

# *Eyes on Tango*



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## *Chapter 1*

Until 11 am on a sunny but humid morning, Doctor Danielle Ryan was on a long-overdue vacation.

Though travelling alone, she was determined not to allow that to daunt her. After an early morning massage that had left her relaxed and refreshed, she hopped a bus for a sightseeing tour. It was a glorious day, with blue skies littered with puffy white clouds that did not, unfortunately, provide much shade from the strong rays of the sun. However, the sight of the magnificent ruins perched on a cliff above the deep blue sea helped her forget about the sweat trickling down her back, making her top cling uncomfortably to her skin.

Their guide had done a superb job sparking their imaginations with the history behind the ruins, and she stood in the midst of the ancient sentinels of rock as in awe as the natives surely were when they built them. For the first time since her arrival, she was truly enjoying herself, and the fascinating walk through history held her in complete wonder and delight.

The deep greens of the jungle and the dense grass contrasted sharply with the greyish-white of the crushed limestone walking paths. So many bright, vibrant colors that

Danielle feared her memory card would fill before the day's end. She had just adjusted her baseball cap over her moist brow and crouched to take a photograph of one of the numerous iguanas lounging in the sun when it happened. There was no hint, no warning.

Yet, from that moment on, her perfect vacation consisting of sleeping in late, languishing on the beautiful beach, and exploring the ancient Mayan ruins in Mexico came to a screeching halt. One minute she was strolling along the dirt walking paths of some of the most majestic ruins in the world, and in the next she was being tackled from behind, roughly thrown to the ground and ordered: "Stay down!"

Landing face first in the dirt with a startled cry, Danielle ignored the stinging in her cheek and the throb where the camera dug into her wrist and hastily tried to rise. It was an effort in futility, for the body that held her down was hard and strong, and she was completely pinned underneath a very solid man. His voice was serious, and the loud buzz of warning in her ears advised trouble. Still, in her confusion she noticed two things: he was American, and he smelled strangely of lemons.

Lemons?

"Stop struggling."

Because of the lightning speed with which it all began, she did not immediately comprehend that the rapid popping sound off in the distance was gunfire. She was only aware of the crushing pressure of the man lying on her back and the seriousness of her predicament. Where were all the other tourists? Why was she hearing screams?

"We have to move."

Before she could protest, or even catch her breath to scream, the suffocating weight was gone, and she was roughly lifted from behind to her feet. The hands at her waist were as hard as the rest of his body, and his grip was firm when he pushed her into the thick jungle growth ahead.

"Hey!" Danielle continued her struggles, growing more panicked as she was forced out of sight of any tourists. She

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knew in that moment she was facing danger.

For a moment, her life flashed before her eyes. She saw her parents and her brother standing over her body at a Mexican morgue, solemnly and tearfully identifying her dead body. Then she remembered her mother telling her not to go off to Mexico alone and recalled her bitter response, “well, who is there for me to go with?” It was all so surreal that it took her that brief moment of insanity to remind her of what was important. That was when she realized she would never do that to her family - ever. Not without a fight at least.

In a voice that was in direct contrast to his actions, he replied calmly. “We have to get out of sight.”

Like hell, she thought. Spinning around, she used her beach bag as a weapon. Complete with towel, wallet, passport, cell phone, bottled water and sunscreen, it was not exactly an effective deterrent, but it was all she had available. Definitely a valiant effort on her part, but his hand was faster. Almost as though he sensed her plan before she started to move, he released his grip around her waist and snatched the bag in mid-strike. His other hand shoved her roughly forward, and she fell headlong into the thick blanket of green foliage. Her knees squished in the mud when she landed, and to add insult to injury he pressed her all the way to the ground. Overheated muck seeped through her clothing and stuck to her damp skin.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” This time his voice showed a trace of annoyance, making her flinch even more. “I’m trying to help you.”

He dropped to his knees beside her and tossed her bag down while she fought to get up. Before she could catch a glimpse of her unknown attacker, he placed his hand on her back and thrust her back down.

“Please,” she gasped hastily, “just take the bag. You can have it.”

His hand increased the pressure to hold her prostrate in the undergrowth, leaving her arms pinned beneath her and making it difficult for her to breathe. She wanted to scream, but

she could not take a deep breath.

“They’re firing, even on the tourists,” he said harshly. “People are hurt out there. Just shut up and hold still. I’ll do what I can to protect you.”

“Who? What?”

“Please, lady, just stay down. I can’t help you if you draw them here.”

His voice was surprisingly earnest, and Danielle cautiously lifted her head to hear the commotion beyond the trees. It only took an instant to realize that he was right, and her panic rose to new levels of fear. People were screaming near the entrance, an area that was thick with tourists. Although she had wandered off to a less populated region beyond the magnificent ruin of *El Castillo*, the sounds of panicky voices and trampling feet became louder as more people flocked her way. Though many of the voices were speaking in Spanish, she could also hear several in English, and what she heard made her blood go cold.

“To the entrance!”

“Get out of here now!”

“Run!”

The voices mingled, but the meaning was clear: they needed to flee.

The sobbing of children echoed through the dense vegetation, and Danielle’s heart began racing in response. Hot rivulets of sweat began dripping down her face. It burned her eyes, and she blinked several times to clear them before struggling to free one mud-streaked arm to wipe the drops away. Her hand came away wet, and for a few seconds she wondered if it was just sweat or tears there as well. She needed to flee. She had to get out of there, but her body was suddenly frozen with fear.

Another scream, this one from a child, made Danielle’s blood go cold. The hand on her back tightened briefly when she shuddered, and she wondered if the Good Samaritan was trying to be supportive or preparing for renewed struggles.

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As the sporadic gunfire grew closer, her trembling became increasingly more violent. In response, the man threw his entire arm over her back and squeezed her gently in a partial hug. She would have laughed at his chivalrous attempt to console her if she was not so terrified, but then he surprised her even more by scooting closer.

His lips brushed her ear as he bent to speak. "It'll be okay. Just stay quiet and stay down. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

The next thing she knew, the hand was gone. It was replaced by the touch of several loose, decaying palm fronds. They were scratchy and damp, just like everything else in this godforsaken jungle. She stiffened in terror when she comprehended that he was actually burying her with the foliage. It was not a blanket she wanted.

Fighting the rising panic again, she squeezed her eyes shut when he leaned in close again. "Stay here and don't move. I'll be right back to get you out."

Her eyes opened wide. He was leaving her? "What?"

But he was already gone. Straining to hear him slip away over the sound of the commotion, Danielle quickly realized that he was stealthy as well as strong. Knowing she should do the same, she almost came to her feet when she grasped that he might not return at all. After all, who was this guy anyway? Why would he go out of his way to help her? She knew better than to trust a complete stranger, and she called upon her recently-deserted practicality to gather courage and flee with the others.

She was about to thrust the fronds away when a new round of gunshots held her in place. They were loud and chillingly close. The gunmen were following those who tried to flee. Despite wanting to run, like a child she squeezed her eyes closed hoping that if she did not see them they would not see her. Though she itched from the feel of the leaves against her sweaty and muddy skin, she was unable to move or even shift away from the nervous pressure of her bladder. She remained

as still as the air, which was now heavy with the sounds of terror and panic.

What on earth was going on? What happened out there?

Long minutes passed, and Danielle wondered if she would be found shot to death somewhere in a Mexican jungle far away from her family and friends. Her ears ached with the sounds of the terrorized screams followed by the cold, hard report of intermittent gunfire.

The sounds were horrible, but the fear was worse.

Squeezing her eyes shut again, Danielle pressed her hands over her ears to block out the sound of the gunfight and tried to think of other things. Memories of the previous two days spent on the beach did little to ease the discomfort of lying on the muddy ground. She longed for a drink from her water bottle but was too afraid to move to fish it out of her bag.

Finally, the pattering of frantic footfalls decreased in intensity, and Danielle felt safe enough to raise her head slightly. She desperately needed water. Her throat was parched, and the amount of sweat dripping off her body warned her that she was rapidly becoming dehydrated. With a hand that trembled as violently as her body, she reached for her bag and eased the bottle out as slowly and quietly as possible. Before unscrewing the cap, she raised her head a little more and looked back over her shoulder to the trail beyond. Through the darkness of the thick jungle cover, the trail was a slash of bright light. There appeared to be no one else headed her way.

Was it over? More importantly, was she the only one left?

Aware that her terror was on the verge of taking over the last of her reason, Danielle took another deep breath and forced her attention to the water bottle. She pressed it to her lips, almost choking when the warm water flowed down her throat. Not knowing how long she would be in hiding, she satisfied herself with the single gulp and replaced the cap. While it did little to quench her thirst, it kept her occupied enough to regain some composure. She needed to think rationally now. She had to figure out a way to get out of there alive.



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Having always prided herself on her ability to handle stress, Danielle assumed she had mastered her emotions. Yet she had to admit that her situation was nothing short of crazy and beyond anyone's expectations. On the television, sure, but there in a popular tourist attraction? It just did not make any sense. It was not normal that a stunning archaeological site would become a battlefield. With that in mind, she forgave herself for her momentary loss of control and focused on pulling it together so she could take stock of her situation.

Before she could think any further, a sudden movement on the trail caught her attention. Still semi-seated, Danielle froze. A man had rounded the corner, pausing only five yards away from her hiding spot. He was not dressed as a tourist with shorts, flip flops and sunglasses. Nor was he dressed as one of the natives of the area. He was dressed elegantly, more suited for a day in one of the fancier resort's golf courses with his tan slacks and white button-down shirt. His thick black hair was slicked back, and dark sunglasses covered his eyes. They hid most of his medium-complexioned face, but what she could see appeared handsome. His goatee was neatly trimmed and framed full lips that were currently compressed in what appeared to be regret.

Another man joined him, carrying a semi-automatic rifle with both hands. Dressed more like a gangster from an American inner city than a tourist, his bandana covered most of his head and was darkened by a thick swath of sweat. His body was hidden behind a loosely hanging shirt and jeans.

Danielle felt her heart leap back into her throat. While still partially concealed under the palm fronds, her hat and sunglasses had fallen off when her strange rescuer had thrown her to the ground, leaving her exposed in the shadows of the trees. She hoped her blond hair would not give her away.

"We got the three."

"All dead?" The man she had studied spoke in fluent Spanish, a language she understood but could not speak well.

"Yes, sir."

“*Excellente.*” He followed up with an approving nod. “They will speak to no one.”

“But sir, Tango is missing.”

The handsome one let out a sharp curse, and the approval on his face was replaced with a dark anger. Danielle shivered at the ferocity of his outburst. “No sign of him?”

“No sir.” The second man shifted the weight of the gun. “He’s not here.”

“I saw him from a distance. Did he tip those men off to our meeting and then run? Pit us against the enemy?”

“I don’t know, but he’s not here now.”

“Obviously he’s been lying to us all along. The treacherous snake! The deal is dead. When I find him, I’ll tear him limb from limb for ruining this. Now I have to report this to JW, and he won’t like it.”

“Yes, sir.”

The handsome one shook his head with some form of remorse, but Danielle had a hard time understanding his sympathy when he was so cold just moments before. He clucked his tongue. “Such a senseless waste... Collect the others and get out of here. The *policia* will be here soon.”

With an abrupt nod, the second man turned around and jogged back down the trail. Making a final sweep of the jungle around him, the well-dressed man seemed to pause and make eye contact with her. Fearing the worst, Danielle bit her lip to keep the scream rising in her throat at bay when a small, cold smile appeared on his lips. Remaining as still as a statue, she watched him hesitate then casually stroll down the path in the direction of the exit. She heard him whistling.

*Whistling?*

Danielle ignored the goose bumps rising on her arms in response to his emotionless cruelty. How could he whistle when people were injured and even dead? So cold, so heartless. She was certain that the whistling, coupled with the horrified screams and gunfire, would stay with her forever.

As soon as she could no longer hear movement, Danielle

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decided to move. She was no longer safe where she was. If he had seen her, he could backtrack at any moment with one of his guns and do away with her. Glancing right and left, she took stock of her options. The exit was covered by the handsome one, the trail by the gunman and the cliff was not a viable option without stairs. That left the thick jungle. Though unappealing, she knew she could not take the chance and stay.

First returning her water bottle to her bag, she then thrust the palm fronds away from her legs. It took her a moment to come to her feet, and her legs nearly buckled under her weight when she did. Nevertheless, she forced herself to move forward.

The jungle behind her was thick with vegetation and root systems, and within three steps she was regretting her decision. Each forward motion through the dense mass of plant life threatened to topple her, and Danielle was reminded of the doomed characters in a horror movie. They would stumble, fall and turn to find their stalker above them. She shivered despite the oppressive heat. That could not happen to her.

Scanning the jungle before her, she picked her way forward. Roots protruded from the moist ground, perilously placed to hide amid the undergrowth and catch her unaware. Rocks, the same limestone that caused the ruins to gleam brightly in the sunlight, loomed dangerous in the shade of the growth. Within minutes, she had gone as far as she could and threw her arms up in surrender. She could no longer see the trail, but she was already out of breath and sweating so profusely that she felt weak.

She would never make it out on her own, and she wondered where her mysterious savior had gone. Had he escaped safely without her while she battled with the jungle? A strange feeling of loneliness and despair filled her with the thought, but even worse was the idea that he had been shot too.

As if on cue, a shout followed by two sharp gunshots caused Danielle to startle violently and lose her balance. She fell to the ground, feeling the wetness of the swampy area soak through her ruined shorts. After the silence of the past several

minutes, the noise frightened the birds in the branches above, and they flew off with a sudden flapping of wings. She glanced up and watched their flight as anguish overwhelmed her, wishing she could do the same. Without knowing how, she was certain her savior was the recipient of that last gunshot, and her vision blurred with the tears she had struggled to hold back.

She knew he would not be back. Now she was truly alone with no idea how to get out of the jungle alive.

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Shaking his head with regret, Hayden Evans returned his gun to the holster secured in his waistband and spun on his heel. One well-placed shot was all it took to remove the threat remaining at the site. The inexperienced kid went down quickly. Now all he needed to do was go fish the girl out of the trees. They needed to move quickly, for he already heard the sirens. Although they were still a good distance away, he and the girl needed to be long gone before the local police descended on the site. He could not be seen, especially now that everything had gone to hell.

Staying low, Hayden hurried back along the trail. He did not encounter any other stragglers, and he was grateful he was in the remotest part of the site. Two bodies, an older man and woman, lay across the path directly ahead. They were obviously deceased, so he did not linger. Time was of the essence now, no matter how much the sight tugged at his heart.

He spied the girl's hat and glasses and scooped that bit of evidence up as he passed. The foliage he had hidden her in was just a few feet away, and the sounds of the sirens were even closer. Jogging the final few steps, he pushed his way through the trees and halted in surprise. The spot was empty. The palm fronds had been hastily discarded and now rested in a small pile, an indication that she had moved on her own rather than being snatched, but Hayden felt a moment of fear. He had told her that he would be right back, but it had taken him longer than he expected to get a good look at the remaining shooters. There were three in total, plus Rocky. Four men hunting him...

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no, three now that he had shot the fourth. If she was running around on her own, she was in serious danger.

Sighing heavily, Hayden placed his hands on his hips and took a moment to reflect upon what happened so he could plan his next step. Things had fallen apart too quickly; something had gone seriously wrong.

His meeting was to take place at the *Casa de las Columnas* where they would set up a time to make the exchange. He arrived ready to make the deal and fly back to the States with the cargo despite the warning trickle down his spine that started immediately upon waking that morning. It was one of those suspicions of dread he could not shake.

After years of learning to trust these feelings, he accepted that his intuition was on fire.

He did not cower in fear, but he did heed his instincts. As planned, he dressed the part and mingled with the tourists with the full intent of going forward with the deal. It only took him a moment to locate a worthy target to use as cover. Following the only alone young woman off the tour bus from Cancun, he kept far enough away so she would not notice but close enough that he could be mistaken as her companion until he could break off at the signal. All had gone according to plan.

Unfortunately, the woman he chose ended up being far prettier than he imagined. Though her face was partially hidden behind the baseball cap and sunglasses she wore, he noted the small, straight line of her nose and pouty lips when she raised her camera to take a picture. She was attractive, tall and lean, with long, tanned, runner's legs and round breasts covered in a bikini and a pink tank top. While he trailed her from a safe distance, he focused on her narrow waist and wondered how she could be alone. Surely there was a pack of men hounding her.

Regrettably, his distraction had momentarily taken his mind off the matters at hand, an error that had been paid for with the blood of the innocent. Somehow the tenuous bond of trust between him and Rocky had been shattered, and he had

no clue how or why. That he did not know what started the shootout was unacceptable. Their tardiness evidently had been deliberate. Their arms and eagerness to shoot, sloppy. Normally Rocky was more cautious than that, a sly man who covered his tracks well. There were far too many unknowns, especially considering there were three other gun-wielding men dead in the plaza. Who were they? Why were they here? Were they officials? Only one thing was clear: things had fallen apart and he had screwed up when he shoved that girl into the trees.

Returning his attention to the crushed vegetation, Hayden studied the area around it. He could not see any returning footsteps in the mud, nor could he see where anyone else had entered their makeshift hiding spot. Spinning in a slow circle, he noticed a single print going deeper into the jungle. She had moved into the heavy darkness, and she was still alone. Not sure why that gave him such relief, he made a quick decision to follow and began to move. Although he knew his predicament was perilous and he should ditch her now, he foolishly had involved her in this mess as soon as he tackled her to the ground. There was no way he could abandon her yet despite all the unknowns.

Following the trail of footprints and bent vegetation, Hayden was nearly on top of her location before he saw her. It had grown steadily darker under the canopy of trees, and he immediately saw the wisdom of her move. Unless someone was specifically looking, they would not quickly find her in her current spot.

She was seated partially in a puddle, her sneaker-clad feet almost completely submerged. Her head rested on her hands, and her elbows were propped on her bent knees. The way she had curled into herself made him suspect her initial shock had worn off, leaving fear in its stead. The twinge of pity struck him as odd when so many others had fallen out in the deep green expanse surrounding the ruins, but he could not resist the sympathetic feeling from rising. Maybe it was because he had a little sister, or maybe it was because he had nearly scared her to

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death when he reacted instinctively and forced her to the ground. Either way, he had no time to ponder it. Knowing they had to get out of the area, he closed the distance and reached out to place his hand on her shoulder.

Before he could speak, she was swinging again, her mouth opened in a startled gasp. Their eyes met, his brown and hers pale blue, and the look of horror she gave him reminded him of his appearance.

“Wait,” he whispered, catching the same bag she had attacked him with previously. Despite her attempts to yank it back, he easily disarmed her and replaced her dropped belongings. “It’s me, it’s me.”

The panicked look in her eyes remained, so he dropped to his haunches and handed her back the beach bag. “It’s okay. I’m back to get you out.”

Suspecting his clothing may have something to do with her alarm, he hastily reached up and pulled the blue-checked bandana off his head and ran his hand through his damp hair. Although she flinched, she did not move away. Instead, her wide eyes scanned his face, none of the fear dissipating until her nostrils suddenly flared.

“Lemons,” she whispered.

Unbuttoning the long-sleeved shirt, he pulled it off, leaving only his white T-shirt. It was saturated with sweat and clung to his chest uncomfortably, and there was little relief when he took the extra shirt off. He was thirsty and hot, plain and simple.

He glanced at her curiously while wrapping it around his forearm. “Lemons?”

“You smell like lemons.”

He cocked his head to the side and stared at her, wondering if she had sunk into some kind of shock. She blinked back at him, her round eyes studying him carefully and lucidly. Shrugging, he dismissed the random comment. “We have to get out of here. Are you coming with me or not?”

Her voice was clear and steady when she answered. “I hear

sirens. Shouldn't we wait for them?"

"You can if you want, but I don't trust anyone. I also don't want to wait while they clear this place. It's big and will probably take hours," Hayden replied quickly. She did not need to know that he also suspected he might be the cause for this massacre.

Her lips formed an 'O' of surprise. "I didn't think of that."

She glanced down at her feet, and her brow furrowed in thought. He was growing impatient but understood her need to debate her next action. She did not know who he was, so the question was whether or not she would take a chance. For some strange reason, he really hoped she would.

"My feet are wet, and these bugs are driving me crazy," she commented.

Returning her gaze to his, she offered him a wistful half-smile that showed him exactly how pretty she was despite the mud-stains and sweat that marred her clothing and every bare patch of skin. His heart lurched in his chest. Though startled by his reaction, he never had a chance to return it, for raised voices suddenly reached his ears.

"She was in here. Find her before the *Federales* do."

He stiffened. He knew that voice. It was Rocky.

Without another word, Hayden reached for her arm and yanked her to her feet. This time she came willingly. Their eyes communicated the need to remain quiet and flee immediately. With an abrupt nod, Hayden set off, dragging her along behind him and using his free hand to push aside the thick jungle growth.

Because of the pursuit, he had no time to keep the trail he bushwhacked as natural as possible. Instead, he plowed his way through as quickly as he could. It proved to be a difficult task and slow going. Heart pounding in his ears and sweat pouring into his eyes, Hayden ignored his exhaustion and cleared the way for the girl. It was up to him to keep her safe, and that was not a responsibility he took lightly. After what seemed an eternity, midday sunlight loomed ahead, indicating a break in



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the jungle and hopefully a chance to rest. He paused under the cover of the trees, aware of the girl's harsh, ragged breathing behind him.

"Get down," he ordered.

He was pleased when she responded immediately. Without another glance in her direction, he continued forward and scanned the opening ahead. The threatening sound of a helicopter broke the eerie calm, causing him to hang back until he was certain it was out of sight. The opening was another small branch of the trail around the ruins. There was no one lurking in this area, but if the men after them had any sense they would take the trail and wait for them to appear. That meant they had precious little time.

"Come quick."

Again she did not hesitate, and his admiration of her spirit grew. In a show of unspoken trust, she held her hand out to him as she reached the other side of the trail, and he took her wrist in a firm grasp before resuming his struggle with the jungle. Muscles screaming in agony, knees ready to buckle, Hayden was relieved long minutes later when they reached the far wall of the ruin. The girl let out a high-pitched squeak of dismay, hastily suppressed when she bit down hard on her lower lip.

Though she was obviously exhausted, she did not waver when he tugged on her wrist again and pulled her along the length of the wall. He knew they were close to the cliff dropping into the Caribbean, so if there was no opening in the ancient wall they were stuck.

Several minutes of ankle-twisting, thigh-straining slogging through the growth, sunlight again appeared before them. Hayden drew up, and the girl stumbled into him. He felt her forehead rest against his back out of sheer exhaustion and knew he could not press her much further. It was too hot and humid. They both would collapse if they kept up the punishing pace.

"Now what?"

The defeat in her breathless voice hardened his determination. While it was true there was a path to cross and a

clearing that would leave them wide open, the other side of the wall, and the temporary freedom that granted them, was just a few yards beyond. Inhaling deeply in an effort to catch his breath, he glanced at her over his shoulder. Though she was flushed the color of a ripe tomato and sweat dripped down her face in rivulets, he could not help his smile of admiration. For her courage or her beauty, he did not want to consider at the moment. All he knew was that his smile turned into a wide grin.

“We’ll just run for it,” he said with a wink.

She gave him a horrified look. “Run for it?”

“Absolutely. Let’s go.”

Grabbing her yet again, Hayden dragged her behind him out of the relative safety of the trees. In the bright sunlight, the heat immediately penetrated their skin, seeming to suck what little energy they had left. However, he did not let that slow him, and his sheer determination kept the girl going, stumbling and forced to place her free hand on his waist to keep her footing.

A shout came from behind them, followed by pounding footsteps easily overheard over their own. They had been spotted, but Hayden’s suspicions that they were amateurs were confirmed. They were much too loud in their pursuit.

Running headlong to the edge of the cliff, he paused to wrap his hand around the girl’s waist, and he used the last of his strength to guide her around the edge of the wall. Just a few more steps and they would be out of the park and on their way back through the jungle until they could find a spot to enter the road.

After that, he had no idea what they would do.

## *Chapter 2*

Heart pounding so hard she feared it would explode right out of her chest, Danielle finally felt her knees give out an instant before her legs buckled. Stumbling into the back of her guardian, she was unable to regain her balance and fell forward. Too exhausted to care, she closed eyes and awaited the impact. It never came. With frightening speed, her companion turned and caught her before she landed face first on a large, foreboding block of limestone hidden among the roots of a tree trunk. His grip was solid when she sagged against him.

“Okay, easy,” he murmured. Still holding her upper arms, he lowered her to the ground and took a look around their surroundings while she struggled to regain her breath.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped.

Though she liked to think she was in fairly decent shape, the last two hours had proven the effects of the oppressive heat and humidity far outweighed her ability to keep up. Reaching blindly into her bag, she grasped her water bottle and pulled it free, no longer caring if their pursuers entered the jungle behind them. Now that they were on the other side of the wall, she knew she had to take a break or die from sheer exhaustion.

Thankfully, he did not protest. Once his dark eyes scanned the area they had just covered, he sat down across from her and eagerly reached for the bottle she handed out to him. Though she had very little water left and what was left was hot, the feel of the liquid dribbling down her parched throat helped to revive her slightly. As she watched the muscles in his throat work, she assumed it helped him as well. His eyes closed when he took the large, long gulp as if he was savoring it like he would a cold shower after their painful, midday slog through the jungle. If she had not been so exhausted, she would have smiled at the sight and the fact that she was sharing her water with a complete stranger. Funny how desperate times caused desperate measures.

His eyes opened again when he lowered the bottle. "We can't stay here."

She sighed heavily. Although she knew that, the idea of moving again was not appealing. Aware that the muscles in her legs were trembling, she offered him a pleading glance. "Can we just wait a second?"

"Not long," he said brusquely.

As he came back to his feet, Danielle perused him from head to toe. Despite his earlier appearance, he was definitely American and very Anglo. The angular face, with his straight nose, square chin and high cheekbones, covered chocolate-brown eyes, but his dark tan was just that - a tan. His thick, mahogany hair was cut short, above the ears and trimmed neatly in the back, something she knew firsthand considering her position behind him for the past couple of hours. The white T-shirt clinging damply to him outlined a strong back and broad shoulders tapering down to a lean waist. He was tall and lean overall, with long legs and arms that she knew were extremely strong.

Very handsome, very masculine and he smelled like lemons. Appealing under normal circumstances but she was not convinced she could trust this stranger.

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Though he had dressed like a Latino, he obviously was not. That made her nervous and suspicious at the same time. Why was he helping her through the jungle instead of leaving her to fend for herself? He had disappeared. She had heard gun shots. She knew there was more to the story and could not help but feel uneasy. Then there was the suspicious bulge in the waistband of his khakis. Though she did not want to admit it, she suspected she knew what it was. And she did not like it.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” she said in a low voice. “I’m out of the park. I can find my way back to the road.”

His alert brown eyes finally returned to her after scanning the trail they had plowed. It was his turn to study her, and she fought the urge to squirm under his intensity. Those eyes of his did not seem to miss anything, and judging by the twist of his lips he had correctly determined her line of thinking. After staring at her for what seemed an eternity, he suddenly flashed another handsome smile that showed a set of bright white teeth.

“Don’t you think that if I had any intention of hurting you I would’ve done so already? Dragging you through this mess hasn’t exactly been fun for me either.”

Stunned by his response, her eyes went wide in surprise. He was actually mocking her.

Following up with a bemused shake of his head and a chuckle, he ignored her narrow-eyed glare and reached out to push a few strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail and now clung in sweaty tendrils to her cheek. His fingers were gentle and almost paternal.

“Look, you’re in pretty big trouble,” he said. “They saw you, and now they’re looking for you. They have no idea who I am.”

“Then why are you hanging around risking yourself for me?”

The barely veiled amusement on his face suddenly eased to a more serious look. Though his gaze never left her face, he suddenly scowled. “To be honest, I don’t know, and I probably

shouldn't... But we'll have to consider that later. They're back."

Not knowing whether or not to trust him, she glanced over her shoulder. She did not see or hear anything except for the exhausting sight of the jungle, but he apparently did, for once again he was pushing her down and covering her with his body.

She was growing weary of his manhandling.

At the same time, she was not completely immune to the intimacy of his very male body pressed against hers. So what if she had a root digging painfully into the small of her back and the ground around her was hot, moist and thick with decaying foliage? He was tone, well-built, and handsome, and despite his mysterious behavior she was not immune. Not immune but definitely crazy, she realized.

Just like before, his soft lips brushed against her ear, and his voice was so low she could barely hear him. "Ten yards away. Lie still and keep quiet."

When her breath hitched in her chest, he pulled away. What he took as acquiescence, she took as relief. His weight was crushing, and the heat from his body made her suffocating internal organs feel as though they were on fire. She suspected the water she just sipped was now making its exit through every one of her pores, and the discomfort of the heat was distracting her from the danger.

The desperation began to rise from the deep well she had stuffed it into, and briefly she feared she would lose the tenuous grip on her control. Feeling her tension, his hand slipped across the damp ground, and the same paternal touch again lightly stroked her flushed cheek. She remembered a time when her grandfather had done the same while she curled on his lap to hear him read to her from the comfort of his rocking chair. If she just closed her eyes, she could remember her grandfather's deep voice rumbling from somewhere in the cavern of his broad chest.

Fighting the urge to lean into his palm, Danielle grasped severity of their situation. Well, of hers. If anyone came into the

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jungle to search for them, that meant they were serious about getting her. But why? Had she heard something she was not supposed to in that brief conversation? Either way, she had to leave immediately, get back on a plane and hightail it back to the States like any normal person would. That was exactly what she would do as soon as she got out of the menacing jungle that threatened to take her life with each overheated step she took.

What had begun as a pleasant, restful vacation away from the pressures of work, family and friends - well, lack thereof she had to admit - was now a nightmare even her recent life could not compare to. At this point, she would rather face her ex-best friend and ex-fiancé in their pre-wedding bliss than continue lying on the ground with creepy insects that made her skin itch just thinking about.

Above her, she felt the man stiffen. One moment he was idly stroking her, and the next his hand was gone. She felt rather than heard him release the dreaded object she knew was hiding in his waistband, and then she heard the whispered voices. They were close, and though she could not understand the mumbled Spanish she heard the excitement in their voices. They had found something, and she hoped it was not them.

A sudden burst of gunfire shattered the tense silence. This time it was louder, closer, and even more terrifying. Her entire body went as rigid as stone, and a frightened wail escaped her lips. Leaves exploded around them as the spray of bullets pounded into their partially concealed depression. Birds squawked, and the fluttering of wings mixed with the excited voices and deluge of bullets. Danielle curled into a tight ball, certain she was about to die.

Another helicopter suddenly sounded overhead, drowning out the noise. Rather than accepting the distraction, her unofficial guardian seized the opportunity. In a flash, his weight was gone, and she turned to see him on one knee with a gun in his hand. Two deliberate shots were fired, the sound drowned out by the helicopter, and then he was reaching for her and

hauling her to her feet. Ignoring her look of horror, he bent and grabbed her bag. He thrust it at her before tucking the gun back in the holster at his waist and reaching for her wrist.

“Let’s go. Quick.”

She dug her heels in as best as she could, her heart beating furiously against her ribcage, and her breathing coming so rapidly she feared she was hyperventilating. “Did you -”

“Now,” he commanded. Gone was the almost-charming man who had smiled so jauntily at her. In his place was a stony-faced and deadly serious stranger unwilling to wait for her to move. His grip was firm, and he half-dragged her away from the spot.

It was a slow, painful scramble. Danielle stumbled, tripped and sank in the mud. The hovering helicopter covered the noise of their movement, and though she did not know if it was friend or foe, she knew she could not go much further in the company of a man who intrigued and terrified her at the same time. Danielle’s legs burned as if she had run a marathon, advising her that she could not run from him yet. Her exhaustion was rapidly getting to the point where the heat was overtaking rational thought, but she now knew he could be as dangerous as the men hunting her.

“We’re going to take a chance and cut through this field,” he said over his shoulder.

She peered around him and spotted another burst of sunlight. In a clearing sat another park building, and beyond the gate lay a small parking lot filled with cars. She would have breathed a sigh of relief at the simple sight of civilization, but she was far too frightened to believe her ordeal might be ending. They still had to get through the fence.

Grasping her wrist, her guardian sped up as soon as they had cleared the jungle. Running in the shadow of the trees, he pulled her along a long dirt road. The ground was rocky and uneven, and her legs trembled from the effort. Though not a praying woman, she hoped they would not give out on her



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before they found cover.

As the exit loomed ahead of them, Danielle's heart sank. There was a lock on the chain link fence with a large park sign saying "*prohibido*". The sight appeared to her as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Heart sinking, her footsteps slowed. "Now what?"

"Keep going."

"I don't think -"

As soon as she began to speak, her legs buckled. Terrible cramps, a pain unlike anything she had ever experienced before, caused her to cry out sharply. Stumbling to her knees, she would have toppled onto her face if her benefactor had not turned swiftly and caught her. He lowered her to the ground while she struggled to take a breath, but the pain was so intense she could only curl into a ball and wrap her arms around her middle tightly. It was over. She could go no further.

Standing above her with his hands on his hips, he swore under his breath. If she had been able to speak, she would have told him to leave her, but once more he amazed her by bending down and scooping her into his arms. In two long strides, he carried her to the shade of a tree and placed her down behind the thick trunk.

"I'll be right back," he said. "Stay here."

With the last of her strength, she managed a partial smile. Were those not the same words he had told her before? Unable to fight the exhaustion, Danielle allowed her eyes to slip closed as she battled the cramping. No longer caring if someone found her, no longer caring if she was shot, all she knew was that her body was shutting down and her only defense was jogging down the dirt road to the exit.

But the funny thing was that this time she did not doubt his return.

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Hayden jogged along the edge of the fence in the shadow of the trees. The gate that separated the drive from the parking lot

beyond was closed and latched but thankfully the chain was not padlocked - their first hint of good luck after the fiasco of the afternoon. He remembered seeing this building on his way up to the meeting and knew his backpack was stashed nearby. He was glad for his forethought. Had he not stashed his pack in a moment of laziness, their movement would have been even slower, and he probably would be suffering from the same heat exhaustion that his little blonde was.

The thought sobered him. If left untreated, she could easily become critical in this heat and humidity. He needed to evacuate her now.

Continuing at a steady pace, Hayden left the gate closed but unlatched, hoping no one would notice before his return. Cars sped down the road toward the ruins, unseen but undoubtedly were more police. Using the vehicles in the parking lot for cover, Hayden hurried to the edge and retrieved his pack, slinging it over his shoulder and returning to the only unlocked vehicle he noticed during his pass. An old Toyota van, white in color with rusting, sun-bleached paint, was perfect for his needs. The several mile drive back to town would be all he needed it for, and he could safely leave it on a quiet street in Tulum no worse for wear.

He had to get the girl to safety. He was no fool, and he knew that their punishing run in the heat had won its battle against her. Slipping into the van, he made short work of the old ignition system and started it up before jogging back to the gate and into the concealment of the trees.

His steps slowed as he approached the chit palm he had placed her under. Smudged with mud from the top of her blond head to her toes, face red from exertion and eyes closed, she did not pose the same attractive picture she had when he first saw her. However, he still smiled when her eyes fluttered open. Those pale-blue orbs were enticing with their honesty and entrancing with their depth of emotion.

“Ready to move?”

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She groaned but studied him carefully. “Did you kill those men?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t think so.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know if I should go with you or not.”

He heard the tremble in her voice betraying her fear as well as her pain. Although he left the van running, he was not willing to force her. She had been amazingly cooperative so far, so Hayden stifled his impatience and sat cross-legged on the ground next to her with a patient smile. Trying to put her at ease and succeeding were obviously two different things.

“I thought we had this discussion earlier,” he reminded her gently.

“That was before you took out a gun and shot two men.”

“One in the leg, and the other in the knee,” he said automatically.

She shook her head. “Who are you?”

“I think I also remember telling you we could discuss that later.”

“But what if I go with you now and you kill me?”

He could not prevent the chuckle that burst from his chest. The memory of her round backside and long, lean legs suddenly rose into memory. There were many things he would like to do with her, but killing her was definitely not one of them. “What if you stay here and *they* kill you?”

She exhaled rapidly in a frustrated sigh. “Damn, you’re right. Which of you gun-toting creeps is the lesser evil?”

“Gun-toting creep?” He threw his head back and laughed despite the seriousness of their situation. The sound caused a monkey high in the trees to shout back at them, but he ignored it and continued releasing some of his tension. Reaching out, he took her hand in his, came to his feet and slowly pulled her up. With a touch of relief, he noticed she came willingly. He grinned down at her. “I’ve been called many things, lady, but ‘gun-toting creep’ is definitely new.”

“I’m serious, and you’re laughing at me,” she growled. She gave him a stern look, but her lips twitched. Apparently she was able to see the humor in the situation, too. He suddenly felt better, like maybe they would be able to get away from the area without any bullet wounds after all.

“Can you walk?”

She nodded slowly, bravely, despite the pain shining in her expressive eyes. “I ache everywhere.”

“I’m going to get you out of here to a safe place where you can rest.”

Though she complained of pain, she surprised him again with her fortitude. He had considered having to carry her to the van, but she made it on her own and with a speed that made him smile. This girl certainly did have courage. She even climbed in without commenting on the lack of keys in the ignition, even though he saw her gaze rest there before she reached for the lap seatbelt and secured it. Grinning at her discretion, he pulled a Gatorade from his backpack and handed it to her.

“It might be warm but should help the muscle cramps.”

She fumbled with the cap while he pulled the rickety old van onto the road. The engine sputtered and coughed as he accelerated, perhaps too quickly for the old van’s liking, but it faithfully carried them away from the danger. Hayden was pleased the activity had eased and briefly entertained the idea that they were almost safe.

Reaching across the seat, he plucked the bottle from her hands and removed the cap. He handed it back without glancing her way.

“Thank you. My hands seem to be shaking too much to be useful,” she said.

“We’re almost safe.”

Though he would never tell her, he was not yet that confident. He kept his eyes peeled around every corner, ready to slam on the brakes if he saw a roadblock ahead.

## *Eyes on Tango*

“Thank heavens,” she whispered.

When they reached the intersection of Highway 109, he continued heading west. Though he knew his bungalow would not hide them for long, he needed to stash her safely before ditching the stolen van. In her current state, he could not ask her to keep running. She needed a break.

Glancing at her from the corner of his eye, he watched as she took long sips of the tepid Gatorade. Her eyes were half-closed, but the raging color was fading from her cheeks and her breathing was more steady and regular. It gave him hope that he would not have to bring her to a hospital after all.

He turned onto the dirt road of his eco-friendly resort and stopped several yards before the thatched roofs were visible. Putting the van in park, he shifted in his seat to look at her. She lowered the bottle from her lips, leaving a drop tantalizingly perched on her lower lip. It hovered briefly before her tongue snaked out to wipe it away as she stared at him expectantly.

“Where are we?”

Mentally shaking himself from the sight, he cleared his throat. “My cabana. You’re beat, so I’m going to drop you there then hide the van.” When her eyes widened, he grinned again. “I told you I wasn’t going to hurt you. Sooner or later you’ll have to believe me.”

Despite the frightening circumstances of their strange meeting, she graced him with a smile. It was a true smile, and the flash of small, pearly-white teeth caused a flutter in his chest that he once more refused to acknowledge.

“You’re right, of course. But then again, who’s to say you can trust me? I could be a psycho, too.”

Eyebrows rising in answer, he left the van running and opened the door. So, she had a sense of humor hidden in there?

“Just get your bag.”

Glancing at her over his shoulder, he was pleased when she again did as he asked. He liked that about her. She was unbelievably reasonable. In fact, the longer she was in his

company, the more he liked her. Not good.

“How far of a walk will it be?”

He nodded in the direction of the cabana. “Not far. Just up ahead are the cabins. I was lucky and got an ocean view.”

Still grasping the Gatorade bottle as if it was a lifeline, she fell in step beside him. He noticed her pronounced limp after being seated for those few minutes. Frowning, he realized leaving once darkness fell might not be possible.

As he led her through the gardens leading to his cabana, he considered their options. His eco-resort had wireless, so as soon as he returned from stashing the van he could check out other resorts until he could return her to Cancun. A few phone calls needed to be made as well. He had to explain himself now, report in and update Alpha on what went down. Sighing heavily, he accepted that he had plenty of work to do ... and explaining.

Feeling her gaze like a hot brand, he glanced down at her with one eyebrow arched in question. “Everything okay?”

“You sighed.”

“Just tired, like you,” he lied.

She sent him a sarcastic half-smile. “Yeah right.”

She left little doubt that she did not believe him. Nevertheless, when he led her straight to the colorful bungalow perched on a small cliff overlooking the beach, she seemed to forget his comment altogether. Her mouth opened in surprise, and she glanced around appreciatively.

“This is where you’re staying?”

In answer, he placed his hand in the small of her back and guided her up the concrete steps to the patio. She was taking in the small cabana with wide eyes, her gaze running over the thatched roof and wall of windows with so much relief she seemed not to notice his proprietary gesture. Pausing in front of the door, he watched as she stared at the quaint hammock swaying gently in the ocean breeze.

“Yep, but I just arrived last night.”

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Under cover of darkness and with no one knowing the true purpose of his visit, which was the only reason he had brought her there.

“This is adorable,” she murmured. “If only I had known...”

“I prefer the privacy myself.”

Once again he was graced with her sarcastic smile which he ignored. Pushing the door open, he allowed his hand to remain on her back while she stepped inside. At first she moved cautiously, as though waiting for him to slam the door behind them, but when she saw the spacious tub resting under the windows with a view of the sea, she turned to him with a smile.

“This is actually wonderful.”

“I just wish I had the chance to enjoy it.”

Feeling he had groped her long enough, he forced his hand to fall from her spine and set his backpack on the king-sized bed. The mosquito netting had been pulled back by housekeeping, and a new towel sculpture - this one in the shape of a heart - had replaced the swan from the evening before. Though he was not exactly pleased with the latest shape on offer, he was relieved that at least the maid service had already come and gone. He was about to shove the towel aside when she stopped him.

“Wait! That’s beautiful.”

Shaking his head, he sent her a wry glance over his shoulder. “You’ve been shot at, run through the jungle, gone face first into the mud and almost suffered heat stroke, and you care about a silly towel?”

“Well, it’s the prettiest thing I’ve seen all day,” she said morosely.

He snorted. “And here I thought I was.”

Her eyes widened first as his words sunk in, but then she snorted. “I can tell you honestly that right now you’re not even close to being pretty.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, irritating an already swollen mosquito bite. “Trust me, I know. You’re a mess, too.”

Judging by the open-mouthed look of shock on her face, he assumed she was not used to being teased and instantly felt like a fool. He softened the blow with a quick unzip of his pack. Pulling out a clean shirt, he tossed it at her. “But there’s a bar of soap and shampoo in the bathroom, and you can wear this until we can clean up your clothes. You’ll be back to your beautiful self in no time.”

Though she caught the T-shirt with her free hand, the horrified expression on her face did not alter. Wincing, Hayden suspected he had blundered pretty good, yet another reminder why he had not settled down yet. Feeling awkward and biting back remorse, he returned to the door.

“Help yourself to anything you need. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”



### *Chapter 3*

No sooner was the door closed and locked behind her mysterious benefactor than Danielle was hurrying to the bathroom to find the single mirror in the room. What she saw explained his insult, and suddenly she could not blame him for saying so. She looked a mess. What was left of her blond ponytail was now a tangled mess streaked with mud, foliage, and most likely more bugs. Shivering at the thought, she pulled the hair tie free and shook out what was left, certain she was just tangling it more. Strands of hair stuck to her cheeks, plastered down by her own sweat, and her face bore the crusted over scratches from her fall as well as mud tracks streaked with paths where sweat had come down in rivulets.

Turning away in disgust, she stared longingly at the shower and debated the wisdom of stripping and cleaning off in it. He was gone for the moment, but nothing was stopping him from returning. Of course, he already had multiple opportunities to harm her, but he had protected her instead and saved her life at the risk of his own. Her instincts told her he was not going to hurt her.

Trusting that he found her unappealing after his blunt

comment, she immediately turned the faucet on for the shower and peeled the remainder of her clothing off. She kicked the pile against the door knowing the less she had to touch those clothes, the better she would feel. In fact, she would have preferred to throw all of it, including her sopping wet and filthy sneakers, in the trash. But for the moment that was all she had, leaving her no choice but to wait.

Biting her lip in dismay as she stared at the mess, she knew she was not out of trouble. The ordeal of the afternoon had not yet eased in her memory, but the shower beckoned in a reminder that she would not have to worry about that just yet. What mattered most was washing the jungle away and easing her aches before she dealt with the emotional trauma. The water was cool and refreshing. She ignored the niggling pain in her muscles as she lathered up, enjoying the relief of the grime washing away and leaving her with clear skin gently bathed in salt water. Anything was healthier than the dirt smudged and sweat-encrusted body she had been wearing before.

She would have lingered in the shower, but her persistent unease propelled her to towel off and dress in the shirt he had given her. Though a tall woman, she was smaller than her unofficial guardian, and his shirt fell to a somewhat modest mid-thigh. But that did not stop her from wrapping a towel around her waist modestly before she ventured back into the room.

It was as silent as he had left it, with only the sound of the ocean and the chirping of the birds breaking the silence. Knowing he was ditching a stolen vehicle, Danielle shivered again. Who was this man? Was he good or bad? Clearly he had some disreputable skills. Though she had faith in his ability to protect her, she still mulled over his motivation and intentions with her.

Oh, how had she gotten into this mess?

Returning to the bathroom, she washed her bathing suit in the sink, removing most of the dirt stains that had seeped

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through her cotton shorts. She frowned as she toiled, expecting someone to burst through the door at any moment but also wishing she could lie down and give in to her exhaustion.

Laying the two pieces on the windowsill above the tub to catch the afternoon sunlight, she picked up the black plastic comb left with other small toiletries and sat on the bed. A sigh of relief escaped as her weight eased off her aching feet, and she curled them under her as she began to work out the snarls in her hair. It was another long and tedious process, and she was thankful for the deceptively comfortable mattress beneath her. Too exhausted to deny the urges of her body any longer, as soon as she finished her hair she succumbed to the urge to lay her head on the pillow.

Inhaling deeply, she again caught the faint scent of lemons and smiled. A handsome man who smelled like citrus and had no qualms about shooting people had rescued her from possible death. Now, just a few short hours later, she was wearing his clothing and lying on his bed. The unreality of it all would have been amusing if the sounds of the screams and gunfire were not still ringing in her ears. If her parents could see her now...

She knew she should flee while she had the chance, but her head felt too heavy. Maybe just a quick rest and then she could bolt to the door... just a short time to rest her eyes and aching muscles. A deep, dreamless sleep followed at her body's insistence, and her last coherent thought was both confusing and alarming at the same time. She was safe; her guardian would protect her.

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Hayden only drove a short distance down the road before turning the van into a large beach resort and leaving it parked in the rear of the lot. It would be stumbled upon eventually, with any luck long after they made their escape.

Wait a minute, he thought, scratching his head. They? There should be no 'they'. He could not take responsibility for this girl.

But while he knew he would be wise to deliver her to the embassy, he also knew he could not abandon her with Rocky searching for her. The man was ruthless and cruel, and with his power and connections she would never last on her own. She was an innocent being hunted by a panther. Grimacing, he decided he was stuck with her for a bit longer, or, rather, she was stuck with him.

Returning his attention to his current predicament, he scanned the lot with the eye of a pro. The location of the van would throw off their pursuers. Hopefully believing they were not smart enough to leave it far from the hotel they were staying in, Rocky's men would center their search at the more well-known and luxurious resort rather than choosing his rustic eco-friendly cabana. He knew he had bought them a little more time at least.

Even with that extra time, he had none to waste. As he approached the welcome center, he stopped at the gift shop and made a hasty purchase before heading back out into the steamy late-afternoon sunlight. In an effort to blend in, he removed his stained shirt and dropped it into one of the nearby trash receptacles on the way to the beach. Several guests smiled in greeting as he passed, and one pair of bikini-clad ladies called him over to share a beer. Any other time, he would have jumped at the offer, but presently he felt no interest whatsoever. Curious but true. His thoughts were not only consumed with his foiled plans, but also with his fascinating new acquaintance waiting alone, and probably terrified, in his cabana.

He had been gone long enough. Smiling politely with a regretful shake of his head, he waved and headed down the beach. It was a much straighter route back to his lodging and, despite the tiring effort of plowing through the soft sand, he soon saw his cabana. Seeing it for the first time through the girl's eyes, he realized it truly was picturesque with its traditional thatched roof and yellow exterior. If he had been on

## *Eyes on Tango*

a real vacation, he probably would have enjoyed it.

With a weary sigh, he mounted the steps, holding his bag under one arm while he fished the key out of his pocket. Though not intentionally quiet, he eased the door open cautiously. Unsure what to expect when he entered the room, it certainly was not to find his young companion asleep on his bed, her head resting on the pillow he had used the night before.

The sun had shifted in the sky, casting its soft glow on the expanse of golden thigh that disappeared under the hem of his shirt. Despite his best intentions, his gaze traveled further up until her tanned skin disappeared behind the faded red of his Arizona Cardinals shirt. Cursing his favorite sports team for stealing the appealing vision from his gaze, Hayden swallowed when he noticed the bikini resting on the windowsill. Eyes widening, his head snapped back to the sleeping girl's form, and his mouth went painfully dry with the knowledge that she was nude under his clothing.

Oh boy, he thought anxiously. Though it was definitely erotic having an attractive woman wear his clothing with nothing on underneath, he knew now was not the time to explore those fantasies about her. In fact, he should not entertain those thoughts at all. He needed to stay focused and almost wished he had arrived to find her falling to pieces instead.

A towel lay bunched around her middle where she must have wrapped it around her waist only to have it fall away when she shifted in her sleep. Crossing the room in three hasty steps, he eased the towel from the mattress and drew it over her inert form once more. Better he *not* see too much, or he might end up proving her suspicions right.

Staring down at her with his foot tapping nervously, he considered pulling the covers away from the other side of the bed and tossing them over her for added peace of mind, but then he noticed that she had carefully eased the towel heart into

the middle of the mattress. Foolish guy that he was, he did not make a move. Scratching his head, he grinned. It was amusing how impressed she was with the simple offering by housekeeping, and it proved that it really was the little things after all.

Straightening, he took a moment to study her. He was impressed that she did not flinch when he covered her. Her eyes remained closed, and her thick lashes rested against tanned cheeks with a spattering of freckles. Now clean, he noticed how her hair curled damply around her shoulders. It was longer than he had originally thought, falling beyond her shoulder blades. Fighting the urge to reach out and touch it, he decided he had tortured himself enough and turned away.

Placing his package on the small table on the other side of the bed, he searched out his backpack and removed some clean clothes. The urge to wash the afternoon's events away was strong, and only then would he be able to tackle the work that lay ahead. Rest, unfortunately, would have to wait until everything else was done.

The shower refreshed his aching bones and gave him the strength to complete the tasks ahead. When he emerged, he noticed the girl was still sleeping soundly, one hand resting under her cheek and the other under the pillow. Her posture softened the previously strained lines of her face, reminding him how attractive she actually was. And he had made a comment of how terrible she looked streaked with mud and sweat? He really was an idiot, he thought with a quick shake of his head.

Gathering up his laptop and mobile phone, he slipped out onto the patio to give the girl some peace while he worked. The hammock perched between two support beams on the concrete patio beckoned, and he settled there as he pressed his phone to his ear. His brother, Ford, answered on the second ring.

“Yeah.”

In the background, Hayden heard the popping of

## *Eyes on Tango*

automatic nail guns, indicating that Ford was visiting one of his job sites. Though the economy was struggling, especially construction in his home state, Ford seemed to be getting by. The man was always working.

“Hey,” Hayden said, keeping his voice low enough that it would not travel through the open windows. “You got a minute?”

“I thought you were on vacation.”

“I am.”

“What’s up?”

“Well, I’ve run into a bit of trouble and need to change hotels. Not too far because I don’t have a car, but something a little more private.” Here it comes, he thought.

“What did you do now?”

Hayden chuckled. “What makes you think I did anything?”

“Because I know you, Hayden.”

His chuckle turned into a weary laugh. While true his brother knew him well, no one except Alpha knew the real Hayden Evans. He hid the double life he had been living for the past eight years from everyone despite having a tight-knit family. Because he knew his actions would devastate them, he allowed them to think he was just the careless middle child. If only they knew, he thought wryly.

Still, Ford was Ford. The oldest member of his family, Ford was the acting patriarch. Since their parents’ death fifteen years prior, Ford had stepped into their shoes and managed his brothers and sister like a true dad. Even though they were all now in their thirties, his paternal instinct and the worry that went with it remained strong. Allowing his brother to let his own suspicions form was the best thing to do. Better that than the truth, he admitted, especially now.

“That you do, Ford.”

“So what happened? Did you get caught by some girl’s boyfriend?”

Glancing toward the window, Hayden sought out the

outline of the sleeping girl. “Not quite.” He laughed. “You give me too much credit. I’ve only been here one day.”

“You ran into an ex then?”

“Closer.” Sighing he decided to cut to the chase. “Would you have time to find me a small place and reserve me a room?”

“Under my name? What are you up to out there?”

“I just need a bit of privacy.”

“So you met a girl, ran into an ex, and now you want to hightail it out of there so you can be alone to have your wicked way with the new hottie?”

Eyes turning to the girl’s outline again, Hayden could not prevent the images that entered his mind of him having his wicked way with her. Yeah, he wished it was that simple, but he had to play it safe for now. “Bingo! Ford wins the prize.”

“You’re lucky you’re my brother,” Ford answered sternly. “I’ll get back to you when I have details.”

“After hours arrival would be better,” Hayden said.

“Under cover of darkness? She must be quite a girl.”

“You could say that.” Was it him, or did his voice really grow that warm?

“Well...” Ford said meaningfully. Apparently his brother heard it, too. “It’s about time.”

“Yeah, thanks for handling this,” he said tersely. “Just text me the details when you have a minute.”

“Will do.” Ford sighed on the other end of the line. “Please be careful, okay?”

“I’m always careful,” Hayden said with a chuckle.

“No, you’re not,” Ford replied. “That’s one thing you’re definitely not.”

The worry in his voice was evident, and Hayden felt a moment of guilt. Maybe it was not fair to involve his brother in this. Ford was married with children, and using his name and ID to get around could backfire and place them in danger if he was found out. But at the moment he really had no other choice. If it was just him, he could sneak back to his plane and



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fly home, but now he had the girl to worry about. Rocky was after her. Until she was safely on a plane back home, he could not abandon her. He was all she had for the moment.

“For you, I’ll stay on my best behavior,” Hayden conceded.

“I guess that’s the most I can ask.”

As he signed off with his brother, Hayden powered up his laptop. Two quick emails later and his phone vibrated in his hand within a minute of pressing send. Glancing down at the caller ID, Hayden immediately answered. “You’re pretty fast.”

There was no warmth in the voice that responded. “Tango, where the hell are you?”

“I’m safe for now.”

“I want you back in the plane. Everything went to hell, and they’re blaming you. We’ve been betrayed, and heads are going to roll as soon as I find out who did it.”

The deep voice was almost as stern as his brother’s, and Hayden sighed. “I’m working on it, but I think I should lay low for a day or two until things settle down.”

“The preliminary reports coming here now are saying five confirmed dead and seven wounded. This is big.”

“Do you know what happened? Why the shooting?”

A harsh sigh reached his ear. Alpha was stressed. Knowing him well, Hayden did not doubt he was fuming over the duplicity. He wanted the deal to go through, and a lot weighed on Hayden’s success. Whoever crossed them would be hunted down and caught, no matter the cost.

“No idea, but rumors are rival interference. They were looking for you to eliminate competition.”

“I flew down to make this deal,” Hayden said tensely. “The next thing I know, I’m getting shot at, and other people - tourists for Christ’s sakes - are dropping like flies. You’re telling me it was a set up? I need to know who’s stabbing me in the back.”

“I don’t know yet. That’s why I want you back here. Rocky started a war today, and you’re caught in the middle.”

“He knows my plane. I’d be a fool going to that airfield now.”

“All right, I’ll put word on the street that you’re on your way back on a commercial flight. Give it a day or two and then get your ass back here.”

“Today was out of character for him,” Hayden said thoughtfully. “He’s usually more subtle. I need to know what’s going on in his head.”

“I’ll let you know when I know,” Alpha promised.

“Yeah, I’m too young to die.”

“I don’t want that either. You’re my best pilot,” Alpha said with a bark of laughter.

“Glad for your concern.”

“You know better than that,” Alpha replied. “By the way, how many shots did you fire?”

“One confirmed, two wounded. If they make it out of the jungle, there’s hope.”

“Too bad for that. I’ll hope they don’t.”

“You and me both.”

“I want you to check in regularly so I know your movements. Getting out of there alive is the most important thing right now. All eyes are on you, Tango, and word is they’re hunting you down.”

Hayden grimaced. Yep, he and the girl were in a bad way.

“If you’re that concerned, send someone down to pick me up,” Hayden suggested, already knowing what Alpha’s answer would be. It was fine with him because he still had the girl to consider.

“I can’t. Too hot right now. You’re on your own.”

“Understood.”

“You’re a tough guy, Tango. I’m sure you can manage.”

“It’s not like I have a choice right now.”

“I’ve got to go.” There was a long pause on the other line before his voice came back in nearly a whisper. “Stay safe.”

Hayden ran his hand down his face. He was in the jungle.

## *Eyes on Tango*

If he had to find a spot to camp out he would, insects or not. “I’ll try. Just keep me informed. This stinks, and I don’t like the feel of it.”

“That makes two of us.”

Hayden reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose and lowered the phone. A dull throb had started over his temples. With little to do now except wait, he allowed his eyes to close. The breeze was comfortable, the sound of the ocean waves soothing and the hammock swayed like a cradle. Like the girl inside his room, he too was quickly sleeping soundly.

When his eyes next fluttered open, the sky had darkened to a menacing gray. The low rumble of thunder that had disturbed him faded away, but the approaching clouds warned of rain to come. Summer was notoriously a rainy season in the jungle, where the torrential downfall was brief but heavy. A glance at his phone indicated he only had slept for an hour, but the darkening skies made it appear more like dusk.

Gathering up his laptop and phone in one hand, he swung his legs over the side of the hammock and returned inside. The girl lay as he left her, with one leg now stretched out from under the towel he had tossed over her. The golden skin bore the marks of both plant life and insects, with several long scratches and red lumps. It was a sad testimony of their earlier adventure. They certainly had shared quite a day, but she had proven to be a strong and admirable companion.

Not daring another glance for fear he would reach out and sample the smooth skin of her legs, he returned outside, pausing only long enough to lock the door behind him. His stomach was growling, and the restaurant would be quiet with a storm approaching. It was the perfect time to eat.

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Rocky Alvarez stared at the group of curious onlookers with a mixture of disgust and irritation. Leave it to a tragedy to bring out the gawkers, he thought irritably. A light touch on his forearm drew his gaze away, and he glanced down at his

companion. Micaela Rosa Medina nodded in the direction of the stretcher being wheeled toward a waiting ambulance parked outside the site's entrance. It was his man. He was dead.

"Roberto," Micaela said sadly.

Rocky's hands tightened into fists by his side. This treachery had gone too far, and the white hot fury that blazed inside him was so strong he felt able to snap a neck with his own bare hands. Damn Tango for setting him up. He would pay dearly for his deceit.

"Where are Carlos and Rico?"

Though her voice was low, Rocky reached out and captured her small hand. Giving it a crushing squeeze of warning, he continued to watch the stretcher as it was loaded into the ambulance. As more time passed the word was spreading, and the crowd had thickened to the point of becoming crushing. That also meant ears.

"We should go," Rocky said.

Micaela wisely held her tongue. With a slight bow of her head, she followed when he turned and used his stature and posture to create a parting in the sea of onlookers around them. He wanted to be out of the crowd before the reporters caught him in one of their photos. Being a tall man, he knew he would stand out like a sore thumb.

The photos! He had to collect them all.

Walking the distance back to Micaela's car, Rocky slipped into the passenger seat while she started the engine. Twisting slightly in his seat, he studied her closely as she maneuvered through the overcrowded parking lot filled with *policia*, curious onlookers and residents. Though she appeared relaxed and cool, he alone understood the depth of her sadness. Roberto was her cousin, and she was not likely to allow his death to go unpunished.

Once they had navigated back to the main highway, she tossed her silky black hair over her shoulder and returned his steady stare. Her large, almond-shaped brown eyes were cold

## *Eyes on Tango*

and angry. “You made a momentous mistake, Rocky.”

One thick, black eyebrow rose. “I didn’t order anyone to shoot. Roberto took it upon himself to target anyone who fit the description of the traitor. Tango set us up. They were waiting for us.”

Her eyes flashed. “Roberto was your responsibility. You should’ve guided him with a strong hand.”

“He snapped, Micaela. As much as you dislike hearing it, that’s the truth.”

Her perfectly-manicured fingers tightened around the steering wheel. “All the more reason you should have watched him closely.”

“It was bound to happen. He was not stable.”

“You’re speaking of my cousin.”

“And you’re smart enough to know the truth,” he replied harshly.

He smiled grimly as she bit her full lower lip to hold back her retort and sullenly returned her attention to the road. She refused to speak further, leaving him with his thoughts. While he understood her fury ran as deeply as his did, he was annoyed by her defiance and blame. He would make that clear once they were home.

Pulling into the dirt drive of the spacious mansion, Micaela parked the car in the garage and stormed inside. He followed after her with rapid steps, grasping her arm when she paused in the kitchen to place her keys and handbag on the granite counter.

She hissed at him with bared teeth. “*Bastardo!*”

Yanking free of his grasp, she spun on her heel and lashed out with her hand. It was a deceptively fast move, but he was faster. Grasping her hand in a tight grip, he smiled when she winced. Her dark eyes narrowed threateningly, but he was not deterred. Pulling her against his hips, he lowered his head and kissed her deeply, his tongue punishing its way into her mouth when she gasped in surprise.

Though she beat at him with her free hand, he merely chuckled. They both knew what would happen next, and he knew she wanted it. Using his height and greater strength, he shoved her up against the counter. Trapped between it and his body, she had nowhere to go. But within moments, he softened his kiss, allowed it become more loving and encouraging, and soon her fist went from pounding to stroking his back. He raised his head and smiled down at her.

“Show me your fury, *mi rosa negra*,” he whispered.

In the blink of an eye, she lifted her head and bit his lower lip. He winced, but her tongue eased out from between her full lips and licked away the pain. “I’ll show you just how furious I am.”

Bending his head, he kissed her again and listened to her soft moan. As soon as he began to relax and enjoy the building tension in his belly, he felt the cold sting of a blade against his throat.

“Mm,” he purred, raising his head slightly.

With the speed of a viper, his hand lashed out and slammed into her wrist. The knife skittered across the Saltillo floor. Smiling, he bent his head and nuzzled her neck. She gasped, but her eyes soon drifted closed. Hands braced on his shoulders, she allowed him to continue his exploration. As his need grew, she lowered her head to whisper her plans of revenge in his ear.

“When we find him, *amado*, I’ll cut him limb from limb. He’ll know much pain before he dies. I’ll prolong his torture...”

His body tensed. “Tell me more.”

“He will know agony like no other. He will suffer.”

Her words were full of promise, and he gripped her hips tightly. “That’s right. I’ll find him and bring him to you. He will pay for Roberto.”

“Yes,” she hissed.

“Roberto will have his revenge.”

Baring his teeth, he nipped her neck with enough pressure

## *Eyes on Tango*

to leave a mark. With a soft cry, she buried her face in his shoulder at the exact moment his phone vibrated. Lifting his head, he read the text message displayed and smiled triumphantly.

“That was Carlos. They’re on their way back, injured but alive. Now I need to find the girl. She has photos of me and possibly photos of him. She’ll lead us to him. I’ll know his true name in a matter of days.”

Games over, he released her with a shove and took a step back. Staring down into her face, he noted the heightened color of passion on her cheeks and knew she was longing to finish it. The only sign of his punishing kisses was the slight puffiness of her lips, but he knew she was on fire internally. That was the way it always was with her, but he would make her wait.

She smiled savagely, baring her teeth. “That girl is nothing. She means nothing. She’s just a tourist.”

In fact, she was jealous of the blonde who had caught his eye. He shrugged and ignored her possessiveness. “With a camera... And he was with her,” Rocky said meaningfully. “Carlos and Rico *saw* him with her. She’ll talk when we’re done with her.”

Eyes flashing again, Micaela scowled at him. “You mean when you’re done?”

Rocky shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps.”

Once again she lashed out, but this time his reflexes were not fast enough to catch her hand. So consumed with his thoughts, this time he was slow to see it coming. The resulting slap caused his face to sting and hers to flush with regret. Grasping her by the throat, Rocky squeezed until her face grew darker before leaning close. “Unwise, my love. Do that again and you will regret it.”

Eyes wide, Micaela nodded. He released her from his punishing grip and strode from the room as she sagged against the counter and gasped for breath behind him. Without a backward glance, he gave her his next orders. “Watch all

Collette Scott

charter buses and airport transfers. She'll be heading back to the airport."



## *Chapter 4*

The persistent squawking of a macaw drew Danielle from her dreamless sleep. Fighting the urge to bury her head under the pillow to make it go away, she tried to relax back into sleep. However, the absurdity of the location of the angry bird so close to her room brought her fully awake. She was high up in a luxurious hotel room perched on the beach in Cancun, Mexico... wasn't she?

With a startled gasp, the terror at the ruins came flooding back, and she sat bolt upright in bed hearing terrified screams and the buzzing of insects in her ears. Though aware of the pain her panicked action caused to her aching muscles, she glanced around the room wildly in an effort to separate fact from dream.

It was nearing dawn, meaning she had slept over thirteen hours. Blinking in confusion, she struggled to remember what happened. Sleep fogged memories coupled with her possible dreams put everything in a surreal light. The room was in shadow, but she finally recognized it as belonging to the strange man who had come to her aid the day before. Her bikini rested where she had laid it on the windowsill by the tub. Yes, she

remembered that, but where was the man?

Continuing her perusal of the room, her gaze at last landed on her mysterious host. He was on the bed beside her, wearing only shorts. He was asleep on his back, with one arm covering his eyes and the other resting on his flat, bare stomach. The heart-shaped towel she had commented on was still intact, though he had settled it between their two bodies and adjusted its width to accommodate them on the king-sized bed. One corner of her mouth lifted. She may not know this man, but he certainly was proving to be a thoughtful one.

Glad that her movements had not disturbed him, she took a moment to study the enigma who saved her life. Already she knew he was handsome, but seeing his well-defined and tanned chest lightly spattered with the same dark hair as his head did something strange to her insides. It also reminded her of the strength in those firm arms and the feel of his body when he had shielded hers multiple times during their tumultuous day... Okay, enough Dani, she chided herself. This man was a complete stranger - a dangerous one.

Still, that did not negate the dangerousness of her situation. She had to go, get back to Cancun and catch the first flight out of the country.

Allowing her eyes to skim up the length of his arm back to his face, she noticed that he appeared to be sleeping as soundly as she had. No big surprise considering their ordeal. She owed this man so much, including her life. The least she could do was tell him of her plans to get back to Cancun before running off, right? He had protected her, given her shelter, and so far had done nothing to harm her. Instinctively she knew what her head kept telling her not to believe. She could trust him.

Easing her legs over the side of the bed, Danielle gingerly checked the soreness of her muscles. She paid monthly dues at a local gym, but no matter how many miles she jogged on the treadmill it was nothing compared to the punishing workout she

## *Eyes on Tango*

had put herself through the day before. Biting back a groan, she stood slowly and walked on sore feet to the windowsill. Even bending forward to gather up her bikini was a strain, but she managed to get it in one hand and hobble up the two steps to the bathroom. Partially closing the door behind her, she put the damp suit back on under her borrowed shirt and returned to the room feeling slightly more presentable.

The macaw's calls had eased in intensity, and Danielle tiptoed quietly to the door. Her bag still rested where she had dropped it the day before. Bending painfully, she grasped the frayed handles and carried it out to the patio. There was a small table with two chairs across from the hammock, so she eased herself painfully into one of the chairs and dumped out her bag.

The first thing she sought was her cell phone. Despite being shielded by her towel, it refused to power up. When she pulled the battery, the dreaded red circle confirmed her worst fears. The phone was fried, and she was out of communication. She should have found some plastic to wrap it in. Of course, how would she have known she would be risking her life by running through a jungle during the hottest time of day?

Her wallet and passport also bore water damage. The passport was crinkled and bent, and the bills in her wallet were soggy. She removed everything and laid it flat to dry, despite knowing the effort was futile in the humid climate. The beach towel she spread over the back of her chair, hoping the sea breeze would prevent it from mildewing at least. The spray-on sunscreen was none the worse for wear, and her hat and glasses were just smudged and damp. Finally she reached for her camera, nervously chewing on her lip as she inspected it. Fearing it suffered the same fate as her phone, rather than turning it on she opened the battery case and pulled the battery out. It would need time to dry for a bit before she confirmed that was ruined, too.

Glancing down at the table, Danielle shook her head in

regret. That was the extent of her belongings. Everything else remained in her abandoned hotel room.

A slice of warmth touched her arm, so Danielle raised her gaze to the ocean. Off in the distance through a line of fluffy, purplish clouds, the sun was rising. It was so beautiful that she watched in silence, giving thanks for the fact she was still alive to see the sun rise rather than languishing in a hospital bed or dead. A phone and camera could be replaced; her life could not.

“Nice.”

Danielle turned in surprise, and her gaze landed on the open door. Her new friend stood in the doorway, drowsily rubbing his chest and watching the sunrise. When he noticed her stare, his head swiveled in her direction. He smiled faintly.

“Sleep well?”

Clearing her throat nervously, Danielle nodded. “Like a baby.”

“I noticed,” he said. “You didn’t move at all while I ravaged you. Kinda took the fun out of it.”

Danielle felt her eyes go wide. Although he still appeared to be half asleep, his lips twitched. It took her a moment to realize he was teasing her again.

“Relax,” he assured her. “I had no energy either... So do you feel okay?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you,” she responded firmly.

One eyebrow rose as he approached. “Not sore?”

Pulling the opposing chair around the table, he set it next to hers and took a seat. When he finished propping his feet on the table, he turned his attention back to her and laughed when he noticed the telltale blush on her cheeks. She liked the sound of his laughter. It was easy and genuine. What she did not like was that she seemed to be the constant cause of it.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m a little stiff too,” he admitted.

Yeah, after her peek at his body this morning she could tell...

## *Eyes on Tango*

Stop it, Dani!

She looked away quickly, returning her attention to the sunrise. "I've been cursing the treadmill at my gym all morning. Useless waste of money."

"Yeah, nothing beats a run through the jungle for exercise," he said, his eyes crinkling in the corners when he grinned.

Following her lead, he looked out to sea. They were silent for a time, and Danielle assumed he was struggling like her. They both knew they had many questions, but neither seemed sure how to approach the conversation in dire need of being shared. It was much more pleasant for her to pretend everything was okay and that she was enjoying her vacation by watching one of the most glorious sunrises of her life. The sky had changed from a purplish hue to a pale blue, and the sea was molting from black to navy. It was a magical sight, and she wondered if he felt the same.

Though she was not familiar with one night stands, she pondered if that was how a couple felt the morning after. Was this that awkward moment between two people who shared an intimacy born out of desire - or in their case necessity - and then woke up the next morning realizing they knew absolutely nothing about each other except for the feel of their bodies? If so, she hated the feeling. One night stands were definitely not for her.

Turning her attention back to him, she noticed that he was staring at her. "Did-"

"So-"

This time they both laughed at their awkwardness. He recovered first and nodded at her. "You first."

Still smiling, she shrugged. "No, go ahead."

"I was going to ask where this useless treadmill resides."

Immediately put at ease by the dancing amusement in his eyes, she nodded her head in understanding. The awkward moment had passed; now began the conversation. His question sure beat her useless inquiry as to how he slept, so she suspected

he had more experience in these matters than she did. While it was an unreasonable thing to do, she felt a twinge of jealousy.

“San Diego.”

“Nice,” he said with an appreciative nod.

“You?”

“Chandler, AZ.”

“Arizona?”

He nodded again. With the speedy grace she had noticed the day before, he came to his feet and bowed slightly before holding out his hand. “Hayden Evans, at your service. Third out of five children, one sister and three brothers.”

Danielle’s smile grew, and she reached for his hand. As his familiar fingers closed around hers in a playful shake, she responded. “Dani Ryan. Oldest of two, one brother.”

“Single or married?” He still had not released her hand.

“Single. You?”

He gave another laugh and a wry shake of his head. “No one’s caught me yet.” When her brows rose in surprise, he grinned. “Well, that’s what my family thinks. They harass me all the time to settle down.”

“My father’s the same way,” she admitted. “He tells me all the time that twenty-nine is too old to be single.”

His fingers tightened around hers. “So you’re twenty-nine?”

She ignored the resulting flutter in her chest. “Yes. You?”

“Approaching middle age at thirty-four,” he replied with a dramatic sigh.

Finally releasing her hand, he glanced back at the room. “I’m going to order us some room service. You okay with eggs?”

“I’m so hungry I’d eat anything you put in front of me,” she said, immediately regretting her words when he eyed her speculatively with a more meaningful look in his eyes.

“Really?” Before she could answer, he laughed and turned away. “Relax, I’m just kidding. I’ll be right back.”

She heard the deep timbre of his voice through the open

## *Eyes on Tango*

door as he placed their order and thought about their recent exchange. Away from the jungle, the steamy heat and the fear, Hayden seemed as normal as any other man she had met. He was charming and friendly, and he really enjoyed laughter. There was an awful lot to like about him, except the niggling doubt that she could not shake. She had watched him shoot two men without blinking an eye, as if it was the most normal thing to do. Was he a cop or something during his day job?

He returned sooner than she expected and immediately resumed their conversation. "So how is it you're still single at twenty-nine?"

Caught off guard, Danielle sat back in her seat and leveled him with a serious frown. "What?"

He threw himself back onto the chair next to her and cocked his head to the side as he studied her. "Well, I was just thinking about what your father said, and I sort of agree with him."

Feeling her hackles rise, she scowled. "Really?"

Completely unfazed by her ire, he continued innocently. "Yeah, I remembered when I first saw you at the ruins I couldn't believe you were there alone without a pack of men trailing after you."

Caught off guard by his flattery, her tone softened but only slightly. "Really?"

"Well, sure. You're a pretty lady."

Okay, so she had to admit that his comment eradicated his jab from the evening before. Trying to ignore the nonstop fluttering in her chest, she searched his face for any sign of sarcasm or underlying motives. But his eyes were clear and appeared honest. In fact, she was fast learning that Hayden Evans said what was on his mind regardless of the impact.

"Thank you, I guess," she said.

"So?"

Though it was not a subject she wanted to discuss, after what she had experienced the day before she figured she had nothing

to lose. Seeing his interest, she smiled ironically. "I was engaged, but he was otherwise attracted."

"Otherwise attracted? Interesting. To whom?"

"My best friend."

Awareness dawned, and his dark brows lowered over his eyes. He avoided her amused gaze and squirmed in his seat. "Oh... I see."

"You asked," she reminded flippantly.

"So I did," he said with another chuckle. "I'm sorry."

"You don't sound it."

A grin flashed on his face when he returned his attention to her. "I'm not," he admitted. "After all, you wouldn't be here with me if you were still with him."

"Good point." It was her turn to laugh. "But I don't think that's really a good thing for either of us considering the circumstances."

He waved his hand in dismissal. "Technicalities only, Dani."

"Pretty frightening technicalities."

The macaw began its angry song again, and Danielle turned to search out its colorful feathers in the trees. Unfortunately, the density of the jungle blocked her view, but her action ended that line of conversation. He shifted in his seat and raised his feet back on the table, crossing them at the ankle. While he lounged, Danielle continued to scan the jungle. She stifled a shiver as she remembered what it had felt like to be trapped within the maze-like growth of exotic and beautiful trees. Though she had no way of knowing what would happen next, she was glad they were out of there.

"He didn't deserve you."

Hayden's voice was low when he spoke, but there was no mistaking his meaning. Danielle sent a quick glance in his direction. He had laid his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes, but she sensed he was very alert despite his relaxed appearance.



## *Eyes on Tango*

“I guess you’re right,” she said with a half-hearted sigh.

“I know I’m right,” he replied. “I saw you in action yesterday, remember? You’re quite a catch.”

“Maybe for someone who doesn’t mind dodging bullets and running through the jungle.”

At her comment, one of his eyes opened and ran lazily over her. “I guess you’re pretty lucky I don’t.”

Shaking her head, she smiled. “Aren’t I supposed to be saying you’re the lucky one?”

“No need,” he said as he straightened. “I already know.”

Danielle opened her mouth to respond, but Hayden had come to his feet and was walking the length of the patio toward the stairs. She watched, feeling confused and alarmed, but to her surprise a cheerful female voice announced the presence of one of the staff. Just out of sight, she could hear Hayden’s deep voice greeting their visitor and offering to help in fluent Spanish. She remained where she was and waited for his return, wondering how he had known someone was coming. Was she that distracted?

“Good morning.” A beaming woman appeared with a colorful scarf tied over her head and wearing a navy blouse with a white skirt. She carried a covered tray bearing their breakfast and approached with a friendly smile that made her weathered face beautiful. “Ah, *su esposa*,” she said over her shoulder to Hayden, “*es muy bonita*.”

Hayden glanced beyond the woman at Danielle, and his eyes were warm as he spoke. “I was just telling her that myself.”

Feeling the now familiar heat in her cheeks, Danielle ducked her chin and focused on the tray the friendly woman placed on the table before her. Hayden reached into his pocket for a tip while Danielle cleared away her meager belongings. Smiling up at the server, she thanked her before Hayden escorted her back to the stairs.

“Looks good,” he said when he returned to his seat.

“It does,” she agreed, hoping he could not hear the persistent rumbling of her tummy.

The tray bore fresh cuts of tropical fruit, two omelets, two plastic glasses of freshly squeezed juice, a pot of coffee and slices of toast already buttered. Danielle’s mouth watered while she served and Hayden poured the coffee into two white mugs. No sooner had he replaced the pot than he was lifting the steaming cup to his lips.

Earlier conversation stalled but not forgotten, Danielle watched as he dug into his meal with as much gusto as she did. He finished first and leaned back in his chair to stare out at the waves with his coffee in his hand. The sun had risen higher in the sky, and the sand below their cabana glistened brightly. Danielle soaked in the beauty before her, the isolation of their room and the sheer simplistic elegance of their surroundings. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine that the previous day was all just a dream and she was really on her honeymoon with a handsome man rather than faking it for the server.

Her soft sigh caught Hayden’s attention. “Feel better?”

“Less hungry at least,” she said reaching for her damp bills. When she held them out to him, he waved it away impatiently.

“Don’t bother,” he said firmly. “I don’t want your money.”

“But I owe you so much already,” she protested. “Please take some of it so I can leave here without feeling too guilty.”

Reaching out, he caught her wrist in his hand and closed her fingers around the money with the other. Holding her hand between both of his, he leaned forward and stared at her intently. “You got mixed into something that didn’t concern you and should never have happened. I’m impressed that you kept it together... that’s payment enough considering you’re not out of the woods yet.”

The reminder doused her mood better than a slap across the face. “Good point.”

He squeezed her hand reassuringly, but his face remained

## *Eyes on Tango*

serious. She almost wished he would find something to laugh at her about again. “Can you tell me why they were looking for you?”

“I saw one of the men, and he must’ve seen me.”

“When?”

She shrugged. “When you left me there. I needed a drink and sat up a little. I was still covered, so I thought they didn’t see me through the trees. That man had sunglasses on, but apparently he spotted me.”

Hayden nodded slowly, ingesting her words with his customary efficiency before pursing his lips. “So you saw, and I imagine you heard what they said?”

“Of course. The nicely-dressed man told the kid with the gun to take one more look around for some man they were looking for. He said to hurry because the police would be coming. Then they went off in separate directions.” She shuddered. “He was whistling.”

“Who was?”

“The nicely-dressed man. He was whistling a Beethoven piece. It was creepy.” Danielle felt the goose bumps rise on her arms and pulled her hand from his warm grasp to wrap both around her arms.

“You got a good look at him?”

“Yes, I suppose our eyes truly did meet.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I really thought he couldn’t see me through his sunglasses and the trees. He must have good vision.”

Hayden nodded absentmindedly. “You can identify him as being there.”

“I think I could... I’m not sure.”

“Well he doesn’t know that.”

“So?”

Rising quickly to his feet again, Hayden went to stand by the railing of their cozy patio. His fists rested on the splintered wood, and he frowned as he stared out at the ocean. Danielle watched

him, not liking the tension in his posture and his obvious concern. She suspected he knew more than he was letting on about the events of the day before, and his fear suddenly became hers. Forgetting their earlier laughter, she gripped her coffee mug between her hands so tightly she thought she would break the glass.

“So maybe he thinks you can identify him and prove he was the ringleader because of what you overheard. It’s doubtful anyone else could tie him to the scene, Dani.”

She swallowed hard, suspecting she would not like what he said next. “Okay?”

Glancing over his shoulder at her, Hayden frowned. “If he has enough connections to get armed men into that site, he can certainly find out the passenger list on the bus you took from Cancun...”

“Which listed where I was staying?”

He nodded.

Danielle bit her lip, and Hayden returned his attention to the sea. After a moment of fighting back tears, she managed to control her voice enough to speak again. “So they’re going to watch the buses back to Cancun and the hotel there, right?”

“Probably... those guys don’t mess around.”

“I have to get out of here now,” she cried, jumping to her feet. “I can’t stay here and wait for them to track me down.”

Very close to losing what was left of her control, Danielle did not notice when her coffee mug spilled over her plate. The clatter caught Hayden’s attention, and he turned to see her trembling from head to toe and ready to bolt. In two steps he was before her, reaching for her upper arms and preventing her from fleeing.

“I didn’t say this to make you freak out,” he said calmly.

“No? What else did you think it would do?”

He smiled crookedly. “I don’t know.”

“I’m on vacation,” she cried. “I was going to swim with the

## *Eyes on Tango*

dolphins today. I love dolphins, did you know that?"

He shook his head, his eyes losing their sparkle to turn wary.

Though she knew she was making him nervous, she no longer cared. "Well, I do! And I came here to frolic in the waves with them, not run through the jungle to get away from crazy men with guns."

"I promise you, I'm going to figure everything out," he said earnestly. His thumbs began to trace small circles over the sensitive skin of her upper arms, and it took her a moment to look beyond the pleasant sensation to realize he was trying to calm her down.

"That's just it, you shouldn't have to. This isn't your problem."

Lowering her face away from his observant gaze, she took comfort in the curtain of hair that spilled over her shoulders. There was no denying how much his words had shaken her. The fear she felt the day before slammed through her body, and their serene location did little to calm the growing panic. What he told her made so much sense that she felt foolish for not considering it previously. She should have known those men were serious and had connections. How on earth did she ever think she would be able to just hop a bus and hightail it back to Cancun? Stupid, she thought. Evidently the heat had fried more than her skin.

While her thoughts raged, Hayden pulled her closer. One hand slipped down to cup her waist as the other tipped her chin back up. She was not exactly sure how to respond to his overly familiar approach, but she had to admit that it felt good to share the burden. His voice was still deceptively calm. "It is my problem, too," he said softly. "We're a team now."

"I can't ask that of you," she whispered.

He appeared offended. "But you would ask me to abandon you knowing you're in serious trouble?"

"I can go to the police," she said quickly. When his mouth twisted sarcastically, she added. "Or the embassy."

Suddenly his smile reappeared, and it brightened his face so much that she felt the unmistakable glimmer of hope. “I forget that you don’t know me very well, Dani, but we have time to fix that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not going anywhere until you’re home safe.”

“You’re crazy,” she said, blinking back her tears.

He flashed a grin. “Maybe.”

“I shouldn’t let you do this.”

“Just try and stop me.”

Before she could protest further, he closed the gap between them, and she had no choice but to submit to the insistent pressure of the strong hands at her waist. Drawing her up against the warm, satiny skin of his chest, he enveloped her completely and totally in his arms, and she discovered she did not want to resist at all. It had been a long time since someone had hugged her so thoroughly, and her eyes closed as she listened to the steady but rapid beating of his heart. In spite of his calm and easygoing manner, Hayden was still only human. It made him all the more endearing to know that his heart was beating in response to her proximity. Dangerously so.

Danielle fought the urge to snuggle deeper into his chest, though it proved to be a difficult task. The scent of lemons tickled her nose, and since she used the same soap he had she wondered why that seemed to hover around him. But before she could ponder the matter, he released his grip and took a step back.

“Okay, so is the mini-meltdown done?”

His voice was bright, but the light in his eyes was not. Regretting the distance between them, she struggled to remain neutral when she held his gaze. “I think so.”

“Good, because we need to keep it together. One mistake and we’re both toast.”

“Hayden-”

He held up his hand to stop her words. “Not again.”

## *Eyes on Tango*

She smiled. “I wasn’t.”

“Oh,” he said. “What then?”

“I was going to say thank you.”

His brows lifted in surprise. “No thanks are necessary.”

“I beg to differ.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. “Here we go again.”

“I mean it,” she said emphatically. “I might not be alive today looking at the beautiful sunrise if you hadn’t been there yesterday. Now you’re offering to stay knowing there are some pretty bad people after me. You’re either really brave or really stupid.”

“I’d prefer really brave myself,” he replied with a nonchalance that belied her gravity. “But seeing as you’re serious right now, I’ll just disclose that you’re in good hands, Dani. I’m more than capable of taking care of you.”

Narrowing her eyes, she seized the opportunity to dig a little deeper into this man that she knew so little about. “Are you a cop?”

His head fell back in more easygoing laughter. “My brother Ian is. Does that count?”

When she shook her head and stared meaningfully at him, he finally relented.

“No, I’m not a cop, Dani. But I promise I won’t let them hurt you.”

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