

Chapter One

The house should have been completely quiet.

Still, Summer Velásquez stirred in her sleep. Prying her eyes open slightly, she brushed her long, almost-black curls out of her eyes and glared at the offending red numbers on the clock radio beside her bed. 11:10 a.m. Way too early for someone who'd worked all night and only managed to crawl between the sheets three hours earlier. She flung an arm over her eyes to block out the thin rays of sunlight that stubbornly worked their way around the edges of the wooden blinds covering her bedroom window.

A muffled sound from downstairs, like the soft squeak of a running shoe on the gray slate tiles in the front entryway, drifted up to the second floor. Summer bolted upright. *Someone's in the house.* She reached for the phone on her bedside table and punched in 911. No time to talk to anyone. If something was about to happen, hopefully the dispatcher would be able to hear it and would send the police to her home.

She slid open the top drawer of the nightstand. A ring box beside the clock caught her eye, and she swept it and the phone inside and closed the drawer, hoping that would block out the voice of the dispatcher. Flinging back the covers, she threw her legs over the side of the mattress and pushed to her feet. She tugged the strap of her tank top into place as she tiptoed, nearly soundlessly in her bare feet, across the wooden floor to the dresser that lined one wall of her room. Not wanting to give away either her presence in the house or her location, she gripped both knobs and slowly, slowly slid open the top drawer.

The harsh click of a Beretta safety sliding off froze her in place.

“Don’t.”

Summer let go of the knobs and lifted both hands slightly in the air. Her stomach twisted into a painful knot as she struggled to keep her breathing slow and even. Who was in her house? In her room? And what did he want?

“Step back.”

She complied. *Ten calma. Stay calm. Wait for your opportunity.* She took another step back and slowly turned to face him, keeping her hands where he could see them.

A tall, broad-shouldered stranger in black dress pants and a steel-blue shirt stood in her doorway. His clean-shaven face might have been handsome if the eyes focused on her weren’t so hard and cold. Summer repressed a shudder. The man pointed the pistol directly at her chest, holding it in his gloved hand in a way that suggested he was familiar with guns and knew exactly how to use one.

She swallowed. “What do you want?”

A mocking smile turned up one corner of his mouth. “What do you think?”

Despite having immigrated to Canada ten years earlier, traces of the Spanish Summer had spoken exclusively during the first eighteen years of her life in Mexico still clung to her words, even more thickly when she was flustered. “We have no thing of value.”

“I seriously doubt that is true.”

In her tank top and shorts, Summer felt incredibly vulnerable. And if there was anything she hated, it was feeling vulnerable. She lifted her chin. “Whoever you are, you have no right to break into my home and—”

The spark that flashed in his eyes stopped her. The man took a step forward, the gun still trained on her. “I don’t have a right?” He pushed the words out through clenched teeth. “I have every right to be here, to come after the diamond.”

Her eyes narrowed. *He thinks I have something that belongs to him? Why would I?* “Look, I don’t have any diamonds.” She kept her voice low and even in an attempt to keep from antagonizing him further. “But I would be happy to give you what you want if you tell me what it is.”

His laugh was as cold as his eyes. “Oh, you’ll give me what I want, all right, chica.” He took another step closer and reached out with the gun.

Summer forced herself not to flinch. Any sign of weakness would only add fuel to his boldness. Did this have something to do with her work? She wracked her brain, trying to remember if she had seen this person before, but nothing came to mind.

The man slowly ran the barrel of the Beretta down her cheek. “They told me you were beautiful. I thought they were exaggerating.”

Who told him that? Who had been talking about her with this man and why? The cold steel sent shivers of apprehension racing through Summer’s body. It took everything she had not to swipe the weapon away. Espera una oportunidad. Wait.

Her eyes locked on his. Neither of them moved for several seconds, until the gun slipped slightly down her cheek. *Now.* She bent her arm and brought it up sharply, knocking the gun away from her face. Grasping his wrist, she twisted it and bent forward, sending him sprawling over her and onto the floor. Summer leapt over the prone body and ran for the door. Just before she reached it, strong fingers closed around her ankle, and she lost her balance and fell onto the wooden floor with a thud.

She flipped onto her back and bent her knee, then drove her free foot into the man's face. His nose gave under her heel with a sickening crunch. The man howled and let go of her ankle. Summer shoved hard against the wooden floor with both feet, propelling herself backwards. When she reached the doorway, she flipped over onto her hands and knees and scrambled to her feet.

She made it as far as the top of the stairs before an arm circled her waist and lifted her up. Summer kicked backwards, landing one solid hit to the man's shins, but he didn't loosen his grip.

Cold metal dug into her temple. "Stop." The gun pressed deeper and she winced. "Are you going to keep fighting me?"

She shook her head slightly and the man set her down. Summer whirled to face him. Blood dripped from his nose and onto his chin. Keeping the gun aimed at her face, the man swiped a gloved finger over his top lip and glanced down at it. He cursed loudly as he gripped the pistol in both hands.

Piensa. Think. Everything in Summer screamed at her to run, but that would only guarantee a bullet in the back. She did take one small step backwards then stopped and raised both hands again. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I got scared. Tell me what you came here for, and I will do whatever I can to help you get it."

The man stepped forward. "Too late for that, sweetheart. A little cooperation back there..." he jerked his head toward the bedroom, "... might have saved your life. Now I'm going to leave my message and get out of here."

Her forehead wrinkled. Leave a message? For who? How did he plan to—? His finger tensed on the trigger. Heat coursed through her. *Do something. Now.* Focusing all her rage on the

man in front of her, Summer ducked below the gun and launched herself forward, ramming her head into the man's stomach.

The breath emptied from his lungs with a whoosh, but he managed to bring the butt of the weapon down on her head as he stumbled back, driving her to her knees.

For a few seconds, Summer concentrated on drawing in air, blinking to clear the vision that had gone blurry. A stabbing pain shot through her head from her neck to behind her eyes. Grasping hold of the railing at the top of the stairs, she hauled herself to her feet. The man swore at her and lunged forward. When he hit her, she lost her grip and they both tumbled down the stairs. The man managed to grab the railing and stop himself part way down, but when Summer reached frantically for one of the posts her fingers closed around air. She continued to fall, hitting the stairs violently several times until she landed on her back at the bottom and her head cracked against the gray stone tile. Hard.

Dios, sálvame, she breathed as, unable to move, she watched the man slowly descend the stairs, one deliberate step at a time. *Would* God save her? No one else could now. The smile on his face slid in and out of focus. One of Summer's arms had landed beside her head and a warm, sticky liquid lapped against her skin.

The man reached the bottom of the stairs and shoved the gun into the back of his jeans as he crouched beside her. "Well, look at that. You did help me after all."

His voice, like his body, wavered, as though she was seeing and hearing him under water. Summer licked her lips. "H... how?"

"You've enabled me to leave my message." Using the glove that didn't have his own blood smeared across it, the man dipped two fingers in the pool and scrawled something across the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

“What...?” She couldn’t finish the sentence. The word she had been grasping for was gone, lost in the thick fog swirling through her mind.

Far off in the distance a siren wailed. The man glanced toward the door. “What message?” He stopped writing and stepped over her, heading for the entrance. “You, chica. You are the message.” The front door clicked behind him.

Summer pressed her eyes shut and opened them again, willing away the darkness that crept across her field of vision. *It’s so cold.* A numbness started deep inside her and spread through her chest and stomach and down her arms and legs. The wail of the siren grew louder.

They’re too late.

Her entire body had already gone numb, as if encased in ice. She blinked, trying to make out the words on the wall. The letters danced a macabre waltz across the white paint and the effort it took to try and still them sent another stabbing pain shooting through her head. An inky blackness fell over her vision, as though the power had been cut in the house.

Summer closed her eyes.