

Ambush

On the Streets of the Pacific Northwest

By Lisa Parsons

Sneak Peak

“Pull up right there,” said Kelly.

Brian pulled the medic unit up behind the fire truck at the entrance to Highline Community College. They grabbed their medical kits and followed Kevin, one of the firefighters.

“Hey, Kevin. What do we have?” asked Kelly.

“Just our local homeless guy who says he has chest pain. It looks like he got off the bus and found his way inside. With this rain, he’s probably looking for a warm place to sit out the weather.”

“It’s that time of year again,” said Brian.

“Did the Lieutenant call an ambulance?”

“Already have one on the way,” replied Kevin.

They walked past the cafeteria and in between some campus classrooms. Kelly strained from carrying their heavy kit and the ECG machine.

“How far back is he?” asked Kelly.

“Toward the middle of the campus. I guess we should have warned you it would be a hike.”

Kelly leaned her head towards the radio mic clipped to her jacket and depressed the button. “Dispatch, have the ambulance crew bring their stretcher to the scene.”

“Copy.” replied the dispatcher.

They navigated the maze of buildings and found themselves at a double glass doorway. The entrance had a plaque with “Environmental Climate Science” written on it. The building looked brand new.

They entered a large foyer surrounded on three sides with glass windows, from floor to ceiling, revealing each floor. Kelly could see people in offices and classrooms.

She turned her attention to a sitting area across from the door and saw one of their regulars, Bob. Bob was sitting in a chair, bundled up in an oversized tattered wool jacket with a dingy red down vest opened to reveal his chest. The firefighters had him on a heart monitor and oxygen.

“How are you, Bob? I’m Kelly, the paramedic who saw you a few weeks ago.”

“My chest hurts. Here.” He put his hand to the middle of his chest.

The firefighter started to give his short report. “Sixties-year-old male complaining of chest pain. Vitals BP 200/120, pulse 120. RR 16....”

Kelly noticed Bob was sweating profusely and fidgeting with a hole in his wool pants. His dull blue eyes darted from his black canvas backpack to the doorway, and then he looked up at Kelly.

Something seemed different. His clothes were dirty, but he’d recently showered. His usual long greasy strands of gray hair had been cut short, and his face looked like he’d shaved the day before. Kelly noted that the backpack appeared new too.

“Bob, we haven’t seen you for a while. What have you been up to?” asked Kelly.

“I’ve been around. Stayin with friends.”

“How did you find yourself here?” She asked, curious why he would be deep in the college campus. Usually, he was at the bus stop at the entrance to campus or at the local 7-11 up on Pac Highway.

He leaned forward with his head tilted slightly downward. His cloudy blue eyes looking up at her from the side. “I was just walking when this chest pain started, so I came here. It’s real bad.”

“Are you taking your blood pressure medicines?”

Kelly looked back at Bob’s backpack sitting on the table next to him. “Can you check to see if his meds are in his pack?” Kelly asked the firefighter.

Bob abruptly blurted, “Can we just go!” His raspy voice had an edge of fear as he tore at the patches on his chest. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.” Then he vomited a large undigested

meal onto the ECG machine at his feet. He looked up at Kelly, vomit dribbling down his chin. "I'm sorry," he said.

The last thing that Kelly saw was Bob reaching up to wipe away the vomit from his chin. From his backpack there was a powerful explosion, disintegrating the building and everyone in it. As the yellow and red flame erupted outward, the intensity turned the pouring rain to steam before it hit the rubble and body parts left in the wake. The attack could be felt miles away.

Chapter 1

Nick and Maya sat on the back gate of her SUV. Maya leaned her head on Nick's strong shoulders, grateful for his presence. She couldn't imagine being alone in that moment. Nick was not only her fiancé and best friend, he was her anchor against the harsh winds blasting her from all directions.

Kali, Maya's Belgian Malinois, sat on the ground before her, looking directly up at her, watching to make sure her person was okay. Kali always seemed to know every nuance of Maya's mood. Maya could tell she was worried about her. As the sun set, Maya leaned her head on Nick's shoulder and dug her hands into the soft fur of her other dog, a white German shepherd, Rio.

"I still can't believe they're gone."

In the aftermath of Maya's phone conversation with Jeff, Maya, still reeling from everything that had happened in Tahoe, was devastated when she found out about Kelly and Brian.

Kelly and Brian had only been on the job a few years. Maya cried all afternoon. Emotional exhaustion finally overwhelmed her as they drove to the top of Winnemucca Peak, in Nevada, to camp.

They made their way home to Seattle the next morning. Along the way, they tried to enjoy the drive but Maya hadn't slept well. Every irritation seemed like knife edges cutting across her mind. When an oncoming car drifted slightly towards the center line of the highway she

shouted, “look out”, afraid the car would crash into them. When they stopped at a gas station, a loud bang from a truck backfiring caused her heart to pound as her vision narrowed. She was under fire again. She tried to push down the panic but it coursed through her body.

Just past Sun Valley, they hiked through tawny meadows and green Aspen groves past flocks of sheep guarded by big white Great Pyrenees, whose warning barks told them to stay away from their sheep. Rio and Kali quietly dropped in next to her and Nick. The dogs knew they were no match for these fierce protectors. Maya preferred the predators that would attack sheep to those who awaited her at home.

As they drove over the pass between Ketchum and Stanley, the rugged peaks were like mighty fortresses against time. Here her time felt so fleeting and temporary compared to the stone that had been there for millions of years.

Kelly and Brian were just doing their job when the bomb went off. A bomb that killed everyone in that Building at Highline Community College. Why there? It was a question she kept asking herself.

That evening she broke down again. “Nick, we need to go home. I need to be there for my coworkers.”

He looked at her with his deep brown eyes that said, I’ve got your back.

She didn’t mention the panic attacks and hopelessness she was feeling. She’d been ready to work on her mental health, but now she just wanted to put it all behind her. Processing her feelings about the murdered police officer and the attempts on her life in Tahoe would have to wait. She just needed to get back to work. There would be time later. If she could just hold it together.

The following morning, they drove directly home to Seattle. Maya looked out the window and planned how to get back on shift. The first step started with a call to her chief.

“Chief, hi, this is Maya.”

“Maya, hello. How are you doing?” said Chief Anderson with an edge of concern in his voice.

“I’m okay. I’m calling to follow up with you about coming back to work.

“Maya, I’m not so sure. You’ve had a lot of stressors. Now, with the loss of Kelly and Brian. Why don’t you take more time?”

“Chief, I can’t take more time. I can’t sit on the sidelines with something like this going on. Just let me come back. If I feel it’s too much, I’ll let you know. I promise.”

“Here is what I want you to do. Make an appointment with our psychologist. If she thinks you are ready to return to work, I’ll consider it.

Maya wondered if she could convince their psychologist that she was okay. She’d been able to handle everything before the ambush. If she could convince everyone else...and herself she was ready, she could return to the medic unit.

“You really aren’t considering going back to work when we return?” asked Nick.

“Nick, like I said I can’t sit on the sidelines. I need to be there for my coworkers.”

“Maya, you were nearly murdered on the police officer’s execution. That call drove you to take time off from work to recover but you didn’t get that. Tahoe was worse. We just left Tahoe where Don tried to strangle you and now you want to jump right back into a volatile work situation. Think about it. Is that a good idea?”

Maya looked away from Nick out the passenger window. Tears threatening to spill from her eyes. “Look, I know you’re concerned but my mind’s made up. You don’t understand. You don’t work in our profession. We rush in when others rush out. It’s our job!

Our profession, did she just say that? Would Nick, like her previous boyfriends, start to feel he’d never be able to compete with Maya’s coworkers, whose bonds were forged by the knowledge that their lives depended on each other?

Chapter 2

Maya sat in the waiting room, thinking about her next steps. She had to convince the psychologist that she was okay to return to work.

The door opened, and Dr. Julie Harrington waved her in. “Maya, it’s good to see you again.” Maya knew Dr. Harrington. She had given presentations on mental health resilience for first

responders at their monthly continuing monthly education meetings. Maya had heard that Dr. Harrington understood the challenges that first responders faced.

As Maya sat down, she suddenly felt extremely nervous and exposed. She leaned back against the chair, trying to give the impression this was a social visit and not an interview to establish whether she was fit for duty.

After taking in some details, Dr. Harrington sat quietly for a minute. She seemed to read through Maya's calm exterior.

"So, my understanding is you want to go back to work, and I'm your gatekeeper."

That caught Maya off guard. "Well, yes. I need to get your sign-off to return to office duty. I, I really want to help because of everything that is going on. As you know, we are down two paramedics."

"I get that. But first, let's talk about what has happened. Chief Anderson gave me some background on what you've been through, but I want to hear it from you."

Maya gave a brief detached recollection of the events, starting with the call with the police officer shooting, the events in Tahoe, the ambush of Kelly and Brian, and ending with the upcoming funeral. "I know it's a lot, but I feel I'm processing it well. I've discussed it with Nick, my fiancé, and some of my coworkers. I know I've been through a lot, but I'm tough. It's part of the job."

"Maya, I know you are tough, but no one is invincible. How many of your coworkers could have gone through what you've been through and still be okay? Wouldn't you tell them to take it easy and get some help?"

She paused, looking down at her feet. "It's just that I can't sit by the sidelines. I want, need to be back at work. I need to be there to support my coworkers. For me, helping is therapy."

"Yes, paramedics are great at taking care of others but not good at taking care of themselves. If you don't take care of yourself, you will not be as focused and able to care of others. I want you to think about what you would want for your coworkers if they were in the same position."

Maya knew she was basically asking her to admit she needed help. Maya cut to the chase.

"Look, I get it. If you release me to light duty, I'll agree to come in every week and dig deep to work through everything that has happened. Just give me a chance." Maya pleaded.

Dr. Harrington looked at her. Her eyes softened. “Maya, while I don’t agree with this, what I hear you saying, is that if I allow you to go back to light duty, maybe you’d be willing to open up a little?”

“Yes, absolutely!” Maya replied.

“Okay, I’ll release you back to light duty, but I want you to come in two times a week to start with. Then we’ll see how things are going and figure out the next steps.”

Dr. Harrington knew them well. She knew that if she stuck to a strict plan and enforcement, her strong-willed medics would just shut her out and refuse to cooperate. Maya felt relieved. Little steps. As soon as her sprained arm healed, she’d push to get back on the trucks.

Maya started back to work as if nothing had happened. She set up a desk in the office and met with Chief Anderson to set out a plan for her to work on implementing the details of their new “Domestic Terrorism Directive.” She attended meetings with Homeland Security (HS) trainers and their regional training consortium. She reviewed the plans, drawing on her personal experience when she and her coworkers were ambushed during the execution of the police officer. She helped integrate the training that would launch the following month. Training that would raise their situational awareness and give them tactics for staging and retreating if necessary. She organized their new, more protective, bullet-proof vests. They added ballistic helmets that they could comfortably wear on every call. She inventoried the antidotes for chemical weapons intervention. She wanted to ensure that she and her coworkers were covered while working on the streets.