

THE BOSS ASSIGNMENT

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Teaser Chapters 1 and 2
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PROLOGUE

Nine months earlier

Charlotte Bennett sat back on a swivel chair and did her usual stretches to ward off stiffness in her shoulder and neck muscles. Hunched for six hours in front of a microscope analyzing cell samples could be tough on the body.

Not that she would complain.

After a year of vying for one of two coveted research scientist positions under Doctor August Leigh—a prominent CDC virologist—she was finally accepted onto his team.

She was proud to have achieved this on her own. Not with the help from influential friends because of her mother's family name.

And most especially not with the help from dear old dad.

And best of all? She was exactly where she needed to be.

At the newly constructed Biosafety Level 4 (BSL-4) lab of the CDC in Los Angeles.

There were only a few of its kind in the United States and in the world. Tasked to analyze some of the planet's deadliest and most exotic pathogens, this particular lab was outfitted with the latest in bioengineering technology.

Even with all the cutting-edge instruments, this current virus puzzled her.

Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to her partner at the lab, Dr. Sandra

Evans. Her colleague was busy depositing the virus cultures with administered candidate vaccine into a temperature-controlled containment unit.

“Dr. Evans, can you come here a second?”

The other doctor walked over. “Still showing an anomaly?”

“Yes. The spike proteins of this newer sample show a difference.”

Charly scooted back on her swivel stool to give the scientist room. “Have a look. Left one is current; right one is from a week ago.”

Sandra peered into the microscope.

The Z-91 cells on the glass slide were a weaponized version of the Zaire Ebola virus. It couldn't have mutated that quickly from the version ingested by Raul Ortega, could it? The crime lord deliberately infected himself with Z-91 for revenge against the LAPD and to cause fear in Los Angeles. From what Charly had gathered, it took amazing detective work to capture the elusive criminal.

As her patient, he was being kept on the same level as the lab to minimize contagion exposure. Though her beliefs prevented her from the many ways she wanted to torture the man, she had little remorse in using Ortega as a human pin cushion.

Do no harm.

A muscle twisted at the center of her chest as a memory from long ago echoed in her head. But she was an expert in coping, an expert at shutting out feelings that could make her vulnerable.

Plus, her work as a virologist kept her busy.

Sandra straightened from viewing the cell samples. “You're right. Their spikes are different. The ones on the right are more prominent. Have you sent your findings to Dr. Leigh?”

“Yes. But he hasn't responded.”

“Does that mean it's less transmissible?” Sandra asked. “Less capable of attachment to the host cell?”

“In theory, that's what I think, but that's what is confusing me if the mutation was deliberate since this is a bioweapon.”

“I agree.” Her colleague sighed. “I'm about done here. Ready to go?”

Charly's stomach rumbled and she nodded. It was eight. Yep, she needed to eat.

Both of them tidied their work areas. Working in a BSL-4 lab, they were required to work in

tandems to allow cross-check and avoid deadly mistakes in the lab. Both of them stepped into a chemical shower, letting the spray disinfect their positive pressure suits. The last step was their own personal shower before emerging from the lab. Sandra pointed at the opposite direction Charly was heading. "I'm parked on the third level. I'll use the skyway."

Charly waved her off and checked her messages. Strange that Dr. Leigh hadn't responded. She would think he would be interested in her findings. Or maybe he thought she was an overeager research scientist with something to prove. She'd been here only a few months after all. Charly didn't need to be patted on the head or be told she was doing a good job. What she wanted was to be taken seriously.

Her car was under the covered ground-level parking beside the CDC entrance. Her annoyance at Dr. Leigh quickly faded and was replaced by thoughts of getting the biggest burger at her favorite drive through.

Maybe Charly should have noticed the missing guard in the reception area.

Perhaps, she should have been more suspicious seeing Dr. Leigh waiting for her beside her car. Charly shouldn't have ignored her instincts when her boss was suddenly chatty about the email she sent him.

Mutated viruses weren't typical parking lot conversation.

Especially when it involved a notorious crime lord.

Maybe she should have ditched her boss and run back into the CDC.

Then, probably, she wouldn't have ended up in the mess she was in now.

Chapter One

Present

This can't be happening again.

Dust trails obscured the back of the Land Rover as it moved further and further away from Charly. And with it, the chance of getting out of this hellhole.

She'd been too shocked to react.

Enraged.

From the moment Antonio Andrade pulled the gun on the driver, flashbacks to the time she was taken from the CDC crashed through her mind. Here she was again at the mercy of a madman.

“Get on the plane.”

His steely voice ordered behind her. Full of menace and in a tone that was impossible to ignore, she turned slowly to face him.

The gun was no longer raised and his arm was relaxed by his side. With reluctance, she lifted her gaze and wasn't surprised to see the candor in his inky blue eyes. Antagonism seemed to be their default interaction from the time they met twelve hours earlier. Somehow, she disliked him on sight, and it appeared he'd formed negative preconceived notions about her too. Not that she could blame anyone really. Charly carried the honor of being the person who'd sprung Raul Ortega from his CDC confinement, and, apparently, she also carried the distinction of allegedly

creating Z-92—the mutated version of the weaponized Ebola virus.

When she remained motionless, Antonio prowled toward her, eyes narrowed.

Charly held her ground, eyes defiant.

Invading her space, he lowered his head, his mouth inches from her own. “Don’t think,” he said quietly. “That just because I won’t shoot you, I don’t have my own ways of making you get on that plane.”

“Does that include clubbing me over the head and dragging me by my hair like a caveman?”

“Don’t give me ideas.” He straightened his posture and adjusted the fit of his suit jacket. It was a wonder he was not melting under the Mexican sun at high noon. Who in their right mind would wear a dark blue suit in this heat? But other than the telltale sweat on his forehead, Antonio Andrade appeared as cool as a cucumber. As though he hadn’t just threatened the driver of Joaquin Alcantara who had been their host and rescuer from the Mexican Army.

He tucked his gun inside his suit jacket then adjusted the cuff of his right sleeve in a bored manner. “I’m getting tired of this game.” He looked in the direction where the Land Rover disappeared. “And we need to leave. *Now.*”

Charly snorted and gave a careless wave of her arm. “And I want you to take me back to the Alcantara hacienda.” Her lips curled mockingly. “*Now.*”

“You realize once you get back on U.S. soil, they’ll throw you in prison.”

“And I can clear my name.” She didn’t need to explain anything to this bastard.

A brief surprise flashed through his eyes before he quickly disguised it.

“You do realize you’ve technically kidnapped an American citizen,” she countered.

Movement in her peripheral vision drew her attention to a person stepping down from the stairs of the Gulfstream. A hefty man a head shorter than Antonio approached them. Judging from his dark khakis and dark shirt, he looked like one of his security detail. Or his goon. Charly’s bravado faltered as she was beginning to realize that Antonio wasn’t a billionaire who played by the rules. At this moment, he looked like a mob boss.

“Problem, *chefe?*” the man said, eyeing Charly with hostility.

The pulse in her neck quickened and breathing became difficult.

She took a step back. This was becoming a tiresome refrain. She just wanted to be a virologist, dammit.

“Nothing I can’t handle.” Antonio smirked.

Charly bristled. “Sure about that?”

Before she could take her next breath, the man in his stupidly expensive suit charged forward and tossed her over his shoulder.

For the second time in the space of less than ten minutes, Charly was rendered speechless and a tad breathless.

And pissed off.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed. The backs of her legs were clamped tight so she couldn’t even kick him. Hanging upside down made her dizzy, and the lunch she’d eaten not an hour ago, backed up in her throat. It didn’t help when he quickly negotiated the steps up to his plane.

Antonio started barking orders in Portuguese.

Charly could pick up enough of the language to understand its meaning.

But she had more pressing issues in her stomach to think about more than anything else.

When Antonio set her vertically with a smug look on his face, Charly had the sweetest revenge.

She puked all over his expensive suit.

That woman was a menace.

Of all the suits she had to ruin, it had to be the one made by his close friend. It may not be one of his Italian ones—those could burn for all he cared. Those were easy to obtain with money unlike the custom-made suits he had tailored to his specifications with a concealed gun pocket.

They definitely came in handy.

He glanced at the soiled jacket he’d discarded on the floor. *Merda*, that was his favorite one. He was in the bedroom on the Gulfstream 550 that had its own toilet and shower. Sonya, the flight attendant, had unpacked the remainder of his clean clothes and hung them in the closet.

When CIA officer John Garrison offered him a deal that would help absolve Antonio’s company from the Z-91 virus mess, he jumped on it. In exchange for flying the special ops team into Mexico to retrieve the bioweapon, Garrison promised him transparency in the search for the

perpetrators of the man-made virus. Better still, Antonio was assured access to the virologist Dr. Bennett.

Antonio wasn't expecting an infuriating woman he had the oddest desire to throttle every time those disapproving crystal blue eyes landed on him.

He remembered the way she scrunched up her nose in his presence. Like he was gum on her shoe she couldn't wait to scrape off. Although he did give her little to like about him, Antonio wasn't about to sweat over that either. He needed one thing and one thing alone from Dr. Bennett.

Her fucking cooperation.

Then he would decide what to do with her. Maybe send her back packaged in a bow to the U.S. government. Whatever happened to her after was none of his business. But, by God, she was going to help him flush out the traitor in his organization. She was the key.

He'd already shot off an email to his IT guy. Antonio wasn't a fan of wasting time. He expected to know everything about Charlotte Bennett by the time they landed in Rio—where she grew up, where she went to school, even down to her favorite damned color.

He selected a crisp dress shirt and was about to put it on when he caught the reflection in the mirror. Tattoos and scars from knife fights and bullets covered his naked torso. The favelas—the slums of Rio de Janeiro—were a part of his DNA and he proudly wore the marks that brought him his wealth. No snobby and treacherous blonde was going to make him second-guess what he had to do to survive.

Survival.

Antonio's mouth tightened as he remembered the clusterfuck that followed the rescue operation.

The CIA team splintered in two groups when the Mexican Army attacked. He didn't doubt that the army was on Carillo's payroll, but Antonio didn't reach the top of his game without a backup plan. When one of Garrison's men, Migs Walker, emerged from the fray of gunfire and explosions with his wife, Ariana, who had also been kidnapped by the cartel leader, Antonio had an escape vehicle waiting. He had counted on the extraction of Dr. Bennett, the bioweapon, and its related research to be the CIA team's primary goal and he wasn't disappointed. It was as though the doctor and her research fell from the sky and straight onto his lap.

Antonio expected a possible car chase across Mexico.

He expected to be pursued by the Mexican Army with bullets flying.

He didn't expect to be shut out of Mexico City without a place for his plane to land for their extraction.

Neither did he expect Ponce-Neto Organization (PNO) to turn their backs on him.

But most of all, Antonio hadn't expected to be held down, face to the ground while a soldier from the Mexican Army was about to pump a bullet into his head. That was when Walker's cousin, Joaquín Alcantara, showed up with his private army and saved their asses. That was too much of a close call for Antonio's liking which was why he chose this drastic measure to escape with the virus and its alleged creator rather than risking both falling back into enemy hands.

A faint knock on his cabin was a welcome distraction from his disturbing preoccupation with what Dr. Bennett thought of him.

Opening the door, Sonya stood there. She was more suited on the cover of a fashion magazine than catering to the whims of a businessman at thirty-thousand feet.

"What is it?" he asked brusquely as he finished buttoning his shirt.

"I was just checking if you needed anything else, Mr. Andrade," the flight attendant inquired huskily, her eyes following the way his fingers worked the buttons, before settling on his face. The invitation in her eyes was unmistakable.

Still charged from their mad dash across Mexico to escape its army, a blow job from Sonya certainly had its merits, but her veiled proposition only heightened his irritation. "How's Dr. Bennett?"

Startled, the flight attendant backed a step. "Sir?"

"Is she feeling better?"

"I don't know."

"Sonya," Antonio gritted. "Isn't it your job as air hostess to see to the comfort of our passengers?"

She shot him a sultry smile.

His jaw tightened. "Aside from me."

"But she vomited on you."

"That was my fault. Now see what she needs." He was in the act of closing the door when

he paused. “Actually, make her tea.”

A haughty expression crossed Sonya’s face. “We only have the one from the French tea room.”

Antonio shrugged. “So use it.”

“But ...”

“That’ll be all.” This time he shut the door firmly in her face.

Minutes later, Antonio strode up the aisle of the plane. He passed the seat where Dr. Bennett sat and went to the flight cabin to check on his crew, making sure they had everything in order with their flight plan. His man, Oscar Prieto, who also doubled as bodyguard/driver, was the co-pilot. Antonio was a fan of hiring people with more than one skill. It certainly came in handy.

He did not want a repeat of Mexico. Being denied entry into Mexico City still stuck in his craw. It also made him rethink his alliance with PNO. If the cartel couldn’t help him with the simple task of greasing his way into landing his jet at their nation’s capital, what use were they? They made millions of dollars off his XZite pills. Ditching his controversial and popular product was looking more appealing. But going fully legit could make him more enemies and negate his influence on the criminal underworld. He had to tread carefully.

It was roughly a nine-hour flight to Rio De Janeiro, but with the couple of stops he had in mind, it was pushing more like twenty-four hours. That was another reason why Antonio was successful. He didn’t like wasting a trip or his time.

After making sure there was no problem with their flight plan, he turned around and casually strolled up to the doctor. She was clutching a teacup, and was about to take a sip, but her eyes were fixed on him. Wary.

Good.

Maybe she’d stop giving him lip.

“I hope you’ve recovered from your upset stomach.”

Dr. Bennett lowered the teacup and squared her shoulders. “I’m not apologizing for throwing up on you.”

Apparently, she had more lip to give. “Was I asking for an apology?”

Her gaze narrowed, but she didn’t answer, instead she ignored him and resumed drinking

the hot liquid.

“Are you waiting for one from me?” he inquired.

She muttered something like she wasn't holding her breath.

Was he crazy that he delighted in their verbal sparring? Antonio needed to have his head examined. He'd tolerated a lot from this woman, especially with the knowledge that she might have engineered the Z-92 virus. Somehow, he had yet to reconcile that heinous act with this innocent face. Maybe that was his problem.

He leaned forward so only she could hear. “Face it. You were hoping I'd take my shirt off in front of you.”

The doctor set down the cup and rolled her eyes. “That's your narcissism talking. Not everyone is impressed with this Latin-lover vibe you've got going.”

Antonio was actually offended. “Latin Lover?” What the fuck?

“Your suits?” Her mouth twisted and it wasn't in amusement. “You had one in Mexico when the army was chasing us.” She snorted a laugh. “Only you forgot it when you heisted a car.”

“I was busy securing us a new ride.”

“You mean stealing one.

This was a conversation to be had while sitting. He took the leather armchair in front of her and carefully gripped its armrests so his fingers wouldn't wrap around her throat. “I'm going to buy the owner of the Volvo a new one.” He shot her a look. “And I gave you instructions not to forget my suit jacket.”

“I had more important things to carry.” Her eyes squinted at him. “Which reminds me. Where's my stuff?”

Antonio relaxed against his seat as she reminded him of their precious cargo. “Dr. Bennett ...”

Sonya took that moment to walk up to them. This time the flight attendant had her professional face on. Thank fuck. His penchant for hiring people with an extra skill certainly didn't extend to his inflight entertainment. Not that he indulged often, but he was a man who took what was offered when he wasn't seeing a woman.

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Coffee for me, Sonya. Thanks.” He looked at the doctor. “You should eat something.”

“Do you have instant ramen?”

Antonio didn't know what to make of that request. Didn't she realize she was on a world-class jet?

“Uh, I ... think,” the air hostess stammered. “Oscar has some, I believe.”

“Oh.” Her lips turned down. “I don't want to steal from his stash.”

“Prieto shouldn't be eating that sodium-laden garbage.” He slitted his eyes at the doctor.

“And neither should you.”

“Wow. Does kidnapping me include prejudice against my diet?”

Sonya cleared her throat. “There's Angus steak and potatoes.”

“Do you really want those damned instant noodles?” Antonio asked.

“Yes.”

“I'll never understand how you can pass up a steak,” he mused. He told Sonya, “Heat it up.”

The air hostess was more than willing to escape the firing range.

“You're supposed to be a doctor. How can you eat that shit?”

“When will people realize that doctors have the worst diets? We're not nutritionists.”

“So why instant noodles?”

“Comfort food,” she chirped. “Sometimes that's all a starving medical student can afford.”

Her words triggered something unpleasant inside him. It must have shown on his face for her delicate brow arched inquisitively.

“You have no idea what it means to starve,” he said.

The doctor's face grew stricken. “I'm sorry, I—”

Antonio snorted. “The last thing I need from you is sympathy. Look around you. My wealth tells you how far I've come. What I need from you is cooperation.”

Her expression chilled. “I'm listening.”

“An abomination was manufactured in one of my labs and I intend to find out who did it. That person was in communication with someone called Charles Bennett.”

No surprise on her face. No guilt either, but she appeared to be contemplating what to say next. “And you assume that person was me.”

“I wasn't expecting you. I was expecting a Charles Bennett. A man,” he said. “Obviously

you tried to disguise who you are.” As soon as he stated his opinion aloud, it sounded lame. Because the maker of this abomination was smart and wouldn’t be stupid enough to use an alias so close to her name. That was a huge hole in his theory—that Dr. Bennett was the one in contact with the source of the original virus. There was also a possibility that it wasn’t created in one of his labs, but his company was being framed.

“When exactly did Benito Carillo get his hands on you?” he asked.

“You don’t know?” Dr. Bennett’s brows rose. “Right after Ortega died.”

He waited for her to say some more, but it didn’t look like she was. Antonio was surprised he had this much patience given it was like pulling teeth to get information out of her.

“That was also the time we lost track of the digital trail between Charles Bennett and Doctor Z.”

“Doctor Z?”

Antonio shrugged. “Since we don’t know who created the Z-91, that was a fitting code name.” He smiled grimly. “I was hoping you’d help us solve the riddle of who is Doctor Z.”

She gave a shake of her head. “That’s assuming I’m Charles Bennett which I’m telling you now, I’m not. It’s been nine months. You don’t have a lead?”

Antonio shook his head. “Not a pin drop since Carillo put the virus up for sale on the dark web, bragging about acquiring the scientist who successfully synthesized the mutation—bragging ...” he gritted. “That it was a superior version to the one manufactured in my lab.”

Dr. Bennett cocked her head and Antonio didn’t like the way she regarded him, neither did he like the words that followed. “Is this about ego? Whose lab and brains are capable of creating a better bioweapon?”

“Do not twist my words,” he snapped.

“I’m not twisting anything. It was the way you said them.”

Antonio replayed what he said in his head. Damn her. “It wasn’t what I meant.”

“Noted.”

Tamping down his irritation, he continued, “There was an encrypted message sent to a Charles Bennett right after that.”

“What did the message say?”

“To contact him.”

“And did you try?”

“No.”

“I still don’t get how I’m supposed to help you flush out this traitor.”

“An effective bioweapon generates much interest among arms dealers,” Antonio said. “Not the run-of-the-mill kind. We’re talking about sophisticated bioterrorists intent on causing a cluster of infections and holding a city ransom.”

Her brows furrowed. “The one that Carillo was interested in has an attenuated transmission rate. I don’t think it would cause a cluster of infections unless a person has been exposed to the virus short of ingesting it.”

This took Antonio by surprise and he leaned back against his seat. “Are you sure?”

“Not without testing. Carillo didn’t have the facility to do this safely. But from computerized models—yes.”

Antonio paused for a beat, thinking. Finally, he said. “Doesn’t matter. It’s still a threat unless there’s a cure. You have an antiviral and a candidate vaccine, right?”

“Yes. But what makes you think they don’t have those already?”

“That’s irrelevant,” he said. “They don’t want anyone else to have one. I also want you to compare the virus information in our database to the one you have.”

“So demanding considering I haven’t agreed to help.”

“I wasn’t aware I was giving you a choice.”

Dr. Bennett leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. “Wow.”

“You’re on my plane, on the way to Brazil and completely at my mercy. We’re landing at a private airfield. You have no clothes. No money. No phone. You really should be bargaining for your life.”

For the first time since he hauled her onto this plane, a look of uncertainty, of fear crossed the doctor’s face.

Antonio didn’t like that.

“You don’t mince words,” she whispered.

Jaw clenched, he shook his head.

“You just threatened my life,” Dr. Bennet accused.

“We’re talking about a possible rogue virus that will threaten more lives.”

“For the greater good, huh?” Her voice was still barely above a whisper.

Antonio rarely felt guilt for using his position of power for intimidation, but at this

moment he felt like a cockroach. He rose from the seat and stared down at her. “I’m not a good enemy to have. Remember that.”

Chapter Two

Abducted by a billionaire.

It was as if she was starring in one of those guilty pleasure romance novels her mother loved to read. Charly used to steal them from her library and devour them when she was a teenager. The hero was always a foreigner, rich as sin, and arrogant as hell. The heroine was always naïve and a virgin. Charly was neither of those, and from her experience with Carillo, she wouldn't be treated to shopping sprees and caviar. She suspected it wouldn't be any different with Andrade.

They arrived in Brazil at a private airfield.

Like Antonio had warned, there was no one to ask for help.

A fleet of Mercedes SUVs awaited them.

Among the people who met their flight was a woman in a blood red power suit and a head of dark, wavy hair. Her name was Renata and she was Antonio's second-in-command who ran things for him when he wasn't in the country. She spared Charly only a cursory glance, speaking in rapid-fire Portuguese as she and Antonio made their way to the vehicle.

"We'll talk at Villa Rosa," Antonio told the woman in English as he got into the SUV beside Charly.

He hadn't spoken more than four sentences to her since his last threat. What a temperamental man. And yet he let her sleep in that one bedroom on the jet.

Or rather, he ordered her to rest in it.

“The bedroom is yours,” he told her. “Ask Sonya for anything you need.” He didn’t even give her a chance to respond, just took the reclining couch farthest away from her and then ignored her. Charly complied only because she couldn’t stand being in the same vicinity as a brooding Antonio. Sonya was surprisingly helpful enough, even when waves of disdain rolled off her.

As if she was responsible for her employer’s bad mood or Charly was expected to jump when Antonio said so.

“We’re almost there.” Oscar met Charly’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Right now, Antonio was glued to his phone and making calls which suited her fine as she took in Rio’s landscape and its majestic coastline. She wasn’t a stranger to the area. She had a passable understanding of the language which was useful when she’d been here with a team of doctors to investigate the Zika virus outbreak five years before. If she wasn’t mistaken, they were on their way to Jardim Botânico, one of the affluent neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. Their convoy was circling the foot of the Corcovado mountains that led up to the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer.

The SUVs veered into a heavily vegetated road lined with palms and tropical trees until finally they ended up at a gated estate.

Panels of scrolled wrought iron trundled on a track and opened automatically, but there were two armed men guarding the entrance.

“Why all the security?”

“Because this is more than simply a residence,” Antonio said idly, tapping on his phone before slipping it inside of his suit.

“Care to elaborate?”

“I will. Once you admit that you have no choice but to help me.”

“There’s always a choice.”

Antonio sighed. “Are you arguing for the sake of arguing?”

The arrogance. “No.”

“Because I know you’re willing to sacrifice your life in order not to be separated from your work.”

Dammit, he was right. When their car got run off the road by the Mexican Army and it looked like it was about to explode, all Charly could think about was grabbing the Pelican case

that contained the vaccine and the backpack that held the virus. Antonio was the one who forced her to leave them.

“It’s the principle,” she admitted.

“Of being forced to work for me?”

She nodded.

By that time, Oscar had guided the Mercedes into the driveway of an impressive mansion.

“I’m more than a fair boss, right, Oscar?”

“*Sim, senhor*. You’re lucky to be working for Mr. Andrade.”

“Of course you’re going to kiss his ass,” Charly muttered.

The man beside her exhaled heavily again. “Honestly, I’m not sure I’m looking forward to dealing with a combative female.”

“As if you’re going to be a picnic.”

A chuckle—the first one she’d heard from this man that was free from mockery—rumbled up his throat. It made a difference to his features, made him less intimidating and ... handsome?

Ugh, she was not one who was easily swayed by a man’s looks and money. She’d been surrounded by the likes of him growing up. Charly was attracted to the heart of selfless men. Her last boyfriend was a champion for accessible healthcare in war-torn countries and refugee camps around the world.

“I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Charly had heard that before. And look where that landed her.

“For now, Ida will take you to your room.”

Great. More names to remember.

Ida turned out to be the housekeeper of this ridiculous, expansive house and its seemingly endless hallways. At least it felt that way. Oscar followed her and Ida as the latter led her to her room. Apparently, Charly wasn’t to be left to her own devices.

The housekeeper was a stern-looking black woman, maybe mid to late forties. She had a high forehead and an elegant neck. She was slender, wearing a dress that reached her ankles and imprinted in colors that reminded Charly of a sunset. Ida was almost as tall as Oscar. The whole

lot of people Charly had run into so far treated her with stone-faced civility as if she were a prisoner being marched through a firing squad to her doom. Except her doom happened to be a bedroom located at the corner of one of the wings of the house. As they passed several doors, she noticed some of them had locks on the outside.

“How many prisoners does Antonio keep?”

“Not many,” Ida replied, unlocking her cell—or rather her room.

“That was a joke,” Charly said.

Ida smiled tightly. “I wouldn’t be joking about your situation. Our loyalty is to Senhor Andrade. Remember that.”

“Stop scaring Dr. Bennett.” Oscar walked ahead of them and opened the curtains. “The *chefe* is willing to give her a chance.”

Charly wanted to point out that it wasn’t much of a chance or a choice. It was an *or else*.

The afternoon sun bathed her room in warm light and she gave it a good look. It wasn’t a big room and it had a double bed with plain white sheets. There was a desk and a lamp. She had her own bathroom. She felt like one of those intellectuals who were put in prison for their ideals. Give them a desk, a pen and paper, and let them write their essays on how to fix society, but keep them locked up.

Shopping bags and boxes on the floor drew her attention.

“Renata bought you some clothes,” Ida informed her.

“How did she know my size?”

Oscar rubbed a finger over his mouth to disguise a grin.

“Let me guess,” Charly said. “Antonio is a womanizer and is, therefore, an expert in guessing women’s sizes.”

“Dinner is at seven,” Ida told her. “Rest. It looks like we’re going to have a full house tonight.”

“Mr. Andrade wants to see you in his office in an hour,” Oscar said, contradicting the housekeeper. “Does that give you enough time to get ready?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll come back for you in forty-five minutes.”

Charly watched the door close and heard the lock turn from the outside.

She turned around to face her room.

Twenty-four hours ago, she thought she was going to see the United States again. They were American agents who rescued them, right? And from what she made out, they were CIA. So, how did she end up further away from the U.S.?

If and when she got out of this place, she seriously needed to rethink her profession. It seemed everyone was gunning for the virologist.

She almost escaped Carillo once. She'd almost been free.

She stayed for the greater good.

The greater good stranded her in cartel hell for nine months.

She didn't even know who was in charge anymore.

But one thing she did know was that Antonio Andrade was on the CIA's radar. This might be an opportunity to make things right, clear her name, and find the real culprit of this bioweapon madness.

If anything, that directive inside of her hadn't changed. She was where she needed to be to stop the people who intended to set the deadly virus on the loose and more successful if she was indeed at the source.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Antonio eyed his friend over the rim of the glass of brandy. Luis Vasquez had been his friend and mentor for twenty-five years. Antonio rarely drank during the day. He dropped his gaze to the amber liquid before taking a sip. But after the events of the past thirty-six hours, he deserved the entire bottle, especially for not losing his temper with the stubborn doctor.

"Not sure what you mean, old friend," he replied.

Renata was the only other person in the room, but she was off to the side, staring at the scenery through the window, partaking of a glass of wine.

"Don't give me that, amigo," Luis said. Antonio had a healthy respect for the man standing before him. At sixty-two, with a wiry frame and a shock of gray hair sprinkled sparsely with black, one wouldn't believe that he used to be Andrade Organization's most feared hitman ... that was when the company dabbled in organized crime until a three-year war pulled it out of that world and into more legitimate business. Now they were simply Andrade Industries whose

main subsidiary, Anriotech, had labs and pharmaceutical companies all over the world.

“Kidnapping that doctor and forcing her to work for you will have repercussions.”

“What makes you think I abducted her?”

“Enough! Stop deflecting!” Luis slapped a palm on the table for emphasis. “I looked the other way when Andrade Industries started manufacturing the XZite pills. I looked the other way when you brought Miss Dumont to mule them for you—”

“Actually, that was Renata,” Antonio pointed out.

The woman in red turned from the window and regarded him with amusement. “I merely introduced Claudette and told you of her connections to Hollywood. I didn’t expect you to hook up with her.”

“And now the woman is in jail,” Luis reminded them.

“She deserved it for kidnapping and swapping babies,” Renata said, looking unapologetic and sipping her wine. “I mean, who does that?”

That whole story about his former lover was almost like a Mexican telenovela.

“She has disappeared into the U.S. penitentiary system,” Antonio said. “None of my contacts know where she is. Which means the CIA is keeping her hidden for a reason.”

Luis’ brows furrowed. “You think they still suspect you of creating the bioweapon?”

“Not sure, but they seem inclined to work with us to find out who did it.”

“It could be a trap,” Renata said.

Antonio smiled. “You think that thought didn’t cross my mind? Although they could have arrested me this last time.”

“To keep you complacent. To find out who else is involved,” Renata said.

“Where is Pierre?” Antonio cut in. “Why isn’t he here?”

Pierre Hudson was part of his management team. The French American was a microbiologist, chemist, and physician. He was the creator of their hit party drug XZite and was now in charge of Anriotech’s research scientists.

Renata’s face hardened. “I haven’t seen him in the past week. You know he isn’t happy about you putting his whole team under scrutiny this past year.”

“Pierre was the one who gave Claudette the virus pearls that started this whole mess.”

“Now, back up a minute, Antonio,” his childhood friend snapped. “He gave you the names of everyone who bore the chain of custody of that briefcase. Is it his fault that the Paris

police couldn't solve the murder of the last courier who had it? Obviously, it was stolen and replaced."

Antonio clenched his jaw. "You shouldn't have put Claudette up to it."

"She asked me for help," Renata said. "I mean, why would she think we'd still need her to find new distributors for XZite when we own the Ponce-Neto routes?"

"You know how Claudette was," Antonio sighed. "She always wanted to get us new business."

Renata raised a brow. "Because she knew your interest was waning."

He didn't answer. He merely sat, contemplating the brandy in his glass. Antonio shouldn't have let his relationship with Claudette last as long as it did. He'd known the blonde for two years and finally gave in to the convenience of having her by his side in the past year. But the convenience didn't last long and it started to get uncomfortable when Claudette started dropping hints of cementing their partnership into something more permanent.

"I don't think she knowingly carried the virus pearls," Renata added.

"Agreed."

"Pierre clearly is feeling demoralized by this lack of trust," Luis interjected. "So, don't blame him for not jumping on your summons."

Antonio narrowed his eyes at his old friend. "I'm gone for a month and all of you are ganging up on me?"

"Don't be ridiculous, *minha amigo*," Luis said. "We know you don't exactly trust your own people which was why you were hellbent on finding this virologist. So, can we address our current problem? Dr. Bennett?"

"I don't see her as a problem," Antonio shot back. And Luis was wrong, he trusted him implicitly. As for Renata, he trusted her to a certain extent, but Antonio was wary of her weird relationship with Pierre which could influence her loyalties. But he was in no mood to pander to their hurt feelings. "The purpose of this meeting isn't to discuss this virus. I want the current status of the clinical trials for our new products. The announcement is this Saturday."

Renata made a disgruntled sound at the back of her throat, eyed Antonio with displeasure at his insistence to change the subject, before giving in to what he asked. "The ADgen is on track. The results are better than the current market leader." ADgen was their new drug to battle COPD.

“And the glucose monitor?” Antonio asked.

“GLUmetrx needs a few adjustments.” It was Luis who answered. “Our engineer said it’s minor and we can go ahead and announce it in our unveiling.”

“Excellent,” Antonio said with satisfaction. At least no hiccups on that front. Looking at Renata, he asked, “How about our guest list?”

“Most of the health officials involved in the SUS have RSVPed,” Renata said. The SUS was Brazil’s universal healthcare system. “We’re also flying in some Chinese investors who want to be distributors for the glucose monitor. So, you see, Antonio, nothing is falling apart. So why don’t you tell us why you’re hiding Dr. Bennett from us?”

“She doesn’t concern you.”

The two occupants in his room exchanged glances. “Is that why you have Nico on a secret mission?”

At this, Antonio gave a mysterious smile. Let them be on pins and needles for a while. Nico worked for their company’s IT department, but Antonio had conscripted the hacking whiz to work for him exclusively these past few months.

Antonio caught movement in the slightly open door to his office. “You’re mistaken in thinking I’m hiding Dr. Bennett, especially since she’s agreeing to work with us.” He raised his voice. “Right, Doctor?”

Oscar pushed open the door and the doctor stepped in. Antonio frowned at what she was wearing. Stiff jeans and a lacy crochet top that would have looked better on a grandmother instead of a thirty-year-old blond woman. White only made her paler. Also, she needed some time on the beach.

Renata’s lips were twitching. His friend was up to her tricks again.

“The clothes look good on you,” Renata purred.

“Yes, thank you,” Dr. Bennett smiled widely. “They fit perfectly.”

He doubted that was his unwilling guest’s honest sentiment, but he would deal with Renata later.

Luis coughed, removed his glasses and started cleaning them. Oscar looked like he wanted to leave the room.

“I could hardly agree to help you when you locked me in the room,” she said.

And Antonio immediately felt like a hypocrite. How could he be critical of Renata’s

treatment of their guest, when he himself was doing so much worse? Naturally his friend would follow his lead. “If you promise not to try to escape ...”

“You think I’m stupid enough to attempt escape with your guards carrying assault rifles?”

“Sometimes smart people do the most idiotic things. Besides, I don’t want to take you to the hospital.”

The doctor raised a brow. “Too many questions would be asked?”

“I don’t trust hospitals.”

“Your business is healthcare.”

Antonio emitted a derisive chuckle. “Now, why do you think that is?”

Dr. Bennett ignored his leading statement and turned her attention to Luis. “You seem like a nice guy. Do you condone this forced servitude?”

“I’m the wrong man to ask.” Luis continued polishing his spectacles. “We live by a code—Antonio, Renata, and I.”

His mentor could be scary if he wanted to be. Antonio wasn’t sure he wanted him intimidating the doctor, but he couldn’t step in right now and show it mattered even when it was Luis who thought bringing her here was a bad idea.

Despite the quiver in her chin, Dr. Bennett tilted it up defiantly. “Oh, and what is the code?”

“The end justifies the means.” Luis put on his glasses and stared steadily at her.

“You idiots,” Renata scoffed, gliding to where Dr. Bennett was clenching her fists at her sides. “If you want the good doctor to help us then you do it with honey.” His friend tucked her arm into the crook of the doctor’s arm and started leading her to the door.

What the hell was Renata doing?

Antonio started to rise.

“Oh, chill, Antonio. Dr. Bennett and I are going to have a chat.”

When Renata and their new guest disappeared from his office, he nodded for Oscar to leave.

After the door closed behind him, Luis asked, “What’s going on with you and Dr. Bennett?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Antonio replied coolly.

“You forget who you’re talking to, amigo,” Luis said shrewdly. “You were ready to jump out of your seat when I questioned her.”

“I have no problem with intimidation, but you forget that the cartel had her. Without knowing what was done to her, we don’t know her limits both physically and mentally.”

Luis frowned. “They hurt her?”

“I’m not sure. But given how mouthy she is, I’m sure Carillo has shaken her around.”

“We’re nothing like that asshole.”

“Of course not. We don’t hurt women. Ever. But we will find the traitor in our organization and we stand a better chance of doing that with her cooperation.”

“Understood.” The other man slipped out a cigar.

“I hope Renata doesn’t fuck up our chances,” Antonio said, then squinted his eyes disapprovingly at his mentor. “That thing will kill you.”

Luis shrugged and lit up. “If it’s your time, it’s your time.”

* * *

END TEASER CHAPTERS

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