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**THE
CRASH**

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Poisoned Pen
PRESS

CHAPTER 1

TEGAN

I'm not sure I'll make it to my front door.

It is approximately fifty feet from my little Ford Fusion to the entrance of the apartment complex where I live. Fifty feet isn't far. Under the best circumstances, I could run it in seconds.

But not tonight.

I live in a studio apartment on the second floor of a small apartment complex in Lewiston, Maine. It's a terrible neighborhood, but right now, I can't afford better. My shift at the grocery store ends after dark, which means that it's pitch-black outside right now. There used to be a streetlight illuminating the path from the parking area to the complex, but the bulb blew out a month after I moved in, and nobody has bothered to fix it. Once I kill the headlights, I won't be able to see two feet in front of my face.

I turned off the engine in the car soon after parking because I can't waste any gas right now. It's cold enough that even within the car, I can see the puff of air from my

own breath. In Maine, the temperature in December is always well below freezing. I peer through the windshield, and I can just barely make out the entrance to the building. There's no streetlight, but there's a tiny light just above the doorway that will make it possible for me to see the keyhole to unlock the door.

It's also just enough light to see the man lingering in the shadows near the doorway.

Waiting.

I'm shivering as I shift in the driver's seat, which isn't easy to do these days. A sharp, electric pain shoots down my right leg, which has been happening to me more and more lately. The doctor told me it was something called *sciatica*, caused by an irritated nerve in my spine. I thought my life was about as bad as it could get, and then I went and irritated a nerve in my spine on top of everything else.

I squint into the darkness at the man by the entrance, wondering what his business is here. It's too dark to make out any of his features, but he's relatively tall and lean. He's wearing a long, dark trench coat, which doesn't make me feel any better. His face appears menacing, but to be fair, everyone looks menacing when cloaked in shadows.

His intentions could be entirely innocent. Maybe he's visiting a friend in the building. Maybe he's an undercover cop. (Not likely.) Maybe he's... Well, I can't think of what else someone might be doing here at nine thirty in the evening. My point is he isn't *necessarily* here to mug me.

Anyway, I can't sit in my car all night.

I reach into my purse and remove the bottle of pepper spray I've taken to carrying around, and I relocate it to my coat pocket. If this guy wants the meager contents of my wallet, I'll make sure to give him a run for his money. I

move my house keys to my other pocket for easy access, and then I grab the bag of groceries on the passenger's seat and heave it into my arms. Mr. Zakir always gives me a massive discount on soon-to-expire groceries, and I refuse to leave them behind just because of some creepy man outside my building.

That lightning bolt shoots down my right leg again as I climb out of my Ford. My coat hangs open, but there's not much I can do about it, because it doesn't zip closed anymore and hasn't for several months now. There's nothing functionally wrong with the zipper, although a broken zipper would be fairly consistent with the state of my life these days. No, the reason my coat doesn't close anymore is that it no longer fits over my distended belly.

I am nearly eight months pregnant.

As soon as I step out of the car, my swollen feet scream in protest. Over the course of a double shift at the supermarket, they have expanded to nearly twice their original size and barely fit in my sneakers anymore. I straighten up as best I can, and the cold air smacks me in the face. I've become increasingly fatigued over the course of my pregnancy, especially later in the day, but that ice-cold wind wakes me right up.

I slam the car door behind me, and the man leaning against the front of the building jerks his head up. I still can't make out much more than a silhouette, but he's now staring directly at me. My arm holding the bag of groceries trembles, and I reach with my other hand into my pocket for the pepper spray.

Don't even try to take my expired bread, you asshole.

I suck in a mouthful of chilly air and walk purposefully toward the entrance of the building. I avoid looking

at him, like I've learned to do over the years with dozens of other creepy men, but I can feel his eyes following me. My fingers encircle the pepper spray, and I am close to whipping it out when a familiar voice breaks into my terrified thoughts:

"Tegan?"

I pivot my gaze in the direction of the voice. The light from the doorway is bright enough now to make out the man's features, and all the tension instantly drains out of me.

"Jackson!" I cry. "Oh my God, you scared the crap out of me!"

The man in front of me, who I now recognize as Jackson Bruckner, is wearing a trench coat over his usual rumpled white dress shirt, gray tie, and gray dress pants underneath. He's not local, and I'm assuming he's driven at least two hours to get here, but he always looks bright-eyed when he shows up at my door.

Without my having to ask him, Jackson heaves the bag of groceries into his arms, which makes my aching feet hurt a tiny bit less. "I'm so sorry," he says. "I was going to go to the supermarket, but my GPS said it was closed, so I came here instead. I figured you'd be home any minute, so I was waiting."

"You could have texted me," I mumble, now slightly embarrassed by how frightened I was of this man wearing coke-bottle glasses, with big ears that stick out on either side of his head. Now that he's not cloaked in shadows, he's pretty much the least threatening man I've ever seen. He's cute, but in a dorky sort of way.

He is not, by the way, the father of my unborn child. He's not my boyfriend either.

"I did text you," he says.

I reach into my purse for my phone, and sure enough, there are a bunch of text messages from Jackson that I hadn't seen. Of course he texted me. Jackson is responsible. He works as an attorney and graduated summa cum laude at his Ivy League law school. He didn't tell me that, but I googled him.

"I guess you did text me," I admit.

He glances at his watch. "I also ordered Chinese food, which will be here in a few minutes."

My stomach growls at the mention of food. I'm supposed to be eating for two, but I'm barely eating for one. "Chicken lo mein?" I ask hopefully.

"Of course." He grins at me. "Let me carry these groceries up for you, then I'll come back down to get the delivery."

I want to protest, but carrying groceries up the stairs has gotten progressively harder as my belly has grown larger. If he's willing to do it for me, I'm nothing but grateful.

"Thank you," I say.

His eyes meet mine under the dim light over the entryway. "Of course."

Jackson waits patiently while I fumble to get my key in the lock. It always sticks in cold weather, and around here, that's ten months of the year. When I finally get the door unlocked, he holds it open for me like a gentleman. I really like Jackson. I like it when he comes over with an offering of dinner, which has been happening with increasing frequency lately.

But in actuality, this is not a social call. Jackson and I have important business to discuss.

Soon, I'm going to be rich beyond my wildest dreams.
And it's all because of the baby growing inside me.

CHAPTER 2

Once Jackson and I get inside, I bypass the mailboxes. I'm not excited to see the bills that await me, and I don't have money in the bank to pay them anyway. Instead, we climb up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. The bulbs in the stairwell are low wattage, and the paint on the walls is badly chipped, but nobody here would complain. My feet throb with each step, but soon I'll be home.

I stop at the second-floor landing, taking a few seconds to catch my breath. I'm always out of breath these days. I assume it's because of the fetus growing inside me, keeping my lungs from expanding as much as I would like. Or it could be something terrible. I asked Dr. Google, and I didn't like anything they had to say. It could be a blood clot in my lungs. It could be heart failure. It could be *tuberculosis*.

But my health insurance is awful, so I'm just going to keep my fingers crossed that it's nothing serious.

Jackson's brow creases in concern. "You okay?"

“Fine,” I gulp. I nod at the stairwell. “Let’s go.”

As soon as we reach the top of the last flight of stairs, Jackson’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and looks down at the screen. “Food is here.”

I hold out my hands for the bag of groceries. “You go down and get it. I’ll take it from here.”

He looks doubtful. “You sure?”

I shoot him a look. “What do you think I do every day when you’re not around?”

A flash of guilt passes over his thin face, but I don’t know why. It’s not Jackson’s responsibility to babysit me during this pregnancy. It’s nice of him to carry my groceries, but my baby and I are not his problem. And very soon—after the papers are signed—I’ll likely never see him again.

Jackson passes the groceries back to me. I juggle them in my left arm while I walk down the hall to my apartment, digging around in my coat pocket for my keys. I almost get the door open when a sharp voice speaks up from behind me:

“Another man, Tegan?”

I swivel my head to meet the watery, bloodshot eyes of Mrs. Walden, my elderly next-door neighbor. I discovered her first name is Evangeline when I saw a package left downstairs, but on the day we met, she introduced herself as Mrs. Walden, and even though we have lived next door to each other for two years now, she has made it very clear that I am still to address her as “Mrs. Walden.”

“Honestly,” she says, “you’re turning this place into a brothel.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. In the entire time we have lived next door to each other, Jackson is

the only man who has come to visit me aside from my brother. And the two of us aren’t even sleeping together. But it would be pointless to argue. In her eyes, I may as well be parading around the building with a scarlet letter on my chest.

Mrs. Walden’s eyes drop to my belly, protruding below my thrift-store black-and-green blouse with the empire waist. It has ruffles around the collar, and it’s so tacky I could cry, but at the time I bought it, I was in no position to drop a bunch of cash on clothing I would need for only four or five months. Anyway, Mrs. Walden isn’t judging me on my cheap, ugly shirt. She’s judging me because I am twenty-three years old, eight months pregnant, and unmarried.

But honestly, it’s none of her damn business.

“I meant to ask you, Tegan,” she says in her crackly voice. “Will you be moving to other accommodations once the baby is born?”

I rest a hand on my abdomen and am rewarded with a hearty kick. One thing I can say for this baby is that she has a ton of energy. More than I do right now.

“Maybe,” I say. “I haven’t decided.”

“You know, it will be quite disruptive having a baby around.” She lifts her chin. “All that crying at all hours of the night! What a nightmare.”

I put my hand back on the key protruding from the lock and turn it until I feel that satisfying click. “I’ve heard that babies cry a lot. It’s because they don’t know how to speak yet.”

“Nobody will be able to sleep!” she continues. “It’s very selfish of you to bring a newborn into a community that is mostly adults.”