

VENGEANCE IS MINE

SPECIAL AGENT CRUZ – FBI ACTION

Alex Ander

Chapter 1: Cabin

January 7th, 5:32 p.m.

18 miles southwest of Tallahassee, Florida

Near the eastern edge of the Apalachicola National Forest

Special Agent Raychel Elisa Delacruz opened the trunk of her black Dodge Charger, slipped her arms out of her dark blue blazer and tossed the garment into the compartment. She grabbed a bulletproof vest, the letters FBI emblazoned on the front, and handed it to her partner. She donned a similar vest over her pastel blue blouse, cinched the straps and pulled her ponytail from under the protective apparel. She inserted a communication device into her ear, tapped the earpiece and glanced toward her partner. “Check, check...one—two—three.”

Special Agent Curtis Ashford paused from securing the straps on his vest only long enough to give her the ‘thumbs-up’ sign. “I’m reading you loud and clear, Cruz.”

During her time in the military, her fellow soldiers called her Cruz. They had joked that her full name was too difficult to pronounce. To this day, the nickname had stuck and everyone who knew her used the shortened version of her name.

Ashford double-checked the status of his Glock 22 and shoved it into his hip holster before touching the spare magazines on his left hip. He stared over the trunk lid toward the winding dirt road that led to a small shabby cabin, surrounded by dense woods. “We really should call this in and wait for backup.”

Cruz’s reply was sharp and monotone. “We probably should.” She dropped the magazine from her Glock 23 pistol into her hand. Verifying the magazine’s capacity, she rammed it into the butt of her weapon and pulled back on the weapon’s slide. Seeing a shiny brass case in the chamber, she let go of the slide, holstered the Glock and adjusted the black belt supporting the hardware and her dark blue slacks.

Ashford curled up the right side of his mouth. “Something tells me we’re not going to do that though, are we?” Not getting a reply, he studied the woods on either side of the long driveway. Darkness enveloped the vegetation a few feet inside the tree line. “If anyone slips by us,” he lifted his chin toward the forest, “it’s going to be hard to find them in this.”

Cruz tapped the button on the back of her Surefire flashlight and a brief beam of white light appeared inside the trunk. She closed the lid, stowed the flashlight and observed the surrounding area. “Then, I guess we’ll have to make sure no one slips by us.” Ashford’s tone and body language compelled her to offer assurances. “We’ve done this before, Ash...rolled up on scenes and taken down the bad guys *without* calling in the cavalry.” She motioned toward the direction of the cabin. “Peterson and Lopez are up there and I’m not going to let them get away again.” She gave him the ‘peace’ sign. “Two times is two times too many. One way or another, this ends...*tonight*.”

“I’m with you on that, Cruz. My concern is...what if there are more people than just Peterson and Lopez up there?”

“Our recon says otherwise.” Hidden among the trees, Cruz and Ashford had watched the cabin for an hour and had only seen two men inside the structure.

Standing at the right-rear corner of the Charger, she squinted at her partner. His black hair, dark eyes and long eyelashes gave him a hardened, attractive appearance. The square jaw and perpetual stubble on his cheeks only added to his ‘bad boy’ good looks. He was not her type, but she was confident he had no trouble getting dates.

Wearing navy blue slacks, a white shirt under his bulletproof vest and black shoes, Curtis Ashford stood six-feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds. He had an athletic frame with wide shoulders, a narrow waist and heavily muscled arms and legs. A football player in college, he made the team as a linebacker. To him, the best part of the game was hitting people. His coaches had determined he was too small to play linebacker and moved him to running back. Disappointed at first, he soon discovered he could fulfill his hitting prerequisite at the new position. He ran over and through defenders on his way to a school rushing record in his first year. A knee injury in the playoffs ended his college career, in addition to his hopes of playing professional football. With his dreams sidelined, he focused on a backup plan—becoming an FBI agent.

“You know I’m always ready for a good fight, Cruz.”

Aware of his penchant for getting physical with criminals and uncooperative suspects, Cruz grinned. *That’s an understatement.*

“I just want to know what your plan is if this thing goes south.” He saw Cruz’s grin transition into a smile. He rolled his eyes. “So, it’s going to be like all the other times. We pull plan ‘B’ out of our butts.” Shaking his head, he drew his pistol. “Okay, let’s do this.” Ashford extended his arm. “Ladies first...lead the way.”

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The single-level cabin was made of old wooden planks, dried and cracked from countless years of being unprotected from the elements. Many of the boards were split at the ends. Long gaps appeared where the edges of the wood were joined. Hastily constructed patch jobs could be seen on all sides of the building, ranging from irregular-shaped pieces of plywood nailed to the sides to rags and cardboard stuck into the smaller gaps. The techniques did little to keep out the weather, and the abundant critters looking for food or shelter.

A short porch, less than a foot off the ground, jutted out four feet from the front door and spread out eight feet to the left and right. The handrails that enclosed the porch were made of a rotted horizontal two-by-four resting on several shorter vertical two-by-fours. None of the timber had been painted or stained.

Each side of the cabin had a window at shoulder-height, while the back of the building had a door and a three-step staircase leading to the ground, which sloped away from the back door. White smoke billowed out of the brick chimney on the left side of the cabin. The column drifted to the left every few seconds from an intermittent, faint breeze.

A green Ford truck with larger than normal tires and a lift kit was backed against the porch on the right side of the door. The tree line on the sides and back of the cabin was no more than twenty feet from the shack. The distance from the tree line, near the driveway, to the porch was closer to a hundred feet and the terrain afforded no natural cover. Cruz and Ashford knelt within the cover of the trees to the left of the driveway, studying the cabin and the immediate area. She had half thought about using her Charger to make the approach, but the roar of the engine would have made it more challenging to maintain the element of surprise.

Ashford spoke, his voice hushed. “It’ll be dark soon. Are we going in under the cover of night?”

Cruz shook her head. “I want a little bit of daylight left, in case this thing doesn’t go according to plan.”

“Speaking of this plan...care to share?”

She made an arc with her left arm. “You go left and take the back door. Stay in the trees as long as you can before you make your approach.” Nodding toward the cabin, she added, “I’ll be knocking on the front door.”

“What’s our R-O-E?”

“Rules of Engagement haven’t changed. We fire if they fire at us. I want them to stand trial for what they’ve done.”

United States Border Patrol agents Stephen Peterson and Marcus Lopez had been using their positions of authority to help smuggle drugs and illegal immigrants across the Mexican-American border. Their activities had been on the FBI’s radar for several months, while the agency gathered evidence against the pair. They fled a day ahead of a scheduled raid to apprehend them, moving deeper into the country, finally settling at this location.

“That being said—” Cruz plopped her hand onto Ashford’s shoulder to get his attention. “You’re cleared to go hot.” She poked him in the chest. “Be careful. These people are well-trained agents and they know how to shoot. We’re both going home tonight. *Got it!*” When she did not get a reply, Cruz re-stated her question. “Are we clear, Ash?”

He smiled. Cruz was four years his elder and he sometimes felt as if she treated him like a younger brother, protecting him from schoolyard bullies or reminding him to look both ways before crossing the street. If any other person had treated him that way, he or she would have been on the receiving end of a severe tongue-lashing. Cruz was exempt, however. Secretly, he enjoyed her concern for his well-being. While growing up, Ashford, the youngest of four male siblings, never had anyone to shield him from the incessant teasing from his older brothers.

He nodded and gave *his interpretation* of her instructions. “We shoot first, ask questions later, and go home with no new holes in our bodies...Got it.” He leapt to his feet. “I’ll let you know when I’m in position. Watch yourself, Cruz.”

Cruz shook her head and grinned, while her partner disappeared into the thick foliage. His imposing presence and sense of humor had cultivated in her mind the persona of a big teddy bear. He portrayed the image of a tough and surly man, while maintaining his fun-loving and joking demeanor.

Minutes later, her earpiece crackled.

“I’m in position and ready to breach on your order.”

“Copy that. Stand by. I’m moving out.” Cruz took one more look around the area and slipped out of the concealment of the underbrush. Crouching, she sprinted toward the cabin. Fifteen feet away from the truck, Ashford’s voice came over the airwaves.

“I’ve got movement in the house...Someone’s heading for the front door.”

Cruz darted to her right and dropped to the ground, using the truck as a barricade. As long as no one stepped too far out onto the porch, she would not be seen. The door to the cabin opened and closed. Boots scuffed along the wooden boards, creaking under a heavy weight. Thirty seconds passed. Her pulse was pounding in her head. She had no clear view of the man, but she could see smoke rising from beyond the hood of the truck. *He’s having a cigarette. Okay, just finish your smoke and go back inside...No need to step off the porch...No need to...* The door opened and closed again. Cruz waited.

“All clear, Cruz. Two subjects in the structure. You’re good to go...over.”

Cruz got to her hands and knees and slowly lifted her body to see over the hood of the truck. *He’s gone.* She raced toward the truck, stopping in front of the vehicle’s grill. Easing to her left, she peeked around the right corner. No one was in sight. She moved back in front of the grill and withdrew a folding knife from her pocket. She thumbed the blade and it automatically locked open. “I’ll be ready to go in two minutes.”

“Copy that.”

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Stephen Peterson closed the door to the cabin and trotted across the main room. “Get your crap together. We’re bugging out.” He grabbed a duffle bag, dropped it onto the table and started tossing in stacks of hundred-dollar bills. He paused to point at the cache of weapons and ammunition in the corner of the room. “Grab as much ammo as you can.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Lopez had joined him at the table.

Peterson jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “There’s somebody out there. I can feel it and I can *smell* it.” His ten years of service, guarding the border between the United States and Mexico had ingrained in him a sense of when others were nearby. Spending many nights on patrols, he knew when people were lurking in the dark, waiting for him to move to another position, so they could sneak into the country. Eventually, he gave up and decided to make money from the activities. His choice had gotten him and his friend in their current situation.

“So, now you can *smell* when people are around.” Lopez stared at Peterson. “I think you’ve been on the run so long, looking over your shoulder, you’re seeing ghosts.”

Peterson stopped stuffing the money stacks and held Lopez’s gaze. “I went for a smoke and I could smell perfume. When was the last time the forest smelled like perfume?”

Lopez laughed. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re spooked because you think you smelled *perfume*. That’s what this is all about?” He shook his head. “No, it couldn’t be flowers or—”

“Shut up and get the damn ammo.” Peterson zipped the duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder before checking the status of his pistol. He jumped and nearly sent a round into the floor when he heard a fist pounding on the front door, followed by a commanding female voice.

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Chapter 2: Surrounded

Special Agent Cruz issued a command, her voice as deep as she could make it. “This is the FBI. The place is surrounded. There’s nowhere to go. Come out with your hands up.”

Peterson shot a glance at Lopez and raised his pistol toward the door. He aimed left of the door, then right of it. *She’ll be on one side or the other, but not in front of it.* He swung the pistol back to the left. “Aw, to hell with it,” he said and repeatedly pulled the trigger, while strafing the front of the cabin. The slide locked back. He inserted a fresh magazine and charged toward the door, firing as he ran.

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Squatting near the stairs at the back of the structure, Ashford heard Cruz pummel the front door. Her voice travelled electronically to one ear; live to the other. “This is the FBI. The place is surrounded. There’s nowhere to go. Come out with your hands up.” He cocked his head. *‘The place is surrounded.’ It’s just the two of us.*

He sprang forward and reached the back door in three giant steps. Pressing his back to the wall, he heard gunfire. Wheeling around, he put a size-twelve-foot to the door and the rickety barrier flew inward. The top hinge separated from the doorjamb and the door listed to the right. He raised his weapon and had both Peterson and Lopez in his sights. They were running toward the front door. He charged forward and yelled, “Freeze...FBI...don’t move.”

Ashford watched Lopez spin to his right with pistol in hand. He did not give the man a second chance to comply with his order, pressing the trigger when Lopez’s chest was centered in his sights.

Lopez continued his turn. Instead of penetrating his chest, the bullet zipped across it, leaving a half-inch wide trench from his sternum to his right nipple before lodging in his bicep. Screaming, he dropped to the floor and dragged himself toward the out-of-reach pistol. Flopping forward the wounded arm, his fingertips touched the butt of the weapon. Before he could grasp it, searing pain radiated from the hand and through the arm. His head reeled backward.

Ashford had stomped on Lopez's hand with the heel of his dress shoe before shifting most of his bodyweight forward. "Marcus Lopez, you're under arrest for the illegal smuggling of drugs, weapons and immigrants. You have the right to remain silent..."

Lopez howled, while tears moistened his reddening cheeks.

Shrugging his shoulders, Ashford handcuffed Lopez and said, "...Or not," before informing the man of the rest of his rights.

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Cruz stood to the left of the door, balled her fist and rapped on the wooden door. "This is the FBI. The place is surrounded. There's nowhere to go. Come out with your hands up." She took a two-handed grip on her Glock and waited, her back pressed against the cabin, her left ear facing the dwelling. She opened her mouth, but before she could issue another command bullets flew out of the cabin, starting on the other side of the door, heading straight for her. She whipped her head around and dove to the right. Landing on her right side, she shielded her head and face from the debris. Splinters from the handrails flew into the air, as bullets zipped through the old wood. Having taken three rounds in her back, her chest heaved and her mind went back to an encounter during her days as an officer for her hometown police department of Dalhart, Texas.

Two years into her job with the Dalhart Police Department, she made a routine traffic stop of a vehicle with a broken taillight. The incident marked the first time she had drawn her weapon and exchanged gunfire with a criminal, who happened to be a Mexican drug trafficker on the FBI's Most Wanted List. A bullet had grazed the surface of her leg, but she was able to capture and arrest the fugitive, shooting and wounding two of his companions. Cruz received special recognition from the FBI and the Dalhart P.D. promoted her to sergeant. Until this moment, that was the only time she had been shot.

Cruz drew a deep breath, but the pain in her chest forced her to abort the process. She settled for shorter gulps of air. The bullets had ceased flying, so she rolled onto her back and extended her firearm toward the door. She let out a yelp when her back touched the porch. *Bad idea, Raychel.* Continuing the roll, she propped herself on her left elbow. A second wave of gunfire commenced. More holes appeared on the door. Dust, dirt and fragments flew outward.

Digging the right heel of her black chunky one-inch high heels into the brittle planks, she scooted backwards, until she came to the end of the porch, her upper body thrust against the bowing handrail. A split-second later, the door exploded when Peterson's bulk crashed through it.

Cruz saw the slide locked back on his weapon and slid her index finger from the trigger to the frame. She shouted. Still recovering from being shot, her commands were mixed with coughs. “Stop...right...there.”

Peterson let go of his sidearm, leapt from the porch and landed in the bed of the truck. Scrambling over the side, he climbed into the driver’s seat and cranked the engine.

Cruz struggled to get to a standing position. With every movement, the sharp needle-like sensations pricked her back. Taking inventory of her injuries, she felt lucky. Ashford appeared on the porch and dashed to her side. His voice was strained when he addressed her.

“Cruz, are you hurt? Are you okay? Did he shoot you?” Bobbing his head up and down and flicking his eyes left and right, he searched for bullet wounds.

Bent over and her head hanging down, she waved him off. “I’m good. I took them in the vest.” She coughed. “I’m good.” Her left arm jerked toward the truck. “Take the left side. I’ll come up on the right.” Ashford ran toward the handrail on the opposite side of the porch, crashing through it, instead of going over it. Cruz rose to her full height, arched her back and leaned from side to side. Having cut the fuel line on the truck, she was in no hurry to go after Peterson. He was going nowhere and his empty weapon was lying on the porch. With a two-handed grip on her service weapon, she took the single step off the porch and drew alongside the right window of the truck, staying several feet back from the door.

Since getting into the truck, Peterson had been cranking the engine nonstop. Groaning, the battery hardly had enough power to engage the starter. He turned the key again, but all he heard were the commands of Special Agent Cruz.

“End of the line, Peterson.” Cruz was staring at him over the sights of her pistol. She shifted her eyes to the left. Ashford had drawn up on the left side of the truck, stopping short of creating a deadly crossfire situation between the two of them. “Exit the vehicle with your hands up.”

Peterson rotated his head to the left and stared down the muzzle of Ashford’s pistol. He swung his head back toward Cruz. His mind searched for any weapons he may have stashed on his person or in the truck—*nothing*. He was not stupid. He had no cards to play and he knew it.

“Hands, Peterson...I need to see those hands.” Fixing her gaze on Peterson, Cruz’s eyes narrowed. “And, if I see *anything* in them...it won’t end well for you.”

Ashford barked a similar command, but his voice boomed in the stillness of the quiet night. “Get out, now!”

Peterson raised his right hand, while opening the door with his left. He swung his legs outward and slid out of the seat, while Ashford took a step backward.

Cruz moved around the front of the truck, stopping at the left corner. “On your knees...get on your knees.”

Peterson was out of options, but he was not going to go out without some satisfaction. His hands at his sides, barely above his waist, he pivoted to face his female opponent. A crooked grin formed on his lips. “*You* get on your knees, bit—”

Ashford had advanced and driven his foot into the back of Peterson’s knee, dropping him and cutting him off in mid-sentence. Ashford followed with a blow to the back of Peterson’s head, propelling the disgraced border guard forward, until he was sprawled on the ground, face-first in a spread-eagle position. “That’s no way to talk to a lady, Stevie.”

Cruz lifted her head and stared at her partner.

Ashford saw her. “What?”

“You just *have* to hit someone, don’t you?” Shaking her head, she holstered her gun, retrieved her handcuffs and circled around Peterson.

“Hey, he shot you,” growled Ashford. “He’s lucky to be still sucking wind.”

Cruz planted her left knee into her quarry’s lower back and clamped a handcuff onto his right wrist. “Stephen Peterson, you have the right to remain silent.” She brought his hands behind his back and smacked the second handcuff around his left wrist. “Anything you say can and will be used against you...”

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Chapter 3: Refreshed

January 9th, 8:39 a.m.

Washington, D.C.

Special Agent Cruz yawned, blinked and stretched her arms and legs, dragging them across the smooth bed sheets. Shoving her arm under the covers, she ran her fingers up and down her leg, feeling the prickly hairs. Certain tasks were neglected when chasing criminals across the country for several days at a time.

After arresting the border patrol agents, Cruz and Ashford handed off the mundane administrative tasks to the first FBI team to arrive at the cabin. Deciding to stay in Florida and drive back to Washington, D.C. in the morning, they booked two hotel rooms. The next day, they took turns driving and made the fifteen-hour trek in fourteen-and-a-half hours. Closing the front door to her house around Midnight, Cruz had headed for the only place she wanted to be—her bedroom, specifically, her bed. Taking only enough time to strip out of her clothes, use the facilities and slip into a red satin teddy, she was asleep minutes after her body slid beneath the covers.

Cruz grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand, hoping to see she had missed a call from her boyfriend. She had called Derek several times on the long drive home. Each attempt went to voicemail. They had last spoken three days ago. He said he was going out of town for a business meeting. At least that is what she *thought* he had said. She had been searching a hideout used by Peterson and Lopez. Distracted, her focus was not on the phone call. Since Derek worked in international banking, the out-of-town meeting was plausible.

Derek and Cruz had been dating for more than two months and she felt ready to take their relationship to the next level. For her, that meant taking him to meet her mother. She had dated many men, but none came close to making it this far with her. Cruz had never introduced any of

her boyfriends to her mother. That was a sacred moment, not to be squandered on the wrong man. Derek might be the one with whom she would spend the rest of her life. She was getting ahead of herself, but falling in love did that to people.

Yawning, Cruz scanned her text messages. "They can wait," she murmured, her voice gravelly. Before she could put the phone on the nightstand, it vibrated and she flinched. Scratching her head, she cleared her throat. "What's up, Ash?"

"Good morning, Cruz."

She caught the distraction in his voice.

"I wanted to give you a heads-up...the director wants to...meet with us this morning...ten o'clock in his office."

Cruz took the phone away from her ear and checked the time. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the office."

"You're at work already? Did you even go home last night and get some sleep?"

"Of course," he said, giving Cruz his full attention. "I'm not as old as you. I understand you folks need more sleep."

Cruz let a puff of air slip past her lips and chuckled. She heard Ashford's smile and let him revel in his verbal victory.

"Besides, I thought I'd get started on the paperwork."

Bless you. Cruz hated paperwork. She never ceased to be amazed at how the simplest of tasks required multiple forms being filled-out and submitted. No one ever warned her about that aspect of law enforcement. "Do you have any idea why he wants to see us?"

"Not a clue," replied Ashford, his distraction returning. "I need to put the finishing touches...on this masterpiece...I'll see you at ten."

"Thanks, Ash." She disconnected the call and tossed the phone onto her bed before shuffling into the bathroom, located off the bedroom. Standing at the sink, she looked at her reflection in the mirror.

Two months ago, Cruz celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday. Despite the last couple of rough days, she felt great. Her slim, well-toned five-foot, eight-inch figure proved she had taken care of her body throughout the years. Falling well below her shoulders, her dark brown hair matched her equally beautiful set of dark brown eyes. She had a long face with high cheekbones and a flawless complexion.

She turned her head from side to side, while turning on the faucet. Bending over to splash water on her face, her back muscles seized and she clutched the sides of the sink. She arched her back and tilted her head backward. Her face contorted and the memories of taking down Peterson and Lopez flooded her mind, especially the three shots to the bulletproof vest. Letting go of the sink with one hand, she pulled the teddy off, drew back her long hair and eyed the damage in the mirror. Three red welts, forming a triangle, were centered above the small of her back. The act of twisting her torso to see over her shoulder sent new shockwaves of discomfort to her brain. She expanded her lungs and exhaled, the air whistling through pursed lips. She let the teddy drop to the floor, grabbed a razor and eased her body into the shower.

Twenty minutes later, Cruz felt refreshed. The hotter than usual water had loosened the muscles in her back and relieved the pain. Wearing a basic white bra and cotton high-cut briefs, she slid hangers left and right along the metal bar inside the bedroom closet. Selecting a matching red blazer and slacks, she laid the outfit on the bed. *After three days of wearing dark colors, I need to brighten things up a bit.* She added a black form-fitting turtleneck sweater and black chunky one-inch high heels to the ensemble before getting dressed, securing her hair in a mid-rise ponytail and heading downstairs to the kitchen. After a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast, she left the house.

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Chapter 4: Take the Day

9:58 a.m.

J. Edgar Hoover Building

Washington, D.C.

Phillip Jameson sat at his desk. He split his attention between examining the contents of a case file and writing on a notepad. He pushed aside a piece of paper and picked up an eight-by-ten photo. His eyes narrowed and he pursed his lips. The photo depicted an attractive woman wearing a two-piece bathing suit. In red marker, a childlike drawing of a crown had been added above the woman's head. To the right of the crown, also in red marker, the word 'winner' was printed. Jameson placed the print to the left and continued thumbing through the rest of the pages.

FBI Director Phillip Jameson had recently turned fifty, though no one could have guessed his age. He was physically fit, following an exercise regimen of weightlifting and jogging. He stood five-foot, eleven-inches tall and weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. He was bald and wore rounded, rectangular eyeglasses with thick black frames. His work attire consisted of a black suit, black shoes, white shirt and a red tie. He changed the shade and print of the tie, but the color was always red. His clothing was a projection of what could be expected from him—a man who displayed impeccable leadership and decision-making skills, while demanding his agents uphold the same high standard of integrity.

For the next couple of minutes, he added to his notes. Hearing a knock on his office door, he paused, glanced at the digital clock on his desk and went back to writing. "The door's open."

Special Agents Cruz and Ashford entered. Ashford closed the door, while Cruz slipped between two straight-back chairs, facing Jameson's desk. She smiled. "Good morning, sir. You wanted to see us."

Not looking up, Jameson pointed with his pen. "Have a seat."

Cruz sat in the chair to Jameson's left and crossed her legs, resting her hands on her thigh. She saw Ashford claim the other chair.

Jameson let go of the pen, put his eyeglasses on the notepad and rocked backward in his chair. Letting out a sigh, he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Righting himself, he donned his eyeglasses and skimmed the contents of the file folder. "I got a call from a friend of mine—" Jameson stopped short. "First of all, I want to congratulate the both of you on apprehending Peterson and Lopez."

"Thank you, sir."

"Yes, thank you, sir," replied Ashford, crossing his legs.

"It's good to know they're out of play." Jameson took a hard look at his agents. "I know you've got to be tired after all the hours you've spent tracking them down."

Remembering their phone call and Ashford's age-related joke, Cruz shot a sideways glance at him.

Jameson picked up the photo from the file folder. "However, I need you two to do me a favor. As I started to say, a friend of mine, the sheriff of a small town to the north, contacted me about a body discovered this morning. I'd like you to head up there and see if you can help him out with the investigation."

"Do we have jurisdictional authority?"

Jameson shook his head.

"Is the victim somehow connected to the government?"

Jameson held up his hands. "That hasn't been determined yet."

Cruz glanced toward Ashford. "Sir, with all due respect, how does a small-town murder case involve the FBI? We have enough work to keep us busy. Let the locals take care of their own problems." She was familiar with what happened when federal agents showed up at local investigations. The hometown police were never pleased and usually became obstacles in the pursuit of justice. Still tired, she was not feeling up to going toe-to-toe with a sheriff and his deputies.

Jameson rotated the photograph and set it on the opposite edge of his desk, facing her. "This was found on the body."

Cruz uncrossed her legs and leaned forward to see the image. Her body stiffened. "*That* was found with the victim?"

Jameson nodded. "I thought you'd be interested."

Cruz squinted. "It could be a coincidence. It might not mean anything."

"Or, it *could* mean something."

Ashford pinched the picture between his thumb and forefinger and leaned backward. "Whoa, she's *hot*. Is she a witness?"

Jameson ordered the pieces of paper and slid them into the file folder.

Ashford let out a low whistle. "I'm not sure I've seen a skimpier bathing suit." He whipped his head toward Cruz. "I call dibs on the interview."

Cruz's cheeks flushed and she felt her body perspiring. "*Give me that.*" She snatched the photo from his hands. "Show some professionalism." She placed it on the desk, face down.

Ashford shied away, his head cocked, eyebrows arched.

Trying to re-collect her composure, Cruz resumed a relaxed posture and crossed her legs. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"It's all in here." Jameson handed over the file folder. "You can review it on your way up there. Take the day and meet with the sheriff. Maybe you can shed some light on what happened."

Taking the cue the meeting was over, Cruz and Ashford stood. She hung back, while Ashford made his way to the door. Retrieving an envelope from the pocket of her suit coat, she placed it on the Director's nameplate and walked away.

"What's this?" Jameson flipped over the envelope and saw his name written on it.

Reaching the doorway, Cruz spun around and lifted her chin toward him. "Open it and find out, sir."

He pushed aside the unsealed flap and slid out a simple light blue greeting card. In dark black ink, the numbers five and zero took up most of the cover. He opened the card and read it to himself: *...is the new 39!* At the bottom was handwritten: *Happy Birthday, Cruz*

Cruz saw a barely perceptible grin flash across his face.

He regarded his agent. "How'd you find out?" Jameson had never celebrated a birthday at work. He had kept the date, today's date, to himself. He was a private person and did not like people making a fuss over him.

She shrugged. "You're not the only one who has contacts in the bureau." Beaming, she left the office.

He read the card again. This time, alone in his office, he allowed himself to show a real smile. His joy did not come from the wit of the card maker. He could not care less about his age. It was only a number. No, he was happy Cruz had taken the time to remember him, even managing to do so without drawing unwanted attention. He carefully situated the card in front of the clock on his desk, so he would see it whenever he checked the time.

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Chapter 5: Burden

11:11 a.m.

Interstate 270 North

45 minutes outside of Washington, D.C.

After hearing the first few words of Derek's outgoing voicemail message, Special Agent Cruz pressed a button on the dashboard of her Charger, ending the call. Her irritation with him for not taking her calls had morphed into worry. Something must be wrong. The twisted knots in her stomach had been telling her the same thing. He had taken several business trips during their relationship and he always managed to contact her.

Okay, Raychel, calm down and take a breath. It's only been three days. He could be...tied up in meetings and unable to break away. He could be... She exhaled slowly. Relax. He's fine. Don't jump to conclusions. Curling her fingers around the turn signal lever, she checked her side mirror, changed lanes and passed a slow-moving vehicle.

"I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about this picture that's familiar."

Cruz shot a glance to her right. Since leaving Washington, D.C. forty-five minutes ago, Ashford had been reviewing the file from Jameson. Most of that time had been spent staring at the photograph of the woman.

"This seems to have been taken years ago, but I feel like I know her." Cupping his chin, he paused. "Usually, I never forget a face." He turned toward Cruz and lifted his eyebrows twice before adding, "Or, in her case, a *body*."

Feeling her body temperature rising, Cruz twisted the fan knob to the left and moved the heat selector closer to the blue section. She squirmed in her seat and arched her back, trying to relieve pressure points. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ashford had the picture inches away from his face, squinting. The only thing missing was a Sherlock Holmes hat and magnifying glass. She

touched her cheek with the back of her cold hand. The coolness felt good. The reflection in the rear view mirror showed her crimson face.

“It’s like when you’re trying to remember a song or an actor’s name. It’s right there on the tip—”

Cruz cut him off, making no effort to mask her annoyance. “I’m sure there’s other information in that folder you could be reading, instead of drooling over that picture. Honestly, you’re acting like some horny teenager, who got a hold of a Victoria’s Secret catalog.”

Ashford rotated his upper body toward his partner and leaned against the door. His mouth agape and his eyes reduced to slits, he stared at her. *What the hell is your problem?* He re-phrased the question when he uttered it aloud. “What’s your problem, Cruz?” He held up his index finger. “First, you bark at me in Jameson’s office and now you rip me a new one over,” he lifted the photo in his hand, “looking at a hot girl.” He shook his head. “What did I do? If you got something to say to me, spit it out. We’ve known each other long enough that I think we can be straight and say what’s on our minds.” He held his hands up. “What’s got you so pi—”

“It’s not you,” interrupted Cruz, her voice dropping an octave. “It’s me.”

Ashford’s shoulders relaxed. More questions formed in his mind. “All right, what did *you* do that’s got you so upset?”

Cruz shook her head, took the print from him and held it up to his face. “No, I meant it’s *me*.” She waved the image back and forth. “*This...is me*. I’m the one you’ve been staring at for the last hour.” She dropped the photograph into his lap and grasped the steering wheel with both hands, her knuckles turning white.

Ashford flipped over the print. Studying it, his next words leapt from his mouth. “You’re Miss Texas?” The woman in the picture had a sash across her body with the words ‘Miss Texas’ on the sash.

Staring straight ahead, Cruz nodded.