

Chapter One

It's taken me twenty-nine years to realize this fact: People are pigs.

I'm on my hands and knees scrubbing the crap out of a section of mulberry colored carpet in a second-floor bathroom. The crap, I should clarify, is the literal kind. Dried on like cement. It's been there awhile. Dumping the remains of a bottle of piney smelling industrial cleaner on it, I leave the liquid to do its thing.

My name is Tayt Waters. I'm nearing the three-decade mark, and in case you wondered, no, this is not my dream job. I opened my cleaning business: "Repo Renew," five years ago at the ripe old age of twenty-four. The business name sort of says it all, but I did add this catchy little tagline to my business cards, "We make it look brand new!" In a nutshell, my job is to clean houses that have been foreclosed on. I take on other cleaning jobs, too, when I'm in need of extra cash. Which is just about always.

But that's just my first job. Two years ago I opened my own security firm, T.R. Waters Security, housed in a derelict building in downtown St. Albans. Here I act as skip tracer locating missing persons, from dead beat dads to lost loves from years past. I also do general grunt work for nearly any situation requiring extra security.

I glance at my watch, nearly one o'clock. My stomach whines, reminding me that I haven't had lunch yet. I debate for a minute then check the carpet in the bathroom again. The heavy duty cleaner has done its thing. I begin alternately rinsing and patting the area dry but am interrupted by my ringing cell phone. I pull it out of my bag, but the screen is blank, the phone silent. I hear the ringing again and realize it's coming from the second phone I keep, this one a cheap pay-as-you-go type.

"Hello," I say.

A woman's voice, dry and brittle like old tree roots, responds. My mind immediately creates an image: mid-fifties, brown hair turning gray, wrinkled face with a downturned mouth and an angry pull to the eyebrows.

"I need some help with my husband, Walter. A friend," she pauses for a moment, "a friend told me about your Sunflower Specials."

"Great," I say and scramble for paper and a pen. Calls answered at this number require discretion, and this woman has said the magic phrase, "Sunflower Specials." We make arrangements to meet at a small coffee shop on Main Street later this afternoon.

"I'm a redhead," I say, "and I'll be wearing all black."

The air is chilly outside, dry leaves blowing around my feet as I pull the heavy door closed and double check the lock. The sky overhead is robin's egg blue without a single cloud. This will change shortly. Vermont in late autumn, a good part of winter and most of spring, is covered in thick, gray clouds. In other words, for about seven months of the year, it's dreary, cold and pitiful looking. This is something that rarely ends up on postcards, however, leaving tourists filled with shock and dismay that every day in the Green Mountain State isn't, in fact, made up of a Norman Rockwell'esque landscape.

The door on my rusted Toyota squeals like a squirrel who's just been informed he has a nut allergy. I ignore the racket; it will soon be drowned out by the angry growl of a muffler sporting yet another hole. Out of habit, my eyes travel to the inspection sticker planted beneath the rearview mirror.

“We’ve got two more months, baby,” I croon to the hulking beast as I back him out of the driveway. “You’ve gotta get yourself together.” My sedan seems to snort in response, a puff of dreary smoke coughing from the tailpipe. I ignore this response and turn on the radio. Loud African tribal music drowns out the rest of the car’s protests.

I follow the winding back road onto Route 7, the main artery that runs nearly the length of the state. The scenery outside the windows is the same as it’s been for the last few weeks: brilliant gold and fiery red leaves mixed with an orange so bright it nearly glows. I turn up the heat but crack the window, breathing in the scent of pine and earth and the slightly sweet smell of decaying leaves. And of course, exhaust fumes.

Stopping by the gas station across from the Highgate Shopping Plaza, I pick up lunch: a tuna sandwich on wheat, chips and a flavored seltzer. I eye the jumbo sized chocolate chip cookies and end up nabbing one at the last minute. A nagging voice in my head reminds me that I missed my visit at the gym yesterday.

I’ll go later.

Really.

I sip and crunch and chew my way through lunch watching businesses, then residential lots pass my windows. I make a right onto Lower Newton and then a left on Federal Street, passing a milk creamery and farm store along with more houses, these on postage sized lots, some with chipped paint and crumbling foundations. Stowing the lunch wrappers in the garbage bag, I wipe my hands on a napkin and brush crumbs from my jeans. I’ll change in the office where I keep a few extra changes of professional-looking clothes and a toothbrush.

I make a right onto Lake Street and look for a parking spot near a string of tired buildings after crossing the railroad tracks. As usual there is none. I turn into the parking lot and find a sunny place for the sedan.

Living or working “below the tracks” is a derogatory comment here in Rail City, but I’m just grateful for an honest to goodness office, however humble. Sure, it’s located in a sketchy part of town. All of the buildings on this street have seen better days. If they could express feelings, they’d wag fingers and shake disapproving heads at the newly remodeled Main Street.

Neglected or not, I always feel a little thrum of excitement as I mount the stairs to the second floor. It’s an adventurous climb; one never knows what might be found on the steps. I’ve discovered everything from a pair of rats, to a creepy-looking baby doll, to a drunk guy and once, an orange cat the size of a small car. The latter clattered down so fast and unexpectedly I nearly had a heart attack.

Today, however, the steps are bare. They creak, and one or two wobble under my weight. I unlock and open the goldenrod door. A smile spreads over my face as I look for the eightieth time at the lettering professionally rendered on the door in white: T. R. Waters’ Security.

Choosing a title was hard. I’d considered at one time becoming a full-on PI, working with state and federal agencies, but then I came to my senses. I want action without the red tape. As a security expert, I can throw a wider net, picking up jobs that aren’t law-enforcement related. Sometimes a bar needs extra security for a weekend event, or a traveling musician requires additional help for a concert and sometimes my job is to use my sleuthy skills to spy and track someone down. Not uninteresting work and definitely better than sitting in government meetings for hours on end.

I clean up in the tiny bathroom that’s barely big enough to turn around in. A miniature dresser in one corner holds extra clothes. I change and brush my teeth, then my hair, pinning it up in a

loose bun. It's medium brown and exactly matches my eyes. Eyes, teeth and nose are all straight, a good thing I guess. I'm no beauty queen like my mother and older sister. A smattering of freckles across my nose and cheeks makes me look younger than I am. I smooth the polyester button down (no hanging required) over my waist. My figure is one I'm proud of. I'm petite but muscular. All that time in the gym and my mixed martial arts classes paid off at last. I stuff my clothes from this morning's housecleaning into a grocery bag to bring home and launder. My office is made up of a single room of about fifteen by twenty. File cabinets, mostly empty, hunker along one wall. Another wall displays a bulletin board where I've tacked up newspaper articles of interest along with a copy of my brochure, business card and a list of professional references. The third wall holds a small set of built-in bookcases and a conference table sits in front of it. The last wall is divided by two large, nearly floor-to-ceiling windows. Though drafty in the winter, I wouldn't trade them for anything. Natural light pours into the room which would otherwise have a closet-like feel. Between the windows is my desk, a vintage, army green metal beast that I bought at a surplus sale. A coffee pot along with fixings and a few clean mugs and spoons perch on a small credenza that I found outside the local Salvation Army, so ugly even they didn't want it. But a fresh coat of paint and a new leg have rejuvenated it. I've barely started checking email when a knock sounds at my door. Must be my one o'clock appointment. I stand, smooth my shirt and put on a smile. Again the tentative knock sounds, then a hand snakes around the frame of the door pushing it open.

"Hello?" The voice is male.

I start moving toward the door then stop in my tracks. My breath catches so tightly in my throat that I nearly choke on it. Directly in front of me with a face as familiar as my own stands a man who makes me wish I were a hundred miles away. Or even two.

Just not here.

Anywhere but here.

Chapter Two

"Tatum Rose, I'm so glad to see you," Jack Waters says. He stands just under six feet, tall and lanky, hair in need of a trim, lines crisscrossing his face like rail yard tracks. He looks older than the last time I saw him, tired and worn down but still just as handsome. His clothes, expensive as always, are wrinkled. A coating of dust covers his normally sparkling wing tips.

"Sorry to barge in like this, unexpected," he goes on. My feet have turned to roots dug deep into the ugly carpet. I can't locate my voice, but my heartbeat hammering in my chest tells me that this isn't a dream.

"I didn't know where else to go." Jack's voice breaks then, and he looks out the large windows, rubbing his left hand over his face wearily.

"May I?" He flaps the same hand toward one of the two chairs facing my desk. I nod, mutely, then turn and nearly fall into my office chair. The barrier of the green beast between us feels good.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, my voice low and surprisingly steady. I force my face into a poker stance, pray that he can't see my heartbeat through my shirt.

"Aren't you going to offer your old man some coffee?"

I shake my head.

“Can’t. Sorry. I have an appointment in a few minutes.” My voice sounds anything but sorry.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re here?” I repeat the last words slowly, but my mind is spinning. A thousand images of our past play out before me like a jerky movie reel: Jack tossing me high into the air, my long hair streaming as I squeal in delight, playing tickle monster and hide and seek and endless games of Monopoly. And then the later years: the lines appearing on his face after long days traveling for work; the endless phone calls about mergers and outsourcing and bottom lines; the late nights; the fights between him and my mother and the hot, strangling anger which became an additional member of our family.

I clear my throat, waiting.

He’s looking out the windows again, then gets up to pace in front of them.

“I’m in some trouble, Tatum; I think it’s pretty bad. I thought because you’re a PI and all, you might ...”

I hold up a hand, “Whoa, wait a minute. I’m not a private investigator.” I point to the door and the lettering. “I do missing person searches and general security work—you know, as a guard or bouncer at a concert—that type of thing. Between that and Repo Renew, I have my hands full.” I clear my throat which is slowly loosening enough for me to breathe normally.

“I can give you Judy Palmer’s card, though. Did you ever meet her? She’s been my informal mentor for years, and she’s one of the best investigators in the state.” I’m babbling, but my father isn’t filling in any of the awkward pauses. I run a finger through my Rolodex (yup, I’m old-school) and find a few of Judy’s cards. I push one across the desk to Jack, who is still staring at a spot over my head. Then he looks at his shoes and moves one against the other as though trying to remove the layer of dirt. Finally, he glances at me. His eyes are sad, but I recognize another emotion there. One that no child wants to see in their parent’s face: fear.

“What happened, Jack?” My words are soft. I still hate him, but a small part of my chest is loosening like thread coming out of a knot.

He sighs then rubs both hands over his face, scrubbing.

“I don’t want to mess up your appointments. I know how hard it is when you work for yourself, and you’re just starting out. Listen, Tatum, would you meet me later for a coffee? Not in town, though,” he adds before I can answer. “I’ll pick you up when you’re done here.”

Pause. Long and uncomfortable. I fumble with my date book. The late afternoon slots are wide open.

“I guess.”

He smiles then, a sad smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“What time?”

I check my appointment book again.

“Four-thirty would be OK.”

“Four-thirty it is. You parked in the lot?”

I nod.

“I’ll pick you up there. I drive a silver BMW.” He didn’t need to tell me this. My father has been driving variations of silver BMWs my whole life.

“Fine. I’ll see you then.” I stand, move toward the door. He takes my hint and walks out in front of me. Just before I close the door behind him, he pauses, puts a hand out to stop the door.

“Thanks,” he says. I nod once and close the door as soon as he’s withdrawn his hand.

I listen to his footsteps on the creaking wood stairs, praying that they won't give out and at the same time wishing he'd break his neck.

What is he doing here? And how long has it actually been since I've seen him? I walk to the window with a partial street view but can't see his retreating figure. Two years, maybe three. We've kept in touch sporadically via phone. Well, OK. Mostly a few voicemails he's left which I haven't returned. I know he keeps in touch with Mama which is likely how he found my office. I can't believe she still speaks to him.

My one o'clock appointment is a no-show. I spend the next hour shuffling paperwork and responding to email. T.R. Waters Security's website traffic has picked up, Google Analytics informs me, which is good news. It's probably due to the recent ad in the paper. I water the plants and plump the pillows and make my mind go blank whenever my father's face appears in it. It's an old trick that's served me well over the years.

Movement catches my eye as I stare out the window and I glance at the big white house across the street. It's pretty, or used to be. A large Victorian, it has all the original gingerbread trim and a wide front porch, but peeling paint and sagging stairs take away from the charm. Alinah is out on the front porch shaking out a rug. I grab my jacket and pick my way down the stairs carefully then jog across the street.

"Good afternoon!" I call out.

Her dark head rises, a smile on her beautiful brown face.

"Afternoon," she says, her voice heavily accented.

The air is chilly, our breath making little steamy orbs that dissipate seconds later. Alinah is wearing a thin cotton blouse and a pair of jeans. Her feet are bare.

"Aren't you cold?"

She nods, smiling. Her hands continue shaking the rug, and I notice a broom nearby.

"Can I help?"

"Oh no. No, no, thank you."

Alinah is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in real life. Her body is slender, hair dark and thick, face wide with perfectly formed cheekbones. Her eyes are almond-shaped and lined with thick black lashes. I would hate her if I didn't like her so much.

"Want to come up for coffee?" I ask her this time and again, but she's only joined me once, and even then, seemed uncomfortable.

"Oh, no. Thank you, but I have much work to do."

Her hands are trembling, and when I look more closely I notice her eyes are pink-rimmed.

"Is everything OK?"

Her hands stop moving the rug. She glances at me, then away, then at the floor of the porch.

"Sarjana, my cousin? She missing." Her voice is so low that I strain to hear.

"Missing?" I keep my voice quiet, but Alinah puts a finger over her lips, shushing me.

"I no can talk now. Maybe later you come back." She smiles at me, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Then she moves back into the house, waves and closes the door behind her.

I gnaw on a hangnail as I cross back over to my office building. Sarjana is younger than Alinah, a cousin from Malaysia, I think. The two moved here from New York City several months ago but they stick to themselves. They share the house with a white guy, Sarjana's boyfriend, Doug, Alinah told me. He's got a lot of tattoos and a nearly shiny bald head, and he looks at me in a way that makes my skin crawl.