

Avery Taylor clutched her sleeping daughter tighter, her fight-or-flight instincts begging her to do anything other than stand there, frozen, staring down the two masked gunmen blocking her from entering her home. “Please, I...”

But what could she say? Had she stumbled upon a home invasion? She couldn’t imagine having anything either of them could possibly want. She lived off the beaten path. The small but cozy two-story bungalow she’d inherited from her grandfather sat alone on a cul-de-sac at the end of a long, winding mountain road. And she worked from home as a medical transcriptionist, supplementing her income with her inheritance to make ends meet. Well, whatever they wanted, they could have it, as long as they left her and her four-year-old, Liliana, alone. She opened her mouth to say as much.

The taller of the two lifted his weapon, his hand rock steady.

She could only assume he’d done this before.

“Where’s Tristan McAvoy?” he demanded.

Her mouth snapped right back closed again. Once she recovered enough to try to answer, her voice shook before she could utter more than a grunt, and she worked to steady it. Although she didn’t know why she bothered. It was clear she was terrified, and even more so now that she knew what they wanted...because she couldn’t give it to them. “I don’t know where Tristan is. I haven’t seen him in almost five years.”

Since he’d walked out on her and never looked back, despite her numerous attempts to get in touch with him and tell him he was going to be a father. He’d been her best friend, her love, her future, and then he’d been gone.

Her arms began to tremble beneath Liliana’s weight, and Avery hefted her up higher so the little girl’s head rested more comfortably on her shoulder. The last thing she needed was Lily waking to this mess. They’d attended a church festival that evening, and her daughter had passed out on the way home. It was a good thing Lily was a heavy sleeper.

The shorter man, who outweighed her by a good hundred pounds of pure muscle, gestured toward the front door with his weapon. “Get inside.”

She hesitated.

“Look, Avery...”

The fact that he knew her name and had associated her with Tristan sent a chill racing up her spine, despite the heat of the summer night. If they knew all that, she had to figure they knew Lily was Tristan’s daughter as well, even if Tristan didn’t know. But how had they found out? True, she’d listed him as Lily’s father on her birth certificate, but why would this stranger have access to that?

“All you have to do is tell us where to find McAvoy.” The man’s easy shrug belied the tension in his posture. “Once we have him, we’ll let you and his kid go. Easy enough?”

It would be if she believed him, and if she had any clue where to find Tristan, but she wasn’t buying it. Then again, they did have on ski masks, which gave her some hope that they planned to let her go. If not, they’d have no reason to conceal their identities. Of course, she couldn’t give them what they wanted. If she knew how to get ahold of Tristan, he’d know about his daughter.

An image of him flashed in her mind—his shaggy brown hair that just brushed his collar and always seemed in need of a trim, a smile that could melt her heart in an instant, his brilliant blue eyes that used to cage hers and fill her with hope for their future together. A hope that died when he walked away with promises to return once he’d gotten his head on straight. An empty promise, as it turned out.

She’d wanted to talk to him after he’d left, to tell him he was going to be a dad instead of imparting the news via voicemail, email or text. She’d wanted to gauge his reaction, so she’d simply asked him to call her back. Time and time again. And he hadn’t. Not once. So, he’d never learned about his daughter. But that wasn’t really fair. He’d left after his parents had been murdered, bitter and grief-stricken and so filled with anger she hadn’t known what to do for him. Still, he could have answered at least one of her messages.

*Focus, Avery.*

She weighed her options. She could make a run for the car, where she’d left the doors standing open and her bags inside in hopes of retrieving them after she’d gotten Lily into bed, but she’d never outrun a bullet if these men intended to shoot her. Then again, they couldn’t get information from her if she was dead. But they could

incapacitate her. How could she risk leaving Liliana alone with these monsters? She couldn't. Which left her no choice but to do as they'd instructed.

Lily's weight was becoming a strain on her back and shoulders, and she didn't want to set her down on the stone walkway and risk waking her. But she did have to put her down. If it came down to it, she couldn't fight with Liliana in her arms. What did it matter if she went inside with them anyway? It wasn't like there was any chance of someone driving past to notice what was happening or being close enough to hear her screams. The secluded home she'd grown up in, that she'd always viewed as so peaceful and serene, a safe haven tucked against the side of the mountain, surrounded by fields and wildflowers, now seemed nothing but isolated. She'd never felt so frightened and alone, even after Tristan had left and her grandfather had passed away.

But if she could get inside, if she could get to her grandfather's hunting rifle hanging above the mantel, maybe she'd stand a chance of defending herself and her daughter.