

PHARMA WARS

CHAPTER 1

Nightmare

The car door wrenched open and her lover appeared. There was a gunshot, his back arched, and then he fell forward into the car. A man appeared behind him, holding a gun. Lauren had a Glock in the console beside her. She grabbed it frantically and, leaning over her lover, shot the man who had just shot Carlos. He disappeared. She dragged Carlos into the car. He was still mobile enough to get his own legs in.

“Black flag,” he said hoarsely, “get us out of here.”

As she took off, he managed to close the car door, then leaned back, scrabbling for his seat belt. More shots hit the car, shattering the passenger’s window. She heard her lover cry out, as he was hit again. Tires squealing, she headed for the safe house they had planned to use. The streets were surprisingly empty.

As they rounded a corner, spotlights suddenly came on. A police blockade! It was too close to spin the car around, the moonshiner’s turn. With no alternative, in desperation, she gunned the car, heading straight for the gap between the two police cars. With exquisite judgment, or just pure luck, she smashed between the two of them, sending the police cars spinning. There was a maelstrom of noise of the bullhorns shouting in Spanish for her to stop, the glaring lights, the gunshots, and the windshield exploding from the bullets.

And then the quiet room, her lover, pale and in pain, hunched over, sitting at the table, looking up at her.

“It is over. If I try to come with you, we can’t move fast enough. We

will be caught. I will be tortured and killed to prevent me from speaking. You too, after they have finished raping you.” He gave her his Glock and pointed to the back of his head. “Shoot me now and run. I will love you forever. *Vaya con Dios*”

Recognizing the truth of what he said and the inevitability of the end, she took the gun and shot him in the back of the head as he had directed. As he slumped forward on the table, trembling with tears, she put the barrel of the gun in her mouth, intending to kill herself and accompany him hand in hand into the future, wherever that led. And then she woke up with a hastily muffled scream.

Fred Buechel, her husband asleep beside her, was a surgeon, accustomed to phone calls in the night. He snapped awake. She had not done this for a long time. He had never asked what the nightmare was. If she wanted him to know, she would tell him. Doctors know that people have secrets. He knew that she had a past, but he had no wish to pry.

“You OK, Lauren?” he asked.

“Sorry, Fred. A nightmare. Go back to sleep. I will get up for a little bit.”

He grunted, turned over, and went back to sleep. Lauren got up and went to the next room where Scott, her youngest child, was asleep. She stood beside his cot, looking at the sleeping child for a long moment, calming herself. She went down to the kitchen and switched on the kettle to make herself some chamomile tea.

It’s over woman, she thought. *Toughen up. You have a good marriage and a couple of kids. Better than a girl from the barrio could ever hope.* And then the misery came flooding back. *Oh Carlos. I owe it all to you.* That bold bad man who had taken her from the slums of East Los Angeles, shown her the world, and given her the world. He had taught her everything—how to dress, how to talk, and how to act, and he had paid ultimately for her freedom with his own life. After she had shot him, she had run, escaping what was almost certainly a black flag operation.

For years she had thought of going back to South America and killing all of those responsible. But Carlos would not have approved.

“We are professionals,” he had said after one botched affair. “We are not in the revenge business. That just gets you killed for nothing. As Lao Tzu said, ‘the best fighter is never angry.’”

After his death, not knowing what else to do, and not much caring if she lived or died, she had taken his trade name of Charlotte Corday and

carried on. She had once asked him where the name came from. He had laughed.

“Charlotte Corday was an assassin who killed Marat, one of the monsters of the French revolution.”

“Why would you care about what happened in France?” she had asked.

“I don’t. But she is well known. So they may think I am some sort of a right wing French woman. Anything to help conceal my identity.”

She had continued to use their contacts in the dark web, and in that capacity, she had been hired to do a major job in England to get a Canadian boy out of jail. In doing so she had killed, among others, two British home secretaries. That was such a major affair she was concerned that the one who had hired her would try to eliminate her to break the trail.

To cover herself she had come to Toronto and sought out the divorced father of the boy she had rescued. He maintained good relations with his ex-wife, the boy’s mother, and now head of one of the major Hong Kong triads. To her own surprise, Lauren, which was the name on the passport she had been using in Canada, had perhaps fallen in love and had married him. It was a complicated story. After giving her a child, the man had dropped dead. She had subsequently married her current husband, a well-known Toronto orthopedic surgeon with whom she had recently had another child. She liked the men she had married; but none had taken the place of Carlos in her heart, and she knew they never would. As she had read somewhere, “One gives one’s best once to one only.”

The nightmare of the death of her lover, that last contract when she and Carlos were betrayed, had never left her. It now came less often, but it still came. It was seared into her memory. The look on Carlos’s face when he told her to kill him and run again floated back, and the tears came in her eyes.

“Christ!” she thought. “*Stop it. I am married to a good steady man and I have a couple of kids. I live in a wealthy Toronto neighborhood, not like East LA where I was born.*” But then the misery came back. He had told her he loved her for the first and only time just before she shot him. “*Oh Carlos,*” she thought. “*I owe everything to you.*”

Her formal education in the barrio had been minimal, but she had begun to read poetry because Al Campbell, her first husband, treasured it and quoted it often. She thought of one that described her feelings for Carlos.

What can the grave against us, oh my heart,
Comfort and light and reason in all things.
Thou that was't I, these barren unyoked years.

Since that time, she had carried a pistol to every job. Maybe to fight her way out, or maybe to kill herself if she was caught. She had no intention of spending the rest of her life in prison. She would put the gun in her mouth and blow the back off her head, and go to meet Carlos, whom she was sure was waiting for her somewhere out there in the great unknown. They would then go hand in hand into the future to face whatever there was.

“Ah Christ,” she chided herself. “Stop thinking like this.” But she knew she never would. Another poem came to her mind. It was so old no one knew who had written it. It expressed the longing she felt for Carlos, that bold bad man to whom she had given her heart.

Oh Western wind when wilt thou blow.
That the small rain down can rain.
Christ if my love were in my arms.
And I in my bed again.

The nightmare had receded after the birth of Scott, her second child, but she knew what had brought it back.