

Chapter 2

Charlene jolted awake, her chest heaving, sweat glistening on her naked body. She threw off the damp sheets, kicking them away in panic, and rolled onto her stomach, tasting the salty dampness from her pillow.

She reached down and checked the time on her iPhone; it must have fallen from her hand onto the hardwood floor when she'd dozed off: 11:34 p.m. She shook her head, rolled off the futon and onto her feet, then slipped on a pair of men's boxers.

Charlene made her way to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She looked in the mirror and shook her head again, this time for different reasons. She was thin, her rib cage visible, not as athletically fit as she had once been, and prominent bags lingered under her eyes.

But it wasn't the physical changes that bothered her the most. She could handle them, because she had always been a motivated, hardworking cop who could will herself back into shape. No, it was much more than that.

After emptying her bladder, she stumbled back to the futon in the living room, her eyelids heavy, and threw herself down. She reached for the prescription bottles that waited tauntingly beside a bottle of warm beer on the floor.

Propranolol. Benzodiazepine. Fluoxetine. Paroxetine.

It had been months since her final showdown with Darren Brady, aka the Celebrity Slayer. Ever since that night, she'd been on a steady diet of antidepressants prescribed by Dr. Gardner, the LAPD psychiatrist. Sleep was now elusive.

She'd taken two months off after the ordeal, upon doctor's orders, to recover and recuperate. She thought she was fine. In her mind, that night had only made her stronger--the intense confrontation, the near-death struggle with one of the most brutal serial killers in LA history. She had survived to tell about it, believing she had put it behind her. Until the flashbacks and nightmares started a couple of weeks ago. Why now?

She hadn't told anyone about them, because if she did, she'd probably lose the promotion she had worked so hard to earn. The late Darren Brady simply would not leave her subconscious. As hard as she tried to eliminate her former LAPD colleague's image from her mind, he still consumed her thoughts; apparently her scars were only superficially healed.

Brady had been a psychotic killer, someone who'd ruined her life, and yet she couldn't stop thinking about him.

During the daytime she was fine, but the darkness haunted her. She wasn't eating consistently, and her sleepless nights came in waves. Many people worried for her—loved ones, friends, and family. But there was only one person who could help her.

The doctor diagnosed it as PTSD, common among military veterans, brought on by a traumatic event. She had visited her own personal war in hell.

She had attended a month of psychological debriefings after the incident, a series of interviews meant to directly confront the event and share her feelings with Gardner and to help structure her memories of the event so that she felt more in control. She bullshitted her way through those, as she had done most of her life, learning strategies to avoid her father's constant disapproval of her lifestyle. But Gardner had still prescribed the drugs, and she kept refilling the vials.

She continued weekly meetings with Gardner, but she had been cleared for full duty the previous month. It felt good to be back doing what she knew and loved. It felt real, and took her mind off other things. During the day.

Charlene checked her phone for missed calls, hoping that Andy had called while she slept, but he hadn't. Andy, her on-again, off-again boyfriend, had permanently turned their relationship to "off" a few weeks after the Celebrity Slayer sequence of events.

She didn't blame him. She was a basket case throughout the entire ordeal.

The relationship had probably ended long before that, but Andy had felt the need to stick around to support her after everything that happened, but eventually they both agreed to move on. She couldn't say she was disappointed, because she hadn't put in the effort to make it work.

She hadn't been easy to get along with while battling demons and knew that he deserved better. She didn't think she would care that much, but at night the loneliness seeped into her bones, and she missed his comforting presence.

Darren Brady had turned her life, her whole world, upside down.

She remembered the scene. Brady, someone she'd trusted as a cop, hovering over her, two hands holding a knife to her chest, ready to thrust down with a vengeance. She was seconds away from the plunge of the blade when her new partner came in and shot Brady point-blank.

Since that fateful moment, her professional life, her career, soared, while her personal life went in the opposite direction. She received accolades, high fives, back pats for bringing down the man known as the Celebrity Slayer. But her boyfriend had left, her family grew distant, and she hadn't slept in months.

There was no doubt in her overtaxed mind that Officer Darren Brady had been an integral part of her life—a game-changer. He had killed her father and had cleverly positioned himself in Charlene's life after her promotion to detective.

The Celebrity Slayer had become a household name, an LA serial killer who fed off the media's attention. He had a hunger for B-list celebrities, torturing and mutilating them for the fun of it. A complete psychopath, who couldn't tell the difference between reality and fantasy.

But Brady was gone. She was sure of it.

So then why couldn't she sleep at night?