

CHAPTER 1

PALANDAN ISLAND
SOUTHEAST ASIA
PRESENT DAY

Maybe it wasn't true, Maya thought. It could be just a rumor. The Neztart village didn't really have any experience with that bastard Nadim. They'd always been terrified of the stories about him.

Well, so had Maya, because most of the stories weren't rumors, and she had more experience with Nadim than she ever wanted to repeat. Her heart was beating hard at just the thought of him. But she mustn't let Charles Bevan see that fear. She'd never really trusted him. He was too slick and self-serving. She could never tell if he would take advantage of any weakness.

"You're sure it's him?" She kept her tone cool and absolutely calm. "Where did you hear Nadim was anywhere near the island? You can't trust any of the northern villages. He's supposed to still be in India."

IRIS JOHANSEN

“But we both knew he’d be back as soon as he had enough bribes floating out there to buy his way back into the local landowners’ good graces.” His voice was slightly mocking as he leaned back in her office chair. “You made Nadim very angry when you stuck that dagger into his hand. I’d only just arrived here on the island when I heard the story of how you just strode over to him and stabbed him. I couldn’t believe it. If you wanted to get rid of him, you should have gone for the jugular.”

“I was angry.” She shrugged. “And I’d already had one bad run-in with him. He’d just struck one of my foremen on the head with the butt of his gun. It was a delicate situation. I wanted to punish, not cause the incident to escalate.”

“And if you hadn’t been surrounded by another ten or twelve more of your men, I’m sure that he would have taken you back to his camp that night for fun, games, and painful interrogation. I guarantee he wouldn’t have been nearly as sparing with your blood.”

“He didn’t have the chance. Besides, I’d already decided I was going to throw him off the island.” Her mouth tightened. “And I did.”

“Yet bad things could still have happened. That’s why I’m here to tell you that you’re entirely too gentle for this kind of business. You need to take on a partner.” He smiled. “And I happen to be available. Don’t you think this is the time?”

“Where did you hear Nadim was on his way?” she repeated. His smile faded. “I’ve no objection to bribery, either. And I

THE SURVIVOR

don't like the idea of Nadim stealing something that I've been wanting to acquire for myself. Nadim's top man, Max Gunter, has been in my pay since the night you kicked Nadim off the island. You'll probably be upset to know Nadim did very well in India. He's got a full crew now and he's ready to go after you and whatever treasure he believes you have tucked away on this island. Plus, he's sure any poaching he does on Palandan will be immensely profitable since you don't allow any hunting on the island or in those mountains that belong to it." He shook his head. "I could be a good partner to you, Maya. We've done business here for the last two years, and you know I've never cheated you. Why not take the next step? I'll protect you and keep Nadim from cutting your throat. In return, naturally, I'll require you to be accommodating enough to consider making the arrangement even closer. I've always had a yen for you when you're not being lethal. You might also furnish me with that prize Nadim thinks you're keeping hidden from him."

She gave him an incredulous look. Then she laughed scornfully. "You don't want much, do you?"

"I want *everything*," Bevan said. "And I'll get it, either from you or from Nadim. It would help if I knew exactly what it was that he was trying to relieve you of, but even Gunter couldn't tell me that. He only said that Nadim told him he'd drain you dry before he killed you. What is it? Jewels? Money? I've been waiting and watching, but you're very clever and I haven't found it for myself yet." He lowered his voice to soft

IRIS JOHANSEN

persuasiveness. “But it will come, Maya. You think that all these villagers you have surrounding you here on the island will keep Nadim away? He’ll crush them like ants in an ant-hill. I could do it myself. Make the deal with me and I’ll find a way to keep you alive.”

“I don’t think so.” Maya shook her head. “I’m not as gentle or tenderhearted as you think, Bevan. And I don’t appreciate that you’ve been waiting until you were sure you’d have Nadim as backup before you decided to make your move. Neither you nor Nadim had better threaten or attack any of these villagers, or I’ll find a way to punish you.” Her lips tightened. “It’s true I don’t like to kill or maim, but I believe I could make an exception in your case.” She opened her desk drawer, pulled out her Smith & Wesson, and pointed it at him. “I think you’d better leave now.”

His smile faded as he saw the weapon. “You’re making a mistake, Maya.”

“I’ve made them before, but I don’t think this is one. This feels entirely right. Get out, Bevan. Don’t come back.”

His face flushed. “Oh, I’ll be back. There’s no point in getting all upset over a disagreement. Let’s forget this little discussion. You’re an exceptional businesswoman, and my produce and construction companies have made you and your villagers a good deal of money in the past couple years. I only want the best for you. I’ll give you another chance later to reconsider . . . an expansion. And I guarantee you’ll welcome me. Perhaps on

THE SURVIVOR

your knees, Maya.” He turned on his heels and strode out of the house.

Maya’s hand instinctively tightened on the gun. He’d tried to mend fences in those last few minutes, but that initial threat couldn’t have been more clear. Then she deliberately relaxed her grip and returned the weapon to the desk drawer. She’d been a little hasty. *Think about it, acknowledge the threat, but don’t let it get in the way of keeping Palandan safe.*

“He was angry.” Tashi, her housekeeper, came into the office and brought them both a cup of tea. In her full-length silk beige-gold sarong and chic upswept, gray-streaked hair, she was elegant, graceful, but definitely disapproving. “I eavesdropped, of course, and I think you should have shot him. He showed you no respect.”

“And I showed him the same lack of respect.” Maya sipped her tea. “It was that kind of conversation.” She chuckled. “And you always think I should shoot first, negotiate later.”

“It would be safer for you.” Tashi sat down in the brocade chair beside the desk. “Jann Lu would have done it. Sometimes the old ways are best.”

“Jann Lu is dead.”

“She would not be dead if she’d shot the last man who tried to kill her,” Tashi said. “She was not fast enough, but she never hesitated to go after any enemy. You should learn from her.” She gazed at Maya critically. “Bevan frightened you. You hid it from him, but I could tell. You were frightened for us. You

IRIS JOHANSEN

should know that we are much better fighters than Bevan or Nadim.”

“But they have more lethal weapons.” Maya leaned wearily back in her chair. “We’re too vulnerable. We have to change and become stronger. We’ve always been able to take down the Nadims and Bevans of the world, but technology is making it harder. And what about India and China right on our doorstep? Who knows who will be next? It’s a different world, and there are too many Nadims ready to leap out and attack. Bevan could be right; it may be time to make a deal.”

“No!” Tashi shook her head. “You cannot do that. You *won’t* do that. We won’t let you.”

“You can’t stop me.” She reached out and affectionately covered Tashi’s hand. “And you know that I would never do anything that would bring pain or dishonor to the island, nor to the villagers who have given their lives to protect it. But maybe I can strike a balance. Bevan could be right about making a deal. This might be the time when I can reach out and change our world. Would you trust me?”

Tashi didn’t answer immediately. “Perhaps. You’re thinking of Riley Smith? I thought you’d given up on that possibility.” She didn’t wait for an answer. “We’d be willing to let you try. If you’re not foolish enough to get yourself killed rather than pull that trigger. That can’t happen.”

“It won’t.” Maya was frowning. “But the situation is going to be very sensitive, and I don’t know how much time I’ll have. Did someone follow Bevan when he left here?”

THE SURVIVOR

Tashi nodded. “Dawa. We knew you’d want to keep track of him after he treated you with such disrespect.”

“In case you wished to punish him?” Maya asked sarcastically. “At the moment, all I want is to know where he is and who he’s meeting with here on the island. It would help if I knew when and where he might also be meeting with Nadim. I believe that will be inevitable.”

Tashi nodded. “Then we will find out.” She rose to her feet. “Bevan was right: You should have slit Nadim’s throat when you had a chance. It would have been much more efficient.” She shrugged. “But you have problems making that move. I understand. You are still young. It is good that you at least have a certain intelligence.”

“I’m glad you believe I have something going for me,” Maya said wryly.

“You’ve been with us for many years. You have a good heart, and you fight for us. Therefore you belong to us, even if you could be wiser. But you must work on it, Maya.” She swept gracefully toward the door but stopped before she reached it. “I almost forgot, thanks to that foolish Bevan. You have to go see Bailey right away. She wants to see you before she goes to sleep. She is worried.”

“About what?” Maya sighed. “Or who?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. I didn’t think it would matter to you. You know she will not sleep until she sees you. She was working on her studies all evening and then decided she had to see you. She was going to come to you. I knew you wouldn’t want that tonight.”

IRIS JOHANSEN

“No.” Maya headed for the door. “And you’re right, it wouldn’t matter. But I already dropped in to see her this afternoon, and she wasn’t worried then. I need to know if I’m going to have a trip or just an update.”

“It is Bailey.” Tashi was following her out of the main house and down the walk to the arched bridge, past the armed guards. “Either way it will be fine.” She watched Maya cross the bridge and head toward the curved door. “And it will be good for you to not have to think about Bevan or Nadim for a little while. Do you want me to wait for you?”

Maya looked over her shoulder. “Why?”

“Because you belong to us, and you’re a little sad tonight.”

“I won’t be sad while I’m with Bailey,” she said gently. “But I thank you for the thought.”

“You’re very welcome,” Tashi said as she turned and headed back toward the main house. “If you can, I suggest you let Bailey take you far away for a little while.”

“I might do that.” Maya opened the door and peeked into Bailey’s room. It appeared Tashi had been wrong. Bailey was curled up on the couch with one of her textbooks, but she appeared to have dozed off. Maya could see her tousled mop of golden hair against the embroidered teal cushion. Maya just stood and gazed at her for a long moment. Curled up like this, she looked smaller and younger than her ten years, and yet Maya knew when she woke her blue eyes would be filled with spirit and intelligence and probably the worry Tashi had told

THE SURVIVOR

her about. Maya suddenly wanted to touch her. She took a step closer...

And Bailey instantly opened her eyes, wide awake. "Hi, Mama." She gave a quick yawn and sat up on the couch. "I'm glad you're here. Though it took you a long time."

"But here I am," Maya said. "I came as fast as I could." She sat down and put her arm around Bailey's shoulders. "What are we supposed to be worried about?"

"The baby," Bailey said. "I'm worried about Riva's baby."

"I didn't even know Riva was going to have a baby." She tried to remember exactly which deer Riva was. "Why should you worry about her?"

"Because she's always alone. I didn't know she was going to have a baby, either, but she always kept to herself and away from the rest of the others. Then today I was sitting here and thinking about her, and I suddenly knew why."

"Knew? Are you sure?"

"Of course not," Bailey said. "I don't know much about babies. I've only read about them in some of my books, and I saw one being born on the mountain once. That was cool." She added quickly, "And scary."

"Well, do you think that we have to really worry about Riva? Does she look like that mother who gave birth on the mountain?"

She shook her head. "Skinnier."

"Do you think you might know if Riva was close to that point?"

IRIS JOHANSEN

Bailey shrugged. “Maybe.” Then she asked, “You mean the same way I learned about the baby?” She thought about it. “Yeah, it was as if she told me. Maybe she didn’t want to be alone any longer.”

“So if I send the herdsman, Chima, up to the mountain to keep an eye on Riva, do you think that would be safe for her? You like Chima, don’t you?”

She nodded. “And he could tell me if she wasn’t feeling well and then I could go?”

“If you feel comfortable with it. I don’t want you worried. It’s up to you, Bailey.”

She was frowning seriously. “That’s scary, too. But I don’t think Riva would have been able to let me know about the baby if it wasn’t natural and right. In my books, it says that animals can know all kinds of things that people don’t. They smell better and hear better, and they know when earthquakes are going to happen. It’s like magic, isn’t it, Mama?”

“I don’t believe that’s what all your books would tell you.” She pressed her lips on the top of Bailey’s head. So silky soft, so beloved. “But maybe something a little like it. You can tell me after you read a few more books on the subject. Okay? Now, have you drawn any pictures of Riva? I can’t see you sitting here waiting for me and not keeping yourself busy.”

Bailey was already giggling and handing her a sheet from her art book. Maya studied the picture of Riva critically. “You have to be smarter than me. I can’t tell whether she’s going to have a baby or not.”

THE SURVIVOR

Bailey broke out into laughter. “She knows she is, Mama. And now I do, too. You don’t have to know anything. You’re just being silly. I’ll show you when we go to see her.”

“Whew, what a relief.” She grabbed Bailey and rocked her back and forth. “Good thing I have you around to fill in the blanks. Now just show me what else you’ve worked on today. After that we’ll cuddle a little and I’ll hold you until you go to sleep. Then I’ll go back to my office and call Chima’s dad and tell him to send his son up the mountain tomorrow. Does that work for you?”

Maya took a moment to talk to Bailey’s nanny after she was sure her daughter was asleep and then left for the main house. Tashi had told her that she should let Bailey take her away for a little while, and that was exactly what had happened. It was amazing how innocence and love could change and balance a world that seemed to hold only darkness. But that time was over, and she had to return to reality and solutions. Tashi might remain optimistic, but Maya could see that the situation on the island had gotten considerably worse over the years. If she couldn’t find a way out, then Maya and these villagers might be caught between Nadim and his scum, and that up-and-coming vermin Charles Bevan. She couldn’t stand the thought of what that would mean for any of them.

So she mustn’t let it happen.

IRIS JOHANSEN

As soon as she entered her office, she slowly picked up her phone. Riley Smith was now at Cambry, Morgan Cade's palatial estate outside London, where the Helen of Troy Museum had been established. She set up the phone for visual, then punched in the number.

Riley Smith answered on the third ring. There was a shocked silence as she saw Maya's face on the screen. "Maya? Are you all right? Why are you calling?"

"I'm fine." How should she start? "You're surprised to hear from me? It's only been five years. I told you that I might call you if I changed my mind about payback. I'm humiliated to admit that the time might have come." She paused. "Do you still want to talk to me?"

"How can you ask?" Riley asked impatiently. "When my father and I would have both died that night on the island if you hadn't saved us. I told you then that I pay my debts."

"But life sometimes changes people. I've been keeping track of you, and you've become the famous archaeologist your father always thought you'd be." She paused. "I heard that he died tragically recently. You know I always respected him, even though I couldn't give him what he wanted."

"He respected you, too," Riley said. "And neither my father nor I really thought that we'd find Helen's tomb on your island. It was too far to the southeast, but we had to explore every possibility. We'd heard the legends and my father followed them, as he had every clue for the past thirty years."

"But according to the media, after his death you did find

THE SURVIVOR

proof that Helen of Troy existed. That must have been exciting for you.” Maya was silent. “At least for a little while. How long did it last, Riley?”

“What are you trying to say? You don’t believe it was enough for me? I was as dedicated to the search as my father, Maya.”

“You were fascinated by Helen. You liked the adventure and taking the next step. But I always thought that there would be another step for you. That’s why I kept my eye on you after you left Palandan Island.” She smiled crookedly. “I was afraid I might someday need someone to take more than one step with me. If I can make it worth their while.”

“That sounds like an offer.” Riley’s eyes narrowed on Maya’s face. “And why now?”

“Perhaps because in the time since you left the island, you’ve become a kind of celebrity. You’re quite famous in academic circles these days. I might be able to use it.”

“Celebrity?” Riley made a rude sound. “Maybe I’ve accomplished what I set out to in finding Helen and bringing her to everyone’s attention again. I’m proud of that.”

“You’ve also made contact with Eve Duncan, the foremost forensic sculptor in the world. That could be very valuable. She’s done extensive work in the past with historical restoration. She even did the sculpting on your Helen of Troy. You were lucky to get her. She’s quite wonderful.” She paused. “Don’t you think she might be intrigued by the stories that drew you to the island?”

IRIS JOHANSEN

“Perhaps,” Riley said slowly. “But she’s also a professional who has a career she cares about. Mere curiosity wouldn’t tempt her.”

“But friendship might, and the media has done a lot of talking about your relationship since you began setting up that London museum.”

She stiffened. “I wouldn’t impose.”

“Your choice. Then should we discuss Morgan Cade? Another very close friend who might prove useful. According to the media, he’s half Indiana Jones, half Robin Hood, and he has a special hatred of traffickers of both humans and animals. One of the richest men in the world, winner of a Congressional Medal of Honor, archaeologist, humanitarian, famous environmentalist and animal activist...” She paused. “That latter qualification alone might lure him to the island. And did I mention that almost every news story I’ve read lately can’t resist publishing a photo of you with Cade? Are you still living with him?”

“That’s none of your business, Maya. Are you trying to make me angry?”

“No, I’m trying to be honest.” She added wearily, “And I’m trying to point out that I might be ruthless enough to attempt getting any help available if I need it. I’m trying to warn you in case you want to tell me to go to hell. I don’t want you to do anything against your principles, but I also don’t want to put you in danger if I don’t have to.” She tried to smile. “I won’t deny I’m in trouble, but I believe I can still come out on top

THE SURVIVOR

with a little help from my friends . . . and *your* friends. If it turns out to be just the two of us, we might still make it. After all, you found Helen. I think you might be able to find Silvana. I have my own guards on the island, but I don't want them hurt. You'll remember they helped keep you and your father alive. Now I'm going to hang up and let you think about whether you want to help me. If you're smart, you'll probably turn me down. Regardless, I want your promise not to discuss me or the island with anyone else. Okay?"

"Of course. But I don't really know what's happening with you, dammit."

"Think about it. You're very intelligent. You know I have enemies. You ran into a few of them. The situation with Aden Nadim has just gotten more complicated." She added, "And less safe. I'll call you back in a few days to get your answer. I'll try to go into more details then if you want to hear them." She hesitated before she continued, "But there's one thing you should know. This is going to be the endgame for me, and I have to treat it the way Jann Lu would want it treated. That means that the stakes are sky-high, no holds barred. I'll give you everything you want from me, but I'll take whatever I need to keep the people and things I value safe. I can't promise anything else. Do you understand?"

"Hell, no." Riley was frowning. "How could I? It's bullshit. I don't even know what this Jann Lu has to do with it."

"You will. You'll know everything soon if you want to come back to the island. If you don't, perhaps what you have

IRIS JOHANSEN

now is worth forgetting it. I won't blame you whichever you decide. Goodbye, Riley."

Maya cut the connection. She leaned back in her chair and drew a deep breath. It was done.

Or at least it was started. She had never thought she would retrieve that promise from Riley, but never was a long time. Why else had she kept track of Riley's doings all these years? It was true they had become close during the time Riley and her father had visited the island, but Maya had deliberately broken the contact after she had been able to get them safely away from here. Her own life was too full of threat to let young, enthusiastic Riley Smith with her big dreams and driving ambition remain anywhere near her. It had obviously been the right decision. After Riley left, life had been neither tame nor uneventful. She had suffered loss and danger, but success had also followed her like a bright comet.

And now Maya was going to tap that comet.

She leaned her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes. She hoped she was doing the right thing. It felt good and moral and ethical, and it was the duty she'd been trained for since childhood. That alone should make it right, shouldn't it?

As long as it didn't cause the deaths of good people before it was over...