

*The constriction around her neck tightened, and she tried to get her fingers under it to snatch a breath. She was losing consciousness. A large wave came over the bow of the boat, and the sea spray struck her in the face, reviving her struggle. She had to fight or he would kill her. She could smell his cologne, something spicy and strong. His ring flashed in the moonlight, and she dug the fingers of her right hand into his red sweater. The pressure on her neck was unrelenting. She was going to die.*

Elin Summerall bolted upright in the bed. Her heart pounded, and she touched her throat and found it smooth and unharmed. It was just that dream again. She was safe, right here in her own house on the outskirts of Virginia Beach, Virginia. Her slick skin glistened in the moonlight streaming through the window.

The incision over her breastbone pulsed with pain, and she grabbed some pills from the bedside and swallowed them. *In and out.* Concentrating on breathing helped ease both her pain and her panic. She pulled in a breath, sweetly laden with the scent of roses blooming outside her window, then laid back against the pillow.

Her eyes drifted shut, then opened when she heard the tinkle of broken glass. Was it still the dream? Then the cool rush of air from the open window struck her face, and she heard a foot crunch on broken glass.

She leaped from the bed and threw open her door. Her heart pounded in her throat. Was an intruder in the house? In her bare feet, she sidled down the hall toward the sound she'd heard. She paused to peek in on her four-year-old daughter. One arm grasping a stuffed bear, Josie lay in a tangle of princess blankets.

Elin relaxed a bit. Maybe she hadn't heard glass break. It might still have been part of the nightmare. She peered around the hall corner toward the kitchen. A faint light

glimmered as if the refrigerator stood open. A cool breeze wafted from the kitchen, and she detected the scent of dew. She was sure she'd shut and locked the window. The hair stood on the back of her neck, and she backed away.

Then a familiar voice called out. "Elin? I need you."

Relief left her limp. Elin rushed down the hall to the kitchen where her mother stood in front of the back door with broken glass all around her feet. The refrigerator stood open as well. Her mom's blue eyes were cloudy with confusion, and she wrung her hands as she looked at the drops of blood on the floor.

Elin grabbed a paper towel. "Don't move, Mom. You've cut yourself." She knelt and scooped the bits of glass away from her mother's bleeding feet. Her mother obediently sat in the chair Elin had pulled toward her, and she inspected the small cuts. Nothing major, thank goodness. She put peroxide on her mother's cuts and ushered her back to bed, all the while praying when morning came, her mother's bout with dementia would have passed. For now.

It was only when she went back to the hall that she smelled a man's cologne. She rushed to the kitchen and glanced around. The glass in the back door was shattered.

*Inwardly.*

*He'd been in the house.*