



ISABELLA
MALDONADO

THE

CIPHER

“A heart-pounding novel from page one . . .
I read this in one sitting and I guarantee you will too.”
—JEFFERY DEAVER, *New York Times* bestselling author

PRAISE FOR ISABELLA MALDONADO

Praise for *The Cipher*

“A heart-pounding novel from page one, *The Cipher* checks all the boxes for a top-notch thriller: sharp plotting, big stakes, and characters—good and bad and everywhere in between—that are so richly drawn you’ll swear you’ve met them. I read this in one sitting and I guarantee you will too. Oh, another promise: You’ll absolutely love the Warrior Girl!”

—Jeffery Deaver, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Intense, harrowing, and instantly addictive, *The Cipher* took my breath away. Isabella Maldonado has created an unforgettable heroine in Nina Guerrero, a dedicated FBI agent and trauma survivor with unique insight into the mind of a predator. This riveting story is everything a thriller should be.”

—Hilary Davidson, *Washington Post* bestselling author

Praise for *Phoenix Burning*

“Maldonado’s a writer to watch, and she showcases her own extensive law enforcement background in this tightly plotted police procedural.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Maldonado, a former law enforcement officer, brings her experience and expertise to this gripping police procedural. With its gritty heroine, this

action-packed mystery will attract readers who enjoy crime novels about the war on drugs.”

—*Library Journal*

“Phoenix may be burning, but Maldonado’s star is rising. Gritty and gripping.”

—J. A. Jance, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Maldonado’s writing always bristles with urgency and authority.”

—*Mystery Scene Magazine*

“Delivers a brilliant and complicated heroine, accented by a take-no-prisoners plot . . . It’s spicy, smart, and entertaining, definitely worth your time.”

—Steve Berry, author of *The Lost Order*

Praise for *Blood's Echo*

Winner of the 2018 Mariposa Award for Best First Novel

“A highly entertaining police procedural . . . Maldonado rises to her written challenge to entertain, enthrall, and engage readers in this high-octane thriller.”

—*Suspense Magazine*

“A tense thriller with a strong sense of place and an insider’s look at some of the most dangerous work in law enforcement.”

—Jan Burke, *New York Times* bestselling author

“The Phoenix sun isn’t the only thing burning in this thrilling debut, and I look forward to more.”

—Shannon Baker, bestselling author of the Kate Fox mystery series

“An ex-narc leads a war against a powerful crime family. The payoff is satisfying.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Praise for *Death Blow*

“If you’re in the mood for a nonstop exposé of every fear you’ve ever had about cartel crime, Veranda Cruz is the woman to follow.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Finally! A kick-ass female protagonist and an author who knows firsthand the world she writes about. The combination makes for an explosive read that grabs you from page one and doesn’t let go.”

—Alex Kava, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Lost Creed*

“Red alert to all readers of police procedurals with a strong thriller bent: Isabella Maldonado’s *Death Blow* delivers nonstop action with substance, grit, and surprises.”

—Lisa Preston, author of *The Clincher*

“Gritty, raw, and realistic, Isabella Maldonado’s *Death Blow* is the real deal.”

—Bruce Robert Coffin, bestselling author of the Detective Byron mystery series

“A gritty, gut wrenching, page-turning thriller featuring a woman cop bent on bringing down a twisted cartel leader for reasons of her own, *Death Blow* grabs you from the first jaw-dropping scene to the last, and Maldonado’s stellar writing weaves it all together.”

—Jamie Freveletti, internationally bestselling author of *Blood Run*

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MALDONADO**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*For Mike,
the other half of my heart.
I love you.*

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Chapter 1

Ten years ago

*Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District
Court of Virginia*

Nina Esperanza gazed up at the man who held her fate in his hands. Judge Albert McIntyre perused the submitted documents in silence. She forced her foot to stop jiggling beneath the long oak table and schooled her features into what she hoped passed for a polite expression. The papers had been filed, the testimony had ended—only the ruling remained.

The judge stopped reading to eye her, taking her measure before he spoke. “I am prepared to finalize your petition to the court, but before I do, I want to be sure you are clear about the consequences of this decision. This ruling cannot be reversed. You will have full responsibility for any actions you take or agreements you enter into from now on.”

Nina’s guardian ad litem, Cal Withers, dug a finger into his shirt collar. “She accepts the terms, Your Honor.”

Withers was the attorney appointed by the court to represent Nina’s interests. At seventeen years old, she could not petition the court on her own. His silver hair, deep-set wrinkles, and calm efficiency spoke of experience. His careworn expression bore witness to years spent wrangling with an unpredictable juvenile court system that could either render or miscarry justice depending on the circumstances.

The judge flicked a glance at Withers before directing his next words to the girl whose life he was about to irrevocably change. “I understand why you are petitioning this court for emancipation. Especially given your current situation.”

The few people allowed to attend the closed hearing shifted in their seats, but Nina refused to shrink down in her chair. After what had happened, she'd made a private vow never to go back into the system. If the judge didn't rule in her favor, she would run away again. And this time, no one would find her until she had passed her eighteenth birthday.

"You have demonstrated that you can support yourself," Judge McIntyre said. "But what are your plans going forward? Do you have a goal for the future?"

Withers spoke before she could answer. "Your Honor, the paperwork we filed shows an early acceptance to George Mason University. She's also been awarded a scholarship and grant money to assist with tuition. She has a part-time job and will live in a dorm on campus where she—"

The judge held up an age-spotted hand. "I would like to hear the young lady speak for herself."

Withers had tried to intervene, to spare her this moment. He and her caseworker had counseled her before the hearing. If the judge asked about her career plans, they had advised her to give a touching speech about how she had considered becoming a nurse, teaching kindergarten, or joining the Peace Corps. Technically, it wasn't a lie. She *had* contemplated those options. For about a nanosecond. Then she'd realized what she should do with the rest of her life. But would the judge accept her choice?

Under the table, Withers nudged her foot with his. She knew what he wanted her to say. Then again, she'd never done anything just because someone said she should. Probably why she'd bounced from one foster home to another.

Coming to a decision, she squared her shoulders and opted for the truth. "I'm entering the criminal justice program at GMU. After graduation, I'll join the police department, work my way to detective, and spend the rest of my career putting monsters who prey on children behind bars."

Withers scrubbed a palm over his face. The county caseworker shook her head.

Nina ignored their reactions, focusing her attention on the judge. "Is that far enough into the future, sir?"

Judge McIntyre narrowed his eyes. "You'll continue with counseling?"

"Yes, sir."

“Circumstances have made you very independent at an early age, Ms. Esperanza,” Judge McIntyre said. “But you must allow others to help you when you need it. Remember that.”

The courtroom fell silent. Every eye was trained on the judge. Waiting. Her frayed nerves stretched to the breaking point. Had she just made him doubt she could deal with what had happened to her? Her breath caught.

After an eternity, his deep voice broke the silence. “I will grant the petition.”

She exhaled with a long sigh.

“Now for the remaining matter.” The smile died on her lips as the judge continued in a somber tone. “The petition for a name change.” He held up a notarized document. “You are requesting to change your name from Nina Esperanza to Nina Guerrero. The filing indicates that you wish to choose a name rather than continue to use the one assigned to you. You could do this when you turn eighteen next year, why the rush?”

Withers found his voice. “Your Honor, my client was given her current legal name by her original caseworker when it became clear adoption would be”—he cast her an apologetic glance—“unlikely.”

Her gaze drifted down to her clasped hands. As a little girl, she was not among those with bouncy blonde curls and bright blue eyes. She did not have porcelain skin or rosy cheeks. The caseworkers never referred to her as *sweet* or *shy*. Instead, she overheard snatches of conversation peppered with words like *headstrong* and *willful*. She may not have fully grasped their meaning at the time, but she knew these terms—along with her dark hair, brown eyes, and tan skin—set her apart from the other girls. The girls who got adopted.

Withers rushed to fill the awkward silence. “She had no say in the matter and believes the occasion of her emancipation from the guardianship of the Commonwealth of Virginia is the appropriate time to choose a name that reflects her new course.”

The judge raised a bushy gray brow at her. “Your new course?”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “Do you speak Spanish, sir?”

“I do not.”

She drew in a deep breath. Full disclosure was her best option. “I tracked down my very first caseworker from when I entered the system seventeen years ago.”

The judge's expression darkened. "I'm aware of the . . . circumstances."

Circumstances. A detached clinical term designed to protect her feelings. The judge probably thought he was being kind, but he couldn't whitewash it.

She had been left to die in a dumpster when she was a month old.

Nina swallowed the lump in her throat and went on. "Her name is Myrna Gonzales. She told me I'd originally been called Baby Jane Doe. She wanted me to have an ethnically appropriate name, so she called me Nina, the English version of *niña*, which means 'girl' in Spanish. She also hoped I would be one of the kids who has a happy ending. That I would be adopted by a loving family, so she named me Esperanza, which means 'hope.'" The lump in her throat expanded, straining her last words. "I didn't get that happy ending."

"No," Judge McIntyre said. "You did not."

He didn't attempt to patronize her, which she appreciated.

"But why Guerrero?" He wanted to know.

"In Spanish, *guerrero* means 'warrior' or 'fighter,' and *guerrera*—with an *a* on the end—refers to a female."

The judge took a moment to digest her words before his eyes reflected comprehension. "Warrior girl."

She inclined her head in acknowledgment. "I've given up on hope," she said quietly, then lifted her chin. "From now on, I fight."

Chapter 2

Present day

Lake Accotink Park, Springfield, Virginia

Ryan Schaeffer tamped down his excitement. He had to keep his head in the game. So much careful preparation had led to this moment. The late-afternoon sun showered down through the dense canopy of trees, dappling the running trail below. A warm fall breeze rustled through the hedgerow, the faint scent of azaleas providing momentary relief from the pungent odor of sweat clinging to his best friend.

Zippo popped his head above the shrubbery to check on the jogger. “Here she comes.” He held the binoculars up to his eyes, focusing them on the winding trail near the shore of Lake Accotink. “I can make out that neon blue tank top she’s wearing.”

“Let me see.” Ryan yanked the field glasses from Zippo’s grasp, eliciting a stream of expletives. “Oh yeah.” His pulse kicked up a notch as he dialed in a clearer image. “She’s a hottie.”

The jogger’s short-cropped dark hair was sweat-damp and sexy, like the spandex that clung to her toned body. He studied the steady rhythm of the footfalls bringing her closer to his hiding place. His blood heated.

“And she’s small,” Zippo said. “She can’t weigh more than a buck ten. How much of a fight can she put up?” He jabbed Ryan’s ribs with a bony elbow. “Should be easy for you, dude.”

A senior at East Springfield High, Ryan was already bigger than his father. Four years on the gridiron had taught him how to tackle a runner. Zippo was right—he could take her without breaking a sweat. They’d come to the park every day after football practice, hunting. Today they’d finally

found the perfect . . . what had Zippo called her? *Prey*. They were the hunters, and she was their prey.

He glanced at Zippo. “You aren’t going to wuss out, are you?”

Zippo grabbed his crotch. “Dude, I’m locked and loaded.”

Ryan nodded. “You getting this?”

Zippo held up the burner phone he’d bought last week. “On it.”

Ryan would take his turn first while Zippo livestreamed the whole thing. He’d sworn the cops couldn’t trace anything back to them. Ryan had gotten ski masks for both of them so they could change places once he finished with her.

Ryan gave a thumbs-up. This would be epic. He peered back through the lenses. “She’ll be at the spot in about thirty seconds. Better get in position.”

They pulled the knit masks over their heads. Zippo crouched, poking his phone through a hole in the hedgerow.

Ryan hunkered into a three-point stance next to the thickest part of the foliage. She wouldn’t see him until it was too late. He watched her approach. They had picked out a place near the end of the running trail, figuring she’d be tired if she jogged the whole way, but it didn’t matter. She was tiny. Up close, her brown eyes looked huge in her small face. He would make those eyes go even wider. Body thrumming with anticipation, he focused and waited.

The instant she ran past him, he launched himself, slamming his shoulder into her back with all his weight.

She sprawled headlong, thudding facedown on the grass beside the trail. He had knocked the wind out of her, but he figured she would recover enough to scream in a few seconds.

He couldn’t let that happen.

She rolled over as he threw his body forward again and slammed down on top of her, using the full force of his bulk to crush her. He heard the air rush from her lungs in a grunt and knew he’d bought another few seconds of silence.

Before he was prepared, she began to fight. One of her palms shot upward, connecting with his nose. He howled and batted her hand away. While he tried to grasp her arms, she brought her knee up into his crotch. Gritting his teeth, he managed to avoid rolling off her and doubling over.

Realization dawned. If he didn't regain control fast, this crazy chick would kick his butt. Pinning her legs with his thighs, he reached for her wrists. They were so slender he could easily hold them both in one hand. He grabbed one and fumbled for the other when he felt searing pain in the soft flesh along the back of his jawbone just under his earlobe.

He pulled his head back, lifting slightly off her, and caught a glimpse of something black in her free hand. Had she stabbed him? There was no blood. Still clutching one of her wrists, he drew his other arm back to punch her face when the agony returned to light up every nerve above his shoulders. She kept digging that black thing into him.

All thought ceased in the wake of the most excruciating pain he had ever felt. The sensation felt overwhelming, devastating, immobilizing.

Where was Zippo? A small part of his mind still able to function understood he needed help taking down a woman less than half his size. What the hell had he gotten himself into? Darting a glance to the left, he saw the back of Zippo's gray T-shirt flapping behind him as he ran away. He would murder the little weasel first chance he got. The throbbing along his nerves eased a fraction, and he became aware the woman underneath him was speaking.

Her enormous brown eyes had narrowed to slits. "What's your name?"

Intense pain had reduced his thought processes to their most primal level. His synapses only fired on one overriding subject. "You're hurting me."

"Am I?" She pressed in harder, blurring his vision around the edges. "I'm all choked up about that. Here's a thought. Don't jump women in the park."

He could only muster a feeble protest. "I didn't . . . it was just a prank. Wasn't serious."

"Save it." Her lip curled. "You're under arrest."

Everything crashed in on him as her words sent his once-bright future spiraling into darkness. Less than five minutes ago, he'd been headed for college on a full-ride football scholarship. Now he'd be playing hoops in a prison yard.

His watering eyes met her steady gaze. "C-cop?"

"Special Agent Nina Guerrero." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "FBI."