

CHAPTER 1

Gabriel Armel was parked around the corner from Hazelwood Elementary School. His plan on this cloudy and cool day in late October was to kidnap his daughter, Daisy.

He was sitting in the back seat of a rented black Escalade with heavily tinted windows. The two burly men occupying the front seat were hired security. Armel wasn't expecting any trouble, but having oversized, serious-looking people with him should intimidate anyone at the school who might ask too many questions or raise an objection.

Although Armel was a naturalized U.S. citizen, he retained his French citizenship and was eager to return to his native country. Perhaps his daughter would come to love France as he did; perhaps not. It didn't matter to him one way or another. The girl was only coming along so he could punish her mother.

His recent divorce had been a bitter struggle from beginning to end. As far as Gabriel was concerned, his ex-wife had been awarded too much child support, real estate, and custody. In this case, sole custody of their only child. He was a man of means, so he could afford the divorce-related financial penalties. What infuriated him was that he was *required*, by judicial decree, to compensate a woman he'd come to despise and provide monthly child support for a child he was wholly indifferent to. He had no choice and no say in the matter.

Armel had never wanted children. He'd been abundantly clear about this fact with his ex-wife. Still, the day she'd told him she was pregnant, she was all smiles and so excited she couldn't sit still. His well-stated aversion to having children had been forgotten or discarded without regard or apology. The argument that ensued was loud and mean, and things were said that couldn't be taken back.

The pregnancy announcement marked the beginning of the end for Armel and his wife. And things continued to get worse over the next nine months. Seeing his wife's growing belly was a constant reminder of her betrayal. For Armel, betrayal seemed the appropriate word to describe his unwanted promotion to fatherhood.

By the time his daughter was born, Armel's resentment toward the child was so strong that any bond or affection he might have had for his newborn daughter had been burned away.

Armel checked his watch. "I left instructions that my daughter should be in front of the school one hour early. It's almost time."

The man in the front passenger seat said, "Where do you want us to be? What do you want us to do?"

"Follow behind me, but not too close. If any trouble arises, put a stop to it."

"What kind of trouble are you expecting?"

"My ex-wife, for all her many faults, is not entirely stupid. She may suspect I'd show up here. I'm unsure what action she could take to prevent me from collecting my daughter, but she might try something. You two are insurance against that and any other unforeseen obstacles that may arise."

Armel looked at his watch once again. "Let's go."

The three men exited the vehicle, walked to the corner, turned right, and continued down the sidewalk toward the school entrance. They didn't hurry. The child had yet to appear, so there was no rush.

A woman pushed through the school's front door and descended the stairs, her ponytail bouncing against the back of her leather jacket. She walked down the sidewalk, turned, and walked in Armel's direction.

The woman was attractive. It's something a serial womanizer like Armel would notice. *She would be much prettier if she'd only smile*, he thought. But the expression on the woman's face was hard to read. Armel noted the intensity in the young woman's gaze. She was staring straight at him as she approached. There was something in those eyes that caused him concern. He couldn't put his finger on it. It was just a feeling. He turned his head and said to the men, "You

two better get up here.”

The men responded instantly. They increased their pace and stepped in front of Armel to shield him from any potential danger.

“That’s close enough,” one of the big men said to the woman. “State your business.”

“My business is with Gabriel Armel,” Riley Callen said. “For your safety, gentlemen, please stand aside.”

The two big men looked at each other and smiled.

The other big man said, “We’re not worried about our safety. You, however, should be thinking about your own.”

“If you judge me by my size, you’ll be making a mistake, guys. Let’s keep things friendly, shall we? You two take a walk, get a coffee, or do whatever you like. Be anywhere but here.”

“Get lost, lady. *Don’t* test my patience.”

“Last chance, fellas,” Riley said without a hint of concern in her voice or worry on her face. “Leave now, or I will put you both on the ground.”

The big man on the left unbuttoned his coat and lifted one side so Riley could see his gun in its hip holster.

“Cool. I have one of those, too,” Riley said matter-of-factly.

“Good for you,” the man said with a smirk. “Do you know how to use it?”

“I do.” After a brief pause, Riley added, “Let me show you.”

Riley quickly drew a pistol and fired a silenced round at the man flashing his gun. He’d tried to pull his weapon, but it didn’t clear his holster before Riley’s shot caught him in the chest. Riley shot his associate in the neck before the man could open his coat. Both men wobbled on unsteady legs for a few seconds before collapsing to the ground.

With a shocked expression, Armel looked at one fallen man and then the other. “You shot them! You killed them!”

“They’re not dead. They’re just sleeping,” Riley said. She’d successfully used these same tranquilizing darts in a recent case. The darts spared lives, but there are side effects for those who get shot with one: extreme disorientation after waking, accompanied by debilitating nausea.

“Who are you?” Armel said.

“I’m the person your ex-wife hired to prevent you from taking her daughter to France. You’re not allowed to take the child to a foreign country without the express permission of her mother, which you’ll never get. Furthermore, you’re not allowed any unsupervised contact with your daughter.”

Armel’s angry expression reflected his frustration at having his plans ruined by a stranger who’d effortlessly rendered his armed protection useless.

“Although you’re knowingly breaking all kinds of laws today,” Riley said, “I don’t care about that. I won’t be reporting your actions to any law enforcement agency. I like to fix problems my way.”

“What does that mean?” Armel said, his eyes locked on the weapon in Riley’s hand.

“I’m here to make sure Daisy stays with her mom. You can’t have her.”

Armel frowned and said, “I grant you, you’ve won the day. But there will be other days, other opportunities.”

After shoving her dart gun into the waistband of her black jeans, Riley reached into her jacket and pulled out both of her Ruger pistols. She kept them pointed at the ground as she walked toward Armel. “Perhaps I haven’t been clear, Mr. Armel. If you *ever* come after Daisy again, it’ll be the last time.”

Riley lifted one of her pistols and placed the barrel against Armel’s chest. “I’m in a generous mood today, so I’ll let you leave here, get on your chartered jet, and fly home to France. I strongly advise you to stay in France. Don’t come back to the U.S. for any reason. Forget you even have a daughter. If you do that, you can enjoy the rest of your life.

“But if you lack the common sense to stay away, or someday your grudge against your ex-wife overwhelms your better judgment, you’ll see me again. Do you understand?”

Armel looked at the gun pressed against his chest and then at Riley. “Yes. I understand. You have the look of someone who could pull a trigger. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Good read,” Riley replied, lowering her weapon.

Riley put her guns away before walking over to the fallen men and retrieving her expended tranq darts. She stood up and said to Armel, “I was never here.”

“How do I explain these unconscious men?”

“You don’t. Leave them here. Get on your plane and fly away. You’ll be thousands of miles away before the authorities figure out you hired these men.”

Armel nodded, seemingly in agreement with Riley’s simple and tidy solution to a potentially messy situation. “You surprise me,” he said to Riley. “Or, more to the point, my ex-wife surprises me. I would never have imagined she’d hire someone as dangerous as you. She was always so mousy.”

“For your sake, I hope you don’t forget today’s lesson, Mr. Armel. If you threaten a woman’s child, she’ll bring Death to your door.” Riley turned and walked away.