



Elite assassin, Cruz McCall, must locate a missing FBI agent who uncovered a plot to assassinate the President and take control of the government. With time running out, McCall risks everything to crush the rebels and save America.

The Takeover
By Clay Corley

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A woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a grey tactical vest and a headband, is aiming a handgun directly at the viewer. She has a serious expression and a small cut on her cheek. The background is a blurred American flag.

THE TAKEOVER

A Cruz McCall Novel

CLAY CORLEY

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Chapter 6

Alicia Cruz McCall was born in 1980 and abandoned just three weeks later. Six months afterward, she was adopted by Benjamin and Miriam McCall. The McCalls lived in Nashville, Tennessee, where they owned a small market and a gas station on Lafayette Street. Alicia was a bright, cheerful, and talented girl who loved her parents and excelled in all her activities. However, her life took a dark turn at age nine when Miriam died of cancer, and it became even darker when Lewis Jeffers murdered her father. Then, within a few months, Alicia's close friend William Steele was killed while trying to save her from an attacker.

With both parents gone and her best friend murdered, Alicia's life changed dramatically. Her uncle, a retired Special Forces legend, encouraged her to join the Army. After four years of active duty, including three as a Ranger, *Cruz* McCall, as she became known, was honorably discharged with a chest full of medals. Following her military service, she worked for the CIA for three years and has since been a self-employed operative.

McCall has led two lives — first as a successful, highly respected oil painter and portraitist, and second as a fixer and hired assassin, code-named Masterpiece. One identity masked the other. Many of her contracts were completed without bloodshed, but when necessary, McCall's skills as an assassin were unmatched. The five-foot-nine-inch redhead has killed

thirteen people since leaving the Company, believing that each act was justified and that eliminating evil was a worthwhile pursuit.

In 2007, to protect their privacy, McCall and her partner and friend, Juan Mendoza, moved their operation from East Tennessee to Lindenhurst, New York. Mendoza, a former respected Army sniper and Special Forces instructor, was quiet and resourceful; when necessary, he would gladly kill or even die to defend McCall.

Mendoza's nephew, Armand De La Vega, joined them in 2009, forming a close-knit, successful team with her trusted dog, Tango 2. De La Vega, a young and talented electronics engineer and computer whiz, lived and worked with Mendoza and McCall in a converted boat factory on Long Island. He invented the electronic chip that enabled long-distance communication via an invisible, miniature earbud. His research often proved essential in solving problems when Cruz found herself in seemingly impossible situations.

Recently, McCall considered improving her services to enhance her image. She envisioned building a more personal relationship with clients and saw her role as a problem solver rather than an assassin. However, when she discussed the idea with Mendoza, he disagreed, believing Cruz created this new approach because she needed a distraction after what happened with Lewis Jeffers.

"Cruz, you know the saying, if it ain't broke, don't fix it," countered Mendoza. "The way we are currently operating is safe, and we have plenty of clients. If we allow closer contact,

they'll know who we are and what we look like; we'll be in greater danger." Mendoza realized he hadn't convinced her, despite her listening to him. After their discussion, however, Cruz temporarily set her ideas aside.

Chapter 7

Long Island, New York, 2016

In November, when Charles Tharp, a Republican, was elected President, McCall once again focused on restructuring her business. She had long been the “go-to” person for covert operations and felt trapped in the Godfather syndrome. Like Michael Corleone, she kept getting pulled back in. As she discussed with Mendoza, she wanted to change her image and become more selective in evaluating new projects.

De La Vega served as the main contact when a potential customer first reached out to the group, usually handling the initial response. After reviewing the job requests and resolving obvious issues, he forwarded the list to McCall for further review. Most people were unaware of Cruz and mistakenly thought De La Vega was Masterpiece.

Some clients were given priority and did not require vetting. One of these was Colonel John Cutler, a close friend of Cruz’s late uncle Harper and the commander of McCall’s Special Forces training group during her time in the Army. In recent years, the Colonel had been promoted and transferred from the training site in Georgia to Washington, D.C. He was recognized as one of the most knowledgeable wartime strategists in the country and works directly with Congress.

Saturday 9:15 A.M.

De La Vega knocked on the doorframe of Cruz's second-floor studio. She was on her balcony reading the New York Times with Tango 2.

"What's up, Vega?" she said as she and the little Jack Russell walked inside.

Entering the room, Da La Vega said, "I just listened to a call from the recorder that I think you'll want to know about, boss."

"OK, let's have it."

"It appeared to be from the Pentagon; it might be Cutler," said Vega while finger-combing his coal-black hair. When I tried to call back, the number was blocked. Would you like me to keep working on it?

"If it came in on our private line, it could be a former client wanting to keep his identity hidden," said McCall. "I doubt it's the Colonel, but since we don't know who it is, if they call again, try tracing it another way."

"Will do, boss." Before De La Vega could leave the room, the phone rang. He looked at the screen, then gave Cruz a thumbs-up. She nodded, and he answered the call.

"Hello," said De La Vega.

"What do you know, a human being," a loud voice said. "I want to speak to McCall, and I want to talk to her now."

"And who may I say is calling?" asked Vega in a formal tone.

"Not that it's any of your damned business, son, but this is Colonel John Cutler. Now put her on," Cutler said loudly

enough for McCall to recognize his voice from across the room. She gestured, and Vega handed her the phone.

“Hello, Colonel, I’m surprised to hear from you.”

“McCall, you’re too damn hard to get hold of,” said Cutler.

“It’d be much easier, sir, if your phone didn’t have a blocked number.”

“Okay, okay. I understand. But this is important. I have a mission for you, and it pays well.”

“I’m all ears,” said Cruz. Everything was a mission with the Colonel, just like it had been when she served under him in Special Forces.

Cutler, confident that the line was secure, began to speak. “The Western Dynamics Corporation, located in Sunnyvale near San Francisco, is involved in numerous government projects, including those related to weaponry,” said Cutler. “Much of what they do is classified and under the jurisdiction of the Senate Armed Services Committee. As always, the government monitors the security measures of any company handling top-secret information, especially those with production facilities outside the U.S.”

“I’ve heard of them,” said Cruz.

“Good,” said Cutler. McCall could picture the Colonel nodding to himself as he continued, “Some time ago, the FBI received word that a secret activist group had infiltrated Western Dynamics. Classified information was being stolen and sold to outside parties. At first, it wasn’t taken very seriously; however, the government grew more interested as the probability increased and more details became available.

Senator Rainey contacted me and requested that I put together a team to investigate the situation at Western and report back to him. I sent two men to California about three months ago.”

Cutler paused briefly, as if considering how to phrase what he was about to say. “After thirty days without any progress, they finally reported finding irregularities at a Western subsidiary, Technology Associates. After another month with no contact, I assumed the agents had been exposed and possibly killed. Then, at Rainey’s request, I sent another agent, Shane Bowers, to California as an informant to infiltrate Western’s workforce and determine what had happened.

The Senator said he was the best person for the job, and since I had worked with Bowers before, I agreed. The FBI provided him with a detailed background and a new identity under the name Gil Trabec. Fortunately, he applied for and got a position as an assistant in the security department at WDC,” said Cutler. “Just when it seemed there was nothing more to learn and the case had stalled, a security agent at one of their key subsidiaries announced his retirement, and Bowers was chosen to replace him. That division, Technology Associates, is reportedly the branch with issues. Our man was finally able to find out if there was a leak, how the information was being stolen, and who was involved.

“I met Bowers ten years ago,” McCall said. “Back then, he didn’t seem like the spy type; he was more of a messenger boy.”

“Apparently, it took him a while to recognize the opportunity he was given and to take advantage of it. He has

successfully worked for me several times since then,” replied Cutler.

“What opportunity, Colonel?” asked McCall.

“I don’t know all the details,” said Cutler, “but Bowers was an orphan. After public high school, he joined the Army for a two-year term. After finishing his enlistment, he unexpectedly received a full scholarship to Yale. Once he graduated, the FBI recruited him—end of story.”

“I see,” McCall replied, her attention returning to the mission. “What does Technology Associates do?”

“Lots of things,” said Cutler, “but their main research focuses on nanotechnology and its potential for weaponization. At last contact, Bowers said he'd found something significant and would share the information once he could verify what he discovered. I haven’t heard from him in a week. He usually contacted me every 48 hours via a secure satellite phone. After two contact periods had gone by, I assumed he was in trouble, if not dead.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Cruz. “It’s my job to eliminate problems, not find missing agents. If Bowers needs help, Colonel, you have a whole team of assets that fit this scenario much better than I do.”

“I understand that, McCall, but there’s a problem. Recently, I was ordered to bring Bowers in. When he was promoted at Technology Associates, I realized he was finally in a position to access the information we needed. If Bowers were to quit or suddenly disappear, it would alert the people we’re watching. Not only would all our efforts be wasted, but

it would also be nearly impossible to insert another agent into WDC's workforce."

"So, what happened?"

"The people I was working for didn't see things the same way I did. After losing two agents, they wanted Shane brought home, but I disagreed. I believed he should stay at Technology Associates. However, my superiors assumed I would follow their instructions when they gave me an order. After the directive to recall Bowers, the higher-ups moved on, leaving me to carry out his withdrawal."

"So, what did you do?" asked Cruz

"That's the problem: I didn't pull Shane out. I took it upon myself to keep him undercover and try to expose the traitors. If he succeeded, then everything would be forgiven."

"Now he's missing," said McCall.

"Exactly," said Cutler, "or hiding." I can't send any more agents to California without admitting I didn't do what I was told. I need your help, Cruz. My ass is on the line."

"Exactly what do you want me to do, sir?"

"I need to find out what happened to Bowers. There's a slim chance they don't realize he's a federal agent or why he's there. Find him, dead or alive, and get his information to me. Rescue him if you can, but make sure I get that information."

"No trouble at all," she said sarcastically. "A walk in the park."

"Cruz, I know it might seem impossible, but the alternative is admitting I didn't follow orders and probably being forced

to resign. I can do a lot of good here, and I don't want to retire in disgrace."

McCall felt uneasy about the conversation. The Colonel rarely called a subordinate by their first name; now it was Shane this and Cruz that. Something felt off; as unlikely as it seemed, maybe he *was* scared.

Cutler continued, "I'd like to be able to tell you that the situation is not as serious as it sounds, but I'm afraid it is. These people have no qualms about killing, and it seems they're good at it; so, it'll be dangerous."

"I need to talk to Mendoza," said McCall. "He's supposed to go see a dying friend in Mexico. Unless that changes, I'll be headed to California alone."

"I understand. Just don't waste any time. We need to act quickly."

"OK, I'll get back to you today," said McCall.

Chapter 8

After lunch, when she was alone with Mendoza, she explained what Cutler wanted and asked for his opinion.

“The Colonel was a friend of ours,” said Mendoza. “I don’t see how we can refuse him, even though he reacted badly when you left the service.”

“I’m a little surprised he called,” said McCall.

“I guess he’s forgiven you.”

“Or, he’s really in trouble,” she said. “What about your sick friend in Mexico? How much time do you think he has?”

“Don’t know, not much, according to my information,” Mendoza replied, barely shaking his head.

“If I go to California on this Cutler thing, I might need your help.”

Mendoza paused for a moment. “I’ve got to visit Hernando, but we’ll stay in touch, and I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

“Okay, I’ll call Cutler back and ask him to send me his information.”

“I’m heading to Mexico in the morning; keep your head down,” Mendoza said.

“¡Hablamos pronto! (We’ll talk soon)”

“Si, mi amigo,” answered Cruz.

Chapter 9

It was 3:30 that afternoon when McCall contacted Cutler. “Colonel, I’m going to help you. Fax me a summary of the current situation at Western Dynamics, including all relevant information about Bowers. I’ll review it, and we’ll talk again before I leave.”

“Great,” said Cutler. “I’ve got most of that ready to send, but I need to give you some additional information that isn’t in my report.”

“Ok, I’m listening.”

Cutler: “There is one man who controls everything at WDC: the CEO of the Western conglomerate, Hilton Tanner. The other person to watch is his security chief, Wes Litton. That’s who Bowers works for. Litton is known for his tenacity and ruthlessness. His reputation precedes him, and the employees who work for him are loyal. They’re well-paid, but more than that, they’re afraid of the consequences if they make a mistake.”

“What about Tanner?”

He’s a different case. His background details are in my report. Don’t let Tanner fool you. He’s wealthy, smart, and influential. Of the two men, Tanner is the more dangerous.

“I understand,” said McCall. “I’ll need everything you have on Western Dynamics and Technology Associates.”

“I’ll fax you our information and photos of both men,” said Cutler.

“Thanks, Colonel. Please send it soon so we have enough time to research it.

“Okay, but I don’t think you’ll need any more information; the report is thorough. Just call me if there’s anything else,” said Cutler.

“I know you’re right, Colonel,” McCall said, realizing there was no point in arguing with him.

“Thanks, McCall.”

After hanging up, she called De La Vega. “Vega, expect some info from Colonel Cutler to arrive by fax this afternoon. Review the file and investigate everyone mentioned in it. I need to know each person's background, including their previous work experience and the date they joined Western Dynamics. Give me a detailed summary, and get me a ticket to San Jose for tomorrow.” Having done this before, De La Vega knew exactly what Cruz wanted. She was a stickler for details.

At 5 PM ET, McCall called an old friend, Paula Frizbe, the chair of the National Plein Air Convention, a major art exhibition in Monterey, California. Both had attended Centennial High School in Franklin, Tennessee, and have stayed friends since the Frizbes moved to the West Coast three years ago.

While McCall would have liked to attend the event, she hadn’t signed up. However, it would offer good cover now, and the location was close to San Francisco.

Cruz dialed her friend’s number. “Hello,” answered Frizbe.

“Paula, it’s Alicia,” said McCall.

“Alicia, it’s great to hear from you. I wish you were attending the convention.”

“That’s why I’m calling. I’ve had a sudden change of plans and would like to be there. I’ll be happy to help with the program if I’m needed.”

“That would be wonderful. When will you arrive?”

“Tomorrow afternoon on Southwest,” said McCall.

“I’ll book you a room at the Marriott. Do you need Terry to pick you up at the airport?” Terry was Paula’s husband. He had accepted a job offer from a firm in Los Angeles that he couldn’t refuse, so they moved there with their three kids.

“No thanks. I’ll rent a car,” McCall said. “See you all at the reception tomorrow night. Thanks for fitting me in, Paula.”

“It’s a pleasure, Alicia. I’m so glad you’re coming. It’ll be a great surprise for the members.”

“See you tomorrow,” said McCall.

Having achieved her goal, Cruz turned to Tango Two and said in a child’s voice, “No, baby, you can’t go this time. I need you here to help Vega guard the compound. Besides, you don’t like flying. No, you don’t, do you, precious?” T-2, lying on his hand grenade-shaped faux wolf skin bed, turned 180 degrees, angling away from McCall, clearly annoyed.



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