

## Blurb

Shanice Lawrence has met the perfect man. He's sexy, considerate, and best of all, he loves to read. She's certain she's found the man of her dreams—until she learns the real reason for his appearance in her life.

Cruz Cordoba's mission was simple: Get close to Shanice, retrieve the data, and kill anyone who gets in his way—including her. But he didn't anticipate falling for the voluptuous bookstore clerk. Now he has to decide what's more important—the mission or the woman.

Until Now by Delaney Diamond

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## Spanish Translations

**Acere** – Cuban slang meaning bro, dude, buddy

**Cabrón** – Bastard, jackass

**Ahí está!** – There it is!

**¡Ganamos!** – We won!

**Hasta la proxima** – See you next time, Until next time

**Lo siento** – I'm sorry

**Mierda** - Shit

**¿Que bola?** – Cuban slang meaning How's it going? or What's up?

## Chapter 1

Cruz Cordoba swam quietly along the edge of the pier and then slipped from the dark water, army-crawling up the grass toward the mansion with a pair of night-vision goggles over his eyes that cast a greenish glow on his surroundings. He flipped the goggles on top of his head and assessed the landscape. Crouching in the shadows in a black wetsuit, he'd be hard to see.

There were three guards in his line of sight—two smoking and talking near the back door, another slowly walking the length of the second-floor balcony that ran along the back side of the house. All three were well-dressed with no visible weapons, but he recognized the gun bulge at their hips beneath those tailored suits.

Through the floor-to-ceiling window to the left side of the house, guests milled around in floor-length gowns and tuxedos, sipping champagne and laughing as if they didn't have a care in the world. They had no idea the man their political party had nominated to represent the state of Maine was a lover of snuff films—that *he* starred in.

Of course, there was also the money-laundering and rumors of using shell corporations to give donations to anti-government domestic terrorist groups, none of which had derailed his political career. Everyone knew he had presidential aspirations, but maybe a murder charge would finally do the trick before the piece of shit took down the whole country.

Cruz checked his watch and set the timer so it started counting down from ten. Ten minutes max to get in, retrieve the video, and get out. The delivery to a local journalist would take place in another location.

He eased to the edge of the brush and stayed low, waiting for the right moment. It was easier to take the men one at a time, but he'd tackle them both at once if he had to.

He removed the KA-BAR knife from his hip, blade facing backward as he gripped the handle and waited. As luck would have it, one of the men stubbed out his cigarette and sauntered back inside, while the other—a blond—remained behind to finish his cigarette. The one at the top was on his way down to the other end of the balcony, so when the blond turned his back to walk the length of the building, Cruz bolted across the grass.

Stealthy as a cat in his bare feet, he grabbed him from behind and slit his throat before he could scream. Nothing but the sound of a low gurgle escaped as Cruz supported him until he crumbled to the ground.

He wiped the blade on his thigh to get rid of the blood and paused, ears cocked as he

listened. No unusual sounds, so he was on the go again, moving swiftly in the opposite direction away from the window that exposed the partying guests. The agency had planted a waitress with the caterers, and if she did her part right, there should be an open window on the ground floor for him to crawl through.

Cruz stopped at the window and tugged up, and it gave easily. He pushed it higher and slipped in, then eased it back down. Once again, he paused and listened, which gave his eyes time to adjust to the dark interior. The sitting room was filled with antique chairs and portraits on the walls and smelled stuffy, as if it wasn't used often.

He'd memorized the floorplan of the house and knew exactly where to go. He tiptoed across the carpet and cracked open the door. No movement in the hallway, but he could hear the distant chatter of the guests and the music playing from the live band.

The office was at the end of the hall. He eased out and moved quietly as he approached the heavy oak door. He tried the knob and it turned.

*Perfect.*

This was almost too easy. A quick glance behind him showed the hallway was still empty, so he let himself into the room.

With a quick glance at his watch, he saw four minutes down, six to go.

He lifted the oil painting of the White House off the wall and, placing it on the floor, exposed the safe. He'd already memorized the combination, so he turned the dial according to the numbers and tugged open the door.

Cruz couldn't suppress a smile. Now for the treasure inside. He found the video easy enough—an old VHS tape sitting atop a stack of papers. Might as well take the papers, too. Who knew what nuggets of additional information could be found on those pages. He stuffed everything into the waterproof bag he lifted from inside his wetsuit, stuck it back in the suit and zipped up the front. That's when he heard the door open.

"Don't move," a gravelly voice warned.

*Dammit.*

Cruz listened to the faint sound of footsteps coming toward him on the soft carpet.

"Who the hell are you!" the man demanded in a loud voice.

Worried that his raised voice would invite other guards to come investigate, Cruz decided to defuse the situation by calmly asking, "Can I turn around?" He slowly lifted his hands to show he didn't have a weapon.

“Take. Your. Time,” the man warned.

Cruz heard the safety disengage from the gun and did just that—took his time—not wanting to make any sudden moves that could cause his trigger-happy opponent to shoot—accidentally or on purpose.

He turned and found himself face to face with the guard who’d stubbed out his cigarette. Dark-haired, he was about an inch taller than Cruz but not as wide, with a scowling face and shaved head.

“Who the fuck are you?” the man asked.

“Pablo didn’t tell you I was coming?” He needed to buy time, and bluffing helped him do that.

Right away, he guessed one thing about the man—he didn’t want to pull the trigger. The gunshot would be heard by the guests and questions would be asked. Which meant he’d try to detain Cruz and find out what the hell he was doing there. All of which worked in Cruz’s favor.

The guy frowned. “Pablo who?”

Not too bright, this one.

“You know Pablo. He works for Senator Peaslee.”

“There ain’t no Pablo.” Finally, he was catching on.

“Maybe I’m in the wrong place then. I should leave.”

His attempt at humor didn’t go over well. “No way.” The guy scowled and moved closer, holding his hand straight out and pointing the gun at the middle of Cruz’s chest.

Now he was in the perfect position for Cruz to disarm him. Attempting to grab someone else’s weapon was always a risky proposition, but he’d done it plenty of times. Wise men knew to remain at least a few feet out of reach so that if the victim moved quickly, you’d have time to fire off a round. Foolishly, the guard was standing too close.

*Distract.*

*Grab.*

*Kill.*

“You want to talk to Senator Peaslee about it? Go ahead, call him,” Cruz said, hands still raised in fake surrender.

As the guard hesitated, Cruz snapped the fingers of his left hand. That caused the other man’s eyes to shift toward the noise. Within that split second, Cruz snatched the gun and stepped out of reach.

The guard's eyes widened, and he thrust his hands in the air.

"Never hesitate." Cruz pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit the middle of his forehead as the sound blasted through the room. The man's head tipped backward, and he crashed to the floor.

Four minutes left.

He tossed the gun to the desk and dragged one of the guest chairs under the doorknob. That should slow down anyone coming to investigate the noise.

He closed the safe and replaced the painting. Hopefully they wouldn't guess he'd accessed the safe and removed the video, thus taking them by surprise. Since he couldn't go back the way he came, he lifted a window and swung onto the grass.

"Hey!" a voice yelled.

Two men in suits raced toward him. Cruz sprinted away from them, his long legs eating up the earth. The sound of handgun bullets cracked in the air. Clearly, they were no longer worried about disturbing the guests.

Several rounds whizzed way too close to his ear as he dodged and ducked in the dark, weaving a crooked line toward the water.

More voices yelling. There must be at least four of them now.

Taking a deep breath, he dived into the bay and sank to the shallow bottom, curling into the smallest ball his body could contort into as he pressed his back against the embankment. Bullets rained into the water from above, but he kept still. Depending on angle and velocity, the bullets could penetrate the water up to seven feet, so he didn't want to move and risk getting shot.

He could hold his breath for six minutes but didn't have that much time. He had three minutes tops to get out of there if he wanted to make the rendezvous location in time.

The men argued. Cruz remained still.

One minute. The voices moved farther away.

Two minutes. No more sounds. To be sure they were gone, he stayed put.

Three minutes.

Now he'd take a chance.

Cruz resurfaced under the pier and pulled air into his lungs. Above, through the cracks in the wood, he saw a man standing guard on the shore. Dragging the goggles over his eyes, he took another deep breath and dived into the bay, swimming underwater for a few minutes before returning to the surface.

With long, steady strokes, he moved swiftly toward the rendezvous point—a boat that awaited him on the water. Pretty soon the senator's men would come looking for him in their boats, and he wanted to be far away by the time they did.