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Shadows of Yesterday

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SHADOWS OF YESTERDAY

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2020

Dedication

I dedicate this final thesis to my husband, my two sons, my family, and my friends. You all stood by me, cheering me on, and never letting me quit. You each encouraged me in your own way and made me believe I could do this. I owe my success and completion to your love and support.

Also, a special thanks to my “accomplice”, June “DJ” Westerfield. My writing is incomplete without a sprinkle of your magical fairy dust to polish the rough edges. You know my writing style and temperament and know how to get the best out of me without changing my voice or tone. Thank you for always being there for me. We did it!

Also, an extra thank you to my small team of “consultants” that brainstormed with me and were my sound boards for specific areas of the novel. My husband Michael, for being my weapons, ballistics, and fight scene specialist, and to my nursing crew, Isabel, Ivon, Jorge, and Missy, for the medical questions I had throughout the context of the novel. You were all key in the success and completion of this thesis.

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SHADOWS OF YESTERDAY

by

MARLENE LIOTTI, B.A.

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Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Table of Contents	v
Preface.....	vi
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two.....	9
Chapter Three.....	17
Chapter Four	27
Chapter Five.....	40
Chapter Six.....	51
Chapter Seven	60
Chapter Eight	67
Chapter Nine	79
Chapter Ten.....	85
Chapter Eleven.....	91
Chapter Twelve.....	97
Chapter Thirteen	105
Chapter Fourteen.....	111
Chapter Fifteen.....	119
Chapter Sixteen.....	126
Bibliography	135
Vita.....	139

Preface

The year is 2020, but here we are still living in a male dominated society. We remain constantly reminded and surrounded by the mentality that certain activities and career choices are better suited for men over women. We even endure these depictions in literature, on the big screen, and on television. Action films, war movies and novels, and crime dramas show the protagonists and supporting characters as males. There are rare occasions where you may find a female actress or literary character protagonist, and when this happens, she is not depicted with the same strength, knowledge, respect, or importance. She is considered weaker, having to prove herself, but not always given the opportunity to do so. A perfect example of this is Demi Moore's character in the movie *A Few Good Men*. She was JAG Corps (Judge Advocate General - Navy lawyers) just like Tom Cruise and Kevin Pollak's characters, but she was never taken as seriously, and even talked down to because she was just a woman. Another good example is Stephanie Plum, the main character in the Plum series by Janet Evanovich. She changes careers to become a bounty hunter, a tough job deemed for a man, and she is portrayed as the woman who doesn't know what she is doing and needs a man to help her get out of sticky situations she finds herself in. Though the novels are entertaining, the protagonist is not the strong female lead we need to look up to.

I always loved to read when I was younger, mesmerized by the authors' creativity while yearning for something more than the usual boy saves girl scenario. My love and respect for writing came in the ninth grade. I always remember my English teacher's words when she explained to us the key to writing. She said that in order to capture the essence of our voice we needed to "write like you speak and write what you know". It all seemed to click and make perfect sense after that. Once it all clicked, I realized that if I couldn't find a story with a strong female lead that saves the man, then I would need to create them myself. My novels, from that point

forward, were either led or included a strong Hispanic female. Reyna Montoya is a product of this seed, leading female protagonists into the future they deserve.

In my search for the right genre fit, I went way back to my preteen years. Actually, it hit me like a runaway freight train. I devoured the Nancy Drew series by Carolyn Keene. Every book, every page, every sentence, every word, pure magic. The characters meshed well with each other, with their own personalities and relationships. The only thing still lacking, despite the protagonist being female, was the fact that Nancy still needed her boyfriend Ned to help her or save her when things got a little hairy. The mysteries these friends solved together, though a little cheesy now, kept me at the edge of my seat and constantly going just one more chapter before I get caught awake after bedtime. These books were, and still are, the series that inspired me to continue down the writing path and fueled the fire higher to create stronger women.

When I was older, in my late twenties and early thirties, a friend introduced me to Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series. Her mystery/suspense series is written in first person, a point of view I wasn't sure I would enjoy because until then I had only read books in third person. This series gave me true motivation to get writing and helped me develop my voice. I learned from reading her series that humor and sarcasm are just a few anecdotes when creating realistic characters and dialogue. My writing went from too proper and stiff, to that more natural tone and rhythm found in dialogue, which later became one of my favorite narrative devices. Still, for my current and any future novels, I opted for third person because I could see the possibilities and opportunities to show the actions of my other characters through an almost panoramic perspective of events. I was more than thrilled to have finally found the right fit in the crime drama/mystery/suspense/thriller genres and the voice to express myself.

Of course, I had a few other influences that were not books and authors. I am a big fan of Francis Ford Coppola's adaptations of *The Godfather* series by Mario Puzo. There was something about the intricacies of crime families that intrigued me, I even took a few criminal justice courses as electives during my bachelor's degree program at American Public University. I took courses such as The History of Organized Crime, Firearms Forensics Investigation, and Blood spatter Pattern Analysis. I figured they would also help make some of my scenes more realistic because all fiction has some elements of fact and non-fiction blended in. All of these things meshed together with spies, especially Ian Fleming's James Bond, assassins, and federal agents, lit new fires and renewed my passion for the written word.

Shadows of Yesterday has been a true labor of love. Like any good character, Reyna is not without her flaws, faults, and downfalls. I kept her background story consistent throughout the changes in the drafts, with a few tweaks to make her more plausible to the evolving story. She experienced the traumatizing experience of seeing her parents killed in their home in Cuba when she was seventeen, by someone her parents knew. She and her best friend Nicolás fled the country to Miami Beach, Florida. She buried the trauma and joined the military to make her parents proud. Her military career moved them around every few years, but they always remained grounded in their roots and relationship. While on an assignment her memory is triggered, showing the reader a quick flashback, and causing her to disobey orders. Everything else that happens in the novel spirals from this point, cause and effect. She comes to the realization, even though it's twenty years after the death of her parents, that she wants to find the killer, if he's still alive, and finally get the closure she needs to get well mentally.

This novel has experienced a complete reconstruction and makeover through its writing and editing process. It has undergone changes in plot, theme, and even dialogue. To help me stay

grounded in my efforts, I pulled out my copy of Stephen King's book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. I tabbed several sections on my first run through with quotes that I knew would help and inspire me later. According to King, he states, "stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech" (150). I have incorporated strong dialogue into my novel to bring out the personalities of each of my characters. I feel that the way a person speaks, and the things they contribute to a conversation, shows the readers a deeper level of who the character is.

In writing my novel, I have learned that plotting is a crucial part of the process. When it comes to genres such as mystery, suspense, thriller I do not feel that too much should be left to chance, even though thoughts and first drafts are in more of a stream of consciousness, everything is later organized in a more cohesive fashion. In order to achieve this, I needed a map of who, what, where, when, why, and how to get me through the tangled web I weave. The more I wrote, the more the plot gave its own twists and turns. Where my mind was originally with the order of operations, is not where everything landed in the end. Reyna's anger went from childish tantrums, to moments of realization and bits of regret. Nicolas transformed a little further to have a more active role in the storyline. The secondary characters gave more input in the end version, instead of getting killed off in the middle. Everything and everyone evolved, giving the story and plot much more depth than from where it started.

Knowing I needed my novel to follow a specific path, I created a traditional outline which organized all the main and subplots in sequential order. I gave as much detail as I could, sometimes including short dialogue, in order to be sure I remembered everything I wanted to say in each

chapter. In the article “Stephen King is Wrong About Plotting”, Ryan Reudell shows contradicting opinions regarding plotting:

When it comes to plotting, Stephen King writes that because our lives are mostly plotless, plotting a story should not affect our writing as much as we typically allow it to. However, as Bethany Clemons remarks, ‘I have lived long enough to know my life is stuffed with plot. I’m open to pantsing scenes, starting off with a basic idea that Point A has moved to Point C by the end of the scene, and allowing my mind complete freedom on how to get there. Some of my favorite scenes have come to life that way. But doing that for an entire novel? No.’ It feels like it would cheat the reader, she says. They come to your story trusting you to have done your job as a writer to give them an excellently crafted story, one that knows where it’s going even if the reader doesn’t.

A lot of my novel also relies on back story, character history, and flashback. In regards to this, King tells us that, “The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn’t very interesting. Stick to the parts that are, and don’t get carried away with the rest” (165). The first draft of the novel had several long flashbacks to help give the back story to Reyna and Nicolás’s past. Some were pages long, and after re-reading the pages several times, really didn’t help the story or move it forward. I think it actually hindered the story instead of helping it. It was better to sprinkle bits and pieces throughout for the reader to get a feel of who she was and why she is who she is now. After several rounds of editing, revising, and readdressing all the issues, the only long flashback I left in the novel was when Reyna was in her session with the base psychiatrist for her psychological evaluation. This was a pivotal moment that needed the full flashback for her to explain to the doctor what she saw when she was on assignment and disobeyed.

As we all know, dialogue is a conversation between two or more people in a narrative work. As a literary technique, dialogue serves several purposes. It can advance the plot, reveal a character's thoughts or feelings, or show how characters react in the moment. There is so much you can learn about a character from the way they speak, the tone they take, the words they choose to use, the emotions they evoke in others around them. My characters speak the way my friends and I speak to each other. I pull from real life conversations I hear around me, as well as the conversations I have with others. It's not about what is said, but how it is said. Science Fiction and Fantasy writer Caroline Humes tells us in a blog post on her website that, "Dialogue should always do one of the following, and preferably two or three: 1) Dialogue reveals character. What people say and how they say it, and how they respond to each other, tells us a lot about them. 2) It provides information. The challenge is doing this without being obvious. Let information come out naturally at an appropriate time. 3) It advances the plot. Again, it shouldn't be obvious that this is happening, but dialogue is usually a part of vital scenes that move the story forward."

Humes also mentions that dialogue should be used to make your characters sound unique. "Their dialect, favorite phrases, simply the way they hesitate or use pauses – all these can reveal additional character." The excerpt below from the novel gives the reader a look into Reyna's anger and PTSD, how she flies off the handle at the slightest of things, and how her dialogue reveals bits of her personality and struggles:

He looked over at Reyna, "So how goes the hunt today?"

"Same as every day," she didn't look up from her phone when she answered.

"Is there anything new?" Nicolás was genuinely curious and was trying to make pleasant morning conversation.

Reyna stopped scrolling, put her phone down, and looked over at Nicolás with a scowl. “Are you going to ask me the same shit every fucking morning?”

Nicolás was reaching the end of his rope with his patience and her attitude. “Actually, smart ass, I’m pretty sure I asked you in the afternoon yesterday.” He sat up, careful not to spill his coffee, “tomorrow I might even wait until dinner time.”

“So, is this all a joke to you now?” She pushed her chair back and turned her body sideways to look at him straight on. “Or are you just mocking me because you’re the big man with the job?”

“Oh, come on, Rey. You know perfectly well that’s not what this is.” His tone was a little firmer and more agitated. “I’m asking because I’m curious and concerned that- “

“That what? That you’re the only one pulling their weight around here because you have a fucking job and I don’t?” (Liotti, 41).

The dialogue in the excerpt above shows Reyna’s immediate frustration and anger, as well as the frustration Nicolás is feeling when she overreacts. When I read this, I can feel the anger and frustration rise and fall during the intense conversation the characters are having. I want to instill this same feeling in my readers. I want them to understand the trauma and disassociation Reyna is feeling due to her PTSD. My research on the mental illness helped me understand the reactions and conversations my characters should have, as well as the tone the conversations should take. There was a thin line between anger, frustration, and belligerence.

An important theme in this novel is gender equality, specifically that some feel that certain careers are not meant for women. In her pursuit to find the right job for her skills and qualifications, we find Reyna applying to a position deemed for a man. Just like her military career, she is looked upon like just another woman, the weaker sex, not fit for the physical demands of a “man’s job”.

This section of dialogue shows exactly what Reyna thinks about society's views when confronted with male chauvinist stereotype.

"Well no," he held his bulging belly as he chuckled, "I need a night-time bouncer to keep the heavy drinkers in check, but you're too hot and delicate for that job, hun."

Her blood was beginning to boil over. She wanted nothing more than to show this guy how not delicate she really was, but that was not the right thing to do. She promised Nicolás she would do the right thing. Doing the right thing wasn't so easy during these situations. "Actually, that was exactly the position I came in here for." She handed him her resume with all her military credentials. She figured the paper would speak for itself and he would be begging to hire her.

He peered up from the page, eyeballing her from head to toe and back up again. "A Marine, huh? You sure don't look like a Marine. I thought all you military chicks were more butch-like. You look too girly to have seen any action other than in the Captain's quarters." He laughed hysterically at what he thought was a great joke, but he was also calling attention to himself and the conversation he was having.

"You must have been too preoccupied with me being girly to have really read my resume." Reyna was about done being soft-spoken and polite. "I'll need you to notice that I'm the Captain, I led a special force ground team, and was one of a group of elite women allowed to attend and complete sniper training." She heard an oh shit from someone behind her while she stood and stared at the owner. He was re-reading her resume.

"People lie on these things all the time." He tossed her resume on the bar. "If you want a bartender spot, I can do that, but I don't see you as bouncer material." He shrugged his shoulders again and nodded towards a muscle layered, no neck guy sitting at the end of

the bar. “I have Mad Max over there to cover the shifts if I need him to until I find the guy I need.”

Reyna crossed her arms in front of her and laughed as she peered around the stocky little man. “Well that’s cute.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” The owner was not amused, and his patience seemed to be wearing thin too.

“It means it’s cute how you think that he can do a better job just because he’s layered in muscle and has no neck. That’s a pretty big gamble if you ask me.” Reyna was hitting all the hot spots. His beady little eyes looked like they wanted to pop out at her. (Liotti, 44-45).

In the first draft of the novel, Reyna Montoya was an assassin in high demand and getting paid well for her special skills. Her past and deep-rooted anger made her who she was, a killer. My thesis director helped me realize that Reyna could still be the tough independent woman she was without being an assassin. She needed more depth, she needed flaws, and she needed more feelings than just anger and hate, and I needed to create a solid strong female character. This was also an opportunity to develop my idea of writing a novel that, as I said at the beginning, introduced us to the life of a woman who didn’t fall into the weaker sex category society inflicts upon the gender. This is not who Reyna was when I created her, but she certainly evolved into someone better and stronger than I imagined. How did I get her there? I figured the only way for her to keep her original assassin-like skills while making her a strong female lead who didn’t need a man to save her was to give her a military career. One that is, according to society, better suited for a man. This was also my opportunity to show the unseen role of women in the Marines, as well as the effect of the Marines on everyone else.

Chief Warrant Officer Townes, Reyna's second in command, jumped on the com, "Eagle Eye, are you seeing this? What do you want us to do?"

"I see it, hold your positions," she responded.

All the poor woman could do was continue to apologize and beg as she tried to clean up the mess, but Kashir kept yelling and hitting her. "The only thing you've ever done right as a worthless woman is bare me children. I can't even stand to look at you." He back handed her, and she fell to her knees.

Townes broke in on the com again, "This isn't right. Can we go in and stop it?"

"I don't like it any more than you do, but if we go in now, we could make matters worse." Reyna shook her head as she continued to watch the abuse through her scope.

She watched in discomfort as the woman, on her knees and, with the children crying from all the yelling, inch close to her husband as she continued to beg and plead for forgiveness.

Kashir suddenly had enough, pulled out his gun, and aimed it at her head. "You worthless beast, I should save us all the trouble of dealing with you any longer."

"Shit!" Reyna nearly shouted into the com, "I'm looking for a clear shot, so continue to hold y-"

"You hold, we need him alive," blared a new voice into her ear. Lieutenant Colonel Ashe, her commanding officer, had locked in on her com and cut in. (Liotti, 2)

My research took me to searches for women in the military, women in combat, women as military leaders, and women snipers. This is where I discovered one of the underlying roots for my thesis. Women, though there are claims otherwise, were still not being treated as equals. The lack of allowances for women in the military were astounding, especially when other country's

military forces had their women kicking asses and taking names (almost literally). I took it a step further and searched “women snipers”. Not one American article or story popped up. What I got were stories from Russia. The Red Army trained and used women as snipers in WWII. I found an article on the *Defense Media Network* from March 8, 2018 that offered a plethora of information regarding the Red Army and their female snipers.

The article, “Women with Guns: The Red Army Female Snipers of World War II” began by stating that the “1917 Russian Revolution gave Russian women legal equality” (Markowitz). That meant they had the right to work just as hard as men on top of the usual burdens of keeping house and tending to children. What struck me the most of Markowitz’s analysis, and helped me pinpoint the real life focus of my novel was to understand that, “Women were thought to make good snipers, because they could endure stress and cold better than men, and they had ‘more patience’ to wait for the perfect shot”. The author brings special attention to a few woman who achieved recognition and fame, such as the Hero of the Soviet Union Maj. Lyudmila M. Pavlichenko who was the top-scoring woman sniper of all time, with 309 confirmed kills, of which 36 were enemy snipers.

Five Hundred women snipers survived the war and were held in high regards by their superiors and subordinates. Of course, the communist party later tried to erase this part of history showing the true strength of women by glamorizing the more feminine roles of medic and nurses. This practice of throwing a cloak of invisibility over women at war is precisely why I chose to tell this story of a woman who is part of the United States marine Corp and, at the same time, the result of a revolution. The stories of these brave women in the military is another reason I chose to have Reyna follow in their footsteps. Men are not the only ones who should have the honor and glory of war stories and heroism. Women have been a driving force for decades, but never given the

recognition they earned and deserved because there was always a man to hold them down. In this novel we see that the secondary characters are men. They are not the driving force; they are the support system Reyna needs to get herself through her struggles. She does not need them to save her or do the work for her, they are her backup and support her in everything she does. The female snipers of The Red Army set the groundwork for the strength and determination I wanted to see in my female lead character.

I have always written my stories and novels with strong independent female leads. Reyna Montoya is a perfect example. Her military branch went from Air Force then Army before finally landing on Marine. I didn't want to be stereotypical with making her a Marine, but it was actually the best fit for her and what I wanted her military career to entail. In an article by Rod Powers he states that "Marine boot camp is considered more challenging, both physically and mentally, than the basic training programs of the other military services. (...) It has been said time and time again by former Marines that Marine Corps recruit training was the most challenging thing they ever had to do in their entire lives." They are a special breed, and I was proud to include Reyna in their ranks. Plus, they are one of the military branches, along with the Army, that were beginning to finally allow women into combat. Let's not confuse that with women being treated better because they were allowed to fight, it just meant they were allowed to do so. Women were still, and are still, being treated like the weaker sex, to be taken advantage of and talked down to while being pushed aside. I made sure to show that this was still happening, but Reyna was never one to stand for it. Her no filter attitude always pushed back as she fought to attain her upward move in the ranks.

When it comes to the novel as a genre, there are different narrative styles and lessons in the realm of writing. In "The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human" by Jonathan

Gotschall the author relies heavily on telling to provide a certain insight. Gotschall tells us that stories are intrinsic to human condition, and that the various forms and uses of language are the most human thing we have. The telling of stories surrounds everything we do and shapes our communication with each other. Gotschall expanded my horizons regarding what we define as a story, or where we think stories come from. In my case I wanted to tell a story that had not been told before, like an author dreams of doing. Growing up in a home where there wasn't a man of the house, where we had to learn to do for ourselves, became the foundation of what I wanted this novel to be. I needed to show that having a man around was nice, but that it was not a need or requirement.

Gotschall also addresses how dreams help create some of the fiction an author creates. Although this seems a little personal and quite emotional, it explains why we sometimes feel such an eerie connection to certain stories or characters. A lot of dreams people experience are quite similar, hence the strange feeling of familiarity when we are reading some works of fiction. I will admit I never experienced this with any of my other works of fiction, but Reyna is different. She has come to me in my dreams and daydreams, trying to tell me what should happen next. Her whispers in my ears as she played out a scene my novel couldn't live without. Reyna and I have an unbreakable bond.

In "Varieties of Disturbance: Stories", Lydia Davis presents the reader with a collection of works where she used different narrative and poetic devices. Though Davis and Gotschall are not the same, some of their styles actually play off each other if you look at them closely. Before mentioning how Davis blends in with Gotschall, I have a Davis style to mention first. In *Dog and Me*, there are brief moments where she uses stream of consciousness. It shows up more clearly in *Kafka Cooks Dinner* and *The Caterpillar*. I picked up on these more clearly on my second round

of reading because I studied stream of consciousness in my Forms and Techniques of Poetry class. In both stories, the narrators spend most of their time in their own heads thus exposing the reader to an overflowing waterfall of interior monologues. Where is the blend, you may ask? I think this goes well with Gotschall's talks about dreams, especially the stream of consciousness. Another of Davis' shorts that showed stream of consciousness was *Grammar Questions*. This one grabbed my attention a little more than the previous shorts mentioned because it asked questions I could see me asking myself as I worked on a piece.

“...Actually, then I won't know if the words 'he' and 'him' are correct, in the present tense. Is he, once he is dead, still 'he', and if so, for how long is he still 'he'? People may say 'the body' and then call it 'it'. I will not be able to say 'the body' in relation to him because to me he is still not something you would call 'the body'...” (24).

Though I do not use stream of consciousness in my novel, I do utilize the style in my process. When a story comes to mind, everything comes to me in rapid succession. The characters, the plot, some of the dialogue, and the scenes all come at me from different angles. In order to create the thoughts into a cohesive story I need to get it all out of my head first. My brain works faster than my hands, so it's all thrown onto the page as a stream of consciousness. Even my first outline draft looks like an organized version of the stream as well. Being that this style is part of my process to develop my novel, I thought it important to mention and bring to light.

With the different styles I have seen from these two authors it is easy to deduce that “Davis deliberately avoids traditional story format”. Personally, I think there is no right or wrong way to express yourself in the realm of writing. Why do the same as everyone else? Not all readers like the same thing, so why should a writer be shackled to one form of writing. My writing takes on several styles during the writing process. My first draft, because I am trying to get all the ideas and

voices out of my head and onto paper, falls as stream of consciousness. It evolves as I go through edits and changes, until it reaches its final traditional style. The fact that we pull ideas from different aspects of life is completely true. We write what we know. Fiction is just an exaggeration, to an extent, of the truth we live and see every day.

I am a big believer in soaking in everything around me, listening to what people are saying, watching how people are interacting, watching people's body language. It all becomes part of the writer's scope as I try to figure out later how to put it all into words so that the reader can see what I saw and feel what I felt. Part of the writing process, in my opinion, is having someone read what you're writing, including the outline and plot structure. Outsider eyes are a crucial element to a good, consistent story. It's nothing technical, it's not something you will find in a how to book, it's just an extra source I like to keep in my back pocket.

After years in the Marines, another milestone was reached. Women were finally allowed to attend sniper training. Downfall to this, not all made it through the grueling tests, and those who did were not always allowed to actually serve as a sniper on a team. There were the elite few that made it through, fought as snipers, and even got to lead a team of their own. I made Reyna one of those elite few because I wanted to prove that women are just as tough as men, while keeping their femininity intact:

I joined the Marines because I wanted to make a difference while protecting my new country and the innocent people who live here. I am one of the few women who was allowed to attend and pass sniper training, and one of the few elite females in charge of her own special ground force team. I am damn good at what I do and always place the safety and lives of others before my own (Liotti, ten).

Despite all the research into military careers and ranks and branches, Reyna's transition from assassin to military hero was not an easy one. Well, at least not so much for me. She already had a certain temperament and attitude that I had fun building. She was a trained killer, cold, calculated, little to no feelings of remorse or regret. Now she needed to have some feelings, and some remorse because violence for the sake of violence was no longer an option. Reyna also needed to be a hero. She had to place others, her team, and innocent lives, before her own. She kept her smart ass, no filter mouth, but I smoothed out her rough edges. I am pretty sure I went through at least three or four complete makeover edits to get her just right. I loved Reyna the assassin, but I also love and am very proud of Reyna the Marine Captain.

Here is where I uncovered the other underlying root for my thesis. I decided that PTSD and mental illness needed to be brought to light, minus the stereotypes and stigmas. Most of the time a PTSD diagnosis is given to combat soldiers because of what they have seen and/or endured in the heat of battle on foreign soil (or even domestic). Yes, this is an obvious diagnosis, but, as I learned from my research, it is not just for combat soldiers. The Mayo clinic had fantastic, detailed information about PTSD and mental illness, including symptoms, causes, and how to treat them. "Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms may start within one month of a traumatic event, but sometimes symptoms may not appear until years after the event" (Mayo Clinic). Another great source of information for me and Reyna was The Recovery Village. This site also gave in-depth explanations to symptoms and treatment without having to speak to a psychiatrist myself.

The signs and symptoms of PTSD in veterans will be the same as the PTSD symptoms people experience from car accidents, dog bites and other traumatic situations. PTSD will trigger four distinct symptoms: 1) reliving or re-experiencing the event; 2) staying away from people, places or things related to the event; 3) problematic feelings and beliefs about

the event; and 4) feeling on edge or keyed up. Each symptom may cause a variety of issues linked to the trauma and PTSD. In the case of reliving the event, the patient could have: 1) frequent, vivid or frightening nightmares; 2) flashbacks, which is the feeling that the event is happening all over; 3) triggers, which are sights, sounds, or smells that remind the person of the danger, like a loud car triggering memories of gunfire (The Recovery Village).

I wanted to be sure I crushed those stigmas completely out of the readers' minds when discussing Reyna's diagnosis. She was sent for a psychiatric evaluation after disobeying orders, so I made sure the scenes with the doctor were as accurate and true to real life as possible. I did consult with a few friends that deal with mental illness and therapy either for themselves or a loved one. This was a very touchy and sensitive subject, so I certainly did not want to offend anyone, and I definitely wanted to get it right. I feel that these issues are barely depicted in the light they need in order to shine for others to understand the complexity of it all. Though in some cases it can be debilitating, I wanted my readers to also understand that with proper care and treatment, everyone can lead a normal healthy life. The topic of mental illnesses always fascinated me, so I thought it was about time to bring it into my writing and novels.

After all is said and done, I have poured my blood, sweat, tears, and heart into this novel and what it stands for. Reaching this final point in the long process has not been easy, but I feel that pairing the knowledge and skills I have tried to hone in my two years pursuing my master's degree, with the lessons I discovered on my own, I have developed a strong novel with an even stronger theme. As an independent Hispanic woman I felt it was important to create a character with the same core values and pride I grew up on. Raised by a single mother we were taught that you don't need a man for anything you should be able to do yourself. Also, seeing some of my friends struggle with mental illness, be it their own or their family, made me realize that more

positive attention needed to be brought to the public. I just hope I did them all justice with my research and interpretation. Reyna Montoya is one of my strongest characters, physically and emotionally, and if I have portrayed her and her story properly, this will not be the last you see of her.

Chapter One

Hidden behind the boulders that surrounded the small village, Captain Reyna Montoya got into position to back up her team. The sun was setting over the vast expanse of rock and sand, but there was still enough light to see her men below approaching the home of their target. Amad Kashir was discovered, through various channels of chatter, to be the head of a newly awakened terrorist cell. Her superiors wanted him brought in alive, so Reyna's ground special ops team was there to do just that. They had never been to this secluded region of Qatar, so they were all on high alert.

"I've got eyes on you boys." Captain Montoya announced to her team.

"Watch our six Eagle Eye, and we'll do the rest."

She couldn't help but smile to herself. The team had come a long way in the last two years. The six career Marines had been shocked when they found out a woman would be their new special ops team leader. It wasn't easy erasing the stigma of being a woman in such a position of strength and power with the Marines, but she had worked her ass off to prove she could do the job better than anyone else, man or woman, and earned their respect. Now there was nothing they wouldn't do for her and vice versa.

"All clear so far. Should be an easy in and out for this extraction, but don't let your guard down."

As her men surrounded the house located on the outer perimeter of the village, Kashir, his wife, and their two small children were about to begin their evening meal. The team was stealth in their movements as they approached so as not to be heard through the open window. The children were preoccupied with a toy while the wife walked towards the table with a tray full of food to serve her husband. Just as she approached, she lost her footing trying to avoid

stepping on her children and their toys. The wife and the tray lunged forward and covered Kashir in the hot meal. He leapt to his feet in obvious anger, yelling at her in Pashto, “You stupid woman! Look what you’ve done you clumsy beast!” He slapped her away from him when she tried to clean the mess she made.

Chief Warrant Officer Townes, Reyna’s second in command, jumped on the com, “Eagle Eye, are you seeing this? What do you want us to do?”

“I see it, hold your positions,” she responded.

All the poor woman could do was continue to apologize and beg as she tried to clean up the mess, but Kashir kept yelling and hitting her. “The only thing you’ve ever done right as a worthless woman is bare me children. I can’t even stand to look at you.” He back handed her, and she fell to her knees.

Townes broke in on the com again, “This isn’t right. Can we go in and stop it?”

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but if we go in now, we could make matters worse.” Reyna shook her head as she continued to watch the abuse through her scope.

She watched in discomfort as the woman, on her knees and, with the children crying from all the yelling, inch close to her husband as she continued to beg and plead for forgiveness.

Kashir suddenly had enough, pulled out his gun, and aimed it at her head. “You worthless beast, I should save us all the trouble of dealing with you any longer.”

“Shit!” Reyna nearly shouted into the com, “I’m looking for a clear shot, so continue to hold y-”

“You hold, we need him alive,” blared a new voice into her ear. Lieutenant Colonel Ashe, her commanding officer, had locked in on her com and cut in.

“Situation has taken a turn.” Reyna quickly explained.

“Do not reassess, Montoya. Bring him in.”

“I’m not sending my men straight into a hostile situation.” Reyna’s heart was racing, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end like an attack dog ready to pounce. “I need to take him out before he kills those innocents.”

“Stand down and do your job, Montoya!”

“Their mother sir, he’s going to kill their mother!” Her head was spinning, and her thoughts were suddenly clouded as her eyes seemed to go out of focus. She was drifting somewhere else.

The flash and pop of the bullet flying out of the muzzle of his gun echoed in her ears as she watched her father’s limp body drop to the floor. She was only 17 years old, and helplessly staring at the back of the killer’s head. Another loud pop and her mother screamed out as she fell beside her husband, their blood mixing on the floor between them. All Reyna could do was watch from the corner of the dark hallway in disbelief as she hoped he didn’t know she was there too.

“Montoya! Are you listening? Respond!” Ashe yelled in her ear.

Reyna snapped back into reality completely confused about what just happened. “The children! Their mother!”

“Montoya! Stand down! That’s an order!”

Without hesitation, she squeezed the trigger. The .338 Lapua Magnum bullet whizzed out of her McMillan TAC-338 sniper rifle and sailed through Kashir’s medulla oblongata, or “apricot” as sniper’s call it. Reyna watched the rest of the scene play out through her scope. The impact pushed Kashir back into the wall behind him and he was dead before he hit the floor. There wasn’t even a shiver when he slid down the wall in a slump. The children jumped up off

the floor they had been confined to and ran into their mother's arms. She held them as close as she could and rocked them as she continued screaming. Tears streaked their faces as their pain echoed out the window and straight through Reyna's heart. She took a breath to brush off the emotion before speaking to her men.

Ashe must have dropped his com signal because Reyna was able to hear her men again.

"Eagle Eye! What the hell? Now what?" Townes broke into her thoughts.

"LtCol Ashe wanted us to bring him in boys, so bag him and let's roll out before any of Kashir's men show up."

"You heard her boys, double time." He rounded up the team and they followed their Captain's orders.

The team went in while Reyna watched and covered them from her position between the boulders on the outskirts of the small village. The woman, still in shock, held her children and moved aside. She didn't say a word, and turned the children's heads, as the Marines bagged Kashir's body and took him out of the home. She didn't look too concerned that these American soldiers were taking her husband. Reyna shook her head as she watched, knowing she would be just as uncaring if her husband had shoved a gun to her head too. Despite how well she hid her emotions from everyone, her heart was racing a mile a minute and her hands were a little shaky. It wasn't even worry that Ashe was going to ream her about disobeying his order. She knew she made the right call. She saved that woman's life and her children, but she couldn't understand why the image of her own mother's murder invaded her mind. Why had that buried memory come out to haunt her now, after twenty years? It didn't make any sense and it was making her head hurt.

Reyna's team was out of the village and back at their vehicle just as she made it down from her perch. They all piled into the Humvee and sped away on the dirt road leading back to base. Townes drove, and Reyna rode shotgun. Her head was killing her, but she did all she could to stay alert and focused. There could still be some sudden retaliation, so they needed to remain wary of their surroundings.

"LtCol Ashe is gonna have your ass once we get back to camp."

"Yeah, probably," Reyna rubbed her temples as she spoke.

"He gets bent outta shape when you use your own brain." Sgt Green commented again from the back row. He was usually the quiet one of the group, but even he knew the shit was about to hit the fan.

Reyna chuckled as she leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes for a minute to stop the pounding in her head. "I can't help that I'm the one with bigger balls."

The Oooo's filled the Humvee. "He's probably afraid you're after his rank and job."

"Oh, he should definitely be afraid of all of that." She laughed then groaned holding her head. "Now shut up, my head is fucking killing me."

~ * ~ * ~

"We're here." Townes announced as he pulled up to the bunkers on the small compound they were using as a temporary base.

They all got out of the vehicle and walked around to the back to get the body bag. Just as they had the bag in hand and turned to head towards the barracks, LtCol Ashe rushed up on them. They all stood at attention as they put the body bag down, and saluted their superior officer.

He stood in front of Reyna with only two feet between them, "Montoya!"

She stood a little straighter out of habit. “Yes sir.”

“What part of *bring him back alive* did you and your rat pack not understand?”

Reyna took a deep breath, almost as though fighting with her inner thoughts to say the right thing, but it was a miserable fail when she opened her mouth, “It must have been the alive part, sir.”

Her team snickered but stopped immediately when Ashe glared at them. “This is why women don’t belong out in the field.”

She has dealt with ignorant men her entire military career and took pleasure in proving them wrong. It burned her ass when high-ranking officials put her down just because they assumed women don’t belong in combat. Her record proved she was more than capable of doing the job, having been honored to be awarded a silver star twice, and legion of merit.

She had been leading her team with honor and respect. She tilted her head slightly in what she hoped looked like confusion and shock at his statement. “Because we’re smart asses with vaginas instead of penises, sir?”

“No, but you should put a filter on that mouth!” He grit his teeth as he spoke. “Because you all let your damn girly emotions get in the way of your objectives and orders.” Ashe was an older generation Marine who still believed a woman’s place in the military was as an Officer’s secretary or personal assistant.

“With all due respect sir, the situation out there changed, and I had to make a quick decision to protect the woman and her children.”

“That wasn’t *your* call to make. You had direct orders from me.”

“We’ll agree to disagree, sir.” She was treading on thin ice and she knew it, but she was too pissed to care. Ashe has had a personal problem with her since day one when she took over

the team after Captain Hank Solo was promoted and reassigned. It was probably the fact that Hank went over Ashe's head to ensure Reyna was the one given the Captain promotion, as well as team lead.

She could see him clench his fists at her remark, "You're just a stubborn and insubordinate bi- "

"-Oh sir!" Reyna took a slight step back and raised her hand to stop his sentence as she heard some of her men gasp in disbelief, "For both our sakes, don't finish that sentence. My men don't have money for my bail."

Releasing his fists, Ashe took a moment before he spoke again. "You're to report to Major Henry Jones when we get back to LeJeune. Your appointment is on Wednesday at ten hundred hours."

"Major Jones? The shrink? What the- Why?" She swore she saw the corner of his mouth turn up in a smirk.

"Because Major Ramirez said I can't court martial and discharge you on the spot since you have an impeccable record with no disciplinary actions against you. His words, not mine. So, you get to go to the shrink for a psych eval. Maybe he can figure out why you flipped."

Her voice raised an octave, not completely on purpose, but there it was anyway. "I didn't flip! I chose a different outcome to accommodate the drastic shift in the situation."

"It was the wrong decision."

"Says you." She threw back without hesitation.

"Damn right says me, and what I say is all that matters." He took a step closer to Reyna, and she could hear her men all take a breath. "I think it best you remember who you're talking to, Captain."

She knew exactly who she was talking to, and that she was crossing the line, but she couldn't stop the downward spiral. "I had to place my men's lives and safety first."

"You can explain it all to the doctor Wednesday morning. You can all fall in and hit the sack. Leave the body there; I'll have someone else retrieve it. Your flight back home leaves at 0700."

Reyna was about to stick her foot in her mouth one more time and say something else that would have made matters worse, but her men saw the signs and grabbed her as they head towards the barracks.

"What the fuck just happened?" She exclaimed as they practically dragged her away.

"Exactly what Green told you was gonna happen. You pissed him off and the shit hit the fan."

Chapter Two

Reyna slouched in the old and worn brown leather couch with her arms crossed defiantly in front of her, staring at Major Henry Jones with her right eyebrow cocked. Her fatigues were perfectly pressed and her long red hair was pulled back at the nap of her neck.

“Ok Montoya, you can’t just sit here staring at me the whole hour and expect me to magically clear you back for duty.”

Reyna just glared at the base psychiatrist. She shifted closer to the edge, ready to bolt if he said the wrong thing.

“I know you don’t want to be here,” his tone was calm and soothing, “but it could have been worse. You could have been court martialed and discharged on the spot. Your years of service and impeccable career gave you this rare opportunity. So, talking to me can’t be half bad.”

“I’m not really into talking about my feelings, Major Jones.”

“Okay, for now let’s not talk about feelings. Tell me what happened in your own words. If you can tell me what was going through your mind at the time, then it might help me understand why you disobeyed a direct order.”

“I don’t know,” she flopped back and dropped her arms at either side of her.

“Just take a deep breath, relax, and let your mind go back to that evening.”

“I don’t even know how this is supposed to be helpful.”

“You’re here because your CO asked me to evaluate whether or not you are fit for active duty. I can’t do that until I understand what happened. I don’t mean just the facts that are in the report. If you help me understand what was going through your mind then we can work it out.

I'm not here to jam you up, Reyna. I'm just here to understand what happened. I'm on your side."

"My side? You don't even know what my side is." The frustration was evident in her voice.

"So, explain it to me."

"Fine, LtCol Ashe was wrong and his orders were bullshit." She lost what little control she was trying to keep in check.

"Let's try this," he cleared his throat and flipped through the file on Reyna he had in his lap, "I'll tell you what is in the report and you fill in the gaps and blanks."

She shrugged her shoulders in involuntary surrender. She knew opening her mouth again could have ended in disaster.

"Ok, you and your team were on assignment. You are the team leader as well as their sniper when called for. You had followed your information to capture the head of a new terrorist cell. Your orders from LtCol Ashe were to capture him and bring him in once a positive ID was made. So, what's your report? Where did all this go wrong?"

Reyna cursed under her breath as she began her side of the story. "We came up to the small village as the sun was setting. It's a small village that sits in a canyon-like crevice. My team knew what they needed to do on the ground, so-

"-Let's fast forward. Where did everything change?" He leaned back in his armchair and crossed his leg, ankle over knee.

"My team approached and surrounded the house." Her back was rigid and shoulders slightly slouched as she explained what she saw through Kashir's open window. Her feet were planted firmly on the floor as she leaned forward and rested her arms on her knees.

“I’m sure that wasn’t easy to watch unfold,” his voice remained monotone and calm.

“It was hard, but I had the power to control the situation and help them.”

“And in that moment, you felt that required going against a direct order and killing the target?”

“You’re twisting my words.” Reyna replied in frustration, as she raised her voice.

“Untwist them for me. At the time, could you think of any other way to diffuse the situation? Was killing him the only solution to the scenario?”

Her frustration continued to rise as she tried to gather her thoughts and words. “I joined the Marines because I wanted to make a difference while protecting my new country and the innocent people who live here.”

Major Jones furrowed his eyes slightly as he watched her struggle through her responses. It was obvious that talking about herself and her feelings were not easy.

She continued, “I am one of the few women who was allowed to attend and pass sniper training, and one of the few elite females in charge of her own special ground force team. I am damn good at what I do and always place the safety and lives of others before my own.”

Major Jones took a cleansing breath and clasped his hands in his lap. “I’m not questioning your ability Captain, that was never a factor. I would just like for you to tell me what was going through your mind when you saw this turn into a domestic violence situation?” Major Jones maintained his composure in order to bring her anger back down to a more manageable level.

“My brain went into overdrive. I was trying to keep the situation from escalating by communicating with my team, but Ashe kept cutting into my com. He had blocked the team to get into mine. I could see it was all going to go south very fast. I got on the com and asked Ashe

to let me do my job and lead the team.” She leaned forward as she spoke, wringing her hands and clenching her teeth.

“So, what I’m hearing is that Ashe wasn’t listening to you or your suggestions.”

Her explosion of words continued, her hands and arms in motion as she gestured for emphasis. “He sure didn’t, but he wasn’t there seeing what we were seeing either. I had a clear shot of this guy from where I was in the rock cluster across from the main window. I could save the woman and the children.”

“And the only way to do that was to shoot the target?”

Her voice raised another octave, her pitch went higher, and her throat tightened, “He was going to shoot their mother in the head, right in front of their crying little eyes.”

His eyes widened slightly at her burst of emotion. “So, you had to shoot him first? Was that the only way to diffuse the situation?”

She shook her head in disbelief. Was he not listening? “The children were screaming. They were scared. He was going to kill their mother!”

“But did you have to shoot him?”

She jumped up. “Of course, I did! I couldn’t let him shoot my mother!” Her emotions had gotten the best of her, which she never allows to happen, as a tear streamed down her face.

“Your mother?” He wasn’t sure if he managed to hide his look of surprise.

“What?” She sat back down and her emotions shut down as quickly as they started, and she furrowed her eyes at him in confusion.

“You said, I couldn’t let him shoot my mother.”

“No, I’m sure I didn’t. I said, their mother.” Her heart was pounding in her ears. Even she wasn’t sure what she said.

“I record all my sessions, Captain, would you like me to play it back for you?”

“No.” She was indignant and confused.

“I have a feeling there was something else going on in your head. My guess is something your brain unconsciously walled off to protect itself and you.” Major Jones leaned forward in his chair. He finally triggered something, and now he had to work to get it all out.

“I, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Isn’t our time up by now?”

“I thought you wanted to be cleared back for duty.”

“I told you what you wanted to know. I disobeyed an order to save the innocents. I had to take him down.”

“You keep saying you had to, you had to save them. Are you sure it was them you were trying to save?”

“Oh geez! Who the hell was it then?” Her arms flew up in the air again. Frustration was beyond settled in and she was having trouble controlling the surges of emotions she was feeling.

“That’s what we’re going to figure out. Whatever it is you had buried from your memory was triggered when that woman’s life was threatened, and it wants your attention.” He leaned even further with his elbows on his knees and waggled his pen as he spoke.

“Nope, just need to bury it deeper.” Reyna was adamant and defiant.

“Let’s think about this. You and I both know that if it triggered once there’s a good chance it can happen again. It blinded you, took over your emotions and caused you to disobey orders.” Reyna shifted in her seat, feeling completely out of her element, distracting the doctor’s thoughts. “If you don’t let me help you get this under control, next time an episode like this happens could put the lives of your men or innocent civilians at risk, and I know you don’t want that.”

“Fuck it, I can’t do this today.” She stood up to leave.

“Alright,” he leaned back again, “tomorrow 0900, we’ll finish this conversation then.”

“But I- “

“That’s an order. Now go home and get some rest, Captain.”

“Yes sir.”

Reyna went straight home. She didn’t even stop at the gym. The session with Major Jones mentally drained her. Not only that, but now she was stressed about her second session the next morning. She knew she certainly didn’t want to dwell on her heartache from the past. Not again. Not ever.

Nicolás was in his usual spot on the couch with his laptop and early afternoon beer, with his curly brown hair pushed away from his face. After all their years together, he was still a creature of habit. She dropped onto the leather couch across from him, staring at him and his cushy lifestyle. “I think I want a job where I can sit around all day and drink wine whenever I want.” She tossed her keys on the coffee table. The clatter forcing attention to her.

He looked at her over the top of his laptop screen and smiled. “You’re the one that wanted to join the Marines and help the innocent. I told you to be the spoiled girlfriend whose job is to have spa days, shop, and spend her man’s money.”

“Great, throw that in my face.” She rolled her eyes. She chose the military to make her parent proud, as well as protect the innocent. She used to be one of those innocents, but she had to learn how to protect herself.

“Dare I ask how the psycho session went? Do they use shock treatment here like they did back home?” He rubbed his hands together in an evil scientist kind of way.

Reyna sat there staring, unsure where to begin her tale of misery. Her eyes wandered around the small living room and stopped on the wood burning fireplace that had never been used because neither of them could stand the smell of the smoke. She did, however, catch a whiff of whatever Nicolás had cooking in the oven.

Nicolás had been her best friend since they were children in Cuba. Their parents were neighbors and close friends, so naturally the children played together. They could usually be found outside trying to outrun or out bicycle each other down the road in front of their houses. After Reyna's parents were killed when she was seventeen, he fled the country with her to keep her safe. Over the years their friendship evolved into a deeper romantic relationship.

It was hard for them at first, two teenagers alone in a foreign country. But Nico fell back on the technological and scientific training he'd been getting at the military academy in Cuba. Nico worked to become one of the best hackers out there and dabbles in chemistry of the poison kind. In the beginning he worked whatever jobs he could get, mostly shady stuff from the dark web. But a few years ago, Reyna introduced him to a freelance contractor named Viper she worked off-the-books special ops jobs with every so often. He was former CIA, and now had his own business with guns for hire. His jobs are mostly foreign and domestic government contracts with the occasional shady mission. Now Nico makes his big money from foreign and domestic governmental special ops jobs passed to him by Viper.

"It was a nightmare, Nico. He made me get into my one little feeling."

"Oh shit, that *is* a nightmare." His deep voice was oozing with sarcasm. He knew all too well she didn't like to get into her feelings or dwell on the past, let alone have to talk about any of it to a stranger. He could barely get her to open up emotionally to him either most of the time. She was still a very closed off and private person.

“You’re not funny and I’m not kidding.”

“I know you’re not. So, what happened?”

She told him everything, including the fact that she had to be back tomorrow morning to talk about her past, “Or else.”

“Babe, I’m pretty sure the professionally trained psychiatrist and Marine Major did not say or else.” He shook his head to keep from laughing at her over dramatization. Their years together have taught him a few things and knowing when to pull back was one of them.

“He might as well have, Nico.” She stood up to pace the living room. “I don’t know what to do. Is telling him everything going to save my military career or just make my damn nightmares worse by hashing all this back up?”

“I don’t know, that’s a demon you’re going to have to wrestle yourself, but I do know that you don’t want a dishonorable discharge haunting you and your future.”

“I was doing so good at keeping it all buried so deep I had even forgotten about it.”

“A trauma like that is never really buried so deep that it disappears, Rey. It was bound to surface out of your nightmares at some time.”

“Now you sound like one of those cheesy TV shrinks.”

“TV or not, you know I’m right, and I know your nightmares have never gone away. They’ve gotten worse over the years. You’ve jumped up screaming and kicking in the middle of the night too many times to count.”

Reyna dropped back down onto the couch, almost defeated. She knew he was right but didn’t want to admit that. Her position was one of strength and leadership. The slightest show of weakness, in her mind, would diminish the respect she has worked hard to earn.

Chapter Three

The morning sunlight shone through the blinds and onto Reyna's face all too soon the next morning. She rolled out of bed and dressed for her morning run before her appointment on base with Major Jones.

She arrived early and was outside Major Jones's office waiting for him to arrive. He showed up a few minutes later, keys in hand, "I wasn't expecting you to be here early."

"Might as well get it over with." Reyna's straight forward, no filter personality was a little abrasive to some, but that was who she was. She learned early on from her father not to take crap from anyone, and that demeanor oozed into her filter-less way of conducting herself.

"Great attitude, Captain." He opened the door and stepped aside to let her in. "After our conversation yesterday, I am hoping you will be more open with me today."

"Not really, but my career and reputation are threatened and, on the line, so let's get this over with." Shrugging her shoulders, she walked across his office.

"I'm not trying to end your military career. I'm trying to help you understand your actions."

"Yeah, sure, I get it." She made herself as comfortable as she could and waited for him to get his file and notepad.

"Ok, so let's pick up right where we left off yesterday. Do you recall what we last said?"

Reyna bit her tongue to refrain from blurting out a rude smart-ass remark, but her inner filter failed again. "No, I got it. You said I said *my* mother, I'm sure I said *their* mother, so apples and oranges with a little he said she said thrown in for good measure."

"And there she is. For a split second there you had me believing you really wanted to get this all out and over with." He chuckled and shook his head.

She threw her arms up in the air, exacerbated with the whole situation. “Fine, what do you need to know? My childhood? My traumatic past?”

“Yes, all of that if it’s going to help. You need to acknowledge that something in your past is trying to surface and may be affecting your reasoning in the field.”

“My past is not a problem. I am who I am because of it.” At this point Reyna wasn’t sure if she was trying to convince him or herself. She’s the no nonsense woman she was because that’s how her parents tried to raise her.

“Okay, it’s not a problem. But if it made you who you are, why don’t you tell me a bit more about it. Perhaps it will help me understand you a better.”

Reyna took a deep breath. She wasn’t sure what was going to come of anything she said, but she no longer had a choice in the matter. “I’m not even sure where to start.”

“As far back as you feel you need to for me to get the full picture.”

“I was born in Cuba. I came to America when I was seventeen with my best friend Nicolás. He was nineteen.”

Major Jones maintained his usual calm and monotone voice, “Why did you two leave Cuba alone at such a young age?”

“There was an incident.”

“An incident? What kind of incident?”

“Right.” She took a cleansing breath. “Well, I was seventeen and-”

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There are only a couple more days left before the three-day celebration for the National Revolutionary Holiday. The whole town is preparing, but all I can think about is getting to see my best friend Nicolás. He’s been gone for almost six months for military training. I’ve felt so

lost without him. No one understands me like he does. He should be home some time tomorrow and I can't wait.

Mami serves *la comida* at our five o'clock regular time, but something feels completely off. My excited high begins to fade when we sit down to eat and I notice my parents aren't their normal jovial selves. They are quiet and serious, and my concern mounts as I realize *Papi* hasn't even told us his daily corny joke. "*Papi*, are you ok? Is anything wrong?" I ask.

"I wouldn't say anything is wrong, *mija*, but we do need to talk," he says in that serious tone he only uses when he is lecturing me. My stomach churns.

"Papi, you're scaring me."

Mami moves her chair closer to me and reaches for my hand. "Don't be scared *mijita*, we just want to tell you a few things to prepare you just in case there is ever an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?" My stomach churns again and I'm suddenly sorry for the little bit of dinner I've eaten. "Papi, are you sick? Mami? Do you have cancer? Are you going to die?" I look back and forth at them in growing panic. I can't imagine life without either of my parents.

"No, *mijita*, neither of are sick," my father says. "But we do live in very uncertain times."

He starts talking about how comfortably we've lived here in Cuba under Castro's regime, because we are part of his inner circle, but things are getting out of control and Castro's cruelty is showing more every day. Then he goes on to tell me that he and *mami* have been part of the movement against Castro since I was ten, so they want me to be prepared in case the day comes they're discovered. This feels like a little too much for me to take in right now.

“If anything should happen to us, there is already a plan in place for your safety.” Those words just linger for a few minutes before I can process them completely. I want to interrupt, ask him questions, but he keeps going. I’m trying my best to stay focused.

Papi goes on to tell me that Nicolás’s military path is being reassigned to the science department with his father at the military university. They pulled some strings and called in some favors to get him there. I’m thrilled he will be back home where he belongs, with me, but if something happens I’m supposed to run next door, without being seen, and tell Nico it’s time to go fishing.

He must not think I’m listening because he keeps asking if I understand. I do and I don’t, but I nod anyway. I’m still not sure why he’s telling me all this now. I swear he’s afraid something is about to happen.

The rest seems a bit tricky in my opinion. Nico and I are supposed to go to the marina late at night so no one can see us or identify us. There’s a small yacht docked that he paid for using an alias. The cabin below has full wardrobes, and a safe that’s hidden in a panel in the walk-in closet that’s full of American money. *Mami* says it’s more than enough for Nico and I to live comfortably for a few years till we’re settled and have good jobs. We’re just kids so where do they think we would even work?

“Follow the coordinates already set in the yacht’s navigation system, it will take you straight to Miami.” He says we have to get rid of everything, all traces of Cuba, while we’re in International waters. Just dump it overboard and be sure it all sinks, he says. He got us U.S. passports and green cards already too. He’s telling me we probably won’t get stopped by the Coast Guard, but just in case we have the passports and paperwork.

My head is still swarming with information overload when I go to bed, so of course I have trouble getting to sleep. I can't help but think my parents left something out. It's not like they can worry me any more than I already am at this point.

I'm still very tired the next morning so *mami* says I can stay home from school as long as I do some studying for finals next week. Staying home means I get to see Nico sooner, so I readily promise I'll study.

I'm in my bedroom studying when I hear pounding at the front door. I glance at my bedside clock and see it's almost 2:30. I jump up thinking it's Nico, but the raspy voice of the man they let in tells me otherwise. I go back to my studies only to get interrupted again by arguing coming from the living room. Curious about what's happening, I sneak down the hall towards the living room. I see the man, but his back is to me. My parents have their backs to the wall, facing me.

"How dare you!" My father's face is red with rage as he yells at the other man. I'm frozen in shock; my father never raises his voice.

. "You've been meddling into things you should have walked away from and left alone!" His raspy voice sends a chill up my spine.

I'm terrified, but I'm not sure what I should do.

"You told us, now you can go!" Mami says, her raised voice shaky. She looks so scared. I want to inch closer, but I catch my father's eye, and he cocks his eyebrow at me. I know that look all too well, so I stay put.

"I can't risk either of you telling anyone and destroying what I've built!" The man's voice is deadly calm as he pulls something out of his pocket and raises his arm at my parents.

I can't see what it is, but I think it's a gun. Ice floods my veins as I look at Mami and Papi. The terror on their faces tells me that I'm right and the man has a gun. Help. I need to help. But I can't make my feet move.

I hear three muffled pops. My hands fly to my mouth to cover the gasp and keep me from screaming out. I just stand there watching my parents' bodies slump to the floor almost like it's in slow motion. Blood! So much blood!

Horror shoots through me and I realize I can't let him see me. He'll kill me too.

The hallway I'm in is dark and I force my body into motion, backing slowly into the open linen closet. I pull the door almost closed, but don't shut it completely so that he doesn't hear the latch. There's just enough of a crack for me to still see him. I still have my mouth covered, I'm too scared I'll make a sound. In the tiny closet even my breathing sounds deafening and I'm so afraid he'll hear me. My heart nearly stops when the murderer turns around and I can see his face perfectly. Those beady eyes will haunt me forever.

He stares down the hall for a long moment, and I'm positive he's heard me. But instead of coming down the hall he turns and leaves. I stay in the closet until I hear the gravel crunching under his tires when he pulls out of our driveway.

I creep out of the closet slowly and stare at my parents' bodies, surrounded by blood, one last time before I run out the back door. I can barely see through my tears as I run through our backyard to the neighbor's house. Just as I reach their kitchen door it flies open and I collide with Nicolás. I'm sobbing hysterically as he grabs me by the arms to look at me with his ocean blue eyes full of concern. "It's time to go fishing."

~ * ~ * ~

The tears were flowing down her cheeks when she finished her story. Major Jones handed her the box of tissues off the desk.

“I am very sorry for your loss and that you were a witness to it.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“Well, that definitely explains why the hostage situation triggered all this emotion, and why you believed that you had to disobey LtCol Ashe’s orders.”

“I didn’t think it was all connected. This is the first time I have even talked about it with anyone since it happened.” Reyna had buried it and moved on with her life because she had to. She was determined to be a stronger woman and learn how to better defend herself and others. She didn’t want to be a victim, ever. She wiped her face and blew her nose, but she couldn’t stop the pain in her chest.

“I completely understand, and according to your records, you have done a great job of it.” He flipped through her file as he spoke, making sure he had not missed anything that needed to be covered.

“I knew it, I feel a ‘but’ coming on.”

“Not at all. I do have a few questions, though.” He tapped his lip with his finger as he thought.

Reyna let out a sigh. She was really hoping this session was over. “What else do you need to know?”

“Did you happen to notice that you were telling me about your parents’ death as though you were there? Almost like you were reliving it?” Major Jones leaned back in his chair as he waited for her response.

“I don’t know,” she hesitated, unsure of the correct answer, “I just have vivid memories, I guess.

“Vivid, ok, fair enough.” Major Jones nodded. “What about nightmares?”

She shrugged her shoulders and leaned forward on the couch. She was getting uncomfortable again, but knew she had to answer. “Well, yeah, all the time, but that’s normal... isn’t it?”

The expression on his face showed concern, but he didn’t answer. Instead he asked, “Do you also have trouble sleeping?”

“I guess. I’m a Marine Captain in charge of a special ops team, sleep is a luxury I can’t always afford.” That was a half-truth. The nightmares did keep her awake and were intense at times, so intense that she has scared Nicolás on more than a few occasions. She also used work as an excuse to keep from having to go to sleep.

Major Jones closed Reyna’s file. “Captain Montoya, you have all the symptoms and reactions of post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.”

“Oh, come on,” Reyna tried to laugh, “my parents died twenty years ago, I was just a teenager.”

“That’s where most people with PTSD get confused and have a hard time believing they have the disorder.” He took a breath as he began his explanation. “Symptoms may start within a month of a traumatic event, but sometimes the symptoms may not appear until years later. When they do appear, they can interfere with your ability to go about your normal tasks and duties.”

“How can you be so sure that’s what this is? I’ve been fine other than sleep.” She refused to believe anything was wrong, especially not a mental health condition. That would discharge her for sure.

He shook his head and took another deep breath. “Your flashbacks are vivid, like you’re reliving the event. You’ve been having nightmares I’m guessing for years that keep you from wanting to sleep, which also contribute to your trouble sleeping to begin with.” He paused for a moment, waiting to see if it was all sinking in. “And let’s not forget the giant elephant in the room. The hostage situation triggered a memory during your mission which then caused you to disobey your orders.”

“Fine!” She threw her arms up in the air in defeat. “How do I fix it so I can get back to work?”

“It’s not an easy fix. You can’t just pop a pill and it magically goes away forever.”

“Well why the hell not? Everyone knows that’s the way to go.” She was getting antsy and frustrated with this whole ordeal.

“You need treatment, probably long term. You need to find yourself a therapist you feel comfortable with and start psychotherapy, or they may place you on medication. You and your therapist will need to work together to find a treatment that works for you.”

“You’re the damn doctor and you don’t know? It all sounds like bullshit to me.” Reyna was getting all riled up and overreacting, but she was pissed. She was having trouble accepting that she suddenly had a mental disorder that needed a doctor and meds.

“I would gladly work with you to start treatment as you’ve already made a great breakthrough by talking about your parents, but only if you’re comfortable with me as your therapist.”

Reyna stood up and started pacing, wringing her hands as she moved. “I knew I should have kept all this to myself.”

“You need to be honest with yourself and try to see that opening up is going to continue to help you.”

“You said you weren’t out to ruin my career, yet here you are hinting at just that.” The anger was flaring back up in her tone.

“No one is trying to ruin your career. You need to understand that your emotional state was triggered in the field by something unexpected and out of the ordinary. The best thing for you is to start therapy. You feel as though you can bury it all again, but there is honestly no way to control or know what may trigger you again.”

“I say it won’t happen again!” Deep down she knew this was going to be the end of her military career. What really pissed her off was that Ashe was going to get his way. He was going to be rid of the female threat he felt was going to take over his precious job. How could she have been so stupid to show all that weakness when she needed to be fighting. How could she have allowed her past to get out and ruin her career and all that she built.

“I know you think that, and it’s normal to do so. Trust me and know that whatever you may think of me right now, you’ll thank me later for helping you open up.”

“The hell I will.” She stood and left without waiting to hear another word out of his mouth. She should have known better than to trust anyone other than Nicolás with her past.

Chapter Four

“You’re going to wear out the carpet along the perimeter of the living room.” Nicolás didn’t even look away from the monitor as he spoke, working on another assignment for a new contract Viper just acquired. It was as though he could sense her movement.

“I’m going out of my mind,” she continued to circle the room, “it’s been two weeks already and we still haven’t heard anything. I’m not used to this stay at home thing like you are.”

He stopped typing and looked up from the screen. “Babe, why don’t you get out of the house? You haven’t left the house in these two weeks.” He would have tried to drag her out or take her somewhere, but he’s been busy with work. Viper had him working three different government contracts at once. Getting the men they needed, checking their backgrounds, and assigning them to the proper jobs according to their skills wasn’t an easy task.

Reyna flopped down on the black leather couch across from his spot in the recliner. “I don’t know what to do if it’s not leaving the house to go to work. It’s not like I have any hobbies or a book club to run off to.” If this time away from the base taught her anything it was that she didn’t like being stuck at home all the time.

“Go to the gym or go swim a few laps in the pool at the clubhouse. You’re miserable inside the house, so get out there.” His bright blue eyes softened his face when he spoke. He had a deep voice that carried, but it was more soothing than booming.

She forced a half smile. “I know you mean well, *mi amor*, but all I really want is to get back on base and work. I’m sure my team is starting to freak out by now.”

“I’m sure they’re fine, but if you don’t get back on your gym regimen, you may not pass inspection and PT.” He waggled his eyebrows at her, daring her to prove him wrong.

“Really?” She stood and smacked her hand on her firm butt, “I’ll have you know you could still bounce a quarter off my perfect tight ass.”

Nicolás jumped up and grabbed her by the hand, pulling her towards the bedroom. “Well let’s test that shit out. I’ve got a quarter.”

Just as they passed the front door the doorbell rang. Reyna stopped, but Nicolás kept pulling. “Shh, come on,” he whispered, “If you don’t say anything they’ll go away.” She was about to give in and follow him when the doorbell rang again. “Damn, you’re gonna answer it aren’t you?” He let go of her hand and moped back to the living room.

Reyna smacked his ass as he walked by her, “We’ll finish this later.” She looked through the peephole and saw the mailman with a manilla envelope and a clipboard. She opened the door.

“I have a certified envelope for Captain Reyna Montoya,”

“I’m Captain Montoya.”

He handed her the clipboard and a pen, “I need you to sign for me please.”

She scribbled her signature and handed it back to him as he handed her the envelope.

“Thank you.” She closed the door with envelope in hand and walked back to the living room. She dropped the envelope on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

Nicolás looked up from what he was doing. “So, who was it, babe?”

She tried to smile but wasn’t sure if she succeeded. “It was the mailman with that certified mail from Camp LeJeune.” She pointed at the envelope on the table as she spoke. “The shit of it is that now I’m too scared to open it.”

“You’ve been waiting two weeks for them to tell you something. Now you have something, and you don’t want to look at it. How does that even make sense?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I just really have a bad feeling about all this.” Reyna had never been one to show any weakness, but with her military career on the line she was feeling less than confident. She curled her long tan legs under her as she tried to get comfortable on the couch. She pushed her long red hair out of her face and reached for the envelope.

Nicolás walked over to sit next to her. He placed his hand on her knee, “We got this.” He kissed her cheek.

Reyna looked into his bright blue eyes. She could see all his love and sincerity shining in those deep pools. Her heart swelled knowing he always had her back. “You’ll still love me even without the cool military job that keeps us moving every few years?” She didn’t like how that sounded the second it left her lips. Without the military was not an option she was willing to entertain. She was starting to wish she had gone to work for Viper when he offered again for the umpteenth time last month.

“Always, mi Reyna. Don’t ever doubt it.” He kissed her again. “Now open that thing up. Just rip it like a band aid.”

She rolled her eyes at his exaggerated enthusiasm. “Ok, ok.” She tore open the big yellow envelope and pulled out a letter neatly typed on Camp LeJeune letterhead. She took a deep breath and read the letter aloud. “Captain Reyna Montoya, you have served your country for eighteen years as an officer of the United States Marine Corp with pride, honor, and loyalty. Your record to date has been impeccable, and your actions in the field have been commendable.”

Reyna paused and looked at Nicolás. “I feel like they’re buttering me up for the kill.”

“Just keep reading.”

She took a deep breath to continue reading. “It is, however, with our deepest regret that we must inform you that due to your PTSD diagnosis from your recent psychological evaluation,

you are hereby honorably discharged from the United States Marine Corp for medical reason. Your discharge takes effect ten days from the date of this official letter.” She paused to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat. “Please use these days to collect your personal belongings from your office and locker on base. If you have any Government issued items in your possession, please be sure to turn them in to the proper authorities. You will receive your DD-214 in HR upon the return of your government issued items. Thank you again for your years of service. Sincerely, Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Ashe, USMC Camp LeJeune.”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” She screamed out in tears. “I fucking knew it! That bastard has wanted me out ever since I took command of the team.” Reyna was livid. She threw the letter back on the coffee table and buried her face in her hands.

“Rey, as badly as Ashe wanted you out of there, I don’t think this was his doing.”

She moved her hands from her face and furrowed her eyes. “Whose fucking side are you on right now?”

“Rey, just calm down a minute and listen to me.” He stopped her from jumping off the couch to get away from him in her anger. “I did my own research on PTSD so I could get a better understanding of how to help you, and that doctor wasn’t wrong.”

Reyna shot him another deadly look, but at the same time her eyes were filled with water again. “So, you’re on their side.” Her voice cracked when she spoke. “I thought we were in this together.”

Nicolás lowered his head and took a cleansing breath before he looked back up at her and continued. “*Mi amor*, please, I did it because I love you and I want to be able to help you. Let me show you.” He reached for his laptop that was also sitting on the coffee table and opened The Mayo Clinic website. “Everything Major Jones told you is right here in black and white.” He

clicked on the different pages and sections. “These detail everything. The symptoms, causes, risk factors, diagnosis, treatment, coping and support. So many of these are exactly what you have been dealing with for years, and we had no idea what it was or why.” He handed her the laptop to read for herself.

Reyna sat there for a few minutes, staring at the screen as she clicked through the sections. She stopped after a while and looked at Nicolás. “So, I really am damaged goods? I didn’t wanna believe it when Major Jones said I have a mental disorder.”

He placed his hand on her face and wiped a stray tear with his thumb. “No baby, you’re not damaged goods. You had a very traumatic experience and it messed with your wiring. It’s not uncommon, and it is treatable, but you have to want to.”

She sniffled as she spoke, still a little confused by it all. “I just don’t want to be labeled. I’m not crazy.”

“Of course not, and no one said you’re crazy. Having a mental health condition doesn’t automatically mean you’re crazy. We just need to work on stabilizing the mood swings so you can continue a normal and healthy life. Hell, you might even get some real damn sleep, and maybe you won’t keep getting angry so easily.”

They looked through all the information together over the next two hours, and made a few decisions on what they thought they should do to help her. Reyna had calmed down and agreed that she would do what she needed in order to get well, for both their sakes. “And yes, I’ll stop by Major Jones’s office and apologize for my asshole behavior when I ask for a referral to a civilian doctor.” She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I suppose I need to go out to the base and pack up my office and gun locker.”

“Don’t forget the letter said to turn in any government issued items, that’s gonna mean your weapons, so take them with you.”

Reyna laughed, “Yeah sure, they can have my side arm and the shitty M24 sniper rifle they issued me, but the McMillan TAC-338 is my baby. Viper gave that to me on our last black ops mission together two summers ago, including the 338 Lapua bullets she likes to shoot.”

Nicolás shook his head as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “Do you need me to come with you?”

“No, *mi amor*, I can always get the guys to help me load the car. I need to be sure I see them while I’m there.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “What am I going to do without my team? I don’t know how not to be a Marine.”

“Once a Marine, always a Marine! Isn’t that the code?” Nicolás reminded her.

“Oorah!” She smiled and kissed him gently on the lips. “You’re the only one who ever truly understood me.” All the years they have been together grew from the seed of friendship when they were just kids. It helped them to better understand each other, and to survive so far away from home. Their love didn’t happen just because they found themselves alone in a foreign country. There was always a fondness, a close bond neither truly understood until they had to rely on each other for everything. They knew it was more than friendship after some liquid courage from celebrating Reyna’s 25th birthday. Her eyes and heart were opened, and she saw him for the man he had become. The man who loved her and risked everything for her. Finally admitting it to each other was the best decision they ever made.

“You sure you want to go out to the base today? The letter does say you have ten days.”

Reyna knew Nicolás was trying to protect her and keep her calm. “I just need to get it over with. The longer I put it off the harder it’s going to be,” she reached for her cell phone in

the back pocket of her shorts. “I better text the guys to be sure they are all on base so I can say good-bye.” She was vague in her text to her men. She didn’t want to tell them anything over the phone. That was just too impersonal, and they deserved better than that. She wasn’t sure how she was going to tell them, but she knew she had to be the one to do it. Reyna was afraid that the story would get distorted if anyone else told it, especially Ashe. They all responded quickly. A few of them said they were on base, while the rest said they would be there within the hour. This gave her more than enough time to think things through before she spoke to her team.

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Reyna arrived at the main gate of Camp LeJeune about 45 minutes later. Her officer decal still proudly displayed on the front windshield for the guards at the gate to see and acknowledge with a salute. She was going to miss the respect her title and position demanded. She handed the guard her ID and waited for him to approve her passage through the gate.

He handed back her ID and ordered the gate be lifted. “Have a good evening Captain Montoya.” She thanked him and drove through.

She finally arrived at her building on the other side of the base. It wasn’t a huge building, but she did have a corner office. She had told her team to meet her there so they would have some privacy while she explained and packed. *What the fuck am I going to tell them?* Nicolás told her to just tell them the truth. That they would understand. How was she going to get them to understand if she could barely understand it herself?

Townes was the first to arrive. He had a look on his face like he already knew. He leaned on the door frame, his tall large build nearly blocking all the light from the hallway, with his arms folded across his broad chest. He was her second in command from the moment she took over the team, so he knew Reyna better than any of the other guys. “So is the rumor true?”

She looked up from her seat at her desk. She wanted to give her chair one last spin. “That depends on the rumor and who you heard it from.”

Townes grinned as he stepped into the office and sat in the cushioned chair in front of her mahogany desk. “Well the source is pretty shitty so I’m hoping it’s bullshit.”

Reyna leaned forward in her chair and rested her elbows on the desk. She tried to smile as she looked into the worn and tired eyes of her Chief Warrant Officer. “I want to wait until the rest of the team is here before I tell the whole story, but if the rumor is my discharge then it’s true.”

He slammed his fist on the desk, “That’s not fucking fair. Any one of us would have taken that damn shot too. Can we fight it?”

“Tom, there’s more to it, and no we can’t fight it.” Just then the rest of the team showed up. They stood in the doorway waiting for permission to enter. Her chest hurt as she told her men to come in for the last time. “Shut the door behind you, Lee.”

“We got here as fast as we could, Eagle Eye.” Sergeant Robbie Green was her Coms guy. He was the one who kept them all in communication when out in the field, no matter what foreign soil they were on. “Are we heading out again?”

“Not exactly.” Her office had an oval table in the far corner for their meetings, so she ushered them over to sit down. “I have something to tell you all because I don’t want you to hear it from anyone else, and I don’t want you to believe any ugly rumors that may start either.”

“Oh shit, you got knocked up!” Warrant Officer Mario Salazar was their bomb tech and specialist. If anything needed to explode, or needed diffusing, Mario was the man for the job.

“Oh man, computer nerd boy finally got the job done.” Corporal Miguel Leone, one of two marksmen on the team, laughed his ass off and high-fived Mario.

“You look good, you’re not even showing.” Corporal Jonathan Deveau, their other marksman, cut into the fun they were having at Reyna’s expense.

“You’re all idiots. Eagle Eye has no time for that shit. I bet she got promoted and took Ashe’s job.” First Sergeant Lee Chang, the team’s backup bomb tech, found his story to be the most believable.

“Oorah!” They all shouted in unison to express their enthusiasm and hope that Lee’s story was true. All except Townes, of course.

“Ok assholes, can you all shut the hell up and listen.” As amusing as they all thought they were, they were making it more difficult for Reyna to tell them the truth. They weren’t just a team to her; they were a family. They protected each other and watched each other’s backs in everything they did. They developed a bond and had become best of friends. There was nothing they wouldn’t do for each other, and now she was going to lose the only family she had. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek.

Now look what you assholes did,” Townes exclaimed, trying to lighten the mood, “you made her face leak.” He smiled at his Captain and got her the silence she needed.

“I’m not fucking pregnant and I didn’t get a promotion. Ashe is still your Lieutenant Colonel.” Their low groans made her heart happy as she stood from the chair at the head of the oval table. She stood there for a minute and looked at each of her men. She was so proud of her team and was truly going to miss these knuckleheads.

“Damn it, did your face leak cuz it’s bad news?” Chang jumped in before she could start her story.

“Yeah guys, it’s definitely not good news, at least not to me.” She took a deep breath and blurted it all out at once. “I was honorably discharged for medical reasons.” The looks on their

faces said it all. The shock didn't even let them speak. There were no smart-ass comments and no wise remarks.

Leone was the first to break the silence. "Medical reasons? I don't get it. You're healthier and stronger than some of us, Eagle Eye."

She sat back down and explained everything that happened during her psych eval. She told them about the flashbacks and the trauma that caused her to relive it and disobey Ashe's orders. No one spoke. They barely breathed as they hung on her every word. "So, after I told him everything and answered some of his questions, his diagnosis was PTSD. I was pissed, I didn't wanna hear what he was saying, and I didn't believe him, but Nicolás researched it and helped me understand it all better."

"I just can't believe you really have to leave," Mario cut in, "we were finally getting to like you and want you around."

Reyna shook her head. "I don't even know what to do with you jerks. Your next Captain is gonna have a shit show to deal with."

Townes stood up. "I know I speak for all of us when I say we're going to miss you." He cleared his throat and continued, "I've been with you the longest, and I'm a pretty old school Marine. I freaked the hell out when I was told we were going to be led by a woman. Yeah, I was scared shitless we were all gonna die on our first time out as a team. Then you walked in with your bad ass take no prisoners attitude, and you proved to every Marine on this base, especially me, that you had more than what it took to be a Marine and a leader. You needed a little help here and there, I was glad to teach you, and you were never afraid to ask. I would follow you anywhere Eagle Eye."

"Oorah!" They all stood at attention and saluted their Captain. "Semper Fi!"

“Oorah.” Reyna responded with a lump in her throat and tears in her eyes. “You know I love you guys and will always consider you family. I have never been more proud to work with a group of Marines that truly represent our core values of honor, courage, and commitment. It has truly been my pleasure and great honor to be your Captain and Eagle Eye.”

“Anytime, anywhere, you ever need us, we’ll be there.” Deveau came around the table to hug her good-bye. They were brothers and sister, and nothing was going to change that. “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

She wiped her face and put on a fake smile. “I’ll take you all up on that anytime, anywhere, right now, help me box up my shit and get it in the car.” They laughed and did as they were asked. They managed to find some boxes in a storage closet down the hall and helped her gather all her personal belongings. It was much faster with six people instead of just her. Once everything was packed in her car, they said their final good-byes and reminded her that they were only a phone call away if she ever needed anything.

She got in the car and drove about a mile and a half across the base to the medical building. She still had to apologize to Major Jones and see if she could get a referral. She parked and sat in the car for a minute. Her mind was racing when she had a sudden thought. She placed her phone on the Bluetooth perch and called Nicolás.

He answered on the second ring. “So, what happened?”

“I’m not finished yet. I’m about to go up to Major Jones’s office, but I had a thought.”

“Should I be worried?” He chuckled.

“I’m not sure,” she paused for a second. “What do you think about leaving North Carolina to start over somewhere else?”

“It’s not a bad idea. You know I can work from anywhere. So where did you have in mind?”

“What if we go back to the beginning?”

“Back to the beginning? Like back to Cuba? Are you fucking nuts!” His voice and tone raised more than an octave.

“Oh geez, not that beginning.” She had to laugh as she covered her face and shook her head. “I meant go back to Florida. Maybe further south than Miami Beach and Miami.”

“Can we live on one of the Keys? I would love to live on the water.” Nicolás sounded a little more excited now that he knew she wasn’t trying to go back to Cuba.

“I don’t see why not. We have a yacht and money.”

“Sold! I’ll start packing.”

Reyna got out of her car and walked into the building. She didn’t even think about calling ahead to be sure Major Jones was there, or if he was busy with a patient. *I’ll just wait if he’s busy.* She went up to the second floor and walked up to the receptionist. “Is Major Jones available?”

“He’s with a patient right now. Do you have an appointment?” The Private was a petite and soft-spoken young woman who seemed a little timid.

“I’m sorry, I don’t, but I only need a minute of his time if he has a few minutes after he finishes with this patient.” Reyna was hopeful she wasn’t going to need to spend all afternoon in the waiting room.

“His schedule is open after this patient if you’d like to have a seat and wait for him,” the girl motioned to the comfortable cushioned chairs behind Reyna.

It wasn’t long before the office door opened and out stepped the patient with Major Jones right behind him. They walked over to the receptionist’s desk. “Please give Staff Sergeant Howard the same day and time for next week, Melody.” He glanced over to the lobby area and looked surprised. “Captain Montoya, what are you doing here?”

Reyna stood from her chair and walked over to him, “I was hoping I could have a minute of your time.”

“Of course, come on in,” he motioned for her to take the lead into his office. They walked inside, Major Jones went right to his desk and offered the chair in front of it to Reyna. “So, what can I help you with?”

“I wanted to apologize for my behavior during our last meetings. I was angry and frustrated and didn’t completely understand everything you were trying to explain to me. My better half did some research and we sat down to look at it together. He made me realize that you were right and helped me see that maybe I need a little assistance to become a real person again.”

Major Jones smiled at her. “I’m very glad to see you have a positive support system at home Captain Montoya, that’s a big step towards getting well, and I gladly accept your apology. I know that was a lot for you to take in, and I’m sorry your superiors decided to discharge you after receiving my report. That was never my intent.”

“I was hoping you could maybe give me a referral or suggest some good doctors for me.”

“There are several good psychiatrists in the area that I would highly recommend for you.”

“Actually, I need referrals for some in Florida, specifically the Key Largo area. Nicolás and I are hoping for a fresh start.”

“Well that sounds like a great idea.” He leaned back in his chair deep in thought. “I will have to get back with you on some names. I think some of my colleagues may have connections out in Florida. Leave me your email address and I will send you a list as soon as I can.”

Reyna stood and shook his hand. “I appreciate everything you’ve done to help me. Now my goal is to get better and maybe find some closure along the way.”

Chapter Five

Reyna sat at the table hunched over her phone, scrolling through jobs. Two months of doing the same thing has gotten old, and she was getting more discouraged and angrier as the days passed. Nothing caught her eye or interested her, and she wasn't even sure what she wanted to do. The only college education she had was a few courses she took to help improve her English. She joined the Marines shortly after turning 18 to honor her parents who were military in Cuba. Basic training was far from easy, but she excelled in marksmanship right away. Everything her father had begun to teach her when she was fifteen had paid off. Her skill set really didn't match too many postings. Not even the ocean view and fresh breeze from their new house in Tavernier were soothing her. Nicolás was reclined in a lounge close by, sipping his coffee and breathing in the ocean air. He looked over at Reyna, "So how goes the hunt today?"

"Same as every day," she didn't look up from her phone when she answered.

"Is there anything new?" Nicolás was genuinely curious and was trying to make pleasant morning conversation.

Reyna stopped scrolling, put her phone down, and looked over at Nicolás with a scowl. "Are you going to ask me the same shit every fucking morning?"

Nicolás was reaching the end of his rope with his patience and her attitude. "Actually, smart ass, I'm pretty sure I asked you in the afternoon yesterday." He sat up, careful not to spill his coffee, "Tomorrow I might even wait until dinner time."

"So, is this all a joke to you now?" She pushed her chair back and turned her body sideways to look at him straight on. "Or are you just mocking me because you're the big man with the job?"

"Oh, come on, Rey. You know perfectly well that's not what this is." His tone was a little firmer and more agitated. "I'm asking because I'm curious and concerned that- "

“That what? That you’re the only one pulling their weight around here because you have a fucking job and I don’t?”

“No! Concerned that you’re getting frustrated and maybe just need a break from the job fishing for a little while.” He put his coffee mug on the table and stood from the lounge. “Jesus Christ, Rey, I’m so tired of fighting with you about the same shit that doesn’t even matter in the scheme of things.”

“Of course, it matters!” She yelled back.

“Our life together is what matters, not whether you have a damn job or not.” He ran his hands through his thick brown hair, the muscles in his arms tensing with the motion. “We moved out here to start over again and to help you get better with your PTSD. I don’t care if you never work again as long as you get better and quit jumping at every little thing I say to you.”

Her chest tightened, “What the fuck do you want me to do then?” Once her emotions were out there, she didn’t know how to reel them back in or keep them under control.

“I want you to reach out and get some damn help, and get a fucking therapist,” He grabbed his mug and started walking towards the house, “because obviously I’m not enough to keep your anger at bay.”

“Shit. Nico!” He kept walking and didn’t even look back. *Fuck my life. Why can’t I get this under control?*

Reyna waited thirty minutes before going in the house. She wanted to give them both enough time to cool down and think more rationally. She knew she was at fault, but admitting it was hard for her. At some point she needs to learn that she has to own up to her mistakes and take the first steps to mending broken or breaking bridges.

She walked into the bright living room where Nicolás was furiously clicking away on his laptop. She knew she would find him drowning himself in whatever new assignment Viper may have sent him. “I’m an asshole and I’m sorry.” She sat on the coffee table next to his laptop where it was near impossible to ignore her.

He stopped what he was doing and shook his head. “You’re not an asshole, Rey, you’re just frustrated and need an outlet to get everything out.”

“But I shouldn’t use you as my punching bag.” She shifted a little closer and took his hands in hers. “I’m having a really hard time dealing. I don’t know how to control the anger I’m feeling more often than I used to. I can’t just shoot shit or blow shit up to feel better anymore.”

“It’s only been two months and I know it’s still a lot to take in, but you have to let me in so we can work it out together. I love you so much, but you’re pushing me further away.”

“I don’t mean to, Nico, I swear it.” She squeezed his hands tighter. “This is all new and scary. I don’t like to talk about my feelings or what’s bothering me, but at the same time I know I have to so you don’t feel like I’m closing you out. I love you too much to lose you now.”

He placed his hand on her face and looked into her chocolate eyes. “You’re not going to lose me, but you do need to talk to me more, not yell,” he smiled. “Actually, you need to finally go over that list Major Jones sent and find a doctor.”

“You’re right, but-”

“Really, Rey.”

“I was going to say that I will look at the list this afternoon after my interview I just got while I was sitting out there alone.” She smacked his knee as she stood up. “Have a little faith, baby, I’m going to do the right thing. It’s you and me against the world, right?”

“Absolutely, now go get dressed and we’ll work everything else out later.”

She threw on a flowy summer dress that came just below her knees and her low wedge sandals. A quick brush through her deep red hair and a touch of makeup to match her tan complexion, and she was out the door.

Reyna's interview was only a few miles away in Fiesta Key. It wasn't really a formal interview, but more of a show up with your resume because we have several positions open. There was only one position she was interested in and more than qualified for, so she took a chance. She arrived at the Baja Lounge and went inside to ask for the owner. A round, stocky, older balding man came out from behind the bar. "What can I do for ya, hun?"

That "hun" didn't settle well with her, but she ignored it. "I saw you were having open interviews today. I'm here for-"

"Yeah, you're cute and all, but I already have all the cocktail waitresses I need," he shrugged his shoulders and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Wow," she had to laugh to keep her filter intact, "So not only did you not let me finish what I was saying, but you're going to assume that I'm here for a cocktail waitress position."

"So, you're cute *and* ballsy." He grinned at her. "I didn't mean to offend, hun. I suppose I could probably use a good-looking bartender if you know what you're doing."

Reyna clasped her hands together in front of her, to keep from strangling this idiot she was talking to. She put on a fake smile and grit her teeth ever so slightly. "I see, and are those the only jobs you have available?"

"Well no," he held his bulging belly as he chuckled, "I need a night-time bouncer to keep the heavy drinkers in check, but you're too hot and delicate for that job, hun."

Her blood was beginning to boil over. She wanted nothing more than to show this guy how not delicate she really was, but that was not the right thing to do. She promised Nicolás she would

do the right thing. Doing the right thing wasn't so easy during these situations. "Actually, that was exactly the position I came in here for." She handed him her resume with all her military credentials. She figured the paper would speak for itself and he would be begging to hire her.

He peered up from the page, eyeballing her from head to toe and back up again. "A Marine, huh? You sure don't look like a Marine. I thought all you military chicks were more butch-like. You look too girly to have seen any action other than in the Captain's quarters." He laughed hysterically at what he thought was a great joke, but he was also calling attention to himself and the conversation he was having.

"You must have been too preoccupied with me being girly to have really read my resume." Reyna was about done being soft-spoken and polite. "I'll need you to notice that I'm the Captain, I led a special force ground team, and was one of a group of elite women allowed to attend and complete sniper training." She heard an oh shit from someone behind her while she stood and stared at the owner. He was re-reading her resume.

"People lie on these things all the time." He tossed her resume on the bar. "If you want a bartender spot, I can do that, but I don't see you as bouncer material." He shrugged his shoulders again and nodded towards a muscle layered, no neck guy sitting at the end of the bar. "I have Mad Max over there to cover the shifts if I need him to until I find the guy I need."

Reyna crossed her arms in front of her and laughed as she peered around the stocky little man. "Well that's cute."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" The owner was not amused, and his patience seemed to be wearing thin too.

“It means it’s cute how you think that he can do a better job just because he’s layered in muscle and has no neck. That’s a pretty big gamble if you ask me.” Reyna was hitting all the hot spots. His beady little eyes looked like they wanted to pop out at her.

The man looked like he’d had enough of Reyna’s mouth. He snapped at no neck who walked over to him. The man couldn’t even get his bulging arms down all the way, so they stuck out slightly like he was preparing for flight. “Can you show the Captain here the way out.”

“Sure boss.” He walked a few steps closer to Reyna and reached out like he was going to grab her.

She smiled sweetly, “If you want to keep that hand, I suggest you keep it off me.”

No neck laughed and didn’t listen to her, “Whatcha gonna do, little lady?” His arm was outstretched to grab her by the shoulder.

Big mistake. She grabbed his at the lower palm, flexed his wrist back far enough to make him wince, then half spun to twist his arm behind him. All the muscle prevented it from twisting too far back, but it was enough to bring him down to a knee. It was one of the most basic self-defense ten1 moves and no neck fell right for it. She learned that maneuver in basic training.

Reyna leaned in closer to him, applying just a bit more pressure. No neck knew that if he made any sudden moves to free himself, he could snap his own wrist or forearm. When she was close enough to be heard over his whining she whispered in his ear, “That’s Captain to you, dickless.” She pushed him away and released his arm.

Either she pushed a little too hard or he had bad balance or both because he hit the floor face first and smashed his big nose pretty good. The drips of blood were landing on his too tight t-shirt. She was a little out of breath, but no worse for wear.

“When can you start?” The owner, wide eyed and shocked, had suddenly changed his tune.

“Never.” She straightened her skirt and fixed her hair. “I’m done working for sexist pigs.”

~ * ~ * ~

Reyna’s thoughts were still swarming when she got home an hour later. She walked into the house and went straight to the kitchen for an ice pack out of the freezer. She had tweaked her shoulder when she grabbed no neck and pulled him into submission. She sat at the counter to ice the sore shoulder.

Nicolás walked in a few minutes later, surprised to see her. “I didn’t know you were back.” He went to sit next to her but stopped short, “Why are you icing your shoulder?”

She looked up at him and grinned. “Yeah, funny thing about that.”

“Am I really going to laugh, Rey?”

“Well, you might. I know I was amused, but now I feel a little bad that he slammed his face on the floor.” She told him the whole story about her not so perfect interview, making sure not to leave out any details. In the end he did snicker when she got to the part about no neck. “So, that’s why I need ice. He was a little heavier than I thought when I pulled him.”

“Sounds like the guy deserved what he got. Don’t worry about the job, something will come up that will be a perfect fit for you.”

“I haven’t been able to find a job, but I need to stay busy, so I don’t keep dwelling on shit that makes me angrier so I think I’m going to finally take Viper up on his offers to work for him.” She took in a breath before continuing. “A normal job isn’t going to work for me, at least not right now, so I think working for Viper is the best solution.”

Nicolás sat in thought for a minute. “I agree that this is a good option and going to work for Viper could be too.” He kissed her forehead as he stood. “You want me to bring your laptop so you can look through that list of doctors while you’re icing your wound?”

“Um, about that too.”

He furrowed his eyes when he turned back to her, “you promised you would do the right thing and work on getting better.”

“Yes, I know, but I was thinking on the drive home and I want to try something.”

Nicolás sighed and sat back down in the stool next to her. “This better be good.”

“Just hear me out.” Reyna took a deep breath. She had put a lot of thought into this proposal and even drove home below the speed limit to practice what she wanted to say to convince Nicolás that it would be a healthy option for her. Was she trying to avoid the option of going to a doctor? Probably, but in her mind the option still had some promise. “Ok, I was doing some more reading and research on PTSD and treatments. The VA actually has a pretty good blog with helpful information.” She reached for her phone and opened the websites for backup.

“I know the VA would be a good source, maybe they have a therapist you might like.”

Ignoring his comment, “Right but look what I found,” she scrolled to find the sections she needed, “They talk about exposure therapy and closure. They make sense, and I quote, ‘repeated exposure to the thoughts, feelings and situations to help reduce the power it has to cause distress’¹.”

Nicolás interrupted her. “That’s all great, but you can’t really get true exposure because this all happened in Cuba and we can’t go back there even if we wanted to.”

“I know, but this combined with the closure information I found on the VA blog all makes sense. Listen, ‘In some cases, closure is a profoundly transformative experience that does allow the person to move past the traumatic event. Some find that closure may simply be a starting point for moving past the painful event. Though the trauma is not resolved, the person is better able to work through it’².”

¹ GoodTherapy.com

² Myhealth.va.gov

“So, what are you trying to get at with all this?” Nicolás was a little confused and concerned that she was trying to distract him to avoid needing to see a therapist.

Reyna took another deep breath to steady herself. Since all of this started her emotions had been all over the place and she had a tendency to get angry and over-aggressive for no reason. That wouldn’t help her persuade Nico agree to her plan. “I’m thinking that a good start to helping me get better is to find the closure I never got. I want to find my parents’ killer if he’s still alive.”

“Closure sounds like a step in the right direction, but I need you to hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

“Yes, this is probably a good point to start, but you still need to have therapy sessions with a doctor, even if only twice a month to be sure you’re on the right track. Can we agree and come together on this?”

She lowered her head, understanding that he meant well and wanted what was best for her. Reyna was torn but wanted them to agree on a solution that would make them both happy. “I really hate the thought of having to go to a doctor and talk about my feelings, but I know you’re right. My health should be the first priority.”

“All I ask is that you go into this open-minded and ready to get better.”

“I promise,” she smiled at him.

“No more changes at the last minute to get your way?”

She stifled a laugh. “No more changes.”

“That laugh wasn’t convincing, Captain.”

She sat up straighter, put on her serious Marine face, and raised her frozen right hand that had been holding the ice pack. “I promise, no more changes.”

“Thank you,” he leaned in to seal it with a kiss. “I will help you in every way I can too.”

“I’m sure it will all work out fine.” Not really. She had her doubts, but all she could do at this point was try.

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Reyna wasted no time and called Viper right away. She kept his number on speed dial but had not used it in months. They had run a few ops during her military career. He was CIA when they first met, then he went into business for himself, taking on government contracts and some that were more in the grey area. He had been trying to recruit her for a few years, but her military career kept her answer at a hard no.

Viper answered his phone on the second ring, “Well hey there Captain Hottie.”

Reyna suddenly regretted having her phone on speaker, but she knew Nicolás was outside on the dock. “Hey there yourself, she paused, “So, today is your lucky day.”

“Finally!” Viper shouted, “You broke up with Nico and you’re running away with me.”

“Jesus! Not even close buddy.” Reyna’s relationship with Nicolás was never a secret, and she made that clear to Viper from the very beginning, but that never stopped the banter and flirting. He was notorious for his playboy charm, and made it painfully obvious that he had the hots for her anyway.

“A man can dream. So, what’s up?”

Reyna took a deep breath, hoping she was making the right decision. “You still looking for a sniper on your team of merry men?”

“Sure am, you know any?”

“I might know a Marine Captain that was recently discharged and is looking for some side work with their McMillan TAC-338 sniper rifle.”

“Wait,” Viper paused, “aren’t you a Marine Captain that recently got discharged?”

“That I am.” Reyna replied, playing the game she technically started.

“And wasn’t that magnificent precision weapon a gift from a devilishly handsome and very impressed former CIA Agent?”

Reyna stifled a laugh. “Yes, it was a gift, but I think it was more because I saved his ass than the fact that he was impressed.”

“Touché, you did save my ass out in the desert a few times. So, are you finally coming over to the dark side to join your boyfriend and work for me?”

“I could use the work, and I hear the money is pretty damn good too.” She made herself comfortable on the couch to negotiate her terms. She figured she only needed to do one or two jobs a month, and she didn’t want any of the grey area contracts. “I have a reputation I want to maintain where I’m still the good guy with a clean record.”

“Yeah, I get it, once a Marine always a Marine. I agree to some of your terms Captain.”

“Thanks Viper, she let out a breath of relief. “I guess I’ll need a new call sign too, huh?”

“But you’ve always been Eagle Eye.”

“I know,” she responded sadly, “but I’m not active duty anymore and it would just hurt too much to use it.” Her team had given her that name, so using it without them just didn’t feel right.

Viper paused for a moment, “I’m sure I can come up with something fitting. We can meet for lunch next week to finalize everything and you can sign your contract.”

“No problem, just text me when and where.”

Chapter Six

Reyna was up with the morning sun. She was dressed and, in the kitchen, making a pot of coffee when Nicolás dragged himself in. He was barely dressed in just his Mickey Mouse sleep pants and his curly dark brown hair was all disheveled. “Good morning sleepy head. Did you sleep well?”

He looked at her with half opened eyes. “Who are you and what did you do with my Reyna?” He plopped onto the stool at the counter and continued to stare at her through the open slits of his sleepy blue eyes.

She laughed as she poured him the first cup out of the pot. “It’s a new me with a ‘go get ‘em attitude’, but still no sleep. I’ve been up since four. I’ve cleaned, done dishes, and did a load of laundry.” She smiled proudly and sat next to him. Her sleep shirt just long enough to cover her butt.

He turned to look at her. “What the fuck? You never did all this shit before. Now I’m worried.” He took a sip of his dark roasted ambrosia, closing his eyes as he breathed in the aroma.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. I’m just excited to get started on my revenge... uh, closure.” She laughed, trying to play off her slip of the tongue, but the look on Nicolás’s face told her he caught every word. *Shit*.

“Stop right there,” he lifted his hand and turned in the stool to face her. “I may not be fully awake, but I’m not stupid or deaf either. You just said revenge.”

“Revenge, closure, it’s all the same thing, synonyms.”

“Yeah, not the same thing. Where’s your head at?” Concern rang in his tone.

Reyna stood up and paced the kitchen. “Come on, Nico, he took everything from me, from us! I lost my parents, you had to leave yours behind, we had to flee to another country, alone, with

no one to help us. We were just kids. Of course, I want answers when we find him, but a little torture never hurt anyone. Not really, especially if you do it right.” She tried to make light of it to ease the look of dread on Nicolás’s face, but inside she was still fuming. Maybe talking about torture being okay was a little over the top too, but it’s how she was feeling. She’s a Marine, a sniper, a killer. She was trained to handle a hostile situation and move on with no remorse and no looking back. Switching gears to the civilian world was going to be a major transformation, one she needed time and help to adjust to.

“Rey, I need you to take a deep breath and think about this.” He brought his voice and tone back down, trying to be calmer. “Yes, the bastard took everything from us, I’m with you on that, but revenge isn’t going to do anyone any good. We don’t want to stoop to his level, we need to rise above and get justice.”

“How are we supposed to do that?”

“I’m not sure, but we will figure it out.”

Exasperated and somewhat defeated, Reyna sat back down. “I know you’re right, and revenge isn’t the best answer, but I’m just so pissed about it all. Venting about it kinda made me feel better though, if that makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense, Rey. Vent when you need to as long as you don’t act on it.”

“So, not even a little good old-fashioned torture? Just a little to make him squirm.” She raised her hands in the air and gave an evil Disney villain laugh.

“Now that shit right there is scarier than you wanting revenge.” He laughed, hoping she was only kidding.

“That was pretty good though, you gotta admit I have talent, and I made you laugh.” She kissed him and smoothed out his still disheveled hair. “I’m just kidding. It was another feel-good

moment, and who doesn't love Maleficent and her evil laugh." She waggled her eyebrows at him.

"Oh, and before I forget again. I looked at the list of recommendations from Major Jones."

"That's great. Did you pick one?"

"I did and was able to make an appointment for later this afternoon. They happened to have a cancellation."

With all the jokes and laughter aside, it was time to set a plan and get started on their searches. With a fresh pot of coffee in a carafe on the table in the living room, they each sat in their favorite spots with their laptops in hand. Since Reyna still had some of her government contacts, she would be able to conduct some research as well. Of course, Nicolás had more interesting contacts and sites he could check for information.

"You do realize I have to do real work in between helping you, right? I mean, we have to have money to keep living this life of luxury we've grown accustomed to," he gestured to their picturesque surroundings. Living in a big house, on the ocean, with a dock and small yacht, was far from cheap. They both liked nice things and were lucky they had money from her previous military checks, as well as the obscene amounts of money Viper paid Nicolás for his hacking and research. Reyna's military paycheck was just icing on the cake.

"Yeah, yeah, keep taking those jobs from Viper. I'm too used to all this expensive stuff to let you stop now. My paycheck from Viper can be our 'let's be irresponsible' fun money."

"That's great that you finally took him up on his offers."

"Yeah, I figured a couple of jobs a month would bring in a pretty penny to keep us living this beach life." Reyna paused, "I called him yesterday after our discussion about it. I didn't want to waste any more time."

"Just be careful which jobs you take. Not all his contracts are on the up and up."

“I know, babe. We’re meeting for lunch tomorrow to finalize my contract and payment.” She could see all the concern on his face. “Don’t worry, I’m going to stick to the government side of his contracts, foreign and domestic.”

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s a great guy, and you two have that military save everyone’s asses history together,” Nicolás took a breath. “But I know some of his shit is a little questionable.”

“I’m not too partial to shade, so I promise to stay in the light.”

“Do you think we’re going to need him and any of his resources?”

Reyna thought for a minute, almost tempted. “I think I would rather see what we can get ourselves before dragging in someone else I need to give explanations to.” It’s not that she didn’t trust Viper, she trusted him with her life. She just didn’t want to involve more people than necessary just yet.

“Gotcha. So, where do we start? You want to give me the description of this guy so I can run a trace through all my sites with the aging program?”

“Actually,” she paused what she was doing to look at him, “I was thinking I want to find as many of the people that worked closely with my parents first.”

He cocked his head and furrowed his face. “Huh? Why?”

“Think about it. Someone else had to know something, see something, overhear something, or even know him. Someone else could have given him intel so he would know they were home that day. You see what I’m saying? We need to investigate all the surrounding possibilities to get our answers.”

“Yeah, I get it, we can try that. I’m just not sure how much information we’re going to get. But we can see if their friends are still in Cuba or if they fled too.”

“I’m hoping we find some of these people, and that my questioning will smoke out the killer. This way we don’t have to do as much deep diving to find him.” She shrugged her shoulders. Doing investigations were not in her realm of expertise, but she understood the basic concepts.

Nicolás got to work hacking into everything they needed from Cuba. It was easy to get into the Military University’s system since there were no firewalls in place. He created an algorithm that would search for all the faculty that worked there during the same time that Diana and Pedro Montoya did. With that all set, all he had to do now was let it run.

~ * ~ * ~

Reyna dressed for her lunch meeting with Viper while she told Nicolás about her first appointment with the therapist earlier that morning.

Nicolás stopped what he was doing and had come into the bedroom. “So how was it?”

“Dr. Zayas seems ok so far. She had my file from Major Jones. She didn’t want to just read everything out of the file, she wanted me to tell my side.”

“I’m sorry you had to do that again,” he sat on the end of the bed, “What did she have to say after all that?”

“Some of the same things Major Jones said. She wants to see me once a week for a few weeks so we can work out the best plan for a treatment that will be most effective for me.” She sat next to him on the bed to put her shoes on.

“That sounds promising, babe. At least she doesn’t rush or jump to conclusions. I like that she wants to assess you herself instead of going only by what’s in your file.”

“Exactly, and she said she prefers not to use medication for treatment if it can be helped, but that all cases are different. She did have me do bloodwork just in case. She wasn’t too keen on my lack of sleep or nightmares either, so we’ll see what the next few weeks bring.”

“I’m so proud of you, Rey,” Nicolás smiled at her. “I know this wasn’t easy for you, but it was a step in the right direction.”

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought, and I know it’s the only way to help me cope and get better.” She sugar coated how bad it was, for his sake. Reyna did not like talking about herself, and definitely not about her feelings or past, but it was the only way to reach her goals of getting better.

“I’m sure it will get easier when you start seeing results, babe.”

Reyna took one final look at herself in the mirror. “You sure you don’t wanna come? We’re having crab claws at that place you like in Marathon.” Reyna made one last attempt to invite Nicolás to her lunch with Viper because she felt bad leaving him behind.”

“Damn, you’re going to Clawsablanca?” He seemed to stop and consider it for a minute. “Nah, you go, I need to keep an eye on this algorithm and finish an assignment for Viper.”

“I’ll bring some back for you.” She kissed him and walked out the door.

Viper had already claimed a table at the back, overlooking the ocean. The speckles in his hazel eyes seemed to dance when the sunlight hit them. Reyna had never noticed that before and wasn’t too sure why she was noticing it now.

“Hey there Captain.” He stood and kissed her on the cheek hello.

“Hey there yourself.”

He pulled out her chair then sat across from her. “I already ordered us some beers and twenty claws a piece to start.”

“Thank goodness,” she laughed, “I’m starving, and I love their claws.”

“I remembered you have a hearty appetite.”

Their food and beers arrive shortly after and they dug right in.

After devouring a few claws, the conversation struck back up. Reyna was curious. “So what else did we need to discuss that we didn’t get figured out during our call last week?”

“Not much really,” he wiped his mouth and took a swig of his beer, “I hadn’t seen you since before you were discharged. I needed to see for myself that my favorite Marine babe was really ok.”

She smiled as he cocked his head a little when he looked at her. “It hasn’t been too easy, but I’ll be ok, especially if I can get some work.” The prospect of work helped her ignore his flirtatious comments.

“I hear ya,” he grabbed another claw and cracked it open. “I have a few jobs that have come in we can go over. Some are high stakes and big money.”

Reyna took a breath. She needed to lay out her ground rules without sounding like a snob or an asshole. She and Viper have been through a lot together and she didn’t want to offend him in any way. “I’m not judging. The contracts you take and some of the bedfellows you make are your own business, but I can’t, in good conscience, take jobs that are questionable.”

“Aw come on, Rey, those are the most exciting with the biggest payoff.” He rubbed his hands together as he spoke.

“I know, but I’m trying to be more than a government trained killer.”

“You feeling guilty or something?” Viper had a look of confusion and concern on his face.

“No, I have no guilt or regrets about my military career. I did what I had to do and what I was told to do to protect my country. I’m just struggling a little trying to find the right path and balance to do the right thing.” She shook her head, “Am I even making any sense?”

“Yeah, you are. We’ll do this your way. I’m just glad we’re a real team again.” He reached across the small round table and squeezed her hand.

She squeezed back before they let go. “Thanks for understanding.”

“No problem. I’m sure you’ll come over to the dark side when you’re ready.” He laughed as the waitress cleared their plates and he ordered two more beers. He handed Reyna a file folder and a pen. “This is just the standard contract. Read it over and sign it and we’ll be good to go.”

She took the paperwork from him, “But we didn’t even talk about all the money you’re going to pay me.” Reyna waggled her eyebrows and smiled.

“Don’t worry Rey, it’s all outlined in the contract.” He cleared his throat and leaned forward on the table. “While you look that over I have a job you may be interested in.”

“Oh really,” she looked at him and tepped the top of the pen on her lower lip, “Do tell.”

“It’s right up your alley. A domestic government contract.”

Reyna stopped what she was doing to pay attention just as the fresh beers arrived. “Well that’s a convenient coincidence,” she snickered as she took a long sip of her cold draft beer.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. It just came in but it’s perfect for you.”

“Fine, I’ll bite, what’s the job?”

It seems Kashir’s replacement at the head of the cell in Qatar is worse than he was. Your old team needs help tracking and taking him down by any means necessary. They still have no captain or sniper for the team.” He stopped to watch all that sink in for Reyna.

Reyna wasn’t sure if to burst into laughter, do a happy dance, or feel bad for her former team. “Are you serious right now?”

“As a heart attack. Ashe just contacted me yesterday. The beauty of this contract and scenario for you is that the LtCol has no clue we’re friends and even less of a clue that you are lead on my team.” He flashed her a big toothy grin, “So you in?”

“Fuck yeah I’m in. When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning, 0900 hours from Tamiami Airport. Meet me there with all your gear packed and ready to go.”

Chapter Seven

Nicolás was sitting on the bed with his laptop working while Reyna packed her bag and gear for Qatar at the foot of the bed. “You sure you wanna do this job?”

Reyna stopped to look at him. “It’s going to be worth it just to see the look on Ashe’s face when I walk onto their camp with Viper and the team.”

He couldn’t help but laugh with her after all the hell that man put her through, “I figured that was the selling point to this.”

“Plus, it will be great to work with my guys again,” she added with a smile.

Nicolás got more comfortable on the bed, “Rey?”

She stopped packing again to look at him. His tone was different, more concerned when he said her name. “What’s wrong?”

He furrowed his face, “You’re gonna be extra careful, right? I mean,” he cleared his throat, “I know you’re always careful.”

“Babe,” Reyna came around the bed to sit next to him. She could see the worry all over his face, “I’ve been to Qatar before, and I’ve worked with this team Viper is taking with us.” She paused and took his hands in hers, “Plus, I’m just their sniper for this assignment, and you know my Marines won’t let anything happen to me out there.”

“I just have your last trip out there in my head and it worries me you might relapse or something.” His grip on her hand got a little tighter.

She nodded her head in understanding. “I’m a step ahead of you, *mi amor*.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want to go backwards in my progress either, so I called and talked to Dr. Zayas on my way home from lunch with Viper.” She could see the relief wash over his face as he let out

a long cleansing sigh. “I’m taking all of this seriously and trying my best to do everything I need to do.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her. “I feel better, you can finish packing.”

She kissed him again and got up to do just that.

As she zipped up her tactical gear Nicolás’s laptop pinged differently than usual. “And there it is,” Nicolás called out triumphantly as he clicked a few keys on the keyboard.

“Is that information on the people that worked with my parents already?” She asked surprised, “That was much faster than I thought.”

“Faster than I thought too,” he typed in a few more things and looked up at Reyna who had come to sit beside him again. “So, we have ten names.”

“Ten names! There’s no way only ten people worked at the University at the same time as my parents.”

“Of course not,” he chuckled, “I adjusted the algorithm while you were at lunch this afternoon cuz the original algorithm spewed out over fifty names.”

“Well we kinda knew it wasn’t going to be a short list.”

“Yeah, but I sure didn’t want to sift through all that information on all those people. I believe in working smarter not harder.”

“Ok, so how did you get it down to ten people?”

“Well, I skimmed through a few of the files and noticed that the instructors get paired up or had mention of instructors they preferred to teach their classes in their absence.” He sat up a little straighter and pat himself on the shoulder, “So I rewrote the algorithm to pull all the people directly associated with your parents, and these ten came up. Now we need to search and research one by one to find them.”

“Well how hard can that be,” Reyna reached for her laptop sitting by her bags and got comfy, “just do a Google search.”

“That’s cute, babe, you think it’s just that easy?” Nicolás laughed and kept clicking at his keyboard.

“That sounded like a challenge to me.” She stared at him with a smile on her face. “I bet I find something on the first guy before you do. Gimme the name.”

“Fine, it’s Mario Valencia, but I already found out that he changed his name to Marcus Bernal ten years ago.” He stopped typing. “So, let’s make this interesting since you think you can out research me.”

Reyna laughed, “Ok, loser does all the dishes for a week, by hand.”

“Ooo, that’s harsh... you’re on.”

Reyna loved a good challenge, even if she didn’t think she may win. It was the thrill of it. She went to Google and typed in Marcus Bernal. Since Nicolás gave her that tidbit of information there was no need to check his real name first. “Ha!” *Holy shit it worked!*

“You’re lying! Quit trying to distract me.”

“He’s going to be in New York.” She laughed and turned her laptop around for Nicolás to see. “Manhattan to be exact.”

“No fucking way! Did you seriously just find that on Google?!”

“I told you Google was an amazing tool and resource for the amateur trying to get a little information.” She laughed at the distraught look on his face. “You can find anything and everything, on Google.” She was enjoying this victory way more than she thought she would. She just beat a top hacker by using a simple search engine available to the public. “Maybe I can hack for Viper. I’ll be his sniper hacker.”

“Don’t get too cocky over there, missy,” he wagged his finger at her and laughed. “That was just sheer dumb luck.” He put his laptop down and moved closer to her in the bed so he could see her screen. “So, what else did your Google search give you.” He shook his head, still in disbelief.

Despite her seemingly nonchalant attitude after her Google search, Reyna was emotionally torn. Did she really just find a man that worked with and knew her parents? Her heart rate jumped up, but she did her best to control her breathing and hide the sudden anxiety from Nicolás before he got too worried. He had enough on his plate with all her other outbursts in life. This wasn’t the killer, and she wasn’t going to get that lucky again.

They sat and read through the information on her screen. “Marcus Bernal, author of ‘The Real Cuba Under Fidel Castro’, is beginning his first book tour in New York City. This book has been many years in the making and has ruffled many feathers along the way. His brutal honesty and truth about the hardships in Cuba has brought him much attention, as well as placed him under a microscope. For more information about the author and his book, visit his website at Marcus Bernal dot com.” Reyna clicked the link to his website.

“Well that’s not a very professional looking webpage.” Nicolás commented as they scrolled through the information. “Wait, scroll back up a little. Right there,” he pointed to the spot on the screen. “Says right here he is open for interviews. All you have to do is contact his agent through here.”

“That seems a little too easy.” Reyna was a little doubtful. Finding him easily through Google was one thing, but having direct access was completely different. This was all falling into place so quickly and seamlessly, and that made her a little nervous and skeptical.

“Not really. As a new author with his first book out he’d be open to any media coverage he could get.” Nicolás sat back a minute, his wheels spinning. “I bet you could get an interview by telling him you’re a journalist or something.”

Reyna’s wheels had been spinning too. Coming up with a perfect plan of attack was in her wheelhouse of expertise. “I think we need to appeal to his background, or at least to his ego.” Her nerves calmed slightly as her skills in military strategy kicked in.

“I see that twinkle you get in your eye when you have a plan festering. What do you have in mind?” He turned sideways on the bed to face her, leaning his head on a pile of pillows.

“Let’s think about this logically.” She set her laptop down to free her hands. “He worked at the University with my parents and this is a tell all kind of book giving history on Cuba. So, we should assume that education is still important to him in a way.” She paused a moment and twirled her finger in her hair as she thought.

“The suspense is killing me.”

“I may not even have to coax anything out of him if he’s comfortable and a talker.”

“Perfect, get that request in there. Hopefully they respond quickly, and we can get out to New York before he moves on to the next city on his book tour.” Nicolás almost seemed more excited than her.

Reyna completed the request form that was built into Bernal’s website. She made sure to be as detailed as possible so he would take the bait. Even if someone else was reading the requests, she was sure her request would be approved. “And, sent.”

“Now we wait.” Nicolás got up from the bed and walked over to the bathroom. “Did it say about how long they take to reply? Some sites will give a response time.”

“I didn’t see anything, but I would guess it depends on whether anyone is online monitoring the site.” Just as she was about to close out the screen, her email notification popped up in the corner. “Well I’ll be damned, someone responded.”

“I guess there was someone online monitoring,” he laughed and went back over to the bed beside Reyna. “Let’s see what they had to say.”

Reyna opened the email and read the response aloud. “Good afternoon, Ms. Vargas—”

“Wait,” Nicolás interrupted, “you used my last name?” His tone and expression were both surprised and happy.

“Well, yeah,” she paused for a minute, struggling to find the right answer to give him. “I was afraid to use my name. What if he recognized me or got suspicious or something?”

“Right, I get it. Keep reading.”

Reyna cleared her throat, though there was nothing there. “Thank you for inquiring about an interview for your blog. I would be honored to assist you in reaching your goals in any way I can. I have a book signing and reading scheduled next Saturday the 13th at Strand Bookstore on Broadway near Union Square from tenAM until 4PM. If you don’t mind meeting for dinner around 6PM, I will gladly share with you any information you need. Looking forward to hearing from you, Marcus Bernal.”

She raised her left eyebrow as she spoke. “Now we need to respond, pick a place to eat, and come up with just the right questions to ask him so he doesn’t get suspicious.” She stretched and yawned, getting more comfortable.

Nicolás already had his laptop in hand and was researching places to eat near the bookstore he mentioned. “Here you go babe; tell him you can meet at The Pokespot for dinner. Their specialty is different varieties of poke bowls.”

“Perfect. You book us a flight out of here for next Thursday morning and get the hotel for a few days, and I’ll respond to this email.” Reyna needed to move on this quickly. “I should only be in Qatar a few days anyway.” That only gave them a little less than a week and a half to have the perfect plan with the perfect interview questions.

Chapter Eight

Reyna was back from Qatar on Wednesday afternoon and repacking bags that night for the trip to New York leaving in the morning. Marcus Bernal had agreed and confirmed their plans for dinner and the interview for Saturday. She was trying to think about it like any other mission, but she was actually getting nervous instead. She was going through the questions in her head even though she had them all written down.

Five o'clock in New York on a Saturday rolled around faster than they thought it would, and now they had an hour to get themselves ready to meet with Marcus Bernal. Reyna was still not feeling too prepared, and she wasn't completely positive about the questions she and Nicolás had come up with. "I have never been this nervous to go out on assignment. This should be no damn different. It's just a job." The frustration in her voice came through crystal clear as she tried to get dressed. But how could she think it was like any other job when she was about to come face to face with a man that knew her parents, or who could possibly have been involved in their murder, or might know their killer.

"But this isn't a job. This is personal," Nicolás came over to her, "You're going in there to talk to someone who knew your parents and may have even been a friend. There's also the possibility that he may have information that will help you find out who murdered them. I can only imagine what you have running through your mind."

"I just don't want to screw up and give myself away, ya know." She walked over to the bathroom to fix her hair and put on her makeup. She wanted to look presentable, and to hide the bags under her eyes from all the travel and lack of sleep.

"I won't be far. I'll sit at another table so you can signal to me if you need me." He placed his hand at the small of her back and kissed her cheek. "Just stick to the plan and you'll be fine."

Nicolás hoped his pep talk helped calm her a little. She was always so strong. He had never seen her so nervous.

They arrived at the restaurant a few minutes early so that Nicolás could go in first, see where Marcus was already sitting, and ask for a table nearby. Reyna hung back outside for a few minutes, pacing a little to get her bearings. It was a beautifully clear evening without a cloud in the darkening sky. Nicolás sent her a text to let her know Marcus was there, and that he got a table with a perfect view of where she would be sitting.

Reyna walked into the restaurant, looked around, and found Marcus at a table near the sushi bar. She had bought and read his book to prepare. His picture was on the back cover of the book. As she approached, she noticed he was an attractive older man in his late sixties to early seventies, with more salt than pepper in his thick curly hair and bushy mustache. The button-down shirt he was wearing brought out the green in his hazel eyes. “Mr. Bernal?” She asked as she reached his table.

Marcus stood and held out his hand. “Ms. Vargas, I presume?” He walked around to hold out her chair as she sat down.

“Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. I’m sure you already had a very long day.” She smiled graciously as she pulled her small notebook and phone from her bag. “I hope you don’t mind if I try to record our interview as well as take notes. I don’t want to miss a word you say.”

“Of course not,” he replied with just as much enthusiasm as she was showing, “I know how difficult and stressful it is to get all your information straight.” He motioned for the waitress who came right over to their table. “Now that my guest has arrived, I think we can at least order something to drink while we look over the menus.”

“I’ll take a Cuba Libre.” The waitress wrote down what Reyna requested. She felt the alcohol might calm her nerves.

“I haven’t had one in years. I’ll take one as well, please.”

The waitress returned with their drinks quickly and took their dinner orders. Once she was gone, Marcus leaned forward on the table. “So, answer me one question out of curiosity, Ms. Vargas.”

That caught her a little off guard, but she recovered quickly. “Oh please, call me Diana.”

“Diana, what a lovely name. I knew a Diana once.” There was almost a hesitation in his smile as he looked as though he was remembering the Diana he knew.

“What a coincidence. Was she a friend or just an acquaintance?” Reyna had done well to use her mother’s name as her own. She hoped to pull information without having to ask. The almost glassy look in his eyes told her she had pushed the right button.

“She was a good friend, and so was her husband.” He shook his head as though trying to shake out the memory and regroup his thoughts. “I almost forgot what I was going to ask you,” he laughed. “What made you want to blog a series on Hispanic cultures and history?”

Reyna took a deep breath and gathered her thoughts. “Well, I am first generation American, not by birth, but I am very proud of my culture and background. I wanted to make my family proud as well as put myself in a position where I could help others see the beauty and wonder we, as Hispanics, bring to this country.”

“That is a beautiful sentiment and wonderful answer, Diana.” He paused as the waitress brought their food and left. “May I ask where you are from?”

“Mr. Bernal –”

“Please call me Marcus.”

“Marcus, this interview is supposed to be about you and your book, not about me.” She smiled as she took a bite from her Tuna poke bowl.

“You’re right, I tend to be very curious,” he gestured towards her notebook, “Ask away.”

Reyna set her phone in the middle of the table and opened the app to record. “Let’s start easy with the basics. Where are you originally from and what made you write this tell all book about Cuba?”

“Well that was right to the point,” he chuckled as he swallowed and wiped his mouth. “I was born in Santiago, Cuba. When I was about ten my parents moved us to Havana because there were greater opportunities for them and better schools for me. We remained there until they passed away in 2003, and I left the country a few years later,” he paused to take a large sip of his drink. “I wrote the book because I could no longer stand to see what my country had become, and the horrible things I witnessed happen around me. I lost family and good friends to the havoc and struggle over political power, and had reached the final straw. Someone had to come out and tell the truth about what was going on. I finally realized that maybe that person should be me.”

Reyna took this as an open invitation for some follow up questions. He opened the door so she might as well walk in. “So, what was it, what was that final incident that pushed you over the edge?”

“So many things spiraled and triggered my decision.” Marcus’s tone lowered.

Reyna could see the turmoil and sadness on his face. His tone changed as he spoke, but she pushed on. “But there must have been a turning point. That one instance where you said enough is enough.”

Marcus pushed his plate aside and leaned forward on the table, resting his body on his arms as he sighed. “It was the day I found my friends murdered in their home.” His voice was almost a whisper. His eyes darted around the room as though making sure no one had overheard him.

She tried her best to remain composed. Those friends could be anyone, but she knew, deep in the pit of her stomach, he was talking about her parents. She was frozen, unsure whether she should ask something else or wait to see if he would say more on his own. After a long moment she broke the silence. “I’m so sorry, that must have been horrible. What happened?” She couldn’t hold it all in and the seal to her filter broke once again.

Marcus looked up into Reyna’s eyes and wiped his nose with his wrist. “We worked together at the university.” He paused to take in a breath. “I was worried when they didn’t show up for a faculty meeting that afternoon. That evening I went over to the house to see what was wrong. It was very odd for both Diana and Pedro to just not show up for work.” He paused again wiping a stray tear. “The door was open a crack and no one answered when I called out to them, so I walked in. They were in the living room, lying there next to each other. The blood had pooled and was drying around them.” His voice cracked as he continued. “I was frantic and searched the rest of the house while I called the police. They had a teenage daughter, beautiful and smart young lady, but she wasn’t there, thank goodness. I waited for the police, told them everything, and put out a missing person report for their daughter Reyna.”

Reyna swallowed the lump in her throat and held back the tears on the verge of breaking through the surface. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She wanted so desperately for this man to be one of the bad guys. She wanted him to be the first notch on her belt to the killer, but now all she could see was a man who had been broken by the system and the loss of his friends.

“I didn’t mean to pry so deeply into this memory, Marcus, but thank you for sharing it with me. May I ask, did the police find anything? Did they find their daughter?”

Marcus shook his head. “The police ruled that it was a robbery gone bad, but there was nothing missing from the house, not even a fork. They closed the case despite me asking them to investigate further. There is no way it was a robbery. There was nothing missing or out of place. I think it was murder, plain and simple, but I can’t imagine still to this day who would do such a thing. They had no enemies I was aware of.” He took a sip of his drink before continuing. “I’m not sure they even bothered looking for Reyna. I just hoped she wasn’t there when it happened. I can’t imagine what kind of psychological harm that would have caused her. I went back to the house every other day for two months, praying she would show up, but she never did. I talked to the neighbors, but no one saw anything of course.”

Reyna couldn’t handle anymore; she was losing the little control she still had left. “I’m sorry, can you excuse me a minute while I go to the restroom?”

“Of course, my dear.” He stood as she got up and went to the bathroom.

Reyna practically ran to the bathroom. As soon as she was in the bathroom area she pulled out her phone to text Nicolás, “Come to the bathroom, I need you.”

Her only saving grace was that he didn’t recognize her, which seemed a little odd. She favored her mother with her father’s brown eyes, so if he knew them as well as he says, then he should have seen it. Of course, the long years and her military career have hardened her features.

Nicolás appeared before she got her phone back into her purse. “What happened? Why are you crying?”

She rattled everything out as fast as she could, trying to keep the crying to a minimum. She didn’t want to be gone too long or Marcus might come looking for her. “I don’t think he had

anything to do with it. He's the one that found them." She grabbed some napkins from a nearby table to wipe her face dry. "I want to tell him it's me. He seemed so worried. He said he kept going to the house to see if I was there."

Nicolás wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I know you want to believe everything he's telling you, but I don't think telling him who you really are is a good idea."

Reyna thought for a minute. She wanted to believe Marcus but understood what Nicolás was saying too. "Can you email your dad and ask him? I'm sure he would remember someone asking about me."

"Ok, babe, but only because this is an emergency. When we disappeared, I'm sure it threw up red flags with the government, so sending them a message is going to be tricky." He paused and wiped a stray tear from her cheek. "Now you need to get it together and finish this interview." He squeezed her a little tighter. "Are you going to be ok?"

"Yeah, I think I got it." She kissed his lips and thanked him for coming so quickly. She walked back to the table. Marcus stood again to hold out her chair for her.

"I was beginning to think that maybe you snuck out on me." He chuckled and sat back down across from her. "I'm sorry I soured the mood with my story."

"Don't apologize. It was very enlightening and told me much more than I expected to learn from our interview." She smiled as she placed her notebook back in her purse. "Thank you for sharing with me. I know it wasn't easy for you."

"Your name brought me right back there like it was yesterday. I had not thought about it in years and didn't realize how much it still hurt to think about."

"It could not have been easy to come across your friends like that." Reyna wasn't sure what else she was fishing for, but she couldn't bring herself to completely change the subject. Her heart

ached for her parents, and the fact that this man knew them so well and was the one that found them, almost created a bond. There was no way to explain it.

He nodded his head as he spoke. “It was a traumatizing experience, but I think what bothered me more was that I never found out what happened to poor Reyna. Her parents were always talking about her and how proud they were of the young woman she was becoming. Pedro was preparing her for when she had to enlist. I remember him telling me what a precise marksman she was becoming. I just hope she was ok and got out of Cuba.”

Reyna tried to discreetly wipe the tear from her eye, but she wasn’t successful.

“I didn’t mean to upset you with my stories. Let’s change the subject.” Marcus tried to put on a smile.

“It was just more than I was expecting, but not in a bad way.” The interview was better than she planned, and more informative than she could have imagined. There was no need to push on with any of the other questions and comments she had prepared. “I’m just sorry this interview took the turn that it did.”

He smiled at her. “It’s good to get things out occasionally, and to remember certain memories, even if they’re bad. I just hope I didn’t veer too far from what you needed for your blog.”

“I got everything I needed and then some. Thank you so much for your time, Marcus.” They finished the last of their drinks and said their good-byes. He asked Reyna to let him know when the interview was posted on her bog, and to contact him if she needed anything else.

~ * ~ * ~

Nicolás worked off two screens in the office instead of comfortably in his recliner in the living room on his laptop. He was working on an assignment from Viper on one screen and trying to locate the next guy on Reyna's list on the other screen.

"Babe, I really think we need to ask Viper for some help." He pushed away from the desk frustrated.

"Why? What's wrong?" Reyna found it odd for Nicolás to be asking for help when she knew he could hack into anything.

"I've exhausted my abilities and limited resources," he pointed at the screen as he spoke, "We found Marcus on a fluke, and I managed to eliminate seven names because I found death certificates and obituaries. These last two keep bouncing back empty."

Reyna stood next to him with her hand on his shoulder, "That's pretty damn good though. Your skills have gotten better and faster over the years."

"Thanks, but we're still gonna need Viper and his connections," he rolled the chair back up to the desk. "I'll send him an email with the names I have left and see what he can come up with."

"Ok, send them and let's see what he does."

"Do I tell him why we need the info on where these guys are?" He continued typing while waiting for an answer.

She thought for a minute, "Only if he asks." Even though they're friends and she trusted Viper with her life, she didn't like her personal business out there. "Just enough for him to understand the importance and why we need it."

Minutes after sending the email, Nicolás's cellphone rings, "It's Viper."

Reyna shook her head, she knew he would call, "Answer on speaker."

“What’s up, Viper?”

“So, when did the tables turn for you guys to be sending me jobs to do?” He laughed with a hint of seriousness in his voice.

Reyna spoke up, “It’s a favor to me, Viper, you know you owe me a few favors.”

“So, you’re calling in a favor. Why didn’t you just say so.”

The echo of computer keys rang through the small receiver. “Whenever you’re able to figure it out just send it back to Nico.”

“This is easy shit,” he laughed again, “I’ll have this to you within the hour, Captain Hottie.”

Before Nicolás could respond, Viper had ended the call. He spun in his chair to face Reyna, arms folded across his chest.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She knew why. She was stalling so she could think of the best way to explain it to him while keeping the peace. She knew she should have jumped down Viper’s throat like she does for everything else even remotely sexist. The difference here was that she knew Viper was just an over flirtatious playboy who meant nothing derogatory. She just always ignored it and moved on, but then again, he never called her that in front of anyone else, especially not Nicolás.

“Did he really just call you Captain Hottie with me right here?”

She shrugged her shoulders and tried to play it off like it was just Viper being Viper, “You know how he is, you never know what’s going to come out of his mouth.”

“Right, so is there anything I need to know?” His teeth clenched slightly as he tightened his grip on the arms of the chair.

And there it was, the doubt Reyna was afraid would be attached to Viper and his big mouth.

“What are you asking me?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?” Nicolás’s mouth barely moved as he spoke.

“No, baby, you don’t need to spell it out. There is absolutely nothing going on between me and Viper.” There was no sense in avoiding the conversation. It was a legitimate concern she never thought she would have to deal with. As often as she was sent on missions in her military career, sometimes for weeks or months at a time, she was actually surprised this doubt didn’t rear its ugly head sooner.

“I just needed to hear you say there’s nothing going on.” He rolled his chair closer to her and pulled her into his lap, “I never doubted it, but hearing Viper call you Captain Hottie rubbed me the wrong way.”

Reyna hugged him tight and whispered in his ear, “Never doubt that I love you and *only* you.”

“Thank you, mi Reyna.” He was about to pull her in for a kiss when his computer pinged, and cellphone rang again. “Damn it,” he cursed under his breath. He held Reyna in his lap, spun the chair, and rolled back to the desk to answer the call, “Yeah Viper.”

“I sent all the information on one of the guys so far. I’ll send the other as soon as it comes through.”

“Perfect,” Nicolás replied with his finger over his lips, “I’ll be sure to let Reyna know.”

“Ok, talk to ya later.”

Nicolás pat Reyna on the lower back to move her off his lap, “Let’s see what he found.”

“He got the information fast, I guess it was good that we asked for his help.”

“Yeah, he still has all his CIA connections and resources, so it’s easier and faster for him to move about the web undetected.”

Reyna moved behind Nicolás and read over his shoulder. There was a photo of guy number two on the screen from Cuba, and one of him now next to it. She leaned in a little closer to get a good look. “He looks so familiar; I think he may have come to our house for dinner a few times.”

“Do you think he would recognize you?” Nicolás’s tone changed when he asked.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure how much I’ve changed or if there’s a detail about me that would give me away.”

“I could ask the questions this time.” Nicolás suggested. “You come up with the plan and the questions, and I’ll follow through.”

“Hmm,” Reyna wasn’t completely against the idea. She trusted Nicolás. “That may not be such a bad idea. You sure you’re up to it?”

He puffed out his chest and smiled up at her, “Put me in coach.”

She rumbled his thick brown hair and laughed. “Fine. Let’s see what Viper found out so I can formulate the perfect plan.”

They both stopped on the same sentence. “Come on! He wrote a book too. What are the damn odds?” Reyna couldn’t believe their dumb luck.

“Wait, keep reading,” he pointed at the next paragraph, “His book is about his time as a chemist and scientist for the military university.” Nicolás paused for a moment, “Shit, he might know my dad if he was in the science department.”

“We’ll just have to change your name like I did for the interview with Marcus.” Reyna continued reading. “It says here that he teaches Forensic Chemistry for the master’s program in Forensic Science at Florida International University.”

“I see your wheels spinning already.” Nicolás laughed.

Reyna moved from behind him to pace the room. “I have a plan, don’t worry.”

Chapter Nine

Nicolás stepped into the auditorium-like classroom. Never having attended college in the United States, he had no idea classes could be so huge. The professor had already started the class, so he quietly found a seat at the back of the room near the doors. Despite no formal education in his new country, Nicolás had dabbled with chemistry while in Cuba. He learned a thing or two from his father who was the head of the science department for the military university.

After the forensic chemistry class ended, and most of the students had left, Nicolás made his way to the front of the class to speak with the professor. “Excuse me, professor Sanchez.”

Rodolfo Sanchez stopped packing his books back into his satchel and turned around, “Yes?”

“That was a brilliant and very entertaining lecture, sir.” He had to give credit where credit was due. “I could feel your passion for the subject.”

“Thank you,” Rodolfo replied with a smile that deepened the wrinkles in his faces. “Forensic chemistry is an exciting and precise science.”

Nicolás nodded in agreement. “I was wondering if I could have a few moments of your time,” he motioned to the front row seats.

“Of course,” they both sat down. “What can I help you with?”

Nicolás laughed, “Did I look too needy?”

“Well,” Rodolfo chuckled back, “Students don’t usually ask for my time unless they need or want something.”

“So you’ve seen this desperate look before?”

“Too many times to count.”

“Then I won’t beat around the bush anymore.” Nicolás took a calming breath to make sure he remembered exactly what he needed to say. His nerves were getting the best of him. He was a computer guy, always behind the scenes, and this was the first time he ever had to be out in the field, like Reyna put it. “I’m preparing my thesis and proposal, but I have some questions and would like your opinion on the direction I’m thinking about taking.”

“I’ll help in any way I can,” Rodolfo offered without hesitation. “What are you proposing for your thesis?”

“It is a bit complex,” Nicolás threw in for good measure.

“We can iron all that out. Tell me what you’ve got so far.”

He started the scripted proposal Reyna had worked out. “I want to research how forensic science in the US today could possibly help solve twenty-year-old cold cases in poorer or less advanced Latin American countries.

“That’s quite a heavy undertaking, young man.” Rodolfo paused to rub his goatee in thought.

“I know it is,” Nicolás began, “but I am very ambitious and curious.” He paused to study the expression on the older man’s face. “I’m hoping to prove that the modern methods for forensics, especially chemical, could help solve the cold cases in these other countries where their lack of proper tools and procedures failed them.”

“I’m very impressed and quite curious to hear what cases, if any, you have found to use for your hypothesis.”

“I have found some cases I’d like to focus on to narrow the margin.” Nicolás rubbed his hands together.

“I’d love to hear what you found,” Rodolfo turned in his chair to focus more clearly. “I might be able to give you some input or further insight.”

“That would be so helpful.” Nicolás pulled out a notebook to properly play his part. It even had related notes written in case prof. Sanchez happened to glance at it. “I’m going to use the Pilar Ramirez strangulation case from Colombia, the Marco Rubio fall from a building case from Venezuela, the Pedro and Diana Montoya shooting in their home case from Cuba, and the Miriam Trejos poisoning case from Guatemala.

“Those are all excellent cases,” Rodolfo paused for a moment, “A forensic scientist’s dream to solve.”

“So you’ve heard of these cases?” Nicolás questioned. “Do you think they’re good enough to use and solve?”

“I have heard of them,” Rodolfo replied. “And yes, they will suit your purpose perfectly.”

With phase one complete, Nicolás took his questioning further. “I was wondering if you knew anything specifically about the Montoya case that could help me.”

Rodolfo was taken a little aback, but he hoped he had hidden it well. “Why that case specifically when you have such a vast variety?”

Lucky for me I read all my professors’ bios on the faculty page of the school website. Yours said you were still teaching in Cuba at that time, so I was hoping maybe you had some insider information.” He adjusted himself in the hard plastic seat, pen in hand, fully prepared for an influx of information.

Letting out a deep cleansing breath, Rodolfo revealed much more than Nicolás anticipated. “Not only do I know about the case, but I also knew Pedro and Diana. We were co-workers and friends, and what happened to them was a tragedy.”

“Wow.” Nicolás hoped that his surprise looked and sounded sincere because in truth, it came as more of a shock. “I had no idea you knew them.”

“They were good friends who didn’t deserve to die that way.” He shook his head and wiped his eyes. “They were slain like animals in their own home.” He took in a jagged breath, trying to calm himself. “What’s worse is that the police called it a robbery gone bad and left it at that.”

“That’s the same information I found,” Nicolás interjected, “but they never found the robber.” He paused for a moment, “You don’t believe it was a robbery, do you?”

“Not at all,” Rodolfo sighed. “If your research can bring out the truth then perhaps my old friends can finally rest in peace.”

Nicolás looked into the professor’s saddened eyes, “I will do all I can, sir.”

“I will help you in any way I can, and if you add me to your thesis committee it won’t look like an unfair advantage.”

They continued their conversation for another hour as Nicolás diligently took notes to keep up the charade. Rodolfo suggested a few chemical compounds he should look into, and the angles he should backtrack to double check the effectiveness and efficiency of law enforcement and forensics at the time.

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Reyna came home from her weekly Thursday appointment to find Nicolás in the kitchen cooking. “Whatever you’re cooking smells delicious.”

“I felt like cooking a hearty meal after the hours I spent at FIU with Rodolfo this morning, so I have a pork shoulder slow roasting in the oven and my mom’s black beans in the pressure cooker.” He set the timer on the oven for the beans and sat at the counter. “And I got a response from my father while you were gone too.”

Her face brightened a little at the prospect of some good news. “So, what did he say, and how was your time with the professor?”

“My dad says everyone is well and sends you their love. He said he remembers a co-worker that kept going to the house and asking questions around the neighborhood and asking about you, but that’s all he could remember. Nothing to specific.” He paused to pull out his notebook, flipping through the pages for Reyna to see all his hard work. “Rodolfo had a lot to say too.” He gave her the rundown of all the information he was able to gather from the professor, “I don’t think he was involved either. Hell, he gave me info to try and figure it out.”

Reyna sat next to him, still a little doubt on her face and in her heart. “Well at least we know Marcus wasn’t lying.” She shook her head. “Now I kinda wish I told him who I was.”

Nicolas reached for her hand. “Even though he probably wasn’t lying to you, I still don’t think it’s a good idea.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “So, tell me, how was your appointment with Dr. Zayas?”

“Not too bad. All the bloodwork came back perfect, well, except she said my iron was a little low.”

Nicolás laughed. “These beans should help with that. I can make some nice steaks on the grill this weekend too if you want.”

“I’m so lucky I have you to take care of me.”

“Yeah, you just like that I know how to cook.”

“Well there’s that,” she admitted, “but you’re really cute too.”

“Kiss ass.” He shook his head and laughed at her. “Did she have anything else to say other than tell you your iron was low?”

“We talked about my lack of sleep again. I’m so used to it that it doesn’t really phase me anymore, but Dr. Zayas wanted to prescribe something to help me sleep.”

“Ok, what did she give you?”

“I refused the prescription.”

Nicolás looked confused. “Why? I thought you wanted to sleep better.”

“I do, but I’m afraid of becoming dependent on a prescribed sleep aid. I asked her if I could maybe try something more natural and over the counter before going straight to medication that needs a prescription.”

He nodded his head. “I get your concern. What did she recommend?”

“She suggested I try Melatonin. She gave me a few brand names and how many milligrams I should take.”

“How do you feel about it? You ok with trying it to see if it helps you sleep a little longer and sounder?”

“I think I should try it for both our sakes. I know my tossing and turning keeps you awake too.”

“Remember, this is about you and what you need.”

She smiled at him and reached for his hand, “I think what I need is sleep.”

Chapter Ten

While sitting out on the patio with a beer and the ocean breeze, Nicolas's computer pinged with an email from Viper. He ignored the ping, assuming it was going to be a new job to work on but gave in anyway as he took a long swig from his beer.

It was the information they were waiting for on the final guy. He needed to show Reyna, but he didn't want to go inside just yet, so he text her to come outside instead.

Reyna came out to the dock with phone in hand and shaking her head, "Have you really gotten so lazy that you had to text instead of coming inside?" She was trying not to laugh, but it wasn't easy keeping a straight face.

"But it's such a pretty day," he took in a deep breath and stretched out his arms to take in the warm sun and ocean breeze, "and I was comfortable out here with my laptop and this ice cold beer." He smiled and motioned to the chair next to him at the table. "Grab yourself a beer outta the cooler so we can check what Viper sent on the last guy."

She grabbed a bottle out of the cooler and sat down, "Ok, let's see what he sent us."

Nicolás opened the email and downloaded the file. "Well this is different," he laughed, "Luis Alberto Tamayo owns a small business. Thank goodness he didn't write a book too."

"Yeah, that would have been way too weird." Reyna laughed as she drank from her beer.

"Look at this," he pointed to a section in the third paragraph, "He owns that café you like right off mile marker 99, the one with the fresh *pastelitos* and strong *café con leche*."

"Oh wow, so he owns the Midway Café." She leaned back in the chair, "This plan may be a little harder to figure out."

"Yeah, we can't go in as students this time," Nicolás laughed.

She sat up a little straighter, the lightbulb getting brighter as she spoke, “No, but we can go in as a local journalist and photographer.”

“Ok, switching it up from the blogger with Marcus, so what’s our angle and story?”

“I can be running a series piece on successful local businesses owned by Hispanic Immigrants.” She turned to him to see what he thought.

Nicolás looked at her and nodded. “That’s not a bad idea and could actually go pretty smoothly.”

She took a swig of her beer. “The less easy part is coming up with questions, so we get the information we need.”

It took all the rest of the day and part of the evening to hash out a good plan and good questions. Nicolás got to work making fake IDs, and they decided they would put their plan in motion the next morning. The sooner they could talk to Luis Alberto, the closer they could get to the killer.

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Wearing their best business casual outfits, with the added bonus of shiny new badges, Reyna and Nicolás walked into the Midway Café on a mission. As they stepped up to the front counter, the young lady working the register greeted them with a perfect smile. “Good morning, how may I serve you?”

“Good morning,” Reyna spoke up, trying to match her jovial personality, “We’re looking for the owner,” she scrolled through the notes on her phone for the name, “Luis Alberto Tamayo.”

“Oh sure,” she bounced out from behind the counter, “Let me get him from the back for you.” Just like that, she disappeared to the back.

Nicolás looked at Reyna and laughed, “That was way too much energy for first thing in the morning.”

“If I could bottle that shit, we’d be rich,” she laughed back. “I don’t know that I ever had that kind of spunk, even when I was her age.”

“She looks freakin’ twelve, Rey.”

The girl bounced back out before Reyna could make any further comments. “He said he would be right out; he’s setting a few things in the oven and preparing the other bakers for the late morning rush.”

“Thank you,” Reyna replied. “Can we get two medium sized, dark *café con leches* while we wait, please?” She paid the young lady then found a table off to the side to sit and wait for Luis Alberto to finish.

Halfway through, an older gentleman, looked to be in his late 60s, pushed through the double swing doors to speak to the bouncy girl from behind the counter. Reyna saw her look their way then point the man in their direction.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting so long,” he smiled as he approached, wiping his hands on his apron. “How can I help you?”

Reyna held out her hand, “Mr. Tamayo, I’m Maria Trujillo and this is Jose Martinez, we’re from Keys Weekly here to do your interview.”

“My interview?” Luis Alberto looked confused and completely taken aback.

“You look surprised, did we come on the wrong day?” She scrolled through her phone, playing the part well, and opened her calendar.

“No, I think maybe you have the wrong person,” he laughed as he sat in the chair across from her.

“Well, no sir, I have right here on my calendar, Luis Alberto Tamayo, Midway Café for today,” she paused as though in thought and to add more drama. “Did no one from Keys Weekly call you to make these arrangements?”

He shook his head, “I’m afraid they didn’t.”

“I am so sorry, how embarrassing,” she turned to Nicolás with an inner smile, “Jose, can you please call the office to see who dropped the ball.” Reyna turned back to Luis Alberto, “I’m very sorry about this, I’m sure you’re very busy. We can reschedule.”

“It’s ok, really,” he responded with a calm low tone, “you’re already here and it’s not going to be that busy for another hour at least.”

“Are you sure,” she laid it on a little thicker, “I would hate for us to inconvenience you.”

“Not at all, this could be fun,” he laughed. “So, how did I get chosen for an interview?”

Reyna was so glad he asked. “I’m writing a spotlight series where we interview successful local businesses owned by Hispanic Immigrants, but my main spotlight focus are the successful Cuban Immigrants.”

“How exciting,” he rubbed his hands together, “Ask whatever you’d like.”

Oh, I will. Reyna pulled out her tablet with her questions. “Ok, I’m sure our readers would like to know how long you’ve been here, and what made you leave Cuba?”

“Let’s see,” he paused in thought, “I’ve been here about fifteen years. Clara was only three.” He looked over at his granddaughter who was busy behind the counter. He turned back to Reyna and smiled, “I remember it like it was yesterday.” He gazed off beyond Reyna and Nicolás, as though lost in thought and memories. He snapped out of it and laughed, “I’m sorry, what was the other part of your question?”

“You seemed lost in thought. What were you thinking about just then if I may ask?” Reyna felt that going a little off script helped sweeten the end result and information.

“I was remembering that day we left,” he smiled fondly. “It was a beautiful day, but we were all a little sad. My wife was trying to stay strong for the children’s sake, but I could see it in her eyes. She was leaving her mother because she was too frail to travel and too scared to leave.” He took a breath before he continued. “We were leaving some friends behind, but some left with us as well. Poor Clara cried most of the flight here.”

Reyna and Nicolás understood the plight of leaving family behind all too well. “Why did you leave Cuba?” she asked softly, “Was there a specific reason.” She knew what she was fishing for, but was he going to take the bait.

“I think I left for the same reasons many others, including my friends, did. I wanted a better life for my growing family. Staying in a communist country, under the thumb of a power-hungry dictator, was not the way to do that.”

A small detail in his stories caught her attention. “You mentioned that some of your friends left Cuba for the same reasons as you, and some left with you. Have you kept in touch with any of them at all over the years?” There was more than one way to skin a cat.

“Oh yes, we have remained close. As a matter of fact, we play golf every other Saturday together,” he laughed as he spoke, “Been doing that for about ten years or so. We never miss a tee time, or the two pitchers of sangria with our steaks after the game.”

Luis Alberto told a few more stories, Nicolás snapped a few photos to make his presence legit, and Reyna wrapped it all up by thanking him for his time. They said their goodbyes and walked out the door. Once in the car, Reyna’s wheels were spinning in her head.

Nicolás watched the expressions on her face change as she drove. “I know those looks. What are you thinking?”

“It’s more like wondering,” she answered with a smirk on her face.

“Dare I even ask?”

Her smirk turned into a slightly wider smile. “I’m just wondering who he goes to play golf with,” She glanced at Nicolás, “Aren’t you curious?”

“Oh, I was just as curious,” he laughed, “So do we need to follow him this Saturday and see if he goes to play?”

Her eyes back on the road, she nodded in agreement. “Yes, I absolutely think you should, and take the good camera too.”

“Ah ha, so not we. How did it turn into just me?”

Reyna pulled into their driveway, turned off the car, and turned sideways to face him, “Two perfectly good reasons.”

Nicolás turned as well with his arms crossed in front of him, “Two huh, well this should be good.”

Reyna rolled her eyes and continued, “One, it’s easier to hide just one person if you have to get out of the car. Two, I’ll be out on a job for Viper this weekend.”

“Well damn it all to hell, those are good reasons.” He took off his seatbelt, got out of the car, and trudged towards the house.

Chapter Eleven

Saturday morning Nicolás woke up early to stake out Luis Alberto's house. He assumed the friends took the early tee time, so he wanted to be waiting outside the house before the sun came up, just in case. Reyna had left on her assignment late Wednesday night and was kind enough to leave the camera out for him.

Luck was with him that morning because just as he was coming up on Luis Alberto's house, the old man was pulling out of the driveway. He drove right past without even noticing Nicolás was there. He turned himself around and followed Luis Alberto at a safe distance. They were driving in the opposite direction than the café, so he knew they weren't going there.

Forty-five minutes later they pulled up to Don Shula's Hotel and Golf Club. Nicolás knew he had hit the jackpot. It wasn't easy keeping his distance through the parking lot, but he was able to manage. Nicolás parked a row and a few cars away, and waited for Luis Alberto to get his golf bag and start walking before he got out of the car to follow. With the camera in its bag over his shoulder, Nicolás followed until he saw Luis Alberto stop to speak with three other men.

He found a spot off to the side with some thick shrubs to conceal himself. He pulled out the camera and zoomed in to get facial details. He recognized two of them right away, Marcus Bernal and Rodolfo Dominguez. He snapped as many photos as he could until the four men got in the golf cart they rented and drove off. There was no way to follow without Nicolás paying his way in, so he packed up the camera to leave. He figured he had more than enough photos to help figure out who the unknown fourth guy was.

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Nicolás had all the images enhanced and downloaded onto his laptop, waiting for Reyna to return and look them over. She was scheduled to return on Sunday, but she got her stuff wrapped

up sooner than planned. Viper told her to go ahead and start back early Saturday morning, and had one of his planes fueled and ready to take her and all her equipment. Despite leaving at 6:00 AM, she walked in the house close to midnight, exhaustion oozing from every pore of her body. She dropped her bags in the hall by the stairs, then dragged herself to the living room and flopped onto the couch. “No more assignments out of the country for a while,” she leaned back and closed her eyes, “the flight kills me.”

Nicolás moved to sit next to her. Rubbing her thigh and a kiss on the cheek, “Do you need me to get you anything?”

She reached out to run her fingers through his curly dark hair, “All I want right now is my soft, toasty bed.”

“You look like you need the rest,” he moved her long red hair out of her face, “we can go through the new stuff tomorrow after we’ve slept.”

Her head shot up and she sat straighter, “Did they play Saturday? You got pictures didn’t you?”

“You said you wanted your bed, so let’s go with that and worry about the rest tomorrow.”

“Screw that! Go put on a pot of coffee and let’s tackle this now.” She leaned forward rubbing her hands together.

Nicolás didn’t want to move, but he knew there was no way she was going to go up to bed now. “Fine, I’ll go put on a pot, but you should at least go take a shower first. You’ve been in the desert for three days, and on a 16-hour flight.”

“Ok, ok, meet me back here in thirty minutes.”

She was not kidding when she said thirty minutes. Reyna was back in the living room in her comfy spot on the couch waiting for Nicolás to get his laptop booted back up.

He got up from the recliner to sit by her. Making himself comfortable next to her, he pulled up the images and handed her the laptop.

Reyna placed the laptop on the arm of the couch and began slowly scrolling through the pictures Nicolás had taken. “Where did they go to golf, this doesn’t look like Kendale Lakes?”

“Right, he drove to Miami Lakes to meet his friends at Don Shula’s”

“Wow, pretty fancy and expensive. I guess the café does pretty well.” She continued to scroll till she got to the images where you could see their faces a little better, but not the close ups. “Hey, is that Marcus?”

“Indeed, it is,” Nicolás smiled while he waited for her to notice the other gentleman standing with them in the next picture.

“Well damn, that’s freakin’ Rodolfo too,” she squints at the screen, “There’s a fourth guy back there. Was he with them too?”

Nicolás responded without looking at the image, “Yeah, he was, but I don’t know who he is. I took a bunch of close up shots of all of them too.”

“That will help us and Viper figure out who he is for sure,” she continued scrolling, “The camera takes great pictures. I can see all the wrinkles in Rodolfo’s face,” she laughed as she continued through. The laugh immediately changed to a gasp as she stared into the face of the unknown fourth man.

Nicolás looked at her reaction, her face was suddenly pale and flushed, her mouth open as though trying to speak but there was no sound. “Rey, what’s the matter?” He turned sideways and nudged her a little, hoping for a reaction other than the utter shock he was seeing on her face.

She took in a jagged breath before she spoke, “Nico, that’s him!”

Nicolás's eyes shot from her to the screen and back, "Him who? What are you talking about?"

Reyna turned to him, fire now in her eyes, she pointed furiously at the screen, "Him, Nico! The bastard that killed my parents!"

"Holy shit are you serious?! Are you sure?!" The doubt and shock were all over his face.

"I'm positive!" She turned back to the screen; teeth clenched as she tried to control the blinding anger about to rear its ugly head. "Same beady fucking eyes and how could I have forgotten that thin scar across his left jawline," she traced it with her finger for Nicolás to see.

"Scar?" Nicolás questioned, "you never mentioned anything about a scar before."

"I'm remembering a lot of this shit as it comes back to me cuz believe me I would have mentioned it before now."

"Jesus, Rey! This is way beyond what I thought we would get from the pictures," he grabbed the laptop from her and jumped off the couch, "We need to get these over to Viper, like right now."

"He's still on assignment, he's not gonna see any of these till he gets back sometime next week," she got up to pace the room, "I can't wait that long now that we have the face to trace."

"I can do some searches on my end too, babe," Nicolás tried to console her, "It's something to go on at least and maybe I can find some information."

"I don't understand why he didn't come up when we got the initial list before," she wondered as she continued pacing the room, but her momentum had slowed as her concentration increased.

"The list was people who worked with them at the university," he reminded her.

“But they knew him,” she remembered that day over like she was there, “My father let him in the house like they knew each other, like they were friends. A few minutes after that he was yelling about how my parents should have minded their own business, and he wasn’t going to let them ruin what he had built.” She shuddered as the memory and sounds replayed in her head, “Then he shot them.” She wiped a tear that rolled down her cheek and looked to Nicolás as though expecting answers.

He stopped typing the email to Viper to look at her. “Ruin what he had built? What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know, but he murdered them over it.” She stopped her pacing abruptly and swung around to Nicolás, “We should try to talk to one of them again.”

“What?” Reyna had caught him off guard.

“Maybe Marcus. I bet he would tell us everything if I talked to him again.”

“Bad idea, Rey,” he waved his arms and shook his head, “We don’t know who this guy is and if they’re all friends they may be involved too. Talking to any of them again could turn on us.”

Reyna folded her arms in front of her in defiance, “I don’t agree. If we go about it at just the right angle, we could find out who he is and where-”

“-Are you listening to yourself cuz you’re definitely not thinking straight,” Nicolás took a breath before he continued, “You’re talking about confronting the man who is friends with the man who killed your parents. He may have been nice and had all the right answers, but how do you think he’s going to respond to you when you confront him now with what we know?”

Reyna started pacing again, taking deep breaths with every stride, controlling the monster screaming to get out and explode. “You’re the one that’s not listening,” her tone was eerily steady

and firm, “I can come up with the perfect plan and have back up. It could work and we would get him and make him answer for what he did to us.”

Nicolás lowered his head and stood from the recliner, eliminating the distance between them in a few short strides. He took her hand in his and looked in her watery brown eyes. “I know you want to do this your way and end it, I completely understand that need, but I need you to understand the countless ways this could go wrong. You’re ranting and you don’t have a solid plan.” He took a breath and squeezed her hand. “Can we please wait and see what I can come up with, and what Viper finds when he gets back to the states?”

She slumped her shoulders and shook her head, exhaustion and defeat taking over her resolve, “I don’t want to wait, but I’m too fucking tired to keep arguing with you about it.”

He smiled and kissed her forehead, “I’ll take that.”

“Don’t think this is finished,” she put her hand on his chest and pushed him away.

Chapter Twelve

Reyna gave up tossing and turning and trying to sleep around dawn and was in the kitchen making coffee. Her mind was racing. She couldn't erase the image of her parents' killer staring back at her from Nicolás's laptop. All she could see were his beady eyes daring her to come find him. She sat at the counter sipping her coffee and contemplating her next move. Allowing her anger to win was not going to be the best choice, but sitting back and doing nothing wasn't the right move either.

Nicolás dragged himself into the kitchen around nine and went straight for the coffee pot. He sat at the counter and stretched before he spoke, "How long have you been up?"

"Not too long, but I managed to get a few hours of sleep-"

"-Before the nightmares and your brain kicked in," Nicolás finished her sentence.

"Yeah, I woke up before they got too bad," she got up to place her mug in the dishwasher, kissing his cheek as she walked by him, "I didn't want to wake you."

"So, what have you been plotting while I've been sleeping?" He stared at her with one eyebrow cocked.

Sometimes she hated that he knew her so well. "Damn it, Nico, maybe I was just sitting here drinking my coffee."

"You don't even believe that lie," he smiled at her.

"Fine, I was about to contemplate what our next move should be," everything rushed out of her mouth at once, "and I don't think waiting on your computer or Viper are the right move."

"I know you don't, but I have a bad feeling about all this, Rey. I don't think going back to talk to any of these guys is a good idea." He couldn't explain why and that was killing her.

"You're overreacting," she retorted.

“And you’re not thinking rationally,” he took his last sip of coffee and put his mug back down with a thud, “Hell, I don’t know that you’re thinking at all.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re letting your anger take control and it’s clouding your judgement. Your common sense it outta whack cuz you’re so pissed.” His tone was stern and determined. He couldn’t keep giving in to her when he knew this time the results were too unpredictable. He had to put his foot down and hold his ground.

“You should be pissed too, Nico.” Her voice had raised enough to be a borderline whine.

“I am pissed, but I have my laptop already trying to find some facial recognition while we wait for Viper to get back into the country,” he sighed and shook his head, not too sure he was getting through to her, “It’s only a few more days.”

Reyna folded her arms in front of her. “You say it like it’s only hours.”

“In the scheme of things, it is,” he saw her look of confusion and what the fuck are you talking about before she even opened her mouth. “What I mean is, we’ve waited twenty years to know who this guy is, so another few days to be sure we get it right isn’t going to hurt anything.”

She didn’t want to listen to him. She wanted to do things her way, but she knew he would keep droning on it and never let her out of his sight. Sure, he means well, and is always looking out to be sure things are done right, but this is one of those situations where she really didn’t give a shit about right or wrong. Of course, she needed to calm down and think this through rationally, but he’s so close. There’s that underlying fear that he will slip through her fingers and she won’t be able to track him down again. This moment was handed to them by the karma Gods, and she sure didn’t want to piss them off by ignoring their offering. Reyna threw her arms up in defeat,

“Fine, but if Viper isn’t back by Wednesday to run this guy through his contacts, we do it my way.”

“Wednesday? That’s only three days from now,” Nicolás seemed concerned that wasn’t long enough for Viper to return.

“I can’t imagine him taking any longer than that,” Reyna was sure of her calculations, “He was there before I was so he should be finished pretty soon.”

~ * ~ * ~

Monday morning Reyna was already dressed and having breakfast in the kitchen just after eight. She felt rested and ready to tackle the day. Nicolás, as usual, dragged himself in a few minutes later and went straight for the coffee maker. “Are you going somewhere?” He looked her over from head to toe.

She shoved the last bite of toast into her mouth and chewed before responding. “I have an appointment with Dr. Zayas and then I’m going shopping for a few hours.”

“Well that’s a pretty perfect day, shopping always helps you clear your mind,” he smiled as he took a sip from his mug.

Reyna finished up and kissed Nicolás good-bye, “I’ll see you later on,” She was out the door at nine to make it to her ten o’clock appointment with Dr. Zayas. It wasn’t a regular meeting day, but Reyna felt she needed it in order to calm down enough to make it through the rest of her day. She didn’t want all her time in therapy to go backwards after she had worked so hard to maintain the balance. Of course, now she felt like she was teetering on the edge, and her gut was tipping her to a side Nicolás wasn’t going to be happy with.

Her session with Dr. Zayas, as always, was calming and emotional, but brought her to a place of peace and understanding. She knew what she needed to do and had already set that in

motion. Reyna pulled into the visitor parking garage of Miami Dade College just before noon. She had sent a text while in the reception area of the doctor's office planning to meet Marcus Bernal for lunch. Since he had some morning classes at the Homestead campus, the college seemed the perfect public place to meet. He promised that the cafeteria offerings were nowhere near as bad as what she remembered of school in her youth.

Following his explicit directions, she found her way to the cafeteria, grabbed something simple to eat and drink, then found a table away from the other groups already there. She wanted them to be in a public place, but she didn't want anyone else to hear their conversation. She was suddenly nervous and unsure of exactly what she wanted to say. Reyna needed to be sure she eased into everything she needed to say. Just as she looked up from her thoughts, she saw Marcus's smiling face walking towards her with his tray. She stood to greet him.

"So glad you made it," he took the seat in front of her, "After our last meeting I never thought you would contact me again."

"I'm so sorry I didn't try to contact you sooner," the butterflies in her stomach were zipping around out of control, "I felt as though some things were left open ended and unanswered."

"It must have been pretty important for you to track me all the way in Miami from New York." He chuckled as he took a bite of his sandwich.

"Right," Reyna tried to laugh, "Actually I live here and tracked you to New York. I flew there to speak with you."

The look on his face was puzzled, confused, and lost. "So, you don't live in New York?"

She lowered her head briefly, almost ashamed, "I'm not even a blogger," she took a deep breath before she could continue, "It was all part of a plan to talk to you."

“That seems like a lot of work just to talk to me,” he pushed his tray aside and leaned forward onto the table, “and now I’m wondering what you were really fishing for when you came out to New York.”

Reyna moved her items aside and leaned forward as well. She wanted to keep her tone as low as she could. “I really do feel bad for lying to you, but I had good reason.”

“I’d love to hear it, Diana, if that’s even your name.” His voice was a touch sterner than when he first sat down, and the look on his face was not as jovial either.

She shook her head, “It isn’t, but the story you told when you thought it was, helped me tremendously. It was much more than I had hoped you would tell me about your time in Cuba.”

Marcus tilted his head and stared at her face as though trying to pull something more, “I don’t understand, they’re just lost memories from the past.”

Reyna sucked in a breath as she reached into her purse and pulled out an old picture. She always carried it with her to remind her who she once was. It was the last picture taken of her with her parents in front of their house after her mother had planted some rose bushes. She was so proud of those roses. She placed the photo face down on the table and slid it over to him. “They’re my lost memories from the past too.”

The bewildered expression on his face turned to shock when he looked at the picture she had slid over to him. He looked from the picture to her and back again before he spoke, his mouth barely able to form words, “Who are you?”

“I think you know,” Reyna whispered to hide the lump forming in her throat.

“Oh my God,” Marcus wiped a tear with the back of his hand, obviously unable to control his emotions, “Reyna? Is it really you?”

All she could do was nod.

He reached across the table and grabbed her hands, “I can’t believe it’s really you. I thought you were dead. There was no sign of you. I kept going back to the house thinking you would double back. Where did you go?”

“I left that same night. My parents had everything planned and set up for me.” She didn’t dare mention Nicolás. She was already risking a lot by telling Marcus who she was. There was no need to drag Nicolás in too, especially since he didn’t even know she was there. “They must have known something was going to happen to them.”

He rambled on some more, but suddenly stopped short and his face went a little pale. “Reyna, were you home that day? Did you see?”

The tears streamed down her face as she remembered that day again. The sound of the bullets as they exited the muzzle. The sounds of her parents’ bodies as they slumped and landed on the floor beside each other. “I saw everything,” she nodded slowly as she spoke, giving him the details he didn’t have, right down to what the killer said before he shot them.”

“I am so sorry you had to see all that,” he took out his clean handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to her, “I can’t imagine what that trauma has done to you.”

Reyna shrugged, “Apparently it gets you honorably discharged and diagnosed with PTSD when it’s triggered and resurfaces.”

“Discharged? You joined the military here? I know your parents were grooming you for when you reached the age to enlist in Cuba.”

She sat up a little taller and smiled, very proud of her military career, “Marine Captain and Sniper Reyna Montoya, sir. I wanted to make my parents proud.”

Marcus’s face beamed with the pride of a parent. “A Marine, that is wonderful, I’m sure Diana and Pedro are very proud of their daughter, as am I.”

“Thank you,” she relaxed back in the seat, “I like to think they are.” She took a breath, not wanting to ruin the happy reunion, but she had another motive for their meeting. “I wanted you to know who I am because I need your help, Marcus.”

“Of course, Reyna, anything I can do to help you.”

“Ever since I was discharged, I have been more diligent in trying and find the man who killed my parents. I am sure I finally found him, here in South Florida, but I need your help to identify him.” She bit her lower lip in anticipation of his response.

“He’s here? How can I possibly help?”

Reyna had printed the pictures Nicolás had taken of the four men playing golf. She pulled them out of her purse to show him. “You do know who he is.”

“What do you mean?” He took the pictures and flipped through them, “These are pictures of me and my friends at the golf club. Why would you have these?”

“I’ve talked to three of you, but the fourth one was a mystery until I got these pictures. I knew his face right away. I just need a name.” She pointed to one of the men in the picture.

Marcus furrowed his face, and his tone lowered to a monotoned droning. “Are you saying you think this is the man that killed your parents?”

“I know that’s him,” Reyna demanded. “He has the same beady eyes and that scar along his jawline.”

“He’s not a killer. We’ve all been friends for years, since Cuba.” Marcus’s voice had raised slightly. “You were young, traumatized, how can you be so sure when it was twenty years ago.”

“How could I not remember?” Her voice had raised to match his.

“There is no way it was him. We would have known, and that’s not in his nature. He’s a family man.”

“Marcus, please, I just need his name, then we can see if I’m right.” She didn’t want to beg, but she was desperate. She was so close.

“You’re wrong and I won’t give you his name.” The frown still on his face, he stood and took his tray in his trembling hands, “This lunch is over, and don’t try asking Rodolfo or Luis Alberto for help. They won’t tell you anything either.” He stared at her for another moment before turning on his heel and walking away.

Reyna just sat there and watched him leave. There was no point in chasing him and making him tell her. Now she had no choice but to wait for Viper to get back.

Chapter Thirteen

Marcus couldn't stop thinking about everything Reyna had said during their lunch. He didn't want to believe that any of it was true, but there was that little voice of doubt in the back of his mind. He remembered that Pepe was the only one not rattled or moved by the mention of Diana and Pedro at the golf game after he had returned from his book tour. As a matter of fact, he was even more nonchalant and rude when Rodolfo mentioned he helped the forensics student. All that bothered Marcus more now than it did that day. They were all friends. They all worked together and served in the military together. Why wasn't Pepe as bothered as he and the others were? He didn't want to believe that there was any truth to what Reyna had told him, but... He called his old friend to meet for dinner.

Pepe was already at the restaurant when Marcus walked in. He was seated at a table in a dim corner close to the bar. "Good to see you, my friend," he stood to greet his friend as he approached the table, "Are Rodolfo and Luis Alberto coming too?"

Marcus stuttered as he answered, not comfortable with telling lies, "They can't make it, you know how they are, always something they have to get done."

"Right," Pepe furrowed his eyes and sat down. "So, why the sudden invite for dinner?"

"Can't friends just get together for dinner once in awhile without having a reason for it?"

"Of course," Pepe pulled open his menu, "It was just very out of the blue."

"I just felt like talking and getting some dinner with my friend," Marcus paused a moment, trying to find all the right words, "We haven't gotten together to talk in a long time." He opened his menu, but his mind was still on the conversation. "We used to talk a lot more when we were younger, back in Cuba and when we first got here."

Pepe put down the menu to stare at Marcus, “You feel like reminiscing about the old days again? Did that girl doing the blog thing call you again?”

Marcus could see something that looked like concern on Pepe’s face. His tone wasn’t asking a curious question, he seemed worried about something. “Why do you ask?”

“Because the last time you talked to that girl you wanted to stroll down memory lane, so I assumed she may have called you.”

The waitress appeared just as Marcus was about to respond. They ordered their meals and a pitcher of sangria. The pause in the conversation gave him the opportunity to compose his answer.

“So,” Pepe jumped right back in, “Did she contact you again or are you having a moment?”

“It’s not a moment,” Marcus shook his head, “She did call me and we had lunch today.”

“And there it is,” Pepe folded his hands on the table and leaned forward, “How did she get you to tell more stories this time?” He rolled his eyes as he spoke.

Marcus copied Pepe’s posture and tone as he leaned forward to answer. “Actually, she had the stories this time.” The waitress appeared with their pitcher and poured them each a glass.

“This should be interesting,” Pepe laughed, “What did she have to say?”

Marcus took a breath and just blurted everything out without giving it too much thought, “She seems to be convinced that you’re the one who killed Diana and Pedro Montoya.”

Pepe sucked in a breath but remained calm. “Wow, and you believed her?” He tightened his hands on the table and did all he could not to clench his teeth. “Who the hell is this girl anyway? Where would she have gotten that outlandish idea?”

“Who she is doesn’t matter right n-”

“-Doesn’t matter?” Pepe interrupted and nearly came out of his seat. He readjusted himself and looked around as people were beginning to look over at their table. He tried to lower his voice.

“This girl is accusing me of murder, of course it matters.”

“I think the more important matter is whether or not it’s true?”

“We’ve been friends for over thirty years,” Pepe began, “What do you think the answer to that is?”

Marcus leaned back in the seat and folded his arms across his chest. “After your reactions just now, I’m not sure what to believe.”

“How did you expect me to react when you’re sitting there asking me if I killed our friends because some random girl says I did? What possible reason would I have for doing such a thing?” Pepe took a large sip of his sangria. “Maybe I need to talk to her and settle these delusions of hers.”

Marcus stood his ground. He saw the anger and fear in his friend’s eyes. There was no way he was going to tell him who the girl was. “I told her she was wrong and there was no way it could be you, and I told her never to call me again.”

“Mmm hmm, and you think that did it? So, I shouldn’t worry about it because you handled it and she’ll never bring that up again?”

Marcus shrugged his shoulders as he followed suit and drank some of his sangria. “Exactly.” He hoped he was convincing enough to keep Pepe at bay. He still had that ounce of doubt, and giving him Reyna’s name was not going to be the right solution. He needed to dig a little deeper, maybe see what Rodolfo and Luis Alberto may know.

~ * ~ * ~

After Nicolás’s home cooked meal, he and Reyna relaxed in the living room watching the news. After such a big dinner, a nice glass of wine would really hit the spot, so she got up to get a

bottle from the wine fridge and glasses from the butler in the dining room. As she walked back into the living room Nicolás pointed hysterically at the TV calling out her name.

“Rey! It’s Marcus!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” She turned to the TV to see a picture of Marcus on the screen with a headline below it that said, “Fatal Car Accident on the Dolphin Expressway”. Her mouth dropped open as she nearly dropped their wine glasses and fumbled for the remote to raise the volume.

There was a fatal car accident yesterday evening that blocked all westbound lanes of the Dolphin expressway at the Palmetto interchange. Police detoured traffic off the expressway and prevented anyone else from getting on. “We just learned that the victim was Cuban exile Marcus Bernal. He sought asylum in Miami ten years ago after writing a tell all book about the Cuban government and the Castro regime. Police confirmed eyewitness accounts of a black sedan cutting off the victim and speeding away. The victim’s car flipped several times before it smashed into the guardrail you see here behind me. Mr. Bernal was deceased when police and emergency vehicles arrived on the scene. Witnesses also state it was a miracle no other car was close enough to get hit. Miami-Dade Police are investigating to find the black sedan. If anyone has any information, please call Crimestoppers. Sadly, Mr. Bernal had no family in the states to contact, but authorities are checking his native country of Cuba. This is Maria Padilla with WSVN7 reporting live from the Dolphin expressway.”

“Oh my God, that’s awful.” Reyna covered her mouth in shock.

“That is messed up and weird at the same time. I just saw him not too long ago when he went to play golf with his friends that day I was following Luis Alberto.” Nicolás was just as shocked.

“That didn’t seem like a regular hit and run accident,” Reyna shook her head, “This is probably all my fault.”

“Shit, Rey, what do you mean it’s probably all your fault, what did you do?” Nicolas leaned forward in his recliner and glared at her.

She cursed under her breath, “I had lunch with him yesterday afternoon.”

“What the fuck? I thought we agreed we weren’t going to do that and we were going to wait for Viper to get back.” He got up from the chair and walked around the room. “All you had to do was wait a couple of days.” He threw his arms up in the air, pissed and defeated. “What did you say to him?”

“Nico, you know I couldn’t just wait around for Viper. I needed the answer now, and Marcus could give it to me.”

“Well did he?” His tone was still harsh as he continued to move around the room.

“He wouldn’t give me the name. He said there was no way his friend could do that.”

“Perfect, so was this before or after you told him who you are?” He stopped moving long enough to get her answer.

“It was after.” She lowered her head. She felt horrible that she went behind Nicolás’s back, but even worse that now Marcus was dead, and it was probably her fault.

“So, you’re telling me that even after you told him who you were, he still wouldn’t tell you this guy’s name?” He watched as Reyna just nodded. “Did it maybe occur to you that he didn’t tell you because he is somehow involved too and didn’t want you to put two and two together?”

“I don’t think that’s it,” she looked up at him, “He actually looked torn and confused, like there was some doubt.”

“That’s the least of our worries because now we have no idea if Marcus went to this guy and told him about you.” He sat back at his recliner and opened his laptop. “I need to be sure all the security cameras and alarms are on full alert.”

Chapter Fourteen

The doorbell rang at tenam Thursday morning. Reyna and Nicolás were lounging in the living room watching some TV.

“Are you expecting someone?” He asked as he put his mug down and stood to get the door.

“No, and if I was it wouldn’t be this damn early.” She furrowed her face as she watched him walk out of the kitchen towards the front door.

Nicolás opened the door to find Viper standing there, and he didn’t look very happy. He stepped aside to let him in. “What are you doing here? Is something wrong?”

Viper waved a file at him, “This! What the fuck is this shit you emailed?” He walked into the living where Reyna was standing with her arms crossed in front of her.

“What the fuck crawled up your ass and died, and why did you bring it here so early?”

Visibly trying to calm down, Viper sat on the couch and slapped the file onto the coffee table. “The file with the pictures you two sent me. Is that some sort of sick joke?”

“Sick joke?” Reyna spat back with venom. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? The man who killed my parents is in those pictures. We needed your help to find out who he is.” She grabbed the file and pulled out the picture of the four friends together and the close up of Pepe.

“None of the old men are killers, especially not this one.” He pointed at the close up.

“Well, you’re wrong,” Reyna argued back, “I remember that stupid scar and that look in his eyes.”

“It was twenty years ago, how are you so damn sure now all of a sudden?”

“Viper!”

“It’s not him, Rey!” His voice raised to match hers as he stood and glared at her eye to eye.

“How the fuck are you so sure?” She yelled back.

“Dammit, Rey, because that’s my dad,” he shook his head and took a step back.

Nicolás and Reyna’s mouths dropped, but the shock on their faces spoke volumes. Reyna came out of it first. “Please tell me you didn’t just tell me that the man who killed my parents is your father.”

Frustrated, Viper ran his fingers through his thick black hair, “That man is my father but, there’s no way he could have killed anyone. Ever.”

Furiously pointing her finger at Viper, “How can *you* be so sure? Do you know everything about his past?”

“I know enough.”

“Enough?” she threw her arms up, “So, I’ll go back to my original question, how do you know he didn’t do it?”

“Because he’s just an accountant. He used to work at the University in Cuba teaching mathematics. He opened his accounting firm when he moved us all here twenty years ago.” he stopped mid-word as a thought occurred to him, “I can prove my dad isn’t your guy.”

Reyna crossed her arms in front of her, “And how are you going to do that?”

“We’re gonna hop in my car and go ask him, that’s how.”

“Stop right there,” Nicolás jumped into the conversation, “Who’s this we you’re talking about, cuz Rey isn’t going anywhere.”

“Now isn’t the time to show off your chivalry,” Viper shook his head, “She can speak for herself.”

“This has nothing to do with chivalry,” Nicolás shook his head and rolled his eyes, “What if you’re wrong and he recognizes her?”

Viper let out an exasperated sigh, “If I’m wrong, which I’m not, then I know our Marine Captain sniper here can defend herself. Plus, she’s with me and I’m not gonna let anything happen to her, or my father for that matter.”

Nicolás moved closer to Reyna. “I don’t like it, but if it’s going to give us an answer, one way or another, then I guess you need to go.” He said the words, not completely meaning them, but he knew Reyna was going to do whatever she wanted either way.

Reyna kissed him on the cheek and walked towards the bedroom, “I’ll get dressed.”

Viper sat back down on the couch and Nicolás sat in his recliner across from him. “I sure hope you’re right, for your sake.”

“Is that some sort of warning?” He chuckled.

“You could call it that, I suppose,” he paused before completing his thought, “I just hope you realize that if your father is the murderer, she *will* kill him.”

~ * ~ * ~

Viper and Reyna drove the forty-five minutes to his father’s small store front office in a strip mall right off US1. When they pulled up, the parking lot was empty and the sign on the glass door was still flipped to closed. “Well that’s weird,” he commented under his breath.

“Weird indeed,” she practically folded her arms in front of her and cocked an eyebrow, “I sure hope he didn’t get tipped off in any way.”

“Come on, Rey, cut the shit. You know me better than that, besides why would I need to warn him if I know he’s innocent?”

“Fine, where is he then?” She was growing more impatient and frustrated.

Viper took out his phone, “We’re about to find out.” He dialed and listened as the call went to voice mail after a few rings. “He didn’t answer, but half the time he forgets to take that damn thing off silent when he gets up in the morning.”

“Well that’s convenient.”

“Hold on to your panties, I can find him,” he swiped through the apps on his phone, “I put a locator app on his phone.”

“Oh, I see,” Reyna’s tone was condescending, “so the man is innocent, but you have a lo-jack on him.”

“Jesus, Rey! I have it for both my parents. They’re old and I worry.” He shook his head while activating the app. Two markers appeared on the map. One was his mother at home, but the other marked a location that made Viper furrow his face in what looked like confusion.

“Well, where is he?” Her patience had reached its limit.

“It flagged North Miami Beach, but I’m not too familiar with the area.” He zoomed in to get a more detailed view with street names.

Reyna leaned in to see his screen. “That’s the industrial area near the dock where most of the local fishermen leave from,” she thought for a minute before continuing, “There are some old fisheries out there too, but I think they’ve been abandoned for a few years now.”

“What the fuck would he be doing out there?” The concern in his voice was more evident than the curiosity of his rhetorical question.

“Only one way to find out,” Reyna readjusted herself in the passenger seat, “Let’s go.”

They hit a little lunchtime traffic but managed to make it within an hour and a half. The map was very precise and brought them to one of the abandoned fisheries. Viper stopped behind

the building next to the one where he could see his father's car was parked. They were hidden from sight, but could see clearly to the next building.

"What are you doing?" Reyna asked when he shut off the car, "Is he not here?"

"Yeah, he's here, that's his Mercedes over there, but I thought you said these fisheries were abandoned." His voice was a low rumble and still confused.

"They are, you can see some of the windowpanes are broken, and the wood siding is falling apart in some sections."

"Then something's not right," Viper reached for his binoculars from the glove box, startling Reyna when he reached over her, "What are all those other cars surrounding my dad's car?"

Reyna's radar was going off too, "And who are the suits at the door over there?" She pointed to the building just beyond all the parked cars.

"Well fuck, looks like something we're gonna have to sneak over to investigate I suppose." Viper put the binoculars back and grabbed his gun out of the center console. "Do you need a piece?" He asked as he tried to hand Reyna a spare.

She laughed, "Did you really think I left the house without my nine?" She shifted in her seat and pulled up the back of her shirt to reveal her holster and 9mm.

"Right," he shook his head, "How stupid of me. Let's snap some shots of these license plate numbers, then double around the other way and get to the back of the building."

"None of these tags are even local," Reyna commented as she snapped as many pictures as she could with her phone.

"Let's go see what we're missing." He placed his phone back in his pocket as they both got out of the car.

The two suits at the door were too busy keeping an eye on the front of the building and the cars already there to notice Reyna and Viper run across the back of the buildings. The back door was chained shut, but there was scaffolding at the large second story window. A few of the small square panes were knocked out which was going to make it perfect for them to see and hear what was going on inside. The panes that were intact had a thick film of grime, so the few that had broken were a welcome mishap. They reached the top of the scaffold and positioned themselves where they could see and not be seen.

Viper leaned in to look and what he saw left him speechless. Below, in the wide open space of the empty fishery, were several tables with open cases of military grade artillery. There were fully automatic guns and weapons of all kinds, with enough ammo to start World War III. There was another table with explosives of all kinds, including hand grenades, RPGs, C4, and good old-fashioned dynamite. It was a smorgasbord of weapons, and in the center of it was his father looking like the ring leader. The other men around him were wearing suits, but they didn't look like businessmen in the legal sense of the word.

Reyna tapped Viper on the shoulder, "I thought you said your father was just an accountant trying to retire." She motioned to everything happening inside, "That is not what this looks like to me."

"I know damn it; I'm just as confused as you are." He pulled out his phone to record what they were seeing.

"Oh, I'm not confused, I'm just waiting for the right moment to tell you I told you so." She crossed her arms in front of her and went back to observing the scene below.

"This doesn't make him a killer, Rey."

Just then the front door opened, and a boisterous older man came in wearing a three-piece suit and flashy shoes, “*Oye, Don Bala*, this is a bigger spread than the last time. I hope your prices are still reasonable.”

Viper’s father walked over to the man and shook his hand, “You know there’s always a good deal for my best customers.”

Viper moved back from the window, nearly slipping off the scaffolding, as he watched the two men walk towards the table with the explosives. His face had gone pale and he could barely speak as he recorded a few purchases and more incriminating conversation, “let’s go, I’ve seen and recorded enough.”

Reyna wanted to say something more, question his motive for wanting to leave so abruptly, but the look on Viper’s was all too familiar. It was his don’t bother talking to be cuz I’m trying not to kill someone look. *Not today Satan*. He looked destroyed and disappointed. She nodded just nodded in agreement and climbed back down the scaffolding. In the car, she couldn’t hold it in any longer, “What did we just see in there?”

“Rey, I don’t even know where to start, but I need to call my contact at the CIA.” He spoke with clenched teeth, trying to hide the lump forming in his throat.

“Can the CIA do anything? This is American soil; they can’t operate domestically. Do you have any contacts at the DEA?” Reyna was confused. Why would he think he needed to call in the big guns for an arms deal?

He stopped dialing, looked at Reyna, and spoke through clenched teeth. “That wasn’t just any arms deal. The guy with the flashy suit and shoes called my father *Don Bala*. Do you know who that is?”

Reyna shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, “No.”

“That name is number three on the CIA’s most wanted list, and until just now we had no idea what he even looked like. He has been eluding the CIA and Interpol for years.” He maneuvered the car around and away from the building.

“Shit, Viper, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, and the worst part is that now I have to turn in my own father. He had us all fooled at home. Son of a bitch,” he let out an exaggerated sigh, “Wait till I get him alone in an interrogation room.”

“Don’t you mean, we?”

Chapter Fifteen

Reyna and Viper were arguing when they pulled up to her house. They walked in and slammed the door, startling Nicolás out of the living room. “What the hell you two?”

“Rey, can I just make this damn call, then you can keep bitching about the rights you think you have in this situation?” Viper walked back outside with his cell phone in hand.

She slammed the door shut behind him again. Furious and frustrated she stomped into the living room, Nicolás hot on her tail, and plopped onto the couch. She was spitting fire and her heart was trying to beat out of her chest, but she remembered what her father always used to tell her when she looked ready to explode, *una reina nunca deja que se le caiga su corona*. A queen never allows her crown to fall, she remains calm and poised to keep her control and respect. She took a deep breath and tried to practice what he preached.

“What happened out there, Rey? You look like you could kill someone.”

Reyna took another breath and explained what happened and what they saw. “The man called him *Don Bala*.”

“Oh shit, are you sure?” Nicolás was wide-eyed and shocked.

“I’m positive, but how do you know who that is?”

“Don’t look so shocked. I looked it up when I was helping Viper with some research on a CIA case a few years back.”

“Oh, I sure wish I was better informed cuz I had no clue.”

“Geez,” he shook his head in disbelief. “That man is wanted in too many countries to count. Interpol has been trying to find out who he is for years. They always come up on dead ends, and he’s been under Viper’s nose all this time. My God, he must be devastated and livid at the same

time.” He moved to sit on the coffee table in front of her. “What was the fighting when you got here? Is he still denying his father murdered your parents?”

Reyna shook her head, “No, I think he might believe that more now. He’s calling CIA so he can bring his father in and question him, but he flipped out when I said I wanted in too.”

“Babe, it is his father, I-”

Reyna cut him off, “Don’t you dare finish that sentence! I know who he is, but he’s also the bastard that killed my parents in cold blood and I wanna know why. I have the right to know.”

Nicolás looked up as Viper walked into the living room behind Reyna. “I called it in, and they gave us a window to get the information we want out of him before they show up with shackles.” He stood there with his arms folded across his chest, a somber defeated look on his tan chiseled face.

Trying to hide the excitement on her face, Reyna turned to look at him, “Did I hear you say we this time?”

“Look, I know you want your answers, but attacking me about it right when we found out wasn’t the best way to go about it.” He walked around and sat on the couch beside her. “He’s my father and this shit just sucker punched me in the gut. I needed to breathe and wrap my head around it first.”

“I’m sorry. I got so caught up in the fact that I was finally going to have the chance to get my answers, that I didn’t think about how it was affecting you.” She reached out and placed her hand on his knee. “I wasn’t thinking about the fact that he’s your father and I’m sorry.” All her therapy sessions with Dr. Zayas not only taught her how to control her temper and anger, but also to own up to her outbursts and apologize too.

“Wow, did you just apologize to me?” Viper was taken aback.

She rolled her eyes, “Just shut up and accept the damn apology. You know this shit isn’t easy for me.”

He held up his hands, “Ok, ok, apology accepted. Now we need a plan to go get him without tipping him off.” He started pacing the room, hands in his pockets and shaking his head as he maneuvered through the living room and hallway.

Reyna followed suit and paced opposite of Viper. “Where are we taking him? That will help me figure out what a good plan should be.”

“Right,” he stopped pacing, “I was given authorization to use one of our black sites.”

“That’s perfect-”

“Not so fast,” Viper interrupted her enthusiasm, “We don’t have any sites in Florida, so the closest one they could authorize was a secluded mountain cabin in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.”

“Wow, how are you supposed to get him out there without him getting suspicious?” Nicolás was just as curious and felt left out of the conversation and planning.

Viper and Reyna started pacing again. “Actually,” Viper stopped mid-step, “Dad used to take us to the mountains on vacations around Christmas time when we were kids. It was the only way we were ever going to see snow.” He paused, reminiscing, “He taught me how to fish in those mountains when I was ten, maybe younger. We haven’t been back again since I was in my twenties.”

“You think he’ll go for it if we have a good enough story behind it?” Reyna was a little apprehensive. She was afraid it was going to be way too random for his father to agree to without wondering if there was a catch. “I’m just afraid it might be too random and out of the blue.”

“I would agree with you, however, my old man has been working hard these last few years so that he can retire and travel with my mom. I think a quick weekend trip with me to the mountains

for a little fishing would be a welcome distraction.” He thrust his hand in his jeans pocket for his cell phone. “I think it’s worth a try.” He walked toward the back of the house and out onto the dock to call his father.

A few minutes later, Viper was back inside. “Is your light aircraft license current?”

“Of course it is,” Reyna replied, “I guess we’re going to Tennessee.” She had learned to fly Cessna 172s ten years ago. The thrill and freedom of soaring through the air gave her an adrenaline rush she couldn’t get anywhere else.

“Yes, we are, and you’re gonna pilot my private plane to get us there.” He sat on the couch to explain his plan. “I told him a friend offered me the use of his cabin and it seemed rude to waste it, plus we both needed some us time.” He paused and rubbed his scruffy chin. “You as the pilot is an easy in with no explanation or back story about why you’re there. The small airport nearby allows for private and chartered planes.”

“Well that’s pretty convenient,” Reyna shook her head, “Must be nice to have all these fancy little hideouts to question the bad guys.”

“Let’s remember they are the ones that gave us the ok to use the site for a few days before they come pick him up.” He let out a sigh. “Getting him to talk is going to be the hard part.”

“Leave that to me,” Reyna smiled, “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“I don’t wanna torture the man, Rey, he’s still my father.”

“Calm down big guy, I didn’t say anything about torture, even though that’s exactly what I’d like to do.” She shook her head and calmed her breathing. There was nothing she would love more than to torture the man for information, but like Viper said, it’s his father so she tried to be sympathetic. “I have other methods that don’t involve inflicting pain. This won’t be my first rodeo, so don’t worry so much.”

~ * ~ * ~

Viper and his father were buckled in and ready for takeoff. Reyna came over the intercom, “Welcome aboard Viper Airlines, I’ll be your pilot Captain Rey. Our quick trip into Pigeon Forge, Tennessee should only take us about an hour and twenty minutes, so relax and enjoy the flight.”

“She sounds cute,” Pepe commented as he winked at his son.

He couldn’t help but laugh with the old man, but his stomach churned at the same time, “Yeah pop, she’s pretty hot.”

Reyna landed the plane at the small airport without a problem and taxied the plane into the hangar the tower directed her to. They each grabbed their duffle bags, exited the plane, and got in the car Viper had there waiting for them to arrive. She sat in the back seat so that Viper could drive and talk to his father. It was already late afternoon when they made it to the cabin, so they were just going to get settled in and get up early to go fishing.

Once everyone was settled in, Viper stepped into the kitchen, “John said he left the pantry, fridge and cabinets fully stocked so I’ll whip us up some dinner.”

Pepe sat in the small living room right next to the kitchen and looked around. “This reminds me of the place we used to go when you were younger. Your mother loves the mountain air and to see the snow.” The old man smiled at the memories. “Where’s your cute pilot?”

Viper chuckled, “She’s not a social butterfly, pop, I’ll take her something to eat later.”

“Well that’s a shame.” Pepe settled into the couch, put his feet up on the coffee table, and closed his eyes.

Viper shuffled around the kitchen cooking and texting Reyna at the same time. “There’s a small bar in the hallway. Dad usually likes an after-dinner brandy so go spike the small bottle I

made sure was going to be here. We need him completely knocked out to get him down to the basement later.”

Viper and his father ate in the living room while watching the news. He had already taken a plate to Reyna before sitting down with his father. She told him that she had laced the glass instead so that his father wouldn't get suspicious if he didn't drink some brandy too. “You're always two steps ahead, Captain.”

“That was delicious, Mauricio, you got your cooking skills from your mother.” Pepe wiped his mouth and rubbed his full belly. “All that's missing now is-”

“-Your brandy,” Viper interrupted, “I made sure there was some here for us.” He cleared all the plates and cleaned up the kitchen before returning to the living room with the bottle of brandy and two brandy snifters. Reyna had specified which glass was laced so that Viper wouldn't get them mixed up. He brought everything in on a tray, careful not to drop anything. He set everything on the coffee table, poured the brandy into the sifters, and handed his father the glass to his right.

Pepe took the glass, swirled the golden liquid around, and took a long sniff of the aromatic drink. He furrowed his eyes and looked at his son who was about to take a sip of his. “What brand is this?”

Viper stopped to look at the bottle. “It's Hennessy.”

He picked the glass back up and swirled it again, “I'm sure it's fine, it just smells a little different than mine, I'm just set in my ways.” He took a sip and leaned back in the couch with his feet back up on the coffee table.

Viper took a sip of his as well and made himself comfortable. He and Reyna already knew the Ketamine she used in the glass would take full sedative affect within about five minutes since

it wasn't through an IV. He watched patiently as his father finished his brandy, slurred an incoherent sentence, then passed out nearly dropping the glass. Viper caught it, set it on the table, and called for Reyna to help him. They had to move rather quickly because the dose would only last about thirty minutes.

Chapter Sixteen

Still groggy and unaware of the time or his surroundings, Pepe found himself handcuffed to a chair in the center of a dimly lit room. There was nothing else in the room as far as he could see, and no windows either. He struggled to try and free himself but was unsuccessful. Panic began to set in, and he called out for help. “Hello! Is anyone there?” No one answered. “Where am I? Where is my son?”

The door to the room opened from behind him, and Reyna walked in with a syringe in her hand. Without saying a word, she stepped up to him and jabbed the needle into his neck, squeezing in every last drop of the liquid. Even though he couldn’t be there to administer it, Nicolás had created the perfect mix for her to use.

“What the hell?” He yelled out at the shock and pain of the needle jab.

Reyna stepped out from behind him and stood a few feet in front of him to watch the effect of the injection take hold. There was a two-way mirror beside the door behind him where Viper was keeping an eye on everything going on as well. It wasn’t easy, but she got him to realize that interrogating his own father was not a good idea. There were too many emotions involved, and in the end, it was still his father. She watched as he kept trying to shake the grogginess off, but the new cocktail was working its way through his system too.

He looked up to see her standing in front of him. There was just enough light in the room to make out who she was. “You’re the pilot! What the hell is going on? What did you do with my son?” Panic struck him again as he shouted out for his son, “Mauricio!”

“No one is going to hear you, so save your voice for my questions.” She moved to the dark corner of the room to get the folding chair that was leaning against the wall. She walked back over

to the center of the room and placed it in front of him, but closer than she was before. “Are you comfortable, Don Bala?”

“You stupid girl! My son isn’t going to stand for this! What was in that syringe, and who is Don Bala?” Pure rage laced every word that spewed from Pepe’s mouth as a small dribble of drool slowly rolled from the corner of his mouth. The paralysis was definitely in effect.

She shook her head with a smile. “Tsk, ts, name calling will certainly not make your situation any better. As for what was in the syringe, obviously there was a nerve inhibitor. The question now should be what else did I mix in it for you.” Her heart pounded in her chest and the adrenaline raced through her. She wasn’t that person anymore, but it was like she was back out in the field with her team.

“How dare you! My son said you were some former Marine grunt when I asked about you on the plane, but here you are needing chemical assistance to hold me in place.”

“Let’s get one thing clear,” she stood to pace the room and keep herself from beating the man unconscious. Her anger was building, but she needed to keep it in check. “I could take you on just fine, but I need to be sure I get all my questions answered first. After that you can try to make a move to defend yourself, but you better be fast old man.”

“Who the hell are you to ask anything of me?! I’m not telling you shit, you fucking cu-”

“Oh,” she stopped him in his tracks, “I would be so careful with the words you choose to use when addressing me right now! That word you just wanted to use, that is a definite no-no.” She had been called all sorts of things in her lifetime as a female soldier in the field, but there were some words she would not tolerate. That C-word he wanted to use was at the top of her list. “Let’s remember that I’m the one in control here.”

“Fuck you!”

“That’s ok; give the mix a minute to settle in, you’ll be telling me everything I want to know and then some.” She could see his eye beginning to twitch as though he was trying to fight off the chemical reaction that was taking place. “Don’t fight it old man, I gave you the top of the line shit.”

“Shit! Did you really just give me Sodium Pentothal?” His eyes cut over to her since that was all he was able to move besides his big mouth.

“Sure did, but you don’t look very happy about that.” She smiled again, still overly enjoying the obvious torture he was feeling. “I did my homework and research on you. I’m sure the Cuban Government trained you to have certain tolerances for things you might encounter in the field, and running from country to country has taught you a few new things too, but this is one of those things you can’t fight off no matter how hard you try.”

He took a deep breath, looking a little defeated, and certainly not happy about it. “Ask what you need to know quickly because as soon as this truth serum wears off Mauricio is going to need to call for his CIA cleaners to dispose of your body.”

Reyna stopped her pacing and sat in the chair again. “With all your training and information from your friends on the golf course, do you even know who I am?”

Pepe struggled to try to move but failed miserably. “You’re just some nosey girl meddling into a past that’s no one’s business but mine. What do I care who you are?”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” She moved a little closer so he could see her face. “It’s my past too, and it all went to shit that afternoon you shot my parents in our home in Cuba.”

He sucked in a deep breath, “Reyna!”

“See, I’m more than just some nosey girl.”

“But the house was empty, you were supposed to be in school, I never saw you.” The belligerent anger had turned into something else, but she wasn’t sure what.

“You didn’t check. I was in the hall behind you the whole time, looking into my father’s eyes till the moment you fucking shot him and my mother in cold blood.” She wiped a stray tear. “I saw everything. So, all I want to know is why. Why did you kill my parents?”

Pepe looked as though he wanted to fight it again but had no choice. “They were nosey and meddlesome. They had discovered some information about me that I didn’t need getting out.”

She cocked her head to the side in curiosity. “What could they possibly have discovered that they deserved to die?”

“They found out I was skimming weapons from our government’s arsenal.” He clenched his teeth as though trying to hold back what he had to say next. The rest flew out in succession. “Pedro handled the inventory and knew something was off. He did some digging and figured out it was me. I couldn’t have him ruining my new business and losing all the high-profile clientele I was building. I had a family to raise too. I had to eliminate the threat, friends or not.”

“Let me get this straight.” Her heart wanted to pound out of her chest at the thought that this man was their friend and still murdered them in cold blood. “They were your friends and you still fucking shot them in our house without even thinking twice about it? You’re nothing but a fucking coward!” Her voice cracked but she held back the tears that fought to escape. She refused to let him see even an ounce of weakness.

“I’m a businessman who was protecting his investments, they were just collateral damage.”

“You lousy cold-hearted bastard. My parents didn’t have to die!”

“I couldn’t risk them blabbing, and I would have killed you too if I knew you were home.”

She knew he was telling the truth because of the serum, but it could have worn off by now. It took all she had to keep from beating and torturing this man. “Your gun running and killing days are over. I can’t let you live after what you did to my parents. You ruined my life. I was left alone to raise myself and survive in a foreign country. No teenage girl should ever have to endure that pain. I have wasted my life burying the memory of what you did, and now I can finally have my closure so that my parents can rest in peace.” She knew this wasn’t the plan. Her reputation was important to her, but her anger and hate was taking over her reasoning. She was spinning, not even Dr. Zayas’s calming voice in the back of her mind was helping.

“You think killing me is going to give you closure?”

“Probably not, but it would make me feel better. I have waited twenty years for this moment.” She was about to reach down to the weapon strapped to her ankle when Viper came in.

“I’ve heard enough, Rey.”

“Mauricio! Thank goodness,” Pepe plead, “This woman, she injected me with something and has been spewing lies about me. Help me up!”

Viper shook his head as he walked towards his father. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and played the video from the fishery. “You’re done, pop. You broke my heart and mom is going to be devastated.”

“Son, please, you have to believe me, I was framed, I-”

“-Save it for a jury of your peers,” Reyna interrupted. “CIA will be here in an hour to turn you over to Interpol.” Those words rolled off her lips like a magical song. Justice was finally going to be served for her parents, and for all the other families he ruined along the way to becoming and remaining the notorious *Don Bala*.

“Were you really gonna kill him with me watching?” Viper asked her as they walked out of the room. His father was yelling obscenities as they shut the door.

“I’d like to think that the answer is no, but I’m not gonna lie, I really wanted to shoot him between those beady damn eyes like he did to my father.”

“Let’s get back upstairs to let the suits in when they arrive.”

~ * ~ * ~

Viper called Reyna and Nicolás a few days later to let them know the final outcome with his father. “It will be on the news tonight, but I thought you guys would want to know that he’s going to federal prison with no chance of parole.

“I’m sorry, Viper,” Reyna responded, “How’s your mother holding up?”

“She’s doing ok but has a long road of healing. Good thing she has me to help her.”

“Well, you know if you need anything, just ask,” Nicolás added.

“Actually, I did call for something else.” He cleared his throat, “How would you feel about being on the payroll permanently as a partner?”

“As a what? Are you for real right now?” Reyna couldn’t hide the shock in her voice.

“Just hear me out. You have a different set of skills that would come in handy for me and some of my clients. Besides, there’s no one else I trust more with my life than you.”

“I don’t know, you do a bit of grey area work I’m not too sure I’m completely comfortable with.” She stopped herself and changed angles. “Don’t take it the wrong way, I don’t mean to offend you.” She was sure she had stuck her foot in her mouth.

“I totally get it, Rey. I do have contracts that come through that are not in the grey. Some are the US government, and some are foreign governments. I would let you take priority on those and choose the ones you want as they came in.”

Nicolás shrugged his shoulders at her in silence as she replied, “It sounds tempting, but I’m not sure. Can I think about it?”

“Of course, you can. Gimme a call when you decide either way. You’re not gonna hurt my feeling if you say no, but I really hope you say yes.” He said his good-byes, thanked them again, and hung up the phone.

“Well that was out of the blue.” Nicolás commented as he moved back to his recliner.

“It all sounds good, but I dunno.”

“He knows the best when he sees it,” he pointed at her for emphasis.

“You can’t have an opinion on this, you’re biased.” She laughed. “Besides, I’ve been toying with an idea I want to run by you.”

“Well that’s great,” he leaned forward to give her his full attention, “What is it?”

“This may seem a little crazy but hear me out.” She took a deep breath. “These past few months have been a whirlwind roller coaster, but have been exciting and fulfilling at the same time. You with me so far?”

“I think so, keep going.” He stood to pace the room.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re pacing, but you don’t do that, I do.” She shook her head and laughed at the role reversal.

“I’m testing it out. Keep talking.”

“Ok, so anyway, I had a sense of relief when we resolved the whole *Don Bala* thing. A weight was lifted, ya know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean. I can see the change. You seem to be more at peace with your past than you have been before.” Nicolás observed as he continued to circle the room, disappearing into the hall and reappearing again a moment later.

“Exactly, I feel like I want to do that for other people. I want to help them find calm and peace when a problem is resolved.” She reclined herself in her spot, rested her head and neck on a throw pillow, and closed her eyes. “Maybe this is all stupid.”

“Stop doubting yourself. What is it that you want to do? Whatever it is I’m going to support you, you know that.”

“I want to help people. What if we start a Private Investigation agency of our own? What do you think?” She didn’t want to look at him in case he was making faces at her. She kept her eyes shut and waited for his response.

“Sounds intriguing. What would we call it?”

Her response sounded more like a question than a statement, “Montoya and Vargas Investigations?”

“Hmm, I have one better,” there was a short pause, “How about we just call it Vargas Investigations?”

“Now wait a minute you... oh shit!” She looked up, about to snap in a small fit of indignation only to find Nicolás in front of her, on one knee, holding a small velvet box with a shiny diamond ring in it. “Nico!”

“Will you please, be my wife?” He smiled from ear to ear as he looked into her eyes and waited for her answer.

“When did you even have time to get me a ring?” Her nerves wouldn’t let her calm down to answer him. She had to clasp her hands to stop them from shaking.

“I’ve had this for five years, waiting for the right moment when we were ready for this commitment in our relationship. I think we slammed right into it,” he laughed.

“Wait, don’t think I’m going to start cooking and shit if I become your wife. I’m accustomed to a certain lifestyle I’d like to maintain.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, mi Reyna.”

“Then yes, I’ll marry you.”

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