

PROLOGUE



She sat in the driver's seat of her shiny, candy-apple red, 2014 Mazda Miata convertible with the top down.

The car had been parked on the southbound shoulder of Colfax Avenue, north of Ventura Boulevard near the feet of the hills of Studio City. The Los Angeles River dribbled by a few yards to her right. Directly across the street from where she sat were several charming, two-level, storybook-style houses with large, ornate windows and a chimney on each rooftop. The Miata's engine purred idly and all four orange-yellow hazard lights blinked.

The sun warmed the top of her head and highlighted her golden strands of blond hair, which had been cropped below her earlobes. Sporadic cars passed by her along the quiet, narrow, two-lane street. A crow cawed as it flew overhead.

She looked through a pair of binoculars at a large, white two-story house perched on the side of the hill above, south of Ventura Boulevard. The house looked north with a 180° panoramic view of the San Fernando Valley. She surmised it must have an expansive view. Her intense, steely blue eyes focused their dire attention on only the white house. She pointedly disregarded the rolling, sloping, grassy terrain around it. Instead, she noticed the trees, the brush and shrubs, and the well-maintained grounds laid out with colorful flower gardens around the perimeter of the estate.

She drove up the hill to a higher elevation where could see the entire property below. More flowers graced the back of the house near a swimming pool and around a gazebo beyond the pool. Two marble statues of a Greco-Roman man and woman in differing poses flanked either side of the veranda, and a few small porcelain knick-knacks were strewn in between. A large outdoor water fountain stood in the middle of the semi-circular drive at the front of the house, and some terracotta pottery with five-foot-tall topiaries sat on either side of the front door.

"So, that's *her* story," she said to herself. Her lips formed a frightful sneer. She adjusted her position in the driver's seat to make herself more comfortable. "Ain't that nice? Well, we'll see about *that*, won't we?"

A light breeze wafted by and tousled several strands of her hair. A small brown bird chirped from a nearby tree, then flew away.

She wondered about the wretched wench who'd lived in that beautiful home on the side of the hill all those years.

Twenty-two years of my sorry-assed life, she thought. Just ticks me off. Really makes my blood boil. Tears welled in her eyes. Now, don't start feeling sorry for yourself again, damn it! She continued to stare at the house. *Just watch. Everything'll change. From now on, it's my story.*

She sat for a few more moments, her eyes locked at the view of the house as she ardently scrutinized it. She abruptly hurled the binoculars into the passenger's seat with a huff. They bounced off the seat, bumped against the closed door of the glove compartment, then fell to the charcoal-gray carpeted floor with a soft thump.

She put the convertible in gear, slammed her foot on the pedal, and tore away from the curb.