

# One

*SURFERS PARADISE, Gold Coast, Australia:*

The repetitive beat of house music pulsed through the club, infecting everyone with the urge to either dance, tap their feet, or just contentedly nod their head to the rhythm.

Two heavysset men dressed in sports coats, designer shirts and pants took up a position at the bar and watched the dancers gyrate on the floor with a lack of real interest.

"What would you like?" a barmaid asked the two men, raising her voice to a barely-audible level above the music.

"Scotch and water," the first man told her, for which he received a thump on the arm by his counterpart, who corrected with, "Just make that two iced waters, thank you."

The second man, who had a finely-boned face and thick moustache, turned to the first and said emphatically, "We don't drink when there's work to do." The first man just shrugged and returned his attention to the dance floor.

The barmaid placed the two iced waters on the counter and said, "That'll be three dollars."

"What?" the moustached one was incredulous. He took the glasses. "Forget that, lady. We don't pay for water."

The barmaid considered pressing the issue, but thought better of it. She didn't like the look of the two men, and felt no urge to enter into a debate with them.

A tall and elegant black woman walked onto the dance floor, escorted by a white man in a dark suit. The woman wore a bold red dress that clung to her flawless curves, the colour contrasting strikingly with her dark complexion and hair. The two commenced moving in rhythm to another house track.

The moustached man at the bar nudged his partner, who was distastefully sipping at his iced water, and said, "That's her."

The first man smiled appreciatively. "She's a real honey."

"Not for long," the moustached one replied soberly. "Dead people don't look too glamorous."

"It'll be a waste."

"That's our job."

The house track died out and was replaced by the voice of the resident DJ "Evening, party animals! Just a short interruption to let you know that we have a very special guest here tonight at Nightbeat on the Beach. She's a contestant in the Miss World pageant to be held right here on the Gold Coast; and after the preliminary judging, is favoured to take the crown of Miss World. So, please give a warm welcome to Miss USA, Silhouette... Havana!"

Several hollers and whistles erupted from the male contingent in the crowd as a spotlight focused on the young black woman in the stunning red dress out on the dance floor. The hollers and whistles were superseded by catty remarks from jealous females around the club.

Silhouette felt herself blushing, but composed herself and took the attention in her stride. She had expected the announcement. She was here for publicity. But she'd had no idea when it was going to come.

The music fired up again, the spotlight was replaced by a flickering strobe and the limelight quickly passed. Silhouette danced to one more song, then moved off the floor to the other side of the club. Her companion followed. There she joined up with her second bodyguard. This side of the club featured full-length windows overlooking Surfers Paradise beach. She picked up her glass of Tia Maria and stood staring out those windows at the floodlit sand. She glanced at her Rado watch. It was now after three in the morning. A few drunks lay sleeping on the sand, just beyond the fence that lay parallel to the sidewalk. She forgot; they don't call them sidewalks over here, they call them footpaths. How cute, she thought.

"It's almost time to be getting you home," her dancing partner said to her. He was an American, as was her other bodyguard; both assigned to escort her through her promotions by the American organisers of the Miss World pageant.

"You'll need your beauty sleep," the second bodyguard added and smiled. "Can't have you getting bags under your eyes now, can we?"

"No," Silhouette agreed and turned away from the window. This was the fifth nightclub she'd been to this evening, and now she was feeling pretty drained. Nightclubs weren't as much fun when you couldn't drink much. She had to watch her weight with the pageant near. The Tia Maria she held was the first alcoholic drink she'd had all night. The rest had been iced water and one low-cal lemonade.

Her dancing partner hooked an arm around hers and escorted her through the semi-crowded club. The second bodyguard followed right behind.

A young man smiled at her as she walked past. Silhouette returned the smile warmly. He was a good looking guy, with a prominent jaw line - which she liked. But that was where it ended. She wasn't here to meet anybody so she walked on by.

The two heavysset men at the bar watched her leave. They waited until she was almost at the door, then they moved through the crowd to follow her outside.

Silhouette and the two bodyguards descended a flight of stairs down to The Esplanade which ran parallel to the beach. Across the road, in the angled car parking, was the blue Ford LTD she was being chauffeured around in. The gentle sound of the surf filled her ears as she walked across the road, her stiletto heels clicking loudly on the bitumen. They reached the car and she stood between the two men as one of them unlocked the vehicle, and the other prepared to open the rear door for her.

It was then that an explosion filled the night air, and Silhouette watched, as if in slow motion, the head of her dancing partner splatter across the roof of the Ford. In the next instant she was thrown onto the footpath behind the car by the second bodyguard. He crouched behind the car with her, a pistol drawn from a concealed shoulder holster. Silhouette lifted her head over the bonnet and saw two heavysset men standing across the street. There was a muzzle flash and a second bullet hammered into the driver's side door. Somebody screamed somewhere.

"Stay down, damn it!" the remaining escort said tersely.

Another shot was fired that hit the front tire. It went down with a protesting hiss of escaping air.

Silhouette shuddered, feeling fear grip her. "Who the hell are they?" she asked.

"I don't know." He looked around, spied the low-set concrete wall, beyond which lay the beach. "See that wall there?" She nodded. "I want you to jump that as fast as you can. I'll cover you. Then get on the beach and run like hell."

Again she nodded and, shakily, removed her shoes.

"You ready?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Go!"

With that one word she leaped for the wall, which was only about three feet high, and tumbled over. At the same time her bodyguard rose above the hood of the LTD and fired off several rounds, all of which missed. The two assailants ducked for cover behind a parked car.

She landed in the sand, where she immediately crawled away from the wall and got up and ran. She stumbled over a drunk and fell back into the soft sand. "Shit!" she cursed and got up quickly. She made it to the hard sand just as an explosion erupted in the night, followed by a blinding flash of red and white light. She stopped at the water's edge and looked around to see the LTD one big ball of fire. The two heavysset figures appeared on the footpath behind the concrete wall.

Standing in this floodlit section of the beach, she felt like a sitting duck. About a hundred yards south the beach was dark. That was her first goal; to get into the shadows. She took off and ran at full speed. In High School she'd been in the athletics team, and now she would need to use every bit of what she had left to make it out of here alive.

A bullet exploded from somewhere behind her. She waited for the intense pain of lead ripping through her flesh, but none came. The shot missed and was lost in the sea.

She made the relative safety of the shadows. There was no moon in the sky, which helped, but enough light was emanating from the multitudes of highrise buildings of Surfers Paradise to illuminate the beach a little too much. She took the chance to look back and saw the men running through the soft sand in her direction.

Jesus, what do they want with me? she thought desperately, then was off in full flight again.

Silhouette could sense them coming after her, but she didn't dare look around again. Not yet. She wanted to put as much distance as she could between herself and them. After another two hundred yards at full pace she slowed to a jog, puffing and panting in the warm spring night. The air felt thick and clammy with humidity, and it was hard to breathe. This time she chanced a look around. She could see the figures outlined against the floodlit backdrop. They were still pursuing, but further behind.

She kept jogging at a brisk pace. Another shot was fired, but went astray. In the distance she could hear sirens approaching the scene of the explosion. God, I wish they would come this way, she prayed.

Up ahead lay more floodlit beach. She hesitated at the edge of the light, anxiously trying to make a decision as to what to do. She looked behind her and saw that the men had spread out; one still pursuing along the hard sand, the other higher up on the beach near the footpath. She figured she had three choices: One, she could take her chances and keep on running through the lights. Two, she could try and make it to the road above and probably be cut off by the man up there before she got to it. She decided to take the third option and sprinted into the surf.

A bullet thudded into the water so close beside her that water splashed into her face from the impact. She dove under a wave and kicked as hard as she could until she had to come up for air. Barely having enough time to draw a quick breath before a wave crashed over her, Silhouette dove under again and kicked further out to sea.

When she couldn't stay under a moment longer, she raised only her head above water and looked toward shore. She was fifty yards from the beach and in water about shoulder-deep. She could see the two men standing in the shallows scanning the water for her. They looked left and right, obviously unable to see her.

She hoped there were no sharks around. She'd heard the beaches were netted here, but shark nets weren't foolproof. And this was prime feeding time.

The water was cold, despite the fact that it was spring, and she started to shiver. She tried to think of warm thoughts to stop herself from shaking, fearing this, too, may attract predators. But it was impossible to control. She was not only cold, but frightened as well; her nerves on edge all over.

Still the two heavyset men scrutinised the water for her. She heard one of them curse, "Damn it, we've lost her!"

Then the second one said, "She'll have to come out some time."

The first man replied, "But she could float all the way down the coastline. We'll never find her in the dark. We'll get her another time."

Silhouette watched as the men waded out of the water and trudged slowly, defeatedly, up the beach to the road and out of sight. She waited in the water for another hour before daring to venture back onto the beach, shuddering and cold to the bone.

She hoped they were long gone.