

Prologue

The Cessna 180 Amphibian was going down.

“Under the radar,” he said to her with a wink and a smile, then repeated it in Spanish, assuming it was her native tongue.

She looked out into the moonless sky, then turned her gaze to the side window, trying to spot something, anything, below. The pitch black darkness left nothing to see but her own reflection in the glass – an image she barely recognized under a shorn mop of black dyed hair that had been a dark honey blond that morning. Brown tinted contacts had changed the color of her blue-green eyes to a muddy hazel. Thick black eyeliner, smoky eyeshadow and spiky eyelashes added to her disguise as a street-smart hooker fleeing the islands in the dead of night.

At least that’s the excuse she had given Danny-the-pilot, speaking to him in Spanish when she’d offered him two thousand dollars to fly her to Florida under the cloak of darkness. She’d given him half, with the rest promised at the end. As far as he knew, thanks to a few intentional yet deceitful slips, she was a Cuban refugee with high-dollar clients who had more work for her in Miami if she could find her way there on her own.

With no time to lose and no passport, she knew that slipping in through Key West would be the easiest way back into the states. Once there, she would have to lay low for a while before she could contact her sister in San Francisco to let her know that she was safe.

Kris looked down at her forearm where some of the heavy theatrical foundation did little to mask the purplish-green bruises. She had used the same makeup on her jaw and cheekbone. The swelling was enough to distort the outline of her face which was actually a good thing. No one would be looking for a puffy-faced Latina. She was lucky her eyes hadn't swollen shut.

Lucky.

She was damn lucky to be alive.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw the horrific rage come over her husband, Raymond, who had always been the epitome of calm and cool throughout their brief courtship. But he had changed in subtle ways, she’d realized, beginning with the anxious impatience at their elegant society wedding. Never, however, had she suspected him of violence. Not until that night in the bungalow. The sudden blows. The blood. Her blood.

She had run off into the night with nothing but her purse and the clothes on her back. But when she’d returned to retrieve her suitcase and passport so she could fly home to San Francisco and have the marriage annulled, she had walked into their honeymoon bungalow to find blood everywhere, it seemed. Splattered on the walls. Drenched into

most of a large white area rug. Red shoe prints stamped across the pale pine floor, to the bathroom, to the lanai, to her own feet standing in the doorway.

But there had been no sign of Raymond.

“We’re making a brief stop,” the pilot said casually, again in Spanish, pulling her thoughts away from the macabre memory.

Her heart leaped to her throat, but she had to keep her composure and remember the language barrier she had set up as part of her character, answering him in kind, “We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Exactly.” He flew the plane down to sea level, skimmed the unusually calm surface, and flipped some switches on and off, sending a signal with his landing lights. Ahead, a light blinked in response. “Perfect.”

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” He grinned a cocky grin.

“I paid you to take me to the keys.”

“And you’ll get there. After I conduct some private business of my own.”

Was this the reason he had been quick to take her money, and his plane had been ready to fly at a moment’s notice? Had he already intended to leave the islands that night for this secret rendezvous?

Kris could only imagine what kind of people waited for them. She had been through hell and back in the past twenty-four hours, but now it was beginning to look as if she had been too quick to think that the worst was over. No matter what personal business the pilot had planned, he knew her profession – or thought he did – and would sell her services if the price was right. After all, he only had to search her bag for the second half of his payment from her. Once he had it, he could auction her to the highest bidder.

Would he do that?

She didn’t have time to find out. The plane came to a stop near three modest sized fishing boats in the water. One of them motored over as Danny opened his door.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Shots fired. Flashes of red-orange peppered the night. Bullets hit the plane. Danny slammed his door shut, hollered at her to get down, and revved the engine.

“I’m hit!” he yelled, desperately pulling back on the wheel. She reached over to try to help, but he shook his head. “We’re not going to make it.”

Jump!”

“What? No!” Her perfect English startled him.

“What the—” He regained his composure, and screamed in her face. “Jump, dammit! My cover is blown! When we go down, they’ll kill me, then use you for entertainment before they cut you up for shark bait. You have a better chance if—”

He didn’t have to say any more. She already had her door open and was about to step onto the pontoon when the plane shuddered. Her foot slipped. She tumbled forward, slamming hard against the pontoon, then toppling over the side.

A brilliant flash of light illuminated the sky above her as she sank into the murky darkness.

Chapter One

The night swirled with visions of fists and blood. Pain. Screams. Her own? She wasn’t sure. Her hands dripped red. Her nightgown was torn and stained. She ran out of the bungalow. Hiding in the bushes. Darkness. Voices. Someone else had arrived. The voices raised. Louder. An argument. Muffled sounds of thumps and grunts. Curses. Fighting.

Then silence.

She waited. Holding her breath. Listening. No sounds.

Crouched in the dark foliage, she prayed. For the night to be over. For the light of day. For her life.

“She’s having another dream,” the doctor said, checking the vital signs of the woman lying in the hospital bed, her wrist restraints loosely strapped to the railing to keep her from flailing her arms, one already in a cast, during the worst of the episodes.

Mitchell Fargo stood by, helplessly watching her struggle against someone or something in her mind. Her bandaged head rolled side to side on the white cotton pillow, inhibited by the ventilator tube taped to her mouth.

Who was she? What was her name?

He had hoped his cross-country flight to Key West would supply much-needed answers to the questions surrounding the death of his kid brother. He wanted to know if this woman knew what had happened in the small commuter plane to make it go down in the middle of the ocean on a calm summer night. Why had she been on board? Was she involved with Danny? Or just a passenger? The only passenger, according to the rescuers.

She seemed to be resting peacefully again.

“Do you have any idea when she’ll wake up?” Mitch asked Dr. Mendenhall, who looked about his own age. Maybe older. Maybe closer to forty. With his brown hair tied back in a ponytail, wire-rimmed glasses and dark tan, the physician looked and acted a little less like a doctor and a little more like one of the colorful locals in this eccentric town on a two-by-four mile island. This was the end of the road, literally. Highway One. Mile Zero. Right there in Key West. And it drew every drifter and loner and whatnot that ever lived. Or so it seemed. Mitch wondered if this doctor was the real thing or if he had an offshore license.

Hands stuffed into the pockets of his white coat, the doc shook his head. “When she was admitted two weeks ago, we had to induce a comatose state to lessen the swelling of the brain. She’s ready to come out of it on her own now, but it’s up to her.”

“She could stay this way indefinitely?”

“Hard to say.”

“Then I may never find out,” Mitch said, more to himself than to the doctor.

“Find out? Who she is, you mean?”

“No. What happened to my brother.”

Another voice spoke behind the two men, “Drugs.”

Mitch turned to see a beefy uniformed Key West cop, who greeted the doc by the name of “Wiz.” Who the hell went by the handle of Wiz?

“Hey, John.” The doctor pumped the man’s massive hand in greeting, then said, “This is Danny Fargo’s brother Mitchell. Mr. Fargo, this is Officer Hildago.”

The introductions were polite but somewhat cautious, like two pro boxers coming out of their corners and sizing each other up. Hildago had already mentioned drugs, and Mitch didn’t have to guess that he himself was under suspicion. His kid brother had always been a hell-raiser, much like Mitch in his early days. Before someone directed him into law enforcement that led to Special Ops on a higher and higher level of national security. That was all behind him now, though. All of it.

Hildago nodded toward the woman in the bed, and asked Mitch, “Well? Do you know her?”

Mitch shook his head. “What’s her name?”

“We were hoping you could tell us.” The officer rubbed the back of his thick neck, looking tired and ticked off. He cursed under his breath. “I hate when this happens. Wiz, do you have anything to give me here? Birth mark, body piercing. Something that her family might put in a missing person’s report. The paramedic mentioned a tattoo.”

“On the small of her back. Colorful. A dolphin jumping out of the water. Palm tree. A crescent moon. All inside a circle. It’s a work of art.”

“Hell, how big is the thing?”

“Not big. Three inches, max.”

The officer paused as if he was considering asking to see the tattoo. Mitch was pretty curious himself, but he certainly didn’t expect a peep show at the woman’s naked backside. Not without her permission, anyway.

Then Hildago said, “Get a Polaroid of it for the file, Wiz.”

“Sure.”

“Anything else I ought to know?”

“She’s a natural blond.”

Mitch noticed Hildago glance at the woman’s head and the fringe of black hair along the edge of white bandages. Her slender eyebrows and long eyelashes were black, too. The tan of her smooth skin led him to think that she might have been Hispanic. Cuban, maybe. But now that he knew the black hair was a dye-job, he wasn’t so sure.

Hildago gestured at her battered face. “Looks a hell of a lot better than a week ago, that’s for damn sure.”

“Traumatic brain injury swells the tissues.” The doc directed his explanation to Mitch, who didn’t feel a need to reveal his own eye witness account of a TBI of an agent in the field. No emergency room for the poor guy.

“But,” the doc continued, unaware of Mitch’s thoughts, “She shows signs of other blunt force trauma prior to the crash. Before the edema set in, she had considerably bruising, contusions and a nasal fracture.”

Hildago asked, “What are the odds that she was in another crash? Car or plane?”

Wiz shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it. Our Jane Doe wasn’t that lucky. Seems more consistent with battering. Somebody worked her over real good.”

Mitch felt the officer's eyes as the man said pointedly, "Whoever the hell it was didn't give a damn about sparing her face so nobody could see the damage."

Mitch resisted the urge to clench his fists at the veiled implication against Danny. Inside, his gut burned as he relived the countless times he'd taken hard blows over the years, from fists to boots, rifle butts to two-by-fours. Too many cracked ribs to remember, though. Only a few landed him in the hospital. Now, the idea of someone beating up this woman damn near made him want to hunt down the person himself.

"What did the MRI show?" he asked, careful not to give away the slightest emotion.

"Skull fracture," Dr. Mendenhall said. "Fresh. From the crash. We also have green stick fracture in the right forearm. Cracked ribs. Some of those new. Some not so new. Fresh break in the left tibia."

There was a pause as the doctor looked at Hildago, then at Mitch. The monitors clicked and beeped. The respirator rhythmically supplied air to her lungs.

"She's also pregnant," added the doctor. "Only a few weeks. She might not even know. Considering the MRI we had to do, she can still decide to terminate, if she chooses."

"That's if she comes out of the coma," Mitch said.

"Yes. Otherwise . . ." He simply shrugged.

Hildago turned to Mitch, "Your brother didn't tell you about her?"

"No." Mitch kept his attention fixed on the woman. "We weren't that close in recent years. I'm on the other side of the country and spend most of my time as a guide in the Sierra back country."

"Well, Bubba, your baby brother seems to have been having his own kind of adventure in these parts. I've got reason to suspect that he was using that little pontoon plane of his for more than passenger service to the islands. And I'm hoping this little lady will wake up pretty soon to give us some answers."

A voice paged Doctor Mendenhall over the hospital speaker system, sending the man off on another emergency and leaving Mitch alone with the cop.

"What if she was just an innocent passenger?" he asked.

"She could be. Then again, she could have been the girlfriend. Fits the description. That is, before she did a dye job on the hair. Maybe she didn't want to go along with his illegal activity, and maybe she was threatening to walk out."

“And maybe,” Mitch repeated with emphasized sarcasm, “my brother roughed her up a bit to convince her to change her mind. Is that what you are thinking?”

“If the shoe fits—”

“Danny was a hell-raiser, I’ll be the first to admit. But he would not have beaten up this woman.”

“People change. You said yourself that you haven’t been in touch.”

Mitch was still trying to come to grips with the fact that Danny was dead, and swallowing this insinuation about his kid brother was asking the impossible. He was going on two days with no sleep, and his patience was shot to hell.

“Danny didn’t hurt her.” Inches away from getting in this guy’s face, officer of the law or not, Mitch had to make every effort to keep his voice low in the hospital room. “When it came to women, kids and animals, Danny had a soft spot bigger than anyone you’d ever meet.”

“Yeah, right. A good old boy, huh?”

“Damn straight.”

“Simmer down. I’m just telling you how things stand. And it just plain don’t look good for that brother of yours. If this little lady is, was tied up with him, maybe both you and I will get our answers when she finally comes around.”

Mitch looked back down at the woman. And if she had been involved with Danny? What then? He didn’t have to imagine what it would be like for her when she was told that her boyfriend was dead. He already knew the hell she faced. He’d been through it.

Raking his fingers through his hair, he blew out a long breath, trying to figure out what he was going to do with her. He couldn’t very well walk away. Not if she was carrying Danny’s kid. He owed it to his brother to see to it that baby was going to be okay. Provided for.

Like it or not, Mitch couldn’t just take his brother’s body home for burial in Wyoming then go on back to his own life in California. For the first time in a long time, he couldn’t think of only himself. At least not until he found out the truth from this mystery lady.

He turned toward the corner of the hospital room where he’d dropped his bags after coming straight from the airport. As he grabbed the leather handles in each hand, he said to Hildago, “I’ll be staying at my brother’s place. I don’t suppose I need to give you the address or phone number.”

“Nope. Got it.”

“Of course.”

“Mind if we take a walk down to the morgue first? Take care of some unpleasant business before you leave?”

Mitch had seen enough dead bodies to make him almost impervious to the shock and pain of losing a buddy. But family was different. Seeing his ex-wife nearly killed him even if there had been a bitter breakup. Now, the thought of seeing Danny on ice . . . This was going to be damn hard. But he would get through it. Just like he did two years ago. This couldn't be any worse than saying goodbye to Rosa in a hospital morgue in another state. Another time. Another life.

Mitch had to push aside shadowy images and dark memories that couldn't be allowed to surface right now.

“Lead the way,” he said to Hildago's request as if it was nothing more than seeing to some bureaucratic paperwork of a John Doe. His training kicked in. His armor went up. Just like the old days. No emotion. No expression. Don't give away anything.