

ONE

Patricia lifted her blond hair to cool her sweat-soaked neck. April in Savannah was normally more tolerable.

She took a deep breath, cut short by her close-fitted armored vest. For the third time, she pounded on Faith Pinckney's door.

Faith had called at noon, a couple of hours ago. She had said she was ready to go to the shelter, had confirmed her husband was at work, and had agreed to be picked up at two. They were on time. So where was Faith?

Patricia touched the holstered Kimber 45 on her hip and made sure the safety was off. She glanced at Judy, the newest member of her team, on her right, and Meredith, her closest friend, on her left. Both were grim, coiled, and pale as ghosts. Patricia supposed there was safety in numbers, but they were still vulnerable. And if the situation became life-threatening? Well, none of them had ever shot anything but paper targets.

"I don't like this," Judy said, her hauntingly pale blue eyes methodically cataloging the environment. "It's taking too long. This is a rough neighborhood. We're too exposed."

Meredith, a woman more comfortable with financial ratios than cold steel, gestured over her shoulder toward the curb and the idling SUV. "Don't worry, Alisa has our backs."

"Meredith, check that front window. See if there's anyone inside," Patricia said, trying to speed things up.

Meredith put her face to the window. "Can't see anyone."

Patricia pounded on the door again. No one responded. Had Faith changed her mind about leaving? It wouldn't be the first time that had happened.

But Faith had made the call to the rescue line and had said she wanted to leave. Patricia, the shelter's voluntary emissary, was here at Faith's invitation to provide transportation.

Patricia pulled her smartphone from its hip-mounted case, scrolled to Faith's number, and pressed the call icon.

Ring. Ring.

Patricia shifted weight.

Ring. Ring.

Come on. Answer the phone. Heightened concern for the safety of her team flooded Patricia. The three of them, armed and dressed in black tactical gear, were on an abuser's porch in a dangerous neighborhood. A rundown realm with its own rules. They were easy targets.

Patricia snapped her gaze left and right, checking the wraparound porch once again for threats. If Faith's husband wasn't inside, had a neighbor called him and told him they were at his door? Was the abuser on his way back to his house? Did he carry a gun? How long did they have before he arrived to defend his property? It had happened before, and the thought it could happen again today made her jumpy.

The phone kept ringing. *Where the hell was Faith?*

"Hello," finally came a weak female voice from Patricia's phone.

"Faith?"

"Yeah."

"It's two o'clock."

"Oh."

Patricia let out an impatient breath. "We're here. At your door. You wanted a ride to the shelter, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"It's time to go. Where are you?"

"In bed. I got tired. I suppose it was them painkillers they gave me down at the hospital. Just a sec. I'll be right out."

"Is your husband home?"

"No. He's workin'. Won't be home 'til after five, if that man comes home at all."

A couple of minutes later, the weathered door eased open on squeaky hinges.

Patricia dropped her shaking hand to her gun.

Pungent air poured from the house. The smell of decay registered. A tiny, thin, middle-aged Caucasian woman stood in the shadowed foyer.

Patricia's heart sank at the sight.

Large purple bruises puffed the woman's pale face and forearms. Her mousey hair was pulled back into a ponytail accentuating sad brown eyes. Though clearly a victim, Faith stood straight, projecting determination.

Good for her.

"Faith?"

"Yeah?" The woman's voice trembled.

"I'm Patricia from the shelter." Patricia gestured to either side. "These are my friends, Meredith and Judy."

Faith nodded at each.

"Are you ready to go?" Patricia asked.

"Guess so."

"Okay then. Let's do it."

Faith picked up a stuffed garbage bag and a limp teddy bear.

Patricia stepped aside, and the woman shuffled unsteadily out onto the wide wooden porch. In the outside light, some of her wounds seemed more recent than the chaplain at Falcon Memorial Hospital had described. She must have been subjected to tremendous pain, severe enough to require prescription painkillers.

Faith looked around nervously as if ready to bolt at the slightest threat.

"You're shaking," Patricia said, more abruptly than intended.

The woman looked down. "It ain't easy to leave."

"I know. You're very brave." Patricia wanted to speak more words of comfort and reassurance. She wanted Faith to be happy. But the right words didn't come. So, Patricia sighed and eased her arm around the stale-smelling woman. No more beatings for poor Faith. Ever.

Just as they moved toward the steps, heavy footfalls hammered the porch where it wrapped around the side of the house.

The Escalade's horn erupted from the curb, signaling that Alisa had seen danger.

Patricia's fingers fumbled for the handle of her weapon.

"Hey, bitch," shouted a coarse male voice.

Patricia spun, put her body between Faith and the spine-rattling voice, and eased her hand off the gun. Experience had taught her that confrontation required calm focus, not panicked stiffness. She turned and looked up into a charging man's flushed face. He stopped less than a yard away. His breath reeked of alcohol.

She shot a glance past him to see if he'd brought others. He appeared to be alone, and his stubby hands were empty.

Okay. The three of them against one riled-up drunk. Good odds.

She returned her attention to the man's creased face. Their eyes met. His eyes were black

and hard like coal. His unblinking stare bore into her.

She tensed. She hadn't seen cold, piercing eyes like his before. Though drunk, this brute was likely as dangerous as he was ugly. She kept her face blank. "You talking to me, mister?"

"Yeah, you. What y'all doin' on my porch?"

His porch? Must be the husband. "Your wife asked us over," Patricia said as mildly as possible considering the situation.

His dark eyes narrowed. "Like hell she did. Sure 'nuf she don't know folk like y'all. Besides, you got armor on and a gun on your hip. You a cop?"

Patricia let out a long breath then shook her head. "No."

He stepped near, gripped her arm, and squeezed hard. "Then get the hell off my property."

Keeping her face an impassive mask, she peeled his stiff fingers from her arm, then turned to Faith. "Okay Faith. Stay beside me while we walk to the car."

"She ain't goin' nowhere."

The spit from his spewed words splattered the side of Patricia's face. She fought the screaming urge to wipe her cheek; a reaction that would convey weakness.

Summoning all the authority she could muster, Patricia squared her shoulders and pivoted to face the abuser again. He towered over her, inches away, poised like a grizzly bear ready to fight. Smirking. Close enough to intimidate.

The Neanderthal swung an arm behind him.

Patricia's instincts screamed, *Gun!* Her hand darted to her pistol, but she hesitated. Before she could decide to show her weapon, he fumbled out a small pistol of his own and shoved the barrel toward her face.

"This here says y'all are leavin' right now, and my precious little woman is goin' back inside."

Patricia's chest seized so tightly she could hardly breathe. Heart thudding, she stepped back, getting distance. The husband had given her ample warning fumbling behind his back. She should have drawn her gun. She should have maintained control; guns were about control. Now he was in charge. This wasn't the ending she'd imagined. If they left now and came back tomorrow, would Faith be alive? And if they didn't leave—

Click.

The man's eyes bulged. His jaw dropped.

Judy, standing behind the man, had her gun barrel pressed against his head. "And I say," Judy said coldly, "we let Faith make her own decision about where she's going this afternoon. Now put your peashooter on the floor and back off."

He laughed the harsh laugh of a defeated man trying to regain some pride as he placed the gun on the porch floor and stepped to the side. "Sure. Whatever the bitch wants. But, Faith, you leave, don't bother comin' back."

Patricia took a couple of deep breaths. *That was close.* She gestured, palm up, to Faith. "So what is it? Go or stay?"

Faith wrung her hands. "I can't take anymore of this life. Not another minute." Faith's eyes danced. "Um, I gotta go." She stretched her bruised arms toward the man. "Honey, I'm sorry."

He scowled and swept his hand toward the street. "Go, you ungrateful bitch, and don't even think about comin' back."

Judy retrieved the man's pistol and kept her gun on him as Patricia and Meredith led Faith to the street. Once they reached the SUV, Judy backed off the porch and down the sidewalk, all the while keeping her gun trained on the man. At the curb, she placed his pistol in the mailbox and then pointed at the scowling man standing on the porch. "We know about men like you. You think harass is two words."

Alisa covered her mouth with a hand, stifling a giggle.

Faith tossed her garbage bag into the Escalade, then, teddy bear in hand, stepped inside.

Once seated, she cuddled the teddy bear like a child.

"I know you don't have any children. Is there anyone else in the house he might hurt?" Patricia asked.

"No. Do you have kids?"

"Just one." Patricia's eyes followed Judy as she got into the car. "She returned to college this morning."

"Spring break?"

"Yes. She was here for just a few days. Too short to really reconnect."

"Is she a good girl?"

Patricia nodded.

"Don't let you baby get mixed up with scum like my old man."

"I hear you." Patricia knew too well that her headstrong daughter, Hayley, was in a different world. Out of reach. Beyond control. There was no telling what she was up to.

When everyone was buckled up, Patricia gave the okay, and Alisa pulled the Escalade away from the curb. Out of habit, Patricia turned and looked back. Good. They weren't being followed. For the first time in an hour Patricia's tension eased.

The trip to a better life had begun for Faith, just as it had begun for countless other souls Patricia and her colleagues had transported to her mama's shelter. Battered women beaten to the point their survival instinct finally overwhelmed their fear.