

Chapter One



One year, three months, one week, five days and 4 hours...

Ganoon na katagal mula nang mamatay sa isang car accident ang fiancée niyang si Caroline.

Accident, my ass! Thomas wanted to laugh. He wanted to hurl something. He wanted to scream.

It wasn't an accident. Someone tampered with the brakes of her car. It was a neat job. May hinala siya kung sino ang nasa likod ng nangyari. Ang problema ay wala siyang ebidensya para patunayang si Howard Ortiz ang may pakana ng aksidente. Lalo pa't nakakulong na ito sa isang federal facility na mahigit isang libong milya ang layo sa pinangyarihan ng krimen. Ang lalaki ang leader ng isang organized crime syndicate sa Mexico, at ilang taon niyang tinrabaho para makulong.

As it turned out, Caroline ended up as a casualty in his mission to uphold and enforce the criminal laws of the United States of America.

Naihilamos niya ang isang palad sa mukha, wincing at the feel of his days-old stubbles. Kailan ba siya huling nag-ahit? Damn, he couldn't even remember the last time he ate a decent meal!

Thomas looked like a mess. He felt like a mess with the bullet wound on his left shoulder—a remembrance of his I-couldn't-care-less-for-myself attitude he adapted right after Caroline's death. Even the pain from that

wound could not dull the ache in his heart.

He failed to protect Caroline. He failed to protect the person who mattered most to him.

Ang akala niya ay kaya niyang sikmurain ang lahat. He thought he was made of tougher stuff. But lately, he began to question the injustice of it all. He began to question his abilities as a law enforcer.

Tumayo siya at pumasok sa banyo para mag-shower. He winced when he saw himself in the mirror. Pagkatapos maligo at magbihis ay pumasok siya sa kusina. Maliban sa isang frozen lasagna at dalawang bote ng *Budweiser* ay wala nang ibang laman ang kanyang fridge. His stomach rumbled and he cursed. Dinampot niya ang lasagna. Isang buwan na iyong lagpas sa expiration date. He dumped it in the garbage can and grabbed the bottle of beer.

Kauupo pa lamang ni Thomas sa sofa sa living room nang may kumatok. Padabog niyang binuksan ang pinto at napangiwi nang makita ang mukha ng superior na si Special Agent Jonathan Wilder. Umatras siya at hinayaan itong makapasok. Hindi rin naman kasi siya titigilan nito. Wilder knew him well. He was his father's partner in the *Los Angeles Police Department*. He took him in when he went back to Los Angeles when he was fifteen to follow his dad's footsteps. Wilder was not only his superior. He was also a mentor, a friend, and a father figure.

“You look like hell.”

Hindi niya ito pinansin. Bumalik siya sa pagkakaupo at tumungga ng beer. He grimaced when his stomach rumbled again.

“When was the last time you ate?”

He answered with a shrug. Malalim ang naging

buntong-hininga nito.

“Jury gave him a double life sentence. He’ll be incarcerated at Florence ADX. His transfer’s due tomorrow night,” kuwento nito tungkol kay Ortiz.

Tumiim ang mga bagang ng binata. He should have been ecstatic about the news. Nagbunga ang ilang taong paghihirap nila. Pero wala siyang makapang kasiyahan.

“My leave’s up tomorrow,” pag-iiba niya ng usapan.

“You’re not coming in. I’m putting you on extended leave.”

Lumipad ang tingin ni Thomas sa superior. “I don’t want an extended leave. My shoulder’s all healed. I’m in good shape.”

“Physically, yes. But have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately, Thomas?”

Muli ay nagtagis ang kanyang mga bagang. Iniiwas niya ang tingin sa mukha ni Wilder.

“Caroline’s been gone for more than a year. I know how painful it was for you.”

“You have no idea how I feel,” he snapped. Hindi na niya napigilan. Lahat na lang ng mga kakilala niya, iyon ang sinasabi. Pero walang ideya ang mga ito kung gaano kasakit sa kanya ang naging pagkawala ni Caroline. Hindi alam ng mga ito kung gaano kalaki ang guilt na dinadala niya sa kanyang puso. “Damn!” he muttered. He combed his hair with his fingers in frustration.

“I’ve lost men on the job, Thomas. Believe me, I know how you feel.” Hindi siya kumibo. Pakiramdam niya ay sasabog ang kanyang dibdib sa tindi ng emosyon.

“You can’t live like this forever. She would’ve wanted you to be happy.”

How could he be happy when he had lost a part of his soul?

“Take a break, Thomas. Go someplace else. Visit your family in the Philippines.”

“You know I can’t, Wilder. I have a job.”

“And that’s precisely why I don’t want you back in your condition. Ours is not an average eight-hour, behind-the-desk job. Lives are at stake—yours and your team—every hour that you’re out on the field. You’ve turned kamikaze. And I won’t have you risking your life or your partners just because you have a death wish.”

Hindi nakasagot si Thomas dahil tama ang sinabi nito. Patunay ang tinamo niyang sugat sa kanyang balikat.

“You’re one of my best agents. I need you in the bureau. But I need you alive and in focus.”

What’s the use? We’re not making any difference, are we? Those were questions he kept to himself.

May dinukot si Wilder sa bulsa ng jacket at ipinatong sa lamesita. Hindi kailangang tingnan ng binata para malaman kung ano iyon. It was a plane ticket, destination—Philippines. Naka-schedule ang flight niya bukas ng tanghali.

“I’m not expecting to see you anytime soon. Show your face in the office and I’m gonna kick your butt out myself. Take a break, Thomas. That’s an order.”

“You’re a stubborn son of a bitch, Wilder,” he said blandly.

Wilder stood up and snickered. “At least, this SOB is looking after your sorry ass.”