

Chapter 1

“FUCK!” He screamed once he had closed the door. The Mercedes was soundproof so there were no witnesses to his verbal rant, but the windshield allowed too much visibility. He needed to get himself under control. His bike pants were black and hid the blood well, but the drainage down his leg had reached his sock. Anyone looking down would see the crimson flow staining his white sock.

The knife hadn’t cut much fabric, it had gone straight in. But it was deep and he was losing blood. He had also taken serious blows to his face and abs. “FUCKING BITCH!”

He had had barely made it to his car before the first ambulance arrived. He needed to get away from the crime scene. He was always careful when he acquired one of his playthings, it was more a matter of pride in fooling the stupid cops. He knew he was smarter than they were. He flaunted his DNA to taunt them. It wasn’t on record anywhere, and because he was an only child and his parents had chosen small, nothing lives, there were no family ties in the DNA database to point the finger. Getting caught and going to prison just wasn’t that big a deal, he wouldn’t even live to stand trial. Yet he still had a desire not to get caught. Not yet. At least not until he could have his revenge over that presumptuous bitch who had tried to fight back.

There was really no reason to expect karate from the bimbo...or a knife! No, there was no way he could have predicted that. He reassured himself that he did everything right. She had to die, there was no question. He had mentally shifted from assessing the recent attack to contemplating her murder. Like slipping into a comfortable pair of loafers...a perfect fit. He snapped himself from his reverie, he had been rubbing himself while he thought of the infinite tortures he might employ before he finally cut the thread. He was still in the parking lot.

He turned the key in the ignition and carefully navigated his way to the 91 freeway. He

had picked the play locations so he would have easy access to the highways; once you join the LA crush, you were home free. As an attorney, he worked with his clients on viable exit strategies for all their business endeavors. Always have an exit strategy. It was a helpful habit to have when one turned the mind to crime.

Less than thirty minutes later he pulled through the gates of Serenity Springs. He chuckled at the irony of the grand gates locking out the riff raff. As he drove up and his car's radio transmitter triggered the gates to swing inward, he whistled to himself, "What do you do when evil has a key?" He found his own wit so amusing he slapped his thigh, ending his ebullience as it came away bloody. He was still conscious, so he knew she hadn't hit the major artery, but it was a deep cut and he was losing blood. He needed stitches.

Here again he smiled at the perfection of his new endeavors. An average criminal would need to see a doctor to have his leg stitched up, and doctors were required to report knife and gun wounds to the police. His single year of medical school had given him the basics, and he had continued to practice secretly against her wishes. He even kept an old fashioned doctor's bag fully stocked in his closet. The problem was going to be navigating through the house without getting blood all over the carpet.

There was an outdoor shower out back by the pool, he could clean up there.

Chapter 2

Frankie gripped the sides of the sink with white knuckles. She glared at her reflection. She looked like hell. She had pulled her hair back into a tight French braid, but her hands had shaken so badly the braid zigzagged from left to right down the back of her skull. As a child, she had a shirt emblazoned with *Redheads are Rare*, but with auburn being the color du jour, the only thing special about her light copper locks was the hundred dollars she saved every month not having it touched up. Her eyes were changeable, the hazel on her driver's license could range from yellow-gold, to green, to amber, depending on her mood or what she was wearing. Today, red-rimmed and bloodshot, they were golden bronze, almost an exact match for her hair. With her pale Irish skin and freckles, there was no hiding the fact she'd been crying. Her only consolation was knowing that she would blend in with the crowd of emotional onlookers.

She pulled out her mascara and checked the label. *Waterproof*. Exactly what she needed. She took a couple of quick swipes with the wand to be presentable. She didn't bother with the lower lashes—there were none to speak of. Mascara and lip gloss were the only allowances she made to enhance her appearance. Most days she wouldn't go even that far, but today she would honor the dead. She turned to her dress uniform and checked it for lint. Again, she rolled the masking tape over the spotless uniform to remove invisible specks she may have missed the first four times. She wouldn't be on duty, so she skipped the vest and the twenty extra pounds.

Once she was tucked and squared away, she turned back to the mirror. Her shoulders were broad, courtesy of a Pac-10 swimming career and maintained with one hundred pushups a day. Her frame was lean and angular, too tall and lanky to be described as feminine. At 5'9, she looked most men in the eye, and adopted none of the flirtatious tactics of her gender. Once upon a time, maybe, but those days were past. Her face, with its patrician bone-structure and generous

mouth with perfect white chicklet teeth, topped with golden speckled eyes earned her plenty of admiring looks, even with the scars. But it rarely escalated past a look, or a wolf-whistle. Beauty intimidates, and angry beauty with a badge is better than a father with a shotgun. Frankie was left alone.

She placed her saucer cap on her head and tugged it in line with her brow. Most beat cops wouldn't have spent the solid benjamin on the hat, and most heads would be bare, but the sun was not her friend, and the cap necessary to protect her porcelain complexion. She had known Officer Rodriguez from the academy. One class behind her, they got to know each other in passing. That was three years ago. Twenty-four years old, he had entered the academy the day after his twenty-first birthday, the minimum age to join the thin blue line. Father was a cop, grandfather was a cop, brother was a cop. A family tradition in the Phoenix PD, although only Joey had given his life on the job. It happened during a routine call to a check-cashing joint, a tap on the shoulder of a suspect standing in line earned him a bullet in the face. He was the twenty-ninth officer to fall in the line of duty since Phoenix was incorporated. With the first in 1925, it wasn't a bad record for the fifth largest metropolis in the country.

He left a sweet young widow and a six month old son. Frankie had gone to the wedding less than two years ago. *Magdalena, god, I hope I don't have to face Magdalena today.* All officers not on the street would be at the ceremony, all motors as well. Every law enforcement organization in the state would send representatives, not just one or two, as many as they could spare, fire departments too. Frankie loved that about the cops, the blue brotherhood took care of its own. Frankie slid into her Saturn Sky roadster. It was top-down weather, but she was in a top-up uniform. As she drove across town to Saint Stephen's, she flipped through the memory snapshots of Raul Rodriguez. He was a good cop, and a nice guy. It was going to be a closed

coffin which was a damn shame because Raul had been a good looking guy.

Parking was going to be tough with the crowd. In a POV, or personally-owned-vehicle, she would be a mile or two away. They would have some shuttles running, and any passing motor with an empty seat would stop for her, but she really hoped to walk. With her long legs, she could eat a mile in less than fifteen minutes, and she had given herself a half hour to make the trek. It would give her a chance to pull herself together and adopt the professional indifference so essential to survival in this job.

She approached the crowd spilling down the cathedral steps. Saint Stephen's was big, but with more than a thousand officers present, it would be standing room only. Voices were low and respectful, like the gentle buzzing of a swarm of bees pollinating a field of flowers. She scanned the crowd looking for familiar faces. She would merge into a pocket from her squad, not participating in the conversation, but no longer alone either. *Ahhhh*, she could see Tank. At 6'8, he was a big guy, and with an unpronounceable name like Tschlinger, his nickname was unavoidable. She side-stepped through the crowd and sidled up to Tank's left elbow. Unconsciously, he shifted right to make room for her. She made eye contact with a couple of guys and exchanged abbreviated nods. She was the only one in the group who had actually known the deceased, but she kept this knowledge to herself. As they went around the group and shrugged when the question was asked, she shrugged too, a de facto denial of any personal relationship. There was nothing to hide, but she didn't fancy sharing memories of a buddy senselessly gunned down less than a week ago.

A subtle wave moved through the crowd and everyone started migrating toward the doors. Frankie planted herself behind Tank and used him as her human shield. She had no trouble making her way through the crowd. This was a memorial service held at the family's local

church. A religious ceremony. After the service, the procession would move to the burial site.

This was a formal city orchestration, the priest would certainly play a role, but primarily, it was going to be a show for the cops to say goodbye to one of their own, with all the honor and privilege earned thereof.

Frankie wasn't listening to the eulogies. Her stomach was already in tight knots. She didn't need a reminder that this young, beautiful human being was going to be missed. His father spoke, with long pauses between sentences while he tried to rope in his raw loss and make it palatable for the crowd. His brother spoke with tears streaming down his face. Another emotional man was sharing his stories. No women. Women who cared about a man were generally completely incapable of standing up and talking about that loss, and luckily society didn't expect it of them. Frankie was with them. *Grief is a private thing*. Frankie drifted in and out of the here and now, still flipping through memory polaroids. Emotion was a dangerous place for Frankie. This day was going to take one hell of a toll.

The service was finally over and she joined the slow-moving mass funneled down the flanks of the sanctuary. The cattle-drive was being disgorged relatively quickly via the side exits. The center aisle was reserved for the stone-faced pallbearers carrying the beautiful cherry coffin. The crowd was subdued, with muffled sounds of tears and comforting words a constant reminder of a life remembered...and cut short. Frankie finally stepped into blinding sunlight. The bright Phoenix sun shined cheerfully, oblivious to the pain and suffering below. Frankie cringed in the sudden brightness, in the cathedral she had imagined a grey world with the heavens crying too. She flinched at the sunshine, feeling physically sick that the weather could be so sunny on a day they had to bury their dead.

Knowing that parking at burial would also be tight, officers were doubling up and piling

into all available cars. Frankie stopped, conflicted. On the one hand, she wanted to be alone, to grieve alone. She hated airing emotions publicly, even for something as simple as to say, 'Joey was a good guy and he'll be missed.' *Too much*. But she couldn't pull her usual shenanigans and park a mile away and hike to the gravesite, or she might miss it. Arriving late would definitely be in poor taste. So she ran over to one of the Tahoes and crammed herself in with some other officers. She had picked well—these guys weren't from her precinct, and the overall mood was somber, so she'd be left alone.

She glanced back as the honor guard slid the closed coffin into the waiting hearse. The motors, short for motorcycles, would lead the procession and close off the route streets to traffic. The hearse and limos from the official funeral party, the governor, the mayor, the chief of police, and of course the family of the fallen officer followed. Bringing up the rear would be the hundred-odd patrol vehicles crammed full of uniformed officers, a show of solidarity. The procession would travel slowly to the internment, no more than twenty miles an hour on surface streets.

As they arrived at the cemetery, the driver pulled up to the sidewalk among a line of black-and-whites disgorging uniformed passengers. From above they must look like tiny troop carriers disgorging an invading army. The seven-member rifle brigade had arrived early and were practicing maneuvers. At their best, all seven would fire in synch so you could only hear a single shot. That was how a rifle volley of twenty-one shots only sounded like three bangs—that had always bothered her as a child. Before she became a cop, she thought the 21-gun salute and the rifle volley were the same thing, but the Rifle Volley is reserved as a burial tradition and the Salute is used only for heads of state.

Uniforms from all over the state filled the hillside. More than two thousands cops would

be here to send Joey off. There would be representatives from Taser International headquartered in Phoenix and top security companies serving the uber-rich in Scottsdale and Paradise Valley. Law enforcement was their bread and butter, and former officers made up a significant portion of their staff. Taser was known to be particularly generous to officers killed in the line of duty, awarding millions to police widows in the county. It was no exaggeration to say the force was a brotherhood.

She was steeling herself for the helicopters flying in Missing Man formation, and the last call over the radio. The last call was the final note to every officer killed in the line of duty. The dispatcher on duty during his final shift would call out on the radio with Joey's call numbers, and end with a final call, and that would be the last time his call sign would ever go out on the police band. It would signal the end of a life, the end of a career, and the end of the funeral.

"98F report."

"98F report."

"Final Call, 98F."