

Chapter One

Robert swallowed another salty gob of blood while he considered his impending death.

A sharp kick landed on the main joint of the folding chair. He winced as he skidded with it across the cement floor of the basement, stopping inches away from the rust-spotted floor drain. Gasping, Robert filled his lungs with uneven breaths. Instinct forced him to straighten his spine - - to breathe deeper -- but the handcuffs, restraining his arms behind the backrest of the chair, made the motion awkward and painful.

A shout rang against the block walls: "Answer me!"

Robert tried to raise his eyes to the source of the voice. To Caballo.

Each contraction of the muscles in his face caused him pain. Every bit of tissue felt hot and swollen. Inside his mouth, blood steadily dripped from loosened teeth and a tear along the inside of his cheek. Although he could only see clearly from his right eye, Robert moved his gaze upward. Up over the basement floor with its sixteen oily blotches, over the twenty-eight speckles of his blood that dotted Caballo's slacks and shirt, and finally settling on a face as hard and cratered as the man himself.

Robert jerked forward as he choked on the blood gathering inside his mouth. Spasms in his diaphragm sent him into coughing fits as his body tried to shake loose the obstruction in his windpipe. After a moment of struggle, he swallowed down the blood-soaked phlegm, and his airway opened.

"Sorry. Got distracted." Robert winced. Speaking only aggravated his busted mouth. "You were saying?"

"Real funny, guy." Caballo spoke in that irritating way of his, never quite opening his jaw more than half an inch. That combined with his thick, Mexican accent made him hard to understand, even on a good day. He took a step forward, moving underneath bare-bulb light that lit up his mocha skin, but cast his eyes in deep shadow. "You think I'm playing funny games with you? You answer me when I ask you a question."

Caballo forced a pensive frown. Casually, he raised his left arm, pointing his .45 caliber handgun out of Robert's view. Robert didn't have to look where the gun pointed; he already knew where the bullet would fly, and it sent a hot wave of nausea through his gut.

Caballo spoke in calm, measured tones. "Since you and me go back a little ways, I'll repeat the question. For both of you."

Blood throbbed through Robert's ears. He knew he shouldn't panic, but thinking about panicking just made him panic more. A rough swallow passed through his throat. Robert built up his resolve, and forced his eyes in the direction where Caballo pointed his gun.

Karen Lynch sat on a folding chair, her eyes fixed on Robert -- her son. Handcuffs restrained her arms behind the backrest, forcing her shoulders back into an awkward pose. Dishwater blond curls fell over her pale face. Dark make-up surrounded her gray eyes. Lines on her face deepened while she struggled against her bonds.

"Now," Caballo's voice snapped Robert's eyes back to his abductor. "I said, why should I keep you alive? I told you what would happen if you tried to compete with me. You think I care about getting a cut now? Motherfucker, I take what I want. How much money did you think you were going to make when you cooked up thousands of pills in my city?"

Upon hearing the word 'thousands,' fine, luminescent dots shimmered into life behind Caballo's head. As the man's face moved along with his speech, the speckles coalesced into

discrete shapes. Shapes bent and contorted into numbers. In less than a second, the number 800,012 formed behind the hulking criminal's head. They had made 800,012 pills. From next to the large figure, an electric blue number six materialized. In his mind's eye, Robert rammed the six into the long string of digits, sending all the figures into swirling chaos. Their constituent parts reformed into a new string of white numbers, flecked with electric blue accents: 4,800,072.

"How much!" Caballo stepped forward, his fist raised. The motion alone made Robert cower.

"Four million, eight-hundred thousand, and seventy-two dollars," Robert said.

Caballo took a step backward, his head intersecting with the floating numbers only Robert could see. The numbers disintegrated into fading specks, and vanished as quickly as they came.

"That's a lot of money, homes. Guess what? Now that's my money. So, you tell me why you two should walk out of here alive." Caballo kept his eyes planted on Robert in a dominating stare. "I think you know there's only one way that's going to happen."

Robert's vision grew red and dark. Muscles in his neck turned rubbery, making his head bob and sway. He didn't know what to say.

So he said nothing.

Feet shuffled uncomfortably behind Robert's mother. Robert gave a brief look to Lencho -- the man to whom the shuffling feet belonged. Gun in hand, Lencho perched on the edge of motion. Unlike his boss, he refused Robert's eye contact. He looked incapable of staying still, as his dense muscles twitched every few seconds from underneath his over-sized t-shirt. His dark eyebrows knit together below his brown scalp.

"Well!" Caballo shouted and tensed the arm that held the gun.

Robert's breath quickened to the point of hyperventilation. He still tasted blood as his eyes searched around the basement, to each of the four bare-bulb lights hanging from the ceiling, to the stacks of junk against the walls, to Caballo, to Lencho, to his mother and her smeared make up...

Her smeared make up.

"You better say something quick," Caballo squared his shoulders and waved the gun back to Robert's mother. "I don't give a fuck!"

"Please," his mother whispered. "Robbie, just tell him that you'll do what whatever he wants..."

A fresh drop of blood fell from his nose. His mother's mouth moved, but Robert ignored the words. He couldn't stop looking at the perfectly smeared make up around her eyes. A cold weight settled in his stomach while the meaty warmth of the room pressed in on him. Wounds on his face and body screamed for attention. Scattered thoughts collected over the recent past began to merge, forming a vision of reality he didn't want to see.

All the sound of the room rushed back into Robert's ears. Caballo's voice muscled in over his mother's increasingly desperate tones.

"What's it going to be, *cabron*?" Caballo leaned forward, but still kept his left arm raised, gun pointed to Robert's mother.

Robert's pulse began to slow. He parted cracked lips, and sat up straight in his chair. After swallowing his latest batch of blood and saliva, he spoke:

"Go ahead. Kill her."

Robert's lips curled into a bloody sneer.