

An Excerpt from SECRET SILVER NIGHTS

By Zuri Day

The third son of a powerful Northern California dynasty, Nico Drake has dreams of one day becoming governor of his state. First item on his agenda—beating his newest mayoral challenger. Ivy League dazzler Monique Slater is already swaying voters with her innovative ideas...and arousing an irresistible desire in the heart of her unattached opponent.

Monique has big plans for the small scenic town of Paradise Cove—plans that don't include falling for her sexy political rival. Keeping their sizzling relationship under wraps while running against each other is a tightrope act. Now someone is trying to not only ruin Monique's reputation, but also make sure Nico does not win the race. With both their futures on the line, can Nico convince Monique that there are no losers when it comes to love?

Chapter 1

“Niko. Heads up, guy. We’ve got a problem.”

Attorney Nicholas “Niko” Drake barely glanced away from the speech he was tweaking as his campaign manager plopped down the day's Cove Chronicle newspaper next to the iPad that had his attention. April had turned to May, but that hadn't stopped the rain. And that it was Saturday didn't deter this perpetual go-getter from showing up at the office, or his loyal sidekick from following suit. On Monday, Niko was speaking at a dinner for the members of the Chamber of Commerce. He wanted to make sure that the speech was just right.

“Niko, did you hear me?”

“How could I not hear you, man?” He didn't look up. “Even this early, seven in the morning, your voice reverberates off the walls.”

Bryce Clinton plopped into the seat behind a desk that was a mere six feet away from where Niko sat. “All right. Don't pay attention. But later today when you get blindsided don't say I didn't warn you.”

At six foot one and a lean one hundred and ninety-five pounds, Niko rarely felt he had to be warned about anything. So Bryce's comment got his attention. He reached over the iPad and picked up for the paper. The headline caught him at once: Newest Mayoral Candidate Promises A New Day.

Hum, interesting. So far there'd only been two other residents silly enough to not drop out of the race the moment he'd announced his candidacy. *So who is this fool?*

He unfolded the newspaper to read the article and was hit with his second surprise of the morning. The photo of said "fool." Someone he not only knew but had actually sparred with...and lost.

"Well, I'll be damned."

"He finally gets it," Bryce announced to an imaginary audience. Bryce was not only Niko's campaign manager but one of his best friends for the past twenty-plus years. Having grown up together in the tony Golden Gates neighborhood of their town, Paradise Cove, the two had lost contact during their college years. But after running into each other at one of the local restaurants and discovering that they'd both returned to their roots, they'd reconnected around eighteen holes and a couple of beers. Their friendship continued as though no time had been lost.

"So what are you going to try and do with this one?" he asked, eyeing his laptop and flipping through a myriad of emails. "She's not from around here so your name is likely not to have the same effect that it did on your previous rivals."

"I know her."

Bryce's head shot up. "Huh?"

"Mo is Monique. I would have never made the connection."

"Mo is Monique? You've lost me."

“Monique Slater,” Niko continued. “Successful attorney who practices in Los Angeles, or used to; steel fist in a velvet glove who takes no prisoners, who's known for chewing up prosecutors for breakfast and spitting out judges for lunch.”

Bryce pushed away from his desk, turned toward Niko and laced his hands behind his head. “How do you know her?”

Niko relaxed his position as well, stretching his long, muscular legs out in front of him, and picked up the newspaper again. “I debated her once in college; the most important tournament of my undergrad career. It was for the national championship. She kicked my then overly cocky behind.” He ignored Bryce's raised brow that pointedly took issue with how far in the past was Niko's arrogance. “I guess I can't say I know her exactly. We never talked outside of that one very significant college encounter. So needless to say I am going to need a resume on her ASAP, got it?” He continued reading for a bit, then looked up to make sure he had Bryce's attention. “Beginning with the answer to the question of how she moved here, gathered signatures, and secured the Democratic Party nomination without me or someone in my family knowing about it.”

“I gave you the names of those seeking both the Democratic and Republican noms months ago.”

“Her name totally slipped by me; didn't recognize it at all. Guess I was too focused on building my Independent Party platform.”

“Well, buddy, you know it now.” Bryce nodded toward the paper. “How she did it, and why her candidacy is potentially problematic, is all there in black and white.” He replied to a text message and stood. “I have a meeting with a couple pastors about your speaking to their congregations. Let's talk after you finish the article and discuss how you want to handle this unexpected development.”

“All right. Will do.”

Niko's gaze was speculative as he turned toward the window that looked out on one of Paradise Cove's busiest streets. In the heart of downtown, he'd opted to run his campaign from this virtual epicenter where seventy-five percent of the businesses were located instead of from the stately offices of Drake Realty located closer to the Golden Gates community. So far the move had proved highly beneficial. On any given day he rubbed shoulders with company owners and their staff, and customers of the gift stores, art gallery and framing shop, travel agency, insurance companies, coffee shop, medical and dental offices, dog grooming service, floral shop, New York-styled deli and middle to upscale boutiques. Once or twice a week he made sure to eat at Acquired Taste, one of the larger restaurants in the city and made an equal amount of appearances at The Cove Café, the town's casual diner.

With six months to go until the election, he felt he'd locked up at least sixty percent of the vote. The other opponents weren't exactly lightweights, but didn't carry Niko's kind of clout. Monique was new in town. No one knew her. “Who in the heck is Mo Slater?” he'd asked himself when reading the name. Some local nobody, he vaguely remembered thinking. With almost no name recognition, how did she figure she could compete against one of the town's most popular native sons? The Republican candidate, Dick Schneider, had the seniors, Buddy Gao, a Libertarian, the fringe element. Which only left everybody else: the liberal Democrats, progressives, independents, those fifty-nine and younger and most of the town's female population. One would be short-sighted to leave out this pivotal block of voters.

As far as he'd been concerned a mere ten minutes ago, this election was in the bag. That is until Monique Slater, the only woman who'd beaten him at almost anything, had entered the picture and put a hitch in the proverbial giddy-up. He'd dismissed that guy named Mo with a wave of his

long, thick, well-groomed fingers. But not this woman; not Monique. He'd underestimated her once before and paid the price.

Never again.

Picking up the paper once more, he studied the image smiling back at him. She was prettier than he remembered; softer, more feminine. Perhaps it's because in this photo her shoulder-length hair fell in soft curls around her face and neck, and her smile was bright and welcoming. The day of the debate, which was coming back to him as if it were yesterday and not over a decade ago, she'd worn her hair in a bun secured at the nape of her neck, as stark and conservative as the dark-colored pantsuit she'd also worn. Niko's thoughts whirled as he continued to study her picture. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that aside from the debate question and the fact that she blew his argument to smithereens, he didn't remember much else about her. Had they even had a conversation beyond the stage? He didn't think so. He remembered being angry and embarrassed at being out-argued, especially for the national trophy. The team had tried to ease his guilt and humiliation through teasing. A steely glare and a curtly delivered message left no doubt that for him there was no humor in any part of the affair. That night, he'd returned to California and walked straight into the arms of his latest love interest, one who'd undoubtedly been all too ready to offer comforting hugs and warm kisses to make him feel all better. In time, this solid trouncing became a distant memory in what was otherwise a stellar debating record and career during a fun-filled, sexually adventurous four undergrad college years.

His thoughts returned to Monique. She was attractive, but off-limits. Aside from the obvious improprieties of dating a political opponent, she seemed hardly his type. Serious. Conservative. That's what he remembered. Probably more than ready to give him a run for his considerable money. He hoped things wouldn't get ugly but would be prepared for all outcomes.

Because winning the mayoral seat was only the first rung in the ladder of success he'd envisioned since attending the inauguration of the country's first African-American president. So whether or not he would win and begin this political climb was something not up for debate.

* * *

Monique took one final look in the mirror before stepping from the master bath in her newly-purchased two-bedroom condominium and entered the spacious adjoining suite. She'd been very pleased to snag one of the few remaining units in the tony Seventh Heaven complex, located adjacent to the even more upscale community of Golden Gates and a mere three blocks from the neighborhood's award-winning golf course. That she'd been able to purchase anonymously had been even more satisfying, and part of the larger plan to catch her mayoral competition totally by surprise. It was also why, until this week, no pictures of herself had accompanied the ads, articles and scant, required information on Mo Slater. If what she'd been able to gather from her godmother was any indication, she'd totally succeeded.

A small smile danced across her face as she entered her walk-in closet and reached for the garment hanging on a wall hook. It was one of her power suits, simply designed and tailored to perfectly fit her five-foot seven, toned-yet-curvy frame. She ran a hand over the soft fabric, a light wool blend in charcoal gray, and imagined the look on Niko Drake's face when he saw the morning paper. Her assistant had rushed out before five a.m. to get a copy of the Cove Chronicle, and had brought it over before Monique had enjoyed her first cup of joe, which she had, immensely. The well-written article officially announced her winning the Democratic vote for mayor and explained in clear, concise detail why she was the best person for the job of running the affairs of Paradise Cove.

Donning the Victoria's Secret lingerie that made her feel sexy and girly beneath the ultra-conservative pant suit, Monique thought back to that first conversation she'd had almost two years ago with Margo Gentry, her godmother and the one who'd approached her with the idea of running for mayor on the Democratic ticket. Her first reaction had been a resounding no, followed by several reasons why the idea was impossible: too many cases, too many clients, no desire to enter politics and no desire to move from metropolitan Los Angeles. Margo had listened and then, in her gentle way, had reminded Monique of her godfather's expressed wish before he passed. This reminder had caused Monique to give the request due consideration. Not long after their talk a series of events made moving away and taking a break from law an attractive idea. She posted her candidacy just days shy of the cut-off for nominees, hired her godfather's best friend's grandson as her campaign manager, and then silently and strategically began building her base, her funders, and the focus of her campaign.

The results came in just one week ago. Due to their hard work and her godmother's considerably liberal social circle, she'd secured the highest number of signatures and therefore the Democratic nomination for the mayoral race. Her very first thought after this confirmation? That she and Niko Drake would be squaring off once again. For even higher stakes this time.

A ringing cell phone brought her out of her musings. Monique looked at the Caller ID and forced a smile into her voice. The woman on the other end of the line was known as a busybody who seemed to know, or think she knew, a little something about everybody in town. But she also owned the most popular salon, one that boasted nail care, facials, lash extensions and massages along with hair treatment, and one that was visited by women of all classes and colors. Joy DeWitt's active participation in her campaign could help Monique swing the female vote to her

favor and when it came to taking away women voters from Nick Drake's side, Monique knew that she'd need all the help she could get.

"Good morning, Joy," she answered, placing the call on speakerphone. "Are we all set for my visit?"

"My girls passed out flyers all last night and with our offering 20% off all services except hair appointments, I expect the shop will be full all day."

"That sounds great. I really appreciate your help."

"You're welcome," Joy responded before lowering her voice and adding, "Helping you beat Niko Drake will be my pleasure."

The two chatted a few more moments and then Monique hung up the phone. She thought about the story that Joy had shared about why she detested the Drakes, and had given strong consideration as to whether or not she should have someone with such animosity as a visible supporter. At the end of the day it came down to this fact: stopping short of illegal, the end justified the means.

After a last look in the walk-in closet's full-length mirror, Monique grabbed her oversized bag and set of keys and was out the door. She pointed the remote lock toward her newly leased luxury hybrid sedan and ignored the slight drizzle of rain as she headed toward the center of town. Ten minutes and she was there, having to park down the block for the amount of cars already lining the street, cars of customers who were no doubt in Joy's shop, enjoying the catered in breakfast burritos, Danishes, juice and tea that had been provided, and waiting to hear what Monique had to say.

“Let’s do this, girl,” she mumbled, encouraging herself as she locked her car, popped open her umbrella and began the short walk to the salon. “You’ve beaten Mr. Niko Drake once before. Let’s see if you can do it again.”

