce. She'd acted before she'd realized what she was doing, chasing down more of him by thrusting her tongue inside his mouth on the second kiss.

The pleasure of the contact had tumbled her deeper into an unrecognizable delirium. Tongue to tongue, he tasted like the masculinity he exuded with every breath he took, bold and strong and invincible. It'd called to a femininity in her so long repressed she'd nearly forgotten it existed. And when the proof of his desire had risen up hard against her, a womanly sense of victory had warmed her all over. In that instant, she'd never wanted a man inside her more. A groan of pure longing had poured out of her.

Real, not pretend.

Confusing.

Overwhelming...

Touch, sight, smell, hearing, taste: all senses alive...and a horrible sixth sense premonition that her heart was getting involved in this. Which wasn't at all like her. But then hadn't O'Dwyer acted like a noble-minded idiot throughout this whole thing? Not in a million years would she have predicted that being a team player and "having his back" would turn out to mean *she* was the one who'd have to take the lead in their sex show. That even with all her urgings, he'd still used his eyes to check in with her every step of the way, which was just so freaking...sweet.

The squish had returned to her belly, and as she'd feared, it'd gotten in the way of the mission. She'd balked when it came time to screw O'Dwyer in reality, her awakened femininity resisting the idea of paring down the act to only the mechanics: penis-in-vagina, thrust and repeat, thrust and repeat, etcetera and etcetera. She was no stranger to divorcing emotions from sex, and so it should've been a piece of cake. *You chew through men, Nicole...*

The nail in her emotional coffin had been driven in when O'Dwyer's arms wrapped around her and their naked flesh met. The intimacy of it breached her defenses down to their very foundations. More than their nakedness, it was the way O'Dwyer held her, his strength and care saying that he wouldn't let her fall. No matter the threat. No matter the obstacle. *Never*. And in that moment she'd nearly been overwhelmed by a feeling of...such sad regret for him.

Because intimacy was an emotion she only handled clumsily. Ruinously.

End result of it all: she experienced an emotional hiccup O'Dwyer had, unfortunately, picked up on. He'd refused to continue their sex show. So now Lieutenant Boy Scout was facing down power-monger Alejandro Carrera, and putting his life on the line. For her. Trashing this operation. For her.

"*Did I direct you to stop?*" Carrera inquired, his voice calm, flat, and chilled.

The two thugs by the door swiveled their heads toward the dining room table in robotic unison. Not a necessary move; if the erectile bulges in their pants were anything by which to judge, their peripheral vision was in perfect working order.

And gross.

She'd deal with how many men in this room had seen her naked and lusted after her later. Maybe not later. This might be a memory ripe for repression.

"No, sir," O'Dwyer replied. "*I just need to get the condom.*" Without waiting for permission, O'Dwyer shuffled over to the sex toy bag and rummaged through it.

Nicole's skin prickled, and she shivered, feeling cold now O'Dwyer was away from her, and oddly bereft, sitting naked and alone on the edge of the dining room table. Scared and edgy, too, because there wasn't a condom in the toy bag, not that she knew of.

Carrera's eyes slowly narrowed on O'Dwyer as the search went on longer than it should have.

O'Dwyer was no doubt giving himself time to formulate an impromptu Plan B.

She drilled a silent message into the side of his head that the plan should *not* include reaching for a weapon. Their pen guns could only shoot one bullet at a time, and taking down three men with one-at-a-time shots would be impossible, even for a man of O'Dwyer's superior coordination.

Or maybe O'Dwyer was waiting for the generator to blow, which was a waste of time and hope. She wasn't one to throw a bunch of *I told you so's* in someone's face, but on the inside, her brain was blaring it. Kyle "Mikey" Hammond was probably laughing himself into a tummy-clutch at this very moment.

"*You'll continue on,*" Carrera instructed in an inflexible tone, "*without a condom.*"

“*Oh.*” O’Dwyer scratched the back of his neck. “*I don’t think we can do that, sir.*”

Carrera unfolded himself from his chair, a cruel gaze leveled on O’Dwyer. The kingpin sauntered over, swung up his hand and—Nicole gasped softly when O’Dwyer tensed at the last minute, no doubt fighting the natural instinct to block the blow—delivered O’Dwyer a swift backhand.

She slid off the dining room table, her legs nearly bending beneath her like an antique accordion. *Think fast, mija! Turn, punch, run—whatever you need to do, do it!*

Carrera’s face was an expressionless mask. “*I must have misunderstood you, whore. Did you just defy me?*”

“*No, sir,*” O’Dwyer answered, his fingers twitching at his sides.

Nicole’s lips trembled from stress overload. If O’Dwyer fell apart, she wasn’t sure she could keep it together on her own.

Carrera returned to his chair, sitting down as casually as if he’d just asked one of them to turn up the lights while they were doing their show.

O’Dwyer walked over to her and set his hands on her hips, his nostrils flared, murder in his green eyes.

Her lips parted. O’Dwyer was enraged. Not falling apart. *Furious.*

“*Got any ideas?*” he asked her in low, tight Spanish.

Have sex with me. But they hadn’t brought any condoms, had they? Because who would’ve thought, you know? O’Dwyer wouldn’t screw her without a condom. He wouldn’t screw her, anyway. Not with her absurd vulnerability sitting between them. “*Fresh out,*” she answered.

“Santiago,” Carrera said mildly, presumably speaking to one of his bodyguards. “If these two don’t start fucking in three seconds, shoot the man.”

A stuttering breath spilled out of her. “Eric...”

The last veneer of humanity fell away from Eric, and Nicole lost her breath again as she glimpsed a darkness inside him, a level of black rage she’d never before seen in another human being. *He’s going to start killing people.* She didn’t know how, but—

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