

Sample Chapter

Prologue

The first ring of the phone jolted Vicky wide-awake. She sat up in bed, heart thudding. Each ring was like nails raking a blackboard, but she didn't reach for the phone. Maybe he'd give up if she just let it ring. She let out a sharp laugh at the thought.

Fat chance of that. Just pick it up and get it over with.

Her heart went into overdrive as she lifted the receiver.

"I'm coming for you, Vicky," the man whispered. "Do you hear me, bitch? I am Death, and I'm coming for you." His voice sounded like the rustle of dry leaves and sent a shiver down Vicky's spine. She bit back the scathing words on the end of her tongue, resisted the urge to slam down the receiver, and instead, left it off the hook. He wouldn't bother her any more that night. But what about tomorrow night and the night after that? How long before he made good on his threats? Hugging her knees to her chest, Vicky chewed her lower lip. In the beginning she tried convincing herself it was just some sicko who didn't have anything else to do at one in the morning. In her heart, she'd known better. This guy was serious trouble, and it was time to get the police involved. Of course Vicky knew Frank Paxton, the chief of police, would give her twenty kinds of hell when she confessed what she'd been up to. She'd heard it all before.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind, Victoria Langford?" he'd say. "Keep your nose out of things that can get you hurt."

But she couldn't do that this time—not when she was so close to finding the truth. She'd give it another day or two—see what else she could dig up before talking to the chief. Slipping back under the covers, she lay staring at the ceiling.

I am Death, and I'm coming for you.

She sat up again and snapped on the bedside lamp. Snowball, her white Persian cat, lifted his head and blinked lazily at Vicky from the foot of the bed. He stretched, then curled back into a ball and closed his eyes.

"Wish I could go back to sleep that easily," Vicky said.

She told herself she and her little boy, Josh, were safe, but she couldn't shake the sick, fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach. She reached under the bed for the nightstick she kept there, and then went through the house checking doors and windows for the third time that night. Vicky checked the alarm, too, though she had set it before turning in. As she headed back to her room, she heard her son whimpering.

Eighteen-month-old Josh was sitting up in his crib rubbing his eyes. He raised his arms and cried, "Mama."

"What's the matter, sweetie?" Vicky murmured. "Bad dreams?"

Scooping him up, she settled in the rocker beside his crib. Josh quieted instantly and snuggled against her. Vicky leaned her cheek against his downy head. She was starting to relax when she heard a soft tapping at the window. Her head snapped back up and her breath caught in her throat.

It's only a branch from the old box elder, Vicky reminded herself, but her heart still hammered. Sensing his mother's fear, Josh began crying again.

Vicky kissed him and whispered, "It's all right, punkin. You go back to sleep now."

She sure as hell wasn't. Her gaze darted to the window once more. Uneasiness nibbled at the back of her mind. It was going to be another long night.

Outside, a man peeked through the window of Josh's room. This was his nightly ritual. He couldn't stop himself from coming here any more than he could make himself stop breathing. His dark eyes bored into Vicky as she rocked her son.

Poor mommy. Another sleepless night? He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and punched in her number again. The sound of the busy signal vibrated in his ear. He shook with rage. Stupid bitch. Did she really think she could avoid him by leaving the phone off the hook? He should go in there right now and snap her neck like a dry twig.

"I am Death, Vicky, and I'm coming for you."

But not tonight—it wasn't time. The fun was just beginning and he would savor every moment of it. He deserved that. He stood at the window until Vicky tucked a sleeping Josh back in his crib.

Such a loving mother.

In that instant, an idea took root in his mind and he smiled. This was going to be even better than he had imagined.