

A SECRET MUSE

The Creatives Series

Book One

Chapter 1 Only

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CHAPTER 1

Professor Coco Rhodes contemplated the image before her: a female cloaked in a shadowed background, her eyes closed—and a man standing in the foreground poised in a defensive stance. Both were drenched in tones of deep crimson. Blood tones. Had one of her students painted this picture, Coco would have perceived that the artist was hiding something, holding back from her full potential, or afraid. But Coco had created this image and it signified her personal creative interrupta. She hadn't painted anything in three months, since the headaches and visions of blood had begun. That time also marked the initiation of the nightmares in which she searched continually for something she had lost.

Splatters of red paint, once bright in hue, had dried on the cement floor of her studio classroom and had become dulled beneath the heavy foot traffic. Coco became transfixed by the splatter marks, which seemed to pulse outward and then suddenly contract. She froze as the image of a woman's bloodied face flashed in her mind.

A sharp pain pierced her neck, followed by a tingling sensation that crept over her skin. These symptoms acted as precursors to the migraines that had recently plagued her.

"Not again!" Coco spoke through clenched teeth. She picked up her purse and tucked the painting under her arm. Then she walked briskly past the seven cubicles, which had once housed still lifes, landscapes, and abstract pieces painted by her graduate students, and went to stand before the window overlooking the sculpture garden. It never ceased to amaze her that this sanctuary stood right outside the building where she worked. Here in the sprawling city of Los Angeles, in a university that had a population of over thirty thousand students, she could walk fifty feet outside her office and stand face to face with sculptures by artistic virtuosos such as Richard Serra, August Rodin, and Henry Moore.

When Coco had entered the university as an undergraduate student fourteen years before, the art department had fueled her love of drawing and painting. She had earned her MFA before taking time off to paint and teach private lessons in the studio at her loft in Westwood. When her alma mater offered her a teaching position, she took it. But she had not expected a thick wall of creative resistance to assault her each time she held a paintbrush in her hand. She took another look at the painting of the couple, sighed, and headed for home.

Ten minutes later, she reached the loft complex that she owned with her brother, Christopher, in Westwood Village. She entered, greeted by her thirteen-

pound cat, Thalia, weaving between her legs. Coco placed the painting on an easel in the studio area of her living room, squeezed the back of her neck, and dug through her purse for a bottle of Ibuprofen.

“Another school year completed... summer classes over... and I’m losing my mind,” she said, and then downed two pills with a glass of water. She collapsed onto the sofa, closed her eyes, and hoped for sleep. This increased sense of anxiety and lack of sleep seemed to have dominated her life over the past few weeks. A chime alerted her to the arrival of a text message. It was from Christopher.

Congrats on completing another year, little sister! See you in D.C. tomorrow night.

She groaned and fell asleep.

An hour later, Coco heard a familiar tuneful knock on her front door. She got up and opened it to Layla, her best friend and Christopher’s girlfriend.

“Are you okay?” Layla said, with concern in her heavily Italian-accented voice. “You don’t look very well.”

Coco made herself comfortable again on the sofa. “More dreams,” she said, and gestured at the painting. “He’s the cause of them—whoever the hell he is.”

Layla looked at the painting.

“Any ideas about his identity, doctor?” Coco asked.

“Do you?” Layla said as she sank into a nearby chair.

“He feels familiar. I dream of him, paint him—I feel like I know him—but I’m pretty sure I’d remember meeting a face like that.”

“So, he’s not someone you feel you’ve met before?” Layla asked. “Maybe someone from your undergrad years?”

“Having you pop in like this reminds me of being back in the dorms,” Coco said. “But no—I haven’t got a clue as to who he is.” She stood up. “Are you down for a run?”

“It’ll be dark soon,” Layla said. “Let’s go out to dinner instead and run in the morning before we leave for the airport.” She took a closer look at Coco’s face. “Have you eaten at all today?”

“I had a protein shake for breakfast. Give me a minute while I change.” Coco grabbed a blanket from the sofa and threw it over the painting. “I like the idea of walking somewhere local. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure, ready when you are.”

Layla studied Coco, whose shoulders dipped as she walked up the stairs to her bedroom. What had happened to the vibrancy in her personality? And her eyes, too. Normally a stunning lavender flecked with amethyst, now they appeared dim and tired. When she heard Coco’s bedroom door close, Layla lifted

the blanket and took a photo of the painting with her cell and sent it to Christopher:

Have you seen this? Coco's latest painting... from three months ago.

She kept it at work. Says she has no idea who he is.

She doesn't look well. Walking to dinner.

Seconds later Christopher sent a reply:

First time I've seen it. I've forwarded it to Gabriel.

Security switched up a notch—others on their way. Cxo



Coco watched the numbers on her digital clock flip over to 4:35 a.m. The wine she drank at dinner had done nothing to help her sleep and the tingling sensation that crept over her skin earlier had amplified. Her nerves felt raw. She felt confined. She couldn't handle another migraine. She threw back the covers and got dressed into her running clothes. When she arrived at the front door, Coco felt an urge to text Layla, since using the buddy system was an old habit of hers. She looked in her purse for her phone and on the counter while the tension in her neck grew stronger, causing her muscles to twitch and a cold sweat to run over her. But her phone was nowhere to be seen. Thalia's meowing became incessant.

"Thalia—stop it!" Coco squeezed her eyes shut and took in a deep breath. "Shit, I'm sorry, kitty." She bent down and stroked the cat. Then she gently pushed her out of the way and slipped into the darkness.



Damien had watched Coco walk through the sculpture garden and head back to her home before she left for dinner with the sexy Italian woman. Once Layla and Coco returned home, he had parked across the street from Coco's loft in his latest acquisition, a black BMW 320i Sedan. The car didn't rate as his first choice, but the model seemed popular in the area and when the time came it would suffice. His parking spot gave him a clear view of the side gate and garage to the red-bricked building adorned with green ivy. The Rhodes family lofts stood behind an iron fence with a heavy wooden gate.

During his high school years, Damien had ranked as one of the fastest runners on the school's track team, and after monitoring Coco's daily running routines, he mentally gauged her endurance to be better than most Olympic marathon runners. He had noticed the stares of longing from her students and heard the sexual innuendos from her co-workers. He saw what they saw—the

woman was hot. He had a few more hours of darkness before Coco appeared for her morning run. She'd be dressed in her tight running shorts and sports bra—her body firm and muscular. This thought brought tension in his already tight suit pants. He pushed back his seat, got comfortable, and undid his zipper, grateful for the heavily tinted windows.

Distracted by a clicking sound, he looked up to see Coco open the gate, glance up at the security cameras that monitored the perimeter of the building, and take off down the street. She ran past the BMW without a glance.

He waited until Coco reached the end of Le Conte Avenue before starting the car and following her. He noticed the time on his Omega: 4:40 a.m.

“What the hell's she doing running this early?”

He tracked her to the beach at Santa Monica. If she turned around then he would be out of luck—the beach area was not conducive to what he had planned for her. But when he saw her cut down to the bike path, he knew what he had to do. Coco had chosen to run the sixteen-mile loop. Solo.

“Today's your unlucky day, luv.”

For months he had timed this part of Coco's run. She never failed to complete the section from the bike path at Santa Monica to the Temescal Trailhead in twenty-four minutes, and the trail she ran in the park took another fourteen. He set the timer on his watch and then drove up toward Temescal Canyon, where he would wait for her to return to Sunset Boulevard.

Damien was grateful for the red streetlight ahead. It gave him time to admire his thin leather driving gloves. The sheen of the gloves caused his mind to drift to past assignments for his high paying client. The abortion clinic incident in Kansas City came to mind, and the art gallery in Manhattan. Do it quickly, do it right, and get the hell out of the country. That was his motto. His incentive to kill this beauty was five million U.S. dollars. In twenty-four hours he would be back in Monaco, on the Cote d'Azure, with his unsuspecting wife and kids.



Layla awoke to a sporadic flashing light and low buzzing sound. She immediately checked her iPad, which was connected to the alarm system for the entire building. Instinct took over and she grabbed her cell and called Coco's number.

“Pick up, Coco,” Layla whispered while turning on the speakerphone. She navigated through the hi-tech security system to the pertinent recorded film on the iPad, stopping when she saw Coco exit the side gate and look at the camera. Layla's skin tightened and the tiny blonde hairs lifted along the side of her arms. Her fourteen years of training and experience as a psychologist had taught her to

read people. As she stared at Coco's face, she saw confusion and sadness. Words flashed on the top of the screen:

Power surge at 4:40 a.m.—Temporary system failure.

Her hand trembled as she dialed Christopher's number.

He picked up immediately. "Are you okay?"

"The alarm on the security system woke me up," Layla said, shoving her feet into the closest pair of shoes and grabbing her purse and car keys. "Coco left through the side gate at 4:40 a.m."

"Twenty-five minutes ago? She didn't call you?"

"No," Layla said as she bounded down the stairwell.

"Did you forget to set up the security last night?"

"No!"

"Then what the fuck happened?"

"You're breaking up. I'll call you when I find her."

She ended the call.

Layla jumped into her Tesla and brought the engine to life. She retraced the route that she knew Coco would take, hoping to find her on her way home along Wilshire Boulevard. When she saw no sign of her, Layla put her foot down and tested the car's speed.

"*Merda!*" she cursed. She remembered how distant her friend had seemed at dinner and how she'd been complaining of a head-ache. "What the hell are you thinking, going running on your own in the dark?"

The second the Temescal Park entrance came into view, Layla pulled up onto the sidewalk and bolted out of the car without bothering to lock it. She had run this loop with Coco many times, so she headed for the section of road that intersected with the trail-head. She heard movement fifty feet ahead. Moments later Coco emerged from the trail.

A pair of bright headlights flashed on out of nowhere. An engine roared, and a sedan accelerated toward Coco. "Coco!" Layla screamed. But before Layla could reach her friend a large feline shape leapt from the trail and into the car's path. The animal took the full force of the bumper, causing the car to swerve to the left before it sped off. Rather than swiping her directly, the car clipped Coco's thigh hard and sent her cartwheeling through the air. She landed in a heap on the ground next to the mangled body of the large cat.

Layla had a 911 operator on the line by the time she reached Coco's side. She watched for the rise and fall of Coco's chest, hoping for a sign that she was breathing. "My friend's been hit by a car—this is an emergency situation! We're on Sunset Boulevard, near the Temescal Canyon Trailhead parking lot—please,

hurry!” She switched the cell phone to speaker and placed it on the ground so that she could evaluate Coco.

“Is your friend breathing?” the 911 operator asked.

“Yes, she is—but it’s shallow,” Layla answered.

“Don’t move her. The paramedics will be there momentarily.”

Layla noticed a hint of jagged bone protruding through Coco’s running pants and the stream of blood that flowed from the gash on her head.

“Coco, can you hear me?” Layla asked, her voice calm. “An ambulance is on its way.”

In the distance, the sounds of sirens broke the silence. Layla ended the call. She ripped off her sweater and pressed it to Coco’s forehead. “Listen to me, Coco, you must be strong. You need to think of something peaceful. Breathe, *la mia amica*.” Coco’s head rolled back and she gasped for air, her eyes still closed.

Despite the injured body of her friend before her, Layla remembered the animal that had saved her. She looked at the place where the car had crushed the mountain lion’s body. All that remained was a pool of dark blood and a few tufts of fur.