

THE POSER

CHAPTER ONE - CRIMSON SHEET

Standing over the bed, he watched the erratic bursts from his lover's neck slowly subside. Leaning closer, he saw the light leave her eyes and froze the moment in his mind like a polaroid.

That's the last time.

Reaching for his smartphone, he began posing her body like Hollywood starlets who graced past magazine covers. He took great pleasure in orchestrating his art, capturing images from numerous angles. Minutes later, he put away the smartphone in one jacket pocket and removed a folded letter from another, placing it in the center of a nearby writing desk. Taking out a pen, he placed it in her hand before returning both to the desk. Pleased, he began gathering his clothes.

Suddenly, he heard a noise and froze in place, listening intently.

On full alert, he slowly made his way down the hall. Thinking he heard another sound, he stopped. The only noise came from a splashing fountain next to the pool in the backyard.

Cautious, he continued to creep down the long hallway to the rear of the house. Light from the moon cast long shadows on the marble floor. Stopping, he scanned the room until his eyes landed on a door in the corner of the great room. It was open several inches. Approaching, and with quickening pulse, he stepped outside to scan the grounds.

Nothing.

Satisfied, but still on alert, he returned to the master—checking the hallway clock en route. It was 4:26.

Less than an hour to finish.

Picking up his pace, he returned to the master, finished dressing, and thoroughly wiped down the entire suite. Next, he made his way to her home office which was an adjacent control room lit by dim lights. On one wall was a bank of small screens—each one connected to a camera that monitored her property. The control panel clock read 4:44.

Two stops before home.

Entering a password, he tapped a series of keys—erasing the computer's hard-drive, and shut the system down. Satisfied, he turned off lights and quickly made his way to the kitchen,

placing dishes in the dishwasher. As a final precaution, he took a vacuum from a closet and cleaned, before passing through the house a final time. Wiping down anything he recalled touching, he was about to leave, when a thought bubbled up.

Her cellphone.

He looked in the kitchen, dining room, and office. Frantic, he returned to the bedroom, scanned her writing desk, dresser, and bathroom. Checking his watch, it was 5:02.

First light's soon.

Passing back through the house swiftly, he checked the bar, great room and library.

Nothing.

Snapping his fingers, he recalled seeing her purse on the foyer table. Removing it, he swiped the screen.

Locked.

Clenching his jaw, he returned to the bedroom, and placed it in front of her face, and it opened.

Technology works, dead or alive.

Checking for certain photos, he erased them. Next, he looked for and erased several texts, before returning to the bedroom for a final touch. Retrieving and placing the bloody razor in her hand, he wrapped her fingers around the handle.

Next, he took a souvenir from his pocket, placed it in her other hand and closed tightly. Looking at the beside clock, it was 5:21.

Climbing atop a chair, he took one last photo. When complete, he put it aside and leaned over to whisper, "Sweet dreams, love."

Gathering his things and her remnants, he exited the back door and moved swiftly through the pool area, before closing the gate and making his way down the driveway. At the end of the street, he spotted his rental.

Reaching into his bag for the keys, he didn't see a speeding car rounding the hairpin curve behind him. Looking up at the last second, he was momentarily blinded by high beams and stumbled backwards, as the car swerved to barely miss him.

"Watch where you're going, asshole!" A voice shouted through an open window.

Downshifting into the next curve, a throaty roar and a blaring song punctuated the near miss, before disappearing into the night.

CHAPTER TWO - COLD CASE

The night skies were smoke black—the air, brittle dry. The tail end of the Santa Ana winds fooled you with its shifting currents, and the rustle of swaying palms seemed to whisper, *Chill*.

It was late and the precinct unusually quiet tonight—especially given we were stationed in the center of Hollywood. Since my daughter was out with friends, the latest steady was now a memory, and I suffered occasional insomnia, it felt like a good idea to take advantage of the time.

I had spent little time working overnights since the Academy, but was working to put a period at the end of a sad story. The bloody headline had faded nearly a decade ago, and I had been tasked with closing it for good.

While finishing up paperwork, my mind flashed back to my days as a *boot*, working alongside my then-teacher, now-partner, Detective Stuart Brown—a veteran cop and good man. He started in The Graveyard like everyone else, and was fond of staying it was a place to begin or end a career—dependent upon whether you were a new uniform, or your time had come. I was glad to be working in the daylight these days.

Fortunately, fate had smiled on me, as someone on the ninth floor felt I showed promise—something about solid instincts and good chemistry. So I got a boost to Detective Third Grade and was partnered with Brown. Moving from nights to days, we've been joined at the hip since. As much as I had grown tired of the increased traffic, smog, homeless, and violence, it wasn't time to move on. Not yet. Besides, I was more than anxious to make my mark as Detective First Grade.

I had spent enough time in the job to almost gain enough respect to be treated as an equal. I say almost because in the all boys club of the LAPD, it was next to impossible to break through that ceiling. Besides, I was too stubborn to quit. Having a brother as a Police Captain and a father as Circuit Court Judge, both had provided as much leg up as was possible without fully tipping the nepotism scale.

Closing the file in front of me, I caught myself smiling, finally putting to sleep a cold case which had napped in Hollywood back alleys for half a decade. Lucky for me, the answer had been in sight—it just wasn't plain.

It had involved a fresh out of high school wannabe named Rebecca Strong who had come to Hollywood by way of Atlanta in search of fortune and fame in a town of glitz and glamor. According to sources, her career lasted all of eleven months. After dozens of acting classes and hundreds of commercial auditions, her sparkling smile but average talents were bashed. Along with the back of her head. BFT, or Blunt Force Trauma, had put her dreams to sleep for good.

She had been attacked in the middle of the night, in the middle of Hollywood, yet with no witnesses. Stuart had been "this close" to closing it, before it was buried into the cold files. I just happened to stumble across a record of one of her old acting teachers, connecting him to an arrest was linked to another unsolved case.

Long story short: the tiny needle fell from the overwhelming haystack, when I unraveled the case with reverse engineering—a technique I learned early in life from my father.

Fresh eyes and dogged tenacity helped.

A loud cackle from the coffee room snapped me back, and checking my watch, I saw it was past midnight. Stretching a stiff back, I gathered my things as my tired eyes landed on a picture frame on the corner of my desk.

The first photo was me graduating the Academy. I was standing alongside my parents and brother Peter. It was about the same time my only sibling left Hollywood as Sergeant to become Captain in New York's first precinct. Judge Samuel P. Norelli had both arms around his two suits in blue and a hand on Mom's shoulder.

In the second, I was holding my daughter Shay just minutes after she was born. I had purposely folded the photo where my ex-husband crowded the happy scene.

The third showed Stuart and me the day I was promoted to detective, and the last photo was of my black lab Lucy, who I lost to cancer last summer.

Heading for the door, I heard Officer Patrick, an African-American female officer, before I saw her. She had more bravado than most guys I knew, and sounded in rare form tonight. Catching my eye, she shouted, "What'n the hell are you doing here on the weekend, Patty?"

“Closing cases, girl. And keeping an eye on rookies like you, *Patty*. Be careful out there,” I waved over my shoulder.

“Will do, Detective,” she laughed, disappearing from sight..

She was among the few I allowed to slang my given name.

Few called me *Patty*, only my parents called me *Darcy*, my boss used *Patricia* when he was serious, but most friends call me *Pat*.

Everyone else?

Just *Norelli*.