



## CHAPTER ONE

*Tatiana, age nineteen*

“**Y**ou’ll marry  
Joni Stein. I don’t want to hear another word  
about it. The contract is signed, so it’s as good as cast in  
stone.”

My father’s dismissive wave as he indicates my time is  
up makes me shrivel inside. He’s already returned his  
attention to his laptop, my presence in his study ignored or  
forgotten.

Angry tears stream down my cheeks. I’m shaking with  
the injustice of my father’s decision and my helplessness to  
change that fate.

All my life, I’ve been a good, obedient daughter,  
always doing what I’m told and what’s expected of me.  
I’ve been a cum laude student with straight As in all my  
subjects. I sit through tedious dinners and parties I have  
no interest in attending without complaining, wearing the

dresses my parents deem appropriate. I say please and thank you. My parents' friends tell them how lucky they are to have had it so easy with me during my adolescent years. But if I were hoping that my exemplary behavior and hard work would make my father proud or win his approval, I was mistaken.

He looks up from his screen, irritation written all over his face. "You're still here."

"Father, please." My voice cracks. "Mr. Stein is fifty years old."

And he's fat and ugly, not to mention vulgar. He always looks down the front of my dress or pinches my backside when my mom isn't looking. But I don't say that.

"Exactly." My father stabs a few keys on his keyboard. "That's why he has no time to waste in producing an heir."

"But he's married," I exclaim.

"His wife is dying. It's only a matter of time." My father hits enter a couple of times and squints behind his glasses. "Just as well, seeing that the useless wretch is barren."

"But..." I swallow through my tears. "That's improper."

"We agreed to wait until your twenty-first birthday. The old hag should kick the bucket by next year if not sooner, and then he'll mourn the customary year. Nothing about that is improper. It's all done by the book."

"Please, Father, I beg you."

He slams a hand on the desk, rattling his teacup and the plate with his afternoon *kolaczki* cookies. "Begging is beneath you. You're a Teszner. We do not beg."

The violence makes me jump. "I just meant—"

"That's enough," he barks out. "You'll do your duty for this family like the rest of us. Now get out of my sight."

Blinded by my tears, I stumble from the study.

“And close the door behind you,” my father calls after me. “I’ve had enough disruptions for one day.”

Suppressing the urge to slam the door, which will only earn me a punishment, I do as my father commands.

My mother waits on the other side. “Oh, Tiana.” Her soft blue eyes are brimming with tears. “I’m so sorry.”

It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to melt down. “Did you know?”

Averting her eyes, she nods. “For a couple of months or so. I did my best to change his mind, but he wouldn’t listen.”

She tries to hug me, but I dodge her embrace and rush across the foyer.

“Tiana,” she cries out. “Where are you going?”

Suppressing a sob, I grab my keys from the bowl on the entrance table. “I need to be alone.”

Afraid that I’ll run into one of the neighbors, I don’t use the elevator. I fly down the stairs, barely feeling the exertion of the fifteen floors. I ignore the doorman because I don’t want him to see me crying. I burst through the main door onto the sidewalk with no idea where I’m going.

I wish I could run away, but I don’t want to leave my mom on her own. She’s miserable in her marriage, and she’s sacrificed so much for us. I’m not going to do that to her after she’s only ever been there for me. Leander never spends time with her.

Besides, the bruises that recently started appearing on her arms and face aren’t from accidentally walking into doors as she claims. I’m all she’s got, the only one who can protect her. My father has never raised his hand to me. He mostly just ignores me. When he drinks and gets upset, I lock my mom in my room. He’s yet to come in there. So for now, she’s safe with me.

Unbearable sadness makes my tears fall faster. Until

this morning, I had hopes and dreams. My father won't let me study. Only Leander was allowed to go to college, not that he deserved the chance. He's flunked his majors—*again*. My destiny is to marry and bear heirs. I do want a husband and babies, so I don't mind that too much. What I do mind is a pervert of a husband almost three times my age. That definitely didn't feature in my dreams about a white wedding and a worthy groom. I never hoped to be betrothed to a handsome or compassionate man. Knowing how it works in our life, I didn't expect love. I only wanted someone I respected and closer to my own age. I hoped for friendship, at least.

Making an impulsive decision, I turn in the direction of the park. The cold penetrates the light cashmere sweater and lounge pants I wear in the condo. My city sneakers aren't suitable for the snow. In my rush to get away, I didn't even take my coat or scarf. I don't have money or my cell phone with me. I just wanted to go someplace where I could curl up into a ball and hide.

I tuck my hands under my armpits to warm my freezing fingers and trudge on with my head held low, my tears blurring my vision. I haven't made it a few yards when my progress is halted brutally as I crash into a hard chest. I bounce off that wall of steely muscles, nearly losing my footing before strong hands lock gently but firmly around my upper arms and steady me.

My blurry gaze falls on a pair of fancy dress shoes and dark tailored pants showing beneath the hem of a black wool coat.

The first thing that hits me, even before I look up, is how good he smells. His aftershave is sophisticated and subtle, something woody and spicy. The fragrance is pleasant and, surprisingly, familiar.

Without meaning to, I inhale deeply, trying to

memorize the scent. Or maybe, on some subconscious level, I want to eternalize the intoxicating fragrance of virile masculinity by imprinting it in my senses.

A suave, baritone voice flays me open, cutting through flesh and bone right to the marrow. “Are you all right?”

Invisible fingers walk down my spine, inviting a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold. “I’m so sorry—”

I lift my gaze, and then the words fly out of my mind and scatter on the breeze in the chilly, brittle air.

Dante Morici is staring down at me, cupping my upper arms in his large, glove-clad hands. Recognition stirs in my belly instead of my brain. His dark-blond hair is tussled around his face, framing his painfully handsome features in the sexiest, most alluring way. His golden eyes are as intense as ever, piercing my chest and rummaging through the most private feelings buried deep in my heart.

Said organ triples in its beat.

*No, no, no.*

I don’t want him to see me like this.

“I—” I swallow. “I didn’t watch where I was going.”

He frowns as he takes me in, his gaze playing over my face, but his tone is soft and cajoling. “Hey.”

His compassion and concern are so earnest that I only cry harder. To my mortification, I can’t stop.

He sweeps his hands over my shoulders and up the curve of my neck until he frames my face between his broad palms. Goosebumps break out over my skin in the wake of his touch. The leathery smell of his soft suede gloves as well as the warmth that seeps through them into my wet, frozen cheeks are comforting.

Alarm tightens his handsome features. “What’s wrong?”

No one should be that beautiful. It hurts to look at him.

It hurts because a man like him will never be mine. “I... Nothing.”

He narrows those gorgeous amber eyes. A promise of retribution sparks in their golden depths. “Then why the tears?”

He asks the question as if it matters to him—no, as if the answer is the *only* thing that matters in his life. The anger that cuts hard, unforgiving angles onto his face says he’s about to go on a killing spree to avenge my tears.

Something fragile breaks from a cocoon and flutters with delicate, newborn wings in my stomach. No one has ever looked at me like that.

With excruciating gentleness, he wipes the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. His deep voice reverberates beneath my breastbone, little thrills of awareness jabbing into my belly with every word that falls with undisguised malice from his lips. “Who upset you, Tatiana?”

I’m both surprised and relieved that he remembers my name. I thought he’d long since forgotten about me. After all, we’d never been introduced, and this is the first time we’re speaking.

Dante used to work for my father. I never mixed with the men, but I noticed him straight away. All the women did. It was impossible not to. He often escorted my parents, Leander, and me to events where he stayed in the background with the other guards, but that didn’t stop me from stealing glances at him or fantasizing about him alone in my bed at night.

Then, two years ago, he simply disappeared. I fished for information about his whereabouts from Leander, trying not to make my interest too obvious. My brother told me if I knew what was good for me, I’d mind my own business. When I asked my mom, she told me Dante was

bad news and not to mention his name in front of my father.

It starts snowing. Flakes drift from the sky and dust his sun-streaked hair and the lapels of his coat.

“Come here.” Dante pulls me against his chest and wraps his coat around me. “You’ll freeze to death.”

I rest my cheek against the hard expanse of his breast where I can hear the strong, steady beat of his heart beneath his expensive suit jacket. Unable to help myself, I splay my cold fingers over the hard ridges and well-cut muscles that map out his torso. “It’s not that cold.”

Not when I’m bundled up in his coat and arms.

Pins and needles shoot up my hands. My fingertips tingle like when I warm them over a fire after having been out in a blizzard without gloves.

When the lengths of our bodies press together, he stills. His hold tightens marginally on me, his fingers curling in on my sides, and I swear his heart beats faster and harder.

“Let me buy you a cup of coffee,” he says in my hair, his voice strangely tender and simultaneously strained. “It’ll warm you up.”

He sounds like a man practicing enormous self-constraint. And then I know. He’s doing his best not to grow hard against my belly... and failing.

My pulse goes into overdrive. The cold evaporates. My body burst into flames, a different kind of heat soaking into my skin.

I nod against his chest, burrowing closer to absorb his warmth and the incredible sensations that set every nerve-ending in my body alight.

Pedestrians flow around us and move on, but we’re isolated in our beautiful little snow globe, untouchable from the rest of the world.

He pulls away without letting me go, compelling me to

look at him. When I do, I find him peering down at me with a dimpled smile.

“Do you know my name, Tatiana?”

My cheeks heat as the arrow of that smile hits me straight in the heart. If my voice sounds hoarse, it’s not from crying. “Dante.”

Possessive satisfaction heats his tone. “Good girl.”

His approval is almost predatory. Selfish. As if he wants to keep me all to himself. It speaks to a part of me that likes that.

Scooping me up into his big, masculine arms as if I don’t weigh more than a kitten, he carries me in a bridal hold. “You’re going to tell me what happened.”

It’s a command, not a request.

Savage intentions blaze in his eyes as he makes me a solemn promise. “And then I’ll fix it.”