

MAKING THE DROP

A MIAMI JONES PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR MYSTERY
BOOK 17

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*For all those who look after those
who cannot look after themselves.*

Including Heather.

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS JOGGING ALONG THE BEACH WHEN MY MIND DRIFTED ONTO THE notion that cows and deer are essentially the same animal. If I remembered my high school biology right, they shared a taxonomic rank from *domain* all the way down to *order*. They were ruminants—both had stomachs with four compartments and chewed cud. But despite all that, no one ever confused a cow with a deer.

An onlooker would have a similar impression watching Danielle and me run. She was a deer—athletic, graceful, not imposing but capable of great speed nonetheless. I, on the other hand, was the other thing. Lumbering along the hard-packed sand, hefting the kind of bulk that said *not designed to accelerate*.

As always, I was tucked in behind my wife, dragging my carcass up from City Beach toward the state park. When we passed the last of the high-rises and left civilization behind, I noticed Danielle looking into the sky at a squadron of brown pelicans angling in to land in the water behind the trees. I was huffing too much to be bothered with such grandeur.

We kept an easy pace until the majesty of the park gave way to the elite suburbia of North Palm Beach, where the average home went for well over 10 million and the residents spent their days

sitting on their decks yelling at people to get the hell off their beach.

Danielle stopped, took two big breaths, winked at me, then set off toward home. I put my hands on my knees and sucked in some big ones, then put my pitcher's body into gear and chased after her.

By the time we got back to City Beach, I was more liquid than solid. It was early summer in Florida, when all the smart animals take care of business early or late, but never under the sun's stern midafternoon eye. Danielle said I could take a swim after, but at that moment I figured that would only make the water more wet. What I needed was a stool and a beer and some Doobie Brothers.

Walking along the beach, hands on our hips to cool off, I heard faraway shouting from down toward the inlet. Danielle, having picked up on the sound before I did, was already looking that way and her body had stiffened like a German Shorthaired Pointer on the hunt.

She gathered her pace, so I followed, both of us trying to control our breathing so we could hear. It didn't sound like the beach—there was often laughter in distant beach noise—and before I knew it, Danielle was jogging again. For a moment, I figured she could handle it alone. She was in law enforcement, after all. But that annoying voice in my head told me to get myself into gear and hightail it too.

We ran past the neat lines of resort beach chairs toward a couple pop-up canopies and a small gathering of beachgoers. Everyone was standing and looking out toward the water. My first thought was *shark*—I hoped it was just a sighting and not a meal. Danielle reached the group about fifty feet ahead of me, but I heard her call out.

“What happened?”

A woman turned to her and pointed to the water. “There's something wrong with her Jet Ski.”

As I reached Danielle, I cast my eye out and saw a Jet Ski roaring into shore. The woman on board motored in fast and

hard, then killed the engine and slid up onto the sand, her expression calm.

"It's Mandy," she yelled.

A woman in a yellow bikini ran forward. "What happened?"

"I don't know. She's unconscious or something. But I can't reach the kill switch."

Danielle stepped forward. "You're saying a rider is out there unconscious?"

"Yeah, but the Ski's still in gear. She's heading out to sea."

Danielle glanced at me with a look that suggested she was going to do something stupid. But that was not Danielle's way. She thought things through before she acted. Not necessarily for long, but long enough.

I ran past her and started pushing the Jet Ski back into the water.

The woman on board leaned across the handlebars. "What are you doing?"

"Get me out there."

Once I was in knee deep, I pushed the side of the craft so it turned toward the ocean, and I moved in behind. Then I realized there were no seats, just a platform for a single rider. The woman was kneeling there, leaving me little room, so we got real personal real fast.

She didn't seem to mind. She started the engine and hit the throttle, and we bunny-hopped across the water a few times before the Jet Ski got its bearings and we pulsed across the surface.

My driver edged forward, the handlebars almost under her chin, and I put my hands on her hips to stop myself from falling off the back. I was pressed up so hard against her I thought perhaps introductions were in order. She grabbed my left hand with hers and dragged it off her hip and around the front of her waist, then she let go. I took the hint and hugged her tight and held on.

It took a few minutes to reach the other Jet Ski. The woman

eased off our throttle and ducked as the wash sprayed across the nose and into my face. I was spitting water as we motored alongside the other craft.

This one was bigger—designed for two riders—with a long seat and wide channels on either side for the riders' feet. The woman on board was slumped over with her head flopped forward in the middle of the handlebars. One hand was resting on the bars, the other dangling at her side.

The craft wasn't moving fast, maybe three knots, but the throttle was still engaged.

"Does it stop if you take the pressure off the throttle?" I said right into the woman's ear.

"On this one, yes. But that's a Sea-Doo. It's got cruise control."

Cruise control? How far were they expecting people to go on it? Then I remembered that folks got together in flotillas of personal watercraft and motored all the way across to Bimini in the Bahamas. I imagined that journey took a toll on your grip if you had to hold the throttle open the entire way.

We pulled up close to the other craft. The woman pointed at a coiled wire that ran from the rider's life jacket to the console.

"That's the kill switch. Pull it out and it'll stop. I can't drive and reach it."

"Okay." I let go with my right hand and leaned out, but the other craft was wider than a rhinoceros. I leaned out again, gripping onto my driver's hip, almost forcing us both overboard.

"See?" she said.

"Yeah. I'm going on board."

"You can't jump onto a moving watercraft."

"Don't worry," I said. "I've done this before."

It was true. Unlike Danielle, I tended to leap before I looked, often literally. I resolved after the last time I jumped toward a moving boat that I would not attempt it again, but like my attempts at a life without beer, that contract was about to get torn up at the first hurdle.

As we eased against the other craft, I gingerly stood up into a

crouch. With the hulls butting against each other, overthinking it was going to be my downfall. One confident move was the key.

I stepped over the edge of our craft with my left foot and placed it into the well of the other craft. It was now or never. I had a foot in each camp, so to speak. The swell on the water wasn't going to put up with that for long, so I swept my other leg around and mounted the open seat with a thump.

My momentum violently wobbled the Sea-Doo from side to side. The woman in front of me wasn't holding on to anything, so holding on to her was pointless. Instead, I leaned over her and grabbed the handlebars. With my face tucked into her hair, I smelled coconut for just a moment. When the craft stabilized, I pushed myself back a touch, reached around her torso, and pulled the kill switch.

The engine cut out. We drifted on as I pulled the woman off the handlebars and back against my chest. Her head flopped against my shoulder. I pressed my fingers to her neck to check for a pulse and found her skin cold and wet. I gave it a ten count and felt nothing, but with the beating of the water against the hull, it was hard to be certain if there wasn't something faint. And there didn't seem to be any practical way of performing resuscitation.

I fumbled around her life jacket for the line to the kill switch and pressed it back into place. Then I slowly leaned the woman forward against the center of the handlebars, just as I had found her, and hit the switch to engage the engine.

"How do I move?" I yelled.

"Squeeze the right trigger."

"And this cruise control thing?"

"It canceled when you killed the engine."

I grabbed the handles and lightly squeezed the right trigger. The craft moved forward. I leaned left and eased the handlebars in that direction, turning wide until I was pointed back at the beach, then I straightened up and headed in.

I accelerated cautiously, not wanting the handlebars to bang up her head.

The beach looked far away, but the Sea-Doo ate the distance up fast. I wrapped my arm around the woman and pulled her back as I drove the craft up onto the sand.

The engine went dead as the kill switch pulled away. I carried her onto the dry stuff, dropped to my knees, and laid her gently on her back. Danielle knelt down beside me.

"I couldn't find a pulse," I said.

I grabbed the woman's wrist and counted again as Danielle checked her airways, then she began pumping her chest.

"Nothing," I said.

Danielle didn't respond. I sat back on my heels as she continued with CPR. Bystanders had gathered around in a loose circle. I was about to ask them to stand back, but they weren't blocking any oxygen or interfering. They were just concerned. I looked around the group, and for the first time, realized they were all women.

"Did anyone call the paramedics?" I asked.

A woman in a white beach wrap pointed at Danielle. "She did."

"Does she know what she's doing?" asked another. "She didn't do mouth to mouth."

"She knows," I said. "She's a cop."

Danielle kept at it for a couple more minutes before the onlookers parted for the paramedics—two volunteers from the Palm Beach Shores Fire Department. Unlike me, they had no problem telling everyone to get back.

After Danielle told them the woman was unresponsive, they took over. They used a defibrillator to no effect, then continued working on her until another crew arrived. The second crew dropped a stretcher beside the woman, lifted her onto it, then strapped her in and carried her across the sand to a waiting van.

The onlookers moved toward the van as if it had its own gravity. But Danielle didn't budge. She waited for the volunteer paramedic to pack his defibrillator and stand, then they looked at each other.

The paramedic shook his head. "Do you know what happened?"

"No," said Danielle. "We just came from down the beach. She was out on a Jet Ski, apparently." Danielle turned to me. "Did you see anything?"

I shook my head.

"I better call it in," said Danielle.

"Call it in?" asked the paramedic.

"Police. I'm with the FDLE."

"We share a building. They're on their way."

The doors to the van were closed, but the vehicle had not screamed away with lights and sirens blazing. Shortly after, the boys in blue arrived, except they were in green.

"Sheriff?" I said. "I thought Palm Beach Shores had their own police?"

"They did," said the paramedic. "But they merged with the county sheriff. Cheaper."

I shrugged. It made sense. I never really got the logic of every tiny town having their own police department. It seemed to multiply the bureaucracy, everyone's favorite part of law enforcement.

Two deputies crossed the beach with sour expressions, suggesting they didn't care for what the sand was doing to the shine on their shoes.

One nodded at the paramedic. "That doesn't look good."

"It's not. Female, found unresponsive on a watercraft. This guy found her."

The deputy looked at me. "You found her?"

"No, but I brought her in."

"And you, ma'am?" he asked Danielle.

"Danielle Castle. I'm with the FDLE."

He nodded like he'd been given the weather report.

"You new?" asked Danielle.

"I've been with the sheriff two years."

"That explains why I didn't recognize you. I used to be with the PBSO."

That brightened his mood, but only a smidge.

"So, what can you tell me?"

"We were out for a run."

The deputy glanced at me as if that didn't quite fit the evidence at hand.

"We heard some yelling and one of the other women—that one up there with the blue swimsuit—she came to the beach on a Jet Ski, saying her friend was unconscious out on the water. My husband went back out with her and brought the woman to the beach. She wasn't responsive, so I did CPR until these medics got here."

"So she was just sitting out there?" he asked me.

"She was on that bigger one, the Sea-Doo, is it?" I said. "Apparently it's got cruise control, so the thing was heading for the Bahamas even though she was out of it."

"So, she was unresponsive when you got there?"

"Yes. I jumped onto her craft and turned it off. I couldn't feel a pulse, so I brought her straight back in."

"Are you with the sheriff too?"

"No."

"You go jumping onto moving Sea-Doos often?"

"More often than I'd like."

He looked back at the paramedic. "And she didn't make it?"

"Afraid not."

"Signs of trauma?"

"Nothing obvious."

"Who're these people?" He gestured to the group of women who had gathered under the pop-up canopies.

"No idea."

"You know?"

"No," said Danielle. "Tourists, I figured."

"Let's find out."

The deputies walked back up the beach, and we followed. The paramedics headed for their van.

It wasn't until we reached the canopies that I noticed it resembled a mobile daycare: at least seven toddlers running over picnic blankets and four women standing guard.

"Is Mandy all right?" asked one of them.

"Is that her name? Mandy?" asked the deputy.

"Yes, Mandy Rahm. Is she going to be okay?"

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid not. Mandy has died."

There were gasps and then tears. It felt like a heartless way to break the news, but I knew from experience that there wasn't a better way, only a more confusing one. People preferred terms like *passed on*, but that sounded like you didn't get a job promotion, and when it came to such things, law enforcement folks had to be perfectly clear.

"I'm sorry, ladies," said the deputy. "Are you friends of hers?"

"Yes," said the woman who had taken me out. She seemed to be the only one who had any composure. "We're all just here on a girls' break, you know?"

"I see. And you own the watercraft?"

"Yes, well, no. Not all of them. I own the one I was on—the stand-up one. The others were rentals."

"The others? There's more than that one?" He gestured toward the Sea-Doo.

"Yes. Two more. A few in our group are still out on the reef. Oh my God, they don't even know."

"Did you say reef?"

"Yes. We were out surfing on Reef Road. It's a break just on the other side of the inlet."

"Okay. So you were surfing on Jet Skis?"

"No. On boards. It's just easier to reach the break with Jet Skis, and there's no parking over there. The residents aren't very hospitable toward beachgoers."

"Explain to me how that works," said the deputy. "You carry your boards over there?"

"Yes."

"And you just leave your Jet Skis floating around?"

"No, we rope them together, and one or two of us stay there while the others catch some breaks. Then we switch out."

"So, how did your friend come to be unconscious and heading out to sea?"

"I don't know. I mean, she was surfing, and I was watching the Skis, right? And she came off her board."

"She fell off?"

"Yeah, I guess. She said she wasn't feeling right, so she was going back in. She was headed back, but then I saw she was going the wrong way. And I got a bad feeling, you know?"

"Yes. Go on."

"So I came after her. And she was slumped over the console. Now I think of it, she must have dropped her board out there somewhere. But I couldn't reach over to pull the kill switch out, so I went for help. This guy came out and jumped across and..."

"Okay, we're going to need to get statements from everyone, and we'll need to speak with your friends still out there."

"Okay, I guess."

"Are you staying in the resort here?"

"Huh? Uh, no. We rented a couple houses on the island."

"Maybe we should go back there," said the deputy. "It's pretty hot out here for these little kids."

"They're grommets, they're used to—" The woman's hand shot to her mouth.

"What is it, ma'am?"

"Nora," she whispered.

"Who's Nora?"

The woman turned slowly and pointed to a little girl with honey-blond curls and cherubic cheeks who sat cross-legged on a picnic blanket, driving a Barbie doll around in a dump truck.

"That's Nora. That's Mandy's daughter."