

CHAPTER ONE

THE ATRIUM OF the Winchester Building was busier than usual. Talia Stoddard stood in line at the Starbucks, checking her watch to make sure she would be on time. She had her own office as the Associate of Claims for the Winchester Insurance Group.

The morning sun beamed through the glass walls of the atrium and lit the open area with tiny speckles of light. Rainbows floated along the streams of sunshine. Talia wondered if any of the other Monday morning workers ever took time to enjoy the beauty of the sparkling colors.

The line moved and she inched forward. She could hear the first bit of Reba McIntire's "Is There Life Out There." Six months ago she couldn't have imagined herself standing in line at Starbucks and hearing country music. It wouldn't happen back in DC. But Cincinnati was a world away from the nation's capital and she was glad for it.

Her cell phone rang announcing that her best friend and co-worker Jacob Meier was calling. She waited for her Bluetooth to activate. " 'Morning, Jacob."

"Hi darlin'. Are you here yet?"

"Nope. I'll be up in about ten or fifteen minutes, I guess. Why? Is there something urgent you need?"

"Yes. I'm dying as we speak. I need my cappuccino. Besides, you have to tell me what you think of that new yummy barista."

"I can see him from where I am. Why?"

"Because he's going out with me next week."

Talia smiled. "You are such a whore-dog."

"Yes, and proud of it."

"Of course you are. I'll be in the office in a bit, and you can tell me all about him."

"Good. Now hurry up. I need my caffeine."

"Yes, dear."

Talia got their morning order and headed for the elevators, her high heels clicking against the smooth white tiles that somehow never seemed to smudge. She thought that the Winchester Group must spend a pretty penny to keep the building so shiny and spotless.

The regular, enclosed cars were empty, but she waited for the glass elevator. Even though it took forever to actually take off, it felt more open and a lot less claustrophobic than the others. She could see her reflection and straightened the collar of her new silk blouse. Jacob had insisted she buy some new clothes because he was tired of all the black and navy pantsuits she wore.

They had spent all day Saturday going to every shop in Cincinnati. She'd spent a lot of money on new shirts and slacks and Jacob came away with the phone numbers of two very helpful young men.

The shirt she wore was Jacob's favorite pick. It was light yellow and even though she wasn't sure it looked good with her dark brown features, Jacob insisted it highlighted her eyes. Her mother would be appalled and for that reason alone, Talia bought the shirt.

The elevator car arrived and she stepped in and pressed 10 with her free hand, glad that no one else was riding with her.

The back of the elevator formed a diamond point, and through each panel of glass she was treated to a stunning visual of the upward sweep of Cincinnati's twenty floor architectural wonder, the Winchester Building. She wasn't all that fond of skyscrapers, but this was a building that oozed grace and loveliness. She gazed out into the atrium and took a sip of her cappuccino.

Over the hum of everyday sounds outside the elevator, Talia heard an explosive crash. A woman screamed. A high pitched engine shrieked, and her ears hurt from the sound.

As she whirled toward the elevator doors, she was shocked to see a flash of blue and white careening toward her.

"Oh, my g—"

She didn't have time to say another word or let go of the coffee before a giant metal monster smashed her backwards. Glass rained down. The sunlight blinked out. Pressure all around sucked away the air until every little gasp she made brought in only dust. Something hot and wet trickled down the front of her, and the last thought she managed before passing out was to wonder if that was coffee - or her own blood.