

## Chapter 12



Celeste eased her knee to the side. "If you shoot me, I won't be in any condition to tell you what you want to know."

Her jailer stared at her, and in the shadowy light, a cruel smile lifted his lips. He prodded her thigh with the gun. "Don't you worry. You'll be in pain, but quite capable of telling me what I want to know."

Waves of goose bumps slid down her back. This man was all business, and wouldn't take any sass from her. But she was nothing, if not smart. She would use the brain God gave her and try to escape with her life.

He stepped away from her, and she attempted to stand. He pointed her to the make-shift seat using the gun. "Where d'you think you're going? You move only when I tell you."

She squeezed the handbag to her chest, dreading what he might have planned. The last image she had of Orette flooded her mind. Fingers of nausea squeezed her stomach. The pain in her manhandled arm kicked up a notch, but she had to think before he got busy trying to torture her. She cupped her forehead with her hand in an attempt to avoid eye contact. "You asked me about a thumb drive. I don't know anything about it nor—Ow!"

He tapped her knee hard with the gun, which set a host of tiny stars dancing before her eyes. They watered, and she glared at him while she clutched her throbbing joint. "You didn't have to do that. I don't have your stupid thumb drive."

He grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet. "Did I ask you a question?"

Her nostrils flared and she wanted to say something nasty about his mother, but held her tongue. As it was, she could barely stand up straight. Infuriate him any further, and he'd do worse.

"Now sit down and shut up."

He flung her back on the crate. She crashed onto the top and gripped the edges to prevent an undignified landing on the sandy floor.

He snatched her handbag, upended it on the table and sifted through her things. After searching all the compartments, he picked up each item, studied it, and dropped it in the bag.

Some criminal, Celeste thought. He sure was interested in stuff that couldn't possibly be of any value to him. He turned another evil smile on her. "I have better things to do than spend all night wringing information out of you." He tipped her chin up. "Why don't you make this easy on both of us and tell me what I want to know?"

She sighed. "I'm telling you, I don't—"

The slap filled her ears with the rumble of the wind. Her teeth cut the inside of her mouth, drawing blood, and her head ached. She hung on to her temper by a fraying thread. Teeth clamped shut, she supported her chin with a hand propped on her knee.

When her head cleared, she tried to speak. "Like I was saying, I don't—"

He slapped her again.

This time, she screamed abuse at him.

He snickered, and gun in hand, tugged at the sling around her neck. "Now, where could you have put that memory stick?"

So he had some technological savvy, did he? She killed her snide thoughts when his gaze dropped to her bosom. His hand whipped toward her, but she held on to the front of her blouse. "You mad or something?"

The thump to the side of her face sent her sailing off the box. She crumpled to the sand, blinded by her fury. Her head hurt twice as bad, and she'd had enough of being knocked around.

He gripped her arm and pulled her off the ground. She used her weight to hinder him, but he held her close and glared into her face. "So, you think you're smart, eh? If I have to rip your clothes off, I'm getting back what's mine."

His words ended on a snarl, which infuriated Celeste. With all her strength, she grabbed his privates, squashed and twisted them. She got him good through his loose trousers.

His eyes opened wide, glazed with pain and he bathed her face with a blast of air. She used the advantage to ram her knee into his middle. He sank to his knees, grunting. "I'm gonna kill you, you little sl—"

"Careful," she said, picking up the gun he dropped. "You have the blade. I have the handle."

She pointed the weapon at him, smirking. He cringed, but said nothing. Then his eyes dared her to fire. But she had other plans and couldn't afford to think, in case she changed her mind. She dared not turn the gun for fear of shooting herself, so she clouted him on the side of the head with the barrel. Too bad it didn't go off and shoot him.

He toppled to the sand, out cold.

Heaving air through her lips, she grabbed her bag off the table. What to do with the gun? With only one good hand, she couldn't carry the weapon and a light. She laid the gun in her handbag, praying it wouldn't fire and put a hole in her handbag or worse, do her some additional damage.

She ripped the sling from around her neck, swept up one of the bottle torches and ran from the makeshift prison. She held the beer bottle at arm's length, praying she wouldn't stumble and catch herself afire.

The stones made her progress painfully slow, but she ignored the discomfort in her knee and kept going. The man behind her *would* kill her if given the chance.

Certain she heard sounds other than her footsteps, she stopped, angling one ear toward the cave. Nothing.

Something moved in the shadows ahead. She flashed the bottle from side to side, pressing her lips together to prevent herself from screaming. She sucked in another breath, grit her teeth and whispered. "Nothing's there. It's just your imagination."

She forced her feet to move, and pressed ahead, eyes wide to catch any possible movement.

The path narrowed and the roof dipped. Bending forward, she switched the bottle to her injured hand. Bad idea. She stopped to switch it back. The bottle slipped from her hand, crashed to the rocky ground and splintered. The flames flared as the oil spread, and within seconds she was left in coal-black darkness.

"Wonderful," she muttered.

A rustle close by sent her dashing forward, arms pressed to her sides. Things were bad enough without getting gunk on her hands from the slimy walls.

She put her foot down, set her weight on it, and with the next step twisted her ankle. She fell, bruising her palms. Tears filled her eyes, but she wiped her hands on her jeans and stood. No time for self-pity.

Shuffling forward, she sniffed the air, which was warm against her skin. There, the reassuring sound of the sea. She stretched out one hand, moving it back and forth to guide her along. The dry air meant she was close to the beach.

After what felt like hours, she grinned at the starry sky visible above a cluster of dried branches. She hated the thought of destroying her handbag, but used it to push away a tangle of leafy debris blocking the mouth of the cave. When she had enough space to squeeze through, she edged onto the sand.

The limestone outcrop looming above reassured her that she was at the same point of entry her captors had used earlier.

She started down the beach, all her aches having ganged up on her. An evil drummer pounded a tune in her head. Her lip hurt and her arm dangled at her side as though it didn't belong to her. Her knee refused to cooperate with the commands being sent from her brain, but she staggered onward. If she stopped, her tormentor would get the chance to worsen her pain or end it, and neither of those options suited her.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, which helped her stay close to the clusters of sea grapes and almond trees lining the beach. When she strayed too close, they clawed at her limbs. She wanted to sit down and rest, but that had to wait.

She longed to talk to Mark, but that too had to go on the back burner. She lowered her head and listened—the sound of cars sweeping past brought a bit of comfort—before cutting a diagonal path through the bush. A set of lights sliced the darkness.

Which direction to take? She didn't want to break cover and expose herself, so she stood still and closed her eyes. If her memory was accurate, they had turned left off the main road before hitting the beach, however, she hadn't come across the track they used. Still, that was the least of her worries.

She eased down behind the next clump of sea grapes and stretched out her legs. Placing one hand under her bosom, she held the fabric close her to body and slid the other hand down the front of her shirt.

For a second, she couldn't locate the cylindrical object wedged in there. Then she felt it, pressed against her skin, trapped by the underwire in her bra. With two fingers, she pulled out the cellular phone, grateful she had renewed the roaming service before she left Cayman.

When he first saw the phone and before he knew what it was, Mark had asked what purpose it served, other than impersonating a giant lipstick tube. She'd made a call, while he watched her with an incredulous expression in place.

He then went on to ask why she wasted money buying silly doodads.

"I earn my own money, so I can spend it as I choose," she said.

He left her alone after that.

So she liked electronic gadgets. She saw nothing wrong with that, and this particular one was about to pay for itself several times over.

Holding it steady was a challenge, and the tiny buttons made dialing difficult with her injury. After two aborted attempts and several curse words, the number at the other

end rang.

She closed her eyes to the darkness when Mark answered, and relished the moment. His voice brought a rush of satisfaction, like the first sip from an icy glass of lemonade on a summer day.

"Mark, it's Celeste."

"Hello? Could you speak up?"

She cleared her throat and upped her voice. "It's me, Celeste. I need—"

"Where are you? You have any idea how much trouble you've caused?"

She whispered, "Mark...Mark..."

"What?"

"Shut up and listen."

She felt his outrage in the silence that followed, but to his credit, he said nothing.

"I'm on the beach somewhere."

"Doing exactly what, at this hour of night?"

"Will you keep quiet and hear me out?"

"Okay, but this better be good."

She drew a breath, then in a panicked whisper she said, "Someone's coming. Call you back."

She shielded the phone with her body and turned it off, praying whoever was coming didn't hear the short tune as the cellular powered down. Knowing Mark, he might try to get her back this minute to ask what the dickens she was playing at. Someone hurried toward her, swearing. "... I'll teach that slut a lesson she'll never forget. And she has my gun ... gonna wring her blasted neck."

She bit her lip and crouched closer to the shrubbery. He stopped upwind from her; the glow from his cell phone illuminated his features—pointed nose, thin lips, narrow eyes, and the wavy hair she couldn't see in the darkness. As she watched, he put a hand to his head, where she'd walloped him.

"The two of you need to get back here now. The woman escaped."

A few beats of silence passed before he yelled. "I don't care what you're doing, get your tail back here. Now."

He slapped the phone shut and continued toward her. She waited until he hobbled down the beach, kicking sand and cursing, before she sprang up and bolted.

One man, she could escape. Three, and her chances were much slimmer. She continued in the direction of the road, but hid behind a coconut palm. She powered up the phone, cupped her hand around it, and looked at the time: eight-thirty. Where had the hours gone? She wanted to call Mark, but had to keep her wits together.

She needed to find a landmark before she could give him sensible directions. He had less chance of finding her if the only description she could provide was that she was on a road overrun with coconut trees.

Something winked in the distance. Pepper lights surrounding a sign. She quickened her pace. The sign announced Larry's Sea Food Restaurant.

She scurried to the other side of the coastal road, careful to keep out of sight. A couple exited a SUV and entered the low building. The scent of sautéed onions surrounded Celeste where she stood. She licked her lips, ignored the grumbling in her stomach, and moved on.

A row of buildings appeared on the horizon. She slunk past, noting the name of the plaza. Of interest, was the nightclub adjoining the eatery. She ducked behind a Guango

tree, laden with reddish-orange blossoms, and dialed Mark's number.

"Celeste, I could kill you!"

"Get in line. You're not the only one with ideas. Can—"

"Where did you go?"

What was that sound? Was he on the move?

"That man was chasing me," she said.

"Which man? Where are you now?"

His demanding bark forced her to move the phone away from her ear. She wouldn't give him a hard time under the circumstances because he was understandably worried. Leaning sideways, she peered at the shopping complex. "You know The Reef Nightclub?"

"Yes."

"I'm across the street from it. I'll go inside in a minute."

"Stay put. I'm coming."

"Yes, Teddy," she whispered.

She said nothing else before he hung up, but knew he understood her desperation. She only called him her teddy bear when she was feeling affectionate, or in a crisis.

She crossed the street, trying not to go too fast and aggravate her ankle. After she composed herself on the sidewalk, she sauntered into the foyer of the building. The music reawakened the headache she thought had gone.

The group of people ahead of her chatted as they waited to get into the club. Celeste hunched behind them, stifled by a cloud of feminine scent. She sniffed. Didn't the offending woman care that other people had the right to breathe without being smothered?

She eased her position to take the weight off her bad ankle, conscious that anxiety was making her irritable. The movement reminded her of the abuse her kneecap had taken from Tony.

"All ladies are free before ten," the man lounging near the doorway announced.

He flicked a glance at Celeste's casual wear and then ignored her to talk with the people next in line. On clumsy feet, she walked into the darkened nightclub, which replicated the sea floor. Happy to see couples bouncing and swaying together on a crowded dance floor, she headed for a corner, where she could keep her eye on the doorway.

Phone in hand, she sat down in a booth to wait.