

Chapter 1

Santa Fe, New Mexico

He didn't remember the precise night the dreams started, branding his mind with myriads of bizarre details. Though his parents had been gone for a decade, he saw them clearly each time. In one sequence, he was suspended in air gazing down at their lifeless faces and crumpled forms. Broken and bloodied, ripped by jagged edges of white bone, they lay cradled in a bed of twisted metal that was, only moments before, the sleek frame of their luxury sedan. The sun's warm rays slanted through a crystalline sky, glinting off mounds of shattered glass and splitting into tiny rainbows that danced around the diamonds on his mother's left hand; the diamonds set in a circle of gold, the symbol of love without end, and passed down through generations of Cheynes. For years, he'd kept the cherished ring with the rest of his jewelry, nestled in its original leather case, a faded midnight blue delicately tooled in silver with a tiny round mother-of-pearl latch. Now the case and its treasure were in his lock box, out of site.

Another night, another dream. He came upon them as he ambled down a dirt road. Sitting in Old Blue, the faded ranch truck, they appeared relaxed, their heads resting back on the worn upholstery, their fingers laced together on the seat. Their faces were turned towards each other, unscathed, sharing a gentle look and resigned, peaceful smiles. The roof on the truck was gone. There were no doors. Skid marks showed where Old Blue veered off-road, coming to rest—the front end smashed against a huge boulder. Light rain started to fall, misting his parents' faces as acrid smoke snaked around their feet and twined up their legs. Small fires crackled and hissed. With a start, he realized the old seatbelt latches must have jammed, strapping his parents' torsos tightly in place. The pocket knife his dad was never without lay just out of reach on the dash. As Buck sprang to action the explosion that tore their bodies apart erupted, jerking him up in bed; his warning—an anguished shout – dying in his throat. The knife, which had been a sentimental reminder of times shared with the dad he adored, left his pocket and joined the ring.

Though the scenarios varied with each dream, one thing remained constant. His parents were always together. Sometimes touching, sometimes reaching for each other, sometimes sharing a few final whispered words, sometimes with faces frozen in shock and disbelief, unable to speak as the last breath of life sighed through their lips. They had pledged themselves to one another “until death us do part.” Part them, it had not.

Relentless at night, the macabre vignettes nipped at Buck's heels during waking hours as well. Bits and pieces here and there would flash through his mind, catching him off guard; it happened sporadically—when he was in the board room or sharing a drink with friends, talking on the phone or working out. At night, he postponed the inevitable assault as long as possible; yet, no matter how his exhausted mind resisted, eventually his body surrendered, and he was pulled into the inevitable cycle leading to REM sleep.

Never being one to take a challenge lying down, Buck researched REM. The experts explained that while the REM/dream phase of sleep occupies only 25% of the sleep cycle, it's entered several times during a night creating, in Buck's way of thinking, several opportunities to become its victim. And so, for six interminable weeks the nightly ritual had played out.

In reality, he was in Dallas when his parents were killed on a road 250 miles to the south near their home in Houston. Perhaps he could deal with it if his mind left it there, but that was too much to ask. Replaying the ghoulish scenes, seeing pain and shock on their faces as life slipped from their bodies undid him. And he always woke – semi-conscious, shaking, bathed in sweat, sometimes crying out, sometimes shouting in garbled verbiage for someone to do something.

His private saving grace, it turned out, was that he could grab a nap unaffected. This provided enough of a respite to keep him moving forward. Barely.

Tossing back the covers, Buck hauled himself out of bed, unzipped his bag for a fresh pair of jeans and shirt, and entered the roomy bathroom of his up-scale Southwestern-styled suite. He flipped on the light, hung his change of clothes on the hook, and approached the rustic mirror mounted over a raised counter.

It was time.

He gazed steadily into the mirror. And half smiled. There was no doubt he was a good lookin' guy; the Cheyne genes could not be denied. His head dropped – chin to chest. He leaned in, hands on the granite counter bracing his body. He determined to be brutally honest with himself. Lifting his head he levered away from the counter, took a step back and refocused.

What he saw through the lens of truth shocked him. Gone was the familiar, toned and tanned six-foot three-inch frame radiating confidence and strength. Gone, the clear sparkling azure eyes reflecting intelligence and wit; eyes that hinted at mischief and softened with kindness. Gone, the natural sheen highlighting his medium length light brown hair – a golden touch many a woman had claimed she'd die for. Instead, a pair of listless eyes drooping with fatigue beheld a sagging frame topped with dull, limp hair. "You look awful," he accused, disgusted.

In fact, in all his thirty-two years Buck couldn't remember a time when he'd felt so completely wrung out. Just last week in Houston while celebrating Thanksgiving with his sister and her family, she'd drawn him aside and rather forcefully commanded, "Buck, go see a doctor." Such a confrontation was not her norm. Since then the question, "What is the matter with me?" had set up camp in his brain, taunting his mind.

One thing was obvious; Buck was ridiculously busy – had been for months. Every business Buck Cheyne Enterprises owned was burning on all cylinders and turning in over-the-top results. Creativity and ingenuity, savvy entrepreneurship, and steely determination were paying off in spades. At the same time, his diverse personal investments never performed better. His portfolio contained not even one disappointment. All of them were yielding healthy returns; two even doubling and tripling over the last 3 quarters. Still, despite all the smiles, back slaps, congratulations and high-fives being passed around at BCE, Buck was a wreck; his kick-butt demeanor – kicked in the butt. When he mentioned a few short hours ago that it might be good to go to Santa Fe for some personal time,

his executive assistant, Kelly Patrick, jumped on it. In her indomitable manner, she secured a suite for a week at the inn he had been frequenting since he was a boy. Striding back into his office, she proceeded to clear everything off Buck's desk while he was still sitting there, as she put it, "like a bump on a log." She then looked him straight in the eye and said, "Mr. Buck Cheyne, that reservation starts today."

And here he was, in Santa Fe. He'd been hustled onto his private jet for the short flight from Dallas, had driven a scenic route to his hotel, and dumped his bag and coat on entering his suite. Stripping off his street clothes he'd slipped between the premium sheets, his skin reveling in the cool softness of 1000 threads of cotton woven in each inch. He'd immediately fallen asleep. Chuckling, Buck shook his head and reached down to turn on the water. Kelly was a powerhouse for sure. Dousing his head in the icy flow provided a welcomed shock. Briskly he dried his face, his unshaved jaw and rubbed his hair using the plush Turkish toweling provided by an iconic inn that spared no amenity. He pulled on the fresh shirt and jeans, threw on a fresh pair of socks and shoved his feet into his favorite boots. Straightening his tall frame, he turned back to the mirror, finger combing his hair. Finished with his quick-groom routine he assessed his image, again. Better. He walked out of the suite shrugging into a black leather jacket and headed towards The Shed for a late lunch. Ample servings of chips and salsa washed down with a margarita or two, a few enchiladas, Christmas style, at his favorite little Santa Fe haunt always made everything better.

After lunch he took a stroll around the Plaza, a green parcel in the historic downtown area reminiscent of an old-fashioned city square. A monument formed the center of this oasis, crisscrossed with sidewalks and benches. Leaves were now gone from the large trees, the same ones that provided near complete shade during the summer. Despite a chill in the air, plenty of people – locals and tourists alike – were out soaking up the warm sunrays and crisp mountain air just like he was doing. Cars and a few pickup trucks moved slowly along the four surrounding streets. He strolled along under the protective eaves of the Palace of the Governors on the north side of the plaza. Like most days, Native Americans manned invisible stalls in full force displaying their wares on blankets on the sidewalk. From the looks of it, some were doing a brisk business because people leaned down haggling for a better deal prior to handing over cash. After crossing the streets and walking the circumference, all the while dodging tourists who were preoccupied with shopping and talking to one another, he cut through the plaza and returned to his suite at The Inn of the Anasazi. He grabbed his Kindle and opened the adventure novel he started on the plane. Buck was sound asleep before he could get through a single page.

Startled awake by his cell phone ringing across the room, he jumped up and reached for it. Caller ID showed it was Colby Duncan, his close friend he hired away from Texas Instruments and put in charge of Element119, Inc. Buck answered the phone, "Hey Colby."

"Hello Buck," Colby said, "how's it going?"

"Fine. Okay. I fell asleep."

"Sorry to bother you, but we've got problems. I realize you asked everyone to give you space and go easy on contacting you. This is an emergency though."

"What do you mean, Colby?" Buck squinted now on full alert.

“A Federal agent showed up at the office this afternoon. He put us on notice they’ve started an investigation. Says it’s International in scope. They somehow suspect secret information from our Los Alamos collaboration with the US government has landed in the hands of the Chinese. He claims they have reason to believe someone within Element119 is involved. They want our full cooperation. He asked to meet with you and me right then but I told him you were out of town and a meeting would not be possible. That’s when he let me know you and I are suspects, too.”

“Come on Colby. Is this one of your wild pranks like you used to pull in our college fraternity days?”

“No, Buck. This is not a joke. I wish it were. This is seriously not good.”

Buck went pale as the blood drained from his face. He held the phone to his ear without saying a word.

“You still there, Buck?”

“Yea. Yea. Sorry. I’m not sure what to tell you right now. Let me call John and I’ll get back to you.”