

Chapter One

“Hey there,” I say as Violet wriggles and coos on her colorful playmat. It has lots of shiny squeaky toys attached. Got it free at Swap Day in our building. “Look what Mama has for you.” Violet kicks her chubby little legs and flails her arms when she sees her bottle.

I wasn't planning to be a teen mom. But now that I am, I can't imagine my life without my baby.

Sometimes she's all that keeps me going.

It's a humid August night, but I lift Violet and hold her close anyway. I love the feel of her soft, smooth skin and the smell of her hair. I love how she smiles up at me, her big blue eyes full of trust.

Violet grabs at her bottle and gulps her milk down. I miss breastfeeding, but since I switched her to formula, it's way easier for Wade to babysit when I go to work. I burp her, wipe spit-up from my jean shorts and get her ready for bed.

I rock her in my arms a while before settling her into her crib beside her fluffy pink blanket and stuffed white bunny. I wind up her mobile and listen while it plays "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Finally I turn out the light and say, "Good night, best little girl in the world." Just like my mom used to say to me. Back when she still thought I was, that is.

I push guilt from my mind and head to the fridge for a cold drink. But we're out of soda.

We're also out of milk and bread for breakfast.

Why the hell didn't I go to the store earlier?

I really meant to. But I'm sooo tired. This afternoon was so hot and muggy, I could barely move.

I fill my glass with tap water. Of course we're also out of ice cubes, because I forgot to refill the tray. I take my drink and stand by our sixth-floor window.

There's a party down in the park outside our building. People are talking and laughing, having a great time. Bringing back memories I'd rather forget.

I'd like to shut the windows to keep the sound out. But the city is stuck in a heat wave, and our air conditioner is broken. As usual.

If Wade was here, he'd help me through. He's my half brother, ten years older than me and a million years wiser. He took me in when I was pregnant and had nowhere else to go.

He's been like a father to Violet. Which is good, because her actual father doesn't know she exists. And no way will I ever tell him about her.

Because of Wade, I have a future again. He's the manager at the Bean Leaf Café, and he got me a job. Now I'm saving every penny, trying to be a good mom. When Violet is older, I'll go back to school to get my diploma.

But Wade is bartending at a friend's stag tonight, then staying over. I guess I should text him. He would probably even find somebody in the building to go to the store for me. He's on the co-op board. He knows everybody, and they all like him.

But I don't want to bother my big brother. Much as I love him, sometimes our relationship is just too parental. I'm deeply grateful for everything he's done. But I need to learn to cope by myself.

I pace the apartment, even though that makes me sweat. Our two floor fans are running full blast,

but still the humidity is sickening. I feel all sticky and gross, and the air reeks of dirty diapers.

The party in the park ramps up. More people, more drinks. I step away from the window and take another look in the fridge. Wade has some beer. A cold one would taste great right now.

I open a can and chug it down. I so want another. But Wade will freak if I drink all his beer, and I can't afford to replace it.

If only it wasn't so sweltering in here. This heat's giving me brain fog. And that party in the park is making me crazy.

I pace around some more. It would be so easy to slip out for groceries. There's a 24/7 convenience store, the Ready Go, right on our corner.

Violet doesn't sleep through the night, but she never wakes up before two or three a.m. I could be back in fifteen minutes max. That's no longer than I leave her alone when I go down to the laundry room.

So what's the difference if I head to the store instead?

No, no, no. Can't do that.

I am not going out and leaving my kid alone. It's illegal and dangerous. What if there's a fire?

I try to distract myself by cleaning up the kitchen.

But then the mad cravings start. I want chocolate. I want ice cream. I want cigarettes. Yeah, I know I shouldn't smoke. And I did quit when I got pregnant. But it was easy then. Smoking made me puke. Tonight I have this strong desire to light up again.

I tidy Violet's toys, fold her laundry and set out a clean onesie in case she's wet in the night. I used up the last of a package of diapers after her bath, so I look in the closet for a new one. And don't find any.

Oh shit! I mean, like, literally, right? I was sure we had lots on hand. Now I really do need to go

to the store, even though diapers are ridiculously expensive at the Ready Go.

But still, I shouldn't leave Violet alone.

Maybe I could call Big Bad Betty. She's this old Korean lady down on the fourth floor. Her real name is Kim Soon-hee. Besides Wade and Dekker, the building manager's assistant, she's my only actual friend here.

Betty sometimes watches Violet for me. But nah. It's too late. Almost midnight. I'll just have to take my chances.

My shorts look okay where I wiped off the spit-up, but now I notice some on my shirt. Don't have anything else clean, so I pull on a new tank top I was saving for special, lime green with a shiny silver butterfly on the front.

I check to see that Violet's sleeping soundly before throwing my keys, phone and wallet into a cloth shopping bag.

Then I lock the door and run.

Chapter Two

I take the stairs, not the elevator, so there's less chance of being noticed. I can't risk anyone telling Wade they saw me leaving without Violet.

What a relief the cooler night air is. I glance around as I cross the street to be sure nobody's hiding in the shadows. This area is pretty safe, but I always check, even in broad daylight. Have to watch out for a certain guy I never want to see again.

It's been over a year since I escaped, and he hasn't shown up. But what if he's not the kind of guy to just let me go?

I don't see anyone lurking, so I cut across the park, keeping clear of the party. Wouldn't want to be tempted to join in. I focus on reaching the Ready Go.

Luckily, the store isn't busy. I resist the cigarettes but break down and buy a carton of chocolate-fudge ice cream along with the diapers. When the cashier checks me through, she says, "Love that top. Where'd you get it?"

"Thanks. Old Navy, final sale." I don't make eye contact, just hurry from the store. So far I haven't been gone longer than it would take to load three washing machines and put in the coins. But what if Violet wakes up? What was I thinking, leaving her alone?

Back out on the sidewalk, I spot a kid from our building, Kwame Mensah, riding his bike. Hope he

doesn't see me and stop to say hey, like he does when I have Violet with me. That's all I need.

I flatten myself into the doorway of a building to hide. I'm not completely out of sight, but it works. Kwame rides right on by.

Whoa! That was close.

I step back onto the sidewalk.

And then, out of nowhere, a black SUV with its windows wide-open blasts past. I catch a glimpse of the driver as the vehicle squeals around the corner.

Just as Kwame reaches the intersection, a guy leans out the passenger window.

He's got a gun.

He fires.

Kwame and his bike go flying. The bike crashes into the curb. Kwame lands on the pavement with a sickening thud.

His crumpled body lies still.

Dead still.

Omigod, omigod, omigod!

I'm paralyzed with shock as the SUV disappears down the street. I try to scream, but no sound comes out.

I grab my phone to call 9-1-1.

But my hands are shaking so hard, I can't dial.

The driver. Those eyes. I recognized him!

Staff from the store rush out to where Kwame is lying in a pool of blood. I know I should stick around, but I break into a run. I have to get back to Violet.

Racing home, I lose one of my flip-flops. Almost without stopping, I pull off the other, toss both into my shopping bag and keep going. I make it to the building and dash up the stairs in my bare feet.

When I reach our apartment, I think I'm going to faint. Or barf. Or both.

But everything's okay. My baby is still there. She's sleeping soundly, arms holding her bunny close.

I gulp down a glass of water and collapse on my bed, soaked with sweat, trembling with fear.

Did I just witness a drive-by shooting?