

Chapter 1

Rickie Ciprian leaned back in the worn aluminum lawn chair and gazed into a night sky that covered Miami like a blanket. He was in the back yard of his modest '70s ranch home in the Miami suburb of Plantation. Nearly thirty miles from the city proper, he was still in the vast Dade-Broward-Palm Beach county metroplex that stretched nearly ninety miles along Florida's eastern coast in an unbroken expanse of sweltering humanity.

As usual, the night sky wasn't really black at all. Ambient light from the city illuminated the nocturnal firmament, turning it a deep, soft gray rather than an inky Iowa black. Tiny pinpricks of light struggled to twinkle above iridescent clouds scuttling across the sky like ghostly ships on a vast ocean. Pushing his trusty Marlins cap back, Rickie realized that the night sky looked more like the old black and white cowboy movies he'd watched as a kid. Later, as an adult, he'd discovered the studios couldn't film at night, so the director would use special filters to make the blue sky look black. Night clouds in those old movies were unnaturally white and Roy and Trigger still had shadows under them.

So it had all been a fake. Sort of like Miami.

It was just Rickie and six or seven million of his closest friends huddled together near the ocean on a spit of land that experts claimed would be under water when, eventually, the polar ice caps melted. It would be just his luck for it to happen during his lifetime. Now, that would be ultimate bad luck.

To this perpetual lack of darkness was added an equally perpetual lack of silence. Even after midnight, the air was alive. Birds roosted in trees and insects bounced against window screens; there was a hum, a throb, as if the city were some great beast, slumbering, but dangerous still.

His backyard, though little more than a patio and a few feet of amateur landscaping, remained his refuge. The night air was redolent with the sweet fragrance of orange blossoms and thick with humidity as the evening air cooled. He had only a single citrus tree in his yard, but in an unusual turn of good luck, his property was ringed by orange trees from the neighbors' yards. What's better than orange trees in your own back yard? Neighbors with prolific trees that hung over your fence.

The smell of his little patch of Saint Augustine grass, recently clipped, reminded him of baseball games and his youth. Sadness overwhelmed him and he hurt as if someone had hit him in the chest, hard.

He could hear neighbors arguing again, a shrill scream in Spanish, a man's voice threatening. A slap. Somewhere behind him a helicopter passed close by, a dark mechanical insect flitting across the murky sky. Somewhere else, he guessed, another police helicopter hovered above a neighborhood like his, shining its hot light on frightened residents—both legal and illegal—together, sharing fear, though little else. He wondered: How long would it be before searchlights swept his own little corner of paradise? Would he huddle inside, behind locked windows and doors, hoping they were coming for someone else?

If he could block out the sounds he might just believe this *was* paradise, if only for a moment.

Though infinite and majestic the night sky, his personal life was one pathetic disaster after another. Rickie Ciprian, former Miami Beach police officer, former husband, former son, former boyfriend, lived alone in a rapidly changing neighborhood that in the past twenty years had gone from quaint to crowded. As a former police officer, Rickie knew that crowded always turned into dangerous. There was no way around that fact. It was the law of the city.

He heard the warning horn of a train as it crossed a thoroughfare in the distance. The wail bounced through the night as if it were looking for some place to settle, some place to die its death. He tried to remember the closest railroad but his restless mind was blank. There had been a time when every sound, every voice in his neighborhood was familiar. Then, he could sit in his back yard as he was doing now and know who came and left by the sound of their car doors. He had known flight paths and bus routes, but not any more.

Rickie was Cuban-American, with the slim build, thick curly hair, and soft coffee skin that would never be mistaken for the features of an Anglo. Still, he felt threatened by Hispanics who were rapidly transforming Plantation. They were from faraway places like Honduras and Guatemala, and had little in common with an ex-cop who'd been born here, had lived in South Florida all his life, had buried his mother and father in the sandy Florida soil. It was as if he were paralyzed. He couldn't seem to make a decision. Stay?

Go? What? Sometimes just thinking about it sent him into a tailspin of depression.

His new career as a private security consultant was barely paying the bills and he was dangerously close to losing his house. He drove a twelve-year old rice-burning import that wheezed with an asthmatic cough and moved like a crippled hippo. If he didn't pick up a client in the next week or two, he'd be in that car, living on the street. As a cop, there had been an endless supply of bad guys. He'd never had to worry about drumming up work. But now that he was private, he found business slow and the field uncomfortably crowded.

The phone rang in the kitchen, breaking Rickie's deteriorating mood. He looked at his watch. When he was police, a phone call this hour meant that bad shit had happened. Since his home phone was unlisted, and only one or two friends knew the number, it still probably meant the same thing. He pushed himself out of the rickety chair, went inside, and grabbed the portable.

"Yeah," he said, trying to sound sleepy, maybe get some sympathy.

"Chach, my man," the male voice on the other end said cheerfully, way too cheerfully for the hour.

The fact that it was a man's voice and the voice had called him "chach" narrowed the possibilities considerably. When Rickie was a little boy his mother had called him *chach* or *chachie*. It had been a term of endearment, like "little buddy." Today, on the street, it was used instead of "gay" or "pussy," or as a crude reference to a woman's sex. Only someone who had known Rickie for a long time

would use it with impunity. It was Boomer Falcone, Rickie's former partner, still a member of the Miami Beach police department.

"Don't you have a life?" Rickie asked. "What are you doing up at this hour?"

Falcone laughed. "Me? What are *you* doing out in your backyard when you should be sleeping? And by what I saw, you're alone, so we're not talking about stargazing with a hot date."

"How'd you know..."

"I was over in Lauderdale doing a little night helicopter training," Falcone explained. "We were heading home, so I asked the pilot to swing by. Saw you with my night vision goggles, bright as hell. You wouldn't believe the stuff you can see with these babies. You know, Rickie, there's lots of kinky shit going on at night in people's back yards when they think no one can see them."

"That's nice to know," Rickie said, going back outside and unsuccessfully searching for the helicopter. The aircraft was long gone. Leave it to Falcone to figure out high-tech peeping.

"You called Roxy?" Falcone asked. Roxy Ramirez was Ciprian's most recent failure of the heart, also an MBPD detective. The fact that Falcone had asked about her meant she wasn't with him on the training mission.

"Not for a while," Rickie admitted. Strike one.

"How's the private eye biz? You landed any clients?"

Rickie squirmed, said, "I'm working on it." Strike two.

Falcone mercilessly brought up Ciprian's greatest failure. "What about Fischbach," he asked, "the Chameleon? You picked up any leads?"

The Chameleon case had been the reason Rickie had left the police department. At least, it was the reason he'd told himself and anyone who would listen, like Falcone.

What leads? Rickie thought. A man figures out the perfect Ponzi, disappears with a couple hundred million dollars of peoples' retirement savings. He kills his office manager, kills a kid he hired to set up the computer system that ran the scam, and then makes sure his wife kills herself. No one sees him. No one knows where he went, or how he did the killings.

Then, the Chameleon had made it personal, taking on a powerful Florida crime family, the family of one of Rickie's boyhood friends. More death. No, that was an understatement. There had been lots more death. No leads. Strike three.

"No one knows anything," Rickie admitted. The police had left the killings open but moved on to other crimes, other murders. Such was life in Florida's biggest city. Falcone must have arrived at his destination because over the phone Rickie heard a car door slam.

"Well," Boomer bragged, "at least one of us is going to get laid tonight. Don't beat yourself up over this, my man. You'll find some clients, get Roxy back, and nail the bad guy. I can feel it in my bones."

He was sure Falcone was feeling *something* in one of his bones. Rickie wasn't feeling that, or anything else. He terminated the call without saying goodbye.

Had the Chameleon met some unlikely fate? Maybe he'd been struck down in a freak car accident or felled by a heart weakened by blackness that had ultimately turned it rotten.

No. Rickie was sure he was still out there somewhere, laughing, engaged in unspeakable horror. Somewhere, people thought they were safe, but they were wrong. The Chameleon would pick the most unlikely, the most vulnerable victim; he would chose a time and place where he could showcase his ability to disappear in plain sight. Deep down, Rickie knew it would ultimately involve women.

He pulled his cap back down and tried to focus on the unnaturally bright clouds that swept above him across the sky. He was honest enough to admit to himself how pathetic his life had become, how unfulfilled his promises remained.