

THE WIDOW

FEDERAL HELLIONS BOOK 1



GRAY GARDNER

BLUSHING BOOKS

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COLOMBIAN JUNGLES AND MARTINI
LUNCHES



*D*on't stop running.

The thick, humid air clung to her already clammy hands. It should have smelled so fresh underneath that dark leafy canopy, but all she could smell was dampness. She inhaled as deeply as she possibly could as she pushed her legs to run harder through the dense vegetation. Wet leaves slapped against her body and branches scratched at her face as she maneuvered through the Colombian forest towards the landing strip.

Her extraction point.

Shots echoed and screeched around her, sending puffs of debris from tree trunks and shrubs. Though she had been trained to handle it, she hadn't been shot at in a while and it was pretty unnerving. If she was going to die she wasn't sure she was prepared for it to be at the hands of a Colombian drug cartel.

Run.

The camera slipped in her hands, but she managed to slip the leather strap around her neck as she ducked her head and changed her course to the east. It had to be close.

She wouldn't have been running at all if her moronic partner hadn't blown their cover by activating their mobile satellite on the

roof of their hotel in plain view of practically the entire city of Bogotá. Their position was immediately compromised, probably by the FARC, those damned cartel militants, and while her partner was immediately killed, she'd barely escaped with her life. She'd been on the run with no means of communication for what seemed like two days with six months of reconnaissance in that fake touristy camera around her neck and absolutely no clue as to whether her extraction was initiated or not.

She'd had time to alert the nearest field office, which was in Panama, grab the materials and shove them in the camera that was supposed to fool even the customs officials, and burn the hotel room which had been their base of operations before the FARC had stormed the hotel lobby.

To top it all, she wasn't exactly a full *field* agent. She worked in the field, yes, in many countries and out of plain sight. Her role was purely intelligence, though. She, and her dumb dead partner, had to collect information, relay information, and verify information for the Department of Justice.

Then the cowboy field agents could handle the rest. And get all the credit.

If the Department of Justice was a high school, she'd be a theater geek. Everyone saw her around, she could easily disguise herself with costumes, and she had to clear the stage when the popular class president swooped in to take charge and get rid of the bad guys, making the world a better place. She never got to see any real action because her life was all pretend. Invented.

Until now. Now it was real as hell.

Her partner had drawn attention to himself on the roof of their hotel and had taken one between the eyes by a sniper who most likely worked for one of the most feared drug lords in Central and South America. She'd seen it all on a satellite feed from her room as she monitored the caravan of black Escalades moving through town. And now she was on the run from the bullies, just like a theater geek.

She'd gone undercover before as a student studying abroad, a secretary, and even a freaking librarian. Her boss had grown tired of her complaints and had let her take this job with the new transfer and go to Colombia as a couple. Now the new transfer was dead, and she was sloshing around in her own sweat in a jungle with God knows how many men chasing her.

Her boots slapped onto pavement as the forest opened up and a C130 idled less than one hundred feet away on the sunlit-cracked concrete. Thank God for panic buttons, exit strategies, and global positioning satellites, she thought to herself, as she waved at the pilot and leapt into the rear of the slowly moving huge cargo plane. She snagged the MP5 that the two SEALs at the large cargo door threw at her and joined them in shooting cover fire at the emerging army from the trees with the counterterrorism weapon used mostly in hostage recovery operations. She was glad that she never made it to the hostage stage of her stay in this country and gladly fired the eight hundred rounds per minute out of the submachine gun.

The cartel creeps were forced back and gave the Americans enough time to take off towards the north and head for Washington DC.

"What's your name?" one of the SEALs shouted, securing the door as she fell back onto a metal bench and tried to catch her breath. She didn't want to assess what had just happened. She just wanted to focus so she wouldn't freak out.

She dropped the MP5 and held out her hand. "George," she panted over the roar of the engines, shaking his hand and taking the water he'd offered. If she was a theater geek, the SEALs were the all-star jocks.

"Sanders," he nodded, sitting back. He sighed heavily and folded his arms across his broad chest. "Weren't there supposed to be two of you?"

"Yeah," she huffed, shaking her head and closing her eyes. That was all she was at liberty to say to these guys. Unless she wanted to

be the only *expelled* theater geek from the DOJ. All the jock SEALs were supposed to know was that they had to rescue some wayward feds in South America.

She did everything by the book. No screw ups, no citations, just excellence. It was how she'd always lived her life. Not perfect, just orderly. She wasn't surprised her partner had gotten himself killed, either. He was reckless, passionate, and went off of his gut feelings way too much. Not that she didn't feel sorry for him or his family, but still, she wasn't surprised.

Not much surprised her these days.

"You aren't allowed to speak to me anymore, are you?" Sanders asked, staring at her with a knowing look. Usually he was the one withholding information because of clearance issues and a need-to-know basis. He figured she must have been pretty important.

"Sorry," she shrugged, looking surprised as he handed her a backpack.

"Lie down, get some sleep. We've got a few hours before we get to Andrews."

She nodded her head in thanks and immediately fell asleep. She'd have to brief everyone when she got to Andrews Air Force Base about their botched intelligence assignment and barely successful escape. And she needed to be alert whenever she was around her boss. Not that her boss was a monster, but she hated showing inadequacies at work. She liked perfection.

She wasn't a freak about being perfect or anything. She'd gone to a state school and had kept a B average, but she'd become a CPA upon graduation because she liked the tidiness of wrapping up every day with nice and neat numbers. Perfection in the workplace was just something she strived for, that's all.

After explaining to her current boss how the last assignment was far from perfect, she'd probably spend the next year on desk duty until all of the dust cleared. Damned protocol. She was ready for a break, but not a demotion.

The plane landed with a thud and she emerged onto American

soil full of gratitude. She'd been out of the country for way too long, but that was her life. She had assimilated into Bogotá six months earlier after coming off a previous long assignment in Spain. The student abroad scenario. Her skin was darkened by the sun, and she'd died her dark red hair black and had worn brown contacts to assimilate better into the Colombian culture. Now the dark red was peeking out at her roots and her blue eyes squinted in the late afternoon sun.

A Hummer picked her up and she jumped in, still wearing her sweat-stained green tank top and cargo pants. Her boots smelled a little mildewy and she was certain her body didn't smell very nice, either, but her boss would want an update *immediately*.

Her boss, the perfection fanatic. Paperwork haunted her future as she rode the elevator in her building.

"Agent George?"

She nodded as she stood in the doorway of the large, corner office. The downtown building housed many different federal agencies, with an underground connection to the Hoover Building, and while they all cooperated with each other there was still an underlying rivalry that everyone felt. High school. Her sector, a branch of the DEA's Intelligence Division dedicated solely to deep undercover operations and which only a handful of people even *knew* about, was no different. She'd never gotten along with her partner who was moved from the local FBI to join her, and she really hoped no one thought that any of this was her fault.

"Director Nelson," she began, not sure where to start.

"What in the hell happened?" her boss snapped, facing the window of the top floor office but not really watching anything outside. Her short brown hair curled perfectly under her ears. Her suit was heavily starched and barely shifted at every movement of her body. Nothing was ever out of place with her.

Like Agent George, Nelson had moved over from the Financial Management Division to the Intelligence Division. Perfection seemed appropriate for gathering intelligence, and they were both

much happier in their current positions. Nelson had even been George's handler until the mass firing of almost every head in the DOJ had led to her promotion. New president and everything. Now handlers didn't even really exist anymore, and George still reported to Nelson, only *now* Nelson had the title of Director, which fell somewhere beneath the Chief of Intelligence and many rungs above Agent George.

"We were compromised."

"How?" the Director asked, turning and frowning as she looked her agent up and down.

George shook her head and looked down. "Agent Diaz just..." She rubbed her head and sighed. She didn't want his final act to be known as a stupid one, but she needed to tell the truth. She always needed to tell the truth.

"Yes?"

"Diaz thought he'd set up the remote satellite camera and call his sister," George sighed, folding her arms across her chest.

The Director nodded, stood still momentarily as she carefully calculated her next move, then walked to the door and opened it. "Thank you, Agent George. I have some phone calls to make now. You have reports to write, too."

"He was just checking to see if she'd had her baby yet," George said, feeling she had to defend his actions for some reason.

"Your compassion is noted, Agent George. Now I have some FBI imbeciles to decimate," she said, a satisfied look on her face. Agency rivalries.

"It was really just by *chance* that the FARC lieutenants were passing by in their caravan and spotted him."

"You sure it was them?" Nelson interrupted, perking up in alert. There were several cartels out that region, but the FARC was king.

George shook her head. "No, but, it has to be—"

Nelson grabbed her arm, which shut her up immediately, and leaned in as she lowered her voice. "Put it all in the report, Agent. And quit defending the asshole that got you into trouble. You're

lucky enough that I'm not paddling your ass right now for screwing up the recon."

"Yes, ma'am," George replied, looking down with a little bit of shame.

The door was shut in her face. She exhaled and hung her shoulders as she turned for the elevators. This was why she'd fought so hard to work alone. She couldn't be responsible for other people's mistakes, even though she felt like she was. Stupid Diaz. If she hadn't grabbed the camera when she left him dead on the roof top, she wouldn't have been able to come home. Forget the paddling that Nelson wanted to verbally deliver. Showing up back at the Justice Department empty handed was never an option. It was a hard choice but one she had to make in about one second. She wasn't sorry, but she felt guilty anyway.

She knew he was dead when he radioed her from the rooftop that he'd spotted a caravan and had become an uncle, and after a sickening crack had stopped his report mid-sentence. It came up on her laptop screen in front of her from one of the dozens of cameras they'd set up. She'd killed people before, but when one of her own was killed it never sat well.

She fought to get the sound of his last words out of her head. *He was an uncle.*

"Ugh, how long has it been since you've showered, sweetheart?" a black suited agent asked when she climbed onto the elevator.

She pressed the ground floor button and ignored him. She did keep her arms close to her sides, though. Truthfully? If they would tell her what day it was, she could respond.

"They do have a ladies' locker room now, you know," another suit agreed, as they stood behind her. She wasn't very tall so their voices were coming from above her head.

"Do you speak English?" the first one asked slowly.

She quickly turned and glared up at them with her piercing dark blue eyes. She could tell they were FBI right off the bat, mostly from their arrogance but also from the plastic ID badges clipped to

their lapels. "I've been dodging bullets and angry Colombians and flying in a large, metal tube with propellers for the past seventy-two hours. What the hell have *you* been doing?"

"Touchy," the second one said, glancing over at his friend. "Must be her time of the month."

She had a flashback to high school, and the football guys, and how they all banded together to make the other students feel defective and ostracized. This wasn't high school, she reminded herself. She tried to bite back any comments that were on the tip of her tongue.

"I'll show you where the guy's locker room is, if you want. I'm headed there myself," the first one snickered.

"FBI idiots," she grumbled, watching the numbers descend way too slowly. She was beginning to feel irritated and trapped. The bullet ripping through Diaz's head replayed over and over in her mind.

"What was that?" they asked.

She turned and folded her dirt smeared arms across her chest. "I called you idiots. You're irresponsible, careless, and most of the time none of you *ever* know what you're talking about!"

The two men glanced at each other.

"You're going to be real sorry if you don't apologize for that," the first one sneered.

"Or what?" she asked, holding out her hands. She was feeling combative all of a sudden. Her partner was dead. Her boss wanted to beat her. She was in desperate need of nice smelling personal hygiene products, and all she'd eaten in the past twenty-four hours were some Saltines.

Just give me a reason, she thought. Just give me one good reason.

The blob of gray and black suits milled about in front of the six elevators on the ground floor, and when the one on the right finally had an up arrow that was lit, they all moved forward to wait for it to open. The pack mentality had them all shuffling right, checking

their watches, checking their phones, and commenting on how slow the elevators were.

The doors dinged, parted, and briefcases dropped to the floor as everyone stared in disbelief at the scene revealed before their eyes.

Two agents lay face down, piled on top of one another and totally unconscious, while a little girl in dirty clothes and mud streaked skin sat with a very satisfied look on top of the mound. She stood and dusted her hands off as she exited the ten passenger elevator.

She glanced over her shoulder as the crowd parted and stared back and forth between her and the unconscious men.

“Light weights. Three martini lunches are such a bitch,” she smiled, walking through the crowd and out the glass façade in front of the building.

If there was one imperfection in her life, it was her temper. She could never fully control it.

Which was good and bad at the same time.