

## Chapter One

The setting sun warmed Kali's back as she stood on the open-air flybridge and scanned the horizon. By her calculations, the dark outline of the freighter *Caballo* should appear at any moment now. She knew her course plot was perfect, but in the expanse of the ocean, she could never quite get over the possibility of missing her prey completely.

As the bow of the *Avatara* plowed through the water, she could feel her tension rising. The timing of her operation was critical. She had to overtake the *Caballo* before they entered the more risky international waters. At that point, any nearby ship, including foreign naval vessels, could respond to a distress call.

"There!" her pilot, Philippe yelled, pointing ahead. "Is that her?"

Kali looked in the direction of his finger, a grin splitting her tanned face. Rising from the waves was the tall bridge tower and dark hull of the *Caballo*. It was like a lumbering brontosaurus moving across open land. There was no escape now.

"Sharp to starboard," she ordered. "More power!"

The bow of the sixty-foot *Avatara* angled in the water on the turn, and Kali could feel the twin diesel engines surging to life two decks below. It was a superb feeling that almost made her laugh with delight.

"Are you sure it's the *Caballo*?"

The smile fell from her face and Kali felt her eye twitch.

Philippe glanced at her. "It just took longer to find her than you promised," he said, nervously. "I want to be sure."

Philippe wasn't the first man who dared question her, but she'd long ago learned how to deal with such defiance. His time would come, sooner than he thought, but right now, the task at hand required her total concentration.

To many she was just a pirate, but when compared to others, Kali took the profession to a whole new level. Equipped with the latest technology, she could track, board and subdue any vessel under way. Sometimes she would seize the entire ship, but more often, like with the *Caballo*, she would merely help herself to predetermined, and very lucrative, cargo items.

The target ships were identified long before they left port, and shadowing them into the vast emptiness of the ocean wasn't difficult. It was the approach and boarding of a moving ship that required skill, precision and stealth.

There were barely an hour outside the port of Macapa, Brazil, but by now the small crew of the *Caballo* would already be slipping into familiar routines of life at sea. The setting of the sun would mean dinners would be cooking, card games would be starting and tall tales about port adventures would be in full swing. No one would be thinking of a pirate attack.

As a whiff of oil and diesel fumes passed by her on the wind, Kali grinned. "This is going to be good!"

"Should I activate the jammer?" Philippe asked pointing at the military issue satellite dish perched off the port side. It was a handy piece of equipment that successfully blocked any radio or satellite signals within a one-mile radius. The jammer had cost Kali a pretty sum on the black market, but with the tenfold increase in anti-theft maritime devices, she had little choice.

Instead of answering, Kali leaned forward and flipped the switch.

Philippe's knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel. "How long are you going to be on board, and where should I wait?"

Pulling a black sweatshirt from around her waist, Kali shrugged herself into it. "Like I told you earlier, we'll be twenty minutes." She lifted her long dark hair from under the collar and dropped it. "And since you obviously haven't recovered from your bar romp last night, I'll remind you again to wait in the wake until we're done."

"That's quick for a ship this size. You sure?"

Kali's hand stopped as she was tying her hair into a tight ponytail. "You're getting dumber with each fucking beer. In less than forty minutes we'll be in international waters, and I'd like to be back on our way to Macapa without encountering any do-good ships. So just do what I fucking tell you. Got it?" She finished her hair.

"*Oui, mon capitaine.*"

Shaking her head, she turned and descended the stairs to the *Avatara's* aft deck, stopping on the last step to wait until her crew gathered at her feet. As the cold, hard faces looked up at her with hungry expectation, Kali gave a feral smile. These were her boys. Killers. Thieves. Soldiers. Mercenaries. The only

loyalty they shared was to money, and that suited Kali just fine. Her current crew consisted of five men of various nationalities. It mattered little what made up a man so long as he knew his job and followed her orders without question.

"Target is just ahead," she announced, letting her smile grow bigger. "The cargo is good, but the safe is much better. This is a quick snatch and grab." Jack, the only American, stuffed a piece of gum in his mouth. "What's the take this time?" he asked between noisy chews.

"You get what you get," she said, looking away from him in disgust. "Assignments are as follows. Tajo and Renny will keep the deck clear. Sergio and Jack will secure the crew and clean them out."

"We're not killing them?" Renny asked.

"Did I say kill them?" Kali pinned him with a hard stare.

"Kali, does the freighter have a fence?" Tajo asked, the lilt of his West African intonation made his words sound more formal.

"Probably."

The question annoyed her. Most large vessels were equipped with antipiracy devices. The nine thousand volt invisible security fence was one of the latest developments to deter unauthorized boarding. When combined with satellite tracking systems, vessels were supposed to be theft proof.

"The captain is no dummy," Sergio said, his Nordic blue eyes shining with devotion. "She's using a Trojan."

Kali smiled at the big blond. Technology was an amazing thing that required constant vigilance and understanding. Overcoming a security device could sometimes be beat with counter technology, but in cases like this, Kali liked to rely on an old-fashioned approach.

"Who is it this time?" Renny asked.

"Raphael," she said, twisting her wrist to check her watch. "And he should be just about ready for our arrival."

"Then he's disabling the emergency systems, too?" Paco asked, shifting his Ukrainian Vepr assault rifle in his hands.

Kali looked at him icily. "You never learn, do you? The emergency systems are on a bypass that can't be disabled."

"Then we'll be jamming their signals?" Renny scratched nervously at his two-day beard.

"Not that it fucking matters," she said, with a shrug. "Even if a transmission gets out, we'll be long gone before anyone responds."

"We know you have everything planned," Tajo said, calmly. Of all her crew, he was the most diplomatic. "We trust you."

She acknowledged the comment with a nod of her head. "Then are there any more dumbass questions?" she asked, staring at Jack.

"I still don't understand why we're not killing the crew," he said, popping his gum. "Killing them is safer. They'll know our faces."

She shook her head as Tajo chuckled. "Just how long have you been doing this, Jack? It doesn't matter if they see us." Dismissing him with a wave, she looked around. "Anything else?"

"Si. You did not say what I'm doing?"

"Oh you, Paco?" Kali smiled, grimly. "You're with me." His face went white. "Everyone knows what an honor it is to accompany your captain to the bridge." No one missed the sarcasm in her voice. If they knew what it meant, they wisely held their tongues.

"But Kali—"

"No buts." Kali cut him off before turning to look up at the flybridge. "Where are we?"

"On approach," Philippe yelled back.

Needing to see for herself, Kali grabbed onto the railing and swung her upper body over the side. The massive black hull of the *Caballo* nearly dwarfed them.

"I see the platform," Tajo said, from next to her. "It's down."

Of course it would be down. Kali swung back to the deck. "Get ready to jump."

Under her feet, she could feel the engines being adjusted to match the speed of the freighter. Jumping onto a moving ship required a delicate touch at the wheel, and Philippe was one of the best.

As Philippe pulled them closer, the starboard hull of the *Caballo* slowly inched past. It felt as though the ships were so close that Kali only had to put her hand out to touch the wet metal of the freighter. Instead, she climbed up on the *Avatara's* low bulk wall and waited.

Every muscle in her body was tight with anticipation as the platform drew closer. It looked so small with the dark water churning under it. When it was within reach, Kali pressed her rifle to her chest and jumped. The sea surged as her boots hit the platform, and she scrambled to keep her balance. As soon as she got her legs under her, she moved up the stairs and waited for the others.

Dr. Madeline Cross stood in the fading daylight and counted the boxes again. "There are supposed to be sixteen crates of food. Why are there only thirteen?" She turned to face her colleague, who did not look at all fazed by the suffocating humidity and heat.

"Quit worrying," Dr. Robert Fisher replied, his tone patronizing. Reaching over he gave her butt a quick pat. "I'm sure they're here somewhere."

Maddie pulled away from him. "If I'm worried, Rob, it's because this is our food. It's the only real food we're going to have for six months."

"Trust me. We'll have plenty."

"We brought the food because we need it," she said, following him up the gangway to the deck of the research vessel *Luna Nueva*. "And although they claim to be worldwide, I highly doubt that we'll find a McDonald's on the Amazon River."

"You hate McDonalds."

"But I like to eat. What's more, I like knowing I can do it everyday."

Rob rolled his eyes. "Sweetie, I've been doing this for awhile, and there's always enough food on an expedition."

The condescension in his tone dissolved the last of her patience, and she tossed the manifest to the deck. "Fine," she said, glaring at him. "But if we run out, we're eating you first."

"Jesus, Maddie!"

She covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I should hope not." He frowned. "We're supposed to be getting along here."

"I know."

"Otherwise, it's going to be a long six months for us all."

"I know!" Frustrated, Maddie pushed at a damp clump of streaked blonde hair clinging to her forehead and sighed. "All I want to do is find these crates and go inside to cool off. I'm hot, tired and anxious to forget this whole miserable day." She slumped against one of the boxes and shook her head. "I didn't know it was going to be this hot."

Despite her apology, Rob still looked irritated. "C'mon, Maddie. You study climates for a living. How could you not know it was going to be hot. It's Brazil. The rainforest. The jungle."

"For your information, I may have been academically prepared for the climate, but I wasn't physically prepared for this," she wiped at her gritty neck and showed it to him. "The air is so heavy with moisture, I can hardly breathe. Even the simplest task leaves me exhausted, and I feel like I'm trapped in a wet sauna. So while my books told me it was hot, being here is quite a different experience."

Rob looked at her for a moment before his face softened. "You're right," he said, with a smile. "I forgot that you're not used to it. Maybe I pushed you too hard on your first day."

That was an understatement, but Maddie bit her tongue. "It doesn't matter. I'm only here to advance my theories on hydrocarbons."

"And we shall."

Maddie didn't like the way he was increasingly taking ownership of her theories. Rationally, she knew that if their small expedition succeeded, Rob Fisher would get joint credit, but they were *her theories*. She was the one who had spent five years tweaking her climatic data models. It had been her published papers that had slowly gained her the respect of the scientific community. She was the one her peers called brilliant and insightful. She was the one with a future.

And Rob Fisher? As far as Maddie was concerned, or most of the academic world for that matter, Rob was more of a TV scientist than a real one. He was lightheartedly known as the "King of Field Research", because it seemed that Rob and his trusty DigiCam were always off on one shallow story after another. He had traveled from Antarctica to the North Pole spouting on about global warming, shrinking glacier fields and decimated rain forests. He waxed and waned about the planet's climatic history, but in the end, he really came off as nothing more than a glorified narrator.

When he'd shown up at MIT, Maddie wasn't sure what to make of his proposal to do joint research in the Amazon basin. He had secured a private grant that would fund a six month bare bone expedition, and he shrewdly pointed out that just such a mission was what both their careers needed. He could use the

legitimacy of working with her, and Maddie would finally get some much needed field research. It was a win-win situation as Rob described it.

At first Maddie hadn't been interested, but Rob knew her trigger. For months she'd struggled to discover a true data format for her computer models, but had come to the ultimate conclusion that they were flawed. There were just too many varied environmental factors to account for them all in her database, and because of that, any conclusions she drew were going to be unreliable.

The Amazon rainforest, Rob had told her, was the perfect place to put her theories into practice. The environment was teeming with every possible variable, and because it was a live ecosystem, her findings would only bolster her computer models. Rob had also pointed out that without field research, she would never be offered the tenured position she'd always coveted. It was a low blow directed totally at her ego, but it worked all the same.

In the end, his arguments were so persuasive that Maddie hadn't bothered questioning the details. Besides trusting in his expertise, she had been too focused on the rewards of her research to suspect the process. She now found herself sadly disappointed in the end results.

For starters, Maddie had expected a larger contingent of scientists. True, Rob had said the expedition was limited on funding, but she thought that, at the very least, they should have some graduate students along to assist with collections, data input and modeling. Apparently Rob had made arrangements to host some post doctoral students from the local university, but since Maddie didn't speak Portuguese, she didn't know how that would help her.

So it appeared that it was just her and Rob for six months, and Maddie cringed at the thought. With any luck they would have enough work to keep them both too busy to engage on any other level. Her one affair with Rob had been more than enough.

"C'mon," Rob said, holding out his hand. "I think it's time to quit for the day. Let's go cool off."

The innuendo was obvious and Maddie shuddered inwardly. There had been a time when she had found Rob charming and attractive, but that was long ago. This trip was only about her research, and Rob needed to understand that. "Thanks, but I'd rather look for the food and then go to my cabin."

"Absolutely not. I can't let you be alone on your first night in Brazil." Rob waved his hand at the shore. "Macapa is one of the busiest river ports on the coast, Maddie. There's so much to see, and I promise that after dark, the heat gets a bit more bearable." He held his hand out again. "The boxes will turn up before we leave. I imagine they're merely delayed at customs."

"But I'm tired."

"No, you're not." He smiled, the corners of his brown eyes crinkling. "You're just looking for an excuse to go hide in your cabin and start working."

It wasn't true, but Maddie didn't bother correcting him. "I do have some ideas I want to get down."

"Well, I won't allow it. Tonight we're going to go out and celebrate. We'll get some beer and food." He grinned. "Ice cold beer, Maddie. Think about it."

She licked her lips involuntarily. "Ice cold?"

"Frost on the glass cold. And food so good you'll orgasm."

"Oh!" She looked away.

"Don't waste this opportunity. In a month you'll be begging for civilization." He stepped closer. "And we always did have fun together. Remember the conference in Vienna?"

How could she forget? For almost four days she'd felt alive in ways she'd never dreamed possible. Later, she realized that it had very little to do with Rob Fisher and more to do with herself. For the first time in her life, Maddie had let go of all the conformities and obligations controlling her life and just lived for the moment. It was as exhilarating as it was terrifying.

"There's plenty of time for work, Maddie."

She looked at him, knowing he didn't really comprehend her conflict. This wasn't Vienna, and Rob Fisher wasn't a convenient distraction during an otherwise dull conference. What had happened there would never happen here.

And yet, as she shifted her gaze to the nearly endless line of docks clinging to the shore, would it be so wrong to experience something of this exotic place? There would be plenty of time for work later. Six months of confinement on the ship with nothing to do but work. As long as Rob understood she wasn't going to fall for his shallow charm again, she saw no problem with enjoying herself tonight.

Looking back at Rob, she nodded. "All right. Let's go celebrate."

"Excellent!" Rob cried, encircling her with an arm and pulling her tight against his side. "We're going to have so much fun!"

Maddie froze in his touch. "I'm sticky and hot, Rob." She stepped out of his embrace and smiled cordially. "So where are we going?"

"To the market. There." Rob waved his arm at the rambling assembly of buildings and shacks that swarmed the banks of the Amazon River. "Every strange thing you'd ever want to buy." He slipped casually into what she was beginning to see was his jungle expert mode. It was a role he relished.

"Like what?" she asked, as Rob led them off the ship and into the crowds. A squat Indian woman waddled with a basket on her head, but Rob deftly maneuvered them around her.

"Alligator parts, medicinal herbs, fresh fish, wildlife, fruits, pottery."

"Alligator parts?" She wrinkled up her nose in disgust. "Why on earth would anyone want that?"

"I haven't asked, but like I said, everything you could ever want."

"Well, all I want is that cold beer." She rubbed her stomach. "And maybe something to eat."

"Admit it," Rob said, reaching for her. "You're enjoying yourself."

It would have been safer to deny it, but looking around at everything, Maddie suddenly felt quite a part of it all. The sights, sounds and smells swirled around her in an exotic dance that she wanted to join. This wasn't her sterile lab and nothing here reminded her of her empty life in Boston. It was all so alive that she could feel its pulse with every humid breath she inhaled.

"Admit it," Rob repeated, more forcefully. "This is what makes life exciting. Your damn sterile lab is never going to make you famous. It's never going to be your destiny. This, Maddie, this is where *we* make history."

The last part was sanguine thinking. In six months her theories could prove worthless, and she would limp home a failure. Yet, as she let Rob lead her deeper into Macapa, the more she realized that she did want this trip to be her destiny. There had to be more to life than just her lab.

"I'm ready," she said, grinning wildly.

Rob leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I know you are."

Boarding a moving freighter was always dangerous. Successfully navigating the distance between two moving ships required a tremendous amount of skill and courage. In the past, Kali had lost two crew members. One made a bad jump, and was sucked under by the ship's giant screws. His death had been quick. The other one wasn't so lucky. He had succumbed to fear, and had been ruthlessly punished.

Tonight though, her men all navigated the jump with ease. They were, by far, the best crew she'd hired.

When everyone was across, the bow of the *Avatara* rose in the water as Philippe reversed the engines and the ship fell back. Turning, Kali motioned Renny and Tajo up the stairs to sweep the deck. Anyone unfortunate enough to encounter them would be eliminated. Since this was the last chance of escape, Kali and the others waited below in case her men failed and an alarm was raised.

As their dark forms disappeared on deck, Kali slipped a hand inside her pocket and activated a transmitter to notify Raphael, her inside man, that they were now on board. If everything had gone as planned, in two minutes she would see him at the door of the bridge tower.

Two quick flashes from a flashlight at the top of the stairs drew her attention, and she smiled. The deck was clear.

"Let's go," she said, motioned the rest of her crew forward.

As Paco passed, she pinned him with a lethal look. She could smell the fear on him. That was good. He should be afraid.

On the deck, Kali let her eyes run over the rows of forty foot containers stacked three high. She knew from the manifest that the containers were filled with computer components and consumer goods. If fenced on the black market, the items would bring a nice sum. But it was the nearly half a million dollars worth of currency that had drawn Kali's interest.

Taking the lead, she moved her group along the deck towards the bridge tower. This was the control center for the entire freighter. Inside were crew quarters, computer rooms and the main bridge, perched three stories up over the deck. This was her ultimate destination.

As they approached the tower, Kali was relieved to see Raphael waiting for them by the door. He gave Kali a quick nod as a greeting.

"It's a crew of eight," he said, getting to the point. "The captain and one are on the bridge."

"And the rest of the crew?"

Raphael grinned lecherously. "They're busy."

Next to her, Paco dropped his hands to his hips and rocked his pelvis back and forth. "Porno, si?" Grabbing Paco by the shirt, she pushed him at the door. "Get inside."

The interior of the bridge tower smelled of dust, oil and diesel fumes just like any other large ocean vessel Kali had boarded. She wrinkled her nose at the odor as she followed Raphael towards the main elevator.

When the doors opened, she blocked Raphael from stepping into the box. "Go help with the crew. Meet us back here in ten." She pushed Paco into the elevator.

Selecting the bridge, Kali reached down, pulled out a Beretta PX4 9mm from her thigh holster and checked the magazine. She held it casually in her hand as the elevator rose to the top.

"I thought you said no killing," Paco commented, dryly.

Blinking slowly, she shifted her eyes to his face and just stared at him. "And I thought I warned you to keep your fucking mouth shut when you drink."

"What?" He looked confused. "What did you hear?"

It wasn't a denial. There was nothing to deny. A sheen of sweat was breaking out on his forehead, and Kali smiled. It unsettled him, just as she expected.

"Why are you smiling?" he demanded, nervously licking his lips.

She didn't respond. Let him worry about what she was planning. He'd know soon enough why she was smiling. "Get ready," she said, as the elevator began to slow. "You know the drill."

"I don't know what you heard, Kali, but I'd never betray you. You know me."

She glanced at him with revulsion. "We'll talk later."

The doors of the elevator began sliding back, and Kali tightened her hold on her pistol. The second she walked onto the bridge, she needed to dominate. It was imperative for her to establish fear and submission before any thought of resistance surfaced in her captives.

Stepping onto the bridge, Kali looked around at the various navigation and communication stations. She cared nothing for these things. Instead, her attention went directly to the two men near the helm.

So unaware they were of her presence that neither even looked up as she walked across the floor. Sitting in the pilot's seat was an older man with a well established bald spot. A younger man with muscular arms and a strong back was busy with some electronic chart.

Not one to jump to conclusions, Kali looked between them with a smile. "Captain?"

It was the younger man who turned to her voice.

Kali tilted her head to watch his expression. It was always the same. First, his eyes began to widen. Then his mouth fell open in shock. Finally, the real threat of the situation hit him and he began to calculate a response. If he was going to react, it would be at that moment.

Unfortunately, Kali never gave him the opportunity. Raising her gun, she shot him in the middle of his thigh. Like so many others, he went down with a cry.

She turned her gun on the old man, holding him in place until Paco pulled him viciously from his chair. Of all her crew, Paco was the most brutal.

Once the old man was subdued, her attention returned to the captain. Blood was flooding from his wound, and Kali assessed it quickly. Her shot must have hit an artery, and now she had even less time to get what she needed.

Stepping up to him, she tapped him with the tip of her boot. "Look at me," she said, her voice edgy. When he complied, she touched a spot near her groin where the femoral artery passed over the pelvis bone. "Press here. Hard. It will slow the bleeding."

The captain stared at her for a long moment, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Do it or I'll have him," she pointed at Paco, "put a tourniquet on you. I can't have you bleeding to death before I get the safe open." She looked around. "Now, where is it?"

In an act of defiance, the captain looked away from her as he applied pressure to his femoral artery. Infuriated, Kali kicked his hand away and pressed her gun to his head. "Answer me or I'll take your ship and kill your crew."

"Aren't you going to do that anyway?" He replaced his hand on his wound. "That is how this works, correct?"

"That depends completely on you, Captain. All I want is the safe."

He hesitated, but then gestured towards the back of the room. "It's there. Behind the paneling."

With a jerk of her head, Kali sent Paco to check. She grinned broadly when he pulled back the teak faced paneling to reveal a tall, steel safe. The first step was done.

Squatting down, she looked directly into the captain's eyes. "You know what I want now, don't you?"

"Kill me if you want, but I won't tell you."

"Again, Captain, your sacrifice will only doom your crew." She tapped her gun against his forehead. "But that's your decision."

His eyes betrayed his fear.

"My time is limited, so let me help you decide," she said, glancing at the old man cowering nearby. Swinging her gun around, she looked back at the captain.

"No, wait," he yelled, as she fired.

"Too late." She frowned. "One down, seven to go."

"I don't know the combination!" he cried, but Kali just waited. "Really, I don't. I just do what I'm told. I follow orders." He was nearly hysterical.

Twisting her wrist, Kali looked down at her watch. "You have a minute."

"My crew. If I tell you, what will happen to them?"

"Forty-eight seconds."

"Swear that they'll live."

Kali looked up, surprised. "You'd believe me?"

"Do I have a choice?"

She chuckled and dropped her eyes. "Thirty-one seconds."

"I have a family."

"Twenty three seconds." She rocked her head back and forth. "Tick tock, tick tock."

"Alright! Alright!" He shook his head. "I can't get there, but I'll tell you the combination."

"I know it's a biometric safe, but if you prefer, I'll cut off your hand for verification." She looked back at her watch. "Nine seconds."

"Then help me get there. Please!"

She glanced at Paco. "Get him."

Setting his rifle on a nearby chair, Paco leaned down and roughly dragged the captain to the safe. It took effort, but Paco got the captain to his feet, where he entered a string of numbers into the electronic keypad and pressed his thumb to the biometric scanner. The safe beeped its acceptance and the latch slid back.

Kali sighed in relief. It was done. There were just a few more loose ends to tie up. "Face me," she said, her voice hard and resolved.

The captain hesitated. "I did what you asked," he begged. "I'm not a threat to you."

"You never were." Kali took a small step towards him. "Now it's your choice how you die. I like to see the eyes, but I can do it this way, too."

His head fell forward in acceptance, and he allowed Paco to turn him around. Kali felt a modicum of respect for him. It took courage to accept and face death, and she waited for him to lift his head one last time. When she could see his eyes, she fired a bullet into his head.

"Get him out of the way," she said, after the captain had slumped to the ground.

As Paco was moving the body, Kali bent over and grabbed Paco's rifle. Slipping it over her shoulder, she knew he wouldn't miss it until it was too late.

"*Mio Dios!*" Paco cried, pulling open the safe to reveal row after row of neatly stacked bundles of money. "All U.S. dollars?"

"For what they're worth." Kali reached for a bundle of hundred dollar bills and flipped through it. Digging in her cargo pants, she withdrew a black plastic bag and handed it to Paco. "Fill it up."

"It may not all fit," he said, laughing casually.

Her contempt for him grew. She knew he had laughed like that last night.

"We can retire if we want."

"Not likely," she said, moving away from him.

"I forget," he said, casting a glance over his shoulder. "You enjoy this life." He kept dropping the money into the bag. "Killing pleases you the way sex doesn't."

The comment rolled off her. He'd said so much worse, so why would that one matter now? Paco didn't know when to quit. He had become a liability to her operations. It was business, she'd told herself, but she knew deep down that it was so much more.

"Is that what you and Philippe told everyone in the bar last night? I heard you said I was a dry bitch who killed because I couldn't come." She tightened her hand on her pistol. "You said I needed to be fucked so badly you could smell it on me." Her finger played with the trigger.

"Kali...I didn't..." Paco kept his back to her. "I was joking...I was drunk...I didn't—"

"Drop the bag and turn around!"

Why did it have to come to this? She asked for nothing but respect and obedience. She made them rich. She gave them a purpose. Why did they have to ruin it?

"I don't know who has been lying to you, but—"

"Turn around!"

"No."

"I'll shoot you in the back, Paco. You never were much of a man, so dying like a coward shouldn't bother you."

"You bitch! I was right, you are a dry cunt. You feel nothing for anyone. You never have."

He looked over his shoulder, and even without seeing his eyes, Kali knew what he was thinking. He was wondering where he had left his gun and if he could beat her to it.

"You were always going to end up here," she said, forcing a laugh. "I knew it the first day you stepped on my boat."

"You wanted this," he said, taking a step backwards. "Killing men is what you love most."

"I'm only giving you what you deserve," she said, aiming for the back of his neck. "Remember that." She pulled the trigger. It took a moment for his body to fold forward and then spasm back as the 9mm bullet blew a hole through his face.

Lunging forward, she grabbed the plastic bag and flipped it over her shoulder. She was glad that she'd waited until he'd finished with the money. Blood was so hard to get out.

Stepping into the elevator, she stared straight ahead as the doors closed. The ride to the main deck seemed shorter than the ride up, and Kali was relieved to find Sergio, Raphael and Jack waiting for her. The large Russian looked behind her for Paco, and she shook her head. "He's dead. Let's go."

"But—"

Lunging forward, Kali pinned him to the wall. "No fucking buts! He's dead, and I'm leaving. Are you staying?" She didn't wait for a response. Holding the moneybag tightly, she hurried to the exit.

Tajo met her by the door. "A success?" His teeth glowed as he smiled in the darkness.

"Signal Philippe," was all she said, as she headed for the stairs.

The night grew brighter as the African slapped a glow flare to life and waved it over the side. Below, Philippe flipped on the *Avatara's* running lights and pulled out of the freighter's wake.

Descending to the platform, Kali didn't wait to see if anyone was behind her. She had the money. They would follow. As Philippe pulled the *Avatara* alongside, she quickly judged the distance and jumped.

She climbed halfway to the flybridge. "Back to Macapa," she yelled to Philippe, before turning for the salon.

The air inside was warm, but Kali didn't notice. Crossing the salon, she dumped the money onto the small dining table and stared down at it with satisfaction. The sight of it was her way of affirming the success of another mission. Tomorrow, her share would be deposited into one of her many bloated accounts and promptly forgotten, but for tonight, it represented her leadership and rigid determination to always come out on top.

Behind her, she heard the salon door open and close as her crew came into the room. They knew better than to speak to her at such a moment, and so she gave them little notice as she took her seat and began the tedious task of dividing up the spoils.

It took nearly an hour to count and recount the amount. By the time she had divided it all up, the lights of Macapa were twinkling in the distance.

Sitting back, she looked up at her crew, their greed hanging on their faces. At that moment, she hated them all. Her only consolation was that she'd soon be rid of them — at least for the night. Jack was the first one brave enough to speak. "How much?" he demanded, almost drooling at the money.

She gave him a cold look before answering. "Including what we took from the crew, \$479,000 and some change. Shares are divided as follows." She lifted her notes. "As usual, the top twenty percent goes to the cartel equaling \$95,800." She pushed that pile aside. "That leaves \$383,200. My cut is thirty percent, leaving \$268,240."

"And how much is that?" Renny asked, leaning forward expectantly.

"Divided by six, it's \$44,700 each" She waved at a pile of jewelry and other things. "And whatever you want from the crew's crap."

"I'm taking the Krieger." Jack grabbed the chunky platinum watch from the pile. It was a fake, but Kali would let him figure that out. "And what of Paco's share?" he asked, his tone accusatory.

"What about it?"

"Shouldn't it go to his family?"

Kali shrugged. "Does he have one?"

"He has a mother in Guadalajara," Sergio said, bowing his head. "Very poor. Like my mama in Kiev."

"And?" she snapped. "Do you have her fucking address?"

"No," Sergio confessed.

"Then that's that."

"Yes. That's that." Renny nodded his approval.

Standing, she dropped the cartel's share of the money into a paper bag. Her own, she stuffed back into the plastic bag. She pushed one pile at Renny. "Take that to Philippe. Tell him he can come to me if he wants to question the amount."

"He won't," Renny said, pulling the money towards him. "It's more than fair."

Kali rolled her eyes as she turned away. They were all six thousand dollars richer without Paco's share. Even someone as dense as Philippe would understand that type of math. Dropping the money on a countertop in the ship's small galley, she pulled open the refrigerator.

One look inside and she slammed the doors. "Which one of you fuckers drank my last Xingu?" She didn't bother waiting for the non-existent confession. Yanking open the door again, she grabbed a bottle of some piss-poor American beer. "There will be a new six pack in here by morning."

*Or what?*

The unspoken question hung in the air. It was always there.

Tearing the top off the beer, she tossed it into the sink with a clink. "When we reach Macapa, I want you all off my boat," she said, grabbing the money. "You got that?" Not waiting for a response, she turned and descended the stairs to the stateroom level.

At sixty feet, the *Avatara* was comprised of three decks. It was, perhaps, an eccentric choice of vessel for Kali's profession, but it was also her home. Her own cabin occupied nearly a third of the lower deck. The rest of the space was used by the engine room, a full head, two smaller staterooms and the electronics room.

Opening the door to her cabin, she swept her hand along the wall to turn on the lights. The room was spotless. Everything from the neatly made queen size bed to the polished teak nightstands and desk gleamed. Even her laptop, sitting open on her built-in desk, was a clean line. She stepped into her cabin, closing the door behind her. Immediately, she felt more at peace with herself. This place was her sanctuary, and she shared it with no one.

The beer in her hand was cold, and she looked down at it with contempt. There was nothing worse than cheap American beer.

Angry again, she stalked across the room and dropped the money on the desk. Setting down her beer, she pulled out the chair and sat. By placing her hands on the keyboard, she activated her computer. The aquarium screensaver disappeared immediately, and she was presented with the first of many password screens.

Once logged on, she initiated a satellite Internet link. Her boss would be waiting for a report...and an accounting of her take.

Criminal cartels dominated most of Brazil. The one which controlled Macapa was the *Rato de Agua* cartel. Nothing came in or out of the port that they didn't know about or authorize. Someone like Kali had little choice but to align herself with the cartel or risk certain elimination.

While the computer established the satellite connection, Kali stood and opened a false cabinet in the wall over her head. Behind it was her private safe. After keying in her ten-digit code and holding her eye to the retinal biometric scanner, she pulled it open.

Sticking her share of the money into the safe, she closed the door and resumed her seat in front of her laptop. While her safe was very secure, Kali never left any sizable amount of money in it for too long. She and her crew were thieves, and stealing was a way of life. Therefore, she knew better than to tempt them.

When the Internet connection was made, she opened a new email and addressed it to Duarte de Tueste, the leader of the *Rato de Agua* cartel. Her reputation for ruthlessness and competency had earned her his special attention, and it was to him that she always delivered the cartel's share of her jobs. With any luck, Duarte would already have another plump pigeon lined up for her.