

Chapter One

OPAQUE agent Mitch Granger motioned the taxi driver to keep the change then turned toward the Mariner's Bar and Grill. The place was a Fort Myers waterfront eatery billed as vintage for the tourists. Old for the locals. Didn't matter to him what the place was called. He wasn't a local. And he damn sure wasn't on vacation.

At least this was a hell of a lot better location to be assigned than a week ago, when he was crawling through a swamp full of snakes and poison dart frogs. But he was supposed to be on vacation. Even had a first-class plane ticket to Tahiti in his go-bag.

Instead here he was, starting another protection assignment where his life was only a mistake away from ending. He blew out a cheek-puffing breath. A single twitch hugged the corner of his eye. Nothing like getting real.

On the other side of the restaurant, the Gulf of Mexico crashed ashore, filling the night's darkness with a mesmerizing rumble. He inwardly smiled and sucked in a deep breath. A light breeze, heavy with the smell of wet sand, seaweed, and empty shells washing ashore, bombarded his senses.

He loved everything about the water. Good. Bad. Sunny day. Dark of night. Smooth as glass. Raging storm. He loved it all. If his plans worked out tonight, he should be able to take a nice long swim later.

Scanning the lot, his peripheral vision caught a glimpse of one of his team members, OPAQUE agent Keith Airs. The agent leaned into the light, nodded, and faded back into the darkness. Usually the agent led his own team, but tonight, the boss of everything OPAQUE, Director Drake Lawrence, had evidently enlisted Keith for this job, too. Mitch had been assigned lead.

A second later, Mitch's security-scrambled phone rang with his boss's ringtone, and he moved to the empty parking lot across the street. Didn't need anyone listening to his conversation. "Talk to me."

"Glad you got there." Drake cleared his throat. "Hated to end your time off, but this is high priority."

Mitch's eyebrows pinched together. During their conversation, Drake had insinuated this was a simple shadow case involving someone he'd known when he worked for the Chicago Police Department years ago. Now it was high priority? Didn't sound simple anymore.

Not one to hold back, Mitch got right to the point. "I asked for Cat and Joey for my team. Now I see you've also brought Keith in. Am I still lead?"

"Hell, yes."

"Then cut the bull. Is this a Shades Team mission?" Toss in the three other specialized agents like himself and that would be the full Shades roster.

"Affirmative. I want only my best agents on this assignment." Drake paused. "And I want you to be personally responsible for Elizabeth Walkert's—"

"Call her Liz," Mitch said. "Shorter. Faster. Nondescript."

"Agreed." Drake paused. "I'll let Liz fill you in on everything that's happened in her life during the past week. Suffice it to say, I...uh— OPAQUE believes she's in danger. With..."

Mitch's instincts flashed. OPAQUE thought? Or, Drake thought?

"That being said," Drake continued, "maybe regular security shadow will be enough. But to me, this stinks of Coercion Ten involvement."

Damn. Mitch had hoped, for once, the case didn't involve CT. The corrupt organization seemed to continually spread, expanding its hold in more and more directions. "Working the CT angle, what would make her a target?"

"One, she's a journalist who's friends with CEOs and politicians. Two, the fact her dad's missing."

"Not enough reasons."

Drake sighed. Long. Loud. "And, three... Her family has been in the Witness Protection Program for longer than she's been alive."

Witpro program took the case to another level. One that made the next answer enormously important. Good thing he'd moved to the vacant parking lot. "Okay. Hypothetically, if CT is involved, is Liz the target, or do they want her for leverage?"

"Leverage. Nothing would make her valuable enough to be a target."

"You sure you know her that well?"

Drake's silence dragged on. "I hope so."

What the hell did that mean...*he hoped so?* That left a whole lot of space between yes and hoped so. "Down and dirty, give me the details. All of them."

Other OPAQUE agents took pleasure in harassing Mitch about his million and one who-what-where-why questions. Better to have the answers instead of some obscure detail blowing his plans to hell and back. His main goal was being able to live with himself at the end of an assignment. He'd never blown a mission. Never failed to get the client out safely. Never lost a team member.

"Everything I told you went down twenty-nine years ago. Almost a year before Liz was born. Consequently, the life she's lived is the only one she knows. You need to tell her she's been in Witness Protection from the moment she took her first breath."

His mind fuzzed. "What the hell did you say?"

"Tell her that her life has been a lie."

What the hell was going on? Mitch shook his head. So far, this case was a logjam of confusion, headed straight toward a cluster— "Got anything else you'd like to drop on my head, old man?"

Again, Drake stayed silent for more than a few seconds. "No. That's all for now. How much time do you want to scope out the restaurant before I call Liz to introduce you?"

"Ten minutes. Alert me when you reach her."

Edgy to get the action started, Mitch ended the call on his way to the entrance of the Mariner's and stepped inside. He scanned the restaurant's far wall of windows. They faced the outside patio with customers watching an in-play sand volleyball game. Tiki torches lit the beach in the background, while white foam from the incoming waves dotted the distance. The place gave off a good vibe. Might be a little run-down, but the feel was great.

"You look like you've had a rough day." The gray-haired woman behind the bar was as vintage as the place, but her friendly expression welcomed him. "How about a beer?"

"Sounds like a winner." Taking a slow walk in her direction, he did another scan of the place. "Give me whatever you've got on draft."

The lady drew a frosted mug and sat it in front of him along with a bowl of pretzels, then left him alone. She sure wasn't the one he'd been sent to protect.

A grunt toward the rear of the restaurant caught Mitch's attention. He glanced then turned back to his beer. Joey Prentz, a tech guru with OPAQUE, pushed himself out of a booth and headed toward the front counter.

"If you're hungry, fella, they got some great shrimp tacos here." As he paid his bill, he slid his eyes to the row of wooden booths toward the back of the restaurant. "Got a great jukebox in the corner, too."

Mitch nodded. "Thanks, buddy. Will do."

That's all it ever took. A nod. A look. A few words. Info passed and processed. Customers none the wiser—what few there were inside.

Joey walked out the door. Mitch had already instructed him to head to the beach safe-house property where the client was staying and stake out the perimeter.

Mitch took a swallow of the beer then strolled toward the jukebox. He needed to locate the woman he was there to protect. He'd seen her photo, but the dimmed lights providing atmosphere were a drawback.

First booth, no one. Second booth, no one. Third booth, no—

There she was. Elizabeth Walkert. Huddled in the corner, her head hadn't been visible above the high-top back of the seat. The picture Drake had texted him didn't do her no-nonsense side justice.

Her dark shoulder-length brown hair was cut in one of those swing styles women liked, framed smooth around her face, closing her in. Soft and shiny and silky. Kind of a sexy come-on that could fall against a man's face in the right setting. In the right position.

Where the hell had that thought come from? He took another swallow of his drink and cleared his mind.

Eyelid-length bangs focused his attention to her eyes, nose, and mouth. Her lips were full, slightly parted. Her nose small and cute. She watched him straight on with gold-speckled, green eyes. Ones filled with chutzpah...and fear.

The way she'd snatched what he assumed was a keychain can of mace said she at least tried to protect herself. She was clenching it tight enough to make a dent.

Mitch slid some dollar bills into the jukebox, chose a few songs, then pretended to search for something else before flipping his hand in the air. He turned in her direction. "Hey, you like music?"

She nodded.

"I've got credit for two more songs." He pointed to the jukebox. "Why don't you pick a couple?"

"I...uh..." She shook her head as she released her hold on the mace, sliding the keychain into her purse. Still, she kept her hand within easy reach of the no-zip opening.

Stepping slowly in her direction, he tried another tack. Usually, clients already knew he was there as protection. In this case, Drake had told him to wait till he called again. "You don't even have to get up. Just tell me what you'd like to hear."

Again, she shook her head. "No. Thanks."

She did a lot of communicating with a nod or shake of her head. Maybe she liked writing words so much talking took a back seat. "Sorry, I didn't hear your answer."

She tilted her head enough the bangs parted and her hair fell away from what turned out to be a beautiful face. "I said no. Thanks."

Her now visible eyebrows rose as if signaling the conversation was over. A tiny upturn at the corners of her mouth gave him hope he'd made a small inroad. So far, Elizabeth Walkert was a hard-to-read mix.

"How about a dance?" he asked, hoping her reaction would give him some insight to her tells before she knew who he was. Learning someone's tells was like opening a door to the edge of their emotions. Those tells could come in handy later.

She interlocked her fingers and pressed them palm-down on the table in front of her. "No. I would not like to dance. I would not like a drink. And, I definitely would not like to share my booth with you."

Share her booth? If he had a mind to, he'd tell her she wasn't his type, but he had a job to do.

"My mistake." He raised his hands and eased away. "I'm just going back to my seat at the bar. You have a nice night."