

Chapter One

“This is a bad idea,” Marcos Costa muttered as he drove the flashy convertible the DEA had provided him into the middle of Nowhere, Maryland. Or rather, up into the middle of nowhere. He could actually feel the altitude change as he revved the convertible up this unpaved road into the Appalachian Mountains.

“It was your idea,” his partner’s voice returned over the open cell-phone line.

“Doesn’t make it a good one,” Marcos joked. The truth was, it was a brilliant idea. So long as he lived through it.

The DEA had been trying to get an in with Carlton Wayne White for years, but the man was paranoid and slippery. Until now, they hadn’t even had an address for him.

That was, assuming the address Marcos was heading to now actually did turn out to be Carlton’s mansion and not an old coal mine where a drug lord could bury the body of an undercover agent whose cover was blown. Namely, his.

“According to the GPS, I’m close,” Marcos told his partner. “I’m going to hide the phone now. I’m only going to contact you on this again if I run into trouble.”

“Be careful.”

“Will do.” Marcos cut the call, hoping he sounded confident. Usually, he loved the thrill of an undercover meet. But this wasn’t their usual buy-bust situation, where he’d show up, flash a roll of money, then plan the meet to get the drugs and instead of doing a trade, pull his badge and his weapon. Today, he’d been invited into the home of a major heroin dealer. And if everything went like it was supposed to, he’d spend the entire weekend there, being wined and dined by Carlton.

Because right now, he wasn’t Marcos Costa, a rising star in the DEA’s ranks. He was Marco Costrales, major player in the drug world. Or, at least, aspiring major player in the drug world, with the kind of money that could buy a front-row seat in the game.

Pulling over, Marcos slid the car into Park and popped open a hidden compartment underneath the passenger seat. Ironically, the car had originally belonged to a dealer down in Florida, and the compartment had been used to hide drugs. Today, Marcos turned off his cell

phone to save the battery and slipped it in there, hoping he wouldn't need it again until he was safely out of the Appalachians.

This was way outside normal DEA protocol, but Carlton Wayne White was a big catch, and Marcos's partner was a fifteen-year veteran with a reputation as a maverick who had some major pull. Somehow, he'd convinced their superiors to let them run the kind of op the agency hadn't approved in decades. And the truth was, this was the sort of case Marcos had dreamed about when he'd joined the DEA.

"Let's do this," Marcos muttered, then started the car again. The dense foliage cleared for a minute, giving him an unobstructed view over the edge of the mountain. His breath caught at its beauty. He could see for miles, over peaks and valleys, the setting sun casting a pink-and-orange glow over everything. Carlton Wayne White didn't deserve this kind of view.

Then it was gone again, and Marcos was surrounded by trees. The GPS told him to turn and he almost missed it, spotting a narrow dirt trail at the last second. He swung the wheel right, giving the convertible a little gas as the trail got steeper. It seemed to go on forever, until all of a sudden it leveled out, and there in front of him was an enormous modern home surrounded by an ugly, electrified fence.

Most of the people who lived up here were in that transitional spot between extreme poverty and being able to eke out a living to support themselves. They had a reputation for abhorring outsiders, but rumor had it that Carlton had spread a little cash around to earn loyalty. And from the way the DEA had been stonewalled at every attempt to get information on him, it seemed to have worked.

Marcos pulled up to the gate, rolled down his window and pressed the button on the intercom stationed there. He'd passed a major test to even be given this address, which told him that his instincts about the source he'd been cultivating for months had been worth every minute. "Hey, it's Marco. Here to see Carlton. He's expecting me."

He played it like the wealthy, aspiring drug dealer they expected him to be, entitled and a little arrogant. His cover story was that he came from major family money—old organized crime money—and he was looking to branch out on his own. It was the sort of connection they all hoped Carlton would jump on.

There was no response over the intercom, but almost instantly the gates slid open, and Marcos drove inside. He watched them close behind him and tried to shake off the foreboding that washed over him. The sudden feeling that he was never going to drive out again.

Given the size of his operation, the DEA knew far too little about how Carlton worked, but they did know one thing. The man was a killer. He'd been brought up on charges for it more than once, but each time, the witnesses mysteriously disappeared before he could go to trial.

"You've got this," Marcos told himself as he pulled to a stop and climbed out of the convertible.

He was met by his unwitting source, Jesse White. The man was Carlton's nephew. Jesse's parents had died when he was seventeen and Carlton had taken him in, provided him with a home and pulled him right into the family business. Unlike Carlton, Jesse had a conscience. But he was desperate to prove himself to the uncle who'd given him a home when no one else would. Marcos had spotted it when he'd been poring over documents on all the known players. He'd purposely run into Jesse at a pool bar and slowly built that friendship until he could make his approach.

"Hey, man," Jesse greeted him now. The twenty-four-year-old shifted his weight back and forth, his hands twitching. He was tall and thin, and usually composed. Today, he looked ready to jump at the slightest noise.

Please don't get cold feet, Marcos willed him. Jesse didn't know Marcos's true identity, but that didn't matter. If things went bad and his uncle found out Jesse had brought an undercover agent to his house, being a blood relative wouldn't save the kid.

Marcos tried not to feel guilty about the fact that when this was all over, if things went his way, Jesse would be going to jail, too.

Because Marcos also saw something in Jesse that reminded him of himself. He knew what it was like to have no one in the world to rely on, and he knew exactly how powerful the loyalty could be when someone filled that void. In Jesse's case, the person who'd filled it happened to be a deadly criminal.

Marcos had gotten lucky. After spending his entire life in foster care, being shipped from one home to the next and never feeling like he belonged, he'd finally hit the jackpot. In one of those foster homes, he'd met two boys who'd become his chosen brothers. He wasn't sure where he would have wound up without them, but he knew his path could have ended up like Jesse's.

Shaking off the memory, Marcos replied, “How’s it going?” He gave Jesse their standard greeting—clasped hands, chest bump.

“Good, good,” Jesse said, his gaze darting everywhere. “Come on in and meet my uncle.”

For a second, Marcos’s instinct was to turn and run, but he ignored it and followed Jesse into the mansion. They walked through a long entryway filled with marble and crystal, where they were greeted by a pair of muscle-bound men wearing all-black cargo pants and T-shirts, with illegally modified AK-47s slung over their backs.

One of them frisked Marcos, holding up the pistol he’d tucked in his waistband with a raised eyebrow.

“Hey, man, I don’t go anywhere without it,” Marcos said. A real aspiring dealer with mob connections wouldn’t come to this meet without a weapon.

The man nodded, like he’d expected it, and shoved the weapon into his own waistband. “You’ll get it back when you leave.”

Marcos scowled, acting like he was going to argue, then shrugged as if he’d decided to let it go. The reality was that so far, things were going as expected. Still, he felt tense and uneasy.

Then Jesse led him down a maze of hallways probably meant to confuse anyone who didn’t know the place well. Finally, the hallway opened into a wide room with a soaring ceiling, filled with modern furniture, artwork and antiques, some of which Marcos could tell with a brief glance had been illegally obtained.

From the opposite hallway, a man Marcos recognized from his case files appeared. Carlton Wayne White was massive, at nearly six-and-a-half-feet tall, with the build of a wrestler. His style was flamboyant, and today he wore an all-white suit, his white-blond hair touching his shoulders. But Marcos knew not to let Carlton’s quirks distract him from the fact that the drug dealer was savvy and had a bad temper.

“Marco Costrales,” Carlton greeted him, appraising him for a drawn-out moment before he crossed the distance between them and shook Marcos’s hand.

Marcos wasn’t small—he was five-nine—and made regular use of his gym membership, because he needed to be able to throw armed criminals to the ground and hold them down while he cuffed them. But this guy’s gigantic paw made Marcos feel like a child.

“Welcome,” Carlton said, his voice a low baritone. “My nephew tells me you’re in the market for a business arrangement.”

“That’s right. I’m looking—”

“No business yet,” Carlton cut him off. “This weekend, we get to know one another. Make sure we’re on the same page. Things go well, and I’ll set you up. Things go poorly?” He shrugged, dropping into a chair and draping his beefy arms over the edges. “You’ll never do business again.”

He gave a toothy smile, then gestured for Marcos to sit.

That same foreboding rushed over Marcos, stronger this time, like a tidal wave he could never fight. He could only pray the current wouldn’t pull him under. He tried to keep his face impassive as he settled onto the couch.

Then Carlton snapped his fingers, and three things happened simultaneously. Jesse sat gingerly on the other side of the couch, a tuxedo-clad man appeared with a tray bearing flutes of champagne and a woman strode into the room from the same direction Marcos had come.

Marcos turned to look at the woman, and he stopped breathing. He actually had to remind himself to start again as he stared at her.

She was petite, probably five-four, with a stylish shoulder-length bob and a killer red dress. She had golden brown skin and dark brown eyes that seemed to stare right inside a man, to his deepest secrets. And this particular woman knew his deepest secret. Because even though it wasn’t possible—it couldn’t be—he knew her.

“Meet Brenna Hartwell,” Carlton said, his voice bemused. “I can see you’re already smitten, Marco, but don’t get too attached. Brenna is off-limits.”

It was her. Marcos flashed back eighteen years. He’d been twelve when Brenna Hartwell had come to the foster home where he’d lived for five years. The moment he’d seen her, he’d had a similar reaction: a sudden certainty that his life would never be the same. His very first crush. And it had been intense.

Too bad a few months later she’d set their house on fire, destroying it and separating him from the only brothers he’d ever known.

After all these years, he couldn’t believe he’d recognized her so instantly. He prayed that she wouldn’t recognize him, but as her eyes widened, he knew she had.

“Marcos?” she breathed.

And his worst nightmare came true. His cover was blown.

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