

CHAPTER ONE

Norelli's eyes flicker back and forth beneath closed lids. Pinched in a permanent frown, her forehead is dotted with beads of sweat. Erratic breathing and twitches punctuate her tanned face. Struggling to get free, she twists in one direction, then the other.

Her mind pushes aside a myriad of haunting images when her eyes suddenly snap open. The only light in the dark room comes from a bluish glow illuminating a familiar face.

What?

“More bad dreams, Patricia?”

She remains motionless, wondering if she is lost in a nightmare or awaking to another one. Still disoriented, she is blinded momentarily by a sudden flash.

“Nice,” the low voice whispers. “Another trophy for my collection.”

She slowly reaches under her pillow.

Shit.

Struggling to gain her bearings, she works at slowing her breath, then stretches toward the bedside lamp. Her finger finds the switch. With a turn, she lights the room.

“Morning, love,” Darius smiles, squinting at the light.

Dressed in black from head to toe, he looks calm and resembles a burglar—but he is neither. His nervous eyes belie his steady demeanor.

Looking down at her feet, she sees familiar strips of silk cloth binding her ankles to the footboard. Her sweat-covered naked body lures him to sneak glimpses.

“Dreams still tormenting you?”

“What are you doing here?” She asks, scanning the room.

His eyes follow.

“Just tying up loose ends,” he says, tightening his grip on her ankles with his left hand while sliding the smartphone into his back pocket with his right hand.

She writhes to get loose, but his grip is a vise.

Her eyes widen as he removes a syringe from his jacket pocket—a shock wave of fear shoots through her body.

Removing a plastic cap from the end of the needle with his teeth, he spits it on the floor. “One could say I’m putting a period at the end of a long sentence.”

“You’re insane, Darius!”

“Perhaps.”

“And why in the hell risk your freedom for—”

“Hah,” he blurts. “What freedom? You’ll likely never stop chasing me.”

She is losing circulation and patience. “Not likely,” she says, glaring at him. “Certain.”

“*Riiiiight*,” he says, pointing the syringe between her first and second toes. “When they find you, they’ll assume you had a heart attack. That will be correct because your heart will suffer enough drugs to drop a charging bull—or a raging *Bobby*,” he cackles.

With each passing moment, her fear increases.

His staring eyes are glowing. “You wouldn’t believe how much I shot into that neanderthal. But then again, you saw the results, didn’t you?”

As she tries to sit up, he yanks at her bonds. “Stop! You should know by now fighting me will only make it worse.”

Frozen in place, Norelli hears her pounding heartbeat.

“Play along,” he growls, “and in moments you’ll return to your fitful slumber.”

Stuck between terror and bravery, she doesn’t see a way out.

“Darius, please, I won’t follow you,” she whimpers. “I promise. And I can forget you—like it never happened. Seriously.”

Sympathy dissolves from his face as he tightens his grip and inserts the needle. When the plunger reaches the bottom, a wave of nauseous heat instantly courses through her legs, racing upwards toward her torso, igniting every vein in her body.

As the drug hits her beating heart, it explodes.

CHAPTER TWO

Palm Desert, California—

In the next second, I spring up in bed, gasping for breath, trying to gain my bearings.

What the hell?

A slice of sunshine between blackout curtains splits the darkness. Reaching for the nightstand lamp, I light up the room and see the covers twisted around my ankles at the foot of the bed. My sheets are soaked with sweat.

It's gotta be a hundred degrees.

I look up.

Why isn't the fan on?

With my eyes trying to adjust, I look to the curtains; they're still.

AC's off.

Catching my breath, I try to quiet my monkey mind.

I'm losing it.

Suddenly, a noise down the hall breaks the silence. Kicking off the covers, I reach under the pillow, remove my service weapon, slip on a nightie, and approach the door.

Easing it open, I listen. Nothing.

Why isn't the pool fountain running?

Even though the sun has yet to crack the horizon, there is enough light to see down the hall.

Approaching my parent's room, I stop to listen.

Heavy breathing.

Padding down the marble corridor, I scan the rooms along the way. Peering out to the pool, I see nothing out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, I hear metal hit something. I freeze, quietly chamber a round, and slowly approach the mudroom that separates the kitchen from the garage entrance. Approaching the garage, I lean close to the door and squint a listen.

Nothing.

Taking a deep breath, I point my gun at eye level and count: *Three, two, one.*

Kicking the door open, I crouch low. "Police! Hold it right there!"

The figure drops a flashlight and crashes into a stack of boxes with a thud and a grunt.

"Don't move!"

I reach for the flashlight and shine it in the stranger's face.

"Dad?"