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THE AUTHOR OF MARKED IN MEXICO

A relentless FBI agent  
ratchets up the heat  
in South America...

**A  
OF MEASURE  
MADNESS**

# A Measure of Madness

Kim McMahonill

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## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to all of the kind, caring, and compassionate people out there. I pray that their goodness and generosity will be contagious and our great country will be filled with benevolent and united people.

*Other Books by Kim McMahon*

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*Big Horn Storm*  
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# 1

From the shadows of the thick vegetation hugging the eight-foot-high block and stucco privacy wall, Max Markis studied the large Miami compound. He wasn't planning to break in. He didn't need to. He already possessed all the keys, codes, and contacts necessary to gain access.

As usual, the Florida night was warm and humid, but much more pleasant than it had been before dinnertime. Insects serenaded him from the darkness and frogs took up a chorus in the distance. It could have been a peaceful evening if he hadn't been tasked with this very unpleasant job.

He waved away the mosquitos buzzing around his head and then pulled out a pair of night-vision goggles. Of the dozens of workers it took to run the palatial property, only the security guard and property manager resided at the compound twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The two onsite staff were the only estate employees who had ever seen Max's face and the faces of the owner and his colleagues. These two unfortunate staff were now witnesses who required elimination.

He'd spent the past three days making sure everything was in order. He procured a high-speed

yacht, a damaged inflatable raft patched with a rapidly dissolving glue-type substance, tape, plastic ties, a fast-acting injectable concoction of drugs guaranteed to render his victims unconscious for hours, two needles, and a van.

If all went according to plan, the job would be finished well before daylight. Then, after cleaning up one more loose end in the area, he could return to Arizona where he kept a second home and his airplane, all registered under his alias, John Smith.

As predicted from the previous two nights of reconnaissance, the house was nearly dark by 9:00 p.m. Only the lights in the security room and the first story living quarters of the estate manager remained lit.

Walking the short distance to where he had parked the van, Max slid behind the steering wheel and drove down the long palm-tree-lined driveway to the compound's intimidating wrought iron gate. He pressed the call button.

"State your name and the nature of your business?"

"Monty Kline," Max stated, using the name he and his boss had agreed to earlier. Even though the guard knew his face, he had never given his name and had no intention of doing so now. "I have a delivery. Your boss should have notified you it was coming this evening."

The gate swung open. Max drove through and slowly wove his way around the narrow lane to the back of the main house where all deliveries were received.

A man with a head of unruly dark hair and of medium height and build met him at the door. Max noted he was unarmed and barefoot. *Some security*

*guard.*

“What do you got?”

“New monitors and recording devices for the security room. Help me carry the equipment inside and set it up so I can remove the outdated tech and get it out of here.”

They carried the six boxes into the room and quickly replaced the monitors and recording devices. Once the old equipment was swapped out with the new, both men loaded all the obsolete items into the van, including the media that had stored video of all activity through Max’s arrival.

“Can you make sure everything is up and running so I can head home? It’s been a long day,” Max stated.

The guard nodded and returned to the security room. Max followed and stood behind the man as he rebooted the system. As each camera was brought online, Max watched closely, memorizing every step in the process.

When Max was sure he’d seen enough to disable the cameras that would normally be recording his departure, he slipped a syringe out of one of the bulging pockets in his cargo shorts. With the guard still seated and focused on the monitors, Max jabbed the needle into the man’s neck and took several steps back.

The guard lunged from his seat, sending the chair slamming into the console. He growled, took two steps towards Max, and then crumpled in a heap on the cold tile floor. Max scanned the area outside. No sign of the estate manager. Either she hadn’t heard the commotion or decided it wasn’t her job to check it out. Good.

“That should keep you in a nice deep slumber for three or four hours,” Max mumbled as he secured zip ties around the man’s wrists and ankles. He slapped a

strip of gray tape across the guard's mouth in case he woke up earlier than anticipated. "One down, one to go."

Max was thankful when he heard someone in the kitchen. It would have been much more difficult to make contact with the estate manager if she were in her personal quarters. He made his way down the hallway toward the noise. He entered and was pleased to see she was dressed in casual shorts and a worn-out t-shirt. The small Cuban woman looked up from the sandwich she was preparing. She smiled and nodded at him in shy recognition.

"Hey, I wanted to let you know that we just finished replacing the monitors and recorders in the security room. I heard noise here in the kitchen and was hoping you might have a cup of coffee I could bum off you before I hit the road," Max flashed his most charming grin.

"I do not have any made, but it will only take a few minutes to brew some if you have time to wait," the woman replied with a warm smile.

"Thanks, I'd sure appreciate it. I'll just go use the bathroom and be right back."

Once out of sight, Max retrieved the second syringe from his pocket, already filled with the premixed tranquilizer. After a few minutes, he silently returned to the kitchen. The woman's back was to him. He wouldn't get a better opportunity.

"Sorry it's so late, but you know how it is. When the boss says jump, we ask how high."

The woman grunted and continued to pour water into the back of the coffee maker.

Max waited until she placed the pot in its slot, and then quietly closed the distance between them. The

woman stiffened when he was close enough for her to feel the heat from his body. Before she could react or scream, Max jabbed the needle into her neck. She staggered several steps and then her body went limp.

Catching her in his arms before she hit the floor, Max carried her to the van. He lay her gently on the floor, secured her hands and feet, and taped her mouth.

He stood and stretched, not looking forward to the next task. The security guard would be much more difficult to load, but there was no point in delaying. In order for everything to work out according to plan, he needed to keep on the timetable he had established.

Re-entering the security room, he locked the wheels on the desk chair. Max placed his arms under the man's armpits and dragged the motionless man toward the chair. Grunting and lifting with all his strength, he hoisted the limp form into the seat.

Max unlocked the wheels, placed an arm across the man's chest to keep him from sliding out of his seat, and wheeled him to the van. It was much easier getting the guard from the chair and into the van than it was to move him from the floor to the chair.

With his cargo loaded, Max returned the office chair to the house and did a quick sweep to make sure he had left no sign of his presence. He disabled the camera that would record his van leaving the estate and dusted every room he was in to remove any prints he might have left.

He doubted any of these precautions were necessary. The two staff in the van had been brought into Miami illegally. There was no record of them in the U.S. They would not be missed. Two new employees were scheduled to start in the morning. The

management company that took care of the estate and the new employees expected an empty house. A representative from the management company would meet the employees, conduct an orientation and training, line them out with their duties, and provide necessary supervision, since the owner was seldom on the premises.

Once satisfied he had left nothing behind, Max drove to the private marina where he had located a high-speed yacht with its owners conveniently out of town for two weeks. Earlier in the evening he had “borrowed” the spare set of keys from the marina office, a large metal chest for transporting and storing equipment, and a dolly from the marina warehouse. He retrieved the items from their hiding place and loaded each slumbering body, one at a time, into the chest and wheeled them onto the yacht.

With his cargo secure, Max motored as quietly as possible from the marina in darkness. When he was far enough away to not be heard by anyone on shore he turned on the running lights and opened up the throttle on the powerful boat.

He set a course for Cuba and ran at nearly 40 knots for two hours. His sleeping passengers hadn’t stirred, and he’d seen no sign of the U.S. Coast Guard. It was time to make the drop and head back to Miami.

Dragging the limp raft to the swim platform, he inflated the small boat with the yacht’s portable pump. He inspected the patches he’d taped over the holes earlier in the day, which he calculated would last only fifteen to twenty minutes in saltwater before the adhesive dissolved, allowing the tiny raft to fill with water and sink. To perpetrate the ruse that the two people were trying to reach the U.S. from Cuba in an

unseaworthy boat, Max placed a couple of water jugs, a few items of food, and a duffle with a change of clothes a husband and wife might be carrying with them into the raft.

Sliding the raft into the water, he secured it to the platform. He rolled the man's body into the little craft, removed the tape from his mouth, and cut the ties. Next, he moved the woman into the raft, cut her ties, and removed the tape from her mouth. To ensure neither woke prematurely, he refilled a syringe and gave each a partial injection. He was assured the drugs would leave their systems long before the bodies were discovered, assuming they ever were recovered.

Satisfied with his work, Max untied the raft. He watched as it drifted away on the current. When he could no longer see the bobbing craft, he set a heading for Miami and opened up the throttle as far as it would go.

The yacht raced through the night, the bow rising and then slamming down over the gentle waves. It wasn't quite like flying his plane, but Max loved the speed. Despite the moonlight reflecting off the ocean in a dazzling display, the wind rushing through his hair, and the thrill of completing a mission, Max was anxious to reach land. He had one more job to do before he could disappear in the desert.

## 2

FBI Agent, Devyn Nash, was pleased her partner, Nick Melonis, was back from his honeymoon. Two weeks ago he had remarried his ex-wife, Morgan Hunter, in a beautiful and intimate outdoor ceremony. Normally Devyn hated weddings, but she had barely quit smiling ever since.

For the past six months, she had been struggling to maintain a long-distance relationship with a Sheriff from Wyoming. Most of her fellow agents had believed he was just a figment of her imagination until the tall, broad-shouldered, sandy-haired sheriff strode into the office and set them all straight. The look on Agent Gardner's face had been priceless. Gardner had been going out of his way to undermine her self-confidence for years, and so watching him squirm made her love Sheriff Gage Harris even more.

"So, a weekend with the sheriff still has you smiling two weeks later?" Nick asked as he strode up to his desk which faced Devyn's.

They had commandeered the far corner of the large open area containing over a dozen agents' desks which gave them a little privacy, but had forced Devyn to run the gauntlet of Agent Gardner's nasty comments nearly every day. Devyn hoped that after Gage's visit, the unwelcome commentary would be over for good,

and she would be able to reach her desk without having to regularly weigh the satisfaction of giving him a fat lip with the possibility of getting suspended for hitting a fellow agent.

"Yes, and it's such a pleasant change to not have to deal with Gardner. He's still avoiding me like the plague."

"I hope his childish antics are finished, but it had to be a big blow to his ego to be put in his place by Gage in front of the entire floor, so watch your back. It may not be over. I just regret not being here to see it."

Devyn nodded and leaned back in her chair. "I wish you could have seen the look on his face. Seeing him speechless and nervous was one moment I'll cherish forever."

"As much as I'd love to hear all about it again—Morgan relayed to me every detail you told her—I really need to get up to speed on any progress you've made in the Risky Research case. I hope you, Gordo, and Fitz have found something in all the evidence we got from our operation in Washington, D.C. to justify putting Morgan at risk."

"Nothing is worth putting her at risk, but the mission yielded a gold mine of information. But, first things first. Conroy said he wanted to see you, me, and the tech guys as soon as you got in. I'll call down and see if Gordo and Fitz are available now."

"Does he have anything new that will help us nail Coterie?" Nick asked. "We have to put an end to the sick game this deadly group of individuals is playing to manipulate the diet, pharmaceutical, and medical research industries before anyone else dies."

"I doubt anything has popped since last Friday. I imagine Conroy just wants to catch you up and get an

update from Gordo and Fitz. The information we got through Morgan's participation in the Washington, D.C. political fundraiser operation has given the tech guys a lot of data to sift through. We have a bunch of new leads we're checking out that I can't wait to tell you about."

Devyn punched Gordo's four-digit extension into the keypad on her desk phone and then tapped her fingers impatiently as she waited for him to pick up.

"Hey Gordo, I was about ready to give up on you. Nick's in, are you and Fitz available to meet with the boss?"

After a brief pause, Devyn hung up the phone.

"They're on the way up and they're bringing breakfast."

"Don't tell me Gordo is still trying to win your heart with sweets?" Nick asked.

"No, but I do think he was a little intimidated by Gage so he's probably just trying to stay on my good side."

"I hope you're not taking advantage of him. He's a good kid, even if he has interesting taste in women."

"Interesting? Do I need to smack you?"

Nick laughed. "No insult intended. Most men around here are terrified of you, and you are a few years older than our naïve young Gordo, so you aren't the obvious choice for a workplace crush."

"Maybe Gordo and Gage are a little smarter than the rest of these knuckleheads and can see the softer side of me."

"Softer may be a stretch, though at least I have never known you to deck anyone who didn't deserve it. In fact, you haven't punched anyone or brought anyone to tears for months. What's up with that?"

“Keep it up, Nick, I may be on a bit of a hiatus, but I haven’t forgotten how to throw an effective right hook.” Devyn stood up and headed for Special Agent in Charge, Gerald Conroy’s office with Nick in tow.

### 3

The sun was just peeking over the mountains cradling Rio de Janeiro, silhouetting Christ the Redeemer in a divine glow. Despite the early hour the heat and humidity were already making Sofia Wilks sweat as she ran barefoot down the nearly empty beach.

She wasn't worried about being out alone so early in the morning, but she was worried about being recognized. She had no idea how broadly the photos of her had been aired in the United States before she fled the country, so she remained cautious.

Nearly every morning, she ran on this empty beach with no disguise, happy to be her herself for a few glorious hours before work; but the moment the city awoke, she became Miranda Baxter, a non-descript manager at a new pharmaceutical manufacturing company. She hated the mousy-brown wig, the uncomfortable blue contacts, the retainer making it look as if she had braces, and the thick glasses she wore to transform from Sofia to Miranda, but so far, the disguise had held.

Sofia glanced over her shoulder. She had lost the tall overly-muscled bronzed man she had dubbed, Adonis, who followed her every morning, though she knew it wouldn't be for long. She had no doubt that

J.R., her benefactor, self-appointed guardian, and head of Coterie was having her watched. She could ask him outright, but even if he did confess, she knew he would claim it was for her protection, not to prevent her from leaving him.

Her thighs and calves ached as she ran. Each footfall sunk deep into the warm sand, forcing her muscles to work harder than normal as she covered five miles of beach. She relished the pain. The aches made her feel alive. When she was forced to leave her home and the life she had worked so hard to build, she felt weak, but now her mind and body were growing stronger by the day. She was nearly ready to wrestle control of her life back from J.R.; she just wasn't sure how to go about the dangerous task.

Maybe she was being ungrateful. J.R. had rescued her, orchestrating her escape from Washington, D.C. He had given her a new life as the head of his new pharmaceutical factory in a country with no extradition, but she would be a fool to believe he would ever let her leave, even if she had another option. He claimed to love her, but when it came to love, she didn't trust her instincts or his intentions.

J.R. had gone back to Puerto Rico soon after getting her settled into her new life, but she wasn't free. Adonis wasn't the only person she had spotted shadowing her every move. They were clearly trying not to be seen, but she had spent her entire life looking over her shoulder, and she had become exceptionally good at spotting anyone who didn't belong in her world.

As Sofia approached the ornate iron gate which provided the only access through the eight-foot-high concrete block and stucco-covered wall surrounding

J.R.'s property, she caught a glimpse of Adonis. If he was the best J.R. had hired, she didn't need his protection. She felt confident she could give him the slip or take him out permanently at any time, but there were more. How many, she wasn't certain.

The others had been more difficult to spot. Those men clearly possessed skills superior to Adonis. She would need more time to determine if she had identified her entire *security detail* and to assess her chances of eluding them if ever given the opportunity.

Sofia punched in the code on the small keypad and entered the compound. Compared to J.R.'s Miami and Puerto Rico estates, the place was small but still very luxurious. The four-thousand square foot villa was surrounded by beautifully landscaped gardens, though she had never seen who tended them. The property had a kidney-shaped pool and an outdoor hot tub disguised to look like a steaming pond being fed by a small waterfall. The only view inside the compound for any curious on-lookers was through the gate she had just entered, which was just wide enough to drive through.

She tried to resist the temptation to look up at one of the dozen cameras she had identified around the property. She couldn't help but wonder who was watching. It could be some security guard located off-site or in a van down the street, or maybe even J.R. There was really no way to know, but the idea of being watched didn't set well. Sofia had always been a private person and was obsessed with being in charge of her life. The fact that she had lost that control made her feel trapped and angry.

After a quick shower, she dressed for work in a light-weight skirt and long-sleeved white blouse. She

donned her wig, contacts, retainer, and glasses. She also had a professionally sculpted mask, but she would wear it only if she needed to fly or thought she might come into contact with a sophisticated security system. The mask changed her appearance subtly in an attempt to fool facial recognition software by altering the shape of her face, the shape of her eyes, and the positioning of her cheekbones. In Rio's climate, the mask was too hot to wear daily, so she kept it hidden away in the villa for emergencies.

As it was every morning, a black sedan with tinted windows waited for her as she exited the property. J.R. had arranged a driver to take her to the pharmaceutical factory and anywhere else she wanted to go. She should have seen it as a thoughtful gesture, but she knew it was one more way he could track her movements and be assured of her whereabouts at all times.

If she ever attempted to disappear, she would probably need to go on a Friday night and by Monday morning be far enough away to never be found. If she didn't meet the driver outside the gate at 7:00 a.m. each weekday, the hunt would be on.