

Chapter One

Press it. Just fucking press it! Sweat beaded Ryan Horner's forehead as he stared at the computer screen. His next move could...no...*would* impact hundreds of thousands of lives. And his family. And him.

He lifted his right hand off the mouse and took a deep breath. Images of his beautiful wife, Jeanine, their twin girls, Chloe and Taylor, and his gated home in Blankenese, Germany darted through his head. He thought about his mom and dad back in the States, finally living the life of luxury they so deserved—a life he'd been able to provide them. But at what cost?

The sweat trickled down past his temples. Ryan put his finger on the mouse, closed his eyes, and clicked "send". He felt instantly sick to his stomach and dropped his head into his hands. What had he done? What the hell had he just done?! *God, oh God, oh God.*

After another deep breath and a quick glance to ensure he wasn't being watched, Ryan stood, gathered his things, and walked as casually as he could out of the internet café towards his car. He'd driven for over two hours to find this remote spot where he could safely and anonymously send the email. He opened the door to his sleek Audi, stepped in, and started the engine. Once on the Autobahn, he allowed himself to relax slightly and his thoughts drifted back to that fateful day three years ago in San Diego. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it wasn't and the date was etched into his memory—October 22, 2008.

“Dr. Horner?” Ryan had just reached his SUV after a long lunch at his favorite café, Chez Loma. He was tired and not in the mood for conversation. He looked at the man who called his name. He didn’t recognize him. That should have been his first clue.

“Dr. Ryan Horner?” the man asked again. He was tall, lean, in his early thirties with light brown hair, fair skin, and icy blue eyes. He also spoke with some kind of accent. Ryan thought it was German.

“Yes. I’m sorry, do I know you?”

The man came closer, stuck out his hand. He wore what appeared to be an expensive grey suit and silk tie. “My name is Frederick Färber, and I’d like to speak with you about the Petersens.”

“The Petersens?” Ryan was instantly uneasy. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, fiddling with his car keys. “Who are you? I told the police what I knew and honestly, it wasn’t much.”

“I understand. But I need to speak with you about them. Please come with me.”

“No.” Ryan shook his head and opened the car door. “I have nothing further to say about the case and I need to get back to work.”

“You don’t work for Centurion Pharmaceuticals any longer. And as I said, you need to come with me.”

Ryan turned back to face the stranger. “Excuse me?” Suddenly he was grabbed roughly from behind. Someone was inside his car, waiting to grab him while the asshole outside kept him

distracted. He felt a sharp jab to his right shoulder—a needle—and then he was shoved into the back seat. The rest was a blur until he woke up. He wished he'd never woken up.

Now all he could think was he'd made a huge mistake sending the email. They paid him well. Gave him shit. Lots of good shit. This car for one thing.

What if he drove it into the guard rail? Let the car bounce off? Spin him, round and round until he died on impact? What if? But they would know...

They would know he had made the decision to die.

And his family would suffer as a result.

He prayed to God they didn't know he had sent the email to the journalist in Los Angeles. He prayed to a God he wasn't sure he believed in any more that the journalist would read between the lines. Spur an investigation. Research what had happened three years ago and, most importantly, start paying closer attention to her neighbor.

And then what? Then what!?! You fucking idiot! He slammed the palms of his hands against the steering wheel. Tears streamed down his face as he recalled the faces on the video *they* had showed him. The blood. The torture.

The tears blurred his vision and he kept wiping them away, wishing he could clear the memories just as easily. Wishing he could vanish. Or die.

But *they* had him.

Had him trapped in hell, because of what *they* had shown him and what *they* would do to his family if he took *the cowardly* way out—or worse—told anyone about *their* plans.

The agony on the faces of the Petersens in that video—from Bren who was only six-years old and had made silly faces with Ryan’s then two-year old twins, to their father, Andrew, who from the brief time Ryan had spent with him seemed like a good guy. It didn’t matter because good or bad, no one deserved what had been done to Andrew and his family. *They* had bound them. Raped Selena in front of her husband and children. God, Selena. She had been so sweet when they had moved from New Jersey to San Diego. She had brought his wife Jeanine into her fold of friends. They’d gone to yoga together and went for morning coffees. Jeanine had known Selena better than Ryan knew Andrew. The guys were simply colleagues, but the women bonded at a work picnic. Jeanine had been devastated when they were murdered.

Selena’s silent tears were what always popped into Ryan’s mind. She’d been brave and didn’t want the children to hear her pain, although it wasn’t easy to hide. Ryan had seen the horror in their faces. And their father had been purple with pain and rage, tears sliding down his face. All because he had said, “No.” All because he had not believed in what *they* represented and they’re threats. He had thought it was a joke.

After murdering Selena, the men slit the throats of all four children in front of their father. Ryan could see in Andrew’s eyes how badly he’d wanted to die then—any way they could put him out of his misery, he would have gladly accepted. But they tortured him first. And now, Ryan understood why. It had all been for *his benefit*. The group who referred to themselves as The Brotherhood needed to be certain there was no way in hell Ryan would refuse them. They had forced him to watch the video. Gun to his head. Wrists and feet bound. A gag in his mouth. No, he could not refuse their offer. But then it wasn’t really an offer, was it? Because offers can always be turned down.

The men put a bullet in every non-fatal place possible in Andrew's body, until finally they shot him through his stomach and allowed him to bleed to death. All because Andrew was a chemist, like himself—and because Andrew Petersen had said, “No.”

Ryan reprimanded himself again for sending the e-mail. But if there was still a God—the One he had believed in growing up, the One his parents had told him about and he learned about in church—if that God existed, sending the email, no matter the consequences to him and to his family, had been the right thing to do. Because as horrific as The Brotherhood had been to the Petersens, their plans for humanity were even worse.