

**EXCERPT - Doc's story – working title WITH NO REMORSE
(unedited)**

"I think we lost them," Luke Colter whispered and gulped in a serrated breath that smelled of damp earth, cold stone and the winded woman at his side. "At least for now. Let's take a minute and catch our breath."

His sides ached; his lungs screamed for oxygen in the thin mountain air, pressuring his heart to pound like a bass drum in a marching band. They leaned back against the rock wall then slid to the ground, exhausted, and sat there, side by side sucking in great gulps of air. Above them, a rocky overhang knotted with gnarled tree roots and the detritus of thousands of years of life cycles and high plains decay provided a shelter of sorts from the gunmen who had chased them off the train.

Luke glanced at the woman panting for breath beside him. It wasn't so dark that he couldn't make out her features in the scattered moonlight, or see the rise and fall of those famous breasts beneath her dark turtle neck shirt.

How had he *not* seen through her disguise?

"Valentina," he muttered and could tell by the way her shoulders sagged and the resignation on her face that she wasn't happy he knew who she was.

He still couldn't believe it.

Valen-freakin'-tina.

The Valentina. Like Beyonce or Cher or Madonna – one name was enough to tell the entire world who this woman was.

How in the hell had he ended up on the run, in the Andes with a woman whose face and body had started and ended more wet dreams than a man his age should ever admit to?

He suppressed an incredulous laugh and slowly shook his head as he remembered the first time he'd seen her. He'd been seventeen, still stuck on the ranch in Montana and at the epicenter of his youthful randy and horny period. He'd been bored to death, running a ranch errand for his dad, cruising down the interstate in the pickup on the way to Billings. And there she was ... stretched out on her side on a fifteen by fifty foot billboard along I-90, her long, dark hair blowing in the wind, seductive smile beckoning, the ripe curves of her young body artfully draped in a filmy piece of champagne-colored silk, all sex appeal, innocence and original sin.

His seventeen year old brain had shut down like a smashed clock. He'd damn near driven off the road. And though a lot of years and a lot of women had passed through his life since then, the 'Valentina mystique' had been rockin' a little corner of his world ever since.

Man, he'd had it bad for her. Now, however, was not the time for a stroll down teen idol lane. Now was the time for some answers.

"Okay," he whispered because he couldn't keep quiet any longer, "time for twenty questions. And you've got to know what heads the top of the list."

She gulped down a breath, let her head fall back against the rock wall. Her thick black hair trailed halfway down her back and Jesus, he had another flashback to those long ago nights, in the dark, in his bed with a flashlight shining on a magazine spread featuring her angel face and sinner body, doing what teen-aged boys with runaway hormones were want to do in the night, in the dark, in their beds.

"What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this?" she suggested in a voice made husky by the effort to replenish her lungs with much needed oxygen.

"That'll do for starters."

She rolled her head to the side and glanced at him just as the moon peeked through the clouds. The unchecked vulnerability on her astonishing face coupled with the moonlight that shadowed her brow elevated his heart rate by at least a hundred beats per minute.

"Just giving myself a little down time." She looked away. Looked sad. "Anyway, that was the plan."

Right. It all came back to him. He didn't read gossip rags. At least he didn't unless Valentina's face happened to grace the cover and then despite his best efforts, he couldn't resist catching up with his teenage heartthrob. Old habits and all that. A few months ago, however, he'd spotted her photo on the cover of a tabloid while he'd been waiting to catch a flight out of Buenos Aires. After checking to make certain the rest of the guys on the BOI team weren't watching, he'd been all over it. So, yeah, after reading the article he understood why she would want to disappear from the spotlight these days.

Couldn't say he'd been broken-hearted to hear about her very public and fairly recent split from the golden boy senator from Illinois, but he had felt bad that the paparazzi's constant hounding over the 'fairytale couple's' divorce had forced her into seclusion. Now he knew where that seclusion was – and it sure as hell wasn't a spa in Switzerland as the tabloids had speculated. No need to explain why she was traveling in disguise either. There wasn't a corner of the globe remote enough for Valentina to hide in. Her legendary beauty had made her famous on an international scale.

Valentina, he thought again. Barely able to suppress an incredulous laugh, he wiped a hand over his face. *Of all the gin joints in all the world...*

"So," he whispered, looking across his shoulder at her, "who were those guys?" A hand flew to her chest. "I told you. I have no idea."

His raised brows expressed his doubt. "No. Seriously. Who were they?" Eyes as dark as ebony narrowed in anger. "What did I just say?"

Hokay. The lady had a temper and clearly she didn't like being questioned. "Well, they sure as hell knew who *you* were."

She looked away, lowered her head and hugged herself against a chill that he'd known adrenaline overload couldn't stave off forever. Unfortunately, she'd lost everything – her poncho, her hat, her bag – on their wild tumble down the ravine. He'd been lucky to collect his backpack but his own jacket was back on the train.

"They couldn't have been after me." She looked confused but committed. "No one even knows I'm down here."

"Darlin'," he said, exercising what he thought was a fair amount of patience in the face of the obvious, "they killed a man to get to you. They were willing to die to keep me from taking you away from them. Clearly, they knew *who* you were and exactly *where* you were."

Her look of mystified agony cut straight to his heart. She pinched her mouth shut, shook her head. "No one knows I'm here," she insisted again.

Denial with a capitol D. Fine. He'd play it her way for now because *now* was all about getting out of here alive. If he managed to pull that off, he'd find out what she wasn't telling him later. In the meantime, it seemed she had a few questions of her own.

“Why did you help me?”

He blinked. “Are you for real?”

She blinked right back, waited for him to answer.

“Because you needed help, for God’s sake. Well, not *you*, as in *Valentina*, but *you*, as in a kid who looked scared to death. Was I supposed to just sit there and watch them do whatever they planned to do with you?”

“So, you’re what ... a natural born hero?” The sarcasm in her tone was outdistanced only by her doubt.

He wasn’t too happy about either one. Or about how close she was to the truth. He hadn’t been anyone’s hero since San Salvador. His hand moved involuntarily to his side where he’d been gut shot. Almost a year later, he still felt the occasional twitch of pain. And more and more lately he woke up in the night tearing at the sheets and drenched in sweat reliving the shooting.

Okay, stop. He was so not going there, because damn, it was too easy and too often that he let himself get dragged back into that sucking pit of quicksand. A sure way to get killed in his line of work was to think about dying. About almost dying. About being so scared you’re gonna die that you make promises you know you can never keep. Promises to God. Promises to the devil.

“Actually, I have to work at the hero stuff these days,” he sputtered. Until those two gunmen had killed that defenseless man on the train, he’d been determined to save his own ass and to hell with anyone else’s.

Speaking of truth ... he was starting to wonder if there might be a raving shrew lurking beneath the goddess facade.

Please, God, no. Don’t burst my bubble.

He studied her face. Her perfect, angel face. No. No way. He couldn’t have been wrong all these years. She was just scared. He got that. She didn’t trust that he was one of the good guys. Before he could reassure her, she fired off another question.

“Who, exactly, are you?”

WITH NO REMORSE – Summer 2011

News Flash – October, 2010, watch for the DEADLY PROMISES Anthology featuring Sherrilyn Kenyon, Laura Griffin and an exciting new Black Ops, Inc. novella by Cindy Gerard