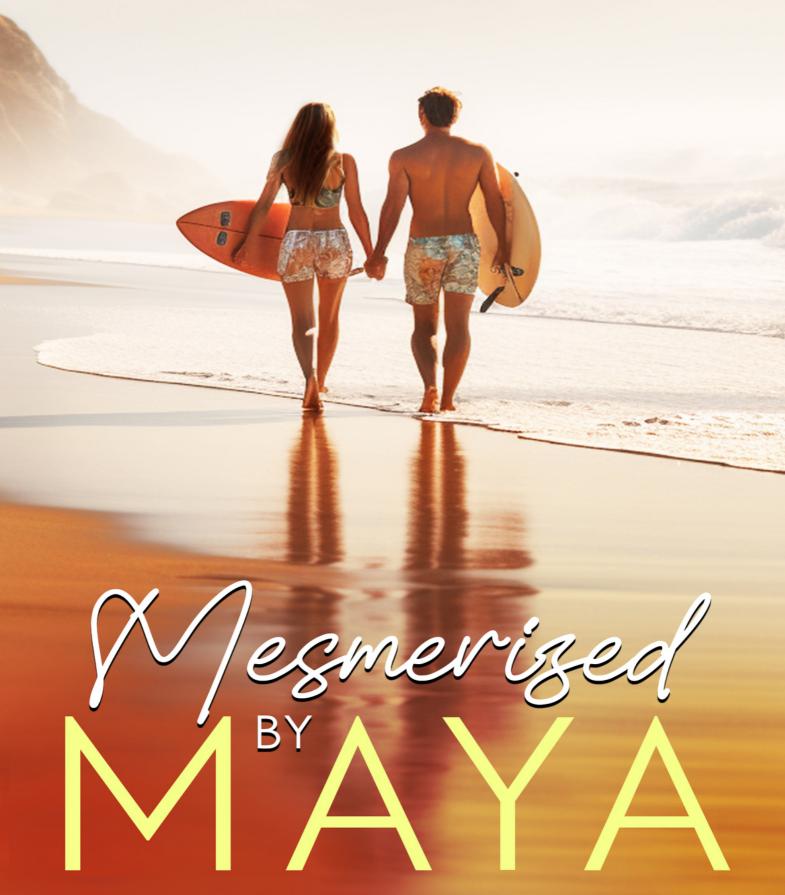
JENNIFER BISHOP



A FLAMINGO COVE NOVEL

Mesmerized by Maya

A Flamingo Cove Novel

Jennifer Bishop

Copyright © 2024 by Jennifer Bishop

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

- 1. Chapter 1
- 2. Chapter 2
- 3. Chapter 3
- 4. Chapter 4
- 5. Chapter 5
- 6. Chapter 6
- 7. Chapter 7

- 8. Chapter 8
- 9. Chapter 9
- 10. Chapter 10
- 11. Chapter 11
- 12. Chapter 12
- 13. Chapter 13
- 14. Chapter 14
- 15. Chapter 15
- 16. Chapter 16
- 17. Chapter 17
- 18. Chapter 18
- 19. Chapter 19
- 20. Chapter 20
- 21. Chapter 21
- 22. Chapter 22
- 23. Chapter 23
- 24. Chapter 24
- 25. Chapter 25
- 26. Chapter 26
- 27. Chapter 27
- 28. Chapter 28
- 29. Chapter 29
- 30. Chapter 30
- 31. Chapter 31
- 32. Chapter 32
- 33. Chapter 33
- 34. Chapter 34
- 35. Chapter 35

36. Chapter 36

37. Chapter 37

Epilogue

Captivated by Callie Sneak Peak

Also By Jennifer Bishop

About the Author

Chapter 1

A FTER SITTING OUT SEVERAL waves that weren't quite right, Maya saw the perfect one approaching. She readied herself on her board as the wave neared. She caught the lip at just the right moment, jumping to her feet and feeling the complete exhilaration that only surfers understood; it's what brought them out to the ocean on chilly mornings in rough surf. It's what kept them addicted to the sport.

She rode down the face of the wave, accelerating as she went. Maya shifted her weight slightly to maintain her balance

and knew she'd made a mistake. Exhilaration turned to fear as she felt herself lose control. The wall of water erupted around her as the wave forced her beneath the surface.

The lip of the wave crashed over Maya's head, knocking her from her board and pushing her underwater. As she submerged in the cold ocean water, she lost her bearings, the pressure of the wave forcing the air from her lungs as it held her beneath the surface.

She felt panic wash over her as the wave held her down, her lungs screaming for oxygen. Maya forced herself to remember her training. *The pressure will eventually subside. You have enough oxygen for three minutes.*

As rational thinking took hold, she searched for any sign of light, which would signal the surface, finally catching a glimpse of it between waves. As the pressure that had been holding her down lessened, she swam for the surface, only to be pulled back downward after just a few inches.

Maya tried again with the same results. *Someone was holding her underwater by her ankle*, her panic-stricken brain screamed once again. No, that couldn't be.

Her leash! The leash around her ankle kept her tethered to her surfboard, but something snagged it. A rock or a large piece of coral. Oxygen-deprivation was making it difficult to concentrate, but she reached down to feel for the tether and remove it from her ankle.

She found the tether, but her fumbling fingers couldn't release it. She struggled against the closure, knowing her life depended on getting free. Just when she was about to give up, a hand pushed hers away, then easily released the tether.

Maya clung to the swimmer who had come to her rescue. He wrapped a muscular arm around her, then carried her to the surface with his powerful kicks. Once at the surface, he lifted her atop his surfboard, where she sprawled, as helpless as a newborn kitten.

"You're okay. You're safe now. I'm taking you in," he said in a reassuring tone. "Can you hold on?"

Too breathless to speak, Maya nodded her head and her rescuer set off toward shore, pulling her and the surfboard behind him.

When they reached the shallow water, he helped her off the board.

She refused his help. "I'm fine," she said, then promptly collapsed into his arms.

"I've got you," he said, supporting her weight as he led her toward a towel on the beach. "Sit here. Have some water."

Maya accepted the water bottle from him, too exhausted to tell him hers was just a few feet away. He sat in the sand next to her and studied her carefully. "Are you okay? Do you need paramedics to check you out?"

Maya shook her head. "I'm fine. That was scary. I've wiped out before, but never gotten stuck like that. For a minute there, I thought I was a goner."

"I saw you go down. When you didn't pop back up a few seconds later, I knew something was wrong. Anything hurt?"

"Other than my pride?"

He gave a small laugh. "Look around. Nobody else is out this early. I'm the only one who saw it, and I've had far more spectacular wipeouts, so your pride is safe with me. Any other injuries?"

"I'm okay."

"Good. In that case, I'm going to go see if I can free your board. You got hung up on the remains of a wreck offshore. I have a pretty good idea where to find it. You sit here and rest." The man drew a small knife and a mask from his backpack, then set back out into the water.

Maya watched him move effortlessly through the water and shook her head at the ironic turn of events. She'd been out here for the past three mornings with the sole intention of meeting this man. She hadn't planned to do it in such a dramatic fashion, but she'd accomplished her goal nonetheless. This was a golden opportunity, and she wouldn't

squander it, so she forced herself to muster her strength. He'd only be gone a few minutes, so with a careful eye on his head bobbing above the water, she dragged his backpack onto her lap. She searched through each pocket quickly, but carefully. The inventory was predictable and disappointing: shoes, a change of clothes, sunscreen, a hat, several condoms in a hidden pocket, and ten dollars in crumpled bills.

No phone, which was what Maya most hoped to find. No ID or anything else that gave away information. She hadn't gotten what she needed to get, so would have to string her rescuer along a little longer.

When she saw his head pop up, she knew he'd freed her surfboard and was riding it back to shore. Keeping her movements as small as possible, she slid the backpack over to its original position, hoping he was too far away to see the beach clearly.

She rose to greet him as he came ashore. Feeling steady on her feet, she walked down to the surf and offered to take her board. He declined. "This is a full-service rescue. I'll get both you and your board safely to shore."

"I appreciate that," Maya said, walking beside him.

"Feeling okay?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm fine now. But that was a close call."

"I hope it doesn't turn you off surfing. I've seen you out here the past few mornings. You look like you enjoy it," he said.

"I do," she said. "I'm done for the day, but I'll be back out."

"I haven't seen you around before."

Bingo! Maya thought. Exactly what she'd been hoping for. He'd given her an opening. Now she just had to play it correctly. "I'm visiting my grandmother for a few weeks. I'll be here until after the New Year."

"Maybe we could get dinner one night," he said.

Maya pretended to look conflicted. She wanted to appear tempted, but hard to get at the same time. When she didn't answer, he said, "Or maybe we should plan on breakfast."

She turned to face him, unable to hide the genuine look of shock on her face. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Breakfast? As in the morning after?"

Seeing that she'd misread his intentions, he held up his free hand in surrender. "No, not *that* breakfast. Breakfast after surfing one morning. Like, maybe, now?"

Chagrined at her assumption, Maya felt herself flush. "Sorry, I thought..."

"My fault. I can never seem to say the right thing around beautiful women. I'm lucky I'm tall or I'd never get a date."

Not wanting to appear too eager, Maya said, "My grandmother's expecting me, but tomorrow would work."

"That sounds good. I'm Nick, by the way."

Maya pasted the sweetest smile she could muster on her face and said, "Nice to meet you Nick, I'm Holly."

Chapter 2

THE NEXT MORNING, MAYA intentionally arrived at the beach several minutes later than usual. Nick had already chained his bike to the bike rack. *Perfect*. Maya took her surfboard down from the roof of her grandmother's car and leaned it against the bike rack, then returned to grab her bag and remove her shoes.

As she reached out to collect her board, she accidentally knocked it against Nick's bike, knocking it over. She bent down to right it, and as she did so, attached a tracker to the

underside of his seat. Her objective accomplished, she pasted a beachy-girl smile on her face and made her way through the dunes onto the sand.

Nick was sitting on the sand beside his own board, watching the ocean, which was as smooth as glass this morning.

"Hey," Maya called to him.

"Hey, Holly. Doesn't look like we'll be surfing this morning."

Maya had checked the beach cam before she left her grandmother's house, so she had already known they wouldn't be surfing, but no way was she going to break their breakfast date.

She lowered herself onto the sand next to him. Not too close, but close enough to show a little interest. "Bummer. Should we try again another day?"

"Actually, I was hoping we could still go get breakfast."

Pretending to consider it, Maya said, "Sure. I guess that's okay."

"Have you been to Everything Bagels?" Nick asked.

"No, but I've seen it. Across the street, right?" Maya asked.

"I love their coffee."

Maya turned to look at him with a small smile. "I would've taken you for an herbal tea or fresh wheatgrass kind-of guy."

Nick gave her a look of mock horror. "Wheatgrass? Me? Never. Maybe herbal tea if I'm sick, but in the morning, it's strong, black coffee."

"I knew I liked you," Maya said, nudging his shoulder with hers.

"Want to walk over now?"

"Let me just strap my board back on my car. Want to tie yours down as well?" she asked.

"Nah, I'll just leave it next to my bike. I've never had a problem here."

They walked across the street to the tiny bagel shop sandwiched between an Italian restaurant and a touristy beachwear shop. The smell of fresh-baked bagels permeated the air as they approached. After they placed their orders, they sat outside at one of the tiny café tables, watching the sun rise over the ocean.

"You said you're visiting your grandmother. Do you come often?" Nick asked.

"Not as often as she'd like," Maya said. "If she had her way, I'd move into her guest bedroom. I love it here, and what better place to be in the winter than in paradise?"

"That's why I'm here."

"What do you do?" Maya asked.

"As little as possible," Nick said with a charming grin that made Maya's heart flutter. She reminded herself this wasn't a date. "What about you?"

"I'm a travel blogger."

"That sounds like it might be the most perfect job ever," Nick said.

"It is. I get to travel all over the place and get paid to do it. Most places give me the VIP treatment because they want to win me over."

"Does that include your grandmother?" Nick asked with a smile.

"She's given me the VIP treatment since I was born. She won me over long ago. But I've never written about Flamingo Cove and thought this would be a great opportunity."

"Will she be in the story?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm considering two pieces. One about the town and a longer, deeper piece about connecting with family."

They chatted easily while they ate, sharing stories about their surfing adventures and their love of the sport. Nick was a much more accomplished surfer than Maya. He was also a great listener, paying attention and coaxing her into telling stories about her life. As the conversation and laughter flowed, Maya felt herself drawn to Nick and reminded herself that it wasn't real. She'd done undercover work in the past, but a subject had never once tempted her. She had a niggling feeling that was going to change with Nick.

When they were done, they walked back across the street to her grandmother's car and his bike. As Maya unlocked the car, Nick reached out and lightly brushed his fingers against hers. "I'd love to see you again, Holly."

Pretending to misunderstand his intention, Maya replied, "My grandmother wants to go to the Greenmarket tomorrow, but I should be here on Monday. I enjoy getting out early, before the beach gets crowded."

He stepped a tiny bit closer. "I was thinking more along the lines of a proper date. Maybe we could grab a drink. Or dinner"

Maya looked into those piercing blue eyes and felt butterflies flutter in her stomach. She reminded herself this was a job. None of this was real, even if her body didn't realize that. How to play it?

She paused long enough that he must've sensed her indecision and misread it as hesitation. He said, "I'll settle for another breakfast."

Maya allowed relief to wash over her face. With a smile, she said, "Breakfast it is. Monday morning?"

"Sounds good. Let's meet here at 7:00 and surf a bit before we eat."

"Looking forward to it," she said as she climbed into her car.

Back at her grandmother's cottage, Maya hosed off her surfboard and herself before making her way into the quaint kitchen. Her grandmother was sitting at the kitchen table drinking her tea.

"Good morning, sweetie. How were the waves this morning?"

Maya adored her grandmother and hated deceiving the sweet woman. But there was no way she could tell her about yesterday's accident, or the real purpose for her visit to Flamingo Cove.

Visits to the beach town had been one of her favorite childhood memories: long days at the beach with her grandmother, late nights at the beach bonfire on warm summer evenings, walking hand-in-hand downtown to Maya's favorite ice cream shop. It's where Maya had learned to surf and scuba dive. Those memories of the water had shaped the woman she'd become. That's why she was delighted when her commanding officer, Wesley Owens, assigned her to the case, even if he had been crude about it. "Mitchell, you have a uniqueset of *talents* that the guys don't have. Use them to your advantage to recover those drugs."

Her grandmother knew Maya was working during her visit, but didn't know it was an undercover assignment to catch the man responsible for the theft of millions of dollars of cocaine. Maya didn't want her grandmother to worry about her, nor did she want her grandmother to slip up while bragging about her granddaughter to her pickleball friends.

"Disappointing," Maya said. "I got banged up a bit yesterday, so I really wanted to get back in the water today, but I didn't even get in. I just went for coffee and a bagel at Everything Bagels instead."

"I remember when you were little. You would get knocked down, catch your breath, and get right back out there. Always so determined, even as a little girl. You always impressed me."

Maya gave her grandmother a kiss in response and said, "I'm going to go take a shower."

"I'm going out for my walk, and I may stop by Barbara's on the way home. I want to make some chicken pesto for dinner, so I want to raid her basil."

"See if she has cilantro. I'll make you guacamole."

"Oh, that sounds delicious."

When her grandmother left for her walk, Maya called her boss. He answered on the first ring.

"Commander Owens."

"Good morning, Sir. Maya Mitchell."

"What do you have for me?" he asked.

"I made contact with the subject." Maya felt her face flush a bit at her words. No way she wanted her boss to know she'd almost drowned. "I planted a tracker on his bike. It's been stationary for the past hour. I'm going to get eyes on the location after this call."

"Excellent work. You made contact with him as well?"

Maya flushed again at his question. Undercover work was about playing a part, which often involved flirting to get information. That was understood by both male and female agents. She even knew agents that slept with people to get information, but that wasn't her.

However, talking about it with her boss was another matter. She decided to keep it brief and let him fill in the blanks. "Yes, sir. I made contact while we were surfing yesterday. I met him again this morning."

"Did you get anything?"

"No, but I'm seeing him again on Monday."

"Why are you waiting that long? We need information."

Did she really have to explain playing hard to get to her very proper boss? Maya took a deep breath. "This is a delicate balance, sir. He's going to be suspicious of anyone new in his life right now. I want him to take the lead. If he thinks I'm reluctant, he's going to be less suspicious."

"Just don't take too long with it. We need that shipment before it hits the street, and he's the key to finding it."

"Understood." With Maya's acknowledgement, Cmdr. Owens hung up.

The tracking app showed Nick's bike was at a motel two blocks from the beach, not far from her grandmother's cottage. She didn't like him that close, so she'd have to make sure he didn't find out where she was staying, so the case didn't put her grandmother in danger.

Maya's cover as a travel blogger was one she'd used before, and the agency had already set up her backstory and published articles under her alias, Holly Thompson.

She kept her cover as much as possible, so she pulled her hair into a ponytail and dressed in her travel blogger attire: linen shorts, strappy sandals, a fitted tank top, and a floppy straw hat. She finished the look with a pair of oversized sunglasses. If Nick spotted her, he wouldn't be suspicious of her attire.

She'd drive her non-descript rental car today. Nick had only ever seen her in her grandmother's car, so he wouldn't recognize her rental car. She programmed the address of Nick's motel into her GPS and drove over.

The area was a mix of cottages, like her grandmother's, and newer, more luxurious homes, with a few older motels and condo developments peppered in. Although they weren't directly on the beach, they were just two blocks away, providing easy beach access.

Nick's motel, Sunrise Inn, was outdated but well-kept; the kind of place that advertised itself as "retro" or "Old Florida", perhaps "art déco" if the owners were feeling generous. The L-shaped two-story motel, sandwiched between another motel and a luxury condo building, had an open breezeway connecting the two wings. Four rooms faced the street on each floor. The short leg of the 'L' was the front office, two guest rooms, and probably the manager's rooms. Three security cameras provided coverage of the front office, the entrances to the rooms, and the parking lot.

A shirtless older man came through the breezeway with a beach towel wrapped around his ample waist, hinting at a pool in the back of the building. The motel had advertised both a pool and direct access to the canal system running through Flamingo Cove.

At a small motel like this, the manager would know each of the guests, so Maya didn't want to interview anyone yet. That might alert Nick to her presence. She might ask the Flamingo Cove Police Department to conduct some interviews, but not until she had more information.

Maya slowed just enough to make a video of the motel and the cars in the parking lot on her phone. She'd run the plates later to see if she could identify one that might belong to him, or any others with possible cartel connections. No sign of Nick or his bike, but that didn't surprise her. He'd likely keep his bike inside his room for security.

Attempting to get a look at the back of the building, Maya drove through neighborhood streets until she found a good vantage point. Almost directly across the canal was a small city park that was a popular fishing spot. Maya took a few photographs of the back of the hotel with her phone as she sat in her car. If she came back for surveillance, she'd need to bring binoculars.

The back of the hotel featured a small pool with several children splashing around, some picnic tables and charcoal grills, and an empty boat dock. The first-floor rooms had small patios outside the rooms with sliding glass doors opening to them.

Satisfied that she'd gotten the lay of the land, she returned to her grandmother's house to research the motel and the cars in its lot. The hotel was owned by Aditi and Rohan Patel, who purchased it in 1997. Research into the owners showed no criminal history. Their address was the same as the motel, meaning they probably managed it as well. Maya searched through law enforcement databases and social media accounts, but found no connection between the Patels and Nick, other than him staying at the Sunrise Inn.

Of the four cars in the parking lot, one returned to the Patels. One out-of-state plate came back to a schoolteacher from Ohio. A third vehicle, from New Jersey, came back to a

seventy-six-year-old man, Myron Kleinman. Maya's mind painted him as the towel-clad man she'd seen that morning. After a bit of digging, Maya eliminated all three of those vehicles.

The last car was a rental, which Maya traced to a Diego Santos from Columbia. Maya felt a tingle of anticipation at the Colombian connection. Maya's current assignment involved a Colombian cartel, *Cártel del Sol*, and a lost shipment of its cocaine estimated to be worth millions of dollars. A Coast Guard drone doing routine surveillance spotted a fishing trawler named Happy Days as it approached U.S. waters. The drone team deemed the boat suspicious after spotting weapons onboard, and an interdiction team was sent to investigate. As the interdiction team approached the boat, the occupants jettisoned six pallets suspected to contain bricks of cocaine.

However, the trawler exploded before the coast guard reached the ship. The coast guard cutter immediately began search and rescue operations, but no crew members survived the explosion. As often happened, officials expected the drugs to wash up along the coastline in a few days.

Two days later, an older couple, Ted and Betty Greene, reported finding cocaine washed up on the beach during their early morning walk. Neither of them was carrying a phone, which meant they had to walk a mile back to their car to call the police. By the time the first officer arrived thirty-five minutes later, not a trace of the cocaine remained.

Skeptical, the officer questioned the Greenes at length, finally believing their story, which meant that someone else must've removed the drugs. The only other person the couple had seen that morning was a tall white man with "shaggy hair" and a tattoo on his shoulder. They recognized him as a surfer they'd seen previously on their early morning walks, but didn't know his name. He and the drugs were both gone by the time law enforcement arrived.

The investigation of the explosion and the missing drugs fell under the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard Investigate Services. Owens sent Maya to Flamingo Cove to investigate the surfer before he could move the drugs. When she'd interviewed the Greenes, they told her they'd seen two large pallets, both shrink-wrapped with duct tape around them. One pallet was torn open, and smaller black bricks spilled out of it. Each brick had what the woman described as an "angry penguin" stamped on the front.

Maya knew each brick was one kilo, and pallets contained one hundred kilos. Keeping the weight of the pallets consistent made it easy for the cartel to track its inventory. One hundred kilos equaled about two hundred pounds, meaning the two pallets would have a street value of close to six million dollars, enough to make the cartel take notice.

By the time the Greenes returned to the beach with law enforcement, it was empty. The pallets and bricks were nowhere to be found.

After interviewing the Greenes, Maya spent two days at the beach photographing all the male surfers she saw. When she showed the pictures to the Greenes, they identified Nick as the man they'd seen on the beach the morning the drugs went missing.

Maya, working with the local detectives, decided it was too soon to pull the surfer in for questioning. They didn't have enough evidence yet, and she didn't want to tip him off that they were on to him. He'd lawyer up or disappear, and they'd have lost their chance. Instead, Maya went undercover to learn more about him.

Her first task was to identify him, then see if she could get any evidence of his involvement. She had to earn his trust to do so. She was willing to flirt with him to get what she wanted. In fact, flirting wouldn't be a hardship on this assignment, but she wouldn't take it any farther than that. She wouldn't compromise her standards to get information.

Chapter 3

NICK FELT LIKE A desperate teenager, sitting around waiting for a certain curvy cheerleader to decide if she'd go to the homecoming dance with him. He'd been reduced to inaction and tense anticipation as he waited for the phone to ring with answers that would determine his next steps. Only this time, the stakes were much higher than they'd ever been.

While he waited, Nick picked up the newspaper clipping that changed his life. He'd been having coffee at his favorite local shop, Coffee Central, and another patron had left the paper on a table. Nick glanced over at the paper and was so shaken by what he'd read that he'd grabbed the newspaper and left without even touching his coffee.

After researching the story online, he knew what he had to do. Nothing in his life had ever meant as much to him. He'd risk everything if necessary. But the waiting was agonizing.

He finally got the message he'd been waiting for on Sunday night: *You're looking for me?*

Yes. Where are you? Prefer to meet in person, Nick texted back

What's this about?

We might be able to help each other, Nick replied. He wouldn't show his hand over text.

I'll come to you. Where? Obviously wary, the sender didn't want to reveal his location.

Nick sent him the address of the motel. After a few minutes, Nick received a reply. *Tomorrow. I'll text you a time*.

Good, Nick thought. That would give him plenty of time to prepare for the meeting. There was a time when Nick would've trusted Miguel Ramirez with his life. In fact, he had on more than one occasion when they were overseas together. They called Ramirez the Steel Sentinel because of his courage in battle. Nick had gotten out before Ramirez, and they lost touch. Supposedly, Ramirez had gotten involved with a dangerous group after he got out.

When Nick recognized Miguel's picture in the paper, he knew the rumors were true. He also knew that he could leverage their old connection to get what he wanted. Nick would cross any line necessary, even if he had to take advantage of an old friend.

On Monday morning, Nick sat on the beach waiting for Holly as the sky lit up in bright orange hues of the winter sunrise. His life would change after his meeting with Miguel today. If it all went to hell, he'd be lucky to come out of it alive.

Holly was a surprise, Nick thought. She loved surfing. She was sweet and funny. Laid-back and easy-going. Looked great in a bikini. And best of all: She'd be gone in a few weeks, so she wouldn't have any expectation of a long-term commitment. Entanglements jeopardized his ultimate goal, and he wouldn't allow that

But he and Holly could have fun while they were here; she would be a delightful diversion. They could experience the town and it would give her material for her article. Today's mission was to get her to say yes to something more than just breakfast, possibly dinner and a walk on the beach.

When she arrived, she set her board next to his and dropped easily onto the sand next to him. She flashed him a smile and said, "How's it looking?"

"Onshore winds," he said. "But I'm not really here for the surfing this morning. I'm here for the company."

"I'm only here for the breakfast," she said, nudging his shoulder with hers.

"I'm not sure you're supposed to be that honest on the second date."

"Is this a date?" she asked.

"Oh, it's a date," he assured her.

"A second date?"

"Yes. Because I got you coffee and a bagel. If I provide you with sustenance, it's officially a date. Therefore, this will be our second date."

"No, that's not the criteria for a date."

"It's not?"

Holly shook her head sadly and patted him on the arm. "I'm sorry no one has explained this to you before. It's only a date if I'm wearing makeup. No makeup, no date."

"Jeez, why am I just now hearing about this?"

"It's a closely guarded secret. I probably shouldn't have told you even that much. But since this isn't a date..." Holly let her words trail off as she shrugged.

"Don't you have some lip gloss or something in your bag?" Nick asked hopefully. His hopeful question earned him a throaty laugh that made his pulse race. Holly shook her head sadly once again. He lowered his voice and asked, "What do I need to do to earn a date with you?"

"See, that's another secret, but one I can't disclose. We'll just have to see how it goes today."

"Ah, then I shall endeavor to prove my worthiness."

"Let's go. The tide is coming in." Holly rolled effortlessly to her feet, kicked off her shoes, and stripped out of her shorts.

When the waves died down several hours later, Holly suggested a small café that she'd gone to with her grandmother for breakfast. Nick happily agreed. She offered to drive, and he strapped both boards onto the top of her small SUV while she responded to a text from her grandmother.

Over coffee and eggs benedict, they shared stories from their lives, although Nick was careful to hide any details that might lead to his true identity. He enjoyed spending time with Holly, was more attracted to her than was safe, but he wouldn't reveal any incriminating information. He was better trained than that.

"How long have you been in Flamingo Cove?" she asked.

"Not long," he answered.

"Is this home now, or are you visiting as well?"

"Just visiting." Nick had to shift the conversation before Maya asked another question. He didn't want the spotlight on him, but had to make the shift subtle enough that she didn't notice. "Most people love a white Christmas, but for me, I'll take a beach Christmas. There's something I just love about being on the ocean on Christmas Day. You must understand that as well, since you're here."

"For me, family makes the difference. This year, my parents went on a cruise and my brother is going to Pennsylvania to spend it with his in-laws. I decided to spend it with my grandmother. She always makes my favorite meals, and that's hard to turn down," Holly said with a smile. "Plus, Flamingo Cove goes all out for Christmas, so that makes it fun as well. Tonight's the tree lighting, and Santa arrives by helicopter."

"Maybe I could take you?" Nick asked.

Holly considered it for a moment and, just when Nick was certain she was going to turn him down, she agreed. "Sounds like fun."

Her green eyes sparkled as she spoke, and Nick found himself mesmerized by them. *Careful*, he reminded himself. This thing with Holly was nothing more than a fling, a simple distraction to entertain himself while he executed his plan with Miguel. Nick wouldn't allow it to become anything more.

Chapter 4

A FTER BREAKFAST, MAYA DROPPED Nick off at the spot where he'd parked his bike, then drove to the police station. O *ut front*, she texted Detective Jones when she arrived.

Jones met her out front a few minutes later with an evidence technician.

As soon as she saw him, she said, "Did you get it? Tell me you got it. I want this bastard."

"I got it. They're putting a rush on it."

"When will we get results?"

"Probably a few days. Could be up to a month. Now, where are the prints?"

Maya directed the tech to the passenger side of the car, the best place to find Nick's prints. She'd specifically chosen the restaurant this morning because it was on the other side of town and too far to walk. She'd bet on Nick having his bike, so she'd gotten him in her car. Now she just had to hope for usable prints.

Hopefully, they'd also get Nick's DNA from the coffee cup he'd taken from the restaurant this morning. As they'd arranged, Maya had texted Jones the name of the restaurant while Nick was securing the surfboards. Jones waited at another table until they left, then collected Nick's cup and fork for DNA analysis.

Maya was optimistic that either the prints or the DNA would pan out. Fingerprints would be much faster, but DNA would be a back-up if Nick's prints weren't on file.

"I think I got something," the evidence tech said. Maya and Jones walked around the car to peer over her shoulder as she worked. "Looks like two good prints here and a palm print at the top of the door. Want me to take your prints for exclusion?"

"No, I wiped the car down this morning before I left. He's the only one that touched it since then."

"Okay, let me pull these and I'll see what we find."

Maya returned to her grandmother's house to shower and change while she waited for a call from Jones on the fingerprint results. She would call Cmdr. Owens with an update once she got the results. She was hoping for a hit so she didn't have to go back to him empty-handed.

While she waited for the results, she searched for the black truck she'd seen at the Sunrise Inn this morning. The make and model, combined with the three letters she'd gotten from the plate, returned ninety-four in-state results. Maya wasn't completely sure it was a Florida plate, but she'd work her way through these ninety-four to see what she found. She'd ask Owens to assign another agent to assist with the research; he'd want that done as quickly as possible.

"I'm going out to pull some weeds, dear," her grandmother called from the other room.

Maya called back, "Okay, Gran. I'm typing up some reports. When I finish, I'll come out and help you."

"Okay, dear." Maya heard the back door of the cottage close and returned her attention to the vehicles she'd found. She was scanning the list, looking for any names that stood out, when her phone rang. Jones.

"Jones, tell me you have good news."

"I have good news. Prints come back to a Nick Sullivan."

"He's got a record?" Maya asked.

"No. Ex-military. Not much on him."

Anger washed over her. She took her military service seriously and had no tolerance for ex-military members who ended up on the wrong side of the law. The news made her more determined than ever to find out if Nick was behind the stolen drugs.

When the silence stretched out, Jones asked, "Still there?"

"I'm here. How's he look?"

"Looks clean. In for fifteen years. Spent time in the sandbox. Honorably discharged."

"Can you email me what you have?"

"Sending it now."

When the email arrived, Maya opened it immediately and printed out the entire contents on her grandmother's printer. She'd read more carefully on paper and she didn't want to miss a single detail. Unfortunately, there were precious little details to be discovered. Nick Sullivan. No arrest record. His

prints had come back with a hit because of his military service. However, it didn't provide his complete military record. Maya made a note to have Owens request that.

The picture confirmed it was the same Nick. The picture was about ten years old; Nick was clean-cut and clean-shaven, but Maya would recognize those piercing blue eyes anywhere. Whether clean-cut or shaggy, Nick was a handsome man, no denying that.

How did you go from that to this, Nick? Maya mused as she searched for Nick Sullivan online. With such a common name, the volume of search results overwhelmed Maya. One Nick Sullivan had posted photos from a club in Las Vegas last night. Another was celebrating the birth of twins in Rochester. A third had just gotten arrested for car theft in Boise. She tried Nick Sullivan Flamingo Cove, but didn't come up with any results.

Not knowing where Nick was from, Maya couldn't narrow the search results down any further. She copied the photo from his military ID and did an image search on that, but didn't get any matches. Jones had already checked Nick's arrest record, but, as a federal agent, Maya had access to databases that Jones didn't. Maya logged in and ran Nick, but didn't come up with any additional results.

Time to call Cmdr. Owens. Maya wished she had more to report, but couldn't wait any longer to make the call.

"Owens."

"Good morning, sir. Maya Mitchell."

"What do you have for me, Maya?"

"Nick Sullivan. That's our surfer from the beach. ID'ed him through fingerprints. Ex-army. Not much else on him."

"That's all you've got?"

Maya continued, "I could use some help with his military records." The army was notoriously reluctant to turn over personnel files, so it would take some prodding from someone of Cmdr. Owens's rank.

"What are you doing up there besides surfing?" he asked.

Maya took a deep breath before answering. "I'm keeping eyes on him, along with the local PD. I've got another meet with him tonight." Maya crossed her fingers, hoping Owens didn't ask about the meet. This was an assignment, a job, but she'd never hear the end of it if it got around the office that she was going to a Christmas tree lighting with a suspect.

"You need to step up the pressure. The cartel will do anything to get those drugs back. They don't care who they hurt or kill. We've got to find the people behind this and get them behind bars."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll get the records for you."

Chapter 5

T AKING A SEAT AT the bar, Nick said hello to Mateo, the owner of Coffee Central. The coffee shop was a favorite among locals, offering coffee and pastries in the morning, followed by craft beer and wine in the afternoons.

"What can I get you?" Mateo asked.

"An IPA?"

"I just got a new one in from a small brewery in Tampa. It's pretty good. Want to try it?"

"Sure." Nick waited while Mateo poured the beer and set it in front of him. He took a sip and nodded his approval. "A bit of citrus. I like it."

"I think it's going to be popular."

Mateo turned to take care of the other patrons while Nick enjoyed his beer. He felt movement to his right and when he turned, found himself staring into Holly's impossibly green eyes. There was something different about her tonight and after studying her for a moment, he figured out what it was.

Makeup. She was wearing makeup. Nick's heart soared at the meaning behind her makeup. Tastefully applied and understated, but makeup nonetheless.

This was a date. He was on a date with an amazing woman who made him feel like a teenager again. Nick took in her long, shiny brown hair. Her warm smile. Her red halter top bared her shoulders and sent his blood flowing to his groin. He shifted uncomfortably and refused to allow his eyes to travel any lower.

Now he just had to avoid saying or doing anything stupid that would scare her away. He'd never been smooth with women, especially women he liked as much as Holly. He was tall and muscular, so that gave him an edge with certain women willing to overlook his awkwardness. But he knew Holly would want something more from a man. He wanted her to like him, and tonight was his opportunity.

Nick met her gaze and smiled at her as desire flooded through his body. "Good to see you."

"You too," she said, returning his smile.

"What can I get you?" Nick asked with a smile. Mateo was watching them from a distance, ready to take Holly's order, but not wanting to intrude on their moment.

Holly spent several minutes scanning the menu, then smiled again. "A Christmas ale, of course."

Nick signaled to Mateo, who came over and took Holly's order. When it arrived, he offered a toast. "To unexpected pleasures."

"To unexpected pleasures," she agreed. After they each sipped their beer, she said, "You clean up nice. I wasn't sure if you owned anything but board shorts."

"If I had my way, I wouldn't," he said. "But I keep a few pairs of jeans in the back of my closet for moments just like this."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Spending the evening with a gorgeous woman."

"And if the evening calls for more than jeans?" Holly asked.

Nick shook his head. "Uncharted territory. I've yet to have a woman tempt me into something that required more than jeans."

A smile played across Holly's lips. "Challenge accepted."

"That wasn't a challenge. Merely a statement of fact," he protested.

"We'll see."

Damn! He could lose himself in this woman. Her wit. Her confidence. And those mesmerizing green eyes. He held her gaze, just taking her in and appreciating her.

After a moment, she set her beer on the bar and turned to face him fully. "I'm going to use my powers of deduction, gleaned from years of travel blogging—"

Nick interrupted her, "Wait a minute, travel blogging develops deductive skills? How—"

"Shh." Holly placed a finger lightly across his lips in a playful gesture, but the moment her skin made contact with his lips, the energy shifted. Nick read the desire in her eyes, matching his own. Her finger traced along the seam of his lips. He parted his lips slightly, allowing her to explore more fully. Desire surged through him and he shifted in his seat to ease the discomfort.

"Holly," he whispered.

She snapped back to reality when she heard her name. She placed her arm on the bar. Holly took a moment to collect

herself, then continued her earlier statement, "Yes, my excellent powers of deduction."

Holly paused as if daring Nick to challenge her again, but didn't, so she continued. "You live at the beach. You don't have a job. You surf every morning. You wear nothing but board shorts, with an occasional pair of jeans. I'm guessing male escort."

"Male escort?" Nick asked, his eyes wide.

"It makes perfect sense. You work at night, leaving your mornings free."

"What about tonight? Shouldn't I be out working?"

Holly considered this for a moment. "Maybe you're not very good, so you don't get booked often."

Nick couldn't let this one pass. He leaned over, tucked Holly's hair back to reveal the delicate skin of her neck, and placed his lips just an inch from her ear. He whispered, "I can assure you, that isn't the case. I leave women very satisfied."

Holly sighed as she closed her eyes and leaned toward him, bringing the sensitive skin of her ear against the warmth of his lips. He nipped her earlobe gently with his teeth and whispered, "That's a promise."

Turning to face him, their lips just inches apart, she said, "Maybe if you leave women so satisfied, you have to be choosy. Make sure you have enough stamina to fulfill on your promises."

Nick shook his head. "Nope. I've got stamina for days." Holly studied him carefully, reading the truth of his words. He saw desire flare in her eyes. He traced his fingers along the delicate skin of her wrist, reveling in the feel of her skin.

"What do you do when you're not surfing, then?"

"I take beautiful women to tree lightings," Nick replied. Wanting to give her more, but needing to be careful, he sat back in his seat and added, "I'm between things right now. I finished up one job not too long ago, and I'm waiting to hear on something else that might come up."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I was in the army for a while. Bounced around a bit since I got out." A movement in the mirror behind the bar caught Nick's attention. Not believing his eyes, he turned fully in his seat. "It's snowing."

"Snowing?" Holly asked, wonder in her voice.

Nick put some bills on the counter, stood up, and took Holly's hand. "C'mon. We've got to go see this."

Hand in hand, they walked out onto the sidewalk as snow flurries fell on an awed crowd. The snow was collecting on the sidewalk and the square across the street that was hosting the tree lighting. Holly caught a snowflake in her hand and said, "This is amazing."

"Have they done this before?"

"Never when I was here. Leave it to Flamingo Cove to create a white Christmas in a tropical climate."

Nick heard a helicopter approaching and pointed up. "Looks like Santa is arriving to light the tree."

"Let's go," Holly said, taking him by the hand and leading him across the street to the town square. Barricades formed a landing for the helicopter, with hundreds of children pressing up against them, eager to get a glimpse of Santa. Nick was content to stand apart from the crowd, and Holly was as well, because she offered no resistance when he led her over to stand next to Santa's workshop. They'd have a good view of the tree lighting, with the added advantage of having his back covered.

As a writer, Holly would never think of something like covering her back, unlike Nick, who had it drilled into him in the army. He might be a wannabe beach bum now, but his training as a soldier was deeply ingrained.

She shivered slightly as the air temperature dropped. Nick wrapped an arm around her shoulders, happy to share his body heat with her. She smiled up a thank you and nestled farther into the crook of his arm. Darkness had just fallen as Santa emerged from the helicopter to shouts of excitement from the children.

Santa's elves handed out candy canes to the children, while Santa made his way over to the Christmas tree, greeting children at the barricades as he went. A Flamingo Cove Fire Department platform truck was waiting to lift Santa to the top of the hundred-foot Christmas tree. Santa climbed into the bucket, accompanied by Ember, the Flamingo Cove fire dog and her handler.

The bucket slowly lifted to the top of the tree as Christmas carols played. When Santa reached the top of the tree, he waved his hands over the star and the thousands of lights decorating the tree lit up at once.

"Beautiful," Holly whispered.

Nick tightened his arm around her and murmured, "Yes." Only Nick wasn't referring to Santa or the tree. He was referring to this woman who was beginning to mean more to him than he'd intended. Holly would be hard to walk away from, but he had no choice.

The crowd dispersed quickly after Santa left. Families with small children left to avoid meltdowns; others to the restaurants on the Avenue. Once the crowd had thinned, Nick took Holly by the hand; they walked toward the tree to the glow of the multi-color lights. Although he'd only known her for a few days, the contact felt automatic, like their hands belonged intertwined with one another.

Holly admired the tree; Nick stepped behind her and wrapped his arms around her. He was enjoying himself too much to allow the night to end. "Have dinner with me?" he murmured into her hair.

She turned her head toward him, their lips almost touching. "I'd love to."

"Let's go."

They both agreed on a Mexican restaurant known for its guacamole prepared table-side. Nick was opening the door for

Holly when he felt his phone vibrate. "Hang on a second," he said, stepping to the side to check his phone.

2100 tonight. Same place.

He turned back to Holly. "I'm sorry. Something's come up. Can I buy you dinner tomorrow?"

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yes. Yes, it's fine," Nick said. He searched for a viable explanation. "A buddy of mine broke down on the side of the highway. Wants me to pick him up."

"Is he okay?"

"I think so, but I need to go help him. Let me walk you to your car. Where did you park?"

Holly pointed toward the far end of the square, then began walking in that direction. "I'm right over there. You must make friends quickly if you just got here and you're already his go-to when his car breaks down."

"He's an old army buddy. We served together overseas. Us military types have a strong network. It's like six degrees of Kevin Bacon. Only less than six degrees. I'm probably only three connections away from anyone in the military, current or former. Once I came here, I found out there's a few guys from my old unit in the area."

Holly was silent after Nick's response. He couldn't blame her for being annoyed at him, but he wouldn't miss the meeting with Ramirez.

When they reached her car, she said, "I had a great time tonight."

Nick leaned down to close the height gap between them. "Me too," he murmured, then touched his lips to hers in a featherlight kiss. His intention was to leave it at a sweet goodnight kiss, but the moment he pulled away, Holly wound her fingers through his hair and pulled him down for another kiss. This one scorching. He pulled her against him, her soft curves perfectly complementing his hard angles.

He teased his tongue against her lips, mimicked what her finger had done to him earlier in the night. Her lips parted and allowing him full access to devour her mouth. She rocked against his erection in response, and he growled his pleasure. "Holly," he moaned.

It took a herculean effort to step away from her, but he did it. Eventually. He held her face in his hands and looked down at her. "Woman, you are dangerous. You're going to make me forget about my poor, helpless friend stranded on the side of the highway."

"Your ex-army buddy is helpless?" she teased.

"Not exactly. But I need to go. Thanks for the date."

"Want me to drive you to your car? It'll save some time."

"Nah, I'm walking home. I need the time to cool off."

"Okay, goodnight then." Holly opened her car door and sat inside.

"Wait. I need your number so we can make plans for tomorrow."

"Sure. Give me your number and I'll text you."

Chapter 6

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Maya was glad to be on her own for this mission. If she had a team with her, the team would have full audio and video of the kiss she'd just shared with Nick. There was nothing fake about the kiss or her reaction to him. She drove around the corner, then pulled to the curb to collect herself. Once she had her breathing under control, she took notes from the evening before she forgot anything important. She couldn't chance following Nick, since he was walking.

She was certain he lied to her about his reason for leaving tonight. But lies often contained some truth. Could the part about an old army buddy be true? It wasn't much, but it could be something.

Now that she had Nick's phone number, she could get his call history and location data. That would add a lot more pieces to the puzzle that was still woefully empty. Satisfied that she'd detailed the night as well as she could remember, she zipped a black hoodie over her red shirt, retrieved her weapon from the glove compartment, and drove over to the parking lot next to the motel to see if she spotted Nick or the man with the black truck.

Maya took photos of the cars in the motel's parking lot; some matched with her earlier visits while others were new. She photographed the license plates. It was too dark for her to read them, but hopefully one of the tech guys could enhance the photographs.

There was little activity at the motel, although the sound of children playing echoed from the pool in the back. Maya smiled at the sound, remembering what a delight it had been to swim in the middle of winter when she'd been a kid visiting Flamingo Cove.

After nearly an hour of waiting, the occupants of the motel had mostly settled down for the night when Maya heard the rumble of a large truck. Shortly after that, a black truck pulled into the motel's driveway. Doing her best to stay concealed, she cracked a window in case conversation drifted on the breeze from the motel.

She held completely still as a bulky man climbed down from the pickup truck and stepped down onto the gravel; the gravel crunching beneath his boots. He wore in a black t-shirt and black pants, with a gun-shaped bulge in the back of his pants.

Maya's pulse sped up as the man approached the rooms, stopping in front of the sign offering directions. The man went to the ground-floor room set apart on the short leg of the 'L' and knocked lightly on the door. His knock was so soft that

Maya could see the motion but couldn't hear the sound. The door opened seconds later, allowing the man to enter the room.

Once he was in the room, Maya rolled her window back up and called Detective Jones. He answered on the first ring. "Agent Mitchell. What can I do for you?"

"I'm at the Sunrise Inn and there's a truck I want a plate on. Could you get a patrol car to get his plate when he leaves here? He arrived from the south, so it's a good bet that he'll leave that way as well."

"Traffic stop?"

"No, I don't want to spook him. I just want to find out who he is and what he wants with Sullivan."

"Okay. Let me see if I can get a unit in the area."

"Thanks, Detective Jones."

Seventeen minutes later, the man emerged from the motel room. Maya texted Jones, *On the move. Heading south.*

He responded a moment later, On it.

Chapter 7

A S NICK WAITED FOR Ramirez, he propped himself against the thin motel pillows on his bed and studied the newspaper article he'd clipped. He'd memorized the article, but couldn't stop looking at the picture attached to it. It contained two familiar faces, but he never would've expected to see these two together.

In the picture was his old army buddy Miguel Ramirez with one of Nick's ex-girlfriends, Luciana. How had such a good woman ended up with a lowlife like Ramirez? Surveillance video captured the image moments before Luciana was shot and killed leaving her hotel in Miami. Luciana was smiling, obviously unaware of the horror that was about to unfold. Nick hadn't even known she was back in the States. When they had broken things off last year, she'd returned to her native Columbia.

The headline above the photo screamed: NOTORIOUS DRUG LORD'S DAUGHTER SLAIN AT MIAMI HOTEL.

Nick hadn't known Luciana was a drug lord's daughter. He'd met her when she was finishing medical school at Stanford. He'd been living in California at the time and they met running a 5K race. Luciana had been clear from the beginning that she'd be returning to Colombia when she finished school. She had a strong calling to provide medical care to the poverty-stricken people of her country. Nick applauded her desire, but knew he would never move to Colombia with her.

They both knew their relationship had an expiration date, so they had fun while they were together, but neither was heartbroken when the relationship ended. To discover now that she was not only dead, but likely killed in retaliation for something her father had done, upset Nick. She'd been a good woman who wanted to make the world a better place; she didn't deserve to die for her father's sins.

If it had just been Luciana in the picture, Nick would've grieved her loss, maybe donated to a medical charity in Colombia on her behalf, and then gotten on with his life. Nick had seen enough death in his time in the military that he'd learned to compartmentalize it.

But it wasn't just Luciana in the photograph. It was what she held that set Nick's plan in motion.

Nick heard Ramirez's truck approach, set the newspaper clipping on the side table, and opened the door before he knocked. Forgoing pleasantries, Nick explained what he wanted from Ramirez.

Ramirez said, "I'll help, but you to understand why I'm doing this."

Nick wanted nothing to do with Ramirez, didn't want to hear his sob story, but Nick needed him right now, so he'd listen. "Go ahead."

"Everything you know about me is a lie," Ramirez said.

"What?" This was not what Nick expected to hear. He expected to hear justifications and excuses for why Ramirez went to work for the cartel after leaving the service. It wasn't unheard of for soldiers to become mercenaries, join crime organizations, or get involved in illegal operations. Some became hooked on the thrill of battle. Others were lured by the promise of easy money in exchange for their lethal skills. Others were so traumatized by their battlefield experience that they didn't think they were fit to return to their regular lives. Ramirez didn't seem traumatized, so Nick had put him in one of the first two categories.

"My father forced me to join the army."

"I thought you joined to get citizenship. You came from a poor village outside of Bogota and wanted a better life for your family. You were always broke because you sent your check directly to your family."

"I did join for citizenship, but that story about the poor village was a lie. My father is Santiago Mendoza."

Nick's body jerked in shock. He turned to the newspaper clipping and held it toward Ramirez. "Head of the *Los Reyes* cartel? THAT Santiago Mendoza?"

Ramirez nodded his head slowly. "Luciana was my sister. That's why she was in Miami. Visiting me."

"Luciana was your sister?"

"Yes"

"Why spin that story of escaping your village and making a better life for family?"

"They were all my father's lies. He needed someone he could trust to take over his U.S. operations. I've been groomed for the position since I was five years old. He had me join the army so I could become a citizen."

"Everything I know about you is a lie," Nick accused. "Was blowing up the boat your handiwork?"

Ramirez didn't fight the accusation or defend himself. Neither did he answer Nick's question. He simply responded, "I want those drugs."

Nick set his jaw. "My terms haven't changed. The drugs for my son."

"You don't know he's your son."

"That's why you're going to get a DNA swab for me. You get me the DNA and I'll get it tested. If it's my son, I want him. If it's not a match, I disappear and you go on destroying thousands of innocent people with your drugs."

Even as Nick heard the words come out of his mouth, he wasn't sure they were true. If the child was his, he would do whatever it took to get him away from the drug cartel. He'd never planned to be a father, but if he was, he wouldn't walk away from his responsibility.

Chapter 8

THE NEXT MORNING, MAYA awoke with a sense of purpose. She splashed some water on her face and started a pot of coffee. Her grandmother would appreciate that when she woke up. Maya checked the time: 7:53. Cmdr. Owens would be in the office by now and impatient for an update.

As was his custom, he answered on the first ring, his voice brusque. "Owens".

"Good morning, Commander. It's Mitchell."

"Tell me you've got something."

"I do."

"It's about damn time. Thought you'd gotten so busy surfing and seeing the sights that you'd forgotten the assignment."

Maya relied on her years of military discipline to keep her mouth shut. Owens was her commanding officer, and defending herself would only make the situation worse. Better to let him have this moment so they could get on with the purpose of the call. Owens was close to retirement, and Maya wouldn't be the only one celebrating when it happened. Cmdr. Owens was effective. He just didn't care who he bulldozed to get the job done.

When she remained silent, Owens spoke again. "What do you have?"

"I got a phone number for Nick Sullivan. The judge signed the warrant for his phone records last night; I've requested them from his carrier. Should get them today."

"What else?"

"Sullivan had a visitor at his motel last night. Got the plate number from the truck the guy was driving. Tracks to a Miguel Ramirez. No criminal history. Ex army. Honorably discharged. I'll see what else I can dig up on him today."

Owens was silent, so Maya continued, "Nick mentioned last night that he was helping an old army buddy, so I sent you a request for Ramirez's records. See what connection the two might have."

"That's it?"

Maya fought to keep the irritation out of her voice. Owens knew how these investigations worked just as well as Maya did. They started slowly, but then once they got a few pieces to fit together, the rest of it came together quickly.

Doing her best to keep an even tone, she said, "That's it for now. I will keep you posted if anything develops today."

Owens wasn't impressed with her optimism. "You've got twenty-four hours. Make something happen today. If you don't have something I can use by 1200 tomorrow, I'm pulling Sullivan and Ramirez in for questioning."

"Sir, if we question them too soon—"

"That's all, Mitchell. Call me if you get anything else."

Maya poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot she'd brewed and took it out to sit on the back porch. Her grandmother's love of gardening showed in the explosion of color and lush greenery surrounding the porch. The sweet perfume of the flowers scented the air, evoking memories of Maya's childhood.

Maya was strategizing her day when her grandmother stepped out onto the back porch. "Good morning, dear," she said, planting a kiss on Maya's head.

"You're up early," Maya said with a smile.

"The smell of this coffee was too enticing. What are your plans for the day?"

"Trying to get something to shake loose in this investigation. I've gotten a few leads, but I need something to break. Right now, we don't even know for sure this is our guy." Maya told her grandmother she was doing surveillance, which was partially true but sounded much safer than undercover work.

"If he is, I'm sure you'll get him."

"Thank you. What are you doing today?"

"I'm playing pickleball this morning. Then Frannie is having her Christmas party tonight. I thought you might want to join me."

"I will do my best, Grandma. It will depend on what happens today. If I get some new information, I may end up doing more surveillance tonight."

"That would be nice, dear. It starts at 5:00. Oh, did I mention her grandson is here?"

Suspicious, Maya narrowed her eyes at her grandmother.

Her grandmother laughed and said, "Honey, you have to date again at some point. You don't want to spend your life alone, do you?"

On the list of things Maya didn't want to do, spend her life alone was second on the list. At the top of that list was having this conversation with her grandmother. "Grandma, I don't—"

"Nonsense," her grandmother interrupted. "You've wanted a family ever since you were a little girl. Do you mean to tell me that's changed?"

Maya shook her head no. That hadn't changed. It's just she'd resigned herself to the fact that it might never happen.

"My history with men... It's well..."

"Disastrous," her grandmother supplied.

Maya laughed out loud. "Well, I was going to be a bit more delicate, but, yes, disastrous. Not one, but two men broke off engagements with me. Two." Maya held up two fingers for emphasis.

"Well, I will admit you missing your wedding rehearsal with Roger looked bad. That poor man."

"I was questioning a suspect and couldn't exactly walk out in the middle of the interrogation."

"What about Brian?"

Maya made a face. "That one was a mistake for sure. He wanted a woman that would be around all the time and that's not me."

"You just have to find the right man, dear. One you won't ask you to choose between him and your career. Then you have to show him how much he means to you. Do you know what I mean, dear?"

Maya rose from her seat. She absolutely did not want to hear what her grandmother meant and was afraid she would if she stayed. "Grandma, I love you. I've got to go to work."

"What are you doing today?"

"I'm trying to figure out if an ex-soldier is a bad guy. And doing surveillance on a motel."

"Which one?"

"The Sunset Inn." Maya regretted her words as soon as they were out of her mouth.

"Oh, that's the Patels' motel, right? They are the sweetest family. I taught all four of their children." Her grandmother's voice turned serious. "You don't think they did anything wrong, do you?"

"No, I'm watching one of their guests. And Grandma, you can't say anything. You need to promise me that."

"I won't say anything, dear, but if they have a dangerous criminal staying at the Inn, they deserve to know about it, don't you think? I wouldn't want anything happening to them."

"Grandma, you have to promise."

"Yes, I promise."

"Thank you." Maya bent down to kiss her grandmother's cheek. "I'm heading out, but I'll be back this afternoon."

"Stay safe, dear."

"I promise."

Maya was across the canal from the Sunset Inn watching through her binoculars when her phone pinged a text. Nick. *I missed you at the beach this morning*.

Maya smiled. She hadn't wanted to reach out to him, but she was feeling pressure after her call with Owens this morning. No more playing hard to get. She had to make something happen today.

Slept in and had coffee with my grandmother, she replied.

Want to meet me for lunch?

Yes, please! Rescue me from playing bridge with "the girls".

Does this make me your hero? he asked.

Yes. But only because you saved my life, she replied.

I'll take it. How about Tacos & Tequila at 1:00?

See you then, Maya replied.

She checked her watch, three hours until their date. The utility pants and fitted t-shirt she'd thrown on this morning didn't fit with her cover, so she'd have to go to her grandmother's house and change. Hopefully, her grandmother had already left for pickleball; Maya intended to dress to impress and didn't want to have to explain her attire.

She also needed time to research Ramirez, so she decided to end her surveillance for now. Maya fastened her seatbelt and put her car in reverse. She was just easing her foot off the brake when she caught movement at the back of the Sunset Inn. Nick! He walked casually across the pool area of the motel onto the dock. He walked to the edge of the dock, stretched his long frame, and spent a moment taking in the beautiful morning. The sun rising over the ocean was just beginning to warm the air. The breeze off the water ruffled his hair. He was easy on the eyes, no denying that. He had also stolen millions of dollars' worth of cocaine; she wouldn't forget that either.

After a moment, Nick turned and walked back to his hotel room. Maya put her binoculars away and returned to her grandmother's house.

Chapter 9

N ICK WAS STEPPING OUT of the shower in the cramped motel bathroom when his phone rang. Ramirez. Nick answered, "You got it?"

"Hey, man, how you doin'?" Ramirez said, sarcasm in his voice.

"I don't care how you're doing. We're not friends, in case you didn't get that message yesterday. You gave up the right to

that friendship when you went against everything we fought for."

The line was silent for a long moment. Nick pulled the phone from his ear to make sure they weren't disconnected. He saw the seconds ticking on the screen and waited in silence. Finally, Ramirez spoke. "Fine. This is a business transaction. DNA for the drugs. I have—"

```
Nick cut him off. "My son for the drugs."
```

"If it is your son."

"You got the DNA?"

"Yes."

"Meet me at the rest area on the Turnpike. The one near exit forty-five." Nick glanced down at his watch. "One hour."

"I'll be there."

When Nick walked out of his hotel room, he instinctively scanned his surroundings. He caught a flash of light from the interior of a dark sedan across the river from the motel. Was somebody watching through binoculars? Who? Maybe Ramirez was watching him, hoping Nick would lead him to the drugs without turning over the child.

Nick didn't think he was being watched, but he wouldn't take any chances. His plan to get his son back relied on his ability to get away clean after the exchange. If anyone knew his real identity or where he lived, his safety and his son's safety would be in jeopardy.

He continued on to the dock, keeping his body loose. Just a surfer dude out enjoying the smell of the salt air. Instead of getting in his boat as he'd intended, he stood at the end of the dock, stretching while keeping his eye on the car across the water.

Nick made no move toward his boat. If someone was watching him, he didn't want them connecting him to the boat. But he needed his truck for the meeting with Ramirez. And a weapon. The situation was about to get tense, and Nick believed in always being prepared.

He casually turned and walked back to his room, scanning for other vehicles that might be watching him. Seeing none, he rode his bike the two miles to his home on the south side of town.

When Nick pulled into the rest area, he spotted Ramirez's black truck in a back corner of the lot. Nick pulled alongside Ramirez, so their driver-side doors were just inches apart. Nick rolled down his window; Ramirez did the same.

"You got it?" Nick asked, holding his hand out the window.

"His name's Sebastian, Nick."

Sebastian. That was the name of the boy that could be his son. Nick carefully schooled his reaction, not wanting to show any emotion. "When was he born?"

"Christmas Day. Luciana called him the best Christmas gift she ever received." A sad smile crossed Ramirez's face at the memory of his sister.

Nick did some quick math in his head. Nine months before Christmas would be March. His stomach clenched. He and Luciana were intimate then. She'd told him she was on the pill and he'd had no reason to doubt her, but contraceptives failed all the time. Luciana wouldn't have cheated on him, Nick was sure of that.

More certain than ever that the baby was his, Nick nodded his head. "The math works."

Understanding flashed across Ramirez's face. "You and my sister. You son of a bitch."

Nick raised the hand he'd extended out the window. "I had no idea she was your sister. You don't even have the same last name. She looked nothing like your ugly mug."

Another sad smile from Ramirez. "Lucky for her."

"She was a good woman."

"Yes. She ran a clinic in the village near our home. My father hated it, but she didn't care. She was always stronger

than I was standing up to him."

Nick nodded a response. "What did she say about the baby's father?"

"She didn't even tell us it was her baby, but we figured it out eventually. When she finished school, she came home for a few weeks. Then she moved into the village so she could be available for patients when they needed her." Ramirez shook his head. "My father went crazy. Refused to speak to her. He finally gave in and went to see her in January. She had Sebastian but told us his mother died in childbirth and she was raising him."

"You believed that?"

Ramirez shrugged. "My father seemed to. Or at least pretended to. He made it clear from the beginning that Sebastian was a member of the family."

Neither man spoke for a moment. The silence that stretched between them was companionable, but neither was it openly hostile as it had been during their first meeting. Nick imagined what it must've been like for Luciana to be pregnant and alone in the primitive conditions of the village.

"She was living her dream," Nick said.

"Yes. Until she came to visit me and got caught up in this mess. All she wanted was out of the life, but it killed her anyway." Nick pretended not to notice the tears in the other man's eyes. He reached down for the DNA kit to give Ramirez a moment to compose himself.

"My swab is in here. I'm sending it out today. I'll have the results by Friday."

"Then what?" Ramirez asked.

"If he's my son, I'm taking him."

"My father will never let him go. Sebastian is his pride and joy. He plans to groom him as the next generation."

"What about you?" Logan asked.

"I never wanted this life. But my father is not a man I can say no to."

"Luciana did."

Ramirez nodded his agreement, disappointment in himself showing on his face. After a moment, he spoke again. "You think my father will just hand over his grandson and let you walk away? He will hunt you down."

"You going to point him in the right direction?"

Ramirez shook his head no, but Nick wasn't sure if he believed him or not. Nick gave Ramirez a hard look, and Ramirez responded with a harsh laugh. "That's not the first time you've given me that look, *amigo*. Remember over in the sandbox when you thought I ate the last of the cookies your mother sent you?"

"Yeah, I guess that should've told me everything I need to know about your character."

"Nah, it wasn't even me. What the hell is a 'snickerdoodle' anyway? If I'm going to get my ass kicked, it's going to be for some chocolate chip cookies."

Not interested in a stroll down memory lane, Nick shifted his truck into drive. "I'll be in touch when I get the results."

Chapter 10

B ACK AT HER GRANDMOTHER'S house, Maya found herself blissfully alone. As much as she cherished her grandmother, she needed the solitude to focus. She set her laptop up on her grandmother's dining room table to research Miguel Ramirez.

His military records were clean, and so was his criminal history. However, Ramirez got interesting when his name came up as a known associate of several members of the Los Reyes cartel. Maya called a DEA agent she'd worked with in

the past, Jamila Johnson. The agent answered on the first ring. "Maya! It's so good to hear from you. How's it going protecting our shores?"

"I'm working a drug case at the moment. In Flamingo Cove. The Cartel del Sol drug shipment that got blown up. Have you heard about it?"

"Yeah. They haven't recovered the drugs, right?"

"Right. We're working with local law enforcement to locate them before they hit the streets."

"If they hit the streets, it's going to cause an all-out war."

"Why?"

Jamila explained, "Cartel del Sol wants their drugs back, but even more, they want to know who blew up their shipment. Word on the street is that they'll pay \$10,000 for the name of anyone who has one of those bricks. It's basically a death sentence for anyone caught with one."

"But how will they know if it's from that shipment?"

"The cartels keep tight control over their inventory. They know how much each dealer has. More importantly, they know who's supposed to have their drugs and who isn't. Were the bricks marked?"

"The witness described them as being stamped with an angry penguin."

"I wouldn't want to be holding one of those right now," Jamila said.

Maya considered that for a moment. "I'm calling because I'm surveilling a suspect, and he's had two meetings with Miguel Ramirez. I think he handed off one of the bricks at the first meeting."

"You think your guy has the drugs?"

"Maybe."

"Then he's either stupid as hell or has balls the size of grapefruits. Trying to sell *Cartel del Sol* drugs to *Los Reyes*?

My grandma would say he doesn't have the brains God gave a goose. What's his play?"

Maya laughed at her friend's expression. "I don't know yet. What do you mean *Los Reyes*? How do they figure in?"

"Your friend Nick's buddy, Ramirez. His full name is Felipe Alejandro Miguel Ramirez Mendoza."

The effortless way Ramirez's name rolled off Jamila's tongue shocked Maya. "Please tell me you're looking at his file"

"Nope, don't need to. That's a name every DEA agent should know by heart."

"Why?" Maya asked.

"He's Santiago Mendoza's oldest son."

"What?"

"Yes. He runs the *Los Reyes* operations in the U.S. He'll inherit the family business when his father dies."

"Jesus," Maya breathed. "I didn't have any of this. The locals need to know it, too. If my guy's meeting with Ramirez, they might move the drugs soon."

"If your guy has the drugs and is meeting with Ramirez, why hasn't he turned them over yet?" Jamila asked.

"Holding out for more money?" Maya suggested.

Jamila was silent for a moment. "Maybe. Or he's trying to figure out a way to do the deal without getting his head blown off."

Maya considered that. "Or both."

"Or both. Is your guy hard core?"

"No. No criminal history at all. Old army buddy of Ramirez's."

"This guy just happens upon millions of dollars' worth of drugs on the beach, scoops it up, and calls his old army buddy for help?"

Neither woman spoke for a few minutes. Maya considered all the possibilities before she spoke. Building a case against Nick had been her sole focus. She hadn't pieced together why or how he'd done it.

Finally, Jamila broke the silence. "My boss is going to want in if he hears Ramirez is involved."

"Think he would send you?" Maya asked, eager for her friend's assistance. Jamila was a talented investigator, knew the drug world, and would have Maya's back if things got heated.

"He should. My tip, my investigation. Plus, I just wrapped something last week. I'm in Atlanta, so it's a short flight down to you."

"Let me put in the request with Cmdr. Owens. I'll get back to you as soon as I get the okay from him."

As soon as she disconnected from the call with Jamila, Maya called Cmdr. Owens. He answered on the first ring. "Owens."

"Hello, sir. It's Maya Mitchell. I've got some new information I wanted to share about the case."

"I'm listening."

Maya recapped the information she'd gotten from Jamila. "I'd like Agent Jamila Johnson to assist me in the case. She is familiar with both cartels and the DEA has local contacts we don't have."

"Damn it! This is our case, Ms. Mitchell."

"Yes, sir. I will continue as lead. The DEA will be here for information and contacts only. You asked me to get you something by tomorrow. In order to do that, I need additional resources." Maya kept quiet after that. She wouldn't plead her case. Owens had given her an assignment. Now he needed to provide her with the resources necessary to complete that assignment.

"Are you telling me you're not capable of handling this assignment, Mitchell?"

"No, sir. It's not that—"

"Good. So far, you've made almost no progress and now it sounds like you're asking for the DEA to come and rescue you. Is that what you're asking, Mitchell?"

"No, sir."

"Then get me something before those drugs hit the streets," Owens said and disconnected the call.

Maya stared at her phone, stunned. Owens was known for being gruff, but she'd never seen him so territorial. Federal agencies generally cooperated with each other, despite television crime drama portrayals. She and Owens had butted heads in the past, so maybe this was his payback.

Maya was logging off her computer when an email alert notified her that Nick's telephone records had arrived. She didn't have time to look at them before her meeting with Nick, so she forwarded them to Stephen Rutherford, asking him to analyze them this afternoon.

Cmdr. Owens had instructed Maya to "make something happen today", and she dressed with those instructions in mind. She paired a tight-fitting pair of dark jeans with an off-the-shoulder black fitted sweater. She carefully applied makeup and left her long hair down. The final touch was black high-heeled boots, which were completely impractical if she had to chase someone, but perfect for completing her look.

Today's primary objective was to get Nick to drop his guard. Hopefully, her outfit would help with that. Female agents hated being objectified, and Maya was no exception to that. However, all agents needed to use their assets to their advantage. For some, that was height or perfect aim. Maya knew her assets, one of which was looking good in a pair of tight jeans, and would use that to her advantage.

Chapter 11

N ICK SWALLOWED HARD WHEN Holly walked into the restaurant. The heels made her nearly as tall as him, and her jeans hugged her curves in all the right places. He rose to greet her, placing a kiss on her cheek.

"You look fantastic," he whispered in her ear. Holly gave a small laugh in response and took her seat in the booth he had secured for them.

"Thank you. And thank you for the invite," she said as soon as he sat down. The booth was a half-circle with a high back. He kept a respectful distance between them, but planned to close the distance if the lunch went well.

"I'm glad you could meet me on such short notice."

Holly smiled. "The perk of being on vacation."

"What about your grandmother?"

"We spend lots of time together, but she has her own life. I wouldn't want her to put it on hold just because I'm here. We're going to a party together tonight, and we're volunteering together tomorrow. We're making care packages to send to soldiers deployed overseas."

"I've actually gotten one of those care packages before."

The server arrived, asking about their drink orders.

"What do you suggest?" Holly asked.

"They have an extensive tequila list. What about a shot?"

Holly's eyes went wide at the suggestion. "In the middle of the day?"

"Vacation, remember?"

With a mischievous grin, she said. "Let's do it." For just a moment, Nick pretended she was offering to do something else, but she brought him back to reality when she said, "You choose. I'm up for whatever you want."

Good Lord! Was this woman trying to kill him? Focus, Nicholas, focus.

Nick ordered a small-batch tequila he'd had before, along with two glasses of water. Holly didn't seem like a drinker, and she might appreciate something to wash the shot down with.

While they waited for their shots, Holly picked up their earlier conversation. "I forgot you were in the service. What if the care package you got was one my grandmother made? Where were you deployed?"

Nick hated talking about his military service with civilians; they never understood what it was like to have your life on the line, and then come home to attempt a normal life. He needed to move this conversation in a different direction before she asked him if he'd killed people before. That was the question every woman asked, as if it somehow made him more manly or more dangerous.

"Here, there, and everywhere. It feels like a lifetime ago."

"Do you stay in touch with any of the soldiers in your group?"

Nick smiled at her wording. "We call it a 'unit'. Yes. I'm in touch with most of the guys from my unit. Some of them are still in. Some of them are old and retired, like me."

Their tequila shots interrupted the flow of conversation, for which Nick was grateful.

"Okay, tell me how this works." Holly said.

"You've never done a tequila shot?"

She gave a small shake of her head.

"Lick, shoot, suck," he said.

"Lick, shoot, suck?" Holly asked, with her brows raised. She leaned toward him and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. "Are we allowed to do that in public?"

Nick's body tightened in response to her question. He slid closer to her on the seat and dropped his voice. "Plenty of privacy in this booth."

Holly held his gaze for a moment, her eyes sparkling with delight. She reached for her shot and said, "Okay, how do I do this?"

"First you lick right here," Nick said, demonstrating by licking the webbing between his thumb and index finger. When Holly followed suit, Nick sprinkled salt on his hand and hers. "We're going to lick the salt, down the shot, and then suck on the lime."

At Holly's dubious look, he reassured her. "It will be good. Promise."

Nick licked the salt off his hand, gesturing for her to do the same. Then he downed his shot and bit into the lime slice. Holly did the same, squealing at the burn of the tequila and the tartness of the lime.

He raised his water glass in a salute. "You did it. Your first tequila shot."

She tapped her glass against his and sipped her water. "Now, let's get some food or that alcohol is going to go straight to my head. Any recommendations?"

"I've never eaten here before."

"You don't bring all the ladies you rescue on the beach here for tequila shots?"

Nick shook his head in mock sadness. "No. Although I go out to the beach every morning looking for damsels in distress, you are the only one I've found."

"I thought you went to surf?"

"That's just a guise."

"In that case, you're welcome," she teased.

Holly ordered fish tacos made with locally caught Mahi-Mahi. Nick chose *molcajete mixto*, which contained a variety of grilled meats and vegetables. He also ordered another round of shots and some table-side guacamole as a starter.

Nick was surprised at how much he enjoyed Holly's company. She was smart and funny. He could tell she was letting her guard down around him, because she was much more flirtatious than she had been in the past. She placed her hand on his arm several times and leaned in toward him as she spoke. Her scent, something light and fresh, was intoxicating.

Placing his arm around her shoulder, he traced his fingers over the silky expanse of bare skin exposed by her sweater. She made a small sound of pleasure, which was all the encouragement Nick needed. He drew her toward him and

whispered in her ear, "I'm not looking for any more damsels to rescue. The one I already found is quite mesmerizing."

Holly turned to face him, her bright green eyes sparkling in the dim restaurant. She parted her lips slightly, and that was all the invitation Nick needed. He lowered his head to hers and kissed her deeply. Arousal washed through him at the contact, and he pulled her even closer. Nick explored her mouth with his tongue, and she moaned in pleasure. She wrapped her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair.

Oblivious to their surroundings, Nick feasted on her mouth, savoring the taste of her. He wanted more. Needed more. He placed his other hand on her waist, attempting to pull her onto his lap.

His attempt for more broke the spell. Holly pushed away from him, breaking all physical contact. She looked up at him with horror. "Nick, I... I have to go."

Without another word, she rose and left the restaurant. *Shit!* Nick's desire had gotten the better of him and he'd lost control. He'd given no consideration to them being in a public restaurant; his primal need for her was too strong. He wasn't that guy: the kind who paws his woman in public. But he'd done that to her, and she deserved so much better. No wonder she left in such horror.

He had to fix this. He'd behaved like a caveman, but he didn't want to leave her with that impression. Even if their time together was short, he couldn't bear the thought of her hating him. He'd pursued her as a fling, but she meant so much more to him. Her strength, her sense of humor, her mesmerizing green eyes; Holly was exactly the kind of woman he could get serious with. He just couldn't allow that in his life right now.

Wanting to clear the air, he called her, but his call went to voice mail after a single ring. Had she declined his call? He texted her, *I'm sorry*. *I went too far. Can we talk*?

Nick's heart felt lighter when his phone alerted to a new text as he was paying the bill. Holly replying to his text so quickly must be a good sign, he told himself. Seeing the text from Ramirez on his phone shocked him.

What the FUCK is wrong with you? Call me ASAP. Not fucking around.

Nick felt a sinking feeling in his gut. What was Ramirez so angry about? Nothing could go wrong on this deal; Nick had to get his son.

He stepped outside to make the call. Ramirez answered immediately, as if he'd had the phone in his hand waiting for the call.

"You think I'm not watching you?" Ramirez's voice shook with fury. "What the fuck? You think I'm some chump? *¡Cabrón!* Did you even know my sister? Sebastian isn't your kid, is he?"

Nick remembered the glint of light he'd seen in the dark sedan this morning and realized it must've been one of Ramirez's men watching the motel. "Dude, calm down. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't play games with me, Sullivan. Here's the new deal: You turn over the cocaine TODAY and I might be able to convince my father to let you live. Forget about Sebastian. You'll never see him again."

"Miguel, I don't know what's going on."

"Oh, you don't?" Ramirez asked, in a voice dripping with sarcasm. He paused for a moment, then said, "Check out the picture I just sent you."

A few seconds later, Nick's phone dinged. He stared at the text in horror. It was a picture of the passionate moment he and Holly shared just a few minutes earlier.

Ramirez broke through the silence. "Nice rack, by the way. Although I'm more of an ass man myself, but I can't see that in the picture. Is her ass as nice as the rest of her?"

Anger surged through Nick at Ramirez's crude comments about Holly. If Ramirez were here in person, he'd be sporting a bloody nose right now. But beyond the anger was shock.

"What is this? Where did you get this?" Nick didn't want Holly anywhere near his dealings with Ramirez. The cartel was too dangerous, and he wouldn't jeopardize her to get his son back.

"You have millions of dollars of cocaine that I want. You think I don't have eyes watching you?"

"So what? She's just some piece of ass I'm entertaining myself with while I finish this deal with you." Nick purposely downplayed his attraction to Holly, hoping Ramirez believed him. He wouldn't let the cartel target her, and they would if they thought they could use her against him.

"Just some piece of ass? You expect me to believe that?" Ramirez scoffed.

"I met her on the beach and thought I'd have some fun with her. She does have a great ass, by the way."

"Tell me you're not really this fucking stupid," Ramirez said. "I don't know which one is worse. Either you're stupid enough to lie to me when I'm holding your son, or you're stupid enough to get caught with your dick where it shouldn't be"

Nick didn't bother to correct Ramirez's assumption that he'd had sex with Holly. "Just tell me what's going on."

"She's an investigative agent with the coast guard."

Nick felt a wave of relief wash over him. This was all a misunderstanding. Ramirez had gotten bad information; Nick could easily clear this up. "No, she's not. She's a travel blogger from the Midwest. Not a big coast guard presence there."

Ramirez must've heard the sincerity in Nick's voice, because most of the anger was gone when he spoke again. "Oh, man, she really got you. You poor bastard; you really are that stupid. Hang on."

Nick was too stunned to do anything else but simply hang on. Was Holly not who she said she was? His phone signaled an incoming text. When Nick clicked the link in the text, it took him to a news article featuring Chief Warrant Officer Maya Mitchell and the work she'd done on a drug interdiction team. The picture accompanying the article featured CWO Mitchell, wearing blue ODUs, standing alongside other members of the interdiction team, pallets of cocaine behind them.

Nick zoomed in on the picture. No mistake about it. His playful and funny travel blogger, Holly Thompson, was really CWO Mitchell with the Coast Guard Investigative Services.

Nick's shock quickly gave way to rage. She'd played him. Toyed with him and his emotions. Used her body to get what she wanted from him. How far would she have gone to get what she wanted from him? Was this her secret to the stellar track record touted in the article?

Nick mentally replayed their conversations. He hadn't revealed anything incriminating; he was certain of that. Her interest in his military service and the men from his "group" made sense. She was working him for information. What he'd mistaken for charming naivete was all an act.

At least now you know she'll call you back. The thought popped unbidden into Nick's head. Pathetic, he told himself. This woman had played him and all he cared about was if she was still mad at him or not. He was thinking like a lovesick boy when he needed to be thinking like a battle-hardened man.

Now that he had this information, it was time to figure out how to use it to his advantage.

Chapter 12

MAYA WAS FURIOUS WITH herself for her behavior at lunch. She lost all semblance of professionalism and behaved like a hussy, as her grandmother would say, pressing up against Nick and practically draping herself across his lap while they made out in a public restaurant.

But if she was being honest, her behavior wasn't what she was most angry about. Her arousal, her desire for Nick, and her wanting more from him were all genuine. She'd lost sight of the mission and had seen him as a man instead of a suspect.

A man that turned her on so much she was close to an orgasm in a crowded restaurant.

She'd been so shocked by her actions that she had to leave, which made it even worse. The entire lunch date had been a failure. She didn't get any new information from Nick because she'd run out on him. Luckily, he misunderstood the reason for her departure and blamed himself for his actions.

Maya would use his guilt to her advantage. He wanted to talk to her, and she would call him, but she needed to regroup first to formulate another plan. She had to make something happen today, but didn't know what or how.

Still feeling the effects of the tequila, Maya walked back to her grandmother's cottage. After two blocks, she was cursing her boots and her decision to wear them. By the time she arrived at her grandmother's, removing them was pure bliss. She sat on her grandmother's couch and massaged her feet, sighing in satisfaction.

"Can I make you a cup of tea, dear?" her grandmother called from the kitchen.

"Coffee?" Maya asked. The walk had done wonders to clear her head, and a strong cup of coffee would be just the jolt she needed to finish the job.

"Of course. It will just take me a few minutes to brew it. Why don't you come in here and tell me about your day?"

When Maya walked into the cozy kitchen, her grandmother remarked, "Look at you! Is that for the party tonight?"

"No, I can't make it to the party. Frannie's grandson will have to find love another night. I'm working."

"Well, no other woman is quite as amazing as you are, but he'll just have to settle," her grandmother said, patting Maya's cheek as she placed her coffee on the table in front of her. "Whew! Martinis for lunch? I thought you were working."

"Tequila. And I was working. Meeting with someone involved in the case. The tequila was to help him get comfortable with me."

Maya's grandmother pulled out a tin of cookies and sat down with her tea. "Eat some cookies. It'll soak up the alcohol. Did you get something good?"

"No. It's frustrating. I can't seem to make any inroads in this case. We know a shipment of drugs is missing. We're pretty sure we know who did it, but we can't move on him until we get more evidence. If I could just figure out *why* he did it, I think I could make some progress."

"Why would anyone steal a shipment of drugs if it weren't for money?"

"I know, but this guy has no criminal history. Seems odd to start with millions of dollars of drugs."

"But he didn't really steal them, did he? He must've just found them on the beach. Nobody knew the drugs were going to wash up on shore, so he couldn't have planned it."

Maya nodded her head. CGIS believed the same thing. Sullivan stumbled upon the drugs and took advantage of the opportunity.

Her grandmother said, "If he's not a criminal, maybe he just did something stupid and got himself in over his head. Maybe he needs your help to get out of it. Remember the Sewells? Well, Jim got fired once, and he couldn't bear to tell Marie, so he lied to her about it. He just kept on going to work every day, like it was fine. It wasn't until they ran out of money that Marie found out. Jim wasn't really a bad guy; he was just in over his head. They worked it out eventually."

Maya considered her grandmother's opinion. If Nick stumbled across the drugs and took advantage of the situation, he would need a way to sell them. But he's not involved in the life, so he reaches out to the only person who could help him: Miguel Ramirez.

If that was true, Nick was in grave danger. *Cártel del Sol* would chase him to the ends of the earth for taking what was theirs. *Los Reyes* wouldn't care enough to protect Nick once they got the drugs. Miguel and Nick might be old army buddies, but Miguel's father was ruthless.

"But this guy is sitting on a shipment of drugs that will destroy lives. People will die from these drugs. He's not a good guy."

Her grandmother shrugged. "I'm not defending him. What he did was wrong. But what if it was all a stupid mistake?" She rose and patted Maya's hand. "I'm going to take a rest before the party tonight. I know you'll figure this out."

Maya had just reached for her phone to text Nick when she received a text message from Jamila: Someone just tried to sell a brick of cocaine with a penguin on it to an undercover in Atlanta. Will update you if it's anything.

Roger that, Maya replied. She puzzled over what this meant for her case. Had Nick already sold the drugs? If so, what was he doing with Ramirez? She had to get more from Nick and she had to do it as soon as possible, before Commander Owens took the case from her.

She called Nick, deciding a call would be better than a text. It rang several times, and just when Maya was about to hang up, Nick answered, "Hello?"

"Hey, Nick. It's Holly. I wanted to apologize for running out from you at the restaurant earlier."

"No. I should be the one to apologize, Holly. I lost control of myself and mauled you in a restaurant. I'm sorry about that. You had every right to run out of there."

"I'd like to see you again," she said.

"I'd like that, too." Nick's voice was tense, despite his words.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just angry at myself. You're an incredible woman and I almost blow my chances with you. I'm glad you still want to see me."

"Want to meet me at the beach later?"

"I'd like that. What time?"

Maya checked her watch. She wanted to see what Stephen had gotten from Nick's phone records, and she needed a long swim to burn off her nervous energy and clear her head. "Six o'clock?"

"Meet you at 'our spot'?" Nick said with a smile in his voice.

"Our spot it is."

Another agent from her office, Stephen Rutherford, had analyzed Nick's phone records and sent Maya a report. The report indicated that Nick's phone number was only ten days old. A burner for his trip to Flamingo Cove? The activity was minimal, mostly calls and texts to a number that tracked to Miguel Ramirez. Nothing else useful. Maybe he used more than one phone.

Maya wanted to see if she could get anything useful from Miguel's phone, so she emailed Rutherford, asking him to type up a warrant for Miguel's records.

Maya wore her most practical bathing suit, opting for comfort rather than style for her swim. She pulled a pair of black running shorts over her suit, put on her running shoes, and packed a small bag.

"I'm going for a swim, Grandma. I'll see you when you get home from your party."

"Give me a kiss before you go, honey. I love you."

Maya jogged slowly to the beach, warming up her muscles for her swim. When she arrived at the beach, she kicked off her shoes and socks. From her bag, she pulled her swim cap and earplugs. She donned her gear and waded into the water, enjoying the tranquility she got whenever she was in the ocean.

She dove under the warm, blue water and set an easy pace until she was about a hundred yards offshore. She was far enough out to be beyond the break line, but close enough to get back to shore if she had a problem. Maya eyed the jetty,

which she knew was about a mile away. There and back totaled just over two miles; it should take her just over an hour.

Her body found its freestyle stroke easily, and Maya settled into the rhythm of her movements. The salt water kept her buoyant, but the current threatened to pull her off course, so she glanced up at the jetty every few strokes to adjust her direction.

Her body functioned on autopilot from years of training, leaving her mind was free to wander. Nick had no criminal history. Could it be as simple as he stumbled across the drugs and knew an old army buddy who'd be interested in them? Based on previous shipments Maya helped interdict, the drugs on the boat could have a street value upwards of ten million dollars. Given prevailing currents, the analysts predicted maybe half of the shipment would've landed on the beach near where Maya had just entered the water.

Was five million dollars more than Nick could resist? Maya was also troubled by how quickly the drugs had disappeared. The window was maybe forty minutes. If he had a truck nearby, he might've been able to do it, but would he have had enough time to do it without help? The packages were heavy and moving them across the sand would be arduous work.

Frustrated that she had more questions than answers, Maya focused on the immediate task at hand: getting information from Nick. He was clearly attracted to her, but so far, he hadn't disclosed anything useful. Most of the men she'd met undercover tried to impress her with talk of big deals and big money. They thought they could impress her into bed with them. But Nick wasn't like that. He was attentive, interesting, and funny.

And attractive, she had to admit. The combination was why she'd gotten carried away at the restaurant. She'd forgotten her mission and became Maya instead of Holly, a mistake she couldn't afford to make again. She was willing to lead Nick on to get information, but she wouldn't sleep with him for it.

When Maya returned to the lifeguard stand where she'd entered the water, she flipped onto her back and allowed the

currents to bring her back to shore while she took in the brilliant blue sky above. When she reached the break line, she stood and saw Nick waiting on the beach.

As she waded toward shore, she waved to him, and he rose to greet her. He wore a pair of khaki shorts and a button-down shirt, which was dressier than his previous attire. It was a good sign if he was trying to impress her.

He met her at the surf line; the waves rolling over his bare feet. Nick smiled at her; his smile was so genuine, she felt herself smiling in delight in response. Nick put an arm around her and pulled her close.

"Nick," she squealed. "You're going to get all wet."

"I don't care," he said. "You looked like a sea nymph walking out of the water. I have to touch you, make sure you're real."

Maya laughed and flicked drops of water onto his shirt. "I'm real, all right."

"Prove it," he growled. As the water lapped at their ankles, he claimed her mouth hungrily. This was a side of Nick she had yet to experience, and she felt liquid heat pool between her legs as his tongue explored her mouth.

When Nick bent his head lower and kissed her throat, she pushed him away. "You have a thing for PDA, Nick."

Moving his mouth to her ear, he said, "No. I have a thing for you, Holly. I can't keep my hands or my mouth off you. Come back to my place."

Maya stepped away, giving herself space to collect herself. She couldn't think when he was this close. "Nick, I, I can't."

"Why not? Is there a man back in Wisconsin waiting for you?"

"Indiana, not Wisconsin. And no, no man. I'm just... I'm not... I'm not ready."

Nick kissed her hand lightly. "I understand, Holly. C'mon, let's go have a seat. I brought beer and water."

"Water, please. That swim dehydrated me."

Nick uncapped a bottle of water while she toweled off. When she sat next to him on his blanket, he handed it to her and asked, "So how did an Indiana girl master open-water swimming?"

Maya froze for a moment and tried to cover her shock by taking a long drink of water. She tried to laugh it off. "I'm just super-slow. I spend most of my time floating. It only seems like I have a lot of endurance. Surfers are usually pretty good swimmers anyway. What about you? You're an excellent swimmer."

"Surfers try to do as little work as possible. We like the waves to do all the work for us."

"You really love it, don't you?" Holly asked.

"Yeah."

"What do you do when you're not surfing?"

"Think about the next time I'm going to be surfing."

She bumped him with his shoulder. "You must work, right?" she asked, trying to keep her tone playful.

"Not really. I'm your pretty basic beach bum."

"Then did we ditch out on the bill at lunch today?"

"Well, you ditched out on the bill. I was gentleman enough to pay after you left."

"Thank you for that. I'm a little embarrassed about my behavior. I'm blaming it on the tequila."

"Then tequila is my new favorite drink because I quite enjoyed it."

Holly shivered as the cool ocean air blew across her bare skin. Nick responded by putting his arm around her shoulders to draw her close. "Jesus, Holly, you're freezing."

He rose from his seat, moved behind her, and sat down, positioning his legs on either side of her and wrapping his

arms around her. Maya sank into his body heat, savoring his strength.

Nick used one hand to brush her hair from her neck and gently nibbled along her shoulder and her neck. Goosebumps erupted on her skin from the sheer pleasure of it. Nick drew her against him, offering more of his body heat. She could also feel his erection, pressing hard and heavy against the cleft of her ass.

"Come back to my motel with me. No funny business. I'll get you a hot shower and some dry clothes. I might even let you cook me dinner."

Maya elbowed him lightly in the ribs. "What happened to your gentlemanly ways?"

"Okay, okay, I'm not much of a cook, but I grill a mean steak."

Maya's stomach rumbled loudly. Nick asked, "Can I take that as a yes?"

Laughing, Maya said, "Yes."

Chapter 13

WHILE MAYA WAS IN the shower at his efficiency at the motel, Nick started the charcoal. He also placed a delivery order from a local restaurant for some sides and bread. Nick had survived quite well without cooking thus far in life, but it would be different once he had Sebastian. Nick would learn to cook because nutrition was important for babies.

After double-checking that the room didn't contain anything he didn't want Maya to discover, Nick cracked a beer and took it out on the back patio of the motel to watch the charcoal as the sun went down. Maya emerged a few minutes later, wearing one of his t-shirts, which hung to almost mid-thigh. Nick's mouth watered at her long, muscular legs exposed beneath the shirt. Maya left her wet hair loose, trailing almost to her mid-back in dark waves. The faintest hint of her nipples showed through the fabric of the shirt. Nick felt himself respond to her once again.

She may be the enemy, but she was sexy as hell, and he'd take advantage of it while he could. Now that he knew Maya's game, she no longer posed a threat to him. He would play her game and see how far she would go to get information from him.

"Damn, you look sexy in that shirt." Nick pulled Maya onto his lap. "The charcoal will be ready soon. Watch the sun go down with me." It was pure torture when Maya wiggled to get more comfortable. Nick didn't hide his reaction to her. Let her feel how much she aroused him. Let her think she could use that to her advantage.

Maya rested her head against his shoulder. He breathed in her clean scent and wrapped an arm around her waist. They sat in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the pink and purple hues of the sunset.

"I think the charcoal's probably ready," Nick said. He put his hands on Maya's hips and lifted her off his lap. "Be right back."

The delivery driver arrived with the rest of the food while the steaks were resting. "Let's eat inside," Nick said. His efficiency had a small table and the same view of the sunset, while providing the privacy Nick sought.

They traded stories of their childhoods over dinner. Both had three brothers. Nick was the oldest, Maya the youngest. Maya shared the struggles of dating with three protective older brothers; they were determined to keep her a virgin until college. Nick talked about the pranks he and his brothers played on each other, much to his mother's chagrin.

After dinner, Maya offered to help clean up.

"Leave it," Nick said, taking her by the hand. He led her over to the couch, pulling Maya down on top of him to straddle his lap. "We're in private now. Nobody here but the two of us."

Maya took Nick's hands and pinned them against the wall above his head. Nick allowed himself to be restrained, loving the feeling of her pressed up against him. She said, "Now I have you completely at my mercy. You must tell me all of your deepest, darkest secrets."

"What if I won't talk?"

"Trust me, I have ways of making you talk."

Nick raised an eyebrow and said, "Did you forget I was in the army? That taught us to withstand torture without divulging information."

Maya smiled a wicked smile. "I'm certain I have ways of torturing you that the army never imagined."

Nick's erection throbbed; he pressed against Maya's heat, letting her know just how he felt about her words. "Will I enjoy them?"

She leaned forward to nip on his earlobe. She whispered, "Very much."

"That's not much of a threat then, is it? You don't quite get way torture works, do you?"

"Ah, see, but I do." Maya dropped her voice to a husky whisper. She ground herself lightly against his erection, causing him to groan in pleasure. He thrust his hips upward to deepen the contact, but she moved away, kneeling above him. He could still feel her heat, but he couldn't reach her. "Now you must tell me one of your darkest secrets."

"A woman I once loved was just murdered." *Jesus!* Nick hadn't intended to reveal that. This woman could teach his resistance-to-interrogation instructors a thing or two. His body, desperate for more contact with her, overrode the filters in his brain.

Maya sat down at his revelation, perching herself near his knees and drawing her face on the same level as his. She let go of his hands. "Oh, Nick, I'm so sorry."

He nodded his head. "It's why I'm still in Flamingo Cove. I was here visiting with some friends, and when I read about the murder, I stayed in town a little longer. There are a few things that don't sit right about her murder, and I'm trying to get answers."

Maya crawled off his lap, sitting on the opposite end of the couch. "Maybe I could help."

This was it. If she was going to come clean and tell him who she really was, here was her moment to do it. Did she really have feelings for Nick, or was she just playing him to get information? He would find out right now.

Nick gave her a look of complete skepticism. "A travel blogger? How is a travel blogger going to help me get answers about a murder? This is serious business, Holly."

Maya paused for a moment, indecision in her eyes. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe moral support. Want to talk about it?"

That was all the answer Nick needed. She was only here to use him, Nick realized with a stab of pain. He'd come to care for this woman, which only proved how good she was at her job. How many others had she used to get information? How many others had she toyed with to get what she wanted? Time to turn the tables on her.

"No, it was history; we broke up a long time ago. I just want to make sure whoever's responsible is caught." Nick shook his head. "None of this can be very interesting to you."

"If it matters to you, it matters to me. Maybe I could become a true crime blogger."

"Or maybe I torture all of your dark secrets out of you," Nick said. He covered her body with his and captured both her wrists easily in one hand. She attempted to break free of him, but Nick held her tight. He wrapped his arms around her and twisted their bodies until she was on her back on the couch. He

nudged her legs apart with his knee and noticed she was wearing a pair of tiny black running shorts. "Where did these come from?" he asked, tugging lightly on one of the leg openings.

"They were in my bag." Maya's voice was breathy.

"Hmm, well, I'll allow them, for now. But if I don't get what I want from you, they may have to go."

Maya's brilliant green eyes smoldered with desire. Was it all an act? Nick was tempted to slide a hand into her shorts to feel if she was aroused, but that could wait. He'd get there soon enough, and he was having too much fun toying with her right now.

Nick leaned back and surveyed Maya's delectable body. "Hmmm, where to begin?" Nick traced his thumbs over Maya's erect nipples, poking through the cotton of his shirt. She thrust her chest upward in response, all the encouragement he needed. He lightly pinched one and then the other through the fabric, and Maya mewled in pleasure.

His cock was hard and demanding, but he would have his fun later. This was about pushing Maya to see how far she would go. He pinched her nipple again, harder this time, and she closed her eyes in pleasure.

"I think my captive is wearing too many clothes," he growled in her ear, tugging his shirt over her head. She reached for him, but he grabbed her hands once again, positioning them over her head. "Keep your hands here, or you won't like the consequences."

She stared into his eyes for a moment, then gave a small nod. Nick sat back to drink in the sight of her. He'd seen her in a bikini before, but nothing prepared him for the sight of her luscious breasts, rosy-pink nipples straining for attention.

Nick was happy to oblige. He teased one nipple with his thumb and finger while he sucked the other into his mouth. Maya arched up against him, wrapping her legs around him, but keeping her arms where he'd positioned them.

Nick feasted on her breasts while she ground her hips against him, seeking even more pleasure from him. He slid a finger into the opening of her shorts and found her hot and wet, ready for him. He slid his finger along her silky folds, and she opened her legs, allowing him full access to her.

His thumb pressed gently against her most sensitive spot, and she cried out. "Nick, oh please. Nick."

Nick knew how close she was, how ready she was. It would only take a few more strokes to bring her the orgasm her body craved. Instead, he kept his pressure too light to satisfy her and whispered, "First, you have to tell me one of your secrets, Maya."

She froze for just an instant, then pushed him off the top of her, scrambling off the couch to pull on the shirt she'd been wearing earlier.

"What did you say?" she asked in shock.

Nick leaned back on the sofa, assuming a nonchalant pose. "Oh, that's right. I already know your secret, Maya. Or should I address you as Chief Warrant Officer Mitchell?"

To her credit, Maya didn't lie or make excuses. She stood tall, her military bearing evident for the first time since Nick met her.

"Do I leave, or do we talk about this?" she challenged him.

"What's to talk about?"

"CGIS is convinced you're sitting on millions of dollars of cocaine. Trying to sell it to Los Reyes. Tomorrow at noon they are going to swarm this town and they won't leave until they have you and the drugs."

"Your job was to sweet talk it out of me? Are you the one they send in to sleep with the suspects? Loosen them up a bit? Damn. And I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I really thought we had something. You're very good at your job. Although some parts can't be faked," he said, alluding to her obvious arousal.

"I'm leaving," Maya said. She collected her bag in one hand, shoes in the other, and walked toward the door.

Nick was off the couch and caught up with her before she made it to the door. He grabbed her elbow. "Don't leave," he implored.

She turned to face him, expression stony.

He continued, "Let's talk about it."

"The conversation is on the case and only on the case. Nothing else or I walk."

Nick nodded his agreement.

Maya took a seat at the small table, oblivious to the remnants of their dinner. Apparently, she wanted to send a clear message that there would be no more physical contact between them. That was fine with Nick. He needed to keep his head about him, which was impossible when he was touching her. He lounged on the couch.

"What can you tell me?" Maya asked.

"No, no, no. That's not how this is going to work," Nick countered. "Even exchange of information."

"Truth for truth," she said.

Nick agreed. Maya didn't wait to begin her questions; she surprised him when she said, "Tell me about the woman who got murdered."

"Luciana Mendoza. I met her when she was in California attending medical school. She went back to Colombia when she graduated. Started a clinic there."

"Mendoza? As in Los Reyes Mendoza?"

"Tsk-tsk. That's another question. My turn," Nick said. "Why am I a suspect?"

"An eyewitness identified you on the beach with the drugs. Both you and the drugs were gone by the time law enforcement arrived. My turn. Is Luciana related to Santiago Mendoza?"

Nick nodded. "He was her father. I didn't know about her cartel ties until I read about her murder. What evidence does the CGIS have against me?"

"Witnesses ID'ed you. Your meetings with Miguel Ramirez. You severed ties to your previous life. We can't find you after you left the military."

Nick considered this for a moment. "So basically nothing, right?"

"For now. But I'm good at what I do, and I know something is up. I can feel it. We'll find it." Maya paused and smiled at him. "And that was your question. My turn again..."

Nick protested, but she ignored him. "Is this about money?"

She didn't ask him outright if he was guilty, but was leading him down that path as any seasoned investigator would do. Nick couldn't let his guard down around this woman. "No." That was all he would give her for now.

Surprise followed by disbelief registered on her face. "Unemployed self-professed beach bum wouldn't jump at the chance to make an easy five or six million dollars?"

Nick shrugged. "My turn. How'd you find out about Ramirez?"

"I've been watching your motel for the past few days."

Now it was Nick's turn to look surprised. He'd been suspicious of the sedan across the waterway, but never considered that it might be Maya.

"My turn," Holly said. "Did you give a brick of cocaine to Miguel a few nights ago?"

Nick nodded his head. "Show of good faith."

"You know what Cartel del Sol will pay for the name of anyone found with a brick of that cocaine? If your old buddy Ramirez doesn't kill you after he gets the drugs, Cartel del Sol will finish the job. Do you have any idea what you've gotten yourself into here, Nick? It's going to be open season on you as soon as those drugs change hands. You say it isn't about the money, you don't have a criminal history, so what is it? What

is worth risking your life over, if five million dollars isn't the reason?"

Maya's voice had risen as she'd spoken. Her hair was still mussed from their romp on the couch, and her eyes darkened to match her mood. Nick couldn't help but notice what an incredibly attractive woman she was. In another time, another place, another lifetime, he would've liked to have seen where it went between them. But now, they were on opposite sides of this, and he couldn't give her an inch.

When Nick was silent, Maya softened her voice and asked, "Just tell me this. Are you responsible for the drugs in Atlanta? Are you double-crossing Ramirez?"

Nick's confusion must've shown on his face because Maya studied him closely for a few minutes. "You're playing a dangerous game. A Crip in Atlanta tried to sell a brick of the stolen cocaine to an undercover DEA agent today. Cartel del Sol refuses to do business with the Crips, after a deal went bad a few years ago. No way that dealer should've had that cocaine.

"The drugs are making their way onto the street and your name is mixed up in this, Nick. Even if you didn't doublecross your good buddy Ramirez, he's going to think you did. You understand that, right?"

Maya rose and walked over to the couch, standing before Nick. "Let me help you with this, Nick," she said. "Let me help you find a way out before it's too late."

"Nice speech, honey, but I'm not falling for it. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. I can handle Ramirez. What I can't handle is a sneaky CGIS agent using sex to get a confession out of me."

"Nick, we don't have to be on opposite sides of this," Maya implored.

Nick scoffed in response. He rose from the couch and said, "You've got two choices. Leave, or finish what we started earlier. Which is it?"

Without another word, Maya collected her belongings and walked out of his room.

Chapter 14

DESPITE THE LATE HOUR, Maya texted Jamila. I think I've got something. Check this out. Retribution? Attached to the text was a link to a news article about Luciana Mendoza's death. Luciana was walking out of a hotel with her brother in Miami when she was shot and killed. Maya had spoken with the detective in charge of the investigation earlier who informed her they believed Luciana's brother, Miguel Ramirez, was the intended target.

What made it interesting was the timing. Luciana was murdered five days before the *Happy Days* was blown up. Destroying the shipment could've been retribution for Luciana's murder.

Maya was creating a timeline of events when she got a return text from Jamila. *Could be. Still unraveling things here. I'll see what I can find out.*

Keep me posted.

Same, Jamila replied.

Maya returned to her timeline, adding Luciana's date of entry into the U.S. She'd been in Miami for four days when someone killed her. Maya couldn't find any contact between Luciana and Nick during that time; if he was communicating with Luciana, he was using a different phone.

Luciana left the country in May of last year, and Customs had no record of her returning since then.

Maya glanced up from her work when her grandmother's bedroom door opened. "You're up late."

"I hope I didn't wake you."

"At my age, I'm up and down all night. What are you working on?"

"I'm trying to make sense of what's happening here. Can you look at this?" Maya held up her phone. "How old is this baby?"

Her grandmother used two fingers to enlarge the picture. "Well, isn't he as cute as he could be? He can't be more than a year old. And look at those blue eyes. Most babies lose them by this age."

"What do you mean?"

"Lots of babies are born with blue eyes, but they start to darken when they're about six months old. This baby's closer to a year, and his eyes are still blue. That means they'll probably stay blue." Maya took the phone back from her grandmother and studied the image carefully. She zoomed in on Luciana Mendoza and Miguel Rodriguez. Both had dark hair and dark eyes. Maya sat back in her chair, stunned.

Camilia Mendoza had dark eyes. Her son had blue eyes. That meant his father must have blue eyes. Blue eyes like her ex-boyfriend. Maya flashed to an image of Nick's blue eyes studying her as he explored her body.

Maya pointed to Luciana's face. "When would she have gotten pregnant?"

"Let me do the math. When was that picture taken?"

"Two weeks ago."

"Let's say he was a year old today. Well, that would make it... March of last year. April at the latest."

March or April. She would've been pregnant when she returned home in May. Maya added that to her timeline. According to Nick, that timeframe matched up to their time together. Was he the father? He'd told her earlier that this wasn't about money. Was it about something more valuable than money? His child?

Maya heard sirens in the distance, a rare sound in Flamingo Cove. She checked her watch: 11:30. *Time for bed,* she thought, and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, only to be interrupted by her ringing phone.

"Mitchell."

"Maya, it's Detective Jones. We have a shooting in progress at your boy's motel."

"On my way," Maya said, disconnecting the call. Her fuzzy shorts and tank top with no bra wouldn't cut it for the scene, so she quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a fitted t-shirt. She hung her badge around her neck and strapped on her gun, unsure what the situation would be when she arrived. She also retrieved her windbreaker, which was still in her suitcase. The back of the windbreaker read 'Coast Guard Federal Agent Police'. Shooting scenes were chaotic and she wanted to make it clear whose side she was on.

Maya left as quietly as she could, not wanting to disturb her grandmother's sleep. She parked at the police barricade a block from the motel. The bright flashing lights of the emergency vehicles that filled the street illuminated the dark night.

Maya showed her badge to a uniformed officer at the barricade. "Chief Warrant Officer Mitchell for Detective Jones. He called me."

The officer raised the yellow tape and Maya ducked under it. As she approached the motel, she noticed one man in handcuffs in the back of a police cruiser and another laying on the ground just inside the door to Nick's room. The room where she had been just a few hours earlier. Nobody was attending to the body, which told Maya he was deceased. It was impossible to make out details until crime scene set up their lights.

Please let Nick be the one in handcuffs, not the one on the ground. Maya had to admit to herself that she'd developed an attraction to him. Nick was right when he said she wasn't faking it earlier. She wanted him to be safe. He'd end up in prison for his involvement with drugs, and she could live with that. She just didn't want to learn he was dead.

She was steeling herself for that possibility when a woman about her age spotted her and walked over. "CGIS?"

"Yes. Chief Warrant Officer Mitchell. Maya."

The woman offered her hand. "Detective Isabella Gomes. Jones is in the motel office conducting witness interviews. This your boy's room? If so, he pissed someone off pretty good."

Maya nodded her head. "What happened?"

"We're still trying to sort that out. Started getting nine-one-one calls about shots fired about twenty minutes ago. Lit up our dispatch center. When the first units arrived, two men were opening fire into the windows. Spraying bullets all over the place. It's a wonder they didn't kill a civilian." Detective Jones shook his head in disgust.

"Who's the body?" Maya asked, keeping her voice as steady as possible.

"Some local lowlife."

"Cop kill him?"

"Honestly, we're not sure yet. Patrol units opened fire, but from the size of the bullet holes in this guy, he may have gotten hit by his buddy."

"Who's in the car?"

"Lowlife's buddy. Dumb and dumber."

"What about Sullivan?"

"Doesn't look like he was here when they showed up. Or if he was, he got away without getting shot."

"Can you show me around?" Maya asked.

"Sure, give me one minute," Isabella said. She turned toward an approaching firefighter. "What's up?"

"We're clearing out. Need anything before I go?"

"Nope, we're good here."

"Think you'll make it home tonight?" he asked.

The detective surveyed the scene in front of her before responding. "Gatinho, I'll be happy to make it home before Christmas."

"Just give me a head's up and I'll start a bath for you."

The firefighter went back toward his truck and Isabella turned back to Maya. "Sorry about that. Let me show you what we have."

The women walked toward the motel room Maya left just hours earlier. She knew she should disclose her encounter with Nick and her presence in the room to the detective, but she also knew she wouldn't. They'd never let her on the crime scene, and she had to see this. Had to reassure herself that Nick hadn't been injured, or worse.

"His room has windows at the front," Isabella said, gesturing to the blown-out windows. "Sliding glass door in the

back that opens to a small patio with a grill. Grill's still warm, so we know our guy was here at some point tonight.

"Best we can figure is that one guy took the front and the other took the back. They both opened fire, which means they were essentially shooting at each other. Thankfully, the building is concrete, made to withstand hurricanes, or they would've killed a lot of guests."

Isabella handed Maya a pair of booties. Both women donned them before stepping into the room. A man was lying in a pool of blood several feet from the doorway. Maya crouched down to examine it without touching it. She saw what appeared to be three bullet holes in his chest.

"These look like entry wounds," she said. Isabella nodded in agreement.

"Has your ME been out here yet?"

"No, we don't get many murders here in Flamingo Cove, so we don't have one in town. When something happens, like tonight, we borrow the on-call ME from the sheriff. It'll take him a little while to arrive."

"Got an ID?"

"Not on this guy. Not yet. But his buddy in the car is a known gang member with the Suicide Dragons. Calls himself 'Ghost'. Real name is Peter Wood."

"Are the Suicide Dragons associated with anyone?"

Isabella shook her head. "No. They're a small neighborhood gang in Miami. Rarely see them up this way."

Miami kept coming up in this investigation. Was it a coincidence that Miguel Ramirez and this gang member both called Miami home? Maya kept the connection to herself. She wasn't ready to share her speculations with the police just yet.

"When the ME arrives, can we photograph any gang tats on the dead body? I'd like to see if we can find anything that identifies him as a Suicide Dragon."

Isabella nodded her agreement. "Anything else you want to see?"

"Show me the back patio, and then I'd love to sit in on the interview with the motel owner."

"Sure thing." Isabella led Maya toward the patio where Nick grilled their steaks while the sun set. More shattered glass, and the patio door was open.

"Did you guys do this?"

"No," Isabella said. "We think the guy inside the room came through that door."

"He walked into the room while his buddy was shooting?" Maya asked, incredulous.

Isabella shrugged. "Crime scene will sort it all out. The guy in the car is high on something; the other guy might've been too."

Satisfied that she'd gotten what she could for now, Maya suggested they find the motel owners. When they arrived in the small motel office, a uniformed officer directed them behind the counter to the unit the family lived in. A middle-aged couple sat on a couch in the small but nicely decorated living room. Family pictures covered the walls, capturing happy moments in a loving family.

Jones rose to greet Maya and introduced her to the Patels, Aditi and Rohan. "We're just getting started. Why don't you take a seat?"

Maya and Isabella dragged chairs over from the kitchen table to sit opposite the couple on the couch. Jones took the lead on the interview, walking the couple through the events of the evening before the shooting. The couple answered his questions clearly. They appeared shellshocked but not broken. Maya admired their strength.

"What can you tell me about the man who rented the room?" Maya asked.

"Oh, he is just the nicest man. He prepaid for two months. Wonderful guest," Aditi said.

"What was he here for?"

"Just to enjoy Flamingo Cove. He told me he was thinking about moving here and wanted to get a feel for the town."

"What was his routine?"

"He was up early most mornings to go surfing. I get up early to clean the pool area and empty the trash. We'd say hello as he was leaving on his bike with his surfboard under his arm. My son used to do that, and I always thought it was too dangerous," Rohan said. Maya flashed a picture of Nick doing just that, his muscular body easily balancing the bike and the surfboard.

"He loved to go fishing in the afternoons. He'd bring us fresh fish for dinner. Grouper or flounder. Even brought shrimp a few times," Aditi said. "I'd make him a curry, but he was usually gone by then."

"Gone by then?" Maya asked. Aditi and her husband exchanged a glance. It was a glance that any member of law enforcement knew all too well. The look that said, "I've shared too much". Maya knew the power of silence in a moment like this and hoped that both Gomes and Jones did as well.

After a moment, Rohan spoke. "He didn't usually sleep here"

Maya raised an inquiring eyebrow but said nothing. Rohan continued, "He'd leave most afternoons, then return the next morning to surf."

"He didn't sleep here?"

Rohan and Aditi both shook their heads. Rohan had the look of a man who'd just betrayed his best friend. It was obvious the couple liked Nick and didn't want to get him in trouble. Maya had to be careful not to lose their cooperation.

"We don't suspect Nick of anything here," she lied. "We just want to make sure he's okay. And we want to protect him if someone is trying to hurt him."

The lie soothed the Patels, just as Maya had intended.

"We can't imagine why anyone would want to hurt him," Aditi said.

"Neither can we." Maya's second lie rolled off her tongue as easily as her first. She shook her head slowly, as if confused by the whole thing. "Do you know where he slept?"

"No," Rohan said. "He'd leave by boat in the afternoon and return the next morning."

"Did you ever ask him about it?" Jones asked.

Rohan shot a look at his wife, and Maya knew he was about to lie to them. Before he could, she said, "Mrs. Patel, may I get a glass of water?"

"Of course. I'll be right back."

When his wife was in the kitchen, Jones repeated his question. "What did he say?"

"He said the women in Flamingo Cove had been quite welcoming."

"Any woman in particular?" Gomes asked.

"No. I didn't ask him for details. We don't agree with that life."

When Aditi returned, Jones asked, "Do you have the registration information for his boat?"

"No," Rohan said.

"But we know where he got it," his wife added. "He asked us for a recommendation when he got here, and we sent him to Artie down at the marina."

Isabella nodded an acknowledgement, so Maya didn't ask for details. The locals were familiar with Artie and could track down information on the boat.

"Is his boat here now?"

"Let me check," Rohan said. He stood and walked over to look out the kitchen window. "No. It's not here."

"Any problems while he was here?" Detective Gomes asked.

"No. None." Rohan's answer was emphatic.

"Did you copy is identification when he checked in?"

"No, I'm sorry. We don't have that," Aditi said. That was a little too convenient for Maya's taste. All three law enforcement officers shot her skeptical looks. "It was an accident. Our daughter checked him in. She doesn't always remember to ask."

Detective Jones turned to Maya. "Anything else?"

"Nothing for now. Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Patel, for your assistance. We'll be back in touch if we have any additional questions."

Chapter 15

NICK AWOKE TO A banging on his front door. He grabbed his weapon from the bedside table, pulled on a pair of shorts, and padded barefoot to the front door. Maya was standing on his front step. He slid the gun into the waistband of his shorts at the small of his back and opened the door fully.

"Now I know it's true that you are a CGIS agent, because only cops know how to knock loud enough to wake the dead. The entire neighborhood's probably awake by now."

"Can I come in?" Maya asked. Her brusque tone made it clear this was not a social call. But Nick wasn't taking orders from her. He stood, blocking her entrance.

"You realized you made the wrong decision earlier? You regret leaving my room?"

"In fact, leaving your motel room is the best decision I've ever made in my life."

"Ah, that's only because you left before you got to discover all my hidden talents."

"No," Maya said. "It was the best decision I've ever made because about an hour ago, someone put about two hundred rounds into your room."

Maya took advantage of Nick's stunned silence to push past him into his house. She stood in the foyer and took in the expanse of his home.

"Whose house is this?" she asked.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Tell me what happened."

"I was hoping you could help me with that."

"I have no idea who would've shot up my hotel. Who would want me dead."

"Should we start with the cartel?" Maya asked.

"No. They don't have their drugs back. Why would they kill me now?"

"Then who else have you pissed off?"

"Nobody," he said. "Well, maybe except the Patels. I imagine they're pretty pissed off at me right now."

"Actually, they feel sorry for you. Can't imagine why someone would want to kill such a nice man who never hurt anyone and brings them fresh fish." Maya's voice dripped with scorn.

"I'm sure you couldn't wait to disavow them of that notion," Nick said.

Maya shook her head. "All I care about is getting those drugs back before we have an all-out cartel war on our hands."

"And keeping me alive?" Nick asked hopefully. Maya shrugged in response, letting him know that keeping him alive wasn't all that important to her. He chuckled at her nonchalant attitude about his life. "Okay, so what do you want?"

"I want to know who tried to kill you. I want to know where the drugs are. I want to know how you got tangled up in all of this. I want to know *why* you got tangled up in all of this."

"If you're here for answers, you're in the wrong place, Maya. You've spent the past week deceiving me, and now, suddenly, we're on the same team?" Nick shook his head dismissively. "You know I'm safe. Now it's time for you to leave."

Maya protested, but Nick stepped closer to her, letting her feel his anger. He put a finger to her lips. "No talking. I don't believe a word that comes out of your mouth. Same deal as before. Leave or finish what we started earlier."

After she left, Nick searched online news articles for any information about the shooting but couldn't find much. Police weren't releasing any information, citing an ongoing investigation. *Damn, I should've kept Maya around to see if I could learn anything from her*, Nick thought, but knew he made the right choice. Maya was too skilled an interviewer to let anything slip. Not to mention that discovering the truth about her hadn't diminished his attraction at all.

He had to put her out of his mind. His sole priority right now was getting his son, and he wouldn't let anything jeopardize that. Even if he had something of value to contribute to the investigation, he wouldn't take that chance.

Nick knew the call he had to make: Miguel Ramirez. Miguel answered on the fourth ring, his voice thick with sleep. "Who the fuck is this?"

"Sullivan. I had to switch phones."

"What's wrong? Why the fuck are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

"Your friends paid me a visit tonight."

"What?"

Nick repeated himself. "Your friends paid me a visit tonight."

"Dude, you better start making sense, or I'm hanging up this phone."

"Those guys you sent by to shoot up my motel? I wasn't there."

"Why the fuck would I shoot up your motel before I got the drugs? Let me get the drugs first, then I'll send someone over." With that, Miguel hung up the phone.

Nick lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. His gut told him the Miguel had been telling the truth. He sounded as if he'd been asleep when Nick called and appeared genuinely confused by Nick's words. But if Miguel wasn't the one who came after him, who was?

And how had Maya found his house? That troubled him almost as much as the motel shooting. This was his haven, but she'd found it quickly. He'd screwed up somewhere along the line and she'd discovered it. If he could figure out how she'd found him, so he'd know if it was safe to bring his son into this home or not.

He texted Maya. I'm ready to talk. Meet me here at 8:00.

Her reply came seconds later. I'll be there.

Shall I open the gate, or do you just want to climb over the fence again?

Not in the mood, came her terse reply. Nick smiled. He shouldn't enjoy needling her so much, but he just couldn't seem to resist.

Despite little sleep, Nick was fully alert when Maya arrived. This time, she buzzed from the gate and he let her in. He waited at the door as she parked her car and was relieved to see that she was alone. She was freshly showered, but the dark circles under her eyes were proof of her exhaustion.

"I made coffee. Want some?"

"Yes, please. A lot."

"Have you slept yet?"

She shook her head and followed him into the house. Nick led Maya through the house into his spacious kitchen, which had a wall of French doors opening out to a lanai that overlooked the intra-coastal waterway.

"This is a step up for you."

Nick ignored her comment. She was already fishing for information, and they hadn't agreed on the ground rules yet. "Black? Or is that how Holly takes it?"

"Black. And if you want me to apologize for lying to you to get millions of dollars of drugs off the street, you're going to be disappointed because that's not happening. I did what I had to do, and it got me right where I want to be. So, why am I here?"

"I'm willing to share information with you."

"Why the change of heart?"

"Because something is hinky here, and I don't know what it is. You've got pieces of the puzzle that I don't have. So if I share what I know with you, you might put the puzzle together in time."

"In time for what?"

Once again, Nick ignored her. He wouldn't give over control of the conversation, at least not yet. "Plus, I've decided I trust you."

Maya sputtered on the coffee she'd been sipping. "You trust me?"

"Well, I trust you care about one thing: your investigation. That means you'll want to keep me alive until that's closed."

She nodded her head. "Purely for the sake of the investigation. Speaking of which, do either of these men look familiar to you?"

Maya pulled two photos from her bag. Two men, one white and one black, covered in tattoos. Nick studied the photos but didn't recognize them. He handed them back. "No. These the shooters?"

"Yes. Gang members from Miami. This one is dead," Maya said, pointing at the photo. "This one is in custody. He was high on something last night, we couldn't get anything out of him. The chief let him sleep it off and try again this morning. I'm heading over there after this. Miami gangbanger? That seems to point to Ramirez."

"I don't think so. I spoke with him last night, and he truly sounded bewildered. Didn't seem to know anything about it."

"Suspects lie, Nick. So do drug kingpins."

"Yeah," Nick conceded. "But I've known him a long time, and it sounded convincing."

They both sipped coffee in silence. Nick was deciding how much to tell Maya when she said, "This is about your son, right?"

Shit! Did she already know everything? No. He'd be in jail if she did. She might suspect, but even Nick didn't know the truth about Sebastian for sure.

"I need some assurances from you before I talk."

"Such as..."

"If you're going to arrest me, it has to be after I get my son away from Mendoza. I can't sit in prison knowing my son is being groomed to run the most dangerous cartel in Central America."

"What else?"

"That's it. I need to know my son is safe."

Maya considered it for a moment before speaking. "No promises, but what do I get in exchange?"

"I'll get you the drugs."

"I want Ramirez."

"I can't do that," Nick said.

"Mendoza?"

Nick laughed out loud at her request. "You think Mendoza would get anywhere near this? He masterminds it all from his fortress in the jungle. That's what has kept him alive and out of prison for all these years."

"I need to think about this." Maya rose to leave.

"Will you do me a favor while you think about it?" Nick asked. Maya stared at him expectantly. "Will you keep this location out of the investigation?"

"For now," she agreed.

"How'd you find me anyway?" Maya's only answer was a small smile, so Nick tried again. "How did you get in last night?"

"I climbed the fence."

"You climbed my ten-foot fence?" Nick was incredulous.

"Semper Paratus," she said with a wink, citing the Coast Guard motto, 'Always Ready'. This woman was full of surprises. Not to mention that she carried a gun. Nick thought he might actually like Maya Mitchell more than he liked Holly Thompson.

Nick walked Maya to the door. She asked, "Did you think of anyone else who would want to kill you?"

"No, the only one I've been in contact with is Ramirez."

"The Patels mentioned you have quite the active social life. Jealous husband?"

"No. I made that up as the reason I wasn't sleeping at the hotel."

"Why did you get that room?"

"Because I'm about to steal a baby from the arms of a drug lord, which might be one of the most dangerous things to do."

"And stupidest," Maya said.

Nick agreed. "Stupid and dangerous, but I'm doing it. Maya, my son is not growing up in a cartel. I'll do whatever it takes to get him back."

"And if, by some fluke of luck, you get out of this alive, you need to disappear. Which is why this house is untraceable."

"You were busy last night," Nick said.

"What about the boat? Detectives are at the marina right now, asking Artie about you."

"Nah. Artie's my buddy. Turns out we're both 101st Airborne. Said he was happy to rent me the boat, but unfortunately this is an old one that he hadn't installed a GPS unit in yet. Wanted to know if I'd still be willing to take it without GPS. I told him I'd be okay with that." Nick flashed a grin and Maya shook her head in disbelief.

Chapter 16

 $\mathbf{M}_{ ext{of coffee}}^{ ext{AYA POURED HERSELF ANOTHER much-needed cup}$

"Be careful with that stuff. It should be illegal," Detective Jones warned her.

"I just need the caffeine. Don't want to fall asleep on our friend Peter here."

"What's your plan?"

"Be as non-threatening as possible. Try to convince him it in his best interest to talk to me." Maya had removed her gun and badge, and taken her hair down. She wanted to look as unlike law enforcement as possible. This man wouldn't be afraid of the police, so Maya would take a caring sister approach with him. Her plan was to be wide-eyed and a little in awe of him, something that had worked well for her with gang members in the past.

She entered the room with her coffee, a honeybun, and her notepad. Peter Wood, who called himself Ghost, was tall, with a surprisingly handsome face framed by shoulder-length hair and a prison-hardened body. Maya saw the edge of a tattoo on his neck, but his orange jail scrubs covered the rest. He eyed her with the dead eyes of a convict with nothing to lose. His file put him at twenty-eight, but Maya would've pegged him for at least a decade older.

"Hi, I'm Maya. I'm with the coast guard. I'm trying to find out what happened because right now the police are talking about arresting you for murder." Maya did her best to sound shocked at the severity of the charge. She and the detectives had agreed that the best way to get Ghost to talk would be to let him hope he wouldn't go to prison. "Are you Peter?"

"Ghost," he replied, icy blue eyes staring into hers.

"Ghost." Maya made a show of crossing out Peter and writing Ghost on her notepad. Pretending to be slightly awed, she asked, "How did you get that name?"

"Not a lot of white guys in the Suicide Dragons. They gave me the name."

"Ghost, they're saying you killed your friend."

"That's bullshit. The cops shot him." The man died during a crime that Ghost committed. That was homicide even if Ghost didn't fire the bullet that killed his friend, but Maya wasn't about to educate him on the finer points of the law. Not if she could use that as leverage.

"Then you have to help me understand. Maybe I can help to explain to the cops what happened," Maya said.

"Motherfucker stole our drugs."

Maya made sure not to register any reaction to the comment made by the man sitting across the table from her, but she envisioned a silent cheer erupting in the video monitoring room.

"Who?"

"Some asshole in that room in the motel."

"What do you mean, he stole your drugs?" Maya asked.

"Me and Black were sent up here to watch for the drugs."

"Who sent you up here?"

"Snake."

"What's Snake's real name?"

Ghost shrugged. "Malcolm something? Everyone just calls him Snake."

Ghost was almost certainly lying, but Maya decided not to push it. She'd keep playing the supportive role to keep him talking. One of the local detectives would come in later to push him for more.

"So Snake sent you up here. But why Flamingo Cove?"

"Snake, he's got a guy that tips him off about where to look for shipments washing ashore."

Drugs were big business, so Maya wasn't surprised the cartels had oceanographers helping them just like the coast guard. She just hoped it wasn't the same oceanographer helping both teams.

"You've done this before?" she asked.

Ghost was silent for a moment before saying, "Not with drugs."

Maya knew what he meant: people. The coastline in this area was known for illegal immigrants traveling on rickety boats from both Cuba and Haiti. The overcrowded, barely seaworthy boats often sank offshore. If the boat sank close

enough to shore, survivors had a good chance of making it safely to the beach.

The smugglers tracked their boat by GPS, then used prevailing currents to give them a target location to search for survivors. Unfortunately, there was nothing humanitarian about their efforts. They had money to collect, and they wouldn't allow an immigrant to get into the country for free.

When the cartel lost the shipment of drugs, they'd turned to human smugglers for help.

"Does Snake have connections to a cartel?"

Ghost shrugged. "He doesn't talk about his connections. Just tells us where to go. He puts guys in a few towns along the coastline to keep watch in case the shipment came ashore."

"What happened?"

"We're supposed to keep watch at night. Snake says if the drugs wash up during the day, we'll never get them back because the beach is too crowded. There's three of us here and we took turns going out to check the beach. Black, he goes out to check one night. Sees these pallets on the shoreline.

"He needs help collecting it, so he comes back to the motel to pick us up. We call Snake on the way; he's thrilled. Tells us to load the van and come straight home. We get to the beach. It's still dark out and the pallets are too heavy to carry across the sand, so we cut them open and carried the individual bricks. It took us a long time to load them.

"The sun was just coming up as we were finishing. We see surfer dude come out to the beach and waited until he got in the water. He was down from us a little ways, but I guess he saw what we were doing. Once we started reloading, some old couple walked by. The other two hid in the dunes, but I was too far away so I just waved, all casual like. It's getting light out, people are on the beach. I want to leave, but Black says we gotta make sure we got it all. I don't want Snake mad at me, so I agree. Black and I go back to the beach, leave Ace guarding the drugs and the van."

Ghost stopped to shake his head, a look of disgust on his face. Maya remained silent, not wanting to interrupt the flow of information. "Only when we return with the last bricks, we realize we have a problem."

"What was it?" Maya asked.

"Ace is knocked out on the sidewalk. The van filled with Snake's drugs is gone."

"What kind of van was it?"

"A Ford, maybe? White. We boosted it for this trip."

"Can you tell me anything else about it? Old or new? Any dents or bumper stickers?" Maya asked.

"Pretty beat up. Didn't have no back seats." Ghost shrugged as if that was all the useful information he could provide on the truck.

"What did Ace say happened?"

"Says he never saw the guy who hit him. Coldcocked him. We stuff the bricks we still have in our shirts and walk back to our motel. Black whines the whole way about how we're going to get caught parading through town with all this cocaine."

"That would've been hard to explain."

"Sure as shit would."

"How many bricks did you have?"

Ghost shrugged. "I had five. Black and Ace probably had the about the same."

"What did Snake say when you told him?"

"I don't think Snake believed us."

Maya raised her eyes at the admission. "You're lucky to still be alive."

Ghost ran his fingers through his hair and grimaced. "Probably won't be for long. Ace is scared shitless. He took the bricks and snuck out in the middle of the night two days ago. That's why Black and I went when Snake sent us to hit

that hotel room. We're trying to prove we're still loyal. But the guy wasn't there when we got there.

"Black was so pissed off, he just started spraying the place. I did, too. It was stupid because now Snake knows just where to find me. I'll be dead as soon as I hit the jail." Ghost's tone was one of complete resignation, and Maya finally understood why he spoke so freely. He didn't care about getting off the murder charge. This was his dying declaration. She didn't argue with him because she knew he spoke the truth. That was the harsh reality of the street, which cut short so many young men's lives.

How had Snake gotten Nick's hotel information? Miguel obviously had it. He'd been there the night before, and left with what appeared to be a brick of cocaine in his hand. Was it just a coincidence? *Not likely*, Maya thought.

Some of the missing drugs made their way to Atlanta. Could that be Ace? She made a note to ask Jamila about it. "You know Ace's name?"

"Some people call him 'Paulie', but I don't know if that's his real name or not."

"What else should I know?"

"That's all"

Maya studied him carefully. "I may have some more questions for you, so you'll probably be in this room or the holding cell most of the day. I'll have someone bring you breakfast."

When she left the interrogation room, the officers who had been observing congratulated her. "Think we got it all?" she asked.

"I believe what he told you, but it doesn't make it any clearer," Jones said.

"Ditto," Maya said. "I need to get some sleep."

"We're all headed home to sleep. I'll text you if anything breaks."

Chapter 17

WHAT NICK NEEDED MOST was to buy himself time until he got the DNA results back on Friday. Before then, he had to find a meeting spot that would work to his advantage. He also wanted to keep eyes on Ramirez in Miami, to see who was coming and going. He decided to drive down to Miguel's hotel in Miami.

Just as he was about to leave, someone buzzed from his front gate. Maya. Nick went outside to wait as the gates opened to allow her entrance. She parked in front of him and

exited her car, all business. Just because Maya was all business didn't mean Nick had to be. He decided to have some fun with her.

"Twice in one day. I understand. All the ladies have trouble staying away once they get a little taste of Nick." He glanced at his watch and shrugged his shoulders. "I was just about to leave, but I have time for a quickie."

Nick began walking toward the front door, making a show of holding it open for her, although she hadn't moved an inch. "Time's wasting, sweetheart. If you wait much longer, I'm only going to have time to make it good for me, and that's bad for my reputation."

Maya mumbled something under her breath; Nick couldn't make out the words, but the tone was clear enough. "You coasties... the way you swear makes us army boys blush."

"I'm not here to play."

"What are you here for?"

"To search your house. Or whoever's house this is."

"You got a search warrant? How? You have no evidence against me whatsoever. Two meetings with an old army buddy isn't enough for a search warrant."

"I don't have a warrant."

"Oooh, sorry. Wish I could help, but having a federal agent rummage around my house without a warrant just doesn't sound like fun."

Maya stepped closer to him. "Listen, the Flamingo Cove detectives think you're in the wind. You asked me not to tell anyone about this house. That would be a lot easier for me to do if I knew it wasn't full to the rafters with the cartel's cocaine."

Nick considered her request. "I'll make a deal with you. We're talking about hundreds of pounds of drugs, right?" When Maya nodded, he continued, "I'll walk through the house with you. You can check anywhere you think the drugs might be, but you're not doing a full search."

Maya nodded.

"C'mon in," he offered once again.

"I want to start in the garage." Maya's green eyes were unyielding.

"Your wish is my command." He led her to the garage, keying in the code to open the smaller garage door. It opened to expose a three-car garage, empty except for some dive equipment, surfboards, and other toys.

Maya quickly scanned the space, noticing the hatch leading to the crawl space above. She pointed toward it. "I want to see what's up there."

"I've never been up there. I don't have a ladder."

Maya looked around the garage once again, as if trying to prove him wrong. Not finding a ladder, she said, "I'll figure it out."

"Semper paratus and all that."

"Precisely. I'll pull my car in and climb on the hood."

"Don't be silly. Let me lift you up." Nick lowered the hatch to the crawl space, then interlaced his fingers to make a step up for Maya. She just stared at him. "I have things to do today and I'm not spending all day here with you. Are you going up, or are we moving on?"

"What do you have planned for the day?" Maya asked, with too much interest for Nick's comfort.

"I'm going shopping and getting my nails done. Now, are you going up or not?"

This was a move that Maya would've done many times in her years of service; Nick had as well. But never had his body responded to it before. Maya placed her hands on his shoulders and her delightfully feminine smell washed over him. He inhaled deeply, drinking it in. She glared at him.

"What? I'm taking a deep breath to get myself ready. You might be heavier than you look and I wouldn't want to embarrass you by dropping you?"

"Embarrass me? If you've gotten too soft to lift a woman, I'd think you'd be the one embarrassed. Too much of the beach bum life."

"Ready?" he asked. She nodded, then placed her foot in his hands. He lifted her easily off the ground and she grabbed hold of the edge of the opening. He stepped back to avoid getting kicked in the face. Maya pulled herself up and obviously needed no help. However, Nick just couldn't stop himself from offering some anyway. He stepped behind her, taking a moment to enjoy the sight of her inviting ass wrapped in tight denim.

"Here, let me help," he said, placing his palms on her ass and pushing.

"Nick!" Maya chided him, but he was having too much fun to care.

Maya removed a flashlight from her tactical belt and turned it on.

"What's up there?" he called.

"Nothing."

"Need help getting down?" Nick taunted, knowing she would refuse his help no matter how much she needed it.

"Nope, I'm good." Maya dropped her body down through the hatch and was hanging by her hands when Nick grabbed her around the waist. Instead of releasing her, he slid her slowly down his body, enjoying the feel of her soft curves against his hard frame.

Maya wiggled in protest, which was torture, but she stopped when she heard Nick's soft moan. He held her for a moment longer than necessary once her feet were on the floor, and thought he saw desire in her mesmerizing eyes. But he blinked and it was gone.

They finished checking the house, Maya finding nothing of interest. "So, where are we headed this afternoon?" she asked as he escorted her to the front door.

[&]quot;We aren't headed anywhere."

"Sick of me already?" she asked, teasing.

"Never," he said, his voice serious. "Yeah, I'm pretty pissed off at you for playing me like that. But sick of you? Not even a little bit."

"Good, because I'm glued to your side for the time being."

"Shouldn't you be out chasing after your drugs?"

"Why waste all that time and effort? I have a pretty good idea that if I shadow you for a few more days, I might just stumble across them. I think you're going to lead me right to those drugs. You could just take me to them now. Then I won't be hanging around all the time."

"That's not much of an incentive, is it? I like you hanging around," Nick said with a seductive grin.

"Good, then what are our plans for today?"

"While I appreciate your eagerness, I must decline. I have plans for today. Why don't you let me cook you dinner tonight?" Maya was about to turn him down, so Nick dangled bait she wouldn't refuse. "I'll even answer any five questions."

"Honest answers?"

"Honest answers."

"Deal," Maya agreed.

"See you at seven," Nick said. He leaned forward to kiss her cheek, but she stepped out of his reach.

"This isn't a date."

"Neither was last night, but I'm pretty happy with how that turned out." Nick said with a wink and a smile as he prepared to close the door.

"I'm just going to follow you," she called.

He paused. "I know you're a skilled swimmer, but I don't think you're that good."

Chapter 18

WHEN NICK CLOSED THE door, Maya leaned against the hood of her car. She planned to wait him out and follow him when he left. She also needed the time to collect herself. Her prime suspect shouldn't unnerve her like this. Damn. She'd almost leaned into him when he was helping her out of the attic. Thankfully, the attic in the main house had built-in stairs, so she'd been able to avoid any further physical contact.

Maya groaned when a boat motor roared to life. What the... She hurried around the corner of the house just in time to see Nick pulling away from the dock. He smiled and waved. She shook her head in disbelief. So that's what he'd meant with his comment about her not being a good enough swimmer. She hated to lose, and for the briefest second, she considered diving in to swim after him. However, reason prevailed, so she just watched as he rode away.

Who was this man?

She thought she had him pegged as the laid-back surfer dude who saw an opportunity for some quick cash and took it. But he was so much more than that. He'd seemed just as comfortable in his tiny efficiency as he was here in this luxury home on the waterfront.

Maya returned to Nick's house that evening fully prepared for the interview. She'd spent the afternoon collecting as much background as she could on Nick, Miguel, Luciana, and other members of the Mendoza family. She'd spoken with several people Nick had served with in the army; all spoke highly of him. Nothing indicated illegal or shady dealings.

Maya just couldn't accept that this was all a coincidence. Nick just shows up on the beach in Flamingo Cove a few days before the drugs washed up on shore? And he just happens to be buddies with the guy who wants them, who just happens to be the brother of his son's mother? Maya was missing essential pieces of the puzzle and couldn't make sense of how they all came together.

She hoped to get the missing puzzle pieces tonight. At least enough of them to get an idea of what was going on. She'd gotten a temporary reprieve from Cmdr. Owens, who had sent a team to Atlanta instead of Flamingo Cove. Several more bricks of cocaine appeared, and two men selling them had been killed. Jamila was leading that investigation.

Maya was done flirting to appeal to Nick, not that it had been a hardship. She hadn't dressed up for dinner tonight; she was wearing jeans and a fitted black t-shirt with a pair of flat sandals. No makeup and her hair pulled up in a haphazard bun. This was work, and she wanted her attire to attest to that.

He opened the gate when she arrived and was waiting on the front stoop when she parked.

"You've been busy since I last saw you. My phone is blowing up; everyone wants to let me know that I'm being investigated."

"Your friends are quite loyal. Although none of them seem to know what you've been up to since you got out. If they know, they're tight-lipped about it."

As Nick stepped back to allow Maya entrance, he said, "No gun tonight? Does that mean you're letting your guard down around me?"

She flashed him a smile. "No, it means that I've gotten to know you well enough that I know I can take you without my weapon, if it comes to that."

"Wow, you really do think I've gone soft."

Maya shrugged, but soft was the last word she would use to describe anything about Nick's physique. He was tall and lean, but well-muscled. As for the rest of him? That had been plenty hard pressing up against her.

Nick held the door as Maya entered, then led her into the kitchen. The spacious kitchen opened to an informal seating area overlooking the water, which gave it a breathtaking view of the sun setting. However, Maya barely noticed the view because she was so taken by the heavenly aromas wafting from the kitchen. Her stomach growled loudly in anticipation.

She put a hand on her stomach and laughed. "That smells fantastic."

"I like a woman with a hearty appetite," Nick said.

Maya scowled at him, but otherwise let the innuendo drop. Nick opened a bottle of red wine and poured two glasses. Maya accepted and they clinked glasses. She sipped her wine, finding it smooth and rich.

"This is delicious," she said.

"Thank you. I'm not much of a wine drinker, but the guy at the store downtown recommended this. He knows his stuff."

Nick pulled a salad out of the refrigerator and set it on the island.

"I deceived you earlier," he said.

Maya stiffened and hoped he didn't notice her reaction. She did her best to keep her voice casual when she said, "Is that right?"

"I didn't cook. This is all from Mario's."

"All will be forgiven if you tell me that's a loaf of their garlic bread in the oven."

Nick went to the oven and removed a loaf of garlic bread. "All is forgiven?"

"The part about you cooking dinner. The rest... not so much."

"What if I promise to let you eat the whole loaf?"

Maya laughed. "Tempting, but no."

Nick gave her a hurt puppy-dog look, which only made her laugh harder.

"If you're a gentleman, you'll let me eat the whole loaf anyway."

"Okay, but then I get all the stuffed shells and tiramisu."

"No way. I can't watch you eat their tiramisu and not have some. That would truly be torture."

The moment the words slipped out of Maya's mouth, the energy in the room shifted. The memory of how they had tormented each other the previous night came rushing back to Maya. Desire flared in Nick's eyes, and Maya knew she wasn't the only one remembering the heat between them.

Unwilling to tempt fate, Maya rose to take in the sunset.

Nick called to her a few minutes later. "Food's ready. Come and make a plate. We'll sit outside and eat."

While Maya made herself a plate of stuffed shells, salad and meatballs, Nick took the wine and bread outside and set the table. She took her food outside and waited while he served himself. Once seated at the table, he raised his glass and said, "Here's to a beautiful evening in paradise. And to turning enemies into friends."

She shot him a skeptical look, but clinked glasses anyway. After she drank, she said, "Are you sure we're enemies, Nick? Can't we be on the same side in this? We get lethal drugs off the street and your son gets to live a good life."

"But there's a hitch in your scenario. In my version, my son lives a good life with me. In your version, I'm rotting away in jail."

"If you help me, I could ask for a reduced sentence."

"What? Twenty years? No, thank you," Nick scoffed. "Let's say I somehow came into possession of the drugs, and I'm right now sitting on one hundred kilos of cocaine. Is there any scenario where I don't get arrested?"

Maya chose her words carefully. "If we found the drugs in your possession, no."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, watching the wind ruffle the intra-coastal waterway. Maya saw one dark shape, then another, looming just past Nick's breakwall. "Manatees!" she exclaimed, going to Nick's dock to look more closely.

Nick followed her over. "Looks like a mom and a baby."

"Do you see them a lot?"

"I've seen them a few times. I think they like this protected cove." The manatees disappeared from sight and they returned to the table.

"Can I get you anything else?" Nick asked.

"That tiramisu you promised me."

"Coming right up."

As they ate dessert, Maya was determined to learn more about Nick and what drove him. "Some of my favorite

Christmas memories are from Flamingo Cove. Everyone piled into my grandparents' small cottage. Arguing over whose turn it was to put the angel on the top of the tree. My brothers and I trying to stay up late to see Santa."

"Sounds like wonderful memories," Nick said. Maya picked up a twinge of sadness in his voice.

"What was Christmas like in the Sullivan family?"

"Not like that. My father was very strict and didn't tolerate what he called 'frivolity'."

"You didn't celebrate Christmas?"

"We went to church in the morning and then we each got one present after that. My mother would cook a turkey for dinner. I didn't even realize that Christmas was more than that until I went to school."

"What about now?"

"Now, it's just not a big deal to me," Nick said dismissively, but his tone spoke otherwise.

"Was it just Christmas, or all year?"

"All year. My father was a good man, but the chaos of four rambunctious boys was more than he could handle. He tried to deal with it by shutting down any type of 'commotion' that would disturb him. He would call to my mother. 'June, those boys are causing a commotion again.' That would be her cue to kick us out of the house or assign us some chores."

"Never a ruckus? Always a commotion?" Maya teased.

Nick laughed. "Always a commotion."

"Is that how you see yourself as a father?"

"No, never," Nick said sharply. He softened his tone before he continued. "I never planned to have children. My father did the best he could, but I don't want to follow in his footsteps. I don't want another child to grow up in such a stifling environment.

"That's why I've never gotten married. Try telling an eligible thirty-something woman you don't want kids and the

date ends right there."

"I can imagine," Maya said. After a moment, she asked, "What about Sebastian?"

"I guess God had other plans for me. If I am a father, I won't walk away from my responsibility." Nick opened his hands. "Even if I suck at it, I've got to be better than a drug lord, right?"

"What if you end up in prison?"

"Well, I better make sure that doesn't happen." Nick winked at her, but Maya refused to allow herself to be charmed by him. If he was guilty, she would do her best to put him in jail.

"If you're so determined not to have children, why are you so convinced Sebastian is yours? Didn't you take steps to prevent that?"

Nick's face registered surprise at the boldness of her question, but he recovered quickly. "Is that one of the five questions I promised you to lure you here tonight?"

"You lured me here?" Maya laughed. "I intend to remain glued to your side until I get the drugs. Unless you ditch me like you did this morning."

"Not likely. I imagine you slipped a tracker in my boat while you were admiring the manatees. Like you did with my bike."

Maya raised an eyebrow. It was Nick's turn to laugh. "Busted. I stopped by this afternoon to talk to the Patels. I found the tracker under my bike seat."

"How are the Patels?"

"They'll be fine, but I don't think they'll have any vacant rooms if I try to make a reservation."

"Smart people," Maya said.

"Tell me more about remaining glued to my side. Sounds delightful," Nick murmured in a silky voice.

Maya felt a shiver of desire but didn't allow it to show. This wasn't a date. This man was the last person Maya should be interested in. He was happy to break the law to suit himself,

and he was willing to let millions of dollars of drugs hit the street. Nope, he was not the man for her, but her body didn't seem willing to accept that fact. She blamed it on not dating anyone for longer than she cared to admit. She wouldn't even try to do the math on the last time she had sex, which is why she'd gotten carried away the last two times she was with Nick.

"Nothing about me is going to be delightful until I close this case. That was all a game," Maya said.

"Ah, but here's the problem... I actually like fiery, determined Maya even more than I liked sweet, easygoing Holly."

"Nick, this isn't a date."

"That doesn't mean I can't enjoy your company." Maya was about to object to Nick's comment when he continued, "I promised you honest answers to five questions. Go for it. I want to get that behind us so we can get on with enjoying the evening."

"When the questions are over, the evening is done."

"We'll see..." Nick pushed his plate away from him and sat back in his chair. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have the drugs?"

"No."

"Nick..." Maya began. He had promised to be honest with her and here he was lying on the first question.

He held up a hand. "Scout's honor."

"You were never a scout."

"Wow! The CGIS is thorough in their background checks."

"Actually, that was a lucky guess on my part."

"I admit I was never a scout, but that was an honest answer."

"Did you steal the drugs?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No."

Exasperated, Maya rose from her seat. "This is bullshit, Nick. Did you bring me out here to play games? I've got better things to do with my time."

He rose to stand in front of her. "It's not bullshit. I promised you honest answers. I'm a man of my word."

"Are you planning to exchange the drugs for your son?"
"No."

"I'm done with this." Maya opened the sliding glass door and walked through the house to the front door.

"Maya, wait," Nick called, catching up with her in the kitchen. He took her by the arm, compelling her to listen. "This isn't a game to me. Nothing has mattered more to me in my life. But I need a way out of this without anyone getting hurt, especially my son. I respect you. Hell, I more than respect you. If this were a different time, a different place..."

Nick shook his head and allowed his words to drift off. Maya understood the sentiment exactly. But it wasn't a different time or a different place, and she had a job to do.

She walked out without another word.

Chapter 19

 $\mathbf{M}_{\mathit{Had\ a\ lovely\ dinner\ last\ night.}}^{\mathit{AYA\ AWOKE\ THE\ NEXT\ morning\ to\ a\ text\ from\ Nick.}}$

Funny, she responded.

Wanted to let you know I had an early morning today, so I'll miss you. My gate code is 68686, to save you the trouble of climbing the fence. I brought coffee to the guys out front.

Maya shook her head and laughed at his audacity. Two Flamingo Cove police officers were staking out his house.

However, Maya knew it wouldn't be enough. Nick's boat gave him freedom to avoid surveillance. Boat surveillance required a helicopter, and they couldn't just leave one stationed over his house all day in case he left. They could call in helicopters in emergency situations, but not for long-term stakeouts.

Her first call was to Jamila, who was overseeing the investigation in Atlanta. "I'm not going to even ask why you're calling me instead of your team members that are up here. I've been a woman in law enforcement long enough to understand completely. And I've got an earful for you, sugar," Jamila said when she answered the phone.

"Good. Lay it on me."

"This yingyang brought some of your drugs up here and tried to sell them on the street."

"Yingyang?" Maya laughed. "Is that a DEA term?"

"No, that's my grandmama's terms. She never cusses and yingyang is just about the worst insult she has."

"This guy's that bad?"

Jamila laughed. "Got this genius idea to come up to Atlanta and fund his retirement on stolen cartel coke. Offers up these bricks for \$10,000 each, about a quarter of the street value, so word spread like wildfire. He even tells people he's got eight bricks to sell."

"Let me guess, he just gave out his address so people could stop by if they wanted to check out the inventory?"

"Just about. He hooked up with some local dealers who then robbed him and killed him."

"Did you get an ID on him? We have a yingyang on the loose, goes by the name of Ace. His real name might be Paulie something."

"Yep," Jamila said. "That sounds like our guy. Paul James. The dealers who stole the drugs didn't know what they were holding. These are small timers and don't know how to move this quantity of drugs, so everybody and their mother know they have them."

"This doesn't bode well for our drug dealers' life expectancy," Maya said.

"Thankfully, they got busted before they could get killed. But we've got two other dead bodies, both attempting a drug rip on these dealers."

"You've got the guys?"

"Yes," Jamila said. "We've got them, and we've got seven of the bricks, including the one they sold to the undercover agent. That leaves one on the street somewhere."

"What are you hearing about the rest of it?"

"Nothing. I don't think any of the guys we've got here were part of anything else. Just looking for some easy money."

Maya asked, "Can you send me what you have on Paul James? I'm trying to track down a connection between the Suicide Dragons and either of the cartels."

"Sure. I can see what we have on the Suicide Dragons as well."

"I'd appreciate that," Maya said.

Maya spent the rest of the morning at the Flamingo Cove police station, working with local detectives and using their resources to track down information on her suspects. The officers watching Nick's house reported no sign of him, not that Maya expected them to see him.

"Is there any way to watch his house from across the waterway?" Maya asked Detective Jones.

"We might find a spot, but what's the point? We can't call up a helicopter just to see where he goes. He'd outrun our drone's range in a few minutes."

Maya paced as she thought. "That boat's too important to him. He's using it as transportation, not recreation. What if he's got another vehicle stashed somewhere, and he's driving the boat to it?"

"If that's the case, our drone may be able to follow him. Let me see if I can get the drone team to find a spot with a visual on his house where they could launch the drone. I'll see if the chief will authorize more surveillance."

Maya nodded her head, well aware of the constrictions law enforcement encountered on investigations. "I'll put in a request as well. We've got an endurance drone that can stay airborne for a long time. If it's not busy, my commander would authorize it."

"Endurance drone?"

"Yes, it's solar powered, so it can stay airborne for two days."

"The military gets all the best toys."

"Yes, we do," Maya said with a smile. "Now let's see if anyone is playing with those toys today."

Maya texted her request to Owens, then on a whim texted Nick to see if he would give her any information. *I was hoping to see you today. Will you be around later?*

I know you want me, but shouldn't you be playing hard to get? Nick replied.

I do want you, Nick, Maya wrote. She waited twenty seconds, then followed it up with another message. And the drugs.

I like a woman who knows what she wants. Nick's tone was all playful banter today.

You owe me a question, Maya texted.

You could ask me now.

No, I want to see your face when I ask.

I knew you couldn't get enough of me. Sorry, but I'm out of town. Not sure when I'll be back.

Maya wasn't sure whether or not to believe him. She wrote, *Are you coming back?*

Of course. I could never leave you without saying goodbye.

Such a romantic, Maya wrote.

She turned back to Jones. "I'm going to try for a real-time tracking warrant on Sullivan's phone."

Jones just nodded his head. He was a skilled detective. Maya enjoyed working with him even though he didn't say much.

The warrant would get approved quickly, but depending on the carrier, it could take a few days before Maya got data back. Maya was typing the warrant when her phone rang. It showed a Miami area code.

"Maya Mitchell."

"Hi, Mitchell. It's Detective Green, Miami PD gang unit. You called about our boy Snake. What did he do now?"

"We've got some missing drugs up here in Flamingo Cove that I'd like to talk to him about."

"Well, you're in luck, because the gentleman is currently a guest of the Miami jail. We picked him up yesterday on an outstanding warrant."

"Can I talk to him this afternoon?"

"I'm not sure if he'll talk to you, but I'll have him sent to my office," Green said. "Are these cartel drugs?"

"Yes, jettisoned off a boat. Why?" Maya asked.

"Well, word on the street is Santiago Mendoza is in Miami."

"What? Why? These guys never leave their fortified bunkers."

"I don't know. But we're hearing it, thinking something heavy is going down."

"Thanks for the tip. Anyone in your office have a good rapport with Snake?"

"I've known him since I was a beat cop. Want me to sit in with you?"

"That would be great."

"Want to plan around two o'clock? Transport works slowly down here."

"See you then."

Maya decided she had just enough time for a swim before the meeting. Her military service taught her the value of physical fitness. Not only for staying in shape, but for helping her function at her best. She was more focused, clear-headed, and energized when she exercised regularly. The case was heating up around her, and she needed the stamina to see it through to the finish. Plus, a long swim might help her fit more of the pieces into place.

She jogged to the beach as she'd done a few days earlier and felt a twinge of sadness knowing Nick wouldn't be meeting her when she returned to shore. Maya had to admit to herself that she had feelings for Nick, something that had never happened before. She'd always had a clear line between right and wrong, and the people she'd met stood on one side of that line or another.

That thinking had cost her relationships in the past. Boyfriends told her she was too rigid and unforgiving. That the world wasn't as neatly defined as she believed it to be. She'd never understood what they meant until now, with Nick. She was a tangle of emotions.

In her heart, she wanted him to be innocent, but she wouldn't make excuses for him. If he was guilty, he was going to jail. She would handcuff him herself if it came to that. She could never live with herself if she let a guilty man walk free.

As Maya swam, her head cleared, just as she knew it would. Her assignment was to watch Nick, find evidence against him, and get him to talk. She'd come here with blinders on, Nick as her sole focus. The witnesses identified him, and Owens wanted to arrest Nick before he could move the drugs. But what if the initial identification was a mistake? Or seeing Nick on the beach was a coincidence? Maya had been so focused on Nick that she hadn't investigated other possible suspects. That would change immediately, and she knew exactly where to start.

Chapter 20

N ICK WAS SO CERTAIN what the DNA tests would reveal that he spent Thursday putting his plan in place. He should have the results back Friday by noon, so he had to make the most of the hours he had left. If Sebastian was his son, he wanted custody of him as soon as possible. He couldn't take a chance that Miguel or his father would smuggle the child out of the country.

If Sebastian wasn't his, Nick could abort his plan. Maya was the most troublesome part of the plan. Not the most dangerous, but the most difficult. She'd begun as a diversion when he had an excess of time on his hands. But he'd developed genuine feelings for her; he admired her strength and integrity. He couldn't remember ever feeling like this about a woman and knew it would be hard to walk away from her.

But he would. He couldn't see any outcome that involved him and Maya having more time together. By tomorrow night, he might have his son, which meant he'd have to go into hiding for both of their safety. He may have a deal with Miguel, but Nick didn't trust him enough to fully honor it. Miguel may try to double-cross Nick, or he may come after him afterward. Santiago Mendoza might demand it. Maya couldn't live her life on the run with them; Nick wouldn't ever ask of her.

His last stop of the day was at Miguel's hotel, *La Estrella*, in Miami. He parked several blocks away to surveil the area. The hotel was on Ocean Drive, in the heart of South Beach, bustling with sunburned tourists and colorful locals. Ocean Drive featured a wide boardwalk opening onto an inviting beach with waves lapping at the shore. It also boasted world-famous restaurants and designer boutiques mixed in with its upscale hotels. Miguel's hotel was one of these. Nick got a *cafecito* from a walk-up shop and took it across the street to a bench with a good vantage point of *La Estrella*.

The white stucco building was six-stories tall. Nick knew Miguel had a top-floor apartment but didn't know if other rooms or apartments were on that floor, or if Miguel had the entire floor to himself. Was Sebastian up there right now? Miguel's apartment would be the logical place for the baby to be. Miguel would have heightened security after the shooting, making the entire building a fortress.

Two security guards positioned themselves on either side of the front entrance, making their presence obvious. Nick watched for less-obvious security near the hotel but didn't see anyone. Four cameras covered the exterior of the hotel, probably being monitored by the security office within the hotel. An older man sat down on the bench next to Nick, sighing with weariness as he lowered his weight. The men nodded at each other, but thankfully, the man wasn't inclined to chat. Nick pretended to sip from his now-empty cup while he acted distracted on his phone. Behind his sunglasses, his watchful eyes tracked the movements at the hotel. This time of day, well-dressed guests were leaving the hotel to walk to a favorite spot for drinks or dinner. Others were returning to the hotel from the beach, driven in by the chill as evening approached.

After a few minutes, the man on the bench heaved himself to his feet with a grunt, gave Nick another nod, and continued down the boardwalk. Shortly after he left, Nick noticed four additional security guards in dark jackets exit the hotel. They joined the security guards already in place, using their large bodies to create a tunnel from the hotel onto the street. Annoyed pedestrians stepped around them. Less than a minute later, a large black SUV pulled up to the entrance of the hotel. A bodyguard jumped out of the passenger seat, opened the rear door, and escorted someone out. Security immediately surrounded the passenger, creating a wall around the person entering the hotel. Once the person was inside, the SUV pulled away, and it was back to business as usual at the hotel.

Nick wondered who would warrant that much security. With darkness approaching, Nick abandoned his earlier plan to enter the hotel. Whoever the special guest was, security would be on alert for any threats this soon after their arrival. He watched for a few more minutes, until the darkness made it impossible for him to see the faces of the guests and staff clearly. As he was preparing to leave, he did a double-take on a woman exiting the hotel. She was wearing a slinky cocktail dress, spiky heels, and a tiny black purse. The staff rushed to assist her with the door, almost comical in their enthusiasm. Nick didn't blame them. With curves like that, any man would make a fool of himself.

He hadn't seen her enter the hotel earlier; he would've remembered. She scanned the street in both directions, then headed north. In about forty steps, she'd be directly across the street from him. He tried to redirect his attention back to the hotel but found himself drawn back to her. As she continued

down the sidewalk, she crossed directly beneath a street lamp, giving Nick his first clear look at her face.

Maya. What was she doing here? Why was she dressed like that? Not that Nick was complaining, but this was a whole new look for her. The *femme fatale*. Her presence in the *Estrella* couldn't be a coincidence, especially dressed like that. He followed her from the other side of the street. He pulled his hat low on his forehead and hoped that was enough to make him unrecognizable, although Maya didn't seem to pay much attention to her surroundings.

Nick followed her for several blocks, remaining slightly behind her. He didn't worry about being spotted on the crowded sidewalks. When Maya turned left onto a side street, Nick jogged between cars to cross the street. He turned onto the same street, but found it deserted. No sign of Maya. He kept walking, hoping for a sign of her.

As he approached a parking garage, she stepped out in front of him with a small automatic pistol aimed right at his chest.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said with a smile.

Maya stood still, her gun unwavering. "What are you doing here and why are you following me?"

"What are you doing at the Estrella?"

Maya shook her head. "I've got the gun. I ask the questions."

"Where was that hidden? That dress doesn't look like it conceals much." Nick gave an appreciative glance at Maya's form in the tight dress.

Maya didn't answer his question, just lifted the hem of her skirt to reveal a holster strapped to her inner thigh. She reholstered and secured the weapon. Once her skirt was back in place, the weapon was completely concealed. She repeated her question. "What are you doing here?"

"Just sightseeing in gorgeous South Beach. It's such a picture-perfect day, I couldn't resist. Now that I get to see you, my day is even better. Why don't you let me buy you dinner? We could sit outside and enjoy the ocean breeze."

"I have a briefing in thirty minutes."

"Maya, I may not see you again after tonight, and I want to... I want to explain. I'm not who you think I am."

Maya studied him for a long time. "I don't want to hear more of your half-truths. Your actions tomorrow will tell me everything I need to know about you. If you're still around on Saturday, you can explain it all to me then."

She turned and walked into the parking garage. "Maya, wait," he called, but she didn't even turn around. He let her go. She was right. He hadn't been honest with her and they weren't on the same side in this. Yet.

Chapter 21

S INCE JAMILA WAS LEADING the investigation in Atlanta, Owens requested she be part of the Miami team briefing so they had the full picture of the investigation. Maya volunteered to pick Jamila up from the Miami airport on the way to the briefing. However, Jamila's flight was delayed by twenty minutes, which meant they would be late. Maya texted Owens to let him know.

"Hello, hot stuff," Jamila said when she saw Maya on the sidewalk. "And here I didn't dress up for you at all."

"Cute. But I came straight from La Estrella."

"Hot date?"

"Surveillance."

Jamila raised an inquisitive eyebrow, but Maya wouldn't share her information out on the sidewalk. She opened the trunk, and Jamila placed her small overnight bag inside. Once they were strapped in, Maya started the car and eased away from the curb.

"Those rumors about Santiago Mendoza?" Maya paused and Jamila nodded an acknowledgement. "They're true. He's here. I saw him at the hotel. I knew something was up the moment I walked in. Security was stepped up: two in the street, four more in the lobby, and two more at the elevators."

"This is your undercover outfit?"

Maya nodded.

"Damn, during my last undercover assignment, I was a bartender at a biker bar."

"It's all glamor at CGIS. Although I did chip a nail on an assignment once; that was a scary one."

"Is that why you only investigate offshore crimes? You don't want to leave all the hard work to us at the DEA? Don't want to risk getting your hands dirty?"

"Or messing up my hair." Maya said with a shiver.

"Heaven forbid. Now, if we're done with the beauty portion of the evening, tell me what we're doing tonight. I want a plan before all those men try to steamroll the operation," Jamila said. Maya considered her a feminist, but Jamila took it to an entirely different level. Maya had respect and admiration for many of the men she worked with, but Jamila treated them with disdain. Maya was certain there was a story behind Jamila's attitude, but because their friendship was professional, she'd never asked.

"Commander Owens called the briefing. We've got a lot of moving parts and he wants us all working together. He told me I wasn't playing nice with others." Maya made a face that said everything about how she felt about his comment.

Jamila laughed out loud. "You've only heard that on every investigation you've done."

"Right. Shouldn't he be used to it by now?" Maya teased.

"Sugar, this isn't his problem to fix."

Maya sighed. "You're right. But incompetent agents just slow me down. That's why I'm glad you're here. Things are going to heat up quickly."

Maya smiled over at Jamila, but her friend wasn't so easily swayed. "Don't suck up to me. We both know who's the better agent here. You needed someone to figure out this mess you made; that's why you called me."

Maya laughed out loud at her friend's comment.

When they arrived at Maya's office for the briefing, she gave Jamila a tour of the essentials. "Coffee is right through here. I have a stash of pods in my desk drawer, unless someone stole them while I've been out. Help yourself. The break room is the first door on the right. Just after that is the bathroom. We'll be over here in the conference room."

As they walked down the hallway of the bare bones, utilitarian office, Jamila said, "This looks like every law enforcement office I've ever been in. Depressing beige with soul-sucking dividers."

"Minus the perps. We don't have a holding facility here."

The rest of the group had already assembled in the conference room when Maya and Jamila entered just after seven o'clock. In addition to Cmdr. Owens, Stephen Rutherford, sent to Atlanta, was also there. They were sitting across the table from two of the detectives from Flamingo Cove, Det. Jones and Det. Gomes. Maya picked up on tension in the air and guessed that Owens's off-putting manner was the source of it. He tended to alienate local law enforcement with his presumption they were incompetent.

Maya began to introduce Jamila, but Owens cut her off. "This isn't a goddamn cocktail party, despite how you're dressed. I hope we didn't interrupt your plans for the evening. We've got work to do. Rutherford, bring us up to speed."

Maya shot Jamila a look. Owens was in a mood tonight. As the lead agent, Maya herself should be the one to lead the briefing. Owens was making it clear what he thought of her investigation.

"Well," Stephen said, pausing to clear his throat. "Let's start with Flamingo Cove. Detectives Jones and Gomes, do you want to bring us up to speed on what's happening on your end?"

Maya's phone flashed a text from Jamila. *Classic*. Maya resisted a smile. For the next twenty minutes, the team briefed each other, recapping the actions of the past few days.

Before Maya had a chance to brief on the events of her day, Cmdr. Owens spoke again. "Rutherford, tell them about our plan."

This time, Maya felt no trace of amusement. Maya felt Jamila's eyes boring into her head, but refused to acknowledge the look. What was happening here? As the lead agent, she should be in charge of directing the investigation. Owens had cut her out of this. He'd shown his disdain for Maya in the past, but this was taking it too far. She wouldn't say anything to him in front of others, but she would confront him about this when the briefing was over.

How could Owens completely cut her out of the plan, especially when she was the one most familiar with the case? Was he taking her off the case? She jumped in before Stephen had a chance to begin. "Commander Owens, I have some additional information from earlier tonight—"

Owens held his hand up. "You can put all that in your report, Mitchell. We've wasted too much time on this already, and we need to move. Every day Sullivan is walking around is another chance for him to move the drugs."

[&]quot;But, sir-"

"Enough, Ms. Mitchell."

"Yes, sir." Maya sat fuming in silence. She wouldn't get anywhere by pushing Owens, especially in front of a group like this. Tonight, his famously brusque attitude had turned into downright rudeness, and it seemed that he was aiming it all at her.

"Want to stay with me tonight?" Maya asked Jamila as they were walking out of the building into the cool evening air. It was nearly ten o'clock, and she had no intention of driving back to Flamingo Cove. She'd stay in her apartment tonight. "I'm starving. We can order in pizza and figure out what the hell happened back there. I have an extra bedroom."

"What the hell did happen back there?"

"Other than me getting sidelined? I have no idea. But I can't think with my stomach growling."

"Pizza sounds delicious, if the offer includes a big glass of wine."

"I think I can manage that."

Maya drove to her apartment, located in a high-rise building not far from her office. She loved the security of the building, especially since she was often gone for long periods of time on investigations. She used her electronic key to unlock the elevator from the parking garage up to her fourteenth-floor apartment.

She showed Jamila around, indicating the spare bedroom where she would sleep.

"Why don't you get settled? I've got to change out of this. Help yourself to whatever wine you can find."

Maya stripped off her clothes and opted for a quick shower to wash off the day. After moisturizing her skin, she pulled on a sweatshirt and some bike shorts, leaving her feet bare. When she emerged from her room, Jamila had already poured a glass of white wine for herself and had one waiting for Maya.

"I'll order the pizza. What do you like?"

"What do you get?"

"White pizza with spinach, onions, and sausage."

"That works for me."

Maya placed the order on her phone, then led Jamila out onto her balcony to drink their wine while they waited for the pizza.

"What's up with your boss?" Jamila asked, diving right into the issue at hand.

Maya shook her head. "He's always been tough, but not like this. It wouldn't surprise me if he took me off the investigation. He didn't even want to hear what I had to say."

"Does he know Mendoza's in the country?"

Maya shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not sure if anyone has confirmed it or not. He's pushing to get Nick arrested, but he's overlooking the bigger opportunity. We have a cartel boss on U.S. soil. Isn't that worth more? Yes, this is a big shipment, but it's nothing in the scheme of things. We get one of these a month. What if we could get Mendoza?"

"You think Nick Sullivan could lead us to him?"

"I don't know, but I think we have to explore it. The moment we arrest Nick, we lose all our leverage."

"Are you certain that the person you saw in the hotel today was Santiago Mendoza?"

Maya unlocked her phone and handed it to her friend. "Take a look."

"You got pictures? Ballsy. I'll send these to myself. I want someone at my office to do facial recognition. See if we can get a positive ID. What's he doing here? He's taking an enormous risk."

Maya stared off into the lights of the city. "I have an idea," she said tentatively.

Jamila sat upright in her chair. "What is it?"

"His grandchild. Nick Sullivan is the father and is trading the drugs for the baby."

"What?" Jamila was shocked by the revelation.

"Nick had a relationship with Luciana Mendoza; he thinks it's his baby she was holding when she was killed. He's waiting for DNA confirmation, then he's planning a swap with Miguel Ramirez, Mendoza's son. The baby for the drugs."

"Okay, I take back what I said earlier. Nick Sullivan is the one who's ballsy. Going up against Mendoza like that."

Maya nodded in agreement. "My hunch is that Ramirez agreed to the deal and his father got wind of it. Apparently, he wants to groom the baby to be the next generation of drug dealer, so he wouldn't allow the trade. Especially for a measly shipment of cocaine."

"Why would Ramirez agree to that?"

"Maybe he's stringing Nick along to get the drugs back."

"That makes sense. The drugs belong to *Cartel del Sol*, and it would be quite a slap in the face for the *Los Reyes Cartel* to take possession of them. They could undercut the market. Or lace the drugs with something. If word got out that drugs from *Cartel del Sol* were tainted, it would drive customers to *Los Reyes*."

"Discredit the competition." Maya thought it over. "It works for politicians. Why not drug dealers?"

Jamila considered the question for a moment. "Owens is hot to arrest Nick tomorrow. Think we have enough evidence?"

"Probably. The original witnesses ID'ed him. That alone could get an arrest warrant. But enough to make it stick?" Maya shook her head in admission that they didn't have enough.

"What's Owens's game? Why is he pushing so hard when we don't have the drugs?" Jamila asked.

"I've been asking myself the same questions. It's like he cares more about Nick Sullivan than he does the drugs."

They talked through the case while they ate the pizza and finished the bottle of wine. Maya stood up and cleared the small table where they'd eaten. "I'm going to bed. Let's get some sleep and regroup in the morning."

After cleaning up the remnants of the meal, Maya checked her phone. She had a text from Nick that had come in just minutes ago. *I need to talk to you. Tonight. Just tell me where and when.*

His tone sounded as urgent as it had been at the parking garage when she'd pulled her gun on him. Maya wouldn't be able to talk to him after tomorrow; once he was arrested, he was off-limits.

Are you still in Miami? she asked.

Yes.

Maya sent him the address of the drugstore down the block from her building. She could walk there easily, but he wouldn't be able to figure out where she lived. When can you get here?

15 minutes. Nick replied.

I'll be there.

Maya heard the shower running in the guest bath and decided to fill Jamila in after the meeting. After a moment of debate, she strapped on her gun and holster, concealing them under her baggie hoodie.

Chapter 22

N ICK PULLED INTO THE deserted parking lot, backing into a spot that gave him the best visual of the entire lot. Maya emerged seconds later from a shadowy alcove of the building.

Nick swallowed hard at the sight of her long legs in a pair of skimpy bike shorts and had to remind himself of the task at hand. Tomorrow was going to be a dangerous day, and he wanted to keep Maya safe. She'd grown to mean something to him and he didn't want her hurt, or worse, because of his actions.

She slid into the seat next to him, bringing with her that delicious feminine scent he loved. He breathed deeply, knowing this may be his last chance to indulge. She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to speak first.

"I need your help tomorrow," he said. She waited, so he continued. "I'm meeting Miguel. We're supposed to do an exchange for my son, but I need backup in case he tries to renege on the deal."

"You want me as your backup?" Maya asked, incredulous.

Nick nodded.

"You do realize that my primary goal is to arrest you. If I'm your backup and I see this exchange go down, I'll arrest you, Miguel, and anyone else who is there. How does that serve your purpose?"

"I can't see any other way out. If I go in alone, there's no guarantee I'll walk away alive. I've thought this through from every angle. Even if Miguel would let me walk away, his father will hunt me down to get his grandson back. The best possible outcome is I get my son, stash him away somewhere safe, do my time, and then hopefully be out before he's an adult." Nick knew Maya could hear the resignation in his voice because her face dropped.

When she tried to speak, he raised a hand to stop her. "One more thing. I have a condition."

Maya arched an eyebrow at him but didn't speak.

"No team at the meet. I can't risk guns blazing and my son getting hurt. After we make the exchange, you take my son to a friend of mine, someone safe. They'll meet you at the motel in Flamingo Cove. You take Sebastian, get him to this person, and they'll disappear until I'm out."

"You've really put a lot of thought into this."

"It's the only way."

"What if it isn't your son?"

"I'll have the results by noon tomorrow. Hopefully earlier. If it isn't my son, I'll text you the location of the drugs. You'll get to recover them, but you won't get me. I'll text Miguel as well. I've already promised him that. If you run into him at the warehouse, that's just good luck."

"The warehouse?"

Nick winced. Of course she would pick up on that.

"Where is this warehouse?"

He shook his head. "I need to get the DNA results first. If Sebastian is mine, you back me up and get him to safety when the dust settles. If he isn't mine, I'll text you the address. The rest is up to you."

Maya sat quietly for a few minutes, staring out the windshield into the dark night. He was asking a lot of her, but he also knew she would do the right thing.

A slow smile crossed her lips. He watched her, enjoying the curve of her mouth. He wanted to reach out and stroke his finger across her lips, but that would be too much. As much as he wanted this woman, he would have to rely on memories of their night together.

"I have a condition as well," she said.

Nick groaned. "From the look of delight on your face, I don't think I'm going to like this very much."

"I get to put the cuffs on you personally. You have to hold nice and still while I do it. Maybe you even ask me nicely."

Nick pitched his voice low, deliberately shifting the meaning of her words. "You're that eager to cuff me? I could never deny you anything you desired that much."

Nick heard Maya's sharp intake of breath and the air became thick with desire. "Nick-," she began, but he cut off her words with a kiss, hot and yearning. His tongue delved into her mouth and she responded with a moan of pleasure. He trailed kisses over her jaw and down her neck. When his mouth reached her collarbone, she pushed him away.

"Stop. I can't do this."

Nick sat back in his seat and dragged his hands through his hair in frustration. She was right, but that didn't stop him from wanting her. His erection pressed urgently against his zipper, and he shifted in his seat, seeking relief.

"Maya, you are the wildcard in all of this. When I met you, I thought you'd be fun to hang out with for a few days to help me kill some time while I worked this out."

Maya opened her mouth to protest, but he held up a hand to stop her. "Do you really want to get into our motivations when we first met?" Maya shook her head, and he continued. "As I go to know you, I found out you were so much more than a hottie in a bikini."

She scowled at him and he laughed. "Holly wouldn't have minded that comment."

"Holly also wouldn't have pulled a gun on you," she said.

"It's going to be hard to walk away from what might have been between us. There is something real between us, and I think you feel it, too."

Maya gave the smallest nod as an acknowledgement of the connection.

"Unless you're willing to wait ten to twelve years for me, tonight is all we have. I won't ask you to sleep with me." Nick paused expectantly, turning the statement into a question.

Maya said, "Good choice."

"Right. I won't ask you to sleep with me, but I want you to know how much you mean to me and how much I regret we won't get to see where this goes."

"Maybe it's best if we let the possibility live in our fantasies."

"What does that mean?" Nick asked.

"My job? I'm great at that. Relationships? I suck. I've destroyed every relationship I've had. I take something good and I ruin it. It would break my heart if I did that with us. So maybe you are my perfect man... I can forever live with the untainted fantasy."

"Your fantasy is a beach bum doing ten to twelve?"

Maya laughed. "Wouldn't be the worst choice I'd made."

"That sounds like a story I need to hear."

"When you come to visit me in Leavenworth?"

"Not likely."

Maya's gaze was full of longing for what might have been, and Nick was certain she saw the same sentiment reflected in his eyes.

After a moment, she said, "Text me tomorrow, as soon as you hear."

"I will," he promised.

[&]quot;Another day."

Chapter 23

MAYA AND JAMILA WERE in an interview room with two Miami-Dade detectives and a member of the Suicide Dragons. Despite a frustratingly long morning of interviews, they had made no progress uncovering who'd sent the gang members to Flamingo Cove to watch for the drugs. They also hadn't made any progress on the task Owens assigned them: learning more about Nick's background. Jamila had assigned that to an analyst in her office. Technically, they hadn't

disobeyed Owens, they just leveraged their time. Jamila called it "efficiency".

Maya checked her phone for the fourth time in the past minute, earning her a hard look from one of the detectives. Phones in the interview room were disruptive, but Maya had bigger fish to fry.

"I think we're done here," she said, rising to her feet. "Thank you for your time this morning."

As the detectives escorted the gang member out of the building, Jamila snagged Maya's elbow and pulled her down the hall into the women's room. The women's bathroom was usually the safest place to talk in any law enforcement facility. Jamila checked the stalls to make sure they were alone, then said, "What gives?"

"We're wasting our time here. We need to be out there, making sure this doesn't turn into a shit show."

"Exactly nothing is happening out there. Sullivan's in the wind, and unless they can get a real-time trace on his phone, he's going to remain in the wind." She stared expectantly at Maya.

"He's supposed to text me."

Jamila's jaw dropped at Maya's words.

"Not here," Maya said, worried about who might overhear them. "Let's take a drive."

The women made their way to Maya's car. The moment their doors were closed, Jamila said, "Start talking. And fast."

Maya recapped the events of the last night for Jamila. When she was done, Jamila asked, "So you're going to play hot dog and take this whole thing down yourself? Make Owens look like a fool, out chasing after Sullivan while you get the bust? Maybe grab a high-level cartel member all by yourself?"

Maya shrugged, and Jamila laughed at her audaciousness. "Honey, I am here for it. What do we do?"

"Nothing until I hear from Nick."

"When will that be?"

"Hopefully any minute. He said he'd text me as soon as he gets the DNA results."

"Buy me some lunch while we wait. If I'm in Miami, I want some Cuban food. Find me a taco truck."

"Tacos aren't Cuban. How about fish tacos? That's very Miami."

Jamila sighed dramatically. "Fine. I shall settle for authentic Miami fish tacos."

Maya took Jamila to her favorite taco truck. The fish was always fresh and the portions were generous.

They sat at a nearby picnic table overlooking the ocean while they waited for the tacos. Jamila flipped aimlessly through the case file. Maya had already memorized its contents, so she was staring off into the surf, trying to figure out what she was missing.

"Damn, Nick's looking rough in this mug shot. When was he arrested?"

Jamila's question roused Maya from her musing and she glanced over at the case file. "That's not Nick. That's Ghost," she said casually. An instant later, the importance of Jamila's mistake hit her. If Jamila could mistake the two men, maybe the older couple had as well.

She grabbed for the file. "Where's Nick's photo?" When she found it, she said, "Look at this. Both are over six feet tall with shoulder-length hair, stubble, and tattoos. Ghost was on the beach where the Greenes had seen Nick the previous mornings. It was barely dawn. What if this is a case of mistaken identity?"

Jamila glanced back and forth between the photos. "You've spent time with both of them. Didn't you see it?"

Maya shook her head. She hadn't seen the similarities between the two men when she'd met with Ghost. But it may have been because her body always reacted when Nick was nearby and it hadn't with Ghost. She had such a different reaction to the two men that she hadn't seen the similarities.

"Let's get a Flamingo Cove detective to show Ghost's mug shot to the Greenes. See if maybe they were wrong about identifying Nick." Maya reached for her phone.

"Shit! What if Nick didn't steal the drugs?"

"No. He's involved somehow. I saw him hand a brick of cocaine to Miguel. He's got a meet set up to exchange the drugs for his son." Despite the confidence in her voice, Maya flashed back to the night she had dinner with Nick. He'd sworn he was being honest when he told her he didn't steal the drugs. She was sure he was lying, but what if he wasn't?

Halfway through their meal, Maya's phone signaled an incoming text. She glanced at her phone and spoke through a mouthful of taco. "Nick."

"What does it say?"

"It's an address in Flamingo Cove and a time. 1:45. Shit! We barely have time to make it up there."

"We're not rushing into this; that's suicide. Give me the address."

Maya did and Jamila looked up the location on her phone. "A storage building. Single point of entry. Fenced. Did he give you a unit number?"

"No."

"You have to tell Owens about this," Jamila said. When Maya didn't respond, she continued. "We need drone coverage. We need access to these cameras. We need to get inside."

"I gave Nick my word."

The look on Jamila's face was incredulous. "You gave him your word? Honey, how many years have you been lying to subjects? That's part of the job. What's up with you?"

Maya shook her head. She couldn't explain her complicated feelings about Nick to Jamila. She'd crossed a professional

boundary and put herself in an impossible situation. "Let's go. We can argue about it in the car."

As they approached the staging area, Maya was happy Jamila had convinced her to call in the meeting both to Owens and to the Flamingo Cove Police Department. She'd attempted to contact Nick to get the results of the DNA test, but had gotten a notification that her message couldn't be delivered. They didn't know what they were walking into, and, while she would do her best to help Nick, she wouldn't jeopardize anyone's safety.

Maya parked her car in the bus station being used as the staging area for the operation. Detective Jones met them as they got out of the car. The tension in the air was palpable.

"We just put the drone up, and should get video in the next five minutes or so. We've had a couple of units drive by. There's a security gate, and you can't see much from the road."

"Have you spoken to anyone at the mini-storage?"

"Negative. We don't want to alert them until we know what's going on."

"Who's in charge of the op?" Maya asked.

Jones shot her a look of surprise and then said, "Rutherford, from your team."

Maya nodded, trying to move past the awkward moment. When she'd informed Owens earlier, he'd made it clear that she was no longer in charge of the operation. She thought he'd assign it to someone with more experience; Stephen Rutherford had never run an op like this.

"SWAT?" Jamila asked.

Jones shook his head. "Rutherford wants to see what we have before we call in the big guns."

Maya turned to Jamila. "Let's go check in. Let him know that we're here."

Maya approached Stephen, who barely glanced up from his phone. "Stephen. Where do you need us?"

Without making eye contact, he said, "You two can help with traffic control once we get rolling."

"Traffic control?" Jamila asked. "That's not a serious assignment."

Stephen shrugged his shoulders. "Not my call," he said sheepishly, then gave his full attention back to his screen. Shocked and unable to move, Maya just stared at the top of his head for a moment. He didn't look up or give her any other form of acknowledgement, so she turned and walked away.

"Tell me we're not doing traffic control," Jamila said when she caught up with Maya at the car.

"We're not doing traffic control. Let's go."

Maya drove to the mini-storage and parked. "Wait here."

"I'm coming with you," Jamila insisted.

"No way. That drone is watching us right now. This could get me in hot water. You don't want any part of that. Plus, I need you to cover me if something goes wrong." Maya took off her gun and badge, handing them to Jamila.

"What are you doing?"

With a lilt in her voice, Maya said, "My boyfriend asked me to drop off these boxes in his storage unit and I just can't remember which one."

Jamila shook her head as Maya got out of the car. Upon entering the office, the heavy odor of cigarette smoke wafted over Maya. The woman behind the counter puffed unapologetically on a cigarette, watching Maya walk in with weary eyes. She wasn't exactly unwelcoming, just worn down by the world. Maya sized her up and changed her approach.

Slumping her shoulders slightly, Maya spoke in a soft tone. "I can't believe I did this. He's going to kill me."

"What's the matter, sugar? Who's going to kill you?"

"My man. He asked me to do one simple thing and I couldn't even get that right. I screwed up again."

"Men." The woman commiserated. "It's always one thing or another with them. What happened?"

"He asked me to drop these boxes off." Maya waved vaguely toward her car. "My friend even agreed to come and help me, but I forgot the unit number. If I have to call and tell him, he's going to lose it."

"One little thing like that? That's no reason to get riled up."

Maya pitched her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "He works a half-day on Fridays and starts drinking at noon. It's not the day to make mistakes."

The woman behind the counter shook her head in disgust and Maya could only hope it was disgust for men and not her sorry performance. She breathed a sigh of relief when the woman responded. "My second husband, Clyde, was like that. Mean as a snake when he got to drinking."

Maya nodded her head, but stayed silent, hoping the woman would continue.

"I've got a good man now. George. He's the manager here and doesn't take kindly to men who mistreat women. He wouldn't mind me helping you out. What's your boyfriend's name?"

"Oh, thank you. His name is Nick Sullivan."

"Nick Sullivan?" the woman asked as she typed. "I've got him right here. Unit 3-29. That's going to be the building in the back, on the far side. I'll open the gate for you. It can be a little finicky."

"Oh, thank you. This really means a lot to me."

"Us women have to stick together, don't you think?"

Maya gave the woman a warm smile and said, "Yes, we do." As she walked out of the storage unit, she felt a twinge of guilt at her deception, but remembered Jamila's comment about how many times she had lied in the course of her job.

When Maya got back in her car, the gate was already beginning to open. She put on her gun and badge and filled Jamila in on the conversation while she waited for the gate to fully open. She drove slowly through the facility, she and Jamila scanning for people or vehicles that caught their attention.

Maya saw a couple loading furniture from a storage unit into a moving van. The rear of the buildings offered storage for boats and RVs. A man was hooking a boat up to the back of his truck.

Maya's phone rang as she approached the third unit. A quick glance at the screen told her it was Stephen Rutherford. She didn't answer it, even though she knew the next call would likely come from Owens.

"Will you text him and tell him it's Unit 3-29?"

"Care to tell me what we're doing?" Jamila asked as she typed on Maya's phone.

Maya shrugged. "I just wanted to find out the unit number, but then when she offered to open the gate, I couldn't say no."

When they reached the third building, Maya circled slowly around. Two women were at a unit in the front of the building; they appeared to be organizing their space, which was filled with painting supplies.

"What do you think?" she asked Jamila. Jamila shook her head no, indicating that she wasn't suspicious of them.

Watching the unit numbers, Maya realized Nick's unit would be at the back of the building. She circled the building slowly.

"Don't stop. I'll take photos. You just keep driving," Jamila instructed.

"Yep. Got it."

When Maya turned the corner to the back of the building, it was empty. No people or vehicles along this side of the building.

"Look for cameras that look out of place," she said. She drove as slowly as she could without stopping; she couldn't risk the possibility that Nick, Miguel, or another cartel member would come around the corner while they were here. "Damn, I want to get a look inside that unit."

"Don't even think about it."

"I won't. I'm not. But it's oh so tempting."

"Tempting enough to flush your career down the toilet?"

"No," Maya admitted.

"Good, because you're going to have enough trouble from this little prank you pulled. Compromise the investigation and you're done."

Maya completed her circle of the building and drove toward the exit. She would love to find a spot amongst all the stored vehicles to watch Nick's unit, but she didn't dare. The woman at the front desk seemed the type to keep her eye on the surveillance cameras, so she probably already knew that Maya hadn't dropped off any boxes. She didn't want the woman to get suspicious and walk into the middle of a dangerous situation.

"I think we can get some decent surveillance on the other side of that back fence. Park in one of those warehouses," she said. "Then we can find a way over the fence if we need to."

"Why don't you let the drone do the surveillance?" Jamila asked.

"Because then we'll be five minutes away and miss all the fun."

While they waited for the gate to open slowly for them, Maya texted Stephen. Going to set up on Industrial Drive. Then we'll be ready for traffic control when you need us. She wasn't sure if Stephen would believe her or not, but he would pretend to believe her, and that was enough for now.

She found a spot in the parking lot of a warehouse overlooking the storage facility. The overgrown foliage would conceal them. She reached into the back for her binoculars and found that she had a good vantage point through a break in the foliage to see anyone coming to Nick's unit.

The women took turns watching the storage unit and parking lot. They didn't have radios, so they didn't know what the team was doing; Stephen hadn't bothered to update her by phone.

Jamila was watching with the binoculars when she said, "Truck"

Maya took the binoculars. She recognized Nick's truck and texted the information to Stephen. He responded, *We have it. Moving in.* A moment after getting the text, she heard sirens approaching. What was Stephen doing? It was too soon to move in. Nobody from the cartel had arrived yet. Nick hadn't opened the storage unit. Stephen jumped the gun and it could cost them valuable evidence in the case.

As much as it killed Maya to wait on the sidelines, she stayed where she was. If someone tried to make an escape over the fence, she and Jamila would be there to stop him. She heard the squeal of tires as the law enforcement vehicles surrounded the truck.

An officer was giving commands. "Put your hands out the window. Let me see your hands." Maya was on full alert; if there was going to be a problem, this is when it would happen. She jumped out of the car and made her way to the fence, needed to see what was going on. She couldn't watch Nick get shot by a trigger-happy cop. She wanted to be available to intervene if needed.

She was facing the passenger side of the vehicle, so she couldn't see what was happening, but Nick seemed to comply because the officer was now giving instructions to open his door and step out of the vehicle.

Once Nick was in cuffs, Maya couldn't wait any longer. "Let's go," she called to Jamila, who had joined her at the fence. She drove back to the storage facility. This time, the gate was fully open, probably at the request of the Flamingo Cove Police. Maya saw an officer speaking with the woman who had helped her earlier. She rolled her window down and

stuck her badge out the window. The officer waved her through.

By the time she reached the scene, Nick was already in the back seat of a cruiser.

Stephen approached her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm happy to report that traffic is under control and we wanted to see if we could offer any help here." Without waiting for a response, Maya walked past Stephen toward Detective Jones.

Jones shook his head as she approached. "It's not him." He saw the confusion in Maya's eyes and said, "The guy in the truck is some pimply-faced teenager. Not Sullivan."

Maya's brain still wasn't processing. "Not Sullivan? That's his truck."

Jones shrugged his shoulders. "Let's go ask him."

Maya glanced over her shoulder and saw Jamila in a heated conversation with Stephen. Good, she'd created a distraction. Maya followed Jones to the cruiser that held the person who wasn't Nick. When Jones opened the door, Maya saw a skinny teenager on the verge of tears.

"Did that officer read you your rights?" she asked.

The boy nodded his head.

"You have two minutes to tell me everything, or you'll never see the light of day again."

The boy took a moment to collect himself, then his words rushed out, as if he wanted to explain as much as he could in two minutes. "This guy gave me \$100 to drop these boxes off here this afternoon."

"Why you?"

"Dunno. I was at the gas station when he pulled in. Started talking about trucks, you know, because we drive the same one. Then asked if I wanted to make \$300. Promised it was nothing illegal."

"You just said he gave you \$100."

"He did. His friend's supposed to give me the other \$200 when I got here."

"What's this friend's name?"

"Maya something. He said not to worry about finding her, she'd find me."

Maya quietly cursed, and she suspected Jones stifled a laugh with a cough.

"Why didn't you take the hundred bucks and steal the boxes?" Jones asked.

"Because they're empty. I checked." The boy hung his head sheepishly, as if admitting he would've stolen the contents if they had been worth it.

"So why did this guy want them here badly enough to pay you \$100?"

"I dunno. He just told me the time I had to be here and gave me the money. Am I in trouble?"

Maya was furious and wanted the boy to feel some of it. "Depends on what we find in that unit. You better hope it's squeaky clean with grandma's old furniture. Otherwise, I'm putting whatever we find on you. You have the key and you clearly had the intent to open it."

The boy looked as though he might throw up. Maya and Jones both recognized that look and stepped backward, just in case.

Jones took pity on the boy. "Listen, if you come clean and tell us absolutely everything, I might get the judge to go easy on you. This officer is going to take you down to the station. We'll be there when we're done here. While you wait, think of every little detail that we might want to know. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," the teen replied.

Jones closed the back door of the vehicle and turned to a uniformed officer nearby. "Take him to the station and babysit him in an interview room until we get there."

"Am I booking him on anything?" the officer asked Jones. Jones turned to Maya with a questioning look on his face.

Maya shook her head. As angry as she was at being duped by Nick, this boy hadn't committed a crime. She'd interview him in case she could get more information, but they'd release him. "If he's underage, get a parent there."

When the officer left, Maya turned to Jones and said, "I'm so fucked."

Jones gave her a commiserating nod; as a cop, he'd know how difficult it would be for her to come back from a humiliation like this. He said, "There's still a chance we'll find cocaine behind that door. That would salvage your reputation."

"Only one way to find out."

"Unfortunately, not without a warrant," Jones said, although Maya was well aware they would have to wait.

"How long do you think that will take?"

"Couple hours maybe. Let me see who's in the office that can start the paperwork for me. I'm going to search the truck, then clear out of here. Want to interview the kid with me?"

Maya gestured toward Stephen, who was stalking toward her, waving his phone. "I believe my boss may wish to have a word with me first."

"Good luck with that," Jones said.

When Maya got off the phone with Cmdr. Owens, she went to meet Jamila, who was perched on the hood of Maya's car on a call of her own. She disconnected as Maya approached, then grimaced at her and said, "Was that as bad as I think it was?"

Maya nodded her head and leaned on the car next to Jamila. "I'm off the case effectively immediately. I've shown 'conduct unbecoming my position', and we will talk on Monday to reassess my role within CGIS."

"Regretting that you reported the tip?"

"No. It was the right thing to do. We've all gotten false tips before."

"I'm going to hang here until they get the warrant for the unit. If the drugs are here, I want to be here when it's opened."

"Keep me posted?"

Jamila agreed, then asked. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to visit some friends of my grandmother's. They've been going through a difficult time lately and I want to check in on them. Call me when you're done here and I'll pick you up."

Maya parked in front of the manager's office of the Sunrise Motel. The parking lot was mostly empty, but that was typical of a late afternoon at a motel. Guests would still be at the beach or sightseeing. The Patels had replaced the glass in Nick's old room, but the pockmarks left by the bullets were still there.

Coming here was a long-shot, which is why she kept it to herself. Nick led her on a wild-goose chase earlier, but perhaps he'd been honest about his friend staying at the motel. Even if she didn't expect to find anyone, the lead had to be pursued.

Aditi Patel was behind the desk and greeted Maya warmly.

Maya said, "Did I mention last time that my grandmother is Melanie Mitchell? She said to tell you hello."

"Oh, I should've seen the resemblance. You both have that purposeful stride and those gorgeous green eyes. How is she doing?"

"She's loving her retirement. I'm staying with her while I'm here. She taught your kids?"

"Yes, she's such a gift to the children. They loved having her. Please tell her I said hello."

"I will do that. How are the repairs going?"

"It will be a little while before we can rent that room again. We're sold out with the holiday, so we've had to cancel some reservations."

"Have you heard from Nick Sullivan again?"

Aditi's face lit up, proof of how highly she regarded her former guest, despite the damage he caused. Maya could relate. He'd charmed her, too.

"Yes, he stopped in yesterday to check on the repairs. He's paying for them himself, so we don't have to file an insurance claim." Aditi reached for something under the counter and came up with an envelope. "He left this for you, said you'd be stopping by for it."

Maya plastered a smile on her face even as her stomach sank. "Thank you, Mrs. Patel. Did he leave anything else?"

"No, that's all."

Maya waited until she was in her car to open the envelope. Inside was a single piece of paper that said, *Forgive me*.

"That son of a bitch!" Maya swore at her windshield. She studied the note, willing some clue to appear, some sign of where he was and what he was doing.

Chapter 24

NICK FELT A KNOT of stomach-churning guilt when he checked his watch. Maya was an excellent agent and an exceptional woman, and he'd used her. He'd sent her on a wild goose chase and could only hope that she'd followed his advice to come alone. If she had, she'd be furious. If she hadn't, she'd be furious and humiliated.

He hated doing that to her, but he had to get her off his trail. It was more important than ever, given the email he'd gotten this morning. Sebastian was his son. He'd known it in his gut, but he needed the evidence in his hand. Today was a tightly planned operation, and he needed his favorite law enforcement officer off his tail.

If things went according to plan today, he wouldn't see Maya again. That part bothered him deeply. She was such a bright light in his life that he'd imagined a future with her; as difficult as it was, he just had to accept that wasn't a possibility. Maybe he'd try in seven years, or whatever the statute of limitations was in Florida. He imagined himself showing up on her doorstep in seven years and smiled at the thought. She'd be furious with him; he pictured her green eyes flashing with anger. She'd probably try to arrest him anyway. Or shoot him. Depending on how mad she still was.

Time to put his plan into motion. He picked up the phone and called Miguel. When he answered, Nick said, "DNA results were positive. We're a go for today."

"No shit, man. We suspected the baby was really Luciana's, but never in a million years would I have guessed you were the father. What are the odds?"

Nick didn't fully trust Miguel or his "old buddies" routine. It could be genuine; Miguel could be happy to free his nephew from a life of violence and drugs. It could just as easily be a ruse to lure Nick into complacence. Nick would be on his guard until Sebastian was in his arms and he was free.

He'd arranged a safe house they could stay at temporarily while he made permanent arrangements. Once he got there, they would be fine. He'd learned to operate off the grid, so he didn't have to worry about either Maya or the cartel finding them.

He just needed to make it through the next few hours alive, which meant he had to play his cards carefully with Miguel.

"You want me to send you a copy of the results?" Nick asked.

"Nah, man. Luciana wasn't the type to play around. I'm glad you're the father. He'll have a good life with you, away from

all this shit. I don't want him to end up like his mother. She would want him with you."

"Your father won't feel that way."

"Leave him to me," Nick said. "Stealing *del Sol*'s drugs and selling them right under their noses? That'll make him happy. You have the drugs, right?"

"Yes. Here's the meet." Nick explained to Miguel the details of the exchange and confirmed that Miguel understood them. "I'm ditching this phone after this call. I'll text you from a new number with the exact time and location."

"I'll see you there, bro."

If all went well, Nick was just hours away from getting his son; his life was about to change forever. He imagined how much easier this mission would be if he had Maya watching his back. What would it be like working with her as a team? He couldn't see himself in law enforcement, but she would be a valuable asset to some of his side projects.

Nick spent the next several hours double- and triple-checking every facet of his plan. When he was confident that it was as airtight as he could make it, he drove his truck to the outskirts of town and left it on an overgrown path that might've once been a road. He'd discovered the abandoned road on the edge of the everglades earlier in the week.

It wouldn't be safe for him to drive it again. The police in Flamingo Cove would have the vehicle description and would pull over any vehicle matching the description. The whole county would be on alert by now. Nick couldn't take that chance.

He locked the truck and placed the key fob in a magnetic box he attached to the wheel well. He may make it back when things settled down; otherwise, the truck could be here for a while.

Nick walked back toward the main road to make sure he had properly camouflaged the truck. Sunlight glinted off the front bumper, so he returned to rearrange some branches. Once he was satisfied with the truck's camouflage, he started the minivan he had bought with cash earlier in the week. The body was showing some wear, but the owner had assured him it was mechanically sound. Nick wasn't a mechanic, but when he started it up, it sounded fine to him.

A minivan was the perfect choice because they were so innocuous, almost invisible, but the irony of the purchase wasn't lost on Nick: he didn't even have his son yet, and he was already driving a minivan. He'd already installed an infant car seat and filled the back with whatever supplies he thought a baby would need. Nick had done his research and knew that Sebastian would eat solid food but still needed baby formula, so he'd bought plenty of that, a selection of bottles, and three boxes of diapers.

He eased the minivan onto the main road and obeyed the traffic laws all the way back into town. He didn't notice much of a police presence, and winced in guilt, imagining them all the storage unit investigating the false tip he'd given Maya. She would be furious with him.

Nick parked in the lot of a busy waterfront restaurant that offered a dock for its diners. The manager had eagerly accepted a hundred-dollar bill from Nick to dock his boat for the day with no questions asked. This restaurant was on a canal, not the main waterway, which would make it more difficult for the Coast Guard to locate his boat.

Nick climbed aboard the boat and cruised slowly through the canals. There were enough other boats on the water that he didn't stand out.

Nick tied his boat on one of the small islands dotting a large lagoon. The lagoon was a popular fishing spot, although most of the fishing boats had already gone in for the day. There were some pleasure boats out, cruising the sights, anchored at the sandbar, or docked on the islands. Some islands were large enough to host a picnic or barbeque, but Nick chose one that was nothing more than a tangle of mangrove roots. He didn't want any innocent bystander happening by to share the space.

Nick unlocked the cabin of the boat and removed the bags he had stored there previously. He was sweating by the time he had cleared out the cabin, a combination of heat from the unventilated space and exertion from carrying heavy bags through the boat.

Confident the boat was ready, Nick slipped on swim fins and a snorkel, put his binoculars around his neck, and placed his keys, phone, and wallet into a waterproof bag. He slid over the edge of the boat and swam just below the surface to the edge of the lagoon, only the tip of his snorkel visible from the surface. The exposed roots of the mangroves offered plenty of concealment. Nick could watch how the afternoon unfolded without making himself a sitting duck on the boat.

Once he was certain he was well-concealed, he texted Miguel. Meet me at the Flamingo Cove lagoon, south of the bridge, in two hours. Come by skiff. Bring Sebastian. We'll swap boats and each be on our way.

Which boat? Miguel asked.

I'll give you that when you get there.

I might need more time to get a boat.

Two hours, Nick reiterated.

Miguel didn't respond again, so Nick put his phone back into the waterproof bag and perched on a mangrove branch. He settled himself into mission mode. The army taught him to wait, and it was a skill he'd used many times over the years.

An hour before the meet time, a small fishing boat with two men aboard entered the lagoon. Instantly alert, Nick tracked them with his binoculars. The larger man wore a white t-shirt and dark sunglasses. The smaller man wore a black tank top and a hat. There was no sign of weapons on either man, but they might have concealed them on the boat.

The two cruised slowly around the lagoon while Nick kept a watchful eye. They passed the cluster of boats anchored on the sandbar, waving to those they passed. Many of the boats were empty, their occupants tubing or swimming, or picnicking on an island, so Nick's empty boat wasn't conspicuous.

The men attempted to anchor their boat in the center of the lagoon, their fumbling efforts evidence of their inexperience.

After several failed attempts, restarted the boat's engine and headed straight toward Nick. He slipped silently into the water, leaving only his head exposed. Carefully, he inched into a thick patch of foliage to conceal himself as much as possible.

Despite Nick's efforts, the boat motored slowly forward, directly toward him. His heart raced, his muscles primed for a fight. Relying on training over instincts, Nick slowed his breathing and held himself still. He drew his knife and waited.

The boat came to a stop about ten feet away from him. When they cut the engine, Nick could make out the voices easily.

"-gives us a good vantage of most of the lagoon."

"Think he's here yet?"

"I hope not, because if he saw you trying to anchor the boat back there, he made us."

"Like you know what the fuck you're doing?" After a pause, the man continued. "Let's start by eliminating boats. Which one isn't his?"

With that comment, Nick knew which one was the brains of the operation. He wasn't sure which man the voice belonged to, but if it came to it, that was the man Nick would take out first. He listened while the two men complained about mosquitoes and eliminated possible boats. From the sound of their voices, they both had their backs toward Nick, and he risked moving the thick leaves to view the men.

They were sitting with their backs fully exposed, obviously not trained for a mission like this. Nick could easily take them both out right now, but they weren't posing a threat, and they were a valuable source of information.

The smaller man made a call and Nick recognized his voice as the man who was in charge. "We don't think he's here yet, boss. We've got a good line of sight into the entry to the lagoon, so we'll see him when he arrives."

The man was silent for a moment, then said, "Claro, claro."

"What did he say?" the larger man asked.

"Not to touch him."

"Just wait for now. Miguel will call back when they are approaching. See that small boat over there? Think that could be it?"

Nick listened to the men speculate as to his whereabouts while he considered the news he'd heard. Miguel's father wanted him. This couldn't be good news. Had Miguel been playing him all along? Heads of cartels didn't get their hands dirty, so it had to be something personal. That meant Sebastian.

The men identified Nick's boat among five other possibilities and didn't pay it any special attention. He stayed where he was while the larger man mused about stealing the boat and the drugs it contained. He imagined himself living the high life surrounded by scantily clad women on a tropical island.

His partner interrupted his reverie with a warning. "If you steal those drugs, you'll be dead before you can dock the boat."

"So why isn't this guy dead?"

The smaller man shrugged his shoulders.

A car stopped on the bridge over the entrance to the lagoon, an unusual place to stop. Nick watched, but no one exited the car. The men in the boat didn't seem to notice it because they made no comment. Other boats came and went as the men waited, but the car stayed on the bridge.

Nick checked his watch. Miguel should arrive soon. The smaller man's phone rang. After a brief conversation, he turned to his partner and said, "Two minutes. Look alive."

[&]quot;Why?"

[&]quot;Don Mendoza wants him."

[&]quot;El jefe? What does he want him for?"

[&]quot;No sé. But if el jefe wants him, you better not fuck this up."

[&]quot;What are we supposed to do?"

"Alive for what?"

"Anything that goes bad. The only way this guy makes it out of here is with us."

With that comment, Nick knew it was time to act. He fully submerged himself, then swam toward the boat. This had to be as quiet as possible, so he didn't alert whoever was on the bridge. He sank beneath the boat and found he could touch the bottom. Anchoring his feet, he shoved the boat upward as hard as he could. He counted out five seconds, long enough for the men to stand up and peer over the edge to investigate, then he shoved again.

He heard a big splash. One man dropped into the water next to Nick. He pulled the man under water and wrapped an arm around his neck, squeezing until the man stopped struggling. Nick pulled the man into the roots of the mangrove and draped him over a branch.

The element of surprise was gone, and Nick would have to work quickly. Nick submerged again and swam to the stern. Without warning, he pulled himself up on the stern, catching the attention of the larger man. For the briefest second, the man thought it was his partner climbing back aboard. That was all the time Nick needed to launch himself at the man.

Nick landed on top of him and quickly followed up with an uppercut to the man's jaw that knocked him out. Nick found a towline on the boat and cut pieces of it to bind the man. He then took his phone, wallet, shoes, and weapon. Nick used one of the man's socks as a gag and held it in place with flex tape he found in the boat's hold.

Nick had to get the man off the boat before he woke up. Otherwise, the inevitable disturbance would attract unwanted attention. He slipped the roll of flex tape onto his arm and dropped the other sock in his pocket. Then Nick dragged the man to the side and dropped him overboard. Nick followed immediately afterward and pulled the man's head above water. The fall into the water was enough to wake the man up, and he began to struggle.

Nick towed him to the mangrove and secured him to the root system. When he was certain he was secure, Nick turned his attention to the first man, stripping him of his phone, wallet, and weapons, then binding him like his partner.

As he swam back to the boat, he heard the men struggling, but was confident they were out of commission for now. Once aboard the boat, he created a pin of his current location. As Nick untied the boat and started the engine, gunfire erupted on the bridge.

Chapter 25

A MAN STOOD ON the bridge taking shots at a small boat that had just passed under it. Small eruptions occurred in the water as shots hit all around the boat. Hitting a moving target like this was incredibly difficult, but with enough shots, the shooter would eventually get lucky. One shot took out the small craft's motor, leaving it a sitting duck. Currents carried the boat back under the bridge to relative safety, but not before Nick saw an explosion of red from the boat. Someone got hit.

Nick's heart was in his throat; he couldn't be this close only to lose his son.

Grabbing the AR-15 that the two men he'd bound had graciously left behind for him, Nick steadied himself as best as he could on the deck of the rocking boat. He took aim at the man on the bridge and gently squeezed the trigger. Nick heard the bullet ping off the metal of the bridge. *Shit!* Not only had he missed, but he'd alerted the shooter to his presence.

Nick aimed at center mass and fired another shot as the man dropped for cover. The bullet hit the man in the head, causing him to crumple immediately to the ground. A second man jumped out of the passenger seat with a weapon and Nick fired another shot at the vehicle. It scared the man enough that he jumped back into the vehicle, and the vehicle took off, tires squealing.

The sound of sirens filled the air as Nick raced toward the shot-up skiff. As he drove, he swapped the gun he'd been using, replacing it with his knife. In a setting like this, the knife was just as lethal as a gun, and he wouldn't risk putting a hole in the hull of his own boat.

He pulled up alongside the skiff and immediately heard a baby crying. Two men were lying face on the floor of the boat, one face down on top of a baby car seat. The other was face up near the stern of the boat.

Never taking his eyes off the two men, Nick wound a section of rope around a cleat on their boat, tying the two boats together. He reached over and removed two weapons he could see, dropping them on the floor of his boat.

Someone moaned, the sound barely audible over the baby's insistent wails. None too gently, Nick nudged the man at the back with his boot. No response. He repeated the action with the other man and heard another moan. One alive; one dead.

Nick stepped over the sides of boats onto the skiff. He checked the first man but found no pulse. Blood soaked the second man's jacket. Gunshot wound to the shoulder. Terrified at what he might find when he rolled the man off the car seat, Nick repeated 'crying is good' to himself over and over again.

It became his mantra as he hooked the toe of his boot under the man's chest to roll him off the car seat. It wasn't a gentle move, but Nick needed to keep his hands free in case this man was faking the extent of his injury.

The man rolled over to land on top of the other man's legs. Miguel. He struggled to open his eyes; once he opened them, it took him a moment to focus on Nick's face. Miguel tried to speak, but Nick ignored him. Nick had only one goal in mind: his son.

He reached for the car seat, which was covered in blood. A cry of utter despair escaped Nick. Had he come this far only to be too late? Tears blurred his vision as he struggled to unhook the complicated straps that held the baby in the car seat.

Repeating his mantra, Nick extricated the baby from the car seat and attempted to strip him of his clothing. At a loss for how to remove the outfit, he heard a whisper. "It snaps between his legs."

Nick spared a glance at Miguel, who was now alert enough to watch the scene unfolding in front of him. Nick reached between the baby's legs and unsnapped the three snaps he found there. Nodding appreciatively to Miguel, Nick removed Sebastian's clothing. He checked the baby all over, even removing the diaper to be sure, and found no signs of injury.

"He's fine," Nick said.

"My father was going to kill you."

"Didn't want me to have Sebastian?"

"Didn't like you fucking his daughter."

Nick nodded his understanding. "If he was going to kill me, why'd you even bring the baby?"

"No way you'd show yourself if you didn't see the baby first."

"Who was shooting at you?" Nick asked.

Miguel shook his head. "Thought it was you."

"No, I took him out. At least three guys. One's dead up there. How did they know you'd be here?"

Miguel tried to speak, but the effort made him cough and blood flew from his mouth. Both men had enough experience with death to know what that meant.

"I need to go," Nick said as gently as he could. "I'm going to call 911 on your phone when I do."

"Wait," Miguel said, reaching up to a chain around his neck. Nick had to lean close to make out Miguel's words. "This is my mother's ring. From her mother. Give it to him."

Nick lifted the chain over Miguel's head and placed it over his own. Miguel sputtered up more blood, then closed his eyes. Nick dialed 911 on Miguel's phone, then placed the phone on his chest. He held the baby to his chest as he climbed aboard the boat he'd commandeered. Above him, he heard a car screech to a stop on the bridge. Possibly law enforcement or a good Samaritan stopping to check on the man Nick shot earlier.

He started the motor and headed under the bridge, toward the main waterway, wanting to be out of the area before law enforcement boats arrived. He just cleared the bridge when he heard a loud explosion behind him. The pressure wave hit him immediately afterward, knocking him from the boat, Sebastian still in his arms.

Chapter 26

MAYA HUDDLED ON THE bridge with Jamila and Detective Gomes, the three investigators trying to make sense of the surrounding scene. Nick was behind this; she could feel it. The tip at the storage unit had been a red herring, and she'd not only fallen for it, she'd also pulled in all the resources of the Coast Guard and the Flamingo Cove Police Department. It had given Nick the freedom to wreak havoc without the fear of discovery. Obviously, something had gone

wrong with his plan, and she didn't know if he was dead or alive.

Witness stories differed, as they always did, but a general picture was taking shape. It looked like a targeted attack, not a random shooter. Two bodies were recovered from the water, but neither could be identified. Maya prayed Nick wasn't one of them. As furious as she was with him, she wanted the pleasure of slapping the handcuffs on him herself; she didn't want him dead.

After interviewing witnesses, three boats remained unclaimed. The one in the explosion, one anchored to a small tangle of mangrove in the center of the lagoon, and one a police officer found drifting empty in the waterway. The boats hadn't been searched yet; they would need to be cleared for explosives first.

The women were speculating as to what might have happened when Maya's phone alerted her to a text. The text contained GPS coordinates from a number she didn't recognize. Pasting the coordinates into the map app on her phone, she was surprised to see the location was just two-tenths of a mile away. She showed the phone to Jamila and Detective Gomes.

"Who sent it?" Jamila asked.

"Unknown number," Maya replied, but in her heart, she knew who sent it. Nick. Was this another false lead, or was he finally leading her to the drugs? Or worse, could it be a trap?

"Haven't we had enough of those for one day?" Jamila asked.

"We have to at least check it out," Maya said. "We'll need a boat. Looks like this is near the edge of the lagoon."

Detective Gomes nodded in agreement. "Let's sweet talk a ride on the fire-rescue boat; I think they're done."

It was an arduous path down the embankment beneath the bridge. When they arrived, they waited on a concrete slab around the bridge supports. Gomes waved to catch the

attention of the nearby fire-rescue boat, which pulled alongside them.

"You guys busy? We got a tip we want to check out and I hate to pull the sheriff's boats from evidence collection."

"No problem. Hop aboard," said the boat's captain.

Once aboard, Maya handed her phone to the driver, who used it to navigate to the edge of the lagoon.

"Are you sure this is the right spot? The phone says it's in the middle of the water."

"We're still about forty feet from shore. It's just that the mangroves are so thick here that it looks like solid ground, but it isn't."

"How deep is the water here?" Maya asked.

The captain consulted a gauge on his dashboard. "Five feet or so. Any idea what we're looking for?"

Maya shook her head. The investigators and the boat's crew studied the mangroves, the surrounding water, and the depths beneath the boat.

"What was that?" Jamila asked.

"What?" someone said.

"Turn the boat off."

The captain did as asked and in the still air, they heard a disturbance in the trees ahead. A rustling in the leaves followed by a low moan that sounded human.

"We've got to check it out," Maya said. It could be Nick, wounded and in need of help. Nobody argued with her, so she removed her duty belt and placed her valuables on the center console. "Who's coming with me?"

One firefighter volunteered, but Maya declined his offer. She needed a trained officer watching her back.

"Fine, I'll do it, but if my weave gets ruined, I'm holding you responsible," Jamila said. She bent to remove her boots.

"Leave your boots on. The bottom will be a tangle of roots. You'll need the protection."

"No, let me go," Detective Gomes said, removing her gear. Jamila turned to look at her, a questioning look on her face. Gomes patted her tight bun. "No weave to ruin."

Jamila protested, but Gomes continued. "Just kidding. I'm about six inches taller than you. The water's too deep for you to stand. You'd have to swim in which means you couldn't carry a weapon."

"I'll try to get you as close as possible," the captain offered, restarting the engine.

"I'll watch your backs," Jamila said, taking a position at the bow of the boat and drawing her gun.

Maya dropped into the water first. It came up to her chin, and she had to tip her head back slightly to breathe easily. The bottom was a tangle of roots, rocks, and other detritus. When she found her footing, Gomes handed the guns down, then slipped into the water herself. Once she was steady, Maya handed the detective her weapon and the women inched forward. They heard the sound again, off to their right, and they adjusted their course.

"United States Coast Guard. Come out with your hands up." Maya's command provoked another loud moan, now unmistakably human. She repeated her command and heard another moan. She and Gomes separated as they approached, an unspoken communication passing between them.

"This is your last chance. Come out with your hands up." This time, she heard a moan followed by splashing in response to her command. She wouldn't make any additional announcements. Whoever was in the tree line wasn't responding, and Maya didn't want to make herself an even easier target than she already was.

She inched forward on a diagonal so she'd approach the person from the left. She signaled Detective Gomes to hold her position and provide cover for Maya. Peering through the thick leaves, she saw a spot of white. Moving closer, she could

see it was a man wearing a white shirt. The man's hands appeared to be bound over his head.

"One subject, possibly bound." Was it Nick? It was too dark in the foliage to tell.

Maya continued forward until she could clearly see the man before her. Not Nick. Neither was the man next to him. Maya patted them down for weapons. "Clear," she called to Detective Gomes, signaling her to approach.

Maya called back to the boat. "We've got two men, bound, gagged, and taped to a tree. Do you have a knife I can use?"

"Coming your way," the firefighter who'd volunteered earlier responded. He jumped into the water with a large, sheathed knife, then turned back to the boat for a first aid kit.

He joined them at the scene and helped cut the men down. They had no serious wounds and walked back to the fire-rescue boat. The onboard crew wrapped the men in blankets and radioed ashore for an ambulance to meet them at a nearby dock

Jamila motioned to a small crown tattoo on the side of the larger man's neck. Maya nodded. The crown was a symbol of *Los Reyes*, which meant 'the kings'.

"I thought we were going to die out there," the other man said. "How'd you find us?"

Rather than answer the question, Jamila sat down across from the men and said, "Man, you guys are screwed, huh? It's going to be open season on any *Los Reyes* they can hunt down."

The men stared at Jamila in confusion, so she continued. "That explosion earlier? That was don Santiago and Miguel in that boat. The cartel's gone, boys."

While Jamila played her hunch, Maya whispered to the boat captain, "Let's take the scenic route."

The captain nodded an acknowledgement.

"You guys didn't do anything wrong. You're victims. Someone attacked you and left you stranded. Now, you have

no protection. If you get deported..." Jamila let her words drift off as she shook her head at the sad fate awaiting them at home. After a pause, she added, "Your families..."

"Ese maldito gringo," the larger one muttered. That damned American.

"What did he do?"

The two men shared a glance that Jamila couldn't read, then the smaller man said, "He attacked us on our boat. Came out of nowhere."

"We were just sitting there," the larger one tacked on for good measure.

"Is he del Sol?"

"Nah, he's the one that stole their drugs. They want him even more than we do."

"Why do you want them?" Jamila asked.

The larger man shrugged while the smaller one said, "No sé. We were sent here today to watch for him or his boat. El jefe wanted him; we couldn't touch him."

"That's how he got us," the larger man added, full of male bravado. The men didn't look like they'd put up much of a fight, so Maya wasn't sure that was true, but knew better than to interrupt Jamila's rapport with them.

"Where are the drugs?"

"Supposed to be in one of these boats. I don't know which one."

Any boat leaving the lagoon had been thoroughly searched, and only a few remained. Maya's bet was on the abandoned boat tied to the small island. Once they dropped these men off at the ambulance, she'd ask the firefighters to drive her by and at least check it out.

"Who's in charge now?"

The men looked at each other and both shook their heads. They were too far down the pecking order to know who'd take over. Maya knew it would be a power grab and that it would get bloody.

Jamila glanced at Maya with a raised eyebrow, asking if she had any questions. Maya did. "What about the baby?"

The men looked at Maya with such blank expressions that at first she didn't think they understood the word. She repeated it in Spanish. "*El bebé*?"

The translation didn't help. These men knew nothing about the baby.

"Did you see where the gringo went?"

"No, I heard him start the boat, then the gunfire started. Then it stopped. Then the explosion."

```
"He was shooting?"
"No."
"Yes."
```

Both men spoke at once. The larger man deferred to the smaller one, who explained, "Someone was firing an automatic, but it was in the distance. Then this guy fired a few shots and the shooting stopped. Then he left in our boat. We heard the explosion a few minutes later."

When they transferred the men to the paramedics, Jamila stayed with them. She would take custody of them, fingerprint them, and see if they had any outstanding warrants. Guys like this usually did, which would mean they'd be in custody long enough for the team to sort out what happened here.

The firefighters agreed to take Maya out to the boat tied in the lagoon. The firefighter Maya had met at the motel and his black lab joined them. "Hello again. This is Ember. She's an explosive sniffing dog, so I can run her over the boat for you."

"I saw her at the tree lighting."

"She's the only one who can upstage Santa."

"Checking the boat? That's the only reason you're here, Riley?" the captain asked with a raised eyebrow, getting a chuckle from the two other crew members.

Ember greeted Detective Gomes enthusiastically, then came over to investigate Maya. Riley and Gomes shared a look so full of love that Maya felt a twinge of envy. Gomes had obviously found a man who adored her despite the demands of her career. Something Maya had given up on.

Everyone aboard delighted in Ember's pure pleasure at being out on the water with the wind in her face. It only took several minutes to arrive at the scene; the captain stopping a safe distance from the boat.

Black bags filled the back of the boat. One had several small bricks wrapped in duct tape appearing out through the top of the bag. Her pulse surged at the idea of standing this close to the missing drugs.

"How does this work in the water?" she asked.

"We're about to find out," Riely said playfully. "She's never done this before, but she knows what to do. I'll watch for any changes in her behavior."

"These two make a great team," Detective Gomes assured Maya. "If anyone can figure it out, it's them."

"How deep is the water?" Riley asked.

"Ten feet. You'll be swimming in. Want a PFD?" the captain asked, referring to a life jacket.

"No, I'll be fine." Riley stripped off his shirt, boots, and socks. Maya caught the appreciative look Detective Gomes gave him.

Riley and Ember swam toward the boat. He moved to the bow of the boat, tied to the mangrove system, and said, "Check it out."

Riley gave them a thumbs-up, signaling that Ember understood him. He worked her around the boat and back to the bow, then reversed course and did it again, finishing where he'd begun. Once they completed the circle, he rewarded Ember with praise and appreciation, "Who's the good girl? Who's the best, best girl? Did you see what a good job you did?"

"You got some stiff competition, Gomes," a firefighter said.

"I can handle it," Detective Gomes responded.

When Riley and Ember were once again aboard the boat, he said, "All clear."

Gomes asked Maya, "Should we take a look?"

"Let's do it."

The captain pulled alongside the second boat, and Maya scanned it while Detective Gomes took photos. They wouldn't touch anything until they could be certain they weren't disturbing evidence.

"Do you have any gloves?" she asked a crew member.

"Should have some in the first aid kit." He dug around in the kit, producing two sets of gloves. Maya donned her pair and gave the other to Isabella.

"I want to see if I can reach over and grab a brick without disturbing anything else."

"Let me pull around to the other side," the captain offered.

Once they were in position, Maya climbed on top of the gunwale and leaned as far over as she could. She was sure the firefighters were getting a good show, but Maya had been surrounded by men for so many years that she no longer felt awkward about it. At least the firefighters, unlike many of her fellow coasties, had the decency not to comment on her position.

Maya took photographs of the bags and the bricks within them, then handed the phone back to Isabella. Stretched out, Maya could just touch the top brick that was protruding from the open bag. The moment her hands closed around it, disappointment washed over her.

By the time Maya made it back to her apartment late that night, she could barely keep her eyes open. It had taken hours to clear the scene, then Owens ordered her back to Miami for a mandatory debriefing on what he called, "your disaster". The debriefing was little more than an excuse to chastise her for the failures of the mission, but at least she walked away with her job.

She was lying in her bed, replaying the events of the day and trying to figure out where she'd gone wrong. As Owens had so eloquently put it, "We have a motel shot to hell, a shootout in a tourist town, a suspect in the wind, three dead bodies, and an epic cartel turf war brewing. Did I miss anything? Oh, yes. We still don't have the drugs. Does that about sum up your progress on this case so far?"

Cmdr. Owens had strongly encouraged Maya to take two weeks' leave, so Rutherford could "clean up her mess". Maya stayed after the briefing to fill out the leave request, which he approved immediately. She would take the leave, but she wouldn't sit around licking her wounds. Nick was still out there and she would find him.

He was involved in the shootout today, she was certain of it. She'd begin her hunt for him tomorrow. Owens may have demanded she take leave, which meant limited access to department resources, but she had plenty of friends willing to help, and Owens couldn't stop her from pursuing Nick on her own.

As much as she wanted him to pay for the games he'd played with her, a part of her needed to know he was alive. If only to throttle him. She'd fallen for his games and he'd tanked her investigation, possibly her career. She'd sacrificed her personal life for the sake of her career, and now her career was in the shambles. The thought of slapping handcuffs on him brought a smile to her face.

C'mon, Nick, where are you?

As if by magic, Maya's phone alerted at that moment. A three-word text from an unknown number: *I need you*.

Relief, fear, and anger surged in equal parts. Relief that Nick was still alive, fear that he was in trouble, and anger that he thought he could continue to play her like this. He obviously thought she was gullible enough for him to manipulate her to suit his needs. But what was his end game?

Maya muttered some curse words that would've made the most battle-hardened of her military compatriots blush. She needed the upper hand, and the only way to do that was to stop jumping into action every time he texted. Knowing she was playing a dangerous game, she responded: *I'm done*.

As if she hadn't responded, he sent her another set of GPS coordinates. As Maya was pulling them up on her phone, another text came through. *Please*.

An hour later, Maya parked in a small marina in the Upper Keys, alone. After Nick's earlier games, she wasn't about to report his tip to anyone. As her grandmother would say, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Maya didn't want anyone else privy to her humiliation. But it wasn't just that. She was pissed and wanted the satisfaction of taking Nick down herself. She wanted to look him in the eye as she read him his rights. No more sob story about needing to rescue his son. Hell, that was all a ruse for all she knew.

Croaking and chirping insects filled the otherwise still night. This stretch was known for fishing, snorkeling, and diving, and boasted little nightlife. Not even a murmur of voices from a nearby hotel.

The coordinates Nick sent her were three hundred yards offshore, and this marina was the closest point of entry she could find. Maya knew from the map that a series of small islands dotted the coast, but the dark sky provided zero visibility; she didn't know what she would find when she approached. What she needed was transportation. The distance wasn't far, but it was reckless to swim in these waters at night, particularly when she didn't know what she would find when she arrived at the island.

She had the power to commandeer a vessel in an emergency, which this might be. Of course, it could also be a trap or another one of Nick's games, but she wouldn't know until she got to the island. Nothing at the marina would work for her. She needed something silent: a rowboat, canoe, or kayak. The

marina locked all these up at night, and she didn't have tools with her to cut a lock.

She saw a few dim lights from the small hotel next to the marina. These small hotels usually had boats and paddleboards available for their guests to use. With any luck, the hotel left them unlocked overnight. That way, the early birds could enjoy the amenities whenever they wanted.

Maya walked the short distance to the hotel and found what she was looking for on the hotel's small beach: a kayak with the paddle leaning against the seat. Maya checked the GPS coordinates once again and found a star in the night sky that would work as a general heading.

She paddled as quietly as she could, tamping down the urge to get to Nick as soon as possible. Right now, he had the upper hand, and she had to give herself an advantage. That meant moving as stealthily as possible and carefully scanning her surroundings. The dark water blended into the dark sky, creating an eerie sense of paddling into nothingness.

Maya approached a chain of small islands. She glided past four of them, all with private homes. The island at the far north end of the chain matched the GPS coordinates Nick sent her. Keeping her distance, she paddled slowly around it to assess the layout. The island was small and overgrown, shielding much of the structure from her view.

She could just make out a two-story house with a light glowing on the first floor. The island had a boat dock with a small cabin cruiser tied to it. Not wanting to be conspicuous, she decided against going ashore at the dock. Instead, she found a small patch of land with enough foliage to give her cover, but not so thick that she couldn't get through it. Maya stepped into the shallow water, feeling it seep through her pants and boots. She dragged the kayak ashore, then crouched low to study the house.

A baby's shrill cries pierced the heavy night air, propelling her into action. She made her way forward at a light jog, sacrificing stealth for speed. Maya circled the house and the baby's cries got louder as she approached the front. The front porch was brightly lit, as were the windows to the living room behind it. Maya couldn't see anyone in the house, so she crept onto the porch and peered into the windows. Nothing.

Tentatively, she tried the front door, finding it unlocked. The door opened easily, but the loud creak eliminated any element of surprise she might've had. Using the door as cover, Maya turned slowly to scan the house, gun in hand. In the front room, behind the door, she saw a small playpen with the baby inside.

Maya knew nothing about babies, but she picked him up to assess him for injuries. The moment she held him to her chest, he stopped crying and stared at her with soulful eyes. Maya knew instantly whose baby this was and finally understood why Nick was so convinced it was his son. The dark hair reflected his mother's genes, but the rest of him was all Nick.

With the baby quiet, the house became still. Too still. Where was Nick? He wouldn't have left the baby he fought so hard to get. *Not willingly, at least*. The thought chilled Maya.

Maya had to clear the rest of the house, and she couldn't do that with Sebastian in her arms. Feeling guilty, she placed him back in the playpen, causing him to shriek again. He wasn't hurt and he wasn't in danger, so Maya could live with the crying while she looked for Nick.

She didn't have to look far. She eased her way into the kitchen to find Nick sprawled on the floor in a puddle of blood.

Chapter 27

F YOU'RE CALLING THIS number, it better be for something important."

"I might have a lead."

The man on the other end of the phone remained silent, waiting.

"Her phone is on a small island in the bay near Islamorada."

"When?"

"Real time. She's there now."

"Send me the coordinates and update me the minute her location changes."

Chapter 28

NICK DELIGHTED IN THE soft, feminine fragrance wafting over him. *Maya*. She was floating here with him, even though he didn't know where here was. It was dark and fuzzy, and Nick knew there was pain lurking somewhere in the distance, but it was far away. All that mattered was right here with Maya.

But why was she yelling? He tried to ignore her, but she wouldn't stop.

"I swear to God, Nick, if you don't wake up right this minute, I'm dragging you outside and dumping you in the bay."

Nick tried to burrow back into the fuzziness, but pain, white and hot, coursed through his leg. He tried to move it but couldn't. Something wet trickled over his leg, followed by more searing pain.

"You've destroyed my career and my reputation. You're not even worth the energy to drag into the water. I'm leaving. If you're not awake in the next three seconds. I'm taking the baby and I'm leaving you here."

The baby! Something about the baby was important; Nick was supposed to protect him, but he couldn't remember why. He turned away from the darkness only to be met with pain like he'd never experienced before. He opened his eyes briefly, but the bright light was too much, and he slammed them shut again.

A slap on his cheek. Annoying, but nothing like the pain he'd felt earlier.

"No, you don't. Stay awake, Nick." Another slap. "Open your eyes."

As much as he wanted to drift away again, Maya's voice drew him back. Angry as she was, he still wanted to go to her. He would always want to go to her. He smiled at the thought.

"Don't you dare smile. You are in such hot water, buddy. I only saved your life so I can be the one to kick your ass. I thought I wanted to arrest you, but that's not painful enough. Torture. That's the only answer."

"Is that what you were doing to my leg?" Nick croaked, opening his eyes a fraction of an inch.

"No, dumbass. I was saving your life. Did you actually try to pull shrapnel out of your leg by yourself? Who does that?"

"Soldiers," Nick croaked.

"Huh, well, that's the difference between soldiers and coasties. We don't pass out from a tiny scratch like this. Are

all soldiers this delicate?"

Nick opened his eyes fully to see her face just inches from his, her soft hair tickling his cheek. She looked like an angel. Unable to resist the impulse, Nick put a hand on the back of her head and pulled her down for a kiss. Desire overrode the pain when he felt Maya soften and return the kiss.

Catching herself, she pushed away from him.

"Still want to dump me in the bay?" he asked, managing a small smile.

"No need. I've got more alcohol right here. I'm sure that will cool you off if needed." Maya waved the bottle of rubbing alcohol she'd used to clean his wound.

Nick raised his hands in surrender. "I'll be good. I promise. Just put the alcohol away."

"I'll put the lid on it for now, but no promises."

A cry from the other room killed the last bit of Nick's amorous intentions. He attempted to rise, but Maya pushed him easily back to the floor with one hand. "I'll get him. You stay here."

When Maya left the room, Nick struggled himself into a kitchen chair, unable to bear her seeing him in a crumpled heap on the floor for a minute longer. He bit his tongue to stop himself from crying out at the searing pain. Seated on the chair, he felt sweat rolling down his face and neck, as if he'd just run a mile in full battle gear and fought the fuzziness that was once again threatening to encroach.

"Nick, I swear to God, if you pulled out those stitches I just put in..." Maya didn't finish her threat. At the sight of his face, she stopped. Apparently, he felt as bad as he looked. "Let me take care of the baby, then I'm moving you to the couch. What does he need?"

Nick shrugged. Bullets, injury, and an explosion had marked his first few hours of fatherhood. He'd barely even gotten to know his son. "Supplies," he said weakly, pointing toward the bags stacked on the kitchen counter. Maya rummaged through the bags on the counter until she found the small package of diapers. She pulled it out as if it were a trophy. "Diapers. Babies cry when they need a new diaper, right?"

Nick shrugged again, embarrassed by how little he knew about his own child. But he would fix that. He would learn. Because what he felt was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Even now, with the baby inconsolable, Nick felt a love unlike anything he'd ever imagined. He would give everything to protect this child he'd only known for a few hours.

Maya laid the baby on the table to change him, and Nick stroked his soft cheek. When Sebastian reached out to grasp Nick's finger, Nick blinked away the tears that threatened to spill over.

Maya didn't miss the moment. "It's as if he knows you. Maybe not this little body, but his soul knows you, Nick."

Nick couldn't speak over the lump in his throat, so he nodded. He bent forward to kiss his son, ignoring the stab of pain the slight movement caused. He whispered in Sebastian's ear, "I promise to take care of you forever."

"Done. And know that you owe me for this," Maya said, holding up a heavily soiled diaper. "Where's the garbage?"

"I don't know."

"Whose house is this?"

Nick would explain. He would tell her everything. She deserved it. He just didn't have the strength to do it. Luckily, Sebastian saved him with a piercing wail.

"Bottle," Nick said. He lifted Sebastian off the table and snuggled him to his chest, doing his best to keep Sebastian's feet away from the gash in his thigh. He'd fed the baby several hours ago but read that they had to eat a lot because their stomachs were so small.

Maya searched the bags once again, setting a box of crackers on the counter.

"He likes those," Nick said. "He'll eat them while you make the bottle."

Maya brought the crackers over to the table. Sebastian stopped crying immediately and reached for the box, causing Nick and Maya to both laugh. "Crackers it is," Maya said.

Nick spread his legs as wide as he could, then sat Sebastian on his good leg. He scattered a few crackers on the table, then watched in wonder as Sebastian's chubby hand sought the crackers and shoved them in his mouth. When Nick refilled the pile, Sebastian watched carefully, then grasped a cracker and turned to put it in Nick's mouth.

Nick couldn't hold back a sob of emotion, causing the baby's eyes to go wide. Maya turned to look at them. "Are you okay?"

"He kicked my leg," Nick said gruffly.

"He could probably sit next to you," Maya offered.

Nick just shook his head. This moment was too precious. He was holding the son he never thought he'd have in his arms. He wouldn't give that up a moment before he had to. Sebastian happily returned to his crackers. Nick bent down to breathe in his scent.

Maya brought the bottle over. Sebastian squirmed in happiness, cooing and reaching for it with both hands. Maya and Nick shared a moment of laughter at the baby's delight. They held each other's gaze, and the meaning shifted to something deeper, something just between the two of them. Sebastian slurped greedily at the body, interrupting the moment. Nick attempted to help hold the bottle, but Sebastian pushed his hand away, causing Maya to laugh.

"Everybody's annoyed with me today," Nick grumbled.

"No. Sebastian's annoyed with you. I'm so furious, I'm still considering shooting you."

"If you do, you'll have to change all the diapers."

"Hmm," Maya said, pretending to reconsider. "You may live. At least for now. And only if you explain to me what the

fuck is going on."

"Why don't you sit down? We're going to be here a while." Maya sat at the kitchen table opposite Nick and Sebastian.

"They came to kill me," he said.

"So you killed them first?"

"No, it wasn't like that." Nick walked Maya through the events of the afternoon, hardly believing this had all happened just a few hours ago.

"Mendoza got wind of the plan and decided to kill you?" Maya asked when Nick finally finished.

"Yes. That's what Miguel told me. Mendoza wouldn't give his grandson up and thought that the only way to remove me as a threat was to kill me."

Maya studied him for a long moment. "He was probably right."

Nick looked down at his son, asleep in his arms, and nodded his agreement. He would've never given up on finding Sebastian, no matter what it took.

"Did you ever have the drugs?"

Nick shook his head.

Barely controlling her anger, Maya asked, "So you were playing a game of chicken with two drug cartels AND the United States Coast Guard?"

Nick gave her a sheepish look, knowing that whatever he might say in this moment would only anger her more.

"How did you convince Miguel?"

"I read about the drugs that washed up and then went missing. Two days later, found a few stray bricks when I was out surfing. I'd been trying to figure out a way to approach Miguel; I couldn't just call him up and ask for my son. The bricks gave me the perfect opportunity."

"So you showed him the bricks you had with a promise to get him the rest?" After a moment of consideration, she

continued. "But why did you play games with me? Why let me believe you had them?"

"Because if you knew I didn't have them, you'd chase down other leads."

"We were already pursuing other leads."

"Not very hard. I needed you to stay focused on me. Being the prime suspect made my story even more convincing to Miguel."

"How long were you planning to hide out here?"

Nick shrugged and looked at Sebastian. "Kindergarten?"

Maya laughed. "Very Swiss Family Robinson of you."

"No. That would've been if I had gotten the shrapnel out myself and stitched my leg back up."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I think I passed out from the pain."

Maya shook her head and muttered, "Soldiers."

"I'm going to put Sebastian to bed," Nick said. A bolt of pain shot through his leg when he attempted to stand.

Maya grabbed the baby from his arms. "I've got it. In the playpen in the front room?"

"Yes. I don't have a bed for him yet."

Nick heard her cooing to Sebastian as she laid him in the playpen and his heart melted. He allowed himself to imagine them as a family.

When Maya returned to the kitchen, she asked, "Do you have anything for the pain?"

"In the fridge."

She opened the fridge door and peered inside, calling back to him, "There's nothing in here but beer and baby bottles."

"I only had time to stock the bare necessities."

Maya returned to the table with a beer in each hand. Nick reached to take one, but she pulled it away from him.

"I'm still looking for a reason to arrest you. Give me a reason not to."

"If you were going to arrest me, you wouldn't be sitting here drinking a beer with me."

She raised her beer in a silent concession to his point and took a long drink. Nick would've thought he was in too much pain to get aroused, but watching her long neck as she tipped her head backward to swallow convinced him otherwise. He'd never met another woman with Maya's unique combination of strength and femininity.

"You're a ghost. That doesn't happen without considerable effort. Explain that to me."

"I left the military shortly before the troop withdrawal several years ago. I had every intention of being the beach bum I told you I was."

Nick paused, weighing the risk he was about to take, but knew he owed her the truth after everything he'd put her through. He held out his hand for the beer once again. This time, she slid it over to him. Their fingertips touched, giving him a jolt of awareness that he saw reflected in her eyes.

"When the troop withdrawal began, everyone who'd been deployed knew what it meant to those left behind. People who'd saved our lives, who were critical to our success, were now in danger. I couldn't sit back and let it happen. I had to do something, so I got together with a few of my buddies who felt the same way and we decided to help."

"Help how?"

Nick took a long swallow of his beer. "We organized missions to get over the border and extricate those who were on the Taliban's kill list."

"Was Miguel part of this group?"

Nick shook his head. "We served together, but we were never close. I lost touch with him until I saw his picture in the paper with Luciana."

"You carry out the missions?"

"Many of them. I just finished a mission last month. One of our guys served with a guy who runs a scuba boat in Flamingo Cove. We all came down for a few days to blow off some steam, and that's when I caught the news about Luciana. I say a prayer of thanks for that every day. If I had been anywhere else in the world, I wouldn't have heard about it and I never would've known about Sebastian.

"I'm retiring from missions. I won't take that chance with Sebastian."

"Become an actual beach bum this time?"

Nick shrugged. "Sebastian is my first priority. I'm a father now and he just lost his mother. I may help coordinate and research missions, but that's it."

"All that drug money sure would finance a lot of rescue missions," Maya said.

Nick refused to take the bait. "Thank you for coming down here. I knew I could trust you. I'm going to bed. You can stay here if you want."

Maya studied him carefully, as if trying to read his intent. Nick kept his face impassive. He wanted her, but that wasn't the reason for his offer. It was late. She was hours from home. Exhaustion was written all over her face.

When she didn't answer, he said, "Let me find you something to sleep in."

Nick used his hands to push himself to standing, but it quickly became clear that he wouldn't be able to walk on his leg. Maya rushed over to his side and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"Geez, how did you make it this far on that leg?"

"Adrenaline?" Nick suggested. Maya shook her head, likely at the stupidity of his actions. Looking at it in hindsight, he didn't disagree with her.

They hobbled together into the bedroom; Nick was drenched in sweat by the time he dropped onto the bed.

"Lie down."

"Ooh, Maya. I like your forceful side."

"Funny. Now lie down and let me take your boots off."

When she was done, she asked, "Do you have anything else to wear? These shorts are caked in blood."

"I have a small overnight bag in the bathroom."

When Maya left to retrieve the bag, Nick stripped off his clothes and climbed under the covers. Nick didn't miss the way her eyes traveled down his chest until they met the blanket slung low across his hips. He reached out for her hand and caught her gaze.

"Thank you. You didn't owe me anything, and you still came to help. I appreciate that."

"I didn't come to help. I came to bust your ass. Which I may still do." Maya pulled the covers over his chest. "Get some sleep. We can sort this out in the morning."

Nick reached for her again, his eyes smoldering with desire. "Stay."

Chapter 29

NICK'S WHISPERED COMMAND WAS her undoing. His tenderness with his son earlier in the evening melted her heart; seeing his lean, muscular physique sprawled invitingly on the bed had sent the heat lower. The blanket left little to the imagination, and Maya enjoyed what she saw.

Nick was no longer a suspect. She'd believed his story earlier. Besides, she was no longer on the case. There was nothing stopping her from the night of pleasure she'd been denying herself. The heat in his eyes sent a shiver through her.

He looked as though he wanted to devour her, and the heat between her legs welcomed it.

Without breaking eye contact, she stepped back from the bed and stripped off her clothes. Nick's sharp intake of breath when she removed her shirt told her the effect she was having on him. When she wiggled her cargo pants and panties over her hips in one movement, he made a sound like he was in pain.

She climbed astride him on the bed; the blanket forming a thin and maddening layer between them. She ground herself against his erection, feeling her body opening to welcome him.

"Maya, please," he managed through a clenched jaw. "I won't last long if you torture me like this."

She responded with a wicked smile and ground harder against him. He thrust his hips up to meet hers to deepen the contact. Maya moved on top of him until she needed him inside of her. Wanted him to fill her with his hardness. She rose above him and slid the blanket down to his knees.

Nick stopped breathing when she planted feather-light kisses on his chest. He grabbed her hips and tried to flip her onto her back, but she pushed him back against the bed. "Let me have my fun," she said, scraping her teeth against his nipple, eliciting a moan from him. "If you pull your stitches, I'm going to have to restitch them and neither of us wants that."

Nick stopped trying to turn her over but kept his hands on her hips. His rough, callused hands traced over her delicate skin.

Maya sat up and positioned herself above him. She attempted to sink down on him, but he held her firmly in place.

She looked at him questioningly. He ground out, "Condom."

She shook her head. "Pill," she said as she sank down onto his steely heat. Neither moved for a moment, overwhelmed by the intense pleasure of the moment. Maya arched back, trying to fit him more fully inside, and Nick took advantage of the moment to explore her body. When he found the silken heat between her legs, she cried out in pleasure.

His thumb expertly worked her and she came almost immediately, clenching tightly around him. When the pleasure subsided, she collapsed against his chest. He told hold of her hips again and thrust into her. She matched the movements, feeling another orgasm build. She braced her hands on his chest; the position heightening the sensation.

Nick's thrusts became more urgent, and Maya knew he was close as well. With a cry of pleasure, she came again, and he followed her over the edge.

Satisfied and exhausted, she sprawled against his chest, their bodies still connected.

She didn't even know she'd fallen asleep until Nick shook her awake. She shot him an annoyed look, slid off his chest and snuggled into his shoulder. "Sleep," she pleaded.

He shook her again, this time with a little more force. "Maya. I heard sounds outside."

This got her attention and her eyes shot open. "What?"

"Maybe a boat. We need to get up."

Maya dressed quickly, then collected Nick's clothes and boots. He took them from her and said, "There's a gun in my bag. Go get Sebastian."

Maya found the gun, flicked the safety off and padded barefoot down the hall. The house was silent, but Maya thought she heard something outside, near the dock. She continued to the front room and saw Sebastian sleeping peacefully. Saying a silent prayer not to wake him, she scooped him up and moved quickly back down the hall.

She returned to the bedroom to find Nick dressed. He reached for his son and cradled him to his chest. After a kiss to the top of Sebastian's head, Nick placed his son on the center of the bed, then rose. Maya reached out to help him, but he pushed her away.

"I have to be able to do this," he said.

She nodded. He was right. If someone was here, he would need to be able to fight. She donned her boots while he struggled to stand.

"I think I heard someone down by the dock. Do you have any security cameras?"

"No."

She was the only one in full fighting form, and they had a baby to protect. This was not the time to be a hero, and she hoped Nick understood that. She hoped he'd see the value of a tactical retreat. "I hid my kayak under the scrub at the back of the house. Let's head there."

Nick nodded his agreement. "Where is it?"

Maya gave him the landmarks. He said, "I'll take point. You carry Sebastian because you can run, if it comes to that."

"I won't let anything happen to him," she promised. Maya picked up the baby in her left arm, keeping her gun arm free. He continued to sleep, at least for now, but the moment he woke up, any sound would give away their position.

They crept through the dark house to the French doors that opened on to an expansive deck. Nick eased the door open, his eyes alert for movement and his gun drawn. "Clear," he said, stepping onto the deck. Maya stepped out behind him.

They worked silently through the backyard. Nick reached a thicket of palm trees and Maya was just a few inches away when she heard a bullet whiz by her ear. She dove into the trees, careful to land on her shoulder to break Sebastian's fall. While Maya was in motion, Nick fired off two rounds over her head, which must have met their target because a scream of pain ripped through the night.

Sebastian wailed in fear. They were sitting ducks if they didn't move. Sebastian's cries would give them away.

"Let's go," she urged Nick.

"You go. I'll cover you. If I'm not at the boat in three minutes, leave without me."

Maya nodded. Nick needed to know his son would be safe, and she would give him that.

Maya lingered for a moment until a harsh voice carried over the sound of Sebastian's cries. "Mata a cualquiera que veas." Kill anyone you see. It was all the motivation Maya needed. The farther away she got with the baby, the more Nick could accomplish his task.

With stealth no longer an option, Maya ran as quickly as the uneven terrain would allow, making herself a more difficult target. She found the kayak and quickly pulled off the palm fronds she'd used to camouflage it. The trees provided some cover at the moment, but as soon as she stepped onto the beach, she'd be an easy target.

If she carried the baby in one hand and dragged the kayak with the other, she'd be in the open without her weapon. *Think!* she demanded. She placed the baby in the kayak's footwell and, because she wasn't sure if he understood English, told him, "No te muevas." He may be too little to understand her command not to move, but she could hope. When he tried to sit up, she said, "No."

He stayed put, but cried louder. Maya guessed it was the best she could hope for at the moment. Another volley of shots sounded behind her, followed by the thud of a body falling. Time to move. Moving as quickly as possible, she dragged the kayak behind her toward the beach. As she was about to break cover, she saw a man jogging toward her on the beach.

Releasing the kayak's tether, she gripped her gun in two hands, took aim, and released two shots in a row. The man crumbled to the ground. Maya scanned for anyone else on the beach, but it was clear.

She turned back to the kayak and found Sebastian had crawled out of it and was crawling toward her through the undergrowth, still crying. She picked him up and did her best to comfort him. He clung to her, and she couldn't bear to put him down again. Maya was terrified, and she had trained for this; she could only imagine what he was going through.

She discovered with the baby perched on her left hip, she could hold the tether in that hand and still have her gun hand free. It wasn't as quick, but Sebastian needed the physical comfort she could offer him.

She ran across the beach as quickly as she could, not stopping until she was in waist deep water. Strangely, being in the water quieted Sebastian, so she kept him in her arms.

They would be easy targets sitting atop the bright orange boat, and Maya needed to keep as low as possible. Instead of getting into the boat, she freed the life vest that was strapped to the back of the kayak. An adult life vest wouldn't keep Sebastian's head above the water, so it was too dangerous for him to wear. Maya buckled herself into it instead, knowing the vest could support both of them. She kept the kayak between them and the shoreline, making them harder to see.

It wasn't safe to swim in the open water at night, but weighing all possible scenarios, this was the safest. When they got farther from shore, she'd put Sebastian in the boat. For now, he was quiet, and she needed him to stay that way. He started when more gunshots rang out on the island, but to his credit, he didn't cry.

"You're a water baby, aren't you? That's going to make your daddy happy. He'll teach you how to surf, and all the girls will love you."

Sebastian rewarded Maya with a smile as he reached a chubby hand to her face. He studied her with his eyes as his hand explored. Tears burned in Maya's eyes. She'd only known this baby for a few hours, but she already knew she'd give anything to keep him safe. She could only imagine the intensity of the emotion that Nick felt.

The shore dropped off beneath Maya's feet, and she kicked gently, moving them still farther from the gunfire erupting on the island. When Maya judged they were a safe distance from the shore, she set Sebastian in the kayak's footwell and slipped the paddle and gun beneath the bungee cords that previously held the life yest.

"Don't move," she told him. The next part was going to be tricky, and Maya didn't want to kick the baby as she climbed up. Thankfully, he seemed content to sit in the boat, perhaps lulled by the soft waves of the bay. Maya grasped a handle of the kayak in one hand and reached across the boat to get the other handle in her other hand. With as big a kick as she could muster, she pulled herself across the kayak onto her belly.

When she was steady, she flipped over, putting her butt in the seat, then twisted her legs so she was fully upright. Sebastian was smiling at her antics.

"Don't you dare tell your daddy how ridiculous I looked, okay?"

The baby laughed, and Maya guessed that was as close to a promise as she would get from him. She pulled the baby onto her lap and set her feet on the pegs.

Paddling as silently as she could, she circled the island at a distance. She had no plan beyond getting Sebastian to safety. Her car keys were back in the house. Her phone was in her pocket, but she had little hope of it working after being submerged in saltwater. She wouldn't risk a look. The brightness of her screen would stand out on a dark night like this. The boat and the water fascinated the baby, but he was wet and probably hungry. Maya couldn't count on him staying quiet for long.

Another burst of gunfire caused her to hug Sebastian a little tighter. He squirmed in her arms but didn't cry out. From a safe distance, Maya slowly circled the island, looking for any sign of movement. If she didn't learn anything after one circle, she'd paddle to shore and call 9-1-1 from the hotel where she'd commandeered the kayak. The night was silent; the nocturnal creatures wary of the sounds and people disturbing their normal activities. No voices, no gunfire, no sign of movement.

Maya saw what looked like a body on the beach and realized it was the man she'd killed. A wave of nausea washed over her. She'd killed a man. It was kill or be killed, and she

would do it again if necessary, but the weight of it still overwhelmed her.

She saw another body on the beach a short while later. It was too dark to see who it was, and Maya said another prayer for Nick's safety. She rounded a corner of the island that hadn't been cleared. Palm trees and scrub grew right up to the edge of the island. She circled to the front of the house, barely visible through the thick greenery. She saw a light on inside, but didn't know what it meant, so she continued her circuit of the island.

When she reached the dock, she saw a figure with an automatic weapon strapped across his chest. He was standing inside a boat she didn't recognize. Probably the boat the men had arrived in. He didn't react to her presence, so she stayed as still as she could in the kayak. She positioned the paddle across her legs and reached behind her to free her gun. She'd have almost no chance of hitting with a handgun from this distance in the dark while she was bobbing on the water, but a few shots would probably scare him off long enough for Maya to get Sebastian to safety.

After a moment, the man climbed out of the boat and limped his way down the dock. He was favoring his left leg, the leg Nick had the shrapnel in. She tucked her gun under her thigh and paddled closer to shore. She was pretty sure it was Nick, but she wouldn't go closer until she was certain.

When he reached the end of the dock, he was out of her sightline for a moment, but returned shortly afterward, dragging a body behind him. He repeated the process twice more while she watched. Maya was considering calling out to him, but Sebastian decided for her. Apparently, he'd had enough of being in the boat because he let out a wail of displeasure.

The man on the dock stood stock-still but made no move for his weapon. Nick. An intruder would've automatically reached for his gun. Nick would never point a weapon toward his child, no matter the situation.

[&]quot;Maya?" he called out.

Relief washed over her. Nick. Alive. She was desperate to get to him, but forced herself to wait. Nick had just made himself an easy target if any of the intruders were lying in wait.

Nick yelled something else, but she couldn't make his words out over Sebastian's angry cries. She paddled closer. Nick was at the end of the dock, signaling her to come toward him. When she reached the dock, he stripped off his weapon and reached for his son. Even the baby's small body was enough to throw Nick off-balance and Maya hopped onto the deck in case he needed her help.

"What's the status?" she asked.

"We're clear. Let's get inside and take care of Sebastian. I'll fill you in."

"Let me carry him," Maya said. When she sensed Nick's reluctance to let go of his son, she continued. "I've grown fairly fond of this kid, and you're a mess. If you topple over on him, he's going to feel it. I've got one injured Sullivan to take care of, that's plenty."

Nick handed Sebastian over to Maya and began to lumber his way down the dock. It was slow-going, but he refused her offer to help, not wanting to pull her off-balance while she was holding Sebastian. Neither spoke on the way back to the house.

When they arrived, Maya cleared the house while Nick took care of Sebastian. When she finished, he was wrapped in a blanket, snuggled against his father's chest, and drinking a bottle.

"I double-checked all the locks. The house is secure. If anyone is left on the island, you'll hear them try to get in. I'm going to check the bodies, see if I can find ID or unlock their phones. Maybe learn something that way. My phone is toast. It didn't like the salt water. Whistle if you need me back here."

She collected her weapon and stepped out into the darkness, returning through the French doors with a smile, holding out the four phones she'd recovered. "I come bearing gifts. One of

them keeps getting calls, so I'm guessing he's the leader. I want to check his first. Let's see what we can find on here while you tell me what happened."

"You need to get dry first. Take whatever you can find from my bag. Put your clothes in the dryer."

Maya did as he ordered, realizing she had to get warm and dry to keep herself sharp if anything else happened. The only thing she found to wear was one of Nick's t-shirts, which came down almost to her knees. She donned the t-shirt and dumped her pile of wet clothes in the dryer.

Nick's eyes widened in appreciation when she walked back into the kitchen. Maya felt a flutter of heat. She loved the effect she had on him but they couldn't afford to get distracted. "None of that, buster. We've got work to do."

"That doesn't mean I'm not a man. I can still appreciate what I see."

She held her arms wide. "You can't see much. This thing is huge."

"That's what makes it so sexy. I get to imagine what's beneath it."

An evil impulse took over before she could stop it and she said, "In this case, nothing at all."

Nick's response was a groan.

"Okay, okay. That was uncalled for. Sebastian's asleep. Let me put him down so we can figure this out."

"No. He's fine right here. I've been scared on missions before, but tonight I was terrified. What if I just found him, only to lose him again? Once again, thank you for what you did. I pulled you into the middle of this mess, and you kept him safe tonight, even though it almost got you killed." Nick paused for a moment. "I found the man you shot on the beach."

"Who are these guys? I heard them speaking Spanish."

Nick shrugged. "More your area than mine. I was hoping you could help with that. Didn't know how to fight for shit. I

don't think they were expecting us to fight back. Who knew you were coming here?"

"Nobody. I learned my lesson with your tip about the ministorage." Maya gave him a harsh look and he had the good sense to look abashed.

Chapter 30

N ICK STUDIED THE FIERCE woman before him. He'd done nothing but lie to her and torment her, and she was risking everything to help him. She was a woman of strength and character, and the longer they spent together, the harder he fell for her. And that was even before he'd been inside her silken heat. He owed his life and his son's life to her.

Nick realized he couldn't lose her. He'd do whatever it took to keep her in his life. Now that he had his son and she knew he didn't have the drugs, he was no longer running and they were no longer on opposite sides. There was no reason this couldn't work out between them.

Nick smiled at the thought of them as a family. He tucked his weapon into his waistband and the small of the back and carried Sebastian over to the couch. Nick laid down and placed the sleeping baby on his chest. Now that the adrenaline was leaving his body, his leg was on fire and exhaustion overwhelmed him.

He held out his hand. "Want some help?"

"Sure. I unlocked three of them using fingerprints or facial recognition. I reset the passcodes to 1111. One guy..." Maya shook her head. Nick knew what she meant. The man she'd killed was shot in the face. Nick had seen the gruesome sight when he'd checked the man for a pulse.

They were quiet while they worked through the phones. The contents of the two phones Nick went through were in Spanish, which fit with what he'd heard lately. He used the phones' search functions to translate text messages, but it was slow going. So far, the only thing he'd seen of interest was a text to meet at 11:00, to which the recipient had agreed.

"I've got something here," Maya said. "Five missed calls from the same number and an earlier text with GPS coordinates. No instructions, just the location."

"Where is it?"

Maya was quiet for a moment while she worked the phone. "This island."

"Who did you tell?"

Fire flashed in Maya's eyes. "No. One. As I already told you."

She was the only one he'd given his location to, but Nick dropped it, at least for now. She'd demonstrated she was trustworthy, and they needed to work as a team to get through this. Still, someone had figured out where he was. Which meant they weren't out of danger yet.

"Here we go... He deleted messages but didn't empty the trash."

Maya's stricken look caused Nick to sit up on the couch. "What is it?"

She looked up at him. "Someone knew I was here."

"What does it say?"

"Last known coordinates. I'll update you if she moves. If she's with him, take them both out. Nick, someone's tracking me. And I led them right to you."

He started to speak, but she held up her hand. "This one says... I think it says report in by 3:00 or they're sending more men."

"Shit. It's almost 4:00. Maya, we need to leave. Now."

"Wait a minute. Let me think." She leaned back in the armchair and closed her eyes. "I'm going to text the number that's been calling. Done. Nothing else. See if he responds."

They both sat in silence, awaiting an answer. When it came, Nick asked, "What does it say?"

"Hang on... pictures... evidence... drugs. I think he's saying someone needs pictures as proof that we're dead before he'll turn over the drugs."

"Tell him you'll get him the proof. Ask about the baby."

Maya nodded her head as she typed. When the reply came, her face turned ashen. "Put him in the ocean."

Nick growled a response. He would find this faceless man behind the message and kill him. Nick couldn't live in the same world as this heartless bastard who would kill his son without another thought. "He's mine. We're going to find him and he's mine."

Maya studied him but didn't say a word.

"Ask him what he wants us to do next."

Maya did and a few minutes later, she said, "He said go home and get some sleep. He wants us to meet him tomorrow

at noon."

"Let's get out of here."

"What about the pictures? We've got to send him something."

Maya and Nick did their best to fake a picture of themselves dead on the beach. The darkness of the night worked to their advantage, but the pictures wouldn't stand up to scrutiny.

"Let's hold off on sending them until he asks again. We can always pretend it was poor service on the island and they didn't go through. I can get someone in the office to edit the pictures to make them more believable."

"I have someone that can do it for us. Let me text the pictures to a friend. If someone's tracking your phone, we don't want to give ourselves away."

"The salt water ruined my phone, so if they are, they lost their advantage. Maybe they'll think it got destroyed in the fight that killed us."

"We'll find them, Maya."

Chapter 31

BY THE TIME MAYA pulled into her grandmother's driveway, she was relying on every ounce of willpower and training to keep her eyes open. Nick was dozing in the seat next to her. He'd driven the first half, but they switched when she woke from her nap, knowing she was more rested and therefore safer.

He woke up when the car came to a stop and rubbed sleep from his eyes. "Where are we?" "My grandmother's house. Sebastian will be safe here, and no one will know where to look for him. She'll take care of him while we finish this."

Luckily, her grandmother had just woken and was already making her coffee. She greeted them in her long housecoat and slippers. "Maya! I was worried when you didn't come home last night."

"I need your help. This is my friend Nick and his son, Sebastian." Her grandmother's eyes widened in recognition. Her grandmother was sharp and she'd put the pieces together from their earlier conversations about the investigation. "It's okay," she said, taking her grandmother's hand.

"Nick, this is my grandmother, Melanie."

"Pleasure to meet you," he said.

"Same," her grandmother replied, but in a guarded tone. She turned back to Maya. "What happened to you? You're a mess."

"I promise to tell you everything, but I can't get into it right now, Grandma. We've got some work to do today. Would you be able to watch Sebastian for us?"

"Of course."

Maya turned to Nick, "Expect him to be completely spoiled by the end of the day."

"Nick, why don't you take Sebastian into the back bedroom and take care of him? Maya, help me make the coffee." Her grandmother's tone left no room for discussion, so Nick and Maya both complied.

"Did you bring a criminal into my house?" Her grandmother asked as soon as they were alone.

"No, Grandma. I promise."

"Is he not the man you've been investigating for that drug shipment? The one with the son?"

"Yes, he is, but I had it all wrong. He wasn't the one, but he and his son are in trouble."

"I heard about the big to-do at the lagoon yesterday. Was that him?"

"He was there, but he wasn't responsible for the to-do." It was a little white lie, but Maya forgave herself for it. Technically, Nick set things in motion when he set up the meet, but he wasn't responsible for the violence that ensued. Well, not most of it anyway.

"You are sure this man is safe?"

Maya hugged her grandmother. "Yes. I wouldn't do anything to put you in danger. Somebody is after him and we need to make sure Sebastian is safe while we figure out who."

"If you trust him, then I am happy to help."

Maya stepped back. "Thank you."

When Maya entered the bedroom where Nick was playing with Sebastian, he said, "Not my biggest fan."

"I may have had a few things to say about you."

"So if we're ever going to make this work, I've got to do damage control."

Make this work? What did he mean by that? If he was talking about finding the men behind the text, why would he care what her grandmother thought of him? The confusion must've shown on her face because Nick rose from the bed and took her face in his hands.

"This isn't over between us, Maya. In fact, it's just getting started."

"Nick, I..." Maya didn't know how to finish that statement because she didn't know what her objection was. She was attracted to Nick, but she'd never allowed herself to consider a serious relationship with him. Really, any man. Not after her previous relationships ended so dismally.

He placed a finger across her lips. "I want more than just one night. I want you in my life. Let's close this case so we can focus on us." Nick's finger turned to a caress as he spoke and Maya's lips parted slightly in response to his featherlight touch. Nick took this as his cue to place his lips gently over hers in a kiss full of promise.

Her body's reaction to his kiss overrode whatever objection she planned to voice, and she wound her fingers through his hair to pull him closer. He responded by molding her body against his and slipping his tongue inside her parted lips. Maya opened fully to him, lost in the sensation of their tongues dancing with one another. Desire built and she pressed herself against him, wanting even more.

A clunk next to the bed interrupted the moment. They both turned to find Sebastian happily pulling whatever he could reach off the nightstand.

"Talk about interrupting the moment. We're going to have a word about that, son."

Maya laughed. "He stands up?"

"Apparently, he does." Nick went over to collect his son and right the items Sebastian had removed. "Your grandmother's going to have her hands full today."

"She's ready for it. We were terrors when we were little, and she kept us all in line."

"The moment she stops hating me, I'm going to have to get her to tell me some stories from little Maya the terror."

"No! I'll swear her to secrecy."

"Ah, but grandmothers love me."

"Not this one."

"She will." Nick replied with a confident smile.

Maya's grandmother borrowed a stroller from a neighbor and took Sebastian to the park for a few hours so Maya and Nick could get some sleep. They were operating on empty and needed to replenish their minds and bodies for whatever was to come this afternoon. Before leaving, Maya's grandmother gave Maya a "no funny business" look, but Maya was too exhausted to even consider any funny business.

She laid on the bed and was sound asleep, fully clothed, before Nick even joined her. When she awoke, he was snoring softly next to her. She'd wake him up in a few minutes, but first she had to update Owens. Though she was technically on vacation, he needed to know about the attempt on her life last night. Someone would've reported the shots, and eventually law enforcement would find the bodies.

Since she didn't have her phone, she used her computer to look up his cell number. She could leave a message on his office voice mail, knowing he wouldn't check that until Monday, but this was too important. Not to mention that her grandmother always said it was nice to get unpleasant tasks out of the way as soon as possible, and this would definitely be an unpleasant task. Owens would surely find a way to blame her. They'd want to pull her in for questioning, and she needed him to buy her some time to finish this.

She took a deep breath and dialed the phone.

Owens picked up on the first ring. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? You blew up a fucking island. Cops are all over it."

Okay, this is how it's going to go, she thought. She squared her shoulders and drew a breath to respond, but before she could say anything, he continued. "How did you even get this number? Never call me here again. In fact, I told you never to call me again. You connected me with Ramon. That was all I needed from you. You'll get your money when we move the drugs."

Stunned speechless, Maya disconnected the call. She sank to the floor, unable to hold herself upright, and stared at the phone in her hand as if it were a serpent.

Chapter 32

AYA! WHAT'S WRONG? WHAT happened?" Nick cursed his injured leg as he hobbled across the floor to get to her. Kneeling down was agony, but he did it. He wrapped his arms around her. When she didn't respond, he removed the phone from her hand and turned her face toward his.

"Maya, honey, what happened? Sebastian and your grandmother. Are they okay?"

Maya nodded dumbly at him. "Owens," she whispered.

"Owens? Your boss? What about him?"

"I can't... I have to..." Maya's bewildered state alarmed Nick. This woman had only ever been cool under pressure and something had completely unnerved her. She tried to stand, but Nick held her in place.

"You're not going anywhere yet. Just breathe with me for a minute." Nick held her tightly in his embrace. He remembered the first time he met her, half-drowned, pale, and struggling for breath. Somehow, she looked worse now. She struggled against him for a few seconds, then melted into his embrace, resting her head against his shoulder. He held her silently, giving her as much time as she needed to collect herself.

When she pulled away from him again, he relaxed his grip to let her go. She scooted a few feet away and wiped her face with her hands. "I called Owens to report in. My phone is out of commission, so I used a phone we got from one of the guys on the boat."

She paused; Nick nodded his encouragement but didn't interrupt her. "Nick... He... He recognized the number I called from."

Nick was confused at first, but when the full ramifications of the Maya's words hit him, he leaned against the bed, stunned.

"You know what this means, right?"

"Everything makes so much more sense now. Why he directed all the focus on me from the beginning. Why he didn't send an entire team to Flamingo Cove."

"Why he tried to derail me throughout the investigation." Maya paused for a moment, then released a small sob. She covered her mouth with her hand. "Nick. My phone is government property. That means Owens can pull my data at any time, including my GPS data. He must've sent those men to that island."

Nick knew in that moment that he would do whatever it took to get revenge on Owens. He'd sent a team to kill one of

his own agents just to cover his tracks. That was the ultimate betrayal. The cartel might want Nick dead, but they didn't care about Maya. That was all Owens. Nick felt a rage unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

"Owens is mine. Let's hope he shows up at the meet and I can end this today."

"Nick, I won't let you do anything stupid. You're clear in all of this. You are building a life with your son."

Nick knew she was right, but he couldn't let go of his rage. Maya had been betrayed by someone she should be able to trust with her life. A man who'd sworn to protect his country had tried to have one of his own agents killed. Nick wanted retribution, and not the retribution the legal system offered. But he wouldn't argue with Maya about it now. He'd never convince her of what needed to be done, and it would only drive a wedge between them when they needed to be a united front.

Nick and Maya were both in position an hour before the scheduled meet. Jamila, a DEA agent that Maya trusted, joined them as well. His first meeting with Jamila had been fraught with tension; she'd had a few choice words for him about his stunt with the mini-storage. Once again, Maya had to smooth the waters on his behalf, something Nick was coming to hate. He prided himself on being a stand-up guy, but he'd burned some bridges in his quest to get his son.

For now, his focus was on the mission at hand. The meet was at a deserted gas station at the edge of the Everglades. The area was mostly open land, with a few farms dotting the landscape. Traffic was light, even on a Saturday morning, and Nick understood why the gas station hadn't made it.

He'd dropped the women off to secure the area while he'd hidden his truck behind a warehouse half a mile away. Now, he hid on the roof of the building; Jamila and Maya were both crouched in the dense scrub surrounding the station.

Jamila initiated a three-way call. "I hear something," she said.

Nick listened for a moment before he heard it as well. Because he had the better visual vantage point, he lifted his head to scan the road. He saw a vehicle approaching from the south. "I've got it. Blue SUV. Slowing down."

The van continued to slow as it approached the gas station, but instead of pulling, it drove past. "Two males." Nick said. Then a moment later, "Negative. It's continuing on."

Maya chimed it. "I just got a text checking on my location."

"Tell them you're a few minutes out. Could be the guys in the white van. If so, they know you're not here," Jamila said.

"Done."

As the minutes ticked by, the anticipation rose. Nick scanned the street again and noticed the approach of a blue SUV from the north. He watched until he was certain it was the same one, then relayed the information.

This time, the SUV slowed to a stop in front of the gas station before it turned in. Nick ducked beneath the eight-inch lip that ran around the flat roof. He slowed his breathing, focusing on the sounds around him. The SUV pulled in, circled the gas station slowly, then parked behind the building. Two car doors opened, then slammed shut. *Two men exiting*, Nick thought, only to have it confirmed by a whisper of Maya's voice a second later.

Nick belly-crawled to the back of the building, risking a glance over the edge. Two men, both with automatic weapons, leaned nonchalantly against the front of the vehicle. Nick's trigger finger itched. One of these men had given the order to drop his son into the ocean. It would be an easy shot to make from here, and Nick would have gotten justice. But Maya would be denied her retribution. They needed to see the transaction unfold. He wanted Owens every bit as much as he wanted the man standing in front of him, so he would wait. Part of his job was to set up a camera to record events as they unfolded, but Nick had already decided he would forget to

press record. He had a different goal than Maya did, and he didn't want his actions on video. No one who posed a threat to Maya would walk away alive today.

Nick heard the rumble of an engine approaching, but remained where he was. Either the vehicle would pull into the gas station or it wouldn't. Nick wouldn't risk revealing his position with unnecessary movement.

"Vehicle." Maya breathed into the phone. A moment later, Nick saw a dilapidated white van pull to the back of the building. When the man emerged, he was the picture of a senior military officer, from his bearing to his haircut. This must be Commander Owens.

One man pushed off the bumper of the van and walked to meet the newcomer. The two men shook hands. "Thanks for taking care of our problem in the Keys," Owens said, full of charm.

"I'm always happy to do favors for my friends," the man said smoothly. "One never knows when there may be an opportunity to ask a favor in return."

The man's implication was clear. Owens owed him, and the cartel wouldn't let him forget it. Nick shuddered to think of the power the cartel would wield with a senior military officer at their disposal.

"You have the drugs?"

Owens nodded toward the back of his van. "You have the money?"

The man signaled to the SUV, and two more men exited, one of them carrying a metal briefcase. He placed it on the hood and opened it, revealing stacks of cash.

"Show me the drugs."

Owens pointed to the rear of the van, and the man signaled two others to go check. The man continued, "How did you end up with them, anyway?"

Owens shrugged as if it were no big deal to be sitting on millions of dollars of the cartel's drugs. Owens was in over his head, but his arrogance blinded him to the reality of the situation. "You know how it goes, Ramon. Let's just say I happened upon them and knew you'd be interested in their safe return. I had an *amicable* relationship with *Los Reyes* over the years, and I thought this would be a nice overture to build a relationship with you."

Nick took a moment to process Owens's words. Did the man just admit to colluding with the *Los Reyes* cartel? Suddenly it made sense how Miguel had known Maya was CGIS; Owens had probably informed him of which agent he assigned to the farce of an investigation. If Owens had the drugs all along, he couldn't afford a proper investigation, so he'd set Maya up to take the hit, then further restricted her by identifying her to Miguel. Owens had set her up on a mission doomed to fail from the beginning. Yet somehow, she'd pieced it all together to wind up here, with Owens in her sights. Nick's admiration of her caused him to revise his plan. Maya deserved the opportunity to finish this and put Owens in handcuffs. That was the outcome she wanted, and Nick would let her have it.

Regretting his earlier decision not to record the interaction, Nick started a video on his phone. He didn't dare risk any movement to position the phone properly, but at least it would capture the audio.

Owens's vague answer clearly did not satisfy the man. "But you must've had a friend helping you out."

Nick waited to see if Owens would reveal the name of his accomplice, knowing that by naming the man, Owens would sentence him to death. But Owens shook his head. "One of the local gangs owed me a favor, so I asked them to keep watch along the coast. When the guys in Flamingo Cove found the drugs, they called their boss, who called me. Those guys kindly loaded the van for me; then I took possession of it."

"YOU stole the van from the guys on the beach?" Nick hadn't asked the question, but he very much wanted to hear the answer. He wondered if Maya could hear any of this conversation. Owens scoffed. "Those guys were chumps. I just waited in the seagrass for them to load the truck, then knocked the guy out. Didn't even put up a fight."

Ramon nodded, as if satisfied with the answer. But his casual attitude did not fool Nick. Owens had just admitted to stealing the drugs after they'd been recovered on the beach. Was he really that arrogant?

"We don't take kindly to people stealing from us." The man's tone was still casual, but Nick could hear something chilling in his voice.

"Hey, I wasn't stealing from you," Owens protested. "I'm delivering the drugs back to you, aren't I?"

"For a price."

"I saw an opportunity," Owens said unapologetically. "I knew once law enforcement got wind of this, they'd confiscate the shipment. But millions of dollars of drugs? It's a drop in the bucket. We both know that. You only want them back to send a message not to fuck with you. This way, you can make your statement and I can make a nice profit. I'm ready to retire and I don't want to do it on a government pension."

Owens's words made Nick's blood boil again. Owens was admitting to selling out his agents to fund his retirement. He went against everything Nick fought so hard for. His finger itched to pull the trigger and put an end to this miserable man's life, but for Maya's sake, he wouldn't do it. She deserved an opportunity to look this man in the face and ask him why he'd betrayed his agents. Nick would give her that closure.

Ramon nodded at Owens's words, seemingly satisfied by his answer. Then, in a conversational tone, he said, "Owens, I'm curious. I've never been able to figure out how *Los Reyes* knew to target our shipment. We looked inside for leaks and didn't find any. That means the information must've come from the outside. Someone who saw our ship approaching and tipped *Los Reyes* off. Seems like it would have to be someone with access to military-grade long-range drones, don't you think? Something similar to the drone you just mentioned,

right? So, we're looking for someone with access to high-end drones and willing to sell out their agency for a profit. Does that sound like anyone you know?"

Ramon's body language and tone of voice hadn't changed throughout his speech, but the air crackled with menace. Nick felt it and the men surrounding the van felt it, too. Subtle shifts in their bodies indicated they were ready for action. Was this part of the plan, or was it an impromptu decision by the man in charge?

Owens stood still for a moment, as if trying to process the man's words. The moment understanding dawned, he dove for cover behind his vehicle. Shots rang out from below, but Nick couldn't see Owens to know his status. Nick saw his opportunity to take Ramon down for ordering the death of his son. He drew his weapon to take fire, but before he could take aim, Owens returned fire from behind his van, causing the four men to take cover.

Two climbed into the SUV while the other two crouched behind it for protection.

Maya's voice floated through the earbud Nick had all but forgotten about. "Nick, don't let them leave. Take out its tires. I'm calling 9-1-1 to get some help. We're so far out in the boonies, it will take a while, but at least it's something."

Nick placed two shots in each tire on the driver's side. That would be enough to stop them from fleeing. Unfortunately, his shots also gave his position away and the two men behind the SUV both turned to him and fired. Nick ducked below the edge of the roof. Shards of concrete rained down on him as bullets hit the concrete on the side of the building.

Nick knew he had to move; it was only a matter of time until a bullet hit its mark. He belly crawled to the far corner of the building, out of where most bullets were landing. He heard rapid-fire Spanish below and guessed it was the men trying to figure out who he was and how to get to him.

With no way to flee, fight was their only option. The two men hiding in the SUV both climbed out of it, guns at the ready. Ramon signaled them to go around either side of Owens's van, one in the front and one in the back.

"Owens, call your guy off the roof and we'll let you leave," Ramon called, perhaps to distract Owens from the movement on the ground.

Owens fired two bullets into the man approaching the rear of the SUV, giving away his position. Rather than take advantage of the opportunity to charge Owens, the man assigned to the front ducked for cover behind a tire. Nick mentally put at the bottom of his target list; he would still pose a threat, but he was only fighting because Ramon was requiring it of him. Nick felt a pang of pity for the nameless young man hopelessly unprepared for the fight of his life.

Nick kept careful watch on the scene below him. He had no shot at Ramon, and he wouldn't kill Owens unless he had to. Movement at the back of Owens's van drew his attention. The barrel of a gun appeared around the rear panel. A second later, Owens put two shots in the man crouched behind the tire. The man cried out in pain and fell to the ground, crawling backward to the safety of the SUV. One man from the SUV returned fire, but Nick couldn't tell if the shot hit its mark. The man on the ground crawled behind the van. No one tried to help him, which told Nick everything he needed to know about their loyalty.

A soldier would risk his life to help a wounded buddy to safety; that was one of the first rules of the battlefield. These men were just thugs.

"We seem to be at a stalemate, my friend," Ramon called out.

Once again, Owens kept quiet. Despite the four-to-one odds, Owens had the clear advantage here. Nick knew his position from the movement he saw at the back of the van. In this situation, Nick would look for a better position. Unfortunately, the only better position would be in the scrub, where Owens would have room to move. If Owens took the most direct route into the scrub, he'd be elbow to elbow with Maya.

Roman shoved the injured man toward the driver's door of the SUV. Ramon had decided to attempt a retreat.

"Owens, you'll never get away from us. We'll hunt you down. You even think about dumping those drugs and we'll be breathing down your neck. You have nothing after this." The remaining two men loaded into the back seat and the SUV lurched away on two tires and two rims.

Owens must've seen the truth in Ramon's words, because he charged the SUV as soon as it picked up speed. A burst of red appeared in the driver's seat and the SUV veered wildly into the tall grass. Ramon opened the rear door and leaned out with a gun, holding on to the frame of the truck with one hand.

Nick popped his upper body above the cover of the roof and took aim. He squeezed the trigger gently and absorbed the recoil easily. He steadied himself, took aim, and squeezed off another shot. Ramon fell out of the van, blood pooling on the pavement beneath him.

Owens took aim at Nick, but before he could fire, a commanding voice cut through the gas station. "Drop the weapon and put your hands in the air." Maya. Giving Owens a chance to surrender.

Instead, he swiveled his gun toward her voice, searching for her in the dense foliage. "Mitchell? You've got to be fucking me. Get your ass out here so we can get this sorted out."

Nick implored God to give Maya the good sense to keep her head down and mouth shut. *She knows what she's doing. She can take care of herself.* The woman he loved was in danger, and he had to keep his emotions in check to keep her safe.

Owens continued to scan the grass for any sign of movement. Something caught his eye; he focused on it for a second, then lifted his gun and took aim. Nick couldn't tell if Owens had spotted Maya or not, but he couldn't wait to find out. The brush concealed Maya, but it didn't offer any protection. Owens wanted Maya dead, and Nick needed to make sure Owens didn't have a chance.

Nick fired, the bullet hit its mark, and Owens screamed in pain. He dropped his gun as he collapsed to the ground. By Nick's count, one target remained. The fourth man, hiding in the SUV. While watching Owens, Nick gave an update over the phone. "Four down, two gone, one injured, one unknown. Fourth guy's hiding in the SUV. I'm covering him."

Maya responded. "Jamila, let's get the fourth guy. Nick, watch our backs."

Maya emerged a moment later, crouched low; she ran to the corner of the building for cover. Jamila mimicked her actions, taking a position behind the van. Maya gave commands in Spanish. The fourth man emerged from in tears and begged them not to shoot.

Sirens were approaching as Jamila cuffed the man; they propped him against the side of the building while she read him his rights. Maya checked the men that were down, reporting that Owens was still alive but bleeding heavily and another man was seriously injured but still had a pulse.

Nick climbed down from the roof as gingerly as possible. He hadn't felt pain in the heat of the mission earlier, but it was agonizing now. A bright red stain on his pantleg told him he'd torn the stitches. That didn't matter right now. All that mattered was getting to Maya.

Chapter 33

M AYA LEANED OVER OWENS, fighting the urge to step on his wounded shoulder. Instead, she pulled his shirt over his chest and bunched it up over his wound. As she held pressure on the wound, he paled.

"Don't you dare die on me, you son-of-a-bitch. You don't deserve the easy way out. I want the entire world watching your disgrace. You betrayed your office. You betrayed your agents. You betrayed your country."

Owens, weak from blood loss, attempted to speak, but stopped when he heard Nick's approach. "Need any help?"

"Yes. Will you hold pressure on this wound? I want to meet the officers when they arrive."

Nick kneeled down next to her and placed his hands over hers. She glanced at him briefly and felt a wave of raw emotion wash over her. They'd survived. Somehow, against all the odds, they'd survived this. Ramon was no longer a threat to Sebastian. Owens would be publicly humiliated. The three of them were walking away unharmed.

She couldn't give in to the emotion until they finished here, so she blinked her tears back and gave Nick a quick nod, which he returned.

She pulled her hands out from beneath his, letting him hold pressure on the wound. "Paramedics should be staged right down the street, waiting for the all clear. I need him alive, Nick. I need him to face what he did."

"Believe me, I know that. It's the only reason he's alive right now. When I saw him draw down on your position, I wanted to kill him. But I also knew you'd want to have your fun with him, so I went for the shoulder."

"Such a gentleman," Maya teased. "Just try not to shoot him again, okay?"

"No promises, but if I do shoot him again, I'll aim for somewhere soft but not lethal. How about that?"

Maya gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. I guess I'll have to live with that."

She left Nick with Owens, hoping he'd be good to his word, and joined Jamila near the road. Two police cars screeched to a halt, sending gravel spraying. Maya and Jamila held up their badges and announced themselves as federal agents. The first officers on the scene of a reported shooting would be tense; Maya knew she had to calm the situation as quickly as possible.

"The scene is secure. We've got two DOA. Two to transport. One critical. Do you have detectives responding?"

The young officer nodded and radioed in that the scene was secure and the ambulances could approach.

"Good, they are all familiar with the investigation."

Paramedics quickly assessed the critically injured man, found four gunshot wounds, and quickly transported him to the nearest trauma center. Maya knew his chances of survival were slim at best. All she cared about right now was Owens surviving. He had to stand trial for his crimes. He'd be tried in a military court, where punishment was swift and unforgiving.

All three Flamingo Cove detectives arrived on scene shortly after the first responders. Although Maya had already read Owens his rights, Detective Jones repeated it with his body camera running to eliminate any potential arguments in court. Jones then took custody of Owens, riding with him in the ambulance.

Detectives Logan and Gomes took charge of the scene, separating Nick, Jamila, and Maya until they gave formal statements. Maya knew they'd be in for a long afternoon of interviews. Detective Gomes told her that the DEA and CGIS were both sending representatives. The Coast Guard Office of Military Justice had been informed of Owens's arrest. Maya told Gomes they would likely take custody of Owens soon. To her credit, Gomes didn't seem put-out by that information. This chaotic scene would keep the small-town department busy putting the pieces together; they were probably happy to transfer the responsibility of a high-profile prisoner to someone else.

By the time they were released, afternoon had turned into evening and the winter sky was already full dark. Jamila was riding back to her hotel with the DEA agent who'd been sent to the scene. Maya hugged her goodbye and thanked her for her help.

"I've always got your back, Mitchell."

"I know you do."

"You do owe me big-time. Laying on my belly in the middle of nowhere surrounded by snakes, bugs, and alligators. I wouldn't do that for just anybody."

"Call me whenever you're ready to cash that in."

"Call me whenever you're ready to spill about your new man," Jamila said, flicking her eyebrows in Nick's direction.

Maya started to protest, but gave up after seeing the look of disbelief on Jamila's face. "What can I say... he's a hottie."

"That he is," Jamila agreed.

Maya and Nick rejected the offer of a ride home in favor of a walk back to her grandmother's house. The evening was cool and crisp, a welcome change after being cooped up in the stale air of the police station all afternoon. The walk wasn't far, just under a mile, but Nick's leg must be bothering him.

"You're sure your leg can handle it?"

Ignoring her question, he said, "What I need most right now is some time with you. When he pulled that gun on you..." Nick's voice faltered. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. She listened to the steady beat of his heart as she breathed in his scent.

"I was glad you were there with me," she said earnestly.

Nick cradled her face in his hands, tilting it up to him. His blue eyes were dark with emotion. "I'll never let anything happen to you."

He bent his head to claim her mouth in a kiss full of all the emotion he couldn't put into words. She pressed herself against him, wanting more. Maya lost herself in the kiss until a child's voice brought her back to reality. "Mommy, Mommy, look, they're *kissing*."

Nick must've heard it too, because they stepped back at the same time. He chuckled in frustrated amusement, his eyes full of passion. "To be continued?" he asked, with a hopeful expression.

Maya knew this was it. She tugged on his arm to get him moving again. "Nick, this thing you're thinking of, it can't happen between us."

He stared at her, dumbfounded. Maya continued walking. This conversation was going to be difficult enough; she didn't want to do it with an audience on the street. They'd made enough of a spectacle of themselves for one night.

When he caught up with her, she could feel the anger radiating off his body. He spoke one terse word. "Explain."

"You seem to think that this is just the beginning between us, but it isn't, Nick. The case is over." Maya waved her hands between them. "We are over."

"Maya, we're just getting started. With Owens and the cartel behind us, there's nothing in our way. I was never an actual suspect in the case, so there's not even a murky area there."

"Nick... I can't."

"The time we spent together meant nothing to you? Last night meant nothing to you? What? You were horny and I just was convenient? You make a habit of that, Maya? Sleeping with men you stumble across in your investigations, then ditching them when the investigation is over?"

Rage washed over Maya. Is that really who he thought she was? How could he think so little of her after all they'd shared?

When she trusted herself enough to speak, she turned to him and said, "I'm going back to the police station to call my office for an update. When I get back to my grandmother's house, I want you and your son gone. I don't want to see you again."

Maya turned to walk away, but Nick grabbed her by the arm. "Maya, wait. I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I know that's not who you are. Can we talk about this? Please."

"It won't change anything. This thing between us is over." Maya pulled free of his grasp and started back to the police station.

Nick caught up to her again and took her by the elbow. "Maya. You are the most incredible woman I've ever met. We belong together. Don't you feel it too?"

"Nick, I almost lost my career over this."

"Bullshit. Owens was setting you up from the beginning. It's because of all this that you took him down. Tell me what's really going on."

"I can't do this, Nick. Please let go of my arm." Nick complied, and when he released his grasp, she felt tears well in her eyes. She hoped he couldn't see them in the dark.

"Goodbye, Nick."

Chapter 34

On the Walk Back to get Sebastian, Nick realized he'd never truly understood what it meant to be brokenhearted until now. He'd been so excited about a future with Maya now that the investigation was over that he never considered that she might not want that too. He'd seen their future together, raising Sebastian. With no permanent home, he'd move to Miami for her job. Her condo would work temporarily, but they'd need a bigger place. Something with a yard so Sebastian could play outside. And a family dog.

But all of that had been a fantasy, one that Maya didn't share. Nick didn't realize just how much he loved her until that hug on the sidewalk. It just felt so right to have her in his arms, feeling her pressed against him.

Melanie's grandmother greeted him with a bit more warmth than she'd shown earlier in the day. "Maya called. She said she was still hung up at the police station, but you were coming to get Sebastian. What an amazing baby. He's smart as a whip. He was trying his best to crawl after all the big kids at the park today. Wanted to be part of their games. We both took long naps after that."

It occurred to Nick how lucky Sebastian would be to have this woman as his great-grandmother, then felt a pang of sadness knowing that would never be.

"He's sleeping now. No need to disturb him. You're welcome to spend the night."

For a moment, Nick was tempted to take her up on the offer, just to see Maya's reaction when she returned to find them still there. She'd be furious, sparks flying from those mesmerizing green eyes. He'd enjoy seeing that, but she'd made her point clear. She was done. He'd groveled enough. At least for one night.

"No, but thank you for the offer. I'm ready to sleep in my own bed. Let Sebastian get used to his new home."

"I supposed I can let him go," she teased. "After all, I have a feeling I'll be seeing a lot of him from now on. I picked up some food and formula for him, so I'll have that next time he comes over."

Nick attempted a smile, but wasn't sure it was convincing. He'd let Maya share the news with her grandmother. He used an app on his phone to request a ride, then packed up while he waited. When he got an alert that the car was approaching, he lifted his son carefully and left.

The closest thing Nick had to a home right now was the house in Flamingo Cove, so that's where he had the ride share driver drop him off. He'd rented it for his time in Flamingo

Cove, and still had two months left. He'd spend the night there tonight, then decide where to go next tomorrow. The town held too many memories of Maya; he'd be reminded of her everywhere he went.

He needed to get as far away from her and this town as possible. That was his only chance of getting over her.

Nick was confident that he and Sebastian were no longer in danger. Los Reyes cartel was in shambles; those who were vying for control of the cartel wouldn't know how to find Sebastian. Del Sol simply wouldn't care enough about Sebastian to come after them. Nonetheless, he needed to cut ties to be certain: a new phone, a new vehicle, and a new place to live. Luckily, he had someone on his team that specialized in that. It was part of the service they offered to those they rescued overseas. Some were high-value Taliban targets requiring new identities.

Nick wouldn't need a new identity, but he'd need a new electronic footprint and legal paperwork for Sebastian. Since he'd been born in a small village, he may not even have a birth certificate. Nick made a mental note to contact an attorney to make sure Nick had legal custody. Nobody would ever take his son away.

Chapter 35

M AYA WAS CURLED UP in a ball on the sofa on the back porch when her grandmother found her the next morning. They had coffee together while Maya filled her in on the events of the day.

"No wonder you look like such a wreck today, honey." At Maya's outraged look, her grandmother laughed. "You don't want me to lie to you, do you?"

"No, don't lie to me, but do you have to be so... honest?"

"Okay. You're not as radiant as usual. Is that better?" her grandmother asked. Maya laughed, surprising herself that she could still find humor despite her shattered heart. Her grandmother joined in. Her grandmother was quiet for a moment, then got a gleam in her eye that made Maya suspicious. "I bet that man of yours is exhausted, too. Maybe Sebastian should spend the day with me so Nick can rest."

"Grandma, maybe Nick would like to spend some time with his son."

Her grandmother waved off the suggestion as if it was ridiculous. "He'll have all the time with his son that he wants. I'm just saying it might be nice if he had a day to himself. Sebastian could come to church with me. The ladies at brunch would love him."

"You know he's not yours, right?"

"It's been too long since we had a baby in the family."

Maya's eyes welled with tears that she couldn't hide from her grandmother. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

"Nick and I broke up."

"What do you mean?"

"We broke up."

"I thought you said he was a good man."

"He is a good man."

"So, what's the problem?"

Maya began to cry. Her grandmother came to sit next to her and stroked her hair while she sobbed. She thought she'd cried all she could cry last night, but obviously, she was wrong. When her sobs subsided, her grandmother rose from the couch, only to return a few minutes later with tea and tissues.

"I already have coffee."

"Nonsense. Tea soothes you." Maya wasn't sure of the truth of that statement, but wouldn't argue with her grandmother.

The women sat in silence while Maya sipped her tea. When she was finally ready to speak, the words came tumbling out. "I ended it with him. I've had two men who loved me, and I destroyed it with both of them until it was nothing but hurt, anger, and resentment at the end. That's what I do. I take good men and hurt them. I can't bear to do that to Nick. He's a good man, and I can't stand the idea of hurting him, making him hate me in the end. He doesn't deserve that. And I'm not sure I could survive it if I saw the same disappointment in his eyes that I used to see in Brian's or Roger's. I'd rather end it now than get serious only to watch our relationship die a slow, agonizing death."

Instead of the sympathy she expected, Maya was surprised to get bluntness from her grandmother. "You chickened out."

Maya bristled at her grandmother's comment, only to realize the truth of it. She hung her head. "I chickened out."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm impossible to live with. I don't keep regular hours. You can't count on me for dinner or to be home in time for a party we planned. I might be on a stakeout or two miles off the coast. I missed my wedding rehearsal! No man will put up with that. In order for me to have a solid relationship, I'd have to give up my career. And I can't imagine that. I love this work. It's who I am."

"You just stay single? Is that your plan?"

Maya shrugged. She hated the idea of staying single for the rest of her life, but she didn't see an alternative. All the times she'd let down Brian and Roger, all the arguments about her schedule and how work interfered with their relationship, she couldn't go through that again.

She tried for a bit of humor. "I'll retire someday. Nick might wait for me."

"You're going to put your life on hold for the next thirty years?"

"At some point, I'll get transferred or promoted. When I'm no longer an active agent, it will be different. For now, this is

the way it has to be."

"Did you ever consider you might be looking at this all wrong?"

Maya blinked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe you chose the wrong men before."

Maya shook her head. "Brian and Roger were both-"

Maya's grandmother interrupted her. "My point exactly. Both of them were." Before Maya could ask what her grandmother meant by that odd comment, she rose to kiss Maya on the top of the head. "I'm going to get ready for church. Care to join me?"

"Nope. I need to check with the Deputy Director, Captain Gerard, today. He was Owens's boss, and he's on quite a tear that one of his SACs was on the take from a cartel. He's flying in today and he'll want a full report. I've got to find a uniform and get myself squared away."

"You're going home?"

"Yes. I have to go to the office to start on my mountain of paperwork. I'm supposed to be on leave for the next two weeks, but Captain Gerard might revoke that. As soon as I get a new phone, I'll call you."

Maya did what she did best: lose herself in her work. It had gotten her through her breakup with Brian and the cancellation of her wedding with Roger. However, she was distracted at work at the time when she needed to be sharper than ever. The office was in an uproar with the news about Owens. While nobody wanted a corrupt officer in the coast guard, the military tended to close ranks and protect their own, no matter what. That had softened somewhat in recent years, but the reaction to Maya exposing Owens was mixed.

Some agents, like Rutherford, kept their distance from her, as if the scandal tainted her. However, many of them stood by her, making sure the highly active military grapevine knew that she was a good agent who had done what needed to be

done. Thankfully, Captain Gerard supported her actions and even recommended her for a commendation.

Maya was now assigned to keep tabs on the warring factions of the *Los Reyes* cartel. Two senior members were vying for control of the cartel, and it was a violent, bloody war. Maya's role was to keep her ear to the ground to stop the violence from making it onto U.S. soil. She was working with local law enforcement to interview suspected cartel members and gangs known to be affiliated with *Los Reyes*.

So far, they'd interrupted an ambush and a murder for hire. The DEA was working to destabilize the cartel, hoping that it wouldn't regain the power it had previously held.

An internal investigation revealed that Owens's suspected involvement with *Los Reyes* had gone back several years. In the last three years, CGIS had seized little from *Los Reyes*, and only arrested its low-level distributors. Maya was shocked at how well Owens had fooled them all. He'd kept them so focused on the other cartels that no one had realized what he was doing.

Whoever took over the office would need to rebuild trust amongst the agents. Currently, Captain Gerard was acting as Special Agent in Charge, but that was only to see them through this crisis.

Her distraction wasn't a surprise; she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a decent night's sleep. At night, she was consumed by thoughts of Nick and what might have been. She'd walked away from a good man before things could go bad, but her decision haunted her. As her grandmother pointed out, she hadn't even given Nick a chance. At the time, Maya was certain it was the right choice. Now, with hindsight, she wasn't sure.

Was she really prepared to let him go? To spend her life alone? The life that had once seemed so fulfilling to her now seemed empty. Her life revolved around her work, and she imagined how nice it would be to have someone to eat dinner with, someone to sleep with at night. Someone who knew how to make her toes curl, she thought with a tingle of desire as she reminisced about their night together.

Chapter 36

NICK SMILED AS HE watched his son splash on the beach. The police had finally released the house on the island and Nick decided it was as good a place as any to get to know his son. Eventually, Sebastian would need to be out in the world, but what he needed most right now was time with his father.

They spent their days fishing, swimming, and snuggling. Sebastian slept in bed with him and Nick treasured the feeling of his young son cuddled up to him at night. Sebastian was trying to walk, so Nick had taken to keeping his phone ready at all times. He'd missed many firsts in his son's life and wanted to capture this one.

When Nick's attorney told him that custody had been resolved, they celebrated with a cake and some new toys. Luciana filed a birth certificate for Sebastian, and had included Nick's name as Sebastian's father, so there were no legal questions.

He'd attempted to get in touch with Maya several times, but she hadn't returned his calls. It was clear she'd meant what she said that night in Flamingo Cove. She didn't feel the same way he did. He tried to tell himself he was getting over her, but he knew that wasn't true. His emotions were just as raw as that night on the sidewalk.

He hadn't even bothered giving her his new phone number. If he had, he'd be waiting by the phone, hoping for her call. It was easier this way. He wouldn't allow himself the false hope that she would change her mind.

Other women didn't interest him, and he couldn't imagine bringing one into Sebastian's life. His heart was fuller than it had ever been. Nick loved being a father and couldn't believe that he'd almost deprived himself of this incredible gift.

His heart filled with joy watching Sebastian's antics on the beach and realized how much joy his own father had missed out on. Nick couldn't remember a single moment of warmth or joy with his father. Because of that, he'd grown up believing that fatherhood was a chore. He now understood that it was just the opposite. It was the greatest gift a man could receive.

Movement offshore caught Sebastian's attention and he pointed. Sebastian found even the smallest things exciting. He turned to Nick, jabbering excitedly. Sebastian didn't have any words yet, but his enthusiasm was clear.

Nick glanced up to see a kayak passing by. One of the many kayaks, paddleboards, and small boats they saw each day, which never failed to delight Sebastian. Something was different about this one, though. Nick thought he recognized a familiar figure paddling the kayak. *Don't be ridiculous*. *It's not*

her. Young, lean, and athletic, with dark hair. That describes many of the kayakers that pass by, Nick chided himself. It wasn't the first time he'd imagined that it was Maya on one of the small craft in the bay.

Nick turned back to the sandcastle they were building. Although sandcastle was a generous term for Sebastian's favorite game. Nick would collect a mound of sand and build it as high as he could, with Sebastian urging him on. When the tower met Sebastian's standards, he would smash it over with his fist, then get his father to build it again. Sebastian loved smashing sandcastles. Nick loved watching his son.

Nick was laughing over Sebastian's vigorous demolition when a voice drifted over the water. "Looks like fun."

Maya. No, it couldn't be. Nick blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the glare off the water. But she was still there. Not wishful thinking. Maya, in the flesh. Had he willed her here with the power of his desire? Careful, he warned himself. You don't know what this means. She could need you to testify in the trial. Play it cool. Don't let her see how much you've missed her. Nick promised himself he would. He'd stay in here with his son, play it cool, and see what she had to say.

Unfortunately, his body didn't seem to get the message because just as soon as he thought the words, he wading through the water. He was in waist-deep water when he lifted her off the kayak and into his arms.

He claimed her mouth in a forceful kiss, unleashing his passion and anger in equal measure. Maya wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to his kiss. His tongue explored her mouth, desperate for the taste of her. His body responded instantly. He pressed his hardness into her softness, letting her feel the effect she had on him. She moaned in pleasure and arched against him, craving more. He was happy to oblige, moving one hand to her hips to pull her against him.

Needing more, Nick kissed his way down her neck to her collarbone. She tilted her head back to give him access. He slid his hands under the tiny fabric of her bikini bottoms to

feel the luscious curve of her ass as he kissed his way down her chest.

She pulled away from him and pressed against his chest in protest. He growled his displeasure and pulled her back toward him. She was strong, but he was stronger. He wasn't letting her get away from him again.

"Um, Nick. We're not alone."

That sentence was all it took to cool his ardor. He'd been so consumed by his passion that he'd forgotten they had an audience. A tiny little audience of one that watched everything his father did.

"Tell me he's happily involved digging in the sand and not paying any attention," he said as he nibbled on Maya's collarbone.

She stood on tiptoes to peer over his shoulder. "Nope. Watching everything we're doing."

"Shit." He pulled back, but kept his hands on her hips to keep her in place. Looking into her eyes, he said, "Tell me this isn't over."

"This isn't over." She must've read the doubt in his face. "Promise. Nick, I—"

He put a finger over her lips. "Later, okay? Come and say hello to Sebastian."

Nick made them all lunch while Maya read books to Sebastian in the living room. After lunch, Nick put Sebastian down for a nap. He bent down to kiss his son and whispered, "C'mon, buddy, today's one of those days for a nice, long three-hour nap. If you do, Daddy will let you eat ice cream for dinner, okay?"

Sebastian smiled up at him and patted his face. Nick knew the baby didn't understand his words, but he took that as a good sign anyway.

When he returned to the living room, he said, "If this is a professional visit, tell me now. Don't let me think it's anything

more than it is, Maya."

She shook her head and rose to stand before him. "Not a professional visit. I don't visit witnesses in a bikini."

Nick took a moment to appreciate said bikini, but couldn't allow himself to get distracted. He couldn't let his guard down with her again if she was only going to shatter his heart once more.

"What are you doing here then?"

"Nick, I've had two serious relationships, and I destroyed them both. My job, it's... demanding. Unpredictable. It gets in the way of plans and calls me out at all hours. I've been in four states chasing leads over the past two weeks. But it's who I am. I love what I do, even though I know I'm impossible to live with. So, I ended it with you before it got started, to avoid the inevitable decline when you realized what it's like trying to be with me.

"I missed my own wedding rehearsal because I was working a case. Can you blame my fiancé for calling off the wedding? I don't. At the end, both of my relationships were filled with bitterness, resentment, and avoidance. I never wanted it to come to that between us. When I was hidden in that grass watching you defend me, I made the decision that I wouldn't spoil what we had. Instead, I'd end it before the inevitable decline."

When Maya paused, Nick waited a moment to make sure she'd finished. Her words weren't making sense. Had she really come all this way to explain why she'd ditched him two months ago? She could've done that by text. Not that he agreed with her decision. Sounded like the two men who'd dumped her because of her career were idiots.

When it was clear she was done, he said, "Is that what you came here to tell me?"

She shook her head. "No. I came to tell you that despite all that, I'm selfish enough to want to give it a try with you."

Nick exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and reached for her, but she pushed him away. "You need to hear what I have to say."

Nick ignored her command and pulled her toward him anyway. He picked up where he'd left earlier by planting tiny kisses on the side of her neck. Despite his efforts to distract her, she kept talking. "I'm never around."

He nibbled on her earlobe. "I'm impossible to live with."

He planted hot, wet kisses along her jawline. Her voice was breathy with pleasure when she said, "You can't count on me being home for dinner."

Nick slid his thumb across a pebbled nipple. "I, oh, Nick, I can't cook."

"I'll do the cooking," he said as he pulled her in for a passionate kiss. She worked her hands underneath his shirt and wrapped her arms around him. The sensation of skin against skin was so intense that his arousal became almost painful. She pressed her hips against his, and he felt the heat of her desire.

"Bedroom," he commanded, putting his hands under her hips and lifting her off the ground. When she wrapped her legs around him, tilted her hips upward on his erection, making him groan from the agonizing pleasure. "Stop that. I want to take my time with you."

Her answer was to repeat the motion. "Pure evil. When you were listing your faults earlier, you should've led with pure evil."

He slid a finger underneath the bottom of her bikini and dipped it into her wetness. She writhed against him, moaning. He worked his finger inside and felt her clench down around it. God! He needed to be inside her. He'd take his time next time, he promised himself.

He dropped her on the bed and slipped off her bikini bottoms in the same motion. For a moment, he just stared at her, flushed with desire. Her sexiness captivated him. Then she reached for him and he knew he had to be inside her. He stripped off his shorts and plunged into her in one long thrust.

She came before he even began moving and he remained still, letting her ride her waves of pleasure.

When she smiled up at him, he began to move in long, slow thrusts, savoring the feel of her around him. She urged him to go faster, and he obliged, watching the pleasure build again in her eyes as he did. She tried to say something, but another orgasm washed over her and this time he let himself join her.

Chapter 37

M AYA WOKE UP CURLED against Nick, his hand tracing lazy circles across her skin. She felt like she belonged here, with him, and planted a soft kiss on his chest.

"Ah, good, you're awake." Nick untied her top in two deft movements, baring her to him. He attempted to roll her over on her back, but she stopped him.

"Nick, we need to talk."

Once again, he ignored her protests. "You talk. I'm listening."

But when he drew her nipple into his mouth and caressed it with his tongue, she was beyond conversation. Nick took his time exploring her body, using his fingers and tongue to discover what she liked.

"Please," she begged, needing the feel of him inside of her again.

He positioned himself over her and whispered in her ear, "Anything for you, my love."

He pushed hard into her, all his earlier restraint gone, and she cried out with pleasure. Nick used his fingers to increase her pleasure, and she clawed her fingers against his back. Her muscles clenched around him when she climaxed, and he climaxed with her.

Nick collapsed on top of her; she welcomed the heavy feel of his body. Sweat covered their bodies as they lay sated and exhausted. *I can't believe I almost deprived myself of this*.

For a moment, she thought Nick had fallen asleep, but then he spoke as if reading her mind. "You were really going to walk away from what we have together?"

"Hey, I came to my senses, didn't I?"

"Good thing, too. I was about ready to come and get you."

"No, you weren't. What were you going to do, drag me off to your cave?"

"Nah, caves are too cramped. I was going to drag you off to my island."

Maya wasn't sure if she believed him or not, but she was glad she was here. "Listen, Nick, we still have to talk."

Nick propped himself up on his elbows, his face above hers. "About what? You have a demanding job. I get that. I was in the military, too, remember? You won't be home for dinner. You'll cancel plans. You might miss the wedding rehearsal. I'm sorry those pansy-asses you dated couldn't handle that, but don't you think I deserve the right to decide for myself?

"You just decided for me and walked away. I deserve better than that. Now I'm telling you, I know what I'm getting into and I can handle it. What else is there to talk about?"

Maya gazed into his blue eyes and realized there was nothing else that needed to be said. He was right. He knew what he was getting himself into, and she'd robbed him of the chance to decide for himself. She wound her fingers through his hair and pulled him down for a kiss. Unfortunately, the kiss didn't last long.

An insistent voice called from the other room, "Da-da-da-da-da-da-"

Nick rose. "I have about thirty seconds to answer before that turns into a piercing wail."

When Maya started to rise, he put a hand on her shoulder. "You stay here, take a nap."

Maya stretched out on the bed. "I'll stay here, but I'm not going to nap. I'm going to fantasize about all the things I'm going to let you do to me later."

"Evil woman," Nick said, as Sebastian began to cry.

Epilogue

16 P INCH ME, BECAUSE THIS must be a dream," Maya said as she looked out at the expanse of the Italian villa around her. Sweeping green hills and olive groves covered the horizon. The villa's garden was bursting with roses. The beauty of it took Maya's breath away; she could hardly believe it was real.

Nick wrapped his arms around her. "Always happy to oblige. Will a bite work instead?" he asked as he nibbled on her neck.

"Nick!" she squealed. "I'm wearing my hair up tomorrow and if you leave a mark on my neck, I'm going to kill you."

"Can I leave a mark somewhere lower?" he asked in a suggestive tone, placing a hand low on her belly.

"No, I'm getting everything waxed and plucked and buffed and polished before the ceremony tomorrow, and I don't need anyone seeing that."

"Probably for the best. It would just make them jealous to see what they're missing out on, anyway."

Maya couldn't believe this was her life. She was less than a day away from marrying the man of her dreams in the picturesque Italian countryside. She'd finally found the man that was meant for her. Nick truly loved her for herself. He didn't ask her to be someone she wasn't, and he supported her commitment to her work. While she was glad that Owens would spend the rest of his life behind bars, she also owed him her gratitude for sending her on the assignment to watch Nick. Owens had intended her to fail; instead, she'd not only taken him down, she'd also met the man of her dreams.

The perfection of this moment overcame Maya. She turned to face Nick. "Thank you for all of this. It's a fairy tale come true."

"No," he said. "It's actually quite strategic on my part."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, as soon as you said yes, I had to make sure I'd actually get you to the altar. It was either take you down to the courthouse or bring you an ocean away from work, so nothing could interfere."

"You made the right choice. Thank you. I'm happy to see your deviousness used for good these days."

"Remember our first date?" Nick asked.

Maya nodded her head. She would never forget the day she'd worked up the courage to take a chance with him, to open herself up for the possibility of getting hurt. In the year since then, she'd only fallen more in love with him. He'd weathered the demands of her career and they'd both had their hands full with Sebastian.

"You thought I couldn't afford to buy you dinner."

Maya groaned and buried her head in his shoulder.

Nick put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. He placed a gentle kiss on her lips and said, "Don't be embarrassed. I love knowing that you're not with me for my money. You wanted me when you thought I was a broke beach bum and that is everything."

Nick had later explained that as a young soldier, one of his buddies had gotten their unit hyped up about a new thing called crypto currency. None of them really understood what it was, but since they were deployed, they had no way of spending their checks. Even with a soldier's meager pay, it added up during a twelve-month deployment. Many of those in the unit, including Nick, took a chance on this new investment.

That investment had grown exponentially in the past fifteen years. It meant that Nick could focus on being a dad while still funding the overseas missions that meant so much to him. It also afforded them a lifestyle beyond anything Maya had ever imagined for herself, like a luxury wedding in an Italian villa surrounded by the people who meant the most to them.

"I knew that night that I was going to marry you. I've never met a woman like you, Maya, and I am honored to spend my life with you. You're an incredible partner and you've been a wonderful mother to my son. Every day with you is a gift."

Maya put her head against his chest. "Don't you dare make me cry before we have to go downstairs."

He stroked her hair and held her to him for a moment, then broke the embrace. "It's time for me to get ready. Think your grandmother's still okay with Sebastian?"

"It's funny that you even think you have a chance of getting him away from her. Once she's got ahold of that child, she doesn't let go." "Good," he said, tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her into the bedroom.

THE END

Want more steamy and suspenseful stories from Flamingo Cove?

Visit https://www.amazon.com/author/jennifer-bishop for the full series

Continue reading for a sneak peak of *Captivate by Callie*, the book that launched the Flamingo Cove Series.

Captivated by Callie Sneak Peak

C ALLIE JUST COULDN'T IGNORE Apollo's pleading eyes for a moment longer. He'd been waiting patiently while she wrote all morning, but she could no longer resist his sighs and the thumping of his tail, letting her know that he was eager for a walk. Callie could easily lose herself in her writing, especially on a day like today when the words flowed so easily to her. It almost felt like she wasn't even thinking them, they were just flowing from her as quickly as her fingers could keep up. Callie loved to lose herself in the world of her

characters, where the heroine always knew the right thing to say and inevitably had men fighting over her.

Callie imagined herself as someone who always knew the right thing to say, and issued a sigh of her own, realizing she would probably never be that person. Callie had the sparkling personality of, well, a writer who spent most of her time alone. It wasn't that she was lonely; she enjoyed her solitude. But she did wish she had a bit more sparkle in real life.

Callie saved her work and stood up from her desk. Apollo was at her side in an instant.

"Want to take a bike ride?"

Apollo's answer was an enthusiastic wagging of his tail. Bike rides were his favorite thing in the world. As Callie put on her shoes, she told him, "Go get your leash." She had taught him this trick as a puppy when he started to bring his leash whenever he wanted a walk. Instead of scolding him, she taught him the command for it. Apollo loved to have a job to do and took great pride in his work. He enthusiastically trotted over and grabbed his leash from the bin and brought it to her.

As they set out on their ride, Callie enjoyed the warm ocean breeze on her face. She had just moved to the small beach town and was still getting used to tropical temperatures. As tempting as this idyllic town was, Callie couldn't afford to let herself get lulled into complacency. She would enjoy the ocean breeze, but she still had to be constantly looking over her shoulder. She had to be prepared for danger when she least expected it.

It had been weeks since she'd fled her home, and her quiet life as a writer. Callie had been content with her life: she loved her writing and the energy of the city. Yes, she could admit that it was a bit on the dull side, especially when it came to her love life, but she'd settled into her routine, and it suited her well.

After countless bad dates, tepid relationships, and mediocre sex, Callie had accepted that grand passion wasn't in her future. She wasn't wild and daring. She wasn't the life of the party. She knew she was attractive, but she didn't have that sex

appeal that drove men wild. She'd come to terms with that, which is what made her staid life back in the city so precious to her.

Growing up, she'd been subject to her mother's whims; they'd pick up and move across the country for a chance at grand romance, only to have it fall apart when the romance fizzled out, which it inevitably did. Callie had dealt with so many of her mother's boyfriends and husbands that she had stopped bothering to learn their names. Her mother was currently on a European honeymoon with husband number five. Or possibly six. It would be a while before Callie heard from her mother again, so Callie had just sent a simple email letting her mother know she'd be gone for a few weeks researching a book.

Because of the moving around she'd done as a child, Callie swore to herself that she would never throw her life away for a man. Callie craved permanence and stability in her life and had worked hard to create that. She'd built a good life for herself, and it had been torn away from her. Callie dreamed of returning to her apartment and stepping back into the life she'd left behind. The events of the last few weeks had proven to her that a life of adventure wasn't for her. She wanted contentment. She wanted pleasure in her writing. She wanted her familiar surroundings.

She just didn't know if that would ever be a possibility for her. For a moment, Callie flashed back to the scene that prompted her unplanned move. It was something she hoped to forget but wasn't sure she ever could. At least until she knew she was safe. She longed for the day when it was safe enough to return home but didn't know if she ever would be truly safe again.

Coward, Callie thought to herself for the umpteenth time. She had been known to run from her problems in the past, but this one topped all those that had come before it. She knew that people were worried about her, but she'd cut off all communication. She couldn't bring herself to deal with it yet. Not when Apollo's life was at stake.

Callie knew what happened to dogs that were labeled as "dangerous" in the city, and Callie wasn't willing to risk that. She and Apollo had been a team for years, and she wasn't willing to give that up, especially since he hadn't done anything wrong.

In Callie's eyes, Apollo was a hero; he had most likely saved her life. But to those bystanders who witnessed the attack, it looked as though Apollo had attacked without provocation. Callie knew she was making the mess bigger by trying to hide from it, but she couldn't figure a way out that didn't jeopardize Apollo. He didn't deserve to pay the price for her mistake. That was the reason she hadn't gone to the police when she had the chance. Now, she was afraid it was too late.

Callie wasn't even sure that she had anything to offer that would help the police. She'd seen two dark shadowy figures. She assumed they were man, but really, she didn't even know that for a fact. Not at the time. She'd also seen an SUV that looked black, but she couldn't even be sure of the color.

Bringing nothing with her when she left but Apollo, Callie wanted to believe no one could find her here, but she never let her guard down completely. Not even her editor knew where she was living now. As long as Callie was careful, nobody should be able to find her. Shaking off the dark memories of that terrifying night, Callie forced herself back into the present and her new life.

She'd enjoy her bike ride with careful, watchful eyes.

Also By Jennifer Bishop

Flamingo Cove Series

Captivated by Callie Aching for Addison Bewitched by Bailey Intrigued by Isabella

About the Author

ENNIFER BISHOP WRITES DELICIOUSLY spicy romance novels with a bit of fun and a dash of adventure. Her books feature confident women and the strong heroes who adore them.

Jennifer was a psychotherapist in private practice and a business consultant before her love of reading led her to discover the pleasure of writing. She now spends her days writing happily-ever-afters, usually by the beach, almost always with Coco the Chocolate Lab cheering her on.