

## Chapter One

I walk up the stairs to my office, praying that they won't give out. The stairs are sketchy-looking-bordering-on-dangerous. Plus, I'm carrying an extra fifteen pounds since I last made this climb.

The phone is ringing. I imagine a new client on the other end. A client with money to offset the recent debts I've racked up. A client who expects a fit, strong, security professional to pick up the phone. I hustle, wishing the extra weight was due to a couple heavy bags of office supplies. It's not. Avoiding mirrors for the past two months doesn't disguise the fact that none of my pants fit anymore. Sweat pants, while comfy and soft, are not a good measure of one's mass.

Go figure.

Huffing and puffing up the last two steps, I fumble with keys outside my office door. *T.R. Waters Securities* is emblazoned in gold letters across the frosted glass. The T.R. stands for Tatum Rose, but only my mother, a Southern belle, calls me that. To everyone else I'm Tayt.

I launch myself across the room and grab the phone on the last ring.

"T.R. Waters Securities, this is Tayt."

There's a click and then a low buzz of static before a voice comes on the line.

"Oh, er, hello there," a male voice says. "My name is Phil and I'm happy to be calling you from the bright island of Bermuda today." Pause. A long, low toot of a big ship fills the line. Mechanical sounding gulls fill in the space before the man's voice starts again.

"Ms. Waters, I'm calling today on behalf of Tropical Cruise Lines, excited to tell you about ..."

"I'm sorry," I say, phone halfway to the cradle. "I'm not interested. Thanks anyway."

Click.

The truth is I *am* interested. Who wouldn't want to scurry off to a beach and sport a lobster-like sunburn this time of the year?

Self-employed startups don't take a lot of vacation days though. My company—and by company I mean me—manages everything from working as extra security at a local concert, to tracking down missing persons, to spying on one's significant other for means of proving infidelity, plus a handful of jobs that I don't advertise.

Snow is falling outside the big windows across the room as I put away my winter coat and remove my dripping boots. In their place I slip on my favorite pair of combat boots, featuring London Jack over each toe. My footwear at least is not compromised by my new, larger size.

The phone rings again as soon as I fire up my laptop. I sigh, look at the caller ID, and see "out of area." I could ignore it. But I don't.

"T.R. Waters Securities, this is Tayt."

"Please don't hang up," Phil's voice says again, his voice soft and desperate sounding. This time the line is clear, crisp. "I'm calling you from my cell. I'm in the storage closet at work. I need your help."

"Okaaay," I say. "What can I do for you?"

"It's my ...." His voice fades to a whisper. Either that or he's moved his mouth too far from the phone to hear.

"What? Sorry, I lost you there," I say. I hear a door open and close on the other end.

Phil clears his throat.

“I’ll have to call you back, Mom.” His voice is so loud in my ear, I yank the phone away a few inches. He continues, “Yes, I know. You, too. Bye for now!”

There’s a click and I sit there a minute before realizing he’s hung up on me.

*Weird.*

There is too much on my plate today to spend a lot of time worrying about it, though. I’ve been able to keep up (mostly) with the T.R. Waters Securities website while in recovery. Nothing like a gunshot wound to the shoulder to help one focus on priorities. Having a lot of time on my hands (seven weeks, two days and something like seventeen hours) was good for one thing and one thing only: deciding what needs to stay and what needs to go work-wise.

For the past several years I’ve owned and operated a cleaning business, “Repo Renew,” which is exactly what it sounds like: I clean foreclosed homes and prepare them for a realtor to stage. But while the money was decent, I got little enjoyment from it. A change was needed. So I opened a securities business. Economy in the toilet, zilch experience—what could go wrong with this new venture?

Despite a rocky start, the business is growing. In fact, I’m ready to commit to T.R. Waters Securities and let Repo Renew go, at least the day-to-day management piece of it which has been covered very well by Cindy Sheldon. She’s a ball of energy and really enjoys the work. I enjoy the fact that she’s competent and self-motivated and not one of those people who has to call a zillion times a day with dumb questions like, “Do I use paper towels or rags on the glass?”

I lean back in my chair and stretch my arms overhead. Well, I only get halfway before my shoulder screeches. I let my arms fall and rub the area where the bullet penetrated. Never in a million years had I expected to find myself trapped in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with a psychotic gunman; one who used to be the bully in our rural high school.

Will it ever heal fully?

*Not if you don’t slow down,* an annoying little voice pipes up in my head.

Ignoring it, I bring up my email account and scroll through, tossing the ads for penis-enlarging supplements and expensive watches, and checking for legit requests. Three emails sent directly through my site’s “Contact Us” form stick out. I open the first.

“Please help me get my boyfriend back. I don’t know where he is. I’m desperate for help and the police won’t listen to me. I can pay you big money!! Here is my contact information ....” I jot down the woman, Sandra Garrison’s, phone number and email address while simultaneously rubbing my neck.

Relationship cases are the worst. So much angst to so few satisfying results in most cases. If I’m successful, the missing boyfriend/fiancé/husband will be found. But most often it’s *who* he’s found *with* that causes the heartbreak. Still, Visa and MasterCard will appreciate the job.

I frown and bite my lip. That name is familiar. Garrison. Garrison ... The tickle of remembrance is squashed by thoughts of credit card bills and additional ginormous hospital bills that have started coming my way. Puffing my cheeks out with a sigh of air, I open the second request. This one is from a man whose first name is Phil. The same man who just called on the phone? He left no last name just the initial “H” and his message is cryptic at best: “Please contact at your earliest convenience.”

I jot down his number. There’s no email address.

The final request is from a Julia Lawson who states only that she is in need of security help for a weekend event. There’s no date listed as to when the event is scheduled. *Please, not this weekend.* I rub my shoulder again.

Opening my bag, I find my trusty day planner and flip through the weeks of missed work. Appointments had to be cancelled—most farmed out to other freelancers or bigtime security companies in Burlington. I hated to lose the jobs and the money, but what can you do when you're flat on your back?

I turn to today's date on the calendar and make a pact with myself: fill next week's blocks with new business and I can treat myself to a little shopping spree. Glancing at my stretchy knit pants, I frown. Better make the goal to fill the next two weeks' time slots with new gigs. Mama needs a new wardrobe at this point.

I water my plants, glad I chose hardy succulents. My green thumb is apparently only in effect at my house, not the office. After that I run a duster around the equipment and coffee cart, sweep the floor (poorly, because my chest is starting to ache), then settle at my green metal desk with a cup of coffee and the phone. Time to drum up some new business.

I call the phone number for Phil first, but the line just rings and rings. Who doesn't have voicemail in this day and age? I make a note to try again later and punch in the number for Julia Lawson. A woman's voice answers on the third ring. She sounds middle-aged, rotund and smiley.

"Ms. Lawson, my name is Tayt Waters from T.R. Waters Securities. You contacted us via our website and I'm returning your call."

A little laugh.

"Oh, my yes. That was me, wasn't it?"

I roll my eyes, glad (yet again) that phones don't come with built-in video projectors.

"I believe so, ma'am."

"Well, it just so happens that my son is in a band? And he's going to be playing music at a house party in Colchester? We'd hoped to hire your firm for security purposes?"

Every sentence ends on the upswing, as though she's asking question after question. I grit my teeth silently, force a smile onto my face.

"Yes, that's something we should be able to help with. And what is the date of the event?"

*Not this weekend. Not this weekend.* I touch the aching spot on my chest with three fingers and rub.

"This weekend, Friday night, starting around eight o'clock? Can your boss, Mr. Waters, do that?"

I clear my throat.

"I am the boss, ma'am, Tayt Waters." Silence on the other end. "And yes, I'd be happy to help at this event."

Long pause.

Then, "But you're a woman." Finally, a sentence that actually sounds like a sentence, ignorant though it is.

"Don't worry. I know my stuff. I have my black belt and have been practicing martial arts since I was a kid. I have references as well. If you'd like to speak with them ..."

She interrupts, a laugh mixing in with her words.

"I saw many good testimonials on your website? It sounds like you know what you're doing?"

*Ack!* How can I get off the phone before throwing it through the window? *Deep breath.* I don't have to like my clients, I just have to do a good job. And not blurt out anything rude before they pay me.

I grimace, hoping it comes across like a smile in my voice.

“Thanks. Let me just open up my program here and I’ll get all the pertinent information from you.”

I jot down notes while Mrs. Lawson goes on and on about her talented son, a singer-drummer-songwriter who is just so, well, *talented* she can hardly stand it. I murmur a lot of “uh-huh’s” and “Mmmmm’s” into the phone and finally, blessedly, have the information I need. Julia promises to send the deposit today and I promise to send the contract to her in today’s mail as well.

“Thank you so much? It’s been a pleasure?”

I singsong a thank you to her and hang up before she can ask me another statement.

No sooner do I replace the receiver than the phone rings again. Out of area number. Maybe Phil again? I answer with my standard greeting while fumbling to grab a fresh contract form out of the file cabinet for Mrs. Lawson.

There’s no answer at first to my *hello-this-is-Tayt* spiel. I’m about to say hello again when a distorted mechanical voice fills the silence.

“I’m watching you.”

My heartbeat thumps hard in my chest, banging against my ribs like a bird trying to escape its cage. I rack my brain for something clever to say but only manage to squeak out an “Oh, really?”

There is a mechanical grating sound on the other end. Laughter?

“I’m watching you. You’ll pay for hurting me.”

## Chapter Two

I slam the receiver down, as though that’s going to show the caller whose boss; never mind that he or she has already hung up. Letting out a breath I didn’t know I was holding, I push my chair away from the desk and stand.

“I’m watching you” and “you’ll pay” are classic teen-slasher movie threats. Likely just a dumb kid playing a prank. The butterflies in my belly don’t agree. Just for fun, I try a number combination on the phone to try and track the call. It doesn’t work.

Immediately, my mind goes to Sunflower Specials. My little side business where I help people, mostly women, which the criminal justice system has failed. But the caller dialed my work line, not the separate pay-as-you-go cell phone that I keep specifically for the Specials. I think about the language of the caller. Educated? Hard to tell. Not very old. Or maybe that, too, was changed with the mechanical sound effects?

*Shake it off.*

I’ve got work to do. I start by creating a file for Mrs. Lawson. Dorky but true, I actually like the administrative part of running my own business. After that, I go to the next phone call on my list. Sandra Garrison, the woman with the missing boyfriend. My last relationship-gone-wrong case was a real tear-jerker, if you believe in true love and all that crap.

Sandra answers on the fifth ring, just as I’m about to hang up. Her greeting is bubbly and warm as she answers, “Garrison’s Gym.” I didn’t realize it was *that* Garrison. No wonder the

name sounded familiar. I stumble over my introduction, but she doesn't seem to notice. Her voice when responding is two octaves lower.

"I can't talk right now, it's super busy this morning. Can I meet you somewhere later today?"

"Sure." I pull my appointment book back out. The boxes are depressingly empty. "What time works for you?"

"Um, I'll be done here around ..." her voice fading for a moment, then, "Oh, hey Wanda! Looking good!" her voice is at nearly screaming level. "Sorry, about that. New client. They need lots of encouragement." She laughs. "Two o'clock work?"

"Sure."

"We can meet at the Juice Bar, it's the smoothie place on Main Street."

"Perfect," I say, grimacing and making a mental note to eat lunch before then.

"See you then!" she practically yells into the phone, heavy bass thumping in the background.

I spend another hour at the office, try Phil one more time, but again the phone just rings and rings. I get out a new contract sheet for Sandra, just in case our late afternoon meeting goes well and she wants to hire me on the spot.

Then I lock up and make my way down the creaking stairs to the street. It's cold and there is a light snow falling, the flakes so small they look like glitter. The scent of snow and wood smoke and undertones of exhaust from the cars and trucks passing by fills the air.

I glance at the old, white Victorian house across the street and think of my friend Alinah. A transplant from Malaysia, Alinah had been held against her will by the same man who shot me. Can it really be only a couple of months since I've seen her? It seems like a lifetime ago. A gust of cold air winds around my coat collar, poking at my neck, and I hunch my shoulders and walk quickly to the rear parking lot.

There sits my sad-looking Toyota, rusted and as rundown as the parking lot itself, which is filled with potholes and buckling pavement. I give the hood of the trusty car a pat and open the door, which squawks in protest. Waiting for the engine to re-heat itself after a couple of hours in the cold, I plan out the rest of my day.

First, a stop at the gym—not Garrisons; I go to a martial arts and boxing place in a seedier part of town. It's been weeks now and I haven't done so much as a leg lift. How am I ever going to get back to my 'fighting weight' and re-gain any strength if I don't start moving?

But then my stomach whines and grumbles. Well, I *am* starving. I can't work out on an empty stomach, right? Lunch first then, an early one since it's only eleven o'clock. Then a couple of annoying errands and a quick workout before I meet with Sandra.