



# Protecting Her

**Author:** *Emily Hayes*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Protecting her life is the mission—falling for her wasn't part of the plan.

Seasoned diplomat Carmen Ruiz is all about grace under pressure and handling high-stakes peace talks, but with danger closing in ahead of a crucial summit, her life is under threat.

Enter Captain Jude Smith, a no-nonsense Navy SEAL with one mission—keep Carmen safe at all costs.

From the moment they meet, sparks fly. Carmen's beauty and intellect meets Jude's quiet strength, and as the danger around them heats up, so does their attraction—leading to a steamy moment neither of them saw coming.

But when an assassination attempt shakes everything, Jude struggles to keep her emotions in check and stay focused on the mission.

With deadly threats and an intense connection complicating the mission, can they keep their feelings under control, or will their bond put them in even more danger?

In a world of danger, is their biggest risk each other?

**Total Pages (Source):** 47

1

JUDE

Blood mixed with sweat on the training mat, the metallic scent a familiar companion. Captain Jude Smith's muscles burned from two hours of close-quarters combat drills, but she pushed through another set. Her opponent—a fresh-faced SEAL who'd made the mistake of hesitating—was learning that Jude's reputation wasn't exaggerated. She moved with controlled precision, each strike calculated. When he telegraphed a right cross, she slipped inside his guard and had him on the mat before he registered the movement. Training fights weren't about winning; they were about staying alive when it mattered.

"You telegraph your attacks," she said, offering him a hand up. "In the field, that gets people killed."

The young SEAL nodded, respect replacing his earlier skepticism about training with a woman in his face. Jude had stopped noticing those looks years ago. BUD/S had taught her that respect was earned in blood and sweat, and she'd earned it one brutal evolution at a time.

The call to Command came as she was wrapping her split knuckles, her body humming with familiar pain—the kind that reminded her she was still alive when others weren't.

Dawn blanketed Virginia Beach in shades of steely shadows, the ocean a dark line against the horizon. Her phone vibrated again, a reminder that this summons wasn't

routine.

The Naval Special Warfare Command building rose ahead, its modernized exterior at odds with the weight of history it contained. Jude's boots echoed on the polished floor as she made her way to the briefing room, cataloging the changes since her last deployment. New faces in the halls, fresh unit citations on the walls, another gold star added to the memorial display.

Once inside, Jude scanned the briefing room's walls covered with satellite imagery of Bogotá. The sprawling city looked like a nightmarish tactical maze—narrow streets and blind corners perfect for ambush. Captain Richards stood at the head of the table, his expression grave enough to set off warning bells.

"At ease," he said, though Jude's posture remained rigid. "How's the training going with the new teams?"

"They're learning." She kept her voice neutral, professional. "Some faster than others."

He nodded, understanding the unspoken assessment. Then he slid a diplomatic security file across the table—unusual enough to sharpen her focus. The Department of State seal seemed out of place among their usual military briefings.

"High-stakes summit coming up," Richards said, watching her reaction. "Senior Diplomat Carmen Ruiz has been getting death threats from the Nuevo Amanecer terrorist group. Intelligence suggests they're not just making noise this time. I want you on personal bodyguard duty. Protecting her."

Jude's fingers traced the edge of the file, remembering Yemen. Another diplomat, another threat. They'd gotten lucky then when her instincts triggered an evacuation hours before the attack. The memory of embassy buildings burning still haunted her.

She opened the folder, and her breath caught for a fraction of a second. The photo of Senior Diplomat Carmen Ruiz showed a woman with diplomatic corps perfection: tailored suit, silver-streaked dark hair falling perfectly to her shoulders, and big brown eyes that had seen too much and gave away nothing. It struck Jude for just a second that Carmen Ruiz was very beautiful.

Stop it.

Jude forced her focus to the intelligence briefs instead: three credible assassination threats in the past month, escalating tensions over oil rights and indigenous territories, and corrupt local officials with cartel connections. The more she read, the more the knot in her stomach tightened.

"Why me?" She kept her voice steady, though her mind was already running tactical scenarios. Her file was full of successful protection details, but this felt different.

"Because the last time someone tried to take out a US diplomat in South America, you were the only one who saw it coming." Richards tapped the photo. "She's too important to lose. The entire peace treaty's riding on this one."

He pulled up additional satellite imagery on the screens. "Nuevo Amanecer's activities have been escalating. Two car bombs in the last month and one assassination of a local official. They've got backing from someone with resources—military-grade equipment, professional training."

Jude studied the explosion patterns, recognizing signatures she'd seen in Baghdad. "They've recruited ex-military. These aren't amateur attacks."

"Exactly." Richards pulled up personnel files. "I'm giving you full pick of your team. Whatever resources you need. State Department's made this top priority."

Jude nodded, already calculating team composition. She'd need Sarah as second; her Delta Force background would be crucial. Marcus for local intel, Kate for tech. The pieces started falling into place as she reviewed the summit location specs.

"One more thing." Richards' tone made her look up. "There might be internal threats. Watch the local security forces. We've got reports of cartel bribes reaching high levels."

"Understood." Jude gathered the files, her mind already shifting to operational planning. But as she stood to leave, her eyes caught on Carmen's photo again. Something about those eyes, about the quiet strength in her expression, made this assignment feel heavier than usual.

"Smith." Richards' voice stopped her at the door. "Keep her alive. Whatever it takes."

She nodded once, sharply, and headed out. The weight of the files in her hands felt like prophecy. Her knuckles stung as she gripped the folder tighter, the pain a reminder to stay focused.

This wasn't just another protection detail. She could feel it in her bones, the same way she'd felt the ambush coming in Yemen. Something about this assignment was different.

And Jude had learned long ago to trust those instincts.

Her office felt colder than usual as evening shadows crept across the office walls, bare except for unit citations and her BUD/S class photo. The sight of her graduating class always brought a familiar ache. Three faces would never age past their service photos, forever young in dress whites. She'd stopped counting the ghosts years ago.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Jude spread Carmen's file across her desk, the harsh fluorescent light catching on the glossy surveillance photos. More official photos showed the diplomat at peace signings, humanitarian missions, and closed-door negotiations. Twenty-five years of service in conflict zones had left its mark in subtle ways: the watchful alertness in her posture, the way she always noted exits and entrances.

Venezuela, 2019: Carmen negotiating with cartel-backed officials while riots burned the city.

Sudan, 2021: Carmen brokering peace between tribal factions when everyone else had given up.

Afghanistan, 2022: Carmen establishing women's education initiatives despite death threats.

Each mission should have been impossible. Each one, she succeeded.

An incredible woman, Jude thought to herself.

Memories of her own previous protection details flickered through Jude's mind. Losing Johnson to a sniper she should have spotted in Kabul. Learning to trust her instincts when they screamed about local security being compromised in Caracas. The ambassador's family huddled in a safe room while she coordinated their extraction under heavy fire in Yemen. Each mission had taught her something vital, usually paid for in blood.

The video footage brought Jude's attention back to the present.

Carmen Ruiz moved through crowds with graceful authority, commanding rooms with little effort. In a clip from a recent UN session, she defused a near-violent confrontation between opposing delegations with nothing but carefully chosen words and unshakeable composure.

Jude found herself rewinding certain segments, studying details she didn't strictly need. The way Carmen's hands moved when she spoke—elegant but precise, no wasted motion. How she tilted her head slightly when listening intently, her hair catching the light. The subtle shift in her stance when she sensed hostility, almost military in its readiness.

"Getting to know our protectee?"

Sarah Chen's voice made Jude straighten, caught off guard—a rare occurrence that made her frown. Her second-in-command leaned against the doorframe, a knowing look in her eyes.

"Team assignments." Jude shifted to tactical displays, ignoring Sarah's raised eyebrow. "I want you running backup detail. Your experience with diplomatic protection will be crucial."

Sarah crossed to the desk, studying the summit location blueprints. "Hotel Gran Diplomático. Lovely place for an assassination attempt."

"Sight lines are compromised on all approaches." Jude pulled up satellite imagery. "Too many access points, no good containment options. We'll need to modify standard protocols."

"Already making lists?" Sarah's smile held an edge of understanding. They'd served together long enough to read each other's tension.

"Marcus for local intel; his Colombian contacts will be essential. Kate for tech, James for medical, David for surveillance." Jude marked positions on the blueprint. "But we trust no one outside the core team. Intel suggests cartel money's reaching into local security forces."

Sarah nodded, her expression turning serious. "Like Caracas?"

The memory of gunfire and betrayal hung between them. They'd lost two team members in that ambush after local security forces were bought off by cartels. Jude still remembered the taste of blood and cordite, the way trust became a luxury they couldn't afford.

"We run everything ourselves." Jude's voice carried the weight of command. "Every route, every contingency. I want full background checks on all hotel staff, daily sweeps for surveillance equipment, and alternate extraction plans for every movement."

"You're taking this one personally." Sarah's observation wasn't a question.

Jude didn't respond, focusing instead on memorizing building layouts. But her eyes kept drifting to Carmen's photo, to that pointed look that seemed to see right through her professional distance.

"She's got quite a reputation," Sarah continued, watching Jude's reaction. "They say she can read a room better than any intelligence briefing. Never lost a negotiation she committed to."

"Then we make sure she lives to keep that record." Jude started gathering the files. "Briefing at 0500. Bring the team up to speed on summit security protocols."

Sarah lingered at the door. "You know what they say about protecting diplomats."



Hardest part isn't keeping them alive; it's keeping them from making your job impossible."

Jude's lips tightened. She'd protected her share of diplomats, entitled bureaucrats who ignored security protocols and treated their protection detail like servants. But something told her Carmen Ruiz would be different.

She turned back to the surveillance feeds, watching Carmen navigate another high-tension negotiation with seamless grace. The way she commanded attention without demanding it, how she wielded influence like a scalpel rather than a sword.

Carmen Ruiz's intense brown eyes were in Jude's dreams that night.

Dawn broke over Washington DC, and the State Department building rose like a fortress against the morning sky, its limestone façade catching the first hints of morning light.

Jude arrived early, checking in through the rigorous security protocols. Her new diplomatic security credentials drew a few curious glances. SEALs weren't common in these halls.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Sarah met her in the lobby, already familiarizing herself with the building's regular security team. "DSS has been briefed on our assignment. They're coordinating additional coverage for the summit."

Marcus appeared at Jude's side, his movement silent despite his size. "Just got off a call with our contacts in Bogotá. Nuevo Amanecer's definitely mobilizing. They're anticipating the summit."

"Surveillance positions?"

"They've been scouting the Hotel Gran Diplomático. Three probable sniper positions identified already." He kept his voice low. "My contacts are setting up counter-surveillance before we arrive."

Jude nodded, checking her watch. The diplomatic security briefing would start soon in the large conference room. Her team wasn't here to protect Carmen within the State Department; that was DSS territory. They were here to plan for Colombia, where the real threats waited.

"Vehicle approaching." David's voice was cool and professional. "Diplomatic plates match our briefing."

Jude moved to the secure entrance, her body thrumming with pre-mission tension. The underground garage was clear of all other vehicles, walls of concrete and steel creating a defensible space. When the armored Mercedes pulled in, her awareness narrowed to tactical precision.

The car door opened, and Jude's training almost failed her.

Carmen Ruiz emerged with fluid grace, her charcoal suit and cream silk blouse a deliberate contrast to the utilitarian surroundings. Silver threaded through her dark hair like moonlight on water. But it was her presence that caught Jude off guard—the way she filled the space with quiet authority and how her eyes swept the garage in a security assessment that rivaled Jude's own.

"Captain Smith." Carmen's voice carried warmth without sacrificing professionalism. She extended her hand, and Jude noted everything in that brief contact: the subtle calluses that spoke of more than just pushing paperwork, the steady pulse at her wrist, and the strength in her grip. "Thank you for taking on this assignment."

"Ma'am." Jude kept her voice neutral, ignoring how her skin tingled where they'd touched. "If you'll follow me, we've established secure routes through the building."

They moved through the underground corridors, Carmen matching Jude's pace without effort. The click of her heels on concrete echoed like punctuation, a counterpoint to the silence of Jude's tactical boots.

"I reviewed your security protocols," Carmen said as they entered the elevator. "Quite thorough. Though I notice you've eliminated all public appearances from the summit schedule."

"Yes, ma'am. The exposure risk is too high."

Carmen's lips curved slightly. "The peace process requires public trust, Captain. Sometimes diplomatic necessity outweighs tactical preference."

The elevator doors opened to the conference level, and Jude felt her spine stiffen. "With respect, ma'am, diplomatic necessity won't matter if you're dead."

Instead of taking offense, Carmen turned to face her fully. For a moment, Jude forgot to breathe. The diplomat's dark eyes held depths of understanding that made her feel exposed, seen in ways that had nothing to do with physical sight.

"You lost someone." It wasn't a question. "In Yemen, perhaps? Or was it Caracas?"

Jude's silence was answer enough. She shouldn't have been surprised that Carmen had researched her; Carmen's file had mentioned her skill at reading people. But the sharp accuracy of it made her chest tighten.

"I'm not unfamiliar with loss, Captain." Carmen's voice softened. "Or with the weight of protection detail. I know what I'm asking of you and your team. But this peace treaty could prevent thousands of deaths. Sometimes we must risk one life to save many."

The conference room doors loomed ahead, saving Jude from having to respond. Inside, local officials and security representatives waited for the briefing. She watched as Carmen transformed, her gentle side replaced by diplomatic steel.

For the next hour, Jude observed Carmen's mastery of the room. She navigated the contentious discussion about summit security with graceful authority, defusing tensions before they could ignite. Each carefully chosen word served multiple purposes: building consensus while gathering intelligence, offering compromise while maintaining control.

Jude found herself studying micro-expressions, cataloging tells and tensions. Her tactical awareness kept tracking sight lines and access points, but part of her attention remained fixed on Carmen's diplomatic dance—the way she tilted her head when listening, how she used silence as effectively as speech, the subtle shifts in posture that commanded attention without demanding it.

"Your security concerns are valid," Carmen was saying to the DC Metropolitan Police liaison. "But surely we can find a balance between safety and necessity."

Jude caught the slight tension in Carmen's shoulder, the only tell that she'd noticed the liaison's evasion about coordinating with Colombian security forces. Their eyes met briefly across the room, and Jude saw her own suspicions mirrored in Carmen's gaze. The diplomat hadn't missed anything; she was just better at hiding her reactions.

The meeting concluded with preliminary agreements in place, though Jude noted which officials would need closer surveillance. As the room cleared, Carmen gathered her notes with practiced efficiency.

"Walk with me, Captain?" She made it sound like a request rather than an order. "We should discuss the modified protocols."

They moved through the building's secure corridors, their steps falling into natural synchronization. Carmen's presence beside her felt like a gravity well, drawing Jude's awareness despite her best efforts to maintain professional distance.

"You have concerns about the Colombian security forces we'll be working with," Carmen said quietly.

"Several." Jude kept her voice low. "The intelligence briefings suggest?—"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Cartel influence." Carmen nodded. "I've worked in Bogotá before. Last time I was there, three senior security officials were arrested for corruption. We'll need to be selective about who we trust."

Jude glanced at her sharply. She hadn't expected such tactical observation from a diplomat.

Carmen's smile held a hint of amusement. "You're not the only one who pays attention to details, Captain. In my line of work, missing subtle clues can cost lives just as surely as missing a security breach."

The day stretched into evening, city lights replacing sunshine outside Carmen's State Department office. Jude fought to maintain focus as they reviewed protection protocols, hyper aware of how the enclosed space amplified Carmen's subtle perfume, something sophisticated and understated that Jude firmly pushed from her awareness.

"Let's test the systems," Jude said, pulling out the encrypted communications set. She handed Carmen an earpiece, trying to ignore how their fingers brushed during the exchange. "This connects to three separate frequencies."

Carmen inserted the covert earpiece with practiced ease. "And if someone attempts to jam the signal?"

"It automatically switches channels and alerts the team." Jude demonstrated on the control unit, her body subconsciously leaning closer to show Carmen the interface. "The pendant has a separate backup system. If you tap it three times?—"

"It sends a silent alert," Carmen finished, surprising her. "I had something similar in Venezuela. Though I suspect yours is more sophisticated." She touched the pendant, her fingers tracing its surface. "The craftsmanship is excellent. Almost too ornate for a panic button."

"That's the point." Jude activated the system, and Carmen's phone lit up with a secure connection notification. "Try it."

Carmen pressed the pendant, and Jude's tactical radio crackled to life. Sarah's voice came through immediately: "Alert received. Location confirmed. Response team standing by."

"Impressive," Carmen murmured. "Though some of these protocols seem... excessive."

"Three layers of redundancy." Jude leaned over the desk, pointing out features on the building schematics. "Each member of the core team monitors a different frequency. If one channel is compromised?—"

"The others remain secure." Carmen nodded, and Jude caught another whisper of her perfume. "Like having multiple diplomatic back channels."

Their shoulders brushed as they studied extraction routes on the blueprints they'd received from Bogotá. Jude shifted away under the pretense of checking sight lines, ignoring the zap of electricity between them after the contact. "The Hotel Gran Diplomático's architecture presents challenges. Too many access points."

"I've stayed there before." Carmen's voice carried a weight of memory. "During the last coup attempt. The service corridors proved useful for unofficial negotiations."

Jude frowned. "Those same corridors create security vulnerabilities."

"Which is precisely why we need them." Carmen's eyes darkened and held a hint of challenge. "Sometimes the best path to peace requires calculated risks."

"My job is to eliminate risks, ma'am."

"Your job," Carmen said softly, "is to manage them. There's a difference, Captain."

The way she said "Captain"—like she saw past the rank to something underneath—made Jude's chest tighten.

She focused on adjusting security patrol patterns instead of analyzing why.

Evening settled over the city as they finished reviewing the summit protocols. Through the office windows, DC's lights began to flicker on, creating a backdrop of urban stars. Jude gathered the Bogotá security briefings, trying to ignore how Carmen's presence seemed to loom large and push against her awareness in the small room.

"One last thing," Carmen said, her voice softer. "I know my diplomatic requirements sometimes conflict with security protocols. But I trust your judgment, Captain."

"Just doing my job, ma'am."

"Are you?" Those dark eyes of Carmen Ruiz saw too much. "Get some rest. Tomorrow's briefing will be intense."

Later, in her sparse temporary quarters near the Navy Yard, Jude lay awake. The ceiling fan cut shadows through dim light as she reviewed the day, trying to convince herself that her hyperawareness was purely professional. She traced the rough wrap on her knuckles, focusing on the sting to ground herself.



Tomorrow, they'd run full security drills. She needed to coordinate with the advance team heading to Bogotá, establish command structure, and get everyone in sync. But her mind kept drifting to the way Carmen's voice changed when discussing the peace treaty, the barely perceptible softening that revealed how much it meant to her.

Jude rolled over, forcing herself to focus on tactical approaches and escape routes instead. She couldn't afford distractions. Not with this assignment. Not with these stakes.

The ceiling fan kept spinning, cutting the silent darkness into predictable pieces as she tried to ignore how this protection detail already felt different from all the others. How Carmen Ruiz wasn't just another diplomat to protect, but something far more dangerous to Jude's carefully maintained control.

Yemen had taught her that attachment got people killed. Caracas had reinforced the lesson in blood. She couldn't let her guard down, couldn't let Carmen become more than a mission.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

But as sleep finally approached, Jude's last thought was of Carmen's dark magnetic eyes that saw more than what she let on and voice that made "Captain" sound like something else entirely.

2

### CARMEN

Dawn filtered through Carmen Ruiz's Georgetown townhouse windows, throwing golden flecks of sunlight on the papers on her desk. Her coffee had grown cold, forgotten beside urgent intelligence briefs marked with the highest priority that demanded her full attention. Another village burned by Nuevo Amanecer and more indigenous families displaced by corporate interests masquerading as progress. The photos felt personal: children huddled in temporary shelters, elders watching generations of history reduced to ash.

She removed her reading glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose where they'd left small indents. She knew the summit wasn't just about peace treaties and corporate contracts. It was about these faces, these lives caught between power and profit. Twenty-five years of diplomatic service experience had taught her that real change happened in the spaces between official agreements.

Her phone buzzed. Gerard from the UN Security Council. She answered while scanning satellite imagery of Bogotá, mentally taking notes while she processed his concerns about summit security.

"The corporate representatives are demanding closed-door sessions," he said, his

French accent thickening with frustration. "They're threatening to withdraw support if we include indigenous observers."

"Let them threaten." Carmen's voice remained steady despite the early hour. "They need this treaty more than they'll admit. We just need to help them save face while?—"

A quick beep interrupted her, indicating another call. Maria Elena, one of the indigenous leaders she'd worked with in Colombia was on the other line.

"I'll call you back, Gerard. Keep the pressure on their PR team."

She pressed a button, switching over to the other call, and seamlessly switched to Maria Elena's native dialect, one she'd learned during previous negotiations. The woman's voice carried decades of struggle beneath its courage.

"The oil companies are pushing harder," Maria Elena said. "Three more families lost their homes last night."

Carmen studied the latest surveillance photos, noting the precision of the destruction. "They're escalating on purpose and using humanitarian corridors as leverage."

"Our people can't wait much longer." Fear crept into Maria Elena's usually stoic tone. "The children are sick from contaminated water, and the aid trucks can't get through. We're at a crossroads right now and need to take action."

"I'm bringing in our best security team for the summit," Carmen assured her. "Captain Smith's unit has experience with exactly this kind of situation."

She thought of Jude's service record: Yemen, Caracas, Kabul. The way she'd assessed the briefing room yesterday with tactical precision that went beyond mere security

protocols. Something in her gaze had suggested she understood high stakes beyond just protecting a diplomat.

The DSS agent stationed outside her study did his usual check, a polite knock and brief sweep. Carmen barely noticed anymore; twenty years of protective details had made it routine. But she found herself comparing his methodical movements to Jude's fluid grace yesterday, the way she'd commanded space without dominating it.

Focus, she chided herself. She had displaced families to protect, corruption to expose, and a peace treaty that could prevent more villages from burning to negotiate.

She couldn't afford distractions. Not even ones that came wrapped in quiet competence. The summit briefing would start in an hour, and she needed every diplomatic tool at her disposal.

Her phone buzzed again and kept buzzing all day. Gerard first, then her State Department liaison, then the Colombian ambassador. The morning was filled with the familiar dance of international negotiations, each call a careful balance of pressure and restraint.

But as she prepared to leave for the briefing, Carmen couldn't quite shake the memory of sharp green eyes that saw more than just security risks or of a presence that made her feel simultaneously protected and unsettled. For the first time in her diplomatic career, she wasn't entirely sure how to negotiate her way through what lay ahead.

The DSS team alerted her that her car was ready. She gathered the intelligence briefs, mentally shifting into the role she'd perfected over decades. She had work to do and lives to protect, and there was no room for the strange anticipation that fluttered in her chest at the thought of seeing Captain Jude Smith again.

The State Department's marble halls echoed with her footsteps as Carmen approached the conference room. She could hear voices already—the distinct timbre of corporate lawyers mixing with diplomatic staff. Through the glass walls, she could see the usual pre-summit gathering: State Department officials in conservative suits, CIA analysts clutching their briefing folders, and representatives from Commerce and Energy trying to look less adversarial than they felt. And Jude, standing by the door in her tactical uniform, ramrod straight and quietly alert. The sight shouldn't have made Carmen's pulse quicken.

Inside, the pre-summit tension crackled like static before a storm. Carmen caught fragments of conversations: concerns about American oil investments, whispered intelligence about arms shipments to Nuevo Amanecer, and debates over how much pressure to apply to Colombian officials.

She set her briefing materials on the podium, keenly aware of Jude's positioning without looking directly at her. Years of diplomatic work had taught her to track details in her peripheral vision—which analysts kept checking their phones, whose body language silently communicated interdepartmental rivalries, which senior officials were already forming alliances. But she found her attention repeatedly drawn to the way Jude shifted her stance when voices rose and how she embodied protective readiness without ever appearing threatening.

"Latest intelligence confirms Nuevo Amanecer has sophisticated backing," Carmen began, her voice pitched to command attention without demanding it. "They're using humanitarian corridors as leverage and blocking aid to communities near US corporate installations."

"Perhaps if our companies had better access to their private security contractors..." The Commerce Department's liaison let the suggestion hang.

Carmen caught the subtle tightening of Jude's jaw, the barely perceptible shift in her

body. It echoed Carmen's own carefully hidden reaction to the man's thinly veiled suggestion of military intervention.

"Those same contractors have been implicated in human rights violations." Carmen kept her tone mild but firm. "That could compromise our entire negotiating position." She smiled, the corners of her lips tight, taking the sting from the words while leaving their truth intact. "We need a more nuanced approach."

She felt Jude watching her work, cataloging her diplomatic maneuvers the same way Carmen tracked Jude's security protocols. When the CIA's regional director started to argue, his face flushing with frustration, Carmen noticed how Jude's hand shifted minutely closer to her weapon. The movement was so subtle that probably no one else caught it, but Carmen found it oddly steadying.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

The morning wore on with Carmen orchestrating the delicate dance between competing US interests. She poured water into her glass, and her hand trembled slightly—exhaustion from too many late nights reviewing intelligence briefs. In the reflection of the wall-mounted screens, she saw Jude notice. Their eyes met briefly in the dark glass, and Carmen felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with security surveillance.

"The summit location presents unique challenges," the state's regional director was saying. "Our intelligence suggests?—"

"That someone's arming both sides?" Carmen kept her tone mild, but she saw Jude's slight nod of confirmation. "Perhaps we should discuss which American interests might benefit from prolonged conflict."

The Commerce representatives shifted uncomfortably. Carmen leveraged their discomfort, building pressure with carefully chosen silences and pointed questions, all while being increasingly aware of Jude's presence behind her—solid, steady, somehow both unsettling and grounding.

When satellite images showed the devastation near American oil installations, Carmen translated the humanitarian crisis into language Washington understood: regional stability, resource security, and investment protection. But she heard the deeper implications beneath their discussions of "acceptable losses," and in the screen's reflection, she saw that Jude did too.

The pre-summit meeting ended with provisional strategies and interagency tensions wrapped in diplomatic courtesy. As the conference room emptied, Carmen gathered

her notes, hyperaware of Jude's continued presence by the door. Their eyes met again, this time directly, and Carmen felt that same flutter of connection that both steadied and unnerved her.

The age gap between them should have mattered- Carmen knew from Jude's file she was 39 years old to Carmen's own 54. The different worlds they occupied—diplomat and warrior—should have created distance. Instead, Carmen found herself fighting the urge to bridge that distance, to explore why Jude's protective presence affected her so differently than any security detail before.

She broke eye contact and looked away first, focusing on organizing briefing materials instead of analyzing the warmth that bloomed in her chest when Jude stepped closer to quietly discuss the afternoon's security arrangements. She had a peace treaty to negotiate. She couldn't afford to negotiate the complexity of her own reactions to her new security detail.

But as they walked out together, their steps falling into natural synchronization, Carmen wondered if she was already losing that particular negotiation.

After the briefing, Carmen retreated to her State Department office, where warm afternoon light slanted through bulletproof windows. The day's tensions lingered in her shoulders as she reviewed intelligence updates from Bogotá. More villages evacuated, more families displaced. The peace treaty couldn't wait much longer.

A knock at her door made her look up. Jude stood in the doorway, a stack of files under her arm. "Ma'am, do you have time to review the travel itinerary protocols?"

Carmen gestured to the chair across from her desk, noting how Jude chose to keep her guard up and stand instead, always positioning herself to watch both the door and windows, even here in one of the most secure buildings in DC. The tactical awareness should have made Carmen feel watched. Instead, she felt protected in a way that went



beyond mere security.

"The advance team's latest report," Jude said, laying out documents with precision. "We'll need to adjust our arrival schedule. Local intelligence suggests increased surveillance of diplomatic vehicles from the airport."

Carmen studied the security diagrams and maps annotated with potential choke points and ambush zones. The familiar geography of Bogotá transformed into a strategic grid under Jude's analysis. Her attention caught on a mission patch illustration in the corner of one report: Third Marine Division, South Pacific operations.

"My father served with them," Carmen said quietly, touching the insignia. "Before he transferred to diplomatic security."

Jude's eyes sharpened with interest. "Your father was in the Marine Corps?"

"Twenty-three years. He actually helped establish some of the first embassy protection protocols in South America." Carmen smiled at the memory. "I spent my childhood moving between bases and embassies. Learned to speak Spanish from the local guards before I learned it in school."

Something in Jude's posture softened almost imperceptibly. "My father was a Marine too. Second Battalion, First Marines."

"Force Recon?"

Jude's eyebrow lifted slightly at Carmen's knowledge of Marine Corps units. "Yes, ma'am."

"I remember them." Carmen's voice gentled. "They ran joint operations with embassy security when I was growing up. The way they moved, it was like shadows with

purpose. I used to watch them train from my bedroom window on the compound."

Their eyes met across the desk, and Carmen saw something crack in Jude's professional mask. "My father died in Afghanistan," Jude said quietly. "2010."

"Helmand Province?" When Jude nodded, Carmen continued, "I was working peace negotiations there that year. Lost three good men from my security detail in an ambush."

Understanding passed between them—the weight of service and sacrifice, of lives given to protect others. Carmen found herself studying the small scar near Jude's temple, wondering which battlefield had left that mark. The sharp line of her jaw alluded to strength held in careful check. But it was her eyes that drew Carmen's attention—green with flecks of brown and gold in the afternoon light, holding depths of experience that belied her younger age.

Jude cleared her throat softly, returning them to the travel briefing. But something had shifted in the air between them, professional distance warmed by shared understanding.

They reviewed evacuation routes and safe house locations, Carmen noting how Jude had already memorized every detail. Their hands brushed as they reached for the same document, and Carmen felt that contact like electricity snaking up her arm. She caught Jude's slight intake of breath, the first hint that she might not be alone in this growing awareness.

"The hotel's security feeds will route through our encrypted channels," Jude continued, her voice steady despite the lingering warmth where their fingers had touched. "My team's already sweeping for surveillance devices."

Carmen found herself observing and noting the way Jude moved as she laid out more

tactical maps—the fluid precision that spoke of years of combat training and how she managed to project both lethal capability and careful restraint. She caught herself memorizing details she had no professional need to know: the way Jude's short dark hair curled slightly at her neck, how her tactical uniform stretched taut across strong shoulders, the subtle shifts in her expression as she outlined security measures.

"We'll need to maintain radio contact at all times," Jude was saying. "The pendant I mentioned yesterday?—"

"Will connect directly to your frequency?" Carmen finished, surprised at how much of yesterday's briefing she'd retained. Usually, security details blurred together in her memory.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Yes, ma'am." Was that approval warming Jude's voice? "Three taps for silent alarm, two to check in."

Their eyes met again, and Carmen felt that same flutter of connection that caught her off guard.

"I should let you get back to your preparations," Jude said finally, gathering the remaining documents. Her movements were precise but unhurried, as if she, too, was reluctant to end this moment.

Carmen watched her walk to the door and noticed the way Jude's hand lingered briefly on the doorframe, the slight pause before she stepped through. Then she was gone, leaving Carmen alone with her thoughts and the lingering awareness that this protection detail had become far more complicated than she'd anticipated.

She turned back to her summit preparations, trying to focus on peace treaties and negotiations instead of the memories of Jude's eyes that seemed to see right through Carmen's diplomatic exterior and her steady hands that promised protection, no matter the cost. She shook her head to dislodge the lingering feelings that she didn't have time to unpack and analyze. Carmen had a job to do; lives depended on her focus and diplomatic skill.

But as she reviewed security protocols she'd seen a hundred times before, Carmen couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamental had shifted. For the first time in her diplomatic career, she wasn't sure which was more dangerous: the threats they were preparing for or this growing attraction to the woman assigned to protect her from them.

Evening settled over Georgetown as Carmen reviewed the day's briefings in her study. The DSS team had completed their usual night sweep, the familiar routine of shift change barely registering after so many years. But tonight, her focus kept drifting from intelligence reports to memories of the afternoons catching Jude's eyes and the lingering warmth where their hands had brushed over each other.

Her secure phone buzzed: Maria Elena's number. The indigenous leader's voice carried fresh tension. "Three more trucks stopped at the checkpoints. They're blocking medical supplies now."

Carmen switched to the woman's dialect, noting details. "Military checkpoints or Nuevo Amanecer?"

"Both. They're working together." Maria Elena's words confirmed Carmen's worst fears about corruption within Colombian security forces. "And, Carmen, the corporate logos on the trucks that got through? They match the ones your intelligence reports warned us about."

Ice settled in Carmen's stomach. "Thank you for informing me."

She hung up and immediately dialed Jude's number, diplomatic composure warring with urgency.

Jude answered on the first ring. "Captain Smith."

"I need you to see something. There's new intelligence about corporate involvement with Nuevo Amanecer." Carmen kept her voice steady despite the implications spinning through her mind. "How quickly can you get here?"

A pause, then: "Twenty minutes, ma'am."

The time between hanging up and Jude's arrival stretched endlessly, and she checked her watch three times in the first five minutes after hanging up. Carmen organized her thoughts and evidence, deliberately not questioning why her pulse quickened at the prospect of seeing Jude again.

The DSS team announced Jude's arrival through Carmen's security earpiece. Moments later, there was a firm knock at her study door. Jude entered with the coiled tension of a soldier called to action, her movements sharp and precise as she scanned the room: doors, windows, corners, exits.

"Ma'am." Jude's voice carried its usual professional calm, but Carmen caught the underlying tension. "What's happened?"

Carmen gestured to the files spread across her desk. "Maria Elena called. The situation's escalating faster than we anticipated. Those corporate connections we suspected? They're confirmed."

Jude moved closer, studying the surveillance photos and cargo manifests Carmen had arranged. Her presence seemed to fill the room differently after hours when darkness pressed against windows and professional masks wore thinner.

"They're working with corrupt military units," Carmen continued, switching between documents. "Using aid deliveries to control which communities get supplies. But look at these logos."

She reached for the same photo Jude moved to examine. Their hands brushed against each other again, and Carmen felt that same electric spark between them. Jude didn't pull back immediately, their fingers almost but not quite touching on the glossy paper.

"American companies," Jude said softly, her voice carrying dangerous understanding.

"The same ones represented at this morning's briefing."

"Which means the summit's compromised before it begins." Carmen moved to her drink cabinet, needing something to do with her hands. "Scotch? This conversation should probably be off the record."

Jude hesitated, then nodded. "Thank you."

Carmen poured two glasses, watching Jude's reflection in the window. Even now, the younger woman maintained her alertness, but something in her posture had softened, the professional distance yielding to shared concern.

"The companies at the briefing," Carmen said, handing Jude a glass, "they already knew. That's why they pushed so hard against indigenous observers at the negotiations."

"It explains their security contractors." Jude's fingers brushed Carmen's as she accepted the scotch. "The ones with military training."

"Former special forces, according to Maria Elena." Carmen leaned against her desk, closer to Jude than was strictly necessary. "They're using humanitarian aid to force concessions. Communities that support corporate interests get supplies. Those that don't..."

She let the sentence fade, emotion threatening her diplomatic composure. These weren't just statistics in an intelligence brief. She knew these communities. She had watched their children grow up during decades of peace negotiations.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"We'll find a way." Jude's voice was soothing and showed a glimpse of the woman beneath the warrior. "Your reputation for impossible victories is well earned."

Carmen looked up, caught by the conviction in Jude's tone. "You've reviewed my service record?"

"Thoroughly." Something flickered in Jude's eyes—professional admiration layered with personal interest she couldn't quite hide. "Your negotiations in Paraguay, Venezuela, even Afghanistan, you see patterns that others miss."

"And you?" Carmen found herself stepping closer, drawn by that carefully controlled heat in Jude's gaze. "The way you read tactical situations, how you anticipate threats before they materialize. Yemen wasn't just luck, was it?"

"No, ma'am." Jude's voice dropped lower, intimate in the lamp-lit study. "In the same way that your negotiation victories aren't luck."

They stood close enough now that Carmen could see the faint scar near Jude's temple and could trace the sharp line of her jaw. Their professional pretense felt tissue-thin, stretched between them like silk ready to tear.

"We should review the security implications," Jude said, but she made no move to step back. Her eyes dropped briefly to Carmen's lips before returning to her gaze, the glimpse of desire so quick Carmen might have missed it if she hadn't been watching for it.

"Of course." Carmen forced herself to move away, gathering documents with hands



that wanted to reach for something else entirely. "I'll have my office coordinate with your team first thing tomorrow."

Jude nodded, sliding her professional mask back into place. But as she turned to leave, Carmen caught her reflection in the window and noticed the way her eyes lingered and how her hand gripped the doorknob a moment longer than necessary. The small tells that pointed to proof of mutual attraction hit Carmen like wind before a storm, thrilling and dangerous.

After Jude left, Carmen stood at her study window, watching the younger woman's figure disappear into the Georgetown night. The scotch in her glass caught the lamplight like amber, and she found herself remembering how Jude's fingers had felt against hers, the way her voice changed when the professional distance cracked.

She had a peace treaty to negotiate, communities to protect, and corruption to expose. She couldn't afford complications, couldn't risk distractions when lives hung in the balance.

But alone in her lamp-lit study, Carmen finally admitted what she'd been fighting all day: this protection detail had become more than professional. And judging by the heat in Jude's eyes before she left, the attraction wasn't one-sided.

The realization should have concerned her. Instead, it felt like stepping off a cliff and finding wings.

3

JUDE

Bogotá's morning air bit cold. "Tell me about Yemen," Carmen said quietly. "Not the official report. What really happened."

Jude's hand tightened around her glass. "What makes you think there's more to it?"

"Because I've read enough sanitized reports to know they hide the reality." Carmen turned, studying her at this altitude, the Andes' shadows to the east still holding the night's chill. Jude circled the armored BMW, her body running on caffeine and training after the overnight flight. Every vehicle check was completed with muscle memory now: tire pressure, armor plating, door seals. Yemen had taught her to trust no one's work but her own.

The private hangar still held traces of their midnight arrival: jet engines cooling, ground crew moving with practiced efficiency, and the lingering scent of aviation fuel. Jude had watched Carmen descend the aircraft steps with her grace intact despite the late hour, somehow managing to look elegant even after six hours in the air. They'd shared only professional words since departing DC, but Jude had felt every accidental brush of shoulders during the flight's turbulent moments and cataloged every quiet breath when Carmen had finally dozed off in their private plane.

"Perimeter clear," Sarah's voice came through her earpiece, pulling Jude back to the present. "Morning traffic patterns are normal for the route."

Jude acknowledged Sarah's report with a quick tap of her mic as she scanned the hangar's shadows. Their arrival had been confidential—routed through secure channels with a carefully crafted flight plan—but she'd learned that information had a way of leaking in war zones, and Bogotá was definitely a war zone beneath its cosmopolitan surface. The local security forces had been too eager to help and too interested in their movements. She'd seen that kind of attention before in Caracas . . . right before everything went wrong.

"Three-vehicle convoy is ready," Marcus reported from the driver's seat. "Kate's got surveillance drones up giving us eyes overhead."

Jude nodded, checking her weapon for the third time. The weight of her tactical vest felt heavier here where the altitude made every movement cost more energy. Or maybe it was the weight of watching Carmen move through her morning briefing with the local embassy staff, her voice carrying that particular tone of authority that somehow managed to make Jude's pulse quicken, even while discussing threat assessments.

The click of heels on concrete made her look up. Carmen approached with her usual composure, but Jude noticed the subtle signs of fatigue from travel—a slight softness to her usual precision and the way she held her coffee cup like armor against the morning. Even tired, she commanded attention without demanding it, her charcoal suit and silk blouse a stark contrast to their security gear.

"All clear, Captain?" Carmen's voice carried warmth despite the fatigue Jude could read in the slight tension around her eyes. The overnight flight had been rough with unexpected turbulence that had their security teams constantly recalculating threat scenarios.

"Vehicle's secure, ma'am." Jude opened the rear door, positioning herself to shield Carmen from potential vulnerabilities. Their eyes met briefly, and Jude fought against remembering how Carmen had instinctively gripped her arm during the worst of the turbulence on the plane. "We'll take the alternate route to the hotel."

Carmen slid into the backseat with practiced ease, and Jude caught a whisper of her perfume—something elegant that made the armored car feel suddenly smaller and more intimate. Marcus took the driver's seat while Jude rode shotgun, her body angled to watch both the road ahead and Carmen's reflection in the rearview mirror.

They merged into morning traffic, the city slowly waking around them. Bogotá's streets were already filling up with vendors setting up stalls, business people hurrying to their offices, and the constant dance of motorcycles weaving between lanes.

Through her earpiece, Jude monitored her team's positioning: Sarah and Kate in the follow vehicle behind them, David coordinating surveillance from their temporary command center, and James on standby at the hotel.

"How long were you stationed here before during the last coup attempt?" Carmen asked, her voice carrying that diplomat's gift for making conversation sound both casual and purposeful.

"Three months," Jude answered, somehow unsurprised that Carmen had read that detail in her file and suspected she already knew the answer. "Mostly intelligence gathering on cartel movements near the embassy."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Two motorcycles approaching," Marcus said quietly. "Right side, matching speed."

Jude's hand shifted closer to her weapon. "David, got eyes on them?"

"Checking traffic cams." A pause. "Just commuters. But there's a black SUV that's made the last three turns with us."

Carmen leaned forward, close enough that Jude could feel her presence like heat. The morning sun caught the silver in her hair, and Jude forced herself to focus on the traffic instead of how the light played across Carmen's features.

"The last time I was here," Carmen said, voice pitched for Jude's ears alone, "we lost two vehicles to a coordinated ambush. The cartels had bought off half the local security force. They're patient; they'll wait until you start feeling safe."

The proximity of Carmen's breath against her ear made Jude's skin tingle, but the intelligence beneath the casual observation sharpened her focus. "When was this?"

"Two years ago. Different political players, same tactics." Carmen's tone carried years of experience in reading between lines of official reports. "The corporate interests haven't changed, just their proxies. Watch for the private security contractors; they're usually ex-military, probably from the same units you worked with during the coup."

Jude stored that insight away while tracking the black SUV in her side mirror. "Sarah, peel off and get eyes on our tail. Marcus, next intersection we'll?—"

"Test if they follow," Carmen finished, and Jude caught her quick smile in the mirror. "I've done this dance before, Captain. Though usually with less . . . competent partners."

The simple praise shouldn't have warmed Jude's chest. She blamed the altitude and situation for how her pulse jumped when Carmen continued sharing details about previous security incidents, each observation tactically relevant and delivered with diplomatic precision that made Jude increasingly aware of the woman behind the professional façade.

"The hotel's security chief is new," Carmen added, shuffling through briefing papers. "Replaced after the last summit. His background check shows multiple connections to corporate interests we're investigating."

"I've already flagged him," Jude confirmed, allowing a small smile tug at the corners of her lips at their synchronicity. "His shifts are being monitored."

Their bubble of focused tension broke when David's voice crackled through the comms. "SUV turned off. Clean for now, but satellites show unusual traffic patterns near the hotel's south entrance."

They arrived at the Hotel Gran Diplomático's private entrance twenty minutes later, the morning sun now painting the glass building in blinding streaks. As Marcus did a final sweep of the underground garage, Carmen gathered her briefing materials.

"Thank you, Captain." Her hand brushed Jude's shoulder, feather-light but electric. "I know my experience with local security risks complicates your job."

Jude turned, and for a moment, they were too close in the car's confined space. She could see flecks of amber in Carmen's dark eyes, count her individual lashes, and feel the weight of everything they left unspoken. The air felt thinner, as if Carmen's

presence seemed to consume all the oxygen in the space between them.

"Your experience keeps us alive, ma'am," Jude managed, her voice professional despite the heat building under her tactical vest. "The more intelligence we have, the better we can protect you."

Carmen's smile held knowing warmth. "Always the soldier first, aren't you?" She stepped out of the vehicle before Jude could respond, leaving her with the ghost of perfume and the growing certainty that maintaining professional distance was becoming impossible.

Jude followed, scanning the garage's shadows while trying to ignore how the morning light played across Carmen's features. They had a summit to secure, threats to neutralize, and a peace treaty hanging in the balance. She couldn't afford distractions, couldn't risk letting her growing attraction compromise her judgment.

But as they moved toward the elevator, Jude caught Carmen watching her in the polished steel doors' reflection, and she knew she was already fighting a losing battle against feelings that had nothing to do with duty and everything to do with the woman who made diplomatic protection feel like falling.

The elevator ride to the lobby stretched endless, each floor bringing them closer to the public spaces Jude had spent weeks analyzing through security footage. Carmen stood closer than strictly necessary, their shoulders almost touching as they ascended. Through her earpiece, Jude monitored her team taking up positions throughout the hotel.

"Lobby swept and secure," Kate reported through Jude's earpiece. "Local security's trying to access our feeds."

Jude's jaw tightened at the news. A slight movement caught her eye; Carmen had

noticed her reaction.

"They'll try to monitor everything," Carmen murmured, soft enough that only Jude could hear. "Watch the cleaning staff supervisor. She reports directly to our friends in corporate security."

The elevator doors opened, revealing the marble lobby spread before them, morning sun streaming through the windows. Jude positioned herself slightly ahead of Carmen, scanning faces and movements while Marcus handled check-in procedures they'd arranged through secure channels.

"Welcome to the Hotel Gran Diplomático," the manager stepped forward, all polished smiles and careful deference. Jude had memorized his background check: Miguel Santos, twenty years in luxury hotels, no obvious red flags but too many connections to local power players.

Carmen handled the social requirements with practiced ease while Jude watched the staff's movements. Two bellhops approached with luggage carts, their uniforms pressed to military precision that set off Jude's internal warning bells.

"Our finest suite is prepared." Santos gestured toward the private elevator. "If you'll follow me..."

"We know the way," Jude cut in smoothly, catching Sarah's subtle hand signal about the bellhops' earpieces. "Thank you."

The Hotel Gran Diplomático's presidential suite took up half the top floor, a sprawling complex of interconnected rooms that gave Jude's security instincts fits. Too many windows, too many entry points, too many variables to control. She moved through the space with razor-sharp precision, cataloging every potential vulnerability while her team set up their equipment.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"North-facing windows have clear sight lines from at least three buildings," she noted into her comm, watching Kate mark the coordinates. "I want surveillance on all of them."

"Already running facial recognition on the occupants," David's voice crackled back. "Three law firms, two tech companies, and a lot of recently rented office space."

Sarah appeared in the doorway of what would be Carmen's bedroom, her expression grim. "Local security cameras are compromised. Someone's tapped into the feeds."

"Switch to our system." Jude moved to inspect the connecting door between her room and Carmen's, testing its reinforced locks. "I want our people monitoring every angle."

The door represented both tactical necessity and personal temptation. Having direct access to Carmen's room was essential for protection, but Jude couldn't quite ignore how the proximity would affect her already fragile professional distance.

Soft footsteps in the hallway made her turn. Carmen entered with her usual quiet grace, trailed by hotel staff carrying her luggage. Even after the long flight and tense drive, she maintained that diplomat's gift for making every movement look effortless.

"The staff has been cleared?" Carmen asked, though Jude suspected she already knew the answer.

"Thoroughly. Though I'd prefer you let us unpack?—"

"That won't be necessary, Captain." Carmen's smile held gentle amusement. "Some things should remain private, don't you think?"

The suggestion in her tone made Jude's collar feel too tight. She focused on checking window seals while Carmen directed the staff, hyperaware of how the other woman moved through the space. Each brush past felt deliberate, every shared glance carrying weight.

"Communications are up," Marcus reported, drawing Jude's attention back to security. "Encrypted channels confirmed secure."

She nodded, moving to inspect the bathroom's ventilation system. "I want thermal imaging on adjacent rooms and?—"

The words died on her tongue. Carmen stood in the bathroom doorway wearing only a silk robe, hair damp from a shower Jude hadn't even heard running. Water droplets traced paths down her neck, disappearing beneath deep blue silk, and Jude's carefully maintained control cracked.

"Sorry, Captain." Carmen's voice carried a hint of something that wasn't quite innocence. "I thought you'd finished in here."

Jude forced her eyes up, maintaining professional eye contact through sheer will. "Just checking the ventilation access points, ma'am. I'll give you privacy."

"Always so proper." Carmen's smile held heat that had nothing to do with her shower. She moved past Jude in the narrow doorway, close enough that damp silk brushed against tactical gear. "Though I wonder if that's getting harder to maintain."

The scent of Carmen's shower products—something expensive and subtle—filled Jude's senses. She stepped back quickly, nearly colliding with Sarah who'd appeared

with security updates.

"Ma'am," Jude managed, her voice remarkably steady considering how her pulse raced. "We'll finish the security sweep and let you settle in."

Carmen's knowing look suggested she hadn't missed Jude's reaction. "Of course, Captain. Though do remember that connecting door works both ways. You know, in case of an emergency."

The reminder of their shared access hung between them, loaded with implications beyond just security protocols. Jude retreated to her own room, directing her team to finish setting up surveillance while trying to forget how Carmen's robe had clung to shower-warm skin.

Later, alone in her room, Jude stared at the connecting door. She could hear Carmen moving around next door, taking calls with that diplomatic voice that somehow managed to be both authoritative and intimate. The sounds felt too close, too personal, like classified information Jude shouldn't have access to.

She touched the door's handle, telling herself she was just checking the lock again. But she knew the real danger wasn't what might come through the door.

It was how much she wanted to open it herself.

Her secure phone buzzed, breaking the moment. She expected a security update, but Carmen's name lit up the display instead.

"Captain." Carmen's voice through the phone carried that particular warmth that made Jude's pulse quicken. "Could you join me to review tomorrow's security protocols?"

"Of course, ma'am." Jude was already moving, her professional mask firmly in place.

"Give me two minutes to coordinate with the team."

She updated Sarah about the change in position, checked her weapon, and tried to ignore how eager she felt to cross the space between their rooms. The connecting door clicked open with careful precision.

Carmen's suite glowed amber in the evening light streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. The diplomat stood at her desk, still elegant despite the long day, and Jude noticed how Carmen's silver-streaked hair caught the sunset. She'd changed from her blue silk robe into something even softer—a cream silk blouse and tailored slacks that made Jude intensely aware of still being in her work clothes.

"Drink?" Carmen gestured to the bar cart by the window. "I think we've earned one after today's excitement."

Jude hesitated. "Ma'am, I'm still on duty."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"You're always on duty, Captain." Carmen's smile held understanding. "But sometimes we need to blur the lines between protection and partnership. Especially given what we're facing."

She moved to the bar cart with fluid grace, pouring two measures of what looked like expensive scotch. The casual domesticity of the gesture felt more dangerous than any security threat they'd faced.

"The balcony has been swept," Carmen added, holding out a glass to Jude. "And I imagine you'd feel better assessing sight lines from out there."

Their fingers brushed during the exchange, sending electricity up Jude's arm. She followed Carmen onto the balcony, automatically noting defensive positions and angles of vulnerability. But her focus wavered when Carmen leaned against the railing, "And because I recognize that look you get sometimes. The one that says you're carrying old ghosts. Tell me about Yemen."

The evening air felt thinner, charged with more than just altitude. Jude took a careful sip of scotch, letting the burn ground her.

"We lost two team members," she finally said. "The official report says we couldn't have predicted the attack. But I saw the signs: local security acting strange, unusual patterns in staff rotations, the works. I just didn't put them together fast enough."

"And you've been watching for those signs ever since."

"Like you've been watching for signs of corporate interference in peace

negotiations?" Jude countered softly.

Carmen's smile held surprise and approval. "You've been paying attention."

"It's my job to pay attention, ma'am."

"To security threats, yes." Carmen shifted closer, her perfume mixing with the evening air. "But you see more than that, don't you? The way corporate interests are using humanitarian aid to control indigenous communities. How they're corrupting local officials."

"The same way you see more than just tactical movements when you watch my team work."

The observation slipped out before Jude could stop it. Carmen's eyes darkened with something that held more than just surprise.

"We're more alike than they'd expect," Carmen murmured. "Both dedicated to protection, just with different methods." She paused, watching the city lights flicker on below. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like? To choose something for yourself instead of duty?"

The question hung between them, loaded with implications. Jude turned to face her fully, transfixed by how the fading light softened Carmen's features.

"Duty is easier," Jude admitted. "It has clear lines and defined boundaries."

"And this doesn't?" Carmen stepped closer, erasing their professional distance. "This thing we're not talking about?"

Jude's breath caught. Carmen stood close enough now that she could see the flecks of

gold in her dark eyes and feel the heat radiating between them.

"Carmen..." The name slipped out before she could swallow it, the first time Jude had used it instead of the usual honorific "ma'am."

Carmen's hand came up to trace the scar near Jude's temple, the touch feather-light but electric. "Always so careful, aren't you? Always in control?"

"I have to be." Jude's voice roughened. "People's lives depend on it. Your life depends on it."

"And if I told you some things are worth the risk?"

Jude hesitated, not saying what she really wanted to. The kiss, when it came, was gentle but deliberate. Carmen's soft lips pressed against hers with passionate intensity. For one fleeting moment, Jude let herself respond and lean in to the kiss, tasting scotch and possibility and everything she shouldn't want but did.

Then Carmen pulled back, reality crashing over them with the evening air.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her professional mask slipping back into place. "That was inappropriate. I shouldn't have?—"

She retreated into the suite before Jude could respond, leaving her alone on the balcony with the ghost of the kiss and the certainty that nothing would be the same after this.

Jude pressed a finger to her lips, still feeling the phantom pressure of Carmen's mouth against her own. The city sparkled below, oblivious to how her world had just shifted on its axis. Her military training screamed about compromise and distraction, about how attraction could get people killed.

But her heart, treacherous and honest, knew it was already too late for warnings.

She finished her scotch in one burning swallow and walked back into her own room through the connecting door, each step an exercise in control. But as she prepared for the night security shift, Jude knew she'd lost the most important battle of all: the one against falling for the woman she was meant to protect.

Jude's room felt too quiet after the intensity of the balcony. She moved through her security checklist with mechanical precision, trying to focus on protocols instead of the lingering taste of scotch and Carmen's lips.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Northwest sector clear," Sarah's voice crackled through her earpiece, startling her back to duty. "But we've got increased activity around the hotel perimeter."

Jude welcomed the distraction. "What kind of activity?"

"Local police patrols. More than usual. And they're paying too much attention to our security positions."

"Send me the footage." Jude moved to her laptop, grateful for something tactical to analyze. But as the security feeds loaded, she caught her reflection in the dark screen, her fingers subconsciously touching her lips where Carmen had kissed her. She could almost still feel them...

Focus. She pulled up the footage, noting the patrol patterns Sarah had flagged. The local police were indeed showing unusual interest in their defensive positions. Just like in Yemen before.

Her phone buzzed. David's text was brief but concerning: Corporate security team checking in. Same unit as last summit.

The same summit where Carmen had lost two vehicles to an ambush. The memory of Carmen's earlier warning about patient enemies twisted in Jude's gut, mixing with the echo of her whispered apology before retreating.

She needed to clear her head. "Sarah, I'm doing a perimeter check. Keep monitoring those patrols, and radio me if you see anything that suggests the situation is escalating."

The hotel corridors were quiet at this hour, their thick carpet swallowing her footsteps. Jude moved with practiced stealth, checking security positions and sight lines. Everything looked normal, but experience had taught her that “normal” was often when things went wrong. She wouldn’t get complacent in normalcy.

Passing Carmen's door, she heard muted voices from within. She knew she shouldn't listen. But her training—and something more personal—made her pause and linger.

"—increasing pressure on the indigenous communities." Carmen's voice, tired but determined, filtered through the door. "Yes, I understand the corporate interests at stake, but—" A pause. "The peace treaty means nothing if it's built on corrupt foundations."

Jude's chest tightened at the strain in Carmen's voice. She wanted to go in, to offer... What? Protection? Comfort? Both seemed dangerous after what had happened on the balcony.

A movement at the end of the hall snapped her attention back to duty. One of the hotel's security staff was speaking quietly into a radio, his posture triggering warning bells in Jude's mind and body.

"Kate," she murmured into her comm. "I need a background check on the night security supervisor. Something's off."

"Already on it." Kate's fingers clicked over keys. "He's new. Hired right after the staff changes Carmen mentioned. And his bank records show some interesting deposits."

The pieces started falling into place. Carmen's warnings about patient enemies. The too-interested police patrols. New security staff with suspicious finances. They were being watched, assessed, and measured for weaknesses.

Including, perhaps, the growing connection between protector and protectee.

Jude completed her perimeter check, each step strengthening her resolve. She couldn't take back the kiss, couldn't unfeel what was building between them. But she could ensure it didn't compromise Carmen's safety.

When she returned to her room, the connecting door seemed to mock her with possibilities and temptations. She could hear Carmen moving around next door, the soft sounds a reminder of everything she couldn't have. Shouldn't have.

"Activity update," Sarah reported. "Two unmarked vehicles just parked in our blind spot on the south side."

"Track them," Jude ordered, forcing her mind to security concerns. "I want IDs on anyone who exits those vehicles."

She spent the next hour coordinating with her team, reviewing security footage, and updating protocols. But every few minutes, her eyes drifted to the connecting door that separated them. Every shift of movement from Carmen's room made her hyperaware of the woman on the other side.

Finally, when the night had grown deep and the city's lights sparkled like fallen stars, Jude allowed herself one moment of weakness. She pressed her palm flat against the connecting door, feeling the wood's smooth grain beneath her calluses.

"I'll keep you safe," she whispered to the silence. "Even if that means keeping my distance."

But as she turned away to continue her watch, Jude knew she was lying to herself. Distance might protect their lives, but her heart was already too far gone for protection.

The night stretched out long ahead, full of security threats she could fight and feelings she couldn't. Tomorrow would bring new challenges: a peace summit to secure, enemies to identify, and professional boundaries to rebuild.

But tonight, alone in her room with the ghost of a kiss she couldn't forget, Jude accepted a hard truth: sometimes the greatest threat wasn't the enemy you could see coming.

It was the way love could slip past your defenses when you weren't looking.

4

CARMEN

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

When the first light of dawn crept across Carmen's suite, she had already been awake for hours, reviewing her opening speech notes without really seeing them. The words blurred together, replaced by memories of last night's kiss—the softness of Jude's lips, the brief moment of surrender before Carmen had retreated.

"Stop," she whispered to her reflection as she adjusted her silk blouse. Silver threads in her dark hair caught the morning light, and she wondered if Jude noticed them, if they reminded her of their age difference. Then she pushed that thought away too. She had a peace treaty to negotiate. Lives depended on her unwavering focus and diplomatic skill.

Her phone buzzed with another intelligence update. Three more indigenous families displaced overnight, their homes mysteriously burning after refusing corporate "protection." The photos made her hands clench: children huddled in temporary shelters, elders watching generations of history reduced to ash. She'd seen too many villages burn in her career, too many lives sacrificed to corporate greed masquerading as progress.

Movement from just beyond the connecting door made her pulse quicken. She heard Jude's voice, low and professional, coordinating with her team. The sound shouldn't have affected her so strongly, shouldn't have made her remember how that voice had roughened when Carmen touched her.

Before Carmen could avert her gaze and pretend to busy herself, the adjoining door opened, and Jude stood in the doorway.

"Security sweep complete," Jude said, her voice perfectly controlled. "Ready when

you are, ma'am."

Ma'am. Back to formality, as if last night on the balcony had never happened. Carmen straightened her shoulders, sliding into her diplomatic armor for an ounce of protection. "Thank you, Captain. Just a moment."

She gathered her briefing materials, each movement precise and practiced. Twenty-five years of diplomatic service had taught her how to maintain composure while her world shifted. She'd negotiated peace treaties during coups and mediated between warlords, and she never before lost her focus.

But she'd never had to negotiate her way through falling for her security detail.

She stole a glance at the woman still standing in the doorway. Jude stood like a sentinel in her tactical gear, all controlled power and careful distance. Their eyes met briefly, and Carmen caught the slight hitch in Jude's breathing, the only tell that she wasn't as unaffected and detached as she pretended. The thought filled Carmen with warmth.

"The summit security teams are in position," Jude reported, falling into step beside her as she left the hotel room and walked through the hotel's secured corridors. "But those police patrols from last night are still showing unusual patterns."

Carmen nodded, letting their conversation stay professional while her security detail flanked them. Their footsteps echoed on marble as they descended to the hotel's private garage, the air growing cooler with each level. She noted how Jude's body unconsciously oriented toward her, tracking her movements while scanning for threats as they left the hotel. The protective instinct should have felt stifling. Instead, it made her feel seen in more ways than just security.

Marcus held the armored BMW's door open, and Carmen slid inside. Jude took the

front passenger seat, her posture alert as she coordinated with the convoy through her radio. The familiar scent of leather and gun oil filled the vehicle—an odd comfort after decades of diplomatic protection.

Bogotá's morning traffic flowed around them like a river, streams of motorcycles weaving between lanes while street vendors set up their carts. The Andes loomed against the pale sky, their peaks catching early sunlight. Through the bulletproof glass, Carmen watched the city wake up: business people hurrying to offices, children in school uniforms, and the constant dance of vehicles navigating narrow streets.

"Two motorcycles approaching fast," Sarah's voice crackled through the comms.

Carmen caught Jude's subtle shift, her hand moving closer to her weapon. They'd both seen too many assassinations start exactly like this. But the motorcycles passed without incident, just commuters running late.

The historic Palacio de San Carlos rose before them, its colonial architecture a stark contrast to the modern city growing around it. Carmen had negotiated peace treaties in buildings like this across three continents, each one carrying the weight of history in its stone walls. But something felt different today, like it was charged with more than just diplomatic tension.

Their convoy circled to the private entrance, where additional security teams waited. Carmen recognized the formation Jude had designed: overlapping fields of coverage, no blind spots, every angle protected. The precision would have impressed her professionally, even if she wasn't already aware of the woman who had orchestrated it.

Inside, the building's grandeur took her breath away despite having been here before. Sunlight streamed through tall windows, painting patterns on marble floors that had witnessed centuries of politics and power. Their footsteps echoed off walls adorned

with artwork depicting Colombia's history, each piece carefully chosen to remind visitors of the stakes when peace hung in the balance.

They walked through the corridors, and the grand ballroom hummed with pre-summit tension as they approached. Carmen cataloged the players through practiced eyes: corporate lawyers in expensive suits, humanitarian observers trying to look neutral, and local officials whose allegiances shifted like sand when it suited them. She caught fragments of conversations about resource rights and profit margins, about peace treaties and bottom lines.

"Two new security contractors by the west entrance," Jude murmured, close enough that her breath brushed Carmen's ear. "They're carrying themselves like Special Operations Forces."

"Former Navy SEALs, probably," Carmen replied softly, pretending to review her notes. "The same corporate security firm from Venezuela. Watch how they position themselves near the indigenous representatives."

Through the ballroom's towering windows, morning light caught the gilded details of colonial medallions and made the crystal chandeliers sparkle like ice. Carmen watched MariaElena and her fellow indigenous leaders enter, their traditional dress a proud contrast to the corporate suits. The corporate security contractors shifted subtly, their movements carrying silent threats that made Carmen's jaw tighten.

She caught her reflection in one of the ancient mirrors that lined the walls: elegant, composed, every hair in place. The diplomat they all expected. But in the same reflection, she saw Jude positioning herself with tactical precision, and the memory of their kiss flooded back with physical force that almost knocked her down.

"Two minutes, ma'am," Sarah said as she approached with final security confirmations. "The room's secure."



Carmen nodded, but her attention caught on how Jude's hand rested near her concealed weapon, how her eyes never stopped scanning the crowd. The soldier and the diplomat, both dedicated to protection through different means. Both fighting battles between duty and desire.

The podium stood on a raised dais, its polished wood bearing the scars of hundreds of historic speeches. As Carmen took her position, she felt the weight of all those who had stood here before, trying to forge peace from chaos. The weight of the peace treaty seemed to press down on her shoulders, along with the eyes of every faction in the room.

When she began speaking, her voice carried the authority of decades of service, every careful phrase designed to build bridges while exposing corruption. Her words flowed with practiced ease: welcome speeches in three languages, acknowledgments of each delegation, and subtle diplomatic signals woven through formal protocols.

"We stand at a crossroads," she said, her voice reaching the furthest corners of the historic chamber. "Where corporate interests and indigenous rights must find common ground, where profit and protection must become partners rather than adversaries."

But part of her remained acutely aware of Jude's presence and of how she moved through the crowd with lethal grace. Their eyes met briefly during a pause in her speech, and the silent connection felt electric, charged with everything they couldn't say but wanted to. Carmen forced her focus back to the speech and the carefully crafted words that could save lives or condemn communities if she faltered.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

The fate of villages hung on her ability to navigate between power and justice. She couldn't afford distractions. She couldn't risk the peace treaty for personal desires. Her diplomatic training had taught her that professional distance was essential for successful negotiations.

But as morning light streamed through those historic windows, Carmen accepted a truth she'd been fighting since that first security briefing in Washington: some things were worth the risk.

Even if those things came with impenetrable tactical gear and measured detachment, with memories of kisses that tasted like scotch and surrender, with the weight of duty pressing against desire. The peace treaty might determine the fate of communities, but that kiss had already determined the fate of her heart.

She finished her opening speech, and polite applause followed, each faction measuring their response against their political allegiances. As she stepped down from the podium, Jude materialized at her side like a shadow given purpose, close enough that Carmen could feel the heat radiating from her body.

"Well said, ma'am," Jude murmured, her professional mask perfectly in place. But Carmen caught the softness in her eyes and the slight tremor in Jude's voice that suggested she wasn't just talking about the speech.

Carmen allowed herself one small smile, meant only for Jude. "Sometimes, Captain, the riskiest moves are the ones most worth making."

She let that truth hang between them as they moved into the next phase of the

summit, both of them knowing they weren't just talking about peace treaties anymore.

The morning's formal speeches gave way to closed-door negotiations, which was where the real work happened. Carmen moved through the Palacio's ornate corridors toward the private conference room, acutely aware of Jude's presence behind her. The historic building's thick stone walls made every footstep echo like punctuation between heartbeats.

Inside the conference room, tension crackled beneath polite, diplomatic veneers. Carmen studied the assembled players she'd have to negotiate with. There was Victor Ramirez from the corporate consortium, his expensive suit a sharp contrast to Maria Elena's traditional dress, both of them flanked by their respective security details. The corporate contractors Jude had identified earlier positioned themselves with casual menace near the indigenous representatives—threatening, but not in an overt way to get them removed.

"Our terms are reasonable," Ramirez began in Spanish, his tone suggesting anything but reason. "The indigenous councils will be fairly compensated for any...inconvenience."

Carmen watched Maria Elena's hands tighten on her papers. "Displacement isn't an inconvenience," the indigenous leader replied. "It's cultural genocide."

The words hung in the air that was already thick with unspoken threats. Carmen leaned forward, choosing her next words carefully. "Perhaps we should discuss the recent fires." She kept her voice mild but pointed. "Mysterious accidents that only seem to affect communities refusing corporate protection."

Ramirez's face flushed. He slammed his hand on the table, making water glasses rattle. "You dare accuse?—"

Carmen caught Jude's instant shift to alert status in her peripheral vision. The younger woman moved with fluid precision, adjusting her position to better protect Carmen while maintaining the illusion of a relaxed stance to not alarm others. The sight of such controlled power made Carmen's breath catch in her throat.

"I'm merely suggesting," Carmen continued smoothly, "that peace requires trust. And trust requires?—"

Static crackled through security radios, cutting her off. "Potential breach in the north corridor," Sarah's voice reported. "Unknown subjects approaching the restricted area."

Carmen watched Jude process the information, noting how her situational awareness sharpened without betraying concern to the room. Their eyes met briefly, and Carmen read volumes in that fleeting contact.

"Continue the discussion," Jude murmured, close enough that her breath stirred Carmen's hair. "We'll handle security."

The professional competence in her voice sent an inappropriate shiver down Carmen's spine. She forced her attention back to the negotiations, where Ramirez was working himself into another outburst.

"Your peasant protests are costing us millions!" He jabbed a finger toward Maria Elena. "If you people would just?—"

"'You people?'" Carmen interrupted, letting steel enter her voice. "I believe you mean the legal owners of territories protected by three separate treaties." She turned to the corporate security contractors. "Treaties that certain parties seem determined to circumvent through intimidation."

More static burst through the radios. Carmen maintained her diplomatic focus while eyeing Jude's movements. The younger woman had shifted again, positioning herself to cover both the door and Carmen's exposed side. The sight of such precise protection made Carmen's diplomatic armor feel tissue-thin.

"Unknown subjects neutralized," Sarah reported. "Situation contained."

Carmen caught the slight relaxation in Jude's shoulders, the only tell that there had been real danger. She'd seen enough combat situations to read between the lines of security reports. Someone had tested their defenses, probing for weaknesses.

"Now," Carmen continued, letting her gaze pin each person in turn, "shall we discuss actual solutions? Or would you prefer to explain to your shareholders why their stock values are dropping due to international scrutiny of your methods?"

The corporate team exchanged glances. Carmen had spent decades learning to read such silent communications. They hadn't expected her to know about their market vulnerabilities or their connections to recent violence.

"Perhaps," Ramirez said slowly, his anger banking to calculation, "we could explore alternative arrangements."

The negotiations continued, each side advancing and retreating across verbal battlefields. But part of Carmen's awareness remained fixed on Jude, on how she moved through the room like a shadow. Every shift of her body communicated protection, and Carmen found herself increasingly distracted.

When the session finally broke for lunch, Carmen gathered her notes with hands that trembled slightly. The morning's tension had drawn her shoulders tight, and the constant awareness of Jude's presence had worn her diplomatic composure thin.

"The security breach?" she asked quietly as they exited the conference room.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Handled," Jude replied, close enough that Carmen could feel her warmth. "But it confirms our suspicions about local police cooperation, not that we weren't already prepared for that."

Carmen nodded, increasingly aware of their proximity in the ancient corridor. "Your team performed admirably." She allowed herself to meet Jude's eyes. "I find competence very...compelling."

She saw the words land exactly where she had hoped and saw Jude's pupils dilate slightly before her professional mask slipped back into place. "Just doing our job, ma'am."

But they both knew it had become far more than that.

The private elevator at the Hotel Gran Diplomático felt smaller than usual, its polished surfaces reflecting Carmen's exhaustion from the day's negotiations. Jude stood at parade rest beside her, and the silence between them hummed with unspoken words.

Carmen watched their reflection in the mirrored walls. It was obvious, to Carmen at least, that they were both pretending the air wasn't charged with hope and optimism. The day's events had left her wrung out from corporate threats, security breaches, and the constant dance between duty and desire.

"Join me for a security debrief?" she asked as the elevator ascended, her voice steady despite her racing pulse. "There are some concerns from today's session I'd like to discuss with you."

"Of course, ma'am." Jude's voice gave nothing away, but Carmen caught the slight tension in her jaw and the way her hands clasped tighter behind her back.

They moved through the hallway to Carmen's suite in almost perfect synchronization. Inside, the evening light washed the room in shadows. Carmen watched Jude perform her security sweep with fluid grace, each movement precise and controlled.

"All clear," Jude reported, but she didn't make a move to leave.

Carmen moved to the bar cart, needing something to do with her hands. "Scotch?"

A pause, then: "Thank you, ma'am."

The clink of crystal seemed too loud in the charged silence. Carmen handed Jude a glass, their fingers brushing. The contact sent electricity up her arm.

"The security breach at the Palacio," Carmen began, maintaining the pretense of professional discussion. "You think it was coordinated with local police?"

"Yes." Jude took a careful sip of scotch. "The timing was too precise. They were testing our response protocols."

Carmen moved toward the balcony doors, drawn to the fresh air and the city lights spread below. "Like Yemen?"

She heard Jude's slight intake of breath behind her. "You've studied my file thoroughly." It wasn't a question.

"I like to know who's protecting me." Carmen turned, finding Jude closer than expected. "In Yemen, you spotted the warning signs before anyone else. Just like today."



The evening air carried the scent of rain from the mountains. Carmen opened the balcony doors, stepping out into the cooling darkness. After a moment, Jude followed.

"The corporate security contractors," Jude said quietly. "They're positioning for something bigger than just intimidation."

"I know." Carmen leaned against the railing, studying the city below. "The same way I know you've been watching them watch me."

The space between them seemed to shrink with each breath. Carmen could hear the subtle shift of Jude's tactical gear as she moved closer, drawn by the same gravity that had been pulling them together since Washington.

"It's my job to watch," Jude murmured.

"Is that all it is?" Carmen turned to face her fully. "Just duty?"

The city lights caught the green in Jude's eyes, making them glitter like jade. Her professional mask slipped just slightly, revealing heat beneath the surface.

"You know it's not."

The whispered admission hung between them like smoke. Carmen set her glass down, each movement deliberate. "Last night on the balcony..."

"Was a mistake." But Jude's voice lacked conviction.

"Was it?" Carmen stepped closer, erasing the careful distance between them. "Or was it the most honest thing we've done since meeting?"

She watched the struggle play across Jude's features— her fierce sense of duty warring with desire, protection battling passion. When Jude's hand came up to trace Carmen's jawline, the touch felt like surrender.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"This is dangerous," Jude whispered.

"Everything worth having is." Carmen leaned into the touch. "We both know the real danger isn't just out there. It's this thing between us that we keep pretending we can ignore."

Their kiss felt inevitable. Jude's lips were soft but hungry, tasting of liquor and something uniquely Jude. Carmen pressed closer, her fingers curling into Jude's clothes as years of diplomatic reserve crumbled under the weight of wanting.

They broke apart only when the need for air became critical. Jude rested her forehead against Carmen's, both of them breathing hard.

"We should stop," Jude said, but her hands tightened on Carmen's hips.

"Should we?" Carmen ran her fingers along the nape of Jude's neck, feeling her shiver. "Or should we finally admit that some boundaries are meant to be crossed?"

The city sparkled below them, oblivious to how their world was shifting on this balcony. Carmen watched as conflicting emotions battled each other across Jude's face: desire and duty, need and restraint.

"Carmen..." Her name on Jude's lips sounded like prayer and surrender combined.

This time, when they kissed, there was no hesitation. No retreat. Just the taste of inevitability and the knowledge that everything would be different after tonight.

Carmen pulled back just enough to whisper against Jude's lips, "Stay with me."

It wasn't a question, and they both knew it wasn't just about tonight. It was about all the nights to come, about choosing something beyond just their duty and diplomatic protocol.

Jude's answer came in the form of another kiss, her tongue pushing hungrily into Carmen's mouth.

The air felt charged, like the moment just before lightning strikes.

Carmen's diplomatic training had taught her to read micro-expressions and to catch the smallest tells that could change the course of negotiations. Now, she watched Jude's face in the dim light, noting how her careful control wavered when Carmen's fingers traced the collar of her tactical vest.

"You're thinking too hard," Carmen murmured, reaching up to cup Jude's face. The younger woman's pulse raced beneath her palm.

"Force of habit." Jude's voice roughened again as Carmen's thumb brushed her bottom lip. "They train us to analyze every situation."

"Then analyze this." Carmen pressed closer, letting Jude feel the heat between them. "Tell me what your tactical assessment says about where this is going."

A small sound escaped Jude's throat, something between a laugh and a groan. Her hands settled on Carmen's hips, strong fingers flexing against silk. "My training didn't cover this scenario."

"No?" Carmen smiled, enjoying the way Jude's breath hitched. "All those years of protection detail, and no one warned you about falling for your protectee?"

The words hung in the air between them. Jude's eyes darkened, and Carmen watched her last defenses crumble.

"They warned us," Jude admitted softly. "They just never mentioned how impossible it would be to resist."

Carmen hummed with approval, sliding her hands down to work at the straps of Jude's vest. "Then stop resisting."

The vest hit the floor with a muted thud. Carmen felt Jude shiver as her fingers found skin beneath the uniform shirt. Years of negotiating had taught her patience, but tonight that skill deserted her. She wanted to map every scar, learn every story written on Jude's skin.

"Carmen..." Jude's voice held a note of wonder, as if she couldn't quite believe this was real. "Are you sure about this?"

In answer, Carmen pressed her lips to the scar near Jude's temple, then traced a path down her jaw. "I've spent my life being sure about everything. Making careful choices. Taking calculated risks." She pulled back just enough to meet Jude's gaze. "This isn't a calculation. This is certainty."

Something shifted in Jude's expression, like sunlight breaking through clouds. Her next kiss carried none of her usual restraint, and Carmen melted into it. Jude's hands came up and tangled in Carmen's hair, and once she reached the nape of Carmen's neck, Jude tugged softly at first but then harder. Carmen closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

"Like that?" Jude's whisper came husky in her ear.

"Yes," she breathed, and before she could move her own hand, Jude pulled her hair

again as she spun Carmen around against the balcony's wrought-iron railing and slipped her free hand up Carmen's shirt in one fluid motion.

It took Jude seconds to unbutton Carmen's silk blouse and peel it from her shoulders, exposing Carmen's lace bra. She slipped her hand under the fabric and cupped Carmen's breast, and Carmen let out a sharp exhale that wasn't quite a moan but wasn't not a moan.

Carmen felt more alive than she had in years with Jude's hands on her body.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Carmen reached her hand back behind her to remove her bra and give Jude access to her breasts, but Jude pushed her hand back to the terrace railing before she unclasped the bra with practiced ease and let it fall to the floor.

Carmen knew she should be in awe of the incredible view or concerned about how anyone could see them, but all she could think about was the way Jude's rough, calloused hands were exploring every inch of her breasts and nipples that had risen to peaks on exposure to the night air.

She felt a light brush of Jude's lips as she kissed Carmen in the crook of her neck between her neck and shoulder then bit down gently.

"I want you," Jude whispered as she bit.

"I want you, too."

With her lips still on Carmen, Jude moved one hand down her waist and over her hips, then brought them back up, slowly, slowly until she teased at Carmen's waistband.

Every touch on her body felt like Jude was leaving a trail of fire, and she felt her core heat up and desire pooling in her panties. She arched her back against Jude, encouraging her to keep going, knowing the woman was a master at non-verbal cues.

"Do you want more?" Jude's breath tickled her ears, and her husky voice only spurred on Carmen even more.

Carmen arched her back again, feeling her pussy begin to throb with desire, “You know I do...”

Jude played with her pantsuit waistband more, knowingly teasing her and seeing how long she could be patient, before slipping her hand down the front of her pants. She traced small circles over the top of Carmen’s already damp panties, and Carmen let out a soft moan that encouraged Jude to keep going.

“You feel so good,” Carmen sighed as she leaned back and closed her eyes.

“So do you,” Jude purred as she slipped her hand underneath the thin layer of lace.

Jude reached her hand lower in her panties and moved the tip of her middle finger to pass over Carmen’s clit, already swollen with desire and need. As Jude’s finger caressed the tender spot, applying more pressure as the seconds ticked on, Carmen closed her eyes and allowed herself to get lost in the moment. This moment, here, with Jude on the terrace. It felt like everything in the universe converged to this one singular point between them, and all that existed was the places where their skin made contact with each other.

Carmen slowly fluttered her eyes open and saw that Jude was already staring at her, her pupils boring holes deep inside her, down to her soul. She felt seen, but not in an intrusive way.

Carmen lifted her hand and placed it gently on Jude’s thigh, then snaked her hand up the swell of her thigh, up to her waist where she let her hand rest as Jude continued tracing lazy circles on her clit.

When Jude moved her finger down to her pussy, it was already slick with want, and Carmen inhaled sharply as Jude teased her, touching everywhere but inside her.



“Please.” Carmen gripped Jude’s waist tighter, feeling the woman’s muscles underneath her clothing. “Fuck me.”

Jude quirked a small smile and cocked her head to the side. “Like this?”

Jude stopped moving her fingers for a fraction of a second before she plunged a finger inside Carmen’s soft wetness, then added a second finger.

Carmen felt her knees go weak at the intensity of feeling Jude’s strong fingers pushing inside her and beginning to fuck her.

Even though Jude was still fully dressed, it felt like all the barriers between them melted away, and Carmen couldn’t resist leaning closer to Jude to capture her lips in a kiss. Jude pulled away at the last second.

“Not yet.” Her eyes twinkled. “Soon.”

Carmen bit the inside of her lower lip, trying to not come completely undone as she felt Jude’s fingers deep inside her, what felt like another finger being added and then Jude held her close as she began to fuck her again.

Carmen’s breathing quickened and the moans that she had tried to keep quiet began escaping her lips.

She could feel Jude’s obviously skilled fingers hitting her G spot each time they thrust inside her and she could feel the heat of her own orgasm building deep inside her.

But, she wanted more. She wanted to feel Jude come apart along with her.

Carmen slowly lifted her leg and rubbed her knee against Jude’s inner thigh, trailing

upward until Carmen reached Jude's pussy through her pants. She lightly pressed her knee against Jude, and Jude's fingers, still inside her, twitched almost imperceptibly. Just enough that Carmen felt it. Carmen put more pressure then gently moved her knee in circles for Jude to grind against. Jude's neck craned back as a sigh escaped her lips, and Carmen took the opportunity to lean in closer and kiss her, gently biting Jude's bottom lip as their lips parted.

It must have spurred something in Jude because she doubled down with her fingers, pumping them even faster. Even though it had been so long and Carmen had feared that she would have forgotten what it felt like to be intimate with another woman, it all came rushing back to her as she rocked her hips in perfect synchronicity with Jude's fingers.

"Wait," Carmen whispered, her hand steadying Jude's wrist. "I want to feel your wetness," she breathed into Jude's ear, noticing the gooseflesh that ran across her neck.

"Okay," Jude nodded, stilling her fingers inside Carmen and pulling back slightly, unbuttoning her pants with her left hand.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Carmen slipped her right hand down Jude's pants, feeling inside her underwear and venturing straight down to her pussy that was soaking wet.

Carmen smiled to herself.

"You should've told me how wet you were," Carmen said, a light, playful lilt in her voice.

"I wasn't done with you yet."

"I couldn't let you have all the fun." Carmen felt completely overcome with desire for Jude. As much as she wanted her own orgasm, there was something else she wanted first.

Carmen removed her hand and then began to work Jude's pants off her hips. They fell unceremoniously on the terrace concrete floor, and Jude was left standing in her black cotton panties that were slick with wet that had soaked through the fabric.

Carmen kneeled down, forcing Jude's fingers out of her—but not before they passed over her clit that was still throbbing for more pleasure. Carmen looked up at Jude and smiled, then leaned in close to breathe in Jude's scent before she slipped her hands on either side of the panties and pulled them off her, her smooth ass now bare against the concrete railing.

Carmen flicked her tongue out, slowly sliding from the base of Jude's pussy all the way to the top of her clit. The taste of Jude was everything she had craved for so long.

Jude's scent and taste flooded Carmen's senses until all that was left in her personal universe was Jude. She teased the tip of her tongue along Jude's clit, taking special care to touch every part of it. She slipped a finger inside Jude, feeling her loosen to allow Carmen space, and Carmen delighted in hearing Jude's whimpers and moans as she began to work with her mouth and her fingers.

"More," Jude gasped, and Carmen added another finger, curling them forwards and beginning to fuck Jude as she took Jude's clitoris tenderly in her mouth and began to suck gently.

"Oh, holy fuck.... Carmen," Jude's voice was gravely and desperate with need as Carmen felt Jude's hand grab the back of her head, pulling it close.

She kept her rhythm with her fingers thrusting in and out as she kept the gentle suckling on Jude's clitoris.

She could feel Jude's whole body tensing and her pussy threatening to crush Carmen's fingers as her climax grew close.

"Oh.. Jesus.. Carmen... this is...."

When Jude's orgasm came, Carmen felt Jude tighten further around her fingers and the aftershocks ripple through Jude's body as she cried out in pleasure.

After, Jude's body went slack as she used the terrace railing to hold her bodyweight, and Carmen sat there, on her knees, smiling up at Jude.

"I told you I wasn't done with you," Jude panted as she tried to catch her breath.

"I know."

Carmen felt a shiver down her body as she saw Jude's eyes gleam with desire, so she wasn't at all surprised when Jude gently pushed her down the rest of the way on the cold concrete and ripped her pants and panties down to her knees.

Nor was she at all surprised when Jude simultaneously plunged three fingers back inside her with one hand while roughly grabbing her breast with the other.

But what did surprise her was how quickly her body responded to Jude's rough touch, her body began to writhe and moan as soon as Jude penetrated her. She felt her body jolting beneath Jude as her fingers fucked her hard and fast.

Jude had no mercy and the weight of her pressed Carmen down into the concrete whilst her magic fingers impaled her and thrust into her again and again.

She felt the fingers of Jude's left hand gripping her nipple hard and it sent pulses of pleasure/pain through every inch of her body.

Carmen was completely lost in the pure sensation of being pinned down and fucked hard, she did even recognize the screams coming from her lips.

She did feel herself squirting, once, twice, again and then again as Jude's strong fingers banged her G spot.

Carmen would have been surprised when her orgasm came, except she wasn't sure she was even capable of conscious thought at that point anymore.

It crashed through her, like a tsunami, taking with it any last thoughts Carmen might have had of remaining in control of their sex.

And after the orgasm finished rocking through her body, she lay on the cold terrace ground in a pool of her own wet, as Jude slid out of her and rolled off her to lie next to

her and take her in her arms.

“That was...” Jude started.

“Incredible.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

“You are incredible,” Jude kissed her tenderly.

There was a perfect minute of post orgasmic haze before Jude’s voice disrupted her.

“We just crossed every single professional boundary. I’m supposed to be the one protecting you.”

“And you can’t do that anymore?”

Jude stilled, her body coiling with tension again. “I don’t know,” she finally whispered. “I don’t want to lose my objectivity and focus. If I do and...”

“I know,” Carmen whispered. “I know.” Carmen leant in and kissed her before they both pulled apart and got up gathering their clothes.

Even though Carmen understood their need to keep their professional distance and not breach those boundaries anymore, she didn’t expect to feel the pain in her heart cut as deeply as it did.

5

JUDE

Jude moved through the gala venue's security sweep with mechanical precision, her body operating on training while her mind betrayed her with memories of last night. The historic ballroom's marble floors echoed beneath her boots as she checked sight lines and exit routes. Morning sun streamed through towering windows, creating

shadows perfect for concealment—tactical concerns she should be focusing on instead of remembering how Carmen had felt and smelled and tasted.

"West entrance secured," Sarah reported through her earpiece. "Local security's running final checks on the guest list."

Jude acknowledged with a tap of her mic, studying the ornate columns that lined the ballroom. Each one could hide a threat, but her attention kept drifting to how they'd look with evening light streaming through the windows during tonight's gala. How Carmen would command the space in whatever she chose to wear, elegant and untouchable except for the memory of how she'd trembled under Jude's hands just hours ago.

Focus. She forced her mind back to security protocols, checking her weapon for the third time. They'd agreed it was just sex, just a release of tension that had been building since Washington. They had a job to do, and lives depended on their professional focus. But her body hummed with sensory memory: the silkiness of Carmen's skin, the way she'd arched into Jude's touch, how she'd whispered Jude's name like a plea.

"Personnel change at the service entrance," Kate's voice crackled through comms. "New waiter just checked in. Paperwork looks clean, but something feels off."

That caught Jude's full attention. She'd learned to trust her team's instincts. "Details?"

"Former military, according to his background check. Discharge dates match our intelligence about Nuevo Amanecer recruitment, but nothing concrete to flag him."

Jude moved to the service corridor, muscle memory taking over as she assessed angles and choke points. The waiter in question moved with too much precision, his casual stance carrying echoes of combat training that most wouldn't notice. But Jude



had spent too many years in war zones to miss the signs.

"Track his movements," she ordered. "I want eyes on him at all times."

Her phone buzzed: a message from Carmen about final security arrangements. Just seeing her name on the screen made Jude's pulse jump, her professional demeanor cracking like ice in spring. She typed a brief response, all protocol and procedure, nothing betraying how her fingers remembered the curves of Carmen's body or how her lips still burned from their kisses.

The gala venue continued filling with staff: florists arranging centerpieces, audio technicians checking microphones, and security teams from various delegations establishing positions. Jude watched them all while calculating risk scenarios, trying to ignore how each evaluation included keeping Carmen safe not just because of duty, but because the thought of losing her had become personally unbearable.

"Multiple changes to local security rotations," Sarah reported. "They're swapping out previously vetted personnel."

Ice settled in Jude's stomach. She'd seen this pattern before, both in Yemen and Caracas. Small changes that seemed innocent until they added up to a big problem. "How many changes?"

"Seven so far. All in key positions."

Too many to be a coincidence. Jude moved through the space again, noting how the new security positions created subtle gaps in coverage. Most wouldn't see it; the pattern was only visible if you knew what to look for. Like the waiter's military bearing or the way certain radio frequencies carried extra static.

Her team had the venue locked down tight: Sarah coordinating ground teams, Kate

monitoring surveillance feeds, Marcus tracking vehicle movements, and James ready with medical support. They'd run every drill, planned for every contingency. But experience had taught Jude that the worst attacks came when you started feeling safe and got complacent.

The ballroom's ancient mirrors caught her reflection as she completed another sweep. She looked the same as always: tactical gear, weapon at ready, every movement precisely controlled. Only her eyes betrayed the war between protecting Carmen and wanting her. The memory of last night rose unbidden: Carmen's silver-streaked hair catching moonlight, the strength in her hands turned to passion, the way she'd made Jude forget everything except the feel of her.

"Final security briefing in ten," David reminded the team through comms. "Delegate arrivals begin in two hours."

Jude acknowledged, forcing her focus back to the mission. She had a job to do, a peace summit to protect, and a diplomat whose life was more precious to her than protocol allowed. She couldn't let personal feelings compromise Carmen's safety. Even if those feelings had become as vital as breathing.

But as she watched staff transform the historic space for tonight's gala, Jude accepted a hard truth: keeping Carmen alive might be her duty, but keeping her distance had become impossible.

Evening transformed the ballroom as the chandeliers cast warm light across marble floors where Colombia's elite now mingled. Jude maintained her position near the dais, watching Carmen navigate diplomatic conversations with effortless grace. The silver streaks in her hair caught the light as she moved between delegations, and her midnight blue evening gown was a stark contrast to Jude's tactical gear. She looked so beautiful, Jude could barely tear her eyes away from her, but she knew how vital it was that her eyes were everywhere.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Two more security rotation changes," Sarah murmured through comms. "That's nine total."

Jude tracked the suspicious waiter from earlier, noting how he kept drifting closer to Carmen's projected path toward the podium. His movements were too deliberate, each pass bringing him nearer while still appearing random to untrained eyes.

"Status check," she ordered quietly, thumb brushing her concealed weapon.

"East entrance clear," Marcus reported.

"Surveillance feeds normal," from Kate.

"Perimeter secure," James confirmed.

But something felt wrong. The waiter's jacket sat oddly on his right side, just off-kilter enough to be noticeable to Jude's trained eyes. The local security teams had positioned themselves to create a blind spot near the stage. Even the usual radio chatter felt too quiet, like the silence before an ambush.

Carmen began moving toward the podium for her keynote address. The room shifted around her, delegates and observers repositioning themselves. Jude caught a subtle hand signal between two of the new security personnel—a gesture that didn't match standard Colombian protocols. Jude moved silently closer. Very close.

"Sarah, check the?—"

The waiter moved, one fluid motion that screamed military training, and he reached his hand inside his jacket. Time stretched infinite, each second longer than the previous, as Jude's body responded before conscious thought. She registered multiple details simultaneously: the metallic glint of a weapon, Carmen ascending the podium steps, the positions of her team, and the civilians in the kill zone.

Jude crossed the space in three steps, her combat instincts taking over. The waiter's hand emerged from his jacket with a matte-black pistol. She drove her shoulder into his sternum, redirecting the weapon's aim toward the ceiling as his finger tightened on the trigger and squeezed it. The gunshot cracked against marble, sending ripples of screams through the crowd.

But the waiter was well-trained. He rolled with her impact, using the momentum to create space between them. A knife appeared in his left hand— a standard special operations forces backup technique. Jude caught his wrist as the blade slashed toward her throat, feeling his tendons strain against her grip. She twisted, using his own forward momentum to break his balance.

They crashed into a table of champagne flutes. Glass shattered as Jude drove her knee into his solar plexus. The gun clattered away, but he maintained his grip on the knife. A precise slash forced her to release his wrist or lose her own.

Through her earpiece, she heard her team coordinating Carmen's evacuation while engaging multiple hostiles. The waiter had been a distraction for a larger assault team. But Jude's world had narrowed to the deadly dance between blade and body, each movement a calculated risk.

He struck again, the knife tracing patterns she recognized from close-quarters combat training. She blocked a thrust aimed at her ribs, metal scraping against her tactical vest. Her counter-strike caught him in the throat, disrupting his breathing for a few crucial seconds.

But he recovered faster than Jude had expected, and the blade flickered toward her face again. Jude felt it bite along her cheekbone as she twisted away. The pain sharpened her focus to crystalline clarity. She trapped his knife hand against a broken table, the bones cracking under precise pressure.

The blade dropped. He tried to turn it into a grapple, but Jude had already mapped his injuries. A strike to his damaged wrist, an elbow to his bruised ribs, and he folded like origami. She secured his hands with tactical restraints, noting the quality of his weapons and gear. Not cartel equipment; this was professional hardware.

"Threat contained," she reported, already moving toward Carmen's last position. "Status of the package?"

She had to know if Carmen was ok.

"Primary package secure," Sarah responded and Jude breathed a momentary sigh of relief. "Multiple hostiles engaged at east and west entrances. Extraction route compromised."

Fuck. We have to get her out of here.

Keep her safe.

Jude vaulted over an overturned table, scanning the chaos of fleeing guests and clashing security teams. Her tactical mind processed threats and assets: two more attackers by the entrance, local police responding with suspicious delay, multiple civilians in crossfire zones.

She found Carmen behind a marble column, Sarah shielding her while Marcus engaged hostiles near the service entrance. Their eyes met across the space, and Jude saw both diplomatic composure and carefully hidden fear in her eyes.

"Alternate extraction route," Jude ordered, reaching them as another gunshot cracked against stone. "Marcus, clear the kitchen. Sarah, rear guard. James, bring the vehicle to the service exit."

They moved as a unit, Carmen matching their pace without hesitation. Her evening gown whispered against marble as they navigated through service corridors, Jude with her body between Carmen and the threat. She was so close to her. Close enough to smell the memory of the previous night.

Focus, Jude!!

A burst of gunfire behind them confirmed Sarah engaging pursuers.

"Two targets neutralized," Sarah reported. "But police bands show multiple units converging. Response time's too fast. They had to know."

Jude guided them through the kitchen where Marcus had already subdued a hostile waiting in ambush. "Kate, status on follow vehicle?"

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Incoming. Thirty seconds. But satellite shows three unmarked cars approaching from the south."

The kitchen's service exit opened into a narrow alley. James waited with their armored BMW and kept the engine running. Jude did a final scan while Sarah and Marcus created a protective corridor to the vehicle.

"Clear!"

They moved fast, their practiced evacuation protocols executed with precision. Jude moved as one with Carmen, her body shielding Carmen as she held her close. She thrust Carmen into the back seat, throwing her own body on top of her. She heard the car door slammed behind them as more gunfire erupted from the rooftops all around them. Engine roaring, James accelerated away from the ambush zone.

"Are you ok, are you hurt?" Jude began to peel herself up from Carmen's body, as much as she wanted to hold her close, it was far from appropriate now they were in an armoured vehicle.

"I'm fine," Carmen's voice had a slight shake to it, as the two of them began to sit up.

Only then did Jude allow herself to really breathe, to feel the sting of the knife wound on her cheek and the weight of how close they'd come to losing everything. Carmen's hand found hers in the darkness of the car, gripping with silent emotion that said more than words ever could.

They'd survived, but the attack's sophistication confirmed Jude's worst fears.

Someone with extensive resources wanted Carmen dead. And they'd just proven they had the means to breach even the best security. It was very clear that the only people who could be trusted were Jude's own tight team.

The armored BMW cut through Bogotá's narrow streets, James taking evasive maneuvers with practiced skill. Streetlights strobed across the tinted windows as they weaved through traffic, the engine's purr masking the tension inside the vehicle.

Jude spoke into her radio, "Status report?"

"Three hostiles neutralized at the venue," Sarah's voice crackled through comms. "Local police response was delayed but heavy. They're sweeping the building now."

"The waiter had military gear," Marcus added. "High-end equipment, American-made. This wasn't cartel hardware."

"Two vehicles following," Kate reported from their support car. "Black SUVs with diplomatic plates. Taking evasive action."

James took them down a series of progressively narrower alleys, the BMW's reinforced frame scraping against ancient stone walls. Carmen's hand found Jude's arm during a particularly sharp turn, her grip conveying more than just the need for balance.

"You're bleeding." Carmen's voice carried quiet concern as she reached toward the knife wound on Jude's cheek.

Jude caught her wrist before she could make contact, the gesture more gentle than she'd intended. "It's nothing. We need to?—"

"Incoming!" James called out as headlights flooded their vehicle from a cross-street.



The BMW swerved hard, tires screaming against cobblestones. Jude instinctively covered Carmen with her body as bullets sparked against the bullet-proof glass. The windshield held, but spiderweb cracks spread like frost across its surface.

"Multiple shooters," Sarah reported from the follow vehicle. "Taking them out."

Jude kept Carmen shielded while their convoy executed practiced escape maneuvers. Her body thrummed with adrenaline and awareness of every point where they touched. Carmen's perfume mixed with gunpowder residue from the firefight, an intoxicating combination that made Jude's head spin.

"Base team confirms that the hotel security is compromised." Kate's voice cut through the tension. "Proceeding to the fallback location."

They emerged onto wider streets where James could better maneuver. Carmen straightened in her seat but didn't move away from Jude's protective embrace. Their eyes met in the dim light, and Jude saw her own fear reflected in Carmen's gaze—not of death, but of losing each other.

"The waiter," Carmen said softly, her diplomatic mind already analyzing the attack. "He moved like Special Operations Forces."

Jude nodded, forcing herself to focus on security instead of how Carmen's pulse raced beneath her fingers. "American training. Probably ex-Delta or SEALs working in the private sector now."

"Like the contractors at the summit." Carmen's hand still rested on Jude's arm, her thumb making small circles that threatened Jude's concentration. "They're escalating faster than we had anticipated."

"Pursuers falling back," Sarah reported. "But police channels show roadblocks being

established ahead."

James took them down a series of predetermined escape routes, each turn carrying them farther from the city center. Jude maintained radio contact with her team while monitoring Carmen's condition, noting the subtle signs of shock starting to set in despite her diplomatic composure.

"Here." Jude shrugged out of her protective vest, draping it over Carmen's shoulders. The move brought them closer in the vehicle's confined space, and Jude caught the slight hitch in Carmen's breathing.

"Always protecting me," Carmen murmured, her voice carrying layers of meaning that had nothing to do with security protocols.

"It's my job." But Jude's response lacked conviction as Carmen's fingers traced the knife wound on her cheek.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Is that all it is?" The question echoed their conversation from the hotel terrace, loaded with everything they'd been trying to ignore.

Before Jude could respond, Kate's voice cut through their moment. "Another vehicle approaching fast. No plates visible."

The pursuit continued through Bogotá's labyrinth of streets, each near-miss bringing them closer together in the armored car's back seat. Jude coordinated with her team through pure training, her body and mind operating on separate frequencies. One tracked threats and escape routes while the other cataloged every subtle reaction from the woman beside her: the way Carmen's hand tightened on her arm during sharp turns, how she leaned into Jude's protection without hesitation, and the trust implicit in every shared glance.

"Clear route to fallback position," James finally reported as they turned onto a wider avenue. "No pursuit visible."

Only then did Jude allow herself to really feel the weight of what had almost happened. The knife wound on her cheek stung, grounding her in the reality of how close they'd come to losing everything. Carmen must have sensed the shift because her fingers found Jude's in the darkness, twining together with quiet desperation.

"I'm alright," Carmen whispered, answering the question Jude couldn't voice. "Thanks to you."

But they both knew it wasn't just about physical safety anymore. Something had changed in that ballroom in the moment Jude had seen the assassin reach for his

weapon. Professional distance had crumbled in the face of possible loss, leaving them raw and exposed in ways no security protocol could protect against.

The city blurred past their windows as they headed for the fallback position, each mile carrying them farther from the assassination attempt but closer to truths they couldn't ignore. Jude maintained her security awareness through force of will, but her heart had already surrendered to the reality that keeping Carmen alive had become more than just duty.

It had become everything.

The Hotel Gran Diplomático's underground garage provided cover as their convoy arrived through separate entrances. Jude's team moved with practiced efficiency, securing the space before escorting Carmen through service corridors designed for this exact purpose. Each step echoed against marble floors as they made their way to the security command center on the fourth floor.

Inside the hotel's security room, controlled chaos erupted as Jude's team took over monitoring stations. She positioned herself at the command center, studying surveillance feeds from the summit venue while her pulse still raced from the chase. Each screen confirmed what she already knew: they'd been compromised from within.

"Sweep teams found surveillance equipment in the service corridors," Sarah reported. "Professional grade. Someone's been monitoring our movements."

Jude studied footage of the assassination attempt frame by frame, her jaw tight. She'd missed signs and let her guard down. She let personal feelings cloud her judgment until she'd almost failed at the one thing that mattered most.

"Building across the street," David called out. "Southeast corner. We've got

movement."

She moved to the window, keeping to shadows as she verified the threat. Two figures on the opposite roof carried long-range surveillance gear, their movements suggesting military training. She'd seen similar setups in Yemen before everything went wrong.

"They want us to see them," Sarah murmured beside her. "No attempt at concealment."

Kate's fingers flew across her keyboard, pulling up personnel files. "Hotel security rotations changed again. Three new guards were added without proper clearance."

"Pull them." Jude's voice carried the edge of command despite her exhaustion. "I want our people on all access points. No one enters without direct verification."

The knife wound on her cheek burned as she issued orders, each word carefully measured to hide how the night's events had shaken her. But her eyes kept finding Carmen through the security room's glass wall, watching her speak with State Department officials in the adjacent conference room.

Even now, hours after the attempt on her life, Carmen maintained her diplomatic composure, striking in her midnight blue evening gown. Only someone who knew her well would notice the slight tension in her shoulders, the way her hands moved with too much precision as she gestured to emphasize a point.

"Ma'am." Marcus appeared at her shoulder. "Local police want a statement about the incident."

"No statements." Jude kept her voice low. "They had units in position before the attack. Someone leaked our security protocols."

She watched Carmen end her call with Washington, noting how the diplomat's mask slipped just slightly when she thought no one was looking. The urge to go to her and to offer comfort instead of just protection made Jude's hands clench at her sides.

"The waiter's dead." Sarah's voice pulled her attention back to duty. "Hospital's calling it natural causes, but the timing's convenient."

Of course. They were dealing with professionals. The same ones who'd nearly succeeded while Jude was distracted by feelings she had no business harboring.

Carmen entered the security room, and Jude felt her presence like a shift in atmospheric pressure. She still wore her evening gown, the midnight blue silk incongruous among their tactical gear.

"The State Department wants me to return to Washington." Carmen's voice carried that particular tone Jude had learned meant she'd already made up her mind to refuse. "They're concerned about escalating threats."

"They're right to be concerned." Jude kept her focus on the surveillance feeds. "Tonight was professionally coordinated. They'll try again."

"Which is exactly why I need to stay." Carmen moved closer, her perfume cutting through the room's tension. "If we run now, they win. Everything we've worked for—the peace treaty, the indigenous protections—all of it dies."

Jude turned, ready to argue, but the determination in Carmen's eyes made the words die in her throat. This was the woman who'd faced down warlords and cartel leaders and who'd built peace treaties in active war zones. Who'd survived tonight's attempt because she trusted Jude's protection completely.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

That trust felt heavier than any battlefield command.

"Then we change protocols." Jude fought to keep her voice professional despite their proximity. "No public appearances. No summit meetings without full security sweeps. And you follow every protection measure exactly as written. Deal?"

"Of course, Captain." Carmen's smile held layers of meaning that made Jude's chest tighten. "I trust your judgment completely."

The words hung between them, loaded with everything they couldn't say in front of others. Jude wanted to reach out, to make sure Carmen was really unharmed, to admit that tonight had terrified her in ways no firefight ever had.

Instead, she straightened her spine and gave orders for the night watch rotation. She had a job to do, a diplomat to protect, and feelings she needed to lock away before they got them both killed.

But as her team cleared the room, leaving her alone with surveillance feeds and the ghost of Carmen's perfume, Jude accepted a truth she could no longer deny: keeping Carmen alive had become more than duty.

It had become everything.

And that was the most dangerous security breach of all.

## CARMEN

Steam clouded the bathroom mirror as Carmen's hands shook while struggling with the zipper of her evening gown. The silk clung to her skin, heavy with sweat and the metallic scent of gunfire that seemed to have seeped into the fabric. A dark smear on the midnight blue material caught her eye—blood from when Jude had shielded her during the firefight.

She closed her eyes, but the memories flashed vivid and violent behind her lids: the glint of the assassin's knife, the fluid grace of Jude's response, and the crack of gunfire against marble. Her fingers found the pendant at her throat, the panic button disguised as jewelry that she hadn't needed to use because Jude had seen the threat coming.

Jude. Even now, Carmen could hear her voice through the bathroom door as she coordinated with her team. The steady authority in her tone carried through the wood, grounding Carmen in the present moment. She'd faced death before in her career—car bombs in Venezuela, snipers in Sudan, firefights in Afghanistan—but something about tonight felt different. More personal, perhaps because of what she and Jude had shared, or because she'd watched the knife slice across Jude's cheek and felt her heart stop at the sight of blood.

The zipper finally relented, and the gown pooled at her feet like spilled ink. Carmen stepped out of it carefully, noting how her diplomatic composure had begun to crack around the edges. Her hands still trembled as she turned on the shower, steam rising in billowing clouds that reminded her of gun smoke in the ballroom.

"Carmen?" Jude's voice carried through the door, professional but edged with something more. "Security sweep complete. Do you need—" A pause, weighted with everything they weren't saying. "Do you need anything?"



The question peeled back layers of protocol and pretense, leaving raw honesty in its wake. Carmen pressed her palm against the door, imagining she could feel Jude's presence on the other side.

"I'm all right," she answered, proud of how steady her voice remained despite the tremors running through her body. But the words felt hollow, insufficient against the weight of what they'd survived.

The granite counter was cold under her palms as she steadied herself. In the mirror's remaining clear patch, she studied her reflection: silver threads in dark hair that had come loose from its elegant styling, smudged makeup from the firefight, and the mask of calm beginning to slip. She'd spent decades perfecting that mask, wearing it through peace treaties and war zones. But tonight had cracked something fundamental in her careful control.

When she closed her eyes again, she saw Jude moving through the chaos with lethal precision, felt the strength in her arms as she'd guided Carmen to safety, and remembered how her voice had carried both authority and fear when she'd checked if Carmen was ok in the car.

Steam continued filling the space as Carmen stepped under the shower's spray, letting hot water sluice away the night's adrenaline and fear. But it couldn't wash away the realization that had crystallized during the firefight: she'd stopped seeing Jude as just protection somewhere between Washington and that first kiss on the terrace. Now, the thought of losing her felt like losing gravity itself.

It had been forever since someone had snuck through her defenses like this.

Her last love was Sofia, who she had lost many years ago now to cancer, and honestly, she had never truly wanted anyone since.

Whether it was just the intensity of their situation, or something more true, Carmen couldn't be sure. All she did know is she was drawn to Captain Jude Smith like iron filings to a magnet.

She heard movement in the suite beyond the bathroom. No doubt it was Jude's team updating security protocols. Radios crackled with status reports, the constant hum of protection that had become the backdrop of her life. But she focused on the sound of Jude's footsteps, recognizing their particular rhythm among the chaos. Even through walls and water, she could tell when Jude passed near the bathroom door, as if some part of her had become attuned to the other woman's presence.

The water ran cold before Carmen finally emerged, wrapping herself in a hotel robe that felt too soft against skin that still hummed with remembered danger. She studied her reflection again, watching composure settle back into place like armor being donned. But beneath it, something had shifted irrevocably.

She'd spent her career negotiating peace in war zones, finding compromise between opposing forces, and maintaining professional distance no matter the circumstances. Tonight had shattered that distance, leaving her raw and exposed in ways that had nothing to do with physical danger.

When she opened the bathroom door, steam billowing out behind her like a silver curtain, she found Jude waiting exactly as she'd expected. Their eyes met in the suite's dim light, and Carmen saw her own vulnerability reflected in Jude's gaze. The cut on her cheek had been cleaned but not bandaged, an angry red line that made Carmen's chest ache with the need to touch, to heal, to cross the space between them that protocol demanded they maintain.

Instead, she squared her shoulders and prepared to face the security debrief that would follow. But as steam dissipated around them like morning fog, Carmen came to a stark realization that terrified her more than any assassination attempt:

She'd fallen in love with her protector.

And that made her more vulnerable than any bullet ever could.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

The hotel's secure conference room buzzed with controlled urgency as Carmen entered, her hair still damp from the shower. She'd changed into a charcoal pantsuit—armor of a different kind—but she felt exposed under the fluorescent lights that seemed to highlight every crack in her composure.

Sarah looked up from multiple screens displaying security footage, her expression carefully neutral. "Ma'am, you should rest. We can handle the debrief."

"I need to be here." Carmen kept her voice steady, noting how the team exchanged glances. They weren't used to protectees who insisted on participating in the security analysis. But she hadn't spent twenty-five years in conflict zones by letting others handle the details of her survival.

Jude stood at the command center, coordinating with remote teams through her headset. She'd stripped off her ruined gear but hadn't changed, she was in a tight black T shirt and black combat pants, dirt marring her tanned skin and her green eyes flashing with intensity. Carmen thought as her eyes glanced over Jude's muscular forearms and strong shoulders that she had never seen anyone more attractive. She also caught the faint scent of gunpowder still clinging to the air around her. Their eyes met briefly across the room, and Carmen saw the argument forming before Jude spoke.

"The State Department is right," Jude said, muting her comms. "You should return to Washington until we?—"

"No." Carmen moved to the central display, studying footage from the summit. "Running now invalidates everything we've worked for. Show me what you've

found."

A muscle ticked in Jude's jaw, but she nodded to Kate, who pulled up enhanced images of the assassination team. "Eight confirmed hostiles. All ex-military, probably American Special Operations Forces based on their movement patterns. The 'waiter' was former Delta Force."

"They chose him specifically," Carmen mused, leaning closer to the screen. "Someone knew about Jude's background and anticipated how she'd react to a fellow operative."

The room stilled at her observation. She caught Sarah's approving nod. They hadn't expected a diplomat to notice such details. But Carmen had learned to read between lines and shadows during decades of negotiations.

"The local police response was coordinated," Marcus added, bringing up radio transcripts. "Units were in position before the attack. Someone leaked our routes."

Carmen's fingers traced the glass surface of the display, following the pattern of police blockades that had nearly trapped them. "The same happened in Venezuela last year. Local authorities were compromised, and communication channels were monitored." She paused, remembering all the burning vehicles. "We lost two security teams that day."

Jude moved closer, and Carmen felt the heat of her presence like a physical touch. "You think it's connected?"

"Different players, same playbook." Carmen switched to footage of the corporate security contractors at the summit. "Watch their positioning when the attack begins. They're not surprised; they're ready."

The team studied the footage with new understanding as Carmen pointed out subtle details: the contractors' practiced non-reaction to gunfire, their coordinated movements to block indigenous representatives from leaving, and how they'd maintained line of sight to her position throughout the chaos.

"They're all using American equipment," Sarah noted, zooming in on weapon details. "High-end gear, restricted suppliers."

"The same suppliers that are arming Nuevo Amanecer." Carmen's voice carried decades of experience reading between the lines. "Corporate interests are funding both sides and using humanitarian aid as leverage while their contractors eliminate problems."

Exhaustion began seeping through her professional veneer as the adrenaline crash hit. She gripped the edge of the command console, hoping no one noticed how her hands shook. But of course, Jude noticed everything.

"That's enough for tonight." Jude's tone brooked no argument as she stepped closer, shielding Carmen from the team's view. "The rest can wait until morning."

Carmen wanted to protest, to maintain the image of unshakeable composure she'd spent a career perfecting. But fatigue made her armor feel heavy, and the memory of watching that knife slice across Jude's cheek kept replaying behind her eyes.

The team dispersed efficiently, leaving them alone in the conference room. Screens still flickered with surveillance footage, casting blue shadows across Jude's features and highlighting the fresh cut that Carmen's fingers ached to touch.

"You should have gone back to Washington," Jude said softly, close enough now that Carmen could see flecks of gold in her green eyes. "It's not safe here."

"When has that ever stopped me?" Carmen allowed herself to lean against the console, letting Jude see a glimpse of the exhaustion she'd been hiding. "Besides, I have you."

The words hung between them, weighted with everything they weren't saying. Jude's hand moved as if to touch her, then dropped back to her side. Even now, with no one watching, they maintained careful distance.

"You're impossible," Jude murmured, but warmth had crept into her voice. "At least let me escort you back to your room."

Carmen straightened, gathering the last threads of her composure. "Ever the professional, Captain."

But as they walked through empty corridors, their steps falling into natural synchronization, Carmen felt the space between them shrinking with each breath. By the time they reached her suite, the air felt charged with unspoken words and possibilities.

The door clicked shut behind them, and Carmen finally allowed her mask to crack completely. All the fear and want she'd been suppressing rose like a tide, drowning protocol and pretense in its wake.

When she turned to face Jude, she knew her eyes held everything she couldn't say. Everything she shouldn't want but did. Everything that made her both stronger and more vulnerable than she'd ever been.

And in Jude's answering gaze, she saw the same truth reflected back: that some risks were worth taking, even if they shattered every rule of protection and protocol along the way.

The suite felt too quiet after the security team's departure. Carmen watched Jude do one final sweep—a habit born from years of protection detail—while city lights painted shadows across her features. The cut on her cheek shone in the light, a thin line of red that made Carmen's chest ache.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Come here," Carmen said softly, reaching for the first aid kit she kept in her luggage. Her diplomatic voice had deserted her, leaving something rawer in its wake. "Let me look at that."

Jude hesitated, her body caught between ingrained duty and obvious want. "I should finish the security protocols?—"

"They can wait." Carmen moved closer, brandishing antiseptic and butterfly bandages. "For once in your life, let someone else do the protecting."

The words hung between them, loaded with meaning that went beyond just first aid. Jude's resistance crumbled like a sandcastle against the tide. She let Carmen guide her to sit on the suite's plush sofa, where warm lamplight revealed the full extent of her exhaustion.

Carmen's hands were steady now as she cleaned the wound, each touch gentle but sure. Jude's breath hitched when Carmen's fingers traced the edge of the cut, and the sound made heat pool in Carmen's stomach.

"I've had worse," Jude murmured, but her eyes had darkened as they tracked Carmen's movements.

"I know." Carmen applied the butterfly bandages with careful precision. "I've read your service record, remember? But that doesn't make it easier to watch you bleed."

The admission slipped out before she could catch it. Jude went very still under her hands, and Carmen felt the shift in the air between them – like the moment before a

storm breaks.

"When I saw him draw the knife," Carmen continued, unable to stop now that the words had started flowing, "I thought—" Her voice caught. "I can't lose you. Not now. Not when?—"

Jude's hand came up to cup her face, calloused fingers impossibly gentle against her skin. "Carmen."

Her name on Jude's lips was everything she wanted and needed to hear. They were close enough now that Carmen could feel the heat radiating between them.

"I told you it was just sex," Carmen whispered, remembering their agreement after that first night. "But I lied."

The confession shattered the last remnants of professional distance between them. Jude's other hand slid into her hair, tugging gently until Carmen gasped.

"I know," Jude breathed against her lips. "I lied too."

The kiss felt inevitable, like gravity, like falling. Carmen pressed closer, letting Jude feel all the fear and want she'd been suppressing. Jude's mouth opened under hers, tasting of coffee and adrenaline and possibility. Her tongue pushed into Jude's mouth, tangling with her own, pressing, tasting and exploring.

They broke apart only when the need for air became critical. Carmen rested her forehead against Jude's, both of them breathing hard.

"Stay," Carmen whispered against Jude's lips. It wasn't a question this time, but a declaration. A claiming.

Jude's answer came in the form of another kiss, deeper and full of promise. Together, they moved toward the bedroom, leaving pretense and protocol behind with the first aid kit and Carmen's last attempts at maintaining professional distance. Carmen shrugged off her jacket and laid it on the chair, followed by calmly shedding the rest of her clothes including her underwear and placing them with her jacket.

Jude followed suit until they were both naked. Jude's muscular form, striking and so attractive to her.

When they got to the bed, Carmen gently pushed Jude down on the pillowy-soft mattress, and she felt that Jude had let her. She crawled in to lie down beside Jude, staring at her silhouette in the darkness, and she grabbed Jude's hand and laced their fingers together.

Not even a minute later, and Jude had slipped her fingers out of the embrace, trailing softly up Carmen's arm, starting at the tips of her fingers, over her wrist, up her arm, every scar on display for Jude.

Then Jude trailed back down. Carmen closed her eyes, relishing the moment and wanting to burn every second in her memory forever. She wanted to remember not just Jude's careful caress, but what it felt like lying here next to her. Feeling the way her heat emanated from her body. Feeling the weight of her presence next to her.

Jude continued making her trail along Carmen's arm, then let her fingers linger on Carmen's before she moved a half inch to Carmen's thigh and began tracing small circles on the edge of her thigh that grew larger by the second.

Carmen reached over and rubbed her hand down Jude's side, going over her ribs—she could feel where old fractures had healed—then back down and over her taut stomach.

She noticed the way her skin was pale where her sporty underwear had been and tan everywhere else. She noticed Jude's dark pubic hair, thick curls that just begged Carmen to run her fingers through them.

They turned to face each other, and Carmen stared into Jude's eyes that had depths she craved to explore. She cupped Jude's face, letting her hand rest on Jude's jaw line and leaned in til their lips pressed against each other, and she could feel Jude's sigh wash over her face as the woman's body relaxed next to her.

Being naked with Jude felt natural and real. As though both of their defenses had been left at the door.

The kiss started soft, sweet, then Jude deepened it, their tongues dancing together. Carmen hungrily grabbed at Jude's hips, pulling their bodies even more impossibly close together.

It wasn't close enough. Carmen wanted—no, needed—to be even closer to Jude. She let her hand drop from Jude's hip down her leg then back up, pausing just as she almost reached the top.

Carmen broke their contact. "Is this...?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Jude nodded, and Carmen could see Jude craved it just as much as she did.

Defenseless against her growing desire, Carmen inched her fingers closer and closer to her goal. She slid over Jude's desperately wet pussy that seemed to open like a flower for her, between her folds, and kept going until she reached Jude's clit, where she circled it, pressing down lightly with her finger.

Jude gasped from the sudden sensation of pleasure but relaxed back into the bed, and Carmen leaned up on her elbow to keep going, her gaze never wavering from Jude's eyes.

Carmen felt Jude spread her legs just a fraction of an inch, her knee now jutting out at an angle, and Carmen took that subtle permission to reposition herself between Jude's velvety soft, smooth legs, never missing a beat with her continued clit circles.

She switched from her middle finger to her thumb as she leaned down, still maintaining eye contact, and she saw a glint in Jude's eyes. She was now so close to Jude she could smell the scent of her desire, and it spurred her on even more as she leaned down and ran her tongue through Jude's pussy from the bottom to the top. She moved her hand to the bed to give her extra leverage as she swirled her tongue around Jude's clit, putting the slightest bit of pressure at first then pressing down more firmly.

Carmen could hear Jude's fingers twist in the bed sheets as she continued to lavish on her clit, and she smirked slightly as she inserted one finger, then two, into her slick pussy. Jude lost all control and moaned deeply as Carmen tilted her fingers, looking for that special spot, and Jude moved her hands from twisting bed sheets to finding

their way in Carmen's hair between her legs, pulling and tugging at the root.

It only encouraged Carmen to continue, though, and she slipped in a third finger in easily, pumping to a steady rhythm as she kept flicking her tongue against Jude's clit. She could feel the woman's body coil tighter and knew her release was imminent, and she removed her fingers in order to lap up Jude's juices that now flowed down between her legs, getting all over Carmen's face.

When Jude's orgasm came, it rocked her body hard, and Carmen pinned down Jude's arm to keep her from wriggling away as she brought her higher and higher to climax.

Carmen buried her face deeper as she licked and licked. She felt like she could lose herself between Jude's legs and in the sweet taste of her forever.

It was only when Jude's body slackened back on the bed that Carmen crawled out from between Jude's legs and laid down next to her. She raised her fingers to her mouth, savoring Jude's taste, and she grinned. "You taste incredible."

Jude looked spent, mentally and physically, her beautiful muscular body in complete relaxation for the first time since Carmen had met her.

Moonlight spilled through the suite's windows, illuminating silver paths across rumpled sheets. Carmen traced the scar on Jude's shoulder, an old wound from Yemen that felt like a chapter in a story she was slowly learning to read. The night wrapped around them like a blanket, making secrets easier to share.

"Tell me about this one," Carmen murmured, her fingers following the raised line of tissue.

"Extraction gone wrong." Jude's voice carried the weight of memory. "We lost two team members that day. I should have seen the ambush coming."

Carmen pressed her lips to the scar, feeling Jude's breath catch. "You always shoulder the blame for things beyond your control."

"Says the woman who negotiates peace treaties in active war zones." Jude's hand found Carmen's hip, thumb tracing circles on bare skin. "When was the last time you let someone else take the risks?"

The question hung in the darkness between them. Carmen shifted closer, drawn to Jude's warmth. "You know why I can't leave now. The treaty?—"

"Could get you killed." Jude's arms tightened around her. "Today proved that."

"Or it could save thousands of lives." Carmen propped herself up on one elbow, studying Jude's features in the dim light. The fresh cut on her cheek made her stomach clench. "The indigenous communities need this protection. Maria Elena's people have lost everything: their homes, their water rights, their children's future. If we back down now..."

"I know." Jude brushed a strand of hair from Carmen's face. "But there are other ways to fight. Ways that don't involve putting you in the crosshairs."

Carmen caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Like what? Filing strongly worded complaints while more villages burn? Watching corporate interests destroy communities while we debate policy in Washington?" She shook her head. "I've spent too many years playing it safe, choosing caution over direct action. And what has it gained us?"

"It's kept you alive," Jude countered softly. "Which matters to more people than you realize. Especially now."

The admission hung between them, weighted with everything they'd discovered in

each other's arms. Outside, Bogotá's lights twinkled like earthbound stars, while inside, two women who'd built careers on careful distance found themselves stripped bare in more ways than one.

"I haven't slept beside anyone since Sofia died," Carmen admitted softly. The confession felt weightless in the dark. "She was my last love. My last serious relationship. After losing her to cancer, it seemed easier to pour everything into the work."

"Tell me about her?" Jude's question carried genuine care rather than jealousy.

"She was a war correspondent. Fearless, brilliant, always chasing the next story that needed telling." Carmen smiled at the memory. "We met in Sudan during some peace negotiations. She said my diplomatic double-speak drove her crazy, but she loved how I could stare down warlords without flinching."

"Sounds familiar." Jude's lips brushed her temple. "Though I prefer how you handle corporate sharks in thousand-dollar suits."

Carmen laughed softly, but it faded as darker thoughts intruded. "The night before she died, Sofia made me promise not to close myself off. To keep fighting for what mattered, but to leave room for joy." Her voice caught. "I thought I was keeping half that promise by focusing on the work. Then you walked into that first security briefing..."

"And complicated everything?"

"And woke something I thought I'd buried with her." Carmen traced the line of Jude's jaw, memorizing its shape. "You saw past the diplomatic armor, read between my carefully chosen words. You made me want things I'd convinced myself I could live without."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Like what?" Jude's whisper carried equal parts hope and fear.

"Like this." Carmen pressed closer, letting Jude feel her heart race. "Like someone who understands duty but chooses me anyway. Like falling asleep knowing you'll be here when I wake up." She paused, vulnerability creeping into her voice. "Like having something to lose again."

Jude rolled them gently, covering Carmen's body with her own. The weight felt like anchoring, like coming home. "I crossed every line I swore I never would," she admitted. "In Yemen, in Caracas, I learned that attachment gets people killed. That caring makes you vulnerable." Her voice roughened. "But watching that knife come at you today, I realized I'd rather be vulnerable with you than safe without you."

Carmen pulled her down for a kiss that tasted of promises and shared fears. When they broke apart, she saw her own emotions reflected in Jude's eyes. "The corporate contractors will try again," she said quietly. "They're used to eliminating problems, and I've become their biggest obstacle."

"Let them try." Jude's voice held steel beneath the tenderness. "I've spent my career protecting people out of duty. This is different. This is—" She stopped, emotion making her voice rough.

"I know." Carmen touched the fresh cut on her cheek. "That's what terrifies me. Not the danger, but how much I need you to survive it."

When Jude kissed her, Carmen felt herself opening to it, suddenly filled with need and desire as Jude's kiss moved from tender to probing. Jude sensed her silent

invitation and rolled on top of her, the weight of her body deliciously pressing Carmen down into the bed.

Jude's kisses moved down her body, sucking her nipples one by one and Carmen felt the sharp caress of her teeth as her nipples hardened and her back arched in response.

Jude moved lower and Carmen felt her legs part willingly, open and wide, begging for Jude to give to her and Jude seamlessly moved to kneel between her legs, dipping her head till her mouth met Carmen's soaking pussy.

She looked up for a second. "You are so wet, Carmen." Her voice was gravelly and her eyes dark with desire.

"You make me like this," she said, not losing eye contact.

Jude's handsome face dipped again, the flat of her tongue drawing long lines up from her anus to her clitoris as her hands lifted Carmen's thighs until they were resting over Jude's strong shoulders.

Carmen felt absolutely open and exposed as her pussy enjoyed the warm caress of Jude's tongue, lapping long slow hungry strokes again and again.

She leant her head back and closed her eyes to enjoy the sensation.

She felt Jude's mouth moved to making out with her pussy as though it was her mouth, deep kisses, and sucks as she drew Carmen's labia one at a time deep into her mouth and sucked on it.

She felt Jude's fingers pulling her labia apart as Jude's tongue pushed deep into her as deep as it would go.

She felt Jude's tongue teasing her anus, circling it, pressing against it as she found it.

She heard her own moans coming deeper and louder as she lost herself in sensation. The beautiful beautiful sensation of Jude's hot wet tongue in her most sensitive places.

Jude's tongue moved back to long slow strokes and Carmen felt her orgasm build deep within her before it crashed, hot and wet through every fibre of her being.

Years of holding back were releasing in every moment alone with Jude.

She was lost in a kaleidoscope of color as she heard Jude swallowing and licking what must have been more squirting from her. She felt the comfort and tenderness in Jude's licks now as they moved from her pussy to kisses on her thighs as she gently removed them one at a time from her shoulders.

Jude lay between her legs and rested her head on Carmen's pelvis and Carmen reached down to stroke her face. She felt Jude stroking her thigh.

There was a quiet post orgasm peace between them and Carmen felt sleep overcoming her.

She drifted off into blackness with her lover's head still resting between her legs.

7

JUDE

The encrypted message lit up Jude's phone: Security compromised. Multiple assets turned. Get out now.

David's warning scrolled across her screen as she maintained her position near the conference room door, watching Carmen navigate the latest round of negotiations. Morning sun streamed through bullet-resistant windows, painting patterns across the marble floor that her tactical mind automatically cataloged as potential cover points.

"The indigenous councils reject these terms." Carmen's voice carried that particular blend of steel and silk she used when cornering opponents. "Your corporate interests cannot override established treaties."

Victor Ramirez from the consortium shifted in his expensive chair, jaw set tight. His security detail—the same contractors Jude had been watching all morning—adjusted their stances with too much precision. She counted four visible weapons between them and spotted the distinctive bulge of shoulder holsters under their tailored suits.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Her phone buzzed again. Sarah this time:Hotel security feeds showing unauthorized access. Last night's team compromised.

Ice settled in Jude's stomach as more messages from her team flooded in. The pattern was familiar; she'd seen it in Yemen before everything went wrong. Small changes in security rotations, unexplained equipment glitches, local police showing too much interest in their movements. She'd missed the signs then. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"These negotiations are finished." Ramirez stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor tiles. "Until the indigenous leadership shows proper respect for progress?—"

"Progress?" Carmen's laugh held no humor. "Is that what you call burning villages and poisoning water supplies?"

Jude caught the subtle hand signal between Ramirez's contractors. She'd run enough protection details to read the silent communication: they were coordinating positions and preparing for something. Her body hummed with combat readiness as she tracked their movements while maintaining her relaxed stance. She subtly moved closer to Carmen.

Another message:Police bands showing multiple units mobilizing. No official orders given yet.

Through her earpiece, she heard Kate's fingers flying across a keyboard. "Facial recognition found three of our hotel security team in cartel databases. Recent bank payments traced back to corporate shell companies."

Jude watched Carmen press her advantage at the negotiating table, her hair catching sunlight as she leaned forward. To anyone else, she appeared completely focused on diplomatic warfare. But Jude saw the almost imperceptible tension in her shoulders that meant she'd picked up on the room's shifting dynamics.

Their eyes met briefly across the space. In that split-second contact, Jude saw that Carmen had already read the situation. The slight tilt of her head conveyed volumes: What do you need me to do?

More messages illuminated Jude's phone. Marcus reported suspicious vehicles near their exit routes. James confirmed that hospital staff had been asking questions about their medical arrangements. Sarah documented multiple security breaches at the hotel.

The contractors were moving again, their choreographed repositioning creating coverage zones that made Jude's combat instincts scream. She recognized the pattern from her own training: standard special operations forces procedure for coordinated action in confined spaces.

"Perhaps we should recess," Carmen suggested smoothly, gathering her papers with practiced efficiency. "Give everyone time to consider their positions." Her diplomatic mask remained perfect, but Jude caught the subtle urgency underlying her words.

Ramirez's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Of course. We have all the time in the world."

The threat in his voice was clear enough that even the civilian observers shifted uncomfortably. Jude's hand moved fractionally closer to her weapon as she cataloged distances to exits and noted which corporate contractors had the clearest shots.

"Ma'am." She kept her voice professionally neutral as Carmen approached. "We should review the afternoon's security arrangements."

"Of course, Captain." Carmen matched her tone perfectly while closing the distance between them. "I believe we have that briefing scheduled now."

They moved into the corridor with practiced synchronization, their steps falling into familiar patterns. Jude maintained her relaxed posture until they rounded the corner, then immediately shifted to high alert.

"How bad?" Carmen asked quietly, dropping the diplomatic façade.

"Yemen bad." Jude guided them toward their pre-planned evacuation route, every sense straining for threats. "They've compromised our security teams, hotel staff, and local police. David caught it just in time."

Carmen absorbed this with the same composure she used for international crises.

"The corporate contractors?"

"Moving into attack positions while we talked. Former special operations, probably the same unit from Venezuela." Jude checked her phone as more warnings flashed across the screen. "They're mobilizing now."

"Like Yemen?"

"Worse." Jude's voice dropped lower. "In Yemen, they just wanted to destabilize the embassy. This is personal. They want you specifically." She swallowed the fear that rose at that thought. "We need to move. Now."

Carmen nodded once, trust implicit in her immediate acceptance. "The peace treaty?—"

"Won't matter if you're dead." Jude caught herself, remembering how many times they'd had this argument. "We'll find another way to protect the indigenous

communities. But right now, I need to protect you."

Something softened in Carmen's expression, despite the danger surrounding them. "You always do."

The words carried weight that made Jude's chest tight. She forced her focus back to tactical concerns, coordinating with her team through rapid text exchanges. But part of her awareness remained fixed on Carmen's presence beside her, on how much she had to lose if she failed this time.

"Sarah is meeting us at the service entrance," she said, guiding them through back corridors she'd memorized during security sweeps. "Kate has eyes on the corporate teams. They're moving to cut off the main exits."

"And the hotel?"

"Compromised. We'll head to the fallback position." Jude checked her phone again as more warnings scrolled past. "Marcus has the vehicle ready. We move fast, maintain cover, and don't stop for anything."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Carmen's hand brushed her arm, the touch grounding them both. "I trust you."

The words hit Jude like physical contact. Trust had gotten people killed in Yemen. Trust had led to betrayal in Caracas. But Carmen's trust felt different. Not blind faith, but a conscious choice between equals.

She pushed that thought away as they approached the service area. She had a diplomat to protect, a peace treaty to salvage, and feelings she couldn't examine while their world collapsed around them.

But as they moved through shadows toward extraction, Jude accepted a truth that made her both stronger and more vulnerable: she would die before letting anyone harm Carmen.

Not because of duty or protocol.

But because losing her had become unthinkable.

The service corridor stretched endless as Jude led them through the building's arteries, each turn bringing fresh tactical calculations. Her phone vibrated constantly with updates from her scattered team, but she kept her focus on the immediate threats that enveloped around Carmen.

"Two vehicles blocking the main exit," Sarah reported through comms. "Black SUVs, diplomatic plates."

"Like Venezuela," Carmen murmured, keeping pace perfectly with Jude's

movements. Her heels clicked softly against concrete, somehow managing to sound precise rather than anxious.

Jude nodded, noting how Carmen had already accurately categorized the threat pattern. She guided them through another turn, using the building's service infrastructure as cover. Every shadow held potential threats, but Carmen matched her movements without hesitation, their bodies falling into practiced synchronization.

"Kate, status on the corporate teams?"

"Moving to secure the parking structure." Keys clicked rapidly in the background. "They've got someone monitoring city surveillance feeds. Traffic cameras are being redirected."

A professional hit, then. Jude had seen this level of coordination before—teams that knew how to manipulate the local infrastructure to isolate targets. She adjusted their route, leading Carmen deeper into the building's maintenance areas where surveillance coverage thinned.

A door slammed somewhere ahead. Carmen tensed beside her, but Jude had already identified the sound pattern as one of their people. Not a threat.

Marcus emerged from the shadows, his movement silent despite his size. "Vehicle's ready. But we've got company watching the approach."

"Show me."

He pulled up surveillance feeds on his phone. Jude studied the positions of unmarked vehicles and too-casual observers. The pattern was elegant in its simplicity. They had established overlapping fields of fire covering every standard escape route.

"The loading dock," Carmen said quietly, studying the footage over Jude's shoulder. Her perfume cut through the service corridor's industrial scents, grounding Jude in the present moment. "They're expecting us to take the most defensible position."

"Which means they've planned for it." Jude switched channels on her radio. "Sarah, that construction site we scouted?—"

"Already in position. Access route is clear."

Carmen raised an eyebrow. "You expected this."

"I plan for everything." Jude checked her weapon, hyperaware of Carmen watching her movements. "The construction site connects to maintenance tunnels under three blocks. They won't expect us to go underground."

More updates flooded her phone: local police establishing checkpoints, hotel security doing suspicious sweeps, and corporate contractors moving with coordinated precision through the building.

They were running out of time.

"Multiple targets approaching the service area," Kate warned through comms. "You've got maybe two minutes."

Jude led them through narrow passages she'd memorized during security sweeps, each step calculated to avoid the compromised security cameras. Carmen kept pace effortlessly, her diplomatic poise transformed into fluid movement that matched Jude's tactical advance.

They emerged into weak sunlight filtering through construction barriers. Sarah materialized from behind scaffolding, weapon ready but concealed.

"Vehicle's in position," she reported. "But we've got movement on the south approach. Looks like local police, but their response pattern is wrong."

"Compromised units," Carmen said, recognizing the implications. "Exactly like the checkpoint ambush in Venezuela."

An engine revved nearby—too close, too deliberate. Jude pulled Carmen behind a concrete pillar as headlights swept past their position. She felt Carmen's pulse racing where their bodies pressed together, but the diplomat's breathing remained steady.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Four minutes to contact," Kate updated. "Corporate teams are sweeping outward from the conference room."

They moved as soon as the vehicle passed, using construction equipment as cover. The armored SUV waited exactly where Jude had positioned it during morning security sweeps, its engine already running with James at the wheel.

Sarah took rear guard as Jude got Carmen into the vehicle. But before Jude could go around to the other side, movement caught her eye. A glint of metal in the construction site's shadows.

"Contact left!"

The shot cracked against concrete as Jude pushed Carmen down, covering her body with practiced instinct. Sarah returned fire, forcing the shooter to retreat. They used the distraction to get mobile, engine roaring as James executed a precise exit that looked unplanned.

"Two vehicles in pursuit," Kate reported. "Unmarked sedans, heavily modified. They're carrying specialized communications gear."

Jude maintained her protective position over Carmen as the SUV wove through traffic. Their driver took them through pre-planned routes, each turn designed to look random while following a carefully calculated pattern.

"Police band's lit up," Sarah noted from the front seat. "They're establishing containment zones."

"Standard special operations protocol," Jude confirmed, studying their pursuit in the side mirrors. "They're herding us toward prepared positions."

Carmen shifted beneath her, but made no attempt to move from the protective embrace. "Like Caracas?"

"They learned from that attempt." Jude's voice was steady despite how her heart raced from the contact. "But, so did we."

James took them down an alley barely wide enough for the SUV and scraped paint from their pursuers' vehicles. The unexpected move bought them seconds of separation, enough for Kate to spring the first surprise.

"Construction barriers deploying," she reported with satisfaction. "Pursuit vehicles are blocked on Third Avenue."

But their celebration was cut short as new warnings flooded the comms. Multiple vehicles converging on their position, compromised police units moving to cut off escape routes, and hijacked surveillance cameras tracking their movement through the city.

"They've anticipated our fallback routes," Sarah said quietly.

Jude felt Carmen tense against her as she said, "Then we improvise."

The words carried absolute trust that made Jude's chest tight. She had gotten them out of worse situations, but something about this felt different. More personal. More final.

"Kate, initiate Protocol Echo." She made the call while calculating alternate routes. "Full communications blackout, activate all decoy vehicles."

"They'll know it's a deception," Carmen noted, still pressed close despite the immediate danger passing.

"Yes." Jude allowed herself to breathe in Carmen's perfume, drawing strength from her presence. "But they'll have to chase everything, just in case. It buys us valuable time."

Their SUV turned onto wider streets where James could better maneuver. Through the bulletproof glass, Bogotá's afternoon traffic flowed around them like water around stones. Every vehicle became a potential threat, every intersection another chance for ambush.

"New pursuit vehicle," Sarah warned. "Black SUV, diplomatic plates. Coming in fast."

Jude studied their follower's approach pattern. "Former special operations forces. See how they maintain tactical spacing?"

"Like the contractors from the summit." Carmen's analytical mind never stopped working, even under threat. Especially under threat. "They're better trained than the cartel teams."

"Which makes them more predictable." Jude shifted to get better sight lines through the rear windows. "They'll expect us to follow special operations forces evasion protocols."

"So we don't," Carmen finished, understanding immediately. "We do something they won't anticipate because it's technically wrong."

Jude allowed herself a small smile despite the danger. "Exactly."

She gave James new instructions, and their vehicle suddenly shifted patterns. Instead of tactical evasion, they drove like local traffic: making minor traffic violations, taking inefficient routes, and behaving exactly like someone trying not to draw attention.

The pursuit vehicles hesitated, clearly expecting a trap. Their confusion bought precious seconds as James wove them deeper into the city's maze of streets.

"It's working," Sarah reported, watching their followers. "They're splitting up to cover more ground."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

But Jude kept her body protectively over Carmen's, hyperaware of every point of contact between them. The immediate danger had passed, but experience had taught her that false safety often preceded the worst attacks.

"The safe house?" Carmen asked quietly.

"Soon." Jude checked her phone as more updates arrived. "We'll wait until we're clear of pursuit. I won't risk leading them to our fallback position."

Carmen's hand found hers in the vehicle's shadows. The touch felt like anchoring, like trust made tangible. "You'll get us there." It wasn't a question.

The strong, simple conviction in her voice made Jude's breath catch. She had gotten them out of worse situations, sure, but something about this felt different. Maybe because she had more to lose now than just another protectee.

But as they wove through Bogotá's streets toward safety, Jude drew strength from Carmen's presence beside her. They had survived worse odds together. They would survive this too.

Even if it meant breaking every tactical rule in the process.

Three hours and six false trails later, they finally approached the safe house. James had taken them through a series of calculated misdirections: switching vehicles twice, using underground parking structures to mask their movements, and even doubling back through service roads until Kate confirmed they'd lost their pursuers.

The Spanish Colonial façade rose from Bogotá's shadows, deliberately unremarkable among the neighborhood's other wealthy homes. Jude studied the building's lines through tactical eyes as James brought their vehicle around to the underground garage. The high walls offered good coverage, but they also created blind spots she would need to compensate for.

"Perimeter sensors are active," Kate reported through the comms. "No unauthorized movement detected in the past six hours."

Jude maintained her protective position as they exited the vehicle, scanning shadows while guiding Carmen toward the building's reinforced entrance. The garage's climate-controlled air carried traces of oil and concrete, masking any telling scents that might betray recent activity.

"Initial sweep complete," Sarah confirmed from inside. "Building's clear. Security systems are online."

They moved through the house's arteries with practiced efficiency, Jude noting defensive positions and potential vulnerabilities. Carmen matched her pace perfectly, their steps falling into natural synchronization born from months of protection detail.

"The previous owners were arms dealers," Carmen noted, studying the building's architecture with her usual analytical precision. "I recognize the construction style. Same engineering team that built the embassy in Caracas."

Jude glanced at her sharply. "How did you?—"

"I make it my business to know these things." Carmen's smile held warmth despite their situation. "Especially when they involve keeping me alive."

The observation drew an unexpected laugh from Jude as they reached the main

security room. Screens lined the walls, displaying feeds from carefully hidden cameras that covered every approach to the property. Kate's fingers flew across keyboards as she established their surveillance network.

"Communications are up," she reported. "But I'm keeping us dark except for emergency channels. They'll be scanning for our signals."

Jude nodded, studying the camera feeds. The neighborhood looked peaceful as dusk quickly approached, but experience had taught her that peace often masked the deadliest threats.

"Standard sweep pattern," she ordered her team. "I want every inch of this place mapped and monitored. Check for surveillance devices, entry points, and anything that looks wrong." She turned to Carmen, who watched her work with that particular expression that made Jude's pulse quicken. "I need to secure the panic room. Will you?—"

"Stay where you can see me?" Carmen finished, amusement warming her voice. "Of course, Captain."

The title carried layers of meaning that had that had much more to do than just rank. Jude forced her focus back to security protocols, trying to ignore how Carmen's presence filled the space with an energy that constantly grabbed at the edges of her awareness.

She moved through the house methodically, checking sight lines and defensive positions while cataloging potential risks. The panic room's reinforced door opened smoothly on well-maintained hinges, and it was clear someone had been regularly maintaining the space.

"The ventilation system is independent," she noted, examining the room's

infrastructure. "Separate power supply and communications array, and there are enough supplies for three days."

"Impressive." Carmen's voice made her turn. The diplomat stood in the doorway, backlit by security lights that caught the shine in her hair. "Though I hope we won't need it."

"Better prepared than surprised." Jude tested the room's communications setup, hyperaware of Carmen watching her movements. "I won't take chances. Not with—" She caught herself, but Carmen heard the unspoken words anyway.

"Not with me?" Her voice softened. "Or not with us?"

The question hung between them, weighted with everything they'd become to each other. Jude's hands stilled on the control panel as memories of last night flooded back. Carmen's skin under her fingers, soft sounds in darkness, and whispered truths they couldn't take back.

"Both," she admitted quietly.

Carmen moved closer, her perfume cutting through the room's filtered air. "You can't protect me from everything."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"I can try." Jude turned to face her fully, letting Carmen see past her professional mask. "I've lost people before because I missed small clues. Because I let my guard down at the wrong moment." She swallowed hard. "I won't lose you too."

"Oh, darling." Carmen's hand came up to trace the healing cut on Jude's cheek. "You're not alone in this anymore. We protect each other now."

The touch sent electricity through Jude's combat-heightened nerves. She caught Carmen's wrist gently, feeling her pulse race beneath her fingers. "It's my job to?—"

"To what?" Carmen stepped closer, erasing the careful distance between them. "To pretend this is just another protection detail? To act like last night didn't change everything?"

Before Jude could respond, Sarah's voice crackled through her radio. "Building's secure. But we've got increased police patrols in the area. They could be compromised units."

The interruption snapped Jude back to tactical awareness. She moved to check the security feeds, noting how the patrols had established coverage zones that looked too precise to be routine.

"They're searching grids," she noted, studying the pattern. "Methodically covering the neighborhood."

Carmen joined her at the monitors, their shoulders brushing against each other. "Looking for signs of recent activity. Changes in traffic patterns, new security

features, anything that might indicate a safe house."

"They know our protocols." Jude switched between camera views, tracking vehicle movements. "Which means they have someone with intimate knowledge of our operations."

"A traitor?" Carmen's diplomatic mind was already analyzing implications. "Or someone forced to cooperate?"

"Either way, we're exposed." Jude checked her weapon, comforted by its familiar weight. "We need to establish a security rotation. Four-hour shifts, overlapping coverage, and?—"

Carmen's hand on her arm stopped her. "When was the last time you slept?"

The question caught Jude off guard. "I'm fine."

"That's not what I asked." Carmen's voice carried that particular tone that could make diplomats and warlords alike reconsider their positions. "You've been running on adrenaline since the assassination attempt. You need rest."

"I need to protect you."

"And you need to be at your best to do that." Carmen's fingers traced patterns on Jude's arm that made it hard to focus. "Let your team handle the first watch. You're no good to anyone if you're exhausted."

Jude wanted to argue, but fatigue was starting to blur the edges of her alertness. "Two hours. Then I'll?—"

"Four hours minimum." Carmen's smile held both affection and steel. "Doctor's

orders."

"You're not that kind of doctor."

"No, but I've spent enough time in war zones to recognize combat fatigue." Carmen's hand moved to cup Jude's face, her thumb brushing the cut on her cheek. "Let me take care of you for once."

The words struck deeper than any argument could have. Jude felt her resistance crumbling under the weight of exhaustion and the impossible tenderness in Carmen's touch.

"Fine," she conceded quietly. "But I'm sleeping in the security room. And you stay where I can?—"

"Where you can see me," Carmen finished, understanding as always. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

As if summoned by their discussion, Sarah appeared in the doorway. "First watch is set. Kate's monitoring communications, and Marcus has eyes on the perimeter."

Jude nodded, already calculating response times and defensive positions. But Carmen's presence beside her kept drawing her attention from tactical concerns to more personal ones.

They had survived the extraction, found relative safety, and established security protocols. But as night settled over their sanctuary, Jude knew the real challenge lay ahead: maintaining professional focus when every fiber of her being wanted to pull Carmen close and never let go.

The safe house might protect them from external threats, but nothing could shield

them from what they'd become to each other. And somehow, that felt more dangerous than any assassin's bullet.

A perimeter sensor's soft chime pulled Jude from combat-light sleep. She was instantly alert, one hand moving to her weapon before her eyes fully opened. The security room's monitors cast blue shadows across unfamiliar walls as her tactical mind reoriented: safe house, Bogotá, three hours since she'd reluctantly agreed to rest.

"Just the neighbor's cat again." Carmen's voice came from nearby. She'd kept her promise to stay where Jude could see her, and she sat in the chair next to the couch where Jude had insisted on sleeping, reading glasses perched on her nose as she reviewed intelligence briefs in the dim light.

Jude checked the sensor display anyway, muscle memory taking over. The thermal imaging showed a small figure moving along their outer wall: feline, not human. She forced her hands to relax their grip on her weapon.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"How long was I out?"

"Three hours, seventeen minutes." Carmen set aside her papers, and even in the blue-tinted darkness, Jude caught the hint of affection in her smile. "And yes, I counted."

The admission made something warm bloom in Jude's chest. She sat up, running a hand through her short hair, hyperaware of Carmen watching the movement. "Anything from the teams?"

"All clear. Sarah has the perimeter, Kate's monitoring communications, and Marcus is coordinating with our local contacts." Carmen's voice carried that particular tone that meant she was leading up to something. "The State Department sent updated intelligence while you slept."

Jude was fully awake now. "Show me."

Carmen handed her a tablet displaying surveillance photos. The corporate contractors they'd escaped earlier had spread out through the city in a precise search pattern. Their movements suggested military training, too coordinated to be random patrols.

"They're being methodical," Jude noted, studying their coverage zones. "Working outward from the last confirmed sighting."

"Like you would, if you were hunting someone."

The observation hit closer to home than Carmen probably intended. Jude had run similar operations during her SEALs days, tracking high-value targets through urban

environments. She recognized the search protocols because she had helped write some of them.

A soft sound drew her attention to the monitors. Carmen had moved closer while she studied the intelligence, near enough now that Jude caught the subtle notes of her perfume beneath the room's filtered air.

"You're worried," Carmen said quietly.

"They know our procedures." Jude switched between surveillance feeds, tracking patrol patterns. "They're using our own protocols against us."

"Which means they have someone with intimate knowledge of your operations." Carmen's analytical mind never stopped working, even at this hour. "Someone who knows how you think."

The implications hung heavy in the darkness. Jude started to stand, needing to check the perimeter herself, but Carmen's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Don't." The single word carried layers of meaning. "You've barely rested."

"I need to verify?—"

"What your extremely competent team is already monitoring?" Carmen's fingers traced patterns on Jude's arm that made it hard to focus. "For once in your life, let someone else carry the weight."

The gentle command in her voice struck deeper Jude had expected. Jude found herself studying Carmen in the monitors' blue light, noting how silver threaded through her dark hair, how her reading glasses had left small indents on the bridge of her nose, how her eyes held equal parts strength and tenderness.

"If they find us?—"

"They'll face a fortress designed by arms dealers, defended by one of the best tactical teams in the world." Carmen moved closer, until Jude could see flecks of gold in her dark eyes. "And protected by a woman who's already saved my life more times than I can count."

The space between them seemed to shrink with each breath. Jude's combat-heightened senses cataloged unnecessary details: the soft silk of Carmen's blouse over her beautiful breasts, the warmth radiating from her body, how her pulse visibly raced at the base of her throat.

"I can't lose you." The words slipped out before Jude could catch them.

Carmen's hand came up to trace the cut on her cheek. "Then trust that I'm not going anywhere."

Carmen leaned in and her lips crashed against Jude's. Jude felt the need in her that came harder and harder as her mouth opened to Jude's tongue and she moaned deeply. It was a moan that begged for more. Carmen tasted of coffee and conviction and everything Jude had been fighting since that first night on the hotel terrace. Her hands found Carmen's hips as if drawn there by magnetic force, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them.

When they finally broke apart, Carmen's smile held equal parts heat and certainty. "Come to bed with me." Her voice dropped lower, intimate in the darkness. "Let me remind you what we're really fighting for."

The words struck home with unerring accuracy. Jude felt her remaining resistance crumble under the weight of exhaustion and need and everything they'd become to each other.

"Sarah," she said into her radio, "maintain perimeter watch. I'm going off comms for a few hours."

"Copy that, boss." Sarah's voice carried knowing approval. "We've got this covered."

Carmen's smile was worth every protocol they were breaking. She drew Jude up from the couch by their joined hands, leading her from the security room's blue shadows toward something warmer and more vital than any tactical objective.

They had survived pursuit and betrayal, found sanctuary in a fortress meant for arms dealers, and established defenses against inevitable attack. But as Carmen guided her down the hall, Jude accepted that some surrenders were more powerful than any victory could be.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Jude let Carmen guide her down gently on the bed but didn't stay down for long. As soon as Carmen crawled into bed with her, Jude rolled over on an elbow then her knees.

“Your first,” she growled, light flickering in her eyes.

She peeled off Carmen's pants in one swift motion and discarded them on the floor by the bed, then she rubbed the heel of her hand over Carmen's black lace panties, teasing her and eliciting gasps and the grinding of Carmen's hips against the pressure she was providing. After Carmen's panties became too damp, she slid those off, too, and continued to slide her whole hand up and down through Carmen's wetness, slowly, surely, enjoying how Carmen thrust and ground her hips against her.

She could feel the stress of their increasingly dangerous situation melt off Carmen's body and mind until all that was left was them two, together, in this moment.

Jude could smell Carmen's desire and she ached to taste her. She couldn't resist anymore and buried her face in between Carmen's thighs, honing in on Carmen's clit that was swollen with want.

She flicked her tongue over it before moving down to paint her folds with long, slow strokes of her tongue before she paused then sucked on her labia and then on her clitoris. Underneath her, Carmen came undone, and the woman twined her fingers in Jude's hair, twisting the strands between her fingers as she arched her back, giving Jude even more access to the sweet taste of her.

Jude slipped her fingers into Carmen's soft wetness, feeling the way Carmen's walls

relaxed to make room for her, allowing her in. She added another finger, pushing in as deep as they would go and eliciting a deep earthy moan from Carmen.

“Oh, please.... please... I need you...” Carmen’s voice was just above a whisper.

“Hard?” Jude asked, wanting to be sure, as she curled her fingers to reach Carmen’s G spot and began to thrust in and out of her.

“Yes,” Carmen gasped, “Just like the first night. Fuck me so hard I can’t feel anything else.”

Jude smiled, remembering how beautiful it had been the first night on the balcony. Her body tight against Carmen’s, her right hand fucking her so hard and fast, Carmen had unravelled completely beneath her.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Jude growled as she pressed her body down on top of Carmen getting a good angle so her trusty right hand could take her exactly where she wanted to go.

Carmen’s eyes closed and her head tipped back. Her moans became screams of pleasure as Jude’s four fingers rammed into her again and again.

Carmen’s whole body jolted beneath her and she began to squirt again and again and again for Jude’s fingers.

Jude knew the bed would be soaking beneath them, but she didn’t care. Carmen wanted to give everything to Jude here and now and take everything from her and perhaps, just to feel alive, and Jude wanted so desperately to be exactly what she needed.

She felt something more building beneath her and she pressed her hip down against Carmen’s clitoris as she continued fucking her.

Carmen leaned her head back and cried out in pleasure as her orgasm came fast and strong, rippling over her body in waves.

Jude held her as she rode it out, fingers still buried deep within her and as Carmen eventually stilled in her arms with tears falling from her eyes, she kissed her tenderly.

8

## CARMEN

Carmen woke to silence.

Not the natural quiet of early morning, but perhaps the manufactured stillness that preceded violence. Twenty-five years of negotiating in conflict zones had taught her to read the spaces between sounds and to recognize when silence masked approaching danger.

She found Jude already alert and moving, her fluid grace transformed into something sharper. Through the safe house's reinforced windows, dawn painted harsh shadows across the unfamiliar walls. Carmen watched Jude check security feeds and communication arrays, noting how her movements carried the same focused intensity that had become familiar.

"The signals are degrading," Jude reported, her voice carrying that particular edge that made Carmen's diplomatic instincts sharpen. "Multiple frequencies showing interference patterns."

Carmen moved to the command center's main console, bare feet silent on cold tile floors. The screens displayed their shrinking world: security cameras covering the property's perimeter, communication channels linking them to the outside, and surveillance feeds monitoring the surrounding streets. One by one, green status

indicators flickered to amber, then red.

"They're isolating us," she said, recognizing the tactical approach from previous attempts on her life. "They're cutting off communication first, then physical access." She studied the surveillance feeds, catching subtle changes in local traffic patterns. "The police patrols are too precise. Their coverage zones suggest military training."

Jude's slight pause spoke volumes. "You see it too?"

"I've had years of practice reading between lines and nonverbal cues." Carmen tracked another patrol car's too-perfect route. "In Venezuela, they used similar patterns before the ambush. Local authorities coordinating with private contractors, establishing containment zones while appearing routine."

Through the monitors, she watched Sarah test defensive positions while Marcus ran diagnostics on their equipment. The team moved with practiced efficiency, but Carmen caught the growing tension in their movements. They had all seen this pattern before, and it wasn't going to end well.

A soft chime drew their attention as another communication channel went dark. Carmen studied Jude's reflection in the darkened screen, noting how the cut on her cheek caught the harsh light. The sight made her chest ache with everything they stood to lose.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Multiple vehicles approaching from the south," Sarah reported through their dwindling radio links. "Black SUVs, no plates, professional spacing."

Carmen processed this information while watching Jude's hand move fractionally closer to her weapon. The gesture spoke of combat experience and protective instinct, but something in it felt more personal than professional now.

"They're better equipped than the cartel teams," Carmen noted, her analytical mind cataloging details even as her heart raced. "American weapons, special operations forces tactics. Probably the same unit that tried to assassinate you at the summit."

"Which means they know our protocols." Jude's voice carried dangerous understanding. "Someone with intimate knowledge of our operations fed them intelligence."

The betrayal hung between them as their world contracted with each lost connection. Carmen had built her career on reading subtle shifts in power and anticipating threats before they materialized. But this felt different. More final, more intimate than previous attempts on her life.

She caught Jude secretly watching her with an expression that spoke of memorizing details and storing away precious moments against whatever approached. Their eyes met in brief contact that conveyed volumes: trust and fear, determination and something deeper neither of them had named yet.

The safe house's lights flickered once, a warning of what was soon coming. Carmen straightened her spine, gathering decades of diplomatic steel around herself. She had

survived war zones and assassination attempts. She had faced down warlords and corporate killers.

But she had never had so much to lose.

"We should move to the panic room," she said quietly, noting how Jude's posture shifted at her words. "Before they cut the main power."

"Not yet." Jude studied the surveillance feeds with lethal focus. "We need to maintain tactical flexibility for as long as possible. But yes, be ready."

Carmen touched Jude's arm briefly, feeling the coiled tension in her muscles. The contact grounded them both, a reminder of everything that had changed since that first security briefing in Washington.

Through the reinforced windows, morning light continued its implacable advance. But Carmen felt darkness approaching, the kind that had nothing to do with the sun casting shadows and everything to do with those shadows closing around their fortress.

She watched another communication channel die, its indicator shifting from hope to warning. Soon, they would be completely cut off. But as she studied Jude's reflection in the darkened screens, Carmen found strength in the certainty that some battles were worth any cost.

Even if the price was everything.

As if responding to Carmen's thoughts, the safe house's main power cut out with surgical precision. Emergency lighting activated immediately, bathing the safe house in cold blue light. Carmen moved with practiced efficiency, her muscles remembering similar situations in embassy safe rooms and diplomatic bunkers. But

this felt different—more calculated, more personal.

"Multiple breach points," Sarah's voice crackled through their last working radio comms line. "Teams moving with military precision. Four entry zones identified."

Carmen watched Jude transform beside her. The change was subtle but absolute, every movement driven by pure tactical purpose. "Time to move."

They left the safe house's command center together, Carmen matching Jude's pace without hesitation. As they walked, the safe house corridors felt longer in the emergency lighting. Carmen counted steps and turns, mapping their route to the panic room while tracking sounds of intrusion from above.

Glass shattered somewhere on the upper floor. Multiple sets of feet moved around the broken shards with practiced stealth, the kind that came from extensive training.

"They're inside." Jude's strained voice carried lethal focus. "We need to reach the panic room before they establish containment positions."

More glass broke, closer this time. Carmen felt Jude shift beside her, positioning herself to protect vital areas. The gesture should have felt stifling after decades of diplomatic protection. Instead, it made her chest feel tight.

They moved quickly through the blue-lit corridors toward their last remaining refuge. Carmen heard their attackers coordinating through military-grade communications, and their movements suggested intimate knowledge of the building's layout.

A shadowed figure appeared at the end of the hall, their weapon raised. Jude's reaction was instant and precise. The intruder went down before he could fire, but his radio crackled with position reports. They'd given away their location.

"Run," Jude ordered, her voice carrying that particular tone that left no room for hesitation or argument. "Panic room. Now."

They sprinted through the dimness, pursued by professionals with military training and corporate backing. Carmen's analytical mind kept working even as they fled: American weapons, special operations forces movements, the kind of coordination that only came from extensive preparation—or a leak. Or both.

The panic room's reinforced door appeared ahead, its steel surface reflecting emergency lights. They reached it just as more figures shrouded in shadows emerged behind them.

Gunfire erupted, bullets sparking against reinforced walls. Jude returned fire with controlled precision while guiding Carmen through the doorway. The heavy door sealed with a hydraulic hiss that felt terribly final.

Inside, emergency power bathed them in harsh light. Carmen watched Jude check the room's systems, noting how her efficient movements couldn't quite hide her growing concern.

"Communications are dead," Jude reported, her voice carrying forced calm. "Military-grade jamming equipment. They've completely cut us off from our team."

Carmen studied their attackers through the security feeds. Their movements confirmed her worst fears: these weren't cartel thugs or corporate mercenaries. These were highly trained operators executing a carefully planned assault.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"They knew exactly where to find us," she noted, her diplomatic training helping her maintain composure. "Building plans, security protocols, equipment specifications. Someone must have given them everything."

"A traitor." Jude's voice had a dark edge to it. "Not just anyone either. Someone with intimate knowledge of our operations."

Their world contracted to the panic room's reinforced walls. Outside, their attackers moved with practiced precision, securing the building floor by floor. The security feeds showed them placing charges at key structural points—not to breach the panic room, but to ensure no rescue team could reach them.

Carmen watched Jude exhaust every option, trying frequencies and protocols that had gotten them out of similar situations. But each attempt was met with silence or static, confirming what they both already knew: they were completely isolated.

The realization hit Carmen with physical force. They might not survive this. She'd faced the possibility of death before in war zones and failed negotiations. But this felt different. The thought of losing Jude made her composure crack in ways no previous threat had managed.

She moved closer to Jude, drawn by a certainty that had been building since Washington. "If these are our last moments..."

"Don't." Jude's voice roughened. "We'll find a way out. We always do."

"I know." Carmen touched the cut on Jude's cheek, memorizing its shape. "But in

case we don't, I need you to know something."

Their eyes met in the panic room's harsh light. Carmen saw her own fears reflected in Jude's gaze, along with something deeper that made her heart race.

"I love you." The words felt like truth stripped bare. "Not because you protect me. Not because of our impossible circumstances. Just because you're you."

Outside, their attackers moved closer. Carmen watched emotions war across Jude's features: love and faith, fear and determination, everything they'd been fighting since that first security briefing.

Then Jude kissed her with desperate intensity, tasting of bitter coffee and possibilities they might never get to explore. When they broke apart, both breathing hard, Carmen saw her own certainty reflected in Jude's eyes.

"I love you, too." Jude's voice carried absolute conviction. "Which is why I'm getting us out of here. Whatever it takes."

The words felt like a promise. Outside, their enemies continued their methodical advance. But inside the panic room's steel walls, Carmen found strength in the certainty that some things were worth any risk.

The panic room's ventilation system hummed steadily, cycling air through filters designed to last for days. Carmen stood at the security console, watching Jude work through their dwindling options. Each failed attempt at communication tightened the invisible noose around them.

"East sector breached," Sarah's voice crackled through their last working radio. "They're moving methodically, clearing rooms with trained precision."

Carmen studied the security feeds, her diplomatic mind analyzing patterns. The attackers moved like a well-rehearsed orchestra, each team coordinating perfectly with the others. Their gear marked them as American-trained, definitely former special operations forces who'd likely transitioned to private sector work.

"They're not trying to break in," she noted, watching them place more charges throughout the building. "They're making sure no one can break us out."

Jude's fingers stilled on the communications array. "You've seen this before?"

"Sudan, 2019. They trapped our negotiating team in a reinforced building, then waited." Carmen kept her voice steady despite the memory. "Patience is an effective weapon when time works in your favor."

The memory hung in the filtered air between them. Carmen watched Jude process this, noting how her tactical mind adapted to new information. In the harsh emergency lighting, every detail stood out in sharp relief: the tension in Jude's shoulders, the careful control in her movements, the way she positioned herself between Carmen and the door even now.

"The corporate contractors are coordinating with local forces," Carmen said, studying the surveillance feeds. "See how they're establishing containment zones? They're using legitimate police units as cover for their operation."

"And therefore making any rescue attempt look like interference with official law-enforcement business." Jude's voice carried steel beneath the exhaustion. "Smart." The praise sounded bitter.

Carmen moved closer, watching the screens. "In Venezuela, we lost three vehicles because local police were coordinating with cartel units. But this is different." She gestured to their attackers' formations. "This is someone who knows exactly how you

operate."

"Someone who helped design our protocols." Jude pulled up another surveillance angle. "The question is why. Why now?"

"Because we were getting too close." Carmen's diplomatic instincts clicked the pieces into place. "The summit negotiations, the evidence of corporate involvement with Nuevo Amanecer—we were about to expose everything."

They worked in sync, analyzing feeds and tracking enemy positions. Carmen found herself matching Jude's movements subconsciously, their bodies finding natural alignment in the confined space. It reminded her of all those late nights reviewing security protocols, when professional walls had started crumbling without either of them noticing.

"When did you first suspect a traitor?" Carmen asked quietly.

"The summit. The way they anticipated our evacuation routes." Jude's voice softened. "But I was distracted."

"By what?"



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"By you." Jude met her eyes briefly. "By how you kept your composure even with blood on your evening gown. How you analyzed their tactics while I checked you for injuries."

The admission carried weight. Carmen touched her arm gently. "You were just as distracting. The way you moved through that firefight, protecting everyone while making it look effortless."

A ghost of a smile touched Jude's lips. "Professional admiration?"

"At first." Carmen watched another team take position on the feeds. "Then I noticed other things. How you always had coffee ready before dawn briefings. The way you'd adjust your position whenever I entered a room. Small moments that had nothing to do with protection protocols."

Their eyes met in the harsh light. No declarations needed; they'd moved beyond them now. Understanding passed between them as another explosion rocked the building above.

"They're almost ready," Carmen said quietly.

Jude checked her weapon one final time. "So are we."

The words carried certainty born of shared purpose. Whatever came next, they would face it as one, together.

Explosions shook the building above. The infiltrators were closer now. Carmen

studied the security feeds, counting teams and positions while Jude checked their remaining defenses. The panic room's filtered air tasted stale, despite the ventilation system working at full capacity.

"They're getting impatient," Carmen noted, watching another charge detonate on the floor above. Her diplomatic instincts recognized the shift in tactics. "Something's changed in their orders."

Through the feeds, she watched the tactical teams adjusting their positions. Their original precision had given way to something more aggressive. More urgent. She'd seen this pattern before when corporate interests decided time was no longer on their side.

"Six teams are converging on the east wing," Sarah's voice crackled through their failing radio. "They're—" Static consumed the rest.

Jude moved to the weapons locker, her movements precise and controlled. Carmen recognized the look in her eyes, the same expression she'd worn before the evacuation at the summit. The one that meant she was preparing to do something tactically sound but personally reckless.

"The north service tunnel," Jude said quietly, checking her weapon. "They haven't found it yet. If I create enough distraction?—"

"No." Carmen's diplomatic voice carried decades of authority. "I'm not leaving you."

"Carmen—"

"I've spent my career negotiating other people's wars." She stepped closer, forcing Jude to meet her eyes. "Finding compromise between opposing forces. Making peace from chaos." Her voice dropped lower. "But this isn't negotiable. Where you go, I

go."

Another explosion rocked the building, closer than the others. On the security feeds, Carmen counted the opposition forces: twelve tactical teams, each carrying enough firepower to level a city block. Their movements had shifted from containment to assault.

"They're preparing for a final push," she observed, analyzing their new formation. "See how they're concentrating forces on the weak points? They know about the structural support beams."

Jude checked her spare magazines. "Which means they have the building plans. Probably from the same source that gave them our security protocols."

"The corporate contractors are improvising now." Carmen gestured to the feeds. "Look at their spacing. It's degrading. They expected us to be broken by now."

"Because they thought I'd choose protocol over..." Jude's voice trailed off.

"Over me?" Carmen touched her arm. "It looks like they don't know you very well, do they?"

A ghost of a smile touched Jude's lips. "No. They don't."

The next explosion sent dust filtering through the ventilation system. Carmen watched another security camera go dark, their view of the outside world shrinking with each detonation. Soon they would be completely blind.

"The tunnel leads to the old metro maintenance system," Jude said finally. "If we time it right?—"

"We might make it." Carmen emphasized the word. "Both of us."

Their eyes met in the harsh light. Carmen saw the moment Jude's resistance cracked, when tactical necessity yielded to something stronger than protocol.

"I had a whole speech prepared," Jude admitted quietly. "About duty and the mission and keeping you alive at any cost."

"And now?"

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

"Now I realize you'd never forgive me for leaving you behind." That ghost of a smile returned. "And I'd never forgive myself."

Through the feeds, Carmen tracked the assault teams' final preparations. They were deploying shaped charges now—military-grade explosives designed to breach reinforced positions. The same kind she'd seen used in Sudan when corporate mercenaries destroyed a village that refused to sell their land.

"We'll have one chance," she said, studying the pattern of charges. "The moment they detonate, before the dust settles. They'll expect us to be disoriented."

Jude nodded, already understanding. "But you've been through this before."

"Diplomatic protection isn't always about negotiation." Carmen checked the weapon Jude offered her with practiced ease. "Sometimes it's about surviving long enough to expose the truth."

Another camera died, then another. Their world shrank further and further as each security video feed went dark. Soon they would be operating blind, relying on instinct and experience to guide them through whatever came next.

"The corporate files," Carmen said suddenly. "The ones proving their connection to Nuevo Amanecer. I encrypted them on a secure server. If anything happens?—"

"Nothing's happening." Jude's voice carried clear conviction. "Nothing except us exposing every one of them."

The promise hung between them as the final security feed flickered static then winked out. In the darkness, Carmen felt Jude shift closer, their shoulders brushing with familiar comfort. Outside, their enemies prepared for the final assault. Inside, two women who'd dedicated their lives to different forms of protection found strength in each other.

A new explosion shook the walls, the biggest yet. Dust rained from the panic room's ceiling as the safe house's support structures groaned in protest. Their time had run out. They needed to make a move.

"Ready?" Jude asked, offering her hand.

Carmen took it, feeling calluses earned through years of combat press against her palm. "Always."

They moved toward the panic room door, positioning themselves for what would come next. In the darkness, Carmen felt nothing but certainty. They were survivors who'd faced death before and had emerged stronger.

This time would be no different.

Because this time, they had something worth any risk.

9

JUDE

The panic room's hydraulic door sealed behind Jude with a hiss. Emergency lighting bathed the safe house corridors in cold blue shadows as she moved through familiar space that had turned hostile. She positioned charges at precise intervals, each one calculated to create maximum confusion while minimizing structural damage.

Her body operated on pure muscle memory, but her mind kept circling back to Carmen's voice: I love you. Three words that should have complicated everything but instead crystallized her purpose into perfect clarity. She wasn't just protecting a diplomat anymore. She was fighting for their future.

The first attacker appeared at the corridor junction, moving with the distinctive grace of special operations forces training. Jude recognized the stance before he registered her presence. She closed distance fast, redirecting his weapon before he could fire. His knife appeared exactly where training said it would, but she was already inside his guard. A precise strike collapsed his throat. Quiet, efficient, final.

She caught his body before it hit the floor, easing him down silently. His gear confirmed her suspicions: American-made, high-end, the kind only certain contractors could access. She appropriated his radio, already tuned to their command frequency.

"North sector clear," a voice crackled through the earpiece. "Moving to breach point Charlie."

Jude placed another charge, mentally mapping enemy positions through their radio chatter. They were good—coordinated, disciplined, thorough. But she had something they didn't: intimate knowledge of this building's secrets and absolute certainty in what she was fighting for.

Two more hostiles swept the intersecting corridor. She let them pass, noting their formation. Former Delta Force, maybe Rangers. Their movements carried that particular precision born from years of joint operations. She waited until they cleared the corner before triggering the first charge.

The explosion wasn't meant to kill. It sent dust and debris cascading through the hallway, disrupting their practiced coordination. She moved through the chaos like

smoke, neutralizing the first operator before he could orient himself. His partner managed to squeeze off one shot—silenced, professional—but she was already gone, leaving unconscious bodies in her wake.

More radio chatter confirmed her plan was working. The teams were shifting positions and responding to the apparent breach attempt. Each repositioning drew them further from the actual escape route while creating gaps in their coverage.

She placed the final charge near the building's main support column. This one carried more punch, enough to make them think she was attempting a structural collapse. The kind of desperate move they'd expect from someone running out of options.

A shadow moved wrong at the end of the hall. Jude dropped and rolled as bullets sparked against the reinforced walls. Three attackers this time, all moving with the synchronization that screamed military training. She used their practiced coordination against them, forcing them to cluster to maintain formation.

The fight was brutally efficient. She recognized their hand-to-hand style—the same CQC techniques she had learned in BUD/S—and countered with moves they wouldn't expect. When it ended, she acquired another radio and fresh magazines for her weapon.

"Teams One and Two, converge on breach point Delta," the command channel crackled. "Target is attempting to create an exit route."



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:42 pm*

Let them think that. Let them commit resources to preventing an escape that would never come. She headed back toward the panic room, every sense straining for threats. The path was clear, exactly as planned. They'd pulled units to counter her apparent attempt at breaking out, leaving gaps in their coverage.

Carmen waited at the panic room door, weapon ready, dark eyes bright with trust and knowing that made Jude's chest tight. No questions, no hesitation. Just absolute faith that they would face whatever came next together.

"Seven minutes until the main charge goes off," Jude said quietly. "They'll throw everything at containing that breach."

Carmen nodded, already understanding. "And we will use the maintenance tunnel they haven't found."

"Intel confirms the tunnel exits three blocks east. Sarah has a vehicle waiting." Jude checked her weapon one final time. "Ready?"

Instead of answering, Carmen kissed her. It wasn't like their previous kisses—desperate or gentle or full of unspoken words. This one felt like certainty, like a promise, like coming home.

"Always," Carmen whispered against her lips.

They moved through the shadows together, their steps falling into perfect synchronization. Outside, their enemies prepared for an assault that would never come. Inside, two women who'd found each other against impossible odds made their

own fate.

The final charge would detonate soon, drawing every hostile toward the wrong location. But Jude barely registered the timing anymore. Her world had narrowed to the woman beside her and the future they would fight for.

Together.

They moved through the safe house like ghosts, their footsteps whisper-soft against the marble floors. Jude led them down service corridors she'd memorized during security sweeps, each turn bringing them closer to the hidden maintenance tunnel that would lead them to their freedom. Emergency lighting painted everything in shades of blue and shadow, transforming the familiar space into alien territory.

The main charge would detonate in four minutes. Until then, they needed to stay invisible.

A door clicked somewhere above, too gentle to be accidental. Jude pressed Carmen against the wall, instinctively shielding her. Three sets of boots moved across the upper floor, their rhythm carrying the unmistakable cadence of combat veterans.

"Two teams sweeping east," the voice crackled through Jude's stolen radio. "No sign of the targets."

Carmen's warm breath brushed against Jude's neck as they waited, as their bodies were pressed closely together in darkness. Despite the danger, Jude found herself cataloging unnecessary details: the silk of Carmen's blouse under her fingers, the subtle notes of her perfume cutting through cordite and concrete dust, and how her pulse raced steady and strong where their bodies touched.

The teams above moved on, following the trail of evidence she'd left to mislead them.

Once the infiltrators' footsteps faded, Jude led them deeper into the building's arteries. They passed through the kitchen where gleaming steel counters reflected emergency lighting like underwater mirrors. Every shadow held potential threats, but Carmen matched her movements perfectly, reading her body language with the same precision she used to analyze diplomatic negotiations.

Three minutes until detonation.

The door to the wine cellar emerged from darkness—their entry point to the maintenance tunnel. Jude reached for the handle just as movement flickered in her peripheral vision. She spun, shoving Carmen behind a steel prep table as gunfire shrieked against the kitchen's industrial appliances.

Two hostiles stood at the kitchen entrance; another moved through the dining room. Their coordination suggested extensive training together—probably were from the same unit and familiar with each other's styles. The kind of team that could anticipate their partners' moves without verbal communication.

Jude drew their fire while calculating angles and distances. The kitchen's layout provided multiple lanes of cover, but it also created choke points they could use to trap her and Carmen. She recognized the technique from joint operations training: divide the space into sectors, control movement options, and force the target into predictable responses.

A bullet cracked the industrial refrigerator by her head, spraying coolant in a fine mist. She used the distraction to change position, noting how Carmen had already shifted to cover the opposite approach. No words needed, just deep trust built over their protection detail together that had since crystallized in the past twenty-four hours.

"Target located," one attacker murmured into his radio. "Kitchen, northwest corner.

Moving to contain."

Jude allowed herself a small smile. Their professionalism would be their undoing. Their need to report positions and coordinate movements created precious seconds of vulnerability. She counted footsteps, tracking their approach through sound alone.

The first attacker cleared the corner exactly where training would have dictated. Jude was already moving, redirecting his weapon while driving her knee into his solar plexus. His partner tried to compensate, but Carmen had anticipated the move. The wine bottle she threw hit him perfectly, shattering his concentration long enough for Jude to close the distance.

The fight was brutally efficient. Jude recognized their hand-to-hand style—close-quarter combat techniques taught to special operations forces—but she'd learned to counter those moves during hundreds of training sessions. When they tried to establish dominant positions, she flowed around their strikes like water. Each attempt to contain her created openings she exploited with military precision.

The third hostile attempted to flank them through the dining room. Carmen's warning came as a shift in pressure rather than words. Jude rolled aside as a knife blade sliced through the space she'd occupied seconds earlier. She caught the attacker's wrist, using his own momentum to drive him into an industrial stovetop.

Two minutes until detonation.

"Clear," Carmen said quietly, already moving to check the fallen hostiles. Her diplomatic composure remained perfect despite the violence, but Jude saw how her hands trembled slightly as she collected spare magazines and radio equipment.

Jude did a final sweep while Carmen secured their exit route.

"Company," Carmen warned, her voice carrying urgency without panic. More footsteps approached from above—heavier this time, with the measured pace of experienced operators moving to contact.

One minute until detonation.

They slipped through the wine cellar door just as shadows of operatives appeared in the kitchen entrance. The cellar's darkness wrapped around them like a blanket, filled with the musty scent of earth and aged wood. Rows of vintage wine bottles caught emergency lighting in strange patterns, creating an underwater effect that made depth perception difficult.

Jude guided them between racks of priceless vintages, following the path she'd memorized during security sweeps. The maintenance tunnel entrance waited behind a false wall, the kind of secret rich arms dealers loved to build into their properties.

Boots on the cellar stairs could only mean multiple teams were converging on their position. Jude reached for the hidden latch just as the first explosion rocked the building above. Dust rained from ancient wooden beams as the main charge detonated, sending shock waves through the foundation.

Secondary explosions followed, each one carefully placed to create maximum confusion. The cellar's wooden racks swayed dangerously, bottles crashing to the floor in waves of shattered glass and spilled wine. Their pursuers stumbled on the stairs, professional coordination disrupted by the building's violent movement.

Thirty seconds to clear the area before the final charge.

The false wall clicked open, revealing darkness beyond. Jude ushered Carmen through first, then followed smoothly behind her. The door sealed behind them just as more explosions thundered throughout the structure above.

They moved quickly through pitch darkness, guided by memorized steps and the cold certainty of shared purpose. The tunnel's rough walls pressed close, carrying the weight of earth and concrete overhead. Each explosion felt more distant, muffled by layers of soil and stone.

When the final charge detonated, its shock wave reached them as little more than a tremor. But Jude knew what their pursuers would find: a building that appeared to be collapsing, with evidence suggesting they'd been caught in the structural failure. The perfect cover for an escape no one would think to look for.

"Your plan worked perfectly," Carmen murmured as they navigated the darkness. Her fingers found Jude's in the black, twining together with familiar warmth.

"Our plan," Jude corrected softly. "I couldn't have done it without you."

The words felt inadequate against everything they'd become to each other. But Carmen's answering squeeze of her hand conveyed complete understanding that didn't need lengthy explanations. They moved through shadows toward freedom, leaving chaos behind while forging their own path forward.

Together.

Darkness pressed against them like velvet as they moved through the maintenance tunnel, each step measured and precise. The space felt ancient, a remnant of Bogotá's colonial past transformed into an escape route by arms dealers who understood the value of hidden paths. Moisture beaded on rough stone walls, catching the dim glow of their emergency lights in diamond patterns.

Jude kept one hand on the tunnel wall, counting steps and turns while monitoring their surroundings through their other senses. The thunder of explosions had faded to distant echoes, but new sounds emerged from the darkness: water dripping through

decades-old stonework, the whisper of their movement against confined walls, and the steady rhythm of Carmen's breathing beside her.

They passed beneath a junction where modern concrete met colonial stone. The air changed subtly. It was fresher, carrying traces of the city above. Jude checked her watch, calculating distances against memorized blueprints. Two more intersections before they reached the extraction point.

"Movement ahead," Carmen murmured, her voice barely a breath. She'd already dropped into a defensive stance, proving how much she'd absorbed from her protection detail.

Jude killed their light, letting darkness swallow them completely. The sounds clarified in blackness: multiple sets of boots moving with purpose, radio static, the distinctive click of weapons being checked. Someone else knew about their escape route.

"Three hundred meters to the exit point," a voice echoed through the tunnel. "Sweep every junction and maintenance shaft. They have to emerge somewhere."

The voice triggered immediate recognition, one she'd hoped never to hear again. William Chen, former Delta Force commander turned private contractor. They'd run operations together in Yemen before everything went wrong. Before his unit had been compromised by corporate money.

"Will's here," she breathed against Carmen's ear. "He's the one who leaked our protocols."

Carmen's small intake of breath conveyed perfect understanding. They'd wondered who could have provided such intimate knowledge of their security procedures. Will had helped write many of them during joint operations between their units. He



would've had more than sufficient knowledge to leak.

Lights swept the tunnel ahead as Chen's team began their search pattern. Jude guided them into a maintenance alcove, pressing close together in the confined space. Carmen's heartbeat was steady against her chest, the same calm she showed during tense negotiations that had now transformed into silent strength.

"Grid pattern sweep," Chen's voice commanded. "They'll try to double back toward the square. Teams Three and Four, cover the north access points. Five and Six, move to contain the south exit."

Jude felt Carmen's smile in the darkness. Chen was good, but he was thinking like a soldier. He assumed they would follow standard evasion protocols, the same ones he'd helped develop. But their experience had taught them both that sometimes the best path forward was the one no one was expecting you to take.

They waited in perfect stillness as lights passed their position. Chen's teams moved with professional precision, but they were looking for obvious threats. None of them thought to check the maintenance alcoves—cramped spaces that most soldiers would consider too confined for effective movement.

When the search teams passed, Jude led them deeper into the tunnel network. They moved away from the obvious exit points, following a route she'd discovered during late-night study of the building's original blueprints. The arms dealers who'd modified these passages had created multiple escape options, including ones that weren't marked on any official plans.

Water sloshed quietly under their feet as the tunnel's grade changed. The air grew heavier, thick with decades of underground moisture. Carmen matched her pace, reading her movements in darkness as easily as she read diplomatic negotiations in full light.

"Second team reporting in," crackled through Chen's radio frequency. "North exits are secured. No sign of targets."

Let them focus on conventional escape routes. Jude guided them through a narrow passage that connected to the city's old storm drain system, the kind of alternative path that most military teams would dismiss as too risky to be seriously considered. But she'd learned to think differently since meeting Carmen. Sometimes the most dangerous route was the safest, simply because no one expected you to take it.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

The passage ended at a maintenance shaft that rose toward street level. Old metal rungs created a ladder up the shaft's wall, each one tested during previous security sweeps. Jude went first, climbing slowly to minimize noise while keeping her weapon ready.

Cool air brushed her face as she neared the top. The shaft's cover had been prepared days ago: hinges oiled, edges cleaned, and every detail arranged to allow a silent exit. She eased it open just enough to scan their surroundings.

Dawn painted Bogotá's streets in dewy, golden light. The extraction point waited exactly where planned: an abandoned market two blocks east, where Sarah would have their vehicle ready. No sign of Chen's teams; they were still focused on the main tunnel exits.

Jude helped Carmen climb up the last few rungs, both of them emerging into early morning light that felt impossibly bright after the tunnel's darkness. They sealed the shaft behind them, leaving no trace of their passage.

"Clear," Sarah's voice whispered through their emergency radio, the first friendly contact since the safe house fell. "Vehicle is ready at the secondary location. No pursuit visible."

They moved through streets like the other early morning travelers. Carmen had changed into civilian clothes before they had entered the tunnel—a detail that proved essential now. Jude had stripped her tactical vest and weapons into a backpack and replaced them with a casual sweatshirt and baseball cap. They both had on sunglasses. No one looked twice at what appeared to be a professional woman and

her companion walking together at dawn.

The market's walls rose ahead, weathered stone that was shining with rose-gold light by the sunrise. Sarah waited in a delivery van, engine already running. They climbed in smoothly, and the vehicle merged with morning traffic before anyone could register their presence.

"Teams One through Four are still covering all the main exits," Sarah reported as she drove. "Chen's got them convinced you're trapped in the tunnel system. Backup units are being called in to sweep the entire network."

Carmen's hand found Jude's in the van's shadows, their fingers twining together with familiar warmth. The contact grounded them both. A reminder that they'd just survived the worse odds together.

"Let them search," Carmen said softly. "By the time they realize their mistake, we'll have the evidence secured and transmitted to every major news outlet in South America."

Jude squeezed her hand gently, understanding the deeper implications. They hadn't just escaped with their lives. They'd survived with the proof needed to expose everything: corporate corruption, military contractors acting as mercenaries, and the systematic destruction of indigenous communities.

The sun climbed higher as Sarah drove them toward a new secure fallback location. Through the van's windows, Bogotá slowly woke to what seemed like an ordinary morning. But nothing would be ordinary after today.

They'd survived betrayal and violence, found strength in each other, and forged a path forward that no one had expected. Now they just had to make sure their truth reached the people who needed it most.

Dawn's light caught Carmen's hair, making it shine like starlight. Jude watched her in the growing brightness, memorizing how she looked in this moment of hard-won victory. They'd fought their way through darkness together.

Now it was time to step into the light.

The secondary safe house that Sarah brought them to occupied the top floor of an unassuming apartment building in Bogotá's diplomatic quarter. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered clear sight lines in all directions, while sophisticated security systems monitored every approach. Perfect for their needs, yet unremarkable enough to avoid unwanted attention.

Jude completed her security sweep with practiced efficiency, each room presenting fresh proof of Sarah's careful preparation. Surveillance feeds showed quiet streets below. No signs of pursuit, no suspicious vehicles, no indication that anyone had connected this location to their escape.

"Chen's teams are still searching the tunnel network," Kate reported through their newly established secure line. "Local police have been called in to help sweep the entire system. No one's looking in this direction."

Relief crept through Jude's muscles as adrenaline began to fade. Her body started calculating the morning's cost: bruises from close combat, strained muscles from the tunnel climb, and small cuts from broken glass in the wine cellar. Each pain carried memories of their fight for survival.

She found Carmen in the main room, silhouetted against windows that faced the rising sun. She'd shedded her dust-covered jacket, and morning light caught the silk of her blouse in ways that made Jude's breath catch. Even after everything, she maintained that quiet elegance that had first captivated Jude's attention in Washington.

"The files are transmitting," Carmen said without turning. Her voice carried the same steady strength that had guided peace negotiations through war zones. "Every major news outlet in South America will have proof of corporate corruption within the hour. Maria Elena's people will finally have justice."

Jude moved closer, drawn by gravity she'd stopped fighting. "Your diplomatic career?—"

"Was always meant to serve justice." Now Carmen turned, and Jude saw the certainty in her eyes. "Even if it costs me everything professionally, exposing the truth makes it worth any price."

The morning light glinted off Carmen's beautiful face as she closed the distance between them. Her fingers traced the fresh bruise on Jude's jaw, the touch impossibly gentle against Jude's combat-roughened skin.

"You're hurt," Carmen murmured.

"It's nothing serious." Jude caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Though I'm pretty sure that vintage wine you threw was worth more than my yearly salary."

Carmen's laugh held equal parts relief and lingering tension. "I'll expense it as a security necessity." Her expression softened. "You saved my life. Again."

"We saved each other." Jude drew her closer, needing to feel her warmth and reassure herself that they'd both survived. "I couldn't have made it through that tunnel without your trust. Your strength."

"Trust goes both ways." Carmen's free hand came up to trace the shape of the cut on Jude's cheek—the one from the assassination attempt that felt like years ago instead of days. "You let me fight beside you instead of just trying to protect me. That means

more than any security protocol."

The space between them disappeared as Carmen leaned in, her lips brushing Jude's with exquisite tenderness. The kiss tasted of adrenaline and victory and promises they'd both almost died to keep. Jude pulled her closer, deepening the contact until they were breathing the same air.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

When they finally broke apart, Carmen's eyes held a heat that had nothing to do with combat and everything to do with survival. "Stay with me?"

The question carried layers of meaning beyond just this moment. Jude saw their future reflected in Carmen's gaze: more missions, more fights for justice, and more battles against corruption. But now they would face everything together. They were stronger for having found each other.

"Always," Jude whispered against her lips.

This time when they kissed, it felt like coming home. Like finding shelter after storms, like victory hard-won and worth every cost. Carmen's hands slid under Jude's shirt, tracing scars and muscles with familiar devotion. Each touch carried the weight of everything they'd survived together.

As they removed each other's clothes, slowly, they moved together with the same synchronization that had guided them through combat, reading each other's bodies with practiced ease.

Jude leaned in to brush her lips softly against Carmen's, just to get a taste, but Carmen had enveloped Jude's lips around hers. Jude leaned in against Carmen, deepening the kiss and savoring the hint of salt on her lips.

Jude was already feeling her desire grow stronger, but when she moved to get on top of Carmen, Carmen had already twisted her leg between Jude's legs to trip her and get the advantage. Jude flipped on the bed in one fluid motion, taken off guard by Carmen's swiftness, and smiled up at the woman who had already so fiercely



captured her heart.

Carmen leaned in close to Jude's ear. "Got you."

Jude's eyes narrowed. "I let you."

"Yes, love." But there was no conviction in her words. Instead, Carmen positioned herself in between Jude's legs. When she leaned down for another kiss, Carmen's right knee edged closer to Jude's pussy until it pressed against it. Carmen applied soft pressure as she circled her knee against Jude as their tongues danced together, flitting in and out of their mouths and rolling over each other

Jude reached up, her pleasure already building in her core, and softly traced the swell of Carmen's breast while staring deeply in her eyes. Carmen's gaze softened at the edges as she stared back, and Carmen placed a finger under her chin to lift it slightly to lock their lips again, this time with a little more intensity.

Carmen's knee kept working its magic, and Jude closed her eyes to savor the moment. She let her hand idly move from Carmen's breast up her chest then back down, touching the softness of her stomach before she moved her hand downward, resting just under her stomach.

Carmen shifted and let Jude's hand drop on the mattress underneath them, and Jude looked up in Carmen's eyes that were already dancing with desire. Her lopsided smirk grew bigger before she slipped her hand between Jude's thighs. "Not yet," she purred. "It's your turn. Let me love on you."

Jude wriggled to reposition, trying to suppress her smile. "All yours, babe."

Carmen leaned down and slowly—painfully slowly—teased Jude by running the tip of her tongue around Jude's clit but not quite hitting the spot on purpose.

Jude growled in a low voice, but Carmen just chuckled. "Patience, my love."

She continued circling around-but-not-quite-on Jude's clit, dipping every so often between her folds, and Jude felt herself get slick from want. Jude shifted her leg to give Carmen space, trying to get Carmen to focus on spot that would make her see stars. But it was futile. Carmen must have known what she was trying to do and kept evading, countering Jude's movements almost before Jude could shift in a new position.

"I said to be patient." Carmen slipped in a finger and swirled it inside her before entering another.

Jude's core tightened and heated up. "Please," she whimpered softly.

"What was that?"

Jude sighed. Carmen knew exactly what she was doing; Jude could hear it in the playful lilt in her voice.

"Please," she repeated. "I want you. I crave you."

"I like you like this." She smirked and added another finger, then pressed her palm against Jude's clitoris, putting pressure exactly in the right place. "Good girls get rewarded."

Carmen leaned in and kissed Jude, then trailed feather light kisses on Jude's cheek, on her jaw bone, along her throbbing carotid, down her neck, across her chest, and over the swell over breasts before she licked Jude's nipple then captured it in her mouth and sucked.

Jude inhaled sharply, the sensation overwhelming her, and she grabbed Carmen's

breast and squeezed. Hard.

Carmen shifted above her and nibbled on Jude's nipple in protest, but Jude's leg started to get slick from Carmen's wetness dripping on her.

Carmen kept sucking on Jude's nipple and began to thrust her fingers in a delicious rhythm, and Jude felt the pleasure build inside her until it felt like it was going to completely overwhelm all her senses, but at the last possible second, Carmen took out her fingers and trailed another path of kisses, more insistent this time, down her breast, down her long torso, over the barely there swell of her stomach, and down, down, down.

Until she reached the spot just above Jude's clit.

And she paused.

Jude could feel Carmen's breath over her clit, teasing her in ways she didn't know she could be teased.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

Just when it was almost too much for Jude, Carmen buried her face between her thighs and ran her tongue over her clit and sucked on it lightly. Then harder. And harder still until Jude couldn't form coherent thoughts and her mind was static and she scrunched the bed sheets in her fists to keep holding on to let this moment last forever.

But her orgasm came hard and crashed over her body, completely overtaking her entire body until she felt like her soul had escaped for a few seconds and experienced total bliss.

When she finally caught her breath, Carmen was already lying beside her, staring at her as if she were trying to memorize every detail of her face, that smirk still firmly in place.

"I told you good girls got rewarded."

Jude laughed and leaned in close to kiss Carmen. Except it wasn't with the passionate insistence that had consumed them like feral lovers like before, but it was filled with the love and admiration that filled them with contentment and peaceful knowing that they had finally found their person. Finally.

Later, wrapped in sheets that smelled of their passion, they watched dawn transform into full morning. Carmen traced idle patterns on Jude's skin while Jude played with her hair. The city hummed with life below their window, unaware of how much had changed in the past twenty-four hours.

"What happens now?" Jude asked softly.

Carmen smiled against her shoulder. "Now we make sure the truth reaches everyone who needs it. The indigenous communities get their land rights protected. The corporate mercenaries face justice." She pressed a kiss to Jude's collarbone. "And we find new battles worth fighting."

"Together?"

"Together." Carmen raised herself on one elbow, looking down at Jude with eyes that held equal parts love and certainty. "After all, every good diplomat needs protection she can trust completely."

Jude pulled her down for another kiss that tasted of future possibilities. They had survived betrayal and violence, found strength in each other, and forged a path forward that no one had expected. Whatever came next, they would face it as one.

The sun climbed higher over Bogotá as they lay tangled together in morning light. Outside, their evidence spread across news networks and social media, exposing corruption that had festered too long in shadows. Inside, two women who'd dedicated their lives to different forms of protection found peace in each other's arms.

They had fought their way through darkness and emerged stronger. Now it was time to build something lasting in the light.

Together.

10

CARMEN

Every person in the audience sitting in the Palacio de San Carlos held their breath as Carmen approached the podium. Morning light streamed through towering windows,

throwing dancing shadows on the tiled floor in the hall. The same hall where an assassin's bullet had sparked against stone now witnessed a different kind of history being made.

She felt the weight of every gaze: journalists with cameras poised, diplomats measuring her words, and indigenous leaders whose communities had bled for this moment. But it was Jude's presence she felt most keenly—steady and vigilant at the room's edge, professional distance masking the intimacy they'd found together in darkness and danger.

"The evidence speaks for itself." Carmen's voice carried decades of diplomatic authority as she switched smoothly between Spanish and English. "Corporate interference in indigenous territories wasn't just unethical; it was criminal. The systematic abuse of humanitarian aid as leverage, the use of private military contractors to terrorize communities, and the attempted silencing of anyone who exposed these methods—"She paused, letting the weight of each accusation land. "That silence ends today."

Maria Elena stood with her fellow indigenous leaders, their traditional dress a proud contrast to the corporate suits who had once threatened their lives. The corporate security contractors were conspicuously absent, replaced by legitimate local forces that Jude's team had vetted thoroughly.

Through the cameras' constant flash, Carmen caught glimpses of her own reflection in the mirrors lining the stone walls. Silver threads in her dark hair caught the light, and the diplomatic mask she'd perfected over decades now carried new strength. She had survived assassination attempts and betrayal, found love in a safe house's darkness, and emerged with a truth as sharp as any weapon.

"The peace treaty we sign today ensures these communities will have their rights protected under international law." She met Maria Elena's gaze, seeing decades of

struggle reflected there. "It establishes clear consequences for those who would use corporate power to override human rights."

Questions flew from the press corps. Carmen handled them with practiced ease, each answer reinforcing the evidence they'd transmitted from the secondary safe house. Corporate board members were arrested, security contractors were facing charges, and local officials had scrambled to distance themselves from the scandal. William Chen's betrayal had exposed corruption that reached into the highest levels of corporate power.

Her gaze found Jude again, noting how the cut on her cheek had begun to scar, a physical reminder of what they had endured together. Even now, after the threat had passed, Jude maintained her protective vigilance. But something had shifted in her stance—the professional distance softened by understanding earned in firefights and quiet moments between danger.

"This treaty represents more than just peace," Carmen continued, her voice reaching the chamber's furthest corners. "It proves that truth can prevail against corruption, that profit cannot override justice, and that some battles are worth any cost." She felt Jude's slight smile at those words, remembering whispered confessions in the safe house's darkness.

When she finished speaking, applause filled the marble hall. Maria Elena caught her eye and nodded once, conveying volumes of gratitude in that simple gesture. They had faced death threats and assassination attempts together, but their communities would finally have the protection they deserved.

Carmen gathered her notes as photographers continued capturing the historic moment. She felt Jude approach before seeing her, months of working together creating an almost telepathic awareness of each other's movements.

"Nicely done," Jude murmured, close enough that only Carmen could hear. "Though I noticed you didn't mention the wine cellar fight."

Carmen's lips curved slightly. "I thought that might raise too many questions about my diplomatic methods." She straightened her jacket, using the movement to brush against Jude's arm. "Besides, some victories are best celebrated privately."

Understanding passed between them as dappled sunlight shone a spotlight on them. The hall where they'd first faced death together now witnessed their triumph, their partnership proven stronger than corruption or corporate greed.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

Outside, cameras continued flashing as reporters rushed to file their stories. Inside, Carmen felt certainty settle in her chest like sunrise. They had crossed professional lines and survived betrayal, found strength in each other, and forged something lasting from chaos. Now they faced a future neither had imagined during that first security briefing in Washington.

"Ready?" Jude asked quietly.

Carmen met her eyes, seeing past the professional mask to the woman who had changed everything. "For the next battle? Always."

Two days after their triumph at the Palacio de San Carlos, Carmen strode through the State Department's secure wing in Washington, barely having time to switch her summit notes for intelligence briefs before the joint debriefing began. The transition from public victory to private accounting felt familiar after decades of diplomatic service, though Jude's steady presence beside her made this one different from all the others. The evidence they'd transmitted from Bogotá had sparked immediate action, bringing every relevant agency to the table.

The joint briefing room was filled past capacity, the usual territorial divisions between agencies temporarily suspended by the magnitude of what they'd exposed. Military commanders in crisp uniforms sat alongside diplomatic corps veterans while intelligence analysts crowded the edges of the room. The screens that lined the walls displayed their complex web of evidence: shell companies funneling money to private military contractors, illegal arms deals disguised as corporate security initiatives, and systematic abuse of humanitarian aid programs.

Carmen felt Jude's vigilant presence near the door as she began her portion of the briefing. They maintained careful professional distance—Jude the protective sentinel, Carmen the composed diplomat—but she caught the subtle warmth in Jude's eyes whenever their gazes met across the crowded room. Even here, surrounded by the institutions they served, their connection hummed like a live wire.

"The corporate security contractors operated as part of a sophisticated network," Carmen explained, switching between satellite imagery and financial records with practiced efficiency. Her tablet displayed real-time updates from Maria Elena about conditions on the ground. "They weaponized humanitarian aid, deploying former special operations teams to control access to medical supplies, food distribution, and clean water. Communities that refused corporate land acquisition attempts found themselves cut off from essential resources."

Colonel Matthews from Joint Special Operations Command leaned forward, his expression grave. "And they specifically recruited operators with intimate knowledge of our security protocols. Chen's testimony confirms they sought out personnel who could anticipate and counter standard protection measures." He glanced at several files marked classified. "We've identified at least three other diplomatic missions that were compromised using similar methods."

"Which is precisely why we're implementing completely new protection frameworks," Jude added, her voice carrying that particular tone of authority that still made Carmen's pulse quicken. "No more relying on local contractors or conventional security rotations. Every detail gets vetted through our own teams."

Several senior officials exchanged knowing looks at their seamless coordination. Carmen caught whispers about "unusual partnerships" and "crossed lines," but she kept her diplomatic mask firmly in place. Through the window's reflection, she saw how Jude's body posture shifted and her muscles coiled tighter with each murmured comment.

"The evidence transmitted from the secondary safe house has already led to multiple arrests," the FBI's liaison reported, spreading photographs across the table showing corporate executives in handcuffs. "Board members, private military contractors, corrupt officials—the network went deeper than anyone had ever suspected. We're still uncovering connections to similar operations in other regions."

Carmen pulled up the latest intelligence from indigenous territories. "The communities are finally receiving uncompromised aid deliveries. But we need sustained protection to prevent corporate interests from reasserting control through other proxies. They're already attempting to establish new shell companies and foundation fronts."

"We've identified similar patterns in Southeast Asia," Matthews noted, studying Carmen's reaction. He tapped his tablet, bringing up satellite imagery of disputed territories. "Multiple factions fighting over mineral rights, corporate foundations using aid as leverage, and indigenous communities caught between competing interests?—"

"The same playbook," Jude cut in, shifting slightly closer to Carmen's position. Their shoulders nearly brushed, the almost-contact electric. "But now we know what to look for."

The briefing continued as they coordinated responses across multiple agencies. Carmen maintained her professional composure while hyperaware of how Jude moved through the room, their months of working together creating an almost telepathic awareness of each other's positions. Every subtle shift in Jude's stance communicated potential threats or political undercurrents that most would miss.

A senior diplomat Carmen had known for decades—Alexandra Reeves, who'd mentored her through her first peace negotiations—caught her eye across the table and nodded slightly, layers of understanding and approval in the gesture. The old

guard knew about sacrifices made for service, about finding unexpected connections in dangerous places.

"The State Department is preparing new oversight protocols," Deputy Director Harrison announced, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses. "Particularly regarding...unconventional security arrangements." His pointed look between Carmen and Jude carried volumes of meaning. "Recent events have necessitated a reevaluation of standard procedures."

"Our results speak for themselves," Carmen replied smoothly, her years of negotiating experience keeping her voice mild. "As recent events have demonstrated." She felt more than saw Jude's slight smile at the diplomatic deflection.

The meeting stretched into evening as they established new frameworks and security measures. When it finally ended, Carmen gathered her files while various officials filed out, their whispered conversations a mix of admiration and uncertainty about what her partnership with Jude meant for traditional protocols.

"They're adapting," Jude said quietly once they were alone. "Though I'm not sure anyone was prepared for our particular approach to diplomatic protection and extraction."

Carmen smiled, remembering safe houses and firefights and quiet moments between danger and victories hard-won together. "They'll adjust. Besides"—she caught Jude's eye, letting her diplomatic mask slip just slightly—"I hear Southeast Asia needs experienced hands."

"Mineral rights disputes, corporate interference, and a high-risk environment," Jude listed, professional distance yielding to something warmer now that they were alone. Her hand brushed Carmen's arm, the touch brief but grounding. "Sounds like our kind

of mission."

"Already coordinating with your team?"

"Sarah's running background checks on local forces." Jude's smile held promises that made Carmen's chest warm. "Just keeping my diplomat informed."

They left the State Department together as evening settled over Washington. Tomorrow would bring new battles worth fighting and new truths worth protecting. But they had proven their partnership was stronger than protocol or professional boundaries—a truth even the most conservative officials would have to accept.

The drive from the State Department to her Georgetown townhouse gave Carmen time to shed the day's diplomatic armor. She watched the city's familiar landmarks pass by their unmarked vehicle, feeling tension ease from her shoulders with each mile between them and the formal debriefing. Beside her, Jude coordinated the night's security rotation with her team, her voice low and steady in the dark.

Home felt different now, transformed by everything they'd survived together. Carmen changed from her formal suit into soft silk loungewear while Jude completed her nightly security sweep with familiar precision. The habit should have felt intrusive after so many months, but Carmen had grown to find comfort in the routine, just as she'd grown accustomed to seeing Jude's tactical gear hung beside her diplomatic attire.

"Clear," Jude reported, though they both knew any threats to them had been neutralized days ago. She'd shed her tactical gear but still moved with that contained power that had first caught Carmen's attention in Washington all those months ago.

"You don't have to maintain the security protocols here anymore," Carmen said softly, watching Jude set the perimeter alarms. "We're safe."

"Old habits." Jude's smile held warmth as she moved closer. "Though I might have other reasons for being thorough now."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

The admission made Carmen's chest tighten. She remembered their first security briefing, how they'd maintained careful distance and professional facades. Now Jude's presence in her home felt as natural as breathing.

"I've been thinking," Carmen began, turning to face her fully. "About what happens next. The State Department will have opinions about our arrangement."

"Let them." Jude reached for her hand, callused fingers gentle against Carmen's skin. "We've proven our partnership works."

"It's more complicated than that." Carmen traced the healing cut on Jude's cheek, remembering gunfire and safe houses, desperate escapes and quiet moments between danger. "I'm in my fifties, Jude. I'm a lot older than you, with decades of negotiating baggage and political enemies."

"And I'm a SEAL with PTSD who sleeps with a weapon within reach." Jude's voice carried equal parts humor and honesty. "Age is hardly our biggest challenge."

Carmen laughed softly, letting Jude pull her closer. "The missions will be difficult. Corporate interests are already regrouping in Southeast Asia, and there will be other battles that need fighting."

"Good thing you have an experienced protection detail." Jude's arms slid around her waist, steady and grounding. "One that's particularly invested in keeping you alive."

"Is that what we're calling it now?" Carmen rested her forehead against Jude's, breathing in the familiar scent of gun oil and safety that always clung to her skin.

"Just a protective interest?"

"You know it's more than that." Jude's voice roughened. "It has been since that first night on the hotel terrace. Maybe even before."

The admission hung between them, weighted with everything they'd survived together. Carmen thought about all the lines they'd crossed, the protocols they'd shattered, and the professional boundaries they'd redefined.

"We'll need separate addresses on paper," she said practically. "Maintain some appearance of professional distance. The diplomatic corps isn't ready for?—"

"For what?" Jude's smile held understanding. "For a decorated diplomat finding love with her security detail? For two women choosing each other despite protocol and duty?"

"For me being happy." Carmen touched the dog tags that rested against Jude's chest. "I've spent my career being the perfect diplomat, making acceptable choices, playing by their rules. This—us—it breaks every convention they have."

"Then let them break." Jude caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "We've earned the right to choose something for ourselves."

Carmen studied the woman who had changed everything: the precise line of her jaw, the strength in her shoulders, the way her eyes held both tenderness and steel. Somehow this warrior had slipped past decades of diplomatic armor, making her feel safer than any security protocol ever had.

"The age difference doesn't bother you?" she asked quietly. "The silver in my hair, the career baggage, the?—"



"I love your silver hair." Jude ran gentle fingers through it as if proving her point. "I love your diplomatic precision and how you can stare down corrupt officials without blinking. I love watching you negotiate peace treaties and throw wine bottles at assassins."

The words made Carmen's chest warm. "I was afraid," she admitted softly. "After Sofia died, I thought that part of me was finished. That I could pour everything into the work and never risk that kind of loss again."

"And now?"

"Now I have something worth every risk." Carmen leaned up to kiss her. "Someone who sees past every mask I wear and loves what they find beneath."

When they broke apart, Jude's eyes held promises that made Carmen's pulse race. "So we'll maintain separate addresses, keep things professional in public, and let them adjust to our partnership in their own time."

"While privately rewriting every protocol they have?" Carmen smiled against her mouth.

"While choosing our own path forward." Jude pulled her closer, strong arms steady around her waist. "Together."

They stayed wrapped in each other as night settled over Georgetown, the city's rhythms fading to comfortable quiet. Tomorrow would bring new challenges: missions to plan, battles to fight, conventions to challenge. But they had found something worth protecting in each other's arms, something stronger than protocol or professional distance.

Something worth keeping, no matter the cost.

Evening draped itself over Washington as Carmen stood on her townhouse balcony, reviewing intelligence briefs about Southeast Asia while Jude cleaned her weapon at the small table nearby. The familiar click and scrape of metal components felt oddly domestic now, a counterpoint to the city's distant hum.

"Three corporate foundations have been identified in the region," Carmen noted, scanning the most recent reports. "All with suspicious ties to mining operations near protected indigenous lands."

"And two former special operations teams were hired through shell companies." Jude's hands moved with practiced efficiency, each component placed with precise care. "They're recycling the same playbook."

"But this time we know what to look for." Carmen lowered her tablet, studying the woman who had transformed from protector to partner. Jude wore casual clothes now, but that contained power remained—a warrior at rest, but never truly off guard. "Sarah's preliminary report suggests they're targeting communities near rare mineral deposits."

"Essential for modern technology." Jude reassembled her weapon with fluid grace. "Perfect leverage for corporate interests trying to force land concessions."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

The casual discussion of threats and tactics should have felt strange in the peace of their private sanctuary. Instead, it felt like pieces of a puzzle finally fitting together: Carmen's diplomatic expertise merging with Jude's tactical precision, creating something stronger than either could achieve alone.

"The State Department approved our joint assignment," Carmen said, moving to lean against the balcony's edge. "Though Deputy Director Harrison made several pointed comments about 'maintaining appropriate professional distance' during operations."

Jude's smile carried warm amusement as she joined her at the railing. "I'm sure the mental image of his senior diplomat throwing wine bottles at assassins challenged his notion of what constitutes appropriate behavior."

"That was one time." Carmen felt laughter bubble up, the joy of being alive and in love making even deadly memories lighter. "And it worked perfectly."

"It did." Jude's arm slid around her waist, strong and steady. "Though maybe next time aim for something less expensive? My SEAL training never covered the proper tactical deployment of vintage bordeaux."

They stood together as stars emerged above the capital's monuments, each light a reminder of how far they'd come from that first security briefing. Carmen thought about all the masks she'd worn over her career, all the careful distance she'd maintained. Now here she was, planning joint missions with the woman who had slipped past every defense she'd built.

"I received a message from Maria Elena," she said softly. "Three more villages have

received medical supplies without corporate interference. Clean water reaching communities that were cut off for months. Children returning to schools that were forced to close." She turned in Jude's arms. "We made a difference."

"You made a difference." Jude's free hand came up to trace the silver threads in Carmen's hair. "I just kept you alive long enough to do it."

"You did more than that." Carmen caught her hand, pressing a kiss to scarred knuckles. "You showed me that some battles are worth fighting not just for duty, but for love."

The admission hung in the evening air between them. Below, Washington's traffic flowed like rivers of light, the city's rhythms a reminder of all the forces they'd challenged together. But here on their balcony, they had carved out something precious: a space where the diplomat and the warrior could simply be Carmen and Jude.

"Southeast Asia will be dangerous," Jude said quietly. "The corporate interests are already mobilizing, trying to hide their operations behind new front companies."

"Good thing I have an experienced, professional protection detail then." Carmen smiled up at her.

"I think we left 'professional' behind somewhere between firefights and safe houses." Carmen leaned up to kiss her. "Not that I'm complaining."

When they broke apart, the city's lights sparkled like earth-bound stars around them. Tomorrow would bring new missions, new battles for justice, and new truths worth protecting. But they had proven their partnership stronger than protocol or corruption, their love worth any risk.

"Ready for our next adventure?" Jude asked softly.

Carmen studied the woman who had changed everything: the precise line of her jaw, the strength in her shoulders, and the tenderness in her eyes that she showed to no one else. They had crossed professional lines and survived betrayal. They had found each other in darkness and emerged stronger in the light.

"With you?" Carmen smiled. "I'm ready for anything."

## EPILOGUE

### 5 YEARS LATER

The rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore filled the warm, sunlit morning as Carmen Ruiz leaned back in her chair on their seaside porch, eyes half-lidded, basking in the serenity of their little paradise. The salty ocean breeze tousled her dark silver streaked curls as she sipped on her coffee, the rich aroma mixing with the scent of sea air. Beside her, curled up with a satisfied sigh, was Binx, their mischievous black Labrador mix, his tail twitching contentedly against the wooden planks.

The house was perfect. A modest, modern retreat perched on a hill overlooking the Pacific, close enough to the water to hear the tide roll in, yet private enough that it felt like their own hidden escape from the world. When they bought it three years ago, it had needed work, but Jude had taken to the renovations with the same precision she used in her military career. Now, it was their sanctuary.

Jude appeared at the threshold, her hair still damp from her morning swim, a towel slung over her broad shoulders. She wore a loose-fitting tank top and cargo shorts, her tanned skin glowing in the sunlight. Even after stepping away from activeduty, she still exuded that quiet intensity that had first drawn Carmen to her. But these

days, it was softened by something gentler—peace, maybe even contentment.

Carmen smiled as Jude stepped onto the porch, dropping a kiss to the top of her head before setting down a plate of toast and fruit. “You were lost in thought,” Jude noted, settling into the chair beside her, stretching out her legs.

“I was just thinking about how perfect this is,” Carmen admitted, reaching for Jude’s hand, lacing their fingers together. “Five years ago, if someone had told me this was where I’d be, I’d have called them crazy.”

Jude chuckled, squeezing her hand. “Same. I never pictured myself doing anything other than what I was trained for. But turns out, training the next generation of SEALs is just as rewarding.”

“And a little safer,” Carmen teased, her dark eyes twinkling.

Jude smirked. “A little. But those recruits do their best to keep me on my toes.”

Carmen had no doubt about that. Even in retirement, Jude’s reputation preceded her. She was still Captain Jude Smith—the woman who had walked through hell and back to keep people safe. And now, she spent her days teaching others how to do the same. It was a transition she had once struggled with, but now, she had found fulfillment in it.

“And you?” Jude asked, turning the conversation back to her. “Do you miss it?”

Carmen exhaled, staring out at the endless blue horizon. “Sometimes,” she admitted. “But not in the way I expected. I miss the diplomacy, the thrill of making things happen, but I did what I set out to do. And now...” She turned to Jude with a smile. “Now, I get to wake up every morning with you. That’s more than enough.”

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:43 pm*

Jude's green eyes softened. "You know, sometimes I think about how close we came to losing this. Losing each other."

Carmen nodded. That mission—the threats, the close calls, the gunfire—had changed them both. It had also been the moment she realized that nothing else mattered more than the woman sitting beside her now. They had survived together, fought together, and in the end, chosen each other.

"But we didn't," Carmen whispered. "We made it."

Jude leaned over, pressing a lingering kiss to her lips. "Damn right we did."

Binx chose that moment to stretch, yawning dramatically before rolling onto his back, paws in the air, as if demanding attention. Carmen laughed, scratching his belly. "And then we got this troublemaker."

Jude grinned. "Best decision we ever made. Well, second best."

Carmen arched a brow. "And the first?"

Jude smirked. "Taking the assignment to protect you."

Carmen laughed, tilting her head as she regarded Jude playfully. "You were so serious at first."

Jude was indignant, "I'm a serious operator and I had a serious job to do!"

“And then I seduced you.”

Jude rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. We’ll call it that.”

Carmen smirked, knowing full well that it had been a mutual pull—irresistible, inevitable.

The morning passed in easy conversation and laughter, the way their days often did. There was no rush, no urgency, just a peaceful rhythm they had built together. Later, Jude would head to the base to oversee drills, and Carmen had a stack of books waiting for her in the cozy reading nook inside. They had dinner plans with friends in town, and tomorrow, they were driving up the coast for a weekend getaway—just because they could.

As the sun climbed higher, Carmen stood, stretching her arms above her head. “I think I’ll take Binx for a walk before it gets too hot.”

Jude pushed up from her seat, wrapping an arm around her waist and pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. “I’ll come with you.”

Carmen smiled, leaning into her. “We really did find our happy ending, didn’t we?”

Jude looked at her with a rare softness. “Yeah, we did.”

With Binx trotting ahead, tail wagging, they set off down the winding path toward the beach, hand in hand, the sound of the waves their constant, steady backdrop. The world had once been full of chaos and danger, but now, it was filled with quiet mornings, shared laughter, and the simple certainty that they would always have each other.

And for them, that was everything.