

Chapter One



KILL ME NOW.

Juliette froze at the end of the jetway, staring at the vivid flash of red hair in the crowd up ahead. The woman was just one of many pouring out from a nearby gate, but all it took was a glimpse of those distinctive red waves for Juliette to know exactly who she was.

Not today, not when Juliette was already dealing with so much. Please, not her.

But it *was* her, it had to be. Juliette would know those flaming tresses anywhere. Only one person on earth could carry off that height and color and style with such absolute flair.

The great Raven herself.

Juliette ducked, hiding among the throng spilling out around her, then she worked her way to one side and moved behind a wide pillar. Cheeks burning, she pretended to adjust a strap on her carry-on as the crowd swept past.

What were the odds of ending up in the same gate area of the same airport on the same day as her former cohort? Yet it had happened, even way out here in the middle of the California desert—a near-encounter with a fellow supermodel, one who'd been in the business at the same time as Juliette, back in the '80s. Raven, of all people. The woman was a living nightmare.

The phone in Juliette's pocket gave off the signal for a text, so she pulled it out and checked the message. It was from Didi, her best friend and business partner, who had flown out two days before to



prepare for the big event they would be hosting over the weekend at one of the spas that carried their “JT Lady” line of beauty products. The message said: Am in cell lot. Text when you get in.

Thumbs flying, Juliette replied: I’m here, but u’ll never guess who else is.

Didi’s response was quick: ???

Smiling to herself, Juliette typed, THE RED DRAGON

Didi’s reply—!!!!!!!—was followed by a second text: RAVEN? No way!

Juliette nodded to herself as she typed. Yep, am hiding now. Can’t come out till coast is clear.

Didi’s final response: No prob, take ur time. Oh yeah, check out billboard at carousel 3 before u come out.

Juliette slipped the phone into her pocket and shifted around the pillar to take another look. Scanning the crowd, she spotted the regal redhead at the far end of the hallway. With more of her visible now, Juliette could see the woman was dressed in a flowing mix of purple and teal silk with a couture-like fit. Oh yes, this had to be Raven. Fortunately she was heading straight to the main exit rather than baggage claim. Though the notorious diva had never been known for traveling light, it seemed this trip was an exception. Whew.

Juliette waited until Raven disappeared from sight, then gripped the handle of her carry-on and moved out from behind the pillar. Glad to have dodged that bullet, she made her way to baggage claim and looked around for carousel three. The moment she spotted the sign, her face eased into a smile. Mounted on the back wall, the huge billboard featured an inviting photo of Palm Grotto Spa’s world-famous mineral pool, a handsome couple floating side by side in its turquoise waters. Above them was the spa’s elegant palm-frond logo. But the best part of the sign was in the lower half. There, in blazing white text against even deeper blue water, were the words:

It’s Your Turn . . .
A Juliette Taylor Event
May 11–13



Under that was the contact info for signing up, and across the very bottom was her company's brand new slogan:

**Isn't it time someone took care of you
for a change?**

The whole billboard really was striking. Standing there and taking it in, Juliette knew she should feel grateful for their gorgeous new "look"—new colors, new logo, new packaging. Instead, all she could feel was fear and frustration and regret.

That's because what had started out as a simple product redesign had ended up bringing to light serious criminal acts that were being perpetrated against Juliette and her beauty supply company, JT Lady. Those crimes had been discovered thanks to the implementation phase of the new design program, which meant it had turned out to be a mixed blessing. They *needed* to know what was going on, of course. But Juliette sure didn't *like* knowing, not at all. How blissful it had been when her head was in the sand! If they hadn't done the redesign, they might never have learned about the crimes at all.

Juliette was startled from her thoughts by a nearby scream.

"You have *got* to be kidding me!"

She spun around to see that she was standing not ten feet from Raven, who then let out a long stream of curses, her voice echoing across baggage claim.

Time for a quick getaway. While the woman's back was to her, Juliette scanned the area for a hiding place, but even as she spotted a restroom she could duck into, she hesitated. Perhaps it was the poor old gray-haired porter, who didn't deserve to be spoken to like that. Or maybe it was the children over by the water fountain, who shouldn't have to hear such blue language. Either way, Juliette let loose a sigh. She couldn't run and hide. In the past she'd seen Raven go on like this for a full five or ten minutes, but she'd also seen the woman's attitude change on a dime, even in the midst of her most vicious rant, if she felt like it. Hoping that would be the case here, Juliette took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and strode forward.



Time to slay the fire-breathing dragon—or at least keep her from burning someone else.

MARCUS STONE STOOD IN the doorway of the old warehouse, looking around at the near-empty space inside. For the past six months this had been command central for JATFAT—the Joint Atlanta Task Force Against Terrorism. Filled with personnel and equipment, it had served as a top-secret beehive of activity, everyone working together toward a singular goal: the seizure of a newly activated terrorist cell based in metro Atlanta. That goal had been achieved last month with the arrest of all the cell’s members, and now, after several weeks of processing, investigating, and debriefing, things had finally begun to wind down.

At this point the place held only a few workstations and a handful of people. The rest would be finishing the paperwork at their regular offices and leaving the final wrap-up here to the core members of the team.

Marcus spotted the man he was there to see, Special Agent in Charge Nate Anderson, near the back of the room, trying to close one of the few windows in the place.

He headed that way. “Need some help?”

Nate turned. “Hey, Stone, how you doing?”

The two men shook hands. “Fine. You?”

Nate gestured toward the window. “Not too good at the moment. Somebody thought we needed some fresh air in here today, and now it’s stuck open.”

“The breeze *is* nice.”

“Yeah, but those crickets . . .”

Marcus could hear the cacophony of chirps outside, typical in Georgia for this time of year.

“Still can’t tolerate that sound.” Anderson’s voice was low, guttural. “It’s been eleven years, but the minute I hear it, might as well have been yesterday. Three hundred and forty-three of ’em under the rubble, all going off at once, and not a thing we could do about it.”

Marcus could feel a tightening in his chest as he, too, remembered. “You’re talking about the PASS alarms after 9/11.” Short for



“Personal Alert Safety Systems,” the distress signals were designed to go off whenever the emergency workers wearing them became immobile for more than thirty seconds, to indicate they were in trouble. After the towers fell, more than three hundred firefighters had been trapped, immobile, below the rubble.

Less than a minute later, their alarms began to go off.

Nate nodded. “Sounded just like a bunch of crickets to me. It was bad enough at the beginning, when there were so many and we couldn’t get to any of them. But it was even worse when things started quieting down. Batteries dying one by one.”

Marcus remembered. It had taken more than a day for the last of those beeps to stop. He’d hated the silence even more than the noise.

With a quick glance his way, Nate added, “You?”

Marcus shrugged, sliding his hands in his pockets. “The sound of crickets, not so much. For me, it’s the smell of gasoline or kerosene or diesel. Even lighter fluid. One whiff and I’m back at ground zero, holding my breath from the stench of jet fuel.”

“Amen, brother. We’re a real pair, huh? Scared of insects and barbecue grills.”

Marcus gave a nod and moved to the window. “Let’s see if I can help. Maybe together we can get it closed.”

Each taking a side, the two men wrestled with the stubborn windowpane and finally managed to break it free from whatever was stopping it from sliding shut. As frame met sill with a thud, the sound of the crickets outside was muffled by more than half.

“Sorry to say, you can still hear ’em a little.” Marcus brushed his hands together to wipe off the dust.

“Yeah, well, I never stop hearing ’em, not completely, anyway.” Nate grabbed a rag to wipe his hands. “Then again, who am I to complain? You had it worse there than I did, that’s for sure.”

Marcus felt his stomach clench at the thought, but he was saved from having to respond when Nate added, “Anyway, what’s up? Can I do something for you?”

Marcus took a deep breath and blew it out, not sure how to broach the topic he’d come here to discuss. “I need to talk with you for a minute. It’s about that list of names we found among the papers recovered from the terrorist cell.”



“Oh?” Nate moved toward his desk and gestured for Marcus to have a seat on the other side.

Marcus glanced around, glad the place was all but deserted, then sat and watched as Nate flipped through the file drawer. He pulled one, opened it onto the desk, and flipped through until he came to a copy of the paper in question, the name list.

Among the evidence that had been collected in the wake of the capture of the terrorist cell had been a typed list of ten names—with no other information at all. Most of the names on it had been immediately recognizable, at least to those on the task force. Three were public figures who spoke out against the counterfeiting of designer goods, such as knock-off purses, counterfeit DVDs, and fake perfumes. Four were members of Congress who were working to toughen federal anticounterfeiting laws. The connection for the remaining three names was less clear, but with some investigation it was determined that the list was comprised of ten people whose actions could be financially detrimental to the cell’s counterfeit-based money raising activities in one way or another.

Marcus skimmed the names upside down, remembering the first time he’d seen that list, just a few weeks before.

“Number six,” he said gruffly.

Nate ran his finger along the list and stopped there. “Oh yeah, the former supermodel?”

Marcus nodded, swallowing hard. “Yep, that’s the one. Juliette Taylor. I’m here because I need to talk to you about her.”

“RAVEN?” JULIETTE FORCED A light and happy tone into her voice. “Is that you? I can’t believe it. How *are* you?”

Raven turned, and when she saw Juliette, the expression on her face changed from rage to surprise to what looked like genuine delight.

“Darling! How wonderful to see you! What on *earth* are you doing in this hideous joke of an airport?” Raven threw her arms around Juliette and pulled her in for a hug, seeming to forget her tantrum over the luggage. The porter seized the opportunity and pushed the overloaded cart toward the exit as fast as he could.



Crisis averted. With any luck Juliette would get out of there before Raven started screaming at someone else. Known throughout the industry as a temperamental diva, the woman had never been unkind to Juliette personally—and in fact had once done her a very big favor. But with Raven came drama, which grew tiresome for anyone.

When the hug ended, they stuck to small talk, the two of them trying to remember how long it had been since they'd seen each other last. Five years? Ten? Splitting the difference, they decided it was about seven, when they'd both been in New York for Fashion Week and ended up just one row apart at a Carolina Herrera show.

As they talked, Juliette studied the six-foot-tall beauty, who in her prime had walked the runways for more top-name designers than perhaps any other supermodel in history. It was hard to say whether or not the years had been kind to Raven, but one thing was for certain: The plastic surgeons had not. Between the tightly pulled eyes and the puffed-up lips, Raven looked like a caricature of a human, as though she might melt into a glob of wax at any moment.

How pointless. How sad.

Pity surged through Juliette's heart, and she was glad she'd forced herself to approach her old acquaintance, dramatics or not. Though never best buddies, the two women had moved in the same circles for a number of years. Seeing Raven now made Juliette feel rather nostalgic. Most of all it reminded her of how few people understood the world of the supermodel and the price paid by those who lived it. Despite the decades since either of them had appeared on a runway or a magazine cover, she and Raven shared a bond, one that would be with them for life—just as the title of “Supermodel” was theirs for life, whether they were still in the business of modeling or not.

“So what are you doing out here in the desert?”

She expected Raven to say she was headed for a Palm Springs golf resort, or perhaps a vacation rental in the nearby mountains. Instead, she ignored the question and began to fidget with the neckline of her blouse. “Let's walk, shall we? Who knows what suitcase of mine that idiot will drop next? Better to be right there, keep him on his toes.”

Raven began moving toward the exit, and after a beat Juliette caught up with her. Through the windows she could see that the



porter had stopped his cart beside a black stretch limousine and was now loading Raven's bags into the trunk. Juliette sighed. Though she and Raven had both been successful in their youth, they'd handled that success in different ways. Even now, here was Raven with her designer luggage and her limousine, compared to Juliette with her roll-on bag and a lift from a friend. Their careers had been lucrative for them both, but somehow she had a feeling that all the money in the world couldn't buy the one thing Raven needed most: connection to others. Relationship. An end to the loneliness that all but oozed from every pore of her statuesque frame.

If only there was a way to break through that outer, defensive layer that Raven wore like a suit of armor. Juliette slowed, taking her old friend's arm and trying again. "So do you have a house out here or something?"

Raven looked away, her posture stiffening.

"No, I'm . . . I just . . ." Raven cleared her throat. "I came here to relax, pamper myself a little, you know? Take in the desert air and all that. How about you?"

Ah, deflection. In other words, it was none of her business. Juliette sighed, hating to let it go but knowing to back off. Raven had always been a guarded person. There was no reason to think she would've changed by now.

"Why am I here? It's complicated." Juliette hesitated, trying to think of the simplest way to explain that she'd come on JT Lady business, to give training sessions to spa staff this afternoon and then host a signature "Juliette Taylor Event" for a unique group of clients this weekend. "I'm on my way to Palm Grotto Spa, where—"

"*What?*" Raven's head spun toward Juliette, eyes blazing. "How dare you."

Bracing herself for a Raven-sized rant, Juliette took a step back. "How dare I what?" she asked.

Instead of answering the question, Raven snarled, her green eyes flashing. "That part is mine! Steal it from me and I'll kill you!"

With that, she turned on her heel and stomped away, leaving a stunned and confused Juliette in her wake.

She watched as the redhead burst outside and strode toward the limo. Raven's driver jumped to attention, opening the back door and



holding it wide as she flung herself into the seat. The windows were tinted, so she disappeared from view as soon as he closed the door. Her driver climbed in front, behind the wheel, and waited as the porter finished loading her bags into the trunk.

What in the world . . . ?

All done, the porter closed the lid with a thud. Immediately the back window of the limo slid down and a claw like hand shot out of the opening, waving a wad of cash in the air until he took it. Just as suddenly, the hand disappeared inside and the tinted window slid closed again.

Well. That wasn't surprising. Almost as notorious as Raven's rants were her generous tips. Those tips were the only reason many people were willing to serve her at all.

Watching the limo pull away, Juliette could only shake her head. How could Raven talk to people that way and still manage to sleep at night? Glancing around, she realized two workers at a nearby car rental desk had overheard their exchange and were gaping at her. Giving them an embarrassed shrug, Juliette squared her shoulders, held her head high, and went through the door, rolling her carry-on bag behind her. She couldn't worry about what other people were thinking—nor about whatever Raven had meant by her bizarre words.

The problems Juliette and her company were currently dealing with were far bigger and much more important than some aging diva's temper tantrum.