

## Chapter One

*San Carlos Lucas, Colombia*

*Mendoza Compound*

An ear-piercing cry interrupted the computer's steady hum, twisting Eve Taylor's gut into a tight knot. She grabbed her gun, crouched low, and surveyed the dark room. The excited chatter of a howler monkey had pushed her sixth sense into overdrive. Laughing it off, she willed her heart to slow to a semi-normal rate.

"Damn," Eve whispered into her mic. "Curious George just scared the bee-jesus out of me."

"Hey, the monkey's telling you to speed things up in there," Rex, the partner she'd left hidden deep in a shelter of tropical foliage, answered. "What's taking so long? It's fucking hot out here."

"Relax, Rex, I've almost got it. Keep your eyes open, but loosen the tight-ass grip you've got on your weapon. Don't want you taking out any of our chattering friends by mistake." *Not to mention letting Mendoza's men know we're here. Too much tension puts the team at risk.*

"What makes you think—"

"You always go overkill on the trigger when you're pumped." She needed to ease him down a notch. "I'll lay odds that loud-ass monkey scream got a few of your pistons knocking."

"Miss Know-It-All," Rex said wryly.

"That I am. Now don't be so impatient."

"I'm not impatient. I'm pissed. I can't believe Mendoza somehow managed to block the satellite signal. Beaming up the intel would've been much faster—not to mention easier. And why didn't we know about this before arriving on site?"

"What can I say? Mendoza can afford all the latest geek toys. We should be grateful Blackburn got the password to us before his cover was blown and Mendoza took him out." Blackburn was one of many good IDEA agents killed during the war to stop Mendoza's reign of terror.

She glanced at her watch and finished copying the drug lord's computer files onto a flash drive. She popped the drive out, sealed it in a plastic bag, and tucked the package safely into one of the zippered pockets of her camouflage pants. The blocked signal may have slowed her down, but it hadn't stopped her from getting what she needed. Plus a bonus. One big fucking bonus.

Eve turned the laptop off and the screen flickered to black. She picked up her 9mm Glock from the desk, the solid grip both comforting and commanding. Soundlessly, she slipped through the double French doors into the fading cover of the night.

Avoiding the landscaping and security lights, she crept across the compound's large backyard. Eve reached the perimeter of the pool house, stopped, put on a pair of night vision goggles—NVG's—and surveyed the grounds. Two guards passed far to her left. She spotted her team, alert and waiting for her. Randi Ford, the farthest away, hid beneath the cover of a large, dense breadnut tree near the wall her team had scaled to gain entrance to the compound. Danny Carlyle knelt to one side of a closer tree and Rex Brewer, her partner and best friend, crouched near a large storage shed.

Her tiny earpiece crackled. "Eve, got you in my sights. Any other problems with the files?"

*Other than the damned blocked sat signal? I'd say so...if I could.* Fucking Mendoza was a lot more dangerous than the IDEA first assumed. Eve couldn't share the details until she showed her boss what else she'd found in the bastard's files.

A flutter of guilt hit her belly dead center. Withholding the unexpected info she'd found from her team made Eve uncomfortable. This mission had just grown more important than anyone could've imagined. She shook the self-reproach off, moved into the deeper shadow of a tree, and watched the guard's silhouettes fade in the infinite darkness. Eve cleared her throat. "The password intel was right on the money. If these files don't nail Mendoza's ass, it isn't gonna happen."

"Exactly what I wanted to hear, partner," Rex whispered, sounding more in control.

"Jesus, Rex, what a fuckin' miracle," Danny chimed in. "You finally stopped whining."

"Bite me, dude. I don't whine."

Eve smothered a smile. Her team's focus and black op skills were unsurpassed. The fun-and-games attitude eased their tension. She couldn't knock what always seemed to

work. She wondered what they'd think if they had any inkling how intense this op had just gone.

"Eve," Rex said. "You've got about a hundred yards until you'll reach Carlyle."

"Yeah, I see him. Be hard to miss those Dumbo-size ears."

Rex and Randi's muffled laughter rumbled over her ear bud. Eve looked through her NVGs. Danny grabbed his crotch, a smirk plastered on his lips. "Hey, doll face, if you think my ears are big, you should see my—"

Gunfire erupted.

Danny clutched his chest and dropped to the ground. Eve, a tingle coiling up her neck and settling in her scalp, stood in horror, her chest constricted in a tight knot. A bullet whined past her right ear and she dove for cover, returning fire while rolling onto her side.

"Danny's down," Randi yelled.

*No shit.* Eve crawled to a better position behind a low bush and searched for the source of the gunfire. Mud and leaves stuck to her, thorns scratched across her clothing. *Crap.* "This area is supposed to be secure."

"I don't know where the hell these guys came from," Rex growled.

"Sounds like two shooters." Eve took off her NVGs, improving her depth perception. "I spotted muzzle flashes about twenty-five yards back on my right, near the flowering bushes. You see them?"

"Negative on that." Rex's voice held frustration. "How about you, Randi? Got 'em in your sights?"

"I can't see anyone."

Eve's heart pounded hard and loud in her ears.

"Carlyle's not moving," Rex said. "Cover me while I check on him."

"Copy that." Eve emptied her Glock into the bushes and re-loaded without missing a beat. The acrid smell of fired weapons filled the air.

The barrage of bullets ceased and Eve replaced her NVGs.

Rex checked his fallen teammate's pulse. He looked up, shook his head, grabbed Danny's mic and ear bud, and shoved them in his pocket. "No pulse. Carlyle's dead."

*Aw, Danny.* Eve had seen men die before, but Danny wasn't just a member of her team. He was a friend. Losing him hurt. She shuddered then sucked in another deep

breath to clear the onslaught of sorrow. She fought back tears she didn't have time for and concentrated on getting the rest of her crew and the flash drive out safely.

She shook the heaviness from her arms. Reluctance trickled into her voice despite her best efforts. "Time to pull back. The extraction chopper will be at the rendezvous point in ten."

"Dammit," Rex said. "Eve, he—"

"I know. Danny was a good man. But we've got to go. ASAP!"

Gunfire sliced the predawn air again, forcing her into action. "Grab Danny. No way are we gonna leave him here for Mendoza's bastards to mutilate."

"I'm on it."

Eve closed her eyes, willed herself to stay calm. "You need help?"

"I've got him," Rex yelled, barely audible over a volley of gunfire. "You worry about getting your own sweet ass out of here in one piece. Randi's already at the wall."

Eve said, "Randi, the wall still clear?"

"For now, but we need to hurry." Randi's voice wavered. "All this gunfire's gonna bring out Mendoza's men in hordes."

"Too late," Rex shouted. "Reinforcements are already here."

"Let's get a move on." Ready to sprint to the wall, Eve patted the pocket holding the flash drive, wishing she'd taken the time in Mendoza's study to put it in her boot heel hidey hole. "Where the hell are these guys coming from?"

Rex, still firing his M-16 at the enemy, slipped an arm around Danny's body and heaved him over his shoulder.

Eve covered him with her weapon, stayed low, and began a zigzagging run toward the wall. As she neared the cover of the trees, a bullet slammed into her left shoulder, dropping her on impact. Pain sliced through her and she fought to stay conscious. She rolled onto her hands and knees struggling to get up. Her left knee screamed from the blunt force of her fall.

Rex put Danny down and moved toward her. "Eve, stay down! I'm on my way."

"Negative on that. I repeat, negative on that. I'm okay. You get Danny to the extraction site. I've got your back."

Eve forced herself to stand, hadn't had time to straighten to full upright when another burst of gunfire echoed in the air.

Rex took a hit and tumbled to the ground.

*Holy crap.* “Rex!” Bullets flew around her as she tried to get him to answer. Her fingernails bit into her palms, and she fought to keep her voice steady. Sweat trickled down her forehead, and she wiped it.

“Rex, can you hear me? How bad are you hit?”

No response.

“Rex, answer me!”

Still nothing.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Eve stared at the blood pulsing from her shoulder. “Randi, get over the wall and haul ass to the rendezvous point.”

“I can’t leave you and Rex.”

“Randi, I’m ordering you to retreat. Now move!” Eve gritted her teeth, fighting pain and frustration.

“What about the flash drive?”

It would take Randi longer to backtrack than for Eve to reach the wall, even stopping to check on Rex.

“The intel is secure. I’ve got it and I’m still in the game. I’ll be right behind you. Go, go, go!” Fragments of Randi’s breathless agreement—or argument—she couldn’t tell for sure, crackled through Eve’s earpiece, followed by the rustling of the agent’s hurried retreat.

Eve reloaded and fired off several more rounds, inching her way toward the line of breadnut and mango trees near Rex and Danny. She fought the veil of blackness threatening to take her down. *Dizziness. Shit, where’s that coming from?* Covered with sweat, she began to shake. By the time she reached the trees, Eve knew she’d underestimated the severity of her injury. A horrible judgment call, rendered even worse knowing what else Mendoza was involved with.

She wouldn’t get to Danny and Rex. She couldn’t reach the wall. Even if she did, she didn’t have the strength to climb it. She’d lost too much blood. With her injured shoulder growing numb, she was one handed. Her knee popped with blinding pain every time she tried to bend it. It’d be impossible to tuck the flash drive into the hiding place in her boot. And she damned sure wasn’t willing to risk another team member’s life by calling Randi back. There was no time. Danny and Rex were already dead.

No longer able to stand, she went down on her good knee, pulled the knife from its ankle sheath, and struggled to dig a hole. The smell of wet dirt encircled her like a veil. She buried the flash drive, covered it with mud and rocks then topped the mound with a scattering of wilted leaves. She peeled a piece of bark and carved a small V into the inner layer of the mango tree nearest her buried treasure.

Nausea and pain hammered her. Still she managed to cover her tracks and crawled on one knee back to the area behind the pool house. Eve glanced at her fallen teammates one more time and cringed, a sharp pang of guilt smacking her insides. She prayed Randi had reached the extraction point in one piece. Randi would regroup and bring another team back for Eve.

She dug out an iodine gauze pack from a pocket, tore the wrapper open with her teeth, and pushed the gauze into her wound. It stung like a son of a bitch, but it had to be done.

The flash drive was safe, at least for now, and a surge of satisfaction rose in her throat. The wet ground grew colder by the second. Or was Eve going into shock? Was she dying? That'd be one hell of a note. Who'd retrieve the flash drive if she were dead? Who'd get the vital new intel to the IDEA? So many lives were at stake. She snorted. Apparently, anyone could've done a better job than she did.

Occasional bursts of gunfire echoed in the distance as the distorted voices of Mendoza's men moved closer. The damned monkey started chattering again. She flipped onto her back and forced her breathing and heart rate to slow. The night's stars faded into the orange-red sky of morning sunrise and a welcomed calm washed over her. For the first time in her life, Eve wished she was still back home in Duncan Falls, Iowa with her four overprotective brothers. The Alpha Four, she called them. They'd be royally pissed if she didn't somehow get out of this mess.

Her mind turned to thoughts of Mac, the only man she'd ever loved. Maybe he'd been right after all. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this line of work. Maybe she did need him. So many maybes.

Eve closed her eyes and the maybes and darkness took her.

## Chapter Two

*San Carlos Lucas, Colombia*

*One week later*

“Don’t give up,” Eve squeaked. Her throat burned like hell, but she forced herself to say the words out loud, needed to prove she was still alive. She had no intention of dying in the small, dark prison cell hidden deep in the musty underground chambers of Miguel Mendoza’s huge compound.

“Please, God, let me survive the next round of interrogation.” It was going to happen. The relentless bastards had already covered her body with cuts and bruises inflicted with unrivaled skill and enthusiasm.

Fever from the bullet wound to her left shoulder made pain and exhaustion her constant companions, kept her weak. Sheer determination kept her fighting to stay alive. She had to get the information back to the IDEA before it was too late.

In spite of the heat and humidity, Eve shivered, curled into a ball on the stained, pitted floor of her prison. Dried, splattered blood of past prisoners marked her cage. The lingering stench of stale urine, feces, and vomit had her continuously pushing back waves of panic and nausea.

Trickling through a six-inch hole near the ceiling, light splintered the bleak darkness. Eve cringed at the scratching sound of tiny feet and the occasional flash of cat-size rats skittering by.

“Go away. Find somebody else’s bones to pick today.” She rubbed her throat, tried to soothe the burn. “And take your friends with you.” She refused to think about what other types of creepy-crawlies shared her space. Instead, she fine-tuned her third escape plan.

*Will it be third time’s the charm, or three strikes you’re out?* If her newest attempt at freedom proved successful, she’d grab the hidden flash drive and be out of San Carlos Lucas by morning. *Mission complete.*

Eve wasn’t about to let Mendoza win his little game. He’d kill her if he did. She’d be of no further use to him. No matter how many times he beat her, she wouldn’t talk. He

wanted to know what information she'd obtained and demanded she hand over the flash drive she'd downloaded with the names of associates, buyers, warehouse locations, dates of upcoming drug deals, and more. Much more than the IDEA ever imagined.

Turned out the arrogant bastard conspired with an Afghani terrorist group plotting a major strike against the Pentagon. They'd failed in their 9/11 attempt to annihilate the building and the people inside. To get the job done this time, they planned to use a biochemical toxin developed by Mendoza's chemists and delivered by a prototype U.S. military aircraft. The weapons could kill millions of people in the surrounding area, reaching as far as the White House. How he'd get hold of the aircraft was anyone's guess. The bastard would do anything for money. So hell yes, he wanted the flash drive back and Eve dead.

"Sorry to disappoint, buddy."

Eve relished the frustration escalating on Mendoza's face. Did he know she'd gotten past his encrypted codes and found the hidden file on the terrorist group? Eve was a computer expert and for the most part, was up to date on the latest cyber gadgets, but she'd never seen anything similar to the way his files had been concealed. If she hadn't been looking for a way around the blocked satellite signals, she wouldn't have found the file. Yeah, she'd let Mendoza speculate and second-guess how well he'd buried the data.

Let him worry if someone on her team had carried the intel from the compound and passed it to the International Drug Enforcement Agency's joint task force or Homeland Security. If Mendoza believed the flash drive was in their hands, he had to ask himself when and where they'd come for him. And were they already in hot pursuit of the terrorists he'd been dealing with?

In one of her more creative moments, Eve hinted she was on the take and planned to auction the flash drive to rival drug cartels. Enemies could be plotting his demise already, she'd told him. His files had been breached, but she'd only admitted to finding information on his drug and money laundering business.

Still, he had to question whether she'd uncovered the Afghani plans. He wouldn't want a bunch of pissed off terrorists after him. And pissed they'd be if U.S. forces foiled their planned attack on the Pentagon and D.C. area. Mendoza would be a hundred times better off in the custody of IDEA than with the Afghani fanatics on his ass.

Mendoza had no clue what she'd found. If he did, she'd already be dead.



If her split lip didn't hurt so much, she would've smiled. "The man is beyond frustrated." The longer Eve kept him guessing, the longer he'd keep her alive. And the longer she stayed alive, the better her odds were for escape.

She was drifting toward sleep when heavy boots pounding in the hall signaled the guards' return. Garbled voices grew clearer, the footsteps closer. The guards fumbled with a key ring before a lock clicked as they unbolted her door. The heavy metal frame crashed against the wall, a bang echoing through the darkened chamber. Eve was too exhausted to be afraid of the minion guards anymore. She'd save her fear for a bigger fish. Like a piranha named Miguel Mendoza.

A pair of calloused hands jerked her to her feet.

Eve drove the elbow of her good arm into her nearest assailant's stomach. Satisfaction reigned as her elbow sank into his large belly.

He rewarded her with a solid cuff to the right side of her face.

She staggered, ears ringing and spots flashing in her vision.

It took a few seconds to regain her balance. Before she could high five herself, a flashlight blinded her. She swatted it away. Several blinks later, her eyes adjusted only to find Mendoza standing before her, arms crossed, and a smug look on his face.

*Damn. Looks like the bigger fish has arrived.* Inkling of fear threatened to ruin her tough woman act.

Ignoring Mendoza, she spoke directly to the guard with the rough hands and rock solid slap. "Hey, Paco, do you mind? You're interrupting my nap time here."

"Do you have any idea who you are toying with?" Mendoza's deceptively smooth, silky tone caused Eve's insides to knock and rattle.

She shoved aside exhaustion and covered with a cloudburst of sarcasm. "Sure, I know. I can quote the memo. You're an evil drug kingpin responsible for smuggling well over sixty billion dollars' worth of cocaine into the United States during the last four years alone. You also run the largest money laundering operation in Colombia. You're ruthless and brutal, murdering anyone who stands in your way including, but not limited to, several agents of the IDEA task force team. Basically, you're an all-around prick. Oops!" She covered her mouth. "The last bit about you being a prick...well, that was my own little add-on."

Eve kept her focus steady on him, refusing to show weakness or fear. And she did fear him, a fear that could paralyze if not kept in check.

Mendoza walked with a limp, courtesy of a gunshot wound to his right thigh three months ago, and used a cane to help keep his balance. His long, straight black hair, pulled back in a low ponytail bound with a thin strip of leather, drew attention to his high chiseled cheekbones. Clean-shaven, his angular face and pretty-boy look disguised the monster inside. His six-foot tall lean, muscular body gave him an air of intimidation, one he used to his advantage.

“Well, well, Miss Taylor,” he said in a soft, controlled voice. “I see you are still a feisty little one.”

“That’s Agent Taylor to you.” Eve jutted her chin out, stood with her legs apart.

His head shook. “Spending quality time in our fine accommodations has not improved your attitude at all, has it, *Miss Taylor*?”

Stepping closer to Mendoza, Eve pushed her dirty, matted hair out of her face, and looked him straight in the eyes. “No, Miguel, I’m afraid it hasn’t. But, to be honest, I’ve been trying to squeeze in a few days of R&R.” She shrugged her good shoulder, put on her best nonchalant act. “Although this place wasn’t exactly first on my list of top destinations, I’m at least finally getting a much needed vacation. All this five-star resort lacks is a swimming pool, hot tub, and decent room service.”

Mendoza smacked her across the face, causing her to momentarily sag against the hands holding her.

She regained her balance, shook loose from the men, and rubbed her burning cheek. “What’s the deal with you and your crew of flunkies slapping me around? Is it just something men with small penises like to do or what?”

An enraged look covered Mendoza’s face. *Bingo*. She’d scored big time.

Mendoza’s dark eyes narrowed into menacing slits. “Ah, my *querida*. Ever the comedienne, no? Tell me, how funny is this?”

He yanked her closer and pulled off the dirty makeshift bandage from her shoulder.

She flinched at the instant sting and got a whiff of the sour, decayed flesh of her infected wound. If there’d been anything in her stomach, she would’ve hurled all over the shitheads.

Mendoza dug the tip of his polished ebony cane into the red-rimmed hole.

Eve saw stars and doubled over, wrapping her arms tight around her waist. The cell floor seemed to move in waves beneath her. When the ground settled and the throbbing began to fade, she sucked in a deep breath and stood straight again.

“Are we finished with this game?” Mendoza asked.

*Never.* She pointed to his cane and panted past the pain. “I see you’re ready to enter the company picnic’s three-legged race. I hear the competition is tough this year.”

Fury filled his eyes, making them impossibly darker. Jerkily, he pulled his gun and shoved the muzzle against her head. A red flush inched up his neck as his finger twitched against the trigger.

The metal chilled her skin. Eve certainly pushed all the right buttons today. The man was pissed. *Maybe it’s time to back off a bit.*

“You really do try my patience, *querida*,” Mendoza growled through clenched teeth.

A lifetime seemed to pass before he let out a long, frustrated sigh. Eve froze, waiting for him to regain control and put his gun away. *He doesn’t want to kill me. At least not yet.*

He rubbed his leg with a fisted hand. “Mark my words, the man who betrayed me will pay dearly for this when I find him.”

Eve was well aware of who shot Mendoza, crippling him. Dillon McKenna. She’d loved Mac once. The pain he’d caused was greater than anything Mendoza’s idiots had inflicted. He’d left her and hadn’t bothered to look back. Didn’t fight for her, or for what they’d had together.

A familiar twinge tugged her heart. How could the mere idea of that man still bring on such raw anguish and hurt? Even now, while fighting to survive another day, her disloyal body ached for Mac’s touch. Eve hated he still made her feel so much. Needing to shake the emotions, she focused on mocking Mendoza. “Trusted the wrong man, did you, Miguel?” *Ditto. I trusted him, too.*

“We will not discuss the *cabron!*” Mendoza’s voice cut like a razor through rice paper. He circled her nonchalantly. “Let’s talk about your unfortunate situation. Your pitiful attempts to escape have failed miserably. Only one rescue attempt has been made by your fellow IDEA agents.”

Eve tried to hide a flicker of hope. IDEA must think there’s still a chance she’s alive. Or maybe they tried to retrieve another copy of Mendoza’s files. Either way, the

possibility of finding her increased. They had to rescue her. Had to know about Mendoza's new side business.

He wore a smug smile. "Also...unsuccessful. I'm afraid we were forced to dispose of your poor, unlucky amigos. They screamed like pigs while they died."

"You bastard." Eve pushed away images of the doomed IDEA team. It was painful enough to remember what happened to her own crew. Danny, the constant comedian of the team, the man brave enough to call her doll face—and get away with it—was dead. Rex, her partner, was dead, too. He'd been her mentor and friend. Hopefully, Randi had gotten back in one piece. She'd at least cleared the wall, so her chances were good. Eve ran a hand down her face and refused to dwell on the fates of her team. She needed to focus on staying alive.

"I think it would be in your best interest to tell me what you've done with my files."

"It'd make life easier, wouldn't it? You're not sure if you should make a shitload of changes to protect your interests. Interruptions are bound to cost you millions."

"There will be no changes."

"What will your new customers think when they find out how easily I breached your security?" *Wait till they see how big a screw up they're dealing with.*

"New customers? Keep talking."

"New? Old? Whatever." *Still worried about how much information was downloaded, Miguel? Plant the seed and live a little longer.*

Eve offered him an innocent look, topped it off with a shrug.

"I grow tired of your games. Tell me who has the flash drive. Now!" Mendoza boomed and she jerked her head back.

Eve looked away, ignoring him.

"Did you pass the flash drive to one of the agents who got away?" Mendoza dug the cane into her shoulder.

Her knees went weak, her mind spinning. Eve cried between grinding teeth, "Go to hell!"

"*Querida, por favor.* Please, we must end this."

He let the cane drop to the floor and motioned to another man in the cell. A fireplug with legs moved next to her.

"You remember Carlos. He loves to play with pretty little things like you."

It wasn't likely she'd ever forget him. He'd taken his turn beating her several times. Carlos hadn't been around for a couple of days, and Eve had hoped he'd dropped dead from a bad case of painful penis rot. No such luck.

Eve concentrated on his uni-brow as he leered, his gaze taking in every inch of her body. Her stomach roiled at the way he mentally undressed her. Taking a step back, she tugged her barely-there tank top.

"Carlos, would you like to spend some special time with Miss Taylor, maybe get to know her a little bit better?"

"I would like this very much, Miguel." Carlos looked to Mendoza eagerly and licked his lips.

"Of course you would. But I am afraid you'll not have Miss Taylor until I've had a chance to enjoy her many charms myself. I like her spirit." Mendoza arched a brow. "I may even keep her around awhile."

"Sí, Miguel, I will gladly wait my turn."

Mendoza grazed a knuckle down her bruised cheek. "Remember, Carlos, no one is to have her until I've had my fill."

The notion of Mendoza or any of his men raping her was repulsive. Still, Eve managed to stand defiantly. To keep from shaking, she let her mind drift, thinking of the many ways she would like to kill the revolting men standing before her when—not if—she got the chance.

Mendoza took Eve's left hand in one of his. Raw pain shot up her arm, settling in her injured shoulder. He pulled her closer. "I will give you one more chance to tell me where the flash drive is."

Eve didn't answer. *Back to the quiet game.*

"Did one of your friends take it with them?"

Still no answer.

Mendoza squeezed her hand harder, and Eve bit back a moan.

"Is my property hidden here on the grounds? Do you plan to sell it? Maybe make a little money on the side?"

Eve forced a smile and tried to tug her throbbing hand away from Mendoza's tight grip. "Same old questions. You're starting to sound like a broken record. Give it a rest, Miguel."

He shook his head, making an animated tsk, tsk, tsk sound. “It is not wise to be so uncooperative, my lovely *querida*.”

Mendoza dropped the hold he had on her and took her hand in both of his. His dark eyes narrowed, and he gave her wrist a quick, hard twist. Her bone snapped, sending a loud, clear popping noise echoing off the concrete and dirt walls. Eve screamed and dropped to her knees, skinning off a thin layer of flesh. Her injured knee roared at the new assault.

He pulled her to her feet, and studied her face. “I will give you until tomorrow morning to tell me where my property is. If you still are not talking, Carlos and his men will take turns breaking your bones—one every hour—until you give me what I want.” He ran a manicured finger casually over her cheek, wiping away a traitorous tear.

Cradling her wrist, she squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to let another drop escape.

“Why must you make this so difficult?” The forced concern made her stomach roil.

Eve tried to swallow the thick lump stuck in her throat. Mendoza didn’t expect an answer. And he wouldn’t be getting one.

He faced Carlos. “She is to have no more food or water until further notice.”

Eve wasn’t sure what drove her to set herself up for more punishment. PMS? Bad hair day? Temporary insanity? Whatever the reason, the sarcastic words tumbled out before she could pull them back.

“Now there’s a real loss, Miguel. No more bug-infested fried mush, or bacteria-polluted piss water.”

Mendoza wrapped a large hand around her neck, fisted his other and drove it into her face three times, each blow accentuating a word. “You...*Put*a...*Bitch*!”

With one more solid, cast-iron punch, he knocked Eve to the floor. “When I’m finished with you, I will kill you myself. Very slowly and very painfully.”

Mendoza gathered his cane, used it to push Carlos out of his way, and limped from the cell, leaving a mile long string of Spanish profanities hanging in the air.

Eve promptly passed out.

## Chapter Three

*The offices of Resolutions, Inc.*

*Washington, D.C.*

Dillon “Mac” McKenna’s fist hit the solid, mahogany desk with a loud thundering whack. “Dammit, Hutch. What do you mean you’re not sure if Eve is still alive? What kind of bullshit is that?” *She has to be alive.*

Mac’s boss and Resolutions’ owner, Robert Hutchinson, leaned forward in his chair. “I’m telling you what’s in the report. Her team was ambushed leaving the Mendoza compound a little over a week ago. One agent was killed. Two other operatives, Ford and Brewer, were able to get out. Eve went down with a hit to her shoulder, but the surviving team members saw her get back up.

“Brewer said she ordered them to move out, she’d cover their six. He took a bullet and blacked out. When he came to, he started his retreat and soon realized Eve never made it to the wall. By the time Brewer zeroed in on her, Mendoza’s men had Eve surrounded, and he had to rabbit.”

Mac balled his hands into fists, the veins along his neck bulged painfully with anger. He fought to reduce the boiling rage inside him to a simmer. A former Army Ranger and Delta Force soldier, he believed in the Ranger Creed, No man left behind. “You mean to tell me the bastard just left her there with Mendoza and his men? They’re bloody animals!”

“Brewer had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.” Mac clenched his teeth around the words.

“Brewer wouldn’t have escaped himself if Ford hadn’t backtracked and helped him to the extraction site.” Hutch’s argument lacked enthusiasm. He didn’t buy into bullshit excuses either.

“That’s a load of crap. Did they get the intel out? Eve risked her life for it.” He lowered his voice a notch, almost choked on his next words. “May have died for it.”

“Brewer says it’s still with Eve, probably tucked into the heel of her boot, or stashed on the grounds somewhere. IDEA sent in a recovery team. The move turned into one

royal clusterfuck. Mendoza's men took out the whole rescue team. The IDEA task force head, John Sanders, has contracted us to go in and extract the intel and Eve. The strong emphasis being on the flash drive's recovery."

Mac bristled. "I'll get the fucking flash drive, but Eve comes first."

"You've got to remember Sanders and the task force has been after the bastard more than two years. They've been under fire from Senator Long and his Appropriations Committee. Sanders had a lot riding on Eve and her team making a successful retrieval." Hutch steepled his fingers. "We won't leave her. That's why I'm sending you in. You know Mendoza, his compound, and the surrounding area better than anyone. You're Eve's best shot."

"Damn straight. I should've killed Mendoza while I worked undercover."

"Your mission was to locate and extract the chemist, not take out Mendoza. Without jeopardizing your job, you still managed to pass on information the task force used to shut down two major drug deals."

"If I'd been able to get the intel Eve was after, she wouldn't be in this mess."

"The password wasn't available to you at the time."

"Dammit. This is beyond fucked up!"

"Can you handle this op, Mac? You have to be prepared to set aside personal feelings," Hutch said.

"I'll deal." Mac sucked in a deep breath and exhaled evenly. "Eve is part of my past. I no longer have personal feelings about her. Doesn't mean I want to see her hurt. No one should be left behind with Miguel Mendoza. I know what he's capable of."

Hutch nodded again, a look of satisfaction on his face. "I'm not sure what you'll find—or won't find. Like I said, Eve could be dead."

Mac settled back in his chair, the leather creaking, and crossed his arms. "Eve's not dead. I refuse to consider the possibility. She might be going through pure hell, but she's alive."

Mac, no longer able to sit still, stood, and paced. Unease knotted his gut and fear stole the air from his lungs. Mendoza was known to enjoy both the torture and killing of his victims. The idea of her suffering had beads of sweat dotting his forehead. His heart pounded erratically, every beat echoing loud and clear in his ears. He swiped a sleeve across his brow.



Even though Eve wasn't his anymore, he couldn't shake the overwhelming urge to shield her. He was well aware of what could happen to an unprotected woman...and to the people left behind who loved her.

Mac sucked in a long, calming breath, and stopped in front of Hutch's desk. He planted both hands on its smooth surface. His fingertips went white from pressing hard against the dark wood. He leaned forward calmly and spoke with a composed and clear voice.

"Mendoza will pay for ever having touched Eve."

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*San Carlos Lucas*

*The Mendoza Compound*

Beefy hands wrenched Eve awake from a fevered sleep, pulled her from the cell, and shoved her into a musty-smelling hallway. *I'm being moved?* A guard pushed her with one hand, keeping a tight grip on an AK-47 rifle with his other.

Her shoulder throbbed in perfect cadence with the pains shooting through her broken wrist, and she had one badass headache from being punched in the face a few too many times. Using her good hand, she walked fingers across one cheek, then the other. The right side was totally numb. Her eye had swollen shut, and she couldn't see a damn thing out of it. She ran her tongue across her teeth and tasted the tart, copper flavor of blood. Three teeth loose. *Well, at least they're still in place.*

In spite of the relentless pain, she stayed determined to survive whatever Mendoza dished out. She wasn't a quitter. No, sir. Duncan Falls, Iowa didn't grow quitters. Eve ignored the constant ache in her ribs, courtesy of a guard's overzealous kick, and took in a deep breath. She willed herself to stay alert, to keep pushing. *Escape. Third times the charm.*

Eve slapped the guard's dirty hand. "Hey, Pedro, stop being so damned pushy. Where we going anyway? We got a hot date I've forgotten about?"

He looked puzzled then shoved her again.

“Don’t understand English, do you, Diego? Bet you understand this.” Eve drove her elbow into the guard’s face. Thick rubbery cartilage gave, and she whooped triumphantly.

Blood squirted from his nose and he screamed.

Eve stepped back. “Yep, I’m pretty sure you understand that.”

Unable to grab the guard’s assault rifle, she clutched her injured shoulder, and took off in a slow jog, no longer able to push any harder.

Her escape was short lived. When she reached the stairs, Carlos, the fireplug with legs, was waiting. He pointed a mini Uzi at her, and she froze.

Eve glanced at his weapon then cut loose with a crooked, all-knowing smile. “You know what they say about men with small guns....”

The bloodied guard she’d left behind, winded and holding a dirty hankie to his nose, caught up with them. His expression screamed pure outrage. He pointed his rifle at Eve.

“Carlos, *lo seinto, por favor*—”

Fireplug’s disgusted look and sharp wave stopped any further explanation the guard might offer.

“You are no happy here, *señorita*?” Carlos spoke to Eve with a heavy accent. “Miguel’s feelings will be crushed.”

“You’re right, Gomez, I am no happy here.”

Carlos spun Eve around, steered her up the stairs into the large foyer of Mendoza’s villa. The sound of the bloody-nosed guard’s labored breathing followed.

Eve’s good eye needed a moment to adjust to the late afternoon sun. Ignoring the pain in her ribs, she gulped the fresh air drifting through the open windows and doors. She savored the clean, after-the-rain smell from an earlier tropical downpour. Finally focused again, she scanned the room, memorizing its layout.

The coolness of the colorful tile against the cuts and bruises on her bare feet was soothing. She glanced at an ornate iron chandelier hanging from the center of the high ceiling. Bright and airy, the tasteful décor accentuated the sharp contrast to her dingy, dark hole of a prison cell. Eve hadn’t expected a low-life scumbag like Mendoza to have such good taste. It both surprised and appalled her. Everything had been paid for with illegal money. No telling how many people Mendoza had killed to get the place. The idea left a sour taste in her mouth.

She pushed the nausea back and looked at Carlos. “Hey, Juan, how many drug sales and dead bodies did Miguel have to make in order to build this little hacienda? Or did he merely kill the owners and move in?”

Ignoring her question, Carlos propelled her through the doors of the study she’d broken into just days before. He guided her to stand before Mendoza.

“Look at you, *querida*. Your eyes are exhausted and glassy with fever. This *muy bonita*, very beautiful body of yours is filthy and battered.” He rested the back of his hand on her forehead. “Your fever seems higher than it was this morning. I am impressed you are even standing.”

She slapped his hand away.

“Come now, let me help you. It would seem infection has set in. You really should have immediate medical attention.”

“Your concern is touching.”

He offered her a glass of water. Water not tainted with flecks of rust and other floaties. She stared at it, would’ve licked her lips if she’d had a drop of spit left.

*Could be poisoned. Could kill me. Oh fuck it.* She needed fluids, or she’d die anyway. Eve guzzled the drink, the cool liquid sliding past her cracked lips and down her dry throat. She should’ve felt guilty, but she didn’t.

“See, you are thirsty. Surely, you must be hungry, too.”

Mendoza poured another glass. Again, she downed the water.

“Wouldn’t a meal and a hot bath be nice? Once you are clean, we could dine together. I think I would like the woman beneath all of this filth.” He ran his hands over her breasts and worked them slowly south. “Yes, I think I would like her very much.” He rubbed between her legs, thrusting his hips toward her.

Eve attacked Mendoza, legs kicking, good arm swinging. Her mind and body screamed with rage. He punched her damaged shoulder. Mind-numbing pain flooded her body, and blood oozed from the infected wound.

Laughing, Mendoza pushed her against his desk. Strong legs held her in place, and he captured her hand with the broken wrist between his hands the way he’d done the night before. His sturdy fingers stroked hers before settling on her pinky.

Realizing what her tormentor planned to do, Eve tensed, her breath catching, her chest tightening. She squeezed her eyes shut and gasped.

He snapped her little finger, and a muffled scream escaped her throat.

“I warned you. A broken bone every hour,” he said with a smile. “Now tell me where the flash drive is.”

Fighting back the urge to scream again, Eve answered, “*No comprende, asshole.*”

Mendoza shook his head. “My poor, poor, foolish *querida*. So brave are you, no? Can’t you see this is not going to turn out well for you? Your body is weakening. Even your sharp wit is beginning to dull.”

Time was running out. Still, she wouldn’t give Mendoza anything. She held her broken hand against her chest and squirmed to break his hold.

He released her and signaled Carlos. “I guess we haven’t been persuasive enough with Miss Taylor.” He gathered some papers, threw them in the briefcase parked on one side of his desk, and snapped the lid shut.

“Take her back to the cells. I’d love to stay and get better acquainted, but I have an important business obligation to see to in Buenaventura. I’ll return tomorrow morning. We will continue this conversation then.”

Important business obligation? Like a drug shipment headed north to his U.S. suppliers? Killing some poor bastard? A rendezvous with his new BFFs, the terrorist group?

“So, Miguel, what makes you think the IDEA won’t be waiting to surprise you? Or maybe another cartel, ready to move in on your operations?”

Mendoza thrust out his chest, a smirk in place. “I’ve made some adjustments.”

“Gonna cost you a fortune to *adjust* all your plans.” She mirrored his smug stance.

A flash of red snaked up his neck, settling in his face. He cracked his knuckles and his nostrils flared. “Take her back now, Carlos.”

“*Sí*, Miguel. I will keep a good eye on this one.” Carlos pointed his mini Uzi at Eve and motioned her toward the door.

Eve moved, but Mendoza stopped her. He cupped her chin firmly. “Many days have passed and IDEA has not made a move on any of my operations. I’m thinking maybe your incompetent team was not so successful in the mission to steal my files.”

“Correction. They haven’t made any moves you’re *aware* of. They’re probably taking out your associates first, saving the big fish from the scummy little pond for last. Exactly how long has it been since you talked to your *tus amigos que son una mierda?*”

Alarm flickered across his face. *He's buying this load of crap? This feels better than breaking the guard's nose.*

"My piece of shit friends? Such un-ladylike words. *Querida*, save us both a lot of grief. *Por favor*. Give up this foolishness, and tell me what I want to know."

Eve retreated into her silent mode. Ignoring Mendoza really seemed to make him livid. *Piss him off. Make me happy. Ahh, it's the little things in life.*

"Too bad you choose to disregard my wishes." He released her chin and said to Carlos, "Break a bone every hour until she is ready to talk. Call me when she's had enough."

Carlos clasped his hands to his chest, the feet that usually rocked, seemed to bounce several times. "Sí, Miguel."

Eve shuddered at the sadistic gleam in Carlos' eyes.

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Mac stared out the Black Hawk's open cargo door. His gut twisted into knots and sent acid bubbling up his throat. He listened to the steady whump-whump-whump of high-powered rotor blades propelling him and his extraction team toward San Carlos Lucas. A million bright stars twinkled across the cloudless night sky. He rotated his shoulders, rolled his head from side to side, and his mind focused on the mission ahead.

Leaning back against a small duffle bag filled with medical supplies, hands fisted tight on his lap, he mentally prepared for every conceivable scenario they might encounter at Mendoza's compound.

Cade Warner, his partner this mission, sat across from him sorting through two larger duffels filled with weapons and ammo. He pulled out a box of grenades and flash-bangs. "Wanna review the extraction plan one more time?"

"Not unless you feel the need." Mac shifted forward and tossed Cade the bag of medical supplies.

"I'm good to go." Cade stuffed a couple of the flash-bangs inside the pockets of his camouflage pants. "Want to talk about her?"

"Nothing to talk about. I haven't seen Eve in two years. She's history. She and her chicken-shit partner are together now."

“Understood.” Cade adjusted his radio headset and turned the volume back on.

The time for offset talk was over.

It annoyed Mac—and maybe stung his pride a little—how quickly she’d moved on after they split. Brewer had moved in on Eve so fast her sheets were probably still warm from the last time she and Mac had made love. Make that smokin’ from the last time they’d made love.

The times they’d spent between the sheets had been good. Days and nights filled with sex hot and steamy enough to melt Alaskan ice glaciers. Global warming had nothing on them. He grew hard just thinking about it. Eve only had to walk into the same room with him, and he’d grow hard. But there’d been more than just the sex. She made him whole. When he was inside Eve, Mac felt like he was home. No other woman would ever make him feel the same. He grunted with a half-laugh. Obviously, she hadn’t shared his feelings.

Now, he didn’t even know if Eve was dead or alive.

Mac put on his headset. Breathing in the hot night breeze flowing through the open cargo doors, he listened to the radio chatter. Cade entertained the team with a shitload of his never-let-the-truth-get-in-the-way-of-a-good-story anecdotes. Cade’s tall tales would make a two-dollar hooker blush. Occasional bursts of laughter, with frequent rounds of, “You are so full of shit, Warner,” washed over Mac. He blocked out the bantering voices.

If only he could block memories of Eve so easily.

