DEADLY ATTRACTION

Go! she thought.
Wrenching the door handle back, Gena threw herself out of the truck. The man grabbed for her, catching her shirt, but couldn’t hold on.
The ground walloped her, stealing her breath with a wicked punch. She tried to tuck and roll, but control was beyond her. She heard gunfire and waited for the bullet to tear into her body.
Car tires squealed as she slammed to a stop against a tree. Get up! Got to get up! Gotta move!
Her hands, scraped raw by the pavement, stung as she pushed to her feet. Dizzy, she fell back to the ground.
“Gena!”
She heard Rocco’s voice and tried again to get up.
“I’ve got you, sweetheart.” His arms closed around her, lifting her and holding her close.
Other books by Cate

Dead Right

Deadly Seduction

Anthologies

Baddest Bad Boys
In Memoriam

Alice Katherine “Kate” Duffy
January 28, 1953–September 27, 2009
Ad occursum futurum, requiescat in pace

“Simply brilliant!” isn’t adequate.
“The best!” isn’t sufficient.
“Thank you!” isn’t enough.
“Come back! I miss you!” says it all.
Acknowledgments

To the ones who kept the faith when I didn’t think I’d make it:
    Karen Kearney, always there
    Jenn Stark, always ready
    Lori Harris, always steady
    Nolen Holzapfel, always mine

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And a very special thanks to my fans. Without readers, what would an author do?
As always, I own any errors, mistakes, and boo-boos. I frequently mangle the rules to fit the story.
Chapter One

Arlington, VA
October 3, 11:50 P.M.

Rocco Taylor eyed the tiny digital clock on the video player, the only source of light in the town house’s shadowy living room. Ten more minutes?
No way.
He checked his watch. Way. His Tag Heuer was never wrong.
Damn Sam. It felt like it had been ten more minutes an hour ago. The couch springs groaned as he rocked forward and raked fingers through his hair.
God, he hated waiting, doing nothing. Let him belly crawl across a minefield into an enemy stronghold. Or give him an MP5 and a load of clips and let him shoot his way in. Hell, hand-to-hand combat was better. Anything was better than this: playing along while being fucked with.
Oh, like you’re really suffering. Compared to what Maddy was enduring right now—
Jesus. Maddy. The gravity of her situation mingled with the molten guilt in his stomach.
After three days of nada in the search for missing CIA analyst Madison Kohlmeyer, the Agency had scored deuces today, even if they only knew half of it.
Earlier that afternoon, while busting his ass to get to Dulles airport, he’d gotten word that Maddy’s BMW convertible had been pulled from the backwaters of Chesapeake Bay, a two-by-four still jammed against the gas pedal.
Hearing this from a friend who’d picked the story up off a newswire had infuriated Rocco. After being shut out of the Agency’s official investigation into Maddy’s disappearance on grounds of “emotional involvement,” Rocco had been promised that every stone would be turned, every angle examined, and that he would be notified personally of any big breaks. That he wasn’t should have been clue one.
An illegal U-turn on the interstate had Rocco racing back to the CIA complex that housed his office, dreading the word that would come once they pried open the BMW’s trunk. The relief he’d felt upon learning that the vehicle was empty eroded as the truth of how little else had been done to locate Maddy surfaced.
The Agency genius heading up the investigation had decided to let the police complete their missing-person investigation first. Except the locals had back-burnered the case as a low-priority after an interview with Maddy’s roommate revealed that Maddy had seemed preoccupied.
Rocco would have jumped all over that. Preoccupied could mean scared, nervous. Upset. Had she been bullied? Threatened?
But to the jaded Virginia police detective, who claimed he’d worked “dozens of cases just like this,” Maddy’s failure to show for an all-girl weekend at Virginia Beach three days ago meant she had something better planned.
To the detective, “preoccupied” was code for “she’d met someone.” “I figured she’d turn up for work on Monday, embarrassed to find people worried,” the detective had told Rocco by phone. “Happens all the time.”
Yeah, well, as Rocco’s grandfather used to say, the road to hell was paved with bad assumptions.
In the end, Rocco had stormed out of his office in disgust after picking a fight with one of the supervisors. The official excuse offered, that Armageddon had broken loose at the Agency, was a crock. When was it normal these days, given the ever-expanding war on terror? The war on drugs? The war on wars?
“Hard choices call for tough sacrifices,” the supervisor had parroted.
“You’re saying Maddy was sacrificed?” Rocco had been livid. Did they really think that sounded better than the truth? That Maddy’s case had slipped between the cracks as everyone assumed someone else was handling it?
And even though recovering Maddy’s drowned car had escalated her case to “foul play suspected,” it made little difference in light of the e-mail Rocco had opened just two hours ago. A game-changing e-mail that had languished in his spam folder—for an entire bleeping day—before he’d found it.
The message included a high-res photograph of Maddy, bound hand and foot, wearing nothing but bra and panties. She was curled in a fetal position in a nest of soiled straw at the bottom of what appeared to be a nondescript wooden shipping crate.
In the photographs, Maddy’s eyes were closed tightly, as if she was wincing. Her upper arms bore bruises from a cruel grip. Someone would pay for hurting her, Rocco had vowed as he’d noted the slender, bloody cut that creased Maddy’s rib cage. While a knife blade had likely scored her skin when her clothes were cut away, the inferred subtext of the wound was clear. Future snapshots would be more horrific. But it was the tears on Maddy’s cheeks, visible in the enlarged photograph, that haunted Rocco. The good news was corpses didn’t cry. She’d been alive when the picture was taken. Unfortunately, bad news was also visible. Blowing up the photograph exposed a symbol branded into the plank of wood just above her head. The telltale revealed the sender’s identity more succinctly than any signature line. A triple-headed dragon. The symbol of Southeast Asia’s most notorious drug lord and Rocco’s archenemy, Minh Tran. That Maddy had been targeted because of her association with Rocco was clear.

I’m sorry, Maddy.

YOUR EYES ONLY, the photo’s caption had read. CALL THIS NUMBER OR YOUR GIRLFRIEND DIES. That Tran mistakenly thought Maddy and Rocco were still a couple was a moot point. She was a colleague and a friend. And she was in trouble because of Rocco.

A quick search revealed that the publicly listed, international phone number belonged to a popular commercial messaging service based out of Latvia. For two euros, typically paid with untraceable gift or stolen credit cards, a forty-five-second message could be left. With layers of high-tech-scrambling security, across multiple servers, the system was virtually impenetrable, making it popular with illicit lovers and criminals alike. The access PIN provided allowed Rocco to retrieve the recording and then punch in a callback number. The succinct voice message, playable only once, had been left by one of Minh Tran’s English-speaking minions.

“We will trade this female for you and one other.” The message went on to outline the two-for-one swap. In recompense for the death of Tran’s youngest son, a trigger-happy punk Rocco had killed during a recent mission in Bangkok, Minh Tran demanded Rocco’s surrender. No surprise there. Rocco and Minh Tran had been stepping on each other’s toes for years.

But it was the second part of Minh Tran’s demand that was the kicker. In order to secure Maddy’s release, Rocco had to bring along Dr. Rufin, the scientist Tran’s dead son had shot during that same mission. As the developer of the designer drug SugarCane, Dr. Rufin was key to Minh Tran’s financial future. The sole distributor of SugarCane, Tran’s empire threatened to crumble as his supply of ‘Cane dwindled.

That Tran fed a growing segment of the illicit drug market in the U.S. typically fell under the domain of the Drug Enforcement Agency. The C.I.A. had gotten involved when Tran started wholesaling dope to terrorist groups who used the drug profits to fund their attacks on allied troops in the Middle East. Rocco couldn’t have dreamt up a more hopeless situation. If he honestly believed that Maddy’s safety could be secured with such a swap, he’d have had Rufin hog-tied on the couch and been awaiting further instructions. Except it was never that neat, that easy.

The truth was, Rufin was recuperating on Uncle Sam’s dime at a top-secret location, unknown even to Rocco. As the perceived repository of the works of the late Russian scientist Viktor Zadovsky, Dr. Rufin was wanted by every country on the planet. His value was off the charts.

Though Rufin had been covertly granted asylum in the U.S., the Agency denied the fact and employed countermeasures ranging from offering rewards for Rufin’s capture to planting rumors of his demise. While those tactics were fooling others, Minh Tran seemed to know better. Precisely how Tran had linked Rocco to Rufin, and Maddy to Rocco, was to be debated another time.

Within minutes of his retrieving the voice message and leaving a callback number, Rocco’s cell phone had rung. The conversation had lasted less than twenty seconds. Rocco had demanded to speak with Maddy, proof of life as well as an opportunity to buy time. The reply, “She is not available,” had rattled him. Please let her be alive. As difficult as it had been, Rocco had stuck to his guns, refusing to negotiate until he spoke with Maddy. The caller had promptly disconnected, only to call back a few seconds later with a promise to have Maddy available at 11:30.

But at 11:25, a different man had called, changing the time to midnight. Rocco looked at the clock again. Seven more minutes. Would someone call at 11:55 and blow him off again?

Needing to move, dying to take action, Rocco pushed to his feet. Two steps brought him to the front window. The blinds were drawn, but the slight gaps at either edge allowed him to peer out. Beneath the moth-surrounded streetlights, the night appeared normal. Which didn’t mean squat. Living in a so-called gated community might give most residents a sense of security but Rocco had exploited that same blind trust more than once. Simply giving the gate attendant a name and an address earned you a visitor’s permit.

Turning away from the window, Rocco let his eyes readjust to the town house’s darkened interior. Then he began to
pace. Like a leopard prowling, he moved by instinct, focused. He had the layout of the sparsely furnished town house memorized. Five steps put the coffee table to his left, the pole lamp to the right. A ninety-degree turn brought him to the hulking shape that was a recliner. The one Maddy had openly mocked, calling it “too awful for the junkyard.” And she had felt terrible later, after learning the recliner had belonged to Rocco’s grandfather.

On the end table beside the chair was the now long-dead cactus Maddy had brought over during the I’m-gonna-put-my-mark-here phase of their relationship. Neither the plant nor the phase had lasted long.

The two-year course of their on-again, off-again relationship had been mostly off. The fact that deep down Rocco still cared for someone else had been the death knell.

“Maddy, I—” The apology had lodged in his throat.

“If you say ‘I’m sorry’ one more time, I’ll kill you,” Maddy had threatened more than once. “It’s not what I want to hear and you know it!”

Yeah, he knew. All she’d ever wanted was a sincere “I love you.” The same words Rocco had permanently stricken from his vocabulary. Oh, sure, he was always up front about it, with Maddy and any other woman he’d dated for more than a week.

And in the beginning, Maddy had seemed okay with that, had even thanked him for being honest. Until she pieced together the why after Rocco called her by another woman’s name. Dumb-ass, dumb-ass, dumb-ass. The Freudian slip became a noose.

“You still love Gena, don’t you?” Maddy had accused.

He wasn’t going there. Not now. Whom he did or didn’t love in no way diminished his responsibility to Maddy.

Reaching out, Rocco stroked the desiccated cactus. The dead spire was smooth, the last of the prickly spines having finally dropped off. The symbolism hit like a baseball bat to the head. Rocco killed relationships with the same callous lack of attention with which he offed his houseplants.

Maddy deserved better. But had she found it? Was there a Mr. Right lurking offstage, some new guy who had prompted Maddy’s roommate to label her preoccupied?

Rocco had heard she was dating and had left her alone. Or tried. The problem was, he genuinely liked Maddy, would call her just to talk. They’d agreed to be friends, and that’s what friends did.

Except not everyone got that memo. Which was also Rocco’s fault.

He recalled the party in Key West they’d attended as “friends” not too long ago. Everyone assumed they were still a couple and Rocco had done nothing to correct those assumptions. Maybe the path to hell was also paved with ego gratifications.

The bottom line was Maddy was in danger because of him. And Rocco was willing to attempt the impossible to save her. Because if not him, who?

The Agency’s response would be 100 percent predictable. There were policies for this type of scenario, a set of procedures to minimize the fallout of lose-lose situations.

Plainly stated, from the Agency’s perspective, Maddy wasn’t worth as much as Rufin. Sure, they’d try to save her. But not at the risk of revealing that Rufin was in U.S. custody.

And if Maddy was aware of the demand, she’d deduce that for herself. She knew the score. How many times had she and Rocco joked about how the Agency’s unwritten “good-of-the-many” weighted hierarchy sucked when you were “the few” on the bottom layer?

Don’t worry, Maddy. I won’t forget you.

He moved his black rucksack closer to the door, mentally inventorying the contents. It was difficult to plan an offense at this stage, so he’d stuck to basics. Lots of cash stashed in hidden pockets, two sets of fake IDs and passports, one for himself and one for Maddy.

While the packing crate wasn’t proof positive that she’d been smuggled out of the country, Rocco felt certain that Maddy was being held at one of Minh Tran’s strongholds in Thailand. Talk about a home-field advantage.

Frustrated, Rocco looked at the clock again. One minute, forty-five seconds. Call now, damn you. Let’s do this.

To his surprise, his cell phone started vibrating, the ringtone delayed. Rocco hurried back to the coffee table and activated the digital recorder he’d wired to his cell phone, simultaneously praying this wasn’t another delay tactic on Tran’s part. If the caller said Maddy still wasn’t available, Rocco would have to assume the worst.

Picking up his phone, Rocco groaned when he saw the number illuminated on caller ID. His former boss and friend: Travis Franks. That Travis was calling this late meant little. The man never slept. Travis had most likely just gotten wind of the fiasco at the office.

Rocco hit IGNORE and watched the screen fade to black. He would call Travis back in a few. For now, this line had to stay open.

Hell, Rocco had even ignored his sister’s call earlier. If Adele needed money, Rocco would send it tomorrow. But if
she’d broken up with another boyfriend and wanted a sober shoulder to cry on, she needed to look elsewhere. Rocco’s sympathy for drunks had declined since their mother died of alcohol-induced cirrhosis last year.

He checked the time.

Fifteen seconds.

Ten seconds.

Five.

Two.

One.

“Blast it, ring,” Rocco muttered.

Nothing. Then … vibration. Buzz. PRIVATE CALLER the display read. He snapped the recorder on.

“Taylor,” he answered.

At first no sound came across.

“Rocco?” Maddy’s faint voice hit him like a battering ram in the spleen.

“Yes, Maddy! Oh, Jesus, honey! Are you okay?” She sounded sick. Drugged most likely. “Tell me—”

“Silence!” Heavily accented English came across the line.

“Put Maddy back on the phone.” Scumbag.

“You got your proof of life. Here are your instructions.”

“I don’t consider one word proof of life.” Rocco struggled to control his temper. Antagonizing the man might make circumstances harder for Maddy. “That could have been a recording.”

The man exhaled noisily. Static sawed at the connection, causing Rocco to worry the man had hung up. A second later the line cleared with a faint beep, confirming that electronic jammers were being employed to thwart tracing.

Rocco could hear the man shouting in an indistinct Thai dialect. There were other sounds, other voices, but he couldn’t catch the words.

Maddy’s voice came back across the phone, but this time at a distance. As if the phone was being held out. “No!” she shouted. “Nooooo!” She was sobbing now. “Rocco … make … them—”

Maddy’s words broke off as she started to scream. Then the line went dead.
“Last one!” Gena Armstrong slid the screwdriver back into the leather tool belt at her waist. Stepping back, she took a moment to admire the newly hung bedroom door. Appreciation was a habit she’d picked up after years of watching and working with her friend Vianca. Prior to her untimely death three months ago, Vi had been one of the few Hispanic female commercial building contractors in the country. She’d been damn good at it, too. I miss you, Vi. Gena swung the door shut and checked the hinge alignment before testing the lock. Snap. Click. She tugged the handle. Perfect. It didn’t budge. As locks went, this one wasn’t substantial, but neither was the door itself. The knob on the opposite side had a hole designed for easy picking in the event a young child accidentally locked himself or herself in. Cheap hollow-core doors were designed for privacy, not security. And most of the women who would stay at the New Beginnings II shelter—once it finally opened, that is—had firsthand experience with doors like this one being kicked down. Locks only enraged an attacker. “Don’t ever lock me out of our bedroom, you worthless slut!” Furious that her selective memory had once again served up a nasty remnant from her past, Gena yanked the door open. “Lupe!” Gena took a reflexive step back, not expecting to see someone there. Lupe Del Fuego, the young woman who’d been helping paint walls and trim in the evenings, stood in the doorway, her hand poised to knock. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to, what is the word? Make you jumpy-scared.” “Startle. And it wasn’t your fault. I didn’t hear you come up.” “I am done with the paint.” “And I am done with these doors.” Lupe nodded at the door. “Looks like brand new.” It was brand new. Gena had arrived that morning only to find the vacant shelter had been vandalized during the night. That was twice this week. So much for the promised increase in police patrols. “Evidence of GMW activity in the area,” the responding officer had noted in his report. GMW was local cop talk for Gang Member Wannabe. Juveniles. Which meant the complaint was viewed as more nuisance than criminal. Gena was grateful the damage hadn’t been worse. The red spray paint graffiti had been confined to the downstairs family room and had been less costly to fix since that was the one room that hadn’t been painted, thanks to drywall repairs from the GMWs’ prior visit. It had taken two coats of white primer to cover the red, but at least now it was ready for a final coat of sage-colored paint. The upstairs damage had been more costly and time-consuming to repair. Four of the six bedroom doors the vandals had kicked in were beyond repair. And since the shelter’s construction budget couldn’t take another hit, Gena had paid for the new doors with personal funds. Call it obsessive, but it was vital to Gena that everything be perfect for tomorrow. And what about the day after tomorrow? Once the shelter was complete, she was out of a job, which shouldn’t bother her since she’d never intended to stay in Texas this long to begin with. “Now we pass inspection, si?” Lupe’s anxiety furrowed her brow. “Si.” The doors wouldn’t have been critical enough for the county inspector to hold up their certificate of occupancy any longer, but at this point Gena wasn’t taking chances. After weeks of setbacks ranging from screwups by a lowlife electrician to theft of construction supplies—including the kitchen appliances—it finally appeared the tides had indeed turned. The first inkling of change had coincided with a visit by delegates of the Sugar Springs Garden Club, who had wanted to take on the shelter’s landscaping as a group project. When the club’s committee learned of the shelter’s other problems, they’d donated funds to have the structure properly rewired. Then they went a step further and convinced a local business to donate replacement appliances.
The shelter residents, currently living in a ramshackle building on Eleventh Street, had prepared a thank-you luncheon, which in turn created a bond between the two organizations. Helen Newton, the shelter’s founder and longtime director, had high hopes for an increased sense of tolerance within the community at large—especially since the Garden Club’s president was married to one of the county politicians who viewed the battered women’s shelter as a necessary evil, something to be hidden in the worst part of town and forgotten.

To Gena it was a familiar sentiment. A fourth-generation Texan, she’d grown up in the lush Rio Grande valley and knew all about the love/hate relationship between the haves and have-nots. For decades the area’s citrus and agriculture barons, including Gena’s late father, relied on the largely Hispanic migrant population to work fields and harvest crops. Though the barons’ wealth depended on the migrants, the barons preferred that the help live elsewhere.

Many of the old-school prejudices had faded as the ethnic make-up of power had shifted. But not all. Power had a dark underbelly that superseded race, creed, and religion. Overall, in the four years since Gena had returned to Sugar Springs, she’d witnessed mostly progress. There was still a divide between rich and poor, but the majority of prominent families and business owners—the new haves—were Hispanic. Even the plight of the have-nots had brightened. St. Anne’s Church had opened a day care center for low-income individuals, allowing some migrant workers to seek other lines of work. The farm workers had stronger labor unions. Unfortunately, while working conditions in the fields had steadily improved, the poverty levels hadn’t, particularly for illegal aliens. Tougher immigration laws made it harder for undocumented workers to earn money but did little to check the flow of people sneaking across the border.

Like Lupe.

Barely eighteen, Lupe looked like a weary forty-year-old. That was ten years older than Gena! Alcohol and physical abuse were only part of the tough life that had prematurely aged Lupe. Gena watched as the young woman bent to retrieve paint cans before limping toward the staircase. Both of Lupe’s feet had been broken by her husband when she’d tried to run away after a beating. The bones hadn’t healed properly, and as an “illegal” Lupe risked deportation if she sought medical assistance in the U.S. It was a too common tragedy and eventually prompted Helen’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy at the shelter. Helen was careful not to hire undocumented workers, but her nonprofit shelter turned away no one in need. Unlike the place Gena had once turned to. Don’t go there.

After loosening the buckle on her tool belt, Gena gathered up the packaging from the door hardware and made her way down the hall. She made a mental note to replace a cracked light switch cover near the bathroom. Ditto the caulking around one of the sinks.

Though not a licensed contractor herself, Gena had worked with Vianca for over three years and could do anything required on a site. Gena had kind of fallen into the profession by virtue of the fact she had desperately needed a job and her skills as a translator hadn’t been in high demand in Sugar Springs. As it turned out, however, she loved construction.

Vi had insisted Gena learn every aspect, too. “Not-ing heals the soul like hard work.” A stranger to physical labor and completely inept with any tool more complex than a desk stapler, Gena had been surprised to learn that sweat and hard work kept her demons at bay. Her soul had indeed flourished in the process. Thanks, Vi.

Near the bottom of the staircase, Gena paused to admire the tiled entry. From this viewpoint, the intricate mosaic design appeared upside down. But to anyone crossing the threshold, the scene from the Nativity was a message: there was always room at the inn. Vi had begun that particular project, but in the end Gena had been the one to finish it. Giving the angel above the manger Vi’s dark hair and brown eyes had been Gena’s private tribute to her friend. She made her way toward the back porch off the kitchen, where they’d moved the excess supplies. Next on Gena’s agenda was painting the family room.

“What are you doing?” Gena asked Lupe when she reached the kitchen.

The young woman was balanced precariously on a three-legged stool in front of the sink. She held out what looked like a dirty white feather hanging by a piece of black thread. “My abuela did this to keep away evil.” Lupe turned back and proceeded to wrap the thread around the window latch above the sink.

“A chicken feather?”
“A special chicken feather.” Lupe’s tone was reverent. “The bird must watch its own body be severed from its head. The blood sprinkled from its neck ties the chicken’s spirit to the feathers and keeps evil spirits away.”

As superstitions went, this one was mild. Gena had heard of much worse. Still she tread carefully. “And did your abuela’s feathers ever protect you?”

Lupe shrugged. “She said not everyone deserves protection. But you do. This place does. Now if those vandals return tonight—”

“They will find me waiting.” Gena carried her tools to the back door and laid them on the floor, not wanting to admit she had her own superstitions. They were literally hours away from opening and she wasn’t about to leave anything else to fate. “I’m spending the night here.”

“There are no beds!”

“I’ll sleep in my car.” Actually, Gena doubted she’d get any sleep. In addition to painting, there was a punch list of odds and ends, like installing the closet shelves in the pantry and towel racks in the bathrooms.

“But—”

“The inspector and contractor are due here at seven.” One of Vianca’s cousins, also a licensed contractor, had stepped in at Vi’s death. Even though Gena and a two-man crew did all the work, the job required a licensed contractor for permitting.

Luckily, Vi had framed out the entire building before her death. Finishing it hadn’t been easy, but without a doubt, the lioness’s share of the work had already been done.

Gena opened the cooler sitting on the floor and fished out two cans of soda. “The city clerk’s office opens at nine. With luck, we can start moving furniture at ten.” She opened both cans and handed one to Lupe. “I say we take a break and propose a toast to our hard work. To new beginnings.”

“‘You learn fast.” Gena took a swig of the icy cola.

Lupe frowned at the can in her hand. “I am confused. How can you toast without alcohol?”

Realizing her gaffe, Gena started formulating an apology. Lupe had been struggling to remain sober, one of the requirements for staying at the shelter.

Gena recalled her own battle, how in those early days of sobriety it seemed everything was a reminder. A test. Beer commercials on television seemed like personal taunts. What’s one little drink among friends at social gatherings?

“You can do anything without alcohol, Lupe. Still, my proposing a toast was insensitive. I’m sorry.”

“Do you ever get tempted? It’s so hard sometimes.”

“Your husband? He’s returned to Mexico?” Gena knew Lupe’s grandmother still lived south of the border and suffered poor health. “Are you worried he’ll harm her?”

“No! He gave her some money and asked her to give me a message. He said he’s changed. That he really loves me. Even with my shortcomings! I want to believe that and yet …”

A warning signal pinged inside Gena’s skull. Lupe’s current temptation wasn’t with the bottle. Her battle went straight to the heart—after detouring through Lupe’s low self-esteem. All my shortcomings. Lupe believed she wasn’t worthy of better treatment. To her, bad love was better than no love.

“How many times in the past has Carlos promised to change?” Gena asked.

“Too many. That’s when I get tempted to drink. When I get … lonely. I’m just not strong, like you.”

“Even with my shortcomings! I want to believe that and yet …”

A warning signal pinged inside Gena’s skull. Lupe’s current temptation wasn’t with the bottle. Her battle went straight to the heart—after detouring through Lupe’s low self-esteem. All my shortcomings. Lupe believed she wasn’t worthy of better treatment. To her, bad love was better than no love.

“How many times in the past has Carlos promised to change?” Gena asked.

Lupe wiped her tears against her sleeve. “Too many. That’s when I get tempted to drink. When I get … lonely. I’m just not strong, like you.”

“I wasn’t always strong, Lupe. I had to learn to be.”

“But you said you really loved him.”

Him. The warning ping inside Gena’s head grew louder. In addition to her construction job, Gena volunteered one day a week at the shelter.

At Helen’s behest, all shelter volunteers took turns participating in group counseling meetings to encourage the residents. While Gena had grown comfortable discussing her personal battle with alcoholism, her own experience with “bad love” was verboten and she’d shared very few details about her own miserable marriage.

“You don’t ever think of going back to him?” Lupe pressed. “Or wish it was different?”
By him, Lupe referred to Gena’s ex-husband. If only bad love were that simple.

“I suppose it’s human nature to wish some things were different,” Gena began. But not with Harry. *Never with Harry.* Even if he were alive.

Now, Rocco … A vision of him popped into her mind. The forbidden one. Tall, tanned, rising up naked from an ocean wave like a mythical god. And how many other women shared that same vision of Rocco? Scores? Or just a few dozen? Gena shook her head. She so wasn’t going there.

“We can’t change history. It’s better to face forward.” Another thing Gena usually avoided were platitudes. Right now she grabbed for them, eager to change the subject. “The future lies ahead, not behind.”

Lupe’s gaze drifted to the digital clock on the microwave. “¡Ay caramba!” She shoved her soda can aside, suddenly panicked. “I’m late!”

“Don’t ask” meant Gena couldn’t acknowledge that she knew Lupe worked graveyard shift with a cleaning crew at the fertilizer plant in the next county. Like many undocumented workers, Lupe worked filthy, dangerous jobs for a pittance under the table. A pittance that was largely split between overpriced telephone calls to her grandmother in Mexico and wire transfers that were the old woman’s only source of income.

“You’ll be okay?” Gena asked. “With your temptation?”

“For today. Tomorrow?” Lupe shrugged and waved farewell.

“That is enough.” Gena bit back another platitude. *One day at a time.*

The house seemed abnormally quiet with Lupe gone. The quartet of uninvited crickets that had infiltrated the back porch started to chirp.

Great! Bugs for company. Gena crossed the room and plugged in the ancient radio sitting on the far counter. The only good thing about the analog monstrosity was that thieves ignored it.

She twisted the tuning dial but heard nothing until she smacked the case. Then static came over the speakers. She spun the dial until she found an AM Spanish-language station. Having grown up bilingual, thanks to a Mexican nanny, Gena understood the lyrics even if she didn’t like the fifties music genre.

Right now she just wanted to drown out the crickets. Turning, Gena paused midstep. From this angle, she saw the entire kitchen and realized how hard Lupe had worked earlier to clean it. The grimy layer of construction dirt was gone. The floors gleamed, the appliances sparkled. Even the windows had been polished.

For the first time, Gena could envision the room decorated. Curtains—no, plantation blinds—at the windows. Maybe some potted herbs on the sill. Women and children would gather at the table sharing food. Sharing hope.

Her eyes watered. God, she wished Vianca were there to see it all finished. She’d be so proud. With ten bedrooms and dorms, it doubled the existing shelter’s capacity.

And Vi wouldn’t have rested on her laurels for long. “After this project wraps, I want to look into re-habbing the old shelter,” Vianca had said with her usual verve. “I’ll need your help with that, too. Just to get started. Then you can leave.”

Vi knew Gena had never intended to stay in Sugar Springs. It had been a place for her to hide and heal after hitting rock bottom. Already Gena had remained longer than planned. Over three years longer. Finishing this project was a huge turning point in her life.

Wandering around the kitchen, Gena ran a hand along the smooth Formica countertop, enjoying her sense of accomplishment. Who would have guessed that the spoiled, multitalented beauty-queen daughter of the once powerful Jefferson Armstrong—the same girl who couldn’t wait to flee the citrus belt of southern Texas—would have returned to champion the same poor people her father had once exploited?

Darn it, she was pretty proud of herself.

“We did it, Vi,” Gena whispered.

You did it. You kept your word. You saw it through for both of us.

“But I couldn’t have done it without you.”

If Vi were really listening, she’d know Gena wasn’t talking about the shelter anymore. Helping to build this made up for a lot of old mistakes. Most of them anyway. Some remained unforgivable.

“Guilt is my cue to get busy,” Gena murmured.

The sound of the front door opening and closing echoed in the empty building. Alert, Gena called out, “Who’s there?”

“It’s me,” Lupe said just as Gena recognized the uneven footsteps. “Where are you?”

“I’m still in the kitchen.” Gena looked around for her purse, spotted it hanging on one of the hooks near the back door. Lupe had probably missed her ride to the factory and needed a lift. *Don’t ask.* “Let me grab my bag.”

Lupe rushed through the doorway, her limp more pronounced than usual. Her face drawn, her breathing rapid. “Do you have your phone?”

“Yes, of course. What’s wrong?”
“I think those vandals came back.” Lupe wrung her hands. “I saw two men around your car. I … I ran back here, but they might have seen me. I must go!”

Poor Lupe was terrified of being caught, of being deported.

“It’s okay. Let me call the police, and then we’ll hide you upstairs.” Gena moved to retrieve her cell phone from her purse. She hovered in the open back porch doorway where the signal was strongest and punched in numbers.

“Did you lock the front door?” Gena asked.

“Uh … I think. I will check.”

“Lupe, wait.” But the other woman had already disappeared. The operator came on the line just then, drawing Gena’s attention.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“This is Gena Armstrong at the new women’s shelter on Rio Street. We——”

The rest of Gena’s response was cut off as an explosion ripped through the building.
Rocco knew the man would call back. Proof of life always preceded a demand. This forced wait was a ploy to make Rocco sweat.

Mission accomplished, asshole.

But when Rocco’s phone finally rang again, Maddy was still screaming. Or screaming anew. These men would die for harming an innocent woman.

“Whatever you’re doing, stop!” Rocco ordered with a deadly calm. “If she continues to scream, all deals are off.”

It was an empty threat, but voicing a promise to kill them, as he wanted to do, would only kick off a pissing contest, making Maddy’s situation worse.

Still Minh Tran’s crony laughed—laughed—before barking another command in that same Thai dialect. Maddy’s screams ceased with a suddenness that stopped Rocco’s pulse midbeat. He didn’t want to think about what they’d done to silence her. That they’d gone after her to begin with meant they believed they had Rocco on an emotional leash. He couldn’t let his reactions confirm that. I’m sorry, Maddy.

“If she’s dead—” Rocco began.

“It does not take much for a woman to faint. Now listen closely,” the man continued. “You have ten hours to get our mutual friend to San Francisco. Bring that cell phone with you. You will need it to receive new instructions.”

Oh. Shit.

Rocco did not want it to go down this way. “That’s impossible. I haven’t even confirmed our friend’s location. That will take a day or two in itself. And the moment he disappears, my usual channels of travel will close. I have to get out of the country on my own, which will take longer.”

“We have sources who have confirmed our friend is indeed close to your current location. You need only use your resourcefulness to get to San Francisco. Ten hours. You do not want to see what we do next.” The line went dead.

Rocco hit REDIAL, but got nothing. Not even a ring-tone. He knew the drill: if he traced the number, it would come back stolen or hijacked. The electronic jammer they’d employed would have scrambled GPS tracking coordinates as well.

“Goddamn it!” Rocco gave in to his frustration and kicked over the coffee table, sending a stack of magazines and newspapers across the carpet.

Minh Tran’s ten-hour deadline was calculated to be nearly impossible. It was roughly six hours’ flight time from coast to coast. Commercial flights were out, which left Rocco four hours to find Rufin and secure a private jet. Either Minh Tran had no idea of the security surrounding Dr. Rufin right now, or he’d greatly overestimated Rocco’s abilities.

Hell, four hours wasn’t long enough to make plans, let alone set traps, tags, wires, and ambushes. He had no time to waste.

He also needed to return Travis Franks’s call. Despite Rocco’s anger over the mishandling of Maddy’s case, he knew that somebody at the Agency needed to be in the loop about Maddy’s situation and Minh Tran’s claim of knowing Rufin’s location. Even if it was a bluff, the Agency would take no chances.

While Travis might be pissed that Rocco had kept this situation close to his chest, ultimately Travis would understand. The two men had a long-standing, unspoken agreement when it came to Rocco’s tendency to disappear. As a high-ranking Agency official, Travis’s need for plausible deniability increased with each televised congressional hearing. What Travis didn’t know couldn’t be used as sworn testimony. And right now, Travis was dealing with his own peculiar set of circumstances.

Before contacting Travis, though, Rocco wanted to replay the recording. To see what he’d missed and to listen for background noise as well. Anything that might give a clue to where Maddy was being held. At one point there had been others talking in the background, too.

Grabbing the digital recorder, Rocco turned up the volume and hit REPLAY. Maddy’s soft voice came over the speaker. Minh Tran and company knew how to exert pressure. “Rocco?” Her single word walloped him again.
“Silence!” Tran’s crony roared.
To concentrate, Rocco closed his eyes as he listened to the recorded exchange. Or rather, around the exchange. The slight satellite echo distorted the words. Static from the jammers flared every two seconds. The man shouted in Thai.

Rocco paused and backed up. Replayed it. If he was translating accurately, the man had shouted the equivalent of “make the whore talk.” The blare of a horn distorted the man’s words.
Once more he paused and replayed, to hear the horn. Yes. He’d spent enough time near the docks to recognize a ship’s horn. The man had been on or near water while they talked. Bangkok harbor? Probably not. Too obvious.
He thumbed the PLAY button once more, bracing himself for what would come next. Maddy’s scream. So help him, whatever they’d done to her would be paid back tenfold.
Inaudible words came across the speaker. Someone had been shouting while Maddy pleaded. Again he backed up the recording. Then he increased the volume, needing to hear those words.
The sound of Maddy’s scream filled his living room. “Her screams will draw attention,” someone had shouted in Thai.

At that same moment, Rocco’s front door flew open, as if kicked in by an angry giant. Swinging wide, the door smashed into the wall.
Rocco jumped over the arm of the couch and took cover in the hall. Staying low, he peered around the corner, his Glock drawn and ready.
Two men spilled into his living room, their hulking silhouettes backlit by the ambient light from outside. The men moved quickly, aware of their status as targets. They had handguns drawn and were oddly … familiar.
A third man slipped inside, his weapon drawn as well. Rocco recognized the tall newcomer’s broad shoulders. Travis Franks. The other men had to be his newly acquired “shadows.”

“Travis! It’s me!” Rocco shouted.

“Where’s Maddy?” Travis demanded. “We heard screams.”

“She’s not here. It was a recording. Ten hours. “Close the door. I’ll get alight on.”
The overturned coffee table made the place look worse than usual in the harsh overhead light.
Travis glanced around as if not believing Maddy wasn’t there. Then he moved straight for the recorder still lying on the couch next to Rocco’s cell phone. “You were listening to this?”

At Rocco’s nod, Travis hit REWIND and PLAY.
Maddy’s tremulous voice came across the speaker again. “Rocco?”
He stared at his feet as Travis let the entire conversation play.

“When did this come in?” Travis’s voice was heavy with censure.

“Less than five minutes ago. It’s why I ignored your earlier call,” Rocco said. “Look, I was going to buzz you after I finished listening to the tape again.”

“This”—clearly furious, Travis held up the recorder—“suggests you knew in advance to expect the call. Exactly how long have you been meaning to call me?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking.” Rocco glanced at the two watchers who’d taken up positions next to the door, uncertain how freely he could talk in front of them.

While Travis had been largely incommunicado the last several days, Dante Johnson, Rocco’s coworker and closest friend at the Agency, had suggested Travis wasn’t happy to be hamstrung with the mysterious shadows whom Dante had jokingly dubbed Thing 1 and Thing 2.
Whoever they were, Rocco didn’t like them any more than Travis did. Both “Things” were big guys and each packed a small armory beneath their identical black suits. Clearly they were more than overseers. And they definitely weren’t spooks. NSA perhaps? Or bodyguards?

Travis nodded almost imperceptibly when Rocco frowned, indicating he should speak cautiously. Interesting. Given that the Things had already heard the recording, they now knew about as much as Rocco did.

“I got an e-mail from Minh Tran this evening,” Rocco said. “It had been sent yesterday to my personal account but got flagged as spam.”

“I want to see it. And anything else you have from Minh Tran.”
Rocco retrieved his laptop from where he’d left it charging on the small dinette table. He tapped in his password, opened a browser, and retrieved the e-mail.

Your eyes only. Call this number or your girlfriend dies.

Travis read the message. “Jesus! Maddy was abducted because Tran thinks you two are still involved?”
Rocco nodded. “And I’m damn sure not going to correct him.”

“Let me see the picture.” Travis stepped closer as the photograph of Maddy in the crate appeared on the screen. He
groaned at the image. “Enlarge it.”
Rocco complied. “You can see Tran’s symbol here.”
“Can you forward a copy of that to my Blackberry?”
“Sure.”
“Any chance the crate is a ruse, to make us think she’s overseas when actually she’s still in the U.S.? Tran’s got
strong connections in San Francisco.”
Rocco shook his head. “He knows we’d expect that. The best way to secure a hostage is to keep her close to his
home turf. Which explains why we haven’t heard anything before now.”
“Transport time,” Travis rubbed the back of his neck. “What else do you know?”
“That this will ruin your claim of plausible denia-bility when I disappear again.”
Travis snorted. “Trust me; it was ruined earlier by a tip that the Thai government is circulating your photograph with
REWARD printed on it. It doesn’t sound like Minh Tran is the only one expecting you.”
Shrugging, Rocco shut down his laptop and slid it in his rucksack. “I wouldn’t read too much into that. It’s no secret
Tran keeps a few officials on his payroll.”
“This time it’s different. Tran and the government have a conflict of interest. The Thai government wants Dr. Rufin,
too. They’ve tripled the reward for Rufin’s capture. Consequently, we’ve got bounty hunters springing up like
mushrooms after rain.”
“Great,” Rocco muttered. “Guess I’ll have to be extra sneaky.”
“You can’t go after her.”
“I have to. The official investigation’s been bungled from the get-go. And we both know the Agency’s policy on
hostage negotiation. “The CIA didn’t negotiate. Period. “I’m Maddy’s only chance at a rescue.”
“Do you really think I’d abandon her, too?” Indignation flashed in Travis’s eyes and quickly disappeared. “She’s
been part of the team since Dante’s return. Some of her research has been invaluable.”
“But I feel personally responsible,” Rocco said. “It’s my fault she was targeted to begin with.”
“No, it’s Minh Tran’s fault. Maddy will get help. Just not from you.”
“Then whom?”
“Someone we both trust. Someone who can follow up other leads as well.” Travis’s eyes slid to his watchers. “There
are other developments you’re not aware of.”
“Like?”
“Tran’s hedging his bets by going after others he thinks you care for. Your sister’s place was broken into earlier
tonight. A neighbor called police. Two Thai thugs, both suspected associates of Tran’s, were picked up. One had a
ransom note addressed to you.”
“Jesus!” Guilt over ignoring Adele’s phone call swamped Rocco. Was this what Tran’s crony meant by “what we do
next”? “Where is Adele?”
“I had her and your nephew relocated to a safe house, but she’s making crazy demands. I hoped you could talk some
sense into her.”
“I’ll call her.”
“I’d prefer you talked to her in person,” Travis said. “These men will take you.”
The suggestion irritated Rocco. “Sounds like someone’s worried I’ll slip away.” Or get in the way of an existing op.
Travis was hiding something. “What aren’t you telling me?”
Travis scowled. “We’ve heard the Thai government has a lead on Harry Gambrel’s location, possibly in Burma. The
Thai secret police want to retrieve him and offer a trade for Dr. Rufin. It’s vital that we get to Harry first.”
Harry Gambrel had disappeared two years ago, along with two other operatives: Dante Johnson and Max Duncan. The
three men had been reported dead, but both Dante and Max had recently turned up alive. Making it highly
plausible that Harry was alive, too. To Travis and others at the Agency, Harry was a brother in arms. Their unspoken
code of honor meant allegiance.
The fact that Rocco didn’t much like Harry had no bearing on the situation. Maddy, however, did.
“So you’re saying that recovering Harry is more important than saving Maddy.” Rocco met Travis’s gaze. “Got it.”
“You haven’t got shit.” Travis rocked onto the balls of his feet. “You can’t even see how you’re being manipulated.
Tran’s going after anyone he thinks you care about and you’re playing right into his hands. You’re too damn close to
the situation. That’s why I’m doing this.” Travis turned to his watchers. “Get him out of here. Take him to this
address.” He withdrew a slip of paper from his pocket.
“You can’t be serious!” Rocco wasn’t about to be locked down. “You’ve got to trust me!”
Travis exhaled, clearly exasperated. “I do trust you. Like a brother. The problem is, I know you. And I’d do the
same thing you’re contemplating.”
“Then at least let me work it stateside.”
“You can work it from lockdown.”
“But what if Tran goes after someone else now that he can’t reach Adele?”
“To get to you?” Travis sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If there’s someone new you’re seeing, I’ll order her picked up as well.”
“Not new, but someone I still care about. You’ve got to let me contact Gena.”
“I don’t believe this!” The scowl on Travis’s face deepened. “Since when have you been in contact with her?”
“I haven’t been.” Dreams didn’t count. “Not in years.”
“Then she’s just as likely off Tran’s radar—which is where I want to keep her.”
“What if Tran gets wind that the Thai government is looking for Harry and does some checking on his background?”
“Fine. I’ll get someone to check on Gena.” Travis turned to the other two men. “Now what are you waiting for? Get him out of here!”
Chapter Four

Harlan County, Kentucky
October 4, 1:25 A.M.

Mission incomplete.
Find Rufin.
Find Hades.
No! Find Max. “Remember our plan!”

Searing heat erupted beneath Taz’s skull. Wrong thinking always triggered a penalty. The painful pressure took out his sense of equilibrium. Then it cut off his vision with a suddenness akin to the earth collapsing beneath his feet. The sensation of free-falling in unending darkness nauseated him as his suffering expanded.

You will do what we say.
We control you.

He crashed on the roadway, tumbling head over heels. The asphalt stung him as it scraped his skin, but it was the jaw-busting blow to his chin that he welcomed. For with physical pain came clarity.

He felt his arms and legs twitch and realized he was having a seizure. In the middle of a bloody highway, for God’s sake! Roll. Roll.

Using the last of his dwindling concentration, he forced his body to move. First he flipped onto his back, then up onto his side and over. Blind and off balance, Taz prayed his movement was linear versus circular.

The pain in his skull spiked again, threatening to crush his consciousness.
Don’t think. Don’t pray. Just roll.

The next time he became aware, he felt coarse grass and bits of gravel scraping his cheek. He was facedown in the dirt. That the ground was softer and more uneven confirmed he’d at least made it off the roadbed.

For some reason, dying in a ditch seemed preferable to being run over and smashed to smithereens by a tractor trailer.

He recalled the cabin he’d been holed up in the last few nights. It had appeared out of nowhere, replete with clothes, food, supplies. But how he’d gotten there was a mystery. Had he imagined it? Flickering memories of climbing out of a ravine and wandering for days didn’t quite fill in all the blanks.

Maybe he should have stayed at the cabin a while longer. It had been quiet and deserted. Except, the owner would have returned sooner or later. And the growing urgency to find Rufin allowed Taz no respite.

Mission incomplete.

Flipping onto his back took most of his strength, but this time when he opened his eyes he saw tiny pinpricks of light high above.

Stars. Billions of them. Crikey, when was the last time he’d even seen the night sky? Just admired it, lying softly beneath it?

A woman’s voice teased his ear. “And every night we’re apart, I’ll look up at the sky and think of you. Knowing you’re out there somewhere, looking up at the very same stars. Hurry home to me!”

Taz writhed as white-hot agony ripped down his spine like a glowing welder’s torch. The price for a memory of love was the worst.

Those memories aren’t real. Forget them.

Bullshit! He recalled the scent of roses and screamed as fire licked through his veins.

“Hurry home.”

It was too late. He could never go home.

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he surrendered his thoughts. Mission incomplete. The phrase played over and over in his mind.

Roger, Taz acknowledged when he finally regained some control. He needed to find Dr. Rufin in order to complete the mission. The problem was, he had no idea where Rufin was. The telepathic link between them was gone. Or broken.

Taz had a vague recollection of discussing a contingency plan with Hades, but whatever strategy they’d formulated was also gone. Unfortunately, the urge to follow through—find Rufin—had not abated. In fact, it grew stronger and
carried the threat that to not follow through meant punishment for someone he loved. The scent of roses. No! If they harmed her …

*I will find Rufin!* Even if that meant opening his connection to Hades once more, something Taz had actively resisted. The mixed messages he received from Hades—*“I’m Max, not Hades. You’re Logan, not Taz”*—were confusing and ultimately short-circuited his thinking.

So why the hell could he tune into Hades’ thought but not Rufin’s? Practice? He and Hades had done it for months. Had Rufin tested the connection more than once?

*Doesn’t matter.*

The fact was, Taz had no choice but to contact Hades. He needed Hades’ help to find Dr. Rufin. Closing his eyes, Taz drew his awareness into his body, focusing on his breath first, then on his heartbeat, then finally on his individual molecules. He concentrated, sensing the electrical pulse darting between cells. *On. Off.* And in that tiny space between flashes, he slipped free, to another level of mind.

Here, for a short time at least, Taz could direct and manipulate the thoughts of others. Most others anyway. He could also access a direct link to Hades.

*Help me, Hades.*

The message Taz sent was guarded. Not so much language as image. Sensation.

Hades’ response was swift. Strong. *I’m here.* Or rather, *we’re here.*

Taz realized Hades was with a woman. He opened his side of the connection fully, briefly, and sensed the fierce bond between Hades and this female. That Hades would risk hell’s punishment to love again astounded Taz. Instinctively he pulled away.

*Wait!* Hades called out. *I can help you. Tell me where you are.*

A sudden and overwhelming blitz of sensory data hit Taz, shattering the connection to Hades. Taz snapped back to reality, hyperaware of his surroundings. A car had slowed, pulled over.

He’d been spotted.

A woman, no two women, exited the car simultaneously and ran toward where he lay. The woman carrying the flashlight gasped and skittered to a stop. “I think … he’s dead.”

Taz raised his head and groaned, getting their attention. Both women scrambled toward him once again. They were young; college age.

He managed to perform a quick mental intrusion and learned the women were headed home, to Tennessee, from Eastern Kentucky University.

The blonde with the flashlight dropped to her knees beside him. “You’re hurt. Don’t try to move. Mary Anne can call an ambulance.”

“I’m fine.” Taz winced as he pushed up on his elbows. “Maybe a scrape or two, but nothing serious. Bet I looked like roadkill.”

Mary Anne and Liz both grinned, their relief evident. “We can give you a ride to the next town if you like.”

Taz smiled. *I like.* “If it’s no trouble that would be great.”
Chapter Five

Edroy, TX
October 4, 4:15 A.M.

The whoop-whoop reverberation of another medivac helicopter lifting off into the night faded. Until a second one moved in, whoop-whoop, cleared to land.

Harry Gambrel had been lucky, pulling into the rest area not too far from Corpus Christi, just before the fiery, multicar crash closed the northbound lanes of Interstate 37.

Adding insult to injury, gawkers in the southbound lane had triggered a second, even more horrific accident that included two buses and a fuel truck. The fireball had lit up the night like high noon.

“Rubbernecking freaks,” he muttered, watching the scene beyond the crowded rest area’s parking lot continue to unfold.

Sirens wailed, indistinguishable from one another. According to news reports, traffic was backed up for twenty-plus miles in both directions. Harry could believe it.

Red and blue strobe lights flashed as far as he could see. Every cop, every fire truck, every ambulance in the southern part of the Lone Star state must have been there, which made him nervous.

That they were too busy to notice anyone in the rest area didn’t do much to help. He didn’t like being confined.

The whole thing reminded Harry of a scene from the Iraq War. He’d felt trapped back then, too.

Sweat beaded on his upper lip as he fought the flashback. Damn insurgents had moved in on the survivors of the ambushed supply convoy that Harry had hooked a ride with. Moving fast, Harry had scrambled over the wrecked Humvee to get behind a twenty-year-old Marine sniper.

Ramming a fresh clip into his nine-mil, Harry had prepared to take his own life. What the insurgents would do to a captured soldier paled in comparison to what a captured CIA operative faced. They’d skin Harry alive just to celebrate.

The sweet sound of an incoming air attack—twin Apaches raining hot lead, clearing a space so a Black-hawk could land—had sounded like angels singing.

Unfortunately, the ballsy Marine had taken a fatal hit. Harry had rolled the kid’s body away and kept on firing even though the insurgents had either fled or already been mowed down.

Harry had received credit for most of the kid’s kills, which had bought him his pick of assignments. The assignments had all basically sucked, but getting back on Travis Franks’s team had been Harry’s only goal at the time.

Back then those bastards got all the cushy jobs. When it came to connections, Travis Franks was rumored to have God’s ear. Returning to Travis’s fold had meant sucking up to Rocco Taylor—a bitter irony since it had been Rocco’s fault that Harry had gotten kicked off Travis’s team to begin with. One more strike against his “old buddy” Rocco.

The idiom that it wasn’t what you knew but whom had since become a guiding principle in Harry’s life. Cultivating connections and multiple backup positions over the years had served him well.

As yet another medivac helicopter lifted off the interstate, Harry peered through the blinds of his old Winnebago. At least he wasn’t stuck out in the un-moving traffic. He’d spent the last three hours in relative comfort.

He tried his cell phone again but got the “all circuits are busy” recording. Not too surprising. A disaster like this quickly overwhelmed cell towers. Chances were good his contact, Edguardo, was stuck out there in traffic now, no more able than Harry to get a cell phone signal.

And once he did hear from Edguardo, they would need to decide on another location to make the transfer since the rest area probably wouldn’t clear out for a while. Lifting an unconscious woman from a car trunk was one of those things that went better under the cover of darkness.

The good news was he’d worked with Edguardo several years ago and knew the Mexican mercenary was dependable. He’d stay the course.

Edguardo had two other advantages: one, he’d worked with the Rialto family, the powerful Ecuadorian drug cartel that had expressed interest in the exclusive right to produce SugarCane, a high-powered designer opium that the
doe fiends of the world craved. The Rialto cartel had a reputation for honoring commitments, a rare trait among South American crime alliances. The Rialtos also had the cash to back up their promise to top any competitive bid. Until recently, 'Cane had been available only through Minh Tran. Harry knew this because he’d supplied the drug to Tran. But not anymore. The supply line had dried up months ago and Dr. Rufin was the only one who could restock it. Since there was no repairing the hostility Minh Tran now felt, Harry was a free agent. Once Harry recovered Dr. Rufin, again, and secured the formula for SugarCane, Edguardo could serve as Harry’s go-between with the Rialto cartel.

Edguardo’s second advantage was his unwitting status as a guinea pig. Edguardo’s failure to recognize “Bob Munson” as Harry Gambrel meant that Harry’s disguise was solid. A good plastic surgeon was worth any fee. So, was Edguardo now stuck in that traffic jam outside or had he been unable to even get onto the interstate? Either way, he was probably even more pissed than Harry.

After twisting the top off his thermos, Harry refilled his mug. He blew across the coffee’s steaming surface before taking a sip. After years of choking down the strong, bitter brew that foreigners called coffee, good old Folgers tasted like nectar.

He kept the television muted as he flipped through channels, finally settling on ESPN to watch the replay of the Dallas Cowboys kicking San Diego’s ass.

In spite of its beat-up exterior, the Winnie’s inside was fully tricked out. For two hundred extra bucks, the RV’s previous owner had thrown in the illegal black box that unscrambled all the satellite channels and Internet.

Harry pumped his fist as Dallas scored a field goal. Lord, he missed living in the states! Two years of living and working in the cesspool called Southeast Asia gave one a whole new appreciation for all things red, white, and blue.

In fact, once Harry’s future was secure—beyond risk this time—he’d consider moving back to the U.S. Hell, maybe he’d keep the Winnie and pose as a retired RVer. Travel from Las Vegas to Atlantic City. The thought almost made him snicker.

“Can’t see me as a fucking snowbird.” Turning away from the television, Harry fired up his laptop to check e-mail again.

By running the black box’s cables through the customized junction box hanging off his laptop, Harry had added several layers of security to ensure his connections remained untraceable.

When his e-mail finally opened, however, he was disappointed to find no updates on Rocco Taylor’s status. The news that Travis Franks had indeed moved swiftly to forestall Rocco’s departure had been a relief. That Travis had taken things one step further by throwing Rocco into lockdown hadn’t been a total surprise either. Rocco was one ingenious motherfucker. Which was exactly the reason Harry needed his ass here in the states. Rocco was a fast pass to reclaiming Dr. Rufin.

Minh Tran had had the right idea for getting to Rufin. Kidnap someone Rocco Taylor cared about and let Rocco do the dirty work in order to rescue his lady fair.

In fact, Tran had actually inspired Harry’s current plan, though the similarities ended there. Harry was much smarter than Minh Tran. And Harry knew more about Rocco’s taste in women.

The scenario’s poetic justice hadn’t escaped Harry either. It was Rocco’s fault that Dr. Rufin was here to begin with. Rocco had gone in, guns blazing, and snatched Rufin from Harry’s associate in Bangkok, nearly killing the scientist in the process.

Sure, Rocco’s action had thwarted Minh Tran’s son’s attempt at seizing Rufin. If Tran had managed to get Rufin, Harry would be washed up.

So, while irksome, it was preferable that Rufin was in the CIA’s custody. At least now Harry had a chance.

Actually, Minh Tran had helped to keep the Agency distracted by kidnapping Madison Kohl-meyer. Harry had further contributed a little sleight of hand by leaking key information on himself to a CIA snitch. The news that a third American spy was being held captive in Burma had sent the Agency scrambling to marshal its thinly spread resources.

Without doubt, the Agency had its hands full. The so-called war on terror meant nonterrorists were ramping up operations on all other fronts. The stats on money laundering, arms trading, and sex slave rackets had doubled. Which kept other law enforcement agencies busy, too, making it a little easier for Harry to move about.

What a contrast to nine days ago when Harry had first arrived in the states! He’d barely gotten off the plane when news broke that his partner in crime, pharmaceutical financier Abe Caldwell, had been taken into custody for his role in kidnapping Dr. Erin Houston.

On the heels of that fiasco came word that Dr. Rufin had disappeared from the hiding spot where Harry had left him in Thailand. Initially, Harry had panicked, retreating to the one place he’d sworn he’d never return: his father’s farm in southern Illinois.

Shortly before his death, Ephraim Gambrel had agreed to sell the place for its mineral rights. The sale would have
made Ephraim a multimillionaire. But glitches in the paperwork meant the place temporarily sat in limbo while the buyer waited for new zoning variances and estate settlements. That his old man had left everything to Harry’s ex, Gena, still rankled.

With the estate unsettled, the farm sat vacant and untouched, which meant his old man’s fifties-era bomb shelter hadn’t been discovered. Ephraim’s paranoia, carried over from the Cold War, had provided a shelter that was kept well provisioned, too. Harry could have survived there six months, easy.

But a little quiet time quickly gave rise to a new plan. Sitting alone in that dank, concrete hole in a cornfield had helped Harry distill one simple truth: His Golden Goose was the designer drug recipes. If Harry could get to Dr. Rufin just long enough to make him cough up the drug formula for SugarCane, his future was set. The deal Harry had proposed to the Rialto cartel didn’t include future royalties. Just a onetime cash buyout that Harry wouldn’t have to split with anyone.

It was a win-win. Once Harry got what he wanted, the CIA could keep Rufin and all his dirty little secrets encoded in data chips embedded in the renegade test subject know as Taz. Provided Taz was still alive and the chips were retrievable. And even if the data was viable, all that crap on mind control would require years of testing.

When the news broke that Abe Caldwell had been freed on bond pending a deal with the Justice Department, Harry left his father’s farm and paid Abe an unexpected visit.

Two bullets in the shoulder had Abe begging for mercy. Turned out the man was terrified of dying. In those last few hours of his life, Caldwell had spilled his guts over and over, hoping to win a respite.

“You and I can strike a new deal,” Abe had blubbered. “You can come to Zurich. We’ll both be protected there. I have connections you can only dream about.”

As a desperate show of good faith, Abe had spewed forth the combination to his safe, which had been well stocked with cash and gold Krugerrands. Not enough for Harry to retire on, however.

“I can get more,” Abe had gone on. “Please! Just let me call my personal physician.”

In the end, Caldwell even gave up his most valuable human asset: his mole within the Agency.

Taking over Caldwell’s personal traitor had been disgustingly easy. People sold their allegiance for money, not friendship. Loyalty was a matter of cash flow. And while the CIA mole would have to be done away with soon, for the time being the man was worth his weight in the Krugerrands Harry now controlled. Krugerrands the mole had been smart enough to stash away, amassing a secret fortune without the telltale trail of cash the Agency regularly checked for.

Growing impatient, Harry peeked out the blinds again. This time he noted that the southbound traffic was starting to creep along.

His cell phone went off just then with a special ringtone. Edguardo. “Finally,” Harry said. “What’s your ETA?”

“There’s been a problem,” Edguardo said.

Those four words had Harry snapping off the television. “Go on.”

“The men we hired were spotted by another woman, who ran to warn the target.”

“Jesus! If they blow this job—”

“Unfortunately, that’s exactly what they did. They knew they could be identified, so they firebombed the place before the police arrived.”

Harry groaned. Even though riskier, he and Edguardo had agreed to hire local talent to grab Gena Armstrong. A new face in a Podunk town like Sugar Springs would draw the attention of hometown cops faster than a hot fresh doughnut.

If everything had gone as planned, Edguardo would have eliminated the locals once Gena was handed off. In this part of the country, dead bodies were part of the landscape and were always blamed on border issues.

“I’ve taken care of the men,” Edguardo went on. “So it can’t be tied to us. In fact, the cops are already blaming the husband of an illegal alien.”

Harry peered out at the traffic again. It moved slowly. The familiar urge to flee built in his chest as he began shutting down his laptop. “What about the target? Is she dead?”

“Unknown. I’ve got a report of one fatality at the shelter. Plus several burn victims were transported to the local hospital. The fire spread to a nearby apartment building, so the body count is expected to climb.”

Harry climbed behind the wheel but didn’t start the engine. “See if you can find out if one of the victims is a thirty-year-old Caucasian female. Blond hair, blue eyes. Five-six. Then call me back.”

Swearing, he disconnected and stared out the window before drawing back and smashing his fist against the dash. Gena Armstrong Gambrel would pay for screwing with Harry again. If she was one of the burn victims, he hoped she was suffering, but alive. Because right now he needed her to survive … just long enough to get leverage.

God, please, don’t let the bitch die.
Chapter Six

Washington, D.C. Area
October 4, 7:00 A.M.

“I want breakfast. Two eggs, scrambled, with toast. Coffee, black.” Rocco looked directly at the closed-circuit camera that monitored his movements in the room. He maintained three seconds of eye contact, then turned away before giving in to the urge to flip off the viewer.

Food was the last thing Rocco wanted, but he figured Thing 1 and Thing 2 would be more likely to respond to an innocuous-sounding request. Offering threats had done nothing.

And after a night of no sleep Rocco really could use the coffee. Edgy, he paced. He hated being kept in the dark, literally and figuratively. The windowless nine-foot square room made him restless.

Sparsely furnished, it held a twin bed, a wall-mounted television, a compact refrigerator, and a small-scale table with chairs just slightly larger than kiddy furniture. The adjacent bath was equally spartan: sink, shower, head.

Rocco was familiar with his place of detainment, the basement level of a high-rise not too far outside D.C. He had debriefed “persons of interest” here before. He’d just never imagined himself on the receiving end.

While considered a secure location, it wasn’t as private as the truly hidden places the CIA used when it needed to keep a subject’s whereabouts secret. And even though this place was designed more for protection than detention, the bar across the outside of the door effectively held Rocco against his will.

Once Things 1 and 2—the cocky bastards refused his request to see ID—had locked Rocco up, they had seemingly abandoned him. Except for that one short blast of verbal crossfire over Travis Franks’s whereabouts. That had been fun. The Things were convinced that Rocco and Travis were jointly pulling the wool over their eyes. And Rocco had been too pissed to bother correcting them.

While Rocco had yet to figure out Travis’s game, one thing was as clear as rainwater: Rocco had been played. Right along with Travis’s two watchers. And none of them were happy campers.

Point of fact was the call Rocco had overheard during the ride there. Thing 1 had placed it—to whom?—only to receive a royal ass-chewing for letting Travis out of their sight. Interesting.

Rocco glanced toward the remote-controlled camera installed above the prison-issued door. If not for the camera’s periodic movements, he might have wondered if the Things had skipped out, and maybe they had. But someone was out there watching him. He could feel it.

And he’d make damn sure they felt it, too, because he planned to throttle the next person who came in that door.

Screw Travis. Rocco wasn’t behaving any longer.

So where was Travis now? And damn it, whatever he was up to, how would it affect Maddy’s chances for survival?

That Rocco had allowed Travis to confiscate his friggin’ cell phone was another mistake. Rocco had initially thought he’d understood Travis’s hesitancy to disclose strategy in front of the two watchers and had gone along, fully expecting Travis to reconnect here and bring Rocco up to speed.

None of that had happened.

Without his cell phone, Rocco was pretty much screwed seven ways to hell. He had no way to contact Minh Tran. No hope of saving Maddy. Travis better have a giant rabbit up his sleeve.

Rocco eyed the clock. Three hours. He was supposed to be in San Francisco by ten A.M. What would happen when he didn’t show? Maybe if he’d had his cell phone he could have talked Minh Tran’s goon down. Or struck a new agreement. Was Travis even thinking of that? Or was he too focused on his own agenda? On recovering Harry Gambrel?

The new intel on Harry couldn’t have come at a worse time. For Maddy. Ever since recovering Dante Johnson and Max Duncan from prisons in Thailand, Travis had been mentally flying a missing-man formation. Travis had seemingly been hell-bent on bringing home the last member of his team. No matter the cost.

And yet Travis had assured Rocco that someone they both trusted was working to save Maddy. “Both trusted” made for a very short list: Dante and Max. Check.

Unless Travis had enlisted help in Southeast Asia. That list was even shorter: Diego Marques. Uncheck. After helping Rocco free Dr. Rufin, Diego had sworn never to work with the Agency again. Had Travis somehow changed
Diego’s mind? Or had Travis come up with a fix on where Maddy was being held? Who knew? At this point Rocco was second-guessing every supposition he’d made. To be left isolated like this was unacceptable. So was being left hanging without word on Maddy.

Even though Travis was one of the few who knew that Rocco and Maddy’s relationship had devolved to a platonic one—at Maddy’s insistence—Travis knew Rocco had feelings for her. If not love, then genuine caring.

Travis also knew Rocco felt responsible for Maddy’s situation. God, was she okay? The sound of her screams still echoed in his head. “Nooooo! … Rocco … make them …”

Minh Tran and his men would pay for hurting her.

“Swear to God,” Rocco muttered.

Bet they’re quaking in their boots. The snide thought reminded Rocco of how ruthless Minh Tran was. And going after Rocco’s sister proved how mercenary he could be.

Earlier, Rocco had talked briefly to Adele. While she had no clue what was really going on, Adele had made it clear she felt the government and Rocco both owed her for the many inconveniences she was being forced to endure.

God love his sister, because there were times when Rocco found it damn difficult. Compared to Maddy’s circumstances, Adele was living at the Taj Mahal, in a house far nicer than her trailer, with all her meals brought in, even cigarettes and booze.

He hoped that with Tran’s modus operandi exposed and Adele hidden beyond his reach, Maddy’s value as a hostage would increase substantially. As their sole point of leverage, they needed Maddy alive and well.

But only if there was someone to bargain with.

Once Tran learned Rocco had been detained, was in lockdown and unable to deliver Rufin, Maddy’s value would plummet with Tran’s impatience.

Killing her would give Tran a quick, angry fix. But he wouldn’t stop there. Tran wouldn’t accept being thwarted. He’d still want Rufin. He’d still want to get back at Rocco. Which meant Tran would go further. Dig deeper into Rocco’s past.

No. Rocco refused to let himself think about his remaining vulnerability.

Gena.

He prayed that Travis was correct, that it was unlikely Minh Tran could connect the dots. As far as the outside world was concerned, Rocco hadn’t had contact with Gena in nearly four years. Four years that included her marriage to Harry Gambrel.

Four years of vanquished dreams.

Outside, in the hallway, Rocco heard voices. More than one, but the thick door made their words indistinguishable. It was always possible that they were coming to set him free, but he wasn’t taking any chances. He’d kick their asses first, ask questions second.

Rocco moved behind the door, knowing they’d open it cautiously. If he were too close, they’d slam it shut. He’d wait until the door was open a good six to eight inches, then yank it backward and block it from being closed.

The lock snapped. As soon as the door swung wide enough, Rocco grabbed for the man’s wrist.

“Down, boy.” It was Dante Johnson.

“Dante!” Rocco shoved the door all the way open. Max Duncan was there, too, hovering in the hall behind Things 1 and 2. Disapproval shimmered like a heat wave between the two watchers.

“Travis sent us,” Dante began.

“Where the hell is he?” Rocco snapped. “And who did he send to rescue Maddy?”

“Maddy Kohlmeyer?” The tone of Dante’s voice confirmed he knew little or nothing. “I believe Travis was meeting with Artel Quaid in hopes of learning more about the situation.”

Rocco picked up on the code and tried to quell his irritation. “Artel Quaid” was a fictional name signifying caution. Dante’s use of that same name months ago had helped Rocco locate him in an overseas jail.

Thing 1 shifted closer and tapped Dante’s shoulder. “Where is Franks meeting this Quaid fellow?”

Dante turned, as if seeing the watcher for the first time. “What was your name again?”

The watcher sneered. “Just answer the question. It’s important that we find Travis Franks.”

“I bet it is.” Dante nodded at Max, who drew his gun at the same time Dante did. “Get ‘em up boys. Hands clasped behind the neck.”

Dante passed a Glock nine millimeter to Rocco, who immediately chambered a round.

“Hey, we’re on the same team,” Thing 2 began.

“Right.” Rocco stepped out into the hall. “Where was all your team spirit when I wanted out?”

“Better get inside before you piss him off,” Dante said.

Outfoxed and outnumbered, the watchers exchanged glances, then stepped into the room. Max shut the door and locked it.
“God, I’m glad to see you two,” Rocco said. “Thanks for springing me.”

“We owed you.” Dante and Max nearly spoke in unison. “But how the hell did you end up here, with those two?” Dante went on.

Rocco pointed to the ceiling, reminding them that the building was wired. “We’ll talk outside.”

Rocco’s rucksack, gun, and wallet were right where he’d left them in a metal bin outside the door. His belongings appeared undisturbed, but he’d check them more closely later.

“So what the hell is going on?” Dante asked once the three of them were inside the black Chevy SUV. Dante drove with Max riding shotgun. “And where is Travis?”

“I was going to ask you that same thing.” Rocco squinted against the bright sun. “You told those guys that Travis sent you. Are you saying he didn’t?”

“He did, but not directly.” Dante caught Rocco’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Travis told Cat where you were being held.”

Rocco sat forward. Catalina Dion was Dante’s fiancé. Though not an Agency employee, she’d worked with them years ago as a contract agent. She’d been one of the best, and Rocco considered her an unofficial member of their team. So did Travis.

“He knew damn well Cat would tell you,” Rocco said. “Tell her I owe her one. Did Travis give Cat any updates on Maddy’s situation?”

“I heard her BMW was found in the bay. Empty,” Dante said. “Is there more?”

“A lot more. I got an e-mail yesterday evening with a picture of Maddy. Minh Tran has her, most likely overseas. He wants me and Dr. Rufin in exchange.”

“Shit!” Dante said. “And you called Travis, right?”

“Actually, Travis showed up at my town house after Tran made an attempt to abduct my sister and her son. Travis heard me playing back a recorded phone conversation.” Rocco went on to explain Minh Tran’s demands.

“Did Travis move your sister and nephew to a secure location?” Max asked.

“Yes.”

“Guess that explains why Travis asked Cat to also check on Gena Armstrong,” Dante said. “Good thing, too. The women’s shelter Gena volunteers at in South Texas was firebombed last night.”

Rocco felt as if he’d been hit by a cannon. “Was Gena hurt?”

“I understand she escaped without major injuries. But there was at least one fatality. Sounds like Tran was trying to get to anyone connected to you,” Dante said.

“What time did this happen?” Had the bombing been intended as a message to underscore Tran’s threat?

“I don’t have that level of detail. Cat’s trying to run down particulars as we speak,” Dante replied.

“I want Gena put in protective custody!” Rocco said. “Does Travis know about this?”

“When Cat told him about the explosion, he said to get you to South Texas, fast. He also advised her to keep this out of the normal channels. Obviously, Travis is still concerned about an internal leak,” Dante said.

The reason Travis had enlisted Catalina to check on Gena, as opposed to using someone inside the Agency, became plain. The Agency had a deeply burrowed mole.

It dawned on Rocco that they were headed for the airport, albeit slowly. Morning rush hour was in full swing.

“Damn it! I need to talk with Travis,” Rocco said. “He knows I’ll do anything to protect Gena. But I can’t just abandon Maddy!”

“Look, man, there’s something else you need to know,” Dante said. “Travis and Maddy started dating a few months ago. Finding Maddy is important to him, too.”

“Maddy and Travis?” The news was and wasn’t surprising. Rocco knew Maddy had been dating someone. But Travis? “How long have you known about this?” Dante shrugged. “I didn’t until Cat told me this morning. Guess women are more in tune with that stuff. Cat thought Maddy and Travis were purposely keeping a low profile since his divorce was just finalized.”

Jesus. Was that why Travis had distanced himself these last few weeks, keeping contact with Rocco to strictly work issues? Now Rocco felt even more guilty. How many times had Travis and Dante tried to point out the secret torch Rocco carried for Gena—even while he’d dated Maddy?

“It’s like you compare all women to the Ghost of Gena Past,” Travis had once said. “Who the hell wants to compete with that?”

“I feel like an idiot for not picking up on it sooner,” Rocco said.

“Bottom line: you’ve got to trust Travis on this one,” Dante said.

“Tell me more about what happened in Texas. Did you say Gena was at a women’s shelter?” Had her problem resurfaced?

“My intel’s sketchy, but Cat’s gathering a full dossier for you. Gena worked for the company that was building a
new facility for the shelter. In fact, it was still under construction. There’d been some recent vandalism. Nothing serious. Until last night. Gena and one other volunteer were there working when it happened. Local law enforcement seems to believe either the husband of the other woman is behind the attack, or whoever has been behind the previous vandalism decided to take it to the next level.”

“In light of the timing and what’s happening to people around me, I think we can rule both of those out,” Rocco said.

“I agree.” Max had been quiet up till now. “For what it’s worth, my Spidey senses are telling me Gena’s in serious danger.”

Rocco focused on Max. “What else do you know?”

Thanks to mind-control experiments conducted by the late Dr. Viktor Zadovsky, a protégé of Dr. Rufin’s, Max had developed some highly unusual telepathic abilities. Abilities Rocco had thought only applied to a link between Max and the missing man they believed was SAS Agent Logan Treyhorn. Better known as Taz.

Except now that Rocco thought about it, he recalled that Dante had had some clairvoyant experiences when he’d first returned as well.

“I sense someone watching her, but from a distance. Like they’re waiting.” Max rubbed his forehead as if in pain.

“Sorry it’s not more specific. My, uh, channels are scrambled today.”

“Wow. Guess that confirms Taz is alive though,” Rocco said.

Taz had fallen into a deep ravine in Colorado after fighting with Max. His remains had not been found. That Taz’s body held data chips implanted by Dr. Rufin was one of the reasons the Agency sought him. That Taz was considered a friend by Max added another layer of complexity.

“I’ll go see Gena,” Rocco said. “And explain the danger she’s in and get her to a safe house.”

“We’re going with you,” Dante said. “We’ve got a jet on standby that can fly us to Texas in about three hours. We can be back by nightfall. Then——”

Dante’s words were cut off as his phone rang. Within seconds Max’s was ringing, too.

Max checked the display. “It’s headquarters. Damn. You think they already know about Rocco’s escape?”

“Play dumb,” Dante advised.

“Duncan.” Max grew silent, listening. “When did this happen? Send a copy of the video to my cell phone.”

Max disconnected and turned to Dante. “A gas station in Kentucky was robbed during the night. The female clerk is missing. The suspect’s photo matches the one police have on file for Taz.”

Taz had been sought in connection with an earlier assault following his escape from a hospital in San Diego.

Max’s phone buzzed, indicating an e-mail. He opened it. “It’s him.” Max held his phone up.

Even Rocco recognized the man staring directly into the security camera. “Damn. Now what?”

“I’ve got to get to him before the police do,” Max said. “If he’s unstable, I’m the only one he’ll listen to.”

“Change of plans,” Dante said to Rocco. “Max and I need to go to Kentucky. Who do you trust that we can tap for backup in Texas?”

Rocco shook his head. “Outside of this car? No one. If I can get to Texas in three hours, I can grab Gena and fly straight back here. She can stay with Adele and Billy until we get this straightened out.”

“We both know it won’t be that easy. From what I understand, Gena’s refused to leave the burn victim’s bedside,” Dante said. “Let’s face it, the truth will shock her.”

“Especially coming from me,” Rocco said. “But if I have to, I’ll drag her to a secure environment in handcuffs.”
Sugar Springs, TX
October 4, 11:00 A.M.

Gena huddled on the bench inside the tiny alcove that doubled as a waiting room for the makeshift intensive care unit of Sugar Springs Hospital.
Serving a population of less than five thousand, the small community facility saw its fair share of fevered infants, broken limbs, and bar stabbings. But it wasn’t really equipped for major trauma.
Normally, patients with life-threatening injuries were stabilized, then transported to the larger hospital in McAllen or even Corpus Christi.
But last night, to paraphrase one of the ER doctors, had been a statewide hell night. And everything was bigger in Texas.
There had been a train wreck two counties over. A building at a major manufacturing plant in Brownsville had collapsed during shift change. Add to that a catastrophic traffic accident that closed Interstate 37 north of there.
By the time the fire in Sugar Springs happened, the trauma units in every major hospital across southeast Texas were overwhelmed. Forget air ambulances. The ER here had been told to do the best it could with what it had.
That Lupe was still alive was a miracle. Gena had overheard the paramedics talking. No one had expected Lupe to survive the trip to the hospital. Because no air transport had been available, Lupe had been admitted here and put in a medical coma.
They’d kept her alive, but as time passed and the extent of her injuries was catalogued in whispers, it became obvious that Lupe was beyond medical hope. Her left leg had been amputated just above the knee and her left arm close to the shoulder.
Yet somehow Lupe’s heart kept beating. And her lungs kept working. Eventually she stabilized just long enough for the usual questions to start popping up and spawning problems.
The truth was damning: Lupe wasn’t in the country legally.
She had no medical insurance. Though no one would admit it, Lupe became a proverbial hot potato. None of the hospitals wanted the expense or the liability, especially when her prognosis was so grim.
“I’ll cover her expenses,” Gena had argued with the admissions clerk.
“It’s not that simple,” the woman had responded.
But in Gena’s mind, it was just that simple: Lupe needed advanced life support. Gena could pay for it, or guarantee it, with the estate settlement. For the first time Ephraim’s money didn’t feel like a burden.
Helen Newton, the shelter’s director, arrived just then and squeezed onto the bench beside Gena. “Any change?”
Gena shook her head, avoiding Helen’s gaze, not wanting to see any more pity or sorrow. If one more person told her he or she was “sorry” to hear about Lupe, or reminded Gena how lucky she’d been, Gena would scream.
And if she started to scream, she didn’t know if she’d ever stop. Lupe had screamed and screamed…. “She’s still alive, if that’s what you mean,” Gena said.
“I’ve been elected by the hospital staff to talk sense into you.” Helen gently pried the coffee cup out of Gena’s grip.
“They said you’ve been here all night. You need sleep. Decent food. Probably some medical attention yourself. Why don’t you go and—”
Gena cut her off. “I won’t leave Lupe. She doesn’t have anyone else to fight for her.”
The fact that Lupe had no family in the area further complicated medical matters. There was no availability of medical history, known allergies and the like. No next of kin to relieve the doctors of decisions about procedures, surgeries, and life support.
Gena had offered up what little personal information she knew, which only emphasized the unknowns. No date of birth. A nameless grandmother who lived “somewhere” in Mexico. And a despicable ex-husband whom police seemed to believe was responsible for the fire.
And while Gena had eagerly answered the hospital personnel’s questions, she had learned the flow of information was one-way. Patient privacy laws meant they couldn’t disclose anything about Lupe’s condition to nonfamily. It meant Gena had been forced to eavesdrop to learn what little she knew.
“There’s not a graceful way to say this, so I’ll just blurt it out. Lupe may not want you to fight,” Helen said softly.
“Think of her quality of life. If she survives, she faces a long and painful recovery. There will be extensive scarring. She’ll need skin grafts. And the amputations …”
“I’ve thought of nothing but that.” Gena wiped away tears. “And I’m not leaving. Not as long as Lupe’s still alive.”
Helen took a deep breath. “Here’s something else to consider then. This incident, as horrible as it is, is generating negative press for the shelter. I received two calls this morning, from press agencies seeking comment on accusations that we not only support illegal immigration, but that we also are a way station on some type of underground railroad.”
“That’s preposterous! Did you tell them where to stick their accusations?”
“I started to. Until someone mentioned you were keeping vigil here. I assured them you weren’t acting on the shelter’s behalf.” Helen glanced past Gena, as if uncomfortable with what she was about to say. “Gena, I—”
“I understand. You have to think of the others at the shelter. If it’s any help, I quit as a volunteer. Feel free to publicly announce as much.”
But Helen wasn’t looking at her, was still staring over Gena’s shoulder.
“Well drat,” Helen said. “I knew they’d show up sooner or later.”
Gena twisted around and spotted two men wearing the familiar black windbreakers denoting Border Patrol. One of the men was jotting notes while talking with the fire marshal.
“They came by the shelter earlier,” Helen continued. “Looking to interview witnesses. They, um, didn’t realize we had two facilities. Or used to.”
The reminder that the new shelter had been destroyed twisted another knife in Gena’s heart. All Vianca’s hard work was gone.
We’ll rebuild.
If Vi were sitting there, she’d have been on her cell phone calling in favors. I need a building razed. I need an updated survey. How fast can I get concrete?
To Vianca, life had been black and white. Yes or no. Now or when? Lead or follow.
We can do this.
No. Without Vi, there was no we. Vi’s cousin, the contractor, had been by earlier and reported that the building was a total loss. While Gena had yet to revisit the site, she remembered the chaotic images from last night.
Thanks to a propane tank blowing, by the time the fire department arrived, flames had engulfed two structures, the shelter and the apartment building next door.
What was left was now considered a crime scene after someone reported watching two men toss a Molotov-type explosive at the shelter.
Fury seethed anew, clawing at Gena’s lungs. Damn the men who’d done this, who’d hurt many innocent people. Like Lupe. And the homeless man sleeping at the back of the apartment complex who had died. The others who suffered less severe burns and whose families were now displaced.
“Here they come,” Helen whispered as the Border Patrol agents strode toward them.
“Ma’am.” The agent nodded to each of them, then offered a leather ID holder to Gena. “I’m Sam Ramirez. This is my partner, Dick Huggins. We’d like to talk to you about last night. I understand that you were at the shelter at the time of the incident. And that you and the burn victim were working together.”
“Lupe,” Gena said. “Her name is Lupe.”
“Guadalupe Del Fuego,” Agent Ramirez said. “That was the name you knew her by? How long have you known Lupe?”
“She showed up at the New Beginnings shelter in late July. Or early August.” Gena noticed Helen nodding in agreement. “I volunteer at the shelter, so I’m not there daily.”
“What do you know about Lupe? About her personal life?” Ramirez asked.
Gena hesitated. The shelter’s privacy policy, while treated seriously in-house, was not legally binding, especially in the face of a criminal investigation.
“Very little,” Gena said. “Look, the police already asked me these same questions.”
“I understand that this is difficult, ma’am, but our questions may be different,” Ramirez said. “What do you know about her friends? Where she worked?”
“She never spoke of any particular friends outside of others staying at the shelter, but then again, we didn’t spend a great deal of time together. Two nights a week, Lupe helped me—volunteered, not paid—with cleaning and painting at the new shelter.”
Gena wasn’t going to mention the jobs Lupe worked with other potentially illegal aliens. She was certain Agent Ramirez would ferret that out from other sources.
“Did she ever mention family?”
“A grandmother who lives in Mexico. She raised her. If she had other family, she never mentioned them,” Gena said. “I, um, understand the police are searching for her ex-husband.”

“Juan Carlos Del Fuego,” Ramirez flipped through his notes. “Did you ever meet him?”

“No.”

“Lupe came to the shelter seeking refuge from an abusive husband,” Helen interjected. “One of our goals is to keep the abuser away.”

“Do you know if Lupe told her grandmother where she was staying?” Ramirez shifted his gaze back toward Gena. The implication that Lupe’s grandmother then told Carlos went unsaid.

“I don’t know,” Gena said. I hope not. “All shelter residents are warned about the dangers of disclosing their locations, to protect others as well as themselves.”

The two agents exchanged doubtful glances. Then Ramirez handed Gena a photograph.

She had expected the subject to be Juan Carlos Del Fuego. But the person in the grainy black-and-white mug shot was Lupe. Tears stung Gena’s eyes as she realized Lupe would never look like that again.

“Can you confirm that this is the burn victim currently in ICU?” Ramirez asked. “The woman you know as Guadalupe Del Fuego?”

“That’s her.” The mug shot most likely meant Lupe had been picked up and deported before.

“Were you aware she was in the country illegally?”

“I never asked,” Gena answered honestly.

“Of course not,” Agent Ramirez’s voice had an edge, which he quickly covered. “Tell me what happened last night. When did you and Lupe arrive at the shelter?”

Gena recounted—for at least the fourth time—how she’d found the shelter vandalized early yesterday morning.

“Lupe came by around eight last evening and began cleaning. She also painted several doors I had replaced.”

“Did she leave at any time? Or receive any phone calls that you know of?”

“No. I went to get my cell phone to call the police, while she went to make sure the front door was locked.”

“Lupe, wait.”

“So she was in the front part of the house when it caught fire?” Ramirez asked.

The memory had Gena shutting her eyes. The force of the blast had knocked Gena backward, onto the rear porch. She’d dashed back inside and found the kitchen engulfed in flames.

Lupe had crawled across the floor, screaming.

Gena had used her bare hands to extinguish Lupe’s clothes. Then she half dragged, half carried Lupe out the back door. To the yard.

Another explosion sounded. The propane tank next door. Gena huddled over Lupe to shield her from the debris. A fireman came up and yanked her away. “You’re hurt! See the paramedics.”

But Gena had refused to let anyone treat the minor cuts and burns she’d suffered. “Save her! Save Lupe!”

Gena became aware that Helen offered a tissue. She took it and blew her nose, ignoring the closed look on Agent Ramirez’s face.

“I believe that covers it for now.” Agent Ramirez tugged out his vibrating cell phone. “Excuse us.”

No sooner had the two agents moved away than there was a flurry of activity at the nurses’ station. Beepers and buzzers sounded in ICU.

“Code Blue.”

Gena overheard the medical emergency code. Lupe!

She rushed to the double-door entrance to the ICU. Already the corridor beyond was filled with nurses and techs, rushing to Lupe’s bedside. What was going on? How bad was it?

Suddenly Gena was being jerked back.

“Move it!” a doctor ordered as he slammed his access card through the sensor, then pushed past her as the slow-moving doors swung wide.

Gena stepped forward, stood momentarily frozen in the opening, witnessing the controlled chaos. As the door closed it swept her inside, where she went unnoticed.

A male nurse shoved what must have been a crash cart toward Lupe’s bed, half a dozen nurses in his wake.
The doctor who was responsible for Gena’s ringside seat plunged into the midst, already barking orders. “Give me point-five milligrams atropine … lidocaine!”

Gena lost count of the injections given. Blood pressure and pulse were called out repeatedly, the numbers garbled. Then there were no more orders.

The room went silent. And Gena knew, knew, knew. Lupe was dead. 

No! She hung her head and felt the knot of anguish that had been building in her chest rise.

The doors swung open behind her, stirring the air. A dark-haired woman in a lab coat hustled past without speaking, without questioning Gena’s presence in the restricted area.

Then the doctor who had inadvertently let her slip inside the ICU approached, his gaze sliding across her face. But he, too, passed mutely by.

Invisible.

Gena’s loss had left her as invisible as Lupe had been for most of her life.

“You shouldn’t be in here!” A nurse came up just then, shaking her head as she gently but firmly guided Gena out to the hall before turning away.

Unable to move or speak, Gena stared at the closed doors. Then she felt hands at her shoulders, knew someone was tugging her back toward the waiting area.

She resisted, not ready to leave Lupe, not wanting comfort for a truth she didn’t want to face.

“Gena?”

That voice …

The breath left her body as she turned and looked into the face of the most gorgeous and cruelest man she’d ever known.

No, not the worst.

Utter confusion threatened to wreck Gena’s fragile equilibrium. She blinked, frantic to block the memories that wanted to rush forward. She couldn’t deal with the mess that was their past. Not now.

“What—? What are you doing here, Rocco?”

“I’m sorry for the loss of your friend.” He fumbled for words.

“Lupe. Her name was Lupe!” Gena shook off his hand and stepped away. “And you have no idea what I’ve lost.”

“Agreed.” He looked solemnly left, then right. “Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

The one-two changeup of his tone rankled her. “To be honest, I don’t feel much like talking at the moment.”

“It’s important. And urgent.”

Gena looked past him, at the Border Patrol agents who were questioning a nurse. And then to where Helen sat, watching her with an odd expression.

The last thing Gena wanted was to have to explain Rocco to Helen. Or even to Agent Ramirez. Because explaining Rocco meant walking down the hellish path called Her Past.

Maybe the easiest and quickest way to get rid of him was to listen to whatever the hell he’d come there to say and then tell him to scram.

“Follow me,” she snapped.
Harry Gambrel was pissed that he hadn’t received advance warning that Rocco Taylor was en route to Sugar Springs.

Seeing Rocco stroll through the front door of the hospital ten minutes ago had infuriated Harry. If Rocco got to Gena first …

After confirming that Gena was unharmed, and learning that she refused to leave her injured friend, Harry and Edguardo had staked out the hospital entrances. The place was too small, too full of cops to risk going inside. Instead, Harry had slouched in his rental car, in the hospital’s crowded parking lot, watching through the small slits cut in a newspaper.

As soon as he spotted Rocco, Harry called Ian Brown, the CIA mole he’d inherited from Abe Caldwell. “What the hell is Taylor doing in Texas?”

“Rocco Taylor?” Ian sputtered. “My latest intel shows him on ice, here in D.C. Well crap! I suppose this means he’s operating off the grid now, too.”

“Gee, you think?” Harry ground out. Travis Franks had already pulled his own disappearing act. What good was an inside contact when all the players operated outside?

“Well, on the bright side, it should keep Rocco off Minh Tran’s radar,” Ian pointed out.

“That’s only helpful if we know what Tran is up to.”

Harry would bet that Minh Tran had probably panicked when he’d learned that Rocco was in lockdown. If Tran’s pattern was the same as it had been in the past, he would cut and run, withdrawing to one of his jungle lairs until things cooled down. Or until he tracked down a new leverage point. All the more reason Harry needed to get to Gena.

Within days, Madison Kohlmeyer’s body would probably be recovered, a graphic message not to fuck with Minh Tran. And with the analyst being only a low-level peon, the Agency wouldn’t waste man-hours over her death.

“Recheck your intel, all of it. Find out where Dante Johnson and Max Duncan are right now and get back to me,” Harry snapped. “I need to know what I’m up against here.”

“I know for a fact those two are en route to Kentucky, chasing down a lead on Taz. I’m guessing Rocco’s on his own.”

“Don’t guess, confirm!” Harry disconnected just as Rocco came back out the front entrance with a woman. Harry squinted at the woman. Gena? What had happened to his ex–trophy wife? He’d heard she’d fallen on hard times, but damn. Didn’t the town have a beauty parlor?

Harry called Edguardo, who was covering the ER entrance. “Our subject’s out front, but she has company. Stand by to follow.”

But instead of leaving, Rocco stood off to one side while Gena chatted it up with some old lady, pointing and gesturing as if giving directions. What the fuck was going on?

Rocco had his back to Harry, and Gena was in the shadows, so lipreading was out. What Harry wouldn’t have given for an electronic eavesdropping aid just then. Still, Gena’s body language came across loud and clear, her spine ramrod straight. She was pissed.

“That makes two of us, darling,” Harry muttered.

Harry’s phone vibrated briefly, indicating a text message. It was from Ian, confirming that Rocco’s official whereabouts were “unknown” and he was “believed unaccompanied.”

Sounded like Harry had one up on the Agency.

Watching Rocco and Gena made Harry think about that Marine’s sniper rifle again. Given the right angle, he could have lined up a shot and taken them both out with the same bullet.

Except that would’ve been too damn pain free.

On the other hand, if he only shot Gena …

Ka-pow. He would have made it a messy head shot. Lots of spray and splatter. Hey, Gena! Still wanna give Rocco a piece of your mind?

Harry’s cell phone vibrated again. This time it was Edguardo. Harry activated the wireless earpiece to answer.

“You still see them?” Edguardo asked.
“Yes. They got waylaid by some old biddy.”
“Now what?”
“Let’s hold our positions. They can’t stay here forever. Once they leave, we’ll follow at a distance, see where they’re headed. With luck, they’ll each drive their own car.” That would make it a little easier to separate Gena from Rocco.
“Keep me posted,” Edguardo said.
“I’ll call you when I see some action here.” Harry disconnected.
Rocco showing up by himself at least kept the odds in their favor.
Now Harry just needed to figure out how to get Gena alone.
Chapter Nine

Rocco had followed Gena out the front entrance of the hospital. An elderly woman, who seemed very confused, interrupted them, asking for directions. He stepped aside, allowing Gena to assist the woman. He welcomed the break. Needed it to pull his mangled wits together. Seeing Gena again had slammed a fist in Rocco’s chest. Certainly he’d expected an emotional punch; he had thought of little else since leaving D.C.

Their shared history spanned from supreme ecstasy to bitter strife to an unresolved ending. And it felt like he’d revisited every moment, good and bad, during his flight here. What caught him unaware just now, however, was the tsunami of regret and its vicious, resentful undertow. All the things he wished he’d said and done differently collided with the brick wall of all the things he wished she had said and done another way. His way.

Gena also looked … not like Gena.

When Rocco had first arrived at the hospital and asked for Gena Armstrong, he’d been directed to Helen Newton, the administrator of New Beginnings. Helen had been perched on a bench near intensive care, trying to watch the medical pandemonium unfolding nearby. She had eyed Rocco with open disdain when he’d walked up and said, “Ms. Newton?”

“This area is off limits to the press.” Helen had responded coldly. “Go away and leave us alone.”

“I’m not a reporter. I’m a friend of Gena Armstrong’s.” That had gotten Helen’s attention. “How close?”

“Ex-fiancé.” Only a slight lie, but more expeditious than the truth. The commotion at the nurses’ station drew Helen’s gaze once again.

“Oh, God! Lupe’s dead,” Helen had whispered, crossing herself. “I need to go handle this. Maybe you can get through to Gena. She’s refused to leave.”

Helen had nodded toward the ICU’s doors just as they swept open. A woman had stood inside, her shoulders held too stiffly.

Gena.

Rocco almost hadn’t recognized her. And it was more than the fact that her hair was shorter than when he’d last seen it. Touched it. Four long years ago.

This woman was practically a stranger. She was still drop-him-to-his-knees gorgeous, still blond. A shade of blond anyway. Beneath the soot her hair appeared tawny gold and barely brushed her shoulders.

The Gena he used to know kept her hair middle-of-the-back long and platinum. On rare occasions she’d worn it in a ponytail, but usually Gena Armstrong looked like she’d just stepped off a fashion runway. Her PhD in beauty-pageant training, she’d teased. Even in bed, after gloriously wild sex, she’d looked perfect.

This Gena looked vulnerable. Any make-up she’d had on previously was either cried off or buried under dirt and dried blood. This Gena didn’t even wear earrings, he’d noticed, when she’d tucked her hair behind her ears. Ears Rocco had loved to—Part of him had wanted to shake her and force her to admit where his Gena was. But a bigger part wanted to embrace her. Hold her. Protect her.

He listened as the elderly woman repeated the directions Gena had given and then moved away toward the hospital entrance.

Gena turned and faced Rocco. “Now. What are you doing in Texas? You said it was important.”

Rocco noticed that she cradled her left wrist as she talked. In fact, she favored her entire left side. Bruised ribs, he’d bet.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.” Gena tried to cross her arms but grimaced and went back to cradling her wrist. “Just answer my question, Rocco.”

He finished cataloging her injuries. The burns and scrapes visible on her arms looked as if someone had wiped them clean and smeared them with salve, but the dried rivulets of blood on her neck worried him. Scalp laceration? Concussion?
He wanted to march her down to ER and demand a couple X-rays, but he had a feeling she would reject any heavy-
handedness. At the moment she was a whirling cyclone of dark emotion that might just kick his ass if she didn’t crumble beneath her own sorrow and pain.

“I’m here because of what happened last night—” Rocco began.

Gena cut him off. “And why would the Agency be interested in that?” She held up a hand to keep him from interrupting. “Look, I know they’re claiming that Lupe was in the country illegally and that Border Patrol is looking for her ex-husband. And I’ll tell you the same thing I told them. I know precious little about Lupe’s past. I don’t even know how to find her grandmother to tell her Lupe’s dead. But when I do, you can bet Uncle Sam’s last gold piece that I’ll find out everything that woman knows about the lousy bastard who’s responsible for Lupe’s death.”

Gena’s voice cracked as tears rolled down her cheeks. She was angry—red hot—and he was fixing to pour gas on the situation.

But the urge to offer comfort first rose strong. “I promise I’ll seek justice for Lupe’s suffering,” he said.

“Why? It’s not your battle!”

“I’m afraid it is.” Rocco exhaled sharply. “What happened last night wasn’t about Lupe or her husband. It’s about you and me. I believe you were targeted by an enemy of mine. One woman has already been kidnapped and an attempt was made on my sister.”

Gena staggered as if off balance, but just as quickly recovered. “You’re saying Lupe died … not because of her past but because of mine? Because someone is after you? How is that even possible? I haven’t seen you in … in—”

“Four years,” Rocco supplied.

“But we’re nothing to each other. I’m not even sure we ever were anything to each other. Besides strangers.”

Her words drew blood like a knife plunged between two ribs.

“I don’t know how the connection between us was uncovered,” Rocco said. “But in light of the timing and other recent events, it can’t be a coincidence.”

“The woman who was abducted, is she someone you’re involved with?”

“She works for the Agency. An analyst.” As soon as he said it, he realized his nonanswer was a mistake. He hadn’t lied to Gena, but it was damn obvious that he was holding back. Just like old times.

“A lot of people work for the Agency,” she snapped. “Are they all at risk or only the ones you’ve slept with?”

“She’s a friend. Yes, we dated. Broke it off when it became apparent we weren’t cut out to be lovers. Happy now?”

Gena shook her head. “My remark was uncalled for. I just … can’t believe all this.”

Rocco scanned the surrounding area, noting the police, sheriff, fire, and Border Patrol vehicles parked along the curb.

“Look, I know you’ve been asked a hundred questions but I need to go over it with you, as well. And I promise I’ll fill you in on everything during the flight back to D.C.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes, you are. To a safe house. It’s for your own protection. Whoever did this is still out there and may come after you again.”

“Good,” she said. “We can trap him. I’m sure the local police will work with you to set up a stakeout. And— Why are you shaking your head?”

“No cops. At least for now. What I’ve told you doesn’t go beyond you and me.”

“Like hell! Lupe’s killer is running around scot-free while the police are wasting time chasing after an innocent man.”

“Do you mean Lupe’s ex-husband?” Rocco had read the dossier Catalina had provided. “Border Patrol has their own reasons for going after him. The man forces illegal minors to run drugs across the border. Hardly an innocent victim.”

“But what about the other blameless victims, Rocco? The man who died when the fire spread to another building? The people who suffered burns and smoke inhalation? The families who lost everything they owned? And the shelter we were building—” Her voice cracked. “It’s gone.”

“It’s tragic, Gena. And I agree it’s totally unfair. But the best I can do right now is to minimize the opportunity for more damage by removing the target.”

“By target, you mean me? And if I refuse to go along with you?”

“Don’t,” he replied, then added, “please.” I’ll force you to go if I have to. She looked away for long seconds before speaking again. “If I agree, do you swear to tell me everything?”

“Everything.”

Gena nodded. “I need a little time to wrap things up here. Lupe’s … remains. Come back in an hour.”

Rocco moved to follow her back inside. “Thirty minutes. Lead the way.”

She didn’t move. “It’ll go much faster if I handle things alone.”
“A few more minutes won’t matter. Your safety does.”
“Don’t you get it? If it weren’t for you, none of this would have happened, Rocco. So if I want a little time alone to say good-bye to a friend, to make her final arrangements, you had better get on board with it. I’ll meet you in the lobby in thirty minutes.”
Without a backward glance, Gena stalked through the hospital doors. Rocco knew that if he went after her right then, he’d have one hell of a fight on his hands. Out of nowhere came the urge to run after her anyway, to beg her forgiveness for long-ago sins. Except where to start? Their past was tangled, checkered. She wasn’t happy to see him, but then he hadn’t expected her to be.
Liar.
Fine. So part of him had hoped she’d seem glad to see him after four years, two months, and twelve days. His ability to recall the exact moment and time he’d last seen Gena made him feel ashamed. He remembered very little about the last time he’d been with Maddy. Even less about the women he’d dated after Gena and before Maddy.
Jesus. Had he really been obsessed with one woman all this time?
Yes. In the last four years barely a day had gone by that he hadn’t thought of Gena. Great. So he needed therapy, too. But first he had to get her to a safe place.
He watched as another police cruiser pulled into the parking lot. The amount of law enforcement in the area should have made him feel more comfortable, and maybe it did. Marginally. With two people dead from the fire, new faces in town, Rocco’s included, were being carefully scrutinized, so it was unlikely Minh Tran’s men had stuck around. Still, Rocco wasn’t completely comfortable. He’d give Gena a little space, but he wasn’t leaving the hospital without her.
He headed into the lobby, took a seat where he could watch the elevators.
Tugging out the brand-new Blackberry he’d just picked up, Rocco checked his e-mail, including spam, but found nothing new from Minh Tran. Or Travis.
What had happened to Maddy now that the bloodletting had passed? Had Tran’s crony called Rocco’s cell and reached Travis Franks instead? If so, what had Travis done? Had he been able to reason with Maddy’s abductors? Rocco punched in Travis’s number. The call went straight to Travis’s voice mail.
“Damn it, T. Call me.” Rocco paused but didn’t disconnect. “Dante filled me in about you and Maddy. If I had known … Look, I’m still worried as hell about Maddy, as a friend. You, too, for that matter.”
He ended the call and then dialed Dante’s cell phone.
“How’s Gena?” Dante asked as soon as he answered.
Rocco sidestepped the question. “The woman who was with her last night just died.”
“Ah, hell. I’m sure Gena wasn’t happy to learn it involves the Agency. When are you returning?”
“Gena has some things to wrap up here at the hospital. We’ll go by her place on our way to the airport. What about Taz? Any luck finding him?” Rocco replied.
“No. Two women picked him up hitchhiking in Eastern Kentucky. Gave him a lift to Johnson City, Tennessee. They contacted the police after seeing the news bulletin. We’re headed to Tennessee next. Max has had a couple of blips of telepathic contact with Taz, but nothing significant. The toll it takes on Max concerns me, but he won’t back off.”
Rocco grunted. “Sounds like someone else I know. Keep me posted.”
As he disconnected, Rocco watched two grim-faced sheriff’s deputies enter the hospital and head toward the elevator. Did they want to interview Gena, too?
Wanting to reach her first—to warn her or to rush her?—Rocco headed for the administration offices just around the corner.
He nodded at the receptionist. “I’m looking for Gena Armstrong, from the women’s shelter. We were supposed to meet in the lobby, but—” He shrugged. “Could you call ICU and see if she’s still up there?”
“It might be faster if I paged her,” the woman said. “ICU has been swamped.”
Rocco waited while the woman made the announcement. Within moments, her phone rang. He moved closer, eager to hear where Gena was.
“Thank you for letting me know.” The woman hung up before addressing Rocco. “That was one of the ER nurses. She said Gena took off a little while ago. Said she was going to make arrangements for her friend who died from burns.”
Damn it! Rocco never should have let her out of his sight. “Call her back and ask if she knows how Gena left. By car? Taxi?”
The woman rolled her eyes but did as he asked. A few moments later she told Rocco, “She said Gena insisted she was okay to drive herself.”
Rocco thanked the woman and raced out of the hospital. When he reached his rental car he punched Gena’s home address into the GPS unit. The good news was she didn’t have that much of a head start. Fifteen, twenty minutes. And if she had caught a glimpse of herself in one of her car’s mirrors, he’d bet she’d gone home to clean up before going anywhere. Hopefully, he’d cut her off there. No harm, no foul. If not … he didn’t know what in the hell he was going to do.
Chapter Ten

The numbing cocoon of ice that had started to crack at the news of Lupe’s death had shattered when Gena had turned and found Rocco Taylor standing there. For a brief moment, she had thought she’d lost her mind, had thought she’d conjured Rocco from thin air. The Rocco she’d loved and believed in. The Rocco she’d thought could do no wrong, could heal any hurt. Then he’d spoken and explained his presence. The pain of her present had collided with the grief from her past, slicing her open. What he’d said—

That Lupe had died instead of Gena. That those men had been after her.

Gena had been desperate to get away from Rocco then, needing to process his explanation in solitude. But she’d no sooner crossed the lobby floor, having left Rocco cooling his heels outside, than a woman she recognized from the shelter had pulled her aside. Pilar.

“I heard about Lupe,” Pilar had whispered through tears. “She … was my friend.” “I’m so—” The unfinished condolence stuck in Gena’s throat. It’s my fault.

“Here.” Pilar thrust a battered shoebox into Gena’s hands. “What’s this?” Gena held out the box, uncertain.

“Lupe called it her hope chest. Hope for a better future, I think. It’s things she saved: letters, photos, money.” Pilar’s voice broke on a sob. “The police came to search her belongings. But Lupe kept this hidden.” “And you want me to turn it over to them?” “No! Can you see it gets to her abuela? We promised each other.” Lupe’s grandmother. “But how can I find her abuela?” Gena asked. “Read her letters.” Pilar looked down the hall just then and grew pale. “Border Patrol! Please, I must go! If they find me here—”

Don’t ask. “Follow me,” Gena said. “We can leave through the emergency room.”

Gena had left her battered Toyota parked in the back lot. Thankfully, she kept a spare ignition and apartment key in one of those hidden magnetic boxes. Without it she wouldn’t have been able to follow Lupe’s ambulance to the hospital last night. But once outside, Pilar had refused Gena’s offer of a ride. “I left a friend waiting at the bus stop. It is enough that you will take care of this.”

Lupe’s box.

Fighting tears, Gena had climbed into her car and given in to the urge to flee, to drive and never stop. But in the close confines, away from the antiseptic hospital scents, the smell of smoke clinging to her hair and clothes gagged her. Before she did anything, she had to get cleaned up.

Now she was pulling up in front of her apartment. A neighbor was out front washing her car while talking on her cell phone, oblivious to her three children fighting over the water hose. The normalcy made Gena ache. She picked up Lupe’s box on the passenger seat and placed it in her lap, staring at it for several seconds before actually getting around to lifting off the lid.

A photograph taken two weeks ago at Lupe’s birthday party lay on top. Lupe had asked Gena to help hold the cake up for the picture. Then Lupe had laughingly removed all the candles except one. “To celebrate my beautiful cake. It is my first one.”

Her last one, too. Gena’s eyes overran with tears. Maybe Gena hadn’t really known Lupe. Not as best friends did. Or even long-standing casual friends, for that matter. But there still had been a number of important parallels in their lives. They’d known the same fears and heartaches. That they’d fought the same torments gave them a bond.

Just beneath the pictures, wrapped in plastic, were three of the blue frosting roses Lupe had pried off her cake and air-dried. She had mentioned she was going to send them to her abuela.

The next layer revealed another photo, this one of an old woman holding a broom, standing in a dirt-patch of a yard and surrounded by chickens. But it was the smile that drew Gena in. And the kindly dark eyes that were so like Lupe’s.

Lupe had loved her abuela. And somewhere in Mexico an old woman waited for a granddaughter’s next phone call,
next letter. How long would she have to wait? How many sleepless nights would pass?
And when would the fear set in? Not knowing was always worse than the knowing.
Gena closed the lid on the box, her mind made up. Lupe’s grandmother needed to know what had happened. And
Gena needed to get out of town. Screw Rocco and the Agency. She didn’t want a safe house or protection. No one
had offered those to Lupe.
Leaving the box in the car, Gena hurried inside, suddenly frantic to head out. She ignored the pain of the myriad
small injuries, showering and washing her hair in record time even though hampered by her sprained wrist.
After pulling on jeans and a T-shirt, she tossed clothes and toiletries into a small suitcase. The extent of her
logistical problems sank in as she packed.
Her purse had been lost in the fire along with her cell phone and wallet. That meant no debit or credit cards. And no
driver’s license.
She pulled the metal file box out of her closet and dug out her passport and birth certificate. She had a little cash,
less than two hundred dollars, which she crammed into her pocket.
Her credit cards would take days to replace. And any type of request along those lines would leave a trail that could
easily be followed.
She could make it short term without credit cards, could swing by the bank where she knew the tellers for more cash
on her way out of town. But there was no surviving without a driver’s license. She was going to have to visit the
DMV for a replacement.
And ultimately crossing into Mexico was going to be risky. If Rocco was right about their connection being
uncovered after all these years, then whoever was after him had damn good contacts. Dangerous contacts.
Gena glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Twenty minutes had passed since she’d left the hospital. Had Rocco
discovered her ruse yet?
Another memory from the past surfaced. Once in desperation, she’d prayed Rocco would come for her … to rescue
her.
He hadn’t. She’d survived.
And she would survive this time, too. The same way she’d survived every other crisis in her life: alone. She closed
her suitcase. Right now, she just needed to get away.
A knock sounded at her front door. Gena froze, knowing who it was. Would Rocco go away if she didn’t answer?
The knock repeated. Part of her wanted to open the door and tell him flat out that she wanted nothing to do with him
or the Agency.
Another part wanted to lash out, to make him feel the pain she’d suffered. Did he even realize what she’d been
through?
Moving closer, she peered out the peephole. It wasn’t Rocco, but the man on the other side was vaguely familiar.
Tall. Dark. Hispanic. More wiry than muscle-bound. She’d seen him somewhere before.
It took her several seconds before she realized where. It had been years ago. During her previous life as an Agency
wife. No doubt this man worked with Rocco. Had been sent to collect her.
She jerked open the door. “Tell Rocco I’m not going anywhere with him.”
Instead of answering her, the man forced her backward and closed the door behind both of them.
“What are you?” she demanded.
He didn’t reply.
Alarm morphed into fear. Gena turned to run but he grabbed her arm. She kicked him, hard, her foot connecting
with his right thigh as he blocked the blow from its intended target.
“Let me go!” she cried.
He did. Suddenly. She stumbled to the side, but as she tried to make a second break for it, he grabbed her arm again,
spinning her in a semicircle before snapping her back against his side.
It was then that she saw the knife in his hand. She went still.
The man continued to hold her pinned with one arm, leaving the other hand free to flourish the blade in her face.
He smiled, perfect white teeth sliding slowly into view as his lips parted. “That’s better.” He spoke with a Hispanic
accent that was different from what she heard locally. “Come along peacefully and you will not be harmed.”
Too late, she realized her memory had played her for a fool. Whoever this bastard was, he wasn’t with the Agency.
Most likely, he worked for whoever was after Rocco. And chances were he was one of the men responsible for the
fire. For Lupe’s death.
Gena tried to remain calm. Tried to sort through her best course of action while the knife blade brushed along her
cheek.
“What do you want?” she managed to ask.
“You’ll find out soon.” The man shifted his grip, pressing his fingers into the fleshy part of her upper arm in a quick
show of strength. “Now, we are going to walk out of here together, like old friends. If you see someone and give any
indication of trouble, I’ll shoot them. Comprende? It’s up to you to protect them.”
So he had a gun, too? She recalled her neighbor outside, scrubbing her car, with her children.
The man squeezed harder, causing her to cry out in pain. “Comprende?”
Gena nodded. “I … I need to use the bathroom.”
“Too bad.” The man tugged her toward the door.
“But my suitcase.”
He ignored her. Dropping his grip to her injured wrist, he tugged her out the door.
Gena bit her lip against the sharp pain but didn’t complain. Better to keep her good arm free.
As it turned out, no one was outside. Had the man purposely waited until her neighbor had gone in before
approaching Gena’s door?
“Head for that black truck,” he said.
Walking slow only caused him to yank her arm. She winced and kept pace.
When they reached his vehicle, he forced her around to the driver’s side. “Open it.”
She did.
“Climb in,” he ordered.
The man kept his grip on her wrist as he forced her to slide ahead of him across the bench seat.
He started the engine, but instead of pulling away from the curb, he reached past her, his hand brushing her left knee
as he opened the glove box.
Gena’s stomach sank as he removed a pair of handcuffs. “Those aren’t necessary,” she said. Once he cuffed her, it
was going to be even more difficult to get away.
“That’s not your call.” He shoved the glove box closed.
“Gena!”
She turned as Rocco’s voice called out.
Swearing, her captor grabbed her shoulder and shoved her down onto the seat. The sound of a gun being fired, at
close range, was deafening. She screamed as the man fired two more shots out the truck’s back window.

Rocco. Is he hurt?
“Stay down!” The man dropped the car into gear and spun away, tires squealing.
The handcuffs slid off his lap and fell onto the floorboard before disappearing under the seat as the vehicle made a
sharp turn. Gena hoped the man didn’t notice.
He was on his phone now, shouting. “I thought you were watching him! Ah, shit! He’s following me! I need some
backup and fast. Head north on Route twenty-one!”
Relief flooded through Gena. Rocco was alive. Was coming after her.
The man took another corner sharply, hitting the curb before accelerating. The truck fishtailed, careening to the left.
Gena bounced sideways and slammed into the door.
Go!
she thought.
Wrenching the door handle back, Gena threw herself out of the vehicle. The man grabbed for her, catching her shirt,
but couldn’t hold on.
She fell from the truck. The ground walloped her, stealing her breath with a wicked punch. She tried to tuck and roll,
but control was beyond her. She heard gunfire and waited for the bullet to tear into her body.
Car tires squealed as she slammed to a stop against a tree. Get up! Got to get up! Gotta move!
Her hands, scraped raw by the pavement, stung as she pushed to her feet. Dizzy, she fell back to the ground.
“Gena!”
She heard Rocco’s voice and tried again to get up.
“I’ve got you, sweetheart.” His arms closed around her, lifting her and holding her close.
He was safe. She was safe. But Lupe was dead….
“Why are they doing this?” She no longer fought the urge to cry, to scream.
Rocco carried her to his car and placed her on the passenger seat. She grabbed his collar. “Answer me!”
Gently he loosened her fingers. “We’ll talk in a minute. I promise.”
“I don’t want promises!” But he’d already shut her door.
“How badly are you hurt?” he asked as he started the engine moments later.
“I’m fine! Just take me home!”
“We both know you’re not anywhere close to fine.” He reached for her seat belt and tugged it across her lap,
snapped it in place. “For now we need to get out of here before our friend in the black truck returns. So hold on!”
Chapter Eleven

Thailand, Uncertain Location
October 4, Unknown Time

Madison Kohlmeyer pretended she was still out cold. The whispers she heard confirmed someone was nearby. The ever-present nausea burned the back of her throat. She fought it by trying to think of other things. So where was she now? Had they moved her again while she’d been passed out? The lack of the telltale foggy headache seemed to support the notion she had not been drugged again. But then her captors seemed to save the drugs for the longer trips, when she was transported in boxes or wrapped in rugs. And truthfully, having woken up in both those scenarios, she’d just as soon be heavily sedated. In the beginning, she had welcomed the periods of drug-induced unconsciousness, the relief it brought her from the overwhelming fear. She’d been certain the stern-looking Asian men who’d forced her car off a deserted stretch of road in Virginia five days ago had been bent on killing her. They’d pulled her from her car and shoved her to her knees before encircling her. There had been six of them and each one had kept his compact submachine gun pointed at her. They had shouted orders in what she thought was a Thai dialect, as if expecting her to understand. She hadn’t. The guy with the light-colored snake slithering around his shoulders had leaned down and touched her hair. “Blond,” he’d said in perfect English.

She’d cringed, frightened of snakes, frightened of him and his friends. The man had laughed and pointed to his snake. “Blond.”

They’d bound her hands and ankles and stuffed her in the trunk of one of their vehicles, with the snake. They hadn’t bothered with a gag. She’d assumed because they’d wanted to hear her screams. At some point, they had opened the trunk long enough to reclaim the snake and to sedate her. When she’d next come to, she had been both bound and gagged, but had been lying atop a pile of coarse straw in what appeared to be a wooden box. After giving her another dose of whatever drug they were using, they had covered her with more straw. She’d listened as they’d nailed the lid in place. A coffin.

They were going to bury her alive and leave her alone to die in the dark. Even as the thought had tried to take hold inside her, the drug’s power had pulled her down into a dark nothingness. But just before she’d succumbed, something had moved in the straw beside her. The snake? A rat? Or just her mind serving up one more nightmare? She later realized the coffin had actually been a shipping crate. She’d recalled sounds, loud engines, like planes taking off. When they’d next opened the crate it had been to give her water and food. Evidently they weren’t looking to kill her. At least not right away.

The gag had been left off after that and for what turned out to be a very long and uncomfortable trip. The realization that they had taken her out of the United States had been terrifying. She thought she’d been kidnapped for some sex-slavery ring. A drinking straw was poked between her lips at periodic intervals. She drank—even after she figured out the water was laced with drugs.

She’d woken up in this warehouse yesterday. The three men watching her now were different from the ones who had abducted her. First thing, they’d cut away her clothes and taken photographs. Then they’d dumped buckets of cold water on her, to clean her and revive her. One of the men had given her an oversized plaid shirt to wear. She had instinctively turned away, seeking a modicum of privacy while getting dressed, only to have the shirt snatched away. She had begged for its return, finally breaking down into hysterical sobs. While language continued to be a barrier, her captors communicated with hand signals, facial expressions, body gestures, and pain. They had openly mocked her by rubbing their fists in their eyes while shouting, “Wah! Wah!”

Then the men had circled her. She hadn’t been raped or sexually assaulted, but she feared that was about to change.
Instead the men had pinched and slapped her. Bullied her. She'd been dragged into an adjacent room where a pock-faced man had pressed a cell phone to her ear.

At first she hadn't understood the dynamics at play. Her fears that no one would ever know what had happened to her had been allayed by the sound of Rocco's voice.

Rocco would notify Travis, she told herself. And Travis would make certain that whatever ransom they demanded would be paid.

But as soon as the phone was snatched away, her anxiety had skyrocketed. Did her captors know she worked for the CIA, too? Would they try to force classified information from her?

While Rocco was still on the phone, one of her captors had begun tormenting her with a blue-flamed blowtorch, flicking it close to her face and eyes before finally dropping lower and burning her foot, clearly wanting Rocco to hear her screams. She'd complied and promptly fainted, coming to long enough to be drugged again. Not good.

How long had she been out this time? The whispers she'd heard moments ago ceased as soft footsteps approached. Maddy opened her eyes and took in her surroundings. She had been moved, but just to another room. To a small cot. Her hands were still tied, but they hadn't gagged her again.

An older woman Maddy had never seen before leaned over her. A doctor, Maddy guessed, by the white lab coat and stethoscope. Without a word, the woman unwound the stethoscope. She listened to Maddy's heart, then tugged her shirt up.

"You have been ill?" the woman asked in cautious English.

"A little," Maddy lied.

She flinched as the woman's hands palpated her abdomen. Dread churned in her stomach. Maddy had been sick during the flight—and every day since—but so far no one seemed to guess her secret. Until now.

"Bay-bee." The woman mimicked the outline of a pregnant stomach with her hand.

"Baby." Maddy felt tears slide down the sides of her cheeks. It was the first time she'd admitted it out loud.

The morning Maddy had been abducted, she'd used one of those drugstore tests. After getting a positive test result, she'd agonized over whether to go away for the week as planned. In the end, she had decided to go, to seek her girlfriends' collective counsel. They were all trusted acquaintances who would offer sympathy as well as advice.

But, of course, Maddy had never arrived at the beach.

A new worry bloomed. How would news of her pregnancy go over with her abductors? Would it put her in a more sympathetic light with them? Or had her admission just endangered her unborn child?

Would her captors increase their ransom demand, thinking they had two hostages? Whatever the amount was, she prayed the Agency paid it quickly.

The stinging of her burned foot reminded her that these men were capable of horrible deeds. The thought of what they'd do to make her scream the next time was terrifying.

"You brand new pregnant?" the woman asked.

At Maddy's nod, the doctor tugged the plaid shirt back in place and stepped away. The pock-faced man who'd called Rocco came into view. Obviously he'd heard everything.

As the doctor spoke, Pockface leaned sideways and stared at Maddy, showing disdain at the news of her pregnancy. Tugging out his phone, Pockface punched in numbers. Maddy broke out in a cold sweat. Were they calling Rocco again? Oh, sweet Mary, would she be burned again?

Pockface spoke in Thai, though she knew from hearing parts of his conversation with Rocco that he also spoke English. To Maddy's surprise, Pockface handed the phone to the woman.

Maddy wished she knew what they were saying.

Or maybe not.

When the call ended, the woman continued speaking with Pockface, ticking off points with her fingers.

Then the woman moved back to Maddy's cot. "You will be moved to new place," the woman spoke slowly. "Do not fight. To cooperate is better for baby."

"Bay-bee."

"How long will they keep me?" Maddy asked.

Pockface moved in, cutting Maddy off before speaking angrily in Thai to the other woman.

The woman listened and nodded before turning back to Maddy. "He said to ask you where Dr. Rufin is being held."

"Dr. Rufin?"

Maddy's spirits sank as the significance of the question sank in. She knew from the reports she'd prepared on Max Duncan's rescue who Rufin was. An international manhunt was under way for the scientist. Every country wanted Dr. Rufin.

"Dr. who?" Maddy tried to look confused and shook her head. "I don't know anyone named Dr. Rupert."

"Rufin," the woman repeated the name.
Pockface interrupted the woman with what sounded like more rapid-fire questions. Or threats. The woman sighed and addressed Maddy again. “They need the baby-father, this Rocco, to find Dr. Rufin, in order to free you. He said that if you help, you will be freed more quickly.”

Fresh tears stung Maddy’s eyes. They were both lying. Nothing Maddy did, or didn’t do, would help. The sick feeling that she had been fighting suddenly surged. Twisting sideways, she hung her head over the side of the cot and retched, the vomit barely hitting the bucket the doctor slid into place.

Pockface stormed away as the woman lapsed into speaking Thai again. Even though the woman’s tone sounded sympathetic, Maddy knew it didn’t matter. She was doomed.

If her captors thought Rocco was the father of her child, they had assumed a relationship that wasn’t. And if her freedom depended on these men gaining custody of Dr. Rufin, she and her unborn child were as good as dead.
Chapter Twelve

Southeast Texas
October 4, 2:10 P.M.

Rocco checked the rearview mirror. They’d been on the road nearly twenty minutes without incident. He’d driven north, then cut west in a zigzag pattern. So far there had been no sign of the black truck.

No police either. Which could change in the flash of a blue strobe light. A shoot-'em-up through town wouldn’t go unreported. And even though Rocco hadn’t fired his weapon, for fear of harming Gena, witness accounts could make him a definite person of interest.

Being held in custody while the cops verified Rocco’s identity and vetted his national-security-get-out-of-jail-free claim meant possibly being separated from Gena. And Rocco wouldn’t allow her to be vulnerable like that again.

Had Minh Tran’s man taken her today because they were concerned she could identify them from last night’s firebombing and wanted to keep her quiet? Or had their intent been to kill her? To make an example of her, to hammer home the seriousness of the threat Maddy faced?

Like he needed an example.

One thing was clear: Minh Tran’s men were determined to get to Gena. Their attack in broad daylight suggested they weren’t overly worried about the local cops. Which made them that much more dangerous.

He glanced at Gena. She’d obviously managed to shower and change, but now she looked even more fragile.

She was lucky to be alive after jumping from that truck. And while she claimed she was fine, once the adrenaline dissipated from her bloodstream, she’d be hurting. The sleeve of her shirt was torn. More scrapes were visible, new ones and old ones.

Gena continued to stare out the back window of Rocco’s rental sedan, clearly expecting the black truck to come after them. And Rocco had been so livid over the way she’d left him at the hospital that he’d purposely let her stew, hoping she’d think twice before endangering herself again.

Now, however, they needed to talk.

“You’ll be safe, Gena. I promise. I won’t let him harm you,” Rocco began.

She made a derisive sound. “If that’s supposed to make me feel better, or make me more malleable, it’s not working.”

“Let me amend that then.” He struggled to keep his temper in check. Yes, he was mad as hell at her, but she wasn’t the person to blame. Minh Tran was. And the payback Rocco now owed Tran had more than doubled.

“I won’t let anyone harm you as long as you stay with me,” he continued. “And I feel fairly certain we’ve lost the guy in the truck, so you can turn back around.”

She shook her head and doggedly kept her watch. “What about the man following you? My guy was pretty annoyed that you’d given him the slip.”

Rocco took his eyes off the road for a second to glance at her. “How do you know I was followed?”

“The guy who grabbed me called his partner and chewed him out. Said you were being watched.”

Damn it!

How had these men gotten word of Rocco’s whereabouts so quickly? Either Minh Tran had a larger network here in the states than they knew—which meant the Agency’s intelligence was seriously flawed—or Tran was accessing inside information, which validated Travis’s ongoing concern about a leak.

And if Tran knew that much about Rocco’s movements, it didn’t take much to believe he could also access the safe house location where Adele and Billy were currently being protected. The same place Rocco had intended to take Gena.

With Minh Tran’s actions becoming increasingly unpredictable, Rocco needed to come up with a new location. One not associated with the Agency.

“Tell me again about the man who abducted you,” Rocco said. “He was Hispanic?”

Minh Tran would have realized that sending his Thai associates into the tiny border town would have made them conspicuous. Still, for Tran to work outside his own close-knit clan was highly unusual.

“He was definitely Hispanic,” Gena said. “But he spoke with a different accent. South American perhaps.”
“What about scars or tattoos?”
“None that were visible.”
“Have you ever seen him before?” Rocco asked. “Around town perhaps?”
“At first I thought he looked familiar.”
“Familiar how? Height? Weight?”
“No. Like someone I met when I was married to Harry. But the more I’ve thought about it, the more I’m positive I was mistaken.” Gena still scanned the roads behind them.
“Is it possible you saw him recently or that he followed you from the hospital?”
“No. Yes.” She rubbed her eyes. “Maybe. I was distracted. As I was leaving, a friend of Lupe’s stopped me. She—”
Gena’s voice cracked. “She gave me a shoebox containing some of Lupe’s personal belongings. She wanted me to get them to Lupe’s grandmother. On the way home, I couldn’t stop thinking about the old woman. About how long it would be before she found out her granddaughter is dead.”
“Don’t tell me. That’s where you were headed.”
“I had to go somewhere, didn’t I?” Gena shoved her still-damp hair back with one hand and grimaced with pain. “I figured no one would look for me in Mexico.”
Rocco caught a glimpse of her scraped palms, knew they stung. He needed to fully check out her injuries, but until they were farther away, they couldn’t afford the time.
His cell phone rang. He checked the display, saw it was Catalina. Rocco had called her previously with the tag number of the black truck.
“The license plates were stolen. The Sugar Springs police are still searching for the black truck,” Cat said. “But they don’t seem to have any reports of your vehicle being involved, at least not yet.”
“The perp’s probably already ditched the truck,” Rocco said. “What else have the police got?”
“They are interviewing witnesses, trying to get a better description of the shooter. A dark-haired Hispanic male probably describes over half the population in that region.”
“We’ve got another problem,” Rocco said. “Apparently, whoever grabbed Gena knew to watch out for me. I’m concerned they may know where I was planning to take her.”
“Do you want me to arrange a relocation and get you a new locale?”
“Make arrangements for Adele and Billy. I’ll handle Gena’s security personally.” There was only way to ensure that no one knew how to find Gena and that was by telling no one.
“Understood,” Cat said. “How can we contact you?”
“I’ll stay in touch. Any news from Dante or Travis?”
“Nothing from Travis. Sorry. I know you’re concerned about Maddy. Dante said the missing store clerk has been located unharmed, and she identified Taz as her abductor. The Kentucky police are pressuring the FBI to publicize the manhunt.”
“Has Max had any more contact with Taz, via, you know, their head connection?” Rocco asked.
“Max apparently made contact with him last night, which Dante feels is what influenced Taz to release the woman without harm. But Max had another seizure afterward. Erin wants to join them.”
“And Max is saying no, right?” Dr. Erin Houston was the psychologist who had helped Max after his return. They were engaged now.
“Right,” Cat said. “And I can imagine Erin’s concern.”
“Me, too, but Max knows what he’s doing. And Max is our best shot at finding Taz before he does more harm. Look, I’ll call back in a couple hours.” Rocco turned off the phone and loosened the battery to hamper GPS tracking.
Future calls would need to be limited or made from a throwaway cell phone or even pay phones, though those were becoming harder and harder to come by.
“Did I hear you correctly?” Gena asked. “You said something about Dante and Max. I know this sounds crazy, but weren’t those the same names—”
“As the agents who disappeared with Harry? Yes. They are the same two men, Gena. Dante Johnson and Max Duncan. With everything that’s gone on since I arrived, I haven’t had a chance to explain.” Rocco slowed as they approached the outskirts of McAllen, Texas. “Dante and Max didn’t die on an overseas mission. Which means there’s a strong possibility that Harry is alive, too.”
Harry is alive.
Not for the first time, Gena felt as if her life had become entrapped in a snow globe that kept getting shaken up by others.
Memories swirled, some dark, some ugly. Many incomplete. Don’t think of the past.
“Is all this stuff pertaining to Harry, Dante, and Max, connected to the man who is after you?” Gena asked. “And to the fire last night?”
Rocco had pulled into a drugstore parking lot and stopped the car. “It’s related, yes. Let’s go inside and grab a few supplies. Then I’ll explain everything.”

“No! I want answers, Rocco, and I want them now. Or so help me, I’ll start screaming my head off.” She pointed at the two people who were smoking cigarettes near the door. “You won’t get out of here without them getting a tag number.”

“Easy.” Rocco held up his hands in surrender. “We’ll do it your way.”

“I want all of it,” she said. “No edits. No claims that it’s classified or top secret. After all I’ve been through, I deserve more than the Agency’s standard BS lines.”

“Agreed. How much do you know about the circumstances of Harry’s disappearance two years ago? I know you were divorced by then.”

“Disappearance?” Gena shook her head. She should have known better than to believe the story the CIA floated back then. “Harry’s father was told Harry died on an overseas mission. Ephraim had suffered a stroke just a few weeks before receiving that news and he was devastated. He and Harry were estranged at the time. Ephraim contacted me through my aunt. He had no other family and needed help making funeral arrangements.”

“I heard you were at the memorial service,” Rocco said.

“And you weren’t.” She’d expected him to show up. Had prepared herself for seeing him again.

“I was in Afghanistan at the time.”

“As I said, the news devastated Ephraim. He had dreamed of reconciling with Harry.” She closed her eyes against the onslaught of memories. “Ephraim’s health declined rapidly after that. He died a year ago. I was stunned to learn he’d left his estate to me. I, uh, planned to donate it, but now …?” She looked at Rocco. “Are you saying Harry didn’t really die?”

“We don’t have proof, but there’s a good possibility Harry is alive. Dante and Max were recovered from separate prisons overseas. And recently there’s been an unconfirmed report that Harry is also being held in that same part of the world.”

“Dante and Max were in prison? What were they accused of?”

“These were secret prisons. Asylums. Dante and Max were badly mistreated and subjected to what amounts to illegal human experimentation,” Rocco said. “I would expect that Harry’s been abused as well. But given that Dante and Max survived, the odds are strong for Harry.”

“Oh, God.” Gena blinked back tears. Her memories of Harry, what she could recall at least, were bad. It had taken her years to make peace with them. “Harry and I … Our marriage was a disaster, but I’d never wish that kind of fate on anyone. But how does this tie in to what’s happening to you? To me?”

“After rescuing Max overseas, I apprehended one of the scientists who was conducting some of those human experiments. Unfortunately, other people want this scientist, too, for some very nasty, very illegal reasons. During the course of that mission, I killed the son of a powerful Southeast Asian drug lord by the name of Minh Tran. Tran is now demanding vengeance.”

“An eye for an eye? Is that why he’s killing people? To avenge his son?”

“It’s less about his son and more about that scientist I apprehended, Dr. Rufin. Tran wants him. And Tran figures that since I caught Dr. Rufin I can free him as well. To force my hand, Tran kidnapped the woman I was briefly involved with, and then went after my sister. Now he’s after you as well.”

“People you care, or used to care, about.” Gena’s hands were shaking now. “And Tran doesn’t give a flip how many innocent people he hurts, does he?”

“I won’t let anyone near you, Gena. Please believe that,” Rocco went on. “I don’t want to stay in one place for long, so for now I suggest we go inside and get what we need to tend your injuries. We’ll talk more once we’re finished here.”

Gena nodded, needing to process what she’d just learned.

Was it the truth? Had the Agency known or suspected all along that their own operatives hadn’t actually died?

By the time they exited the drugstore, Gena felt shaky. Her head pounded, and despite her claims to the contrary, her wrist and hip were killing her.

The lack of sleep combined with the horror of the fire, Lupe’s death, and the foiled abduction was taking a toll. Then there was the news about Harry.

When they were back in the car, Rocco began ransacking his purchases. He pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen. He shook out two tablets, then handed her a can of ginger ale. “You could probably use something stronger, but maybe these will help ease the pain. I’ve got an ice pack for your hand, but I want to clean those cuts first.”

Gena swallowed the painkillers. “I can do that.”

“Humor me. You might want to eat a cracker while I do this so you don’t start barfing when those pills hit an empty stomach.”
Gena pulled out a pack of peanut butter crackers he’d bought. Food was the last thing she wanted, but the thought of getting sick in front of Rocco was mortifying. When he finished cleaning and treating her cuts, Rocco started the car and pulled away.

“For now, I think it’s best we stay on the move.”

“You mean hide out? For how long?”

“I don’t know. Tran seems to have ears in places he shouldn’t. I want to find a place to check the rest of your injuries. And you need some rest. We might even cross into Mexico. Minh Tran is not popular with the drug lords south of the border. And I have some reliable connections there, ones who can’t be traced to the Agency.”

“Then we have to go back to Sugar Springs first. I have no ID, no passport. No suitcase.”

“I have what we need to travel under assumed identities, but we’ll have to pose as husband and wife.”

Gena felt an urge to cry and laugh at the same time. “Always the Boy Scout; prepared for anything.”

“Gena, I—”

She cut him off. “I just hate that I have so little choice in any of this.”

Rocco didn’t say anything for a few minutes. He finally said, “We’ll stop a little later and pick up clothes and whatever toiletries you need. For now, why don’t you close your eyes and try to get a little sleep while I drive? Let those ibuprofen kick in.”

Gena nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Part of her wanted to get as far from Rocco as possible. But a bigger part wanted to lose herself in Rocco’s embrace. To find that part of the past that had been so damn good between them. She didn’t want to sleep, but closing her eyes and pretending would buy her time to get her emotions under control. Emotions she thought she’d buried years ago when she was young, naïve, and queen of all things stupid.
Chapter Thirteen

Seven Years Earlier
Washington, D.C.

Can’t. Take. It.
“Easy, princess. I know what you need.”
“Kiss me, Rocco.” She twined her arms around his neck. “Kiss me again.”
Her alarm blared, shattering the fantasy. Gena groaned and reached to shut it off, tempted to hit SNOOZE to chase sleep. To fall back into the dream, back into Rocco’s arms.
Then she felt the wet spot on her pillow.
She pushed up, glaring at the dark circle of moisture. “Eew. Tell me I was drooling in my sleep, not French kissing my pillow.”
Moving made her aware of moisture elsewhere. Between her legs. Great, she’d probably been humping the sheets, too. Had she talked in her sleep as well? Kiss me, Rocco.
She rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom. If there was one consolation, it was the fact she lived alone.
“Your secret’s safe with me, princess.”
She shivered. Those had been Rocco Taylor’s last words to her. Spoken over three weeks ago. Three weeks.
Hello? Time to wake up and smell the double latte. Obviously he’d lost interest.
Or found a new one.
She gripped the counter as icy arrows of despair assaulted her. “Oh my God. I’ve been dumped!”
She blinked back tears, uncertain what to do next. This—a broken heart—was one disappointment her mother had never prepared her for. And she had a feeling Millicent Armstrong’s usual prescription—“here, take a sip”—wouldn’t touch this. So Gena reacted the way her father would have. She got pissed.
She squished toothpaste onto her brush and attacked her teeth. She’d been warned not to take anything Rocco said seriously. The man was considered a walking, talking flirt machine. A player, only out for the thrill of the chase.
And he had pursued her relentlessly at first, refusing to take no for an answer. Looking sinfully handsome while barraging her with e-mails, phone calls, and flowers. He’d been so … intent. How could she not have fallen for him?
Once she’d agreed to have lunch with him, she’d promptly lost her heart. But in the end, he’d lived up to his reputed maxim: Wine ‘em, dine ‘em, fuck ‘em, drop ‘em.
Except in her case it had only been wine ‘em, dine ‘em, drop ‘em. And therein lay the problem.
She rinsed her mouth and stared at her reflection. After she’d frozen twice when things heated up after a date, Rocco had guessed her problem. “You’re a virgin.”
Gena hadn’t wanted to admit her inexperience, not to him anyway. All her mother’s lectures about saving herself might have made her think twice in college, but the truth was, until she’d met Rocco, no man had ever made her want to have sex.
In fact, with him, she had the opposite problem. Raging desires that scared her. The things she wanted to do, she had no clue how to. Those fumbling, first-timer mistakes that her college roommates had sorted out via trial and error seemed like bottomless pits to Gena.
Maybe the friend who’d told her Rocco was out of her league was correct. At twenty-nine, he was worldly. A fair-haired James Bond on steroids. At twenty-three, she was more like Little Miss Muffet. Fairy Tale Girl.
Their last date had ended disastrously. They had been on the sofa, making out. Rocco’s fingers had skimmed the undersides of her breasts, driving her mad for more.
But when he had started to peel off her shirt, she’d panicked. During her freeze-up, his cell phone had rung. He’d taken the call, which he usually didn’t whenever they were together. He’d probably been praying the damn thing would ring!
It had been the beginning of the end. “I have to go,” he’d said. “But I promise we’ll talk about this soon.”
Right! Gena turned on the shower and climbed under the spray. That it had taken her this long to figure out there wasn’t going to be a next time infuriated her.
She’d been living in denial. First, she’d invented a textbook’s worth of excuses for him. He lived in Arlington; she was in D.C. He traveled frequently; she commuted. He was a spy. A man of mystery.

Then worry had set in: What if he’d been captured? Or injured? Was he dying in a hospital, calling out for her? She hadn’t let her cell phone out of sight; checked it hourly for messages—all while fighting the temptation to dial his number.

*Nice girls don’t call boys.* Another one of her mother’s rules.

Gena dried her tears, then wrapped a towel around herself and switched on the blow-dryer. After she finished her make-up, she looked critically at her reflection.

*Nice girls dress properly. Nice girls speak with modulated tones.*

Oh horror! She’d turned into her mother! Milli-cent Armstrong had been dead three years, yet at the first insecurity or doubt, Gena still heard her whining told-you-so voice.

“Enough!”

Time to change, beginning with no … more … nice.

Gena went to the kitchen and fixed a cup of coffee, debated whether to add a shot of Irish whisky. For courage. Then her doorbell rang.

She frowned. It was six-thirty. Kimberly next door would just be getting back from a run and was always out of coffee. Or it could be Tyrone in 3C, always out of everything.

Gena adjusted the towel she wore. Kimberly could come in; Tyrone she’d ignore.

She tiptoed to the peephole, peered out, and saw … Rocco. He drew a sharp breath.

“I heard that. I know you’re there, Gena.” He leaned in close and stared back through the peephole. “I can smell your perfume.”

She jumped backward.

His chuckle came through the door. “Come on, princess! I brought you a surprise.”

She debated what to do and what to say. Should she send him away or invite him in and give him the cold shoulder?

“I’m not dressed. Give me a minute,” she said.

“Not dressed?” Rocco’s voice sounded deeper. Huskier. “Do you mean naked?”

Could her neighbors hear this? “Not naked,” she hissed. “I’m wearing a towel. I just got out of the shower.”

“Oh, then you can let me in and I’ll wait while you get dressed.”

*Nice girls don’t parade half naked in front of men.* That did it!

Gena slipped the chain free and jerked the door open. July’s warm, humid air wafted in. Already the day promised to be a scorcher.

Despite her resolve to be indifferent, her eyes widened at the sight of him. Rocco Taylor was the golden Sun God version of tall, dark, and handsome. His hair was thick and straight—except for a couple ends that curled when it got too long. Like now.

Wherever he’d been, he’d been out of doors. Somewhere tropical, judging by his sun-streaked hair and tan. Tough assignment, she thought jealously.

“Holy God! You look fabulous!” Rocco’s dark blue eyes gave her the once-over. Twice. “You also look pissed.”

*Three weeks, no word.* Pissed didn’t come close, but she didn’t want him to know it. “I’ve got to leave for work in fifteen minutes, so …”

He had both hands behind his back, hiding something.

“So hurry up and hand over your surprise!”

He wagged his brows. “Close your eyes first.”

“Tsk! Come inside, before my neighbors see us.”

“Just close your eyes, Gena.”

She let out a sigh. And the moment she closed her eyes, she sensed him move closer, felt his lips brush hers. *Don’t swoon.*

“I missed you, princess.” He toyed with her mouth, speaking and kissing in that maddening way of his. “And you have every right to be mad. I would have called if I could, but it was one of those things.”

“One of those things” was spy-speak for a classified mission. A job hazard common to CIA operatives.

In fact, they’d met six months ago, working “one of those things.” Gena had just graduated college and had been hired on as a Spanish linguist with the State Department, after interning with the CIA during the two summers prior. Her second week on the job, she’d been sent to Mexico to replace another linguist who’d gotten sick.

The job had involved translating taped conversations between drug couriers. It was a joint mission with the Mexican government and Rocco had wanted to make sure the translations being provided were accurate.
From the first moment she’d seen him, she’d been aware of Rocco physically and sexually. But he’d been a total pro during that job. So much so that Gena had decided he was already involved. Clearly not interested in her even though some of the other operatives had seemed eager.

But once the job ended and Rocco returned to D.C., he’d been persistent in asking her out.

Right now she moaned as he deepened the kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth. And at the exact moment she turned to warm butter, he stepped away.

“Here.” He thrust a bouquet of red roses forward.

“Awww!” She accepted the flowers and smiled, then drew in a whoosh of air as Rocco swept her off her feet and into his arms.

She scrambled to hold the towel across her boobs and felt his arm brush the bare backs of her upper thighs as the towel lifted.

Two steps had him over the threshold and inside her apartment. Using his foot, Rocco shoved the door shut and leaned back against it, still holding her.

She held the roses in a death grip. “Thank you. For these.”

“Does that mean you forgive me?” He pressed another kiss to her lips. “Because if you don’t, I have another surprise.”

“Wicked man.” Gena laughed. How on earth could she stay angry? “In that case, I’m not yet certain if I forgive you. But you need to hurry the next surprise, because if I’m not out of here in ten minutes, I’ll be late for work.”

He carried her over to the couch. Once again she had to clutch at her towel. As he sat, settling her in his lap, the arm beneath her legs brushed higher still. Teasing. Taunting. When he moved it seconds later, she missed its heat pressed against her.

“About work,” he said. “That’s my surprise. It’s a snow day. You can’t possibly go in.”

“A snow day?” It was supposed to hit the mid-nineties today, but Gena played along. “And if I don’t go to work today, what will I do?”

He picked up her fingers and entwined them with his. “You’ll go away for a fabulous weekend with the man of your dreams.”

Gena bolted straight up, feigning panic. “Prince Charming is coming? Here? When? Let me up, I need to get dressed!”

He dipped her backward so suddenly she squealed. The roses fell as she grabbed for his neck.

“Easy, I’ve got you.”

“My roses!” Her bouquet had landed near his feet.

Rocco picked them up and set them aside. His gaze was intense now and she felt her pulse hammer. The towel she wore suddenly felt restrictive, too tight.

“All playfulness disappeared. His mouth was demanding, enticing.

The raging desire she’d woken up with returned. How could she deny this man anything? Yes. Yes. Yes. The words echoed with each heartbeat.

This time when he started to pull back, she tightened her embrace, hungry for more. Holding him in place, she deepened the kiss, nervous to be taking the initiative.

His hand curved along her rib cage, drifting up until his knuckles rubbed the curve of her breast through the towel.

“Yes,” she encouraged. She was ready to take this to a new level. To know where this path of heat and fire led. There would be no more waiting, no more wondering. No more pulling back.

When they finally broke apart, his breathing was as labored as hers. But he pushed her away.

“You need to get packed,” he said. “We’ve got a plane to catch.”

Rocco offered to call Gena’s boss and pull strings for a day off. Gena refused and made the call herself—taking a personal day. Nice girls didn’t lie, but by the same token, they didn’t have to blab everything they knew.

It drove her crazy that Rocco wouldn’t tell her anything about where they were going.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Then how do I pack?” she asked.

“Think snow day. Nothing dressy. And bring your passport.”

Passports meant leaving the country. Snow meant cold. The Canadian Rockies, she guessed, seeing as they only had a three-day weekend.

Though pulling out sweaters and boots in July seemed absurd, Gena tossed everything she could in a suitcase, barely making the fifteen-minute deadline Rocco had given her.

They took a cab to Reagan airport but bypassed the main terminal. “A friend is flying a small group,” Rocco said.

“A small group” actually turned out to be about fifty passengers. Gena grew suspicious as she took in the others’
apparel. Straw hats. Island-print shirts.
“Snow?” she whispered as she buckled her seat belt.
“Snow day,” Rocco corrected. “Don’t you remember as a kid what a blast it was to wake up and find school had been unexpectedly canceled? And you and your friends raced outside to find and follow the snowplows to see where they’d pile the excess?”
“Um, we didn’t get snow days in South Texas.” And Gena never would have been allowed to follow a plow.
“Bummer.” He sounded sincere.
“If we’re not going somewhere cold, then I packed all wrong. I might need to go shopping.”
Rocco grinned. He picked up her hand and kissed the tops of her knuckles. “I’ve got everything you need, princess. Trust me.”
His thumb rubbed slow circles in the center of her palm. The sensation made Gena hyperaware. Sensitive. There was only one thing she needed and it had nothing to do with clothes.
By the time their plane reached its destination, Grand Cayman, Gena was ready to throw Rocco down on the terminal floor and jump his bones. The two glasses of wine she’d had on the plane had eased her inhibitions.
Rocco took her to a marina where he had a small speedboat waiting.
More wine, more roses, were arranged inside a small but elegant cabana on a private island.
Gena giggled as she spotted the stretch of gleaming white beach. “The sand does kind of look like snow. Please tell me you brought me a swimsuit.”
“If I said no, would you swim without one?” Rocco pressed another glass of chardonnay into her hand.
She drank deeply, pondering his question. “Depends on who else was around.” The wine made her feel bold. Naughty.
“Better not be anyone around but me.” Rocco growled as he drew her close. Then he pressed her fully against his body and kissed her.
Gena felt his erection strain beneath the fly of his jeans. She rubbed, thrusted against it, not nearly as wary of his size as she’d been the first time she’d felt his erection. Her hands shifted to tug at his waistband. Wanting more, wanting him …
“You,” she whispered. “I only want you.”
Out of nowhere came the memory of his absence the last three weeks. Confusion washed over her.
“What’s wrong?” Rocco cupped her chin, made her meet his intense gaze. “You pulled back. Tell me what you’re thinking. And feeling.”
“I’m scared,” she blurted. “I mean … apprehensive.”
“That’s understandable. We’ll slow it down.”
“I don’t want slow. I want—”
“Promises?”
The word surprised her. “No. Yes. I mean, maybe. I want a promise of communication. I don’t want to wonder if you’ve disappeared for a few weeks—or for good.”
“Do you think you could actually shake me so easily? Here’s my promise, princess. We’re not going any further with this relationship until we’ve reached an understanding. I want you to know exactly how I feel about you, so you’ll never worry when I’m gone. And I want to know you’re home, waiting for me. Only for me.”
Chapter Fourteen

Brownsville, TX
October 4, 8:37 P.M.

Loose gravel churned beneath his tires as Harry pulled away from the Cactus Rose Inn.
In addition to his regular fee, Edguardo had just been paid a bonus to lie low for the next twenty-four hours. Harry wasn’t so much concerned about police alerts as he was about keeping Edguardo available in the event he needed help on short notice.
Edguardo had railed about the disastrous day. He’d been pissed over having to fend Rocco off alone, losing Gena in the process. “You said you’d handle him while I got the woman!” he’d hollered at Harry.
Yeah, well, that was before some asshole backed into Harry’s car, right in front of the freaking hospital, leaving Rocco free to speed off, oblivious to his would-be tail.
The accident had caused little damage to Harry’s rental car, but the swapping of his fake driver information had taken long enough to allow Rocco to catch up with Edguardo and Gena.
After fleeing Sugar Springs, Edguardo had bonfired the stolen black truck, a fast way to destroy trace evidence. As it turned out, the cops had nothing but a handful of conflicting accounts about a gun being fired from a truck. No one got a good description of Edguardo and the license plates had come back stolen.
None of the eyewitnesses had even mentioned Rocco’s vehicle. And while one person claimed they saw a blond woman in the black truck, there were no reports of a missing person, so the cops hadn’t even realized Gena Armstrong had been involved.
Harry still wasn’t buying the story that Gena had jumped from a moving vehicle. He knew her too damn well. Sober, she was vain with a capital V. So even if she’d managed to scrape up enough courage to jump, ultimately she’d have worried more about the potential damage to her face and chickened out.
Now had she been drunk …
Most likely she’d fallen out of the truck. He didn’t care what Edguardo said, the door must not have been shut all the way. At least Rocco or another driver hadn’t run the bitch over when she’d hit the pavement.
That Rocco now had Gena in his possession wasn’t the absolute worst-case scenario, though it wasn’t ideal. Harry still had a couple of cards to play.
Finding out where Rocco had stashed Gena was job one. The private plane that had ferried Rocco to Sugar Springs had flown back to D.C. without passengers. Harry hoped that meant Rocco had picked a safe house in Texas. The Agency used a lot of third-party contractors for security, which made it easier to circumvent.
Harry was also waiting to learn where Rocco’s sister and her kid were staying. Snatching one of them was not Harry’s first or second choice, but if he ran out of other options …
He slowed, turning off the highway. A few minutes later he pulled up beside the Winnebago he’d left parked at an RV station near Brownsville.
Inside, he booted up his laptop while microwav-ing a frozen dinner he’d grabbed at a convenience store. Then he brewed a pot of coffee. It was going to be a long night. By the time Harry had wolfed down the food and poured coffee, his laptop completed its security protocols. A slow process to be sure, but necessary.
He opened a browser and began retrieving e-mail from various sources. There wasn’t much.
The Rialto cartel wanted a progress report, which was a subtle way of saying, “Hurry, we’re waiting.”
“Well, you’re just going to have to keep waiting,” Harry muttered as he typed a reply that was equally subtle and vague. Wrapping up details now. Hope to have final timeline in 72 hours.
Reading it reminded him of the stakes. Damn it! He needed to make contact with Rufin.
His cell phone rang with the special ringtone he’d assigned to his CIA mole Ian Brown. The traitor.
“Have you found them?” Harry asked.
“No. Rocco hasn’t called in or contacted any of the Agency resources for a safe house.”
“Are you monitoring all his known aliases?”
“Absolutely. But no hits.”
“I expected as much,” Harry said. Rocco had a knack for keeping a ready supply of secret IDs. “I take it you’ve had
nothing on Gena’s IDs then, either.”
“I even tapped her health insurance records, but either she wasn’t hurt badly enough to need medical attention or
she’s using an alias, too.”
“What about Rufin? Any headway in tracking his location?”
“None. Though an opportunity might open if they catch this Taz character. Max Duncan’s fiancée, Dr. Houston,
seems confident that Max is closing in on Taz. If Rufin is truly the only one who can retrieve those data chips, then
perhaps we need to follow Taz once he’s in custody.”
“Maybe I should join the hunt for Taz,” Harry said, only half joking. “We need to watch Dr. Houston more closely
as well.”
Ian cleared his throat. “If we could manage to get the research on those chips, would we even need Dr. Rufin? Abe
Caldwell seemed certain someone on his staff could replicate the Serum 89 formula from the research notes.”
It bothered Harry that Ian knew so much about Serum 89, a mind-control drug the late Dr. Viktor Zadovsky had
invented.
Had Abe Caldwell really confided in Ian to that degree? Or did Ian have access to more data than he let on? True
traitors always looked out for themselves first. All the more reason to debrief and unplug Ian as soon as possible.
“Abe Caldwell overestimated his researchers,” Harry said. “There’s only one scientist I know of who could replicate
the Serum 89 formula. A man who worked with Viktor Zadovsky in Belarus.”
Harry was bluffing. He damn sure wasn’t going to tell Ian the truth, that even Dr. Rufin had expressed doubt in
anyone’s ability to replicate Serum 89. Still, getting the data from those chips might be all Harry required to
manufacture SugarCane.
“Would this person in Belarus be open to a partnership?” Ian was obviously interested.
Harry set the hook. “I’d approach it from a work-for-hire angle. The fewer people to split profits with, the better.”
“Let me see what other sources I can tap to trace Taz.”
You do that, Harry thought. “Any news on where Rocco’s sister is?”
“She was supposed to be moved but apparently her son has disappeared. No sign of foul play; they think he sneaked
away to meet a friend. The kid’s got a cell phone, but he’s keeping it off. The mother was refusing to leave until he
returned. She’s also demanding to speak to Rocco but he’s not answering his cell phone either.”
“We can use this.” Harry took a sip of coffee. “Get word to Dante Johnson about Rocco’s nephew disappearing.
Mention that Rocco’s sister wants contacts. You can bet your ass Dante knows how to get in touch with Rocco.
Then monitor the sister’s cell phone. Rocco will call her.”
Mission incomplete.
Find Rufin.

“Almost there.” Taz grunted as he withdrew the ice pick from his thigh. The slender metal pick created a neater, smaller wound than a knife. It also preserved his clothing and conserved his ability to self-heal, which had grown erratic.

The best part, though, was that the pain of ramming an ice pick straight to the bone was far more excruciating than simply cutting muscle with a knife. And the more intense the pain, the longer the moments of clarity lasted.

He sheathed the ice pick. Something else to thank Hades for. During one of their recent connections, Hades had reminded him of the tenets of self-administered pain. Short and extreme served better than long and less intense.

Hades had also been ready to help when Taz began experiencing brief but powerful bursts of hallucinations. Hades had mentally guided him through the process of compartmentalizing.

Break it down.
Prioritize.
Focus on a single task.

It had worked.
But at a price. When Taz allowed his connection to Hades to open fully, he’d given Hades complete access to his thoughts for a short time.

Hades had quickly exploited the opportunity and discovered where Taz and his hostage were holed up. Taz had felt compelled to release the woman as Hades insisted. In the end, Taz had had to trigger a seizure in Hades to forcibly close their portal.

Then a funny thing had happened. In those scrambled seconds while Hades had writhed in pain, Taz had been granted reciprocal access to Hades’ thoughts. That’s when he uncovered the connection between Dr. Erin Houston and Dr. Rufin.

Hades’ concern for Erin had been off the charts. Mine! Hades had even established a mind link with the woman, not to exploit or manipulate her thoughts, but to protect.

And during those moments when Hades’ consciousness was battling the seizure, Taz had touched that connection to Erin. To Erin’s thoughts.

She had visited with Dr. Rufin yesterday, in a Washington, D.C. hospital. Rufin had been moved today, to an undisclosed location, while Erin had rushed off to Massachusetts.

Right here.
She was currently inside the building, perusing records. What she hoped to find and why it was so urgent wasn’t clear. Nor did it matter.

Prioritize.
Find Rufin.

From his hidden spot across the street, Taz watched the building. According to the front marquee, it housed a half-dozen medical businesses most of which had the word research in their name.

Though foot traffic was low this time of night, Taz still saw a few people he presumed were employees gain entrance by swiping a magnetic card. A security guard had come by twice in the last hour talking on his cell phone while checking doors.

Taz sensed a mental nudge. It was his connection with Hades.

Cautiously, Taz checked it and found Hades was speaking with Erin, by phone. It’s late, why don’t you call it a night? Hades said. Erin agreed. I’ll call you when I reach my hotel room, she promised.

Taz quickly cut the connection to prevent Hades from sensing his presence. His eavesdropping.

After crossing the street, Taz moved toward the parking lot and hunkered down beside a large panel van. A few minutes later, a woman left the building, striding purposefully toward the parking lot. She had her keys out and
headed toward a dark blue Taurus. Crouching low, Taz shadowed her. Beneath the sodium lights, her red hair took on a burnished cast. He shifted the ice pick in his grip as he moved up behind her. “Excuse me, Dr. Houston?” She gasped and turned, clearly startled. 

Even though he had accessed Hades’ memories of this woman several times now, Taz wasn’t prepared for the emotional jolt of actually seeing her. It was more than physical beauty. It’s her eyes, Taz silently acknowledged as he recalled another of Hades’ thoughts about Erin. Angel eyes. So big a man could fall into them. 

It was impossible to look at Erin and not feel Hades’ love for her. Which in turn brought forth a memory from Taz’s own past. A hazy reminiscence of Taz’s one true love. The thought triggered a sharp spike of pain behind Taz’s left eye. Memories of love were forbidden. Taz quickly refocused his thoughts. 

Mission incomplete. Find Rufin. 

Erin tried to back away, but Taz stopped her. Pulling her close, he pressed the tip of the ice pick against her ribs. “No screams. I just want to talk. Pretend like we’re old friends.” “You’re Taz, right? I’ve seen your photograph,” she said. He nodded. “I need your help, Erin.” She relaxed. “We can go inside and talk. It’s more private” “No. Let’s drive. You won’t be harmed,” he said. “As long as you do as I say.”
Chapter Sixteen

Laredo, TX
October 4, 9:15 P.M.

Rocco was parked outside a twenty-four-hour Walmart.
“You sure you’re up to this?” he asked Gena.
“After everything else I’ve faced the last twenty-four hours? I think I can handle Walmart.”
Her bravado didn’t fool him. She had pretended to sleep during the drive, maybe catching an hour of actual rest. The balance of the time had been fitful.
Rocco wished he knew what she was thinking. About Harry? About Lupe? About him? Her habit of internalizing her thoughts hadn’t changed.
And badgering her about it would only make it worse. Or so it used to.
Right now, she looked exhausted. Fragile. Yet beneath the surface there lurked a smoldering resentment. Compressed heat and fire. He realized he’d never seen her like this: angry.
“I meant we could wait till morning, if you preferred,” he said.
“Seeing as I have nothing but the clothes on my back”—she motioned to her torn shirt—“and even these don’t look so hot.”
“We’ll speed shop. Grab whatever you need for a couple days. We can get more later, if necessary.”
“You really think we’ll be on the road that long?” she asked.
As long as it takes, he thought. The last time he’d talked with Catalina, he’d learned there was nothing new on Maddy, Travis, or Taz. The wait was frustrating for both of them.
“At this point, it’s hard to say.” Rocco shrugged. “I’m hoping something breaks soon.”
“Hoping? Or wishing?” Gena opened her car door and started to climb out.
Rocco exited the car and came around to help, but she waved him off. He watched how slowly she moved and realized some, if not all, of her short-temperedness stemmed from pain.
They had stopped a second time after leaving the drugstore so he could clean and bandage the rest of her cuts and burns. He’d wrapped her sprained wrist and convinced her to let him check her bruised ribs.
There were probably myriad other bruises and scrapes hidden beneath her clothes. When they’d finally pulled over at a diner, she’d picked at her food, eating just enough to have something in her stomach so she could take more ibuprofen.
Rocco touched Gena’s arm as they approached the store’s entrance. She jerked and moved sideways.
“Don’t flinch when I touch you,” he whispered. “We’re supposed to be married. Remember?”
She glared at him over her shoulder, not slowing down. “Maybe we just had an argument.”
Inside the store he grabbed a cart. “Fine. We had an argument. Now I’m apologizing. I was wrong. You were right. Better?”
To his amazement, she smiled. Briefly. It was the first time she’d done so, and Rocco felt … dazzled.
“You tone was a bit mocking,” she said. “But, I agree. You were wrong. Turn here.” She pointed toward health and beauty.
The shampoo aisle was crowded, so Rocco kept quiet even though something about her response “You were wrong” didn’t sit right.
He watched as Gena grabbed a pink bottle and flipped the cap open. She wrinkled her nose at the smell and put the offending bottle back on the shelf. Then she grabbed a green bottle. That one must have been really bad because she shuddered. Next up was a white bottle. It made the cut and landed in the basket.
Curious, he grabbed the green bottle and sniffed. Girly and fruity, but not repulsive.
“What?” she looked at him.
“Nothing. I just realized I’ve never been shopping with you.”
He’d shopped for her, but that had usually involved only lingerie and jewelry stores. The memory of stripping away sexy underwear, leaving her wearing nothing but a sparkling gold chain, had him white-knuckling the cart’s handle.
“You can see you missed a lot,” she said.
“I suppose you’re used to shopping at, uh, other stores.”
She started to say something, then stopped. “Once upon a time, maybe. I’ve since learned to be more frugal.”
She turned at the next aisle and selected toothpaste, a toothbrush, and floss. He followed her up and down a few
aisles. She added fewer items than he’d have expected, especially in cosmetics. Not that Gena needed a lot of make-
up, but he recalled a trip they’d taken once. It had seemed half her luggage was a traveling salon.
Still, seeing her wearing so little make-up now made him realize how young she looked. At thirty, she could pass for
a college freshman.
Gena grabbed a neon-colored toiletry bag from an end-cap display. “Done here.”
They headed to women’s clothing next. In less than five minutes Gena picked out three pairs of jeans and three
shirts. She was even faster in lingerie, grabbing underwear, bras, and socks.
“Shoes?” he asked.
“My sneakers are fine.” She leaned against the cart and rubbed her head. “I think that’s it.”
He realized she was exhausted; on the verge of collapse. “Come on. We’ll grab a suitcase and leave.”
He paid for their purchases with cash. She limped as they walked out of the store, and this time she didn’t protest
when he put an arm around her shoulders and helped her to the car.
Where to next?” she asked after she started the engine.
“It’s late and we both need sleep. We’ll get a room, call it a night, and hit the road early in the morning.”
“Do I get my own room?”
“No. I’ll get double beds. I know it’s awkward, but I’m not letting you out of my sight again.” He braced for her
protests, prepared to go gangster on her if necessary. This wasn’t optional.
Instead she shrugged. “I’m too tired to argue, though I probably won’t be able to sleep. When I close my eyes, I see
… Lupe.”
“You can watch movies all night.” Rocco headed back in the direction they’d come, toward one of the busier roads
with lots of newer hotels and restaurants.
A short time later, he carried their stuff to a second-floor room at the Holiday Inn.
“You can have the bathroom first,” he said. “I’ll get ice and some sodas. It’s just two doors down.”
While out of the room, he checked the selection of snacks in the vending machine, just in case he could tempt her to
eat more.
A7. Ding Dongs. His current favorite.
He scanned the lower rows for something healthy. Granola-fied. Gena had read the list of ingredients off his box of
Ding Dongs once.
“What language is this?” she’d teased. “Do you know what this stuff does to you?”
“Yeah. Chocolate makes me horny,” he’d defended.
His eyes locked onto G9. Chocolate M&M’s. He had a flashback. “Does this make you horny?” He and Gena had
been in a movie theater. Gena had held up the box of M&M’s he’d bought her and proceeded to drop them down her
shirt. They’d left before the previews had finished.
Rocco sighed and got pretzels and oatmeal cookies.
Back in the room, he emptied the Walmart bags on the bed and began cutting tags off her clothing. Gena poked her
head out of the bathroom.
“Oh, you’re back,” she said.
“Gee, try to contain your enthusiasm.”
“I mean, I need clothes. Would you hand me a pair of jeans and a shirt?”
“Uh, oh. We forgot to get pajamas, didn’t we?”
“We? Um, I forgot to buy them, yes.”
And I don’t own any, Rocco thought. He picked up a pair of the stiff denim jeans they’d just purchased.
“You’ll be miserable sleeping in these. How about I lend you a shirt to sleep in? It’ll fit you like a knee-length tent.”
For a moment, she didn’t respond. “Fine. But I want to get PJs tomorrow.”
He rifled through his rucksack, pulled out a black T-shirt, and handed it to her.
She grimaced as she took it from him. As if the thought of wearing something of his revolted her. If it bothers you
that much, sleep naked, he thought.
But when she came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, he did a double take.Couldn’t help himself. What
should have been a big, baggy turnoff had never looked hotter. His shirt dwarfed her frame, making her look even
tinier. Except for her breasts, which were anything but tiny and made an indentation that shirt had never known.
He turned away, in part to hide his erection. Couldn’t help that either. He grabbed a pair of his own jeans and his shave kit. “I’ve got dibs on the bed closest to the door. There’s soda, ice, and some snacks. Help yourself.”

“You said you wanted to be on the road early. Do we need a wake-up call?” She had moved to her bed and was flipping back the spread.

Rocco’s internal clock would wake him, but Gena had never been one to spring out of bed without smacking the SNOOZE button a couple of times. “Suit yourself.”

“Where’s the remote for the TV?” she asked.

“Check in the nightstand drawer.” At the bathroom door, he hesitated, concerned about leaving her alone.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said when he peeked around the corner.

She was already under the covers, and looked—Don’t go there. He moved away. “I won’t be long.”

In the bathroom, Rocco eased his jeans down over his erection. Seeing Gena wearing his shirt hadn’t helped. Thinking of her naked beneath it hadn’t helped either.

He climbed in and turned the shower on. The blast of cold water did the trick. Until he picked up her bottle of shampoo and flipped the lid. “Night Jasmine,” the label read. That it smelled like her had his cock hardening again.

He set the shampoo aside. “Hope I don’t run out of cold water.”

When Rocco came out of the bathroom, he found Gena sound asleep, the remote clenched in her hand, the television tuned to a twenty-four-hour news channel.

Moving without sound, he checked the door locks and turned off all the lights except the one in the bathroom, which sent out a sliver of light. Then he slipped the remote free of her grasp and lowered the volume slightly. He left the news on, not wanting to disrupt her sleep if he switched channels or turned off the TV.

He felt tired. Though he hadn’t been through the same ordeal as Gena, he was going on seventy-two hours with minimal sleep. If he didn’t get some decent rest, he’d be no good protecting anyone.

Shirtless, he left his jeans on and climbed into bed. While he preferred to sleep nude, he had slept in his clothes plenty of times, under much worse circumstances. He watched the news through slitted eyes and was just about to roll over when he became aware that Gena’s breathing pattern had changed.

In the time it took him to toss back covers it changed again. She started writhing as if in physical pain, alternately crying and then sobbing.

Rocco knew she wasn’t having an ordinary nightmare. Night terrors were a thousand times worse. They sucked you down, into the darkest abyss of hell. Made you aware of feeling trapped but unable to escape or awaken.

During his first deployment to the Middle East, Rocco had been plagued with night terrors. He recognized Gena’s pain. Watching another person perish while you’re helpless to stop it was agonizing.

“No! No!” She screamed now, thrashing violently.

Rocco leaned over her bed and grasped her shoulders. “Gena! You’re dreaming.”

When she didn’t respond, he shook her more firmly. “Wake up, sweetheart!”

Her eyes opened wide and unfocused. Disoriented, she sucked in a sharp breath of air.

“It’s me,” Rocco soothed. “You’re safe. We’re in a motel. You were dreaming.”

“You mean, Lupe’s not …”

“Lupe’s dead. The fire did happen. But you’re safe.”

She pressed a hand to her mouth. “Oh, God, I remember. It’s all my fault.” Gena tried to climb out of bed. “I have to go, to find her grandmother.”

Rocco gently caught her hands. She was trembling, from grief, from lack of sleep, from trauma.

“None of this is your fault. And it’s too late to go anywhere,” he said.

“But—”

“Shhh.”

Her misery tore at him. Shifting closer, Rocco wrapped her in his arms. She collapsed against him, as if desperate for comfort, and started to sob.

Rocco stroked her hair and let her cry. The urge to charge in, take over, and fix it—anything to make her happy again—rose strong. Except there was no fixing what had been done to her friend Lupe.

When she quieted, he tried to ease her back down to her pillow.

“No!” She struggled to push back up. “The dreams. They’ll start again.”

“Scoot over then.”

“Huh?”

“Scoot over. We’ll lie here and watch television.”

“Together?”

“Sheesh. We’re both adults. And we’re both dressed.” He shook his head. “You know what? Never mind.”

“Wait.” To his surprise, Gena moved to the middle of the bed and began patting the covers. “Where’s the remote?”
“It’s here.” Rocco grabbed it from the nightstand before climbing into her bed. He adjusted the pillow behind his back and began to surf channels. “Good-bye CNN.” Stations flew by, until … “Hello, Homer Simpson.” “D’oh! Bart!” one of the animated characters screamed.

Gena sat forward, hugging her pillow as she stared at the television screen. *The Simpsons* was one of those zany shows they’d both liked, but right now Rocco wondered if she was even seeing the on-screen antics. He pretended to watch the show, but when he glanced at her again, she had her eyes closed. Until her head toppled to one side, causing her to jerk and awaken. Then she looked ready to cry again.

“Come here.” Rocco opened his arms and Gena literally fell onto his chest. He lay still, letting her fidget, half expecting her to pop back up and flee to her own side of the bed. But within seconds she relaxed. The next time he checked, her eyes were closed, her breathing soft and even. Unbidden, memories from their past came forth. In sleep, Gena looked innocent. Trusting. Exactly the way Rocco remembered her. Back when things between them had been perfect …
The island and the cabana were just as Rocco’s friend Dante had promised. Comfortable and private. No phone. No Internet. No distractions.

Solar panels provided basic electricity and a cistern collected rainwater, and this time of year rain was plentiful. The hot tub out on the back deck ran on bottled gas, which, like food and drink, had to be brought in.

But once here … God! What a paradise! The distant relative of Dante’s who owned the place was putting it on the market, and if it weren’t for the multimillion-dollar price tag, Rocco would have to seriously consider buying it.

Gena had been as eager as Rocco to explore the island. After changing into swimsuits, they’d spent the day in the ocean, swimming, snorkeling. Touching, feeling. Moving real close, then apart, like it was an extended pre-foreplay session.

Just before sunset, he’d grilled steaks and made the salad while Gena sipped wine and made him laugh with her tales of growing up on her father’s ranch in the Rio Grande valley of Texas. She’d been an only child, born to the solitude of wealth and privilege, but raised by a loving nanny. Her late mother sounded like a nut job, but hey, Rocco’s mom was no prize.

He’d kept his own childhood stories light, making jokes about growing up poor, in a Kentucky trailer park. He’d never known his biological father, but the presence of a caring grandfather had kept misery at bay for Rocco and his sister.

After a leisurely supper, he’d taken Gena for a moonlight stroll along the beach. When the night breeze picked up, they’d hurried back to the cabana and built a fire in the living room while waiting for the hot tub to heat. Rocco had gotten up to refill their wineglasses only to discover they’d emptied the bottle.

“Red or white?” he had called out from the kitchen.

When Gena didn’t respond, he’d retraced his steps and found her zonked. Sound asleep atop a nest of pillows in front of the fireplace.

Seeing her lying there nearly naked, wearing only a tiny bikini, had been torturous. Deliciously torturous. He decided to take advantage of her snooze and slipped into the bathroom, where he’d promptly jerked off in the shower.

What he’d told himself was the chivalrous thing to do, to not scare the bejesus out of her by waking her up with a giant woodie, now made him feel lecherous.

It didn’t help that, asleep, she looked way too young. Not twenty-three, but more like a seventeen-year-old who’d donned make-up and styled her hair to look more mature.

Rocco didn’t feel especially old, until he thought about Gena being twenty-three going on twenty-four, which meant he was twenty-nine going on thirty.

Thirty felt ancient.

She was just starting out in life. And him? He’d lived three lifetimes.

She was living alone for the very first time. He’d lived alone forever. She was working her first full-time job. He’d had a lawn-mowing business at eight.

And while Gena had a trust fund that afforded her a different standard of living, she didn’t act spoiled or haughty. In fact, he’d seen glimpses of her tomboy side that she tried to keep hidden. He’d heard her infectious belly laugh, the one that wasn’t ladylike.

It was one of the things he adored about her. Her joie de vivre. Gena always smiled. She always made him smile.

When they were apart—which was too often these days—he thought of nothing but getting back to her. Hell, he hadn’t even thought of another woman since first laying eyes on Gen Armstrong.

Rocco had been hot for her since day one, six months ago, when she’d shown up as the replacement linguist on a job in Mexico. An all-male job, in an area known to be hazardous. What numskull had sent a woman there? While anyone who’d racked up three beauty queen titles had to be aware of her own looks, Gena still underestimated her impact on the opposite sex.

Rocco had privately appointed himself her bodyguard, not just to protect her from the local riffraff, but from the
Agency horndogs as well. And though she had done an exceptional job translating original material and confirming his suspicion that the Mexican government’s translator had held back mission-critical data, Rocco had had her replaced before anyone could say “distraction.”

But the moment that job wrapped, Rocco had requested a hometown assignment, something that put him in D.C., closer to Gena. Then he’d actively pursued her. Though they both worked for the State Department, they were in separate divisions, so no conflict of interest.

Gena rebuffed his attempts at first. When she finally gave in and agreed to meet him for lunch, he’d known he’d never be the same. She beguiled him but kept him at arm’s length. They’d dated five times before she let him kiss her. But, Holy Moses, what a kiss!

After that things seemed to heat up, to a point, before Gena called time out. He’d guessed she was a virgin before she admitted it. True innocence couldn’t be faked.

He’d tried to assure her he was fine with waiting, even though he wanted her with a desperation that scared him. Mr. Afraid of Commitment suddenly found himself interested in engagement rings.

Then a black ops mission came up. Rocco had been sent off to Afghanistan without being able to contact anyone. Typically he welcomed those types of assignments; he thrived on danger. That time, though, he hadn’t wanted to leave Gena. Rocco had sworn Harry Gambrel had done it on purpose, assigned Rocco to lead the mission, knowing damn well Rocco wanted a few more weeks stateside.

That’s where relationships got dicey in his profession. He and Gena had talked about that today. Kind of. She’d admitted feeling insecure when Rocco was gone for extended periods.

“It’s part of my job,” he’d tried to explain.

“And I respect that. I just need to know I have a special place in your heart.”

A special place?

Didn’t she know she had his whole heart?

He padded barefoot to the dining room table and picked up the wineglasses, carried them to the kitchen. He checked on Gena as he made his way to the back deck. She must have gotten chilled because she’d rolled up in one of the blankets.

Outside, Rocco cut off the hot tub heater before extinguishing the two Tiki oil lamps. With the full moon the lights were overkill. The breeze had calmed and came in from the west.

“Rocco?”

He turned and saw Gena silhouetted in the open doorway. She’d cast off the blanket but still had her arms wrapped around herself.

Rocco had purposely bought the tiniest bikinis he could find without going to the extreme of a thong. The one she’d put on today screamed “mission accomplished.”

“How long have I been out?” she asked.

“Not too long.”

She crossed the deck, pausing to dip her toe in the steaming hot tub. “Ah! Perfect. Bet you wish you’d brought a real date.”

He laughed and closed the distance between them. “Actually I’ve got this thing for Sleeping Beauty.”

Gena’s arms encircled his waist as she laid her head against his shoulder. He didn’t have a shirt on and her long hair felt like silk against his skin.

“Mmmm,” she said. “You took a shower, didn’t you? And cleared the dinner dishes.”

“Guilty on both counts.” He felt her shiver and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re cold. Let’s go in.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Can I have a do over?”

“And what would you do over?”

She leaned back, met his gaze. “For starters, we’d climb in the hot tub. Maybe look at the stars.”

Rocco felt a grin split his face. “Your wish is my command, princess.”

He picked her up, then carried her to the hot tub and stepped in. Still holding her, he sank slowly into the water.

“Feels divine.” Gena wiggled, sitting sideways across his lap. “So, how much do you know about astronomy?”

“I know the moon is too bright to see much in the east, but if you look back here”—he turned, facing them both west—“there’s Ursa Major.”

“Great bear.”

“You can use the Big Dipper to locate Polaris, the North Star. If you ever get lost at night, face Polaris and you’ll be facing north. Unless, of course, you’re in the Southern Hemisphere. Are you familiar with the Southern Cross?”

She giggled. “Actually, I was talking less about orienteering and more about folklore.”
“Folklore?” Rocco repeated. “I must have been absent that day.”

“Luckily I wasn’t.” She pointed to the sky. “See the Little Dipper? Legend has it that Mother Sky uses it to dole out her love potions. A couple seeking her blessing would stand together beneath the constellation and recite a special poem.” Gena pressed a line of kisses along his shoulder. “In hopes it would win Mother Sky’s favor.”

“I was definitely absent that day,” Rocco said. “What happened if they received this love potion?”

She turned, facing him. Then she untied the straps of her bikini top. “The effects usually showed up in the woman first.”

Her top fell away as she lifted her hair, giving Rocco his first glimpse of her naked breasts. Her nipples were pale pink, her areolas tiny on such large globes.

He whistled softly. “Oh, yeah. We got the potion.” He reached up and touched her nipple with his index finger, watched it respond by hardening. Rocco’s cock responded in the same fashion. He’d been aroused before, but now his erection was full bore. “Tell me more.”

“I made that up, but it worked.” Gena rubbed against him, moaning slightly.

“It worked very well.” He placed a hand on her hip, guiding her motion so they both felt it.

“Rocco, I want you. I want this.” Her voice wavered as she undulated her hips again. “But I don’t know what to do.”

“Luckily, I do. I suggest we go inside, to the bedroom.” Condoms and hot tubs did not mix. “Hold on.”

Steam wafted from their skin as Rocco stood, cradling her as he climbed out. Gena kept her arms around his neck, giving him a bird’s-eye view of her glorious breasts.

At the door, he lowered her and grabbed the towels he’d left out earlier. He unfolded one, wrapped it around her shoulders, covering temptation so he could think. Talk.

“Are you sure about this, Gena?” he asked. “Because once we start …” Rocco wasn’t as certain he could pull back. He’d wanted her too damn long.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything. I want you, Rocco. So much it scares me.”

He could have beat his chest and run around the deck doing war whoops. Instead he tugged her wet hair free and began squeezing the long length with another towel.

“Let’s get you dry,” he said.

Gena squirmed and kicked off her wet swimsuit bottom, leaving her completely naked except for the towel around her shoulders.

“You’re so beautiful, Gena.” He kissed her and slowly lowered his hips, easing her legs apart to just lie against her.

She rolled onto her side, too. Her breasts jutted forward, the tips teasing the hair on his chest as she continued stroking his shaft. “Do you like when I touch you?” she asked.
“Oh yeah.” Rocco laid a hand on her hip, caressing her curves, following the indent of her abdomen, lower to tease her soft nest of curls.

He cupped her, felt the slight withdrawal over the shock of feeling his hand in such an intimate place. But within seconds she relaxed, opening ever so slightly, letting him feel her heat. He caressed her with his thumb and was rewarded with a moan.

“Spread your legs,” he urged. Then he slid his middle finger partway into her tightness.

He felt her instinctively press down. Pulling back slightly, he shifted his hand, letting his thumb rub her clitoris as he pushed his finger up into her again.

“Oh!” Gena pitched her hips forward as she sought the sensation again.

“Feel good?”

She nodded. “Does it feel that way for you, too?”

Rocco flexed his hips. “Different, but good. In fact, if you’d grip me more firmly—” She immediately tightened her hand. “That’s it.”

He worked two fingers inside her, then leaned down and caught her nipple in his mouth. This time as he sucked, Gena rubbed rhythmically against his hand.

“I … I’ve never,” she said, panting, “felt this way.”

Rocco felt ready to explode. Part of him wished they could go on like this for longer and maybe next time they would. He reached for a condom and sheathed himself.


“Just relax, sweetheart. It’ll unfold naturally.”

She lay back against the pillow. Rocco eased up over her and then lowered himself slowly, barely rocking his hips. As Gena increased the rhythm, he met it.

He suckled her breasts as he eased his cock partway inside her. Feeling the heat and wetness there was totally different from what he’d felt with his fingers.

Gena tried to arch against him, frantic.

“Raise your legs, sweetheart,” he urged. “It will help.”

She did. They both cried out as Rocco slid deeper, but not all the way in.

“Please. More!” Gena demanded. “I want it all. All of you.”

Her words undid him. With a groan he pushed in farther, felt her tightness increase. Gena writhed beneath him, taking in more and more before losing control.

When her orgasm hit, she screamed his name and bucked her hips, shattering his control. Surging forward, Rocco rocked all the way up, all the way inside Gena.

*Home.*

Then without another move, he had the most powerful orgasm of his life.
Chapter Eighteen

Thailand, Uncertain Location
October 5, Unknown Time

The last time Maddy had been transported, she hadn’t been drugged, though she’d been blindfolded and bound before being forced onto a helicopter. Had she been moved because her captors worried Rocco had traced the telephone call?

They hadn’t traveled too far. She estimated the flight time to be twenty minutes, but her worry increased when the blindfold was removed and she saw the elaborate compound she’d been brought to. A personal residence, she guessed, belonging to someone wealthy and powerful.

The doctor did not accompany them, though she did help Maddy wash up and change before leaving. The embroidered robe she’d been given to wear was short, hitting midthigh. But at least it was clean. It had matching slippers that were insubstantial but beat bare feet.

The black-uniformed armed guards escorted her into the palatial compound and herded her into a formal sitting area. She tried to take in details of her new surroundings. The room was decorated in a baroque style with heavy drapes over the windows. She was directed by gesture to sit on one of the brocade sofas. One of the guards stood at the door, while the other disappeared.

Ever since her pregnancy had been outed, her captors had treated her fractionally better. Which worried her since she knew they weren’t doing so for humanitarian reasons. Her captors thought they’d have better luck procuring Dr. Rufin in exchange for a pregnant woman.

And while it gave her hope to know Rocco knew that she’d been abducted—and Rocco would tell Travis—she worried what Travis would think once he heard she was pregnant. Would Travis realize he was the father? Or would he believe her captor’s claim that her unborn child was Rocco’s?

She thought about her last phone conversation with Travis. He had been traveling and promised they’d have a deep conversation about taking their relationship “to the next level” as soon as he returned. Would they ever have that conversation?

As much as Maddy wanted to believe in happy endings, she was first and foremost a realist. Even if the Agency had Dr. Rufin as her abductors claimed, the CIA would never negotiate with the enemy. Maddy’s bottom line was painfully clear: No cavalry was coming to rescue her. She was on her own.

A noise outside the door caught her attention. The guard snapped his fingers and motioned for her to stand. Maddy did so, tugging the robe down as best she could.

Two guards entered the room, followed by a fifty-something man wearing a suit and tie. That the man wore multiple gold bracelets on both wrists and had a thick ring on every finger ruined the effect of the Dolce & Gabbana suit. It also tipped off the man’s identity. The drug lord Minh Tran supposedly wore a ring for each wife who bore him a son. The bracelets represented men he’d killed.

Over the course of her job, Maddy had done research on Minh Tran. The photographs she’d seen of him were few and not recent. The passage of time had not been kind. His face was rounder, the skin loose below his chin, but his eyes were unmistakable. Fierce and cruel.

Tran ignored her at first, listening as the guard spoke in a hushed tone. Then Tran nodded and began speaking to her in Thai.

Maddy looked around, uncertain how to respond. When no one translated, she realized it was a test to see if she understood the language. He’d probably just threatened her with something horrible to get a reaction.

She wished she could stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks, but she was too scared, too tired, too sick to muster the effort.

She shook her head. “I don’t understand. And I want to go home.”

Tran barked out a command and a pretty Thai woman was escorted into the room. Maddy guessed the woman was close to her own age, twenty-five or twenty-six.

“This is your nurse, Sunlee.” Minh Tran’s sudden switch to English surprised Maddy. “She speaks English, too. While you are here, you will do everything she instructs. My concern is with your child. Do you understand?”
The implication that Maddy was not of concern was clear. She nodded, but Tran had already turned away to speak with another of the guards. Sunlee watched Tran with reverent adoration. Did the young woman hope to become another ring on Tran’s fingers?

“Look at me, Madison.” Tran stepped closer.

Maddy met his gaze, unable to prevent herself from flinching when his eyes dropped and openly ogled her breasts before slowly raking back up.

“There are ways you can increase your value. If you please me, I can be reasonable,” Tran said.

It was all she could do not to show revulsion over his sexual invitation. Tran lifted his hand and two guards moved in to flank her. Maddy stiffened. Had Tran picked up on her disgust? Would these men subdue her while Tran abused her?

Bile rose in Maddy’s throat. She looked around frantically. If she vomited on Tran’s shoes what would he do?

“These men will take you to your new quarters,” Tran said. “We will speak again soon.”
Chapter Nineteen

Laredo, TX  
October 5, 5:30 A.M.

Morning hard-ons were a normal part of Rocco’s life. His body’s equivalent of running a sound check. Testing. All systems go.
He reveled in it.
And if he woke up with a willing female, so much the better. A duet was a glorious way to start the day.
But this morning’s sound check went awry, disrupting his system with a squelch of disturbing feedback. He knew immediately that his equipment worked fine; he had a hard-on for the record books. He also had a female in his bed. The same female who had dominated his dreams last night.
Gena Armstrong. Former real-life love and all-time favorite fantasy. AKA The Heartbreaker. AKA Damsel in Distress.
The problem wasn’t Gena, per se. It was her hands. She had somehow managed to loosen his jeans, shoved them down enough to allow her hot little fingers to tunnel in. Just like she had in one of his dreams.
Right now she had a grip on his cock that was painful. Painful good. Did her subconscious remember that he liked a firm touch?
She made a soft noise in her sleep. Testing. Then she twitched, clutching him even tighter. All systems go.
Holy God! He gritted his teeth, afraid to move, to breathe, for fear of shooting off. This was a mistake. Except … how to fix?
His Inner Idiot decided to do a visual check. Even bigger mistake. Gena was sleeping soundly, all snuggled up against his side, using his bare chest as a pillow. Her mouth was open and so close to his nipple he felt her warm breath.
One of her legs was lying over his. Correction: it was practically entwined around his. And her contortions had hiked up the shirt she wore, confirming that she was naked beneath. Well, actually, his hand cupping her ass had confirmed that, but hey, his hand wasn’t the problem.
Hers was.
If he were a gentleman, he’d remove her hand from his cock while simultaneously tugging her shirt down. A gentleman probably wouldn’t be wishing that her shirt would creep up farther. Or that she’d twitch again.
And then she did.
Her grip tightened, her hand tugging upward along his shaft. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.
No.
It dawned on him that the question wasn’t whether he was a gentleman, but whether he was a masochist. It was torture lying still, not reaching to touch her in return.
His heart thudded dully in his chest, reminding him of where the real pain was. He had never gotten over Gena. Had never gotten over the way they’d broken up. Had never had a chance to speak his mind. Or apologize. Or make amends.
And her? Had she ever really cared? Did she ever dream about the good times they’d shared or had she let it go? The way he needed to let it go.
The past was ancient history. Most of it anyway. The part that had resurfaced had nearly killed Gena. Which was why they were together again. Because Rocco had sworn to keep her safe.
Period.
She wiggled just then, releasing his cock and breaking the spell. She shifted her leg higher and immediately stiffened.
Rocco knew she was awake. He debated playing possum, faking sleep to give her a chance to extricate herself. But damn if he wanted to, especially since she wasn’t scrambling away.
Instead he lay there, watching as she lifted her head to look down at their legs. When she turned to look at him, she drew a sharp breath, seeing that he was awake.
Rocco silently counted to three, ample time for her to make her move. She didn’t. So he made his.

He lifted his hand to the back of her neck, then drew her close for a kiss. He purposely kept it soft and tentative, monitoring her response, ready to end it at the first sign of resistance.

Gena mowed him down, as if she couldn’t get close enough. Her mouth opened, welcoming and eager.

It was all Rocco needed. He lifted her onto his chest, shoving his jeans lower in the process. A lovely moan escaped as she took over the kiss, her hands on either side of his face, holding him still as she drew his tongue fully into her mouth.

His hands snaked beneath her shirt, brushing it upward along her ribs, exposing her breasts briefly before cupping them. Gena gasped with pleasure, pressing fully into his hands, encouraging his play. He caught her nipples, tugged them lightly.

She bucked, rubbing her crotch against him. He dropped his hands to her hips, encouraging her to spread her legs, wanting her to feel the extent of his arousal. Gena straddled him, scalding his flesh with hers. She rolled her hips, thrusting herself against his shaft.

He echoed the motion, his cock growing harder and longer with each stroke. Gena deepened the kiss, sucking his tongue while dragging her nipples across his chest.

Rocco knew she was as close to the edge as he. The thought of thrusting his cock up inside her and—

The phone on the nightstand rang, startling both of them with its shrill noise. Gena pulled away, shattering the spell. “I’m … I’m sorry!” She rolled away from him and climbed out of the bed. “That’s my wake-up call.”

“Gena—”

“Please!” That she already regretted what had happened was obvious. Rocco grabbed the receiver and slammed it back down, silencing it.

“Gena.”

“Rocco.”

They spoke in unison. He motioned for her to go first.

“I’m … embarrassed. That was … stress. It shouldn’t have happened,” she said.

A stress fuck. That took the wind out of his sails. “I wasn’t implying otherwise.” She tugged nervously at the hem of her shirt. His shirt. That she was on the verge of tears deflated his anger.

His gaze took in her bandaged wrist, reminding him that she was the injured party. Damn it, this wasn’t about what used to be. He was supposed to protect her.

“I apologize,” he said. “You’re right. And I give you my word that it won’t happen again.”

“Fine. I need to check for e-mail and phone messages before we leave.”

As Gena gathered clean clothes, Rocco pretended to be engrossed in firing up his laptop. When she finally disappeared into the bathroom, he was left feeling like a tyrant.

Rather than try to analyze why, Rocco got dressed and packed his bag. While waiting for his laptop to make a secure connection, he activated his cell phone. The phone beeped, the display showing two missed calls. One from Cat, one from Dante. Both left callback numbers.

Rocco called Dante first. Both men were early risers.

“I hoped you’d call,” Dante said.

“What’s up? Are you and Max still in Tennessee?”

“We’re back in D.C.,” Dante said. “I’ve got a couple updates for you. Cat tried to reach you last night. Your nephew left the safe house. Adele thinks he went to meet his girlfriend. We’re trying to trace them by cell phones, but in the meantime Adele won’t relocate without him.”

“Damn it! I’ll kill him.” Didn’t Billy realize his antics could endanger his girlfriend as well? Rocco pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe Rocco needed to level with his sister and nephew—give them a better idea of the danger they faced. “I’ll call Adele. And when you find Billy, I want to talk to him.”

“Actually, Cat or someone else will have to work that. We’ve finally got news on Taz, but it’s not good. He tracked Erin Houston to Springfield, Massachusetts, and has taken her hostage. Taz wants her to lead him to Rufin.”

“Jesus! How is Max handling that?”

“Initially he went apeshit but he’s since been able to monitor enough of Erin’s thoughts to know she’s unharmed. Their connection keeps breaking, however, and Max suspects Taz is drugging her.”

Rocco didn’t understand how the whole head connection thing worked, but he knew he wouldn’t like it.

“If Taz wants Erin to bring him to Rufin, then they’re likely headed your way,” Rocco said.

“We’re setting up surveillance at Rufin’s old location, where Erin last worked with him.”
“Damn. I feel helpless.”
“To a degree, me too. But here’s something else you need to know. The Thai government doubled the reward on your head, which has stirred interest with some of the international bounty hunters. We’ve got reports of one of them nosing around Sugar Springs, looking to pick up your trail. You should think seriously about getting backup.”
“I’ll look into that as soon as we hang up.”
“Then let me give you the last bit of news. From Travis. Minh Tran sent a text to your phone, acknowledging your ‘arrest.’ Said he’ll contact you with a new deadline and instructions. Travis feels certain Minh Tran had your place staked out, probably intended to follow you and grab Rufin before you left D.C.”
“I would have expected as much,” Rocco said. “Did Tran mention anything about Maddy’s fate?”
“Not directly, but Travis doesn’t think Minh Tran is stupid enough to harm Maddy right now. She’s still his only leverage, especially since the attempts on Gena have failed.”
Rocco rubbed his head. “I hope Travis is right. I’ll be in touch.”
After disconnecting, Rocco moved to the small table where his laptop sat. The news that a bounty hunter had traced him to Sugar Springs was worrisome.
He thought about his plan to cross into Mexico. It still seemed the best choice, especially since he and Gena would be using new aliases.
As Dante suggested, it was also time to get help to guard Gena. If Rocco could get her to a secure location in Mexico, he could fly back to D.C. and let himself be spotted there to lure the bounty hunters away from Texas.
Rocco reviewed his mental Rolodex and came up with a person he could trust; an old friend who used to work for INTERPOL in Monterrey, Mexico. A friend who owed him a favor. The problem was how to get in touch with him. Rocco didn’t want to access his contact list at the office from here. Instead, he’d have Cat do it.
Gena came out of the bathroom.
“Get packed,” Rocco said. “I’d like to leave here while it’s dark.”
“Do you still plan to go to Mexico?”
“Yes. I’m also going to hire a backup security person, Gena. I may have to leave you with him long enough to double back and lay a false trail.”
“I’ll be fine on my own,” Gena began.
“No. You saw what happened to Lupe. And now there are new people joining the search. I’m afraid it’s even more dangerous than before.”
Chapter Twenty

Bangkok, Thailand
October 5, 7:00 A.M.

“The woman is alive.”
Luc Skihawtra’s four-word message gave Travis Franks hope.
It had been tough to think ever since learning that his beloved Maddy was in the hands of Minh Tran. The guilt that
ate at Rocco Taylor was nothing compared to what Travis felt. If Travis had been more insistent that he and Maddy
go public about their relationship, she wouldn’t be in danger.
For a lot of reasons that at one time seemed important, Travis and Maddy had decided to keep their status as a
couple private. Their coming together in a romantic sense had shocked both of them. Maddy had worked
periodically with Travis’s team for three years, two of which had been spent with Rocco in a relationship that could
only be described as intermittent.
But two months ago, after weeks of working late, trying to find leads on Max and Harry, something had clicked, and
clicked hard, between Travis and Maddy. Travis invited her out to dinner, and one thing led to another and wham!
He’d fallen for her.
But Maddy had been the one who didn’t want to advertise their status until they defined their relationship. They had
sex—great sex. But she worried that without commitment, that’s all it ever would be.
And while Travis preferred a committed relationship, he’d secretly worried he was too old for Maddy. He was forty-
two. She was twenty-five. That seventeen-year age difference brought up all the old-enough-to-be-her-dad
insecurities.
Damn it, once she was safe, Travis would announce to the world that he loved her.
Once she was safe.
He was waiting for Luc to clear security at their meeting place, the same secret interrogation room he used months
ago when Travis first met Luc.
Luc had been instrumental in locating Max Duncan and Travis had been working privately with Luc ever since,
slowly crafting Luc’s cover as a smalltime arms dealer. Keeping Luc small kept him off everyone’s radar.
Up till now Travis had been using Luc to track down leads on the Agency’s third missing agent, Harry Gambrel. But
every lead proved a dead end. It was possible that Harry had died from the abuses Dante and Max had also suffered,
or had even been murdered by his captors. But until Travis had solid proof, he would assume Harry was alive
somewhere.
Right now, however, Maddy was priority one.
Travis’s phone vibrated. Luc had arrived. A moment later, the door to the conference room opened and Luc was
ushered in. Travis stood and shook his hand.
At twenty-three, Luc had more street smarts than anyone Travis had ever met. Luc wore all black, including his
backpack, reminding Travis that he took his fashion cues from Western spy movies.
Travis motioned for Luc to take a seat but didn’t wait to begin his questions. “How do you know she’s alive?”
“Minh Tran has an old warehouse near the docks that is for sale,” Luc said. “It’s been vacant for over a year, but last
week food was delivered several times a day. Enough for several people.”
“Where is this place?” Travis asked.
“I will give you the location, but the building is empty now. I checked myself.”
Travis gave in to the urge to hit the table. “You said she was alive!”
“She was alive this morning. One of Tran’s helicopters flew in and landed on the roof. I spoke with a witness who
saw a blond woman, same size as yours, being forced on board. She was blindfolded and gagged.”
Maddy. If Minh Tran had intended to kill her, why transport her by helicopter? While choppers were Tran’s
preferred method of transportation between his various lairs and places of business, their expense was catching up.
Tran had supposedly grounded most of his fleet as his revenue streams went as dry as his supply of SugarCane.
“Any idea where the helicopter went after leaving the warehouse?” Travis asked
“Not yet. I’m working it. Wheels turn slower here.”
Travis nodded, reminding himself that he was in not only a foreign country, but also a suspicious one. The Thai government wasn’t pleased with the rumored reports that two U.S. spies had not only been held without their knowledge, but subsequently rescued too.

Then there was the business of Dr. Rufin. Every country wanted Rufin; the rewards offered for his capture were rapidly approaching the ridiculous. Greed-fueled competition was dangerous.

Travis’s carefully orchestrated countermeasures had to make it appear that the U.S. was actively searching for Rufin as well. Which had been another task of Luc’s: To follow up on supposed leads on Dr. Rufin’s whereabouts.

“How soon do you expect to have word on Tran’s helicopter?” Travis asked.

“Today. Maybe tomorrow.”

Travis slid an envelope of money across the table. “Speed is critical. I don’t want this woman harmed.”

Luc cocked his head to one side. “She is special to you?”

“Yes. Very special. Here’s something else.” Travis handed Luc a small black cell phone. “This is equipped with a satellite booster. You should get a signal almost anywhere. My phone numbers are programmed in along with those of two friends. The moment you get any news on Maddy, call me. If you can’t reach me directly, call the others and explain we’re working together. They will know what to do.”

Luc examined the phone, then hefted the envelope. “I have something for you as well.” He opened his backpack and removed two plastic bags containing trash. Disposable coffee cups, plastic silverware, and duct tape that appeared to have been cut.

“What is this?” Travis asked.

“The man you seek who kidnapped Dr. Rufin,” Luc explained. “I believe I found the apartment where he kept Rufin. Maybe you get fingerprints?”

Travis looked at the items. As evidence they were next to useless. It was a long shot that fingerprints, much less DNA, had survived, but he’d leave no stone unturned.

According to Dr. Rufin’s statement the man who had abducted him in Bangkok after murdering Rufin’s friend Bohdana had been a westerner. It seemed Bohdana had met the man while working in Indonesia with the late Dr. Zadovsky. The Agency was very interested in this mystery man.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Travis said.

As soon as Luc left, Travis sent the bagged items to be analyzed, then returned to his temporary office and began doing research on the warehouse Luc had mentioned.

A beeping sound caught his attention. Rocco’s cell phone. Travis pulled it from his pocket and checked the display.

TEXT MESSAGE FROM POWER1. That was the screen name used by Minh Tran’s messenger.

Eager, Travis opened it. The new message was cryptic.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE. YOUR CHILD FOR MINE. WILL ACCEPT FORMULA IN EXCHANGE FOR WOMAN. FORMULA MUST BE VERIFIED FIRST.

Travis reread the message and groaned as the meaning became clear. Your child for mine. Maddy was pregnant and Minh Tran had assumed the child was Rocco’s. And worse, Tran sought to avenge his son’s death by harming Maddy’s child.

Maddy and Travis’s child.

Travis hit REPLY and typed in a message.

HARM THE WOMAN OR HER CHILD AND ALL DEALS ARE OFF. WILL PROVIDE TWO FORMULAS. NEW ONE IS SUPERIOR. NEED 48 HOURS MINIMUM.

Minh Tran’s offer to accept Rufin’s formula, the one for SugarCane, meant Tran had realized that kidnapping Rufin was impossible. It also underscored Tran’s desperation to get more ’Cane into the supply pipelines.

Travis hoped the promise of a second drug formula would pique Tran’s greed. He forwarded the messages to Catalina. Then he picked up his own cell phone and called Luc Skihawtra. They had to find Maddy fast. All stops had to be pulled out now.
Chapter Twenty-One

Monterrey, Mexico
October 5, 5:30 P.M.

Gena tried to eavesdrop on Rocco’s phone conversation but learned little. Since they were in a public place, the Monterrey airport, he was being especially quiet. It was difficult to guess the conversation on the other end when Rocco largely listened and only gave monosyllabic answers.

She knew he was concerned about the abduction of his friend’s fiancée, Erin. Gena had never met Erin but sympathized with her. And Gena didn’t think she’d met Max Duncan, though she might have during her marriage to Harry Gambrel.

Harry’s insistence that Gena accompany him to social gatherings had eventually faded as she’d slipped further into the bottle. There was much about her marriage to Harry she didn’t remember, thanks to her drinking. And the parts she did remember, she wished she could either forget or recall in entirety. Blackouts blocked a lot of those memories.

She did clearly remember her premarriage days of working at the Agency. The close-knit bond the operatives formed was amazing. Gena had met Dante Johnson and had liked him. Rocco and Dante had grown up together and were like brothers, so it wasn’t hard to imagine that Rocco’s friendship with Max was similar.

Gena glanced around the airport, scanning faces, staying alert, but no one seemed to give them more than a casual glance. No one threatening, that is. She’d caught more than one woman giving Rocco a second glance. And who could blame them? The man was gorgeous.

Back when they’d dated, Gena had often experienced bouts of jealousy. Maybe on some level she’d sensed Rocco’s unfaithfulness even before they’d broken up. Don’t go there.

The fact was, she and Rocco had been apart four years. Twice as long as they’d been together. What had once seemed magical between them was water under the bridge. She’d made peace with his mistakes and her own; had chalked them up to poor judgment.

So why had she melted when Rocco kissed her this morning? If the motel phone hadn’t rung, they would have gone all the way. She and Rocco had left the motel without really discussing it, which was oddly reminiscent of their past. There had never been time to talk about the important stuff. Rocco was always racing off to join another mission—or another woman, as she later learned.

Irritated with her errant thoughts, Gena stood and pointed to the restroom. Rocco nodded in acknowledgment.

There was a line inside the ladies’ room. She stretched while waiting, grateful that she felt better today. She was still sore from leaping from the truck yesterday, but her backache was mostly from spending all day in the car. Thanks to some new drug interdiction program, it had taken nearly four hours to clear customs and cross the border.

The drive to Monterrey had been only three hours, but once they arrived they’d mostly driven around while waiting for Rocco’s contact to finalize plans. Rocco had offered to get another motel room, which Gena had refused, not wanting to risk a repeat of the morning. They had also done a little shopping, which meant she now had pajamas and a few items to help disguise her looks, like sunglasses and a straw hat.

When she came out of the restroom, Rocco was off the phone. He’d left his cell phone on more frequently once they’d crossed the border since it was harder to triangulate locations in foreign countries. He also needed to remain available for his INTERPOL connection, who apparently was acting as a go-between, hooking up Rocco with someone named Clay.

“Any news?” she asked Rocco.

“Max and Dante have managed to trace part of Taz and Erin’s route. Max hopes to close in on them soon. And my nephew is back with my sister. I think he understands the seriousness of the situation, even if he doesn’t know all the specifics.”

“Are they being relocated?”

“Yes. And speaking of that, our contact has been held up due to weather delays, but should be here in an hour and a half. I suggest we get something to eat before we meet him. It’ll be late when we arrive at our destination.”
“Are you going to tell me where we’re headed?”
Rocco stood. “Toward the east coast, near Acapulco. The man I’m working with has connections there.”
He motioned her toward a crowded corridor. The sky beyond the windows looked gray, as if a storm approached. Was this the same system that had delayed Rocco’s contact? She prayed the weather wouldn’t interfere with their flight.
They were still posing as a couple, a ruse Rocco insisted they continue. The man they were meeting, Clay, believed he was providing security for an oil company executive and his wife, who’d been targeted by rebels. “The fewer people who know the truth, the better,” Rocco had said.
That he planned to take off as soon as she was settled in the safe house made it easier to go along with the ruse. No chance of waking up in an awkward position again.
After a twenty-minute wait at the restaurant, Gena and Rocco were seated at a corner table that was relatively quiet.
“Is your arm hurting?” Rocco asked. “You’re favoring it again.”
“Am I?” She rubbed her wrist. It was still sore, but she’d left off the compression bandage to avoid calling attention to her injuries. “I’ll take ibuprofen with dinner.”
“Gena, I need your word that you won’t try to leave the safe house while I’m gone.”
She lowered her menu. “And go where? My apartment? That’s the last place I’d feel safe right now.”
“You talked before about finding Lupe’s grandmother. It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that others would deduce the same.”
“I hate that Lupe’s grandmother is being left in the dark,” Gena said. “But, at the same time, I know my presence can endanger others.”
“I’m glad you understand.”
“It’s not so much understanding as it is my desire for vengeance.”
“Don’t even think about taking matters into your own hands.” Rocco had dropped his voice lower.
“Do you think I’m that stupid? I realize the people behind this are ruthless. My hope is that they’ll follow you right into a trap. I want them arrested and tried for Lupe’s murder.”
The waitress returned and took their order, conversing in Spanish with Gena.
“I forgot you were so fluent,” Rocco said. “Look, I’m sorry if I sounded harsh a minute ago. You said you hadn’t known Lupe long, yet it seemed you were close.”
“Everyone at the shelter grew close, even if they were only there a short time.”
“You volunteered there, right? And you also worked for the construction company building the new shelter?”
“Yes. Why?”
“I’m curious how you ended up in construction.” Rocco linked his hands in front of him on the table. “I mean, of all the things I might have imagined you doing, construction wasn’t one of them.”
Of all the things I might have imagined.
That didn’t mean he’d been thinking of her. It was a figure of speech. Every time she’d thought of Rocco, she’d known exactly what he’d been doing. Being a field operative was in his blood.
Gena started to give him the same standard no-big-deal reply that she gave anyone who expressed surprise that a woman did what many still considered “a man’s job.” Except Rocco’s question was based on the Gena Armstrong he’d known a long time ago.
“It was no secret that I was in pretty bad shape when I left Harry,” Gena began. By that time, her battle with alcohol had been common knowledge. “On top of that, my father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, so returning to Texas seemed like my only option. Unfortunately, he died before I got there, in a pauper’s hospital. I didn’t know he’d lost everything.”
“That had to be hard.” She shrugged. “A childhood friend of mine came to his funeral. Vianca and I had been like sisters from kindergarten through high school. We’d planned to go to college together, except she married and stayed behind. We lost touch for several years. Her marriage failed and she decided to take over her husband’s construction business after he ran off with his secretary. Vianca pushed me into rehab, and then she took me under her wing and put me through a very physical crash course in construction. Vi believed hard work and fresh air could cure anything.”
“She sounds like an amazing friend. How did she die?”
“A construction accident. A crane malfunctioned and dropped a roof truss on her.” Gena blinked away tears. Vi had died instantly. That she hadn’t suffered meant little.
“You’ve lost a lot. I’m sorry.” Rocco ordered two coffees when their waitress drifted close, then asked Gena, “Would you prefer to talk about something else?”
“No.” Vianca was a safe subject.
“Did you take over her business at her death?”
“Not really. I’m not licensed, though I can do almost anything a contractor can, thanks to Vi. Her cousin stepped in. He’s a contractor, too, and lent his name to Vi’s incomplete projects. I pretty much handled the shelter job. I knew how much it meant to Vianca.”
“What was her connection? Had she stayed at the shelter?”
“As an adult, no. Her parents were alcoholics. Vi spent time at the shelter during her teen years when her parents battled violently. The acceptance Vi felt there had a profound impact on her.”
“Will you return to Sugar Springs and rebuild the shelter?”
His question surprised her. “I don’t think I could do it again. I had planned to leave Sugar Springs once it was complete, to go back to school. I may make a donation and let someone else rebuild it.”
Rocco touched her hand but just as quickly withdrew it. “I’ll help financially too.”
“I had initially considered donating the proceeds from Harry’s father’s estate, but if Harry is alive, the estate should go to him.”
The waitress delivered their coffee just then. When they were alone, Rocco cleared his throat, then said, “I really can’t comment on that. I’m sure you remember that there was no love lost between Harry and me.”
Rocco’s phone vibrated then. Gena concentrated on doctoring her coffee as he answered.
For a moment when they’d talked, it had been easy. Until he’d mentioned Harry. Rocco and Harry’s dislike of each other had always been apparent, even back when she’d thought Harry was her friend. In retrospect, she realized she never knew the reason for the two men’s animosity.
“When did Travis receive this?” Rocco said.
Rocco’s tone caught Gena’s attention, but at his next words, she dropped her spoon. It clattered against her ceramic mug.
“No, it’s not mine! But Minh Tran can’t know that,” he said.
_It’s not mine._ Gena had heard those words before, was stunned by the sting that memory still held._I’m taking it out of context_, she reminded herself. Rocco could be denying a lot of different things.
“Keep me posted.” He disconnected but almost immediately his phone rang again. “Taylor,” he snapped. “Fine. We’ll meet you there in twenty minutes.”
When Rocco ended that call, he signaled the waitress to bring their tab.
Gena waited until they’d left the restaurant to speak. “Are you going to tell me what that phone call was about?”
“We’re meeting our contact at a corporate hangar. He’s arranged a private plane to ferry us to Acapulco. The safe house is a small villa near the ocean, comfortable but private. Remember our cover story?”
“Executive wife who knows little about what her spouse does.” Gena increased her stride to keep pace with him. “I meant the other call you got. The one that upset you.”
Rocco slowed. “A new demand has been received for Maddy. And her unborn child.”
_No, it’s not mine._ “Maddy is pregnant?” Gena asked.
He nodded. “It’s quite a surprise. No one, including Travis, knew she was pregnant. I’m guessing she’s not very far along. Minh Tran, of course, believes I’m the father, and that sick bastard has threatened to take Maddy’s child as recompense for the loss of his son. We’ve got less than forty-eight hours to find her.”
His phone rang again and he motioned for Gena to keep walking as he answered it.
A knife twisted in Gena’s heart for Madison Kohl-meyer. For two people who had never met, they had surprising commonalities. Both women had loved Rocco Taylor. Both had moved on.
And Gena knew exactly what it felt like to be pregnant and all alone.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Five Years Earlier
Washington, D.C.

Gena checked the dining room with a critical eye. Fresh flowers. Candles. Table linens, pressed. Silver, polished. She couldn’t cook, but her mother had made certain Gena knew the proper way to set a table. “How else can you correct the staff, darling?”

Gena moved a plate a fraction of an inch and nodded. Not bad for two hours’ notice and no staff. She plucked the empty wineglass from her place setting and then retreated to the kitchen before she changed her mind again. Would Rocco notice she wasn’t drinking before they sat down to eat?

She rechecked her menu. The entree she’d ordered from The Crusader was ready to pop in the microwave alongside the asparagus and new potatoes. Salads were in the fridge, along with two slices of chocolate mousse cake, though the thought of chocolate, or any food for that matter, nauseated her.

There really wasn’t anything else to do until Rocco arrived. Except relax. Ha! Fat chance that.

She hadn’t seen him or talked with him in six weeks. A month and a half with only the occasional “Jesus, I miss you, princess” missives from throwaway e-mail addresses that were never used twice.

Gena had known from the beginning that life with a covert operative would never be normal. They couldn’t always go and do like a normal couple. Rocco kept irregular hours, irregular weeks. He frequently disappeared, more and more often, without warning; working on assignments they rarely discussed—though she could make an educated guess.

Everything he did was fraught with danger. His enemies outnumbered his friends. And he saw things no one should. Fighting the good fight took a toll, even on a warrior.

Which was why Gena always tried to make their moments together special. She thought Rocco appreciated her efforts, but lately … She wasn’t sure of anything these days. And this time it was more than the vague but troubling rumors that percolated through the office. “You know how men are. Think they’re safe dallying in foreign countries. Talk sweet to their girlfriends, while texting their whores.”

Her friend Harry had told her to ignore the grapevine. “Go with your heart,” he’d advised.

Gena touched her abdomen. She needed to listen to Harry more and tune out Rumor Central. Last time, Rocco had been gone more than six weeks and had seemed overjoyed to see her. Granted, he’d only been home two days before disappearing again. Two days that had been a blur of lovemaking.

Would this be a repeat? Wham. Bam. Bye. She looked down at her sundress. She’d selected the strapless dress because it called attention to her cleavage—all Rocco’s favorite body part, even if he wouldn’t admit it. “There’s not one part of you that I don’t love, princess.”

She hoped he’d notice her breasts were bigger and ask why. But now she worried the dress would inflame his libido, which would in turn inflame her. And then they’d fall into bed and—

They had to talk first.

Gena went to her bedroom closet and found a short lacy jacket to slip on. It made her look more dressed up, but this was a celebration. A double celebration. That Rocco had obviously made a special effort to be there today, for their two-year anniversary, made her feel less apprehensive. Two years.

Where had the time gone? It seemed like yesterday she was fretting over her lack of sexual experience. Three days on that private island had changed her life forever. After that they’d agreed to be monogamous and Rocco had declared his undying love shortly thereafter.

Of course, that was before she’d discovered she was pregnant. Before she’d started letting the gossip weigh her down.

It was also before her disastrous trip to Texas the first of June. Her father had never approved of her job at the State Department, and since Gena rarely went home anymore it was easy to ignore her father’s verbal jabs about cocky CIA agents and his advice to find a rich, single senator.

So when her father announced in all seriousness that it was time for Gena to return to Sugar Springs and fulfill her
family duty, she’d nearly choked. Family duty meant marrying the boy next door, who just happened to be the son of the wealthiest rancher in South Texas. The same rancher who’d apparently loaned her father large sums, due soon. “As long as you marry before Christmas, I’ll be fine,” her father had said.

Gena had refused, tried to tell her father about Rocco. “I’m in love with someone else, Daddy.”

“Who? This mysterious man you’ve supposedly dated for two years, but is never around,” her father had said. “How convenient for him.”

But her father’s tirades grew nastier. And when he threatened to cut her off financially and emotionally, she’d fled Texas, certain her father would come to his senses.

He didn’t. Instead he’d rescinded her credit cards. And last week, when her monthly trust transfer was typically made, there had been nothing.

Gena had talked with the bank officer, who had been sympathetic while explaining that her father controlled the trust fund her mother had left and could basically do as he chose with the funds. In the end, the officer told Gena to cut her expenses and move. “You can’t afford to live in the city on your salary.”

One option, to get a roommate, was unacceptable; when Rocco was in town they hung out at her place. But maybe they’d have to start going to his place more. He had a town house in the suburbs that she’d visited once. “A place to store clothes,” Rocco had joked.

Would Rocco consider a roommate? Like her for example?

“Men don’t marry women they can sleep with for free. Or the ones they have to pay,” her mother had once warned. “They marry the ones who play hard to get.”

Marriage. She and Rocco had never discussed the subject, but Gena assumed it would be the next logical step. Certainly before having babies.

God, she really didn’t need to deal with this right now. Not with everything else. Maybe she should wait a week and retake the test. Those drugstore kits weren’t infallible. But neither was birth control.

When her gynecologist had switched her pill prescription, Gena had been warned to use condoms during the first month, which they had. But when the new prescription made her drier than usual, she’d bought a sexy lubricant. Only to learn later that that particular lubricant wasn’t safe to use with latex.

She checked her appearance one last time, then returned to the living room. Rocco was ten minutes late. Restless, she inventoried the kitchen once more, her eyes lingering on the bottle of wine. Of all the times she could really use a drink!

She wandered through the dining room. Panic set in as she eyed the table.

“The flowers!” Rocco always brought her flowers! How could she forget that? She grabbed the arrangement and carried it into her guest room.

Just in time. The doorbell rang.

Rocco.

She looked out the peephole and felt a smile lift her mouth. No matter what came between them, or how long they were apart, her heart would always belong to this man. She opened the door wide.

“Miss me, princess?” he asked.

Gena leaped into his arms and began to kiss him.

“I take that as a yes,” Rocco said between kisses.

“I always miss you.”

He carried her inside, pausing long enough to shut and lock the door. Then he pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “God, you smell delicious.”

“Define delicious. I’m the French Jasmine. Steak tips in a portobello sauce is dinner.”

“I pick jasmine. Always.” He grasped her wrist, brought it to his mouth and spread a line of kisses to her elbow.

“Who needs food when I’ve got you?”

Gena’s eyes grew moist. It’s going to be okay. “I’ll get you a drink while you put your bag in the bedroom.”

As soon as she said it, she realized he’d come in empty-handed.

“About that.” Rocco’s smile faded and he caught both of her hands in his and squeezed them. “I can’t stay. I shouldn’t be here to begin with. I’ve got less than two hours to get back to Dulles.”

She shook her head. “But I haven’t seen you in six weeks.”

“I know. It sucks for me, too. Unfortunately, it’s going to suck another six to eight weeks. Hey! What’s with the tears? Please understand, this mission is important, or I’d never leave you.”

“And yet you do.” Gena dashed her tears aside, hating that her voice sounded wobbly. Hating the lack of time. “I’m tired of always being left behind. I’m tired of dropping everything and rearranging my life to fit yours.”
“Look, sweetheart—”
“No, you look!” She stabbed her finger against his chest, then immediately withdrew her hand, horrified by her action. Her mother had done that to her father. “Oh, Rocco, I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. I’ve had a lot of stress lately and—”
She couldn’t say the words. And I’m pregnant.
“Everybody’s got a lot of stress, Gena. What concerns me is the way you internalize yours. You’re alone way too much. And don’t take this wrong, but a couple of times when I’ve called, well, I know you’ve had a little too much to drink.”
“Oh, gee, and when did you last call? All I’ve seen are e-mails.”
Rocco sighed and looked away. She caught a glimpse of how tired and stressed he was. Compared to his fate-of-the-free-world stuff, her stress factors were nothing.
“Quit,” she blurted. “Stay here. With me.”
“It’s not that simple. There are others counting on me. I can’t just quit.”
“You mean you won’t.” She held up a hand when he would have denied it. “I understand.”
“No. You don’t. And this isn’t one of those things we can iron out in an hour.” Rocco shook his head. “I probably shouldn’t have come here to begin with. This is just making things worse, isn’t it?”
No. Telling you I’m pregnant is going to make things worse. Gena started to speak just as Rocco’s phone began to vibrate. He tugged it out and checked the display. “Crap.”
“Go ahead and take it.”
“It was a text. I have to go, sweetheart. I promise we’ll talk about this when I get back.”
“Talk sweet to their girlfriends while texting their whores.”
“Do you even know when that will be?” Gena asked. “Another six or eight weeks, give or take a month? Just leave, Rocco. If I’m here when you get back—”
“If you’re here? Is that a threat? I thought we had an understanding.”
“I’m not sure I can abide by that understanding any longer.”
Rocco stiffened as if he were the injured party. “Fine. Do what you have to do. I’ll be in touch.” Then he turned and stormed out the door.
Leaving Gena feeling more alone and lost than she’d ever felt in her life.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Monterrey, Mexico
October 5, 7:30 P.M.

Danger was the ultimate high.
And right now, Harry Gambrel was on top of the world. The literal top. Maintaining traction on such a slippery space would be tricky. Balance was crucial.
If he pulled this off he would win, big-time, on a number of levels, including putting Rocco Taylor in the ground.
After Rocco had served his purpose, of course.
Failure would mean—
No.
He would not fail. There was too much at stake. Besides, like any good con man, he had more than one backup plan, just in case.
He signaled the pilot, Wally, to start his preflight check. Wally, an ex-patriot drug courier, believed that Harry worked undercover with the DEA. Wally also believed that his pending charges back in Arizona would be erased in exchange for cooperating with Harry.
“You know how good it will be to go home and walk the streets as a free man? To not have to constantly look over my shoulder?” Wally had asked.
Yep. Harry knew exactly.
The scenario Harry had painted for Wally was simple. Harry was posing as a crooked banker, meeting with a money launderer and his wife. Wally’s job was simply transportation for hire. Get the three of them to Acapulco and forget he ever saw them.
And if things happened to go south before they left the airport, Wally was prepared to look the other way. “I still get my deal, even if you take this guy out, right?” Wally had asked.
Harry agreed. Anything to keep Wally relaxed for now.
As soon as they touched down in Acapulco, Ed-guardo and a couple buddies would surround the plane. Gena would be removed while Harry instructed Rocco on what was needed to secure her freedom: Rufin’s formula for SugarCane and another as yet unproven drug nicknamed JumpJuice. Wally’s death would be made to look like a drug deal gone bad.
Harry grinned. Yeah, Ian Brown had earned his Krugerrands today. First Ian had managed to intercept a communiqué between two of Minh Tran’s top aides. Tran had changed his game plan, demanding the formula for SugarCane in exchange for a pregnant Maddy Kohlmeyer.
Then in a stunning one-two follow-up, Ian had also detected Catalina Dion’s incursion into a low-security Agency database. It didn’t take much to figure out that she was doing so on Rocco’s behalf.
Rocco was apparently seeking help from an old INTERPOL connection. It had also been easy to learn what arrangements the connection had made for Rocco. Everything was for sale in Mexico. Loyalty was a commodity here. Bought and sold like pork bellies on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.
Rocco had wanted an enforcer and a safe house, someone who worked freelance. A dependable, private mercenary who operated outside of INTERPOL to avoid the exact traceability problems Ian had exploited inside the CIA.
It had taken some serious cash, but Harry had learned who the enforcer was and intercepted him. Then Harry had assumed Clay Watkins’s identity and assignment. Clay had Rocco’s cell phone numbers, so they could speak directly. Using a nasal-pitched drawl to disguise his voice had become second nature for Harry, and Rocco showed no hesitation.
Taking Gena from Rocco here in Monterrey had been deemed too risky since Rocco’s INTERPOL connection was nearby. Better to get them in an environment Harry controlled.
The door to the hangar opened as Rocco and Gena entered, each carrying one bag. This was it. Harry peeled off his sunglasses and extended his hand confidently.
Harry had had a new face for long enough to know he looked unrecognizable. Chin implants, nose job, new cheeks. A little peroxide and colored contacts had him blond and blue-eyed.
Just like Rocco. Better than Rocco.

“You must be Mr. and Mrs. Swanson. I’m Clay Watkins,” Harry said.

Rocco nodded, moving slightly closer to Gena, who edged away. The hostility between these two was tangible even after all these years.

“This is my wife, Jill. I’m Mike.” Rocco shook hands after introducing Gena.

Don’t call her by her real name, Harry reminded himself.

“The pilot says we should take off before that storm front moves in,” Harry said. “Let me stow your luggage.”

While Harry loaded their suitcases, Rocco helped Gena into the twin-engine Cessna. It seemed she couldn’t get away fast enough.

Then Rocco walked back to Harry. “You’re supposed to have something for me.”

Harry nodded and grabbed the holstered Beretta nine millimeter from the cargo hold. Rocco hadn’t risked crossing the border with a firearm and had asked that a piece be supplied.

Rocco had always hated Berettas, but Harry couldn’t let on that he knew. Rocco frowned at the nylon clip-on holster, but didn’t complain. Harry watched as Rocco slipped the gun’s magazine free and verified that it was fully loaded.

Harry held out two additional clips. “If you need more when we land, no problem.”

Rocco clipped the holster at his waist beneath his shirt and pocketed the extra magazines. “This will do for now.” It would do fine until he tried to shoot someone, Harry thought. The bullets were blanks.

“Thanks,” Rocco said. “We’re ready to go.”

“I’ll tell the pilot.”

A few minutes later, the plane left the hangar and meandered through the maze of runways.

The Cessna’s four passenger seats faced each other. Harry sat directly across from Gena. Wouldn’t they both shit to know who he was?

Outside the small window lightning flashed on the horizon, which elicited a sharp intake of breath from Gena.

Rocco took her hand. “We’ll be fine, Jill. Try closing your eyes and relaxing.”

“Jill” gritted her teeth and looked out the window instead.

Oh, yeah, this was going to be fun to watch. Harry sat back and flipped through a newspaper.

Clearly distracted, Gena continued gazing out the window. Harry wondered what Rocco thought of this Gena. Harry preferred the beauty queen Gena. The dependent Gena. Or his favorite, the guilt-ridden Gena who believed she needed to be punished.

Rocco, however, seemed more smitten than ever. The idiot had never gotten over her.

Rocco touched her knee, drawing her attention. “Headache still bothering you?” he asked.

“It’s tension.” Gena glanced apologetically at Harry as if just now realizing her behavior was less than cordial. No recognition flashed on her face. She truly believed she was speaking to Clay Watkins. “Small planes make me nervous,” she explained.

Harry shrugged. “You get used to it, ma’am.”

“We’ll be fine, sweetheart.” Rocco leaned close and pressed a kiss to her temple, the act of a caring husband.

Except Gena flinched again. Harry found tremendous satisfaction in knowing the two of them hadn’t gotten beyond their past obstacles. Obstacles Harry had gone to great length to craft.

“Here’s some water.” Rocco cracked open a bottle and handed it to her.

Gena looked at it, then at Rocco, and for a brief moment Harry saw a change in her expression. Harry recognized that look. She still wanted Rocco so bad she didn’t know what to do.

The satisfaction Harry had felt moments before morphed into a smoldering resentment.

It had never bothered Harry that Gena didn’t love him until he saw her weeping for Rocco. Falling-down drunk and begging Harry to call Rocco.

Oh how Harry wished Rocco could have seen that Gena.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Five Years Earlier
Washington, D.C.

Harry Gambrel tipped the cab driver an extra twenty for him to wait. “Just let me knock on the door, see if my friend answers. I’m really worried about her, you know? Besides, if she’s not here, I’ll need a ride back.”
And if she’d done something stupid he wanted a witness.
He knew things had been rocky between Gena Armstrong and Rocco Taylor. Hell, Harry had worked his ass off these last twelve months promoting that rift from behind the scenes. But her quitting her job had not been part of the plan. Neither was running back to Daddy.
Gena had already told Harry how her father had cut off her funds. She honestly had no clue about how to survive on less. Likewise, she was clueless that her father’s action was more than a bid to force her to return to Texas for what amounted to an arranged marriage. Harry had done a little checking and found that Jefferson Armstrong had plundered Gena’s trust fund to cover gambling debts. Daddy’s issues were a lot bigger than he’d let on. She’d need to marry triplets to fix all of Jefferson’s problems.
Damn it, Harry had wanted Gena to run to him. He’d been grooming her bad habits for this very moment. So what had gone wrong? Had he underestimated her limits? Had those e-mails and photographs of Rocco pushed her over the edge?
Yes, Gena was young and naïve. Spoiled and gullible. But Harry hadn’t pegged her for the type who would commit suicide over a broken heart. However, the fact she wasn’t answering her phone while her car was parked in its assigned spot hinted at trouble.
Harry leaned on the doorbell as he knocked, pausing just a second before repeating. No answer. Should he go to the leasing office and flash his credentials to get a key? Or continue playing the worried-sick friend and let them check on her?
He heard a faint noise on the other side of the door and knocked again. “Hey, Gena. It’s me. Harry.”
“Go … away.” Her voice sounded slurred.
Ah-ha. Gena had been lubricating her built-in self-destruct mechanism. How fortunate. Harry was Drunk Gena’s best friend forever.
He backed away just long enough to signal the cabbie to go on.
“You don’t sound good, honey. Are you sick? Do you need me to call an ambulance or the police?”
“No! Don’t call anyone!” she yelled. “I’m … I’m fine.”
“Come on, Gena. I’m not leaving. Friends look out for friends, remember? God knows you’ve been there for me.”
When Harry had returned from the Mexican job and learned that Rocco Taylor was already screwing Gena, he’d been furious. Rocco had been so blasted sanctimonious, declaring Gena “off limits” during her brief appearance at that assignment. Rocco should have just called dibs like anyone else.
But instead of calling Rocco out over it, Harry had channeled that anger into something useful. Harry struck up a platonic friendship with Gena by pretending to have a girlfriend who lived overseas. Then he’d sought Gena’s advice whenever he and his girlfriend “fought.”
Once Gena felt safe with him, she began confiding some of her own dating woes. Like how Rocco was gone on assignments more and more frequently. She didn’t realize that as the senior agent, Harry had been able to manipulate schedules, especially where manpower was sorely needed, like in the Middle East.
The sound of the security chain being released had Harry shuffling closer. A moment later Gena opened the door.
He was careful to hide his reaction to her appearance. Going to the Monsters’ Ball, are we?
She looked frightening, like she hadn’t slept in days. She wore no make-up and her hair was wrecked, à la Rat’s Nest Barbie. The oversized men’s T-shirt—a castoff of Rocco’s, no doubt—looked sloppy with the plaid pajama bottoms she wore. Quite frankly, Harry wouldn’t have guessed the little beauty queen was capable of this.
“I went by your office to take you to lunch and was shocked to learn you’d resigned.” Harry reached out to steady her as he reassessed her condition. She wasn’t drunk after all, but something else was damn sure wrong. “You sure you’re not sick?”
She nodded, then immediately started crying projectile tears. Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the sofa. Judging by the crumpled tissues overflowing the wastebasket, he guessed she’d been on the sofa all night. Her normally spotless apartment was trashed, a testament to her loss of maid service. “Let me make you a cup of tea,” he offered. “I tried. Can’t keep it down.” He eased away. Crap, if she had the flu— “Are you running any fever?” “I’m not contagious. I’m just … stupid.” More tears. “I feel like such a fool, Harry.” “Hey now, none of that kind of talk!” He sat in the chair that was positioned at a right angle to the sofa, ready to hear confession and offer advice. “You’re one of the sweetest, brightest people I know. Look, we’ve been pals long enough that I think I know what the problem is. Something to do with your boyfriend, right?” “Ex-boyfriend. We … we had a fight last week, but I thought—” She withdrew with a shake of her head. “You thought what? That you’ve fought before and always patched things up? I’m sure you will again.” “We’ve never really fought before.” “That’s because you keep your feelings to yourself,” Harry said. “But he already has lots of stress.” “Who doesn’t? Look at how stressed you are. You quit your job, Gena!” She grabbed another tissue. “There are things you don’t know about.” Like the e-mail and photographs you received two days ago? “What kinds of things? I can’t help you, honey, unless you let me.” Harry snapped his fingers. “Wait. Don’t tell me you’ve heard more rumors. I told you not to pay attention to those jealous bitches.” The jealous bitches whom Harry could count on to torment Gena with snippets of vicious gossip.

She shook her head. “What they said is true, Harry. A woman named Brandy e-mailed me pictures of her and Rocco. Along with copies of phone texts. She accused me of being the other woman. Said she’s been with Rocco three years. That’s a year before I met him!”

Harry sat back as if dismayed. “God, Gena, I feel awful. How many times did you tell me about the things you heard? And to think I defended that son of a bitch! I’ve got a good mind to kick his—” “No, Harry.” She met his gaze and shook her head. “Let it go. I got myself into this mess, and I’ll … deal with it.” “I wouldn’t exactly call it a mess. If you’re worried about your job, heck, I can get you on in my department. Or recommend you to a friend who’d appreciate someone with your special talents.” And who’d love to ogle your tits. “I’m pregnant, Harry.” Gena started to cry again, in earnest. “And … and I don’t know what I’m going to do.” The news stunned Harry. He did a mental backup. Okay, so she wasn’t drinking because she was pregnant. And she couldn’t hold food down because of morning sickness, which from what he’d heard, could last all day.

Add to that the fact Harry knew Rocco had probably given her the standard spies-like-us-can’t-have-families excuse when they’d first started dating. Of course, Harry also knew Rocco must be rethinking certain issues because Harry had overheard him talking marriage with Dante Johnson.

Time to think fast, act faster. “Does Rocco know you’re pregnant?” he asked. “No! And I have no intention of telling him.” “I understand your position. But, honey, he does have a right to know. We’re talking about a baby here. A life the two of you created. Your romantic relationship may be irretrievably broken now that you know about this Brandy creature, but then again, impending fatherhood may be the wakeup call Rocco needs. How about we try to reach him?”

“No! I … I can’t talk to him. Not when I’m upset like this.” You couldn’t call him before this, either. Oh, yeah, Harry knew all about her idiosyncrasies. “Then I’ll call him,” Harry said. “I’ll step outside, or go in the kitchen so you don’t feel a part of it, but, honey, you can’t possibly keep this to yourself.” “I’m not sure if that’s the right thing to do.” That wasn’t a no. Harry stood. “Let me handle it. You just lie down and try to relax. I’ll go in the kitchen and, um, make you a cup of tea. You’ve got tea bags, right?” In the kitchen, Harry filled the teakettle and set it on the stove, then poked through her cabinets and found tea and sugar. The longer he postponed making the call, the more anxious she’d be. Finally, he opened his phone and began pressing a long string of numbers, followed by END. Then he held the phone to his ear. “Yo! Rocco. It’s me.” He raised his voice. “It’s Harry. Yeah, lousy connection.” He took a deep breath. “Look, I just talked to Gena. And, man, you need to call her. ASAP.” Harry paused. “I’m serious, dude. Yeah, I know what the problem is, but you need to hear it from her.”
Another pause. “Fine. Let me spell it out. Gena’s pregnant. And she needs your help. What? Of course it’s yours, you big dumb fuck! Gena would never lie about— Tell whoever’s yelling to be quiet. Oh, Jesus, you’re with Brandy right now?”

The teakettle started whistling. Harry plucked it off the stove. “Hell no, I’m not going to tell her you said that! I know for a fact Gena’s never been with anyone but you. You know what? Forget I called. In fact, forget we’re friends!”

Harry closed his phone with a snap and tossed it on the counter. Gena’s sobs drifted in from the other room. She’d heard every word. Perfect. He poured hot water over the tea bag. Then he pulled his wallet out and extracted a small paper envelope. He dumped the powder from it into the teacup and brewed a weak but sweet tea. The powder, similar to a date-rape drug, worked better with alcohol. He’d need to increase the dose to achieve the same effect.

The drug shared most of Rohypnol’s amnesia-inducing qualities with one important difference. The last thing said to a victim stayed with the person, making it excellent for persuasion.

He carried the tea in to Gena and sat beside her on the couch. “Here.”

She ignored the cup. “He … was with her?”

Harry nodded. “How much did you overhear?”

“Enough to know Rocco doesn’t believe it’s his baby.” She swiped her eyes. “Is that what he said?”

“He said, ‘It’s not mine,’ but that may have been for Brandy’s benefit. Once he’s away from her, he’ll probably call and—”

“I don’t want to speak with him. Ever.” Gena straightened her shoulders. “I’ve changed my mind about going home. In fact, the sooner I get to Texas, the better. My father won’t be pleased, but he’ll certainly take the news better than—” Her voice cracked.

“Here. Try a sip of this.” Harry held the cup to her mouth.

Gena’s father would have a cow to learn his daughter was pregnant outside of marriage. Armstrong women didn’t do that. Especially not when Daddy hoped to hook her up with the rich heir one ranch over. Armstrong women married well, and then hired nannies to raise their young. Gena wouldn’t know how to care for a cat, let alone a baby. No, Jefferson Armstrong would likely bully her into an abortion. End of story.

And if Rocco got word she’d fled to Texas and went after her, Harry would have an even harder time interfering. No, Harry needed to keep Gena here. He watched her sip the tea as he toyed with a new idea.

“Why don’t you come and stay at my place a while? Give yourself a chance to think it over. I’m gone a lot, so you’ll have the place to yourself most of the time. And it won’t cost a thing. In fact, I’d pay you what I pay the house sitter who usually stays there.”

“That’s sweet, Harry. But I don’t know…” She set the tea down, pushed it away.

Harry picked it up and placed it back in her hands. “Come on. Don’t insult my tea making now.”

He coaxed her into drinking more. When she emptied the cup, he took it from her. “For what it’s worth—and you might not believe me right now—I bet you’ll meet someone who will love you and be proud to give you and the baby a name.”

She shook her head and leaned back, eyes closed.

“Someone like me, Gena,” Harry said.

He smiled. If he could keep Rocco out of town for a few months, let Gena’s belly get nice and fat … Rocco could come back and learn she was married to Harry. And just to watch Rocco squirm, Harry would touch her stomach in front of him and talk about how excited they were.

Granted, it wouldn’t even the score between them, but it would be a start.
Chapter Twenty-Five

East of Monterrey, Mexico
October 5, 8:17 P.M.

Something wasn’t right. Rocco closed his eyes but the drone of the plane’s engine interfered with his ability to concentrate. Listening to his gut, his instincts, had saved his life innumerable times. It was that edge, that difference that made him successful as an agent for justice.

At least it usually did. Right now the sensation was similar to free-floating anxiety. Unable to define what was off-key, he back-burnered the feeling and shifted in his seat. Gena hadn’t relaxed either, was still staring out the window at the dark sky. He debated taking her hand in his, something a normal, concerned husband would do. Except he wasn’t her husband, and the circumstances weren’t normal.

Something was eating at her, too. Earlier, when he’d asked, “What’s wrong?” she’d snapped, “Nothing.” His favorite nonanswer.

Certainly nothing about the circumstances was pleasant. But the sooner they both put their grudges aside—past and present grudges—the sooner they’d find common ground.

Rocco had thought they were making progress at dinner. Gena’s frankness about why she’d moved to Texas had encouraged him. In the past, the topic of her drinking had been a touchy one. He was also curious about her decision to return to school, but he hadn’t had a chance to ask where. Or why.

Then Rocco had received the news about Maddy. That Maddy was alive gave him hope, even as the other news—Maddy was pregnant—increased his apprehension. That Minh Tran had threatened Maddy’s child shook Rocco to the core.

Had Minh Tran’s new threat against an innocent baby made Gena realize just how ruthless Rocco’s enemies could be? Was she now even more concerned about her own safety? About Rocco leaving her with a virtual stranger?

Rocco couldn’t imagine what Travis Franks was feeling right now. Forty-eight hours wasn’t much time, yet compared to Tran’s previous ten-hour deadline, it was huge.

Rocco and Dante felt certain that Travis was in Southeast Asia right now. Perhaps Travis even knew where Maddy was being held. God, Rocco hoped so. He wanted Maddy free.

Same with Erin Houston. Max was in the same boat as Travis right now. The woman Max loved was in the clutches of a potential madman.

Rocco recalled those moments back in Texas when Gena had been snatched by the man in the black truck. The urge to kill had been strong. The truth was, Rocco had been damn lucky to get Gena back. Which was why it bothered him to consider leaving her again.

Rocco eyed Clay Watkins through slitted eyes. Despite the fact Clay had come highly recommended, Rocco didn’t trust him. When it came to Gena, he didn’t trust anyone except himself.

Yeah, right. Was Rocco really more trustworthy after waking up with Gena half naked and nearly losing control with her?

Outside the window the sky flashed with an intense burst of lightning. Gena gripped the armrest more tightly as the plane bounced with the thunder.

Rocco wasn’t a huge fan of small planes. He’d ridden in some scary Russian cargo planes that ferried supplies in and out of the Middle East. Compared to those, this wasn’t bad.

They hit a particularly rough patch of turbulence and Gena let out a squeal.

This time Rocco did take her hand. “Easy, Jill.”

It took her a moment to recall her alias. “It looks like we’re flying straight into the storm.”

“It probably overtook us,” Rocco said.

Clay cleared his throat. “Tell your wife not to worry. The pilot flies this route all the time.”

Rocco shifted closer to Gena. He knew by the death grip she kept on his hand that Clay’s words offered little consolation. “I’m sure we’ll be through it soon,” Rocco said.
The plane bumped again, harder than before, and this time the turbulence didn’t let up. Rocco could hear the pilot talking agitatedly in Spanish on the radio. “Why don’t you check with him? See what’s up.” Rocco said to Clay.

“Sure.” Clay stood but was immediately tossed back into his seat as the plane began shaking in earnest. Thunder crashed all around the plane. Rocco heard the engines surge and suspected the pilot was trying to climb to get above the storm, but the turbulence only grew worse.

Then a bolt of lightning hit, engulfing the plane in a brilliant flash. The cabin lights flickered as the plane dropped for what felt like a minute. The pilot shouted at them in English now. “We’ve lost both engines! And the radio! We’re going down!”

Rocco grabbed Gena’s shoulders and shoved her forward. “Crash position,” he said. “Cover your face and eyes.” “No!” She resisted, trying to climb into his lap.

Rocco forced her to remain in her seat. “You’re safer buckled in. Just do the same thing I do.”

The plane dipped and bucked wildly now. Clay tried to get up again and was slammed to the floor as the plane rotated, angling downward. The lights failed, leaving the cabin in total darkness now. The plane struck something—trees, Rocco guessed. The plane jerked violently as first one wing, then the other, was ripped away with a horrific screech of metal. Rocco held on to Gena’s hand, unable to see anything. Wind and rain hit his face and he realized part of the cabin wall had been sheared away.

The plane heaved upward and Gena’s hand was ripped from his. “Noooo!” Her scream grew faint. Rocco felt himself free-fall before slamming to the ground, into a hole of pain. Above him a fireball exploded as the plane burst into flames.
Chapter Twenty-Six

The plane was crashing. Gena’s seat broke loose as the side of the plane buckled and peeled away like a banana skin.
She tried to hold on to Rocco but couldn’t as the bottom of the plane ripped away beneath her.
Tree branches tore at her. Heavy wet leaves slapped her. The rain continued to pummel her as she slammed downward through the treetops.
Finally she hit a thicker limb that did not break. But it stopped her with a bone-jarring suddenness that whiplashed her neck and back.
She was still strapped in her seat, which now rocked precariously on the limb. She lunged forward, hugging the trunk. Then she heard a loud boom and saw a fiery explosion above the trees. She turned her face as bits of debris fell around her.
“Rocco!” she screamed his name.
Everything around her was dark now. The storm continued to rage, the wind shrieking. Gena hid her face from the slashing rain and sobbed.
Rocco. Had he fallen from the plane, too? Was he close by?
She screamed his name again but heard nothing above the storm.
She forced herself to look around and spotted the fire a couple hundred yards ahead. The plane. Oh, God, what if the others were still inside? She had to get to them.
Please let him be alive, she prayed. Rocco and the others.
Lightning flashed, helping her to see through the branches below, but giving her no idea how far above the ground she was. Shifting her weight, she felt the soreness in her back and legs but was grateful no bones were broken.
She untangled the seat belt from her waist, then shoved the seat cushion over the edge, hoping to hear it land. It didn’t travel far. The next flash of lightning showed it caught in the leaves below her.
She glanced one last time at the fire, saw that it had already grown dimmer. She had to hurry while she could still make out its location.
Easing her legs down, Gena swung to the next branch. It swayed and dipped, not as sturdy. She stayed close to the trunk, hoping the branch wouldn’t snap. The seat cushion that had been caught fell free and hit the ground with a thud, giving Gena hope that she wasn’t so high up.
She eased down to the next branch, but as soon as her feet hit, it snapped, hurling her to the ground. She landed on the seat, which did little to protect her.
Pushing to her feet, Gena tried to get her bearings. At ground level the fire was barely visible. Could she get to the plane before the flames went out?
She had to. She had to find Rocco.
The storm continued to rage, though not as fiercely. Damn it, she needed the lightning right now to help her see. She started walking, hugging herself against the rain. Vines caught on her shoes, slowing her.
A flash of lightning once again illuminated her surroundings. The trees weren’t as dense as she’d thought, making it a little easier to navigate. The plane had obviously gone down in the jungle, but how far were they from a town? From help?
Don’t think about that now. Just get to the plane.
In those last seconds before the crash, when she’d known they were going down, she had desperately wanted to ask Rocco for his forgiveness. Would she ever have that chance again?
She’d been angry with him at the Monterrey airport after hearing that Maddy was pregnant. Hearing Rocco say it wasn’t his brought back painful memories from her past. Their past.
She’d never forgiven Rocco for being unfaithful. For denying their child. But were Gena’s own sins any less forgivable?
Shortly after marrying Harry, Gena had fallen down a staircase and miscarried. Harry had claimed she’d done it on purpose, to get back at Rocco.
She had told Harry he was wrong, but the bottom line was she’d lost the baby. Even if Rocco hadn’t wanted the child, he’d given Gena a most precious gift. It had been her responsibility to cherish and care for his child. And
she’d failed. At everything.

There had even been a point in her marriage when she’d seriously considered forsaking her vows to Harry in order to be with Rocco. In the end, she hadn’t.

But for how many years had she clung self-righteously to the thought that she hadn’t cheated on Harry, when in truth she would have if Harry hadn’t caught her. Threatened her. Beaten her. The memory of that particular night, unlike so many others, was crystal clear.

The lightning flashes were less frequent now, but as Gena drew closer, she saw the glow of the smoldering plane. She tried to run but lost her footing in the slippery mud.

“Rocco!” she called out as she reached the clearing.

What was left of the plane was unrecognizable. The wings were gone, along with the back half of the plane. The passenger cabin was gone. Rocco! Clay! Had they fallen free as she had?

The cockpit was crumpled in on itself. Smoke bellowed from it. Gena tried to get closer, but the acrid smoke burned her nose, pushing her back.

With the next flash of lightning, she saw a body and rushed to it. It was the pilot.

“Can you hear me?” She dropped to her knees beside him.

He was on his stomach, but his neck and legs were twisted at odd angles. He didn’t respond, didn’t move, and Gena sensed he was dead even before she placed a shaking hand to his neck to check for a pulse.

She backed away and buried her face in her hands, giving in to her tears.

God, what should she do now? The rain fell steadily, which would put the fire out soon.

She needed to find Rocco and Clay. What if they had survived and were searching for her? Would they return here?

But what if Rocco was injured and needed help?

She pushed to her feet and surveyed the wreckage, then turned in a circle to get her bearings. Where had she come in? If Rocco and Clay had fallen from the plane after her, they had to be somewhere between here and where she’d landed.

“I’ll find you, Rocco!” she shouted. Then she trudged back toward the dark jungle.

Rocco had landed in a mud bog, his legs trapped beneath a tree. He didn’t think they were broken, thanks to the mud, but he was still pinned.

Gena! God, where was she? Was she alive?

In those last few seconds he had tried to grab her, to hold on, but she’d disappeared. And then he’d been falling, too.

And what about Clay and the pilot? Had they made it out alive?

He tried to shove his way free but lost traction. The rain fell in torrents now, the wind gusting as lightning flashed.

“Hello!”

Rocco heard someone yelling. A man, not Gena.

“Over here!” Rocco shouted. “Clay? Is that you?”

“Yeah! Keep hollering! I can’t see a damn thing!”

“I’m trapped under a tree! Have you seen Gena?”

“Who? You mean your wife?”

His wife. The words gouged Rocco’s heart. Clay thought they were married.

How many times had Rocco dreamed a happier ending to their story? Gena as his wife, not Harry’s. Gena waiting at the door to greet him after a hard day’s work. Gena caring for their children. In his dreams, they’d had several. In his dreams, their love had multiplied with each one.

“Where are you, buddy?” Clay shouted.

“You’re getting closer!”

Lightning flashed. Rocco and Clay spotted each other at the same time.

Clay pushed closer, limping. “Mike! How bad you hurt?”

This time Rocco had to remember his own alias. “Don’t think anything’s broken, but I can’t get loose,” Rocco said.

“Have you seen any sign of my wife?”

“No. But the plane—what’s left of it—is burning about a hundred yards from here.” Clay grabbed a branch of the tree and shoved it. “I think the three of us dropped out together. We were already pretty low.”

“The pilot?”

Clay shrugged. “Let’s concentrate on getting you out. This tree’s damn heavy.”

Rocco twisted. “I think I’ve worked one leg free from the mud.”

“If you can free the other one, maybe I can drag you out.”

Once again lightning cracked, illuminating the area. Clay ducked and moved around to Rocco’s head.

“I’m going to grab you under the arms and pull,” Clay said. “On three.”

Rocco dug in his heels as best he could and pushed. “Almost. Once more.”
Clay grunted, pulling Rocco again. This time Rocco slid far enough that he was able to turn and crawl free. Rocco stood and held out a hand to Clay. “I owe you one.”
Clay shook his hand. “No problem.”
“Now let’s find my wife. Where’s the plane?”
“This way.” Clay skirted the fallen tree and pointed. “See the flames through the branches?”
Rocco nodded. Except for the lightning, the jungle was dark. But if Gena was out there, injured and scared, he had to find her.
“Jill”—Gena—“dropped a few seconds before I did,” Rocco said. “If the plane is there, she probably fell more to the south.”
Clay shook his head. “The plane was banking. We could have come in from any direction. If your wife is able to walk and spots the fire, would she go toward it?”
“Most likely. But what if she can’t walk?”
Thunder rumbled. “I say we check the plane first,” Clay said. “This rain will extinguish the flames fast. We’ve got to find the pilot, too. If he went down with the plane, he may be in more dire need than your wife.”
Rocco rubbed his chest. He hadn’t forgotten about the pilot, but Gena was definitely more on his mind.
“Let’s go. The thought of my wife out there alone— I’ve got to find her.”
Clay touched Rocco’s shoulder briefly. “Come on. We’ll find her. She knows you really love her, right? Try to think about the last time you were together, I mean before this mess. Focus on the good times.”
Rocco didn’t say anything as he trudged toward the glow of fire.
Try to think of the last time you were together—before this mess.
Clay’s remark was well intended but the last time Rocco and Gena were together was four years ago. Back then, she’d been married to Harry. And it had been far from happy.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Four Years Earlier
Arlington, VA

“Crappy weather.” *Matches my mood,* Rocco thought as he backed his gray SUV out of his garage.

Heavy rain clouds were visible as far as he could see, which in the current downpour wasn’t far. Traffic would be a nightmare and the inclement weather would snarl departures.

He shifted the car into drive, frowning at the high-pitched squeal. The noise had gotten worse since the last time he was home, four weeks ago. But back-to-back assignments left no time for Rocco to play shade tree mechanic. Maybe he’d leave it at Jimbo’s garage and catch a cab to the airport. Jimbo knew the drill and would keep the SUV until Rocco returned.

The noise disappeared as he accelerated. Good. He’d gotten damn little sleep, which hadn’t helped his headache. Why he even bothered coming home anymore was beyond him. Last time, he’d gotten in and out of town in less than twenty-four hours, without seeing Gena or Harry. Time before that, too.

These days it seemed his return trips were like a game of emotional Russian roulette. Would Rocco run into the blissful couple or not? So far *not.* And that’s what kept him on edge, wasn’t it?

This housing development wasn’t that damn big, even with the golf course. Harry had bought a house on the ninth fairway, less than a mile as the crow flew. Of course, given the maze of streets, it was longer than a mile to drive, not that Rocco had tried. But since everyone had to pass in and out of the front guard gates, the odds were good they’d pass one another on the main esplanade.

Part of him wanted to see Gena, to ask her if she’d ever really cared. But another part didn’t want to know.

He’d been stunned—no, devastated—this summer to hear through the grapevine that Gena had married Harry Gambrel two weeks after Rocco had left. Two weeks!

Sure, he and Gena had had a fight. At the time it seemed like that was all they did. But Rocco hadn’t considered it over, hadn’t even considered them on “break.” He’d gone over the argument a hundred times. She’d been pissed he was being sent off on another top-secret assignment. Assignments she claimed to hate and had even asked him to give up.

And what was so fucking different about Harry going off on assignment?

Rocco stopped at the four-way at the end of his cul-de-sac and waved the other car through. He needed to get a grip. Let bygones be. And if he couldn’t, then maybe he needed to put the town house up for sale. Or lease it out and rent himself something closer to the airport.

He kicked his wipers up to high and hit the gas. Almost immediately he had to brake. The car in front of him had slowed to a crawl, leaving him no choice but to follow suit.

“Come on,” he muttered, eager to get to the main road, where he could at least pass Grandma Molasses here. Yeah, it was raining, but doing eight miles an hour in a fifteen-mile zone?

He swerved to the left, to peer around the car. Which must have gotten Grandma’s attention because she suddenly sped up. But just as suddenly she slammed on her brakes, sending her car fishtailing into a spin.

Rocco stopped completely and watched as the small sedan spun in circles before jumping the median and sliding off the opposite side of the road.

That no other traffic had been coming was a miracle. It also meant no one else was around to check on Grandma. Her car looked okay, but she was probably shook up.

Damn it.

Rocco made a U-turn and pulled up behind her, then dashed out in the rain.

That she didn’t automatically lower her window when Rocco came up concerned him. He rapped on the tinted glass, then opened the door.

“Gena!” He saw the blood trickling down from her nose. “Easy, princess. I mean—”

She cut him off. “Go away! I’m fine.”

“Like hell. You’re hurt.”

“I … I must have hit the steering wheel.”
“Here. Tip your head back.” He grabbed one of the tissues on her lap and gently pressed it against her nostril.

“Ouch!” She flinched and pushed his hand away.

“You hold it then. You weren’t wearing this, were you?” He tugged on the seat belt resting against the side brace.

“I— No.” She started crying, which made Rocco feel like a heel. It also wouldn’t help her nose, which already looked swollen.

“Maybe I should call an ambulance.” He tried to shield her from the rain falling into the car.

“Please! Don’t call anyone.”

“You might be smacked up worse than I thought.” He tried to coax her chin toward him, but she twisted away.

“Look at me, Gena! I’m not going to bite you.”

She turned toward him briefly, then hugged her coat close. “I’m fine. A little shook up maybe. I’ll just go home and get cleaned up. Really—” But the harder she tried to make excuses, the more her words slurred. Rocco realized what he was dealing with. He pulled away and looked straight up at the sky, half tempted to pull Gena out and let the freezing rain hit her full in the face too. To sober her up.

He’d heard her little problem wasn’t so little anymore. The grapevine had had a heyday reporting her drunken behavior at a recent office gala.

“How much have you had to drink this morning, Gena? A couple glasses of chardonnay? Or maybe a pitcher of Bloody Marys?”

She sat up straight and set her jaw. “Excuse me, but don’t you have someone else you need to go see?”

He reached for her hand when she tried to restart the car. “I can’t let you drive, Gena. Is there someone I can call? Harry?”

“No. No one. I’ll walk then.”

Rocco leaned in close again. She looked like hell. Beautiful hell. Her damp hair, devoid of its usual style, hung around her face. Her make-up was heavier than usual, which didn’t disguise her bloodshot eyes. That it was ten in the morning on a Thursday hinted at the severity of her problem.

“Does Harry know about the drinking, Gena?”

She nodded. “And he’ll be furious if he finds out I left the house like this.”

Rocco sighed. “Call your auto club and tell them to tow the car. As soon as you do that, I’ll give you a ride home.”

Gena looked around for her purse, which had slid to the floorboard. “They can give me a ride.”

“I might take them a while to get here. On a morning like this they’ll have calls backed up.”

“I’ll wait.” She tugged her cell phone out.

“I can’t leave and risk that you’ll try to drive yourself.” He reached for her phone when she started to make another excuse. “I’ve got a plane to catch, Gena. I don’t have all day.”

She snatched the phone back. “You haven’t changed. Always rushing off to catch a plane.”

“Oh, and it’s different with Harry,” Rocco snapped. “Bet he’s home all the time. Oops! What was I thinking? He travels more than I do.”

“You don’t understand.” Gena’s voice rose.

He held up a hand. “That was uncalled for. I apologize. Look, just get in my car. You can make arrangements for this one from your house.”

Gena nodded stiffly and climbed out of the car, hugging her coat around her. Rocco had to steady her elbow when they reached his car.

“Buckle up,” he said after opening the passenger door.

Rocco bit his tongue as she grabbed the seat belt, then lost her grip on it. She was in even worse shape than he’d thought.

“Here.” He grabbed the buckle and pulled it out, before leaning across her to fasten it.

“Don’t be mad at me,” she sniffed. “Please.”

“Please. Rocco paused, his face inches from hers. “I wish it were that easy to forget, Gena. If it’s any comfort, I’m madder at myself.”

She touched his cheek, preventing him from pulling away. “Mad at yourself for what?”

He shut his eyes. Every night he dreamed of this moment, of this conversation. Why, Gena? Why? “I’m angry for letting you get away. For not being a better— Ah, hell, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It’s always mattered. To me.”

Rocco studied her expression, looking for guile, finding none. And then he did a really stupid thing.

He kissed her. Full on the mouth.

God, he still loved her. He still wanted her.

Hearing a car, he broke away and froze, half expecting it to be Harry. But the car, a pharmacy delivery van, kept going.
Rocco needed to do the same. He shut her door and moved around the car.
“I’m sorry,” she said as soon as he climbed behind the wheel.
“Me too. But not for the kiss.” You married the wrong man. “I’m sorry you’re married.”
She laughed. “Oh, that’s right! How could I forget? You’re on your way to the airport.” Her voice took on a bitter
edge. “Would you have preferred a fast fuck before you ran off—like you used to?”
“That is not how it was!”
“No? Obviously you don’t remember the last three times we were together.”
Rocco opened and closed his mouth. The last three times he and Gena had been together, he’d sneaked away from
his assignment because he’d been desperate to see her. Even for just a few hours. Yeah, they had always ended up in
bed because he couldn’t not want her. Just thinking of her set him on fire. Then and now.
“I can see how you’d think that,” he began. “And if I could go backward in time, I’d—”
“You’d what?”
Another car approached, this one slowing to look at them. Rocco started his SUV and pulled away.
“Never mind, don’t answer that,” she said. “Turn left at Willow, then take your first right into Brandy Aire.”
“I would have explained myself better,” he said. “Made sure you knew how much I cared and how hard it was to be
away from you.” None of which matters now.
“Do you still care?”
Rocco hesitated again. Not because he didn’t know the answer, but because he wanted to know how she felt first.
Why set himself up for more torment?
She sighed. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”
“So why did you? Do you still care, Gena? About me? About us? Are you happy with Harry?”
They were at her house now. Rocco pulled in the drive and turned toward her. That she was crying again made him
feel like a heel.
“Let’s just drop it, okay?” he said.
“Oh, I forgot again! You’re late.” She worked to unlatch her seat belt. “No time to talk!”
“If I stayed, would you even remember what we talked about once you sobered up?”
Gena opened her door and didn’t look back. “Thank you for the lift. Good-bye.”
Rocco climbed out. “Gena, wait! I’m sorry. I’m behaving like a jackass. I wish we could talk. Just the two of us, but
not here. Not like this. Meet me later.”
“Today? I thought you had a flight?”
“I’ll postpone my trip if you’ll go in and sleep it off. We can meet somewhere public, later this afternoon. What do
you say? I think we owe each other that small courtesy.”
At first Rocco didn’t think she’d respond. She took three steps away, then turned. And for the first time her eyes
looked focused.
“There’s a small café at Blue Mountain Square. Melita’s. They have private booths. I’ll meet you there at four.”
By four-fifteen, Rocco was pissed. He’d been at Melita’s thirty minutes, arriving early to get a corner booth. And to
mentally rehearse his words one more time. Now he wondered if he’d get the chance to say them.
Was she coming? It hadn’t occurred to him that he no longer had Gena’s cell phone number. Since he and Harry
worked together, he had Harry’s home phone number, but he didn’t want to call it.
If she didn’t show up in the next ten minutes, that would be his sign.
He sipped his coffee, willing her to walk through the doors. But with each passing minute his hopes sank. Finally, he
stood and signaled for the waitress.
What exactly had he hoped to accomplish with this little meeting? An understanding? Of what? Of her drinking
problem? Of why she’d married Harry instead of giving him a second chance?
Outside, Rocco headed west, toward his car. A familiar voice called out his name. “Taylor!”
It was Harry Gambrel.
Rocco turned as Harry and Gena approached. She had a fur coat wrapped tightly around her as if she was freezing.
“Hey, buddy! Weather screwed up your flight schedule too, eh?” Harry thrust out his hand.
Rocco shook it and then greeted Gena.
“Nice to see you, again,” she murmured.
She was dressed up and looked more like her old self except for the lack of a smile. And though she appeared sober,
no recognition lit her eyes. Had she been too drunk this morning to even remember their conversation?
“Gena told me you helped her out this morning. I appreciate it, buddy. She said she was pretty shaken up.”
“It had been raining and her car hydroplaned.”
“Yeah, well, come in and let me buy you a drink,” Harry said. “This is our new favorite place. Gena loves to come
here.”
Rocco shook his head. “Thanks, but I’ve got another meeting.”
“That’s code for a hot date,” Harry said to Gena. He stepped back. “And you don’t want to keep a hottie waiting.
See you tomorrow. Come on, honey.”
Gena nodded a farewell and fell in beside Harry.
As Rocco watched them leave, he realized he had the answer he’d been seeking.
Gena would never be his. Period.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Morgantown, West Virginia
October 5, 9:45 P.M.

Taz watched Erin sleep. They were still in the car but hidden behind a couple trailers in the back lot of an all-night truck station.

After leaving Springfield last night, they had driven a few hours, but stopped before sunrise. Erin had wanted to continue, denying that she needed rest.

Taz had refused to go farther, not wanting to be on the road during daylight hours when the police were more alert. His will prevailed, of course, and once they were settled, he’d induced her to sleep, which allowed him to rest too.

Now, however, he needed her awake. He wanted to be on the road again. He nudged her awake. He wanted to be on the road again. He nudged her shoulder and waited.

Taz knew the moment Erin awakened. Her dreams stopped. Their connection allowed him to voyeuristically watch her dreams.

One moment she was thinking of Hades, imagining herself in his arms, the next she was confused. Taz let the disorientation begin to seep into her consciousness. He felt the lingering kiss Erin’s dream self gave Hades as she reluctantly released her imagined grasp on Hades’ body.

The bond between Hades and this woman amazed Taz. Hades should be dead for daring to risk true love, but instead, he seemed … more alive.

The deep emotional healing Hades experienced with Erin defied logic. And yet Taz felt its truth. How amazing that while Taz’s own memories of love could cripple him, observing another’s didn’t.

Taz’s head started to ache. He urged Erin to open her eyes.

The heat of Hades’ disdain blasted through.

In order to establish an independent bond of his own with Erin, Taz had been forced to temporarily deepen his connection with Hades, the host. Hades wasn’t pleased. If you harm her, I’ll kill you, Hades threatened. The mission will never be complete then.

To keep her safe, stay out of my head, Taz shot back before cutting the connection completely.

From here on, Taz’s skills were going to be tested as he juggled the task of maintaining a link to Erin while simultaneously blocking Hades.

Erin was fully awake now, no more pleased than Hades. She met Taz’s gaze, her recall perfect. “How do you do that? Get inside my head?”

He straightened. Beneath her anger over feeling mentally violated—her term, not his—she was curious both personally and professionally. She wondered how he could read thoughts. If she knew he could manipulate her as well, she’d really be pissed.

“What you’re really asking is how to block it,” Taz said. “Which I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Take your pick.”

“Where are we?”

Taz realized that Erin changed the subject to mask her frustration. While Hades was ready to kill him, she had no wish to see Taz harmed even though he’d abducted her.

Intrigued, Taz probed her sense of compassion. Part of it was her nature, but another part was born of her conviction that she understood Taz. She had talked with Dr. Rufin about him and Hades. About what had been done—

His headache spiked.

Erin leaned forward, concerned. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Peachy. Do you need to use the facilities?”

“Two minutes, then I’m coming in.” He’d given her the same warning before and she had honored it.

Two minutes later, they headed back to the car. Taz’s headache had worsened and just as he opened her door, a blinding pain took him down to his knees.
Erin knelt beside him, her warm fingers sliding to his wrist. For a moment he remembered another woman’s touch. *Somewhere beneath the stars.* Whom was he thinking of?

Taz struggled to maintain an awareness of Erin. If she tried to run right now, he could do little to stop her. As she checked his pulse, he caught her thoughts. She was concerned by the way his heart thundered. He had an image of her helping Hades in a similar situation. *Seizure.*

“Relax, breathe. I’m here.” Sympathy laced her words.

The pain subsided so that he was able to stand.

Erin held his arm. “You need to see a doctor.”

*No one can help me.* “I’ve got you.”

Taz shrugged away her excuse that she wasn’t a medical doctor. Rufin wasn’t either, but he’d helped Taz before. Or had he?

A vision of being shocked and put in a dark chamber flashed in Taz’s mind. “Don’t fight the pain!” Rufin had shouted. “Surrender to me or die.”

He cut off the thought as the pain threatened to rob his vision. Taz wanted to jam the ice pick into his knee, but he knew it would upset her. And for some reason that bothered him. Great! Her bloody compassion was contagious.

“Get me inside the car,” he croaked. “You drive.”

He leaned heavily on Erin as she helped him into the car. Then she hurried around and climbed behind the wheel.

He knew only a portion of her acquiescence was due to his influence right now. A larger part was her naïve belief that she would talk sense into him before they arrived in Washington, D.C. She hoped to convince him to surrender, because another part of her was certain that if Hades forcibly tried to rescue her, Taz might be injured.

Only in a female mind!

Erin started the car and swung onto the highway. “How long do I stay on this road?”

“Until I tell you to turn.” Taz didn’t want her to know too much about their route, just in case Hades did get glimpses of her thoughts.

“You remind me of someone else,” Erin said. “Too stubborn to ask for help.” *Until it kills you.*

It surprised Taz to realize her unspoken thought was about her father, not Hades.

“Tell me why you worry about your father’s connection to all this,” he said.

“How do you know about my father? By reading my thoughts?”

Taz nodded, wanting her to talk while they drove. For some reason, the sound of her voice helped. “I know your father is dead, but in your dreams, you weep that you didn’t do enough.”

Erin’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “My father died ten months ago. His official cause of death is listed as a suicide. I believe he was murdered, but I haven’t been able to find proof. I am a psychologist. If my father had been depressed to the point of contemplating taking his own life—” She paused, drawing on her inner calm. “I should have seen it.”

“Who would have benefited from your father’s death?”

Erin looked at him. “It appears his former research partner, my former boss, may have been involved with a corrupt drug company that was funding unethical research.”

“Your boss was the man I killed in San Diego. Dr. Winchette.” Taz could sense Erin’s grief over Winchette’s death. “Do not grieve for him. He was as corrupt as the people he dealt with. And the things he planned for me and Hades were atrocious.”

“More atrocious than what Dr. Rufin did to you?”

Taz’s head started to pound with a familiar precursory warning. If he pursued this subject, he’d be punished. But Erin knew something about Rufin that Taz didn’t. Something that Taz needed to remember. “Tell me everything you know of Dr. Rufin.”

“Everything?” Erin cleared her throat, thinking she didn’t know enough. “Dr. Rufin originally worked with another scientist named Viktor Zadovsky.”

Taz jerked forward as the pain in his skull escalated. “I will kill Zadovsky for what he did!”

“Zadovsky is already dead,” she said. “He can’t harm you.”

*Does not compute. Rechecking program.* Taz rubbed his temples. “What type of work did Zadovsky and Rufin collaborate on? And how did it involve me?”

“Dr. Rufin was continuing Dr. Zadovsky’s experiments in mind control. You, Hades, and some others were subjected to these experiments,” Erin said.

“In a chamber, right? I remember I hated going in.” Taz started panting now. “But coming out felt glorious. Until later, when we remembered what we’d done.” *The past is forbidden.*

Erin’s voice softened. “We believe some of those memories were implanted. They didn’t really happen.”

“I will look up at the stars…”
“Which ones? Which memories?” he demanded.
“I’m not sure. It’s what Max—Hades—is trying to unravel now. That’s why it’s important you come in for treatment, too.”
“No treatments!”
“It’s not like what Dr. Rufin did,” Erin rushed to explain. “You remain in control at all times. And it can help you reclaim your old life. Your real life.”
His old life. The words hit Taz like a freight train.
Remember who you are.
I am Logan.
I am Logan Treyhorn.
“I love you, Logan. Come back to me.”
Unable to take the escalating pain, Taz jammed the ice pick into his thigh and twisted it. Kill agony with agony. Erin pulled off the road. “No, please. There is another way.”
Gritting his teeth, Taz twisted the pick again. “Didn’t Max, Hades, explain? It’s the only thing that keeps … it at bay.”
“Yes, he told me.”
As Taz’s control returned, he caught glimmers of her thoughts once more. He didn’t like what he felt: pity. Her compassion had melted into sympathy— because she felt that what had been done to Taz was far worse than what the others had suffered. He probed deeper, loathing what he found next.
“Tell me the truth, Erin,” Taz said. “What are these microchips you keep thinking about? And why does everyone want what’s on them?”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Bangkok, Thailand
October 5, 10:05 P.M.

Travis Franks hated playing games. Problem was, he was good at them. And at his level within the Agency, they were required. Typically he could out-juggle a veteran circus clown. But not today.

Maddy.
Pregnant.

He knew exactly when it had happened, too. He had spent the night at her place and woke up spooned against her. Inside her. She had rocked back twice and immediately launched into an orgasm. Which had tripped his trigger. Too late he remembered “no condom” and had pulled out.

She’d insisted they were both responsible since they’d both succumbed to the heat of the moment. And then she’d assured him that she didn’t think she was ovulating.

That had been six or seven weeks ago. Travis had forgotten it. Until now. He’d gone back over the Virginia police detective’s reports. Her girlfriend had said Maddy had seemed preoccupied. No kidding.

Her credit card trail had ended the night before she disappeared. Her Visa transactions showed she’d made a fuel purchase at a gas station near her home before picking up Chinese carryout and stopping at a drugstore.

Catalina Dion had tracked down the store’s copy of Maddy’s receipt, which showed the purchase of a pregnancy test kit. The fact that Maddy had probably just confirmed her suspicions before disappearing helped soothe Travis’s “why didn’t she tell me?” angst.

Travis had already updated Luc about Maddy’s condition and the less than forty-eight-hour deadline. It was frustrating to think that right now Luc had more latitude than Travis did in Thailand. Channels that were normally available to Travis had slammed shut, mostly because of the Agency’s ongoing charade of searching for Dr. Rufin. There were also the diplomatic issues of the Agency’s covertly recovering two operatives while searching for a third.

More and more, Travis missed the freedom of being in the field. Real time was where the difference was made. The mission-critical decisions a seasoned operative made on the spot often tipped the scales. It was what allowed the CIA to be successful despite rumors of a mole, or moles, within its own ranks.

Travis knew that was just part of the spy game. Hell, every country tried to infiltrate another’s intelligence agency; even its allies’. Still, it pissed him off to learn there was a leak within his own division.

Correction: it pissed him off that he couldn’t locate the leak. The person he’d suspected had committed suicide, yet the drip of information persisted. That Travis hadn’t dedicated himself exclusively to plugging the leak had earned him two watchers, men who were recording his every move. Or used to.

The men had also been bodyguards. There had been two threats on Travis’s life in the past year. The first had come right after he’d received word that Dante Johnson hadn’t died. The second had followed the recovery of Max Duncan.

Both threats had been traced to an Indonesian associate of the late Viktor Zadovsky. An associate who had also committed suicide. A lot of that going around.

Zadovsky had been the common thread. The Agency knew Zadovsky had visited Dante’s and Max’s secret prisons in Thailand, so it was reasonable he’d visited Harry Gambrel’s, too. But where?

Tracking Zadovsky’s previous movements had been impossible since the Indonesian and Thai governments had ransacked and seized Zadovsky’s files.

Unfortunately, there were very few of Zadovsky’s known associates left. Rufin was one, but he claimed to have worked with and known about only Max. Zadovsky’s secretary, Bohdana, who had initially lured Rufin out of hiding, was dead now, too, murdered by a man who’d subsequently kidnapped Rufin.

The composite drawing of Rufin’s kidnapper matched the description of the mysterious Mr. Peabody, the middleman who worked deals between Zadovsky and his customers, including Minh Tran. Mr. Peabody’s failure to deliver a shipment of SugarCane had landed him on Minh Tran’s hit list.

Travis’s gut screamed that Peabody was the key to unlocking the puzzle. The problem was finding him.
A knock on the door interrupted Travis’s thoughts. “It’s open,” he called out. Derek, a forensics lab analyst, rushed in. “You aren’t going to believe this.” He set a file in front of Travis. “You know the trash samples you gave me this morning?”

“You’ve got something already?”

“Fingerprint match.” Derek pointed to a report in the file. Travis read the last line. MATCH FOUND: HARRY EPHRAIM GAMBREL. “Are you positive?”

“Absolutely.” Derek flipped to a page with multiple black-and-white fingerprints. “I got three partials and one full thumb.”

Travis stared at the identical thumbprints. It was proof. Harry was alive. And he’d been held in that same warehouse as Dr. Rufin, most likely by Mr. Peabody. Finally a lead!

“What have you got on other prints?” Travis was hoping to learn Mr. Peabody’s true identity. Derek shook his head. “There were only two subjects’ prints. This one and the John Doe set you gave me for elimination.”

Travis had supplied Derek with an anonymous set of Dr. Rufin’s prints. Rufin’s prints weren’t in any known databases but had been expected to be found in Luc’s trash exhibit. The fact that Mr. Peabody’s prints weren’t found likely meant he’d worn gloves.

“Any chance of retrieving DNA?” Travis asked.

“Those samples will take twenty-four hours minimum to process.”

“See what you can do to rush it. Good work!”

“Thanks. I’ll get on the other.” Derek grabbed his file just as Travis’s cell phone started to ring. Travis grabbed it, recognizing the distinct ring tone he’d assigned to Luc Skihawtra.

“Franks here.”

“It’s me,” Luc said. “And I know where Minh Tran’s helicopter went.”
Chapter Thirty

East Central Mexico
October 5, 10:25 P.M.

The plane was a total loss.
In the eerie glow of the fire, Rocco found the pilot’s body. He’d been thrown only a few yards from the wreckage.
“He’s dead. Broken neck,” Rocco said.
“The whole back is gone!” Clay motioned to the plane. “If we hadn’t fallen out, we’d be dead, too.”
“I don’t see any sign of my wife,” Rocco said. “That means she’s out there.”
“Hold up.” Clay tried to approach the wreckage, but the heat was still too intense. “I don’t think any of the emergency equipment survived. Hopefully, the tracking beacon is working. The pilot was radioing an SOS as we went down.”
“Let’s hope he broadcast GPS coordinates as well.” Rocco looked around at the site. “Tracking beacons on these small planes have a higher failure rate.”
“Any chance your cell phone survived?” Clay asked. “Mine’s busted.”
Rocco touched his waist. “Mine’s gone. Doubt we’d get a signal anyway. My gun’s gone, too.”
“Same here.”
Rocco looked at the dark jungle. “I’m going to walk back this way, look for my wife.”
“I’ll head out over there, then,” Clay said. “We’ll cover more ground if we split up. I suggest we stay within a reasonable distance. The fire will be out soon. I know you’re worried about Jill, but it won’t help her if we get lost, too.”
“Look, about her name—” Rocco began. Working this type of private security, Clay had to suspect most clients used aliases.
“Just tell me her real first name. If she’s dazed, she might not recognize Jill,” Clay said.
“It’s Gena. And she’ll call me Rocco.”
“As soon as we find her, you can go back to Jill and Mike,” Clay said. “Good luck.”
Rocco pushed into the brush. The rain continued to fall. The lightning had moved north, but flashes on the horizon continued to break up the dark.
“Gena!” He cupped his hands near his mouth as he shouted.
Please let her be alive, he prayed. Even if they never saw each other after this, Rocco had to know she was alive.
The gnawing reminder that it was his fault she was in danger ate at him. Just let me find her alive and I’ll walk away without ever looking back.
It was the looking back that had kept him trapped. For years he had dreamed of meeting Gena again, just to talk. To get answers. Closure. He’d wanted to know why she hadn’t just told him the truth about dating Harry instead of letting him hear about it from Harry. Especially when she still felt something for Rocco. Damn it, he’d felt it yesterday morning in that hotel room when they’d almost made love.
Gena had wanted Rocco with the same hunger that burned in him. The same hunger he remembered from all those years ago. And it was more than lust, more than physical attraction. Rocco knew true love. Could recognize it in other people as well as himself.
“Gena! Can you hear me?” he shouted again.
“Rocco!”
He stopped moving. “Gena! Where are you, sweetheart?”
“I’m here! Can you follow my voice? Are you okay?”
Rocco turned to his left, honing in. “I’m fine! Keep talking until I get to you!”
“I’ve been so scared! I found the plane and the pilot—he’s dead!” She was crying now, just a short way ahead. He took a few more steps. “I’m right behind you, Gena!”
“Where? Please hurry, Rocco!”
He stepped in front of her and wrapped her in his arms. Almost immediately he released her and moved away. “Are
you injured?”
She pushed back against him and buried her face in his chest. “I’m fine. I was just afraid you were—”
“Shhh. I’m fine, sweetheart. Clay’s alive as well. He’s looking for you, too.”
“Thank God.”
He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Let’s get back to the plane. You okay to walk?”
“Yes.”
He took her hand and led the way through the trees toward the barely visible fire. “You’ve already been to the plane. You must have landed closer than I did.”
“I landed in a tree. My seat cushion somehow stayed with me and broke my fall.”
When they reached the plane, Rocco steered her to a spot away from the pilot’s body.
“I’ll be right back. I need to let Clay know I’ve found you.” Rocco moved into the trees on the opposite side of the wreck and began shouting. He didn’t get a response but wasn’t worried. He’d try again in a few minutes.
When he returned he found Gena huddled with her face buried against her knees. She was shivering, probably from shock as well as the wetness of her clothes.
Rocco looked around and then began gathering limbs and vines to construct a lean-to. The first priority was shelter from the rain. Even if the tracking beacon worked, the darkness and stormy weather worked against them. A search-and-rescue mission probably wouldn’t launch until morning.
“Rocco?” Clay’s voice called out.
“We’re here at the plane! I found my wife!” Rocco shouted.
Moments later, Clay burst through the trees. “Is she okay?”
“Physically, yes. I’m working on a shelter to get her out of the rain.”
Clay moved closer. “Forget that. I found a shelter not too far from here. Looks like an abandoned archaeology site. Hopefully, we’ll find a dry spot there.”
“Great!” Rocco hurried over to Gena. “Come on, sweetheart.”
“Good job, Clay.” Gena pushed to her feet very slowly, reminding Rocco of what she’d been through the last two days. A fire, a thwarted abduction, now this.
“I’ll carry you,” Rocco said.
“It’s nothing serious,” she said. “Just a few aches. I can walk.”
Clay moved close and smiled at Gena. “Good to see you, ma’am. Your husband wouldn’t give up the notion that you’d survived. He was right.”
“He’s pretty stubborn,” she said. “It’s just one of the things I love about him.”
Her words echoed in Rocco’s chest. Even if she’d said the words only for Clay’s benefit, he liked hearing them.
Rocco and Gena fell in behind Clay as they hiked away from the plane. They had to backtrack once, when Clay lost his bearings, but before long they reached the clearing.
“Here we go!” Clay said.
The erratic lightning allowed Rocco to make out the outline of a building. Most of the area had been cleared, but several stone monoliths rose into the night.
“I think it’s been abandoned a while,” Clay said. “Looks like a couple of structures are just covered areas for work space.”
Rocco nodded. “That lodge was probably for workers. Let’s check it out.” He pulled Gena closer to the building.
“Let Clay and me inspect the inside first. Make sure it’s creature-free.”
Gena shuddered and nodded.
The interior of the lodge appeared to be a large open space. “Hold up,” Rocco said. Within a few seconds, another flash of lightning gave a quick snapshot of the inside.
“Looks like a fireplace on my side,” Clay said. “I’ll feel along this wall; you take that one.”
“Good plan.” Rocco appreciated Clay’s coolheaded skills. He’d obviously had some military background, which was common with most mercenaries.
And while Rocco was curious, he didn’t ask because he didn’t want to answer those same questions from Clay.
Rocco felt along the wall as he walked forward. There had been a shelf there. He carefully felt above it versus running his hand along the surface, in case a spider or scorpion had taken up residence. His hand hit a bottle, almost knocking it over but quickly righting it.
“Found something.” He pulled it down. “A kerosene lamp. Sounds like there’s fuel in it, too. Now if we can find matches.”
“Got ‘em right here,” Clay said. “This fireplace must be big enough to roast a whole cow.”
Retracing his steps, Rocco handed Clay the lamp before stepping outside to where Gena huddled beneath the eaves.
“Come on.” He guided her in the doorway just as Clay struck a match and lit the lamp.
“Let there be light.” Clay fitted the glass globe over the flickering wick and then held the lamp up. The room was large, at least twenty feet long. The walls were constructed of logs, but the floor and fireplace were made of stone, probably by-products of the dig. Several more oil lamps were on the shelf. Rocco checked them for fuel, then grabbed one. Several rustic wooden tables and benches were shoved against the far wall. Wood was scattered near the fireplace. A message was painted in Spanish on the wall. “Can you translate that?” Rocco asked Gena. She squinted. “El Brisa ruin. Private property. Leave or die.” “That last was probably added by the local drug lord,” Clay said. “They’re notorious for taking over these older sites. Great place to process drugs.” Rocco looked around. “Doesn’t look like they’ve been here in a while. I say we take our chances and trespass for the night.” “No argument from me,” Clay said. Rocco opened the door at the farthest end of the room. “Looks like they bunked in here.” Cots were stacked against one wall. “Place looks like heaven to me,” Clay said. “Why don’t you folks take this room? I’ll drag a cot out there for me. I want to see if I can get a fire going. Maybe we can get our clothes dry.” “Sounds good.” Rocco helped Clay move a cot and then he returned to Gena. She had already moved two cots into the middle of the room. “I found a couple that don’t have holes. There are blankets stacked over there, too. Just not sure if they’re clean.” Rocco tugged several blankets from the middle of the stack and shook them open. “These aren’t too bad. We’ll need to strip down, Gena. If I put our clothes by the fire, they’ll be dry by morning.” “But, what do I wear?” Rocco held up a blanket. “It’s better than sleeping in wet clothes. You’re already shivering. Take off everything and wrap up in the blanket.” He moved to the far corner and began stripping off his own wet clothes and shoes, keeping his back to her. “You decent?” he asked a minute later. “Yes.” She had a blanket wrapped sarong style around her as she untangled her clothing. “Be right back.” Rocco took her clothes out with his. Clay had a roaring fire going now. “Just as well I’m sleeping alone. I’d roast with clothes on.” Rocco tossed a couple blankets on Clay’s cot, then moved a bench closer to the fire and draped his and Gena’s clothes across it. Clay had stacked up more wood near the fire. “You need anything else?” Rocco asked. “Room service?” Clay joked. “Nah, I’m good. Try to get some rest.” “Holler if you need anything.” When Rocco returned to the rear room, Gena hadn’t moved. She stared at the flickering oil lamp, looking more vulnerable than when Rocco had first arrived two days ago. “Lie down, sweetheart,” he encouraged. “There’s nothing we can do till morning.” She nodded but instead moved closer to him. “Rocco, please hold me.” He enveloped her in his arms, squeezing her as tight as he dared. “Better?” She shook her head. “When I found the pilot, I was so scared. I was afraid I’d never see you again.” “That you were worried about me means a lot, Gena.” He pressed a kiss to her head. “I was frantic to find you, too. Quite frankly, I couldn’t imagine a world without you in it. What would I dream about every night?” “You … you dream about me?” He probably never would either. “Let’s get you settled.” Rocco, make love to me.” Her words stunned him, even as his body sprang to life, ready to make her words true. He lifted her chin, so he could look into her eyes. The flickering lamplight emphasized the hollows beneath her eyes, but her gaze was steady. “Are you sure, Gena? Remember this morning?” Had it really only been that morning that they’d been in the Holiday Inn? It seemed light-years ago. “I’ve been miserable remembering that I had a chance to be with you this morning and I blew it.” She tugged at the blanket at his waist. “I’m sure this time.” Rocco caught her mouth and kissed her with a ferociousness that startled him. The adrenaline that he’d felt before the crash suddenly seemed to spring back to life. Gena’s movements were as rushed and eager as his. She broke the kiss and loosened her blanket to stand naked before him. As soon as he tossed away his blanket, her hand closed over his erection. She began to stroke him, moving back against him to rub him with her abdomen as well.
Rocco’s hands closed over her breasts, plumping, massaging. When his fingers tapered down to her nipples, she moaned softly and whispered, “I want you now.”

Rocco looked around the room. The cots wouldn’t hold two thrusting, driving bodies. And he wasn’t about to lay her on the ground. Which only left one option.

“Hold on.” He lifted her straight up.

Gena wrapped her legs around his hips. She still had his cock in her hand and guided him between her legs. He hadn’t been prepared to enter her so soon, but the feel of her, moist and hot, had him swelling even more. He pressed up and in. Her body was tight, resisting him at first, until Gena surged back against him, pressing her pelvis down.

She gasped as Rocco slid in fully and buried himself to the hilt. Gena pressed kisses across his shoulder, then started raising and lowering her hips.

Rocco could do nothing but hold her. He wanted her breasts in his mouth, he wanted to touch her clitoris, but he couldn’t do any of it. Holding her, letting her control the pace was a divine torture.

He was close to the edge but refused to come until she’d satisfied herself. Gradually she increased the pace of her movements.

“Please help,” she whispered against his ear. “I’m … I’m so close.”

“Me too.” He turned, easing her just slightly against the wall, which allowed him to shift his weight and gain leverage. He pulled his cock out, then drove it back into her. “Better?”

She nodded, writhing in his arms. When her orgasm exploded, he felt her sheath tighten around his cock, bathing him in pleasure.

Rocco began pistoning his hips, slamming in and out of her body, loving the feel of her fingernails and teeth on his flesh, amazed as she launched into a second orgasm.

And then he was coming, too. He had the brief thought to pull out, aware he wasn’t wearing a condom, but he couldn’t stop.

He selfishly reveled in the moment. If Gena was to get pregnant, she’d be bound to him. And then— All thought ceased as his hips pumped and flexed into her one last time.

He hugged her close and felt her tears against his neck. That she was crying broke Rocco’s heart. “Talk to me, Gena. What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Nothing’s wrong. In fact, it all feels very right.” Gena lowered her legs and Rocco eased her to the ground. As they uncoupled, his semen dripped down her legs.

He kept her pinned against the wall. “Gena, we didn’t use protection. If you’re pregnant, I want you to—”

She cut him off, her voice low. Hurt. “Don’t say it! I know I screwed up last time. If I’m pregnant, I’ll do everything in my power to take better care.”

“Last time? Had you gotten pregnant with Harry?”

“No!” She shoved at his shoulder, wanting to move away. But Rocco wouldn’t let her.

“Are you saying you were pregnant … by me? Talk to me, Gena! Damn it, I have a right to know.”

“You did know! When Harry told you I was pregnant, I was there, Rocco! I know you denied it. I know you were with Brandy.”

Rocco felt as if he’d been transported to another universe where he didn’t speak the language. “What are you talking about? Harry never told me you were pregnant. And who is Brandy?” He groaned and shook his head as it became obvious. “Was that why you married Harry? Because he got you pregnant?”

“It was your child, Rocco. Not Harry’s. He married me to give the baby a name, to help me out. But— I lost the baby.”

Rocco didn’t know what to say. His shock was tempered by her loss. His sister, Adele, had suffered a miscarriage after having Billy and she’d been devastated.

He relaxed his grip. “I’m sorry about whatever happened.”

Gena moved away to grab a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Rocco picked up his blanket, then motioned toward the cots. “Can we sit down and talk? It feels like there is something neither of us is getting, though it sounds like Harry lied to both of us.”

Gena opened her mouth. “Why would he do that?”

“Who knows? Let’s stick to what we do know. About us. I’ll start. After that last time I saw you, I was pissed and I shouldn’t have been. I went on a deep undercover job in the Middle East thinking you’d be glad to see me after six or eight weeks. But then I heard through the grapevine that you’d married Harry Gambrel. I went ballistic, Gena. In fact, I picked a fight with Harry after he told me the two of you had been seeing each other for months.”

“He told you that?” Gena went pale. “I thought Harry was my friend. I knew I was pregnant when you came over that last time. My father had just cut off my trust fund and was pressuring me to return to Texas. I had made up my
mind I’d tell you the truth the next time you called. But then I got an e-mail from someone named Brandy. I don’t even recall her last name, but she basically accused me of having an affair with you. She sent photos of you with her. And copies of text messages. I had pretty much decided to go back to Texas to have the baby. But Harry came by. He called you for me, said you denied the baby was yours.”
Rocco hugged her as she wept. “It was a lie, Gena. Harry and I never spoke about your being pregnant. And I didn’t date anyone after first laying eyes on you in Mexico. Whoever sent e-mails from Brandy was in league with Harry. Or maybe Harry did it himself. I wish I could have seen the photos because I bet they were doctored.”
“I guess I never realized how much Harry disliked me,” Gena said. “But honestly, I don’t remember much of my marriage. After I miscarried, I fell into a horrible depression and drank to drown the pain. Which is no excuse.”
“Maybe you were drinking to drown other pain, too,” Rocco said. “Harry’s abuse was more frequent than you told the police, wasn’t it?”
She nodded. “At the time, I thought I deserved to be punished for losing the baby. Our baby. I shouldn’t have stayed with Harry as long as I did.”
“That time you went to the emergency room. A warrant was issued for Harry. When I heard about it, I kicked Harry’s ass and hauled him in. But you dropped the charges.”
“I dropped the charges when Harry agreed to grant me a divorce and stay away.”
Rocco reached for her hands, held them in his. “God, Gena, I know there’s more. And if I had realized—”
“If, if, if. We can’t go back.”
He watched as she pulled the blanket closer around her. “Come here. You’re exhausted.”
Gena stood and moved closer. “Rocco—”
He shifted her onto his lap and kissed her forehead. “I never stopped loving you, Gena. Ever.”
She wrapped her arms around his neck. “And I’ve always loved you, too.”
Chapter Thirty-One

Richmond, Virginia
October 6, 5:00 A.M.

I am not Taz.
I am Logan.
Mission incomplete.

Logan dug the ice pick more deeply into his thigh but got little relief. Erin was right. He needed to do something different.

When she had told him about the data chips earlier, the pain had spiked worse than ever. But in that moment of extreme agony, he’d had a breakthrough.

He’d remembered.
Everything.

Right now he could count the data chips inside his abdomen and beneath the muscles in his thighs. He also recalled Rufin’s instructions. “Find me. Save me. Or Bettina dies. She is with me.”

Bettina.

Those bastards had stolen Taz’s sweetest memory of love. And then they had invented others. Imaginary brothers. Fictional sisters. Children he’d dreamed of but never had.

But Bettina had been real. And she had loved him like no other. “I’ll wait for you, however long it takes. I intend to be Mrs. Logan Treyhorn.”

He’d had that inscribed on her tombstone. Bettina had died from pneumonia. Logan had been on a mission when she’d taken ill. By the time he’d reached the hospital, she’d been on life support for seven days.

“I’ll wait for you.”

He’d sat beside her bed, holding her hand, begging her to get better. “I’ll never leave you again,” he had said.

Bettina had died a few hours later. And his life had sucked ever since.

“Pull over here.” Logan’s voice was hoarse. “We’ll get gas.”
“We just stopped.” Erin’s voice was gentle.

He knew she wondered if he was losing it. Actually, he’d found it. Now that Taz knew about the data chips, it all made sense. Rufin had felt trapped, had expected to be killed. Hell, part of Logan still wanted to find Rufin, just to fulfill that expectation.

But a bigger part realized the danger he was now in. People would slaughter him to get the data.

“Pull up at the pump,” Logan said. “I’ll top the tank off anyway.”

When Erin shut off the engine, Logan held out his hands for the keys, but instead of taking them, he grasped her hand.

“Thank you for telling me the truth. About Rufin.” Logan took a deep breath, struggling to hold back the pain.

“When I was with Dr. Winchette, I saw his thoughts before he died. A man’s life doesn’t flash before his eyes, only his regrets. Winchette had many. He felt guilty for not warning your father. Winchette worried he’d be murdered, too, and kept copies of all his records on a hard drive. It’s in a bank box in Springfield. Number 803 is all I got.”

Erin blinked back tears. “Now I need to thank you.”

“For what it’s worth, Winchette regretted deceiving you, too. And he planned to take his own life if anyone tried to force him to take action against you.” Logan grimaced and dug the ice pick in more deeply, seeking a few additional minutes of relief.

Erin shifted her hand, gripping his more tightly, and he wondered when their grasp had changed. She held him now. He also noticed there were different cars at the gas pumps. He’d been talking, unaware of time or even what all he’d said.

No matter. He tugged his hand free of hers. “Go inside and pay for the gas. Then call Hades … Max. Tell him I remember. And tell him where you are.”

“Please don’t leave! I can help you, Logan. Max will help you, too.”

Logan.
Mission incomplete.
Logan could feel the insanity inside his skull frantically changing tracks as it tried to take over again. He knew he couldn’t fight it much longer.
He panted through the pain. “I’m not leaving, Erin. Just go. Pay for the gas, then use the phone at the back of the store.”
Delving into Erin’s thoughts one last time, he read her indecision. Her concern for him was genuine. She wanted to help him.
Suddenly desperate, Logan opened fully to her and let himself feel the power of her caring. Her innate goodness. And her total love for Max. The same love Logan had once shared with Bettina.
Dropping his defenses and opening to Erin allowed Max to charge into Logan’s thoughts. She’s mine! If you harm her, I’ll destroy you.
Logan opened his car door. “Go on,” he said to Erin. “Pay for the gas and call Max.”
As she hurried inside the store, Logan moved to the back of the car and began to loosen the gas cap. He watched Erin pause at the counter to prepay before moving toward the phone near the coolers.
She’s calling you now, mate. Taz projected the message to Max. I let her go.
The sense of relief Logan received in return was profound. You’re doing the right thing, Max replied. We can help you.
I’m beyond help.
But the chips, mate. No one can be trusted with them. The stuff they did to us should never happen again.
Logan lifted the gas pump nozzle and flipped the lever. Then he doused himself with gasoline.
Don’t do it! Max’s voice reverberated in his head. Erin, stay back!
She’s a keeper, Logan thought. Don’t be a fool like me and lose her.
Bettina had asked Logan to stay, but at his hesitation, she’d withdrawn her request. “Pay no attention to me, love. I know you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. Just hurry back to me.”
Logan walked away from the car and withdrew the Zippo lighter from his pocket, feeling free for the first time in years.
“I’m coming, Bettina.”
Logan flicked the lighter and felt the wonderful ease of relief as his clothes and skin began to burn.
Chapter Thirty-Two

Minh Tran’s Compound, Thailand
October 6, 9:00 A.M.

Maddy was in the formal dining room, waiting for Minh Tran to join her for breakfast. Dreading it actually. What would she do if he made any advances?
She’d been drugged last night with a powerful sedative. This morning Sunlee had woken her early for a bath. Afterward Maddy had been given a gauzy pantsuit and heels to wear.
“I can’t wear this,” she’d protested. “It’s practically see-through.”
“It is important you please Master Tran,” Sunlee had insisted. “It is important I please him as well.”
That Sunlee was simply following orders made it no easier for Maddy to walk down the staircase. One guard stood near the front door but he’d ignored them. She’d been relieved that the dining room was deserted and prayed that Minh Tran would oversleep.
Now all hell broke loose. The early morning quiet was decimated by ringing phones and harsh alarms. People started shouting.
Maddy didn’t understand their words, but total pandemonium transcended language.
The house came alive with frantic activity. A half dozen of Minh Tran’s guards ran down the hall, toward the front entrance, as household staff ducked out of their way.
Sunlee had risen from the table and stepped outside the room to speak with one of the guards. When she returned, she was pale and visibly upset. “We go back to room. Now.”
Maddy stood. “Sunlee, what is wrong?”
“Upstairs. Quickly!”
In the hall, two guards stood before a recessed cabinet handing out compact submachine guns and ammo clips to other guards who seemed to stream out of the woodwork, but no one gave the two women a second glance.
From outside came the sounds of a helicopter—no, multiple helicopters—circling close.
The compound was under siege.
Maddy’s hopes soared. They were coming for her. Travis hadn’t let them forsake her.
Sunlee tugged Maddy’s forearm. “Come.”
They swept up the wide staircase as several more guards rushed down. The second-floor landing was deserted as they hurried toward the bedroom Maddy had been assigned.
Inside the room, Sunlee went to answer the ringing telephone. Maddy moved to the window and shoved the drapes aside, wanting to give her rescuers a clear glimpse of where she was being held.
But the three helicopters parked on the estate’s sprawling lawn were all painted flat black except for the crimson red three-headed dragon stenciled near the tail rotor.
These were Tran’s own helicopters and his heavily armed men scrambled to get inside two of them. Another group of men headed for the third chopper. In their midst was Minh Tran himself.
That Tran was leaving was a good sign, right?
Sunlee grabbed Maddy’s arm and dragged her away from the window.
“What is wrong?” Maddy hid her elation by pretending to be frightened. “Are we under attack?”
Sunlee made a dismissive clicking sound with her tongue. “Here? Never! One of Master Tran’s enemies raided a warehouse. They will be dealt with harshly.”
The news deflated Maddy so swiftly she stumbled.
This wasn’t about her! She wasn’t being rescued. No one was coming for her. Ever.
The thought of remaining Minh Tran’s prisoner was intolerable. But if she wanted to escape this situation, she’d have to take matters into her own hands.
Outside the helicopters lifted off, one at a time.
“Your master must have a powerful enemy. He took a lot of men with him.” Maddy shivered and put her hands protectively over her stomach. “Are we safe?”
“Jengho Vato is more stupid than powerful. Master Tran will destroy him this time.” Sunlee crossed the room and began to fold back the covers of the bed. “Do not worry. By the time you wake up, it will be over.” Clearly, Sunlee
intended to sedate her again.
Maddy moved closer to the bed. “May I remove this outfit before I lie down?”
Sunlee nodded and turned away to withdraw a syringe.
It’s now or never. Maddy grabbed her from behind, slipping one hand over Sunlee’s mouth, while snatching the syringe with her other hand. Then she swept Sunlee’s legs out from under her, taking her to the ground.
Maddy had the advantage of surprise and size, outweighing Sunlee by twenty pounds. It helped that Sunlee had bought into the notion of Maddy as a frightened wimp.
But Sunlee’s strength wasn’t dependent on size. She struggled, nearly bucking Maddy off her back. Maddy held tight, using her teeth to uncap the syringe before jamming the needle into Sunlee’s neck.
Sunlee bit her hand and Maddy bit her own tongue to keep from howling with pain. Almost immediately, Sunlee’s struggles slowed.
“Fast acting, isn’t it?” Maddy whispered. “It took me down in less than a minute last night.”
She remained on top of Sunlee until the woman’s body went totally limp. Then Maddy sprang up and carefully peeked out the window. The grounds appeared deserted now, the house eerily quiet.
She moved to the opposite window, to survey the back of the house. There were a large vegetable garden and some small outbuildings. A chain-link fence separated Tran’s property from the jungle beyond. The jungle was her best bet for hiding.
After moving to the door, Maddy cracked it open and peered out. The hall was deserted but she knew it was unlikely Tran had left the place unguarded. He also had housekeeping staff, whom Sunlee had mentioned used the back staircase.
She slipped off her heels and carried them as she flew down the hall. Dress shoes weren’t the best choice for an escape, but they were all she had.
Maddy crept down the stairs, trying to be as quiet as she could. If she was caught—
I won’t be!
At the bottom landing were two doors. Ignoring the one that led to the kitchen, she unlocked the other and stepped into the morning sun. Too late, she spotted the cameras mounted under the eaves.
Just go!
She ran for the closest section of fence and tossed her shoes over, then began to climb it, barefoot. The chain link sagged near the top, causing her to lose her balance. She wrapped her fingers around the wire as the fence started to sway.
She heard the bark of a dog and glanced over her shoulder. A large black and tan Doberman raced toward her, teeth bared.
Terrified of what the beast would do if it caught her, Maddy pushed up and threw a leg over the top. The sharp tips of the fence tore through her clothes and ripped her flesh.
The Doberman had reached the fence now and leaped straight up, snapping his jaws. She kicked as hard as she could, catching the dog’s ribs. The dog sailed backward and hit the ground with a yelp but immediately bounced up and launched into a more vigorous attack.
The dog jumped again. And this time, he latched on to Maddy’s foot.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Luc Skihawtra hadn’t expected a second uproar at Minh Tran’s compound. At least not yet.
Just before sunrise, while the guards ate breakfast in the kitchen, Luc had diverted the power to the section of fence at the back of Tran’s compound. Then he’d made a vertical cut in the chain links behind the gardener’s shed and slipped inside.
The crowded shed held yard tools and reeked of oil, gas, and chemicals. Keeping the grounds from reverting to jungle was a full-time job.
At nine A.M., the place went wild. Three helicopters swooped in and landed on the compound’s neatly manicured lawn. Luc had a perfect view from one of the shed’s dirty windows.
Travis Franks had promised to create a diversion and indeed it appeared he had.
Luc counted twenty-nine guards climbing into the choppers. Most of Tran’s contingent had left with him. As soon as the helicopters lifted away, Luc called Travis and reported the same. Plus a bonus.
“The woman is still here. I just saw her look out an upstairs window.”
Relief deepened Travis’s voice. “Stay put. My team will be there in twenty minutes. I’ll contact you when we’re in place.”
Minh Tran had been gone only a few minutes when Luc heard the bark of a guard dog. He grimaced, hoping the dog hadn’t picked up his scent. Luc had been told the dogs roamed free only at night, which allowed Tran’s kitchen staff to harvest vegetables from the gardens and hang laundry.
But it made sense that if Tran had taken most of his guards with him, he might have ordered the dogs left out as an extra precaution.
Except now the dog was growling and snapping, clearly on to something. Had Travis arrived early? Luc shifted to the back of the shed and peered out another window.
“No!”
Maddy, the woman they were here to rescue, straddled the top of the fence about fifteen feet away. The huge dog had grabbed her foot. Off balance, she nearly fell toward the dog. Then she overcorrected and fell in the opposite direction. That couldn’t be good for a pregnant woman.
Immediately she jumped up and ran into the jungle.
A second dog raced toward the other, both howling. Sounding an alarm. Guards would come out any second.
Luc grabbed a can of gasoline and emptied it, then fished out a lighter and struck it. He darted out of the shed, along the side away from the dogs, and slipped out the fence. He paused long enough to shove the fence back in place and weave a stick into the wire so the dogs couldn’t follow.
Already smoke poured from the shed. Luc hoped the guards would think the dogs had been stirred up by the fire, buying him and the woman time.
Staying low, Luc tore out after the woman, checking his watch as he ran. Travis wouldn’t be there for another ten minutes. Luc needed to call him!
He now paralleled Maddy, could hear her labored breathing. But before he could call her name, she fell.
Luc leaped over a downed tree to get to her. He covered her mouth to keep her from screaming as he helped her up.
Maddy turned toward him, feinting left while delivering a solid roundhouse kick. She’d obviously had some training but still Luc sidestepped her next move.
“I’m Luc Skihawtra. Travis sent me to help you!”
Maddy shook her head as if she hadn’t heard him. “Travis sent you?” She held her side as if in pain.
“Yes.” Luc straightened and pressed a finger to his lips as a new noise caught his attention. “The dogs are loose. We must get away, fast! Can you run?”
Maddy nodded. “Go. I’ll follow.”
“No! You first. That way.” Luc pointed to her left. “Twenty yards. There is a small river. We can use it to throw them off our scent.”
Maddy charged forward as the sounds of yelping dogs grew louder.
“They’re coming!” she called over her shoulder.
“Just keep going!” Luc had his phone out and pressed buttons as he ran.
The phone rang three times and went to voice mail. Travis had told him to call another number, but there wasn’t time.
He left a message. “I have the woman. She escaped, but they are after us. We are headed northwest of the compound, toward the Si Nan River.”
A growl was all the warning Luc got as a dog lunged for Maddy.
“Go!” Luc threw himself in front of the dog.
The dog twisted away but leaped again, going straight for his throat. Luc caught the dog midair, grabbing him by the jaw and ears before breaking the dog’s neck.
There were shouts ordering them to stop. More barks grew closer as the dogs outraced their handler. Clearly the guards had emptied the kennels.
Luc headed after Maddy. She had reached the river but stopped, looking uncertain.
“You can swim?” he asked.
She nodded, then doubled over as she held her abdomen.
Luc saw blood on her thighs. Not good. But to stay meant worse from the dogs. The beasts were trained to kill.
“Let’s go before they catch us.” Maddy waded into the water.
“Float,” Luc hissed. “The current will carry us without much noise.”
He crossed the river and ran up the side of the opposite bank, making a few footprints before diving back into the water. He hoped the guards would think they’d crossed to the other side.
Luc quickly caught up with Maddy and moved beside her. Behind them, the barking grew frantic as the dogs reached the riverbank. He signaled for her to remain quiet as they continued to float farther away.
Maddy continued to clutch her abdomen, clearly in pain. Luc realized she had likely suffered a miscarriage. His phone was ruined now, leaving him no way to reach help.
Had Travis gotten his message in time to redirect? Or was he back at Tran’s preparing to invade?
“We’ll get out soon,” Luc told her. “Before the river goes underground. We should be well ahead of them.”
“Thank you for helping me.”
Luc shrugged. “I’m not sure you needed help. I watched you climb that fence.”
“Where is Travis?” Her voice cracked.
“I’m not sure,” Luc answered. “I was waiting for him when I saw the dog attack you. And I’m sure I’ve ruined my phone.”
The river widened and Luc steered her toward the bank. “Easy. It’s a steep climb.”
Once they were free of the river, he noticed she’d lost her shoes.
“You won’t make it far in bare feet.” Luc knelt down in front of her. “Climb on my back.”
“I’m bleeding.” Maddy protested.
“I know. Another reason not to walk.”
Luc felt her hands grip his shoulder. He stood as soon as she leaned into him. She didn’t weigh much and she was shivering violently.
She was in even greater danger now from loss of blood and the chill from wet clothes. Which in turn would make her even more vulnerable to infection from the dog bite and the scratches on her feet. He’d seen people succumb in frighteningly short times to jungle diseases.
That Travis Franks had entrusted her well-being to Luc had him hurrying his steps.
He headed south. “I have a small motorbike hidden off the road, not too far from here.”
“Won’t it make us too visible?”
“Perhaps. But it will be faster. And if we stay in the jungle, you will die.”
Chapter Thirty-Four

Mexican Jungle
October 6, 9:30 A.M.

Harry hated jungles. He smacked a mosquito but got only a moment’s respite before two more flew in to bite his flesh.
They had been hiking for four hours, stopping frequently since they had no water, no food.
To her credit, Gena hadn’t complained. Of course, to look at her, you’d think she was walking on air, thanks to her rediscovered love.
Harry had kept an ear pressed to their door and heard every word of their heart-to-heart last night. To listen to them compare notes and piece together the fact they’d both been manipulated was almost comical. And still they didn’t have it right. Didn’t have a clue why Harry had been determined to come between them. Jesus H. Christ! Did he need to hire a skywriter to spell it out?
Gena getting facts wrong was understandable. Harry had planned it that way. The drugs he’d given her had helped, but she’d also been a willing participant, drinking herself into oblivion.
Rocco, however, had no such excuse; he should know damn well why Harry hated him. More likely, Rocco wasn’t telling Gena the whole story on purpose after hearing her reaction to the fictitious Brandy. Why bring up yet another woman and risk Gena’s wrath?
“We should be getting close,” Harry called out. “Unless I’ve totally screwed up my landmarks.”
“So far you’ve nailed them, Clay,” Rocco said. “Next time I decide to tour the jungle, I want you on my team.”
Harry smiled. Let’s see if you still feel that way when we find the highway.
Harry had lied about his cell phone not working. Once the storm system moved out of the area, the satellite chip in his phone had picked up a weak signal. It had been just enough for a text to Edguardo.
Fortunately, Edguardo was still in Acapulco. It had taken a few hours, but finally Edguardo had located the El Brisa ruins on a map. He had texted directions to the closest road, which had still been a long hike because of the terrain.
Harry could tell he’d impressed Rocco after he pretended to recognize the area in daylight.
Harry had been surprised to learn they were only sixty miles from Acapulco. And the last time Harry took a leak and checked for text messages, Edguardo had confirmed his ETA. He should already be in the area.
Harry signaled to Rocco, then pointed to the unpaved road at the bottom of a steep hill. “There it is. With luck, we’ll meet up with someone before nightfall.”
“Preferably not drug runners,” Rocco said. “Just kidding, sweetheart,” he added for Gena’s benefit.
“Maybe we’ll meet only nice drug runners,” she replied.
“Watch your step going down here,” Harry warned as he started along the path.
“See the way Clay anchors his feet? Do like that,” Rocco said. “And watch your center of balance.”
At the bottom of the trail, Harry scrambled onto the road but saw no sign of Edguardo.
Gena came up behind him and paused to catch her breath. “It still seems pretty rural.”
“This is an old logging road,” Harry said. “Which in this area is the equivalent of the Autobahn. Once you leave the big cities, you don’t see much concrete or asphalt.”
Rocco held up a hand. “You hear that? Headed our way.”
Stepping out, Harry waved his arms. The vehicle slowed, then rolled to a stop.
“Let’s hope they speak English,” Harry said.
“Probably not, but I’m fluent in Spanish,” Gena said.
The two men in the front seat looked at them expectantly.
“Explain that we’ve been lost since our plane went down,” Rocco said to her. “Ask if they can give us a lift to the closest town. Or anywhere we can find a telephone.”
“Por favor.” Gena began translating.
After a minute she turned back to Rocco and Harry. “They said we can try their cell phone, but they don’t think
we’ll get a signal here. The driver said he can give us a ride to a mining office about ten kilometers away.”

The man in the passenger seat handed Gena an ancient-looking cell phone as he climbed out.

She passed the phone to Rocco. “He said they have bottled water in the back.”

“I’ll help him.” Harry followed the man to the back of the van.

Edguardo sat cross-legged on a blanket next to a cooler. He held out guns for Harry and the other man. Harry nodded in approval and then stuck his head around the van.

“Hey, Gena, come grab a couple of these.”

When she came around the back of the vehicle, Harry grabbed her by the arm and pointed his gun at her. Before she could react, he pulled her back toward Rocco. The other man flanked Harry.

“What the hell?” Rocco dropped the phone. “What are you doing, Clay?”

The driver pulled a handgun as well.

“Three against two,” Harry said. “And they don’t know about Edguardo. “So listen up. I’m not out to hurt either one of you.”

“Fine,” Rocco said. “Let her go and deal with me.”

“Shut up and listen,” Harry snapped. “Because her life will depend on it. I represent someone who is interested in the formula for SugarCane. I realize Minh Tran has made the same demand, but from what I’ve been told, Tran doesn’t have adequate leverage. You get the formula for me and your wife goes free.”

“You’re suffering from the same delusion as Tran,” Rocco began. “I wish I knew who had Rufin.”

Harry sneered. “I happen to know you took Dr. Rufin off the deck of Jengho’s Jaded Lady in Bangkok harbor. Now here’s the deal. You get Rufin to cough up the formula and then take out a personal ad in the Washington Post. ‘To Gena’ with a contact number. You have thirty-six hours. No tricks.”

“Thirty-six hours? From here?”

“There’s a mining office down the road.” Harry began backing up, tugging Gena along.

“No!” she said. “I won’t go.”

“You will. Watch.” At Harry’s nod, the other man pointed his gun at Rocco. Gena stopped struggling. “That’s better,” Harry said.

He pulled Gena around to the back of the van and shoved her into Edguardo’s open arms. She started to scream but Edguardo quickly silenced her.

“You hurt her and I’ll kill you!” Rocco shouted.

“I’ll look forward to it.” Harry tossed him a bottle of water, then climbed in the backseat. “Stay hydrated. Thirty-six hours.”

The driver spun away, spraying Rocco with dust and gravel.

“How are you two doing back there?” Harry leaned over the seat and looked at Gena.

Edguardo had her pulled across his lap. She struggled and he released her. But she didn’t go far, trapped between Harry and Edguardo.

“I don’t think she’s happy to see me.” Edguardo pulled out a pair of handcuffs. “Let’s make certain that you don’t get any bright ideas about running off again.” He lunged for her.

Gena kicked Edguardo, catching him off guard and landing a blow to his testicles.

“Bitch!” Edguardo quickly overpowered her and pinned her wrists in one hand. He slapped her repeatedly, while cursing at her in Spanish.

That Gena continued to fight back amazed Harry. He’d slapped Gena around plenty, but she’d been so pathetic, so willing to suffer that it had grown boring.

Watching her fight Edguardo made Harry wonder if this woman was the same one he’d been married to all those years ago.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Four Years Earlier
Arlington, VA

The showdown at Melita’s had been brutally disappointing. Stupid Gena had let him down again. Harry sat on the sofa and watched her crawl—crawl—across the floor.
“Would you like another drink, darling?” he asked.
She shook her head. “No … more.”
“No more what? Lies? No more sneaking around?”
“No more drinking.” She misplaced her hand and pitched forward.
“We both know you don’t mean that. Tomorrow you’ll wake up and remember the baby. And it will all start again.”
“The baby.” Gena started to weep, right on cue. “I lost the baby.”
Harry got up and moved to the bar, freshening his drink, ignoring Gena’s hysterics. Alcohol affected people differently, but once you knew their basic pattern it could be exploited with ease. Gena had a low threshold.
Of course, she’d been taking “nips” from her mother’s flask since she was twelve. That had been Millicent Armstrong’s way of easing her daughter’s nerves before a pageant. Apparently, Gena had come to hate vodka after that, turning to wine in college.
Harry had introduced her to Sloe Gin Fizzes. That he’d spiked the gin with grain alcohol meant Gena’s threshold was hit faster.
Drunk, she was completely malleable. She’d believe anything, do anything. And never remember a thing.
But alcohol also made her emotional, so when he needed better control, like this afternoon, he’d roll out the pharmacy. Dope her up good.
Unfortunately, she’d resisted Harry today. It had taken longer to get her sober enough to dress, to put on make-up. He’d rushed to Melita’s, but parking had been a bitch. Then Gena had balked. Balked.
By the time they’d arrived, Rocco had left the building. Harry’s dream of Gena fawning over him while they sat across from Rocco had gone up in smoke. She’d had on a low-cut dress and Harry had planned to kiss her, maybe discreetly fondle her breast right in front of Rocco.
Damn it, Harry’s whole reason for marrying her, to get back at Rocco Taylor, was not playing out as planned. In fact, tonight she might have pushed Rocco away for good.
In retrospect, Harry regretted not going with his “irate husband” routine. He could have confronted Rocco at the café and accused him of having an affair with Gena.
Or maybe Harry should have let them meet and then walked in on them. Except he didn’t trust Gena to be alone with Rocco for even a short time. Her confession about their little meeting this morning had proven that.
Harry watched as Gena, who had managed to get back up on all fours, tried to crawl for the door. He came around behind her, put his foot on her butt, and sent her sprawling again.
“Geez, honey. Be more careful. What am I going to do with you?”
“Are … are you still mad?” she wailed.
“Me? Mad? Because you kissed Rocco? Or because you admitted you still had the hots for him? Let me think.” He rolled his eyes. She was so pathetic, it wasn’t even fun tormenting her anymore. And yet he wanted to.
No, he wanted to torment Rocco. She was a piss-poor stand-in.
Damn it, Harry would have loved to catch them kissing today. Thanks for telling me everything, Gena.
Harry had been on his way home that morning after his flight was cancelled when he’d gotten a call from the security guard that her car was parked on the side of the road and needed to be moved. Gena had been in no shape to leave the house that morning.
Harry had found her at home, looking guilty, but after admitting leaving the house, she’d looked even guiltier.
He’d poured her a drink. “We need to talk, honey,” he’d said.
By the second drink, she’d spilled her guts, told him everything, including how she’d intended to leave him that morning.
“Because I slapped you around a little?” Harry had asked. “Did you tell Rocco that?”
Oh, no, Rocco thought she'd popped her face on the steering wheel. She'd been embarrassed that Rocco had seen her like that.

*Wish he could see you now, princess.*

Gena was trying to slink away again. Harry moved past her and closed the doors to his study.

“I’m not through with you, Gena,” he said. “Tell me what you did with Rocco today. When you climbed in his car.”

“I … I kissed him.” She started to cry.

“You kissed him. Did you fuck him, Gena? Did you tell him how you cry out for him at night in your sleep?”

“No,” she said.

“How can I believe you? I think I’ll call Rocco and invite him over here right now. Let’s end this and tell him everything, Gena. *Everything.* All your horrible little secrets. I’m tired of defending you and covering for you.”

She lunged for his leg and held on. “No! Please, I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again.”

Harry looked at her through narrowed eyes. It was all her fault that his chance to show Rocco up had been blown. He drained his glass and set it aside before stripping off his belt. At some point her begging for Harry’s forgiveness had changed to her begging for Rocco’s. And she didn’t even know it.

He doubled the leather and slapped it against his open palm. Sometimes it was good that she didn’t remember.
Chapter Thirty-Six

Thai Jungle
October 6, 10:00 A.M.

Maddy clung to Luc, willing the small motorbike to go faster. They were still in grave danger of being caught. Minh Tran’s guards had followed them, but after losing their trail at the river, how much longer had the guards searched the jungle? Had they gone back and called Minh Tran and told him of her escape? Were Tran and his small army now coming after them in helicopters? If so, she and Luc were sitting ducks.

She was also worried about Travis. That he had come for her made her heart swell. But not knowing if he’d gotten Luc’s message ate at her. The thought of Travis and his team getting ambushed and possibly killed was unbearable.

The motorbike hit a bump. She groaned.

“You okay?” Luc shouted over his shoulder.

“Yes.” She wasn’t, but they had no choice except to keep going.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she acknowledged to herself that she’d miscarried. A friend of hers had suffered several miscarriages and Maddy recalled her friend’s grief.

“Maybe it’s meant to be,” Maddy had said, unintentionally offering what now seemed like cruel comfort. “You got pregnant once; it’ll happen again.”

And while her friend did eventually go full term, those thoughtless words didn’t acknowledge or honor the tiny spark of life that had started to grow inside her friend’s womb.

Maddy grieved for her own loss now.

“There is a village ahead,” Luc said. “We’ll see if we can get a car. It will be faster and smoother than this. But if I have to promise them money to buy silence, will Travis Franks back me?”

“Yes,” Maddy said. “Travis is an honorable man.”

“I love you, Maddy,” Travis had said the last time they spoke. “We will make this work.”

Luc suddenly turned off the road and slowed before signaling for her to be quiet. A fast-moving vehicle approached from the opposite direction. Minh Tran likely had patrols looking for them now.

Luc helped her off the bike and into the jungle. She sank down behind a thick-leafed plant and watched as two jeeps came into view. Each vehicle carried four heavily armed men dressed in black.

The driver of the first jeep was a fierce-looking Thai male. Maddy ducked, certain the guard had spotted her.

“It’s them!” Luc shouted as he sprang forward and waved his arms.

The second jeep halted as two guards jumped free and pointed their firearms at Luc.

Then Travis pushed into sight. “Stand down!” he ordered, hurrying toward Luc.

“Where is she?” Travis’s voice was raw. “Where is Maddy?”

She climbed to her feet and lurched forward, unsteady. “Travis! I’m here.”

He raced to get to her and wrapped her in a powerful hug. “God, you’re okay!” He loosened his hold and held her at arm’s length, his eyes holding hers. “You are okay, right?”

“Just take me home. Please.”

“She needs a hospital,” Luc interjected. “She has lost a lot of blood and is running a fever.”

Maddy felt Travis sweep her into his arms. She wanted to tell him something, but suddenly it took too much effort to think. To breathe. The thought that she wasn’t going to make it popped into her mind.

“I need to tell you—” Maddy’s words were lost as she started coughing.

“Hush. Save your strength. Riley, get your ass over here!” Travis lifted her into the jeep. “Riley’s a medic.”

She tried again. “Need to tell you—”

This time Travis silenced her with a kiss. “The only thing I want to hear is that you love me and that you forgive me for not getting here sooner.”

Another man moved in and pressed fingers to her carotid artery. “I’m Riley, ma’am. How far along was your pregnancy?”

“Seven weeks,” Travis said. “Right?”

She looked over Riley’s shoulder at Travis. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you.”
Travis nodded. “I know. Like I said, the only thing I want to hear is—”
“I love you, Travis and—”
A wave of cramps cut off the rest of her words as the reality of her loss slammed home.
Travis said something, but Riley’s response was muffled. She tried to speak, but a massive weight crushed her chest.
Her vision blurred. That’s when Maddy realized she was passing out. Or passing over.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

A Private Hospital, Singapore  
October 6, 4:30 P.M.

In the last six hours, Travis Franks’s world had shifted on its axis. He paced to the window of the private, third-floor waiting area. Below was a marble fountain surrounded by statues of seraphim, but the sight brought him no peace. Maddy was in surgery. She’d lost the baby and now complications had set in. Internal bleeding, fever. Riley had kept her stabilized long enough to get her to a doctor in Bangkok, where she’d received several units of blood. But Travis had insisted they get her out of Thailand, far away from Minh Tran’s reach. Their private plane had barely gotten under way when she’d started bleeding again.
They had immediately detoured to this hospital, the same facility where Dante, Max, and Dr. Rufin had all been treated. Dr. Cho, the chief surgeon here, was a friend of Travis’s. Cho had examined Maddy’s X-rays and scans, then quickly routed her to an operating room.
*I shouldn’t have pushed to leave Thailand so soon. I should have let her rest.*

Travis and Riley had been escorted to this room to wait, though right now Riley was running an errand for Travis. Something Travis should have done himself, but he wasn’t about to leave the hospital. Hell, he would have gone into surgery if Dr. Cho had let him.

*Be strong, Maddy, for both of us.*

He checked his phone for messages, but there were none. Before leaving Thailand he’d gotten word that Erin had been rescued unharmed. The news that Logan Treyhorn was in a burn unit, barely clinging to life after setting himself on fire, was disheartening. Erin and Max were at the hospital with Logan, and Travis was eager for an update.

He was also waiting for additional information on yet another shocking report he’d received on Harry Gambrel. The crime scene evidence processed from the Boston condominium where pharmaceutical financier Abe Caldwell had been murdered included two strands of hair that matched Harry’s DNA. Chemically bleached hair.

Travis’s first reaction had been “what the fuck?” To have found Harry’s fingerprints in Bangkok and his hair at a Boston crime scene seemed impossible. Then Travis started connecting the dots.

The Agency had linked Abe Caldwell to Viktor Zadovsky. And Mr. Peabody had been their middleman. If Peabody had indeed held Harry in Bangkok, could Peabody have dragged trace evidence with him halfway across the world? Unlikely.

So why were Harry’s fingerprints and hair turning up but not Peabody’s? And why had Harry’s hair been bleached? Especially since according to Dr. Rufin’s description, Peabody also had bleached blond hair.

The coincidences were too strong not to ask: Were Harry and Mr. Peabody the same person?

If Harry had wanted to change his appearance, logic would suggest going opposite. Harry had brown hair, brown eyes. The opposite would be blond hair and blue or green eyes. And Peabody was blond with blue eyes. Plastic surgery could have easily altered other features.

Travis paced, not wanting to believe the worst of a man who’d once saved his life. Which was Travis’s blind spot, as Rocco had frequently pointed out whenever Travis defended Harry.

Granted, Harry had an abrasive side that usually showed worse when Rocco was around. Travis had chalked their differences up to the fact they had a romantic conflict. Harry had married Rocco’s ex-girlfriend. Rocco claimed she hadn’t been an ex. And then Gena had been hospitalized and a warrant issued for spouse abuse. That the charge had been dropped meant no disciplinary action for Harry.

But now another thought occurred to Travis. Had Gena dropped the charges out of fear of retaliation? Had Travis overlooked things because he felt a debt to Harry?
Possibly, but not intentionally.

One thing was certain, as soon as they were back in the states, Travis would appoint someone else to investigate the matter. Because if Harry had faked his own death, he was a traitor. A traitor with some valuable connections.

*Connections that could leak inside information?*

The door pushed open as Dr. Cho came in, still wearing his surgical scrubs.
Travis rushed to meet him. “How is she?”

“Better. I found a tear in her abdominal wall, probably caused by her falling off the fence. I want to keep her a while, to ensure the bleeding doesn’t start again, from surgery or the miscarriage.”

“Will she have any problems getting pregnant in the future?”

Dr. Cho shrugged. “I did not see anything that would cause a problem, but she should follow up with her personal physician as soon as she is home.”

Home. Something else he needed to talk about with Maddy. His place? Or hers? Or maybe a brand new place?

“When can I see her?” Travis asked.

“She’s being moved to a room now. I’ll show you.”

As it turned out, Maddy’s room was on the same floor, at the opposite end of the hall. She looked like she was sleeping, but her eyes fluttered open when they walked in. Travis moved up beside her bed and took her hand while Dr. Cho checked her vitals. When Dr. Cho finished, Travis shook his hand.

“Thank you again, doctor. I am indebted.”

Dr. Cho bowed. “It is I who still owe you. Perhaps we will meet next time under less trying circumstances.”

“I will arrange that.”

Cho was not only a gifted surgeon, but a loyal contact. Travis had helped get Cho’s wife’s family out of mainland China, which had forged a bond.

When Travis turned back to Maddy, she looked confused. “He said I’m in Singapore. How did I get here?”

He tugged a chair beside her bed but didn’t sit. Instead he leaned over the bed rail and kissed her. “Do you remember the doctor in Bangkok?”

“Vaguely.” She rubbed her head. “I feel woozy.”

“Anesthesia. You had some surgery to repair a tear, but the doctor said you’ll be fine.” He took her hand again and squeezed it. “I’m sorry about the baby, Maddy.” He wanted to say “We’ll have more” but her sad expression stopped him.

“How long had you known?” he asked.

“I had suspected for a week or so before I was abducted, but I’d just done a test that morning.” She looked at him. “I would have told you, but you were traveling and I was going out of town.”

“All that matters right now is getting you home and healed.”

“You probably already told me this, but how did you find me? I was so afraid no one would come.” Tears ran down Maddy’s cheeks.

Travis gingerly reached forward and claimed a tear with the tip of his finger. God willing, he would spend the rest of his life making certain this woman knew, unequivocally, that he would always be there for her.

“All the credit for locating you goes to Luc Ski-hawtra. Once I knew that Minh Tran had you, I came to Thailand. But I certainly wasn’t able to uncover the clues Luc did.” Travis intended to keep Luc working for him. Luc’s street smarts and connections were invaluable.

“But Luc said you created a diversion in order to rescue me. Did you orchestrate the raid on Minh Tran’s warehouse?”

Travis shrugged, noncommittal. “Tran’s longtime enemy Jengho Vato has been trying to raid Tran’s businesses for two years, but Tran always stayed ahead of him. Vato got lucky this time; got a tip where the bulk of Tran’s inventory was stored.”

“A tip, huh?” Maddy swiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “I just realized how you cultivate all the ‘favors’ you’re so famous for. Does Vato even realize that he owes you for his ‘lucky’ break?”

“No, and I’ve taken great pains to ensure the tip was anonymous. For now,” Travis said. “We have an unconfirmed report that Minh Tran was killed during the raid. Vato supposedly got shot, too, but is expected to recover. Their respective networks are in chaos right now, so details are sketchy. But we’ve had reports of Minh Tran’s residences being looted by his own people.”

Maddy shuddered. “He was an evil man. If Vato is anything like him, then the world is probably better off without both of them. So where is Luc now? I didn’t get a chance to thank him.”

“He should be in Australia, taking a well-deserved vacation. And you did thank him, you just probably don’t remember.”

“Did I thank you?” she asked.

“Yes. And do you remember me thanking you?”

“For what?”

“For surviving. For loving me, Maddy. I never want us to be apart again.”

The door swung open just then as a nurse came in, followed by Riley. Riley paused and gave Travis a “mission
accomplished” nod.
“How are you feeling?” Riley stood at the foot of the bed while the nurse checked Maddy’s IV.
“I feel grateful,” she said.
Travis motioned to the nurse when she finished her tasks. “Would you mind witnessing something?”
The nurse looked from Travis to Riley, then pointed to herself. “Me?”
“Yes.” Travis held out his hand to Riley, who passed him a red velvet ring box. Turning back to Maddy Travis
opened it. “We’ll pick out another set when we’re home.”
Once again Maddy’s eyes filled with tears. The nurse scooted closer and looked at the rings. “Awwww.”
“I love you, Maddy.” Travis removed the diamond ring first. “And I never want to be separated from you again.
Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”
“Yes.” Maddy nodded. “Oh yes.”
He slid the ring on her finger and kissed her.
“Awwww.” The nurse looked ready to cry, too.
“Ready, Riley?” Travis moved closer to the bed.
Riley pulled a folded paper from his pocket. “Will you repeat after me?”
“What?” Maddy rose up on her elbows and stared at Travis. “You mean marry you right now?”
“Right now. Technically it won’t be legal until we are home and get a license, but my vow to you won’t change.
And we can still do the big wedding thing if you’d like. Anything you want, but I can’t wait any longer to pledge my
heart to you.” Travis squeezed her hand. “The whole time you were gone, it was all I thought about. Marry me, Maddy. Right here, right now.”
Maddy smiled and relaxed. “That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”
Riley cleared his throat. “Will you repeat after me?”
Maddy went first. Then Travis repeated his vows and kissed her. “I love you, Mrs. Franks.”
“Awwww!” The nurse pushed forward and hugged Maddy.
Riley shook Travis’s hand, and then he hugged Maddy. “I hate to marry you and run, but I’ve got a flight to catch.
I’ll see you back in D.C.”
When they were alone, Maddy held out her hand and stared at her rings.
“I’m serious. We’ll pick out different ones together,” Travis said. “These will be our memory rings.”
“I don’t know. This will always be the ring I married you with.”
The door opened again as a technician pushed in a cart. “I need blood and urine.”
“So much for our honeymoon,” Maddy joked.
Travis’s phone rang just then. He checked the screen, saw it was Dante.
“You can step outside if you need to.” Understanding Travis’s need for privacy, Maddy glanced at the lab tech.
“Thanks. I’ll be right back.” Travis answered the call as he left the room. “Hello.”
“How’s Maddy?” Dante asked.
“Better. We had to stop in Singapore for some emergency surgery, but we plan to leave here in the morning. What’s
up there? Did you get the reports I sent?”
“Yes and at first I thought it was a joke. Now? Well I’m having a lot of thoughts about Harry. Second thoughts.”
Me too, Travis thought. “Start pulling his old case reports and travel logs. See if any of it matches up to Abe
Caldwell’s travels. Get phone records, too. Harry would have been too smart for that, but Caldwell might have
slipped up.”
“I’m on it. I’ve got a situation you need to be aware of, too. Rey Salvador, a retired INTERPOL agent Rocco and I
worked with years ago, just called me. He said Rocco contacted him yesterday looking for private security. Rey
referred him to a trusted friend, Clay Watkins. But Watkins was found dead at his home. Looks like he was tortured.
Nothing missing except his identification.”
“When did you last hear from Rocco?”
“Over twelve hours ago. He’s not answering his cell, which isn’t unexpected, but he’s never gone this long without
calling in.”
“Damn it!” Travis moved farther down the hall. Were some of Minh Tran’s men still tracking Rocco and Gena?
Even if Tran was dead, the contract on Rocco probably hadn’t been rescinded.
“Rey is checking on his end to see how info might have leaked about Watkins,” Dante said.
“Any idea who else knew Rocco was calling Rey?”
“As a matter of fact, Rocco asked Cat to get Rey’s contact information for him.”
“And where did she get it from?”
“The Agency database. Nothing secure, but Rocco gave her a password to use to get into his archive,” Dante said.
“Look, Cat took precautions. If someone traced the call, it would have come back to a disposable cell phone registered in D.C.”
“What if someone inside is watching for Rocco’s log-in?”
Dante swore. “When I get my hands on whoever’s leaking info, I’m going to do more than plug holes.”
Travis rubbed his head. He needed to get back to D.C. “I just had an idea for a trap. Tell Catalina I’m going to need her to access Rocco’s account again.”
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Acapulco, Mexico
October 6, 6:30 P.M.

Rocco had imagined a hundred different ways to kill Clay Watkins, each one more painful than the last. Where had that bastard taken Gena?

After Clay and his cohorts drove off, Rocco had run down the road searching for the mining office. He’d finally found it, but the place was deserted, didn’t look like anyone had been there for months. There were no phones, no vehicles to steal. Rocco had continued down the road, determined to walk to Acapulco if necessary.

A farmer had come by and given Rocco a lift to Acapulco after he promised a hefty payment. Rocco had lost his gun and cell phone, but at least he had his wallet. He had gotten a room at the first motel he’d found.

Clay had obviously planned to double-cross Rocco all along. The plane wreck had thrown a monkey wrench into Clay’s plan, but it was clear that Clay’s phone must have been working and had a satellite chip.

Rocco wanted to call Rey Salvador but hesitated, uncertain whether Rey had helped set him up. He took a quick shower and then called Dante. Without a passport or proper identification, Rocco would need help getting back to D.C.

He had no choice but to use the room phone. Dante obviously didn’t recognize the number and answered with a gruff, “Johnson.”

“It’s Rocco.”

“Jesus Christ, man! Where are you? We’ve been worried.”

“I’m in an Acapulco motel. And I’m on the room phone. Our plane went down in a storm last night.”

“Are you and Gena okay?”

“No. We weren’t injured real bad, but the man I hired to help protect Gena double-crossed me. He’s got her and wants the same formulas everyone else is after in exchange for her release. The man obviously has connections to Minh Tran.”

“Had connections. Tran is dead. I’ll save the details for later. The real man you hired, Clay Watkins, was found murdered. His ID was stolen. Rey Salvador called me when he couldn’t reach you.”

Rocco sank down on the bed next to the phone. “This could be another setup. How the hell did this imposter know I’d even contacted Rey?”

“Look, I can’t say much since you’re not on a secure line, but Travis says he has it figured out,” Dante said. “And speaking of Travis, he found Maddy. She’s free. They’re on their way back as we speak.”

“That’s some good news.”

“Not completely. Maddy miscarried. I don’t know anything more than that. Also, we found Taz. Erin is unharmed and back with Max, but Taz is in the hospital. It doesn’t look good for him.”

“Damn. Look, I need you to pull some strings to get me back in the states ASAP. I lost everything in the plane wreck except my wallet. I’ll need a passport.”

“You’ve got it. I’ll see if we can get you out tonight. Travis has called for a top-secret meeting in the morning.”

“Good. I need to see him first thing.” Rocco checked the time. “I’ve got less than thirty hours to get a message to the fake Clay.”

“We will get Gena back,” Dante said.

“I know it.” After disconnecting, Rocco called the front desk to hire someone to make a mall run for him. He scribbled a list of clothes and shoe sizes.

He had barely finished when a maid showed up. Her English was poor, but Rocco reviewed the list and gave her money, promising to tip her well if she hurried.

When he was alone, he again debated calling Rey Salvador but ultimately decided against it. Whoever had taken out the real Clay Watkins might have compromised Rey’s communications.

Once more his thoughts drifted to Gena. Sweet Jesus! They’d been through enough. He wasn’t going to lose her again.

Wherever she was, Rocco would find her.
Stay safe, sweetheart.

*   *   *

Uncertain Location
October 6, Uncertain Time

Gena’s hindsight was perfect. Picking a fight with Edguardo hadn’t been smart. He’d ended up punching her so hard, she’d blacked out. Clay had watched and hadn’t lifted a finger to help. But what had she expected from someone who had kidnapped her?

They had traveled for several hours in the van. Then Clay and Edguardo had moved her to another vehicle, a dark sedan. Her feet had been tied and she’d been gagged. Then they’d tossed her on the backseat, thrown a coarse blanket over her, and raced off.

Another nightmare had begun when they’d loaded her onto a small plane. She had panicked and they’d drugged her. When she came to she was in the back of this car.

It was night. Were they still in Mexico?

All day she’d wondered how Rocco was. And where he was. She replayed their conversation from the night before. The thought that Harry had lied to both of them and purposely broken them apart was beyond comprehension. Why?

What had she ever done to Harry?

The car slowed and then stopped. Gena heard a sound like a garage door opening. The car eased forward slowly and then stopped again. This time the engine was cut off and the garage door lowered.

“Lucy, I’m home!” Clay called.

The phrase caught Gena in the stomach. That was the same thing Harry used to say when he’d come in the door. It had been her warning to run and hide. What a nasty quirk.

The car door opened and the blanket was snatched away. Clay helped her up and out of the car after slicing the rope from her feet. They were in a garage, but she saw nothing except the vehicle.

“This way.” Clay pushed her toward a door that opened into a large kitchen.

From there he shoved her toward the table. “Sit.”

Edguardo went to the refrigerator and pulled out two beers. He handed one to Clay, then leaned back against the counter and glared at her.

She didn’t think either man lived there. The place had a generic feel to it, like a vacation home that was rented out.

Clay loosened her gag. “Beer?” He held out the can.

Gena shook her head. “I don’t drink.”

He laughed. “Sorry. I forgot.”

She looked at him. He forgot?

Edguardo’s phone rang and he stepped out to the garage to answer.

Clay moved to get her a bottle of water. Then he removed the handcuffs. “Drink up. I’ll get you some food shortly.”

When Edguardo came back in, he motioned to Clay. The two men whispered in the far corner. A few minutes later Edguardo left. She heard the muffled sounds of the car starting and the garage door opening.

“He’ll be back in a few,” Clay said. “While he’s gone, you can take a shower. I’ve got a robe you can use until we can get you some clothes.”

“No thanks.”

“Suit yourself. I know I won’t mind seeing you walk around naked and I’m certain Edguardo won’t. In fact, I think he’d kind of like it. Especially if you started mouthing off to him again.”

Gena shook her head. “Fine. Where’s the robe?”

Clay swept his arm toward the hall. “This way. You and I are staying in the master suite.”

“I am not staying in the same room with you.”

“You’d prefer sleeping with Edguardo?” Clay smiled at her head shake. “Didn’t think so.”

He caught her elbow and steered her up the stairs into a spacious bedroom with a king-size bed. The bathroom was adjacent.

“Shower is here.” Clay turned on the faucets and adjusted the water. Then he turned to her. “Strip.”

“Please—” She already knew his reply if she refused.

“Shut up and do it!”

Gena turned away and peeled off her clothes. She’d caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror when they’d first walked in. She was filthy and who knew what kind of vermin had been in the jungle. But compared to the vermin who had kidnapped her—
Her skin flushed red as she stepped beneath the spray and washed herself as quickly as she could. After she rinsed her hair, she looked over her shoulder and saw that Clay continued to watch her. There was something chilling about the look on his face. She’d expected lust, had worried about sexual assault. But he seemed cold. As if she repulsed him.

It was the way Harry used to look at her.

“Where’s my robe?” she asked.

“In the closet.” He backed away and picked up a towel but didn’t move closer. “We’ll get it after you’re dry.”

Gena bit her lip against the urge to cry. She shut off the water and walked naked to Clay. He unfolded the towel and slowly moved behind her before draping the towel over her shoulders.

“You look upset, Gena,” he drawled. “Does it bother you to be naked in front of a stranger?”

“Of course it does,” she snapped.

“Tsk, tsk.” He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his mouth to her ear. “Good thing I’m not a stranger.”

Gena felt nauseated as the tone of Clay’s voice suddenly changed. Now he sounded like Harry. She locked her knees against the urge to faint.

“That’s right.” He laughed. “I’ve seen you naked before, Gena. And honestly, you left me just as cold as my wife as you do now.”
Rocco’s flight had landed at Dulles at six that morning. As promised, Dante had a driver and a new cell phone waiting at the airport. Rocco had instructed the driver to take him straight to his town house.

On the way, Rocco talked with Rey Salvador but was no closer to getting answers about how Gena’s abductors had connected Rey to Rocco. Rey had also promised to expedite evidence handling from the real Clay Watkins’s murder scene. If they could get a lead on the man who had assumed Clay’s identity, perhaps they could figure out where the man was holding Gena.

At his town house, Rocco had quickly showered and changed then got online and placed the personal ad in the Washington Post so Gena’s abductor could reach him. Keep the faith, Gena. I’m coming for you. The irony that he and Gena had just started to unravel their past only added to his fury. Rocco would get her back. And the men who had abducted her would deeply regret it.

Rocco reached his office ten minutes before his eight o’clock meeting with Travis and Dante. Once inside the building, he arranged to have some evidence processed. He still had one of the magazine clips with bullets, even though he’d lost the gun. It was a long shot, but if Clay had loaded them, perhaps a fingerprint could be lifted. Or maybe the bullets could be traced to a specific dealer, though that was even less likely.

But at this point, Rocco was desperate. He’d try anything that could save Gena.

He called Dante’s cell phone, to let him know he was in the office. Rocco was eager to get a full update from Dante and Travis.

“Yo, bro,” Dante answered on the first ring. “Where are you?”

“Headed for Travis’s office.”

“Detour to basement-level three. We’re in room seven.”

Rocco disconnected and headed for the elevators. Level three held the interrogation rooms. Had they had a break? Dante and Max were both in room seven. The room was darkened as was customary when an interrogation was under way in the adjacent room.

The men all shook hands as Rocco moved closer to the one-way glass. Travis Franks was on the opposite side, seated at a table. The subject, whom Rocco assumed was an Agency employee since he wore an ID badge, was seated across from Travis, facing the glass window. The subject was sweating profusely, stuttering as he answered questions about his work history.

“Who’s this?” Rocco asked.

“Ian Brown. Works in information technology. Before that he worked in records,” Dante said. “He’s our mole. Travis set up an impromptu sting. We nailed Ian this morning when he checked your log-in records.”

“Was he waiting for me to get here this morning?” Rocco glared at Ian through the glass.

“No. Travis had Cat log on, as you, last night. Travis wondered who else knew that you’d contacted Rey Salvador. His hunch that the leak came from here was dead-on. Someone obviously pried into Rey’s affairs and learned that he’d contacted Clay Watkins.”

“Do we know who Ian was leaking this info to?” Rocco asked.

“Ian claims he doesn’t know the guy’s identity.” Dante held up a hand. “Travis isn’t buying that either. Ian admitted that he’d originally monitored information for Abe Caldwell. Ian said his new handler took over at Abe’s death and basically blackmailed him into continuing.”

Max snorted. “That part was really pathetic. He was whining, ‘It’s not my fault. He made me.’ Right! Made him take shiny gold Krugerrands.”

“How long has this been going on?” Rocco asked.

“It appears Ian’s been accumulating Krugerrands for over three years,” Max said. “Travis had his apartment searched. They found keys to his grandmother’s safe-deposit box. Ian’s on her accounts and had been visiting the bank monthly.”
“As soon as Travis mentioned pulling his grandmother in as an accomplice, Ian grew more cooperative,” Dante added.
Turning back to the window, Rocco watched Travis slide a drawing across the table. An artist’s composite? Ian picked it up and shook his head when Travis asked if he’d ever seen the man.
“What’s with the sketch?” Rocco asked.
“It’s the notorious Mr. Peabody,” Max said.
“Another popular guy.” Rocco knew that Minh Tran had placed a price on Peabody’s head, but other than that, the man was an enigma.
“That’s part of Travis’s other news,” Dante said. “He had Rufin work with an artist to get a composite of the man who kidnapped him and murdered Boh-dana in Bangkok. The composite also matches the description of Zadovsky’s middleman, Mr. Peabody.”
“You got another copy of that sketch?” Rocco asked. “I want to see if the guy rings any of my bells.”
Dante looked around. “There was one here somewhere.”
“I’ll go print another,” Max volunteered. “I want to call Erin and see how Logan is.”
Rocco stopped him. “Glad to hear Erin is safe.”
“Thanks. Gena will be safe soon, too,” Max said.
“Is that something you got a message on?” Rocco pointed to Max’s head.
“No. It’s a promise to a brother.” Max touched his chest over his heart, then slipped out of the room.
“Does Travis think there’s a connection between Ian and Peabody?” Rocco asked.
“That’s where it gets weird,” Dante said. “Travis got some fingerprints from the warehouse where Rufin was held. The prints matched Harry Gambrel’s.”
“What?” The news stunned Rocco. Travis had always suspected that Harry was alive. Was this proof?
Dante shrugged. “Travis’s initial conclusion was that Harry had been held at that same warehouse. But we just got reports on trace evidence taken at Abe Caldwell’s murder scene. Hair was found there matching Harry’s. Bleached blond hair. The man who abducted Rufin was bleached blond, too, and—”
“The man who posed as Clay Watkins is bleached blond.” Jesus. “I need to see that composite now.”
Dante opened his phone and called Max. “He’s on his way.”
“How could Harry’s fingerprints and hair show up in Bangkok and Boston?” Rocco asked. “Somebody’s screwing with us.”
The door opened. Max came in with a copy of the drawing.
Rocco started swearing as soon as he saw the sketch. “I don’t believe this!” He held it up. “This is the fucker who posed as Clay Watkins. This is who has Gena.”
“I’ll text Travis,” Dante said.
Rocco moved to the phone at the desk and called the lab. “Did you get any prints from the clip I dropped off? Yes, I need it ASAP!”
Inside the interrogation room, Travis casually glanced at his cell phone before checking his watch. “I need a minute,” Travis said. Then he stood and moved to the door. The guard let Travis leave.
Ian remained seated in the room and stared nervously at the window. Rocco wanted to go in and beat the idiot to a pulp. Ian was scared, but only for himself. Did he have any idea how many other lives he’d endangered by selling information?
Travis came into the room and greeted Rocco.
“Did these guys bring you up to speed?” Travis asked.
“Yeah,” Rocco held up the composite. “This guy has Gena. He posed as Clay Watkins. I sent the lab the clip of bullets he gave me. The lab got two partials off the casings. They’re running the prints now. If we can get a positive ID—”
Travis cut him off. “Call the lab,” he said to Dante. “Tell them to compare the prints to Harry Gambrel’s first.”
“Harry Gambrel? You think he’s working with Peabody?” Rocco asked.
“I think Harry is Peabody.”
The room went silent at Travis’s words.
Dante’s phone rang. He read the display. “It’s the lab,” he said to Travis. “Hello? Yeah. I’ll let him know.” Dante looked at Rocco, then Travis. “The partial matches Harry’s prints.”
Rocco’s hands shook as he picked up the composite again. “I can’t believe this is Harry.”
“Obviously, he’s had surgery,” Max said. “Damn good, too.”
“He has Gena,” Rocco said. “I hope she doesn’t realize who he is until after I’ve killed him.”
“Can I help?” Dante moved in close. “If this is Harry, he sold Max and me out.”
“The bastard sold all of us out,” Max said.
“We need to lean harder on Ian,” Rocco said. “He has to know something that can help us track them down.”
“We could get Ian to send Harry a message regarding Rufin,” Travis suggested. “Try to lure him out.”
“That’s too obvious,” Rocco said. “Look, Harry claims that all he wants is Rufin’s drug formulas. Tell Ian to send a message that the chips have been retrieved intact, from Taz.”
Harry knew better than to celebrate too soon. He also knew to expect a trap. Always expect a trap.

When he’d gotten an urgent message from Ian Brown early this morning with news that Taz had been located and the data chips recovered, Harry had been cautious.

But when Harry had called him, Ian had expressed disappointment and apologized. “I contacted you prematurely. I thought they’d bring Dr. Rufin out of hiding to meet Taz. Instead they downloaded the data and will take a copy of it to Rufin. I’ll keep watching.”

“Can you access the data they downloaded?” Harry had asked.

“That depends on how many layers of security they have it buried under.”

“Check it out,” Harry had said. “I’m willing to pay a lot for a copy.”

It had taken Ian two hours to get back to Harry.

The next time they spoke, Ian had been a nervous wreck. “I found the data, but I’m afraid they’ll know it’s been compromised.”

“How?”

“I logged on with one of Erin Houston’s passwords. She works at the hospital where Taz is. I’ve used her password before to get info for Abe Caldwell. But this time I barely finished downloading when the server kicked me out and wouldn’t let me log in again. Do you know what that means?”

“It may mean nothing,” Harry soothed. “Now did you get a copy or not?”

“Oh, I got it all right. The whole freaking thing. It’s a gold mine. And a death sentence,” Ian had said.

That meant Ian had looked at his copy and realized the value of what he’d stolen. Ian had also realized he couldn’t return to work.

“I have to leave town,” Ian had gone on. “I sabotaged the server so they couldn’t trace it right away, but by tomorrow, I’ll be CIA toast.”

In the end, Harry had convinced Ian to part with the data for a half-million dollars. Which in the big scheme was nothing. In addition to scientific formulas, the data chips had details of Zadovsky’s business transactions. As blackmail, those alone were priceless.

It had taken some persuasion, but Ian had flown to Texas this afternoon on a private charter. He’d crossed the border to Nuevo Laredo an hour ago, expecting to meet with Edguardo tomorrow morning.

But Edguardo was on his way to Ian’s motel now. If the data Ian had was as good as Harry hoped, there was no need for Rocco to get to Rufin. And Gena’s last purpose in life would be to even an old personal score. With Rocco.

Harry wished he could have snapped a photograph of the look on her face last night when she had realized who he was. He had maneuvered her right in front of the bathroom mirror for the big moment. And for once in her life, Gena had not disappointed Harry. She’d been horrified.

He went into the living room, where Gena was tied to a chair.

“Miss me, honey?” He yanked the tape off her mouth, then cut the ropes at her ankles and wrists.

“If figure you’ve got to pee again,” he said. “And if you’re nice, I’ll feed you.”

She snatched the lapels of her bathrobe together, then rubbed her wrists to restore circulation. “How long do you intend to keep me here?”

Harry grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet before shoving her toward the bathroom. “I haven’t decided yet.”

He leaned against the doorjamb and grinned. Watching was nothing more than a way to humiliate her. If he could have gotten a hard-on for her, he would have taken it a step further and intimidated her sexually.

Except Gena had never turned him on. She’d been a means to an end. A way to torment Rocco.

When she finished in the bathroom, he forcibly marched her to the kitchen and set her down in front of a deli bag.

“Eat,” he said. “You never know when your next meal will be.”

He moved to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. “Are you sure you don’t want one of these?”

“No.” She unwrapped the ham sandwich and inspected it.
“It’s not poisoned or drugged.” Harry slammed a bottle of water in front of her. “I need you coherent when I call lover boy in a little bit.”

Harry had retrieved the phone number Rocco had listed in the newspaper, but he was waiting until Edguardo reported in before calling Rocco. Depending on his report, the stakes could be significantly different.

Gena cast sideways glances at him while she ate her sandwich.

“You still don’t believe it’s me, do you?”

She nodded. “I believe it, even though you don’t look like Harry. What I don’t understand is why you faked your own death.”

“Simple: money. The root of all evil and the source of all power.” Harry took a sip of beer. “My old man beat that into me. He swore the government was out to ruin the poor farmers. When I went to work for the Agency it was a double slap in the face to the old man. I’d left the farm and gone to work for the enemy. Old bastard must have rejoiced when he heard I was dead.”

“He regretted whatever passed between you,” Gena said. “He died calling your name.”

“Bet you got a kick out of that. Of course, since he left it all to you, I suppose you could afford to be nice to him.”

She pushed the sandwich away, half eaten. “People change, Harry. He did.”

“That’s rich coming from you. You’ve changed, too, Gena. But how much of that change was forced on you? After you left me, you went running home to Daddy, expecting him to bail you out. Except your daddy was broke, too. Did you check to see if the boy next door still wanted you? Or were you too drunk to drive?”

“I took responsibility for my drinking when I left you, Harry. I let alcohol control my life and I paid dearly for it.”

“I hate to ruin your illusion, but you weren’t even in control of your own addiction, Gena.” He moved around the kitchen. “Oh, sure, you had a tendency to overdrink to begin with, but that just made you easier to manipulate. I slipped you drugs, Gena. I spiked your gin with grain alcohol. You’d end up so drunk, you couldn’t walk, yet you’d beg me to call Rocco so you could apologize for losing his baby. Then I’d remind you it was your fault. And you’d beg me to punish you, because you thought you’d been careless. But it was an ectopic pregnancy, Gena. You’d have miscarried sooner or later.”

She lost all color. “You’re lying.”

“No, this is too rich to make up. I always wondered if you’d find out by getting your old medical records, but obviously you didn’t.”

Tears ran down her cheeks. “Why did you do it? I thought you were my friend.”

Harry leaned down to her eye level. “This is more like the Gena I remember. Want me to smack you around and see if you feel better?”

“Go to hell, you bastard.”

Harry snatched her up by the throat. “Keep it up. I think I’m getting turned on.” He shook her as she struggled to breath. “It was never about you, Gena. You were a way to get back at Rocco. And now we’ve come full circle, because you’re going to be the one to help me bring him down.”

Nuevo Laredo, Mexico  
October 7, 7:00 P.M.

Rocco hadn’t expected Ian Brown to agree to Travis’s demands. First, Ian had wanted a deal that included a reduced jail term. Travis had offered to recommend a life sentence.

“Instead of the death penalty? For what I’ve done?” Ian said. “You’re bluffing.”

Travis had proceeded to list the crimes Harry would be charged with, including murder. “And as Harry’s accomplice, you will be tried as an accessory to all these, in addition to treason.”

Then Travis had rattled off a few names of well-known traitors. All had life sentences. “The best deal you can hope for is a better federal prison than Su-perMax. Could you handle twenty-three hours a day in solitary?”

Ian eventually had agreed to cooperate. The messages back and forth with Harry had seemed to take forever, but Travis played the scenario perfectly.

They had rushed to get Ian south of the border only to have Harry tell him to get a room and wait for instruction tomorrow morning.

No one had expected Harry to wait until then, which was why Rocco was hiding in the closet of Ian’s motel room. He and Catalina Dion had posed as tourists and checked into a room shortly before Ian arrived.

Dante, Max, and Travis were scattered nearby in vehicles as they waited and watched. Rocco’s deadline expired in four and a half hours. Travis felt certain that Harry would make a move on Ian before that deadline was up. Rocco prayed Travis was correct.

While Rocco waited in the cramped space of the closet, he tried to figure out Harry’s motive. Money was obvious, but it didn’t explain everything. Rocco had decided that Harry was out to get him personally, until Dante and Max
mentioned the same thing. After all, Harry had left Dante and Max for dead. Or had he? Had Harry known they were alive and purposely sold them out?

Outside the room Rocco heard a noise.

Ian had the television on which made it harder to hear, but when the noise repeated, Rocco realized what it was. Someone had unlocked the room door.

He peered out the small crack and watched as the door eased open a half inch and then shut when the visitor realized the security chain was in place. Rocco texted an alert to everyone on the team.

Now, someone knocked on the door. Ian muted the television and cautiously approached the door, looking first at the closet as if he expected Rocco to answer.

"Ask who it is," Rocco whispered into his microphone.

Ian nodded as if forgetting he was wired for sound.

"Who’s there?" Ian called.

"Housekeeping," a female voice called. "Clean towels."

"Tell her you didn’t order any," Rocco instructed.

"I didn’t ask for towels."

"These were delivered to the front desk, senor. With a note that you were expecting them," the woman went on. "I have the note, too."

Catalina texted Rocco. TWO PEOPLE OUTSIDE DOOR. She had a camera hidden in the hall, so next came a picture.

Rocco recognized the man outside the door as the same one who’d abducted Gena in Sugar Springs. The man who’d driven the black truck.

"Open the door slowly." Rocco moved into position.

As soon as Ian released the chain, the door flew open and the man strode in, a handgun pointed directly at Ian.

"Who are you?" Ian began.

Rocco stepped out of the closet. The man turned just as Rocco fired a Tazer. The man dropped his gun and fell to the floor, writhing uncontrollably.

Rocco swept the man’s gun out of reach as Dante, Max, and Travis pushed into the room.

Max covered Ian, while Dante and Travis pulled the intruder to his feet.

"Where is Gena?" Rocco demanded.

The man shrugged. "No habla Ingles."

"No speak English," Dante said. "Cat, we need you in here."

Catalina slipped inside the room. "The maid is handcuffed in the hall, but I don’t think she’s involved," Cat said.

"Ask him where Gena is," Rocco said.

Cat translated. "He says you have no authority here. And if he doesn’t call his partner in the next few minutes, Gena will die."

Rocco surged forward, but Travis held him back. "He’s got a point. We can seek extradition."

The man laughed now, switching effortlessly to English. "Yes, call the local authorities so they can tell you exactly where to stick your extradition papers."

Travis tapped his earpiece. "We’re ready for you."

The door opened as Rey Salvador and two Mexican police agents came in. Rey flashed his INTERPOL credentials.

"This man, Edguardo Pina, is wanted for the murder of one of my agents in Monterrey."

Edguardo shook his head and glared at Rocco. "You’ll regret this."

"Not as much as you," Rey said. "I’m also booking you for the murder of one of the Rialto cartel’s couriers. How long do you think you’ll last in jail with that charge?"

"I’d rather be extradited!" Edguardo snarled.

Travis nodded. "You cooperate with us and we can arrange that. He’s all yours, Rocco."

Rocco listened as Edguardo called Harry, or Bob Munson, as Edguardo knew him.

"I have Senor Brown," Edguardo told Harry. "He wasn’t happy to see me."

"Looks clean. I watched his room a while before I went in and I’ve been driving now with no tails."

"Come on back," Harry said. "Tell Ian I’m looking forward to meeting him at last."

Edguardo gave Rocco the address and a sketch of the floor plan, then rode with the Mexican agents and Rey Salvador.

Rocco and Dante drove Edguardo’s car to the location. As soon as they had word that Travis and Max had the front and rear doors covered, Rocco pulled up the street and pressed the garage door opener. As soon as Rocco parked, they climbed out of the car.
“Ready?” Rocco had his gun out. 
Dante nodded as he opened the door leading into the house. They rushed inside together, a move they’d done a hundred times before. 
“About time.” Harry came around the corner and into the kitchen. 
“Freeze!” Rocco shouted. 
Harry darted out of sight before Rocco could fire a shot. 
“Give it up, Harry.” Rocco eased toward the corner. “We’ve got the place surrounded.” 
“Rocco!” Gena called out from another room. “He said for you to come in alone.” 
Dante shook his head. “He’ll blow you away.” 
Gena screamed. 
“I’m coming in.” Rocco tucked his gun at his back and stepped around the corner with his hands raised. 
Gena was seated in a straight-backed chair, her hands and ankles bound. She wore a white bathrobe. He noted the bruises at her neck. 
Harry stood behind her, a gun pointed at her head. “You really want to risk her life?” 
“You won’t make it out of here alive,” Rocco warned. 
“I’m counting on it. You really think I want to be taken alive? You know what they’ll do to me?” 
“Keep him talking,” Travis Franks’s voice said through Rocco’s earpiece. 
“Do you think you deserve anything less?” Rocco said. “You’re a traitor!” 
Harry laughed. “If you’re trying to piss me off, you can stop. I’m finished, and we both know it. This is my last hurrah.” 
“You always were a cowardly SOB,” Rocco said. “It’s one reason we never got along.” 
“No! Kerri Ford was the reason we never got along.” 
Rocco tried to recall who Kerri Ford was. The name was familiar, but he wasn’t sure why. 
“Kerri Ford,” Rocco repeated. Come on, Travis, give me a hint. 
“Jesus Christ. You don’t remember Kerri?” Harry tightened his grip on Gena’s shoulder, causing her to flinch in pain. “See, Gena. I told you that he was a male whore—that he’d fuck anything. Kerri Ford worked at the Blue Halo in Phoenix.” 
Rocco did remember Kerri. Blond, big smile. Big flirt. Harry had talked about her all the time. Until she died. 
“I remember Kerri,” Rocco said. “Sweet girl. No one believed she was the type to commit suicide.” 
“I wanted to marry her,” Harry said. “And then you had to ask her out. She was sure you loved her because you’d slept with her. And you don’t even remember her name!” 
“Max will take him out when he moves clear of Gena,” Travis said in Rocco’s ear. 
“How did it feel when I stole Gena?” Harry said. “Too bad you were never around to see our game.” 
“You mean the one where you beat her, Harry?” Rocco said. “Nice game.” 
Even that lost its fun,” Harry said. “Because you were gone. Hell, you weaseled out of everything.” 
“Sometimes things don’t work out like we plan.” 
“No shit. Do you think you could have survived what Dante and Max went through? You were supposed to be on that mission, not Max! It should have been you!” Harry leaned lower, closer to Gena. “Tell him good-bye, princess.” 
Then he pressed his lips to Gena’s temple and kissed her. 
“Fuck you, Harry,” Gena said as she slammed her head backward, straight into Harry’s nose. He jerked away, screaming and swearing. 
Rocco fired his gun. Harry fell backward with the force of the shot. Immediately, Dante swept in the room and moved to where Harry was rolling on the floor in pain. 
Rocco raced over to Gena and began cutting away her bindings. She stood and Rocco snatched her up and carried her into the next room. 
“Is he dead?” Gena asked. 
Rocco shook his head. “I wanted to kill him for what he’d done to us, to you. But when I heard him admit what he did to Dante and Max, I realized he needed to live. To answer to them and for everything else he’s done wrong. Harry wanted me to kill him so he would avoid standing trial and going to prison.” 
Max rushed in to where Rocco and Gena stood. “Travis wants to know if Gena is okay.” 
Tell Travis she’s perfect.” 
Tell Travis she wants to go home,” Gena added as Max headed out the door. 
“Home with me?” Rocco asked. “At least for now? I love you, Gena. And we have a lot of time to make up for.” 
“Home with you?” Gena lifted her lips for a kiss. “Sounds like heaven.”
Epilogue

Key West, FL
October 12, 4:30 P.M.

The reflected sunlight hurt Rocco’s eyes as he watched Gena rise up from an ocean wave. Did that excuse sound legit? Or did he need to rub sand in his eyes to disguise the fact he’d just teared up while sitting there. Watching her.
His Gena.
She had returned to Arlington with him, and except for a few times when Rocco went in to the office, they hadn’t been apart. He wanted it to stay that way. Forever. And since she’d agreed to marry him, his chances at forever were looking damn good.
The rest of it was all up in the air. Where to live? What to do? Gena had insisted that he stay with the Agency, not wanting to influence his decision. But Rocco knew it was time for a change. He’d been feeling restless for a while.
Then Gena teased that neither of them knew what they wanted to do when they grew up, which sounded perfect to Rocco. He and Gena would build a new life together, with no remnants from the past. In fact, the sooner the aftermath of the old was cleared away, the better.
The extent of Harry’s betrayal still wasn’t clear, but he’d agreed to plead guilty and cooperate in exchange for a life sentence. Of course Harry was still playing games with investigators, teasing them with information in hopes of gaining favors. Which made Rocco grateful the investigation was someone else’s job.
He watched as Gena walked toward him, her face turned up to catch the waning sun. What this woman did to a bikini should probably be outlawed in public.
The ache in his chest grew heavier as she approached. Would it ever go away? This haunting desire to be with her? Or had he lived with it for so long, it was embedded in his psyche? He rubbed his sternum.
Gena reached the edge of the blanket. She stood there and smiled. Then she bent over and shook her head, spraying him with water. “A gift from the sea.”
“You? Or the droplets?”
He stood and helped her dry off before pulling her close for a kiss.
“I’m seriously considering a career as a beach bum,” he said.
“Great minds think alike. I’ve been imagining myself as a sand castle builder.”
“Great minds love alike.” He spread kisses along the curve of her neck. “Ready to head back? I promised Dante I’d man the grill this evening.”
“And I want to man the kitchen. I don’t want Catalina in there unless she’s preparing tea for herself.”
“How long does morning sickness last anyway?”
“According to Cat, hers never goes away. Poor thing.”
Dante, Catalina, and their two-year-old son, Marco, had flown to Key West yesterday with Rocco and Gena. They were the first to hear the news: Cat was pregnant.
“I was thinking. We could throw them a combination wedding and baby shower,” Gena said.
“You might want to check with Erin on that,” Rocco said. He, Max, and Dante had all laughed to learn that each of their fiancées had suggested throwing wedding showers for the others.
“Let’s just do one big party instead,” Max had suggested. “Like this.”
They were staying at an eight-bedroom beach house Travis Franks had rented for the week. Except Travis and Maddy hadn’t shown up yet. Rocco hoped it wasn’t because Maddy was having complications from the surgery she’d had in Singapore.
Max and Erin were swinging in the oversized hammock on the back deck of the house. Max was reluctant to let Erin out of his sight, which Rocco could understand.
“Travis just got in,” Max said as Gena and Rocco approached the deck. “Says he’s got a big announcement to make at dinner.”
“Dinner. Food.” Rocco’s stomach growled. “I’m starving. And since I’m cooking, I say we eat in an hour.”
Gena followed him into the kitchen. “I wasn’t hungry until you mentioned food.” She opened the refrigerator and
began pulling out dishes she’d prepared earlier.
“Any of your potato salad left?”
She shook her head. “Dante and Max finished it off at lunch. But I’ll make more.”
Rocco had been surprised to discover that cooking was another skill Vianca had taught Gena. And Gena had mastered it, too.
Rocco and Gena fell into an easy camaraderie with each other as he seasoned steaks and she chopped vegetables for a salad.
“Let’s eat outside,” she suggested. She piled a tray with dishes and silverware, then followed Rocco and the steaks out to the deck.
Travis and Maddy were standing at the rail, looking out at the beach. Rocco smiled. He had been the first to learn that Maddy and Travis were married. That they were a perfect match was obvious.
“Yo! Look at those steaks!” Dante said as he and Cat came out of the house with Marco in tow.
Cat grimaced at the platters of food and moved to the far side of the deck. “I just got my stomach calmed down.”
Ignoring the adults, Marco made a beeline for the steps, lugging his sand bucket and shovel. He had claimed the sand at the bottom of the deck stairs as his.
Gena ferried food out from the kitchen, declining help. On her final trip, she carried a tray with a pitcher of fresh limeade.
“The kind with pineapple, I hope?” Cat asked.
“Yes. Anyone else?” Gena ended up pouring a glass for everyone.
“Guess this is as good a time as any,” Travis said. He moved to his briefcase and withdrew several large envelopes.
Rocco groaned. “No work! We’re on vacation.”
Travis shoved an envelope into his hands, then gave one to Max and Dante, too. “You can open them later to review the fine print, but basically they’re job offers. Damn good ones. I’ve agreed to head up a new private security operation and I need expert help to build it.”
“You’re leaving the Agency,” Rocco said.
“Resigned last week,” Travis confirmed. “Maddy and I have been house hunting in Miami. The new headquarters will be in South Beach. Your offers include relocation.”
Dante held his limeade up. “I’m in.”
Max nodded. “Me, too.”
Everyone looked expectantly at Rocco now. He wrapped an arm around Gena. “I’ll have to get back to you later, Travis. After Gena and I have discussed what we want.”
Gena smiled up at him. “Thanks for that, but it’s your call. You have my support either way—”
She winked. “Travis had me at **South Beach.**”
“Guess I’m in, too,” Rocco said.
Dante grinned. “I propose a toast to the new venture.”
“To new ventures!” Rocco echoed.
Max raised his glass now. “To brothers found. And to the remarkable women we love.”
Everyone cheered at that.
Rocco rubbed his sternum. That ache in his chest was back, but this time he had a name for it. It was love fulfilled and expanding.

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