

# FLIGHT RISK

*by*

Kim Baldwin



2007

## PROLOGUE

There were three gunshots altogether. Loud, staccato reports that pierced the stillness of the night. Two in rapid succession, then one more after a moment's pause, as if the shooter had stopped to take a breath.

Alexi Nikolos was already pounding back up the familiar stairs by then, her heart beating so wildly in her chest she was almost dizzy from the burst of adrenaline. She clutched her Beretta with such tension that the rough crosshatches in the grip left a faint impression in her right palm.

It was after midnight and there were no lights on in the house, but Alexi knew every room, every stick of furniture, and each of the twenty-three steps that led to the upper level and bedrooms. As she got to the top and rounded the corner, a fist lashed out of nowhere and connected with her jaw. Her world went black.

When she regained consciousness, she was alone and the house was silent. Her gun was gone. She staggered to her feet and lurched toward the bedroom, wanting to shut down, to be anywhere else. Knowing what she would find, she forced herself through the doorway, hearing, as she did, the squeal of tires outside.

She flipped on the light and let out a keening animal wail of anguish.

Sofia Galletti was slumped in the corner, silent and still, the pale skin of her nude body stark against a growing pool of crimson. Blood splattered the cream-colored wall behind her, and two dark holes marred the plaster where the large-caliber bullets that had pierced Sofia's head and abdomen had ended their deadly rampage.

Alexi stumbled toward the woman she had made love to not an hour before and sank to her knees. With infinite tenderness, she cradled Sofia in her arms.

“I am sorry. I am so sorry.” She whispered it over and over and over, as if she could take it all back—her carelessness, her selfishness, her stupidity at thinking that the rules did not apply to her.

She rocked Sofia gently, her mind refusing to accept what had happened, until so much time had passed that the warm flesh she clutched began to grow cold.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *One Year Later*

Blayne Keller sighed wistfully as she slipped tickets and an itinerary into an airline folder and handed this to the meticulously groomed businessman sitting opposite her desk. In the eight years she had worked at the Balmy Breezes Travel Agency she'd booked thousands of vacations for clients, but this was the first time she had arranged a trip to her dream destination. Remote, exotic Fiji. Three hundred and thirty islands of tropical bliss. *The Blue Lagoon*.

It was an especially appealing excursion to think about with the record-breaking cold spell Chicago was enduring this February. When Blayne drove by the large digital thermometer on the bank building down the street that morning, it had read nine below zero, up from an overnight low of minus fifteen. The parking lot that serviced the travel agency and the soda wholesaler behind it was slick with ice, and she'd nearly fallen half a dozen times getting to the door.

Blayne had about \$3,600 in her Fiji fund, a stash of cash stuffed into an old coffee bag in her freezer at home. But that was not nearly enough. Not for the kind of luxury adventure she had in mind. The business class airfare alone from Chicago was more than five grand. She had another couple of years at least before she could arrange her own sojourn to the South Pacific. Until then, she'd have to be content with spending her vacation time closer to home.

Her client got to his feet and she did the same, thanking him for his business and wishing him well for his trip.

"Gotta say, I envy you," she confessed amiably as he tucked the

travel folder into the inside breast pocket of his crisp navy suit. “The diving and snorkeling in Fiji is absolutely phenomenal.” She offered her hand and the man shook it, but his bored expression told her what he thought of her comment.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about that. Give me Vegas any day,” he said. “This was the wife’s idea. No place to me is worth being trapped on a plane for thirty hours.”

*Cretin. You don’t deserve Fiji.* Blayne kept the smile on her face only until the client turned to go, then she stuck her tongue out at him, an impulse that prompted a muffled snort from the dark-haired woman seated at the desk to her left. Fortunately, the man never looked back as Blayne silenced her friend, Claudia Cluzet, with a withering glare.

They were both thirty, and Blayne sometimes wondered how they had ever become close friends, they seemed so very different. For a start, their outward appearances were almost diametrically opposite. Blayne was petite and curvy, her Irish heritage spelled out in her shoulder-length strawberry blond hair and lightly freckled complexion. She was also feisty, outspoken, and fiercely independent, and she dressed for comfort much more than for style. Today she’d chosen black dress slacks and a loose-fitting turtleneck sweater in the muted gray-green color of high-quality jade, the same shade as her eyes.

She never tried to look provocative. But a few people, Claudia included, insisted she had an understated type of sex appeal. That she was graceful in the way she carried herself, and her ready smiles and sense of mischief made her attractive to others. Blayne never had any trouble getting dates, if that was a litmus test of her charms, but she was well aware that the serious good looks belonged to her friend. Claudia had the statuesque, wispy frame of a model, and her classic features and dark eyes and hair were reminiscent of a young Isabella Rossellini. Unlike Blayne, she dressed to impress and entice. Today, despite the cold, she wore a long leather skirt and a formfitting red sweater that focused attention on her nipples.

Blayne tended toward perky enthusiasm, where Claudia was languid ease. But they communicated in their own shorthand, developed over a decade of private jokes and shared confidences.

“Fiji, land of hot monkey sex on the beach,” Claudia said smugly as soon as the man was gone.

“Claud, don’t even...” Blayne threatened, propping herself against the edge of her friend’s desk.

“That tongue of yours is getting a real workout these days,” Claudia remarked in a seductive tone. She hiked her leather skirt above her knees and leaned back in her chair, moistening her lips in invitation.

Blayne obliged by leering at the expanse of skin exposed on Claudia’s long legs. “You wish.”

“God, get a room already,” an exasperated Joyce Houseman interrupted from the hallway behind them. Joyce was a bleached blonde with breasts too perfectly round and pert to be anything but artificial. Every article of clothing she owned showed them off. In the midst of winter, she favored snug V-necked sweaters—today’s was pink. Joyce was past forty and it was beginning to show, so she was fighting the advance of time with plastic surgery and too much makeup. “You two will *never* convince me you have nothing going on.”

“Only in her dreams,” Claudia replied.

“I’m not the one dreaming these days, sweetheart,” Blayne countered playfully.

“Better late than never,” Claudia shot back.

Joyce’s scowl deepened. “What the *hell* are you guys talking about?”

Blayne and Claudia both cracked up.

“Should we be nice and tell her?” Blayne asked.

“If you must.”

“About damn time.” Joyce moved closer. “You’re trying to tell me you two really haven’t gotten together? Not ever?”

“No.” Claudia stuck out her rosy lower lip in a pout. “Not yet.”

Blayne reached over and ruffled Claudia’s hair affectionately. With a trace of regret, she said, “And we never will.”

“But you’re both unattached, and you obviously have the hots for each other.” Joyce looked bemused. “I don’t get it.”

“Well, to understand, you have to back up about ten years to the day I walked into my dorm room at Michigan State and found this magnificent specimen”—Blayne trailed her gaze up and down the length of Claudia’s body appreciatively before continuing—“in my bed.”

“Soon to be *my* bed,” Claudia added.

“She announced she was my new roommate, but only if she could have the bed by the window. I wasn’t about to argue since I got a delightful new view myself in the bargain.”

“And?” Joyce prompted.

“*And...I lusted after her like crazy,*” Blayne admitted. “She used to wear these tight white shorts that barely covered her ass.”

Claudia laughed.

“But she was only into men then.” Blayne sighed. “And totally oblivious to my fascination with her.”

“Until the night you kissed me,” Claudia supplied.

“Aha! I knew something must have happened between you,” Joyce said with satisfaction.

“Still seems more dream than memory,” Blayne continued. “Far too much to drink. Anyway, that ol’ cat came barreling out of the bag *that* night, for sure.”

Joyce turned impatiently to Claudia. “So? Come on. Did you kiss her back?”

“Well, yes and no.”

“Mostly no,” Blayne said. “It was over almost before it started.”

“You caught me by surprise,” Claudia said. “Long before I knew I could swing in that direction. And it wasn’t exactly the time or place.”

“What does that mean?” Joyce pressed. “Details! I want details!”

“Well, we were in the shower,” Blayne said. “Naked, of course... and she had her arms around me...”

“That’s more like it. *Now* I’m getting the picture.”

“Not the whole picture you aren’t,” Claudia interjected defensively. “She stumbled in at four a.m., very drunk, and I put her in the shower to try to sober her up. I had my arms around her to keep her from falling over.” She glanced toward Blayne. “Which is another reason I discouraged you that night. Not only was I not ready for it, I wasn’t entirely sure you knew who it was you were kissing. You were pretty far gone.”

“Well, for your information, I knew all too damn well who I was kissing,” Blayne retorted. “I went out that night in the first place because I had it so bad for you I thought I’d go mad if I didn’t get laid soon.”

Claudia’s eyes got big as she took in this tidbit from the past. “Did you really?”

“Yes.”

“*So?*” Joyce demanded. “What happened?”

“Well, I was so shocked I guess I just kind of tried to laugh it off,” Claudia said. “Blayne apologized the next day and blamed it on the alcohol.”

Blayne sighed inwardly. She’d realized as soon as Claudia pulled

back that her own feelings weren't shared. She supposed she'd known it all along, but she'd just wanted to kiss her so badly she couldn't help herself that night.

Joyce processed this for a moment, then asked, "What about now? You're both into women, aren't you? And you have this huge flirtation thing going all the time."

Claudia hesitated. "Let's just say our Blayne has not been lucky in love, so she's become a bit relationship-shy." She fell silent when Blayne glared at her.

"No. That's not the reason. The reason we're not together is that we've been friends too long and I won't let anything mess that up."

"So you keep saying," Claudia murmured.

Blayne shrugged and gave Joyce a resigned little smile, indicating the revelations were over. Joyce took the hint and said, "Better get back to the books. Holler when lunch is here. I'll pay whoever."

She strolled off down the hallway that led to the rear business office next to the employee lounge and restrooms. Joyce liked to joke that she could skip work and they'd never know she'd gone. Her office was just a few feet away from two convenient escape routes—a connecting door to the soda company in the back and an alarmed fire exit to the parking lot.

"You're so stubborn," Claudia commented once they were alone again.

"And you're just bi-curious," Blayne replied. "You keep ping-ponging from men to women. Any idea yet which it is you want to settle down with?"

"Does it matter? I'll be happy as long as I find someone I trust, can confide in, love, respect, am wildly attracted to..." Claudia ticked off the qualities on the fingers of one hand, then feigned surprise as she looked at Blayne. "And what do you know. You meet all those criteria!"

Laughing, Blayne got up and moved behind Claudia's chair so she could lean down and hug her around the neck. "Not going to happen, honey," she said affectionately, then she planted a kiss on the top of Claudia's head. "You know we make much better friends than we would lovers."

"I'm not done trying to change your mind about that." Claudia stretched and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Time for lunch, and it's my turn to go. Italian today?"

There were a number of ethnic restaurants within a short walk of the travel agency, and the three of them alternated on who got to choose the cuisine for the day. Joyce always ordered the same thing and Blayne knew the Firenze menu by heart. She pulled her wallet out of the top drawer of her desk, extracted a ten, and handed it to Claudia.

“I’ll take that salmon and pasta dish with the dill cream sauce.”

Claudia bundled up in a coat, hat, scarf, and gloves until only her eyes were exposed. “When I come back, let’s plan a girls’ night out,” she said, her voice muffled by the scarf. “Somewhere with a heater better than in my apartment. A place with lots of booze.” She headed for the door, firing one final thought over her shoulder. “Or lots of hot women. That would do too.”

Blayne cracked up. Warning, “Watch the ice,” she returned to her desk.

Pictures of Fiji stared at her from the computer monitor. Tanned, toned bodies in bikinis, fortunate tourists sipping fruity drinks. She tapped a pencil on her desk impatiently as a restlessness swept through her. It wasn’t just a vacation she craved. She wasn’t entirely sure what it was that she needed, she only knew she needed a change, and soon.

She liked her job, her friends, and even living in Chicago, though she’d never expected to settle in the Windy City. At one time, it had seemed her life was all laid out for her. After college, she’d planned to travel for six months and then return home to Ishpeming, Michigan, to take over managing Blarneys, the family pub she’d lived above all her life. Her parents had expected it and she wasn’t averse to the idea. She loved small-town life and knew she would enjoy working in the congenial atmosphere of the authentic Irish tavern.

But a month before her graduation, Blarneys had burned to the ground, killing her parents and leaving her suddenly orphaned, homeless, and with an uncertain future, all in one swift awful nightmare. Claudia’s father had offered her employment in his travel agency, and Chicago had seemed as good a place as any to start her life anew.

Since then it had been a comfortable existence, but it had gotten much too comfortable of late. She needed some fun. Some action. Some romance. Something spontaneous in her life. *Time to shake things up a little. I need to get out more.*



Across the street from the travel agency, four men in business suits and overcoats sat shivering in a large panel truck that read *L. Wolfe and Sons, Plumbers* on the outside.

In the back with two other unhappy agents on temporary transfer from Washington, Special Agent Leslie “Skip” Topping wondered how long it would be before his walrus mustache froze over like a mountaineer’s.

“Turn up the heater, will you, pal?” he called forward to the driver, a paunchy local agent dressed in the insulated coveralls a real plumber might be wearing on such a lousy day.

“Up all the way already,” Johnny Trelaine responded.

Skip had a feeling the jerk was lying, sitting in his cozy little hole up front, making sure the three Washington ringers in the back were as uncomfortable as possible. It was pretty obvious he resented the hell out of the lead role they’d been assigned in this organized crime investigation, when it was FBI Chicago that had put the case together.

“Damn this cold.” Special Agent Dennis O’Rourke blew on his hands. A ginger-haired agent Skip had known for years, he was having trouble operating the sophisticated recording equipment in front of him with his gloves on. So he kept taking them off, then complaining that his fingers were icicles.

Skip had a slightly easier task. He could manage his binoculars just fine with the heavy gloves he’d bought the second day of their surveillance, and there hadn’t been much to see today anyway. Six apparent customers of the travel agency and three trucks in and out of the soda place. The bitter cold and icy roads had kept the streets virtually clear of traffic.

The bosses in Washington were optimistic the tip they’d gotten would pay off, and this miserable stakeout would provide them with evidence to finally nail Vittorio Cinzano. So far the ruthless mob underboss had proven to be an elusive target. Cinzano was careful to avoid being seen anywhere near one of his distribution hubs. And guys that high up in the Mafia hierarchy were rarely sloppy.

“Anything?” Special Agent George Dombrowski mumbled through a mouthful of glazed donut. It was his third, but he was one man who didn’t need to worry about the calories. He was built like a brick wall, with a massive neck to match his overdeveloped arms and shoulders, and beefy hands that made the donut seem half-sized.

“At least we can hear something, finally,” O’Rourke reported,

fiddling again with the knobs on the recorder. “It’s a woman talking. She wants someone to call her when the meeting is over.”

Dombrowski paused over his donut. “That’s all she said? To call her when the meeting’s over?”

“All we got, anyway,” O’Rourke confirmed. “Not enough to ID her. But it’s got to be one of the three that work in the travel agency. They’re the only women in the building.”

“Which one of them do you think it is?” Dombrowski asked.

“No way of knowing with those damn windows where they are,” Skip complained, not for the first time. The squat red brick building they were watching had two large picture windows in front, but they were set too high to see inside. “If I had to pick, though, I’d say the brunette.”

Dombrowski chuckled. “We didn’t ask which one you wanted to screw, Skip.”

“Hell, they could all be in on it,” O’Rourke said. “Maybe they’re back there in the warehouse all the time. Maybe this is just the first time we’ve caught one saying anything.”

“Heads up,” Trelaine interrupted from the driver’s seat. “Three subjects. Ford sedan approaching from the rear.”

Skip shot to his feet and trained his binoculars on the battered sedan that drew alongside them. It slowed to turn into the travel agency parking lot, then disappeared behind the building. The windows were tinted, making it almost impossible for a positive identification of the occupants.

“That was Cinzano himself, God damn it!” Trelaine whooped. “In the back, left side.”

“You sure?” Dombrowski asked doubtfully. “Couldn’t see much.”

“Could be him,” Skip agreed. “Sedan looks about right. He’d want to be inconspicuous.”

“I know I’m right. I’ve been staring at pictures of him for months,” Trelaine reminded them, the usual edge of resentment missing from his voice.

Skip knew what he was thinking. *Play nice or get cut out of this.* “We’ll know soon enough,” he said. “Everybody shut up now, will you, so I can hear what’s going on.”