

## Chapter One

He watched, hypnotized, as the stream of blood snaked its way down his arm, soaking the sleeve of his torn shirt, dripping on the floor, slowly dripping his life away. With the last of his strength, he struggled against the duct tape binding his arms and legs, keeping him imprisoned in the heavy chair. No use. His mouth was dry, he could hardly swallow, probably the effect of the drug they injected him with. What had he told them under the influence of that drug?

His vision blurred and his head dropped to his chest. He jerked it up again, willing himself not to lose consciousness. Not yet. He had to warn Caitlin. He had to get a message to her. She was in grave danger as long as the dragon was in her possession. And she didn't even know she had it. How could he have placed her in such peril? He cared for Caitlin. She didn't deserve this.

He laughed a small bitter laugh. He could do nothing. Nothing for her, nothing for himself. His head nodded again. This time he couldn't summon the strength to raise it. There was a persistent ringing in his ears.

The acrid smell of smoke roused him from his stupor. Bastards. They'd set fire to the building. They were leaving nothing to chance. No matter. Nothing mattered any more. He had been incredibly stupid and he was paying for his stupidity with his life. But Cait... not Caitlin, he prayed, as he slipped into oblivion.

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Five minutes later the fire department arrived, sirens wailing, and moments after, an ax crashed through the locked door.

"Christ! There's a man in here! Cut him loose and get him out of here. This whole building's going to go any minute."

The first firefighter cut quickly through the restraints while the second hoisted the unconscious man over his shoulder and they raced into the smoke filled hallway, down the stairs and out through the front door.

Outside, the paramedics took over. "What happened here?"

"Don't know. We found him unconscious, trussed up like a Christmas turkey. Somebody wanted him to go up with the building."

Together, the paramedics lifted him onto the stretcher. "Keep him upright. He's having trouble breathing. Try to staunch the bleeding while I get him on oxygen!"

"I'm trying. Looks like multiple knife wounds. We'd better get him to Berkeley General fast. His pulse rate isn't good and his blood pressure's dropping."

Suddenly the patient opened his eyes wide, pulled the oxygen mask down and grasped the paramedic's arm, struggling to say something.

"What? What did you say?"

“Must warn Cait—Warn—the am—let!” The hand dropped.  
“I’m not getting a pulse here!”

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Caitlin Abernathy woke to a foggy morning in the Berkeley hills. She shrugged. The fog would burn off by noon. It always did.

She headed for the bathroom. As she lathered shampoo through her thick dark hair, she thought back to Allen’s hot, demanding kisses the night before with a smile of remembered pleasure. Then her smile turned to a frown as she recalled their argument over dinner.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” he’d reasoned. “We’ve been seeing each other for months now. Why won’t you sleep with me? I know you want to. Why do you keep pushing me away? Why can’t I move in with you? It’s ridiculous for us to be paying for two places when I could be helping you with your mortgage here.”

It had been difficult to answer him. From a strictly financial view, what he suggested made sense, but she just couldn’t. While his kisses sometimes made her want more, hers was a purely physical response. Her heart and mind weren’t engaged. She wanted something more, something she couldn’t quite define.

In the end she had opted for some small part of the truth. “I’m sorry, Allen, I’m not ready for that kind of commitment.”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell him she didn’t love him. She’d slipped without much thought into the relationship. In retrospect, she suspected she hadn’t been fair to him. He loved her, or at least he said he did, but, although she was fond of Allen—

“I just can’t,” she’d told him with more than a little regret. Had she been wrong? She had held him at a distance, not sure whether she wanted to take the next, natural step of letting him make love to her, move in with her. He was a thoroughly nice man. A bit dull and predictable, but dependable. They could probably build a good life together. Maybe that was all there was.

She smiled, remembering their meeting four months ago. She’d been delivering to a jewelry shop on the Embarcadero where the owner always carried a few of her best pieces. It had taken longer than she’d anticipated and she was rushing back to her car, hoping to get to the parking meter before the meter maid did. In her hurry she’d run full tilt into Allen, knocking him down and scattering the parcels he was carrying all over the sidewalk.

Flustered and embarrassed, she’d apologized profusely. He’d picked himself up, laughing, and suggested the only adequate apology would be for her to have lunch with him. He had a wonderful, winning laugh. It was his laugh that made her say yes.

They went together to feed her meter, and then picnicked on a baguette and cheese and drank good French wine in the park overlooking the sailboat harbor and

the Golden Gate Bridge. That had been the beginning.

Caitlin liked being with Allen. He had an infectious gaiety. He never failed to lift her spirits when she was down. And until last night their relationship had been a lighthearted friendship with no strings attached on either side. What had changed? Why was he suddenly so insistent on moving in with her?

Oh, well, she'd think about that later. Right now, she had more important things to think about. Like her upcoming meeting with the buyer from the mega-luxury store, Marcus-Pfeiffer. What was she going to wear for her very important appointment with him this morning?

She stepped out of the shower and rubbed the terry towel through her tangled hair and down her body. After using the blow dryer briefly, she ran her fingers through her almost dry hair. Trying to restore the wanton curls to some semblance of order, she pulled them ruthlessly back into the sophisticated twist she always wore for business, securing it with curved combs. A few unruly tendrils curled around her face. She always wore her hair up to display the earrings and necklaces she created. If she could get this contract for her jewelry designs from Marcus-Pfeiffer, it would be a major coup. Not to mention money in the bank. She could pay off her mortgage years sooner with the money they promised.

Her mind veered briefly to Allen's suggestion about living together, to his offer of help with her mortgage. Much as she wanted to be debt free, she suspected drifting into a committed relationship without love wasn't the best way to go about it. She wasn't sure she believed in fairy tales or happily ever after, but she wasn't ready to settle for less, just yet.

Slipping into a black lace bikini and matching bra, Caitlin pushed through her skimpy closet and selected a simple black linen dress. It would frame very nicely the blood red of the mookite necklace she had just finished yesterday. The short tube sheathed her body, hinting at rather than displaying her curves. She touched her eyelids with shadow matching the amber of her eyes, and added a slash of crimson lipstick. Then she fastened the large chunky red and gold necklace around her neck and put the matching bracelet on her right arm. Stepping back, she surveyed the effect in her full-length mirror. It would do, she thought, as she slipped her feet into her old but elegant black Ferragamo's with four-inch heels. She picked up her purse and headed for the door. No time for breakfast. She'd grab a coffee at the Starbucks next to her shop when she stopped there to pick up her sample case.

She pulled her five-year-old Toyota out of its curbside parking place. Absently tapping her fingers in time to WQXR on her car radio, Caitlin navigated the steep Berkeley hills to the center of town, encountering increasing traffic as she approached the area around the university. How fortunate she was to have a shop on College Avenue. It wasn't easy to find affordable commercial space in this part

of town. She even had a miniscule parking slot at the back of the building.

Letting herself into the back door with her key, Caitlin turned off the alarm and walked into her workshop. It occupied most of the ground floor in the narrow two-story building.

She switched on the bright light suspended over her high worktable. Fingering the piece she was currently working on, a small gold frog sitting on a jade lily pad, she frowned. What stones should she use for his eyes? She walked over to the wall of cabinets where she kept her stones. They were stored in old-fashioned oak filing cabinets, the kind libraries used to have before everything was computerized. She smiled as she remembered her good fortune in acquiring these cabinets. She'd bid on them in an auction when she was first setting up her business, and was astonished at her good luck when nobody else wanted them and her very modest bid made them hers. Their small deep drawers were perfect for storing all her gemstones. She had them organized alphabetically, just as the original library cards used to be. Abalone and aquamarine to tourmaline and zirconia; thirty-two kinds of semi-precious stones. They represented a major investment, one she could never have made without the help of the bank.

She frowned, thinking about the size of the mortgage she had taken on the house her parents had left her, to buy this small, rather dilapidated two-story building on College Avenue. Someday, maybe she'd be able to pay it off.

The frog. What stone would look best? Absently Caitlin opened the moonstone drawer. They might work, although perhaps something brighter would be better. She opened another drawer and fingered through the turquoise. She knew her stones as much by their feel as by the way they looked. No. Not the turquoise. They were a bit too obvious. Perhaps obsidian?

She heard someone at the front door and pushed the drawer closed. She walked through to the salesroom, with its three glass cases displaying her original jewelry designs. A very tall black man with dreadlocks half way to his waist, sporting wire-framed glasses and wearing a multicolored shirt, a leather vest, and black velvet cords, was letting himself in the College Avenue entrance with his key.

He pushed his bicycle past her into the back room. "Sorry I'm late, Cait. Professor Humbolt's eight o'clock class ran a little over. I know you got big doings over in Frisco this morning. But I'm here now. You better get going."

"Thanks, Aristotle. Mrs. Cummings will be coming later this morning to pick up the lemon quartz bracelet she ordered. The price is two hundred fifty. Don't let her give you any grief on the amount. She agreed to it when she ordered the piece."

"No problem, Cait. Go on now. Git!"

"I just stopped by to pack my sample case."

Caitlin went back into her workroom and selected some finished pieces she thought might interest the buyer from the mega-luxury store. The tiger-eye

pendant, the lacy collar made of carnelian and moonstone. The delicate lemon quartz necklace and matching bracelet. A few of her best, most expensive pieces. Not too many. Each one unique, each a one-of-a-kind piece. She'd found customers would pay well for designs they knew they'd never see on anyone else.

Picking up her case, she called, "I'm leaving now, Aristotle." Car keys in hand, Caitlin went out the back door.

A dark sedan was blocking her exit from the parking lot. Annoyed, she went over and rapped on the car window.

"Could you please move? I need to get out."

Before the words were out of her mouth two men leaped out of the car, pushing her against it, hemming her in. Something jabbed into her ribs. She glanced down and gasped. A gun. It was a gun.

Caitlin shivered. "What do you want?"

Their eyes were bleak, expressionless. Her mind registered they were both very well dressed. They had on suits and ties, for God's sake. Somehow, the way they were dressed made them more intimidating. Nobody wore suits and ties in Berkeley.

"The case. We'll take the case. Just put it down and you won't get hurt."

Caitlin's chin went up as she pulled her case against her, holding it tight with both arms. "I will not give you my case. I need it to show to a buyer. Why on earth would you want to steal my case? I work in semi-precious stones, not diamonds and emeralds. There's nothing of great value in my case. It's certainly not worth armed robbery."

"*Putain*, you talk too much!" The taller man wrenched the case out of her arms and shoved Caitlin roughly.

Off balance, she fell. Before she could get to her feet again the two were back in the car, speeding down the alley.

"Damn." Caitlin brushed herself off. She inspected her dress and shoes. Still presentable. Her leg was scraped and she had turned her ankle in the fall. She limped back into the shop.

Aristotle looked up, his eyebrows raised in surprise, when she hobbled into the showroom. "What happened? You fell down?" He took her arm and led her to a chair. "Sit down. Your leg looks nasty. Let me wash it off."

Now that it was over, Caitlin was shaking. Aristotle disappeared into the bathroom adjoining her workshop and was back a moment later with a basin of warm water and a cloth. He set about looking after the scrape on Caitlin's leg with a care that might have surprised anyone but Caitlin. She knew from her five years of working with this fierce-looking giant he was capable of great gentleness.

"You gonna tell me what happened? You didn't just fall down. Although in those heels I don't know why not."

“Two men...knocked me down and took my case.”

“What! Did you get a good look at them?”

“I most certainly did. They were dressed like they were going to a funeral. I thought for a minute it might be mine. The tall one had a gun pressed into my side. He was skinny, almost skeletal. The other one was short and dumpy. They both looked, I don’t know, really scary. Like they’d as soon kill you as look at you.”

Caitlin clasped her hands together tightly, trying to still their shaking. “The tall man spoke with an accent, but I couldn’t place it. He called me *putain*. What’s that? It didn’t sound nice.”

Aristotle took her two slender hands in his very large ones and rubbed them. “It’s French, and no, it’s not nice. But it’s okay, Caitlin, you’re safe now. Just breathe. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.”

“But my case!” she cried. “They drove off with my sample case. What am I going to do about the buyer from Marcus-Pfeiffer?”

Aristotle pulled out his large red handkerchief and dried her eyes. “You’ve smudged your makeup. You’ve got lots of other good pieces you can show him. Show him the ones you’re wearing. They’re gorgeous.” His brow creased. “But why would anybody bother to steal your sample case? The stones take most of their value from the way you’ve set them. I suppose they could melt down the settings for the silver and gold, but it seems a lot of work for a small return.”

“I don’t know. I told them the pieces wouldn’t have much resale value. They didn’t seem to care.”

“We’ve got to call the police.”

“Not now. If I have to wait for them I’ll miss my appointment.”

“How’s the leg? The ankle?”

Caitlin stood and flexed her foot. “They seem to be okay.”

“Then go fix your face and choose a few other pieces to show your buyer while I call Mrs. Cummings to change her appointment. Then I’ll lock up the place.”

“Why?”

“You don’t think I’m gonna let you drive into San Francisco by yourself after this? Look at your hands. They’re still shaking. Besides, if you’re driving you’ll have to find a parking space and you’ll be late for your appointment. I’ll drop you off in front of the Mark Hopkins Hotel and go park the car. I’ll meet you in the lobby when you’re through.”

“But my case is gone,” Caitlin wailed.

Aristotle shook his head. “Put the pieces in one of those fancy bags you were so hot to buy for the shop. Probably better anyway. They have your name on them.”

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Two hours later Caitlin emerged from the elevator and walked across to where

Aristotle was waiting for her, sitting in one of the comfortable sofas in the lobby of the hotel.

“Don’t tell me. I can see by your smile he liked them.”

Caitlin beamed at him. “The store’s going to take twenty pieces right away. If those sell well, they’ll take another thirty for their Christmas catalogue. I’m going to have to work hard to supply as many pieces as they want.”

“Congratulations. You’ve earned this.”

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Back at the shop Caitlin surveyed her now depleted show cases. “I’ll have to work day and night if I’m to meet the deadlines for the Christmas catalog. Their buyer took all the pieces I had with me, even the ones I was wearing. And I’ll have to make some new ones immediately for our display cases. I can’t afford to let my bread and butter business slip.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“No. Just man the shop. I’ll be in my workroom.”

“We really should call the police, you know.”

Two uniformed officers opened the door and walked into the showroom. “Ms. Abernathy?”

Aristotle and Caitlin stared at the officers. “How did you know to come?” Caitlin asked. “We hadn’t called you yet. Who reported the theft?”

“Theft?” The officers looked confused. The older one took charge. “I’m Detective O’Malley and this is Officer Thurgood. Are you Caitlin Abernathy?”

“Yes.”

“You know a man named Allen Thompson?”

“Yes, I know Allen. Why do you want to know?”

The officers looked pained. “Maybe you should sit down, Miss,” Officer Thurgood suggested.

Caitlin looked from one to the other of the men and drew herself up to her full five foot eight inches. “I’ll remain standing. Tell me about Allen. Has he been in an accident? Is he hurt? Where is he?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, ma’am, but Allen Thompson is dead.”

The blood drained from Caitlin’s head and her legs gave way. Aristotle caught her as she fainted. When she came to, she was on the bench in her workroom with Aristotle hovering over her. The two policemen were still there.

“I’m sorry we had to inform you of his death this way,” the older officer said. “But we hoped perhaps you could shed some light on the matter. Do you know his whereabouts last night?”

She looked, puzzled, into their faces. “He was with me. How did he die? Was he in an automobile accident?”

“What time did you last see him?” the officer spoke gently.

Tears streaked down her cheeks. Allen. Dear, sweet, funny Allen. Gone? How could it be? He had been an increasing part of her life for... She brought her mind back to the two policemen standing before her. What weren't they telling her?

"Did he have an accident on the way home?" she asked again.

The detective persisted. "What time was it when he left? Did he say where he was going?"

"Around eleven. He always left around eleven. And I naturally assumed he was going home to his apartment in Oakland."

"I see. So you've been in an intimate relationship with Allen Thompson for...?"

Caitlin's chin went up. "We were not in an *intimate* relationship. We were just friends."

"And you have no idea who he might have been going to meet when he left you?"

"Going to meet? No. I assumed he went home to his own place in Oakland. We'd been talking about moving in together but..." Frowning, Caitlin looked up at the two officers. "What aren't you telling me? What happened? How did Allen die?"

Detective O'Malley gave her a piercing look. "We have reason to believe Allen Thompson was murdered."

"Murdered? No, it's not possible." Caitlin's voice shook. "Who would do such a thing? And why? Allen had no enemies." Her shoulders slumped as she gave in to the weeping threatening for the past several minutes.

The detective continued, "We found your name and number on his iPhone. The paramedics said he died with your name on his lips. He was trying to warn you of some danger. I believe his last words were, "Must warn Caitlin...the omelet..." Does that make any sense to you?"

"The omelet?" Caitlin looked up at the two men through her tears. "It makes no sense at all. Allen didn't even like omelets. I never made an omelet for him. Could he have been delirious?"

"Perhaps."

"You still haven't told me how he died."

"We're waiting for the autopsy report, but his death appears to have been from a combination of blood loss and smoke inhalation. He was left, injured and restrained, in an old warehouse that was then set on fire."

"My God! Allen? Who would do such a thing?" She hiccupped through her tears.

Aristotle brought her a glass of water. "Drink."

Caitlin sipped. The hiccups subsided.

Officer Thurgood waited until he had her attention. "We're looking at murder



and arson so you can see why we're interested in discovering his movements last evening."

"After he left me?" She sniffed and Aristotle handed her his red kerchief. "What can I say? As far as I know, he always went home. He is...was...serious about getting eight hours sleep. He always left me by eleven."

"Did Allen Thompson have any connections of which you're aware with criminal elements? Did he use recreational drugs?"

In spite of the circumstances, Caitlin gave a small laugh. "Allen? Don't be absurd! Allen was an accountant. He was the most conventional man I've ever known. He was very nice, but he was..." Caitlin searched for the right word. Dull seemed unkind. "Predictable," she said. "A creature of habit. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink, except for a little wine with dinner. He was a thoroughly nice man."

"Well, your thoroughly nice man got himself mixed up in something that led to his murder. And when we searched his apartment earlier today, we found it had been trashed. Somebody is looking for something Allen Thompson had. Are you sure you don't know what it might be?"

Caitlin shook her head, baffled. "I have no idea."

"With his dying breath he asked the paramedics to warn you. I think you'd better take the warning seriously." The detective shook his head. "If you think of anything you haven't told us, give us a call." He handed her a card.

The two officers were at the door when the younger one turned back and said, "When we came in you said something about a theft? What were you talking about?"

Aristotle answered. "Caitlin was knocked down this morning right in our parking lot. Two guys threatened her with a gun and snatched her sample case. She was on her way to San Francisco to meet with a buyer."

The officers came back inside. "The case had jewelry in it?" Officer Thurgood pointed to the showcase. "Like the stuff in here?"

"Yes." Caitlin straightened her back and looked at the few remaining pieces.

"How valuable are they?"

Caitlin walked over, took a piece out of the case, and held it up to the light. "They range in price from thirty-five dollars for a simple setting like this onyx and silver pin"—she replaced the pin and picked up a filigreed gold necklace set with a dozen small amethysts—"to about four hundred fifty for a piece like this."

The two policemen leaned forward to study the pieces in the display cabinets.

Aristotle added, "Caitlin has a feel for how to combine stones and how to use gold or silver, or sometimes even copper to enhance the stones in her designs."

"Hmm. And you would be...?"

"Aristotle Jones. I'm Caitlin's assistant. Have been for five years."

"Aristotle is a doctoral student in history at UC Berkeley," Caitlin explained.

“He lives over the shop.”

Aristotle frowned. “It’s hard to see how this morning’s theft could have anything to do with Allen Thompson’s death.”

Detective O’Malley shook his head. “At this point, we don’t know what’s related and what isn’t. We’ll send someone from the robbery division around to take down the particulars. Meanwhile, I suggest you take some simple precautions, Ms. Abernathy.”