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SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

VIRGINIA SMITH

INTO
the DEEP



Ben pulled a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket. Then, with a slow movement, he extended it toward Nikki. "It read 'Return the article and she will remain safe.'"

"She?" A wave of fear raised goose bumps along her arms. "Who is she?"

"There is only one she they could mean—you."

"We haven't seen each other in over two years, Ben. Until this afternoon, we've had no contact at all. And that was a coincidence. I don't know what this is about, but they must mean someone else."

He shook his head. "I don't think our running into each other was a coincidence at all. I think someone arranged it."

"What is this article they're talking about, anyway? What's going on, Ben? Why are you so worried?"

Nikki watched a struggle play across his face. Finally, he spoke in a low voice. "I don't want to involve you any more than you already are. It's safer if you don't know."

The memory of being watched crept over her like a wave on the beach. She glanced toward the closed patio curtains again. Was someone out there now? What had Ben done? Who had he run afoul of?

Books by Virginia Smith

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Love Inspired

Murder by Mushroom

A Daughter's Legacy

Bluegrass Peril

A Taste of Murder

Murder at Eagle Summit

Scent of Murder

Into the Deep

VIRGINIA SMITH

A lifelong lover of books, Virginia Smith has always enjoyed immersing herself in fiction. In her mid-twenties she wrote her first story and discovered that writing well is harder than it looks; it took many years to produce a book worthy of publication. During the daylight hours she steadily climbed the corporate ladder and stole time to write late at night after the kids were in bed. With the publication of her first novel, she left her twenty-year corporate profession to devote her energy to her passion—writing stories that honor God and bring a smile to the faces of her readers. When she isn't writing, Ginny and her husband, Ted, enjoy exploring the extremes of nature—skiing in the mountains of Utah, motorcycle riding on the curvy roads of central Kentucky and scuba diving in the warm waters of the Caribbean. Visit her online at www.VirginiaSmith.org.

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INTO THE DEEP

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Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can
I flee from your presence? If I go up to the
heavens, you are there; if I make my bed
in the depths, you are there.

—*Psalms* 139:7–8



For Ted, my dive buddy and best friend

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PROLOGUE

October 13

Mexico

At the sight of the morning paper, a lump of ice dropped into Ben Dearing's stomach. His brain did a quick translation of the Spanish headline screaming across the front page.

LOCAL MAN FOUND DEAD DRUG CONNECTION SUSPECTED

Cesar Ramirez, the owner of Blue Waters Scuba Shop and Ben's boss, tapped the newspaper on the sales counter with a sturdy finger. "I worry about you last night, amigo." The trademark smile that normally split the man's darkly tanned face was absent, replaced by a concerned frown. "You hear nothing? No guns?"

"No, nothing." Ben swallowed against a dry throat. "Why? Did it happen nearby?"

"Sí. Two businesses were vandalized on this road last night." Cesar pointed southward down the beach. "And the man was killed not a kilometer from here. That way."

His finger switched to point up the beach in the opposite direction.

Ben's brain kicked into overdrive to translate as he scanned the article, searching for the victim's name. *Sergio Perez Rueda*. Though bright Mexican sunlight flooded through the dive shop windows, the room darkened as Ben's head started to spin. He took a backward step and slumped against the wall beside a rack of scuba tanks.

Cesar stepped toward Ben, hand outstretched. "What is it, amigo? He was a friend of yours, this Sergio?"

Ben scrubbed at his forehead, thoughts whirling. "No. I've seen him around, but I barely knew him. He...was here last night." Ben jerked his head toward the run-down two-room apartment he rented from Cesar at the back of the scuba shop. "For less than five minutes. He came to the door and asked to use the *baño*."

Ben had been sitting on the back porch, watching the sunset over the crystal blue waters when Sergio rounded the corner of the shop. He'd seen how jumpy the guy was, the way he kept glancing over his shoulder. His breath reeked of stale beer. Ben hadn't wanted to grant the request to use his bathroom, but what could he do? Be rude and tell the guy no? Instead, he'd led him into the tiny apartment and kept a vigilant watch outside the door until he emerged.

Ben lowered his voice, hating the question he was about to ask, but knowing he had to. "Should I contact the police, Cesar?"

His boss didn't answer at first. He ducked between the scuba regulator hoses dangling from overhead hooks like rows of rubber snakes. The whites of his eyes nearly disappeared as he narrowed his lids and considered Ben's

question. Ben waited, breath halted in his chest, until finally Cesar shook his head.

“No, that is a bad idea. This Sergio, I heard about him. He is involved with bad people.” His voice dropped to a low whisper. “Reynosa, I heard.”

A chill zipped down Ben’s spine. The Reynosa drug cartel had gained in strength and prevalence in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo in recent years. Their violent reputation had increased with reports of kidnappings and execution-style murders, both within their ranks and among those who opposed them. If the Reynosa cartel was responsible for Sergio’s death, they might not look too kindly on a possible witness.

A car door slammed in front of the shop. Cesar’s eyes darted in that direction. “Unless somebody asks, say nothing. That is my advice, amigo.”

The first of the tourists scheduled for a morning of scuba diving entered the shop. Ben gave Cesar a single nod, then slipped into the back to begin readying the equipment they’d need to stow on the boat.

Though he had nothing but respect for the local police, whispered rumors of foreigners languishing in Mexican prisons had strengthened Ben’s desire to stay below their radar during the three years he’d lived and worked as a dive master in Cozumel. And the Reynosa cartel... He suppressed a shudder. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Cesar was right. Sergio had gotten himself mixed up with some nasty people, and now he was dead. Nothing Ben did or said could change that. But he was still very much alive, and he intended to stay that way.

Still, why had Sergio showed up at his place last night? Maybe it had nothing to do with the Reynosa

cartel. Maybe he'd vandalized the two buildings Cesar mentioned and was running to escape the police.

On the other hand, surely the news report would have included the detail that a police chase had occurred. No, more likely he'd been running from someone else, someone not necessarily official.

Reynosa.

Ben shook his head. But then why stop to use his *baño*? It didn't make sense. Unless...

His pulse kicked up a notch as a possible reason occurred to him. With a quick backward glance toward Cesar, he slipped out the rear of the store and into his small apartment. A steady salt-scented ocean breeze filtered through the open window. Standing with his back against the door, he scanned the cramped room that served as bedroom, living room, dining room and with the aid of a microwave and coffee pot, the kitchen. Sergio had carried a canvas bag slung over his shoulder, which he'd taken into the second room of Ben's apartment, the bathroom. Was he being chased because of something inside the bag? Something he'd stolen? Money? Drugs? Acid surged into Ben's throat. Whatever it was, would Sergio have tried to stash it somewhere so he wouldn't be found with it?

Ben crossed to the *baño* and scanned the tiny room looking for anything that hadn't been here yesterday. Clean towels lay more or less folded on exposed shelves in one corner. No medicine chest, so his toothbrush and toiletries rested on the top shelf. The shower stall was a single unit—not possible to hide anything there. In fact, there was no place to conceal an item of any size.

I'm imagining things. He didn't stash anything here.

Ben turned to go. As he did, his gaze slid across the toilet.

It looked no different. But somehow, he knew. After all, there was no place else within the confines of this cramped room. Moving slowly, he lifted the tank lid. Peered inside.

On the surface of the water was a plastic bag.

He recognized the waterproof pouch instantly. He and Cesar used a similar one on the scuba boat to keep their valuables, such as cell phones and cash, dry. This pouch was folded slightly to wedge it inside the tank in a way that wouldn't interfere with the operation of the toilet. He couldn't immediately identify the item inside the clear vinyl bag. Not the cash or drugs he was expecting, though. Stomach in his throat, Ben lifted the bag out. He tore open the Velcro seal, unfolded the top flap and emptied the contents into his palm.

A flash drive.

He almost caved in to the impulse that urged, *Put it back. Pretend you never saw it.* But what if someone from the Reynosa cartel came looking for it? What would they do to him if they found it in his toilet?

Ben stared at it, his mind cataloguing a list of possible data that might be stored on this device. It would have to be something big, something worth a man's life. If it involved the Reynosa cartel, there was no telling.

The storage device gripped in his fist, Ben wrestled with his thoughts. One thing was certain. No way could he take this to the police. He'd be signing his own death warrant. And he couldn't leave it here, either. He had to ditch it, someplace it would never be found.

But where?

ONE

March 22

Key West, Florida

Double rows of razor-sharp teeth gleamed wickedly beneath a dead black eye. Nikki Hoffman could almost feel the chilly waters around her, the current pushing her toward powerful jaws....

“You wanna get up close and personal with a shark?”

Startled, Nikki tore her attention from the collage of photos tacked to a bulletin board and whirled around. A swimsuit-clad surfer dude, tanned and bare chested, had appeared from a back room of the small shop she’d just entered, apparently alerted to her presence by the jangle of bells on the front door. He flashed a blinding white grin that contained more teeth than the sharks in the underwater pictures she’d been studying.

“For a hundred bucks, I can teach you how to scuba dive and take you to a wreck where the sharks hang out.” The grin became a leer. “Private lesson. You’d get my personal attention.”

Nikki suppressed a shudder. Sharks gave her the

creeps. Especially the ones with two legs and an agenda that had nothing to do with salt water. She'd met plenty like this guy when she had lived in Cozumel.

With an effort, she pushed the thought from her mind. She'd made a promise to herself to look forward during this vacation, not backward. That was one promise she intended to keep.

"Thanks, but I gave up diving a couple of years ago." She unzipped the fanny pack that undoubtedly marked her as the tourist she was and fished through the contents. "I have a coupon here for a free sailing excursion."

"Free?" The guy's shoulders heaved with a laugh. "I don't think so. The bosses don't give anything away for free."

"This is Key West Water Adventures, isn't it?" Nikki glanced around the shop, looking for a sign. "This coupon is for a free excursion of my choice, up to a \$100 value."

She pulled out the coupon and placed it on the counter. He examined it without picking it up.

Now that she looked at it again, this coupon didn't resemble the others in the welcome packet she'd received when she checked in to the time-share condo a few hours ago. It was just a black-and-white sheet of paper that might have been printed on a laser printer. But the logo at the top was identical to the one that adorned the sign hanging above the store's front door.

"Yeah, that's us, but I've never—" His gaze fixed on something over Nikki's shoulder and the confusion cleared from his face. "There's the boss now. You can ask him."

Nikki turned and looked through the window. The

shop lay midway down an L-shaped pier that stretched like a wooden finger into the bay. Beyond it, the mouth of the bay opened out into the blue Atlantic. Sunlight sparkled off the water's surface, momentarily blinding her. She blinked and caught sight of a boat moving slowly toward the end of the pier. A flag on top waved in the breeze, red with a white diagonal slash. The sight of the rippling silk sent a surprising wave of longing through her, so strong it halted her breath for a few heartbeats. A scuba flag.

Those days are long gone. And he's gone with them.

Swallowing back the surge of emotion, she snatched the coupon off the counter. "Thanks, I will."

Outside, the humid heat slapped at her with an open palm. The breeze carried a distinctive odor, a blend of salt and fish as familiar to Nikki as the smell of cookies baking in her mother's kitchen in Portland. She paused outside the shop and filled her lungs with the scent of the ocean. Many of the slips on the dock were empty, the boat owners probably enjoying this beautiful Friday afternoon. The wooden pier creaked as the remaining boats bobbed gently in the water, rocked by the gentle motion of this inlet. The scuba boat glided to a halt some distance away. She lowered the sunglasses from their resting place on top of her head and made her way toward the pier's end.

When the boat had been secured, two couples climbed onto the dock lugging scuba equipment and beach towels. They laughed and chattered as they shouldered bulky bags and headed in her direction. Music blasted from speakers on the boat. Jimmy Buffett, appropriately enough.

“Good dive?” she asked when they approached.

“Great dive,” answered one guy with a wide grin.

“We saw an eight-foot moray eel.”

The girl walking beside him shoved his shoulder.

“What a fish story. It was not eight feet long. But what about that school of yellow-striped fish? Does anybody know what kind they were?”

Then they were past, their voices carrying to Nikki as she neared the boat. The two men inside had their backs to her as they tidied up the deck. One picked up a weight belt and ducked into the cabin as the song ended. A few seconds later, Jimmy began singing about grapefruit and Juicy Fruit.

The second guy straightened and caught sight of her.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Fine.” She spared him a smile. “Are you the owner?”

“I’m one of them.” He shielded his eyes with a hand.

“What can I do for you?”

Nikki extended the coupon toward him. “I dropped by to make a reservation for a sailing excursion with this coupon, but the guy in the shop didn’t seem to know anything about it.”

He glanced at it. “You’re staying at the Pelican Resort, right?”

“That’s right.”

He unhooked a dive tank from its holder, nodding as he spoke. “Someone called and bought a gift certificate over the phone yesterday and had us deliver it to the Pelican. My partner took the call and told me about it. We don’t sell many gift certificates.”

Allison. A smile stole across Nikki’s lips at the thought of her generous friend. As if letting Nikki use

her family's time-share at no charge wasn't a generous enough birthday present.

The second man emerged from the cabin carrying a pair of fins. Nikki caught a glimpse of his profile as he crossed the deck in two long strides, then bent to store them beneath the bench.

"That must have been my friend," Nikki told the first man. "So, when can I—"

Shock snatched the rest of her question out of her mouth. For a second that lasted a lifetime, her world skidded to a halt.

She knew that profile.

Ben? Here?

Panic slammed her in the stomach, robbing her breath. A single, frenzied thought pulsed in her brain and catapulted her feet into action.

I can't let him see me.

She whirled and ran.

Even before his mind could fully register her presence, Ben jerked upright, his body reacting to the oh-so-familiar timbre of her voice.

Nikki.

It had been over two years, but he would recognize the woman running down the dock even if it had been forty. Her long legs, the familiar curve where her shoulders met her slender neck, even the way she ran with her hands pumping at her sides.

He dropped the fins, leaped from the boat to the dock and sprinted after her.

"Nikki, stop!"

She kept running. Ben kicked up his speed, ignoring the startled looks he collected from two men cleaning