

Prologue

“Down on your knees, hands on top of your head,” Enrique instructed the three fishermen in Spanish, the language of the country whose coast was seven and a half miles to the east of where the yacht had intercepted the fishing trawler.

Enrique, the fishermen, and Juan were on the trawler’s deck, the hot sun forcing them all to sweat rings in their armpits and around the collars of their shirts. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Each fisherman landed face first onto the pile of netting and bumpers, bits of skull and brain matter splattered across the windscreen of the boat, blood coated everything.

“Untie the lines. Cover those bales with the tarp,” Enrique shouted the orders to those on the yacht, including Juan who had just stepped from the trawler.

He made his way to the stern of the fishing vessel, leaned over the outboard, and deftly cut the gas line. Fuel gushed out to create a rainbow-hued slick on top of the salt water waves. He moved swiftly from one boat to the other by stepping over the railing, as he signaled to the man at the helm of the yacht. The engines turned over to rumble quietly. They headed south, and about fifty feet away from the trawler, Enrique aimed the flare gun he had retrieved from its bracket on the outside wall of the main cabin. The explosion sent waves that gently rocked against the retreating yacht.

Placing the .9mm that he had used to end the fishermen’s lives inside the waistband of his pants at the small of his back, then the flare gun back in its bracket, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his chambray shirt. The easy part was done. It was child’s play to take the kilos of coke from the fishermen. The more difficult part was making sure the General didn’t retaliate when he found out his goods had been taken from him. If Enrique wanted to own all of the ports of Baja, and south to Mazatlan,

the General couldn't get any of the action. If Enrique squeezed him out, he would be able to deal directly with Pablo Escobedo, putting more profits into his own pocket instead of the General's.

Enrique glanced at the black smoke billowing into the clear blue sky. *Let that be a message to the General*, Enrique thought.

A quick twist with arms that could bench 250-pounds and the guard dropped like a stone. David propped the soldier up against the wooden side of the building that would normally house a dozen military men. Inching his way along the shadow created by the overhang of the building and the dim compound floodlights, David reached out his right hand and quickly turned the doorknob. Slipping inside, he gave his eyes a moment to adjust as he quietly closed the door.

"Logan," he said in a harsh whisper. A groan from his right took him to his partner, tied to a metal chair. David flicked his lighter, "Oh, fuck."

Logan was beyond hurt. He'd been tortured. One eye was red and swollen shut. There were cuts and bruises on his face, mud and blood on his chest and ribs. The odd angle of Logan's right leg told David it was badly broken. Releasing his thumb, the room was once again covered in darkness. Taking his Bowie from its scabbard at his waist, David moved behind the chair to cut the ropes.

"Don't," Logan growled.

"What do you mean? I'm here to get you out."

“The extension cord from the generator runs inside the rope. If you cut the rope, you’ll close the circuit, and we’ll both get fried.” He was breathing hard to push the words past the pain.

“Christ on a bicycle, Logan, how do you get yourself into these situations? Never mind,” David grumbled and shook his head.

Flicking his lighter again, he followed the extension cord to the gas-powered generator. If he shut it off, the whole camp would hear the sudden silence. David squatted down next to Logan and ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

“Use your lighter to melt the cord insulation,” Logan said through gritted teeth.

“It’ll short,” David nodded. “You’ll get quite a jolt, and maybe some burns.”

“We don’t have time or options. Just do it.”

David exhaled loudly and moved to the back of the chair. Thankful for filling up his Zippo before this mission, David pulled his thumb across the tiny wheels, and held the flame to the bright yellow rubber insulation of the cord running across the wooden floor from the generator to the ropes around Logan’s wrists. As the material melted away, sparks flew from it like blood from a severed artery. David put up his arm to shield his eyes.

Logan was thrown back into the chair with a convulsion, as the smell of burned flesh filled their nostrils. The burning had damaged the ground wire first, sending a short jolt of 210 in both directions down the cord.

“Shit! Shit! I’m so sorry.”

David used his knife to sever the ropes. As he peeled them away, strips of blackened flesh pulled from Logan’s wrists. Lifting him under the arms, David dragged

Logan's unconscious body to the opposite side of the room from which he'd entered. The far wall held a single window and bordered the surrounding jungle. There, he lifted his partner's body up and pushed it out through the window frame, the glass having been cut away by the waiting hands of the two other operatives sent by Headquarters at The Agency to retrieve Logan Phelps from the hands of Pablo Escobedo. David followed Logan's body out of the building, and the four of them disappeared into the South American jungle to meet the chopper at the extraction point.

Once on board, the medic hooked up an IV, and with a little morphine, Logan came around.

"What the fuck happened, Bro?" David demanded

"A leak." Logan cautiously licked dry, bloodied lips.

They looked at each other, realizing what they had to face once they were back at HQ.

"Boss man's gonna tear the place apart," David grumbled, not looking forward to the debriefing.

"Dad can be as pissed as he wants, but I'd hate to be the mole when John Phelps, Sr. finds him."

Six months later

Chapter 1

She looked out at the water. The waves were forming beyond her field of vision, rolling in unending, to curl upon themselves and disappear into a pool of white foam.

When the foam was covered under the next wave, sandpipers would run onto the just-wet sand and poke their beaks into the earth looking for an elusive meal. As the water rushed at them, they scurried up toward dry land, afraid to get their feathers wet. Sea gulls circled overhead giving a cry that echoed her loneliness.

By the time the third wave brushed her ankles, the water felt refreshing instead of cold. She sank a little deeper into the sand as the water flowed past her, back to its source. Glancing down, she saw golden flecks that shimmered in the sunlight. Nestled in the flecks was a perfect spiral shell. *Pretty*, she thought, and bent down to pick it up.

The iridescent pink on the inside was as pale as a baby's cheek. The outside was dull gray. Rinsing the sand off, she stuck the shell in her pocket, and glanced once more out at the water. She closed her eyes and breathed deep the smell of humid, salty air. Exhaling in a rush, she snapped her eyes open, and saw them.

A short distance from shore, her aquatic friends were back and seemed to be feeling playful as they leaped high out of the water only to crash back to the surface with a resounding splash. Her favorite poked his head above the water, opened his mouth, and chattered at her with a series of clicks and whistles, encouraging her to join them.

She turned on her heel and raced up the sand. Rushing into the shed, she quickly got rid of her shorts and shirt and pulled her rash guard over her head. Reaching with one hand behind her to draw up the zipper, and with the other for her tank, flippers, and mask. She heaved the tank onto her back, opened the valve to check the flow of air, turning it again when it hissed, almost in an eagerness that matched her own, to be back in the water.

Encumbered with the tank over her shoulders and flippers under one arm, she walked towards the world of water that she loved. Standing knee-deep in the waves, she spit into her mask, wiped the saliva around, then rinsed it with ocean water before placing it over her eyes and nose. She stepped into the fins, reaching down to pull the strap up over her heel with one finger. With mask in place and flippers adorning her feet, she turned towards the shed and continued into the water, back first. Once the water reached her chest, she leaned back, and allowed herself to sink below the surface. The brightness of the sun was distorted through the movement of the water. She placed the regulator in her mouth, turned over, and kicked hard to propel herself into the deeper, cooler water, where her friends waited.

The bubbles released from her mouthpiece floated to the top and burst. She saw the dark shapes ahead of her darting back and forth. The youngest came to swim beside her on the left, his large unblinking right eye only an arm's distance away. She smiled, diving straight down, then turning onto her back so she could watch the graceful antics of Walter, the newest addition to this pod of bottlenose dolphins.

Walter followed her down, using his fluke to propel himself through the water faster than she could ever swim. He shot past her, under her, and came up on the other side. Sally, his mother, kept close, and urged him to the surface, watchful of his time and depth below the water. The human, too, swam towards the sunlight, but wasn't ready yet to break into the atmosphere. George, Henry, and Lefty continued to circle around and under her, occasionally sending out whistles and clicks. Looking at her watch, she couldn't believe that it had been thirty minutes. She needed to head back. Reluctantly, she turned around and made her way toward shallow water. The dolphins accompanied

her for a short distance, then in a burst of energy, exploded from the water in their typical finale, seeming to say good-bye and good day.

The sandy bottom appeared and she placed her flippered feet on it, stood up and was halfway out of the water. She pulled her mask and mouthpiece off at the same time, then turned to look over her shoulder. Walter's small fin could be seen in the churning water created by the other members as they found a school of cod fish. She raised her hand partway as if to wave, but realized the absurdity of it. The lowering of her hand brought down the corners of her mouth. She toed off the flippers, shrugged out of the harness holding the tank, and dragged herself from the water. Having just reached the high tide mark in the sand, an adolescent Mexican boy came running up to her.

“Señorita, you should not be out here alone. Please, let me take the tank.” He reached for the straps, relieving her of the weight, while looking around with a suspicious eye. With her free hand, she pushed her blond hair back from her face.

“Gracias, Miguel. Doñde esta Maria?”

“Maria is in the kitchen cooking up masa and carne for your special tamale dinner.”

The two of them had a deal. She needed to practice her Spanish so she could work with researchers at the university in Mexico City after her dissertation at UC San Diego, and accomplish her goal of being awarded her Ph.D. in Marine Biology. Miguel needed to learn English so he could get his citizenship in the U.S. He hoped to join the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and work with both governments to speed up the process of gaining permission from the Mexican government to leave the country and

becoming an American citizen, all in the hopes of putting coyotes out of business by decreasing the amount of human trafficking across the border.

He was thankful for the job and the pay the Señorita gave him, as it allowed him to continue his studies in secondary school. If he attended and worked hard, he would be earning his diploma in a couple of months. He was eighteen, tall and athletic, and didn't have much time for parties and girls. The Señorita kept him busy with various jobs, such as sitting in the Zodiac when she was doing her research, sending faxes to her university in America, copying recordings she had made of the dolphins, fixing her 1982 Jeep that seemed to be broken down more than it ran. Miguel didn't mind. The Señorita was pretty and smart, and he liked it when she laughed, which wasn't often. She promised to help him obtain his citizenship and get him started at UCSD.

Once inside the shed, Miguel set the tank in the corner, checking the gauge to see when he'd have to go into town and fill it up. She set her mask on the wooden table, which was nothing more than two sawhorses and an old piece of plywood. Her flippers landed next to her mask, and she reached behind her to unzip the rash guard.

“How was your day at school?” She asked in Spanish.

“Muy buen. I mean, very good, thank you,” he corrected. “My instructor congratulated me on earning the top grade on the Calculus mid-term. I couldn't have done it without your assistance.”

“De nada,” she replied.

She dunked the rash guard in the barrel of fresh water, then used the zipper to hang it from a nail the wall so it could dry. Her mask and flippers followed. The salt water was hard on the rubber, and she had already gone through two masks and a pair of

flippers. She pulled her shorts on over her swimsuit, not caring that they would be soaked, and tossed her shirt over one shoulder.

Miguel headed out into the sunlight, and she followed, sliding the door shut behind her and putting the padlock through the latch. She and Miguel made their way up the beach toward La Casa, its white stucco walls and red tiled roof a sharp contrast to the blue of the ocean and the sky.

They walked through the gate in the chain link fence, around the pool, and between the potted bougainvilleas to the French doors leading into the game room. She pulled the glass door open, and the air conditioning instantly cooled her skin.

“You will rest and get cleaned up for dinner? I’ll help Maria,” Miguel said.

“Gracias. Hasta luego.”

Walking around the pool table and through the arched doorway that led to the stairs and the second floor, she was on the third step thinking how delicious a scented bath and a nap between cool sheets would be, when the phone rang. Sighing, she turned and retraced her steps to the small table at the base of the stairs that held one of several phones that occupied La Casa.

Pulling the receiver to her ear she said, “Bueno.”

The loud, deep voice on the other end made her realize that her bath and nap were now a thing of the past.

“Courtney, glad you are out of the water by this time of the day. My plane arrived early and I’m on my way there. Maria is making the meal I requested, I presume,” her father asked.

“She is. And it smells wonderful.”

“Good, good. We’ll have some time to discuss the General’s requests before dinner. Remember that Mayor Fernando Rodriguez is allergic to gardenias. Wear that dress that you wore for the reelection party. I’ll be there within the hour.” And with that, Senator William Swanson, a Republican from California, hung up in his daughter’s ear.

“Well, shit,” Courtney mumbled as she dropped the receiver to its base. She glanced at the grandfather clock just inside the front door.

“Shit!” She flew up the stairs and down the hall as she realized how much there was to do before her father arrived.

By the time she reached her bedroom at the end of the hallway, her shorts were unzipped and around her ankles. She balanced on one leg as she drew the other out of its short pant leg, then switching, kicked the pair of shorts across the room to land somewhere between her bed and the closet. Her bathing suit followed, though less gracefully, as the elastic caught on her pinky toe and would have sent her face first to the floor if she hadn’t caught her balance on the edge of the bed.

She hurried into the bathroom to run the water in the shower, then darted out again to her dresser. Yanking open the top drawer, she dug around in her lingerie for the one thong she owned. If the Senator wanted her to wear that dress, which was more like a second skin, then she couldn’t wear the cotton panties she preferred. Wadded up in the back corner were the thong and the only pair of nylons she had ever bought. Hoping they didn’t have a run in them, she tossed them on the bed, then turned toward her closet. She didn’t have much to dig through there. Courtney primarily wore a swim suit, a wet suit in the colder months and colder waters, and shorts and T-shirts, so the scrap of red material looked almost lonely in the closet. One pantsuit and a couple of sundresses were all that

kept the dress company in that large space. On the floor was her only pair of heels. Her toes were already cramping at the prospect of being jammed into such a confining space for the next several hours.

Ducking back into the bathroom, she took a shower in record time. Not having the chance to dry her long blonde hair, she rolled and twisted and tucked until a majority of it was in a knot at the back of her head, the shorter pieces coming loose to frame her face in wisps. She poked around under the sink until she found her make-up bag. Since she was either in the water or staring at a computer screen, she never saw the purpose for face paint. Looking over the contents of her bag, she thought she remembered the order of application her friend Alisa swore by: foundation, blush, liner, shadow, mascara. Or was it blush, liner, mascara, shadow? Well, she'd do what she could.

With her make up applied, she shimmied into the thong, and decided that only a man would engineer putting a scrap of material in a place where most women would try to keep it out of, or so she thought. As she snapped the elastic high on her hips, she hoped her cheeks wouldn't be rubbed raw, and was already deriving ways to not have to walk a lot in order to keep the chaffing to a minimum. Next was the strapless bra, which to her thinking, defeated the purpose. She was well-endowed, and self-conscious, so she always wore something that kept her breasts from moving to their own rhythm. Gathering up one leg of the nylons, she pulled them over one of her long legs, only to discover that they seem to have more runs in them than material holding them together. Well, she'll have to go barelegged, and hope that the guests wouldn't be insulted by her lack of formality.

Next was the red sequined excuse for a dress. The Senator's assistant had it delivered for the reelection party two years ago. She supposed she should be glad that all

her swimming kept her figure from showing her love of the local cuisine, including refried beans and homemade flour tortillas, both made with lard, which was what made them taste so good. She stepped into the dress, pulled and twisted, then pulled some more in order to get it in place. When she looked in the mirror, the dress covered as little as she remembered, just skimming the tops of her thighs and hugging her breasts under her arms, so she readjusted it to keep the plunging neckline and dip in the back from showing her bra. As satisfied as she was going to get with her fancy leotard, she silently apologized to her toes as she stepped into red, three inch heels, bending over to buckle the straps across the top of her feet. She put on the ruby necklace and matching ruby and diamond earrings the Senator gave to her on her twenty-fifth birthday, and headed toward the stairs.

Chapter 2

He lowered the binoculars and shifted to relax the cramp beginning in his legs. Headquarters thought it was too soon for him to be back in the field, but another day locked up in rehab and, well, he didn't want to think what that would have done to him. His need was to be in a place where the walls didn't close in, and where he could see the sun and the sky and feel the breeze on his face. He refused to allow his mind to travel down the path of mistakes and leaked information that had led to his cover being blown and subsequent torture at the hands of Hombre de Loco. Crazy Man, Pablo Escobedo, the meanest son of a bitch Logan had ever had the misfortune to cross paths with.

Stretching out his legs, he took a seat on the sand and continued to watch La Casa. Apparently, the curtains were only part of the interior décor and not security, since he could see into all of the windows that faced the west and south side of the house. He could see Maria Gonzales in the kitchen, and watched as the young Miguel Hernandez moved into the dining room with a stack of plates.

Logan raised the glasses to his eyes just in time to get a close up of Courtney Swanson as she rushed from the game room into the dining room. She briefly consulted with Miguel before continuing on to the kitchen.

He had spent the last week in rehab, and the entire flight from Seattle to Ensenada, reviewing the file that The Agency had on Dr. Courtney Swanson. Well, almost doctor. Her preliminary research findings, if able to be replicated, could mean that the U.S. would have a way of stemming the flow of pure Columbian snow coming in through San Pedro, California.

Glancing at his watch, he figured it was time to move. Rolling to his feet, he kept in a crouched position in order to limit the size of his shadow, and keep anyone from becoming suspicious should they choose to look in his direction, as he moved quickly over the sand, through the mounds of beach grasses, and then trotted parallel to the fence that surrounded La Casa. His rented Tahoe was parked a half-mile down the road.

Opening up the back, he tossed in his field glasses, grabbed his coat and tie that would complete the dress code necessary for this operation, which included his alias joining the dinner party. Tipping the canteen to wet his hands, he pushed them through his hair to smooth back the black strands. He closed the back, and walked around to the driver's front door as he fished out the non-prescription glasses from the jacket pocket,

and set them on his nose. Sliding onto the front seat, and looking into the angled rearview mirror, he adjusted his tie and collar, then said, “Well, Cheerio then, Logan,” as he practiced the British accent that would complete the façade of Dr. Edward Perkins, Professor of Ocean and Fishery Sciences, University of Washington. Readjusting the mirror and turning the key in the ignition, Logan mumbled, “Game on,” in his natural, slight-Texas twang.

* * *

“Muy bonita la mesa, Miguel,” Courtney complimented on her way through the dining room and into the kitchen.

“This looks incredible, Maria. You outdid yourself. The Senator will be pleased.”

Courtney snagged a hot tortilla off of the stack that Maria had just finished making, tore it in half, and proceeded to stuff an entire piece into her mouth. She closed her eyes and groaned in ecstasy.

Maria beamed a smile at her, then reached in to the oven to take out the tamales. She arranged them on a serving platter that would go back into the oven to keep them warm. She enjoyed having Señorita Courtney living here. She was a good girl, which in Maria’s mind made up for the fact that she isolated herself in the house or in the water, instead of searching for a husband. Maria enjoyed mothering the Señorita, partly because the girl had lost her mother at a young age, and partly because the girl needed to know some kindness, since the Senator only expressed his expectations of his daughter, never any love.

Courtney was gathering ice from the freezer when the Senator’s voice echoed from the front entryway. Both women stopped and met each other’s eyes. Courtney

swallowed the second half of the tortilla, which seemed to travel to her stomach like a golf ball. Maria cast her eyes down and schooled her features to that of a proper domestic. Courtney picked up the full ice bucket, and went out to meet her father.

“Courtney, don’t you look ravishing. The Mayor and the General will be impressed. Oh, by the way, set one more place. I’m expecting Professor Perkins from Seattle to be joining us.”

The Senator was always changing plans at the last minute. She should be used to it by now. Many of her birthdays, and most of the holidays when she was growing up, were delayed or ruined when the Senator took an unexpected trip out of town, or planned a party that was more about getting votes than it was about celebrating with his daughter.

“Of course. I’ll ask Miguel to take down another setting.” She turned around to find Miguel standing behind her, nodding his head that he had heard the order, before he disappeared into the kitchen.

Turning back to her father, she said, “I trust your trip went well?”

“It did. I had time to read the information on the disc you sent me. That is what I wanted to speak with you about.”

They moved into the game room, where the Senator went behind the bar to pour himself a drink. Courtney placed the ice bucket on the wet bar, then proceeded to open the French doors that led to the pool and the ocean beyond. She strained her ears to listen for the myriad of animal sounds that were usually carried on the breeze, but there was nothing.

“ . . . would really help our negotiations with Mexico. Courtney, are you listening?” He asked, catching her daydreaming.

“Yes. You were saying?” She tried to focus her attention on her father.

“Your preliminary findings are impressive. You should know the General will be asking about the length of training necessary to get the results we need.”

“The training will take some time. I have no idea how long it will take for them to master each stage.”

“Well, you better come up with a timeline. The General is ready to make a deal with a few researchers at one of the universities in Mexico City. He wants this, Courtney. If you’re not on board, the professors he’ll hire will be in charge of the training without you.” The Senator downed his scotch and poured another while a furious Courtney tried to form a come back.

“He can’t-,” she started, but was interrupted by the doorbell.

She smoothed her hands down her dress, as much to pull it down on her legs a fraction of an inch, as it was to dry the sweat on her palms. Courtney felt uncomfortable at social functions, and the way her father dominated these small parties always made her uneasy. There was always a time when he disappeared into his study, either with one of the women in attendance or another politician or businessman. She knew what happened with the first, and didn’t want to guess about the second.

Pulling open the door, she found herself looking into a bespectacled pair of gray eyes set in a tanned face, framed by black hair that was slicked back and disappeared behind wide shoulders.

“Good even’, Miss. I’m Edward Perkins,” was the British accent that floated to her ears. He extended his hand. She slipped hers inside of his, and squeezed.

“Hello. Courtney Swanson. Do come in. The Senator was just telling me that you’d be joining us this evening,” she said as she stepped aside to allow him to enter.

Closing the door behind him, she turned to see Edward Perkins shake hands with her father. He seemed rather well built for a professor. She looked down at her palm as she remembered his hand. Not smooth, like someone locked in an office all day, but calloused, like he worked with tools. Her profession demanded that she notice the smallest details in animals, not only the ones she worked with, but others she saw in the environment, and she tended to do the same with the people she met.

Courtney was just about to join them when the bell chimed again. She admitted Mayor Fernando Rodriguez and his wife, making the necessary small talk to welcome them. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit with a blue and white striped tie. His wife, a few inches shorter than the Mayor, was dressed in a traditional cotton dress with colorful embroidery and even a few petticoats. She pointed toward her father and Professor Perkins, encouraging the couple to join the others.

Just as she started to close the door, a large body wedged itself between the door and the frame. Looking, she saw that the General had arrived, or at least his bodyguard. Swinging open the door once more, she looked out to see the General’s Hummer, complete with Mexican flags mounted to each corner of the hood, parked behind the Mayor’s Mercedes. After the bodyguard and another two men that must have been the General’s top aides entered La Casa, Courtney finally was able to shake hands with the General himself. His khaki uniform was graced with stripes on the sleeves and a handful of medals pinned to his chest. The weapon holstered on his side and his polished black boots completed the picture of a man for whom the military was life. A majority of his

once black hair was gray and cut very short, much like his mustache. His pocked face gave away his poor upbringing. The smile he gave, as his eyes traveled down her body, made her want to extract her hand from his and wash it in bleach.

Two of the General's entourage, armed with large guns, stationed themselves on both sides of the front door. Whether that was to keep anyone else from entering La Casa, or to keep everyone from exiting, she couldn't be sure. She stepped aside, giving ample room for the General to pass in front of her, only to have him brush past, his upper arm connecting with her breast. Sucking in her chest helped to limit the contact, but didn't help the queasy feeling in her stomach. The General and his two supporters continued on to greet her father, while his bodyguard stationed himself in the middle of the foyer.

She was hoping they could all sit at the dining room table so she wouldn't have to walk so much, and have the evening end sooner, but it seemed that her father wanted the cocktail hour to be prolonged. Courtney pasted a smile on her face, and went to join the small group enjoying drinks in the game room.