

Chapter One

No matter how fast or how far he ran, Andrew Lanham couldn't escape the memories. The familiar noise of the ocean waves crashing loudly beside him as his feet pounded through the sand wasn't enough to drown out the sounds dogging him this early morning—not to mention every minute of the past month. Try as he might, it was impossible to distance himself from the flashbacks of his last mission.

Take some R&R, his superiors commanded. *Come back to the States*, his family pleaded. *Go find a quiet place to make peace with yourself*, the Navy shrink advised. *Get drunk and get laid*, his SEAL comrades dared.

So far none of the advice he'd been given had worked. Three days into his enforced leave and he still couldn't shake the nightmares. He'd come back to the states, but instead of returning to Coronado Beach to face the music, he'd isolated himself on the opposite coast, hunkering down at his godmother's beachfront mansion in Magnolia Bay, a seaside resort thirty miles north of Charleston, South Carolina. Aunt Evie, as the elderly woman was called, had 'tsked' over Drew while he drank himself into a stupor. But even the epic headache he'd woken up with this morning couldn't obliterate the scenes from that failed op; visions that played out like a YouTube video on a continuous loop in his brain.

A seagull dive-bombed the shoreline startling Drew. He slowed down to a walk in an effort to get his heartbeat back to DEFCON three. Technically, he hadn't followed *all* the suggestions he'd been given. He hadn't gotten laid.

Drew kicked his sneaker through a sticky mound of foam the sea had left along the sand. Maybe his buddies were right; a few hours of mindless sex might be the thing to help chase away the memories. Too bad he'd detoured to picturesque Magnolia Bay in lieu of Southern

California. The opportunities for a meaningless hook-up were plentiful surrounding a Navy base. Not so much in a sleepy resort town. He stopped in front of the sprawling seaside home owned by his godmother. With its secluded decks and near private beach, it was the perfect spot for licking his wounds. He just wouldn't be able to scratch that other itch while he was visiting. His quirky godmother was a bit of celebrity in town, and he wouldn't risk embarrassing Aunt Evie by picking up a strange woman in a bar just to slack his needs. That particular remedy would have to wait until he got back to base and could look up an old girlfriend. Or maybe two.

He stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the quiet coastline. The sun had been up for more than an hour, but the beach was nearly deserted, just the way Drew liked it. Two little tow-headed boys wearing boardshorts and a layer of zinc across their shoulders were digging in the tall grass lining the dunes that protected Aunt Evie's house from the ocean. Ignorant of his presence, the boys moved closer to the corrugated edging dug into the sand outlining a nest of sea turtle eggs covered by chicken wire. They looked old enough to be able to read the sign warning them to keep away—sea turtles are an endangered species and, as such, their nests are protected by federal law—but, as happens with boys, their curiosity got the better of them. Having been their age once, Drew decided to see how far they'd go before stepping in.

“Hey!”

Turns out, they didn't get very far at all. Both boys jumped at the sound of a female voice. Drew watched out of the corner of his eye as a woman emerged from the surf as though she were Amphitrite, Goddess of the Sea. She charged over to where the boys were now frozen and Drew couldn't help but notice some very nice curves accentuated by the long-sleeved sun shirt she wore over her bathing suit. The white fabric clung to her like a second skin. Her legs were bare, a sheen of water making them look pearlescent in the sun. A wild mass of shoulder-

length strawberry-blonde hair flew beside her as she proceeded to chew out the boys like a hardened Drill Instructor.

“Don’t touch that! You boys shouldn’t be playing over here.” She pointed to the sign. “It’s against the law to tamper with the nests. You could go to prison.”

With the mention of hard time, the younger of the two boys gulped a sob just as the older one’s lip began to quiver. Drew shook his head at the Goddess of the Sea’s dramatic overkill. Being curious wasn’t a crime; it was just a phase all boys went through. Hell, he’d been in their shoes numerous times in his life. Unfortunately, he’d never had anyone stand up for him. *And look where that had landed him.* He wasn’t about to leave these two defenseless.

“They weren’t doing any harm.”

He watched as her body tensed just before she jerked her chin over her shoulder to glare at him. Clearly, she hadn’t seen him standing there when she vaulted from the sea because her caramel eyes held a hint of surprise as she took him in.

“Are they with you?” It was more accusation than question.

One glance at her mouth, however, and he was having trouble formulating an answer for her. It was mesmerizing, that mouth of hers. Built for pleasure and sin. His shorts grew tighter just looking at her.

“Are these your children?” She annunciated each word as if he’d suffered from a traumatic brain injury.

Too bad she was using those sexy lips to intimidate two little boys. Drew shook his head, as much as to answer her question as to clear his wandering mind. He looked over at the two kids. Had she really asked if they were his? He wasn’t sure if he’d ever in his life considered

having children, but he knew now that he never would. Children—families—they were all collateral damage if and when an op didn't go the way it was planned. *Just like Akins' family.*

Drew flinched at the realization. "Boys," he said, using his SEAL team commander's voice. "You need to leave turtle nests alone or the babies won't be able to hatch and go out to sea."

Both boys nodded solemnly while the Goddess of the Sea just gaped at him.

"Do you promise not to go near any of the nests again?" he added.

Their chins bobbed up and down in unison and Drew lifted an eyebrow at her as if to say "we're done here."

She shifted in the sand so that she fully faced him. Her hands rested on her hips pulling the shirt up enough to give him a nice peek at the top of a creamy thigh. Then she went and spoiled the erotic image in his head by opening that luscious mouth of hers.

"Who are you, the Kindergarten Cop?"

He bit back a smile at that one. "No."

"This is private property, you know."

Drew wanted to point out that she was the one who was trespassing, but then his stay at Aunt Evie's would no longer be covert, so he treated her to the stone-faced stare he used on his team when they were acting up. The Goddess of the Sea didn't back down, instead she took the opportunity to study Drew. He kept his stare smug as she slowly perused him from head to toe. Dressed in nothing but nylon running shorts—he'd stripped off his T-shirt a few miles back to wipe his face before hanging it from the waistband of his shorts—Drew was well aware of how the opposite sex perceived him: six feet two and a hundred-ninety pounds of a highly sculpted Navy SEAL. Fortunately, most women ignored the part about him being a human killing

machine once they had access to his body. Based on the way her nipples puckered beneath her wet shirt, this one wasn't any different; she definitely liked what she saw.

Catching a glimpse at herself in the mirrored aviator sunglasses he wore, she jumped back a step before pulling her shirt away from her body. She glanced back over her shoulder presumably to further harangue the two boys only to find out they'd fled while she'd been busy checking him out. This time, Drew didn't bother holding back his grin. Her eyes narrowed as she puffed a stray strand of hair off her face.

"Don't worry. They won't be back." He wasn't sure why he felt the need to reassure her, but he did it anyway.

"You said you didn't know them."

He smiled then. "Not personally, no. But they're just a pair of young boys out exploring the beach. No harm, no foul."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts. Drew took note of the fact that her nipples were still pebbled and his crotch reacted accordingly.

"And what makes you think they won't come back to do some additional 'exploring'?" she demanded.

"Probably the fact that you scared them shitless by threatening to haul them off to jail. Your *world-domination-one-turtle-nest-at-a-time* routine is pretty intense. Do you run all men off like that?"

Her body recoiled as if he'd punched her and Drew swore silently. He hadn't meant to offend her. The sexual maelstrom she'd stirred up within him was doing strange things to his brain and his mouth. His buddies were right, he needed sex. Just not with an innocent like this woman, a defender of sea turtles, for Chrissake. Despite the fact that his body wasn't

discriminating, what was left of his soul was. He'd seen—and done—too much to ever be considered innocent again. As tempting as the Sea Goddess was, he'd never be able to have a woman like her—not when he could destroy her beneath the burden of guilt weighing him down.

The taut silence was shattered by the sound of an ATV pulling up beside them. Two women Drew recognized as Magnolia Bay biddies from the town's overbearing historical society sat on top of it.

“Daisy, I told you not to drive so fast. I nearly fell in the ocean going over that last dune.”

“Oh, Camelia, just hold on, why don't ya,” the driver said. Both women were dressed in identical Save the Turtles of Magnolia Bay T-shirts, khaki shorts and blindingly white rubber-soled shoes. Considering they'd been going less than three miles an hour on the flattest part of the beach, Drew thought it unlikely either would fall off, but he'd already said too much this morning, so he kept his trap shut.

Daisy looked him up and down warily. “Everything okay here, Jenna?”

Jenna. Arabic for Heaven. Drew might have pulled another name from his linguist's background to describe her, but having heard her real name, it somehow reiterated that the woman standing before him was off limits. After the things he'd done in the name of defending his country, Heaven—like Jenna—was no longer an option for him.

“Sure, Daisy,” she said. Much of the bluster had left her sails after his callous remark.

The two women on the ATV glanced between Jenna and Drew. “We got a report that a dog got into nest number nineteen,” Camilia said. “We were just going to check it out. Wanna come along?”

“Yes,” Jenna responded quickly before scrambling onto the back of the ATV. Without another word, they drove off, but not before Drew was treated to a second peek at her nicely curved ass as the breeze lifted up her shirt briefly before she slapped it down with her hand. This time he swore out loud. That was likely the only glimpse of Heaven he’d ever see.