

CHAPTER ONE

Palm Desert, California — Sunday, 6 a.m.

Norelli's eyes flick back and forth beneath closed lids. Pinched in a permanent frown, beads of sweat dot her forehead. Erratic breathing and twitches punctuate her tanned face. Struggling to get free, she twists in one direction then the other. Pushing aside haunting images, 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 one. Disoriented, a sudden flash momentarily blinds her.

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

She slowly reaches under her pillow.

Shit.

Struggling to gain her bearings, she works to slow her breath then stretches toward the bedside lamp. Her finger finds the switch, and with a turn, the room lights up.

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

Dressed in black from head to toe, he looks calm and resembles a burglar. But he was neither. His nervous eyes belies his steady demeanor.

Looking down, familiar strips of silk cloth bind her ankles to the footboard. Her naked body—covered in sweat—lures him to sneak glimpses and causes her heart to race.

“Dreams still tormenting you?”

“What are you doing here?” She says, looking around.

His eyes follow.

“Just tying up loose ends,” he purrs, tightening his grip on her ankles with his left hand, while sliding the smartphone into his back pocket with the other. “Pun intended,” he grins.

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

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

Removing a plastic cap from the end of the needle with his teeth, he spit it to 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? Knowing you’ll likely never stop chasing me.”

She was losing circulation and patience. “Not likely,” she glares, “certain.”

“*Riiiiight*,” he smirks, pointing the syringe between her first and second toes. “When they find you, they’ll assume you had a heart attack. Which will have actually happened 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 seem to glow. “You wouldn’t believe how much I shot into that neanderthal. But then, 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, her heartbeat pounds in her ears.

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

Stuck between terror and bravery, she didn’t see an 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 between her toes. When the plunger reaches the bottom, a wave of nauseous heat instantly courses through her legs, racing upwards toward her torso. It ignites every vein in her body.

As the drug hits her heart, it feels like her chest will explode.

Then it stops.

CHAPTER TWO

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

What the hell!

Scanning the room, a slice of light between blackout curtains split the darkness. Reaching for the nightstand lamp, I light up the room and can see the covers tangle my ankles. They're twisted at the foot of the bed. My sweat soaks the bedsheets.

It's gotta be a hundred degrees.

I look overhead.

Why isn't the fan on?

With my eyes trying to adjust, I look to the curtains; they're completely 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 nighty and approach the door.

Easing it open, I listen. Nothing.

Why isn't the fountain running?

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

Approaching my parent's room, I 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?”

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