

Chapter One

Mason Bailey gulped down his third Glenlivet. "I didn't kill her."

How many times had Whitney Steel heard those words? Dozens. But never from the mouth of a United States senator. For all she cared, the man could drink himself to Mars, but not until she got what she'd come for. An exclusive.

Under the awning shading the Pink Flamingo Club's patio, she took a sip of her lime daiquiri, and couldn't help notice the way the mid-afternoon sunlight brutally magnified every line on Mason's tanned face.

"Of all the reporters in Panama City, let alone Florida, why me? We cut our ties years ago." And our losses, she wanted to say, but didn't.

"I know I can trust you." His gaze darted across the street then back to her. "Besides, we were married once. That should count for something."

Whitney straightened. Anger coiled in the pit of her stomach. "Give me a break. For a year and a half, I thought we were married. Too bad your girlfriends didn't know about our little legal arrangement." *Especially, your twenty something assistant.*

"Damn it, Whitney. I didn't ask you here to rehash our past." He yanked a monogrammed handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed the sweat from his forehead. "I need your help. I know why Carmen Lacey was murdered."

Her eyes widened. Now they were getting somewhere. "You have my full attention. Are we on the record?"

Mason shoved his empty glass aside. "Yes."

Her heart thumped with anticipation. This story would be the topic du jour for months. Her ratings at WBNN-TV would soar, and finally her colleagues would take notice and treat her with the professional respect she deserved.

For the past twelve years, her colleagues said she'd had a free ride because of her father, an award winning war correspondent, and her ex-husband's political connections. This time she'd prove them wrong.

She rummaged through her leather bag, placed her digital voice recorder on the table and gave the record button a firm push. "For the record, Senator Bailey, did you kill Carmen Lacey?"

"No." He leaned back in the chair and loosened his pinstriped tie. "It's true. I was the last person to see her alive. But there's more to this than you think."

Brown eyes that once set her heart hammering now conveyed a chilling, hollow look. Was it guilt? Desperation?

No. Fear.

Uneasiness slid down her spine. She stopped the recorder. "Mason, you're scaring me. What the hell is going on? It's been over three years since we last spoke. Then, out of the blue, you beg me to meet with you today. I know the police don't believe you killed that woman."

"But do you, Whitney? Do you believe I killed her? I need to know. It's important."

Stunned by the urgency in his voice, she answered carefully. “Of course not. You’re many things, but you’re not a killer.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” He reached for his empty glass and tapped his chunky gold ring against the side.

Whitney turned the recorder on again.

“Carmen was a scientist working for a biotech company in Nevada. ShawBioGen. Heard of it?”

“Who hasn’t? They were one of the first to clone animals in the eighties. Caused quite a stir. But I don’t understand. What does that have to do with Carmen’s death?”

He opened his mouth to answer.

The large window behind them dividing the patio from the main restaurant exploded. A storm of glass rained down, showering the patio.

There was no warning. Everything moved so fast, yet in slow motion as if part of a horrid nightmare.

Screams. Rushed, heavy, thumping footsteps.

A few feet away, a male waiter dropped the two plates of food in his hands. He froze.

“Get down!” Mason yelled.

Whitney dropped. She huddled into a ball under the table and squashed the side of her face against the patio stones. Amid the chaos, a gunshot echoed and the waiter ran for cover.

A bullet ripped through the man’s shoulder and spun him around, the force slamming his body against the restaurant door. He folded to his knees and howled out in pain.

More shots rang out. Debris spewed through the air. Food, glasses, plates. The sickening smell of deep fried food and scorched cordite assaulted her nostrils. She gagged.

Crimson snaked toward her hand. The warm, sticky liquid met her fingertips.

Blood. Lots of blood. But it wasn’t hers.

Her gaze snapped to Mason, lying on his back. Dark red blood pumped from a gaping wound in his chest, soaking his white shirt. She held her breath to keep from screaming.

He raised his arm and reached for her. “I swear—I didn’t kill her. I swear.”

“I believe you.” Whitney kept her head down and inched her body closer. She grasped his hand. “I do. Oh, God.”

Please don’t die. Her pulse roared so loud in her ears she couldn’t hear her own words. “You’re bleeding so much. Someone help us!”

Another bullet whizzed through the air and slammed into the bottom of the wooden table leg.

Needle-like splinters from the wood slashed through her pants and drilled into her thigh like a hundred slivers. The pain knocked the breath from her. The world twisted and turned yellow. Darkness thickened and threatened to overpower her. *Can’t pass out...help Mason.*

He gasped a ragged breath and shoved a key into her bloody palm and curled her fingers closed. “Don’t trust—anyone.”

She clutched the piece of metal. A knot wedged in her throat, one she couldn’t swallow. “I’m going to get help.”

“No—stay.” Blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth and trickled down his jaw. “They cloned...”

His eyelids slid shut.

“What Mason? They cloned what?”

Whitney lowered her head to his chest. “Oh, Mason, no.”