CHAPTER ONE

Tatiana

Unease creeps up on me as I peer through the window at the red truck parked on the opposite side of the street. The shiny bodywork and flashy wheel caps stand out in a neighborhood where people don't polish their cars. It's almost as if the owner wants to attract attention, which would be a good sign for me. If someone were on my tail, that person would've tried to blend in with the less fancy and not-so-expensive vehicles lining the curbs and driveways.

Still, I can't help but steal a worried glance at Noah, who's making fighter jet noises while flying a paper plane through the lounge.

Abandoning my task of packing chipped porcelain figurines into a box, I call to the back of the house.

"Jazz?"

I'm grateful for the sheer curtains that allow me to see

outside but prevent others from seeing in. I hate that I'm like this, spooked by a vehicle simply because it seems out of place and the driver has shown up around the same time for the past two days. For all I know, the neighbor is having an affair, and the truck belongs to her lover. But being suspicious has become a part of my nature.

My best friend walks through the doorway that connects to the corridor, bogged down by the weight of the box in her arms. "Please tell me it's knock off time." She drops the box on top of the other ten or so stacked in the middle of the floor and dusts her hands on her jeans. "I've had my quota of sorting through messy papers for one day." She twists a mass of cherry-brown curls into a bun on her head and secures it with a scrunchy that she pulls off her wrist. "Has your client never heard of filing or shredding? Some invoices date back twenty years. Don't get me started on all those moth-eaten magazines from before I was born. Who keeps magazines for fifty years? At least the study is done. I'll need a whole lot of caffeine before we tackle the basement, and I'm talking the good Colombian stuff and not that cheap replacement you call coffee."

Noah runs a circle around my legs. "Whoooossshhhh!"

He doesn't seem to pay us attention, but I've learned that kids' brains are like little computers that can store everything that comes out of your mouth, even when they're watching Looney Tunes with a bad, tinny sound blasting from an old, fat-belly television, so I'm careful to lower my voice. "Have you seen the red truck parked out front?"

"Yeah." She blows a stray curl from her forehead. "Don't sweat it. I've already checked it out. Those snazzy wheels belong to a guy doing a handyman job for the neighbors."

Alarm quickens my breathing. "Did you speak to the neighbor?"

She grimaces. "Not exactly."

Hold on. I hope she didn't do what I think she did.

My heart speeds up. "You spoke to *him*?"

"I just said hi when I took out the trash."

I press a palm on my forehead. No. No way. "You asked what he was doing here?"

She props her hands on her hips. "I may have squeezed that question in between, 'Hello. Nice ride,' and—"

"Jazz!" I exclaim under my breath. "You're not supposed to talk to anyone. Please tell me you didn't give him your name."

Noah clambers onto a box, flying his plane higher. I step closer, ready to catch him if he loses his balance.

"What do you take me for?" She wipes her face with the back of her hand, smearing dirt over her cheek. "I didn't give him my real name." She snickers. "How does Delilah sound? I've always thought it has a sexy ring to it."

"Can you please be serious for a minute? You know what's on the line."

Whatever she sees on my face sobers her. "Chill, will you? It's been over five years. If he was going to find you, it would've happened a long time ago."

Maybe she's right. I want to believe that—desperately—but I can never be sure.

"Don't worry." She pulls her phone from her back pocket, wakes up the screen, and wiggles a website with a flashy header for home repairs in my face. "The driver of that truck is legit. The handyman service is his own business. He charges a steep call-out fee, but he's got great reviews."

Fine, so maybe that explains why his truck has been

parked across the street for the past two afternoons. My obsessively anxious self still doesn't like it.

Jazz waggles her eyebrows as she puts her phone away. "The guy is a dish, and he's not wearing a ring." She takes a sharpie from the front pocket of her lumberjack shirt and scribbles *bank statements* on the box she's added to the pile. "Maybe you should ask him out on a date." Grinning, she waves her sharpie like a magic wand at me before pulling the next box closer. "You, my friend, need to have some fun, and guys looking like that don't come around often."

The idea is so laughable I don't bother to reply. The list of reasons why dating is a *very* bad idea is a mile long. If every factor why I shouldn't see someone were a clause on a contract, the fine-print would contain more asterisks than snowflakes in a blizzard.

For starters, I don't have time for dating. Even if I had, I have a big fat target painted on my back and a juicy price on my head. The last time I heard, it was a nice round million. Men tell me I'm pretty, but I'm not *that* pretty, at least not the kind they'd choose over a million dollars in unmarked bills.

Then there are the logistics. You can't date someone with the hope of building a relationship if you don't hang around in one place for more than a few months. Noah and I have been on the run constantly. I've only recently made a new life for us here, testing the waters in the quieter neighborhoods of Denver. I'm finally daring to dream that it's possible to disappear in a big city far away from New York and just breathe for a while. God knows, Noah needs the stability. He'll be turning five in December. Next year, he has to go to school. He's just a little boy who needs friends, a dog, and new shoes.

I look at my sweet baby who's invented a game to play indoors because he's not allowed to kick his ball outside.

Noah doesn't complain. He's such a good kid. He's still young enough to accept my rules without questioning them.

That's not going to last forever. Like all growing children, he'll want freedom and answers, and when I can't give him either, he'll challenge me. My brother, Leander, made our lives hell during his teenager years. For some reason, he blamed all his issues on my mom. She never had it easy with him. Yet she always said he'd been the sweetest baby.

Watching Noah like this, my insides turn all mushy. And then guilt sets in to taint that bottomless love and infinite affection with the acrid taste of failure. Because it's my fault that he has to live like this, always running and hiding. Because of my mistake, I can't give him the life he deserves. What kind of mother does that make me?

Jazz finishes labeling the last box. "At least think about it. I'll watch Noah. It's no biggie. It's about time you break your five year-long dry spell."

Frowning, I mouth, "Not in front of Noah."

She cocks an eyebrow. "But wouldn't that be nice?"

The kind of *nice* she means has no place in my life. Did I mention guys my age don't want to date girls with my baggage? At twenty-four, they're more likely to sign up for drinks at the club and a good time getting naked than playing hide and seek with a four year-old or sailing paper boats in the tub. I doubt they'd get excited about wieners with spaghetti hair for dinner.

The truth is I don't mind. I love spending every minute I can with Noah. I wouldn't be able to relax if I'm too far away from him. I never know when my past is going to catch up with me. The last thing I want is for that to happen when I'm making out with some guy I'm not really interested in while my baby's safety is on the line.

No, thanks.

I say that out loud, which invites a drawn-out, painful sigh from Jazz. She's moved on to folding up tablecloths that don't fit on any table in the house or garden.

Ignoring the looks she keeps on sending me, I wrap the last of the porcelain animal collection in paper before sealing the box. The owner gave me permission to get rid of anything that's broken, cracked, or chipped, which will definitely help to declutter her home.

The wall into which her flock of ducks has been nailed seems a lot less crammed now that the birds have been relieved of their fifty year-long flight. Their places left marks on the faded wallpaper. The nails were hammered in carelessly, mimicking the haphazard flight formation of a never-ending trek to a warmer climate. I'm sad for those ducks that never went anywhere. Those nails will take the plaster with them when the owner pulls them out. She'll have to strip the wallpaper and fill the holes with spackle. A fresh coat of paint will do wonders.

Noah scrambles over the obstacles he's built with the sofa cushions and lands his plane on the armrest of a chair. He's a real ball of energy. He should be outside, climbing trees and learning to ride a bike. He should also have clothes that didn't come from the thrift store and sneakers that don't have holes.

That's what kills me time and again, those little holes his big toes have worn through his sneakers because he only has one pair he wears every day. Children need good shoes for proper back support. My mom drilled that into me. And here I am, my heart cracking open and bleeding empty in my chest, and there's not a damn thing I can do to make it better.

I tell myself that I give Noah plenty of the important stuff that money can't buy—hugs and love and cuddles at

night. Yet deep down, I know the truth. When I found out I was pregnant, I swore I'd give my child the best. Of course, money wasn't an issue then. Now, I can't even guarantee we'll have food on the table.

Because I screwed up.

In the worst possible way.

But I try not to think about that. The guilt is too damning. If I give in to those feelings, I'll drown in them.

Yet I can't ignore how my choices impacted Noah or what my actions meant for him. I'm made to face my mistakes over and over again, forced to admit all my broken promises when I look at my sweet little boy who's lost in his own imagination and a paper plane because I can't afford to buy him toys.

"Done." Jazz turns to me, framed by small heaps of folded linen on the table behind her. "How about you?"

Straightening, I stretch my sore back. "Almost."

I'm used to the work. The heavy lifting has strengthened my muscles over the years, and my body has grown fit from the exertion. However, I've been pushing myself extra hard to finish this job because I need the money. Every bone in my body is aching.

We finish sorting the boxes by clothes to be dropped off at charities, ornaments destined for pawn shops, and paperwork to be shredded. I call myself a home organizer, but in reality, I'm a glorified maid who declutters and spring cleans other people's messes. The job doesn't pay well, but my clients pay cash, which allows me to stay off the grid.

"So." Jazz rights the last box with a foot. "Are you going to ask him, or am I?"

"Ask who what?"

"The hot handyman." She pulls her shoulders up to her ears. "On a date."

"No and no."

She watches me without replying. I don't bother to decipher her expression. It probably says I'm paranoid and pathetic. In both instances, that would be true. And if she thinks she can fix that, she'd be wrong.

I glance at the wall clock where the minute hand ticks onto four-thirty. "Let's call it a day."

I want to get out of here before the owner gets home. My working hours are designed to be convenient for my clients. I clean when they're out, and when they return from work, I'm gone. I have my own reasons for maintaining minimal contact. The less I'm seen, the better for everyone.

Keeping as invisible as possible doesn't come without complications when you're trying to make a living and take care of a kid. Someone who doesn't want to be found can't advertise. All my referrals are by word of mouth. A burner phone serves as a method of communication, but I only use it for emergencies such as not being able to come in when Noah is sick.

"At last," Jazz groans, massaging her lower back.

I shoot her a guilty smile. "You didn't have to come."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm not even going to validate that with an answer."

I take my tote bag from where I've hooked it over the back of a chair. "Have I told you how much I appreciate you?"

"Plenty." She grabs Noah's backpack from the sofa and winks. "You can repay me by having my cooking turn."

I was going to handle that chore anyway. Taking turns to make dinner was her idea. She only wanted to lighten my burden, but she hates cooking more than spiders and bugs, which is an awful lot.

I go to the window and pull the curtain open on a

crack, just in time to see the handyman walk down the sidewalk with a toolbox in his hand. His tall and bulky frame fills out his overalls. A baseball cap is pulled low over his face. The dark hair that shows beneath is cropped short. He drops the toolbox in the back of the truck and folds his body double to get behind the wheel. Before starting the engine, he adjusts a pair of aviator sunglasses and slides his gaze sideways.

For a terrible moment, I swear he's staring right at me, that our gazes connect through a sliver of cheap sheer fabric. I drop the curtain like a hot potato, breaking out in a sweat, and give a start when a hand falls on my shoulder.

Spinning around, I'm met by Jazz who's staring me in the face.

"Hey." She studies me with a frown. "He's just a handyman, Tiana."

"Maybe." I bite my lip and look back at the window. "Maybe you're right, and I'm making a big deal out of nothing."

Which kind of seems that way when the driver steers the truck into the street, and a few seconds later, the taillights disappear around the corner.

Either way, I'd feel better if we get out of here. I really need the money this job is going to bring, but if the truck is back tomorrow, we bail, money or not. I'll just have to find another job elsewhere.

Unable to let my concern go, I hold out my hand to Noah. "Come on, baby. Let's get you home."

He bounces over with his plane but doesn't take my hand. He's developed a sudden allergy to holding hands. "Can I have nuggets for dinner?" He jumps up and down. "Please?"

I ruffle his hair. "If you eat all your carrot sticks."

"Yuck." He pulls a face. "I don't like carrots."

Pulling him against me, I sneak in a hug. "But they are good for you because…?"

He sighs in an animated way. "They help our bodies fight germs so that we don't get sick."

Exchanging the plane noises for the *vrooommm* of a car, he escapes my embrace and skips from the room with his arms stretched out in front of him and his hands gripping an imaginary steering wheel.

I stifle a yawn and go after him down the hallway.

Jazz falls in step next to me and nudges my shoulder. "Why don't you relax in a warm bath when we get home? I'll take Noah to the park before dinner. He can do with getting rid of all that pent-up energy. Otherwise, he'll be too wound up to go to sleep."

I'm tired to the bone, but I don't want to make my problems Jazz's. She's done enough for me as it is. "I'll be fine."

Her soft blue eyes cloud over. "I don't want you to end up in the hospital again." She stops at the doorway of the kitchen and holds me back with a hand on my arm. "You have to take care of yourself."

"That's over now." I keep an eye on Noah, who's unlocking the back door. It's his new favorite acquired skill. I make a mental note to remove the key tomorrow. "It was nothing."

"Fainting from low blood pressure isn't nothing. Admit it, Tiana. You wouldn't have risked calling me to take care of Noah if it weren't serious."

She's right. I had a fright. I didn't want to drag her into my mess, but I had no one else to turn to and nobody I could trust to look after Noah.

Having gotten the door open, Noah jumps down the two porch steps.

"I've just been standing for too long," I say, telling her

what the doctor told me because he couldn't be sure what had caused my pressure to drop so low.

All the tests he ran during the two days he kept me in the hospital came back normal. I'm still thanking my lucky stars for that.

"Exactly." Jazz lets me go. "You've been on your feet all day, slinging a lot more boxes than me. Don't tell me your muscles aren't aching and your feet don't hurt."

Throwing an arm around her shoulder, I rest my head against hers. "You're the best."

"I know." She wraps an arm around my waist. "That's why I'm your bestie."

Although that's not how she means it, those words carry so much weight. Once upon a time, in our former life, she took enormous risks when I needed her, and here she is, taking them again.

Her unconditional friendship still makes me feel so damn guilty, but I suppress the dark thoughts that come with that notion. I may regret what happened for the rest of my life, but I can never change the damage I've done.

Perhaps this is a good moment to broach the subject that's been on my mind for the last few days. "We need to talk about when you're going back." And more importantly, how to do it without anyone catching on to where she's been.

She pulls away and comes to stand in front of me. "I told you. I'm staying for as long as you need me, and you sure as hell do." I open my mouth to argue, but she silences me with a finger she holds up in front of my face. "I don't want to hear another word about it. No one knows where I am, and no one will be looking. I told everyone I was going MIA to have plastic surgery."

My jaw drops. "Plastic surgery? You're the last person on Earth who needs to change your face or body. Have you

looked in the mirror?" I glance through the open door to where Noah is running around the backyard, making sure I keep him in my sight. "You look like the love child of a model and a movie star. No one will believe that excuse."

She dismisses my argument with a wave of her hand. "Darling, everyone in my circles has plastic surgery."

"If they have the money." And Jazz doesn't. She spent the little savings from her gigs on a plane ticket to come and rescue me.

"Chill, Tiana. I could've met a sugar daddy or won big at the casino. Nobody really cares."

I hope she's right.

She hooks her arm through mine and marches me to the door. "I'm not going anywhere, not until I'm a hundred percent certain you'll be all right, so you may as well get used to having me around for a while."

Apprehension wins hands down over gratitude when it comes to my only friend's safety. "You should head back. Once I get paid, I can buy a bus ticket."

"Shush." She hangs on my arm, giggling like a crazy woman when I knock into her. "Not another word. Just enjoy my wonderful company."

It's impossible not to enjoy Jazz's presence. She's the sister I never had. We haven't seen each other in five years, yet we picked up right where we left off. For once, it's nice not to be so lonely. I've been hungry for adult company, but I'll never forgive myself if my selfishness gets her hurt.

"I'll be okay," she says, her tone insistent as we walk arm in arm to the recycling bins at the back of the house.

Keeping my worry to myself, I take my car key from my tote bag. The key is always zipped in a side pocket where I can easily access it. There's no time to dig around a bag for a key when you have to run, and you never know when running will be necessary.

I unlock the car and put my bag on the backseat where I can quickly grab it if needed. It's happened before that Noah and I had to abandon my car in a traffic jam and run from the man who'd been chasing us. I didn't dare return to the motel room I'd been renting, which left us with nothing but the contents of my bag and the clothes on our backs. I always keep our IDs, my burner phone, a charger, whatever emergency money I can spare, and a change of underwear in my bag. For the same reason, I pack a water bottle that I keep full in Noah's backpack, and I never go anywhere without extra snacks.

Jazz drops Noah's backpack next to my bag. "What's for dinner?" She laughs. "Except for chicken nuggets."

My reply is distracted. "I'm still thinking about it."

Which is a lie. My mind is on something entirely different, such as how to evade a triple homicide if the handyman turns out to be a sniper.

While we load the bins with the recyclables into the trunk of my car, I go over my escape plan in my head. I've made the plan in case we have to get away from this house fast. I've mapped out the entire city long before moving to Denver.

There's a shopping mall with underground parking not far from here. I can leave the car there and get lost in the mall. The food court area is always busy. I've studied the exits. One at the back leads to a double-lane street. From there, it's a short walk to a bus station. A twenty minute-ride will take us to the train station. It doesn't matter that I can't afford the tickets. I know how to dodge conductors. We can be in a different state before anyone is any the wiser.

Jazz is probably right. The owner of the red truck is more likely a handyman than an assassin. Maybe I'll knock

on the neighbor's door, pretending I have a loose floorboard, and ask for a referral just to check out his story.

Yeah, no.

I want to keep a low profile and not draw attention to myself. I definitely don't want to go around flaunting my face to my client's neighbors.

When all the bins are loaded, I shut the hatchback of the old station wagon I bought for a handful of cash. The hood is rusted, and the ignition is cranky, but luckily for me, Jazz knows her way around old car engines. She's done a great job with changing the spark plugs, oil, and brake pads. The spare parts as well as my hospital stay and health tests ate up most of my savings from my previous job, but reliable wheels are non-negotiable.

"Come on, Noah." I wave him over from where he's jumping hurdles over the stepping stones of the path. "Let's drop the trash off at the dump."

His amber eyes light up. The recycle dump has industrial containers for different recyclable products. We turned matching the items to the right containers into a game. Noah gets to throw the trash that doesn't have sharp edges through the trapdoors, an activity he enjoys tremendously. His favorite is chucking the jars through the trap hole and waiting for the shattering noise as the glass hits the pile.

He comes running and clambers into his car seat in the back, something he insists on doing himself. He says he's too big now for me to help him.

I buckle him in and test the safety belt to ensure the clip has locked properly. Jazz slides into the passenger side. I take the wheel.

I stay alert when I turn into the street, checking my rearview mirror every few seconds, but the red truck is nowhere to be seen. No one is following us. Letting out a

long breath, I ease down in the seat and finally allow myself to relax.

After stopping at the dump, we're home just after six, which gives Jazz an hour with Noah in the park before it's time for his bath and dinner. They leave with his plastic soccer ball. Noah loves to play with that ball. The park is just down the block, which is one of the points that tipped my decision in favor of renting here.

The furnished accessory dwelling unit we call home shares a wall with the landlord's house. The bathroom smells moldy, and the window is stuck. On the plus side, it has a shower inside the yellowed tub and an ancient top loader in one corner. Not having to wash our clothes by hand is a big timesaver.

Noah and I bunk down in the bedroom while Jazz makes herself as comfortable as she can on the lumpy sofa in the lounge. The paint is peeling, the carpet tiles are lifting, and the roof has a leak, but there's a small yard with a slide at the back. I keep the place clean and tidy and do my best to make it cozy.

We're living from hand to mouth, so this is the best I can do. I'm hoping to build up the home organizing business and improve our living conditions, but I can only do that if I stay put in one place where I can grow my client base, at least for a while.

I'd love to have that soak in the tub Jazz suggested, but it's not often that I have an hour of free time, so I decide to use it wisely by prepping Noah's lunch box for tomorrow and getting a head start on the laundry. That way, I can get into bed earlier. At this point, sleep is higher on my priority list than a luxurious bath.

After a quick shower, I dress in clean leggings and a T-shirt. I'm padding on socked feet to the kitchen, wringing

the water out of my wet hair with a towel when there's a knock on the front door.

I stop dead, my heart jumping into my throat. Jazz has the spare key. She wouldn't have knocked. If she's lost her key, she would've called through the door to let me know it was her.

Someone knocks again, harder this time.

I take a second to weigh my options, my gaze darting between the lounge where my tote bag with the burner phone lies on the coffee table and the kitchen where I keep a gun locked in a drawer.

Making a split-second decision, I drop the towel and run for the kitchen. Both the back and front doors are locked. The windows are closed. I always double-check before hitting the shower. But windows and doors are easy to break.

I skirt around the kitchen table, knocking a chair over in my haste. Pushing myself up onto the cabinet, I climb onto the counter. I have to stand on tiptoes to reach the top of the cupboard. I feel around the crown molding for the key I taped there. It takes precious seconds, seconds in which my hand shakes so much I barely get a grip on the cupboard, but I couldn't risk Noah finding the key.

At last, my fingers brush over cold, hard metal. I rip off the tape and grab the key. The knocking on the door has stopped. Whoever is on the other side is rattling the handle now.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I jump down and fumble with the old-fashioned lock on the drawer. The mechanism is rusted and stiff. I battle to turn the key.

A bang shakes the door.

Shit.

When I finally get the drawer open, I nearly pull it off its runners. I grab the gun just as the sound of splintering

wood announces that the intruder is entering the house. Doing my best to ignore the heavy footsteps that get closer and closer, I click the magazine in place and take off the safety exactly as I've practiced. Then I spin around, holding the gun in both hands and pointing the barrel in front of me.

The sight of the man who stalks into my kitchen immobilizes me in shock. It shouldn't, seeing that I've been preparing myself and envisioning this encounter for five years. Yet the picture of him in his dark suit sucks the oxygen from my lungs. His large form blocks out the fading daylight that spills down the hallway. His mere presence takes up all the space in the room.

My brain screams at me, accusing me of tricking myself. Dante Morici isn't the young man of twenty-four I remember. For some reason, the last image I saw of him got stuck in my mind. In my bitter and painful recollections, he never aged. For the life of me, I don't know why not. I don't know why I never imagined him older. It's a simple glitch, a malfunction of the psyche. Maybe the memories he left me with were that strong, strong enough to grind to a halt on those last eternal minutes without moving along with time.

Whatever the reason, the man filling my vision and drowning out my surroundings isn't the man my memory preserved from time. The grooves cutting from his nose to the corners of his mouth run deeper. The lines of his face are more defined, giving him a distinguished edge. His dirty-blond hair is darker. All the golden highlights from carefree hours spent in the sun are gone. His eyes burn with more intensity, the copper flames in them brighter but devoid of any heat. He's packed on some muscle, his broad shoulders stretching the expensive jacket and his chest filling out a crisp white shirt. The ink peeking from the collar is

new, as are the tattoos on his hands. Are the ones hidden beneath his clothes the same? I traced them so many times with my fingers that I can draw them with my eyes closed.

My gaze is drawn to his left hand as he straightens his tie in an act that's too casual for the situation. A letter is inked on each finger, but I can only make out the E on his pinky and ring finger. His rings obscure the rest. He still wears the insignia ring that belonged to his father on his index finger and the silver one I gave him for his birthday on his middle finger. The onyx ring on his right hand is new. It's my father's wedding ring. I don't know what shocks me the most—that he stole that ring off the dead body of my father or that he hasn't removed the one I gifted him.

When he smooths down his jacket, my gaze follows the action. My senses are heightened. I notice every minute detail from the familiar smell of his subtle aftershave to the thick veins that run over the back of his hand. The clean, short nails. I haven't forgotten how big or strong those hands are. I always knew they had blood on them.

I force myself to look back at his face. At twenty-nine, he's more devastatingly handsome than I could've ever imagined him. But it's the vibe that rolls off him that hits me the hardest, the danger that he exudes as he slides his icy gaze from my eyes to the gun in my hands.

He's different.

Empty.

Cold.

No, not different. He's just finally showing his true colors.

I point the gun at his head. "Stay away from me."

A sliver of a smile cracks through those sensual lips that used to worship my body and whisper lies in my ears.

Taking a step closer, he challenges me. "Tatiana." His vocal cords are rough around my name. The sound is rusted. Raw. He says it as if the syllables are new, as if he's never uttered it before, never bit it out like a man in pain during the final throes of his pleasure when he emptied himself in me. "After all this time, are those really the first words you want to say to me?"

I glance at the doorway, praying that Jazz and Noah will come home late.

I've played this scenario out in my mind many times. I never had to wonder how it was going to end. Dante has never been a man who did what someone told him to do. I always knew I was going to have to shoot him. What I didn't know was how much it would hurt. Seeing how much I hate him, the notion catches me by surprise, but there it is, a fragile remnant of regret that survived the destruction, fluttering between the hurt and hate in my heart.

He smiles wider. It's a smile any other woman will find disarming, a dangerous smile, but its cruelty hits me right in the chest. I don't tell him to get out of my house because he's not going to listen. I'll just have to let my trigger finger do the talking.

Fuck, but it hurts. Still. After all this time. A part of me can't forget our history, but I can't ignore what he's done or why he's here.

He takes another step closer.

I tighten my finger on the trigger. The resistance of the spring is both reassuring and terrifying.

Fuck.

My hands are shaking. Badly. I try to think about Noah, and then I try not to think at all. I've made this choice many times over—what I'd do if he found me—yet

now that he stands in front of me, taking a life is harder than I thought.

Before I can come to a decision, he pounces. He's on top of me in a wink, grabbing both my wrists in one hand and forcing them above my head while wrapping the other around my neck. My back hits the wall, the breath knocked out of my lungs. He pins me in place with his big hand like an iron vise around my throat, barely letting me drag in oxygen as he wrestles the gun from my grip. The minute my hands are free, I grab his arms, trying to pull him off me. Trying to breathe.

Not easing up on me, he flicks on the safety and slips the gun into the back of his waistband under his jacket.

His deep voice cuts through me like glass. "Is it loaded?"

I manage a nod.

He loosens his grip, giving me air without setting me free, and pulls his eyes into slits as he presses his body against mine. "Do you even know how to use it?"

He's hard. After all this time and everything that's passed, he wants me. My body recognizes his touch. My belly heats, remembering our chemistry. But it means nothing. It's just a physical conditioning. The parts that matter are lies, and his reaction as well as mine only piss me off, fueling years of suppressed anger.

The fury gives me an extra spurt of strength. I try to knee him in the balls, but he sees me coming and manages to deflect the blow, which lands on his thigh. He's distracted for just a second, long enough for me to break his hold on my neck by slamming the narrow side of my palm on his forearm.

I'm free, running for the broken-down front door because it will take too long to unlock the back door, but I

only get as far as the small entryway opening into the lounge before he catches me.

For what it's worth, I fight as he pushes me up against the wall. We're back to how we've been in the kitchen with him crowding me and his hand around my neck. He's not strangling me, but he's not letting me breathe freely either.

I flatten my hands on his chest, trying to push him away, but he doesn't move an inch. His muscles are like a brick wall beneath my palms.

He clicks his tongue. "Bad girl."

"Fuck you."

"Tsk, tsk. Some mouth you've got. Swearing was never part of your vocabulary."

Glaring at him, I banish my terror to a distant corner of my being because I refuse to give him my fear.

"I asked you a question, Tatiana. Do you even know how to use that gun?"

My throat burns inside. My voice scrapes through the ache as I push an answer out with loathing. "What do you think?"

His gaze plays over my features as if he's trying to memorize them. A wry chuckle rumbles in his chest.

Bringing his mouth a hairbreadth from mine, he whispers words over my lips. "I bet you would've pulled the trigger too."

I lift my chin to hold his gaze, ignoring the heat of his skin that burns through our clothes and focusing on the stony look in his eyes, eyes that are so similar to Noah's. "If it's me or you, then yes."

He lets my neck go to grip my wrists in both his hands and pin them on the wall above my head. "Is that what you think? That I'm here to kill you?"

The action flattens my breasts. My nipples, which are

naked under my T-shirt, rub over the steel-like muscles of his torso.

"Why else?" I bite out. "Didn't you come here to finish what you'd started?"

For a fleeting moment, something like guilt flashes in those cold amber eyes, but then they turn hard, and his frosty smile is back in place. "I waited five years for this moment. Do you really think I'm just going to kill you?"

I swallow at that, regretting that I couldn't see my plan through to shoot him. "What do you want? Haven't you already taken everything?"

His reply is dark, filled with a sinister promise. "Not everything."

I'm about to tell him to go to hell when a shadow falls through the open doorway over the floor.

No.

Please let the landlord be home. Please let it be him. He could've heard the noise and decided to investigate. But my hope is futile, and my prayers are unanswered, because a moment later, Jazz appears on the threshold, taking in the damage to the door with terror-stricken eyes.

I give a single shake of my head, urging her to run, but Dante's senses have always been sharp.

He glances over his shoulder without letting me go. "Jasper." The corner of his mouth that's in my vision tips up as a grin stretches his lips. "What a surprise. How long has it been? Five years?"

She looks from him to me and back at him, her mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out.

No, no. Please, not this.

How can this be happening?

And then I know. I've been followed. I know that with deep-seated intuition. It was a terrible mistake to have ignored my instinct.

I think about that red truck, about what the guy could've seen. I kept the curtains closed. The truck wasn't there when I arrived or left. He didn't see Noah with me and Jazz. He wasn't parked close to my house, or I would've noticed the truck. This street has no trees. There's nothing to hide behind. No one broke into my house and discovered a little boy's clothes. He can't know about Noah. As long as Jazz hasn't said anything, there's still a way out for Noah.

I plead with my eyes, begging my friend to take Noah away, but then my baby walks up behind her with his ball under his arm, and it's too late.

Dante stills, clearly taken aback. "Who's the kid?"

At the same time Jazz finds her voice to say, "He's mine," Noah drops his ball, runs to me, and throws his arms around my legs from the side, hugging me fiercely while forcing himself between Dante and me as he utters one distressed little word.

"Mommy!"

Dante's gaze locks on mine over the sound. Confusion sets into his features, followed by disbelief. Jazz stands frozen to the spot, looking on helplessly as the truth is blown open like a landmine, the destruction imminent.

My knees threaten to give out as my heart stops beating. My breathing grows shallow. There's a very good reason I kept Noah a secret. His father is a monster who murdered my family before stealing our assets and taking over my father's territory.

That's why Dante has been hunting me all these years. That's why he's put a price on my head. There's only one way I'll never be able to make a claim on my inheritance, and that's if I'm dead. And now he knows he has an heir, someone else he can take away from me. He won't be

happy with only the money and the shares. Because Dante Morici has never settled for less than *everything*.