

## *Prologue*

It always starts out the same.

He is running. The wind whips into his face, and his hair blows back over his forehead as he runs. He is seeking something. Exactly what, he's not sure. The only thought in his brain is the pulsing need to roam. It deadens all other senses, propelling him forward. Everything else is nonexistent.

He runs through the woods, feeling the slap of branches hitting his face. Somehow he knows just where to go. He can sense that what he's seeking is just ahead, off to the left and down a slight gully. He reduces his speed as he approaches the gully that begins a slow descent down to the lake. He crests the rise, crouches at the top of the incline and sniffs the air.

*There*, just ahead, oblivious to his presence. He always catches them unaware. He starts down the embankment slowly, not wanting to alert his prey. Every footstep is carefully planned and executed. His body assumes a sense of total control, moving

with the smooth physique of a stalker, a carnivore on the hunt. He's barely even aware of the ripple of muscles on his body as they work to move his limbs slowly with sleek-footed stealth down the embankment. His vision relays messages to his brain, resulting in the perfect maneuvering of his lithe, lean body as it snakes down the gully. Without making a sound. Without disturbing a single blade of grass.

Once at the bottom he pauses in a crouch, sniffing the air. The wind carries the scent to his nostrils as gradually as it carries the aroma of rose petals, or the musky scent of arousal. His ears perk, their radar-like sensitivity picking up movement. Around the bend, down another slight incline, and he's right on top of the target.

The breeze is blowing against him, aiding in removing all traces of his scent from the target. Nature is on his side tonight.

His breathing slows to the point where he isn't aware of the natural act of respiration. He continues his descent, past the deadfall on the right, around a slight curve, and then down the incline. He can see his target just as he tops the crest of the incline.

Tonight's target is middle-aged. Maybe fifty. Sandy hair turning gray, thinning at the top. Blue windbreaker over a slightly paunchy body. He's seated on a beach chair, looking out over the lake. A fishing pole is embedded in a stand, which in turn is impaled in the ground. The pole tilts out into the lake, the line gravitating into its depths by whatever bait the man has sunk it with. The man himself seems to be reading a magazine. *Fish and Game? Playboy?*

He creeps closer until he is five feet behind the man. He doesn't make a sound as he approaches; not a foot breaks a twig, or steps on a leaf. He stops and pauses, respiration low and even. His pulse quickens as the adrenaline in his body starts churning, revving his senses into action. His eyes narrow into slits, his body crouches and launches into a spring.

It happens so fast that he's hardly aware of the act. He hits the victim in the back of the neck, sinking teeth into flesh. The man falls into the shallow depths of the lake, magazine flying into the mud. He stays on top of his prey, holding him down as teeth sink into tender flesh. There isn't much of a struggle. Not even a brief flopping of limbs. There never is.

He raises his face to the moonlit sky. The horizon is turning a murky, darkened gray as the twilight becomes the dawn. The warmth of blood in his mouth doesn't even register as he gazes at the slowly descending moon and lets out an ear-piercing howl.

It is that sound, the sound of a wolf baying at the moon that awakens him. He jerks abruptly into consciousness, the bedsheets slick with sweat, his breath coming in gasps. The stillness of the air is broken by his screams as he springs up from bed, his thoughts whirling. Reality crashes in and the bedroom swims into a more familiar circle of scenery. His breathing is the only sound in the room as he struggles to calm himself. It slows to a more steady rhythm as he leans against the headboard, sweat dotting his skin. *The dream again. The goddamn dream again.*

But it's becoming less and less of a dream now.

The memories of stalking, the smell of the prey in his nostrils and the taste of blood in his mouth attest to the fact that dreams and reality can merge and become one.

Just as they were doing now.

## PART ONE

### *Chapter One*

Bernard Roberts never thought about anything else when he was locked in a steamy embrace with Carol Emrich. There was no reason to. He had his work—which was his life—and then he had his sex life, which consisted of his physical intimacy with Carol Emrich.

They were in his office on the fourth floor of the sprawling building that consisted of the national headquarters of Free State Insurance Corporation. The double glass doors that led to the executive suite were closed and locked, and the suite itself was empty and darkened; after all, it was almost eight-thirty p.m. Even the light to his own office was dark; the only light in the room came from the crescent moon that hung in the clear, June sky seen clearly through the plate glass windows of his suite. That was all the light he needed to engage in the flesh.

They were locked in a sweaty, steaming embrace on the cream-colored couch that flanked the south

wall of Bernard's office. Their clothes were strewn over the floor, as if a hurricane had blown them off. Bernard was moving on top of her, over her, inside her, as they screwed with lustful abandon on the couch. Most of their workday romps usually took place in Bernard's office, hours after the day shift employees had gone home. Like tonight.

Carol's nails dug into his ass as Bernard rocked inside her. He could feel the pressure building and he immersed himself in it, fueling himself on and on, ignoring her own cries and moans of passion as he rushed on and released himself with a shudder. He barely felt her nails, or her teeth, as she clamped them down on his shoulder to stifle her screams of ecstasy. Her needs were the farthest thing from his mind; it was his he was concerned with.

They remained that way for a moment, Bernard still buried in her warm wetness as they both caught their breath. Finally Bernard eased himself out and stood up on rubbery legs. For a moment he paused in the moonlight, his attention momentarily distracted by the lights of Costa Mesa and the South Coast Plaza as they twinkled in the dark. It was a beautiful night, without a cloud in the sky and a big, white full moon hanging overhead. A perfect night for a little play in the office.

Bernard looked down at Carol, who was still lying on her back on the couch. She sat up slightly, now recovered from their romp. Bernard bent down and kissed her. "God, you are so good, baby."

Carol smiled. She looked up at him with those bedroom blue eyes of hers. "I could say the same thing about you."

Bernard stood up and stretched, feeling his joints crack. Carol sat up, her fingers tracing across her belly and breasts. Bernard hardly noticed her as he picked up his clothes from the lush, carpeted floor, then turned and made his way to his private bathroom and closed the door.

Once inside, the Bernard Roberts that he shielded during the day came to light in the washroom mirror when he noticed how red his eyes were. Signs of fatigue. The result of too many hours put in at the office. Unfortunately, it was the only way he knew how to combat the situation that had recently arisen, which was rapidly turning into a dilemma that was stealing his every waking moment, driving him to endless amounts of worry and paranoia.

The shell that was Bernard Roberts stared back at him with a hollow-eyed sense of weariness. Stress on the job was taking its toll. In the office by seven-thirty, not leaving until six, most often seven, sometimes eight or nine. Today was a typical day, leaving at five for dinner only to return at seven or so and put in another few hours. At least this time Carol had been willing to stay overtime to provide a much needed outlet for his frustrations. He worked these hours every day of the week. Over and over for the past three months. The amount of sweat, work, and stress was beginning to leave its evidence on Bernard's weary face.

Had it always been this evident?

Bernard turned the faucet on and splashed water on his face, washing away the sweat brought on by the toils of the day and the exertion of his romp with Carol. The cold water from the tap provided an in-

stant relief and seemed to lift much of the weariness that permeated his bones. But the layers of weariness that had seeped into his soul over the weeks of backbreaking hours had settled in and laid themselves down to sleep. And they weren't leaving any time soon. It would take more than a two-week vacation to rid his body of those demons.

The stress would just keep him there. In eternal slumber.

Bernard turned the faucet off and reached for a towel. He dried his face and neck, trying to avoid looking at the circles under his eyes that were still present. No matter what he did, his problems would never go away. When they were coming at you from a source other than yourself and were controlled by forces beyond your reach, there wasn't much you could do but become stressed.

"Bernard!" Carol called out from the main office. She was probably still naked.

"Coming out in a minute, babe." Bernard towed his body dry, surveyed himself once more in the mirror, and strode out of the washroom.

Carol was partially clothed when he emerged. She glanced at him, smiled, and resumed the task of pulling her skirt on. Bernard crossed the room to the couch where his slacks and shirt lay crumpled on the floor. He pulled his underwear on as Carol smoothed out her blouse with one hand, surveying herself in the mirror that bordered the wet bar. "Still need me to work on the Williamson account this weekend?"

Bernard nodded. "If you can. The board is meeting with the VP and director of Marketing on Mon-

day morning, and I'll need all the paperwork for my presentation."

"No problem." Carol slipped into her heels, reached for her purse and coat and turned to Bernard as he sat on the couch, pulling his slacks on. "I'll be home all weekend if you need me."

He looked into her flushed, yet gorgeous, features. "I just might. These long hours at the office are beginning to take their toll. I think a weekend in Acapulco might be just the thing to alleviate it. What do you think?"

"I think that holds some very interesting possibilities." Carol smiled coyly at him. Her full, pink lips glistened in invitation as they parted in a smile. "Especially when the previous trip to Maui is taken into consideration. Or the one preceding that. The lost week."

"Ah, yes." His eyebrows rose in recognition. "Paris, France. A week that was destined to be the first of many."

"Mmm. The first, but definitely not the last." She bent down and kissed him softly. "I've gotta go." She stood, hoisting her purse over her shoulder. "Next weekend is on for me. As for this weekend . . ." She shrugged. "I guess it's work for me."

"I promise you next weekend will be well worth the wait." Bernard rose, pulled his shirt on and walked her to the double glass doors that opened into the executive suite. He opened the door for her. "I'll call you Sunday to find out how you're doing."

"Okay." They kissed once more and then she was gone, walking down the corridor to the elevators at the center of the building. Bernard watched her de-

parture, noting the way her ass swung provocatively from side to side in the smooth confines of her short skirt. He stood there for awhile watching her go. She had near waist-length blonde hair and long, perfect legs that ended in a perfect ass. Her body was to die for, even if she did wear more makeup than he was used to. She was certainly the most sought-after woman in the building, was definitely the most attractive, and he could honestly say that he had laid his hands on the secret places of her body most men would only dream of.

But nobody would ever know of their affair. Neither of them had told anyone, nor had they made the relationship obvious. At work she was his secretary, he her boss, and they played their roles accordingly and professionally. As far as they both could tell, nobody suspected a thing. It would be career suicide if anyone found out. People in his position in a company as prestigious as Free State Insurance Corporation just didn't go around boffing their secretaries, all the while helping them up the corporate ladder, bypassing employees who had worked harder and longer for similar positions. Unfortunately, there were bullshit policies like "equal opportunity" and "sexual harassment" issues that would get him into a load of legal trouble should word leak out about the affair to the wrong people. It could very well bounce him right out of his position as president and CEO of the company and onto the street.

Well, maybe. Actually, there were other things that would probably kick him out faster. But he didn't want to think about those now.

Bernard sighed as he moved back into his suite

and resumed dressing. Why worry? With the way things were moving, his job was pretty much history anyway.

Three months ago, almost to the day, Bernard attended a board meeting where he, as well as the others on the executive staff, were informed of a very decisive and jeopardizing decision. The Board of Directors of Free State Insurance Corporation had decided to merge with a larger company, Eastside Insurance Brokerage. The move would consolidate most of the positions and job functions within the corporate structure, as well as several key departments in the company. Among them, the executive staff.

Bad news.

The merging would consolidate most of the company, squeezing Bernard and his position out the back door without so much as a sayonara or a fuck you. Not to mention emasculating his livelihood, as well as his too-healthy paycheck.

The last three months had been spent doing everything he could think of to save his position. He worked on special projects nonstop, initiated several money-saving executions and curbed spending on unnecessary transactions. All told, he probably saved the company hundreds of thousands of dollars in the past three months alone. All in places where money was being wasted endlessly, and had been for God knew how long. Long term, he had probably saved millions of dollars in unnecessary spending. He had initiated several support groups for employees, among them an African American association, and a gay and lesbian association. He had extended benefits to domestic partners, which

had gone over very well with the local community. His action in forming these groups had affected the company drastically: work morale had risen, boosting production with fewer errors. Employees were beginning to take pride for the first time in what they did, and it showed in the way they handled themselves. A good work morale always resulted in improvement in the professional world.

Despite all his actions and initiatives in drawing attention to his work, those above him weren't responding. In fact, the word he got Tuesday morning was that the merger would be officially taking place in six months. With the executive positions to be relieved first thing.

Nothing he did to help the company, to improve the future of the company and its employees, mattered.

What mattered was that the company was slightly better off fiscally and employee-wise, with a secure future in the form of the merger. All Bernard had done was help push it to that financially secure horizon.

Leaving him in the dust.

These were the thoughts that settled in Bernard's mind as he resumed dressing and gathered his paperwork in his briefcase to close the day.