

SUNBURNT - Death of America's Paradise ©

By Claudette V. Ferron

Chapter 1

Obstructing a dangerous and invisible highway, the Empress of the Sea lay at anchor just off the beach-lined shores of the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Thomas. Aboard the ship, Federal Prosecutor Victoria Mignon, seduced by a moonless tropical night, settled into her cabin as fellow passengers partied -- all oblivious to their impending peril. As a trial weary Victoria drifted peacefully to sleep and party-goers danced on the open-air deck to the percussive rhythms of Calypso, none were aware of the modified twin-engine Cessna swiftly approaching, hidden in the night sky on a collision course with the 2,400 passenger cruise ship.

Flying fast, low, and dark, the Colombian cartel aircraft carrying a half ton of uncut cocaine, bore down on its target. The pilot, a former U.S. military airman, lured by money to work air-drops for the cartel, had made this run dozens of times. He could fly the route blind. With him in the Cessna was a Colombian peasant who had worked his way up from cultivating coca in secret jungle fields to flying air-drops as a line and fuel man. His job was simple, but dangerous. The

hulled out cabin of the Cessna had room for two auxiliary fuel tanks and the payload: pure uncut cocaine, packaged in 40-kilo bales, to feed the insatiable American drug appetite. The extra fuel tanks made possible the 2,500 mile journey from hidden airstrips in Colombia and Venezuela to the American Caribbean islands. Monitoring the fuel was easy, but kicking bales of cocaine attached to a zip-line by cleats, out of a moving plane without getting tangled in the line and falling into the sea, was not. It had happened to other linemen and they had drowned, or were eaten by sharks. And this time, despite the care taken preparing for the drop, an unhooked cleat dangling open on the zip-line went unnoticed.

In the cockpit, the pilot was momentarily distracted by an odd noise as the Cessna rounded the highest peak of a small cay near the drop site. As his line of sight cleared, instead of darkness near the pre-set coordinates, he saw the funnel and top deck of the anchored cruise ship filled with partying passengers rising up fast before him. The Cessna lurched as he took evasive action. Looking up from the zip-line and seeing deck lights, the panic-stricken lineman screamed, "Pull up, pull up, pull up."

"Shit, what'd yah think I'm doing," the pilot screamed back, as he pulled up hard on the controls.

The Cessna jerked upward. The bales tumbled slamming against the cabin door which jarred, threatening to fly open. Clutching a metal bracket securing one of the fuel tanks as it too strained and threatened to pry loose, the lineman scrambled to hold on. The plane shuddered, careening past the funnel almost hitting it and buzzed the deck of the ship within inches of the heads of stunned passengers as they screamed and dove for cover. With the screeching of metal scraping against metal, the plane skimmed a steel cable fastened to a guidepost on the deck, nearly clipping the ship. Roused by the noise, Victoria stirred from her dreams of paradise, unaware of the unfolding drama.

Curious, she turned and looked toward her cabin window just in time to see the Cessna swoop past only a few feet away. Startled, Victoria instinctively recoiled in her bed from the window thinking the plane was about to crash. But to her relief, the plane melted into the darkness as quickly as it had appeared. *That was close*, she thought. *That's why I don't fly in small planes, especially not at night. What a welcome to Paradise!*

As Victoria sat up in bed now wide awake, the Cessna pilot's adrenaline surged as he felt a new vibration and fought to regain control of the plane. He knew disaster still loomed as he leveled the Cessna approaching the drop site, less than a mile away. The Coast Guard would be airborne in minutes. He had to drop the load and get out of there fast! They were over the drop site in seconds. He screamed,

"Throw the shit out now!" The lineman rushed to release the zip-line and the bales as the pilot continued shouting. "If the fucking Mexicans ever get their fucking act together, we can fucking retire, before we fucking kill ourselves!"

The lineman knew enough English to understand what was being said, but he also knew that until the Colombians said so, they both did what they were told. As he hurried to kick out the bales, the loose cleat caught in his pant leg. Tangled, he fought to free himself before the last bale went through the door into the sea with him attached to it. As the last bale slid to the open door, the zip-line snaked around his ankle, dragging him to the edge. The pain was instant. He was wedged in the door. His only choice -- cut the line. Instinctively, he pulled a knife from his pocket, and slashed at the line wildly, nearly cutting his leg as the line gave way and the last bale splashed down into the inky sea below. Now he just prayed the hook-men would pick up the loose bale with the rest, as they had done when it happened before. *The line just snapped.* He lied to himself, as he would later, to save his life.

"All clear," the relieved lineman shouted, in his heavy Colombian accent, as the bales bobbed like buoys in the forbidding black swells of the warm Caribbean Sea. Quickly pulling the plane up and out of the drop zone at full throttle, the pilot prayed that the new vibration he felt wouldn't get worse and that the Cessna would hold together long enough to land safely. He had already

signaled the waiting boats hidden in a nearby cove, and as the Cessna disappeared into the night, a squadron of four high-powered speedboats raced to the floating bales.©