

Chapter 1

Nick

New Year's Eve – Rose Island, Texas

Wanting to escape the loud New Year's Eve party, I stepped outside and strode across the wooden deck of my brother's beach house. Ocean waves crashed against the Texas Gulf Coast as I leaned against the railing and inhaled the warm, salty air.

Tomorrow at this time, I'd fly back to my army post in Germany. Back to the life I knew and loved. The life I'd always wanted.

Yet, for the first time, I found myself envying my older brother Ethan. What would it be like to live on this peaceful island and work a stable civilian job? To have a wife and kids?

Shaking my head, I pushed the thought far away. Domestic life on Rose Island, or anywhere else, had never been part of my career plan. Never been something I'd wanted.

Startled by a noise behind me, I turned to see Anna Morgan sitting on a bench against the house. Had she been here the whole time, watching me contemplate the meaning of my life?

Even though she had no way of reading my thoughts, I was embarrassed and scrambled for something clever to say but went with the lame, "Are you enjoying the party?"

She wiped away a tear, making me want to kick myself. I should've commented on the beautiful night. On the full moon. On the deafening music. Of course she wasn't enjoying the party. She was sitting alone on a bench, crying.

"Your brother and his wife really know how to entertain, don't they?" she said, putting on a brave smile.

I glanced inside at the conga line weaving around the living room furniture and elaborately decorated tables laden with appetizers and desserts. Over the music, the DJ's boisterous voice shouted, "Forty-five minutes until midnight, y'all!"

The crowd raised their drinks and shrieked so loudly I feared the wall of glass windows would shatter. Tired of the commotion, I turned back to Anna. We'd met earlier tonight, and without a doubt, she had the warmest smile and softest blue eyes.

Unfortunately, she fell into the category of women I avoided at all costs—single mothers.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, stepping closer.

She waved a dismissive hand. "Don't worry about me. Apparently, I'm being overly sentimental."

"Oh?"

She held up her phone. "I just talked to my son. We have a silly New Year's Eve tradition, but he'd rather stay at his friend's house than humor his mother for thirty seconds."

Curious, I stepped closer. "What's the tradition?"

"Nothing, really." She gave a soft, self-deprecating laugh. "Just something we've been doing since he was three."

I liked the gentle sound of her laughter and how she didn't take herself too seriously despite being upset. "Tell me about your tradition."

She studied me carefully. Was I worthy of such knowledge? Apparently, I passed the test because she nodded and said, "Okay. We stand on the couch and hold hands. At exactly midnight, we jump into the air and shout, 'Into the garbage chute, flyboy!' It's his favorite line from—"

"Star Wars," I finished, taken aback by the eagerness in my voice. "I know. I can quote every line of that movie."

"So can Travis." She smiled again, giving my stomach that fluttering feeling of anticipation similar to what I experienced every time I jumped out of an airplane. If I were a wise man, I'd politely excuse myself and return to the safety of the party, because as much as I enjoyed this exchange with Anna, it didn't change the fact she had a kid.

That probably sounded harsh, but I'd never felt comfortable around kids. My niece was fun, but most kids scared me. A single woman with kids? Now, that type of woman downright terrified me.

I'd never admitted this aloud, but long ago, I'd vowed *never* to become a parent. Growing up, I'd been abandoned by my mother and ignored by my father. Not that I wanted anyone to feel sorry for me. My mother left when I was a baby, so I didn't even remember her, and my father hadn't been abusive, just highly focused on his career, proving you shouldn't mix family with ambition.

No, children and their single mothers would only complicate my military aspirations. Besides, I felt sorry for those kids who were dragged around the world, forced to change schools and leave their old friends behind. It didn't seem fair to them.

"Don't let me keep you from the party," Anna said, bringing me out of my reverie.

"You're not." I smiled, then, against my better judgment, I sat beside her and did the one thing I knew I shouldn't.

I asked more about her life with her son.

Her face brightened at the question, and she told me all about nine-year-old Travis, the smartest, most talented, greatest kid to walk the face of the earth. Anna lived next door with her son in the little turquoise beach cottage called The Blue Crab. And yes, the cottage was as *adorable* as it sounded—black shutters, colorful flowers in pots, and a porch swing with comfy pillows. The Blue Crab was as cozy and charming as my brother's nameless house was sleek and modern.

"Have you enjoyed being back in the states for the holidays?" she asked. "Ethan said you'll take command when you return."

"That's right. Being here has been fantastic, but I'm excited to begin the new challenge." I sat back and gazed up at the stars in order to keep from wondering if Anna's shoulder-length blond hair felt as silky as it looked. I'd never been intimidated by beautiful women, but there was a sweetness to her that made me nervous.

She continued asking about my job, where I'd received my training, and my past deployments. Because her father was active duty and she'd grown up as a military dependent, she knew a lot about the army.

Without even trying, we fell into an easy, relaxed discussion about the military and our experiences on different posts. When she admitted her disdain of eating eel in Japan, I grinned. "It actually tastes good, but I imagine a kid might find it disgusting."

She nodded. "I used to have vivid nightmares about eel replacing all my favorite foods . . . eel burgers, eel pizza, eel enchiladas."

I laughed, completely understanding the power of nightmares. "Why do some dreams feel so real?"

"I don't know, but after you wake up, does it ever take you a minute to convince yourself it was only a dream?"

"Yes," I answered, feeling an instant connection with her. "When I first became an officer, I had a dream that I lined up for formation only to realize I'd forgotten my boots. The whole time I was praying nobody would notice my bare feet."

She gave an amused smile. "That sounds like the military equivalent of going to school in your underwear."

We both laughed and something inside me shifted. A sort of loosening and tightening all at the same time. An uncomfortable sensation, but not necessarily a bad one.

Over the music came the DJ's rowdy voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's almost midnight, so grab someone you love and help me count it down. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six . . ."

An awkward silence passed between us. I stared down at my hands, wanting to take Anna in my arms and kiss her. Instead, I came to my feet and climbed onto the bench. She gave me an odd look, but I held out my hand. "Come on. I think this will make a good launch pad for your New Year's tradition."

A sly smile grazed her lips, and she hesitated a second before kicking off her sandals, clasping my hand, and joining me on the bench. All across the island, alarms blared, announcing the midnight hour. I squeezed Anna's hand, and together, we leapt into the air, shouting, "Into the garbage chute, flyboy!"

We landed on our feet, both of us cracking up.

Her blue eyes danced as they locked on mine. "Happy New Year, Nick."

A sizzle of excitement knocked the wind out of me, and I swallowed the unexpected lump in my throat. "Happy New Year, Anna."

For a moment, neither one of us moved. Then, without forethought or caution, I leaned forward and brushed my lips across hers.

She gave a sharp inhale, and I expected her to move away, but she surprised me by leaning closer to kiss me again. Her arms wrapped around my waist, igniting a fire deep inside me. I ran my hands through her hair to discover it was even softer and smoother than I'd imagined.

You've been waiting for this woman your whole life.

Before I could analyze or freak out about that absurd thought, Anna pushed me away. "I'm sorry," she said, stepping back to distance herself. Her eyes were wide, and she shook her head. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

"It's okay." I smiled, mostly because I couldn't help it, but I also wanted her to know it wasn't a big deal. I wasn't looking for anything. Whatever she wanted from me was okay. I just wanted her to stay. Just wanted to continue our conversation and enjoy this evening together.

"I have to go."

"What?" My head spun. "Why? Don't leave. I'm sorry I kissed you, but—"

"Good-bye, Nick." She turned and strode down the steps that led to the beach.

"Anna."

Without a backward glance, she raced along the seashell path toward her cottage. A strong ocean wind whipped through the dunes, practically knocking over her slim body, but she kept running. When she reached her home, she bolted up the porch steps, flung open the door, and disappeared inside.

I clenched my fist and pounded the railing in slow motion. *Way to go, Casanova. You really have a way with the ladies.*

Loud music poured from my brother's house, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Ethan and Ivana step onto the porch. My brother placed his hand on the small of his pregnant wife's back and guided her across the deck.

"Happy New Year," Ivana said, standing on tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

I forced a smile. "Yeah. Happy New Year."

My brother grinned. "You weren't scaring away the neighbors were you?"

I glanced at Anna's house and shook my head. "Of course not."

"That wasn't you putting the moves on Anna Morgan?" Ethan's eyes twinkled with mischief.

I shrugged, pretending I had no idea what he was talking about. "No."

My sister-in-law's face scrunched into that pitiful *Oh, Nick* look. Sighing, she patted my arm. "I can understand why you like Anna Morgan. She's very sweet and pretty, but she's an army widow. Her husband was killed in action several years ago, so she doesn't date soldiers."

"She doesn't date *anybody*," Ethan said, sounding put off. "We tried to set her up, but she wasn't interested."

Ivana rubbed her round baby belly. "She's still in love with her husband."

I glanced over at Anna's cottage, empathizing with her loss. Despite my desire to stay unattached and focused on my career, I'd felt an intense emotional connection to her. And when we kissed . . . well, as corny as it sounded, it'd been a long time since I'd felt an attraction like that.

Ethan nudged his wife. "How long would you mourn for me if I died?"

"Don't talk like that," she scolded. "Don't even go there!"

My brother tossed an arm over his wife's shoulder. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I shouldn't mess with a pregnant woman like that. How about I bring you another slice of your renowned caramel turtle cheesecake?"

Suppressing a smile, Ivana jabbed Ethan in the ribs and rolled her eyes. "You're only offering because you want a piece for yourself."

"Hey, the baby's hungry." He placed a hand over his own belly, which had expanded alongside his wife's pregnancy. Yesterday, I'd asked when he was due, and he'd tackled me to the floor like we were kids instead of grown men with successful careers.

"I'll get the cheesecake," I said, heading back inside in order to distance myself from my brother's happy marriage, this peaceful island, and the woman who'd captured my heart tonight.