

Chapter 3 - The Interrogation-Part I

Even though semi-gray reflections continuously appeared and disappeared like mystical shadows along the narrow passageways the authorities forced Maria and Victoria to pass through on their journey into the innermost depths of the Miami International Airport, Victoria appeared unperturbed. Her daughter, on the other hand, had paled and one of her hands started to twitch.

“There is nothing to be nervous about,” Victoria said, glancing at her daughter as the two of them continued to follow the set of dark-uniformed Custom officers three feet in front of them. An identical set of officers followed closely behind, completing the small procession. “We haven’t done anything wrong.”

Maria turned in her direction and her lips formed a small, albeit nervous, smile.

Moments later, the agents ordered them to come to a halt. A black and white sign hanging above the entrance to the twelve-by-fourteen glass-enclosed office announced they had arrived at the Interrogation Room.

“Joe to Captain Richard. You read me?” one of the officers said, raising his two-way.

“I got you, Joe. ... Are you and Mark ready?”

“Yes, sir. Mark’s leading them inside as we speak.”

“Good. Just have them take a seat. Our equipment should be ready in just a couple minutes.”

“10 – 4, Captain.”

As Victoria passed through the gray metallic-framed doorway, she noticed a six-foot, rectangle-shaped, walnut-topped table had been strategically placed in the center of the room. To the left of it, three tan plastic chairs sat in front of a room-length, smoke-colored window. To her right, a single, black-cushioned rocker sitting between a few other uniformed, plastic chairs seemed to be out of place.

The officer who is going to do the questioning must have a bad back. Victoria noted, taking a seat.

“Mother. What are those?” Maria said, pointing to what appeared to be a couple of

camera-type devices hanging from both the southeast and southwest corners of the ceiling.

Mark turned to see what the younger of the two ladies was referring to, then answered before Victoria had a chance to reply. "Those are video cams. We use them to record any interrogation sessions performed here."

"Why would you need to do that?"

"For security reasons." Joe replied, as he took a seat next to Mark's. "Do you see the large one-way window directly behind you?"

Maria twisted around in her chair so she could face it. "Yes. What about it?"

"Behind it is a computerized face and voice analyzer. We use to determine if someone is telling the truth or not?"

Victoria instantly turned pale. "A computerized face and voice analyzer? I thought that type of technology only existed in the movies."

Joe grinned and shook his head, no. "I can assure you, Victoria. It actually exists in real life, as well."

Maria looked at him with a puzzled expression, then took another look at the security cameras. "Are you sure you're not just trying to scare us? Those cameras look just like the security cameras used at my mother's bank ... and they're certainly not connected into a computer."

Joe chuckled, and at the same time, the sound of muffled laughter unexpectedly entered the room from behind the smoked-colored window. Upon hearing it, both Maria and Victoria turned in it's direction. However, their interest became short lived when a stout, dark haired man casually passed through the doorway.

"Ladies," Captain Richardson said, after making his way around the end of the table.

Both Victoria and Maria turned to face him as he slithered inside the black, cushioned rocker.

"I'm Captain Richardson," he said, stretching his hand across the table. "But you can call me, Tom, if you would like."

"Tom." Victoria repeated. A small quirk in the corner of her lips revealed that she wasn't overly impressed.

“Now I know the two of you, instead of being here, would rather be going home with the other members of your family,” the captain said, ignoring Victoria’s expression. “But we have come across what appears to be a potentially serious problem. One that could cause both of you to be either fined, placed in prison, or possibly deported. If not a combination of all three.”

Victoria gazed toward the camera, then turned to face the Captain. “Do you really think that after going through all the trouble and effort it took to acquire a U.S. Visitor’s Visa ... I would throw it all away by allowing either one of us to do something foolish?”

“It certainly appears you did.”

Maria’s face instantly turned red and she bolted to her feet. “How dare you insult my mother like that, you ... you. Well, whatever you are.”

“Maria, please. Calm down.” Victoria said, promptly reaching out and pulling her daughter back into her seat. “There is nothing to get upset about. The captain is just trying to get us upset, little one. That way, we might accidentally say something that could be used against us.”

“Is that what he’s doing?” Maria said, looking surprised.

“Of course, little one,” Victoria calmly replied, as she opened her purse. “It’s all standard procedures. And, believe me, I know. I’ve assisted your brothers so many times with messes they have had involving Chilean custom agents that it’s no longer funny.” She then took out a makeup mirror and began to powder her face.

The Captain just sat and smiled. “So. You think you have us Custom Agents all figured out. Don’t you, Victoria?”

“As I told my daughter. I’ve had my dealings before.”

Tom crossed his arms in front of his waist and let out a small chuckle. “I don’t know what the custom agents in Chile might be like. But I can assure you Mrs. Vargas. You don’t want to be playing games with them here. ... In the United States, we don’t believe in fooling around.”

“And you think the agents in Chile do?” Victoria asked, almost defiantly. “Well. Let me ask you this, Captain. Do you believe in torturing your victims until you finally get the answers you are looking for?”

Tom shook his head. “No. Things like that are not allowed in this country. However, the

means we do use for getting the truth out of people are quite effective.”

“Oh really?” Victoria said, briefly looking upward. “And by being “effective”, does that mean using false accusations and wrongly detaining people in order to accomplish your goal.”

“Do you feel you have been falsely accused?” Tom asked, still maintaining his smile.

“Definitely,” Victoria replied, now turning to face her daughter. “We both have.”

Tom stretched out his arms and nonchalantly cracked his knuckles across the top of the table. “I’m afraid I would have to disagree with you, Mrs. Vargas. So far, neither you nor your daughter has been formally charged with anything. The two of you are just under suspicion.”

Victoria immediately snorted. “Oh. Is that so, Captain? Then please explain why your officer told my son-in-law that we may not be staying in the U.S. very long.”

A wrinkle in his Tom’s forehead unconsciously winced. “Mrs. Vargas. Do you recall what you told your daughter this afternoon ... just shortly after you had passed through Customs?”

“Yes,” Victoria nodded. “I told her to be careful about what she says in front of Custom Agents because words can sometimes be misinterpreted.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t exactly correct, Mrs. Vargas. If you recall, your exact words were ‘You really need to watch what you say, little one. You almost got us into big trouble.’” Tom then paused. “What exactly were you referring to when you said that?”

Victoria’s dark brown eyes narrowed. “I meant exactly what I just said, Mr. Richardson. During the time we were with the Customs Agent, Maria happened to mentioned that my husband and I own a chain of jewelry stores in Arica. And, knowing customs agents the way I do, I became concerned that mentioning this would make us look suspicious.”

“I see.” Tom replied, before taking a short breath. “And when you continued your discussion, which happened to be in Spanish, you did not mention anything about bringing any jewelry with you?”

Victoria gasped. “You understood our conversation?”

“Of course we did, Mrs. Vargas. Spanish is rapidly becoming a very common language in Miami. That’s why we require our agents to have a fluent knowledge of it.”

Victoria leaned back in her chair. It seemed like she needed to consider this new development. It definitely wasn't expected.

"Do you think he is telling us the truth, Mother?" Maria asked, in Spanish, with a doubtful expression across her face.

"Yo no sé. Pensé que sólo se hablaba Inglés en los Estados Unidos." (I don't know. I thought that only English was spoken in the United States.)

MARIA FROWNED. "WELL. APPARENTLY IT ISN'T. ¿Y QUÉ HACEMOS AHORA?" (SO WHAT DO WE DO NOW?)

TOM LOOKED AT MARIA, THEN TURNED TO FACE VICTORIA. HE SEEMED TO BE A BIT PERTURBED. "ES POSIBLE QUE DESEE COMENZAR POR HABLAR EN INGLÉS. DESPUÉS DE TODO, LO HICE EN SU CONOCIMIENTO QUE PODEMOS ENTENDER TODO LO QUE DICE EN ESPAÑOL ". ("YOU MIGHT WANT TO START BY SPEAKING IN ENGLISH. AFTER ALL, I DID JUST INFORM YOU THAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING YOU SAY IN SPANISH.")

"Huh?" Both Victoria and Maria turned to stare at him.

"I said you might begin by speaking in English."

"Oh. Yes. ... Certainty." Victoria replied.

Reaching into his case, Tom pulled out an unidentifiable computerized device and starting to tap on a few keys. "Victoria," he began a few seconds later, "Let's begin with a very basic question. And please remember, your response is being monitored by our computers. Therefore, we will know if you are telling us the truth or not. ... Do you have more than two thousand dollars worth of jewelry?"

Victoria gave him a wide grin. "Of course, I do."

"OK," Tom nodded. "Then why didn't you declare this when you passed through Customs?"

"Because I didn't bring all of my jewelry with me. Most of it is still in Chile."

Tom looked at her and frowned. *I can see this isn't going to be as easy as I first thought.*